6 Preservation or Innovation? Changes in the Transmission of Vedic Identity and Tradition

This chapter puts forward observations on how the Vedic tradition has undergone changes and (re)constructed its identity in recent times through the interaction with different discourses around what it means to lead a "Vedic life". I seek to illustrate the self-perception of orthodox *brāhmaṇa* communities on their Vedic tradition as it has been passed down through a socialization that has its roots in formal education, but goes beyond it. In the following pages, I present elements of the discourses[327] that shape what I call the "kaleidoscopic Vedic identity" of the modern *brāhmaṇa* by weaving them into specific examples drawn from my fieldwork.[328] I by no means intend to be exhaustive with the material that I present in this chapter, but rather to point to a few paradigmatic examples which portray changes in the social environment and in the organization of the *vaidika*s of today, and show how the custodians of the Vedic tradition position themselves, *vis-à-vis* these changes, thereby constructing their identity and dealing with internal and external contestation and contradiction. These case studies illustrate how changes in the political environment, the economic system, the social stratification, the education system, religious reforms, and changes in gender attitudes have influenced the way the Vedic tradition reinvents itself in a globalized world. As I intend to show, these examples illustrate the transformations on more than one aspect simultaneously (and probably more aspects could be observed if we were to zoom into each of these cases). Instead, I will use them to highlight some dominant themes and their asymmetrical interactions, demonstrating how the Vedic identity is constructed in modern Maharashtra.

In order to explore change and innovation within the tradition, a short theoretical excursion to discuss the difficult terms 'identity', 'tradition' and 'modernity' is necessary before presenting the three case studies.

6.1 Identity as a Kaleidoscope

Identity is one of those hotly debated terms in social sciences that has been prominant for several years. Recently, the concept of identity as individual awareness has been vividly questioned altogether. As Sax has aptly summarized:

327 I use the term 'discourse' here in the sense of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse, i.e. "the idea that all objects and actions are meaningful and that their meaning is conferred by particular systems of significant differences." Cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105-114.

328 See subchapter 6.1 for a discussion on identity and the use of the term 'kaleidoscopic'.

> Within the human sciences generally, the "self" has recently been declared dead. A battalion of poststructuralists, postmodernists, social constructionists, deconstructionists, feminists, and others have killed it, claiming that the notion of a permanent, bounded, autonomous self residing at the human core — a notion that is said to be central to the "Western tradition" — cannot withstand critical scrutiny. (Sax 2002: 6)

As Van Meijl notes, in the earlier view of the early structuralists-functionalists,[329]

> [...] identity came to be understood as the historically and culturally rooted self-image of a group of people that was predominantly sketched and sharpened in contact vis-à-vis other groups of peoples. This meaning of identity was related to other anthropological concepts, such as worldview, value, ethos, and, last but not least, culture, all of which suggested a certain kind of homogeneity among members of a community. (van Meijl 2008: 170)

In the 70s, there was generally the view in social sciences that the identity of individuals reflected the identity of their cultural group, and the identity of individuals was supposed to be identical to the identity of the group to which they belonged, which was consistent with anthropological theories about the relationship between person and group or community. Another important aspect of this view of identity concerned the presupposition of stability and permanence. In recent years, however, the anthropological focus on homogeneity and permanence has gradually faded away. With the term 'identity', I mean a *cultural* identity. The word "culture" is, of course, also a very polemical one and has been even longer and more vividly alive in the academic debate than the term 'identity.' Regardless, as obvious as it might seem, it is important for me to emphasize that the identity I am referring to is a *cultural* one; i.e. one that is made evident through the use of dynamic markers or identifiers such as language, dress, place, behavior, or less visible things such as religion, ethnicity, and kinship. The effect depends on their recognition by *other* individuals or groups. These identifiers help to create the fictitious boundaries that define similarities or differences between the identifier-wearer and the identifier-perceivers. Their effectiveness depends on a shared understanding of meaning. Equally, an individual can use markers of identity to exert influence on other people without necessarily fulfilling all the criteria that an external observer might typically associate with such an abstract identity. While identity is a problematic term, its manifestations and the concrete ways in which it is embodied/articulated are what make individuals come together as a social group.

The intrinsic fluctuation of culture that is currently associated with its multivocal contestation implies that culture is being used in a variety of different meanings that are contextually dependent. I call the Vedic identity "kaleidoscopic"[330] to emphasize

329 Such as Radcliffe-Brown and Parsons, among others.

330 The term is not originally mine. It has been used before by at least one anthropologist. Khal proposes the concept in relation to his concept of 'coolitude', which he describes as a 'kaleidoscopic identity' that embraces 'creolisation and a cultural métissage of experiences'. Cf. Carter and Khal 2002.

its multivocal nature — although, I use a visual rather than a sonic metaphor. And while adhering to the concept of identity as "dialogical self", as Van Meijl has called it, I have decided to use the visual image for the reasons that will become evident below. The multiplicity of voices constantly re-accommodate themselves into the self-perception of the modern *brāhmaṇa*. These voices are often dissonant or antagonistic, but still make up part of the whole (self) in the same way that colourful pieces of glass make a single image in a kaleidoscope. One reason I find the idea of the kaleidoscope useful is because of the relative fragility of the image. Depending on who is looking through the kaleidoscope, the image — or identity presented — changes, giving more strength to certain pieces and covering others. "Identity, in other words, is a kind of nexus at which different constructions of self coincide, and sometimes also collide" (van Meijl 2008: 174). The metaphor also includes the agency of the observer, and therefore implies a certain reflexivity, which renders all images relative and fragile. The kaleidoscope also works with mirrors, which add an additional dimension to the metaphor: the images (or discourses) are created through reflections/projections that are actually 'void' or 'immaterial', but still meaningful. While the kaleidoscope metaphor implies that the configuration of the projected image with the different colourful pieces is a matter of chance, the forces at play that highlight some pieces and leave others out are no other than the laws of physics (gravity, etc.). I am aware that an important element in the configuration of these "pieces" is not just a matter of how the kaleidoscope is shaken, but much more than that, the asymmetrical power relations between the glass-pieces.

In the last twenty years, anthropologists have realized cultural identity cannot be defined purely in terms of discursive or language-centered approaches, but must also give a great deal of attention to practices. To put the matter simply, the idea is that one does not primarily learn about a culture by memorizing rules, but through processes of mimesis.[331]

And here is where schools and education facilities are particularly significant, especially in the case of Vedic education where, ideally, the student spends 24 hours a day with his *guru*. It is here that the primary transmission of a 'habitus' takes place. The student learns to embody his tradition, through practices and through systems of meaning that teach him mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. When we talk about identity or identification, we always imply boundaries. It is learning to properly embody and perform these boundaries and their dynamics that makes up the "socialization" and shapes the kaleidoscopic identity of a group or individual.

These boundaries are not always clear-cut. This is particularly prominent within the context of Hinduism, with its endless voices and cultural diversity which, at the same time, do not necessarily abandon its unity at a meta-level. As Michaels writes,

331 For more on the process of mimesis within the Vedic transmission of knowledge, see subchapter 3.4 and Chapter 5 on the guru-disciple relationship (*guruśiṣyasambhandha*).

"Since Hindu religions presuppose such an identificatory principle of equality, they are 'disturbed' by fewer oppositions and dichotomies. They do not need exclusions, as it were, because the Other is always one's own" (Michaels 2004: 8). To explain this characteristic of Hindu religions, Michaels has developed the concept which he calls the "identificatory habitus", which he believes is the "cohesive force"[332] of Hinduism — and while I agree with him on this observation, I believe that the negotiation of boundaries can co-exist at different ontological levels. The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion always depend on the identifications conditioned by context and scale. Contrasting with the first three examples Michaels gives to demonstrate the "identificatory habitus" at work (Michaels 2004: 6-7), countless others can be given where the boundaries and dichotomies are not only important, but also crucial to building the identity or 'habitus' of the Hindu — or, the 'traditional' *brāhmaṇa*, in this case. This does, of course, not underscore the importance of Michaels' proposition, for he himself has explained and exemplified in his work that he is much aware of the importance of the context. What I want to point out here is that, in as much as the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion may appear blurry for anyone trying to grasp the cultural identity of the Hindus as a whole, they are still very much present depending upon how one turns the kaleidoscope.

One would want to think that the Vedic identity is clearer and more homogeneous. Indological scholarship has repeatedly spoken and written about a "Brāhmaṇical ideology" that gives coherence to a specific system of practices followed by a more or less homogeneous group of people (the *brāhmaṇa*s) with specific cultural traits. But, in this small window into the Vedic world of contemporary Maharashtra, I have tried to show that problems arise when one essentializes these traits. When we de-historicize them, we lose the richness of diversity — even within a so-called "Brāhmaṇical culture." If one looks closely enough, it can be seen that even the authoritative texts which present the "Vedic ideals" do not always represent a cohesive, homogenic picture of how a *brāhmaṇa* ought to lead his life, much less portray the historical reality of how these ideals were/are actually translated into practices and socio-political institutions. While observing the lives of the *brāhmaṇa*s today, one may often encounter fundamental discrepancies between the ideal behavior proposed in these texts and the actual practices, even among those who try the hardest to be the most "excellent of *brāhmaṇa*s". The danger, as I see it, would be to try to essentialize a tradition whose identity is polyphonic, or as I like to call it, kaleidoscopic.

The concept of the *dialogical self*, as it has been developed by Hermans and Kemper (1993), is also useful for the analysis of the multiple identifications of

332 "I refer to the cohesive force that holds the Hindu religions together and makes them resistant to foreign influences as 'the Identificatory Habitus', and I ascribe an outstanding value to it because it is linked in special way to the descent, the origin of the individual, which is crucial to salvation in India." (Michaels 2004a: 5)

individuals and communities. It complements the dynamic conception of culture that has emerged in anthropology in recent decades.

> Hermans argues that the main aim of the dialogical interaction among a large variety of internal and external I-positions is to establish 'unity' in the self, but at the same time he points out that this process is never-ending. Unity seems to be achieved only in a meta-position, when individuals reflect on their interactions and invariably highlight the consistency among their different positions. (van Meijl 2008: 180)

Elaborating on this, Van Meijl explains that the rise of differing cultural positions within the self of individuals is a consequence of an increasing interculturality, and an intensified dialogue within the self.

> And these voices are involved in complicated conversations that reflect the differentiation of culture in the global world. Negotiations, tensions, conflicts, agreements and disagreements not only take place between different cultural groupings at the social level, but also within the dialogical self of multicultural individuals. And since the world is becoming more heterogeneous and multiple, the self also becomes more heterogeneous and multiple with due consequences for the internal organization of the self. (van Meijl 2008: 182)

My argument is that even within a relatively closed group, with what has been, until now, believed to be a more or less homogeneous tradition with a distinct "culture", the self and the tradition are also very much polymorphic and kaleidoscopic. What I find most interesting from Michaels' "identificatory habitus" is that it focuses on various mechanisms of identification for an individual or group and, at the same time, manages to get "away both from voluntaristic notions that claim that the individual in a culture exercises free thought and free will, or that thought and action can be considered isolated from the social context, on the one hand; and from a social-science determinism or materialism that maintain that the collective (or economic) reality determines the individual, on the other" (Michaels 2004: 8). But what I argue is that this type of 'habitus' is not necessarily specific to Hinduism, nor does it homogeneously produce a "distinct social" or "cultural sense" which gets transmitted through the process of socialization and acts as the social glue of cultural Hindu identity, but rather that this process creates a polymorphic maze of barriers of identification which are rich in cultural asymmetries and enacted within often unstable social and historical contexts.

