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# Dalits, Reform, and the Brahmin Social World in Viswanatha Satyanarayana's Nīla Peṇḍli

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## *Abstract*

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the rise of social reform as a transformative force in Indian society, challenging entrenched caste hierarchies and reconfiguring social relationships. Viswanatha Satyanarayana's novels, deeply engaged with the issues of social reform and the politics of modernity and tradition, have however remained largely overlooked in social science research. Through a critical reading of Viswanatha's *Nīla Peṇḍli* from a social science perspective, this article makes a start in engaging with his political thought. *Nīla Peṇḍli* portrays the relentless advance of social reform and interrogates the eagerness with which society is embracing it without considering its consequences. By examining conservative responses to social reform and Dalit assertion, this article throws light on the anxieties of the Brahmin conservatives in the face of these changes, and the discursive strategies they adopt to negotiate and be relevant in a changing world.

***Keywords:*** *Dalits; Social Reform; Brahminic; Caste Politics; Western Modernity; Viswanatha Satyanarayana*

## *Introduction*

The nineteenth century ushered in a radically new self-consciousness in colonial Indian society. Constantly subject to the evaluation of an authoritative foreign gaze, the colonial subjects felt compelled to refashion their society to measure up to the standards of the master. Labelling themselves 'reformers', Western educated Indian elite were activist in their efforts to remould their contemporary societies to fit the new standards, to be rid of the grip of rigid and unscientific traditions and usher in modernity. While the particulars of what needs to be reformed and how varied from reformer to reformer, they all shared a belief in the decadence of their contemporary society and a desire for change, with both the judgement of decadence and the desired direction of change being influenced by colonial discourse. Over the years the

visions of various reformers became enormously influential in Indian society allowing them to fundamentally transform, and in many cases completely overwrite, its pre-existing traditions.

It is in this context that the work of Viswanatha Satyanarayana, a twentieth century Telugu littérateur, becomes significant for us. Viswanatha presented himself, consciously, as a critic of the prevalent mainstream reformist discourses. He saw the path being taken by his contemporaries as a shallow, unreflective one, as seeking a modernity without substance, consisting of only a superficial mimicking of the West. In his work he attempts to demonstrate the value of what is being abandoned as the obsolete decadent traditional, and highlights the damage society has undergone by rushing headlong into what he believes to be a shallowly and feebly understood 'modern'. As such, Viswanatha provides us with an interesting and important counterpoint to the mainstream reformist discourses of the nineteenth and twentieth century India. In doing so however, Viswanatha also lays claim to privileged knowledge of authentic tradition. He is rarely critical of 'tradition', instead choosing only to describe the past as a romanticised ideal, filling him with nostalgia. Viswanatha is apologist in glossing over or explaining away the many charges of injustice and discrimination against the tradition that he defends: everything worked well the way it was. As for the present, often his work consists of him seeking solace in isolated receptacles and carriers of tradition, against all odds holding the Maginot line of tradition against forces of modernity, and his conviction that in these lie the seeds of a future resurgence of ‘tradition’. Therefore, while Viswanatha's critique of reform, and of modernity in general, is valuable, it is in no way unbiased. Having said that, there is no denying the value of his work. Viswanatha was a prolific writer, and consistently wrote novels focussing on the politics of modernity and tradition in a career spanning decades. However, there has been no systematic study of Viswanatha's work outside literary studies, and certainly little has been done from sociological or political science perspectives. This paper attempts a start by looking at perspectives that Viswanatha offers on caste reform and its effects on the Brahmin social world in his novel *Nīla Peṇḍli* (*Nīla’s marriage*).[i]

