

# The Impress of the Empress: Provincializing the Queen in the Telugu Desa

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THE everyday spatial experience of the Telugu *desa* presents interesting reminders of the legacy of Queen Victoria.<sup>1</sup> Her name is impressed on many emblems of modernity—markets, museums, printing presses, town halls, hospitals, and orphanages—perhaps more in the colonial Madras Presidency region than in the Nizam-ruled Hyderabad State. But behind the façade of a seemingly facile surrender to colonial domination lie lesser-known histories of discreet provincialization and subtle subversion. A play between submission and subversion that marks the spatial experience also marked colonial print culture and literary production in Telugu. Printing was initially used by missionaries to spread Christianity and by the colonial administration to secure their command and control over the native populace. However, the modern technology of printing was soon mastered by the natives and was used by them to revive and revitalize traditional literature and alternative forms of knowledge. When the queen was proclaimed the empress of India in 1877, Telugu writers of different ideological orientations paid sometimes exaggerated literary tributes to her. But the eulogies often employed the queen’s name merely as a token to pursue their own agendas. Thus the legacy of Queen Victoria was appropriated, provincialized, and subverted in the spatial, print, and literary cultures of the Telugu *desa*.

## 1. SPATIAL SIGNS AND THEIR SIGNIFICATION

In the eastern suburbs of Hyderabad stands an impressive two-story rectangular building constructed in vernacular architectural style (Hyderabad-Deccan,

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Indo-Saracenic) by the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Mahboob Ali Khan. Originally intended as a hunting lodge, the plans of the building were prepared in 1882, and the construction was completed in 1903. However, after a visit to the under-construction building, the nizam fell ill, and considering it a bad omen, he abandoned what was known then as Mahal-e-Saroornagar. The building remained deserted for a while, and in 1904 the British resident Lt. Col. Sir David Barr, perhaps at the prompting of Lord Curzon, the viceroy, requested the nizam to set up an institution in memory of Queen Victoria, who had died a couple of years earlier. The nizam readily issued a *firman* (“edict”) to establish Yateem Khana-e-Victoria (“Victoria Memorial Orphanage”) in the abandoned Saroornagar Palace. The orphanage started functioning on February 14, 1905, and in 1953 while on a visit, Prime Minister Nehru suggested that the word “Orphanage” be replaced with “Home.” So, the building is now known as Victoria Memorial Home.

A few kilometers away in the oldest part of the city, on the banks of River Musi, is the Victoria Maternity Hospital (also known as Victoria Zenana Hospital), the first exclusive hospital in the city for women. The foundation stone of the building was laid by the princess of Wales in 1905 and the construction completed in 1907. Interestingly, the hospital building was one of the few human-made structures that withstood the fury of the Great Musi Flood of 1908 and saved many lives. There was, however, another instance of naming that predates these two and was performed during the queen’s lifetime.

In Secunderabad, the twin city of Hyderabad, which was originally established as a British cantonment, several commercial spaces were established mainly for the residents of the cantonment. One of them was the Victoria Grain Market. A gateway to the modern market was erected in 1883 to commemorate Queen Victoria’s Delhi Durbar of 1877, and the arch had inscriptions in three languages. In English, it read, “Victoria Grain Market Square. Est: 1st January 1883,” and in Telugu, “Maharani Dhaanya Vikrayasaala” (“Maharani Grain Store”). In Urdu, however, the legend was much more elaborate: “Khudawand, Kaiser Ganj Abaad Kar” (“God, make the emperor’s market prosperous”).

While the naming of the orphanage and the maternity hospital in memory of the queen appears consistent with her carefully crafted persona as the “maternal monarch” and “the beloved ‘grandmother of Europe,’”<sup>2</sup> the naming of a market after her might look to be at odds with it. However, the association of her name with trade and commerce is in fact a stark reminder that the queen was reigning over an empire

that was founded on a trading company, and that the Delhi Durbar marked twenty years of the British Crown's takeover of direct administration of India from the East India Company.

While several representative icons of modernity (railways, museums, orphanages) carry the name of Queen Victoria, an interesting case of subtle subversion could be found in the city of Vijayawada, considered the commercial capital of the Telugu state of Andhra Pradesh. In 1887, to commemorate the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria's coronation, Robert Sewell, collector and magistrate in Madras Presidency, laid the foundation in Vijayawada of what was named Victoria Jubilee Museum. Ironically, in 1921 in this very building a young man named Pingali Venkayya from Machilipatnam presented to Mahatma Gandhi the rudimentary design of the "Swaraj flag," which was modified and officially adopted by the Indian National Congress in 1931, and which eventually evolved into the national flag in 1947. Thus a monument built to display the power and authority of the empire also became the site of its symbolic end.