6.2 Tradition, Modernity, and Innovation

When using words such as "change", "innovation", and "reinvention", we are assuming that there is a deviation from an "original". The question of authenticity and tradition, as with identity and culture, is not an unproblematic one. Post-modern scholars have argued that there is no such thing as "authenticity" and have also

questioned the concept of "tradition". The seminal work, *The Invention of Tradition* by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) proposed the concept of tradition as a fiction created in response to novel situations, and which often serves as a political strategy to culturally legitimate certain practices.[333] These authors distinguished between three types of invented traditions which each have a distinct function: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion and collective identities, b) those establishing or legitimatizing institutions and social hierarchies, and c) those socializing people into particular social contexts. The first type has been most commonly referred to and often taken to imply the two other functions, as well (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 9). Authors in many branches within the social sciences have contributed to the discussion on whether the concept of tradition is useful or not, and with which considerations. Other scholars have proposed an "invention of innovation" as a counter theory to Hobsbawm and Ranger's work. Here, authors show how many of the so-called innovations are continuations of latent cultural elements (cf. the essays collected in: Dücker and Schwedler 2008).

Assmann's (2007) concept of cultural memory also argues that cultural elements are transmitted through socialization, and are engrained in our collective memories, which favors the idea of traditions as repositories of these memories. Moreover, since memory is a phenomenon that is directly related to the present — our perception of the past always being influenced by the present — this means that it is a dynamic and ever-changing process.

Acknowledging the work of my predecessors, I still think that the term "tradition" is useful for describing a collective identity with a set of practices that have both elements of continuity as well as of innovation. The word "tradition" derives from the Latin *tradere* or *traderer*, literally meaning "to transmit" or "to hand over". In our case, in which the *handing over* of knowledge is done primarily through oral techniques and, in which the main content of the transmission remains almost intact (i.e. the Vedic texts), the term still makes a lot of sense to me. But, in the larger picture, one has to be aware that it is precisely not only Vedic texts that are handed over to the new generation, but a whole set of cultural elements that are worked into the cultural identity of the *vaidika*. Tradition is, therefore, an abstraction of a collective identity that is constantly being reconstructed by the network of actors who are part of it, and particularly by their custodians — whether consciously or unconsciously. Tradition,

333 "'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. [...] However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition." (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1-14.)

as I understand it, is therefore not just articulated, but also *embodied* and *enacted* by the custodians, supporters, and sympathizers of the tradition. As it was aptly noted by Welbon over 20 years ago:

> Tradition is smṛti, what is "remembered"; but it is not simply a frozen, formal code from which is drawn a remembered element to meet the specifics of a given, current situation. Rather, it is a process, a style of transmitting and revealing an awareness of the transcendent structure and the discoverability anew of that structure's significance in the distinctive features of new situations, not today finding itself in yesterday, but today finding its sense — and the sense of its tomorrows — with yesterday's help. (Welbon 1986: 374)

Now, the term 'tradition' here is not meant necessarily as the counterpole of modernity. We have encountered both these problematic terms several times in this work by now, and while they have been uncritically presented, mostly in the voices of the contemporary *brāhmaṇa*s themselves, I believe that they still hold some value. I am well aware of the dangers of uncritically using these terms. Many scholars, particularly those influenced by the linguistic turn and postmodern studies, have questioned the notion of the modern and modernity as imprecise categories. Dube has noted that even these terms "[...] have been themselves revealed as contradictory and contingent processes of culture and control, as checkered, contested histories of meaning and mastery [...]" (Dube 2002: 197). While critical scholarship has been warning us about the use of binaries — such as tradition and modernity, ritual and rationality, and so on — the predicament of the anthropologist is that the entanglement of such essentialized representations has a forceful impact on the everyday discourses of any social group being studied today. No matter what we as scholars think modernity is or is not, aspirations toward becoming modern, and the claims of being modern, are crucial for all kinds of people in the subcontinent and elsewhere. It is the everyday articulations of modernity in South Asia, as densely woven into the intimate lives of the subjects of modernity (in our case, the *brāhmaṇa*s), that interest me. Thus, while contested and contingent, these processes are not subject-less procedures. In this sense, modernity may well be a ghost of no graspable substance, yet it triggers not only the imagination, but specific attitudes and practices of the people who are daunted by it. I agree with Dube, therefore, that, by carefully "[...] exploring modernity as involving processes of the past and the present, shaped not only by the modern Western subject but by diverse subjects of modernity including, especially, the terms of the self-making of different classes and communities in India", we can raise "[...] critical questions concerning the plural manifestations and key contentions of the modern in South Asia." (Dube 2014: 96) One can also observe, in the examples presented in this book, how the discourses on modernity and the tradition of the *brāhmaṇa*s of today are often in themselves contradictory, contingent, and contested. It can further be argued that while the social actors involved have been *subjected* to these processes, they are also the *agents* that shape and articulate them. Thus, in this sense, both modernity

and tradition can coexist in time and space as binaries of contradiction that shape the social reality of India.

Having briefly discussed the way I understand the terms *identity, tradition*, and *modernity* in light of some of the current theoretical discussions in social sciences, I now turn to concrete examples through which I observe elements of both innovation and continuity within the contemporary Vedic tradition of Maharashtra. With these examples, my aim is, on the one hand, to clarify what I mean by kaleidoscopic identity, and, on the other hand, to illustrate the contexts of the changes and continuities of the contemporary Vedic tradition.

6.3 The Lives of the Vedas Today

6.3.1 The *Rājasūya* of Barshi 2011-2012

The *rājasūya*, as observed in 2011 during my fieldwork in the Śrī Yogīrāj Veda Vijñān Āśram, in one of the *vedapāṭhaśālā*s located in Barshi, Maharashtra and serves as an excellent example to illustrate significant changes in the discourses and attitudes towards the Vedic tradition and, in particular, towards the Vedic ritual in modern India. It also serves as an example of the extracurricular activities that are crucial to the education of the young Vedic students.

The *rājasūya* is an ancient Vedic consecration ritual in which a king's sovereignty is proclaimed, invoking the fealty of his subjects. This ritual made sense, at least symbolically, even as late as the eighth to tenth centuries, as is demonstrated by the claims made by South Indian kings to have performed dozens of these ceremonies and other Vedic rituals related to royal power, such as the *aśvamedha*. According to the Brāhmaṇical lore, the king had to be "consecrated" in fertility rites in order to be a proper king, and his special powers had to be replenished by repeated experiences catalogued in the *dharmaśāstra*.

The *rājasūya* is probably one of the most elaborate Vedic rituals. It contains several types of *somayāga*s, including a *pavitraḥ somayāga*, several *cāturmāsya*s, and 500 *iṣṭi*s (alternating between *pūrṇamāsa* and *amāvāsya*), as well as a number of rare *śrauta* rituals not commonly performed otherwise — like the *daśapeya*, *abhiṣecanīyaḥ*, *keśavapanīyaḥ*, *anumatyādayaḥ*, etc. This ritual is not only very elaborate, but also overly demanding in terms of time and resources. According to the organizers, the performance of the *rājasūya* in 2011-12 took 16 months to complete and ₹ 15'000'000 to cover all the expenses. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 6)

According to the organizers of this ritual, a *rājasūya* was last performed "800 years ago", and while there have been other attempts to claim that this particular Vedic ritual of consecration has been performed in the past, it is not exactly clear what is meant by the term *rājasūya* in those ritual performances. Some scholars like Thite claim that it is plausible that complex rituals such as this one, or the *aśvamedha*

described in the Vedic texts, were never actually performed in such detail in real life. By studying the references to these rituals in source material outside the Veda, as well as in inscriptions on copper plates, he shows that the poets and writers of the epics and the other literary texts he studied had no knowledge of the complexities of Vedic *śrauta* ritual. He finally concludes that these sacrifices, if ever performed, were never performed literally as described in the Śrautasūtras and other Vedic texts, but only symbolically and with many compromises. He further emphasises that the sacrifices like the *aśvamedha*, *puruṣamedha*, *sarvamedha*, and others must have been fictions, and rather theoretical rituals constructed on the basis of pure speculation and mental activity (Thite 1997: 255). While there is a considerable number of records that describe the performance of other Hindu consecration rituals (for example, the so-called *rājābhiṣeka*, which is technically a rather short but crucial part of the *rājasūya*), as far as I am aware, there are no academic studies of the historical performance of a complete *rājasūya*.[334]

It is not the aim in this section to thoroughly describe the ritual procedure, or to explain the symbolism of the ritual action, and not even to describe thoroughly the socio-religious subtleties that such a ritual may encompass. For that aim, one would need at least two volumes similar to those compiled by Staal (1983) when he studied with a group of scholars the *atirātra-agnicayana* ritual, as performed by Nambudiri *brāhmaṇa*s in Kerala in 1975, to do it justice. Nor do I want to repeat here the excellent work of Weber (1983) and Heesterman (1957) on this consecration ritual. The reason why I chose this ritual as one of my examples is because it is in rituals that one can clearly observe both 'internal' and 'external' changes in the discourses of its performance, which reflect the way the performers position themselves in relation to their tradition and, specifically, how they articulate the concept of dharma and their 'Vedic self' in a modern context.

For the last 30 years, the Śrī Yogīrāj Veda Vijñān Āśram (see: Appendix 1) has been making efforts to protect, preserve, and promote the eleven branches of the four Vedas and *somayāga* rituals of all Śrautasūtras available today. Hundreds of *somayāga*s of all types — including *ekāha* ('one day'), *ahīna* ('lasting several days'), *cayana sahita* ('pilling up' [of bricks]), *kāṭhaka-cayana* ('pilling up' [of bricks] according to the Kāṭhaka branch), *dvādaśāha* ('lasting 12 days'), *pauṇḍarīka* ('made of lotus flowers') and even *gavāmayana-samvatsāra-sattra* ('annual bringing of the cows') — of 13 months' duration have been presumambly performed by Śrī Yogīrāj Veda Vijñān Āśram, and all over India.[335] Nānājī Kāḷe and his sons and students are well known all over India for their efforts to revive the Vedic ritual tradition, as well as for the preservation and revival of the oral tradition of the Vedas.

334 See, for the example, the discussion of the coronation of King Bijendra in Nepal: Witzel 1987. For the discussion of other cases in Southeast Asia, see: Heine-Geldern 1968.

