

4 Life in the Vedapāṭhaśālā

This chapter aims at presenting the daily life at the Vedic schools and also at presenting some of the rules spoken and unspoken that regulate the lives of the teachers and students. I present here the yearly calendar and general usage of when to study the Veda, the daily schedule, the extracurricular activities, the dress code, and insignia used by students and teachers in these schools.

4.1 Yearly Calendar and Preparations Before Class

The *dharmaśāstra* literature gives us different information on the annual course of study. According to Āpastamba, the start of the course should be on the full moon of July-August (which is also the full moon dedicated to the teacher called *gurupūrṇimā*), and the course of study should conclude on the full moon or the lunar mansion *rohiṇī* of December-January.²⁵⁰ Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasiṣṭha also suggest the same dates for the beginning of the annual course, and add that the course could alternatively start on the full moon of the next month. According to these sources, the course should last for four-and-a-half months or five-and-a-half months. Vasiṣṭha adds that, “outside of that period [one] should study the Veda during the fortnights of the waxing moon. If he wants to, he may study the Vedic Supplements [i.e. Vedāṅga].”²⁵¹

According to the *dharmaśāstra*, therefore, the period of Vedic studies lasted usually no more six and a half months per year.²⁵² The *dharmaśāstra* literature is silent on the activities to be performed by both students and teachers during the rest of the year. According to Scharfe, probably the curriculum at that time was not as large as when the Vedic canon had been established and, once the curriculum expanded, the study periods naturally also became longer. He writes:²⁵³ “The tendency to extend the period of study is obvious, a result perhaps of the ever-increasing volume of texts that had to be mastered” (SCHARFE 2002:215).

Nonetheless, besides the actual period of the year in which the Vedas were studied, there are “non-instruction” days on which Vedic recitation and study was to

²⁵⁰ ĀpDhS 1.9. 1-3 cf. OLIVELLE 2000.

²⁵¹ GautDhS.16.1-4 / BaudhDhs.1.12.16 / VāsDhŚ 13.1-7 cf. OLIVELLE 2000.

²⁵² KauśGS 139 and 141: four months minus three days; ĀpDhS I 3,9,2: four and a half or five months; PārGS II 11,10: five and a half months; ŚāṅGS IV 6,7f.: five and a half or six and a half months; ĀśvGS III 5,14: six months cf. ALTEKAR 1934: 102.

²⁵³ “What did the Veda students do after *utsarjana*, in the time of our *sūtras* (and the time preceding them), before this (perhaps optional) expansion of the study time was introduced, or those students who opted not to study after *utsarjana*? The old texts are silent on this point.” (SCHARFE 2002: 216), cf. also: ALTEKAR 1934: 106.

be avoided.²⁵⁴ But the fact that only six months or two months were dedicated to the study of the Vedic texts is rather improbable. The fact that, already, the *padapāṭha* and several *vikṛtis* of the four Vedas were preserved — through the oral tradition — by the time the *dharmasāstra* literature was composed implies that intensive study to memorize these texts was needed.²⁵⁵ Either the students then took much longer to memorize the Vedic texts than they do now or, as Scharfe suggests, the study period was extended more and more until it reached a continuous full-year calendar, as we find it to be today.²⁵⁶ One would need to ask if the same students and teachers who preserved the Vedic recitation and chanting with their permutations were the same for/by whom these *śāstras* were written. Whoever created these texts had the time and the financial support to do it. A *vaidika* who had to dedicate most of his life to memorizing and reciting the Veda, and to performing rituals, was not necessarily (pre-)occupied with the transmission and creation of other legitimating texts, such as the *dharmasāstra* literature.

The school calendars of the Vedic schools of contemporary Maharashtra, although varying slightly from school to school and having their own rules and schedules for formal teaching, have a full yearly calendar that differs from the one given in the Śāstric literature, in which in which the rituals of renewal of the sacred-thread called *upākarman* and *utsarjana* accordingly, marked still longer periods which were free of study.²⁵⁷ The structural and functional heterogeneity of the contemporary *vedapāṭhaśālās* observed for this study influence the way the Veda instruction takes place and how it differs from the manner in which it is ideally supposed to be done, according to the textual sources. If one looks at the preparation stage of the Veda class according to the Śāstric literature, the first evident difference one encounters is concerning time and place.

The instruction of the Veda and its recitation is, according to the tradition, supposed to happen only on ‘study’ or *adhyāya*-days, and be avoided on ‘not-study’ or *anadhyāya*-days (cf. SCHARFE 2002: 219-20; OLIVELLE 2006). The detailed instructions on when the Veda study is supposed to happen and when it is to be interrupted, according to the Śāstric rules, are by and large not followed in all the schools, and most probably they never were. Currently, these Śāstric rules are often not being

²⁵⁴ See below in this chapter.

²⁵⁵ It is generally accepted that the consolidation of the oral tradition happened in its majority during the Brāhmaṇa period (900–700 BCE), in which the Saṃhitās and their respective *padapāṭhas* were prepared. For a more detailed discussion on the subject, see: e.g. DESHPANDE 2002: i-xiii. The earliest Dharmasūtras, on the other hand, are generally dated as follows: Gautama 600 to 400, Āpastamba 450 to 350, Baudhāyana 500 to 200, and Vasiṣṭha 300 to 100, all BCE, and the Dharmasāstras even later. (OLIVELLE 2000: 9)

²⁵⁶ Including relatively short vacation periods. See below in this chapter.

²⁵⁷ For more on these rituals, see: MOOKERJI 1998: 191. On the topic of the sacred-thread, see below in subchapter 4.5.

respected *à-la-lettre* for practical reasons, but also sometimes out of ignorance. One must remember that these rules and restrictions were not necessarily authoritative to all the Vedic branches (particularly those articulated within the *śikṣā* and *prātiśākhya* literature), and that even when the rules were intended for a specific *śākhā*, more often local and even personal preferences on the part of the teachers have determined the practices followed in these schools, both in the present as well as in the past.

The study days are dictated by the teacher and follow the school's calendar as determined by either the main teacher or the director of the school. The *anadhyāya* days are traditionally stipulated in the Śāstric literature, but there are different interpretations concerning the prohibition against studying Vedic texts. Long lists of days on which the recitation of the Veda is to be avoided are found in the Dharmasūtras and elsewhere. For an example of such a list, I take the passage from the Gautamadharmasūtra, as quoted by Olivelle in his article on the subject:

He should suspend vedic recitation during daytime when the wind whirls up the dust; at night when he can hear the wind blow; when the sound of a lute, drum, side drum, chariot, or wailing is heard; when dogs are barking, jackals are howling, and donkeys are braying; when the sky turns crimson; when a rainbow appears; when there is frost on the ground; when clouds appear out of season; when he has the urge to void urine or excrement; in the middle of the night, at the time of twilight, and while standing in water; when it is raining —but, according to some, only when the water is running down the eaves; when Venus and Jupiter are surrounded by halos, as also the sun and the moon; when he is frightened, travelling in a vehicle, lying down, or has lifted his feet; when he is in a cremation ground, at the village boundary, on a highway, or in an impure state; when there is a foul smell; when there is a corpse or a Cāṇḍāla in the village; when a Sūdra is near by; and when he experiences an acrid belching. The recitation of the Ṛgveda and the Yajurveda, moreover, is suspended as long as the recitation of the Sāmaveda is heard. When there is a lightning strike, an earthquake, an eclipse, or the fall of a meteor, vedic recitation is suspended until the same time the next day; as also when there is thunder, rain, or lightning during twilight when the fires are visible. When these happen during the rainy season, however, the suspension lasts only that day. When there is lightning during the night, moreover, the suspension lasts until the last watch of the night; but if it occurs during or after the third part of the day, the suspension lasts the whole night. According to some, a meteor has the same effect as lightning with respect to the suspension of vedic recitation, as does thunder when it occurs in the afternoon or even at dusk. If there is thunder before midnight, the suspension lasts for the whole night; if it happens during the day, the suspension lasts throughout the daylight hours, as also when the king of that realm dies, and when one student goes on a journey and another stays behind with the teacher. The suspension lasts for a day and a night when there has been a social disturbance or a fire; when he has finished reciting one Veda; when he has vomited; when he has eaten at an ancestral offering or at a sacrifice to humans; on the new-moon day—alternatively, the suspension here may last for two days; and on the full-moon days of the lunar months October–November, February–March, and June–July. At the three eighth-day offerings during the three fortnights of the waning moon following the full moon of November–December, the suspension lasts for three days; according to some, the suspension takes place only at the last of these eighth day offerings. When the annual course of study is commenced and concluded, the suspension is in effect on that day, as well as on the preceding and following days. In the opinion of all authorities, when rain, lightning, and thunder occur together, the suspension lasts for three days, as also when there is heavy rain. On a festive day vedic recitation is suspended after the

meal. Immediately after commencing the annual course of study, recitation is suspended during the first four “hours” of the night. According to some, vedic recitation is always suspended in a town. Even mental recitation is suspended when a person is impure. After making an ancestral offering, the suspension lasts until the same time the next day, as also when uncooked food is distributed at an ancestral offering. Vedic recitation is also suspended for reasons given in each vedic branch. (GautDhS 16.5-49, transl. OLIVELLE 2006: 306-7)

