

2 Framing the Veda: General Contexts

What does it imply, to study the transmission of the Veda in contemporary Maharashtra? Who are the *brāhmaṇa* reciters of the Veda today? Under what circumstances have these schools emerged, and how have decisive socio-political changes in the last two to three centuries shaped the cultural memory of the custodians of Veda and their social networks? Understanding the contemporary transmission of the Vedas and determining those relations which still allow us to speak of a “Vedic tradition” is possible only on a subordinated level, circumscribed regionally and contextually.

In the following subchapters, I present four main contextual elements that frame my understanding of the *vedapāṭhaśālas* of Maharashtra. I begin by mapping the *brāhmaṇas* in Maharashtra and considering precolonial patronage systems in the region. Secondly, I address sociocultural changes introduced with modernity and globalization, and their direct implications for the Vedic schools. Thirdly, I consider the particular relationship between the predominant *bhakti* religiosity and Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy in the state. Finally, in subchapter 2.4, I consider the homogenizing forces of Reform Hinduism and the drastic impact these forces have had on perceptions about Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy at large.

2.1 *Brāhmaṇas* in Maharashtra

The concepts of space and place have increasingly become the interest of scholars in social and cultural sciences. Feldhaus (2003), one of the most influential scholars on Maharashtra, has studied the region as a ‘place’ in which emotional and cognitive experiences, meanings, and identities are weaved into a geographical awareness. Language, culture, and religious practices are often deeply connected to a specific place.

A person *cares* about places, likes them or dislikes them, longs to go to them, to return to them, to leave them, or not to leave them. In some cases, the sense of region as place includes a sense of the place as one’s *own* place, one’s home, a place that one belongs to and that belongs to one in some important way. Even further, awareness of *where* one is (or where one comes from) can become an important element in understanding who one is: it can become a vital aspect of a person’s identity. (FELDHAUS 2003: 7)

Bearing this in mind, I approach the Vedic schools as places in which the identity of the *vaidika* is often constructed in relation to place(s) and its cultural memory — not only in connection to the region of Maharashtra, but also with regard to how *brāhmaṇas* have understood the land they call Bhārata and how that relates to the reality of a secular nation state. Of course, when talking about Maharashtra, one needs to remember that its modern political boundaries are no older than a few decades, as it was officially constituted in 1960. But the name “Maharashtra” had

been in use for this region for over a millennium and a half (FELDHAUS 2003 :8), and it developed unique cultural traits over the course of its long history.

A common division of *brāhmaṇa* groups in India is between the five northern *brāhmaṇa* groups (*pañcagaṇḍa*) and the five southern *brāhmaṇa* groups (*pañcadrāviḍa*), these being divided across the Vindhya.⁶¹ The northern *brāhmaṇas* are the Sārasvata (from Panjab), the Gauḍa (from the area around Delhi), the Kānyakubja (from the Kanauj area), the Maithila (from Mithila), and the Utkala (from Orissa); the southern groups are the Mahārāṣṭrakas (from Maharashtra), the Tailaṅga (from Andhra Pradesh), the Drāviḍa (from Tamil Nadu and Kerala), the Karṇāṭa (from Karnataka), and the Gurjāra (from Gujarat). All of the ten groups have subgroups within this overarching regional classification. While some evidence suggests that this division is not very old — and that this classification was prone to conflict at the point in history when *brāhmaṇas* migrated south — and these group divisions overlapped in certain regions such as Maharashtra,⁶² it has now become the most widespread taxonomy among contemporary *brāhmaṇas*.

Roughly, Maharashtra has two major geographical subdivisions: the Desh and the Konkan. The Desh is centered on the upper Godāvarī Valley, in the northwestern Deccan Plateau, and is the homeland of the Deśastha *brāhmaṇas*. The Konkan is the coastal lowland between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea, and comprises the six districts of Mumbai, Mumbai Suburban, Raigad, Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, and Thane. The Koṅkaṇ of Maharashtra stretches from well north of Mumbai to Goa on the south, and covers 30,746 km². This is the ancestral home of the Koṅkaṇastha *brāhmaṇas* and their subdivisions, as their name indicates.

The Maharashtra *brāhmaṇas* are again popularly divided into five groups: Citpāvan Koṅkaṇastha *brāhmaṇas*, Gauḍa Sarasvat *brāhmaṇas*, Deśastha *brāhmaṇas*, Karhāḍe *brāhmaṇas* and Devrukhe *brāhmaṇas*. Although other classifications exist, O’Hanlon (following Gunjekar) mentions the following groups:

[...] the Desasthas of the Deccan uplands, and the multiple small communities of the Konkan littoral: Chitpavans or Chiplunas, Karhades, Senavis or Saraswats, Devarukhes, Kiravants, Padyas and Palshes. As might be expected, the histories of these names are difficult to identify with certainty. Some seem to derive from towns where there were large settlements of those subgroups, such as Chiplun, Karhad, Devarukhe and Palshe. Some appear to be titles derived from a particular mode of livelihood. Kiravants, for example, were said to be Saraswat Brahmins fallen from their high status by taking on the ritual work of many Sudra menials, hence their

⁶¹ This popular division is found in the Sahyādrīkhaṇḍa of the Skandapurāṇa, a chapter of the text which tells the story of Maharashtra (LEVITT 1977: 8-40; LEVITT 1982: 128-145). In addition to this reference, a popular verse found in the Rājatarāṅgiṇī of Kalhaṇa that is often cited by *brāhmaṇa* associations, gives the following description: *karṇāṭakāś ca tailaṅgā drāviḍā mahārāṣṭrakā gurjarāś ceti pañcaiva drāviḍā vindhyadakṣiṇe// sārasvatāḥ kānyakubjā gauḍā utkalamaithilāḥ pañcagaṇḍā iti khyātā vindhyottaravāsi*.

⁶² DESHPANDE 2002: 73-75.

name *kriyāvanta* or ‘possessed of many rituals’. Saraswat community histories explain the title ‘Senavi’, applied to Saraswat Brahmins who had moved up from Goa into the Konkan, as a derivation from the Sanskrit term *śahāna*, meaning clever or learned, referring to their clerical and scholarly pursuits. (O’HANLON 2010: 206)

Due to the current state of research, it is difficult to trace how these groups came to be constituted and the nature of their relationships in premodern times. The political dynamics of the settlements in villages gifted as land to *brāhmaṇas* and otherwise motivated migrations — as well as changes of livelihood and ritual rivalry, not to mention shifting patterns of commensality and marriage relations — are some of the elements that still need to be studied in depth if one wants to gain more clarity on the settlement of *brāhmaṇas* and on their interactions with the rest of society in the territory today known as Maharashtra.

Maharashtra has been a land in which the Vedic tradition has both flourished and decayed, and where *brāhmaṇas* have had an important socio-political role to play over time. Recent studies in the historical dynamics of *brāhmaṇas* have pointed to the vast diversity of the *brāhmaṇa* communities of this land, and to the not always smooth shifts of power in this region (for example: DESHPANDE 2012 and O’HANLON 2010, quoted above). Such studies have also shown how these power relations are entangled in larger socio-political processes that have affected not only this region, but also the rest of the subcontinent. Who was entitled to be called a *brāhmaṇa*, and what it meant to be one, has been a matter of heated debate and been tied to ritual, political, and economic privileges, as well as a matter of survival since premodern times. Who had the right to use Vedic *mantras* in ritual and who could study the Veda did not always go uncontested. Tensions and accusations with legal consequences were not uncommon in Maharashtra during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

While scripturally the ideal of the *brāhmaṇa* has been linked to ritual activity and the recitation of the Veda, there is enough textual, epigraphic, and ethnographic evidence to suggest that *brāhmaṇas* from an early period onwards engaged in occupations that did not require expertise in the Veda, and thus were concerned with the world (*laukika*), as opposed to those who were concerned mainly with the transmission of the Veda and the Vedic ritual (*vaidika*) (FISCHER-TINÉ and MANN 2004). For example, as documented in the family records (*kulavṛttāntas*) studied by Patterson, the percentage of Citpāvan *brāhmaṇas* who were exclusively engaged in religious activities was only 5.5% (PATTERSON 1970: 393). While this percentage was certainly not the same among all the *brāhmaṇa* groups, it hints to the fact that *brāhmaṇas* have long been engaged in other occupations besides priesthood and traditional religious activity⁶³ (cf. TALBOT 1988 and 1991). This small example also hints to a rather dislocated imagination around the ideal *brāhmaṇa* and the actual

⁶³ For more on the topic and for an example of the history of *brāhmaṇas* in the military, see: CHUYEN 2004: 61-93.

modes of the livelihoods of *brāhmaṇas*. It is clear from various Sanskrit sources, particularly the Dharmasūtras and Gṛhyasūtras, that the prescription of what it meant to be a *brāhmaṇa* varied a great deal during the constitutive period of this literature, and sometimes even within the same prescriptive text (LUBIN 2005). Also, historical and ethnographic research has shown that *brāhmaṇas* often constructed their identities primarily in terms of patrilinear kinship, alliance, and lineage (MICHAELS 2004a: 121-124), on which the Brāhmaṇical ideals of purity and hierarchy (as exposed in the Śāstric literature) were constructed, but not necessarily rigidly followed. Therefore, one cannot take the category of the *brāhmaṇa* for granted since historical and regional variations of what it meant to be one had to be constantly renegotiated in their given contexts. Nonetheless, a historiographic reconstruction of what it meant to be a *brāhmaṇa* in the context of Maharashtra is a task that lies beyond the scope of this work. This being the case, in the following section, I have to limit myself to some general observations regarding the local history of *brāhmaṇas* that I consider particularly important in the representation of the modern identity of the orthodox *brāhmaṇa* in this particular region of India.