## *Discussion*

Before diving into *Nīla Peṇḍli*, a brief digression to *Vīravallaḍu* (*The Heroic Valladu*), Viswanatha’s only novel with a Dalit protagonist, will be useful to provide context. *Vīravallaḍu* begins with the young son of a Brahmin landlord being shocked to learn that he is named after a dead *Māla* (a Dalit caste) servant of the household. Outraged, the boy demands that the family change his name. His father, however, chides him for his disrespect, and narrates the story of how Vallaḍu rescued the family when they were in dire straits, and that they owe their current prosperity to him. Vallaḍu’s family had served the Brahmin’s family for many generations. Viswanatha makes it a point to show us the friendship between Vallaḍu and his Brahmin master. That bonhomie does not, however, dilute the caste practices of the Brahmin household towards Vallaḍu in any way. Even after their generations of service, Vallaḍu’s family still lives in a hut in the Dalit ghetto; speaking to Vallaḍu is polluting enough to break the landlady’s *madi*[ii]*;* and, even when rescuing his master’s family, Vallaḍu still has to be conscious of maintaining their caste purity. In all this, we see no resentment from Vallaḍu regarding his status: his family was given shelter generations past by the Brahmin’s family, and his loyalty to them is their due. As for the untouchability, that is just the way Brahmins are, nothing to be done about it.

For Viswanatha, Vallaḍu’s relationship with his upper caste masters showcases the amity that existed between the Dalits and the upper castes in the ages past. The subject comes up again and again in Viswanatha’s work. Often, what is highlighted is the debt incurred by the Brahmin due to the kindness shown by the Dalit: in *Nīla Peṇḍli*, for example, the wealth that the protagonist’s family enjoyed for generations is based upon the land donated by a *Māla* farmer to his Brahmin teacher as *gurudakṣiṇa* (offering to the teacher). Brahmins and Dalits both knew their place and lived in harmony within the

bounds of society: The Dalits did not resent their Brahmin masters, and the Brahmins valued and remembered the contributions of their Dalit servants.

Stories of this amity serve as a contrasting background to one of the primary foci of Viswanatha's work, his anxiety regarding the disruption that Western modernity has caused in this relationship. For a Brahmin, the very existence of the Dalit always carries with it the threat of pollution. But, in the past, in Viswanatha's narrative, this threat was managed, and the Dalits, as faithful retainers, willingly kept themselves under good regulation, respectful of the Brahmin's purity.[iii] Under the influence of the West, however, the Dalits turn into adversaries who actively threaten the Brahmin's purity. They seek access to sacred spaces, and to eat with, and marry Brahmins.

Viswanatha, over his decades of writing novels, returns to this issue frequently. In his earliest novels, the Dalit threat to Brahmin purity is still a spectre. In *Vēyi Paḍagalu*, written in the 1930s, the Gandhian movement for better treatment of 'Harijans', including allowing them to enter temples, becomes a point of discussion between the protagonist, Dharma Rao, and his disciple, Kumārasvāmi. However, while the issue is discussed, the threat is still distant and had not entered the home of the Brahmins yet. At this juncture, Dharma Rao is still able to chastise a Dalit for daring to approach him too closely on the street.[iv]

Things are quite different in *Nīla Peṇḍli*, written in the 1960s. *Nīla Peṇḍli* follows the life of Nīla, a precocious young Brahmin girl, through her teenage years as she attempts to navigate the difficult choices imposed on her by a rapidly changing society. Thematically, the novel revolves around the issue of the assault of Western modernity on the Brahmin social world, and the resilience of those who choose to resist that assault. The story is told from Nīla's perspective, and it is through her that this all-pervasive assault on the Brahmin social world is experienced.

Before going into the text, it is important to consider Viswanatha's mode of writing a novel. Usually, Viswanatha did not pen down his novels himself, rather, he used to dictate them to a transcriber over a few days. The structure of the story was loosely framed in his mind before it was dictated, but the finer details were all improvised. As such, often Viswanatha's spur of the moment meditations found their place in the story as long digressions. Given that his stories did not go through any substantial editing process (Viswanatha himself rarely bothered to read his stories after having dictated them), these digressions find their place in the story as they are. In a story like *Nīla Peṇḍli*, it is quite difficult to separate Nīla's own introspections from the narrator's meditations—much too often they simply flow into one another. As such, the author is overdetermined, making it difficult for the reader to separate the narrator and the author.