335 For more information on these types of *somayāga*s, see: Ranade 2006.

The *rājasūya* was on the list of rituals to be performed by Nānājī Kāḷe and his team. For years, they had been hoping to perform it, but it was not until 2011 that the opportunity finally materialized. The main problem was finding a suitable candidate to be the *yajamāna*. The difficulty lay in the fact that the candidate had to be someone from the *kṣatriya* class, and ideally from a famous royal family; moreover, he had to be a keeper of the three fires and had to have performed at least one *agniṣṭoma* in order to be eligible for the role of *yajamāna*. This made the task of finding a suitable candidate virtually impossible, for it is already very rare to find *brāhmaṇa*s who have performed an *agniṣṭoma* in India, not to mention their being *kṣatriya*s, who have probably only been Vedic ritualists in theory. Besides this major obstacle, which could have been resolved by giving the candidate a 'crash-course' in *agnihotra* and making him undergo all the requisite *saṃskāra*s and initiations in order to perform the ritual, the problem was also a practical one. Where could they find a candidate with royal blood who was willing to spend 16 months living in a remote area and performing an obscure ritual full of restrictions on their daily life? In the words of the organizers: "We tried our best to have such type of *yajamāna* for *rājasūya*. But in this *kaliyuga* no one was ready to undergo the penance of strictly observing rules and regulations of *somayāga* as *yajamāna* for 16 months." (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 6) After some time, they finally were able to find a suitable candidate who would become the "king of kings": Thakur Siṃharāj Maṅgal Tanvār, a simple farmer from a small town in Madhya Pradesh, and who had "royal blood" (plate 10). According to the pamphlet of the *rājasūya*:

> Somayaji Thakur Mangal Sinharaj Tanwar originally belongs to 'Pandav Vamsha'. They declare their Gotra namely [as] Veda Vyasa. His wife Soubhagyavati Rukmini Devi belongs to [the] kul of last Hindu King of Delhi throne namely Pruthviraj Chauhan. King Anangpal Sinhaji Tanwar was the ruler of Delhi throne [...] The Tanwar Kula is adorned with Saint Baba Ramdevaji Tanwar, who was highly advanced spiritual soul. Rajasuya Yajaman Thakur Managal Sinharaj resides in Bawai, Tahasil Sonakaccha District Dewas, Madhya Pradesh. Yajamana Mangalraj Sinha and Patni Soubhgyawati Rukminidevi undergone the vedic Samskara system from 1) Jat Karma, 2) Chaul [Cūḍākaraṇa], 3) Upanyan 4) Vivaha, 5) Gruhyagni (Ekagni) Aadhan, 6) Kushmand Homa 7) Shrout [*śrauta*] Agnydhan (setting the three holy Fires) and 8) his first somayag agnishtoma was performed from 28 February to 4th March 2011, to make him eligible to become Yajaman of Rajasuya Maha Somayag. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 5)

Now, one may ask, why would someone want to perform such a costly, time-consuming, and arduous ritual? According to Nānājī Kāḷe and many who share his views, India was once the "land of wisdom and spirituality", and has now become the "land of corruption and hedonism." According to the organizers:

> [...] to change this broad canvas of evil situation we have to accelerate the cosmic subtle energies through collective 'prayers'. To change radically this evil trend of human mind, Holy Vedas propose the uncommon remedy of 'Somayag' to accelerate subtle 'Satvik' energies of Nature i.e. Pruthvi [earth], Aapa [water], Tej [fire], Vayu [wind] and Aakash [space] to create healthy atmosphere for [the] survival and growth of life on earth. Somayag is performed for the rejuvenation of nature and mankind. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 3)

Plate 10: Somayāji Thakur Maṅgal Tanvār and his wife Saubhagyāvatī Rukmiṇī Devī with R. Kāḷe during the performance of an *iṣṭi* of the *rājasūya*. Barshi 2011.

The first justification for such a ritual, therefore, has a clearly universalistic tone in which "nature and mankind" are to be "healed" through the positive energies produced through the "prayers" of the *somayāga*.

Traditionally, the Vedic *śrauta* rituals, which can be traced back to at least three thousand years, focused on individual (rather than universal) needs, such as good health, prosperity, and the removal of one's obstacles, but in this case, the discourse of a 'religious environmentalism' becomes evident in the articulation of a collective health and the "survival and growth of life on earth". One could read this discourse as a revival of the Vedic cosmogony in which *ṛta*, the cosmic order, needs to be restored for the benefit of all. In this way, through the performance of the ritual, not only the particular fulfillment of the *brāhmaṇa*'s *dharma* is accomplished, but also the balance of the universe and the "victory of good over bad" are obtained — thus aligning its discourse with the notion that denies Hindu *dharma* as a religion, and instead elevates it to the status of natural law: a "law" which is right for all people, everywhere, at all times (Nanda 2003: 77).

In the description of the purpose of the *rājasūya* given in the official pamphlet for the ritual, one reads that:

> Particularly [the] Rajasuya Maha Somayaga is proposed to create strong, powerful government which respects and observes ethical values for the welfare of all people irrespective of caste, creed, religion, sex, language etc; which is alert in protecting borders of the nation from enemy attacks and which try its level best to give justice to common man of the nation. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 4)

The passage above shifts from the universal discourse of the first quote — which could be interpreted as being close to the Vedic concept of *ṛta*[336] — to a clearly nationalistic one. Here, the aim of the ritual is articulated in terms of protection of the borders of the nation-state and in terms of "justice for the common man." Paradoxically, while worrying about external enemies and protecting the motherland, one finds a parallel discourse which simultaneously proposes to reinforce universal ethical values, which is understood here as *dharma*. The decline of these ethical values is seen as the primordial cause for the nation's problems.

Here, the mechanics of what I meant by the kaleidoscopic identity can be observed. One single ritual is performed and articulated with multiple identificatory barriers of inclusion and exclusion, and it is an example of what Michaels would call an "identificatory habitus".

On another level, one can see how — even in terms of the ritual itself — there is a "patch-work" of uncommon combinations. The *rājasūya* ritual can be performed according to different Śrautasūtras; however, in this case it is performed according to a combination of *sūtra*s, namely the Āpastambaśrautasūtra for the role of the *adhvaryu* and assistant priests, Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra for *hotṛ* and *brahman*, and Drāhyāyanaśrautasūtra for the *udgātṛ* priests. This unorthodox combination of *sūtra*s is justified by practical reasons. Not only has the sheer length of the ritual been shortened (for, according to the Āpastambaśrautasūtra, its duration should come to 26 months), but many of its rituals have had to be adapted, modified, and simplified to suit the feasibility of the ritual. The justification here is in reference to a mythological conception of time:

> Total Period of Rajasuya followed by Apastamba Shrauta Sutra comes to 26 months. But in this point we have followed Katyayana Shrauta Sutra and Asvalayana Shrauta Sutra, so the total period of Rajasuya comes to 16 months. In this Kali Yuga we find this opinion, feasible in practice. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 8)

Here one can observe again the "identificatory habitus" at play, for one could argue that "anything goes" as long as it suits the purpose of the ritual. But caution is advised here, for even if this particular example speaks to a preference for the principle of substitution and a great flexibility, there are many other rules that are often not so readily negotiable, and are actually rigid, which again depends on the context in which they are applied.

Furthermore, the politics involved in the promotion of this *rājasūya* show the strategic appropriation of the ritual for political purposes. The inherent hierarchical symbology of the ritual is highlighted and reinterpreted in the political framework of nationalism. Here, a two-fold appropriation might be suggested: the deliberate use of

336 For an overview on the term see: Rupwate 1982.

existing political power (leaders and political parties to finance the ritual) to legitimize the ritual, and the reverse, the instrumentalization of the ritual to promote political agendas. It is not always clear who "uses" whom, but certainly they symbiotically benefit each other.

Officially, neither Śrī Yogīrāj Veda Vijñān Āśram, nor the political organizations involved (in this case the RSS), have specifically addressed the role of the government (or other political parties or organizations) in the *rājasūya* ritual. Nonetheless, the presence of the highest ex-leader of the RSS, as spokesperson of the ritual decision (i.e. *saṃkalpa*) in the name of the people of India on the inauguration of the *rājasūya*, sends a clear vision of how India is conceived by the organizers and main sponsors of the ritual:[337] a Hindu India, in which Hinduness or Hindutva is defined by an ideology based on the notion of a nation-state.[338]

Moreover, this nationalist agenda is enacted ritually, as for example:

> [...] Adhvaryu declares loudly that such and such named Yajamana has become the *ruler for the welfare of the whole nation*. The procession of Yajamana and Patni is perfomed sitting both in decorated chariot of two horses, with elephants, camels. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 10, my italics)

While I was in Barshi for the first time in 2009, Nānājī Kāḷe told me specifically that "he was not interested in politics" and that he didn't believe the efforts of the government were sincere or sufficient to "help preserve the Vedic tradition." In November 2011, during the *rājasūya*, he insisted that the ritual was meant for the "good of India and the whole world" and that it was not associated with any political party or force. Nonetheless, it is well known, as he himself has written in his publications, that he was imprisoned for three months for his participation in the RSS Satyagraha in 1949, and that he was an active supporter of the RSS for many years (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2005: 74). While he claimed not to be "politically motivated", or that any political organization had any role to play in the ritual, he also suggested that

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337 "On 4th March 2011, Ex-Sarsanghchalak of the RSS Mananeeya K. Sudarshanji performed saṃkalpa of rājasūya as representative of India [...] and appointed Shri Thakur Mangalsinha Tanwar of Bawai Gram (M.P) as yajaman of Rajasuya." *Ibid* p. 6. In 2006, the ex-RSS leader also "inspired the Shree Yogiraj Ved Vijnan Ashram to undertake the 'Saumik Suvrushti' Project." This project aims to produce strong monsoons and sufficient rain through the performance of *somayāga*s, which they call "rain-induction technology". Sudarshan acted as the announcer of the *saṃkalpa* of the 16 large *somayāga*s performed for this project under the guidance of Nānājī Kāḷe and sons, but without taking the active role of the *yajamāna*. 31 more such *somayāga*s have been performed under the sponsorship and participation of the government of Madhya Pradesh in 2007, 2008-2009, and 2010 to propitiate rain. This is another telling example of the discourse on "Vedic science". For more on the subject, see the next example on the "Ved Mandir" of Nashik and: Nanda (2003, 2005) and Bechler (2013: 123-33).

338 "The ideologue does this by defining Hinduness in terms of a nation, a land, a polity: the Hindurastra." (Ram-Prasad 1993: 25)

the anti-corruption movement initiated by Anna Hazare at that time, and the death of Osama Bin Laden, were aided by "the good energies produced by the *rājasūya*."[339] I have not been able to talk with the performers since 2011, but judging from their postings on Facebook, one could imagine that the success of Narendra Modi is seen as a possible outcome of the 'positive energies' generated by this and other similar rituals.

Another element closely related to politics is how caste (in the sense of *varṇāśramadharma*, but with very tangible repercussions) is being reworked and articulated in this ritual. There is a general call from the organizers to all castes and sections of the society to participate in different ways:

> [...] we appeal to all our Bhartiya brothers to assist Rajasuya Somayaag financially, psychologically, intellectually and physical. By this kind of support to aims and objects of Rajasūya, it shall be fruitful. To get the support from all classes of society to proposed new Government, some specific rituals are performed in Rajasuya. Prominent persons named as Ratni are selected from different classes of society and ritual of 3 hours namely lshti is performed in the homes of 12 Ratnis. These Ratnis are Senapati, Treasury in charge, milkman, Gambling-house head, Gopal, farmer, widow woman, village head etc. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 10)

In this passage, we can observe the highlighting of the sub-ritual to the *ratnis*[340] as an attempt to promote a universalistic/inclusive discourse in which "everyone has its place in society." This sub-ritual is an important element of the *rājasūya*, but here it has been put in the limelight in order to endorse a vision of a society in which the participation of all classes in the ritual is essential to creating a new government. While, according to the Vedic texts (and in particular the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa), this section of the *rājasūya* calls for the participation of several dignitaries and members of the royal household and its primary role has been described as "one of the few parts of the *rājasūya* that are directly and exclusively related to kingship" (Heesterman 1957: 49), here we see it reinterpreted to involve the society at large and make them essential participants of the ritual.

The ritual decision (*saṃkalpa*)[341] in which the purpose of the ritual is declared by the ritual patron (*yajamāna*) was traditionally an individual affair and only spoken out by the *yajamāna* alone or with the aid of the priest. In this case, nonetheless, not only is the acting *yajamāna* an individual who is representing a collective (here, the

339 Personal communication (18.11.2012).

340 On the word *ratnin* in the context of this ritual Heesterman offers the following comment: "The name *ratnin* seems not to refer to jewels or regalia; the *ratna*s are the functions held by the royal dignitaries and the members of the royal household; they are the constituent parts of the government. For the translation 'receiving gifts' (Macdonell Keith, V.I., 2, p. 199), though possible, evidence is lacking." (Heesterman 1957: 49)

341 For more on the concept of *saṃkalpa*, see Michaels 2005; for *saṃkalpa* as transfer of agency, see: Hüsken 2009: 228-231.

