

7 Conclusion

The specific context of modern Maharashtra, where a long Brāhmaṇical tradition has been associated with power and prestige, but also with its abuse, arrogance, and pride, has met with strong contestation both from its own camp, as well as from the non-*brāhmaṇa* antagonists. On the other hand, a “Brahmin double” (NOVETZKE 2011) has been created through the reimagination of a “true *brāhmaṇa*”, which has been reappraised by *brāhmaṇa* communities through their association with *bhakti* saints. The modern *brāhmaṇa* has shown that he is quite aware of the stigma often attached to him as the embodiment of “oppressive regimes of caste as a social system.” (BAIRY 2010: 233)

Modernity, urbanization, and nation-building processes, as well as the rise of egalitarian and democratic principles, have also challenged the Brāhmaṇical ideals which have forced *brāhmaṇas* to find new ways to balance their profoundly ambivalent positions *vis-à-vis* the “anti-modernity” and the “modernity” discourses. Previous research has shown that the *brāhmaṇa* ideal has not been free of ambivalence since the Vedic and post-Vedic period. Repeated attempts to fix the ideal of the *brāhmaṇa* on certain characteristics by Brāhmaṇical authors show that Brāhmaṇahood was an unstable category that needed to be constantly redefined and reinterpreted according to the social changes and local contexts in which it was articulated. This web of tangled engagements reminds us of the complicated worlds that *brāhmaṇas* both create and inhabit, as well as of the contexts within which these worlds emerge. It seems that the ambivalence of what constitutes the *brāhmaṇa* ideal has become even more ambiguous in modern times, in which many discourses around caste, gender, nation, religion, and globalization very openly challenge the very *raison d’être* of the male *brāhmaṇa*.

With the Veda at the center of the *vaidika*’s identity and activity, an additional ambivalence has become evident, namely that of the relationship between orality and literacy, between scripture and sound, and between form and meaning. This work has shown that the complex relationship between these elements has found its way into contemporary discourses and practices of what the Vedas are imagined to be, and how they are to be employed. These discourses often clash with each other and are not always free of contradictions. Some of the examples presented here, such as the Veda Mandir in Nashik, are vivid instances of the shift of perception from sound to scripture and from form to meaning, in which modern values of egalitarianism, democracy, and nationalism are brought to the forefront. These shifts of perception and accentuation of modern values can be traced back to social changes and spiritual reform movements which became prominent at the end of the eighteenth century. They gained momentum with modern charismatic leaders whose seeds can be traced back to precolonial times, and perhaps even earlier. The forces of the so-called “syndicated Hinduism” have clearly shown that a general “Hinduization” of the Veda and of the *śrauta* rituals through several religious institutions with their various agendas

and ideologies is at work. I also noted how homogenizing forces in synergy with processes of globalization and secularization tend to breed a Hinduism that is more standardized, populist, radical, political, and missionary, but at the same time, that some of the individuals in these schools subvert these tendencies by appropriating more embracing, egalitarian, and universalistic discourses.

The examples presented in this work show how the Veda has been reappropriated, instrumentalized, and embodied in different ways by different actors with their own religious and political agendas. The aim of this book has been to present the heterogeneity behind the sponsorship and support of the “traditional” transmission of the Veda in the *vedapāṭhaśālās* of Maharashtra, and how their views have a strong influence on the students and teachers of these schools. By explicitly pointing to the economic aspects, it becomes apparent that they have been crucial to the way that the Veda is transmitted today, and that the socio-economic background of students and teachers also plays an important role in its traditional preservation. We can observe, on the one hand, an increase of Vedic schools and resources through “new” sponsoring systems coming mainly from cash flows from the Hindu middle class, who are often upper-caste members and followers of Neo-Hindu charismatic leaders, and on the other hand, that the custodians of the Veda come from a rather impoverished social-strata. As Alam (2011) has shown, a similar situation seems to be reflected in other traditionalist projects in the subcontinent, such as the Indian *madrasas*, where mainly Dālit and lower-caste children attend these religious schools.

Some of the dynamic negotiations between the *brāhmaṇa* ideal as a *vaidika* (also extensively constructed through Indological scholarship), and the local and translocal discourses and practices around the *brāhmaṇa* self, have emerged from the material discussed here. I have argued that the multivocality in which this constructed self is “looped”, and the difficult and uncertain conditions of subsistence, have created a general apathy among *brāhmaṇa* families that has found expression in a crisis of identity among professional reciters of the Veda. The reason for the general apathy and lack of interest for traditional learning from the younger generations has often been explained to me, by these *brāhmaṇas*, as a lack of professional security and a low-income expectation for Vedic experts. In the changing social environment of modern India, and with new economic possibilities, only the most orthodox or economically disadvantaged *brāhmaṇa* families have maintained the traditional role of custodians of the Vedas. It is here that new dynamics in the patronage system have emerged, and the impact that new sponsors have on traditional Vedic schools has been crucial. In particular, the Indian government (through the MSRVVP) has participated in the standardization and institutionalization of curricula by creating aid programs that bind schools to a certain syllabus over a particular time-span. Other sponsors and institutions, such as the VSS, and in the name of protecting the tradition, have introduced evaluation methods and learning environments based on Western models, thereby contributing to a more rigid and standardized pedagogy. Additionally, the new avatars of traditional training that have introduced non-traditional subjects to