Taking this further, we have to consider Viswanatha's claim to the status of a public intellectual with definitive knowledge of 'tradition', and the stature to speak on a wide range of subjects with authority. Nowhere in *Nīla Peṇḍli* is this public intellectual hidden. The narrator often easily overpowers the inner monologue of Nīla, starkly making his presence known, not to speak of the chapters where the narrator goes into a lecturing mode, revealing the secrets of the world to his readers. So, the author is not merely overdetermined, the narrative voice, in fact, speaks stridently with the authority of a public intellectual. As such, while *Nīla Peṇḍli* is a work of fiction, it is difficult not to see Viswanatha's own voice in it. It is easy to imagine readers from the 1960s and 70s picturing a sage Viswanatha personally guiding the troubled Nīla (and them) while reading *Nīla Peṇḍli*.

The story opens with Nīla struggling with what to do about a love letter given to her by a Dalit Christian student at her college. As a Brahmin girl she feels imposed upon, and in her meditations about what to do regarding the situation, she considers the Dalit boy her oppressor, aided by the authority of the

biased Christian Principal[v] who would not support her were she to go to him, and the hidden hand of her reformer eldest brother who has been trying to 'convert' her to his ideology (and who she suspects instigated the Dalit boy to pursue her).

It is important to note that, for all the threat that they represent, Dalits, by themselves, have remarkably little agency in *Nīla Peṇḍli*. Rather, it is the hand of Sudhākara Rao, Nīla's reformer elder brother, that guides them. College educated, and employed as an academic, Sudhākara Rao lives with his family in 'a city far away' (probably Calcutta). He is a believer in the equality of all human beings, and champions anti-Brahmin discourse, never missing a chance to lecture on the cunning of Brahmins. He is absorbed with propagating his ideas, his charisma, intelligence and radical nature bringing him considerable following. Sudhākara Rao is at heart a preacher heavily invested in propagating his ideals, so it is important for him to convert his family to his way of thinking. He writes long letters to them talking at length about his ideals. When Nīla finishes her high school, Sudhākara Rao decides to take a more personal interest in bringing her to his side and invites her to his house for the summer vacation.

Early into her visit Nīla finds that her brother's family does not practice any of the required customs practised in the Brahmin households of their region while dining. It is not cooked by someone practising *madi*, and they touch everything without a care for purity and pollution. The first time Nīla eats with them she is revolted and feels contaminated. But more than that, soon she learns that her brother does not make any distinctions of caste when inviting people over for dinner. Nīla finds herself curious and observes the interactions of people visiting her brother. She is intrigued by the free association they have with each other and begins to appreciate the lack of boundaries and sense of camaraderie among people of such disparate backgrounds. However, Nīla is soon exposed to the cracks in this seemingly perfect social world through Nāñchāru, her brother's wife. She realises that her brother's is a divided household, and that his social group is not as seamlessly interwoven as she had initially assumed.

Nāñchāru is not at all happy with the free access to the dining table that Sudhākara Rao gives to all his guests. She does not want to eat food that has been touched by 'Harijans', nor does she want to clean the table after they have eaten on it. She despairs the fact that Sudhākara Rao eats meat and has gotten all their children to like eating meat. She is particularly worried about the attention being paid to their thirteen year old daughter by Nathan, an eighteen year old 'Harijan' Christian boy. In conversations with Nīla, Nāñchāru pours out her frustration with a household that has gotten away from her, that her whole family is polluted, fallen. Nāñchāru is a woman who is rendered mute by the clever rhetoric of her husband. She is not familiar with the trivia of the contemporary Western world that her husband's social world considers important and is often mocked by him and her daughters for her ignorance. Nīla's presence wakes her up and gives her voice. In Nīla she finds both someone who values and understands her world view, and someone who can counter Sudhākara Rao's rhetoric effectively.