According to the above passage from the GautDhS, the recitation of the Veda is to be interrupted on several “extraordinary” occasions. Olivelle concludes that a common factor to these restrictions of study is the anxiety arising from the ‘liminality’ of these situations:

Concern with regard to the order of this regulated and classified universe is of paramount importance to the guardians of that order and especially with regard to the process whereby members of the group, especially the younger members, are socialized into accepting the inherited order (Berger 1967). Concern or scrupulosity — what we would call *śaṅkhā*²⁵⁸ [sic] in Sanskrit — during times when this order is threatened is a central feature of the ritualized behavior intended to guard the order. [...] It is the *śaṅkhā* [sic] with regard to the boundaries of the order and to events that disturb that order that appears to be at the concealed heart of the rules governing suspension of Vedic recitation. (OLIVELLE 2006: 320)

As mentioned in the passage above, and according to many other similar texts,²⁵⁹ the instruction of the Veda is not supposed to take place if one has previously engaged in ‘polluting’ activities, places, or circumstances. But most of these rules became obsolete in the course of time, and those mentioned in the passage above were not observed during my fieldwork, particularly those concerning meteorological circumstances. I was able to observe on several occasions how, for example, classes took place while it was raining out of season, or while dogs were barking near the school. Other rules prohibiting the study of the Vedas under other circumstances not mentioned in the passage above are considered in the compilation given by Olivelle (2006). For example, I was able to observe students and teachers engaged in writing, reading the newspaper, or other “forbidden” activities as according to the Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras. In fact, most of the *anadhyaṃya* rules were ignored, except the traditional fortnightly holidays, which are followed in all of the schools and are determined by the lunar calendar on full moon and new moon, during occasions relating to death and birth, and in cases of a solar or lunar eclipse. Other interruptions in study may be the observance of Hindu holidays on which particular rites are followed. On these days, classes and study may fall off completely or be shortened.

258 The word Olivelle is referring to is not *śaṅkhā* (a kind of flute or a derivative from a conch or shell), but *śaṅkā* (care, fear, apprehension).

259 Most of the Dharmaśāstric texts have a section dealing with the study of the Veda in which the non-study days are addressed. For a comparative list of recurring topics in which several textual sources are used see for example: OLIVELLE 2006.

Additional suspension of study is observed during the vacation period which, strictly speaking, is not part of the *adhyāya* days. However, since the yearly calendar is not strictly marked by the *upākarma* rituals anymore, the calendar is quite varied among the schools I visited. Generally, ten days or two weeks are always given as holidays during the *dīpāvali* celebrations (October/November). The other vacation period lasts the whole month of Vaiśākha (around May) during the hot season when it is really difficult to do any kind of work. Over these two longer periods of holidays, the students go home to spend time with their families.

On the *anadhyāya* days that fall on the new and full moon, a few schools perform the traditional Vedic rituals of *pārvaṇa caru*²⁶⁰ (or rather adaptations of it), others spend their time performing alternative domestic (*smārta*) rituals (different types of *yajñas* and *homas*), and other schools with less time, knowledge, and resources perform *smārta* rituals only occasionally, and very rarely attend *śrauta* rituals, but this, too, only as minor assistants or observers rather than as officiating priests, for whom a specific training is necessary. On such non-study days, the teachers and students also take their days off, on which they rest or attend to their personal chores. Study of non-Vedic texts, such as the *vedāṅgas* or philosophy, is permitted (and in rare cases encouraged), and in some schools where regulations are less rigid, entertaining activities such as the viewing of certain movies or cricket matches (both playing them and watching them on TV) are allowed for the students.

On the other hand, I happened to observe, more than once, the interruption of formal instruction for practical reasons other than those stipulated in the *śāstras*, particularly if one of the teachers had a certain business to attend to, such as officiating a wedding, a commissioned *pūjā* or *yajña*, or a speech at a religious gathering. On such occasions, the students are usually asked to revise their previous lessons either in groups or by themselves, usually supervised by one of the elder students or by one of the auxiliary teachers if the school has them.

The instruction of the Veda is supposed to start in the first hours of the dawn on the *ādhyāya* days, right after the student and teacher have taken their baths and performed their *saṃdhyāvandana*. Nonetheless, only in the schools where the teacher and students live (and sleep) in the same enclosure does this actually happen. This is not possible, or at least not on a daily basis, where some of the teachers do not live on campus. In many of the schools I visited, the teacher does live with the students, but certainly not in all of them. In such cases where the teacher does not live in the school, the class usually happens in the course of the morning, but not as early as it is supposed to take place according to the Dharmaśāstric rules.

260 The full and new moon oblations are traditionally called *darśapūrṇamāsa*, but now the *śrauta* rites are very rare. On the traditional *darśapūrṇamāsa* rites, see, e.g.: HILLEBRANDT 1889; DUMONT 1957: 216-243. On the domestic or ‘non-solemn’ rites alternatively performed during this time, see: GONDA 1980.

The teachers who do not live in their schools usually have the classes scheduled after breakfast, roughly around 9.00 a.m. The teachers generally take at least some of their meals at home, and come only to the school to teach and, occasionally, to perform rituals. For students, sharing meals with their mentors is not unusual, however, it is more common for them to eat among themselves.

In most cases, the teachers also have other responsibilities that require their attention. Some even have other jobs and activities. In these cases, not only is the amount of time spent in formal teaching reduced, but also, as we will see later in Chapter 5, the quantity of time spent with the *guru* outside the formal study of the Veda is also reduced.

4.2 Daily Schedule

The *vedapāṭhaśālās* of Maharashtra share a similar daily schedule marked by the natural rhythms of the day, albeit with some minor variations. Usually, this consists of three periods of formal instruction of the Veda: in the morning before noon, in the afternoon, and in the evening.²⁶¹ There is usually no fixed scheme, and all schools (including those founded by the MSRVVP) create their own schedule. Some of the schools that I was able to observe over longer periods of time kept adjusting their schedules to accommodate changes in the curricula (such as new English or Sanskrit classes), and in general, schools of the ‘Gurukula’ and ‘Vedapāṭhaśālā’ types, where more intimate relations are common, have more flexible and mutable timetables. This depends on the household, the extra-curricular activities of the *guru*, and larger community-focused projects in which the students might also be involved. In general, the larger the school, the more fixed the daily routine is, but also the less responsibilities within the school the students have.

For students, their day starts generally before dawn with a bath and personal chores. Usually between 5.00 a.m. and 6.30 a.m., *saṃdhyāvandana* (personal worship) takes place. The *saṃdhyāvandana* or in short *saṃdhyā* (lit. junction) consists of a cluster²⁶² of obligatory ritual acts that mark the divisions of the day (sunrise, midday, and sunset), and is therefore also known as the “triple junction” (*trisaṃdhyā*). In all the schools visited, the morning *saṃdhyā* was considered an indispensable activity. In theory, the morning *saṃdhyā* should be performed as soon as the sun has risen (see GONDA, 1980: 460). This would imply that all the students would do their *saṃdhyā*

²⁶¹ Including the different types of instruction, see subchapter 3.6.

²⁶² The main constituents being: sipping of water (*ācamana*), breath exercises (*prāṇāyāma*), sprinkling one’s self with water (*mārjana*), the ‘driving out of sin’ breathing out from the nose on water taken in the right hand and then throwing the water away (*aghamaṛṣaṇa*), offering water to the sun (*arghya*), and recitation (*japa*) of the *gāyatrī-mantra*. Cf. GONDA 1980: 460.

at the same time, but in practice, in most of the schools, the ritual is performed in the morning hours before breakfast. Only two of the schools visited are located very near of a river where students can go and take their morning and/or evening ritual bath. In this case, students can bathe in larger groups and, therefore, also perform the *saṁdhyā* at the same time. This is nonetheless very rare, for most of the schools are located far away from a large body of water. This results in an inability of all of the students to practice their *saṁdhyā* together at the same time, and in practice, therefore, the students perform their *saṁdhyā* any time before breakfast or before their first revision session.

