

*Gurucaritra Pārāyaṇ*: Social Praxis of Religious Reading

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation project addresses one of the most critical problems in the study of religion: how do scriptures acquire significance in religious communities in ways that go beyond the meaning of their words? Based on data collected during ethnographic work in Maharashtra, India, in 2011 and 2012, I analyze the complex relationship between a religious text and its readers with reference to ritual reading of the *Gurucaritra*, a Marathi scripture written in the sixteenth century. I argue that readers of the *Gurucaritra* create a self-actualized modern religiosity both by interpreting the content of the text and by negotiating the rules of praxis surrounding their reading activity.

In particular, this dissertation analyzes the ways in which members of the Dattātreya tradition in urban Maharashtra ritualize their tradition's central text-- the *Gurucaritra*—in terms of everyday issues and concerns of the present. Taking inspiration from reader-response criticism, I focus on the *pārāyaṇ* (reading the entire text) of the *Gurucaritra*, the central scripture of the Dattātreya tradition, in the context of its contemporary readings in Maharashtra. In the process of reading the *Gurucaritra*, readers become modern by making a conscious selection from their tradition. In the process of approaching their tradition through the text, what they achieve is a sense of continuity and a faith that, if they have the support of the *guru*, nothing can go wrong. In the process of choosing elements from their tradition, they ultimately achieve a sense of being modern individuals who work out rules of religiosity for themselves.

This dissertation contributes to the study of scriptures in two major ways: first, by bringing forth how religious communities engage with scriptures for reasons other than their comprehension; second, by showing how scriptures can play a crucial role in religious communities in the context of addressing concerns of their present. Thus, this research contributes to the fields of scripture studies, Hinduism, and literary criticism.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband, Saurabh Alurkar, and my daughter Abhaya Alurkar, whose sacrifice, patience and enduring encouragement made this project possible.

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## TRANSLITERATION OF SANSKRIT AND MARATHI TERMS

I have followed the standard conventions for transliterating the Devnāgarī script in the case of lesser-known places such as Narsobācī Vāḍī as well as for terms from Marathi and Sanskrit. For the names of Indian states and major cities I have used the standard Romanization. In the case of Marathi words, I have dropped the short “a” when it is not used in Marathi (e.g., *pārāyaṇ*) but I have kept it in case of Sanskrit words (e.g., Mahābhārata). For words that are widely used in English, such as *guru*, I have not used diacritical marks. For the names of authors of Marathi works, I have included spellings with diacritical marks in parentheses the first time they appear in the dissertation as well as in the bibliography section.



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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

**Background**

This dissertation project examines the phenomenon of religious reading in Hinduism. The focus of the project is the ritual and interpretative practices of readers of the *Gurucaritra*. The *Gurucaritra*, the central text of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*,<sup>1</sup> is a sixteenth-century Marathi text about the role of a particular *guru* in the life of ordinary human beings. It was written by a devotee of Dattātreya named Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara. The book consists of over seven thousand verses covering topics including the birth narrative of god Dattātreya, narratives about the life and works of two human incarnations of Dattātreya, and narratives elucidating the centrality of the *guru* in the lives of disciples with reference to the *guru's* grace and the disciples' devotion to the *guru*. In addition to stories about the life and works of the *gurus* of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, the text is perceived to be an ethical treatise, as it consists of comments on topics such as the code of conduct for brāhmanas, married women etc. It is also perceived to be a ritual manual, as it gives elaborate instructions on such topics as the procedures for daily *pūjā* at home, for pilgrimages and for votive observances. Followers of Dattātreya not only value the text for its lucid language and everyday-life topics; they also hold it to be equivalent to the Vedas.

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<sup>1</sup> Angelika Malinar, in her entry titled "Sampradaya" in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Vol 3.157), notes that "the term *sampradāy* is derived from the verbal compound *sam+pra+da*, 'to hand over,' 'to pass on,' and refers in particular to the handing down of knowledge; it is a transmission that constitutes a knowledge tradition." Although the idea of tracing lineage from some *guru* is a characteristic feature of many Hindu *sampradāys*, the colloquial usage of the term *sampradāy* is not necessarily based on the idea of tracing lineage or transmitting knowledge. The followers of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* that I met with did not belong to a homogenous, cohesive religious community. The constituency of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* is varied. Whereas some followers can trace the lineage of their *gurus* clearly, others are not even committed to a particular *guru*. Due to the fluid boundaries of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, it has acquired the character of a set of religious networks centered on the figure of Dattātreya. In this dissertation, the term "Dattātreya *sampradāy*" refers to various religious networks in contemporary Maharashtra that are in some way related to the figure of Dattātreya, but not necessarily connected with each other.

This quasi-Vedic status, along with a belief that each word of the *Gurucaritra* is imbued with *māntric*<sup>2</sup> powers, has led to the development of a distinctive reading practice known as *pārāyaṇ*. In a *pārāyaṇ*, devotees read the *Gurucaritra* in its entirety over a period of seven days. During the reading or *pārāyaṇ* session, they follow several ritual and dietary observances. Whereas some readers carry out *pārāyaṇ* with specific desires such as recovery from illness, success in a business venture, or success in an academic pursuit, many readers conduct the *pārāyaṇ* with no specific desires except for the general well-being of their family. In addition to the *pārāyaṇ* tradition in private houses, a tradition of organizing *pārāyaṇ* sessions in public places has gained popularity among members of the contemporary urban, literate, Marathi community.

Despite the remarkable impact of this religious text on contemporary Marathi religion, there is a dearth of scholarly resources on the way members of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* read and ritualize the *Gurucaritra* in terms of concerns of the present. In this work, I look at the ways the *Gurucaritra* is interpreted and appropriated by urban, literate Hindus in Maharashtra. I show that, although the readers re-traditionalize themselves by developing a renewed sense of what it means to be a Hindu through reading the sixteenth-century text, as literate individuals they also appropriate and interpret the tradition in their urban contexts by taking religion in their own hands. In this sense, rather than simply appropriating what is offered by the text and the tradition, the readers *construct* their religiosity on their own terms through their engagement with the *Gurucaritra*'s text, ritual practice and material presence.

Inspired by recent works on scriptures by Wimbush,<sup>3</sup> the Iconic Books Project,<sup>4</sup> and Griffiths,<sup>5</sup> I argue that the *Gurucaritra* lives in the Dattātreya *sampradāy* both through its content

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<sup>2</sup> The etymology of the word *māntric* can be derived from the noun *Mantra* which is defined as "Vedic hymn or sacrificial formula, that portion of the Veda which contains the texts called *ṛc* or *yajus* or *saman* as opposite to *brāhman* and a *upanīṣad* portion; a mystical verse or magical formula (sometimes personified), incantation, charm, spell. M.Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-Marathi Dictionary*, 786.

<sup>3</sup>Vincent L. Wimbush, *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon Signifying (on) Scriptures* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup><http://iconicbooks.net/> (Accessed June 1, 2012).

<sup>5</sup>Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

and through the social praxis surrounding the text. Having examined religious reading through participant-observation and in-depth interviews with devotee-readers of the *Gurucaritra* in Pune, India, I explore the interplay between the *oral* and the *written, text and practice*, and readers and the read (the text). Employing insights from reception studies (Iser),<sup>6</sup> hermeneutics (Ricoeur),<sup>7</sup> and materiality studies (Keane),<sup>8</sup> this approach to studying scriptures focuses on the *reader* rather than the *read* and consequently calls for diverting our attention from what is *in* the scriptures to what goes on *around* them.

The plan for the remainder of this chapter is as follows: the next section introduces the readers of the *Gurucaritra*. A section on the statement of the problem follows this. The third section reviews literature about religious reading. The fourth section presents key theoretical insights about religious reading as a phenomenon based on the major findings of my fieldwork. Finally, the concluding section consists of an introduction to key terms used in this dissertation, and a statement of the contribution of this work to the fields of religious studies in general and Hindu studies in particular.