Viswanatha's novels are teeming with characters such as Nāñchāru. In a way, his novels are dedicated to the Nāñchārus in real life. He believes that people enamoured with the West, and who speak loudly against custom and religion, are for the most part shallow in their understanding of both the West and their own traditions. They are skilled in rhetoric, but their arguments are often mere sophistry, rarely sound. Viswanatha sympathises with those many who live their traditions quietly, if unreflectively, and do not have the skill and explicit knowledge to face the onslaught of sustained criticism that reformers throw at them. They only know that they are right in doing what they do, that the way they lead lives has meaning and value. But they are unable to prove it discursively to those who seek to interrogate them. To that extent, Viswanatha writes his novels to fight on their behalf—he answers the reformers for them. His protagonists are often isolated figures surrounded by people who are eager to westernise, and wage heroic battles with them.

There is particular focus in *Nīla Peṇḍli* on Sudhākara Rao's choice to eat meat. Nāñchāru relates to Nīla the transformation of her husband due to his dietary habits: "Nīla! What remains of your brother's former beauty? Eating meat and drinking alcohol has made him crude. Have you seen his lips? They are cracked at the corners. You cannot see it under his moustache. Lips of people who eat meat crack like that. He has lost all his beauty. Now his face looks like the face of one who eats cattle. Because he was born a Brahmin you can still glimpse his former radiance, but look at that Nathan's face! I feel revolted whenever he enters the house" (Ibid., 100). Nīla's response to this scathing comment is a simple platitude, delivered with a laugh, "all humans are equal." Nāñchāru's response is telling, "yes, yes, all humans are equal, just as all animals are equal. Is there no difference between a cow and a buffalo?[vi] Is there no difference between a lion and a deer" (Ibid.)? Nāñchāru shifts Nīla's 'all humans' to 'all animals'—Dalits and Brahmins do not even belong to the same species. And eating meat as Sudhākara Rao does can lead a Brahmin to take on the characteristics of the meat-eating Dalit species.

For Sudhākara Rao, meat eating is a performance. He does not eat meat simply because he likes it, but because he wishes to perform the transgression of a Brahmin eating meat. A scene from the novel portrays this quite well: one year after Nīla visits Sudhākara Rao in Calcutta, he quits his job to take up activism full time back in Andhra. Followers inspired by him join him in his touring of villages to spread his message of equality. After a while, Sudhākara Rao settles in the village of his younger son-in-law, living in one of his cattle sheds (by this time Sudhākara Rao's eldest daughter is married to Nathan, and his younger daughter is married to a *Śūdra.* Sudhākara Rao receives much praise for visiting and staying at his Dalit son-in-law's house). Nīla decides to visit her brother there, taking the train to make the journey. On the train she is recognised by the man sitting opposite her as Sudhākara Rao's sister. He introduces himself as a former follower of her brother. Eager to talk about her brother, the man tells the tale of why he broke from her brother. During one of their preaching tours, Sudhākara Rao and his follower run into a bad storm. Desperate for shelter, they end up in the hut of an Erakala family. They are hungry, but the follower does not even consider asking the Erakalas for food. Sudhākara Rao has no such compunction; he forces the family to serve them food, overpowering their reluctance to serve food to a Brahmin. Sudhākara Rao sees this as just another opportunity to propagate his message of equality, telling them that he will eat whatever food they have ready. The food served is rice and unflavoured boiled meat.[vii] The follower, a regular meat eater, finds the smell of the unflavoured meat served revolting. Not recognising the meat to be any of the meats that he eats regularly, he fearfully asks the Erakala man what it is. The reply is cat. He is disgusted. Sudhākara Rao, however, eats it with great relish, savouring each bite; again, not because the meat itself is tasty, but because he is enjoying this new avenue for transgression afforded him, and the chance to further affirm his commitment to the equality of all. When his follower baulks at eating the meat, Sudhākara Rao mocks him for his lack of commitment to the cause. That incident, the man tells Nīla, led to his breaking with her brother.