In addition to the morning *saṁdhyā*, in many of the schools, there is also a varied period of *pūjā* worship. In some of the schools for which there is a temple in the school or very close to the campus, students are encouraged to participate in the morning *pūjā* of the deity. In schools where there is no affiliated temple nearby, students remain in the school and either only perform their *saṁdhyā* or do additional worship in their free time. In the Śrī Kṛṣṇayajurveda Pāṭhaśālā in Satara, I could observe that while some students did only their morning *saṁdhyā*, two (or sometimes three) students had a longer morning routine in which they worshipped Śiva by performing a ritual bath (*abhiṣekha*) to the *śivaliṅgam* in the *pūjā*-room of the school, and integrated parts of the *saṁdhyopāsana* as their worship of Śiva. Another student chose to worship the Hanumān in the small shrine at the entrance to the school, in addition to his *saṁdhyā*, while the rest of the students performed only the *saṁdhyā*, according to their family tradition. This often has to do with the different tasks and responsibilities which students have in addition to their studies (we will come to these later). In other schools, the shrines are dedicated to different deities and, naturally, the worship varies greatly in form and scope — depending not only on the form of worship to each deity, but also on the personal inclinations of the teachers and students. In general, I could observe that in most schools a small group of students rotates on a regular basis in the worship of these deities, and that usually they are partly overseen by the teachers in some schools, such as the Śrī Kṛṣṇayajurveda Pāṭhaśālā. In some schools the teachers do not live on campus, but nearby in the neighbourhood, at a walking distance from the school. For this reason, the teachers rarely perform their *saṁdhyāvandana* in the school, but they rather come to school after performing the ritual at home, and after having their breakfast with their families. I also observed the case of a young unmarried teacher who comes to the school after performing his *saṁdhyā*, but often takes his breakfast with the students in the school.

During *saṁdhyā*, the students apply different kinds of *tilakas*. Most of the schools I visited are from a Smārta background, so that they mainly follow a Smārta practice and calendar. The *tilakas* the *brāhmaṇas* generally use in Maharashtra are mainly of Śaiva expression. The horizontal marks of sacred ash (*bhasman*) gained more of a sectarian connotation with the popularization of Śaṅkara and his association with the

ten monastic orders (the *daśanāmi-sampradāya*). Although, this does not necessarily indicate a Śaiva preference.²⁶³

After *saṃdhyā* and personal worship, the students review the portions learned over the past few days. In many schools, it is not until around 7.00 a.m. that the formal supervision of the students begins. By this time, the teachers and the students come together to take their tea. During this time, in many schools, exercise is supposed to take place, often programmed as ‘yoga’ which mainly consists of the famous sequence of yoga postures, *āsanas* called *sūryanamaskāra* (sun salutations).²⁶⁴ This form of physical exercise, nonetheless, was very often left out of the daily schedule. In one school I visited, a teacher had been hired to teach only ‘yoga’ to the students in the mornings. However, he stopped giving that class after a few months due “to the lack of interest from the students.” In two of the schools where I could observe the performance of the *sūryanamaskāra* sequence, and where it was considered an “important part of the schedule”, the session never lasted more than 15-20 minutes, and it took place without the supervision of a teacher, guided by one of the older students.

After their morning worship is completed, individuals have time for their personal responsibilities (such as washing clothes) and personal study or revision in groups until they gather to eat breakfast around 8 a.m. Together, they recite *mantras* to the goddess Annapūrṇā and to other deities, as well as to the *guru*. In some schools, students help in serving food, usually taking turns every week on a rotating system. Breakfast is usually a spicy dish called *pohe* that is made of rice flakes, or *śīrā*, a sweet dish made of semolina. Buttermilk for breakfast is not uncommon, and milk with sugar is also served in some schools, particularly to the younger students. Tea is usually only served to the teachers or senior students, but on some rare occasions I have seen students drinking tea.

Soon after breakfast, the first lesson (*santhā*) of the day begins for all the students. The classes continue until 11.30 a.m. or 12.00 p.m. in the way described in previous chapters. After class, a short ritual dedicated to Agni in the form of the digestive fire (the *agni-vaiśvāraṇa*) occurs, in which a different student offers cooked rice to the deity. Additionally, in one of the schools I was able to observe, another ritual in which a small plate with the food cooked that day is first offered to the cows or other animals of the school. Also, the leftovers of rice and *capātis* of the previous day are left in the open for

²⁶³ Many have indeed a strong Vaiṣṇava influence in their practice, and it is also not uncommon to find Śākta deities as the tutelary family deity (*kuladevatā*) of many *brāhmaṇas* in the region. For more on the complexity of the appellation ‘Smārta’ and its regional connotation of practice and group identity, see: CLEMENTIN-OJHA 2000.

²⁶⁴ It is unclear how old this sequence of *āsanas* is, but it finds no mention in classical Haṭhayoga texts such as the Haṭhayogapradīpikā, the Śivasamhitā, or the Gheraṇḍasamhitā. Some scholars believe that it was created by Pratinidhi Pant, the Rāja of Aundh, as a regimen for body-building rather than as a part of yogic *sādhana*. (SINGLETON 2010: 124)

crows, ants, and other creatures to eat. This is considered as *bhūṭayajña* or the ‘sacrifice for the living beings’, and is regarded as part of the five *mahāyajñas* that should be observed daily. The rest of the students and teachers do not participate in this offering; in the meantime, the appointed students for a given day arrange the seats by placing the mats and the big steel plates (*thālī*) on the floor. When the student has concluded the ritual, they come to sit for lunch. In the schools with a tendency towards the ‘Vedavidyālaya’ type, I was not able to observe the above-mentioned ritual performed and, instead, students went straight to wash their hands and take their seats on the floor to have lunch. In all the schools, before eating anything or touching the food, all of them recite some *mantras* to Agni and to Annapūrṇā, usually the Annasūkta and/or Trīśuparṇa. After reciting these *mantras*, some of the students offer small balls of rice (*piṇḍadāna*) next to their plates to their ancestors (if a male family member has passed away within the last year), and they sprinkle water, forming a circle around it from left to right in order to bless it (*tarpaṇa*). The diet is strictly vegetarian, and the food is cooked and handled strictly by *brāhmaṇas*. The food is based on a rice diet accompanied by curries of vegetables, *āmati* (a lentil based soup), and curd. There are particular holy days on which certain foods are prohibited according to religious rules of fasting (*upavāsa*) particularly rice, and thus are replaced by other kinds of foods that grow underground, such as potatoes, tapioca or peanuts. On fasting days there are certain food restrictions, and students are typically served a dish called *sabudana khicaṛī* made of tapioca pearls and potatoes, and other allowed products. Students are rarely encouraged to fast completely by drinking only water, since food is considered vital for concentration. As a general rule, they are also encouraged not to eat outside of the school, but if they have to, they should eat in “pure” (*sāttvika*) places — that is, eat food cooked by *brāhmaṇas* which is strictly vegetarian.²⁶⁵

After lunch, there is usually a short period for personal chores and resting until the next Veda class takes place. This period varies considerably in each school. As mentioned above, depending on the school type, students will have varying activities to perform outside of the formal periods of instruction, whether less or more.²⁶⁶ Between lunch and the afternoon Veda class is the time where many schools fit in their ‘complementary’ classes that might include: English, Marathi, Sanskrit, or computer sciences.²⁶⁷ In some schools, these classes are given in smaller groups, depending on the needs of the students. In a school in Satara, the youngest students are sent to a class at the home of the main teacher, where they receive instruction in Marathi and basic Mathematics which are taught by the daughter-in-law, as well as an extra

²⁶⁵ For conflicts on the aspect of eating out and consuming non-*brāhmaṇa* food, see subchapter 4.4.

²⁶⁶ See also the next section on the extracurricular activities of students and of teachers in the different schools.

²⁶⁷ For more on these classes see subchapters 3.5. and 4.3. In the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 3.2.1.24, it is said that: “A Brahmin should not speak the language of the mlecchas”, as quoted in KILLINGLEY 2007: 125.

revision class for Sanskrit, also given by her. In another school, the English class was given by a female teacher who came three times a week for one hour, but the class had to be temporarily discontinued when the teacher found another full-time job and no replacement for her could immediately be found.

In many schools, before the afternoon class students also take care of their assigned tasks that help with the running or maintenance of the school. This work is known as *gurusevā*, or service to the teacher. It is not merely believed to be menial work for the school or a sort of self-sufficient strategy. Instead, it is conceived as ‘the yoga of action’ (*karmayoga*) and ‘selfless spiritual practice’, and one through which one obtains merit (*punya*). Service to the master equals service to God and the fulfillment of one’s *dharma*. This service to the master is also a crucial socialization strategy that serves to embody discipline, and automate control over the body and the senses.

After their English class, they attend to their second Veda class of the day with their respective teachers until 4.30 p.m. After their class, most of the students and the two younger teachers usually play cricket. They play a couple innings in the field next to the school, the courtyard, or in any space available to be roughly adapted into a cricket playground. The ‘Vedavidyālaya type’ will tend to have a courtyard in the school grounds which is designed specifically for large social events or for the practice of sports. In the Śrī Guru Gaṅgeśvar Mahārāj Pāṭhaśālā, there was no cricket ground, however, it was the only school which had a proper playground with recreational equipment for the students.

After playing cricket, they still have around 20 minutes of free time which they use for washing themselves and doing their evening *saṃdhyā*. They recite their prayers in small groups, or alone in different places within the school. After *saṃdhyā*, the students have dinner in the dinning hall and, after washing themselves, they have either some revision of the previously learned texts, self-study, or classes with the teachers. Sometimes the elder students and the senior teachers come together to recite at this time of the day. Around 9 or 10 p.m. the children prepare themselves to go to bed. The teachers go to their homes. A few students also go home if their families live nearby. The students who go home are mostly from the advanced batches, while most young students are all residents. The students prepare their “beds”, which are only made of a couple of blankets spread on the bare floor and some of them even have a small pillow. During the warmer months of summer, they will only have a sheet (usually simply an extra *dhōṭī*) to cover their bodies with. It is customary that students sleep on the floor (*sthaṇḍīlaśāyin*), and the Mānavadharmasāstra and other scriptures state that it is mandatory for Veda students to sleep on the ground.²⁶⁸ At 10 p.m. the lights are turned off and everyone goes to sleep.