## 2. COLONIAL PRINT CULTURE AND ITS SUBVERSION

Even more striking, however, was the provincialization of another familiar marker of modernity, namely printing. While there is no evidence of printing in Telugu till the end of the seventeenth century, "prints in Telugu emerged from Halle within four years of the departure of Rev. Schultz from India."<sup>3</sup> However, although the first set of six Telugu books prepared by Schultz was printed by the middle of the eighteenth century in Halle, Germany, his initiative of printing books in Indian languages in Halle did not seem to have made much progress, and "towards the end of the 18th century fresh efforts were made in India itself to multiply books in the languages of the country" (42).

One such major effort was the establishment of a press at Serampore in 1800 by William Carey, William Ward, and Joshua Marshman. The contribution of the press and of the "Serampore trio" to the growth of Indian print culture is of course well known. By the 1820s, the Serampore press completed the translation and printing of the New Testament and the Pentateuch in Telugu, plus a Telugu grammar, and transferred Telugu printing to Madras Auxiliary Bible Society as printing in any language was expected to be better if it was done where it was spoken (56–57).

As C. P. Brown observed, printing among the Telugus started around 1806 but made little progress until 1830.<sup>4</sup> By the middle of the

nineteenth century, however, Madras emerged as the hub of printing Telugu books, with Bellary, Narsapuram, Rajamahendravaram, and Visakhapatnam as other important centers. The missionaries set up presses (like the American Mission Press, the London Mission Society Press, and the Scottish Press) and Tract Societies (in Madras, Bellary, and Vizagapatam), which were printing thousands of pages in Telugu for the propagation of Christianity. However, since these presses were intended to be run on commercial lines, they did not confine themselves to printing only Christian literature. Although they printed only Christian books in the initial stages, they soon started printing secular publications (such as dictionaries, books on Telugu names, and even culinary books), and then a large number of Hindu religious books, to remain financially viable.

The recognition by the end of the eighteenth century that learning Indian languages was imperative for better governance led to official support for the printing of suitable instructional materials in Telugu. The government helped those who undertook printing, especially the Europeans, by purchasing a certain number of printed copies from the authors or by making payments in advance to enable them to meet the print charges (81).

With the rise in demand for books in Telugu and the government supporting their publication, printing spread to the districts in the 1850s. By 1855, the colonial administration sent fifteen printing machines to the districts, and by the end of the decade, government printing presses were set up in all important Telugu-speaking collectorates of the Madras Presidency. The primary function of these district presses was to print the monthly district gazette and other official documents in both English and the “Vernacular of the district.” However, by the 1870s, private printing presses had sprung up in various towns of the Telugu *desa*, and the monopoly of the colonial government (and of the missionaries) over the printed word came to an end. Interestingly, many of these presses, owned and run by “native scholars,” were named after the queen, and one in Madras was in fact called the “Empress of India Press.”

Much before printing in Telugu became widespread in the 1850s, C. P. Brown, a deputy collector of the East India Company, famed for promoting vernacular publishing, made an attempt to establish a Telugu printing press in 1832 at Masulipatam. But his effort was unsuccessful because, according to him, “the Hindus read their national poems with delight, yet the printing of their authors was regarded as a

profanation.”<sup>5</sup> However, Brown, who left India in 1855, noticed that the situation had changed significantly by the 1860s and that, besides the presses run by the missionaries and the government, there were many others either owned or managed by the Telugus that published “a variety of native books, particularly the Mahabharat, the Bhagavat and the Ramayan.”<sup>6</sup>

Print was one of the most significant technological products of colonial encounter, and its impact on knowledge production and dissemination has been irreversible. In his study of the influence of English on Telugu literature, Kottapalli Veerabhadra Rao notes that the introduction of the printing press was the greatest single technological factor that revolutionized academic life and education, as it destroyed once and for all the oral tradition of teaching and learning by rote and paved the way for the spread of English education across social classes.<sup>7</sup>

Printing, along with education and administration, were considered the three main channels “through which the English influence exerted itself upon the minds of the people and found expression in their literature.”<sup>8</sup> However, each of these channels contributed, even if inadvertently, to the development of a counternarrative and an indigenous alternative to colonial discourse. Missionaries established printing presses to facilitate the spread of Christianity, and, as Mangamma points out, to study printing in India is “to study the early Christian missionary activity as printing intermingles with their operations” (20). She also notes that the enthusiasm of the missionaries “to make these early works [translations of Christian literature into local languages] available to as many people as possible hastened and promoted the printing activity in the regional languages” (78). But, as mentioned earlier, in order to sustain themselves and to remain profitable, the presses printed not only canonical Hindu texts like the Mahabharat, the Bhagavat, and the Ramayan that Brown mentions, but also subsidiary texts of the Hindu religion such as the shastras, Puranas, satakas, and mahatmyas in large numbers.

After Sir Charles Wood’s dispatch of 1854, the government assumed the direct responsibility of educating the Indians. The rapid spread of English education, which replaced oral instruction with written texts, necessitated the printing of a large number of textbooks. As religious instruction was sought to be avoided in textbooks, the focus shifted away from printing religious books and classics to the revival of other forms of traditional literature such as moral tales, fables, parables, proverbs, and riddles. Consequently, the instructional material thus prepared often comprised not newly written books but print versions of old texts.