Sudhākara Rao's tendency to cross all boundaries in his determination to transgress unnerves those around him. In the moment where he challenges his follower to eat cat meat, he sees in Sudhākara Rao a demon. And this is not the only time Sudhākara Rao is characterised as such. Earlier in the novel Nīla, speaking to Nāñchāru, says, "Oh sister-in-law! You think you are a common woman?! You are a goddess who was cursed to come to earth. My brother, if you ask me, is a demon. You ended up as his wife. It is a strange situation arranged by God" (Ibid., 103). What makes him so? Sudhākara Rao not only transgresses social custom himself, but has dedicated himself to the task of convincing others to as well. His follower, for example, is worried about the consequences of following where Sudhākara Rao leads: "There is one thing. He has transcended humanity. Those who have transcended, instead of keeping their transcendence to themselves, start propagating. This causes trouble for common people without any of these transcendent qualities. They selectively perceive what they like in their teachings and start following them. Those who have transcended have a definite place either here or in the hereafter. But those who follow them do not have any definite place. They are damned here and damned in the

hereafter" (Ibid., 151). Later Nīla takes this line of thought forward in a conversation with Sudhākara Rao, during a visit with him. She refuses to eat with him saying, "I have not come to eat in your house. If I eat in your house, there is no absolution for me. Like someone said, to spread *adharma,* God has created you like he created the Buddha. I will leave tomorrow morning" (Ibid.).

Sudhākara Rao has, by his own admission, stepped out of the caste system. That in itself is not as much of an issue for those such as Nīla, as his conviction that everyone else should do the same. Viswanatha believes that 'Indian' society has arranged itself in the most optimal manner, much effort having gone into achieving that optimum by our ancestors. He suggests that those like Sudhākara Rao who abandon the system, and those who are tempted by Sudhākara Rao to follow him, do not understand its ramifications. Most people find it difficult to let go, only managing it superficially, and often find themselves trapped in between. *Nīla Peṇḍli* has a surfeit of examples of such. The follower who is not able to follow Sudhākara Rao in eating cat meat is, apart from being disgusted by the meat itself, worried about the consequences of committing that act. Sudhākara Rao's transcendence comes from his complete rejection of the caste system. The follower, though tempted by Sudhākara Rao's message of equality, is still beholden to the system that he was born into and is not able to rid himself of the fear of the consequences of transgression. Many among Sudhākara Rao's friends and followers advocate inter-caste marriages quite eagerly, but it is quite rare to find one who is ready to have such a marriage oneself.

Running in the background throughout the novel is the question of Nīla's marriage. The choices available to her, and the various claims that each of these choices represent, are central to the novel. First, there is the claim by Sudhākara Rao. Nīla's marriage is important to Sudhākara Rao, for it is in her marriage that, for him, the strength of his ideology will be proved or disproved. He tries to convert her, either by himself, by lecturing her, by inviting her to his multi-caste soirées; or through proxies, as in the case of the Dalit Christian boy who gives her a love letter. Nīla never seriously considers 'converting' however. Though intrigued by the diverse nature of her brother's coterie, she herself is never tempted to become a part of it. Rather, content to be an observer, she is easily able to find the fault lines in the utopia that her brother is attempting to create.

Then there are, of course, the attempts by Nīla's family to get her married to a Brahmin man. Many men come to see her over the years without any success. Exasperated by the shallowness of the Brahmins coming to see her, Nīla during her visit, complains to Nāñchāru, "...what can I say about those marriage proposals? As repulsive as I find my elder brother's ideologies and customs, when I think of those marriage proposals; when I think of the condition of our society; when I consider the situation of our country; I get equally repulsed. When I look at our Brahmins, consider their demonic qualities, their greed for money, their un-Vaidic way of life, I feel as if this Brahmin society should be destroyed. A few of them such as Veṅkaṭarāma Śāstri [a learned Brahmin in Nīla's town, whose lectures Nīla often attends] are Brahmins. The rest are not Brahmins. They are demons" (Ibid., 103). That is why when Sudhākara Rao invites Nīla to come visit him in the village that he has settled in, and her parents and her younger sister-in-law object to her going—having had his daughters marry men of other castes, they are no longer fit to visit; her sister-in-law in fact tells her that if she goes there, then she cannot come back—Nīla, tired of their objections, and the failed marriage proposals in the past year, replies, "I am anyway not getting married. You can't give dowry. The prospective bridegrooms who do come to see me do not like my figure. At least there I might find someone or the other willing to marry me. For one born as a woman isn't it marriage that gives life ultimate meaning? Whether it be Vedic religion, or foreign religion, isn't it in marriage that it is proved!? That its truth manifests!? I will go. When I come back, sister-in-law! Serve me food outside on the verandah" (Ibid., 147).