"representative of the Indian people") and acting in the name of an abstract political power, but at the moment he is ritually performing the ritual decision (*saṃkalpa*) he is replaced by a different person who has greater political power and prestige than the acting *yajamāna* himself. Temporarily appointing with real political power to the role of *yajamāna* (such as the highest ex-leader of the RSS) who, however, will not actively participate in that role during the 16 months of the ritual and whose sole role is to "legitimate" its performance and act as a representative of the Hindu nation, suggests a transference of political/ritual power. The result of this strategy for the organizers is a potential increase in the number of supporters.[342] Moreover, the ritual decision is here interpreted as a "strong will power" which can bring about the desired change through the participation of "all people together":

> Subtle process of Sankalp:
>
> Such strong government can be created only through accumulated determined strong will power i.e, sankalp of all people together. And Rajasūya Maha Somayag is uncommon, vedic process which projects such 'Sankalp' of common man in mesosphere, in cosmos and accelerates all subtle cosmic energies which materialize the 'Sankalp' and brings the desired mutation in establishing new Government, which is honest and highly respects ethical values, only by obtaining divine blessings through "Rajasuya performance". Sankalp i.e. hundred percent determined will of unselfish key person plays a vital important role in success of any mission undertaken. Sankalp serves as the nucleus of Vedic Somayags. If this nucleus of Sankalp is feed by collective same hearty desire of crores of people, nurtured by collective mind-power through prayers of innumerable individuals, it is sure to materialize the Sankalp earliest. This strong subtle cosmic flow of Prana Shakti vibrates, accelerates cosmic energy to shape the Sankalp in reality. Desire, Knowledge and Action are the inherent qualities of Prana Shakti. Through Rajasuya Somayaga subtle process, this nucleus of Sankalp is properly channelized and is developed to harvest desired fruits. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 4)

According to the passage above, the *saṃkalpa*, as a hub of willpower, needs to be fed by the mind-power and prayers of as many people as possible to achieve the necessary results. Here, the *saṃkalpa* passes from being an individual ritual declaration of intentionality to a "subtle energy" that needs to be fed collectively and channeled through an "unselfish key person".[343] Whereas, in former times, the Vedic ritual was restricted to specific groups demarcated by class, sex, etc., it is here reversed and now performed to promote an ideology of inclusion. The predicament that it is not the acting *yajamāna* (in this case, the "king" — i.e. Thakur Maṅgal Tanvār) or even the 'de

342 The RSS is said to have 5 to 6 million members (Bhatt 2001: 113).

343 In this case, the "unselfish key person" is ex RSS leader Sudarshan, who is a Sarsaṅghchalak (paramount leader of the RSS hierarchy) and who represents the ideal of a servant of the nation. Indeed, for many years the leaders of the RSS were expected to remain celibate and unmarried, and to devote all their energies to the cause. For more on cohesion, leadership, and control in the RSS, see: Hansen 1999: 107-115.

facto' *yajamānas* (Nānājī Kāḷe and sons),[344] but a third individual who is invited to be the spokesperson of the *saṃkalpa,* exemplifies a new discursive formation in favor of a Manichean worldview.

6.3.1.1 Modern Hinduism

Besides the above-mentioned relationship with political Hinduism within this ritual frame, one also has to consider the presence of another complementary discourse, namely that of the spiritual affiliation of the Nānājī Kāḷe and the Śrī Yogīrāj Veda Vijñān Āśram. The pamphlet of the *rājasūya* reads: "[...] will be successfully completed due to grace of Sadguru Shri Gulavani Maharāj" (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 1).

Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj is the spiritual *guru* of Nānājī Kāḷe, who inspired him to revive the ancient Vedic rituals.[345] It is commonly accepted that the saint lived between 1886 -1974 and spent 12 years in Barshi. This is Kāḷe's birth place. Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj was known as a *śaktipātācārya* who "awakened" the *kuṇḍalinī* energy in his disciples through an initiation called *śaktipātadīkṣā*. This tradition is closely associated with various *haṭhayoga* traditions, and in particular the *datta-sampradāya* of Maharashtra. For many years, Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj was a disciple of the famous Vasudevānand Sarasvatī, who was also known as Ṭembe Mahārāj from Guḷavāṇi, and he received initiation in 1909.[346] A few years later, in 1922, he took *śaktipātadīkṣā* from Śrī Loknāth Tīrth Svāmī Mahārāj in Hoshangabad (MP) and was then entitled to give *śaktipātadīkṣā* himself.[347]

Nānājī Kāḷe became a close disciple of Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj in his youth. He decided to learn the Ṛgveda in the traditional oral way and — after attending to a *somayāga* in which also Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj was present, and in which he felt that his *guru* was giving him a "command to revive the Vedic tradition" — in 1981, Kāḷe decided to set the three sacred fires in Nanded at the banks of the Godāvarī River in honor of his *guru*. After that, he went back to Barshi and, after a few years, in 1985 he established the Śrī Yogīrāj Veda Vijñān Āśram in the agricultural land of his forefathers. His ancestral house in the town of Barshi was donated in 2004 to the devotees of Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj, and remodelled into a temple with facilities for cooking and other amenities. He and his family moved permanently to the *āśram* that was a short distance from the city in order that he be able to carry out his self-appointed mission of reviving the

344 They being the ones with the original intention to perform the ritual and the actual organizers of the *rājasūya*.

345 See: Appendix 1.

346 http://www.shrivasudevanandsaraswati.org/english/itinerary.htm accessed on 3.3.2012.

347 Śrī Loknāth Tīrth Svāmī Mahārāj was born in Dhaka (now Bangladesh) in the year 1892 in a family of priests devoted to the goddess Kālī. According to hagiographic accounts, he came to western and south India, bringing the *śaktipāta-sādhanā* to these regions.

Vedic tradition. The building now functions as a temple that is visited daily by local devotees — mainly women who come to chant devotional songs.

It is noteworthy that the *datta-sampradāya* has been crucial to the development of the Vedic tradition in Maharashtra, particularly in recent years through the influence and sponsorship of *guru*s associated with this tradition. It is difficult to speak of a "marriage" between orthodox traditions and the esoteric/Purāṇic developments in Maharashtra (and lays beyond the scope of this work). However, from what we know, it is certain that this dynamic dialog is central to the formation of various identities associated with the Vedic transmission of knowledge in modern Maharashtra.

While I have argued that elements of popular Hinduism play an important role in the new forms of Vedic ritual, these elements can also be conspicuous by their absence in contemporary *yāga*s. In this case, during the formal performance of the ritual, one does not find any references to popular Hindu gods or local deities to which people can relate to — i.e., no Viṭṭhala, no Rāma, no form of the Devī etc. — as is usually the case in other modern "Vedic" rituals.[348] The only non-Vedic figure to appear in the ritual is Yogīrāj Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj. He, too, remains rather marginal during the ritual procedure, appearing only at the initial segment in which also Gaṇeśa is invoked.[349] The *śrauta* rituals appear to be foreign, lengthy, and complex procedures in which no common names of the divine, and no common ritual practices or symbols are invoked with which the devout Hindu could identify. While the Vedic *mantra*s are generally perceived as holy and potent by the average Hindu, the context in which these are usually encountered is clearly within a Hindu framework (and not a Vedic one). This can also occur within the ritual framework of the Brāhmaṇical *rites-de-passage* or *saṃskāra*s, in which mainly Vedic *mantra*s are used.

The soft emphasis on familiar Hindu discourses within the *rājasūya* and its framing is perhaps one of the reasons why this ritual has not drawn the popularity and interest as successfully as other contemporary so-called "Vedic" rituals in which more popular Hindu themes are highlighted.[350]

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348 See the case of the Śrī Rāmayajña of Satara, given below in subchapter 6.3.3.

349 Based on my experience and from what I have discussed with the *brāhmaṇa*s of Maharashtra, I observe that it has become common practice in large Vedic rituals to start such an event by invoking both the 'remover of obstacles' (*gaṇeśa*) and the worship of the charismatic spiritual master (usually also involved, either personally or through his/her organization in the sponsorship and organization of the ritual). This invocation is done by performing some form of *gaṇeśa-pūjā* and a *guru-pūjā* (which often involves a ritual washing of the guru's sandals or *pādābhṣeka/pādukābhiṣeka*). Additionally, in this particular case, a small shrine of Guḷavāṇi Mahārāj was installed in the southwest corner of the *yāgyaśālā*, in which a simple ghee lamp burns in front of his picture and some electric twinkling lights decorate the altar. While it is a significant innovation that merits being mentioned, the shrine does not receive much attention and remains at the periphery of the ritual activity of the *rājasūya*.

350 The invented ritual of the All World Gayatri Pariwar (AWGP) in north India, called "Ashwamedha Yagna" and in which the *gāyatrī-mantra* is recited by thousands of people, is becoming very popular in north India. (Cf. Bechler 2013: 116-121)

6.3.1.2 Media, Mobility, and Global Participation

While internal aspects of the ritual may perhaps not be as appealing to a wider Hindu audience, the media plays a crucial role in promoting the visibility of such an event. New media and technologies (Internet, TV, etc.), as well as greater access provided by physical mobility, allow for the wider promotion of the ritual. This makes it more accessible to everyone, including those living beyond the local region. Previously, promotional material distributed to promote a performance of similar rituals used to flow relatively slowly. Also, its reach was generally restricted to a local and communal audience rather than a pan-Indian one.[351]

A participant does not even have to be physically present to participate in the ritual anymore and to obtain the merit and fruits produced by it. It is sufficient that one joins the cause with his/her will power through prayers, good wishes, and preferably through monetary support. At the same time, the ritual is relatively private, especially compared to other grand rituals performed all over India, which attract large numbers of people and have extensive media coverage.[352] In fact, this ritual is relatively unknown even among the *brāhmaṇa*s I met during the examinations of the VŚS in Pune 2011. This is especially interesting, as most of them were from Maharashtra.

Usually these larger rituals are advertised extensively in print, digital, and social media. However, the *rājāsūya* ritual was only promoted by pamphlet and the website produced for this occasion.[353] There were hardly any references in local or national newspapers. Furthermore, word of the event did not spread through online social networks. Neither was it covered by television. I asked Nānājī and Caitanya Kāḷe if they had done any promotion by inviting the media to cover the ritual. They explained that they preferred to keep the number of visits to a minimum and that the presence of many people would "disturb the atmosphere of the ritual". Although they claim that "anyone is welcomed to the *rājasūya*", the fact is that it would be impractical to have a large number of visitors. Additionally, the fact that the *āśram* is located in an isolated

351 The best example is perhaps the Nambudiris who, until a few decades ago, allowed only members of their own community to participate or even observe their rituals, and who still prefer members of their community as the officiating priests for any ritual, this over external priests no matter how learned they may be. In recent years, however, the increased media presence and the academic interest in these rituals have resulted in an upsurge of their performace in Kerala and elsewhere in India.

352 Examples of such grand rituals involving a large number of *brāhmaṇa* priests are often performed by wealthy temples in south India and by transnational spiritual groups, but these are usually of the *smārta* variety and often involve the participation of auxiliary priests who have not undergone any priestly training. Additionally, these rituals are framed as "civic spectacles" (Lubin 2001b), many of which are connected to charitable projects that further provide the opportunity to support people or organizations in need.

353 http://yogirajsomyagvedas.com accessed on November 20, 2011.

rural area means that it does not attract the interests of too many middle class Hindus who might otherwise be interested in attending such rituals.[354]

The participation in large-scale rituals, such as this one, has generally increased in the last few years through extensive networking. In some cases, this has expanded to a global scale. Increased mobility and better communication have allowed communities to come together through a shared identity. It has also allowed for a seemingly more welcoming attitude towards those considered to exist outside of the group. In the example of the *rājasūya* performance, these changes have allowed for the collection of necessary funds and participation beyond the local sphere. While most of the priests involved with ritual came from the Śrī Yogīrāj Veda Vijñān Āśram, there were several who also came from other parts of Maharashtra.