Printing, therefore, came to be seen as “rendering great service to Telugu by preserving its old literature.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the potential threat of print to orality was not only subverted, but modern technology was made to subserve the interests of traditional literature. This in effect seems to confirm Stuart Blackburn’s argument that “Print, . . . does not tend to produce new genres or texts but rather to reproduce more texts in old genres.”<sup>10</sup> Blackburn, therefore, concludes that although print was “an innovation of undeniable consequence,” it “did not produce new books, only more old books.”<sup>11</sup>

The missionaries used print to spread Christianity, and the colonial government employed it to prepare instructional material to train its personnel in local languages for better administration; to stamp its authority through gazettes, orders, circulars, and reports; and to control access to information. But once the technology was provincialized, it was used by the Telugus to revive Hinduism, preserve their old literature, and offer alternatives to governmental information. Thus impressions in print both mimicked and subverted colonial designs, and the native language and literature used the same means by which it was vernacularized to modernize itself. Graham Shaw, the print historian of South Asia, notes that print played a vital role in the process of “turning the tide” as the Hindus founded religious presses, set up tract societies, and published magazines as a “counter-offensive” to the “aggressive tactics” adopted by the Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. Thus, “the printing press, revered by the missionaries as the great engine of conversion, had become an effective tool of subversion, not only of Christianity but of the colonial power itself.”<sup>12</sup>

### 3. VENKATARATNAM, VIRESALINGAM, AND THE REFORM DIVIDE

Public expression of loyalty to the queen was common in the postcoronation period, and the proponents of both reform and counterreform indulged in it quite unabashedly. Writers demonstrated their loyalty by invoking her name in forewords, dedications, or titles of their works. A casual search in just one sourcebook (*Andhra Vangmaya Sookhika* or Index of Andhra/Telugu Literature) for Telugu books in the nineteenth century with titles beginning with the word “Victoria” yields more than twenty publications. These included poems, prose pieces, plays, biographies, studies on language development during her reign, and also a book on “Hindu medical practices.”<sup>13</sup>

The two texts under consideration here were written by two major figures on opposite sides of the reform debate in the nineteenth-century Telugu *desa*, in which one section wanted to reform Indian society along the lines of Western modernity, while the other sought to redefine Indian culture through a reinterpretation of its indigenous sources. Of the two texts, the first is a nine-stanza poem titled “Empress of India: Navaratnamulu” (“The Empress of India: Nine Gems”), by Kokkonda Venkatarathnamu Pantulu, rendered into English as “The Empress of India” by R. Sivasankira Pondiah. The Telugu and English versions of the poem were published together in July 1876 “as an outward expression of their heart-felt joy at the assumption of the title ‘Empress of India’ by Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, and as a humble tribute of their loyalty to The Venerable British Throne.”<sup>14</sup> The second text is a biography of the queen by Kandukuri Viresalingam, arguably the most prominent public figure in the nineteenth-century Telugu *desa*. Titled *Sri Victoria Maharagni gari Charitramu* and subtitled *The Life of Her Majesty Queen Victoria: Empress of India*, the slim volume of about sixty pages covers three phases of the queen’s life: childhood, family life, and administration.

Kokkonda Venkatarathnamu Pantulu (1842–1915; henceforth Venkataratnam) was a distinguished scholar of Telugu and Sanskrit and a lecturer in Telugu at the Presidency College, Madras. He was a poet, playwright, editor, teacher, and archrival of the reformists led by Kandukuri Viresalingam. Known as “Andhra Johnson,” and only the second Telugu to be conferred the title “Mahamahopadhyaya” by the British, Venkataratnam was a diehard purist who led a section of the society opposed to reforms in Telugu language, society, and culture. He started the periodical *Andhra Bhasha Sanjivani* (translated by Pondiah as “The Telugu Tongue Reviver”) in 1871, the first Telugu journal from Madras to be run by a Telugu, and used its columns to launch a tirade against social reform movements, especially targeting women’s education and widow remarriage.

Kandukuri Viresalingam (1848–1919) began his writing career as a classicist, emulating the achievements of Venkataratnam, and published his early works in Venkataratnam’s journal. But soon their paths diverged, and as Viresalingam began to criticize classical Telugu and espouse social reform, he had to find alternative channels of publication. He started his own journal, *Vivekavardhini* (1874), and rebuffed the criticism of traditionalists like Venkataratnam by lampooning them. A biographer of Viresalingam, Anjaneyulu, considers the rivalry between



Venkataratnam and Viresalingam as being both ideological and personal. According to him, the two held diametrically opposite views on the “women’s question” of nineteenth-century India, and while the former was a staunch upholder of the Hindu social tradition in all its rigidity, the latter questioned the rituals and superstitions through which the basic postulates of Hinduism were understood. Their differences in ideology and approach soon deteriorated into a personal campaign of invective and slander, and they used their respective magazines to attack each other.<sup>15</sup>