²⁶⁸ In MānDhŚ II.108, it is said: “Kindling the sacred fire, begging almsfood, sleeping on the floor and doing what is beneficial to his teacher - a twice-born should do these until he has performed the rite of returning home” (Olivelle 2005a: 100).

This daily cycle repeats itself without interruption except for the official holidays, when students enjoy their free time in different ways, but usually they tend to appreciate playing cricket and doing other things not related to their studies. I was told by some of the students that they “review what they have learned and do their *saṁdhyā* on holidays”, but mainly this is a time for them to relax and spend time with their families. There is no new text to be learned; however, they have to remember where they left off before taking their vacations. It often implies that they have to revise during some minimum of time everyday. Other students told me that they are often asked to perform rituals at home or recite what they have learned in school in order to please particular family members.

The schedule presented here in plate 5 is an actual example posted on a wall from the school in Nashik. This schedule varies from the prototype presented in the English version in Table 6. It includes a morning session of recitation of several non-Vedic texts, such as the Bhagavadgītā, the Viṣṇusahāsrnāma, and other *stotras* in the morning, as well as the midday *saṁdhyā* which is absent in the prototype. Such variations are found in all schools. While most schools aim for regularity, certain items in the schedule are actually performed every day at the given time (such as the morning and evening *saṁdhyā*). Other schools have more activities and are not so rigid. This depends on the teacher and the needs of the moment. The students may skip one activity or perform another for a longer period of time.

Table 6. Sample of a daily schedule

Time	Activity
4:00 a.m.	Wake up
4:15 – 5:00 a.m.	Personal chores, revision, and exercise
5:00 – 6:30 a.m.	Veda revision
6:30 – 8:00 a.m.	Morning <i>saṁdhyā</i> and morning <i>pūjā</i>
8:00 – 8:30 a.m.	Breakfast
8:30 a.m. – 12 p.m.	Veda study (<i>santhā</i> or <i>guṇḍikā</i>)
12:00 – 1:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:00 – 2:00 p.m.	English class/Veda study
2:00 – 2:30 p.m.	Rest
2.30 – 5:00 p.m.	Veda study (<i>santhā</i> or <i>guṇḍikā</i>)
5:00 – 6:30 p.m.	Play/Computer training for senior students (alternate days)
6:00 – 7:00 p.m.	Self-study (Music class / Computer training)
6.30 – 7:00 p.m.	Evening <i>saṁdhyā</i>
7:30 – 8:00 p.m.	Dinner
8:00 – 9:00 p.m.	Sanskrit class or revision (alternate days)
9:30 p.m.	Lights-off / Bed

(Jyotiṣa class on Sundays)

वैदिक ज्ञान विज्ञान संस्कृत महाविद्यालय, नाशिक.	
ज्ञानं विज्ञानसंहितम्	
॥ दैनंदिनी ॥	
५:०० ते ५:३०	मुखमार्जन व प्रातःस्मरण
५:३० ते ७:००	स्नान संध्या, सूर्यनमस्कार (व्यायाम)
७:०० ते ८:००	गीतापाठ, विष्णुसहस्रनाम, स्तोत्र पठन
८:०० ते ८:३०	अल्पोपाहार व दुग्धपान
८:३० ते ११:००	महाविद्यालय प्रथम सत्र
११:०० ते १२:००	मध्याह्नसंध्या, ब्रम्हयज्ञ, वैश्वदेव इ.
१२:०० ते १:००	भोजन (सीबळ्यात)
१:०० ते २:००	विश्राम
२:०० ते ५:००	महाविद्यालय द्वितीय सत्र
५:०० ते ५:३०	चहापान
५:३० ते ६:३०	आश्रम सेवा, क्रिडा, व्यायाम इ.
६:३० ते ७:३०	सायं संध्या, स्तोत्र पाठ, स्वाध्याय इ.
७:३० ते ८:३०	भोजन
८:३० ते ९:३०	लेखन, अभ्यास, चिंतन
९:३० ते ५:००	विश्राम, शयन.

श्रीधर आर्ट.
९८९०६९६६९३

Plate 5: Daily schedule posted in the Vaidik Jñān Vijñān Saṃskṛt Mahāvidyālay. Nashik 2009.

4.3 Extracurricular Activities

I call ‘extracurricular activities’ those activities that are not dedicated to the teaching or study of the Veda. In extracurricular activities, I have included the instruction of non-traditional subjects such as English and the use of computers in order to separate them from the study of the Veda and because they often occur in a different setting and with less regularity. The teachers of the *vedapāṭhaśālās* also do not consider these subjects as central as the instruction of the Vedas, and so they are often neglected. Other extracurricular activities are those that involve the maintenance of the school and service to the teacher. In the Vedic schools visited for this study, these activities are rich and varied. Depending on the school, the daily schedule is either more flexible or more rigid, permitting therefore more or less of these activities, depending on the outlook and needs of the school and the pedagogical approach of the teachers. In certain schools (usually those of the ‘Gurukula’ type and in the more independent ‘Vedapāṭhaśālā’ type) it is expected that students participate in extracurricular activities both in the school as well as outside of the school. Usually, these activities are framed as *gurusevā* (‘service to the teacher’), and they are often considered part of students’ training.²⁶⁹ Other activities outside of the school, such as assisting the teacher in the performance of rituals for clients at their homes or in ‘function halls’ (*kāryālayas*), going to the market to buy ritual materials and other groceries, and even taking classes outside of the school or going on pilgrimage are not rare in certain schools.

These extracurricular activities usually vary according to the degree of trust and responsibility conferred upon the students. Naturally, younger students do not engage in many extracurricular activities, particularly those that involve greater independence and responsibility. Younger students usually stay under the supervision of teachers and elder students, and rarely leave the premises of their school. Their extracurricular activities usually consist of simpler tasks, such as cleaning the premises and other household chores within the school. The focus for the younger students in their first years is usually placed on their studies and learning the proper behavior in the school. Occasionally, they accompany their teachers to a particular ritual. For example, in a *somayāga* I observed in Pune, I encountered some of the younger students from a *vedapāṭhaśālā* in Satara who had come to observe the ritual with two of their teachers. The rest of the elder students had stayed in Satara, as they had to prepare for an upcoming ritual in the school, and some of the elder students had left with the senior teacher to perform a wedding. For these younger students, this was both an opportunity to learn about a ‘rare *śrauta* ritual’, and at the same time it was an opportunity to break from their daily routine and enjoy a ‘picnic day.’

²⁶⁹ For more on the importance of the extracurricular type of instruction as part of the *gurukula* system of education, see Chapter 5.

Once the students are a few years into their studies, their extracurricular activities start to diversify. Usually, their teacher — depending on the character and disposition of the student — confers these activities upon the students. For example, two of the students of a school in Satara became very interested in Indian classical music and desired to study *tablā* with one of the local teachers in town. They asked permission of their *guru* to see if they could take *tablā* lessons in the evenings during their free time. The teacher then consented with the condition that they “do well in their Vedic studies.” Two other students of the same school wanted to study “more about computers”, and also asked for permission to take a course on the computer program ‘Office’, to which the teacher also consented with the same condition, but a third student who wanted to take the same course was denied participation because he was “not doing good progress in his Veda class.” The school mentioned here covers the costs of these extra classes, but this arrangement is rather an exception, and most of the schools do not provide such facilities or resources for students to study other subjects outside of their school. Sometimes, teachers of non-Vedic subjects, particularly of the English language, are hired by the schools to teach all of the students the given subject. These teachers are not necessarily traditional *brāhmaṇas*, and come to school as a side-job to their regular income. In two cases I observed, female teachers imparting English classes, in two *vedapāṭhaśālās* in Satara and Pune, came daily in one case and thrice a week in the other. When I asked the director of the school if the fact of them being female was any problem for them, he replied to me: “There is no problem at all. She is in fact very good with the children, but she does not come to the school when she has her period. No woman can enter the school when they have their period. According to the *śāstras* this is not permitted.”²⁷⁰

The extracurricular activities of students and teachers also include what they can do in their free time. These activities can vary from playing recreational sport games (cricket being the preferred sport), and reading newspapers and more rarely books, on to visiting friends and nearby temples. In a few schools, the watching of movies or selected TV programs is allowed on the *anadhyāya* days. Occasionally, students are allowed to watch cricket matches on TV or watch a movie. In a school in Satara, students had a TV set in the school and, on their free day, they were allowed to watch a few episodes from the popular *Rāmāyaṇa* or *Mahābhārata* serials under the supervision of a teacher. In all the schools, visits to the cinema were prohibited and non-religious content was discouraged. Despite this, most of the students I spoke to were familiar with the current Bollywood and even the Hollywood hits, which they watched during the vacation period in their family homes. Although still rather uncommon, some students now have increasing access to Internet in their schools, Internet cafes, and even on mobile phones on which they spend considerable parts of their free time, particularly on social media sites such as Facebook. Teachers and

