

## Brief Summary of the Dissertation

*Embodying Sacred Sound. The transmission of knowledge in traditional Vedic schools of contemporary Maharashtra.*

The Vedas are generally believed to be authoritative texts by most Hindus and “the oldest scriptures of Hinduism”. Nonetheless, the Vedas despite of having been written down in relatively recent times (compared to the date of their composition between 1750-1200 B.C), have traditionally been preserved and ritually used, almost exclusively, *orally*. The verbatim transmission of the Vedas in its current cultural setting (i.e. traditional Vedic schools) is the topic of this dissertation.

This work deals with perhaps the most classical of all subjects of Indology (Vedic studies), but it approaches the subject with a non-classical, i.e. exclusively philological methodology. This dissertation aims at studying the Veda and the “Vedic tradition”, but not as it was lived thousands of years ago, but rather as it can be observed in contemporary India. In a way, my approach is an alliance between classical Indology and cultural anthropology and it aims to shed light on both, Indological themes, as well as on current socio-cultural dynamics. I consider the Vedas to be “living texts” that cannot be separated from their custodians, the *brāhmaṇas*.

In my work I present the results of my study of the traditional education and training of *brāhmaṇas* through the traditional system of *gurukula* as observed in 25 contemporary Vedic schools. This system of education aims to teach Brahmin males how to properly recite and memorize the Veda, as well as to train them for ritual performance. This system of education is alive today in many parts of India and it is particularly strong in the southern states. In this study, I deal particularly with Vedic schools or *vedapāṭhaśālās* from the state of Maharashtra.

*Vedapāṭhaśālās* (or *gurukulas*) are the hub in which the Vedic knowledge and authority is passed from one generation to the other. It is also the place per excellence in which the younger and older generations meet to reconstruct/reaffirm their religious and social identity and become *brāhmaṇas* in the literal sense of the word (i.e. those to carry *brahman*, in the sense of “sacred utterance or rite”). Vedic schools with their *gurukula* model of education are, thus, a very tangible place to observe how the Veda is passed on to the next generations and the way the Vedic tradition is preserved and reconstructed by the *brāhmaṇas* today. Those who transmit the Veda orally, those most fully instructed in the Vedic lore, become *vedamūrtis* or “embodiments of the Veda”. They “become” the text, and thus what they do and say can be considered “Vedic”. This dissertation aims to present a systematic study of these traditional Vedic schools in the state of Maharashtra as observed through ethnographic fieldwork. For the analysis of these schools I have considered social, religious, and political discourses and practices to understand the motivations of the main actors to maintain and reinvent their traditions and the way they present themselves in a rapidly changing society. This dissertation, therefore, hopes to prove to be a valuable contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of the transmission of knowledge in the Vedic milieu and the way tradition is perpetuated and reinvented in a specific regional and historical context. One of the main goals of this dissertation is to show some of the dynamics in the identitarian construction of the “Maharashtrian Vedic *brāhmaṇa*” and the changes in the *brāhmaṇa* ideal as portrayed in traditional discourses found mainly in Sanskrit textual sources. I present examples from my fieldwork using discourse analysis to illustrate how changes and innovations, as well as continuities within the tradition are rearticulated depending on the context used to reinforce a particular identity. These examples illustrate how the articulation of discourses through practices, rituals and symbols are constantly re-negotiating what it means to be a “Vedic Brahmin” in contemporary Maharashtra.

In my work, I discuss the preservation (or reinventions) of traditional elements, as well as the innovations and transformations within the transmission of the Vedas in the Vedic schools of Maharashtra. I present several specific examples drawn from my fieldwork to illustrate how changes in the political environment, the economic system, the social stratification, the education system, religious reforms and changes in gender attitudes have influenced the way the Vedic tradition reinvents itself and the Veda in a globalized world.

I begin my study (Chapter 1.1.) by presenting a description of the material gathered, the methods used to obtain the ethnographic data and as well as the way in which the data has been implemented in the analysis of the schools. In Section 1.2 I give a short summary of the history and the main academic studies on the Vedic Tradition and discuss the *vaidika* system of education as the system, which focuses on the preservation of the sound form. In section 1.3, I revisit the concept of orality (or rather “sonality”) and its relationship to literacy in the Vedic tradition. The element of sonality is important for the Vedic tradition, which not only survived largely without script, but even refused to use it for its sacred texts for many centuries after it was already in use.

After this introductory section, I proceed in chapter 2, to the discussion of the relevant contexts in which the 25 Vedic schools visited during my fieldwork are embedded and offer a brief history of the Vedic schools in Maharashtra and the transformations of the education system from the Peshwa rule to the current policy of the Government in religious education. Here I also present the general characteristics of the schools, the forms of organization and infrastructure and the sponsoring systems.

The section 3 deals with the educational objectives, the curricula, the modes of study and the examinations conducted in these schools. In this chapter I also offer three different models aiming to propose a typology of *vedapāṭhasālās* of Maharashtra deduced from my observations. This typology serves as an analytical tool to highlight distinct discursive features and organizational forms found in these schools.

Chapter 4 deals with the daily life in these schools. I also introduce here the distinct socialization method through the master-disciple relationship (*guruśiṣyasambandha*) and the details of the environment and daily life in the Vedic schools: their daily schedule, the rules and regulations regarding ritual purity, extracurricular activities etc. I deal here also with the perspectives on becoming a traditional Vedic Brahmin in today’s India. I point to the job opportunities, network strategies and power relations in their social environments.

Finally, in chapter 5, I discuss the preservation (or reinventions) of traditional elements and the innovations and transformations within the transmission of the Vedas and in the education of the Vedic schools. I start with a theoretical discussion on the terms “identity” and “tradition” in order to present several specific examples drawn from my fieldwork to illustrate how changes in the political environment, the economic system, the social stratification, the education system, religious reforms and changes in gender attitudes have influenced the way the Vedic tradition reinvents itself in a globalized world. What are the challenges that modernity brings to these schools and what are the compromises and adaptations they have to undergo in the 21st century? Who are the sponsors and how much influence do these have on the Vedic schools? And finally, what is the future of Vedic chanting and what trends can be predicted for the coming generations?

In the sixth and last chapter, I revisit my research questions and conclude by delving into the discussion of the socialization process in the *gurukula* system of education with the master-disciple relationship (*guruśiṣyasambandha*) at its center. Here, I approach the discussion in the light of the debates current in social theory using such notions such as habitus, mimesis and embodiment as tools to analyze the knowledge transmission and identitarian construction in contemporary Maharashtra.