The presence of *brāhmaṇa* groups in Maharashtra goes back as early as the Gupta period, where evidence in the form of inscriptions of land donations to *brāhmaṇas* from the Vākāṭaka dynasty has been collected. An example of these grants is the so-called Chammak Charter published by John Faithfull Fleet in 1888 in his *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*. The Chammak Charter consists of a series of copper plates written in Sanskrit, documenting a land donation to *brāhmaṇas* under the reigning king, Pravarasena II, in the fifth century CE. The grant consisted of 8,000 *bhūmis* to a “thousand *brāhmaṇas* of various *gotras* and *caraṇas*” (some mentioned by name) in the district which is today known as Amravati. The copper plates read that among the community of predominantly *yajurvedins* and *atharvavedins* also *caturvedins* received royal favors, and that the Vākāṭaka ruler Pravarasena I had performed various *śrauta* rituals, including the well-known *atirātra*, *vājapeya*, and four *aśvamedhas* (MIRASHI 1963: 22-28).

Different dynasties ruled substantial parts of the area now known as Maharashtra: the Sātavāhanas (first century BCE to 250 CE), the Ābhīras (third century CE), the Vākāṭakas (25–510 CE), the Kalacuris (fifth to sixth centuries CE), the Western Cālukyas (560–750 CE), the Rāṣṭrakūṭas (750–950 CE), the Śīlāhāras (tenth to twelfth centuries CE), and then the Yādavas, who were the first dynasty to rule a Marathi-speaking kingdom in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. (FELDAUS 2003: 8). During these centuries, despite a strong Buddhist and Jaina presence that won the favors of many rulers in the region, patronage towards *brāhmaṇas* continued under these dynasties and empires, some giving more generous land grants and gifts to them than others. The gifting of land to *brāhmaṇas* and the construction and expansion of royal temples served the purpose of creating an important network of ritual, political, and economic relations — not only in Maharashtra, but in other regions of India, primarily in the south (KULKE and ROTHEMUND 2004: 138-40).

In 1296, the Muslim power of 'Alā-ud-dīn Khiljī conquered the Yādavas, and parts of the territory of today's Maharashtra came under a series of Muslim sultanates and empires, including the Bāhmanīs (1347–late 1400s), the Sultanate of Bijapur (founded in 1489/90), and the Ahmadnagar Sultanate (1489/90–1633) (FELDAUS 2003: 8). It was not until Islamic rule in the fourteenth century that significant changes in patronage for the *brāhmaṇas* took place when the Khiljīs and their successors not only stopped state patronage, but also enforced taxes on non-Muslim subjects, which later (under the last important Sultan of Delhi, Firuz Shah Tughlaq) was extended to *brāhmaṇas* who had previously been exempted (KULKE and ROTHMUND 2004: 178). Additionally, the violent expansion of the Mughal Empire became feared in central-west India as they looted and destroyed Hindu temples and institutions. These socio-political changes in many ways disturbed the economic privileges enjoyed by *brāhmaṇas*, and thus traditional knowledge systems and Vedic learning in particular were partly abandoned in order that they could find profitable occupations among the new rulers.

The Mughal Empire rapidly expanded throughout most of the Sub-continent (except for the very southern areas), partly due to the use of firearms and artillery that had been previously unknown in this part of the world. The political, administrative, and military structures which extended through seven generations maintained a record of unusual administrative organization. Akbar, through incessant warfare, was able to annex all of northern and part of central India. Despite this fact, he is also known for having adopted a tolerant position toward his Hindu subjects, and he sought to enlist them in his armies and government service. The tolerance of Akbar and his son Jahāngīr stood in marked contrast to the Muslim religious bigotry displayed by his successor, Aurangzeb, who reigned from 1658 to 1707. During the period of Aurangzeb's reign, the Mughal Empire expanded so much that it could hardly be ruled any longer (KULKE and ROTHMUND 2004: 206). The first half of the seventeenth century was a very tumultuous period in central-west India, as Mughal forces, having eliminated the Nizām Shāh sultanate, attempted to expand southward into the Ādil Shāh sultanate, whose capital was at Bijapur. Local Hindu chiefs and hired troops in the region (who were increasingly identified by the term 'Marāṭhā') shifted alliances among various sultanates and minor factions. From among these military leaders, Śivājī began slowly and successfully raiding, hiding, fighting, and forging greater alliances with local petty rulers. Śivājī's tactics allowed him to claim greater sovereignty and taxation rights, as well as to demand greater fealty from the petty rulers below him. Finally, in 1674, when he managed to consolidate significant power, he had himself crowned the universal emperor with 11,000 *brāhmaṇas* reciting the Veda at his consecration ceremony (WOLPERT 1993: 165). By the time of his death in 1680, Śivājī had amassed a substantial treasury, and the command of over one hundred forts in western Maharashtra. With this reach, he established the foundation of an empire that would expand greatly over the next century. The Marāṭhā Empire and the subsequent historical developments were crucial to the manners in which

Maharashtrians experienced social change, and now continue to refer to the past in order to construct their collective memory.

Śivāji's son met with rather less success, although this was in part due to adjustments by Aurangzeb and his generals to the Marāṭhās' guerilla tactics. Śivāji's grandson, Śāhū, was more fortunate, in one sense, because he appointed a particularly skillful *brāhmaṇa* from the Konkan coast, Bālāji Viśvanāth, as his minister (*peśva*) in 1713. Although Śāhū was technically the king of the Marāṭhās, it was through Bālāji's diplomacy and military decisions that the empire began to stabilize. Bālāji was also responsible for appointing fellow members of his sub-caste (Citpāvan *brāhmaṇas*) to influential and lucrative positions, creating animosity among other *brāhmaṇa* groups (mainly Deśasthas and Sārasvats, who claimed a higher position over the newly appointed Peśvas) and forcing many of them to migrate to the smaller independent states of the Scindias, Gaikwads, and others at the periphery of the Peśva kingdom. Bayly has argued that, in fact, the concept of a caste, as we know it today, was primarily constructed during this period.

In both north and south India, such rulers were happy to vest these hitherto rather marginal people with rights and honours which were equally beneficial on both sides. In so doing, they contributed very powerfully to the shaping of more formally Brahmanical caste conventions in the wider society. (BAYLY 1999: 67-68)

At Bālāji's death in 1720, his son Bājirāo I was appointed minister in his place. Bājirāo I assumed control of the Marāṭhā kingdom, with its capital at Pune, and he commanded that Śivāji's descendants should live protected from eminent danger, in Kolhapur and Satara. With this move, Bājirāo I managed to obtain the *de facto* power of the empire and continued his father's policy of appointing Citpāvan *brāhmaṇas* at key administrative positions. It was during this time (1720–1740) that the city of Pune took on its distinctly *brāhmaṇa* (i.e. Citpāvan) character.

Thus, whether he [i.e. the Brahmin] acts as ritualist, as celibate preceptor-*guru*, or as *lokika* servant of the king, his presence is auspicious and desirable, indeed a defining condition of 'brahman raj', a realm of worth and legitimacy. Hence, without wholly overriding the openness and comparative castelessness which had characterised their predecessors' political strategies, many eighteenth-century rulers took steps to Brahmanise their office-holding networks, in some cases recruiting only men of Brahman birth to occupy important posts and offices [...] It also helped to reinforce the claim that served them all so well, this being that the greatness of the Maratha realm was derived in large part from the greatness and piety of its associated Brahman client groups. (BAYLY 1999: 69-70)

During this time, new *brāhmaṇa* networks became prominent. State pilgrimages and benefactions directed massive flows of wealth into the hands of the priestly and preceptoral *brāhmaṇas* who served them both at home and in the distant all-India sites (cf. BAYLY 1999: 70.) These grants, and the founding and patronage of schools of Brāhmaṇical learning, started to flourish and attract *brāhmaṇas* from afar. Under

the Peśva reign, generous annual donations to Vedic scholars and institutions — from the region and from afar — were established. In addition to the mass distribution of the annual *dakṣiṇā* in Pune, other imperial expenditures were made to support Vedic scholars and other religious institutions.⁶⁴ The Peśvas built, renovated, and donated land and cash to temples, organizing sponsored religious festivals at several localities, especially those dedicated to Gaṇeśa. Particularly important were the two Gaṇapati temples at the nearby towns of Morgaon and Theur, belonging to the famous cluster of eight temples dedicated to Gaṇeśa called the *aṣṭavināyaks* (FELDHAUS 2003: 140-148).