270 For more on ritual purity, see the next subchapter, 4.4.

schools have also started to discover social media as a way to communicate and network, as well as a platform to present themselves and their services to the wider Hindu community.²⁷¹

4.4 Ritual Purity

Besides these activities that break with the daily routine of teachers and students, their life remains very regulated and disciplined within the pedagogical and ritual framework, and within the aims of the school. Vedic schools are presumably the place where one encounters more resistance towards change, and where orthodoxy most openly orients itself towards the ancient rules of purity. Rules limiting sexual contact, food transactions, touch, company, the right to ritual activities, and etc. are known to be particularly stringent among orthodox *brāhmaṇas*. The discourse on the purity of being and leading an “ideal Vedic life” is largely at the center of the self-representation of the *brāhmaṇas* of most of these schools. Ritual purity (*śuci* or *śauca* in Skt and *soṃvaḷā* or *sovaḷā* in Marathi), i.e. rules of “permanent”²⁷² and “temporal”²⁷³ impurity, continue to be an important aspect in the daily life of the Vedic schools, despite the fact that important changes of practices and attitudes can be noted in the lives of these *brāhmaṇas*. It is important to remind ourselves here that these rules of ritual purity have been not only a matter of ideological fallacy for the Brāhmaṇical elite, but that ritual purification was actually conferred by institutions and judicial processes in premodern India²⁷⁴, as O’Hanlon has remarked:

[...] at the important junction between an individual’s interior life, his or her networks of social relationships, and the authoritative institutions of local community and the state responsible for overseeing the maintenance of ritual purification. (O’HANLON 2009: 51)

She has demonstrated in her article on purification in pre-colonial Maharashtra (O’HANLON 2009: 65-69) that *brāhmaṇa* councils (*dharmasabhās*) continued to hold legal and ritual authority well into the eighteenth century, when it was institutionalized into the legal system of the Marāṭhā Peśva governments in Pune.

²⁷¹ Several teachers and at least three of the visited *vedapāṭhaśālās* have active Facebook profiles, with a rapid increase of Facebook users among the students over the last three years.

²⁷² Mainly the association with things or animals that are considered ‘permanently’ impure.

²⁷³ Such as those produced by the contact with death, childbirth, and blood (particularly menstrual blood).

²⁷⁴ For instance, the *dharmasabhās* of “Nasik, Karad, Kolhapur, Mahabaleshwar, Rajapur, Wai, Pandharpur, and Paithan enjoyed particular reputations for experience, fairness, and consequently for the authority of their judgements” (O’HANLON 2009). These in turn often consulted pan-Indian *brāhmaṇa* authorities, such as the ones established in Benares. (BRONKHORST 2005: 19-23; O’HANLON and MINKOWSKI 2008: 384-7)

I agree with the conclusions drawn by Olivelle in his article on the language for purity in the classical *dharma* literature (OLIVELLE 1998: 189-216), in which he regards these rules as *procedural* rather than static, in that they aim at ‘becoming pure’ not at ‘being’ pure. For him, these rules inscribe an anxiety (*śāṅkā*) of impurity or an attitude of constant purification that is a crucial element for the construction of the Brāhmaṇical ‘habitus’.

We can consider impurity rules as a system of socialisation. Individuals within the society must be made to acknowledge and support the social boundaries imposed on them, and this is effected primarily through social rituals. This may be one reason why many of the Dharmaśāstric rules on impurity are found in the sections dealing with the vedic student. (OLIVELLE 1998: 214)

If one would compare the ritualized daily routine of the *brāhmaṇa* from normative Sanskrit sources and the memory of elder *brāhmaṇas*, as well as the historical and ethnographic sources available, one would note important changes in the daily life of *brāhmaṇas* with regard to these rules. As we have seen in previous chapters, deviations from almost every purity rule can be found if compared to the normative texts, but to simply deduce from this fact an erosion of ‘tradition’ and a deviation from ‘authentic’ Vedic practice would be to miss the point. As I will argue in Chapter 6, the dichotomy between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ is partly a misleading one, and both are interdependent.

A very tangible change that has drastically altered the rules of purity for both *brāhmaṇas* and non-*brāhmaṇas* is that, officially in India, untouchability has been prohibited under articles 15 and 17 of the Indian Constitution since 1955, and the practices of discrimination on the basis of untouchability are punishable up to a maximum of 6 months imprisonment or a fine amount of up to ₹ 5’000 — or with both.²⁷⁵ While in practice, rarely are such cases reported, and the practice of discrimination and violence against ‘untouchables’ continues to be a reality in India; the long history of social critique, particularly strong during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the recurrent discourse against these practices in today’s public sphere have affected the self-perception of *brāhmaṇas vis-à-vis* these practices. The fact that many secular *brāhmaṇas* have abandoned and criticized these practices has left the orthodox *brāhmaṇas* with a certain anxiety on how and which practices concerning ritual purity are to be maintained. There is, of course, no homogeneous answer as to how the *brāhmaṇas* of these schools deal with the rules of ritual purity in their daily life. Questions concerning these practices are a sensible topic and are usually dealt with with a certain sense of secrecy towards the outsiders, particularly if the one asking the question is, in theory, an ‘untouchable’ himself. Furthermore, the illegality of some of these practices and the hegemony of humanistic values of egalitarianism in the public discourse tend to be a potentially problematic ‘grey area’ where rules are interpreted and followed rather freely.

²⁷⁵ Act No. 22 of 1955 1 [8th May, 1955] <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/1627294/> accessed on November 22, 2012.

Despite the above cautionary observations, one can say that, broadly speaking, most of the schools follow the Dharmaśāstric norms and ideals found in Sanskrit texts, albeit rather loosely. The ideal of the ‘*brāhmaṇa* student’ (*brahmacārin*) is constructed with traditional values of discipline, obeisance to the *guru*, celibacy, a strict vegetarian diet, austerity, and control of the senses. The *brahmacārin* is then both a reconstruction from normative Śāstric sources, as well as a ‘habitus’ transmitted from one generation to the next, that is embedded in a particular cultural and historical context.²⁷⁶

As already mentioned in subchapter 3.4, the ideal of seclusion in a rural area continues to be, to a certain extent, a popular trope in the imagination of the orthodox *brāhmaṇa*. The city represents an uncontrolled environment in which polluting elements and distractions for the pious *brāhmaṇa* are abundant, and thus maintaining the rules of purity is a bigger challenge than for those living in more isolated areas who can afford to have minimal contact with non- *brāhmaṇas* and with the “disgusting degeneration of the big cities”, as one of my informants put it. There are naturally less tempting distractions for students, and thus the tranquillity of the village or the forest continues to be mentioned, now and again, as an ideal place for a “Vedic life”.

With regard to commensality rules, all schools serve so-called *sāttvika* food which is cooked by *brāhmaṇas*, and which students and teachers eat exclusively in the company of other *brāhmaṇa* males within the premises of the school. According to traditional norms, *sāttvika* food is vegetarian, nourishing, easily digestible, not too spicy, and not oily. This type of food enhances and maintains the intrinsic *sāttvika* nature of the *brāhmaṇa* that, according to the tradition, allows him to perform his duties as a “man of learning” by giving him “clarity of mind” and a “pure body”. The term *sāttvika* is an adjective derived from the term *sattva*, one of the three qualities (*guṇas*) of nature into which everything manifest (*prakṛti*) is classified according to Brāhmaṇical thought.²⁷⁷ *Sattva* — the quality of clarity, lightness, happiness, and the like, along with *rajas* (agitation, vigor, pain) and *tamas* (darkness, confusion, lethargy, heaviness) — constitutes the three primordial qualities of nature. While one of three *guṇas* dominates an individual, the other two are always present and active, as well. It is believed that, while the relationship among the three *guṇas* is a dynamic one, most of the time one of the three *guṇas* dominates the other two. This imbalance in the qualities of one’s nature is directly affected by one’s lifestyle, including the food and other substances one ingests, but also one’s thoughts. At the same time, the intrinsic nature of the individual is often pre-determined by birth. Thus, *brāhmaṇas* are intrinsically more *sāttvika* than, for example, individuals born in a caste traditionally classified under the “warrior

²⁷⁶ More on the construction of this ‘habitus’ and on learning to embody the Veda appears in Chapter 5.