Of course, Nīla's words are said in anger and desperation. She never seriously considers marrying one of Sudhākara Rao's cohorts, outside her caste. At the same time, it is also true that she is disgusted by

her contemporary Brahmin society: among her suitors are those who see in Nīla a chance to preserve the privilege of being a Brahmin, while at the same time enjoying the advantages of being attached to a well-known reformer. The only real possibility that announces itself is Umāpati, a young, intelligent, and wealthy, Brahmin friend of Nīla's younger brother, Nāgeśvar Rao. As a favour to Nāgeśvar Rao, Umāpati started tutoring Nīla in maths after she finished her high school. Over the years the two develop a close bond, with Umāpati helping with her studies and looking out for Nīla at college, and Nīla quietly appreciative of his attention to her. In time Umāpati falls in love with Nīla, and Nīla, respectful and admiring of Umāpati, is not indifferent.

Their relationship is not to be, however. Towards the end of the novel Umāpati has a conversation with his mother regarding marriage. His mother is aware of his partiality to Nīla and forbids him. When he asks why, she has this to say: "They don't have anything. Forget dowry, they cannot even afford to give us the required gifts of silver vessels and silk clothes. Even if we were to ignore that, her brother is a *matabhraṣṭuḍu* (defiler of custom). His entire family is the same. Yes, Nīla is a good woman. But, if you marry her, someday her brother will come to our house with his son-in-laws. He is a Brahmin. One son-in-law is a *Māla*. The other a *Śūdra*. Where will you serve them food? In the street? Who will clear the leaves they eat on" (Ibid., 158)? For Umāpati's mother neither Nīla's individual good qualities nor her father's piety are enough to counter the spectre of her fallen older brother. Nīla's strength and intelligence, attractive to Umāpati, are not as important to his mother—what is important is ritual purity, maintaining custom, and by marrying Nīla, Umāpati will put that in jeopardy. So, she forbids him.

It is often women who speak with Viswanatha's voice in his novels. Men are frequently too enamoured, too close to the West. Western educated young men are eager to believe that all that is traditional is bad, and that their education, and knowledge of the West, gives them the means, and the responsibility, to effect a change. Given this, women are left to be the keepers of tradition, to ensure its continuance, and to regulate their menfolk. It falls to Umāpati's mother, therefore, to speak wisdom, ensuring that he does not follow his desires at the cost of duty to his family. In the case of Nāgeśvar Rao too, it is his wife Veṅkaṭalakṣmī who is credited with keeping him on the straight and the narrow. Nāgeśvar Rao is agreeable by nature and very devoted to his elder brother. He does not have any strong objections to his brother's ideology and would have followed him into his reformist projects if not for the strong hand of Veṅkaṭalakṣmī. When Nāñchāru complains to Nīla about the fallen state of her family, Nīla is of the opinion that it is Nāñchāru who is at fault. If she had moved to control Sudhākara Rao early on, then things would not have gone so far. Now it is too late to do anything, and the only avenue left to Nāñchāru is to follow wherever her husband leads her. For Viswanatha then women have the burden of safeguarding tradition.

Viswanatha expects the same from his protagonist too. Nīla has access to Western education. She has financial independence, from her stipend from college, and later from her teaching job, earning far more than Nāgeśvar Rao. From a young age she is exposed to Sudhākara Rao's radical rhetoric. She even travels to that liminal space, the city, where boundaries are broken and mixing happens without restraint. But Nīla stays rooted. The lectures of a learned Brahmin hold her attention far more than brother's. She is not impressed by the name dropping of great Western men by Sudhākara Rao. She rejects the Dalit Christian boy that proposes to her, burning his letter in ritual purification. Viswanatha allows Nīla out to explore the changing world, but that journey does not add any blemish to her.