### The Readers

In contemporary Maharashtra, one often comes across an abundance of printed copies of religious books such as *Satyanārāyaṇ pūjā*, *Gurucaritra*, *Bhāgavatam*, *Devī Mahātmyam*, and *Dāsboḍh* in local bookshops. These books, available in abridged and full-length versions, are generally inexpensive. The abundance of copies of such books and their inexpensive prices indicate that reading is an important mode of religiosity for contemporary Hindus. Indeed, men and women of various castes, classes and ages engage in reading such religious texts in private and public settings. Compared to the *Satyanārāyaṇ pūjā pothī* (a printed copy), books such as the

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<sup>6</sup>Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

<sup>7</sup>Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," In *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1981]), 197-221.

<sup>8</sup>Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. The Anthropology of Christianity. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

*Gurucaritra*, the *Bhāgavatam* and the *Devī Mahātmya* are longer and they are read in small portions over a period of days or weeks.

Despite its significance in contemporary Hindu traditions, religious reading is an understudied practice. Among scriptures in Hinduism, three types of texts—Sanskrit liturgical texts, folk/regional texts and *bhakti* literature have received scholars' attention the most. These categories are not mutually exclusive. By contrast, they overlap. By and large, Sanskrit liturgical texts are accessible only to select, elite brāhmaṇs who are able to read Sanskrit and follow the correct mechanics of chanting the *mantras*. By contrast, folk/regional texts written mostly in regional languages<sup>9</sup> are available to common people and are products of the oral discourses of local communities. In between these two traditions, there is also a rich textual tradition of devotional literature that has flourished in various parts of India in the second millennium with the rise of *bhakti* movements. This tradition, unlike the one among the rural communities, has also thrived in urban communities. Although most of the literature produced by the *bhakti sants* was not used in liturgical contexts, with time some texts have acquired a quasi-Vedic character in certain regional communities. The *Tiruvāymoḷi* of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community is one such example. The *Gurucaritra* is another example. The *Gurucaritra*'s commonplace language, examples of the *guru*'s grace in the most common crisis situations, and guidance on ideal behavior for all sections of society make it appealing to people across castes, classes, ages and genders in contemporary Maharashtra.

The readers I met with during my fieldwork came from different social and professional backgrounds. I met with priests working at various Hindu temples, businessmen who owned their shops, and employees of banks, of the state electricity board, of local schools and of a major engineering company. I also interacted with *rickshaw* drivers and bus drivers. Among the women, I met with several housewives who invited me to afternoon tea at their homes, a university professor who met me at her office, and a group of women priests who read the text together at a

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<sup>9</sup> Some examples of this category would be the *Vaibhavlakṣmī vrat*, the *Soḷā Somvār vrat* etc. Typically, pothīs of these vratās are read out loud at the end of the ritual praxis.

private house. In addition to working professionals, I met with several retired professionals. Meeting retired professionals was easier than meeting working professionals, as the retired people met regularly at certain places (*kaṭṭās*). My readers were all literate.<sup>10</sup> Their educational backgrounds ranged from middle-school to university education. Readers from the the Diṇḍorī tradition were followers of the same guru (More Dādā). But a majority of the other readers were not institutionally affiliated to any religious organization. The readers had undertaken reading of the text on their own or on the recommendation of friends. There was a great deal of variation with respect to the degree of ritualization. Following the ritual observances in utmost detail was crucial for the *orthoprax* priests, whereas even cooking non-vegetarian items (during the *pārāyaṇ* period) for other family members was acceptable for some female readers.

As with the degree of ritualization, the motivations for conducting the *pārāyaṇ* differed from person to person. For some, a belief that the *Gurucaritra* can address specific material concerns for their family members was important, whereas for others the *Gurucaritra* was a book that brought them peace of mind. In short, readers of the *Gurucaritra* that I met with related to the text on different levels.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite variations in terms of reasons for reading the text, and in terms of castes, classes, ages and genders, there were certain common patterns in the way the readers framed their experiences of *pārāyaṇ*. The most striking finding of my fieldwork was that despite spending at least one week every year reading the *Gurucaritra*, my interlocutors rarely referred to the specific literary content of the book in their conversations. They paid much attention to reading as an exercise; however, they were not particularly interested in discussing topics such as the meaning of specific verses from the text.

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<sup>10</sup>The literacy rate in Pune was 87.2 percent in 2011.  
[Http://knoema.com/atlas/India/Pune/Literacy-Rate](http://knoema.com/atlas/India/Pune/Literacy-Rate) (Accessed November 3, 2013).

Upon further investigation of the history of the *pārāyaṇ* tradition, I realized that there is no major commentarial tradition associated with the *Gurucaritra*. On the one hand, there are abridged versions of the text; on the other hand, there are biographical writings that share the personal, spiritual experiences of the readers. However, apart from glosses of difficult words in footnotes, there is no commentary on the text itself. Further, the text itself is uniform in that there are no major variants in the manuscripts published by different publishers.

I realized during my conversations with readers that when they used the Marathi verb “*vācaṇe*” (translated as “to read”) they did not imply reading in the strict sense of the term. For instance, a woman recounted her husband’s schedule for *pārāyaṇ* in the following way:

He [her husband] wakes up early in the morning, around 5 AM. I wake up a few minutes before him and mop all the rooms in the house with a wet cloth, take a bath, and fetch flowers for him for the *pūjā*. He takes a bath and drinks a cup of tea. In the meantime, I make a *rāṅgoḷī* design in front of our home shrine. Then he sits on the *pāṭ* [a wooden seat] and starts reading. You see, it is not easy to do the *Gurucaritra* reading. You cannot get up in the middle of a reading session. At his age [early sixties] it is tough for him to sit in one place for two hours without a restroom break. Sometimes he takes a break and then takes a bath again before sitting down again to read.

The above account makes it clear that reading in this context is not as simple as taking a book and grasping the meaning of the words. It is not only eyes, brain and hands that need to be prepared to do the reading, but the entire body of the reader needs to be ready. A reader must make himself worthy of reading by cleansing his body; and if there is bodily pollution in the middle of a reading session, he needs to get rid of the impurities by taking a bath before resuming the session. Moreover, the space for reading has to be specifically prepared. For this, the space where a reader sits for *pārāyaṇ* is cleaned with a wet cloth and then decorated with auspicious *rāṅgoḷī* patterns.

Another account of this, by a male reader, brings forth subtleties of the use of the word “*vācaṇe*” with reference to the *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ*:

When you read the *pothī*, you should make sure that you are away from all distractions. This is why I read early in the morning. No one calls you at that time. All family members, including my three-year old grandchild, are asleep. My attention is undivided. So I prefer to read at that time.



In the above narrative, the reader refers to “undivided” attention as a requirement for reading the *Gurucaritra*. In leisurely reading, one may take breaks in between reading or read as per one’s schedule in bits and pieces. However, when it comes to reading the *Gurucaritra*, this is not an option. In this sense, the verb “*vācaṇe*,” when used in the context of reading the *Gurucaritra*, refers to more than the reading itself. It demands that the reader be physically and mentally prepared and it requires that the ritual space be purified. In addition to the reading itself, *vācaṇe* calls for specific ritual actions from the reader. Thus, the Marathi verb “*vācaṇe*” can mean anything from “to read” to “to recite” or “to read aloud for an intended audience.” Moreover, it may imply more than the action of reading, as in the case of religious books, in which case “*vācaṇe*” implies “reading with pure body and mind.”