²⁷⁷ The notion of the three qualities has been commonly attributed to the philosophical school of Sāṃkhya, where it plays a central role, but, according to Gonda (1976), this system of triple classification (*triṣṭa*) is attested to within the larger context of “triadic groupings” that is found in Vedic literature.

class” (*kṣatriyavarṇa*) who are born with *rājasa* qualities. These qualities, too, are to be maintained by eating *rājasa* (nonvegetarian and stimulating) food, smoking tobacco or opium, and drinking alcohol — activities that are completely taboo for the orthodox *brāhmaṇa*. Sex is also considered to be highly *rājasa* in nature, and therefore, it is said that the ancient kings should keep a large number of women as their companions to strengthen this quality. *Brāhmaṇas*, on the other hand, should avoid sexual activity during their study and limit their sexual appetite to reproduction purposes only; finally, the ascetic eliminates sex altogether. Contact with *tāmasa* substances — such as feces, dead bodies of humans and animals, or even saliva²⁷⁸ or hair — introduces “impurity”, and thus one avoids contact with such substances and with those who deal with these substances for a living.

Using the same logic presented above, in the Vedic schools, *brāhmaṇa* women never eat with the males — and they are usually absent from the schools in any case — except for the rather rare cases when cleaning ladies, female cooks, or the wives and daughters of the teachers are present on the premises. A *brāhmaṇa* student should be clean before eating and should eat on the floor²⁷⁹ after having offered his food to god.²⁸⁰ In only one of the schools I visited is the prescribed tradition of begging food (*bhikṣācaraṇa*) followed.²⁸¹ They follow the method called *mādhukārī* (honey-bee method), which consists of begging from different *brāhmaṇa* families in the vicinity. The collection of alms is done by a small group of students who take their begging bowls and make their rounds among the *brāhmaṇa* households, picking different families every day. This is considered a pious act that brings religious merit upon both the beggar as well as the donor, and as Knipe aptly notes, this practice also serves “as a means of bonding with the larger community” (2015: 30).²⁸² For the *brāhmaṇa* solicitor, it is a way of embodying austerity, and an opportunity to exercise his duty as a recipient of gifts, and for the donor it is an opportunity to increase his or her positive karmic capital.²⁸³

²⁷⁸ The contact with saliva is called *ucchiṣṭa*, and while generally thought to be polluting, the remains of food and water from god or the *guru* are thought to be purifying. Eating another’s *ucchiṣṭa* deliberately is, therefore, considered a way of showing one’s close personal relationship to another person or acknowledging one’s inferior rank. A student may eat the leftovers of his teacher, or a wife those of her husband, without becoming “impure” (see: OLIVELLE 1998).

²⁷⁹ In one of the schools (see Appendix 1: Śrī Guru Gaṅgeśvara Mahārāj Pāṭhaśālā), meals are served on tables and students sit on chairs, which is clearly an innovation from the traditional eating practices.

²⁸⁰ See section on the daily schedule, subchapter 4.3, for a reference to the *bhūṭayajña* and *pitṛyajña*.

²⁸¹ See: Śrutismṛiti Vidyāpīṭham, Appendix 1.

²⁸² An important difference is that the two practices of begging food that Knipe describes in his book take place within a *brāhmaṇa* village (*agrahāra*) where there are only *brāhmaṇa* households, whereas in Maharashtra there are no *agrahāras* left.

²⁸³ Cf. HEESTERMANN 1964.

In the rest of the schools, donations for feeding the students as a pious act are received in cash, the sum (an auspicious number such as 1008 Rs., 1001 Rs. or the like) usually advertised by the school either through their website, pamphlets, or even on a notice board in the school. These donations may sponsor one meal for all of the students on a specific auspicious day for the sponsor (birthday, anniversary etc.), or one of the many holy days of the Hindu calendar. There is also the possibility of donating a meal for one or more students for a specific duration (a month, six months, or a year), or the sponsor may also cover the expenses for a specific ritual, festival, or religious event organized in the school. The feeding of *brāhmaṇas* in specific moments, such as during the yearly funerary rites (*śrāddha* or *pitṛpākṣa*), is considered particularly meritorious, and many schools receive donations during this time.²⁸⁴

Students are usually prohibited from eating outside of the school, but in some cases — during the extracurricular activities or while traveling — it can happen that students do eat or handle food outside of their school. For shorter trips, they either take food with them or make arrangements so that their dietary requirements are met, even if purity rules are not always easy to maintain. Among orthodox *brāhmaṇas*, it is still considered a virtue to maintain commensality rules. During a Sanskrit Conference in Pune, I was introduced to a well-respected *brāhmaṇa* scholar who claimed to only eat food cooked by himself (*svayampākin*), and only ate in the company of other relatives or *brāhmaṇas* from his own kin. His strict observance of this vow inspired the awe of a young *brāhmaṇa* who told me: “You see, he is such a great person; he is a *śuddh* [pure] Brahmin.”²⁸⁵

The centrality of food in Brāhmaṇical Hindu thought has been widely studied in previous scholarship (e.g. DUMONT 1988, MARRIOTT 1968, KHARE 1976, 1992; OLIVELLE 1995). By these studies, we are repeatedly informed that food and feeding are socially and philosophically determinant in India. Within the Brāhmaṇical context, food is closely associated with the socio-cosmic reality:

To the Hindu, food also does not “represent” Brahman, but it is actually a part of this ultimate reality, Brahman. In this world and beyond, the cosmic moral order (*dharma*) regulates the availability of food to all creatures. Hindus regard such a truth as selfevident, requiring no further proof and admitting no doubts. When body and self are concerned, food is considered as one of the five “sheaths” (*annamayakosa*) which “clothes” the soul (*jiva*; the other four sheaths being those of lifebreath, mind, understanding, and bliss). Thus, food directly matters to the formation of a Hindu’s inner being and its becoming from one birth to the next. (KHARE 1992: 5)

²⁸⁴ The “fortnight of the ancestors” is a religious observance that, in Maharashtra, falls during the lunar month of Bhādrapada (September–October) in which the ancestors are honored through a series of rituals, and particularly through the offering of food. For a bibliography on the subject of death in Hinduism, see: SAYERS 2004.

²⁸⁵ Anonymous interview, 7.2.2009.

While the above quote may be regarded as too essentialist, particularly in consideration of the heterodox Hindu traditions, it does point to a Brāhmaṇical ideal that continues to colour the worldview of the *brāhmaṇas* of the Vedic schools of Maharashtra.

During my fieldwork visit to the southern Koṅkaṇ region, one of the senior students from a *vedapāṭhaśālā* in Satara had agreed to accompany me on my trip, and we had much difficulty in finding a ‘pure vegetarian’ restaurant on the road. Our driver, a strict vegetarian *brāhmaṇa* himself, drove for hours in the evening hours in the Ratnagiri region —looking for a suitable place for us to have our dinner, but without success. We ended up eating at a hotel on the highway that offered vegetarian food, but alcohol and meat were also served in the same place. While this situation was initially problematic, and in normal circumstances completely unacceptable for both the driver and my assistant, we agreed to finally eat there, and ended up discussing how the best food is that which is cooked at home.

This short anecdote is intended to illustrate how, in general, the members of the schools largely follow Brāhmaṇical food regulations that express intricate socio-ritual distinctions of how food, body, and self are handled. At the same time, the example above shows how exceptions in food exchanges and commensality are negotiable, depending upon the circumstances.

It must also be noted here that more stringent rules of commensality observed in the past, between different *brāhmaṇa* groups, are generally ignored and, in my observations, most *brāhmaṇas* — whether Deśasthas, Sārasvats, or Citpāvans — eat with each other if the occasion presents itself. Westerners, such as myself, who could traditionally be classified as untouchables (*mleccha*), are usually readily welcomed to dine along with them, particularly in Vedic schools that have relations to Western sponsors or scholars. Nonetheless, most *brāhmaṇas* expressed an enthusiastic approval when I revealed my life-long vegetarian diet, which clearly shows that a general preference for the purity ideal is still prevalent among the traditional *brāhmaṇas* I encountered.

Many other deviations from Śāstric ideals of ritual purity could be observed during my fieldwork.²⁸⁶ Not only are the prescribed rules followed more loosely, but also expiations and penances for committed offences are not frequently followed. In two schools, for example, I observed that puppy dogs had been adopted by the students with the reluctant consent of their teachers. This struck me as particularly strange, since dogs are usually considered impure animals in Śāstric sources.²⁸⁷ In both the cases, the animals were kept within the school’s premises (courtyard and

²⁸⁶ The case studies in Chapter 6 will present further changes and innovations that concern not only ritual purity rules, but also other aspects of tradition.

²⁸⁷ See, for example, MānDhŚ III. 239: “A Cāṇḍāla, a pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman or a eunuch must not look at the Brahmins while they are eating.” (OLIVELLE 2005a: 120) Vedic recitation is also to be interrupted if dogs and other impure animals are nearby (MānDhŚ IV. 126 OLIVELLE 2005a: 130). Additionally, one of the names for members of the lowest class in the Brāhmaṇical hierarchy is *śvapacas* or *śvapakas* (‘Dog-Cookers’); for a discussion on this subject, see: WHITE 1992.

garden), but were not allowed to enter the buildings of the school. Another curious incident was a *pūjā* in honor of a deceased dog for a Western client in the U.S.A. that was performed in one of the schools. The client had asked the *brāhmaṇa* to perform the ritual because the “dog had become like a member of her family”, and they were hoping for a “good transition of his soul.”

