

Preface

In my early teens, I was sitting in an *āśram* in upstate New York listening to Vedic *mantras* being recited by a group of *brāhmaṇas* who had travelled from India to perform several rituals, among them the installation of Hindu deities in the *āśram*'s main temple. I recall listening to the sound of these *mantras* with great awe and wondering how these priests had learned to recite such long pieces of text by heart, and with such precision and unity. This mesmerizing event triggered a long-lasting fascination in me that led to the work you are about to read. I became interested not only in the Vedic texts but, particularly, in the traditional education of *brāhmaṇa* priests and their lifestyles in the twenty-first century. In 2005, I made it to India for the first time and took the opportunity to visit the Vedic school of Vedamūrti Śrī Vivekśāstrī Goḍboḷe. I was so impressed by the young students' recitation of the Veda and their way of life that I decided to take up the topic for my Master's thesis. After its completion, I had more questions than answers regarding the tradition and the apparent contradictions it seemed to have with the extravagant modernity I encountered in big Indian cities. I felt that the topic had potential for further research. When I came in contact with the work of Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels and the South Asian Institute in Heidelberg, I decided that this was the ideal place for me to continue my investigation into the subject. Luckily, Prof. Michaels was kind enough to accept me as his doctoral student and, after five long years of dedicated work, I managed to produce my doctoral dissertation, which I completed in 2013. This book is the revised version of that dissertation.

The following work deals with the body of texts collectively known as the Vedas, which are considered by many people to be the philosophical cornerstone of the Brahmanical traditions and, thus, of Hinduism at large. But this work more than being an exposition about the Vedas, is a book about those who carry the Vedas *in* them, namely the *brāhmaṇas* themselves. This volume is unique in that it combines insights from ethnographic and textual analysis to unravel how the recitation of the Vedic texts and the Vedic traditions, as well as the identity of the traditional *brāhmaṇa* in general, are transmitted from one generation to the next in traditional Vedic schools of contemporary India. The questions that guide this work, besides the central issue of the transmission of the Vedic texts, are: (1) How does the distant Vedic past relate to the modern present for these custodians, and (2) How is this relationship framed within contemporary Hinduism?

The book is divided into two main sections: the first (Chapters 1 and 2) deals with the traditional system called *gurukula* and the Vedic tradition in general, and the second (Chapters 3 through 6) deals with the contemporary schools of Maharashtra. Chapter 7, the Conclusion, discusses the question of the Veda in relation to contemporary Hinduism. In the first section of the book, I briefly present the traditional view on studentship (*brahmācarya*) and the centrality of orality, as well as its relation to literacy in instruction of the Veda according to scriptural sources.

I accomplish this by crystallizing two main elements presented by the Dharmaśāstric literature: namely, the “ideal setting” (the *gurukula*) and the “ideal relationship” (the *guruśiṣyasambandha*), in which this transmission of knowledge is supposed to take place. I use these normative (although non-homogenic) discourses, as established in the textual Brāhmaṇical imagination (mainly in “legal” literature), that portray the *raison d’être* and lifestyle of the *brāhmaṇa* to contrast them, in the second section of the book, with what I was able to observe in the contemporary Vedic schools of Maharashtra.

In Chapter 2, I offer a brief history of the Vedic schools in Maharashtra and the transformations of the education system from premodern times to their current state under the policy of the Indian government regarding religious education. Chapter 3 deals with the general characteristics of the schools, the forms of organization and infrastructure, and the sponsoring systems. Additionally, I offer three different models of *vedapāṭhaśālās* deduced from my observations in Maharashtra to propose a typology of contemporary Vedic schools. This typology serves as an analytical tool to highlight distinct discursive features of the Vedic schools. This chapter also deals with the educational objectives, including curricula, modes of study, and examinations conducted in these schools. In Chapter 4, we learn about daily life in the *vedapāṭhaśālā* and the manner of socialization within the *gurukula*.

In Chapter 5, I analyze the mechanisms and institutions necessary to create the ‘habitus’ of the Veda reciter and become an “embodiment of the Veda” (*vedamūrti*). Here, the main topics are the central relationship between master and disciple (*guruśiṣyasambandha*), and the transmission of knowledge as a mimetic process.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the preservation (or reinventions) of traditional elements, and the innovations and transformations within the transmission of the Vedas, as well as in the education system in these schools. Here I present a few specific examples drawn from my fieldwork in order 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 traditions have reinvented themselves in a globalized world. In order to show how Vedic schools reinterpret the Vedas in contemporary India, I have developed the notion of an “identitarian kaleidoscope.” With this concept, I show how a multiplicity of actors is involved in the production of discourses surrounding what it means to be an ideal custodian and embodiment of the Veda (*vedamūrti*). What are the challenges that modernity brings to these schools, and what are the compromises and adaptations they have to undergo in the twenty-first century? Who are the sponsors and how much influence do they have on the Vedic schools? And finally, what is the foreseeable future of Vedic chanting, and what trends can be predicted for the coming generations?