Another thing that caught my attention in the early days of my fieldwork was the varied range of ritualization associated with the reading of the text. On the one hand, I met with traditionalists, conservatives who believed that, considering the *māntric* status of the text, one needs to be careful about correct pronunciation of the words of the text for the efficacy of the *pārāyaṇ*; on the other hand, there were readers who were unconcerned about precision in pronunciation of the words in the *Gurucaritra*. Despite degrees of ritualization, what struck me the most was the significance that readers were assigning to the reading of the text. In other words, the lack of concern for the meaning of the text in the first place, along with the ritual process that accompanied the reading practice, put me in a conundrum: if the meaning of the text is not primary, then what makes the readers so engaged with the book so that they read it every year? Further, how and why do readers justify alterations to the prescribed ritual procedures?

My specific observations from field work were further sharpened by the contemporary line of theorization about scriptures that pays more attention to the praxis of reading than the comprehension of content. My initial queries about the *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* developed further into questions that apply across religious traditions: How do we understand the complicated relationship among readers, reading processes and scriptures? In what ways are scriptures embodied and ritualized? More specifically, how can we address the issues of the significance of

the text, the ritual practice that goes around the reading itself and the significance that the materials involved in the ritual reading acquire? The following section will set the stage for such discussions about scripture in the Dattātreya *sampradāy* by reviewing the literature in the fields of scripture studies and Dattātreya studies.

## Literature Review

### Scripture Studies

According to an article in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*,<sup>11</sup> “the most basic meaning of “scripture,” like its Indo-European cognates (Ger. *Schrift*; Ital., *scrittura*; Fr. *écriture*; etc.), is “a writing, something written.” The variations in connotations of the term in contemporary usage can be associated with the semantic journey of the term. Graham summarizes the journey of the term as follows:

It [the term scripture] is derived from the Latin *scriptura*, “a writing” (pl. *scripturae*). The Latin word translated the Greek *graphe* (pl. *graphai*), which corresponded in Classical and Hellenistic usage to the postexilic Hebrew use of *ketav* (pl. *ketuvim/kitvei*) as a term for writing: a letter, inscription, written decree, or a holy writing.<sup>12</sup>

In its contemporary usage, the term “scripture” is almost always associated with religious writing. However, this does not imply that the notion of scripture is universal. The disparities in the usage of the term can be traced by looking at the variations in the content and form of writings referred to as scriptures in different religious traditions. Graham notes that “ritual books, legal maxims and codes, myths and legends, historical accounts, divine revelations, apocalyptic visions, ecstatic poetry, words of teachers and prophets, and hymns or prayers to a deity can all be found in scriptural texts.”<sup>13</sup>

Further, various types of religious writings get assigned the status of scripture even within a single religious tradition. Hinduism presents a case of this broad spectrum of scriptures. On the

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<sup>11</sup> William A. Graham, “Scripture,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, Mircea Eliade and Charles. J. Adams, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA 2005), v. 12, 8196.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 8194.

one hand, there is literature that is assigned a non-human, transcendental origin (*śruti*); on the other hand, there is literature with a human origin (*smṛti*). Whereas the former refers to the Vedic corpus -- the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, Upaniṣads etc. the latter is more of a hold-all category that consists of manuals of legal and ethical codes (*dharmaśāstras*), narratives about various deities (*purāṇas*), and the two epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. In addition to these, regional literature about deities, pilgrimage places, local *gurus* etc., is also assigned scriptural status by local communities. For instance, the biography of Nanasaheb Taranekar (Nānāsāheb Tarāṇekar), a 20<sup>th</sup> century *guru* from the Dattātreya tradition, has acquired scriptural status among the community of his followers. In addition, the issue of the origin of scriptures is also variously interpreted within religious traditions. Whereas some scriptures – for example, the Vedas – are considered to be revealed, others are perceived to be divinely inspired although authored by human beings.

Apart from their source and content, scriptures also vary in terms of their functions. As Graham observes, “recitation or reading aloud of scripture is a common feature of piety, whether in Islamic, Sikh, Jewish or other traditions.”<sup>14</sup> For instance, the *Guru Granth Sāhib* holds a central place in Sikh ritual life, as all rites of passage from the naming ceremony to funeral rites are conducted in its presence. The scripture, in that sense, functions not merely as a book, but as a “living *guru*” for the Sikh community.<sup>15</sup> In addition, recitation of scriptures for meditational purposes is common. Finally, some religious communities perceive scriptures as empowering material objects. Kissing a Bible in an Eastern Orthodox Church or covering the *Guru Granth Sāhib* with a *caddar* (a blanket) are examples of reverence paid to scriptures as material objects that are sources of power.

While earlier scholarship treated scriptures as books that exist without people reading them, recent scholars have a tendency to move away from a straight focus on the text itself and to look at the operative dimensions of scriptures, focusing on their functions and people’s reading

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 8196.

<sup>15</sup>Anne Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

practices. The trajectory of scholarship on religion and scriptures over the past 150 years can be classified in three stages: translations of religious literature, “history of religions,” and phenomenology of scriptures.<sup>16</sup> The writings in the third stage, i.e., works focusing on the phenomenology of scriptures, have been foundational to this dissertation. Rather than just focusing on what is *in* the *Gurucaritra*, I also look at what goes on *around* it. Rather than the meaning of the text’s words, I look at *how* it is transmitted and appropriated by its readers.

Despite their seminal contributions, works of the founding scholars of scriptures such as Max Müller<sup>17</sup> have been under critical scrutiny for more than one reason (Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa).<sup>18</sup> First, this scholarship was influenced by the Christian model of religion based on the centrality of scripture. Second, the focus on translation was responsible for neglecting how scriptures “functioned in religious communities.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to the definition of religion and the neglect of the social life of scriptures, early translations themselves came under scrutiny by later scholars as being heavily influenced by Christian scriptures. Nonetheless, the contribution of the first phase of scripture studies is foundational in terms of opening the field of comparative religion for the first time.

Scripture scholarship in the early twentieth century tried to address criticisms of earlier studies by focusing on the life of scriptures in their communities. As Van Voorst<sup>20</sup> puts it, “researchers turned away from studying literary sources from the past in favor of the social-scientific study of present-day living communities of faith.” The anthropological thrust of “history of religions” scholarship concerned itself with understanding the praxis of religion by focusing on the myths, rituals, and symbols in various religions. The concerns of scripture scholarship after the

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<sup>16</sup>Robert E. van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*. 8th ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012), 3-4.

<sup>17</sup>Max Müller’s “Sacred Books of the East” Series spearheaded the study of world religions for the first time around 1880 by translating scriptures from around the world into English.

<sup>18</sup>Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup>van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*, 3.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

1960s were shaped by key insights of the “history of religions” approach. The new directions in research focus on the life of scriptures and go beyond the exegetical dimension of scriptures.

Recent scholarship on scripture draws our attention to the role of readers in the lives of scriptures. Some scholars have urged that there is a need for expansion of Western notions of a text as a printed, silent object when it comes to understanding the category of “scriptures.” The new scholarly works focus not on how scriptures were received or what their literal meaning is. Rather, they ask us to consider what the religious communities have made of those scriptures over the generations.

Two works (Denny and Taylor, and Coward)<sup>21</sup> take a comparative approach to introducing scriptures from the major religions of the world. According to Denny and Taylor,<sup>22</sup> the goal of their work is to give “reliable, nontechnical introductions” to the scriptures of the world’s religions. One of the key recurring points of various articles in this collection is that the ways in which language “symbolizes, communicates, informs, regulates, unites, inspires, and motivates religious belief and action differ between literate and nonliterate traditions.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, scholars explore the relationship between orality and literacy to show how scriptures differ from each other in terms of their origins, forms and functions.

Although the theme of revelation is central to narratives about the origins of scriptures around the world, the meaning of revelation differs from tradition to tradition. In this context, Denny and Taylor’s argument that the “question of scriptural origins needs to be viewed within the context of religious experience,”<sup>24</sup> is relevant. Moreover, the specificity of cultural contexts has also resulted in producing variety in the forms of world scriptures. This variety refers to languages, literary genres, and notions about the potency of written and oral words. Finally, this anthology sheds light on how scriptures function in religious communities.