Another point of contention between Venkataratnam and Viresalingam as writers is the authorship of the first novel in Telugu. In 1878 Viresalingam published *Rajashekhara Charitramu*, which he claimed as (and which was generally assumed to be) the first novel in Telugu. However, eleven years earlier in 1867, Venkataratnam published a “vachana prabandha” (“prose narrative”) titled *Mahasvetha*.<sup>16</sup> Evidently based on the seventh-century Sanskrit classic *Kadambari* by Banabhatta, *Mahasveta* was never published as a book, and only a portion of it was serialized in the literary monthly *Vyjayanti*. Yet Venkataratnam’s *Mahasvetha* is sometimes considered more significant than either Narahari Gopala Krishnamma Chetti’s *Sri Rangaraja Charitramu* (1872) or Viresalingam’s *Rajashekhara Charitramu* (1878) as, unlike the latter, which are seen as products of colonial encounter, *Mahasvetha* draws entirely on indigenous sources.

#### 4. READING THE NINE GEMS: THE AUTHOR AND HIS TRANSLATOR

In 1876 one of Venkataratnam’s poems was selected and published in a volume titled *Anglo-Indian Prize Poems, by Native and English Writers, in Commemoration of the Visit of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales to India* (1876). In the “Prefatorial Remark,” the “translator” of the poem, Sivasankira Pondiah (1853–1899), points to several interesting aspects that were considered worthy of mention in the colonial context:

The poet who has composed this “*Prince of Wales’ Pearl or Star Necklace*” is a great *Telugu* scholar, of wide reputation, and is unrivalled in his mastery over the *Telugu* language (one of the two most important languages of the Presidency of Madras). A prose work by the pen of this learned author is now made a text-book in *Telugu* for the *First Examination in Arts of the Madras University*. . . . This poet is the proprietor and editor of a monthly *Telugu* periodical, namely, “*Andhra Bhasha Sunjeevani*.” This periodical may be called the *Spectator* of Southern India, because its masterly articles



are likely to be made text-books for the B.A. degree Examination of the Madras University. Owing to this poet, the Telugu language may be said to have come to a prosperity, similar to that attained by it in the reign of Krishnatheva Rayaloo, a king of Northern Carnatic.<sup>17</sup>

Besides establishing the poet's stature, the "translator" repeatedly refers to the author's works being used as textbooks to signal the reclamation of the ground lost to colonial education. Similarly, the poet's ownership and editorship of a periodical are highlighted to authenticate his claim to modernity. By drawing parallels between the poet's work and that of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century South Indian emperor (and author of the Telugu epic *Amuktamalyada*), on one hand, and with a nineteenth-century British periodical on the other, Pondiah seeks to present the author as a synthesizer of the classical and the contemporary, the Western and the Indian, and the literary and social traditions.

Sivasankira Pondiah (henceforth Sivasankara Pandya) was no mere "translator" of random texts. He was a pioneering educationist who dedicated his life to reviving Hindu ideals. To counter the impact of the Christian missionaries on Indian youth, Pandya founded Arya Dharma Vidyasala (1886) and the Hindu Theological School (1889). Since he believed that print was as crucial as education in the modernizing process, he began publishing the *Hindu Excelsior Magazine* in 1884 and in 1887 set up the Hindu Tract Society, which sent its own evangelists all over South India with anti-Christian pamphlets in the thousands, often highlighting the "contradictions" in the Bible and encouraging students to inquire into the tenets of Christianity. He also wrote a book, *Modern British Wisdom* (1886), which he dedicated to Queen Victoria in whose praise he also composed a poem titled "Victorian Rule." Thus Pandya's translation of the works of a votary of counterreform like Venkataratnam is not incidental but should be viewed as a part of his larger agenda of launching a Hindu counter-offensive but, ironically enough, by invoking the name of the queen herself.

The poem "The Empress of India: Nine Gems" comprises nine stanzas (the *navaratnas* or nine gems of the title) of four lines each followed by an unnumbered concluding stanza, also of four lines, in which the poet inserted his name. The nine stanzas are written in a classical poetic meter called *mattebhamu* ("an elephant in a rut") in which the fourth line of each stanza is a refrain known as *makutamu*. The refrain in this poem is "befits you the title 'Empress of India,' O queen mother Victoria" while

the foregoing three lines of each stanza provide a justification for the refrain. The flowering of fine arts, the global spread of the glory of the English language and of Shakespeare, the cessation of atrocities against girl children and women (perhaps a reference to child marriages and sati), respect for learning and religion, the prosperity of farmers and traders, the spread of women's education, and the "astonishing" equality among all people are among the achievements of the queen's reign listed by the poet that justify the bestowal of the title of "Empress" upon her. The unnumbered tenth stanza follows a different meter called *mattakokila* ("intoxicated cuckoo"), which follows a highly symmetrical and rhythmic pattern.

Although perhaps lacking in literary merit,<sup>18</sup> the poem makes interesting reading for the manner in which the "other" is emptied of its alienness and absorbed into the native. For instance, the poet likens the queen to the demon slayer Durga, compares the present glory of English to that of Sanskrit in the past, employs classical similes and metaphors (comparing Shakespeare to the moon and his fame to moonlight), and of course conveys the modern content in a traditional poetic form using classical language and metrical structure.