These non-traditional attitudes show how orthodoxy can be permeable and accommodating, depending on the contexts and circumstances. These changes, I will argue in Chapter 6, are part of the dynamic reconstitution and self-representation of what it means to be a *brāhmaṇa* in modern India.

These purity ideals surrounding the traditional *brāhmaṇa* self are not only inculcated in the socialization process, as will be argued in the concluding chapter, but are also prevalent in discourses that circulate among traditional *brāhmaṇas* all over India. These discourses are not only often spread through close *brāhmaṇa* networks — such as the schools, *brāhmaṇa* associations, and religious gatherings of different kinds — but also often reach the public sphere in printed press, television, chatrooms, and Internet forums. The imagination of who is a *brāhmaṇa* and how he should behave is not only voiced within the *brāhmaṇa* community, but also through multiple dissonant voices. The *brāhmaṇas* of the schools, therefore, position themselves in reaction to these discourses. Particularly influential seem to be the opinions of religious figures of authority within the *brāhmaṇa* communities. The religious, and to a lesser extent the political affiliations, of different *brāhmaṇa* groups to particular organizations and their charismatic figures often inform us of the opinions they have on issues of ritual purity and doctrinal interpretation. For example, the concept of Brāhmaṇical purification (*śuddhi*), which in the nineteenth century had an important comeback through Hindu revivalists such as Dāyanānda Sarasvatī and his Ārya Samāj, continues to influence the concept of purification, even up to our time. The concept became central to the mass ‘purification rituals’ of the so-called ‘*śuddhi* campaigns’, which sought to ‘recover’ the once-converted Hindus back into Hinduism, as well as those who were considered Hindu, but were marginalized.²⁸⁸ Many of these militant and often violent campaigns continue to fuel communal conflicts throughout all India, particularly among the tribal and Dālit communities.

In a similar vein, many of the *brāhmaṇas* I encountered during my fieldwork (although certainly not all) see themselves as ‘social workers’ who help people (particularly ‘*bhaktas*’) in various ways.²⁸⁹ School teachers, or sometimes advanced students with the permission of their teacher, give advice to individuals or families, recommending certain ritual and non-ritual procedures to help people with their

²⁸⁸ Cf. GHAI 1990; JAFFRELOT 1994a; CLEMENTIN-OHJA 1994; ZAVOS 2000: 87-92; KANUNGO 2008.

²⁸⁹ An interesting trend are the so-called massive blood donation camps (*raktadāna*) that are often organised as part of the *brāhmaṇa* conventions. For more on the contemporary forms of *dāna* as philanthropy, see: COPEMAN 2011 and 2009.

personal problems. In exchange for this advice, people offer money or other goods. Many people come to the teachers of the schools seeking for advice for their personal problems, and particularly from those teachers who are also astrologers. Teachers, according to the needs of their clients, recommend a certain *mantra* or a certain simple ritual, depending on the nature of the problem itself.

Here is another example of the social imagination presented to me by one of the teachers I interviewed on the topic of *varṇa*. He told me that the classical division of society in India in four classes (*varṇas*) is “found not only in India, but everywhere in the world”, and then continued to explain why he considered it important to have good relations with the non-*brāhmaṇa* classes:

[...] every class has certain importance. Because, although you are worshiping in the temple, who made the *mūrti* and the walls? *Śūdra*. They did the temple. So always, when you think class-wise *śūdras* are many, because they are the foundation. For example, when you built something, then the foundation is big and wide, and the top floor is small, and middle floor is connecting with [the] foundation and with the top. Same thing is everywhere in the world, but the one who is on top should not forget the foundation. Otherwise, it can break anytime. Trees and flowers on top should not forget the roots, otherwise: no food. So, it is like that. Although they are not knowing many things, they have good devotion and good *bhāv*, and even though they are not knowing what is truth and untruth, and what is pious *karma* and what is bad *karma*, they do not know. Many of them, they do not know how to behave. So when they come to you, you have to teach them and they become happy. Then they are very grateful about this. They offer their gratitude, so their *bhāv* is like that. If you hurt them, you are finished.²⁹⁰

The categories of *varṇa* and ritual purity are often framed as “divine service” for humanity, in which “everyone has its role in society.” Śrī Candraśekharendra Sarasvatī (1907-1994), 68th head of the Kanchipuram *maṭha*, also known in English as “the Seer of Kanchi”, became very popular in Tamil Nadu, and beyond. Because of his life-long dedication to protect the Vedas from dying out some of the *brāhmaṇas* I talked to even credit him for the survival of the contemporary Vedic traditions. His writings and speeches continue to widely circulate among *brāhmaṇas* in south India and beyond. Since a few years ago now, some of his work is available also on the Internet, through the official website of the Kanchi *maṭha*, where a considerable amount of his work has been translated into Tamil, Telugu, and English. His successor and current head of the *maṭha*, Śrī Jayendra Sarasvatī, along with his disciple Śrī Vijayendra Sarasvatī and a whole array of other modern *gurus*, continue to propagate his teacher’s views. In one of his writings, he says:

The Brahmin’s body is to be cared for like a temple since it is meant to preserve the Vedic mantras and no impure material is to be taken in. It is the duty of the Brahmin to protect the power of the mantras, the mantras that create universal well-being. That is why there are more restrictions in his life than in that of others. The Brahmin must refrain from all such acts and practices as make him unclean [...] The Brahmin’s body is not meant to experience sensual enjoyment but to

290 Anonymous interview, 22.02.2009.

preserve the Vedas for the good of mankind. [...] He has to care for his body only with the object of preserving the Vedic mantras and through them of protecting all creatures. Others may have comfortable occupations that bring in much money but that should be no cause for the Brahmin to feel tempted.²⁹¹

It can be observed from the passage above how the ‘ideal *brāhmaṇa*’, as the container of the Vedic *mantras*, is discursively reiterated by an authoritative figure within contemporary Smārta Hinduism. The Veda is engrained in the body of the *brāhmaṇa*, which has to be maintained as ritually pure and morally regulated as possible.

4.5 Dress Code and Insignia

Regarding the instructions concerning the dress code, most of the *vedapāṭhaśālās* have their students wear regular plain white *dhoṭīs*, but in practice, quite often the rule is relaxed and students also wear t-shirts of different colours and motifs, both inside and outside of class. In some schools, such as the Kailās Maṭh Akhaṇḍānand in Nashik or the Śrī Yogirāj Veda Vijñān Āśram in Barshi, the dress code is stricter and the students are only allowed to wear the uniform of the school that consists of the traditional *dhoṭī* and *aṅgavastra* (plate 7). This rule concerns only their time spent within the school’s precinct, as the rule is relaxed when students go out or travel and they are then allowed to wear Western clothes (plate 8), or at least a *dhoṭī* with *kurtā* and the traditional Maharashtrian cap (*ṭopī*). Among the *vaidikas* of Maharashtra, as with other *brāhmaṇas* in India, a relatively strict dress code rule is to remove the upper garment (especially if it is a t-shirt) during the ingestion of food, and particularly at lunch and dinner. In some schools, such as the Śrutismṛti Vidyāpīṭham and the schools attached to the Maḥarṣi Veda Vyās Pratiṣṭhān in Dhalegaon and Alandi, the students are even asked to wear a different set of upper and lower garments, these being made out of silk and dyed in either bright red, orange, or ochre colours. In some schools, this change of clothes to colourful silk is only observed during festivities or special observances, but not during regular school days. The explanation given to me by a *guru* about the change of garments was that: “food is a holy act and, because of [the] pure qualities of silk, the student is made worthy to carry and eat food. Red colour is for renunciation. One should eat and serve food with [a] pure mind.”²⁹² On special occasions, such as festivities or rituals of different kinds, *brāhmaṇas* will also use their “Sunday clothes”; the *dhoṭī* and *aṅgavastra* will be made of silk (or at least be a new one with a particularly intricate colourful border), also called *sovaḷā*, and they will wear their jewelry (see

²⁹¹ CANDRAŚEKHARENDRA Sarasvatī, Hindu Dharma, Chapter: “Brahmacaryasrama”, online version accessed on October 31, 2012. <http://www.kamakoti.org/hindudharma/part17/chap11.htm>.

²⁹² Interview with G. Jośi 06.06.2009, Trimbak.

subchapter 4.5). On these occasions, some of the *brāhmaṇas* use the *puṇerī pagaḍī*, a type of ceremonial turban-hat from the Peśva era and popularized by nationalist intellectuals of the nineteenth century, such as M.G. Ranade and L. Tilak as a symbol of honor and respect, and also as a marker of *brāhmaṇa*'s pride. If women are present in the celebration, they will also wear their finest *nauvārī saṛīs*²⁹³ in the Maharashtrian style, as well as their finest jewelry.