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<sup>21</sup>Frederick Mathewson Denny, and Rodney Leon Taylor. *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* 1st ed. Studies in Comparative Religion. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1985);Harold G. Coward, *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions*(Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.,2.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.,1.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 4.

Coward<sup>25</sup> reflects on the relationship between literacy and orality from the vantage point of praxis. He points out that, although today the written word is considered to be more authentic than the oral, writing is a relatively recent development in the history of humanity. As a result, perceiving scriptures as printed objects is also recent. For scholarship this means that a strict association of scripture with written material must be challenged. He suggests recovering the oral methods of studying scripture as far as possible. Coward bases his argument about desired techniques of learning scriptures on the history of learning scriptures across religious traditions. He shows that memorization has been an effective means of studying scriptures across traditions throughout human history. Reflecting on this further, he argues that “recovery of the oral experience of scriptures is crucial if it is to function as a transforming power in people’s lives.”<sup>26</sup>

Levering<sup>27</sup> and other contributors to the edited volume titled *Rethinking Scripture* look at the process of “scripturalizing,” which implies understanding how communities “relate to words as scripture.” Arguing against the views that emphasize the “fixity” and “boundedness” of scriptures, Levering et al. call for understanding “what people do with and what they expect from scriptures.”<sup>28</sup> Comparing the content and use of scriptures across religious traditions, Levering points out, is a difficult task, as it is challenging to mark the boundaries of the category of scriptures. Instead, he proposes that a great deal can be gained by focusing on “the dynamics of the relations that people have had with texts, their ways of receiving texts in the context of their religious projects.”<sup>29</sup>

In this same light, William A. Graham<sup>30</sup> urges scholars to rethink scripture fundamentally by treating it as “that which is woven, a living tissue.” Taking specific examples from various religious traditions, Graham successfully demonstrates that the aural and oral dimensions of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>27</sup> Miriam Levering, ed. *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>30</sup> William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 21.

scriptures are as important in meaning-making as their literary content. Thus, he argues that "Scripture is ... spoken word rather than holy writ."<sup>31</sup> Graham points out the perils of literacy in the context of scriptures. He explains that print textuality objectifies the reader and overlooks the subtle religio-historical contexts of meaning-making of scriptures. However, his theoretical contribution to the study of scriptures is not only in dichotomizing the "oral" and the "written," but in making us aware of the "sensual dimension of religion."<sup>32</sup> By "sensual dimension" he refers to the responses to scripture that figure in religious practices of all kinds, including pilgrimages, rituals, musical performances, meditation etc. A great deal is gained by this approach. The focus on the sensual dimension allows scholars to look into the question of the impact of scriptures beyond the elite, literary readers. It invites scholars to understanding the effect of scriptures on the "nonliterate and semiliterate segments of a larger community."<sup>33</sup>

W. C. Smith's "What is Scripture?"<sup>34</sup> has had an unparalleled influence in shaping the study of scriptures in the last four decades. Both in *The Meaning and End of Religion* and "What is Scripture?," Smith advocated clarity in categorization and classifications in the study of religion. In particular, he warned against Christian biases in the formation and evolution of the field of religious studies. In "What is Scripture?" Smith shows the shortcomings of two major approaches to the study of scriptures, namely, the historical-critical method and the method of literary criticism. He points out that the historical-critical study of the Biblical texts has focused on such issues as the original form and meaning, the historical context, and the "authenticity" of original utterances. However valid these concerns may be, Smith reminds us that Biblical texts were not treated as scriptures at the point of their origin. Although literary criticism, the other method employed for the study of scriptures, does not reify scriptures by stressing issues of authenticity and originality, it has its own problems. Most importantly, Smith notes,<sup>35</sup> literary criticism treats

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 162.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 163.

<sup>34</sup>Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture?: A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. 4.

scriptures like “any other literature,” which indeed overlooks the texts’ role in human life. Smith’s proposal is to study scriptures in their historical and relational contexts. By “historical” he refers to the “quality of [scriptures] changing over time—and place; of being ever enmeshed in the particular contexts of those in whose lives and societies the role has been played.”<sup>36</sup> By “relational,” he means that the relationship between the community and scripture is fundamental for the existence of any scripture. Thus, he says, “people—a given community—make a text into a scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way.”<sup>37</sup>

In addition to allusion to the significance of the community in the life of scriptures, Smith’s other contribution to the study of scriptures lies in expanding the definition of scriptures beyond the purview of Holy Writ or “that which is written.”<sup>38</sup> Smith contends that exposure to scriptures from other religions has a profound effect on the understanding of the aural/oral dimensions of Abrahamic scriptures as well.

Thus, going beyond the exegetical aspects, recent scholarship on scriptures has brought to our attention the significance of understanding the engagement of a community with scriptures. Two initiatives from the last two decades have immensely influenced the theoretical frameworks of my work. The first initiative came from The Institute of Signifying Scriptures (ISS) at Claremont Graduate University. Vincent Wimbush and other collaborators from the ISS define the new orientation of studying scriptures as a work of “excavation.” By “excavation” they refer to understanding what goes into the formation of the texts and what texts *do* for human beings after their formation. Through a focus on excavation, two things are achieved: the agency of meaning-making is restored in the readers; and, by implication, the situated contexts of the readers are considered to be important in the process of meaning-making. The critical orientation of ISS restores human agency in the process of meaning-making by focusing on how human beings “create and shape their reality” through the prism of scriptures.<sup>39</sup> More specifically, Wimbush’s

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 8.



allusion to “scriptures as sites of power” makes us think about how scriptures can be sites of empowerment for certain groups within society. In our case, this insight will be especially relevant to understanding the case of women’s participation in the reading of the *Gurucaritra*. Thus, Wimbush’s proposal is that, rather than treating scriptures through the prism of the meaning of their words, scholars should treat them as “signs,” i.e. representations. In his introduction to “Theorizing Scriptures,” Wimbush notes,

With this different orientation or agenda, the primary focus should be placed not upon texts per se—(that is, upon their content-meanings), but upon textures, gestures, and power—namely, the signs, material products, ritual practices and performances, expressiveness, orientations, ethics, and politics associated with the phenomenon of the invention and uses of “scriptures.”<sup>40</sup>

Another important initiative regarding scripture scholarship comes from the Iconic Books Project. According to their website,<sup>41</sup> “by ‘iconic book,’ we refer to a text revered primarily as an object of power rather than just as words of instruction, information, or insight.” Papers presented in the three symposia organized by leading scholars of the Iconic Books Project have concentrated on the iconic dimensions of using various texts, including legal and religious books.

#### Scripture in Hinduism

Hindu religious literature is enormously diverse in terms of the range of linguistic styles, periods of composition and the cultural and social environments in which it was created. Hindus have interacted with the written word in varied ways, ranging from memorization to recitation to exegesis. The treatment of the word on the part of practitioners has been varied. Some books have served as ritual manuals while others have served merely didactic purposes. Although the majority of the authors of the subsequent Hindu scriptures revere the Vedas as foundational, the extent to which they have built on Vedic materials is varied. Scholars such as Coburn have pointed out that the association of writing with scripture has always been of a tentative nature in

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<sup>39</sup>Wimbush, *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon Signifying (on) Scriptures*, 14.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>41</sup><http://iconicbooks.net/> (Accessed on Sept 9, 2012).

Hindu traditions and hence inconsequential in praxis.<sup>42</sup> According to Coburn, focusing on the performative and ritual dimension of the scripture, Hindus have argued not only for the anteriority of speech, but also for the status of orality to be higher on the scale of purity than literacy. As will be shown later, this last argument about orality being superior to literacy is not helpful in the context of the *Gurucaritra pāraṇa* tradition.