[...] by the later eighteenth century, both the Chitpavan Peshwas and the great lines of Maratha warrior-rulers, who built dominions in central and western India from the 1760s onwards, had made their mark all over India as patrons of supra-local Brahmanical worship and learning. (BAYLY 1999: 68)

Under Bājirāo I, the empire took advantage of infighting among the Mughal princes and greatly expanded its territory northward. Bājirāo I died in 1740 and his son assumed power, later expanding the Marāṭhā Empire into Orissa and parts of Bengal. In 1752, the Mughal throne in Delhi became a protectorate of the Marāṭhās. The empire was finally weakened only by a decisive defeat in 1761 at Panipat (80 km. north of Delhi), after which the various Marāṭhā generals began to assert greater independence, and the unified empire was transformed into more of a patchwork confederacy. The Marāṭhās' defeat at Panipat did not dismantle the empire, but it did trigger a significant change in their administration, as regional Marāṭhā generals became the leaders of noble houses (now Marāṭhā by *jāti*, which had become recognized as *kṣatriya*). Starting in the 1770s, some of the Marāṭhā houses began to be attacked by the British, who were consolidating their own centres of power. British fortunes continued to increase, and the Marāṭhā noble houses were too fractured to resist. In 1803, the British forced all of the Marāṭhā houses to sign disastrous treaties, and in 1818, the Peśva-led empire was formally dismantled as the British subjugated the remaining major Marāṭhā kingdoms, making them dependent princely states. Nonetheless, the prestige of Maharashtra — with Pune at its centre as a bastion of *brāhmaṇa* scholarship and religious authority — remained well into the twenty-first century.

However, according to Tucker, under the last Peśvas, the grants became rather haphazard, so that hundreds of ignorant *brāhmaṇas* came to Pune for the annual distributions of *dakṣiṇā* without having to prove their erudition.

⁶⁴ Parulekar, who compiled several letters from the Bombay Secretariat Records for his Survey of Indigenous Education in the Province of Bombay (1820–1830), reports that the *dakṣiṇā* fund of the Peśvas “amounted to several lakhs” and had been “much reduced by the new Rulers, keeping it to about 35,000 rupees for annual distribution.” (PARULEKAR 1951: 23.)

Elphinstone, therefore, followed his subordinates' suggestions to reorganize Sanskrit learning by establishing a Sanskrit college similar to the colleges in Calcutta and Benares, using parts of the Dakshina fund to finance it. The rest, administered by a committee of five eminent shastris, was to go as grants to the most learned Brahmins. (TUCKER 1976: 234)

Even so, soon the British enunciated a new policy in 1836, under which only 'useful' learning was to be taught in the newly founded colleges (cf. TUCKER 1976: 335; M. DESHPANDE 2007: 1206.) The spread of British education and the general dissemination of Western ideas about history, science, religion, and society all had a tremendous impact on Maharasthrian society. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of *brāhmaṇas* in Pune and Bombay began to publish, advocate, and organize for social and religious change. These *brāhmaṇa* social reformers consistently denounced the practices of child marriage, dowry, the ban on widow remarriage, and polygamy; some *brāhmaṇa* reformers also advocated for the dissolution of caste. Moreover, social and political changes in relation to caste were demanded much more vocally by a number of prominent low-caste and untouchable movements in the region, particularly those led by Jotibā Phule between 1873 and 1890, and by B. R. Ambedkar from 1927 to 1956. Additionally, there have been and continue to be strong nationalist movements in Maharashtra, and this has deeply influenced the views of Maharashtrians' on their past.

As mentioned above, *brāhmaṇa* groups have not always been sympathetic to each other, and important rivalries among them have led to some resentment that continues even today (cf. M. DESHPANDE 2012; O'HANLON and MINKOWSKI 2008; O'HANLON 2010 and WASHBROOK 2010). M. Deshpande, for example, has pointed out ritual rivalries among different *śākhās* in Maharashtra, noting that:

With such strictures, the various Śākhās of the Vedas gradually evolved into *jātis*, sub-caste communities with distinct social identities, and the relations between them became ever so complex. (M. DESHPANDE 2012: 346)

These centuries of significant social change, and modernity in particular, have also affected the way *brāhmaṇas* perceive and represent themselves today. The question of caste and representation is too complex to deal with thoroughly here, but as will become clear in the presentation of my material and in the concrete case studies I present in Chapter 6, its modern articulation is crucial to the way *brāhmaṇa* reciters of Maharashtra socially position themselves in present-day India. The point of sketching some of the history of *brāhmaṇas* in Maharashtra is to problematize and historicize the issue of self-representation — the more so because the construction of the *brāhmaṇa* self has often revolved around the dominant, but often contending, discourses of caste in terms of birth (*jātibrāhmaṇa*) on one hand, and virtue and morality (*karmabrāhmaṇa*) on the other. Another key aspect in the construction of the ideal *brāhmaṇa* is ritual purity and the different types of identifications with the Transcendental — i.e. with the sacrifice and the Veda (see MICHAELS' concept of "identificatory habitus" 2004: 332-340).

2.2 The *Brāhmaṇa* in Modern and Globalized India

The colonial experience and recent historical developments, most notably in terms of India's independence and the rapidly emerging economy in global markets, have drastically changed the social context of the *brāhmaṇa*. Particularly through the urbanization of the two megacities of Maharashtra — Pune and Mumbai — increased mobility, new job opportunities, and education, as well as the rapid development of communication technologies, have diversified the social landscape of the region. Communities from other states have migrated to these places and brought with them their own customs and rituals. While the majority of *brāhmaṇas* in Maharashtra continue to affiliate with the five Maharashtrian groups, an important number of *brāhmaṇas* from other parts of India are found in the larger cities of the state, some of which are organized in particular associations.⁶⁵ While these *brāhmaṇa* associations highlight the unique aspects of each subcaste, it must be noted here that, recently, there have also been several efforts to level out differences with various *brāhmaṇa* organizations through a pleading for an overarching “Brahmin front” or a fostering of an “all-Indian Brahmin pride”, this often tied to nationalist discourses and political agendas.⁶⁶ Migration of Vedic traditions into Maharashtra has in many cases been a deliberate effort to import Vedic reciters in order to enrich the Vedic landscape of the region. Maharashtra has therefore now become one of the melting pots of Vedic traditions, and, as we will see in Chapter 3, most of the existing Vedic *śākhās* of the four Vedas that survive today are found in the state.⁶⁷

The increased secularization of the modern *brāhmaṇa* has had a decisive impact on the way *vaidikas* position themselves in modern India. To justify their activities and their tradition, they have to construct their identities while taking into consideration critique both as an internal articulation (for example, by social *brāhmaṇa* reformers and secularized *brāhmaṇas*) and as an external reality (through the critique of other castes, non-Hindus, anti-*brāhmaṇa* movements etc.) The “sense of siege” of the *brāhmaṇa* as a (casted) community, that Bairy (2010) emphasizes, has certainly found expression in the anxiety of the *brāhmaṇa* to find their place in modern India.

The Brahmins, however, had an additional and very unique demand placed on themselves. The discourse of the ‘modern’ prefigures caste as a system of hierarchy and inequality that is the very antithesis of modern ways of ordering social life. As a constitutive part of this unequal system, but also its very embodiment (BAIRY 2010: 117).

⁶⁵ These associations have different names such as *sabhā*, *pariṣad*, *samiti* or *saṃgha* which can also be translated loosely into English as: assembly, council, community and association.

⁶⁶ More on these associations in BAIRY 2009; ARNOLD et al. 1976.

⁶⁷ Although, I should mention that — due to the Pan-Indian veneration of the Vedas — this is also true for other places in India, such as Vedic schools in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and of course Varanasi.

It is useful to recall here that the paradox of the *brāhmaṇa* self is twofold: on the one hand, it was mainly the *brāhmaṇa* who carried modernity forward in India, and on the other, he represented all that was unmodern. The hegemonic discourse of the modern ethos is built around individuality, emancipation, and democracy. The *brāhmaṇa*, then, have been confronted with the dilemma of ideologically representing a threat to modernity and at the same time striving to maintain their intellectual aura.

Washbrook has argued that the developments among *brāhmaṇa* communities in Maharashtra from the fifteenth century were crucial, and that these laid the foundation for “an acceptable model of secular Brahmin behaviour, which, if not without difficulty, eventually came to establish itself as normative across the South” (WASHBROOK 2010: 597). The relationship between the ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ identity of the *brāhmaṇa*, and the natural tension between these different spheres of knowledge, as well as the discrepancies between ideology and practice, have existed for far longer than the colonial intervention.

This situation forced *brāhmaṇas* to articulate their identity in new ways in order to justify not only their contemporary relevance, but to present themselves as custodians of all knowledge worth keeping, including technological and scientific developments. For example, one such strategy consists of ascribing the Vedic scriptures with the power to contain all knowledge, including modern physics, aeronautics, and other sciences.⁶⁸

As mentioned in the Introduction, only a very small percentage of *brāhmaṇas* are engaged in learning the Vedas today, and while many upper-caste Hindus support the idea of the necessity to preserve the Veda in the traditional way, very few would actually send their children to these traditional schools. This is often left to the most orthodox *brāhmaṇa* families, and often to those with the lowest resources who have no other option but to educate their children in boarding schools that are free of cost — namely, the *vedapāṭhaśālās*.⁶⁹ Despite the fact that one of the conditions to being a custodian of the Veda (*vedamūrti*) who strives to fully embody the Brāhmaṇical values is both gendered (male) and determined by birth (*jātibrāhmaṇa*), in recent years, a few attempts have been made to dismiss this traditional access to the Vedas — that is, to undercut the charge of casteism or *jātivāda* by accepting non-*brāhmaṇas* and women as students of the Veda in some schools, thereby professing a modern

⁶⁸ It would therefore be of little surprise that one now finds the Indian Institute of Scientific Heritage, whose aim “[...] is to inform the world about the glorious scientific, rational and logical heritage of India and also inform the world to practice and adopt these messages in their life to lead a happy life in the 21st century.” Their publications include titles such as: “Ancient Indian Aircraft” and “Ancient Indian Advice For Modern Management.” http://iish.org/index.php?option=com_ipricecalc&view=price&Itemid=115 accessed on January 8, 2013.