Though Viswanatha's novels are often polemical in their tone, there is never any call to action. As such, *Nīla Peṇḍli* is a prolonged rumination about the kind of action that is required, with a final positive decision that, in the current world, to suspend action indefinitely is the right action. Nīla's speeches in her brother's household have not made a difference, just as perhaps Viswanatha's novels would not make a difference. Society has gone too far along down the road to change for it be stopped. However, perhaps,

Viswanatha thinks that change could be contained, or at least, some of what is valuable can be preserved for the future: “this is always the fate of social revolutions in India. Small issues blow over in a week. Something like Buddhism might stay for two thousand years. Will what is going on now be permanent? Who knows how many years this will last? But in the end victory will be Nīla’s” (Ibid., 62). In Umāpati's reluctant and painful admission of his decision to obey his mother's demands that he not marry Nīla, Nīla finally finds a ray of hope. She had almost succumbed to despair and cynicism. In acceding to his mother's demands Umāpati has upheld the same values that Nīla holds dear, and affirms the world view that Nīla still keeps faith in. By silently, but reverently, accepting Umāpati's declaration, Nīla completes the circle. Their decision not to marry keeps their social world alive.

### *Conclusion*

In 1971, A.S.Raman, a journalist, asked Viswanatha to comment on criticism levelled against him about him being "an obscurantist without any sympathy for or understanding of anything that is modern...the champion of lost causes, the upholder of values that are no longer valid today” (Sastry, 1977, 76). Viswanatha's response is very interesting:

> If people think, I have no sympathy for modernism, I say they are short of understanding. I am not an enemy to the modern Scientific[sic] things of utility. The train, the phone, the plane, the radio, the ship—I want them to be here. If I can read between the lines of my writings, I want the type of Government[sic] which now people are having in Russia but I want at the same time not to do away with the metaphysics, the mysticism and the spiritual.
>
> I may defend lost causes. I do not want them to be revived, which I know is an impossible thing. But I want the modern people not to call the ancient things which were good in their own way and from which there are many things to be borrowed by us and preserved, call it a dog and hang them. Many of the modern people were unnecessarily carried by a mad emotion for everything that is new. They have to wait, to examine, to probe into. Let them not unnecessarily follow the west[sic] blindly. We are a race, whose ancients have thought about some things or about many things and reached the maximum. Think of them, borrow from the west[sic] things which are new and add to the human values and the happiness of man. Do not follow them when and where massacres and internal convulsions of society, mutual hatred are there. (Sastry, 77-78)

If we are to take Viswanatha’s response above seriously, he does not object to socialism. In *Vēyi Paḍagalu*, Dharma Rao asks Kumārasvāmi why, if the objective of the reformers is to improve the lives of Dalits, they do not first focus on improving their health, hygiene, housing, financial status, etc. In the worldly sphere, Dharma Rao does not object to being equal to the Dalits. When it comes to temple entry however, he responds as a Brahmin: allowing Dalits into the temple will defile the deity. For all that Viswanatha makes it a point to stress the bonhomie between Brahmins and Dalits in the past, if we take Nīla’s thoughts on the matter seriously, the separation between the two is quite insurmountable. When reflecting on her situation after the Dalit Christian student gives her a love letter, Nīla feels herself powerless. The weapon of the powerless, she thinks, is Gandhi’s *Satyagraha.* But, she reflects, the efficacy of *Satyagraha* depends on the emergence of guilt and compassion in the oppressor. The longer it takes for that to happen, the longer the *satyagrahi* must suffer. That duration, Nīla ponders, depends on the past births of the oppressor. One who has lived a good life in the previous birth, will realise sooner. One who has led an evil life, later. And one who was not even a human being in their previous life, will they ever feel guilt, or compassion for the suffering of those they are oppressing? If that was not clear enough, Viswanatha then tells us the story of how the great sage Vaśiṣṭa married Arundhatī. Vaśiṣṭa, using his yogic power, burns and resurrects Arundhatī, previously a *Māla* girl, a hundred times, before she

becomes pure enough for him to marry her. That, then, is gap between a Dalit and a Brahmin. So, Nīla obviously did not expect any compassion from her Dalit oppressor, which was why, instead of resisting silently, she burnt his letter publicly and spit on it.