Keeping the above considerations in mind, we will take an overview of Hindu ways of interacting with the words in terms of praxis and scholarship. At a most basic level, one comes across “two levels of sanctity” in Hindu literature, namely, *śruti* and *smṛti*. Generally speaking, Hindus perceive the former to be of transcendent origin and the latter to be of human origin. Thomas Coburn, in his article “Toward a Typology of Hindu Word,”<sup>43</sup> offers a fivefold typology that explores a variety of ways in which Hindus have related to scriptures. The typology is as follows: (1) words that are “frozen” and “captured verbatim” (Vedas), (2) words that have “salvific/normative” qualities (stories of Kṛṣṇa, stories of Rāma and other Hindu mythical narratives), (3) “commentaries to make the word intelligible in the present” (*śāstra* literature), (4) imitations of the classical Sanskrit texts into regional languages (regional varieties of *Bhāgvat Purāṇa*; and imitations of a particular genre of texts such as *Bhagvad Gītā*), (5) embodiments of the word that have “lived on by receiving additions” (*Purāṇa* and other materials from the *smṛti* genre that are open-ended). Coburn’s typology is instructive for the study of Hindu scriptures in at least two distinct ways: one, Hindus have associated with scriptural words in contexts other than as sources of intelligibility; two, the meaning of many Hindu scriptures (especially with regard to types 2 to 5 above) is unfolded in the course of their reading by the communities.

In the context of Hindu scriptures, a number of works have discussed the dichotomy of oral/written. In particular, the works of Thomas Coburn,<sup>44</sup> Iltis,<sup>45</sup> Coward and Goa,<sup>46</sup> Lutgendorf,<sup>47</sup> Narayanan,<sup>48</sup> and Flueckiger<sup>49</sup> will be especially useful for the purposes of this study.

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<sup>42</sup>Thomas B. Coburn, "Scripture in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 3 (1984): 436.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. 452-4.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

In her doctoral dissertation, *The Swasthānī Vrata: Newār Women and Ritual in Nepal*,<sup>50</sup> Linda Louise Iltis analyzes the Newārī ritual of *Swasthānī vrata* in the context of the status of Newārī women in their ritual and social life. Focusing on the complex relationship between text and ritual of the *Swasthānī* votive observance, she argues that

Whether reading the *Swasthānī* stories or observing the roles of women participating in the *Swasthānī* ritual, one is struck by the independent, initiatory, positive, and integrative image the women represent. The roles of women in both the ideological/textual and behavioral/ritual levels of this context are at considerable variance with most of the standard writings on women whether cross-cultural or specific to Nepal.<sup>51</sup>

The major contribution of Iltis' study lies in its integral approach of analyzing women's role in the text and ritual process involved in the *Swasthānī vrat*. As she notes, "the textual research reveals stories of female characters acting as agents of social cohesion."<sup>52</sup> Moreover, she demonstrates the "spatial, structural and ideological" centrality of women to the whole textual and ritual tradition through the ritual observance as well as the pilgrimage carried out at the end of the one-month recitation period.<sup>53</sup>

Inspired by R. Bauman's concept of "verbal art as performance," Lutgendorf focuses on the interactions of *Rāmcaritmānas* (a Hindi version of the epic of *Rāmāyaṇ* popular in northern Indian states) with its audience by analyzing the different genres of its performance. He analyzes individual readings and *Rāmlīlās* in depth. He argues that the recitation of the *Rāmcaritmānas* involves a movement from language to discourse as the "codified", "systematic", "fixed" language is performed in the context of its recitation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Linda Louise Iltis, "The Swasthani Vrata: Newar Women and Ritual in Nepal Hinduism" (Ph. D. diss., The University of Wisconsin- Madison, 1985).

<sup>46</sup>Harold G. Coward and David. J. Goa. *Mantra* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima), 1991.

<sup>47</sup>Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1991.

<sup>48</sup>Vasudha Narayanan. *The Vernacular Veda: Revelation, Recitation, and Ritual*.(Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), 1994.

<sup>49</sup>Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India: Myth and Poetics*.(Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1996.

<sup>50</sup>Iltis, "The Swasthani Vrata: Newar Women and Ritual in Nepal Hinduism."

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.* 14.

<sup>54</sup>Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas*, 92.

Vasudha Narayanan, in her *The Vernacular Veda: Revelation, Recitation and Ritual*, offers a study of *Tiruvaymoli*, the central religious text in a Tamil “belief and social system.”<sup>55</sup> Her study draws our attention to the aural/oral aspects of *Tiruvaymoli* in the context of its recitations and performances in private homes and temples where the text is also performed in a dramatic sense. Like Lutgendorf’s, this work is also vital for developing insights into the dynamics between the “written word” and its social context. Both Lutgendorf and Narayanan explore the evolving character of the “written word” in Hindu traditions.

Flueckiger’s *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India*<sup>56</sup> is distinctive due to its comparative aspect. She presents an inter-textual analysis of performance genres belonging to two sub-regions of Madhya Pradesh, namely Phuljhar and the heartland of Chattisgarh. It is clear from this work that performative traditions are essentially fluid in nature. People assign meaning to performances according to their social and geographical contexts. For unmarried pubescent girls of Phuljhar, performance of “bhojali” songs is a way to make ritual friendship by exchanging the wheat seedlings they worship as the goddess; by contrast, in the heartland of Chattisgarh, “bhojali” songs are sung by married women and forming ritual friendships is secondary for them. Indigenous folklore genres and the principles of their organization are “constructed socially” and in the context of historical frames of production. As a result, their boundaries are fluid.

To recapitulate, recent scholarship on scriptures across religious traditions has a twofold focus: one, scholars look at scriptures as products of specific human societies; two, they study scriptures beyond their literal qualities by focusing on their aural and oral qualities. While the emphasis on traditions of recitation and attention to aural and oral dimensions of scriptures in recent scholarship has opened new gates for scripture studies, this approach does not account for how the scriptures acquire authoritativeness in the first place. Specifically, Coburn’s claim about orality over literacy in the context of Hindu traditions may not be sufficient for understanding the case of the *Gurucaritra pāraṇa*. For instance, reading the entire text is the prime activity

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<sup>55</sup>Narayanan, 1994.

<sup>56</sup> Flueckiger, *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India: Myth and Poetics*, 1996.

during a *pārāyaṇ* session. Thus, a reader, in one way, emphasizes the textuality of the text in the process of reading. The text is considered to be old, ancient, important, authoritative, even fixed—so much so that the literal meaning of the text is inconsequential in its authority. However, in the case of the *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ*, the significance of the text is derived not only from the meaning of the words but also from the readers' praxis surrounding it. This is why a copy of the manuscript/printed copy of the text of the *Gurucaritra* serves as an icon imbued with power after years of *pārāyaṇ*.

Another aspect of the contrast between orality and literacy concerns the primacy of the written text over the read text. As will be clear from readers' narratives in chapter five, the written manuscript of the text as a material object becomes vital in the process of significance-making as there is detailed ritual praxis which has little to do with the contents of the text. Further, the painstaking efforts and critical awareness about what the readers *do* in the process of reading comes from the fact that readers consider the manuscript itself as an icon. Thus, the case of *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* is distinctive in that it forces us to go beyond the dichotomy of orality and literacy. The readers engage with the written text, but they do not consider the literal meaning of each verse to be primary. Further, the oral performance serves as a means of re-enforcing the fact that the text is written. Finally, the readers re-invent themselves in the process of the social praxis that surrounds the reading itself.

#### Dattātreya Studies

With the beginning of the second millennium, the idea of worshipping a personal deity became popular in Hindu religion. Various *bhakti* communities have sprouted up all over India in the thousand years since then. The religious history of medieval Maharashtra was dominated by three distinct *bhakti* traditions, namely, Mahānubhāv, Vārkarī, and Dattātreya. All these traditions focused on the concept of *bhakti*, i.e., personal worship of a single deity.<sup>57</sup> Rigopoulos<sup>58</sup> asserts

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<sup>57</sup> Although these three religious movements have been well-known, the religious history of Maharashtra would be incomplete without understanding the folk /local religious traditions such as worship of deities like Khandoba.

that Dattātreya is the second-most popular deity in Maharashtra after Gaṇeśa. Although the idea of a triad exists in Hindu texts right from the *R̥g Veda*, as Dhere argues, the iconographic development of Dattātreya as a three-headed deity happened much later, around the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Maharashtra.