It is equally interesting, however, that the 9-stanza, 40-line poem expands into a 20-stanza and 315-line poem when rendered into English. Significantly, Pandya does not call himself a translator nor his rendition a translation. Instead, he designates himself as the author of the poem in English, which is only "Illustrative of the Views Comprised in the Above Telugu Poem." While thus "illustrating," he inevitably interpolates his own views, drops the phrase "Nine Gems" from his title, turns suggestions into statements, reorders the content of the stanzas, eliminates the features of classical literature, and adds modern references. For instance, he hails the queen as the "pride of modern times," alludes to her dissenters and foes with whom she dealt with "pol'tic skill and cannon's fire," and, more importantly, refers to "those woeful times when Moslems rul'd our Ind" when neither life nor honor was secure, while "benignant British banners have briskly brought / Security of life and pelf and freedom of thought."<sup>19</sup> On the whole, the English version of the poem tries to impress the empress far too earnestly with a display, on one hand, of the author's modern knowledge and mastery over the English language and, on the other, with his unqualified glorification of the queen.

## 5. WRITING BIOGRAPHY AND WRITING REFORM

Kandukuri Viresalingam is the most prominent Telugu public figure of the nineteenth century. Regarded as an epochal figure, Viresalingam combined literary scholarship and social reform, which was not unusual in the late nineteenth century. Besides the many innovations he made in Telugu literature, his fame as a literary scholar rests also on developing “women’s literature” into a subgenre in Telugu literature. But he showed greater concern for popularizing his ideas than for establishing his reputation as a scholar, and what also distinguished him from the other scholars-cum-social reformers of his time was his enduring commitment to action.<sup>20</sup> Given the orchestrated iconography of the queen as a modernizer (at least in the Indian context), it is not surprising that Viresalingam, who is often considered the first modern biographer in Telugu, perhaps rather unjustly on the basis of his own claims, should write her story.<sup>21</sup>

*Sri Victoria Maharagni gari Charitramu* was first published in 1894 and again in 1897 with the addition of illustrations of the queen and other members of the royal family. It was published by Viresalingam’s own press, the Vivekavardhani Press, and was priced at six annas. In his *Sviyacharitra* (“autobiography”), Viresalingam states that the biography was intended for women readers and was therefore written in a simple style appropriate for them. The stated objective of the author in writing the biography, as with many of his other works, was to produce a book to aid his social reform, which centered on the “women’s question.” As Rajagopal remarks, Viresalingam viewed his writing only as a means to an end and “used literature for his projects of social intervention and engineering.”<sup>22</sup> The biography of the queen should therefore be seen as a part of his advocacy of social reform, and alongside his two other biographies of Raja Rammohan Roy and Jesus Christ.

However, Viresalingam and his approach to reform often faced criticism both from the “traditionalists” as well as the nationalists. The traditionalists accused him of lacking an understanding of the essence of Hinduism, found fault with his lifestyle, which sometimes was at variance with his avowed reformist stance, and saw in his reforms a danger to the very core of Hinduism. It may be added here that the traditionalists who led the counterreform movement did not comprise only the orthodox Hindus but a section of the Western-educated elite, some of whom were employed with the colonial government. The participation and leadership of the Western-educated elite in the counterreform

movement was a significant factor in shaping the response to the reform agenda.

The nationalists, on the other hand, found his social reform agenda narrow-focused and his indifference toward the larger goal of national liberation objectionable. Despite attempts to co-opt and dovetail social reform movements into the nationalist movement and recast the social reformers as nationalist icons, the fault lines between the two were quite obvious. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that Viresalingam's reform movement lost steam and receded into the background as the fervor of the national movement gained ascendance in the Telugu areas, particularly after a visit by Bipin Chandra Pal in 1907. As Leonard observes, Viresalingam, whose social reform movement relied majorly on students and the English-educated youth, now had to deal with a new generation of students and young people who took social reform for granted, whereas "nationalism now struck their fancy, and they sometimes reacted to its promises, especially after a local visit by Bipin Chandra Pal, in a violent and destructive fashion."<sup>23</sup>