the curriculum may perhaps inadvertently foster a slow but steady decline of the richness of these traditions. While on the one hand one sees a general increase of institutions and new forms of economic support for the Vedic tradition, this does not necessarily correlate into an increased quality of preservation for the oral traditions. In fact, many of the teachers lament a decrease of interest among *brāhmaṇa* families wanting to send their children to traditional Vedic schools, thereby leaving them with only a few sincerely self-motivated students. From the study of the schools, one could perhaps predict a general increase in basic *paurohitya* training, but a decrease in traditional higher studies and the advanced recitation of texts beyond *Samhitā*, such as *krama*, *jaṭā* and *ghanapāṭha*, or the recitation of selected *Brāhmaṇas* and *Upaniṣads*.

Also, the loss of prestige for the traditional *brāhmaṇa* among the urban youth and an increasing view of the orthodox *brāhmaṇa* as “backward”, “narrow-minded”, and “provincial” has pushed conservatively-oriented *brāhmaṇas* to find new venues through which to justify and “market” their activities among a variety of “clients”. Besides the above-mentioned funds, new sources of income have emerged among the wealthy Hindu diaspora, and increasingly among Western yoga-enthusiasts seeking the “authentic spiritual heritage of India”. This evolution has not, of course, been without internal frictions among *brāhmaṇas* who need to constantly renegotiate the borders of their orthodoxy and the power relations among one another.

The traditional Vedic schools demand a harder sense of identification with the category of being and becoming a *brāhmaṇa* than other spaces in which *Brāhmaṇaness* is articulated, such as caste associations or schools that strive to produce a “secular” *brāhmaṇa* self, such as the Dayānand Anglo-Vedic Schools System (DAVs) or other so-called “*gurukulas*”. A traditional identity constantly woven into ontological categories of “eternal knowledge” and “universal welfare” could be read as an effort to accord themselves a state of permanency and transcendence. In doing so, *brāhmaṇas* strive to demonstrate their immutability *vis-à-vis* contextual and historical pressures.

Nonetheless, while the identity of the traditional *brāhmaṇa* has been more strongly solidified in Sanskrit sources which have been looped extensively, both by themselves and by external forces, it is important to highlight that self-representation is always contextual. The examples presented here show the relationship that the *brāhmaṇas* share with their “*Brāhmaṇaness*” is fundamentally ambivalent, and even contradictory. Any attempt to define their identity is always established through active enunciations, as well as repudiations of what constitutes the “ideal *brāhmaṇa*.” In the process, different actors in the network of the *vaidika* participate in what Hacking has called the *looping effect*. Discourses that portray “*Brāhmaṇaness*” are looped in the public sphere and mass media (written press, theater plays, TV, radio, and the Internet), as well as in a whole array of religious paraphernalia, grey literature, and CDs and VCDs that are all integrated into the religious economy of sacred places, iterating and thereby perpetuating certain discourses and practices. The iteration of these

discourses happens both in favor of, and against, the imagination of the *brāhmaṇa*-self, thereby forcing *brāhmaṇas* to constantly position themselves according to these discourses, not only in ideological ways, but also in embodied and performative ways.

On the one hand, by striving to represent an ideal that is constantly retrived from Sanskritic sources, traditional *brāhmaṇas* seek to act on behalf of the larger *brāhmaṇa* community, and even as representatives and guardians of the “authentic” Hindu heritage at large. On the other hand, they seek to recover and sacralize the modern public space by reclaiming their roles as “teachers” and “advisors” in secular arenas (*Vāstuśāstra*, science, medicine, management and governance). The use of modern technology, such as digital media and social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.), to project a particular self-image — one that is often presented in English and not in the vernacular, and that seeks to reach a public beyond the local level — allows entrance into the global media space.

This work has sought to engage with the discourses on the Vedas and “*Brāhmaṇaness*” in differentiated rather than essentializing ways. It has been argued that the construction of the *brāhmaṇa* identity is a matter of degree in which different layers of the identitarian “kaleidoscope” reaccommodate themselves constantly, according to processes that are dynamic, asymmetrical, and context-dependent. By giving voice to the custodians of the Vedas and showing the different ways in which the Vedas are being appropriated by the driving forces of modern Hinduism, we seek to move away from simply considering the Vedas as the “foundational texts of Hinduism”, and to look at *how* the Vedas are transmitted within very concrete socio-cultural frameworks. This approach seeks to do away with the notion that the Vedas are forgotten fossils which are only vaguely and symbolically authoritative to the Hindus at large, and carefully zoom into the processes in which these traditions are reinvented in contradictory, contingent, and contested ways. There are good reasons to believe that is true also for other traditions in the contemporary world that approach their scriptures as more than just books on a shelf. I suspect that these traditions will continue to transmit their knowledge systems to the next generations, and that these will survive, adapt, and reform themselves in various creative modes, along with the coming generations that will embody them. Hopefully, this book will encourage others to further study the oral transmission of texts among living traditions across the globe.