A number of scholars (Mathathou,<sup>59</sup> H.S. Joshi/H.S. Jośī,<sup>60</sup> and Rigopoulos<sup>61</sup>) have analyzed the origin and development of the concept of triads in the scriptures of Hinduism. All of these scholars find the philosophical roots of the present three-headed form of the deity in the idea of “unity in multiplicity.” Although this idea was present in the ancient texts of Hinduism, iconographic representation of triads became popular only in the second millennium.

Scholarship about Dattātreya as a deity and the religious tradition of worship of Dattātreya is very limited and mainly text-based. Generally scholars have focused on the origin and development of Datta worship. Dhere’s (Dhere’s)<sup>62</sup> *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa* is the first scholarly work that reviews the development of Dattātreya as a deity and tradition.

From a historical perspective, Dhere explains the creation of Dattātreya as a response of medieval society to the internal fragmentation between Vaiṣṇavites and Śaivites and the encounter with Islam. The descriptions of the deity in classical literature are more in tune with Śaiva traditions in that Datta is depicted in the Mahābhārata as a *yogic* and *tāntric* figure. By contrast, the deity appears as an *avatār* of Viṣṇu only in post-classical literature<sup>63</sup> such as the *Śāndilya Upaniṣad*. Dhere asserts that the historical context of the Islamic invasion shaped the nature of the Dattātreya tradition to a great extent. For example, Sufi influence brought the love

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<sup>58</sup>Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin and Avatāra: A Study of the Transformative and Inclusive Character of a Multi-Faceted Hindu Deity* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1998.

<sup>59</sup>Kurian Mathothu, *The Development of the Concept of Trimūrti in Hinduism* (Palai, Kerala, India: Sebastian Vayalil, 1974).

<sup>60</sup>Hariprasād Sivaprasād Jośī, *Origin and Development of Dattātreya Worship in India* (Baroda: Mahārājā Sayājirāo University of Baroda Press, 1965).

<sup>61</sup>Rigopoulos.

<sup>62</sup>R. C. Dhere, *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa*. Dusrī Āvṛttī Pune: Nilakaṅṭh Prakāśan), 1964.

<sup>63</sup>Dhere notes that the *Upaniṣads* written around the year 1000 are generally classified as post-classical *Upaniṣads*. See Dhere, 17.

for music to devotees of Datta. This is more evident in the followers of Māṇik Prabhu and Akkalkoṭ Svāmī than in other sub-traditions of the Dattātreya tradition.

Further, Dhre argues that the development of the deity in its present iconic form is very recent. He shows that the idea of a three-headed Śiva is very old; however, Dattātreya was not depicted as a three-headed deity until 1000 CE. The deity with three heads became popular only around the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Dhre explains the worship of the *pādukā* (sandals) of Datta (as against the icon) by hinting at a possibility of iconoclasm practiced by Islamic rulers in medieval Maharashtra. Hariprasād Joshi's<sup>64</sup> work on the development of the Dattātreya tradition was published in 1965. Although Joshi agrees with Dhre about the date for the evolution of the Dattātreya tradition, he challenges Dhre's contention about the sociological context of the evolution of the tradition. Joshi denies any Sufi/Islamic influence on the Datta tradition. Joshi contradicts this claim by arguing that worship of Buddha's *pādukās* (sandals) was present as early the first millennium. The main emphasis of Joshi's work is that Datta is a popular deity in all religious traditions in Maharashtra and that this is due to the synthesis of the three deities. However, three-headedness is not universal in the Datta tradition, as worship of a one-headed Datta is found in many religious traditions in Maharashtra (for example, the Mahānubhāv tradition and the Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī tradition) and Nepal (at Bhaktapur).

Ian Raeside,<sup>65</sup> in his article on Datta as a deity, presents a brief overview of the nature of the deity as perceived by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Marathi tradition of the Mahānubhāvs. Raeside, too, notes that the contemporary three-headed image of Datta is relatively new in the history of the tradition. Although we find references to Datta as a sage in the Mahābhārata, Mahānubhāv literature is the first datable Marathi written source for the origin and development of this deity. Finally, the author's review mentions references to the figure of Datta in the literature from the 16th century onwards. In particular, Raeside refers to two streams: one of Eknāth and his *guru*

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<sup>64</sup> Hariprasād Śivaprasād Joṣī, *Origin and Development of Dattātreya Worship in India*.

<sup>65</sup> I.M.P Raeside, "Dattātreya." *School of Oriental and African Studies* 45 (1982): 489-500.

Janārdansvāmī, whose works dealt mostly with Viṭhobā, the god of the Vārkarī *sampradāya*; and second, Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī, who wrote the *Gurucaritra*, the central text of the Datta *sampradāya*, in 1550. All in all, Raeside gives a brief introduction to the literary sources of Datta as a deity from classical Marathi literature. The author does not deal with contemporary practices, sub-traditions or rituals.

Zelliot and Pain<sup>66</sup> present a brief overview of contemporary ritual practices related to Dattātreya in Maharashtra. Zelliot and Pain point out that, although the first written evidence about the existence of the deity comes from Mahānubhāv literature, the popularity of the figure of Dattātreya in contemporary Maharashtra is not necessarily associated with Mahānubhāv literature. Zelliot and Pain present a brief overview of the variety of followers in Datta temples in Pune, Maharashtra. Their short article opens doors for a new ethnographic approach to the study of this religious tradition. Further, the article presents an interesting question at the end: that is, why does this ascetic deity attract prostitutes?

*Dattātreya Jñān-Koś*<sup>67</sup> should be mentioned as a significant work in Marathi about this tradition. P.N. Joshi (P.N. Jośī) presents an overview of the various *gurus* in the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, along with the chief texts used by the followers. This is a good source for understanding the evolution and nature of Dattātreya in contemporary Maharashtra.

The most recent work on the Datta tradition is by Antonio Rigopoulos.<sup>68</sup> Rigopoulos presents a text-based study of the evolution of Dattātreya as a deity and his worship. Devotion to Dattātreya cuts through social and religious strata, including the untouchables, Mahānubhāvs, *nātha yogins*, thieves and prostitutes. The author introduces various texts used by Datta followers, including the *Avdhūt Gita* in the Nāth tradition, *Tripurā Rahasya* in the south-Indian Datta *sampradāy*, and the *Gurucaritra*, which comes in a highly sanitized and brāhmaṇical form. As Rigopoulos notes, "Dattātreya has an assimilative force that has attracted different religious

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<sup>66</sup>Zelliot and Pain 1988.

<sup>67</sup>P. N. Jośī, "Śrī-Dattātreya Jñān-Koś " (Bombay: Surekhā Prakāśan), 1974.

<sup>68</sup>Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin and Avatāra: A Study of the Transformative and Inclusive Character of a Multi-Faceted Hindu Deity*.



traditions in Maharashtra, including the *nāth*, *vārkarī* and *samartha*, Mahānubhāv, Vaiṣṇava devotionalism and Śaiva asceticism, Śaktism and Devī worship.”<sup>69</sup>

Followers of Dattātreya have contributed a vast body of literature as well. Taken as a group, these works, mostly in Marathi, are hagiographical in nature and are good sources for an introduction to the local histories of various Datta centers and *gurus* of various sub-traditions. In addition, some scholars (Dhere,<sup>70</sup> H.S. Joshi,<sup>71</sup> and Rigopoulos<sup>72</sup>) have focused on the lives and works of his two medieval incarnations (Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī and Śrīpād Śrīvallabh), religious practices at the pilgrimage places of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, and works of the significant *gurus* and central texts of the Datta tradition.