M. Pattabhirami Reddy, a well-known Marxist and editor of the *Andhra Pradesh Historical Journal*, articulated perhaps an extreme view of the nationalists who, finding fault with Viresalingam's aloofness from the freedom movement, his writing the biographies of Queen Victoria and Jesus Christ, his acceptance of patronage and titles from the colonial government, and his inability to conceive of a free and independent India, dismissed him and other reformers like him as "products of British Imperialism in India" and the social change they sought to bring about as "comprador renaissance, the bastard child of imperialism in India." Pattabhirami Reddy regrets that "protégés of colonial rulers" like Viresalingam are hailed as "harbingers of Andhra renaissance."<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, the near-total absence of critical attention to Viresalingam's biography of the queen perhaps needs to be seen in this context of rising nationalism and his perceived allegiance to British rule. Although the biography is mentioned in various commentaries on Viresalingam's writings, none of them seem to have found it relevant enough to subject it to a detailed analysis. Leonard, who wrote a comprehensive biography of Viresalingam, makes no direct reference to it, and another biographer, Anjaneyulu, makes no mention of it at all. Veerabhadra Rao, who designates the second half of the nineteenth century as the "Viresalingam Era" and considers him the product as well as the creator of it, devotes nearly 150 pages to Viresalingam's writings but gives a mere paragraph to the biography. Ramapati Rao's published

thesis *Viresalingam: Samagra Pariseelana* (“Viresalingam: A Comprehensive Analysis”) deals with the biographies in the “addendum” section and offers perhaps the most useful contextual information about the biography of the queen (in about four paragraphs) but no insight into the text itself.

In the effort to co-opt Viresalingam and other nineteenth-century social reformers like him into the nationalist movement and appropriate their legacies, it perhaps became expedient to focus more on their reform work and conveniently overlook or underplay the pro-British stance in their writings. In fact, Viresalingam himself was not averse to effecting such deliberate elisions. For instance, Schmitthenner contends that Viresalingam “typified and perhaps set a precedent among Telugu intellectuals who proudly claimed originality and gave little or no credit to their predecessors, particularly those who were Europeans.”<sup>25</sup> However, he does not find such aversion to acknowledging the European connections odd as “in an era of rising Indian self-pride and increasing resentment against the British rule, such lack of acknowledgment . . . would not have been unusual.”<sup>26</sup>

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The first feature of Viresalingam’s biography of the queen that catches the modern reader’s attention is the directness of its presentation. There is no paratextual “outwork” of any kind—no invocation, foreword, introduction, or endorsement framing the text or its context—which is quite unusual in a nineteenth-century text. Organized into three equal parts, the short book of sixty-one pages gets to the subject almost abruptly and describes the three phases of the queen’s life: childhood, family life, and administration.

A key aspect of the biography is its implied audience. In the very first few pages of the biography, it becomes evident that the author’s intended reader is located here, in the “local” contemporary Telugu milieu. Consequently, the biography aims to (a) exploit the familial, “motherly” image of the queen and present it as a model for emulation, (b) project the queen as an ideal woman for her ability to perform her public role *without neglecting* her domestic duties, and (c) use her life, and selected incidents from it, to critique the current practices here as a part of promoting the author’s reform agenda.

Viresalingam begins the biography by reminding “us” how the birth of a male child is considered to bring greater joy than that of a female

child, and how if the male child happens to be the heir to the kingdom, it becomes a cause for public celebration. He then informs us that considering women assuming power a disaster, several nations have even decreed women ineligible for the throne. He then counters such “popular beliefs” by recalling instances from history to show that life in fact was much better under women’s rule. He first cites the example of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, during which England reached the pinnacle of its glory. He then writes that “even in this country where women are looked down upon, whenever it had the fortune of being ruled by women, the country prospered and the people lived happier lives.”<sup>27</sup> He gives the examples of Rani Rudrama Devi of Trilinga Desa and Rani Ahalya Bai of Malwa and argues that they were better rulers than their male predecessors.

As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that the immediate as well as the ultimate objective of the biography is to provincialize the subject and put it to “local” use. The author carefully selects and interprets aspects and incidents in Victoria’s life that help him further his agenda and glosses over others that do not fit into the scheme. He highlights the queen’s disciplined upbringing, her unassuming conduct, and above all her homeliness. The overall image he projects of her is that of a woman who not only discharges her official duties as an empress with utmost diligence but does so without ignoring or reneging on her domestic obligations as a wife and a mother. The emphasis on domesticity and motherhood conforms to the prevailing Victorian concept of the ideal woman, the “angel in the house,” which seems to align well with Viresalingam’s own views. As Leonard comments, although Viresalingam praised Western ideas, “he reasoned that women should be educated so that they would cease quarrelling, manage households efficiently, and rear intelligent children. This was a strange amalgam, an Indian idea of virtue mixed with Victorian thinking about the woman’s role in the household.”<sup>28</sup>

Viresalingam highlights the fact that the empress “whom we respect like a mother, and serve with devotion, and to whom the kings of the Indian subcontinent show utmost loyalty” is, in fact, the daughter of a remarried woman (*punarbhuvu putri*) (4). This, he says, “will be a matter of encouragement to those social reformers who argue in favor of widow remarriage” (4). He also writes that the queen was born at a time of great social and political unrest and economic hardship. But “although she was born in such unfavorable times, from the noble character of the great queen everyone may realize that the time of birth has no bearing on

future merit” (5). He also points out that she was inoculated when she was four months old: “She was the first royal child to be inoculated” (4). These examples show how the author uses nuggets of information from his subject’s life to further his own reform agenda: to support widow remarriage, fight superstitions, and promote scientific thinking.