For all the valuable insights that *Nīla Peṇḍli* gives us regarding the deficiencies and hypocrisies of those who champion caste reform, it is the threat to the Brahmin social world that is the primary concern for Viswanatha. In a long digression in *Nīla Peṇḍli*, Viswanatha reflects that Indian civilisation is Brahminical because society as a whole, often unwillingly, recognised the sublimity of the Brahmin way of life and adopted it, 'Brahminism' having percolated down to all strata of society.[viii] Seen in that light, for Viswanatha, as long as the 'Brahmin' survives, the essence of Indian civilisation survives. Consequently, in a reversal of caste power dynamics, the Dalit threatening Brahmin purity with impunity becomes the oppressor and a threat, and the Brahmin, heroically holding on to the essence of Indian civilisation, becomes the victim. And as Nīla's creator, accepting as he is that the preservation of the world in the form that he is nostalgic about is a 'lost cause', Viswanatha positions himself as its defender by attempting to keep it alive in the minds of his readers.

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## Endnotes

[i] I have used the ISO 15919 system for transliteration from Telugu into English. All the translations in the paper from the original Telugu to English are mine.

[ii] One who is practising *madi* would bathe and don clothes set aside for *madi*—they are only *madi* clothes if they have been recently washed and dried by them—and cook (or eat) while being untouched by anyone else. Being touched by anyone not in *madi* or coming into contact with food or liquids touched by someone else would contaminate the *madi.* They would have to bathe again, and don new *madi* clothes to regain it. A more stringent practice of *madi* would involve bathing in the *madi* clothes and letting the *madi* clothes dry on you. The women practising *madi* in Viswanatha's works usually cook in their wet *madi* clothes.

[iii] Or at least, that is what Viswanatha tries to portray. In practice, there was always contestation between the Dalits and the upper castes, with the upper castes having to periodically apply various means of coercion to regulate Dalit behaviour.

[iv] Dharma Rao's chastisement is, in fact, a resigned and fatalistic outburst. Dharma Rao is walking with Ghanācāri, the soothsayer of the village deity. While walking, they see an 'untouchable' walking towards them. Ghanācāri tries to move aside, but the untouchable does not understand and comes closer. Dharma Rao exclaims, "wait ten years. Ghanācāri won't be there then. We will all go to the temple together. The deity won't have Ghanācāri, and the divine essence of the sacred site will vanish. I will be the same as you then" (Satyanarayana, 2013d, 360-61).

[v] While Viswanatha does not explore it in *Nīla Peṇḍli*, he highlights the way Christian missionaries use educational institutions to propagate Christianity in *Vēyi Paḍagalu*. In *Vēyi Paḍagalu*, 'Hindu' texts are regularly demeaned in missionary colleges, with any protest by the 'Hindu' students being ignored. Conversely, any criticism of the West is taken seriously, with the perpetrators being penalised.

[vi] Dharma Rao makes a similar point in *Vēyi Paḍagalu* when discussing temple entry for Dalits with Kumārasvāmi. Dharma Rao argues that *'panchamas'* (Dalits) are as different from Brahmins as buffaloes are from cows.

[vii] The Erakalas are a traditionally nomadic community found primarily in the southern states of India. An Erakala family would not eat unflavoured boiled meat. Erakalas traditionally cook their meat over open flame, flavouring it well. Boiling meat, that too to eat with rice, is not done.

[viii] Viswanatha does not acknowledge the possibility that the 'Brahminical' is the product of complex negotiation among the elite of society, reflecting its contemporary power structures, and the aspirations of the elite—a negotiation in which the Brahmin is often only a junior partner in a patron-client relationship. A junior partner given minor concessions because of his ritual status, but it might in fact be that the world view reflected in the 'Brahminical' is that of the patron, the Brahmin merely being the voice that espouses it. Seen this way, the patron caste is 'Brahminical' not because there is something deep within them that recognises the sublimity of the Brahmin, but because the Brahminical in fact reflects their world view and serves to uphold their privileges the best.