M.V. Kulkarni (Kulkarnī)<sup>73</sup> employs an historical approach to understanding the world behind the text. He analyzes the geographical, historical, social and literary conditions that produced the *Gurucaritra*. Referring to the scarcity of publications in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Maharashtra, Kulkarni refers to the *Gurucaritra* as a book representing the dark ages (“*tamoyugāce pratinidhitva karnārā granth*”).<sup>74</sup> He argues that the author of the *Gurucaritra* intended to bridge the gap between Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva communities. In his analysis of the literary and aesthetic qualities of the work, he highlights the distinctive nature of the *Gurucaritra* in terms of its form and content. In terms of form, the dialogical format, similar to that of the *purāṇas*, makes it distinctive in relation to other religious writings of the time. Similarly, the inclusion of stories of the devotees makes the content lucid and entertaining for contemporary readers. Kulkarni contends that in addition to personal piety, the historical conditions of Islamic rule had a significant influence in the writing of the text.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid. xi.

<sup>70</sup>Dhere, *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa*.

<sup>71</sup>Hariprasād Śivaprasād Joṣī, *Origin and Development of Dattātreya Worship in India*.

<sup>72</sup>Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin and Avatāra: A Study of the Transformative and Inclusive Character of a Multi-Faceted Hindu Deity*.

<sup>73</sup>M. V. Kulkarnī, *Śrīgurū Caritra: Sarvāṅgiṇ Abhyās* (Belgāv: Āśā V. Jawaḷkar, Belgāon), 1993.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 162.

H.N. Kunden, in his “*Ek mukhī Śrī Datta*,” asserts that the three-headed representation of Dattātreya is of recent origin. Details about various Dattātreya temples that have one-headed images of Dattātreya make this work a rich resource for study of the one-headed Dattātreya. Kunden introduces devotees to sixty-one Dattātreya temples with one-headed images in Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, and Bhaktapur, Nepal. He gives a brief history of each temple and a brief narrative about ritual practices associated with each image.<sup>76</sup>

Umakant Kurlekar’s (Umākānt Kurlekar’s)<sup>77</sup> *Śrī Gurucaritra Anvayārtha athavā Subodh Gurucaritra* is a welcome addition in terms of its commentarial orientation. The author contextualizes specific references from various narratives from the *Gurucaritra* based on earlier philosophical and *śāstric* works. He also elucidates how Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara has interwoven the themes of *jñāna*, *yoga*, *karma* and *bhakti* (spiritual knowledge, *yoga*, action and devotion, respectively) in the narratives of the *Gurucaritra*.

In sum, the major concerns of scholarship on the Dattātreya *sampradāy* have been the nature and evolution of Dattātreya as a deity, the iconographic journey of the deity, as well as analysis of textual materials about the personality of Dattātreya. Further, most of this scholarship relies mainly on written/textual and archeological resources. However, the reliance on texts and icons presents the Dattātreya *sampradāy* as if it were one homogenous entity. Moreover, it does not address the ritual practices of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. In other words, there has been a notable dearth of ethnographic works about the ritual practices of the Dattātreya tradition, including its recitative practices. This dissertation aims to address this gap in scholarship by analyzing the religious reading of the *Gurucaritra*—the central text of the Dattātreya tradition.

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<sup>76</sup> Kunden, *Ek mukhī Śrī Datta*, 1997.

<sup>77</sup> Umākānt. Kurlekar, *Śrī Gurucaritra Anvayārtha Athavā Subodh Gurucaritra* (Pune: Kurlekar Umākānt), 2000.

## Text, Ritual Practice and Physical Presence

### Text: Writing Matters

With reference to Hindu scriptures, Coward argues that “the notion of scripture as a reified, bounded entity fails to do justice to the Hindu situation.”<sup>78</sup> Although scriptures serve a “didactic role”<sup>79</sup> in Hindu lives, their sanctity is not necessarily associated with their intelligibility or comprehensibility. In this context, Coward notes that the aural/oral dimensions of the written word become more important than the literal ones for Hindus. Admittedly, traditionally, the sonic dimension of the sacred words has been considered to be vital in preserving and transmitting ancient Hindu scriptures. However, print technology has brought a sea-change in the accessibility of scriptures. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, printed copies of religious literature are easily available at local bookstores. Easy access to scriptures has had significant consequences for Hindu ways of engaging with them. Any literate reader, irrespective of his/her caste, class and gender, can buy religious books and read them on his or her own. Further, in the case of scriptures written in regional languages, such as the *Gurucaritra*, readers can follow the contents of the text to an extent without any external guidance. In the case of the *Gurucaritra*, the numerous amusing Marathi narratives about the *guru* and his disciples are easy to follow for the readers. Thus, ease of access to scriptures and their content results in a distinctive and complicated discourse between the readers and the text in the modern world.

In the case of the *Gurucaritra*, the fact that it is written becomes salient in more than one way. Access to other modes of religiosity, including rituals, is limited to certain sections of the society. For example, being a woman, I was not allowed to enter into the sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagrha*) of many Dattatreya temples in Maharashtra. The issue is deeper than entry to temples. The issue is one of accessibility. Despite being able to enter other temples, many people are not able to participate fully in the ritual process due to structures of authority, the language of

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<sup>78</sup> Coburn, *Scripture in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life*, 437.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

the ritual manuals and lack of prior knowledge about the ritual praxis itself. By contrast, as I have stated, printed books of the *Gurucaritra* are easy to find in local bookstores. As against an oral tradition, which is transmitted to a select few, a written text becomes available widely at once. The participation of women in the Diṅḍorī tradition is another example of accessibility. Moreover, one does not need any prior ritual knowledge to read the *Gurucaritra*. I met several readers who did a *pārāyaṇ* session based on a friend's recommendation to do it.

More importantly, writing matters because written discourse, by its nature, creates possibilities of interpretation. In a Ricoeurian sense, the intention of the author and the meaning of the text are independent of each other once the text has been written down.<sup>80</sup>

What has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text.... If we may be said to coincide with anything, it is not the inner life of another ego, but the disclosure of a possible way of looking at things, which is the genuine referential power of the text.<sup>81</sup>

The majority of the readers I interacted with could not tell any details about the author of the text, such as his native place, his lineage within the Dattātreya tradition, or his descendants. More importantly, the historical context of the encounter between Hindus and Muslims had little relevance to contemporary readers. What mattered to them was the “direction of thought opened up by the text,” viz., the central message about the role of the *guru* in perfecting the human condition. It is this message that gets inscribed and acquires a timeless character in the process of each reading of the text.

This discourse surrounding the written text of the *Gurucaritra* acquires an evolving character in the specific contexts of the reader. The meaning assigned by the reader to a specific narrative from the *Gurucaritra* may not coincide with the one expected by the author at the time of writing. An interpretation of a narrative from the *Gurucaritra* (chapter 17) by a contemporary reader will illustrate this point. The narrative from the text centers around a brāhmaṇ who loses his only source of income, i.e., a vine of beans, as his *guru* uproots it. The brāhmaṇ, instead of

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<sup>80</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. (Texas: Fort Worth, 1976).29-30, 87, 92.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid, 92.

getting annoyed, digs deeper in the place where the vine belongs, and finds a treasure. The *guru* instructs him to use the treasure without letting anyone know how he found it. A contemporary reader, an Information Technology professional in his thirties, referred to this narrative in the following way:

I got really tired of working in the field of marketing. It involved a lot of travelling. I had been unable to plan a visit to my hometown for the previous five years. Then one day I resigned. I did not know what to do next. I needed to earn money to make ends meet. But I did not know how I could do that. Then a friend suggested that I get some training in computer programming. I took six months of training and I got this job, which pays me way more than what I earned before. This is how the *guru* instructs you about the right path. The vine of beans could not have taken that brāhmaṇ much further. He needed to somehow see beyond what he had, and the *guru* made him see that.