⁶⁹ I will come back to this economic aspect in subchapter 3.1.1.

(i.e. universal and egalitarian) *brāhmaṇa* self.⁷⁰ Despite these trends in urban India, in only one school visited during the fieldwork for this book were non-*brāhmaṇas* and women theoretically being admitted, but in practice, it was only *brāhmaṇa* males who attended even this school. These innovations have generally been rejected in the most orthodox circles, for whom the access to the recitation of the Veda for women and non-*brāhmaṇas* is simply unthinkable. Notwithstanding this rejection, one wonders if the changes described are a sign of a slow accommodation into the modern Hindu discourse in which universalism and egalitarian ideals weigh more on the imagination of what Hinduism ought to be, rather than overt exclusivism coming in the form of the caste and gender exclusion found in certain orthodox Brāhmaṇical circles. One teacher told me: “It is already very difficult to get apt Brahmin students who will study the Vedas today. We get only those students who cannot go to regular schools. If Brahmins are not interested in the Veda today, why should non-Brahmins be?”⁷¹

Since the 1950s — with the work of Srinivas, followed by Singer and their successors — much has been written on the subject of social change in India. The proliferation of ethnographic monographs indeed complicated the picture of an essentialized view of the *brāhmaṇas* and of caste, as produced by previous scholarship, particularly that from classical Indologists. Srinivas, who contrived concepts such as ‘Sanskritisation’/ ‘Westernisation’ has been instrumental in enriching the discussion not only of ‘caste’, but also of the processes of cultural appropriation.⁷²

Singer (1972) was one of the first to study the changes of the so-called “Great Tradition” of Sanskritic Hinduism in the context of a modern city (then Madras, now Chennai). In his observations in his seminal work, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: an anthropological approach to Indian civilization*, he argues that there is no essential separation between tradition and modernity, and that the individual custodians of this tradition learned to cope with modernity through various “adaptive strategies”. According to him, the process of the modernization of the religious sphere occurs simultaneously with that of the “Sanskritization” of the more secular spheres. He described how:

Embodied in ‘sacred books’ or ‘classics,’ sanctified by a cult, expressed in monuments, sculpture, painting, and architecture, served by the arts and sciences, the Great Tradition becomes the core of culture of an indigenous civilization and a source, consciously examined, for defining its

⁷⁰ The case of a young non-*brāhmaṇa* woman named Suvarna Satardekar, who successfully learned to recite the Śuklayajurveda Saṁhitā in the *mādhyandina* style a few years ago in the Guru Gaṅgeśvar Mahārāj Vedapāṭhaśālā in Nashik in the traditional way, remains a rare case. The trust that runs the school and the Veda Mandir (Chapter 5) takes pride in presenting her as an example of their progressive and modern views on both caste and gender.

⁷¹ Interview with Caitanya Kāle 4.11.2011, Barshi.

⁷² For a contestation of the usefulness of these ‘concepts’, see: CARROLL (1977).

moral, legal, esthetic and other cultural norms. A Great Tradition describes a way of life and as such is a vehicle and standard for those who share it to identify with one another as members of a common civilization. (REDFIELD and SINGER 1956: 63)

The studies of contemporary *brāhmaṇa* priests — like the scholarship by K. SUBRAMANIAM 1974; FULLER 1984, 2000, 2003; PARRY 1994; PARPOLA 2002; KNIPE 2015 — as well as the broader studies on the *brāhmaṇas* as a social group (read ‘caste’) in different regions of India — see: MADAN 1965; KHARE 1970; CHUYEN 2004; FULLER and NARASIMHAN 2014; and BAIRY 2010 — are arguably the most prominent studies that deal with the *brāhmaṇa* not as a theoretical construct, but as communities within diverse social contexts.

Not only for *brāhmaṇas* as a socio-religious class, but also for the traditional *vaidikas* of the schools I deal with here, modernity (urbanization, westernization, technological development, etc.) has marked their daily lives, as will become clear in subsequent chapters. For instance, the use of modern technology in the schools (one of the clearest markers of modernity for them) is perceived differently depending on the context of the conversation and who is asking. From my observations and from what I heard from the teachers and students, modern technology is a great attraction. For example, I was constantly asked about cars, computers, cameras, iPods, and all kinds of technological gadgets. In the eyes of some of the teachers and other *brāhmaṇas*, the use of such devices was neither condemned nor rejected as long as their use was limited and used in a “*sāttvika*” (i.e. pure, chaste) way to create “more awareness about the value of the Vedas among the people.”⁷³ The use of MP3-devices to record recitations of the Veda, cell-phones to better communicate with one another, TV and DVD players to watch religious films like the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata*, and loudspeakers for special occasions to transmit Vedic recitations to surrounding areas of the school have all become part of their everyday life. Facebook accounts and other social media, as well as the access to “modernity” through the Internet and mass media (notably TV and Bollywood), are slowly becoming the norm, rather than the exception, among students and teachers of Vedic schools. Computer technology is not only permitted, but even encouraged in some of the *vedapāṭhaśālās*.⁷⁴ Some students have learned to copy Sanskrit texts on the computer in Devanāgarī script or to create PowerPoint presentations. Some children seemed very keen to create ‘slideshows’ with their new idols: global sports champions like football players Ronaldinho and Roberto Carlos, famous cricket players, or movie stars like Leonardo DiCaprio or some of the Bollywood stars.

In some schools, clothing has also been influenced (little by little) by ‘Western style’ fashion: occasionally the students wear T-shirts, shirts, and sometimes even

⁷³ Interview with Mr. Limaye 1.10.2009, Satara.

⁷⁴ For an insightful collection of studies that have investigated the impact of these innovations on religious practices in South Asia see: BABB and WADLEY 1997.

shorts.⁷⁵ In one of the schools, I met a student that was such a big fan of the football player Lionel Messi that he wore his new FC Barcelona jersey which he had received on his birthday practically every day.

Elements of Western food are also entering their diet, at least on special occasions when they are out of school or, for example, when they got to eat Swiss chocolate that the author brought for them. In one school, I heard that all students get to eat ice cream when they celebrate the birthday of one of the students. At the same time, I did observe an ambiguous relationship with modernity. The first and more formal reaction from many of my interlocutors, particularly from the older generations, was mostly one of rejection and suspicion towards these developments. Modernity at large was considered a threat to their world order, and a threat to their ‘Vedic way of life’. The ‘materialism’ and the ‘competition spirit’, the ‘money-oriented mentality’, the ‘corrupt Western way of life’ with their ‘loose morals’ and the ‘abandonment of religion’ cause both fear and awe for them — it is a tension that is never quite resolved. For instance, some of the graduated students of a Vedic school, who I became friends with, liked to take me out to nearby temples or other places. Sometimes, they used to take me out to have an ice cream in one of the newly opened ‘ice cream parlors’ of the city. This was done rather secretly, and almost incognito. The students would wear Western clothes (shorts and a polo shirt) and a baseball cap to cover their tufts (*śikhā*) of hair, which would immediately identify them as *brāhmaṇas*.⁷⁶ One of my friends explained to me that the change of clothes was a strategy to protect them from “evil talk”. He said that they preferred not to be recognized as *brāhmaṇas* by the people in the town because, in his words, “if people recognize us as Brahmins, they may talk bad about us. They could say ‘look these *baṭuks* [Vedic students] eat food outside the school and we are not leading a pure life’. Actually, they do not know us, but they would talk bad like this. We are not supposed to eat outside [the school] and we never do! This is just for fun. This is only ice cream!”

The ice cream example shows the ambiguity that many *brāhmaṇa*, both secular and *vaidika*, seem to have towards modernity and ‘the West’. Furthermore, on the one hand it brings to the fore a fascination and appropriation of selected modern elements, and on the other, the revalorization of these elements within traditional frameworks that value community over individuality. Nandy argues that “the absolute rejection of the West is also the rejection of the basic configuration of Indian traditions; though, paradoxically, the acceptance of that configuration may involve a qualified rejection of the West.” (NANDY 1983: 75) This paradoxical negotiation of identity and cultural

⁷⁵ For more on the dress code, see subchapter 4.5.