Viresalingam constantly holds up the queen’s upbringing as a model for emulation by the rich and privileged here. Contrasting the two, he writes, “In this country, children of the rich generally have two weaknesses. Parents indulge their children too much and let them eat sweets and whatever else they fancy. As a result, rarely do these children remain healthy. Moreover, rich people do not pay enough attention to their children and leave them in the care of lowly servants. Therefore, children fall into bad company and learn bad language and bad behavior” (7–8). He also praises several other aspects of the queen’s upbringing—her inculcation of truthfulness, frugality, and good conduct. But most of all, three qualities, according to him, mark her upbringing: “The Duchess of Kent followed three main principles in the upbringing of her daughter: not giving her rich and unhealthy food, drawing a strict time schedule for every task, and avoiding causing excitement” (11).<sup>29</sup>

Viresalingam sometimes veers away from the immediate topic to make gratuitous comparisons between Indian and English women. He contrasts the sequestered lives led by rich women in contemporary India with the freedom enjoyed by their counterparts in England.

Unlike in this country, women in England can go on their own, like men, to interact with their friends and to some extent freely move around. No matter how privileged they are, the women do not remain cooped up in the inner chambers of their houses cut off totally from the outside world as is happening now [in this country]. But in its progressive phase in the past, in this country too like in Europe now, women used to accompany their men to the court and move around freely without any restrictions of the royal house. Everyone knows from the *Puranas* Sita accompanying Rama to the royal court, Chandramati and others going on a hunt with their husbands, and Satyabhama going to the battlefield. (12)

He reasons that owing to this socialization and exposure, English women are healthier and more articulate than Indian women. However, it is not women’s freedom or their health that he is in fact concerned with. Viresalingam is keener to point out that enlightened women will make better, more companionate wives and healthier women will eventually produce healthier children. This line of argument once again



demonstrates the close correspondence between the Victorian ideal of womanhood and Viresalingam's idea of improving the status of women.

Viresalingam also applies local, Hindu ideals of *pativrata* (virtuous wife) dharma to appraise the actions of some important women in the queen's family. The decision of her mother, the duchess of Kent, to remain in England after the death of her husband, despite not knowing the language of the country and in the face of many other obstacles, is deemed appropriate for a widow as per the Hindu custom (6). Similarly, he also admires several acts of Victoria that to him mark her out as a "jewel of a *pativrata*" (23). These include her insistence at the time of her marriage with Prince Albert on following the traditional custom of the bride declaring her obedience to the groom; her assertion that even if she may fail as a queen, she would perform all her wifely duties with devotion and dedication; and her note in the diary in which she acknowledged her husband's sacrifice of his family, friends, country, and everything else for her sake, and committed herself to keep him happy always (22–23).

Extending the image of the queen as a devoted wife, the author presents her as a dedicated mother. While describing the recreational activities of the rich in England, he abruptly draws the reader's attention to the queen's breastfeeding her children as a mark of her dedication to her motherly duty. "Unlike those high-class women who when they become somewhat rich appoint wet nurses and deceive god and betray children by wasting the breast milk that god meant for their own offspring, the queen breastfed her first child as well as those who were born subsequently" (26).

The third part of the biography, which deals with the administrative phase of the queen's life, is interesting mainly for the author's views on some political developments during the queen's reign. For instance, his description of the French Revolution betrays his sympathy for monarchy and suspicion of people's rule. "In the year 1848, the attempt to replace the monarchy with democracy resulted in a major crisis throughout Europe. Scared by the atrocities that occurred in the wake of the turmoil that originated in France, the king [Louis Philippe] somehow managed to flee and took refuge in England under the pseudonym of Smith" (49). Note how the revolution is termed a "crisis" and only the "atrocities" in its wake are mentioned. Closer to home, his view of the revolt of 1857 similarly affirms his promonarchy stance: "Bengali soldiers revolting against the rulers and murdering several Englishmen, Nana Saheb encouraging the rebel soldiers and joining forces with some scoundrels and

committing several atrocities, and the English army swiftly suppressing the rebellion and establishing order are events that are familiar to everyone” (51).

Viresalingam’s favorable disposition toward British rule is not surprising in light of his well-documented disinterest in the nationalist movement. As Leonard points out, “He was, keeping with the spirit of times, a moderate in politics. He extolled the virtues of British rule and was thus a victim of ‘false consciousness’ as it was the case with other intellectuals of the nineteenth century, who believed in the colonial rule for the transformation of the Indian society.”<sup>30</sup> It is not a coincidence, therefore, that his mission of social reform lost its prominence with the emergence of nationalism as the dominant discourse in the early twentieth century.

Toward the end of the biography, Viresalingam provides a quick list of the achievements of England and India during the queen’s reign. With regard to India, he assesses the progress in terms of technical developments—in railways, communication technology, and print technology. The biography concludes in the true Indian narrative tradition. As A. K. Ramanujan pointed out “No Indian text comes without a context, a frame, till the nineteenth century. Works are framed by *phalásruti* verses—these verses tell the reader, reciter, or listener all the good that will result from his act of reading, reciting, or listening. They relate the text, of whatever antiquity, to the present reader.”<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, Viresalingam ends the biography with the following *phalásruti*: “May all those who happen to read this biography make an effort to adopt the queen’s virtues of truthfulness, altruism, compassion, honesty, punctuality, humility, and kindness” (62).

