

## Decline and revitalization of Vedic tradition and identity.

### A survey of contemporary Vedic education in the State of Maharashtra, India.



Students and teachers of the Svāmī Muktañanda Vedaśālā, Satara, Maharashtra (2006).

Religious education in India has been an important part of socialization since ancient times. Usually religion is still primarily conveyed through the family and the caste. Nonetheless religious socialization also happens in formal education systems like the āśramas, monasteries, temples and other centers of learning or through other alternative education systems like fairs, celebrations, popular music and mythical tales... or in modern times even through TV series and movies.

This dissertation deals with one of the oldest traditional forms of religious education in the subcontinent, namely the Vedic tradition of the Gurukula. This education system is designed to train male priests from the Brāhmaṇa caste mainly in the art of recitation of the Vedas, but also in the execution of rituals and all actions implied in the performance of Vedic sacrifices. This ancient corpus of texts was composed in Vedic Sanskrit and even if the meaning is quite rich and important, the focus of these

schools is not on learning this ancient language, but to master the recitation of these texts and their ritual application.

This dissertation deals with a little studied phenomenon within Indology, namely Vedic education in modern India. Traditionally, Indology has been linked with linguistics and philology since its beginnings. Accordingly, the studies that we find in this area are in its majority of historical and philological nature. There is however the relatively recent distinction between classical Indology and modern Indology, the former using a more sociological approach and using mainly modern languages from the subcontinent (Hindi, Marathi, Bengali etc). This dissertation is a combination of the philological study of Sanskrit and Marathi texts that deal with the traditional organization of Vedic schools and it that sense true to the classical approach of Indology. On the other hand, the need for ethnographical methods, the use of Marathi (a modern language) and the focus on tradition within modernity makes this dissertation a balanced combination of both the modern and classical approach.

There have been a considerable amount of studies made on Vedic education, mainly dealing with the Vedic education in Vedic and medieval times (the most important being Witzel several publications, Apte 1954; Mookerji 1999; Chatterji 1947; Scharfe 2002 etc.); few however have dealt directly with the preservation of traditional Vedic education in modern India (Witzel 1976, Staal 1983, Fuller 2001).

This dissertation aims to present a systematic survey of these traditional Vedic schools in the state of Maharashtra nowadays. This survey would study the social, religious and political backgrounds, the motivation of the main actors and the relationship these had and/or have with their sponsors. It would also study how the

Zeitgeist of this age and its available currents of thought and how they have been influencing their religious traditions and identity.

This study aims to create a typology of different kinds of Vedic schools using various elements of criteria, i.e. their religious and political affiliations, their type of funding, their relationship with other popular and local religious forms and traditions, their teaching methods, their facilities and so on. These crucial factors often lacked careful consideration in the analysis of Vedic schools. This study will hopefully then largely contribute to the subject of Vedic traditions in general and to the traditional Vedic education in modern India in particular.

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