⁷⁶ While the *śikhā* (Marathi *śeṃḍī*) is occasionally used by other males in different communities that consider themselves “twice-born” (*dviṇas*), it is nonetheless a very clear marker of pious *brāhmaṇa* identity. According to Michaels: “many Hindus consider this *śikhā* the sign of the paternal line.” He describes it as a sort of “patrilinear ‘umbilical cord’” (MICHAELS 2004a: 86).

values in relation to Western influence is constantly being contextually redefined. A visible shift in the socio-economic structures based on individualism, consumerism, and greater mobility seems to have strongly polarized attitudes of what constitutes ‘tradition.’ Religious institutions, such as the Vedic schools presented here, exemplify the efforts to renew, expand, and sustain a particular worldview through processes of socialization, i.e. legitimacy and control.⁷⁷

2.3 Bhakti and Orthodox Brāhmaṇism

In Maharashtra, *bhakti* religiosity is inescapable. Perhaps the most prominent *bhakti* tradition in Maharashtra is represented by the *vārkarī-sampradāya*⁷⁸, who has coloured Maharashtrians’ cultural identity. One can encounter *vārkarī* temples in every city and town, and see several groups of pilgrims constantly going to the shrines of the many saints while hearing multiple generations of families singing famous Marathi devotional songs (*abhaṅgas*, *bhajans*). In the homes of orthodox *brāhmaṇas* and in the Vedic schools are no exceptions. Every year, one can see great numbers of *vārkarī* pilgrims from all castes and classes go by foot, from the whole state of Maharashtra and beyond, to have the *darśana* of Lord Viṭṭhala (also known as Viṭhobā) in the town of Pandharpur. The pilgrims group in so-called *diṇḍīs*, and carry the image (*mūrti*) or, more often, the wooden/silver sandals (*pādukās*) of their patron saint in procession on colourful decorated palanquins (*pālkhīs*).⁷⁹

There are other important *vārkarī* centres also, such as: Alandi, where the *samādhi* shrine of Jñāneśvar Mahārāj is visited by hundreds of thousands each year; Dehu, the birthplace of the famous Tukārām; Paithan, the hometown of Eknāth that was once a bastion of Vedic learning; and many places more. Other devotional traditions, such as the more distinctly Brāhmaṇical one created around Samārt Rāmdās⁸⁰, which one could arguably group under the umbrella of ‘*sant* traditions’, have also had a very strong influence on the religiosity of Maharashtrians.

⁷⁷ For more on the processes of socialization and the creation of a particular ‘habitus’, see Chapter 5.

⁷⁸ The word *sampradāya* is commonly translated as “tradition”, referring to ritual traditions and philosophical-theological doctrines organized in different religious communities (MALINAR 2012).

⁷⁹ For more on the *vārkarī* pilgrimage, see: MOKĀŚĪ 1987; and KARVE 1962.

⁸⁰ As it has been noted by Keune: “[...] much research remains to be done on the Rāmdās *sampradāy* and its religious and political influence in pre-colonial Maharashtra. An introduction to these matters can be found in J.W. Laine, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, esp. 52-62. A longer but quite dated work on the *sampradāy* by W.S. Deming, *Rāmdās and the Rāmdāsīs*. For a fascinating description of the heated historiographical conversations over Rāmdās’ political significance in the 20th century, see P. Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*, 183-191” (KEUNE 2011 FN 44 p. 156). Rāmdās was also unique in that he proposed a *mahārāṣṭra-dharma* with clear nationalistic overtones, and which has been influential in modern nationalistic circles and political groups, in particular the Shiv Sena party.

It has been argued that *bhakti* of the *sants* has been one of the leading forces in reforming Hinduism by emphasizing a more egalitarian access to the divine and by particularly attacking Brāhmaṇical pride as based on descent and ritualism.⁸¹ These traditions moved away from the elitarian access of a minority (the *brāhmaṇa* male) to divine knowledge by conveying their message to the masses through their poetry and songs, these being composed in the spoken vernaculars rather than in Sanskrit.⁸² The possibility of an individual relationship with God through a series of simple practices — particularly as centered on the repetition of the name that became available through the *bhakti* traditions — is one of the markers of the popular religiosity of Maharashtra.

The untouchable *sant* Cokhāmeḷā and other *śūdra* poet-saints — such as the gardener Sāvātā Māḷī, the potter Gorā Kumbhār, or Nāmdev the tailor have been recognized as important members of the *vārkarī* tradition. The most popular *sant* in this tradition, Tukārām, was also a *śūdra*. Additionally, the two main *brāhmaṇa* *sants* (Jñāneśvar and Eknāth) in the tradition are both remembered as having met with strong rejection and punishment from the *brāhmaṇa* authorities because of their interactions with lower castes and their transgressions of the Brāhmaṇical rules of purity.

Keune (2011) has shown in his dissertation how understandings of devotional religion and caste changed in Maharashtrian society between 1700 and the present, as exemplified in the hagiographies of Eknāth Mahārāj, whose boundary-transgressing actions challenged societal expectations about ritual purity and Brāhmaṇness. At the same time, he also cautions that:

Critical Marathi scholars point out that social reform and social equality are modern notions that are only anachronistically and problematically read into a 16th-century context. Many dalits dismiss out of hand the idea that Eknāth or any of the Marathi *sants* was truly concerned about social change, since equality for them was confined only to the realm of spirituality. (KEUNE, 2011: 6)

Other scholars such as Burchett (2009) and Lorenzen (2004: 185-186) have warned against an essentialist view of the inclusivity and egalitarian values of the *bhakti* traditions, and showed that these traditions in practice “point out that *bhakti* theory has rarely if ever been translated into actual social reform or sustained egalitarian *bhakti* practice” (BURCHETT 2009: 116). While these observations may well be true, there are, nonetheless, countless stories, songs, and hagiographies that today circulate among Maharashtrians and that present the *vārkarīs* (and other devotional

⁸¹ See for example: SCHOMER 1987; ZELLIOT 1976; GORDON 1993: 18-19.

⁸² Here, I must caution that there is an important gradation between these ideas among the *sants* of Maharashtra. Rāmdās, for example, developed a very militant discourse attractive to mostly an upper-caste audience, while the songs of the *śūdra* *sants* of the *vārkarī* tradition appealed rather to the lower social strata. See below within this chapter.

saints) as expounders of a more open and egalitarian religiosity than the one professed by the Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy. I argue that these discourses influence the way *brāhmaṇas* are perceived by other social groups, and also the way in which they represent themselves today.

Here is one such story known by most Maharashtrians which illustrates the case in point, and that I take the liberty of summarizing below:⁸³

Jñāneśvar and his siblings had been excommunicated by the *brāhmaṇas* of Alandi because his father, after being married, left to become a *saṃnyāsīn* and, by command of his *guru*, returned to his wife, which caused the fall of all of his family from the caste. Jñāneśvar and his siblings nonetheless decided, after their parents' death, to do anything possible to regain the status of their caste. The local *brāhmaṇas* of Alandi told the children that, if they could get a certificate of purity from the *brāhmaṇas* of Paithan — a bastion of learned *brāhmaṇas* at the time — they would accept them back into the community. Hence, Jñāneśvar and his three siblings went to Paithan to obtain the certificate from the learned *brāhmaṇas*. The *brāhmaṇas* of Paithan looked down on the children and did not agree to issue such a certificate. But Jñāneśvar insisted on their being innocent of any wrongdoing, and gave a speech to the *brāhmaṇas* in which he proclaimed that God was present in all living beings alike. He was mocked by the *brāhmaṇas* and was challenged to prove it. There was a buffalo nearby and Jñāneśvar coerced into making him recite Vedas to prove his point. He placed his hand on the animal's head, and then the buffalo immediately started reciting the mantras from the Ṛgveda. The animal continued to recite Vedas for hours, and many *brāhmaṇas* came to see the miracle at the bank of Godāvārī River. With the performance of the miracle, the *brāhmaṇas* had no choice but to accept the greatness and supernatural powers of the young boy. They give up their arrogance and prostrated themselves at the feet of the children. The *brāhmaṇas* of Paithan then issued the certificate of purity to the children.

The story continues with the children going back to Alandi and having to prove once more, this time to the *brāhmaṇas* of their hometown, that the certificate was authentic and that they were 'true *brāhmaṇas*'. The story illustrates a point that seems to be paradigmatic and is often encountered in stories similar to this one: the orthodox *brāhmaṇas* are 'forced', through the evident miracles, to recognize the spiritual power of the *sants*, and therefore temporally forgive their transgressive actions within the traditional social order. But, by recognizing the spiritual power of these saints, nonetheless, these stories at the same time "also reinforce the social hierarchy and confirm *brāhmaṇas* as possessing a social identity of higher purity and value than any other" (BURCHETT 2009: 116). The fact that the godly siblings wish to return to their caste and become '*brāhmaṇas*' once again shows that the problem is not the social hierarchy of Brāhmaṇism, but that the *brāhmaṇas* in the story are morally weak

⁸³ This story has been included in many hagiographies of Jñāneśvar, including in popular cinema. This story is one of the central narratives of the famous Marathi film of the 1940s, *Sant Dnyaneshwar* directed by Vishnupant Govind Damle and Sheikh Fattela. This story is also part of the analysis presented by Novetzke (2011: 232-252.)

and corrupted, and therefore incapable of recognizing the spiritual greatness of the children.

This process has been described by Novetzke as “the Brahmin double”, in which the *brāhmaṇa* himself turns to rhetorical and performative self-criticism in order to reinvent his own identity and tradition, and reclaim his religious and moral authority.