As it has been pointed out above, even the central figure of the ritual, the *mahārāja* and his wife, came from a tiny village in Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of kilometers from Barshi. The money for the sponsorship also flowed from supporters of Nānājī Kāḷe beyond Barshi, usually from wealthy families living in mega-cities such as Mumbai and Pune. Additionally, scholars, both Indian and foreign (e.g. myself), visited Barshi in order to observe the *rājasūya* and other rituals performed in the *āśram*. This was only possible through a certain openness and hospitality on the organizers' part. This is important, as it demonstrates the non-static nature of the *brāhmaṇa* identity because this openness required a reinterpretation/reinvention of certain Brāhmaṇical values, such as *svadharma*, or *varṇa*. This opportunity has been supported and perhaps even catalyzed through processes of globalization, which have resulted in an increase in mobility and communication through technology and better infrastructure. These changes have not only permitted the creation of more effective networks beyond the local sphere, but they have also facilitated larger economic transactions, physical movement, and participation within these networks. These changes have altered not only the ritual environment and the ritual itself, but also the identity of their performers. As Michaels notes, "new ritual-complexes emerge in marginal or marginalized groupings and are often part of their identity building. As symbols of a new identity these ritual-complexes are modified or created anew."[355]

Of course, I am not suggesting that *brāhmaṇa*s are a marginal or marginalized group (although some of them do feel threatened by the modern society),[356] and they are not necessarily creating a "new" identity *per se* (though, as I have observed above,

354 Some scholars, such as Nanda, have argued that it is mainly the Indian middle class that has an increasing interest in such large-scale rituals and religious events. (Nanda 2009)

355 "Neue Ritualkomplexe entstehen meist in zunächst marginalen oder marginalisierten Gruppierungen, und sind oft Teil ihrer Identitätsbildung. Als Zeichen ihrer neuen Identität werden bestehende Ritualkomplexe modifiziert oder neue geradezu kreiert." (Michaels, 2004b: 8) translation mine.

356 Bairy has called this Brāhmaṇical angst the "sense of a community under siege." (Bairy 2010: 171-72)

I consider identity to be always "new"), but rather that they are creatively adapting and reusing discursive resources to the changing circumstances of contemporary India among others through ritual. But I agree with Michaels in that these changes in ritual can also reflect an identitarian change, or the adaptation of one's identity in a changing society.

6.3.1.3 Economics: the "Miracle" of Funding

The economic aspect of the ritual has also been at the focus of ritual theorists in the last few decades.[357] It is again not my aim to provide an in depth analysis of the economics of the *rājasūya* or to make a significant contribution to the economic theory of rituals as such, but rather to point towards possible answers to the changes one can perceive in the Vedic tradition.

Michaels has pointed out that humans only need as much ritual as they can afford by replacing other guarantors of social or personal stability, including new rituals.[358] He writes that reformulating or replacing ritual is successful when the following conditions are met:

> That there is enough power to act: (a) and the cultural and political situation is ready in such a way that the cultural "costs" of alternative beliefs are reduced, (b) that enough coordination, information, and diffusion are guaranteed, and (c) that the social or soteriological benefit supersedes the material costs. (Michaels 2004b, translation mine)[359]

According to this theoretical approach, these three elements would need to be fulfilled in the *rājasūya* in order to be economically profitable in the broad sense of the word. From the perspective of the rational choice theory, one would also need to assume that the performance of such a ritual would need to 'pay off' for the performers, the indirect participants, and the sponsors, or otherwise it would not be performed. The soteriological, social, and political benefits of the ritual are perceived to have a higher value than the ₹ 15'000'000 allegedly spent during the 16-month ritual.

The participation in the ritual through the donation of money for the performance of the *rājasūya*, and its articulation as a pious act yielding religious merit (*puṇya*)

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357 Cf. for example: Widlock 2005, 2010; McAnany and Wells 2008: 1-16; Hüsken and Venkatachari 2010.

358 "Der Mensch braucht soviel Ritual, wie er es sich leisten kann, es durch andere Garanten der sozialen und persönlichen Stabilität (darunter neue Rituale) zu ersetzen." (Michaels 2004b: 10)

359 "Eine durchgreifende Ritualreform (oder Ritualersatz) ist dann erfolgreich, wenn (a) ausreichend Handlungsvollmacht vorliegt, der Boden kulturell oder politisch so vorbereitet ist, daß dadurch die kulturökonomischen „Kosten" der Äußerungen von alternativen Überzeugungen verringert sind, (b) hinreichend Koordination, Information und Diffusion gewährleistet ist, und (c) der soziale oder soteriologische Nutzen die sozialen und materiellen Kosten überwiegt." (Michaels 2004b: 9-10)

for the donor, opens the traditionally exclusive role of the *yajamāna* to a wider public. This empowers a mere sympathizer to harvest the fruits of the ritual even without having to be physically present. This empowerment is also reflected in the reinterpretation of *saṃkalpa*, as we saw above. In a way, the monetary support gives this 'subtle *saṃkalpa*' concrete expression and gives pragmatic support to the ritual. The economy of the ritual is also framed within the *varṇāśrama* ideology, in that it seeks support through appealing to a broader base built upon the four traditional classes of Brāhmaṇism:

> Expert Vaidik Brahmins will perform Rajasuya, strictly following shrout [*śrauta*] sutras. Rich people of Vaishya class will give their full financial support to Rajasuya. And ordinary man can contribute through his physical seva in Rajasuya. Thus the participation in Rajasuya of all people, from all quarters is necessary. (Shree Yogiraj Vedvijnan Ashram 2011: 8)

Thus, the "participation of all people" is not framed exclusively as a monetary transaction; participation may include donations in kind, service in the form of labor (as free *sevā* or payed), and even 'just' through will-power (*saṃkalpa*).

From a more pragmatic and economic view, an important missing element of public Hindu rituals, which usually attract several devotees, is the distribution of free food. While this might seem particularly appealing to the financially disadvantaged, it seems to me, from the rituals I have observed, that it attracts people of all social strata. 'Blessed food' or *prasāda* is not only an opportunity to get a 'free lunch', but also, and more importantly, an opportunity to receive the blessings of the ritual performance through accumulating purifiying religious merit (*puṇya*) in a very tangible form.[360] A ritual feast, or *bhaṇḍārā*, is usually widely advertised as part of the ritual program, and the richer and more abundant the food plate is, the more people it attracts, and also the more merit and prestige the patron of the ritual obtains.

As one can see from this example, the economics of the ritual are interwoven into the religious ideology of the performers and their social network. This ritual economy is reflected in the dynamic social interactions between sponsors, participants, and performers, and is internalized and also embodied as their cultural capital through the enactment of the ritual event.

6.3.1.4 Socialization through Ritual

It is noteworthy that the main performers of this big event are children or teenagers who are students of the Śrī Yogīrāj Veda Vijñān Āśram. The majority of the other priests involved in officiating in the ritual were also former students of this school. Rituals, such as the *rājasūya*, are the arenas where the students can apply the knowledge

360 For more on the concept of *prasāda*, see: Pinkney 2008.

they have learned from their education while consolidating their ritual expertise in a formal public setting. Rituals enable students to perform their identity and, at the same time, further interiorize the discourses attached to its execution. All the discursive elements discussed above are performed by the students in different rituals and on several occasions during their studies. They learn to reproduce and reinvent these discourses mainly through mimesis, and not necessarily through rationalization. This forces the custodians of this tradition to be in a constant negotiation with the larger social processes, not only in their role as "culture brokers",[361] as Singer called them, but also in their constant identitarian construction of their self. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the image created by the identitarian kaleidoscope is, first of all, not a stable one, but even more importantly, the asymmetrical forces that trigger the fragile configuration of the pieces at work are not random, but dominated by the complex relations of power. These asymmetries are negotiated anew every time the actors perform their identity. As soon as one element changes, the relations of power and authority are re-negotiated, re-articulated, and re-enacted — creating a new image of itself, in the same way that a small change in the configuration of the glass-pieces in the kaleidoscope creates a new image every time one sees through it.

6.3.2 The Veda Mandir in Nashik, Maharashtra

In this section[362] I intend to present an additional example in which the traditional emphasis on the sound form of the Veda is challenged. In a temple situated in Maharashtra, the Veda is represented as a book bound in a contemporary style and allegedly crafted in white Italian marble. It is worshipped by anyone, irrespective of caste, gender, or nationality. This Veda temple, called 'Śrī Gurugaṅgeśvar Ved Mandir' (henceforth 'Ved Mandir'), will help to elucidate a shift in perception from the Veda as the spoken word to the Veda as "Holy Scripture", and to present some of the discourses that have catalyzed these changes.

The same trust that maintains the Ved Mandir in Nashik also runs one of the 25 schools I visited during my fieldwork. Every year since 1987, the organization also grants the "Guru Gangeshwar Ved-Vedang National Award" to three Vedic *paṇḍita*s "who recite the Vedas in the true form and imparts knowledge of the Vedas to

361 "Internal differentiation under these conditions leads to the autonomous development of separate social institutions and spheres of culture held together only by consensus on the technical order, whose accelerated rate of change tends to outrun the moral order. In metropolitan and colonial cities and in other 'secondary' urban centres, the intelligentsia and reformers serve both as agents of cultural innovation and as the 'cultural brokers' who try to reconcile and rationalize these innovations with the Great and Little Traditions of their primary civilizations." (Singer, 1972: 7)

362 Parts of this subchapter have been taken from an article entitled "Sacred sound becomes sacred scripture: the Veda Mandir in Naśik Mahārāṣṭra" published by the author in 2011.

maximum students".[363] The award includes a monetary prize of ₹ 21'000 in a public ceremony. The other two prizes are given to scholars who have contributed to the preservation and research of the Vedas.[364]

The Ved Mandir is found on the outskirts of Nashik City, in the present state of Maharashtra, India. This temple was built by the Sarda (also spelled Sāraḍā in the IAST system) family in the early seventies of the last century, and through the inspiration of Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj, a popular saint who became widely known across India and beyond.

According to hagiographic accounts, Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj was born in a *brāhmaṇa* family in Punjab in 1881. When he was five years old, he became blind as a result of chicken-pox and was left by his family under the care of a saint, Svāmī Rāmānand. According to the website maintained by one of the trusts founded by him, after many years under Svāmī Ramānand's tutelage, he succeeded his *guru* as the 17th head of the *udāsin* sect, which claims that the "lineage [was handed down] from Sant Kumar, son of Lord Brahma, the creator."[365]

Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj lived presumably for 111 years and passed away in 1992. He commissioned and supervised the production of a book called "Bhagavān Ved", which compiles the *mantra*s from all the four Vedic Saṃhitās, and supposedly "for the first time in a single book."[366] His book was widely distributed in India and abroad, partially, as will be shown below, to be used as an object of worship.