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Before the title “Empress of India” was conferred on her, Victoria was “England’s Domestic Queen,” and as a devoted wife and a dedicated mother, she was shaped by and represented many of the cherished virtues of her age, immortalized by Coventry Patmore’s image of the “angel in the house.”<sup>32</sup> At the same time, however, she was also the ruler of a powerful country and later an empire on which the sun never set. Thus, as Elizabeth Langland has argued, Victoria, renowned for both her devotion as a wife and her imperiousness, embodied “the contradictory roles of self-reliant monarch and dependent wife.”<sup>33</sup>

The ambiguous image of Queen Victoria afforded its appropriation in India by both advocates as well as critics of colonial modernity. While

the reformists regarded her as a harbinger of change, the counterreformists saw her as an ally in their effort to preserve traditional values. However, as the foregoing discussion has sought to demonstrate, neither of them employed the image of the queen uncritically. Instead, they mimicked, morphed, and reconfigured the image and provincialized it to further their own agendas.

## NOTES

1. Desa (desamu) meant a cultural-linguistic realm rather than a geographical region, country, or political nation-state. It is on the foundation of this cultural character that a political party, Telugu Desam, was founded in 1982 by drawing on the purported self-respect and self-pride of Telugu people.
2. Munich, "Queen Victoria," 267; Homans and Munich, "Introduction," 1.
3. Mangamma, *Book Printing in India*, 34. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text. Benjamin Schultz, a Protestant missionary, was perhaps the first European to learn Telugu well enough to print books in it. He arrived in India in 1718 and after serving for more than two decades, first in Tranquebar and then in Madras, returned to Halle, Germany, in 1743.
4. Reddy, *Influence of English*, 61.
5. Rao, *Telugu Sahitayam*, 304.
6. Rao, *Telugu Sahitayam*, 298.
7. Rao, *Telugu Sahitayam*, xii.
8. Reddy, *Influence of English*, 41.
9. Reddy, *Influence of English*, 62.
10. Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism*, 5.
11. Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism*, 9, 1.
12. Shaw, "An Initiative That Backfired."
13. *Victoria Jubilee Hindu Medicine* (1866), by N. R. Subbarajulu Naidu.
14. Cover page of the publication. Interestingly, both texts have English titles on the cover page and Telugu titles on the inner cover. While the cover page of Viresalingam's book mentions his official designation ("Senior Pundit, First Grade Govt. College; Rajahmundry"), publication details, and price, the cover page of Venkataratnam's poem carries, besides publication details, more detailed profiles of

- the poet and the translator, and explains the occasion and the purpose of the poem's composition.
15. Anjaneyulu, *Kandukuri Veeresalingam*, 16–17.
  16. The term *navala*, an adaptation of “novel,” came to be used widely in Telugu literature only after 1897 when it was first used. All earlier fictional prose narratives were labeled as *prabandhas*, which traditionally are semihistorical biographical narratives.
  17. *Anglo-Indian Prize Poems*, 48 (emphasis original).
  18. A professor of Telugu who helped me parse the poem dismissed it as “trash.”
  19. Pandya, *The Empress of India*, 1.6, 3.6, 10.1, 10.3–4.
  20. Leonard, *Kandukuri Viresalingam*, 4–5.
  21. The other leading figure of modernity in Telugu is Gurajada Venkata Apparao (1862–1915), the author of the play *Kanyasulkam* (1890/1909), regarded as the *adikavyam* (first literary work) of modern Telugu literature. He too is known to have composed a series of praise poems in English on the queen titled “Victoria Prasasti,” which were reportedly presented to the Viceroy of India by his patron the Maharani of Reeva in 1890. However, they remain untraced.
  22. Rajagopal, “Fashioning Modernity in Telugu,” 47.
  23. Leonard, *Kandukuri Viresalingam*, 217.
  24. Sivarao, *Viresalingam*, xxix–xxx.
  25. Schmitthenner, *Telugu Resurgence*, 281.
  26. Schmitthenner, *Telugu Resurgence*, 281.
  27. Viresalingam, *Sri Victoria Maharagni*, 1. All translations from this text are mine. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
  28. Leonard, *Kandukuri Viresalingam*, 60.
  29. He conveniently glosses over the notorious Kensington System of her childhood, which isolated her from other children and relatives. Similarly, he portrays the decision of the duchess of Kent to remain in England after the death of the duke as an act of *pativrata* dharma rather than a decision motivated perhaps by the possibility of her daughter ascending to the throne.
  30. Leonard, *Kandukuri Viresalingam*, vii.
  31. Ramanujan, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” 48.
  32. Langland, *Nobody's Angels*, 62.
  33. Langland, *Nobody's Angels*, 62.

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