Alternatively, this ‘double’ may display publically a self-conscious critical evaluation emerging from within Brahmin contexts, the presentation of two kinds of Brahmins, good and bad, as it were. It may also serve, more insidiously perhaps, as a comic foil that lures the sympathies of a non-Brahmin audience, acting, in a sense, as a ‘double agent’. It is in any case the Brahmin double that provides one important way to separate Brahminism and Brahmins discursively in public culture. (NOVETZKE 2011: 236)

The *brāhmaṇa* groups of Maharashtra, stigmatized for their ritual rigidity and social intolerance, have therefore tried to adapt and integrate these discourses, and turn them to their favor. While the ‘bad *brāhmaṇa*’ and his intolerant orthodox outlook has existed well up into our days, there have also been efforts from the *brāhmaṇas* themselves to counter this discourse,⁸⁴ not only through adopting the above mentioned rhetoric, but by appropriating, participating themselves, and ultimately partly mediating devotional practice. But the acceptance of the critique of the *brāhmaṇa*, nonetheless, is one of accommodation, selection, and reinterpretation of discourses and practices that generally favor the Brāhmaṇical ethos. Often, the more directly sharp criticism of Tukārām and others on the validity of Vedic learning expressed in their songs is either nuanced or simply ignored by the *brāhmaṇas*.⁸⁵

Nonetheless, it must also be acknowledged that the social reforms of the nineteenth century⁸⁶ — from figures such as Bal Shastri Jambhekar, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, Jotibā Phule, and later from Mahadev Govind Ranade, Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Pandita Ramabai, Dhondo Keshav Karve, and many more, up to Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and his contemporary followers — orthodox *brāhmaṇa* practices and opinions, have been repeatedly challenged in different degrees by both *brāhmaṇas* and non-*brāhmaṇas*. This has had an impact not only on the way *brāhmaṇas* are perceived in the Maharashtrian imagination, and in the way *brāhmaṇas* position

⁸⁴ We must not forget that the stories which criticize *brāhmaṇas* in the hagiographies of the *sants* were largely written by *brāhmaṇa* authors.

⁸⁵ In his recent study of the Marāṭhā *kīrtan* traditions of South India (mainly in Tamil Nadu), Soneji (2013) has found that only *brāhmaṇas* are found among the performers, and mostly an upper-caste audience attends these events. He also remarked that all *abhaṅgas* and *bhājans* critical of the ritualistic Vedic tradition are filtered out of their repertoire, and only those addressing spiritual and mythical topics are used in their performances. For a reinterpretation of the *sants* poetry for nationalistic purposes, see: SCHULTZ 2002 and 2013.

⁸⁶ See also the next section.

themselves in their local socio-religious contexts, but also in their daily lives and ritual practices.

While one could think that the *vārkarīs* and orthodox *brāhmaṇas* are incompatible, in many schools I visited I was able to witness the opposite. The *sant* religiosity and the Vedic traditions seem not only to coexist, but also to actively support each other. For example, one of the learned *brāhmaṇas* I came in contact with, Vivekśāstrī Goḍbole from the Śrī Kṛṣṇayajurveda Pāṭhaśālā, who is himself very fond of devotional music and is an accomplished singer, often organizes recitals of devotional songs in combination with a ‘Vedic’ *yajña* performed on the same day. He also had traditional music classes organized for the students of the *vedapāṭhaśālā*, where they learn the traditional devotional songs of the saints. In this school, I also witnessed a group of *vārkarīs* from a neighbouring town who came from time to time to the school to perform their *kīrtans* and sing *abhaṅgas* and other devotional songs. The students and teachers would not only observe, but also participate in these events and would even participate in the *diṇḍī* dances. The main teacher of this school also taught little children from the town (they being 5-10 years old) how to recite verses from the Bhagavadgītā and the popular Marathi text Manāce Ślok of Rāmdās. The teacher claimed having no regard for caste while teaching these lessons that lasted one hour in the early afternoon. These lessons were undertaken while the Vedic students of the school had some free time before their Veda class.⁸⁷ These two examples, from Vivekśāstrī Goḍbole, are not isolated cases. He and many other *vaidikas* who consider themselves “orthodox Brahmins” (as he denominated himself) show the influence of the acceptance and, to some extent the integration, of popular devotional traditions of the region into their daily lives.

The relatively close contact they have with people who follow very particular forms of popular Hinduism, like the *vārkarīs*, certainly plays a role in the construction of their worldview. For example, almost every year the school members assist the pilgrims on their annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur. On this occasion, the *brāhmaṇas* from this school set up a resting point to provide pilgrim groups with food, water, and other basic needs for their journey. Vivekśāstrī Goḍbole told me in an interview that this involvement was important for him. He said:

There are two types of importance; (1) first, they are chanting God’s name, so when you feed them your food is going to God directly, and (2) also, they are walking on the road, and physically they need something. It is very hard. You cannot provide them with everything, that is true, but whatever your capacity is, you should give that. God is providing for all. Whatever your capacity is you should open your door. And God will open doors through other persons. God will give to you through other persons. (From interview, 22.02.06)

⁸⁷ As of 2010, I am told that these community classes are given irregularly by the younger daughter of the main teacher or by one of the advanced students.

Once, I was also able to witness a curious exchange: a group of farmers wanted to honor Śiva on the night of Mahāśivarātri in the temple of their small village near Satara, so they came to one of the Vedic schools in the city. They came asking for advice from the *guruḥ* there on how to ‘properly perform the rituals’. The main teacher and principal of the school agreed to help, and sent some students with precise instructions on how to conduct the rituals there. He had them recite Vedic *mantras*, such as the Śatarudrīya⁸⁸ (TSaṃ 4.5, 4.7), and perform the rituals in the village temple, but he also instructed that a session of *kīrtan* of the names of Śiva and the famous ‘*om namaḥ śivāya*’ *mantra* be led by the students of the school, and in which the villagers could also participate. In exchange for this aid, the teacher of the school asked the villagers to come once a month to sing and dance devotional songs in their repertoire on the premises of the school, to which the villagers happily agreed.

Whether, historically speaking, these values have truly been put into practice by the *bhakti* traditions or not, the above examples and many of my interactions with the *brāhmaṇa* teachers and students in Vedic schools of Maharashtra show that the modern values of social equality, self-determination, and service to the saints of Maharashtra (regardless of their social background) have been largely ascribed to *bhakti* religiosity, and accepted as something desirable and worth attaining.

However, it must also be noted here that not all of these *bhakti* traditions necessarily transcend Brāhmaṇical ideals of *varṇāśramadharma* and the conservative attitudes concerning the rights and duties of women; in fact, some scholars have argued that it was these devotional traditions which reinforced Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy.

These Brahmins who Brahmanised others, including people of comparatively lowly or uncertain status, played a crucial role in spreading and stabilising the values of ‘traditional’ caste in this period. In both north and south India this task was regularly performed by the *sampradaya* devotional sects. (BAYLY 1999: 75)

An example of this in Maharashtra is the so-called *datta-sampradāya* in the line of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī and his successor Vāsudevānanda Sarasvatī (aka Ṭembhe Svāmī), as well as the *rāmdāsī-sampradāya* of Samārth Rāmdās. As Morse has aptly summarized:

Neither class nor genre was used to exclude members from the Vārkarī Pantha, and indeed many of the saints in the tradition were from the lower classes [...] this ‘spiritual democracy’ had permeated the socio-religious fabric of Maharashtra by Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī’s time (fifteenth century CE) thus challenging the Brahmin establishment, whose power and authority was dependent on the very distinctions that the Vārkarī’s ‘spiritual democracy’ swept away. Although Brahmins did participate in the tradition (some of the great poet-saints, such as Ekanātha, were Brahmins), the Vārkarī’s *bhakti* was at odds with the śāstric ethos. (MORSE 2012: 236)

⁸⁸ For more on this popular hymn, see: KRAMRISCH 1981: 71-74.

While the *vārkarīs* and other devotional groups in which lower-classes are predominant in number may have very different stories about their interactions with *brāhmaṇas*, and their collective memory may evoke very different associations about ‘the *brāhmaṇa*’, it is clear that for the *brāhmaṇas* of these schools to follow the teachings and practices of the saints and *gurus* of Maharashtra is as important as the maintenance of their Vedic *dharma*. In fact, by honoring and practising the traditions of the *sants*, as one of the teachers who I interviewed told me, “one becomes a better father, a better son, a better *brāhmaṇa* and especially a better human being.”⁸⁹

While this statement may come across as a romanticized version of Orientalism,⁹⁰ there are other ways in which *brāhmaṇas* think of themselves in relation to the more critical *bhakti* traditions. There is a constant negotiation that is mediated by the *brāhmaṇa* regarding what belongs to the Vedic tradition (*sanātana-vaidika-dharma*) and what does not. The same elements — for example, devotion to a particularly iconoclastic saint such as Akkalkoṭ Svāmī (?-1878) — may or may not be considered ‘Vedic’ depending on which context they are framed within and who their interlocutors are. In Chapter 6, I will present how some of these apparent contradictions are negotiated within specific frameworks.

2.4 Modern Hinduism and the Religious Market in India

I want to conclude this section by drawing attention to another important context of the Vedic schools of Maharashtra — namely, ‘modern Hinduism’. Of course, as with the previous three contexts, I can only highlight in a cursory way here some aspects that are crucial for the understanding of how these schools constitute themselves, and how they position themselves *vis-à-vis* the “newer” forms of Hinduism. By ‘modern Hinduism’, I am explicitly referring to the developments that were shaped in the nineteenth century⁹¹ through the so-called Hindu reform movements⁹², and which continue to develop and influence contemporary forms of Neo-vedānta, esoteric Guruism, popular *bhakti* religiosity, and political (i.e. nationalistic) Hinduism.

While these movements may reflect very different opinions and interpretations of Hinduism, a crucial common denominator is that they evolved in the context of the colonial experience. Halbfass has referred to this self-representation as one “which grew out of its encounter with the West” (HALBFASS 1988: 344; 1991: 378). This self-

⁸⁹ Interview with Śantarām Bhanose 4.05.2009, Nashik.