The rich businessman Śrīman Seth Kisanlāljī Sāraḍā and his wife Akhaṇḍ Saubhāgyāvatī Kiraṇ Sāraḍā, in memory of Kisanlāl's father, Śrīman Bastīrāmjī Sāraḍā, sponsored the temple. They established a trust in the name of his mother that maintains the temple and provides a number of charitable works and religious services. The trust is called: 'Matośrī Rāmpyārībaī Sāraḍā Dharmik Pratiṣṭhan'. The Sarda Group, a family enterprise established in 1922, is one of the largest *bīḍī*[367] companies in western India and has now expanded its business into real estate and hospitality service industries. The family does not have any traditional *brāhmaṇa* background and, as Kisanlāljī explained to me in an interview, his family were followers of the *vārkarī sampradāya* and of Jñāneśvar Mahārāj, in particular. Later in his youth, he became interested in Vipassanā meditation and used to visit the famous Vipassanā International Academy (also known as Dhamma Giri) at Igatpuri twice a week. At the time, he was completely ignorant of the Vedic tradition, except for the names of the four Vedas which he had learned during his school years. On April 1st, 1981, he and his family encountered Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj and, from then onwards, became

363 http://www.vedpradip.com/vedvidyalaya.php accessed on July 6, 2010.
364 *Idem*.
365 Taken from http://gurugangeshwaranandjimaharaj.com/experiences2.htm accessed on July 3, 2010.
366 See http://gurugangeshwaranandjimaharaj.com/accessed on July 3, 2010.
367 Indian cigarettes.

his dedicated devotees until his death eleven years later. They accompanied him in his travels and stayed with him whenever they could. Since Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj was so interested in the Vedas, Kisanlāljī, too, became interested. During the last years of Gaṅgeśvarānand's life, he travelled India and the world, teaching about the Vedas and installing temples dedicated to the Vedas.

Initially, Kisanlāljī wanted to build a simple temple dedicated to Kṛṣṇa and to his *guru* as an expression of his devotion. According to him, he had a limited budget and a simple plan, but through the suggestion and blessings of his *guru*, the project grew and was transformed into the construction of the large Ved Mandir that it is today. It was through the "grace of his *guru*" that the necessary funds became available to him and that the project was finished on time.

The Ved Mandir in Nashik was inaugurated on the 25th of January in 1988. The construction has three spacious vaults. The left chamber enshrines lord Rāma, accompanied by Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. Hanumān guards them. The right chamber is dedicated to Tryambakeśvara, which is one of the twelve famous *jyotirliṅga*s of India.[368] Gaṇeśa and a black Nandi guard the *śivaliṅga*. The shrine also includes a smaller image of Pārvatī, Śiva's consort.

In the main vault at the centre of the building, one finds the *sanctum sanctorum* which enshrines the idol of what it is called "Bhagavān Ved", a two meter-tall representation of the Vedas bound in contemporary style and crafted in what is presumably white Italian marble. Opened in the middle, one can see in big golden Devanāgarī characters the words *bhagavān vedaḥ* engraved on the book. Under this title, one can see in a slightly smaller font the *gāyatrī-mantra,*[369] carved also in golden characters into its pages:

ॐ भूर्भुवः स्वः ।
तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं भर्गो
देवस्य धीमहि ।
धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥

OM. May we receive this excellent splendor of the God Savitā, which should inspire our thoughts.[370]

On the right page of the book idol it reads verse I.1.9 from the Ṛgveda:

स नः पितेव सूनवे
ऽग्ने सूपायनो भव ।
सचस्वा नः स्वस्तये ॥

Be easy for us to reach, like father to his son. Abide with us, Agni, for our happiness.[371]

368 The original Tryambakeśvara temple is located only around 30 km. from the Ved Mandir.
369 Ṛgveda III.62.10.
370 Staal 2008: 220.
371 Doniger 1981.

Enshrined in front of the monumental marble book is a two-meters tall bronze statue of Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj holding a staff (plate 11).

Plate 11: Bhagavān Ved at the Ved Mandir of Nashik 2009.

As in any other Hindu temple, the idols are worshipped daily in the temple with traditional Hindu *pūjā* elements. Bhagavān Ved is daily decorated with fresh flower garlands. For festivities, such as *gurupūrṇimā*, Gaṅgeśvarānand's birthday, *mahāśivarātri*, and etc., the idols are worshipped accordingly with more pomp, and temple attendance substantially increases.

From the official website of the above mentioned trust, one can read:

> [...] Vedmandir is a unique gift to humanity.
>
> [...] Vedmandir is a modern presentation of the eternal truths of Indian Culture.
>
> [...] Above all, visit to Vedmandir is a pilgrimage.
>
> [...] Vedmandir is a cultural nucleus dedicated to Guru Gangeshwaranandji Maharaj, the torchbearer of Ved in modern times.[372]

As the passage above demonstrates, the temple presents elements that differ from the traditional view on the sonic nature and the oral transmission of the Vedas that we have encountered in the Vedic schools described in earlier chapters. Here, one can observe a shift in emphasis and perception of what the Vedas are and how they are to be "used", from the primarily oral form of the Vedas to be used in the Vedic ritual, to the worship of the Vedas as a scripture containing soteriological teachings for the individual and

372 http://www.vedpradip.com/vedtemple.php?linkid=15 accessed on March 3, 2010.

society — this being a "scripture" that not only contains meaning, but where the contents are considered meaningful for the modern man. The idea of installing a book as the main idol, instead of the *mūrti* of one of the gods of the Hindu pantheon, was thus, as Kisanlāljī explained, also "educational". Claims that the Vedas contain all eternal truths, including all the discoveries of modern science, are constantly made by many Hindus, Nationalists or not.[373] Here the Vedas are not just meant to be in praise of the ancient Vedic gods and an inseparable element of Vedic ritual, but they have evolved to a sort of mystical codex containing truths to be used as a guide in one's daily life, once they have been correctly explained to us by the knowledgeable *guru*.

In this example, Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj is perceived by his devotees as "[someone who] dedicated all his life to Bhagavan Ved. The very objective of his life is to propagate Vedic knowledge in the various countries all over the world and make human life meaningful."[374]

It is also worth noting that the carving of the *gāyatrī-mantra* on the marble idol in representation of the whole Veda is a powerful statement in itself. To have this *mantra* on display to any visitor who comes to the temple cannot be ignored. The *gāyatrī-mantra* traditionally has been used in the initiation ceremony (*upanayana*) of the highest class of the Brāhmaṇical society. During the ceremony, a boy's father or *guru*, while veiled from the public view under a blanket or shawl, secretly whispers the *mantra* into the young male's ear.[375] The *gāyatrī-mantra* has been praised in many authoritative texts as the condensation of the Vedas[376] and, as Michaels argued, it is often used by laymen as the "symbolic identification with the Veda... [that] is sufficient as a substitute for the whole." (Michaels 2004a: 97). Here it is made widely available, following the nineteenth century Hindu reform movement's plan to extend the chanting of the *gāyatrī-mantra* beyond caste and gender limitations. In 1898, Svāmī Vivekānanda began initiating non-*brāhmaṇa*s with the sacred thread ceremony and the *gāyatrī-mantra* (cf. Vivekananda 1969: 108-110), this on the basis that the Vedas and the Bhagavadgītā proclaim that *brāhmaṇa* status is earned and not inherited (Mittra 2001: 71). The Ārya Samāj notably spread the teaching that recitation of the *mantra* was not limited to males, but that women could rightfully be taught both the Vedas and the *gāyatrī-mantra*. (Bakhle 2005: 293)

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373 On the construction of the Vedas as books of science, see below in this chapter.

374 Translated from a brochure in Hindi published by "Matośrī Rāmpyārībaī Sāraḍā Dharmik Pratiṣṭhan". [...गुरुदेव सम्पूर्ण जीवन वेद भगवान को समर्पित है। उनके जीवन का उद्देश्य हि वैदिक ज्ञान का देश-विदेश मैं प्रसार कर मानव मात्र को सार्थक बनाना है।]

375 See: Michaels 2004a: 89 Illustration (b).

376 The MānDhŚ II, 83 states that: "[...] nothing is higher than the Sāvitrī [*gāyatrī-mantra*]." (Olivelle 2005a: 99) In many post-vedic texts, this mantra is designated as "mother of the Vedas" and is also equated with *brahman* (cf. BK Smith 1992). In the Bhagavadgītā X, 35, Kṛṣṇa says: "Of chants I am the Brihatsaman; Of meters I am the Gayatri" (Sargeant 2009: 445).

The most orthodox *brāhmaṇa*s left in India — or orthoprax, as Staal (1979b: 4) would call them — would most likely not adhere to this universalistic and open religiosity because it threatens the dilution of their own identity. I suggest, as mentioned above, that this is an example of the discourse which developed out of the nineteenth century Neo-Hindu nationalist movement that presented us with a "scientific" and "rational" religion found in *advaita-vedānta*.[377] Rām Mohan Roy, Vivekānanda, Dayānanda Sarasvatī, Aurobindo, and many other gurus who followed, like Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj, found a friendly echo from their Western counterparts, and particularly amongst Western educated Indians, by presenting their spirituality through the lens of "science" and "rationality".

In Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand's writings and "Vedic speeches" (*veda-pravacana*s), one can perceive a very particular interpretation of the Vedic hymns coloured with ideas from a Neo-Hindu discourse drawing from various sources.[378] In his book from 1982, *Vedas a Way of Life from Yadnya (Sacrifice) to Yoga (Union)*, one repeatedly encounters the terms "scientific", "motherland", "modern age", etc. A few titles of the chapters of this book read: *Family Planning in Vedas*, *Sages Who Opened New Vistas in Science*, *Devotion for Motherland*, *Great Men Live for Others*, and *Make your Motherland Rich*, to mention a few. Many of Gaṅgeśvarānand's works exemplify the ideological discourse proposed by him and many other Hindu Nationalists, such as Vivekānanda and Sri Aurobindo, of the pressumed epistemological equality between "science" and modern Hinduism. This discourse stems from the need to prove that modern science verifies the metaphysical assumptions found in the Vedic episteme, and insists that the Vedas presage all important discoveries of science, including quantum and nuclear physics, thus, asserting that the Vedas are simply "science by another name." Nanda, who has written extensively about this claim, asserts that "[...] my inquiry has led me to conclude that what is going on in India today can best be described as 'reactionary modernism'" (Nanda 2003: xiv), this being a term she borrowed from Herf, who defined it as: "[... the] embrace of modern technology by those who reject Enlightenment reason." (as cited in Nanda 2003: 8). This discourse of science and the Vedas further reaffirms the perception that the Vedas are primarily 'books of knowledge'.

The first missionary efforts and the later colonial powers in south Asia introduced print technology and their own culture. These included the Western ideas of modernization, which evolved into the processes of industrialization and globalization. Therefore, the construction of the Orientalist worldview also created a monolithic, romantic and static picture of South Asian society. This has brought

377 Vivekānanda claimed, in the World Parlament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, that only the spiritual monism taught by the *advaita-vedānta* could fulfill the ultimate goal of natural science, and that it was Hinduism, the fulfillment of all other religions. Cf. Nanda 2005: 226.

378 Although he mainly quoted from Vedic literature, the Bhagavadgītā, the poet saints from Maharashtra, and the Purāṇas were also part of his repertoire.

about a confrontation between people from all social and cultural backgrounds. The confrontation included, of course, the Brāhmaṇical class that had been for many centuries the intelligentsia *par excellence* and the main religious elite in South Asia. With the colonialization, a "strategic mimetism", as Jaffrelot has called it,[379] was crucial in shaping a bibliolatry centered on a single "holy book".

The Western conception that knowledge is directly linked to literacy moved the Neo-Hindu nationalists of the nineteenth century and those who followed them to mimic not only the missionary zeal of their conquerors, but also to copy their institutions and practices — such as in conversion rituals, attempts to standardize and canonize religious knowledge and practices, and systematic unification of the heterogeneous sects and religious traditions of India, as well as attempts to dogmatize their beliefs and centralize religious power.[380] Not that these phenomena were completely absent from pre-colonial India, but instead I assert that they were clearly not present in the modality I am addressing here.

Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj draws considerable inspiration from this tradition of Neo-Hindu reformers. He was also one of the most influential figures connected to Vedic revivalism. On the official web page of Vedpradip, the journal "for preservation and research of Vedas" published by the Sarda group, he is described by one of his close disciples, Arjan Advani, in the following way: "He had in him the philosphical vision of Shree Aurobindo, the intense introspection of Shree Ramkrishna Paramahansa, the missionary zeal of Swami Vivekananda and the complete surrender of Shree Chaitanya Deva."[381]

One can also observe the objectification and personification that Vedic sound, by becoming a sacred book and a deity, could be venerated. The new god is addressed as "Bhagavān Ved", or "venerable Lord Veda".[382] As a result, this new god has entered the realm of *deva*s (gods) along with Śiva, Rāma, and their consorts. Moreover, Bhagavān Ved is introduced as the focal point of worship, having been enshrined in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple, where prayers and offerings such as flowers, fruits, and incense are offered to him.

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379 "Strategic mimetism" is a mechanism model in which the Hindu nationalists mimic the new religious and political forces (the British and the Muslims), and reinterpret their own traditions in light of the "other" to better articulate and justify their existence. (Jaffrelot 1994a: 184-217)

380 One is reminded here of the many examples which illustrate this mimetism — i.e. in the so-called "Catholic Hindu Mandir" proposed by Śraddhānanda in 1926, in which the Hindu devotees would worship the three mother spirits: Gaumātā, Sarasvatī, and Bhūmimātā. More examples of these mimetic strategies and the process of formation are well described in several of Jaffrelot's works, for example in: 1993: 517-524.

381 http://www.vedpradip.com/guru.php accessed on August 4, 2010.

382 My translation of the term "Bhagavān Ved".

With his missionary zeal and the help of the Viśva Hindū Pariṣad[383] (VHP), Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj founded over 500 temples in India and abroad. In each temple, he installed Bhagavān Ved as the main idol. Bhagavān Ved was not only represented by a book, as in this case from the Ved Mandir located in Nashik, but also as an anthropomorphic divinity standing on a blooming lotus flower and holding four manuscripts of the Vedas, one on each arm. The iconography reminds us of the marble idols of Purāṇic gods found across India, and in many Hindu temples across the globe.

The materialization of the Vedas into a written text, and even their deification *per se*, is not a new development of Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand alone. Examples of this personification in descriptions of the Vedic goddess Vāc, and later in Sarasvatī, as the 'goddess of speech' and the 'mother of the Vedas', or in Brahmā himself are evidence of this. These deities are often represented as holding one or several manuscripts in their hands. Later examples of the Vedas as scripture are found in the Purāṇas in which Hayagrīva or Matsya — i.e., two *avatāra*s of Viṣṇu — save the stolen manuscripts of the Vedas from the bottom of the ocean after killing the demon brothers Madhu and Kaiṭabha[384]. Other Purāṇic examples in which the Vedas themselves become personified as anthropomorphic creatures are found in several Purāṇas.[385]

Nonetheless, a large-scale sculpture representing the Vedas as a printed book (rather than a manuscript) is, to my knowledge, unique to Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand. The new anthropomorphic deity presented by him in the *mūrti*s he installed in India and abroad is also unique.

As mentioned at the beginning, Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj is the heir of the *udāsin* sect. Historically, the ascetic *udāsin* sect is said to point back either to Guru Śrī Cand or Bābā Gurditta (Oberoi 1994: 78). The former was the eldest son of Guru Nānak, the founder of the Sikh religion, and the latter was the eldest son of the sixth Sikh *guru*, Hargobind. The *udāsin* sect and their followers are sometimes referred to as *nānak-putra*s or the "sons of Nānak". According to Oberoi, the early Sikh history records ten *udāsin* orders, some of which have survived up to the present day.[386] The *udāsin* tradition was nonetheless excluded from the Sikh community when the *khālsā* order took over the religious power of the previously heterogeneous and non-exclusive Sikh groups in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This process took a decisive turn, particularly under the Singh Sabhā's project of "purging Sikhism from all its diversity" (Oberoi 1994: 25), which included ascetic branches such as the *udāsin*s.

383 For more on the VHP and its role in Hindutva ideology, cf. Jaffrelot 1994b and Hansen 1999: 90-133.

384 In some versions of the story, the demon stealing the Vedas is called Hayagrīva. See, for example, Bhāgavatapurāṇa (8.24).

385 For a detailed account on these *mūrti*s, see: Piano 1997 and also Shulman 1984.

386 Almast, Balu Hasne, Phūl Goinde, Suthure, Śāhī Bhagat Bhagvānīe, Sangat Sāhibīe, Mīhān Śāhīe, Bakht Malīe, and Jīt Malīe. (Oberoi 1994: 78-80)

The *udāsin* sect is still active today. Their members can be seen at each *kumbha melā* and, although many of its members still adhere to their Sikh heritage, they currently function as independent organizations (cf. Clark 2006: 55-56). Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj is seen as the successor of Svāmī Ramānand and the 17th head of the *udāsin*s of the southern *dhūnī*[387] that goes back to Balu Hasne, one of the four main disciples of Śrī Cand.

In this particular case, in the figure of this *guru*, one finds predominantly Hindu[388] rather than Sikh traits. In fact, references to their Sikh heritage are rarely mentioned in their congregations, and the emphasis is clearly put on the Vedas and on other Hindu scriptures and practices.

The name "Bhagavān Ved", I would argue, also mirrors (or at least timidly alludes to) the "Guru Granth Sāhib" which is enthroned in every Sikh *gurdwārā*. Both carry the epithets "*sāhib*" and "*bhagavān*", which are usually employed to address respectable humans, gods, demi-gods, and particularly *guru*s, and therefore addressing the texts with these terms reinforces their personification and their role as the ultimate teachers (*guru*). In fact, in a rather bold statement, Kisanlāljī suggested in an interview that: "[...] all temples should be demolished and only Veda temples should be there. Because we should teach children that knowledge is in the books, knowledge is in the Vedas [...] not in those [other] statues."[389]

Here, one can witness a fairly accomplished process of "Hinduization" in which the Vedas[390] are reinterpreted and mixed with elements, such as idol worship, which historically speaking are not "Vedic" and which have caused internal dispute amongst the Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy for many centuries (see, e.g.: Stietencron 2005: 52-54). The analysis of this process is certainly an enormous task and is beyond

387 The *dhūnī* or *dhūān* is a sacred fire, and sometimes it also refers to the place in which this fire is kept. These fires are an important aspect of various ascetic groups, including the Sikh-related orders: *udāsin* and *nirmala*. (For details on the udāsin Sikhs, see: Oberoi 1994.) Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand presumably belongs to the southern *dhūnī*; "[...] saints of the respective dhoonas were ordained to go in their directions to spread the Vedic teachings. Our Guruji are from the Dakshin Dhoona." http://gurugangeshwaranandjimaharaj.com/newsdetail.aspx?id=84 accessed on August 3, 2010.

388 The *udāsin-sampradāya* traditionally follows the worship of five main deities (*pañcadevopāsana*): Gaṇeśa, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devī, and Sūrya. But references to both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava religiosity and practices are predominant in the publications and activities run by the trust. The spiritual initiation and blindness of the Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj are linked to a vision of Lord Kṛṣṇa he had when he was five years old, and the founder of the *sampradāya*, Śrī Candra, the son of Guru Nānak, is regarded as an incarnation of Śaṅkara. (http://gurugangeshwaranandjimaharaj.com/shrichandra-bhagwan.htm accessed on August 3, 8.2010.)

389 Interview with Kisanlāljī Sāraḍā on 22.11.2011, Nashik.

390 Certainly not an unproblematic term, as has been shown by some scholars like Stietencron (2005), Viswanathan (1998) and others, but I use it in the absence of a better one. Here, "Hinduization" occurs in the sense of indexing Hinduism as a world religion with a particular book at its centre.

the scope of this book.[391] Nonetheless, I would like to point to an important element in this particular case. The Sikh worship of the Ādi-Granth and the Sikh heritage of the *udāsin* sect may have had a strong influence on the perception of the Vedas as a "holy book" for Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand. I suggest that it was the later Sikh bibliolatry and missionary endeavour within the *udāsin* tradition that inspired him to establish hundreds of "Veda-temples" in India and abroad, and to compile the Vedas in a single book to encourage the worship of Bhagavān Ved. He drew direct inspiration —as it is portrayed in the trust's website — from the practice of worshipping the Veda that presumably came from the founder of the *udāsin* sect, Śrī Cand.

> The book Chandra Baashya (written in the 16th century) describes the practice of worshipping Bhagwan Ved with dhoop, aarti and pooja. It says mantras are Guru and hence we should pray to them (Ved Mantras) in the same way we pray to the Guru with flowers, dhoop etc. Even if Bharat (India) wanted to follow this tradition there was no book form like the Granth Sahib to pray to. Keeping this in mind Swamiji decided to print and publish 'Bhagwan Ved'.[392]

Unfortunately, I was unable to find the Candra Bhāṣya mentioned in this passage, but it is plausible that the practice of worshipping Veda manuscripts predates Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand and, perhaps, it was a common practice among the *udāsin*s and even amongst other groups.

Sikh, and modern attitudes towards scripture, were appropriated by Guru Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj and his followers to develop a new "Vedic tradition" discourse that employs an "immemorial" trope. With these new elements, the emphasis has changed from the sonic form of the Vedas to their scriptural interpretation, even shifting to a religious bibliolatry (cf. Michaels 1996). The shift of the Vedas from sound to scripture, and the relationship between the orality and literacy in this context, remains a rather understudied subject. Additional investigations on the role of manuscript culture in India, the later printing technologies introduced into India, and the Muslim and Buddhist attitudes towards the written text are crucial elements which ought to be considered.

While this may be a telling example for "Hinduization" and a shift of perception from sound to scripture, one can also observe that the perpetuation of the oral method of knowledge transmission and the honouring of traditional Vedic reciters is a way to actively perpetuate orthodox values that were not completely transformed or replaced by the Neo-Hindu reforms. Instead, they co-exist alongside new perceptions about the Vedas and their role within the spiritual religiosity of the followers of Gaṅgeśvarānand Mahārāj.

My point with this particular example is to argue that the identitarian kaleidoscope can turn mirroring images of itself in different ways, depending on who is observing or

391 Dutta (2007) among others has exemplified this dynamic process of interaction between the Vedic (Sanskritic) and the non-Vedic (vernacular i.e. Tamil) traditions in the history of Śrivaiṣṇavism in south India.

392 http://gurugangeshwaranandjimaharaj.com/newsdetail.aspx?id=92 accessed on August 7, 2010.

whether it is observing itself. I agree with Sax, who describes in his book *Dancing the Self* that the problem of identity is a "hall of mirrors". He uses this allegory to illustrate the complexity of the identitarian relationships in the communities of the Garwahl. He writes:

> The Other is also a reflection of the self, at times resented, at other times emulated. (Sax, 2002: 204)

This reflection is more often than not an unconscious effort to cope with the recent social changes that have emerged. The important question is how the people represent themselves to each other and to the rest of the world, and how they in turn are represented by the Others (including scholars). This dynamic exchange of symbolic capital at different levels between the custodians of a tradition and the Others is precisely what constitutes this ever-changing kaleidoscope.

6.3.3 The *Śrī Rāmayajña* of Satara

In this last case study, I will present the annual nine-day-long ritual performed in honor of the birth of hero-god Rāma (*rāmanavamī*) in Satara, Maharashtra as an example of the interdependent relationship between Vedic traditions and more popular forms of Hinduism. Here, it will become apparent how the identitarian kaleidoscope constantly produces new images of itself.