In all the schools I visited, hair is kept in the traditional North Indian *brāhmaṇa* way,²⁹⁴ i.e. with all of the head shaved (or hair is kept quite short) except for a tuft of hair called a *śikhā*. The *śikhā* can be found in different styles and to be of different density. Some *brāhmaṇas* carry it as very small and discrete, almost invisible among the rest of the hair, while others allow their tuft to grow very thick and long, and then tie it in a particular way. In most of the schools, the grooming of the hair is a personal matter, but the teacher can decide when it is time for a haircut.²⁹⁵ On special occasions such as an important ritual or a bigger social event, students can be told to get a haircut and shave beforehand on the permitted days sanctioned by the tradition. Teachers also shave and groom their hair and mustaches if the occasion requires it. Usually, a particular barber does the haircut and shaving for both students and teachers.²⁹⁶

Since all the schools presented here belong to the Smārta communities, the use of corporal insignia follow the rather broad Smārta tradition.²⁹⁷ These insignias include the application of the triple Śaiva marks of sacred ash on their arms, chest, neck, torso, and forehead, called *tripuṇḍra* during *saṃdhyā*, as well as the different *tilakas*, mainly of Śaiva expression — such as a dot mark (*bindī*) of vermillion, turmeric, white, or red sandalwood paste, or a combination of these (plates 6 and 9).²⁹⁸ Also, after larger fire rituals such as the *atirudra-yāga*, some *brāhmaṇas* take the soot from the main offering-ladle and apply with it a *bindī* on their forehead. Among the Vedic schools I visited, I rarely came across the Vaiṣṇava sectarian marks (vertical U or V lines), even among those Smārta *brāhmaṇas* who had a clear tendency towards Vaiṣṇava devotional practice, which has a particularly strong holding in Maharashtra.

293 These *saṛīs* are typical for the region of Maharashtra and are longer than the ones worn in the rest of India, measuring nine yards.

294 On the importance of the hairstyle in South India in relation to the different *brāhmaṇa* groups, see: MAHADEVAN 2003, 2008 and 2016.

295 For more on the subject see: OLIVELLE 2005d.

296 All Tuesdays, Saturdays, no-moon day (*amāvāsyā*) and other festive days in month of the ritual calendar are prohibited for cutting one's hair.

297 These body marks are not as heavily distinguished among *brāhmaṇas* in Maharashtra as in the south or among ascetic groups. cf. Rao (2002) includes in his book a pictorial representation of the body markers worn by the different categories of Madhvas in Udupi.

298 It is not uncommon to see two *bindī* marks on the forehead, either with different materials or the same.

In addition to the dress and sectarian marks, the *brāhmaṇas* of these schools also wear prayer beads (*mālās*), other neck charms, and necklaces. The beads are usually either made of the sacred basil wood (*tulasī*) or *rudrākṣa* seeds (plate 8), and occasionally they are also made of sandalwood.²⁹⁹ The *mālās* are used daily, mainly for the practice of the *japa* of the *gāyatrī* to count the 108 repetitions of the *mantra* during the practice of *sandhyāvandana*. Earrings are also common among *brāhmaṇa* teachers, and occasionally among older students. The pierced ears indicate that the *brāhmaṇa* has gone through one of the sixteen main life-rituals indicated for the twice-born, the *saṃskāra* of *karṇavedha* “piercing of the ear lobes.”³⁰⁰ Currently, the ritual is rarely performed on males in this region and, therefore, earrings on men are usually a clear index for Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy. The earrings are mainly made of pure gold, or consist of *rudrākṣas* or pearl mounted on gold. Some teachers also wear rings with precious stones, and this is particularly true of those who are also astrologers. Astrologers commonly prescribe the use of certain stones and minerals to balance the evil effects of particular planets.

But, the most indispensable and externally visible demarcation of Brāhmaṇahood³⁰¹ that is to be worn at all times is the ‘sacred thread’ called *jānavem* or *muñja*³⁰² in Marathi (plate 6). The *brāhmaṇa* is invested with this thread at the *upanayana* initiation, and it is the most crucial prerequisite to one studying the Vedas. This ritual is ideally performed before puberty — usually between the age of six and nine years old — although, in many places across India, one finds cases where the ritual is delayed until right before a *brāhmaṇa*’s wedding (FULLER and NARASIMHAN 2014: 191). Now, in Maharashtra (and most of India), the material

²⁹⁹ The plant *tulasī* (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*), often called the “holy basil”, is venerated in households throughout India. Special flowerpots or smaller temple-like structures called *tulsī-vṛndāvan* are frequently found in courtyards of houses, temples, and other compounds. The plant is associated with Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa, in particular. *Tulasī* is considered the consort of Viṣṇu, and therefore particularly sacred to a Vaiṣṇava. The wood of this plant is made into beads that are strung to a rosary/necklace. The *rudrākṣa* or “eye or tear of Rudra” (*Eliocarpus ganitrus*) is a seed from a tree found in Nepal and in northern India. They are identified with Śiva and are widely believed to possess healing power and the ability to confer spiritual power. These materials are commonly used in the manufacturing of prayer/chanting beads called *japamālā*.

³⁰⁰ More on this *saṃskāra* is described in KauśGS. 1,20,10 and BaudhGS. 1,12 cf. GONDA 1980: 377.

³⁰¹ Although other, particularly upper castes, may also wear the ‘sacred thread’, no orthodox *brāhmaṇa* would refuse to use it. In Maharashtra, the Molesworth’s Marathi-English Dictionary states that “at present several classes of people, Sutars, Sonars, Lohars and common Marathas, arrogating descent from the Kshatriya, or actuated by whim, adopt this thread” (p.314). To wear the ‘sacred thread’ has also been explained as an attempt for upward mobility through the process of ‘Sanskritization’: see: SRINIVAS 1995; MANDELBAUM 1968; DELIÈGE 2002.

³⁰² Also, *yajñopavīt* from the Sanskrit: *yajñopavīta*.

of the 'sacred thread' consists of white cotton thread³⁰³ with three strands, and is usually worn over the left shoulder and under the right, going around the torso.³⁰⁴ The three threads are strung ceremonially into a triple or five-folded knot called a *brahmagraṇṭhi*. I received different interpretations from *brāhmaṇa* experts and scholars on the meaning of the three strings; some say they refer to the three Vedas (excluding, thereby, the Atharvaveda), the three inborn debts of the *brāhmaṇa* (*ṛṇas*),³⁰⁵ the three *guṇas*, the three goddesses (Gāyatrī, Sarasvatī, and Sāvitrī), the *trimūrti*, and/or other popular Hindu triads.

The thread is renewed whenever it is necessary, but usually this is done in a ceremonial way at an auspicious time (usually during a full moon) and following particular ritual procedure that includes the repetition of special *mantras*. Once a year, usually during the month of Śrāvaṇa, all *brāhmaṇas* discard the old thread and invest in a new one in a ceremony called *upākarman*.³⁰⁶ This procedure varies according to the Vedic *śākhā* that one belongs to, since the method of tying and wearing the sacred thread is connected, at least in theory, to one's own ritual ancestry, i.e. one's *gotra* and *pravara*.³⁰⁷ In a few cases, I found that the ritual for renewing the *jānaveṃ* (as well as other daily rituals) was not bound to the actual Vedic branch determined by the birth (*svaśākhā*) of the student, but rather to the one of the Veda he was studying and which he had learned from his teacher. This was generally the case for students whose fathers were not familiar with the 'proper' procedure of their birth's *śākhā* or who were orphans who did not have a male figure in their family to teach them.

303 The word *muñja* indicates that, in the past, the thread was made from the fibres of the sacred grass (*saccharum muñja*). Occasionally, it is still used during the *upanayana* ceremony, but thereafter replaced by the cotton string. Already in the MānDhŚ II.44 (2005a: 96), it is indicated that cotton is the material indicated for the sacred thread of *brāhmaṇas*.

304 On ritual occasions, such as during water offerings to certain deities or saints, the *upavīta* is worn suspended around the neck (then called *nivītin*) and, during ancestor rites, over the right shoulder (technically called *prācināvīta*).

305 The debt to the gods (*devas*), to the seers (*ṛṣis*), and to the ancestors (*pitṛs*). Cf. MALAMOUD 1983.

306 Traditionally, the *upākarman* ritual marked the start of the academic calendar each year. See subchapter 4.1. On a curious note, the sacred thread often also includes the peculiar use of a 'key chain'. Many students and even teachers attach the key of their locker or chest, where they keep their personal belongings, to their *jānaveṃ*.

307 It follows that the *pravara* is a line of ancestors, usually a group of three or five seers (*ṛṣis*), in one's lineage (*gotra*) and is also decisive in some communities for marriage relations. Cf. MICHAELS 2004a: 122.



Plate 6: Young *kṛṣṇayajurvedin* wearing a combination of red sandalwood *tripuṇḍra* and a vermilion *bindī*. He is also wearing the ‘sacred thread’ called *jānavēṃ* or *muñja*. Satara 2009.



Plate 7: Students of the Kailās Maṭh Akhaṇḍānand wearing traditional *dhoṭī* and *aṅgavastra*. Nashik 2009.



Plate 8: Young student wearing praying beads (*mālā*) of *rudrākṣa* seeds and gold earrings and a Western t-shirt. Satara 2011.



Plate 9: A young Veda student wearing the *tripuṇḍra* of sacred ash (*bhasman*) and a vermilion *bindī*. Dhalegaon 2009.