⁹⁰ For a proposition of six types of Orientalism (1. Patronized/patronizing, 2. Romantic 3. Nationalist, 4. Critical, 5. Reductive 6. Reactionary), see: HEEHS 2003: 169-195.

⁹¹ From ca. 1850 Cf. MICHAELS 2004a: 45.

⁹² These are exemplified in the organizations such as the Brahmo Samāj (est 1828), the Theosophical Society (est 1875), and the Ārya Samāj (est 1875).

representation was one that sought to present itself as a unified force which was worthy of competing with the religion of the colonial powers. It was in the hands of these movements that the notion of a unified eternal religion (*sanātana-dharma*) emerged, a trope that continues to circulate among the Vedic schools of Maharashtra. Zavos argues that *sanātana-dharma* “as orthodoxy in fact emerged as an influential feature of the modernization process, most particularly in the development of a doctrinally nonconfrontational, pan-Hindu identity” (ZAVOS 2001: 109).

The ideas of a unified Hinduism in the form of *sanātana-dharma*, which have the Veda symbolically at its center, also provided the “spiritual” rationale for political and social action, and have been linked with various forms of political rhetoric. Examples of this linkage are found with Vivekānanda (1863–1902), Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), and their successors. In Maharashtra, too, similar efforts were on the way, for example, through the Prarthana Samāj (‘Prayer Society’) established by Ranade (1842–1901) and G. K. Gokhale (1866–1915) in 1869, from which debates over widow remarriage, child marriage, and female education were soon to enter the public sphere.

Many other examples could be noted here, such as the later movement led by Pandurang Shastri Athavale, the founder of the Svādhyāy Movement in the 1940s, which promotes the study of the Bhagavadgītā and the “recognition of God in all human beings.”⁹³ In addition to these movements which are oriented towards social change, other *guru* movements in Maharashtra, such as those headed by Meher Bābā, Muktānanda or Rajneesh (a.k.a Osho) became very popular around this time, not only among Maharashtrians, but also among Indians from afar, and particularly Westerners.

Of special mention here is Sāi Bābā of Shirdi, a famous eclectic saint who lived from the 1830s to 1918 in the small town of Shirdi in the Aurangabad District. The saint, who lived in an abandoned mosque, spread his teachings and acted in accordance with the lifestyles of contemporary Sufi divines, but had a heterogeneous following that included many Hindus (WARREN 1999). The once small village town of Shirdi has now become a large temple-town centered around Sāi Bābā’s tomb (*samādhi*), and its temple complex is arguably one of the richest and most visited in India. Sāi Bābā’s popularity exploded in the 1970s with the growth of mass media technologies and particularly Bollywood cinema in Mumbai (ELISON 2014). The saint now has a ubiquitous presence in Maharashtra, and indeed his popularity has reached even beyond India among the Hindu diaspora. He has become an icon of religious tolerance

93 “The primary goal of Swadhyay is to develop an awareness of the indwelling God — the divine presence within every human being. Another basic idea of Swadhyay is that bhakti (devotion) is not strictly an introverted activity; rather, it is also a social force. Bhakti is at the foundation of Swadhyay’.” Quoted from the official website of the movement: <http://www.swadhyay.org/> accessed on February 1, 2013.

and coexistence for his followers, who often quote his most famous saying as it is inscribed on top of his *samādhi* shrine, this as an example of the inclusive character of his teachings: “*sab kā mālik ek*” or “the Lord of all is one”. Despite his Muslim background and universal character as someone worshipped by diverse religious groups, Sāi Bābā now has a predominately Hindu aura (some scholars would see in him a typical case of “Sanskritization” or “Hinduization”). Priests from local *brāhmaṇa* families preside over daily worship of Sāi Bābā’s image in the traditional Hindu mode, this including the offering of *āratis* during different parts of the day. In 2014, Sāi Bābā and his followers became the object of a controversy initiated by Svarūpānanda Sarasvatī, the Śāṅkarācārya of Dwarka who criticized Sāi Bābā on the basis that he was not a Hindu, but a Muslim “*faqīr*”, and thus not worthy of the worship of Hindus.⁹⁴ The issue was widely circulated in the news both nationally and internationally, and brought about heated public debates, both among secular devotees as well as among various Hindu leaders. Svarūpānanda Sarasvatī apparently said, among other things, that someone “who used to eat meat and worship Allah, a man like that can never be a Hindu god.”⁹⁵ The Śāṅkarācārya received support from some of his followers — including orthodox Hindus such as the members of the Kāśī Vidvat Pariṣad and the belligerent *nāga-bābās* — who were sympathetic to his cause. On the other hand, Sāi Bābā’s devotees accused the Śāṅkarācārya of religious bigotry and he was summoned by the courts in various places like Varanasi, Indore, Jaipur, and Bihar on the basis of the complaints filed against him under section 298 of the Indian Penal Code (uttering a statement with an intention of hurting religious feelings).

Despite the controversy and the tension between various religious authorities on the subject, Sāi Bābā remains a popular religious force even among many Maharashtrian *brāhmaṇas*, particularly for those who see in him an example of spiritual unity in diversity and view him as “a needed corrective to rigid sectarian ideologies” (McLAINE 2011) that brings forth the “true spirit of *sanātana-dharma*”, as I was told by a young Veda teacher in Nasik. It is interesting to note here that the most famous disciple of Sāi Bābā, a *brāhmaṇa* known as Upāsani Mahārāj, was probably the first person in Maharashtra in modern times to impart Vedic chanting to girls at his *āśram* in Sakori, a town near Shirdi. His influence has been significant in Maharashtra, where women priestesses (*strī-purohitās*) are now found in the cities of Pune, Nasik, and Mumbai.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ “There is no mention of Sai Baba in the Shastras and the Vedas” so he “should not be worshiped with Hindu gods... He was not God, he was just a Muslim Fakir” <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Sai-vs-Shankaracharya-Conflict-may-turn-ugly/articleshow/37670625.cms> accessed on July 6, 2014.

⁹⁵ <http://www.ibnlive.com/videos/india/talking-point-shankaracharya-swaroopanand-699412.html> accessed on July 6, 2014.

⁹⁶ For more on the teaching of the Veda to women, see: subchapter 3.8 and L. PATTON 2005, 2007. Ute Hüsken is also currently leading a research project entitled “Changing Patterns of Women’s Ritual Agency” which studies the phenomenon of the *strī-purohitās* of Pune.

Scholars such as MacKean (1996) and Nanda (2009) have discussed the role of modern *gurus* and their organizations in politics, particularly in Hindu Nationalism. They have noted that the prosperous emerging middle classes have embraced popular forms of Hinduism centered on temples, pilgrimages, popular saints, or male and female *gurus*. These new expressions of Hinduism have necessarily been fostered by India's liberalizing and globalizing market economy, and are becoming increasingly public and political.

Aided by the new political economy, a new Hindu religiosity is getting ever more deeply embedded in the everyday life, both in the public and the private spheres. Use of explicitly Hindu rituals and symbols in the routine affairs of the state and electoral politics has become so commonplace that Hinduism has become the de facto religion of the 'secular' Indian state which is constitutionally bound to have no official religion. (NANDA 2009: 3)

But the current socio-economic policies are bringing the state, the religious organizations, and the business corporations into a much closer relationship than ever before. All these recent developments have propelled hegemonic discourses on caste and *brāhmaṇa* orthodoxy that in turn have deeply tainted the construction of Hindu identity and the role of the *vaidikas* today. Additionally, these processes have also become visible in official textbooks and the curricula of public education, as the research of scholars such as Bénéi (2008) has shown.

The first and clearest link of the *vedapāṭhaśālās* to modern Hinduism is the patronage. As I discuss in subchapter 3.2, most of the schools have close ties to modern *gurus*, often attached to a larger organization that provides them with the necessary funds to run the schools. Some have multiple associations with different organizations, and others may not have direct economic links to modern religious movements, but they certainly have explicit relations with them. The non-economic ties to diverse religious traditions and discourses are equally important, for they often influence the way the members of these schools position themselves ideologically. These links are more difficult to map, for they are multifaceted and operate on different layers: the family traditions and lineages, the local temple(s), the caste association(s), political affiliation, and the religious affiliation of the clientele, of the teachers, and of the students, etc.

For instance, consider this hypothetical case: A traditional *brāhmaṇa* teacher may come from a traditional Deśastha family of ritualists whose traditional *kuladevī* is Reṇukā Mātā of Mahur. He may have been influenced politically by the Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Saṅgh (RSS) and be active in his local caste association (Deśastha Ṛgvedi Brāhmaṇ Saṅgh). He may also count among his favorite books the works of Vivekānanda, be invited to perform at a *somayāga* organized and financed by followers of Akkalkoṭ Mahārāj of the *datta-sampradāya*, and be a devotee of the current Śaṅkarācārya of Sringeri — all at the same time.