The *rāmanavamī* festival is very popular in Maharashtra, particularly around this area where the *rāmdāsī-sampradāya* has a strong holding due to the proximity of Satara to the Sajjengar fort,[393] where the remains of Samārth Rāmdās are buried. Many temples and religious/cultural organizations of the city participate in the celebrations with their own programs. As part of the festivities, a large ritual in honor of the god Rāma is organized by the Śrī Kṛṣṇayajurveda Pāṭhaśālā[394] under the blessings of the Sringeri *maṭha*.

The main ritual takes place on the premises of the school, and all the students and teachers of this, and other neighbouring Vedic schools, participate in the ritual. The "Śrī Rāma Mahāyajña", as the ritual is called, is divided into morning and afternoon sessions, and it involves the daily repetition of the *mantra: "śrī rām jay rām jay jay rām (svāhā)"*[395] while making offerings and oblations into the fire-pit. Between 16

393 Lit. "Fort of Good People."

394 See: Appendix 1.

395 This *mantra* is very popular in Maharashtra. It is said that it was composed by Samārth Rāmdās (1608–1681), whose *samādhi* tomb is located at the Sajjangaḍ fort near the city of Satara. The *mantra* was further used by other saints of the region, notably Srī Brahmacaitanya of Gondavale (1845 - 1913), who based many of his teachings on the interpretation and practice of this particular *mantra*. Śrī Brahmacaitanya was also one of the key figures in the revival of Vedic ritualism in Maharashtra. See: Rajopadhye (forthcoming).

and 20 *brāhmaṇa*s of all ages take turns making the offerings to the fire, while the rest of the students sit in the ritual enclosure repeating the *mantra*s. A few students or guests also take turns repeating the *mantra* with microphones, and the sound is delivered through loudspeakers placed around the school, while the audience repeats the *mantra*.

The elaborate ritual enclosure where the sacred fire is burning, and where the altar to Rāma and his holy family (as well as a whole array of other deities and *guru*s, including the patron of the event, the Śaṅkaracārya of Sringeri) is placed, is delimited by a canopy which only *brāhmaṇa*s are allowed to step within. The guests and local public can come and go as they please, sitting around the ritual enclosure or in a hall next to it, as they watch, listen, and repeat Rāma's name. In the adjacent hall, another altar is erected for the devotees. Here, they can pay their respects to the idols of Lord Rāma and other deities at a short distance, and make monetary offerings or in kind.

Parallel to the main *yajña*, in a small pavilion located in the backyard of the school, the teachers and some senior *brāhmaṇa*s invited especially for the occasion recite the whole Taittiriyasaṃhitā of the Kṛṣṇayajurveda. The recitation of the Veda here is also accompanied by the same ritual offerings (black sesame and ghee), but the sound of the *mantra*s is not broadcast via microphone, and thus remains only within the reach of *brāhmaṇa* ears. Outsiders and regular visitors are not allowed into this area, and even the younger students only go there when they are requested to bring wood, water, or to fulfill any other request the senior *brāhmaṇa*s may have. The morning session, which lasts a few hours, is then interrupted for lunch, during which speeches in Marāṭhī on different religious subjects are given by the main *brāhmaṇa* teacher or by an elderly *saṃnyāsin* associated with the school. Besides these speeches, a group of mostly elderly women sit in the adjacent hall and sing devotional songs that celebrate Viṣṇu's main incarnations: Kṛṣṇa and Rāma.

For a few hours in the afternoon, the ritual offerings along with the repetition of the *mantra* continue in the same way as in the morning session. Finally, in the evening, a 'cultural' program is organized in a public hall in the city center. Indian classical dance, *kīrtan* sessions, religious discourses, debates, and theatre plays are staged, alternating, on each of the nights. All the *brāhmaṇa*s of the school come to participate and are involved in the organization of the event. Not only do they actively help with the logistics of the events, but they also perform in a drama on one of the nights. The play is either a story from the Purāṇas or from the lives of the saints of Maharashtra. Prior to the event, they are rehearsed for a few months in the school. Each night, the main teacher of the school, Vedamūrti Vivekśāstrī Goḍboḷe, welcomes the gathered audience and presents the program of the night, introducing the performer(s). After the event, he publicly honors the artists or special guests by handing them a shawl, flowers, and a coconut. After the performance, everyone is invited to go back to the school to finalize the day by performing *ārati* in the hall next to the *yajña* pit. The *brāhmaṇa*s of the school sit together, singing on microphones

and playing the instruments that accompany the *ārati*. The crowd gathered for this closing ritual of the day stand.

Instead of *brāhmaṇa* priests who usually perform the evening ritual, people from the local community wave the flames on trays in front of the altar. They are people who are celebrating their birthday, or who requested they participate in honor of a personal special occasion, such as an anniversary or in the name of a deceased family member. On the last day (the actual ninth day of the month of Caitra according to the Hindu calendar), the final offering, called *pūrṇāhutī* (full-oblation), is performed in the morning. Around noon, when Lord Rāma is said to have been born, *brāhmaṇa* women ritually cradle a coconut on a decorated swinging crib, representing him as a baby.

The main *brāhmaṇa* teacher reads (or rather re-tells) the story of Rāma's birth to the gathered public. Once the reading (*kathā*) is over, all the devotees come one by one or in small groups and prostrate themselves in front of the *brāhmaṇa*, offering him a few Rupees (plate 12). They also pay their respects to the 'baby' Rāma and bow in front of the Vedic fire and altar. After all devotees present have had a personal glimpse of the divine (*darśana*), a procession (*śobhā yātrā*) with a palanquin containing the idols of Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, and Hanumat sets forth around the city where it joins other processions and groups. The *brāhmaṇa*s lead the procession, chanting the names of Rāma while other devotees, including *vārkarī*s, follow with festive enthusiasm. Men and women dance to the rhythm of the drums and the cymbals.

The palanquin stops at strategic points, temples, businesses, and homes to receive the offerings of devotees. Coconuts are smashed on the ground and milk is poured on the feet of the carriers of the palanquin. This continues for some hours, following a particular route that comes to an end in the Vedic school, where a special last communal *ārati* to Lord Rāma is performed. Immediately after the *ārati* performance, the audience sits down and listens to an offering of *mantra*s from the four Vedas (*aṣṭāvadhānasevā*)[396] as recited by the *brāhmaṇa*s of the different schools. The main *brāhmaṇa* of the school briefly explains the different types of recitations to the audience, reminding everyone that "the Vedas are the root of Hindu *dharma*." Then the *brāhmaṇa*s recite significant *mantra*s and particular types of recitation from their repertoire. After the Vedic *mantra*s are performed, and a last devotional song is sung with harmonium and tablas, the celebration ends with the words: "Victory to

396 The term originally designates an "eightfold-attention service" and is usually associated with a kind of literary memory contest. In the contemporary Vedic recitation offered at the end of a ritual or in honor of a special occasion, there are no poetry compositions or questions to be answered by the reciters, as is the case with the *avadhāna* performances in the Telugu tradition, but it is still a sort of 'show' of the reciters' abilities of memory and attention (*avadhāna*). For more on the *avadhāna*, see: Datta 1987: 292. The term "eightfold-attention service" may also refer to the performance of the eight traditional forms of the recitational permutations of the Veda (*aṣṭavikṛtis*), although in Maharashtra only the *jaṭāpāṭha, kramapāṭha,* and *ghanapāṭha* permutations survive, and this too only in the Ṛgveda and in the Yajurveda recensions.

Dharma! Destruction of Non-Dharma! May there be good conduct towards all living beings! Blessed be the whole universe! Glory to the husband of Pārvatī, the great god Śiva!"[397]

Plate 12: Vedamūrti Vivekśāstri Goḍbole giving blessings after retelling the story of Rāma's birth. Satara, 2009.

In this very brief description, I would like to make some observations. The *brāhmaṇa* reconstructs his own identity by participating in the *looping*[398] of a particular traditional 'habitus'. This is done by staging and performing his authority within the discursive frames of the Śrī Rāma Mahāyajña, exemplified, for instance, through the delimitation of the ritual arena, which only *brāhmaṇa* males can access and make the ritual oblations within. Further, the recitation of the Vedas, which takes place

397 The Hindī slogans may change slightly, but this is the standard sequence used in Maharashtra: "*dharmā ka jay ho! adharma kā naś ho! prāṇiyon mẽ sadbhāvana ho! viśva kā kalyāṇ ho! pārvatī pātaye hara hara hara mahādev!*" to which often the slogan *jay jay raghuvīr Samārth!* (Glory to the hero of Raghu['s clan], the powerful one [Rāma]!) is also added.

398 For more on the concept of the looping effect, see Chapter 6. The concept was developed by Ian Hacking (2001). His basic premise is that classification affects the thing being classified and that, unlike objects, people are conscious of the way they are classified, and therefore they alter their behavior and self-conceptions in response to their classification.

parallel to the main *yajña*, remains the exclusive duty of the *brāhmaṇa*. The audience, nonetheless, is aware that the recitation of the Vedas is a *brāhmaṇa* affair and that their prestige (at least ideally) comes from the oral command over these *mantra*s. This becomes particularly clear at the end of the ritual, when the *brāhmaṇa*s' ability to recite complex Vedic *mantra*s is exhibited in front of the audience. This act is significant because it is framed as a particular 'service' (*sevā*) to the God and the community. At the same time, the devotees also actively participate in the ritual by listening and observing the procedures, as well as by repeating a simple, yet allegedly powerful and prestigious (non-Vedic) *mantra*. Here the non-*brāhmaṇa* reiterates the ritual hierarchy of the *brāhmaṇa* over him, while at the same time appropriating his own merit as a *bhakta*. The 'cultural program' also serves as a stage on which the authority of the *brāhmaṇa* is performed, both directly and indirectly. It is the *brāhmaṇa* who honors the different performers, thereby visibly asserting his authority; when the *brāhmaṇa*s perform their theatrical play, the Brāhmaṇical self is reenacted and the audience learns about the ideal behavior of both the *brāhmaṇa* and the devotee. The non-*brāhmaṇa* audience is at the same time fully integrated into the ritual and given a key role in the evening, when not the learned *brāhmaṇa*s, but members from the community, perform the *ārati* to Lord Rāma. Finally, it is the *brāhmaṇa* who re-tells the story of the birth of Lord Rāma, and it is *brāhmaṇa* women who first cradle the deity.

It is noteworthy that, in modern *yajña*s such as the one described above, post-Vedic gods like Rāma are being incorporated into "Vedic" practices, and at the same time the Vedas, as authoritative texts, are being incorporated into post-Vedic Hinduism. While the textual basis for such ritual practices is, at best, thin, the very existence of such rituals indicates not only their functional importance to preserve the Veda in its oral form, but also modern Hinduism's innovative use of the Veda for the legitimation of its own practices.

Finally, the celebration of *rāmanavamī* in Satara is embedded in the meta discourse of Smārta Hindusism through the endorsement of the Sringeri Śaṅkarācārya, who is translocally perceived as the *jagadguru* (universal *guru*) among Smārta Hindus. The *looping* of discourses on the ideal *brāhmaṇa* at different scales is not only a textual one, but also necessarily an embodied one. The hegemony of the discourse on the ideal *brāhmaṇa* is dynamically negotiated anew through ritual activity and socialization. From the example above, one can observe that these two fields collide: the ritual is part of the socialization process and the socialization is also highly ritualized. The students not only learn to memorize and correctly reproduce the sound of the Vedas, but they also learn to be the Vedas and, by performing this identity, they continue to define what it means to be a *brāhmaṇa* in contemporary India. Using Bourdieuian language, we can regard the *vedapāṭhaśālā*s, in this sense, as both 'structured' and 'structuring' — 'structured' through the organisational, political, ideological, and economic frames, and 'structuring' through the impact that they have on the students, and on local and translocal communities through ritual activities such as this one.