It is interesting to note that many of these organizations are closely linked to spiritual/religious lineages that are or have been initially openly critical of

Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy, such as, in Maharashtra, the *datta-sampradāya* or the *vārkarī panth*.⁹⁷ Some examples of these institutions are the MVVP⁹⁸ as founded by Svāmī Govind Dev Giri (prior to 2006, known as Śrī Kiśor Vyās), who claims affiliation to the *vārkarī panth*, and in particular to the famous saint of the thirteenth century, Jñāneśvar Mahārāj at Alandi.⁹⁹ This institution sponsors a total of 12 Vedic schools in India, five of which operate in Maharashtra. Śrī Ramakṛṣṇa Sarasvatī, considered by his followers to be an incarnation of Dattātreyā, inaugurated in Ahmednagar one of the largest Vedic schools in the state — visited during the fieldwork for this book — which teaches all four Vedas.¹⁰⁰ Śrī Gajānan Mahārāj of Shivapuri (also known as ‘Śrī’), who is considered a reincarnation of Akkalkoṭ Svāmī and therefore also belonging to the *datta-sampradāya*, could be considered as one of the main revivalists of the *śrauta* traditions in the area. The *śaktipāta*¹⁰¹ master Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj (1886-1974), the spiritual father of Nānāji Kāle and sons, is the inspiration for the revival of hundreds of the most complex Vedic Soma rituals (*somayāgas*) and the protection of endangered *śākhās* of Vedic recitation through the Śrī Yogirāj Veda Vijñān Āśram, as well as its branches. The late Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand is another example of a man who is considered to be a great saint by his followers and who continues to inspire them in support of the Vedic tradition.¹⁰²

To briefly illustrate this point (plates 2), I will describe the following event: When I first visited the Alandi branch of the MVVP, there was occurring a festive programme to award students from a local girls’ school. The patron of the organization, Śrī Govinddev Giri Mahārāj, and some dignitary guests were present at the ceremony.

97 The case of the *datta-sampradāya(s)* is a complex one because different groups (both *brāhmaṇa* and non-*brāhmaṇa*) in the region have appropriated the figure of Dattātreyā as their main deity, though he himself is a figure who has an ambiguous and rather transgressive relationship with orthodoxy. The dominant branches of this *sampradāya* in the lineage of Śrīpād Śrīvallabha (around 1320-1350) were ‘Sanskritized’ since the beginning, and have a largely *brāhmaṇa* following. See: RIGOPOLUS 1998, and PAIN and ZELLIOT 1988. Also noteworthy is the support that has come from the successors of Śaṅkara, whose non-dual philosophy (*advaita-vedānta*) was critical of the ritual aspect of tradition to obtain the ultimate knowledge. This has clearly been shown by: F. SMITH 1994.

98 <http://dharmaashree.org/VedicSchools.html> accessed on February 21, 2011.

99 He also proclaims himself to be a disciple of Jayendra Sarasvatī, the current Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchipuram. Also, Svāmī Govind Dev Giri (then known as Kiśor Vyās) received the Sri Chandrasekarendra Sarasvatī National Eminence Award in 2003. How important his influence on the *vārkarīs* of Alandi or the region is a question that needs to be studied elsewhere, but as has been pointed out to me by Jon Keune, there is a strong non-*brāhmaṇa* stream in the contemporary *vārkarī* tradition, especially as coalesced around the commemoration of Tukarām in Dehu.

100 See Appendix 1. <http://www.dattadevasthan.org/VedantVidyapeetham.asp> accessed on February 22, 2011.

101 *Śaktipāta* (‘the descent of power’) is a yogic/tantric experience that is often associated with the initiation (*dikṣa*) in which the *kuṇḍalinī* energy of a disciple is ‘awakened’ by the *guru*. For more on this process see, e.g., WALLIS 2008.

102 For these two examples, see subchapter 6.3 and Appendix 1.

Prior to the arrival of the *guru*, well-known *vārkarī* devotional songs (*abhaṅgas* and *kīrtans*) were sung by the assembled crowd, *vārkarī* in its grand majority. The group was divided into a large majority of white-clad males with their distinctive *ṭopī* caps, and a few women who were seated separately, as well as the honoured students. The other group consisted of the *brāhmaṇa* students of the Śrī Sadguru Nijānand Mahārāj Vedavidyālay. The *brāhmaṇa* students sat in front of the assembly near the stage. Once the *vārkarīs* finished their chanting, a man in his 40s-50s gave a short speech and introduced the Vedic chanting by the students of the school. They intoned a few Vedic *mantras* in the *mādhyandina* style (the branch taught in this Vedic school) while the public listened patiently. After the *mantras*, Śrī Govinddev Giri Mahārāj, an elder *vedamūrti* from Alandi, and other dignitaries were honoured by the staff members of the school, assisted by young *brāhmaṇa* students. As a symbolic gesture, Śrī Govinddev Giri Mahārāj with the other dignitaries on stage, together, kindled the large *ghee* lamp, each of them lighting a different wick. Following this event, the dignitaries received garlands, a shawl wrapped around their shoulders, a small gift, and a cardboard photograph of Śrī Govinddev Giri (who received the garland and a shawl). Once honoured, the guests of Śrī Govinddev Giri bowed to the *saṃnyāsin* in respect. The elder *brāhmaṇa* tried to bow to the *guru*, but instead Śrī Govinddev Giri honoured him by touching his feet. After honouring the saints on the altar on the stage, and after a few speeches from the organizers, the ceremony of handing over prizes/recognitions to people in (the *vārkarī*) community, and particularly the girl students, took place. Each of the dignitaries seated on stage had an item to distribute to the students (these items being a book by Govinddev Giri, a shawl, and an envelope with money). The students, in turn, either prostrated themselves before each of the dignitaries on stage or touched their feet in respect. The elder *brāhmaṇa* and Śrī Govinddev Giri received always the highest form of respect — a full prostration with the hands stretched out towards the feet (*daṇḍavat-praṇāma*). After the students had received their awards, other personalities in the crowd received honours. Speeches, mostly on nationalistic themes such as the protection of cows and the restoration of *sanātana-dharma* by protecting the Vedas and the *brāhmaṇas*, were also given by one of the *brāhmaṇa* students and by Govinddev Giri himself. After the speeches, the *guru* requested that the audience recite the famous prayer by Jñāneśvar Mahārāj called *Pasāyadān*.¹⁰³ After the prayer, the gathering dispersed, and after a few minutes, the crowd was gone.

¹⁰³ This is the closing prayer of Jñāneśvar Mahārāj's *opus magnum*, his commentary on the Bhagavadgītā in Marathi called Jñāneśvarī. The *Pasāyadān* is often referred to as the "universal prayer" (KRIPANANDA 1989) and is regularly used in Maharashtra as an invocation prayer (*āvāhana* or *maṅgalastuti*). On many occasions, in ceremonies and other religious events such as this one, it is also used as a closing prayer.



Plate 2: Festival honoring school girls at a Vedic school from the MVVP. Govinddev Giri (upper image) in the center surrounded by *brāhmaṇa* and *vārkarī* personalities. *Vārkarīs* singing (lower image) devotional songs before the program was officially inaugurated. Alandi 2009.

Part of the legacy of these reform movements are found in discourses that have affected areas of Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy — for example, that women should be college educated before marriage, widows should be respected and take active roles in families and communities, and that caste barriers should be dissolved or at least become more permeable. As Saunders has remarked:

Clearly, the ideas of the Arya Samaj and other reform movements with respect to these and a variety of other social issues have been largely accepted by an influential segment of the Hindu population in India. (SAUNDERS 2011: 55)

The influence of these discourses has had an important impact not only on ideological elements of Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy, but in relation to actual innovations in ritual performance, such as the access of women to the Vedas.

One partial by-product of the paradigm seems to have been unintended. This was the expansion of women's access to Sanskrit education and the assignment to women of leadership roles in the Vedic system that had once been entirely performed by males. Arya Samaj schools launched this trend early in the twentieth century, training women to read Sanskrit, to recite Vedic *mantrams*, and to perform the fire offerings known as *havans*. During the late 1930's Guru Upansani Baba spread women's priestly roles to Maharashtra, when he began training women of his *ashram* to conduct Vedic sacrifices. Women of the Ramakrishna Mission finally realized Vivekananda's dream of a *math* for women *sannyasinis* devoted to service in 1957, founding the Sarada Math and Mission. [...] The Sri Sri Anandmayi Ma organization has likewise consecrated *sannyasinis*, as well as *brahmacarinis* vowed to perpetual discipleship. In fact, even the Shankaracaryas who serve as a living final authority for the orthodox Hindu community seem increasingly willing to accept women *sannyasinis*, while at least two women leaders of the so-called 'Hindu Party', the B.J.P. (Bharatiya Janata Party), have likewise taken up *sannyasini* robes. (N. FALK 2011: 314)

The consequences of this appropriation and reinterpretation of fundamental values of Brāhmaṇism, which have their roots in these movements, will be illustrated in the examples in Chapter 6. My aim here is to point to the interdependence of the *vedapāṭhaśālās* with the developments brought about by efforts initiated in the Hindu reforms of the nineteenth century.

Another reason for the malleability of Brāhmaṇism's core values is that the different discourses around what it means to be a Hindu are widely and quickly circulated in today's communication era, through print and electronic media (film, television, video, and more recently the Internet), and therefore can also quickly change and influence opinions within *brāhmaṇa* networks.

The influence of these movements on contemporary Hinduism may be larger than scholars have heretofore recognized. Here, I have merely scratched the surface of the topic, and a more thorough study of how these ideas have spread in popular Hinduism, whether disseminated through *guru* movements, caste associations, or family members, would help us better understand the entangled lives of modern *vaidikas*, but I hope that some of these entanglements will become clearer in the examples I present in the following pages.