As noted before, readers of the *Gurucaritra* that I met with rarely referred to specific narratives from the text itself. However, when readers did mention specific narratives, they interpreted those narratives from their specific contexts. As the above example illustrates, what a reader makes of the text may not coincide with the meaning produced by the linguistic associations of the words in the text. Thus, taking a leaf from reader-response theory, one can say that the *Gurucaritra* is not to be perceived only as a “window”<sup>82</sup> to its author’s mind, nor is it to be seen as a “self contained entity” from which meaning is extracted.<sup>83</sup>

Commenting on the role of readers in the reception of texts, Wolfgang Iser<sup>84</sup> puts forth in the preface to his *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, “As a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is virtually impossible to describe this response without also analyzing the reading process.” In this sense, the locus of meaning, for reader-response theorists, is not in the content of the text, but in the reading process.

To be sure, this does not undermine the role of the text in the process of interpretation. The act of comprehension in the context of reading necessarily presupposes the existence of a text. Thus, what is realized by the readers of the *Gurucaritra* is necessarily guided by the content

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<sup>82</sup>John C. Poirier, “Some Detracting Considerations for Reader-Response Theory” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (2000), 252.

<sup>83</sup>Philip S. Nolte, “One Text, Many Stories: The (Ir)Relevance of Reader- Response Criticism for Apocryphal Literature in the Septuagint” *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012): 4.

<sup>84</sup>Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, ix.

of the text. However, what I suggest here is that the content of the *Gurucaritra* cannot exercise complete control over what the reader realizes. In fact, as will be demonstrated in chapters four and five of this dissertation, the kinds of associations that the reader makes with the text of the *Gurucaritra* go beyond the literal meaning of the text.

However, scriptures are not available to readers to interpret in the same way as other non-sacred books are. In that sense, one can ask, is the *Gurucaritra* really available for the reader to interpret? The issue of interpretation of texts becomes complicated in the specific context of religious texts. Scriptures, being embodiments of a divine message, are to be perceived and preserved *as they are*. By reading silently and aloud, the readers of the *Gurucaritra* keep the text intact. Thus, the readers, in the process of *pārāyaṇ*, along with relating to the text from their various vantage points, also attempt to re-establish the sanctity of the text by keeping the text *as it is*.

The lack of commentaries on the text and the lack of variations in different editions of the text provide additional evidence for the urge to keep the text unaltered. The text, rather than loosening up, becomes more rigid in the process of *pārāyaṇ*. On the one hand, the *Gurucaritra* is perceived to be an authoritative, significant text that gives the readers a sense of being part of an old, Sanskritic tradition. On the other hand, the lucid narratives about the *guru* and the disciples work as instructions for the readers to perfect themselves as human beings/as disciples. For instance, the *purāṇic* narratives from the *Gurucaritra* (chapters 3, 4, 6, 15, 26, 35, 41, 42) re-orient readers to their ancient religious past by giving them a sense of rootedness. In this sense, the text needs to be perceived and preserved *as it is*. But still, with each instance of *pārāyaṇ* the reader appropriates the text selectively from his or her own context and in the process re-invests the text with new significance.

#### Ritual Practice: *Doing* of Reading Matters

Devotee-readers conduct readings of the *Gurucaritra* in its entirety every year in the month of *Mārgaśīrṣa* (around December). The reading, called *pārāyaṇ*, takes place in private houses and public settings such as Hindu temples. Typically, a *pārāyaṇ* is conducted over a

period of seven days, starting six days before Datta *Jayantī* (the full-moon day of Mārgaśīrṣa). It is believed that the *guru* visits the reader's house sometime during the reading session to listen to his praise as it is being uttered by the devotee-reader. A reader begins the session with an elaborate *pūjā* of a printed copy of the book and places the book in the same place for the entire period of the *pārāyaṇ*. Readers prepare themselves by taking a bath prior to each reading session. In addition, readers make several alterations to their routine lifestyles. For instance, non-vegetarian foods and foods made with onions and garlic are avoided. The use of certain materials such as leather is restricted. Sleeping on comfortable mattresses is avoided as well. Although the rules of ritualization vary from person to person, the idea of withdrawing from worldly pleasures for the period of the *pārāyaṇ* is common to all readers. At the end of the *pārāyaṇ* period, Dattātreyā is born and a new life starts in the family. The devotee-reader shares the joy and merit of finishing the *pārāyaṇ* successfully by inviting a married couple or a married woman and a brāhmaṇ man for a meal.

The above description of the religious practice of reading the *Gurucaritra* exemplifies the fact that reading religious literature is different from leisure reading in several ways. First, a devotee-reader approaches a religious text in an *appropriate* environment. *Gurucaritra* readers take a bath and don a specific type of clothing before each reading session. Taking a bath and wearing specific clothing create a distinctive environment for the reader. Emphasizing the distinctiveness of religious reading, Evola writes, “[t]he way the text will be read heavily depends on the context: the reader is performing a daily prayer (or perhaps is sad and wants to be consoled through the sacred scripture), the place is an open space, very quiet (either a church with the organ playing in the background, or a private room), he or she has performed a rite before taking to reading.”<sup>85</sup>

Second, the reading style makes the environment even more distinctive. Devotee-readers read the *Gurucaritra* either aloud or silently. For instance, readers dwelling in one- or two-

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<sup>85</sup>Vito Evola, "Cognitive Semiotics and on-Line Reading of Religious Texts: A Hermeneutic Model of Sacred Literature and Everyday Revelation." *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* 6, no. 2 (2005):14.

bedroom apartments prefer to read it silently so they do not disturb other family members. By contrast, at community reading centers, members volunteer to read the text over a microphone to keep the entire group on the same page. Third, devotee-readers read the *Gurucaritra* with specific motivations. Some people read it with the expectation of finding solutions to their concerns about their present situation, whereas others read with a meditative purpose. Regardless of the variations in their motivations, readers of the *Gurucaritra* expect it to “change their lives”<sup>86</sup> in some way. Fourth, following ritual observances is yet another way of creating an appropriate environment. The rules about sitting arrangements and purity and pollution make readers realize that their routine lives are significantly altered during the period of *pārāyaṇ*. After all, readers’ preparations before the reading session, their styles of reading, and their specific motivations for reading, along with the ritual observances, allude to the fact that reading, in this case, is not as simple as taking a book and running one’s eyes over its pages. It is an exercise that needs the reader’s commitment in respects external to the reading itself. In this sense, comprehending the content of the *Gurucaritra* is not the sole concern of the reader. But conducting the reading in an appropriate setting is also vital.

Although creating an appropriate setting is necessary for religious reading of the *Gurucaritra*, the definition of what is appropriate is not the same for all readers. There are two reasons for this: one, the author of the text leaves this issue to the readers’ discretion; and, two, readers define and re-define what is appropriate depending upon the challenges of their contexts. For instance, orthoprax readers insist on not consuming any other than home-cooked food during a *pārāyaṇ* period. The reasoning behind this choice comes from the idea that store-bought food may have been prepared by someone who is polluted due to their caste, menstrual period etc. However, following these rules strictly is not possible for readers whose work demands travelling. Hence, they take a flexible approach to rules about food.

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid. 1.



Another example of readers' re-definition of the appropriate environment concerns the rules about sitting. Traditionally men would sit cross-legged for the entire time of each reading session. Some orthoprax readers mentioned that they had stopped doing *pārāyaṇ* as they could not sit cross-legged on the floor for long hours due to their age and physical ailments. However, I also met several readers who starting sitting on chairs during the reading session to overcome the challenge of sitting on the floor in a cross-legged position. In short, the degrees of ritualization varied from person to person, although the idea that preparing a ritual environment is necessary for reading was constant.

Following Kreinath et. al.<sup>87</sup> one can say that the frame of a ritual is “not something to be acted upon.” It is something that is not *a priori*. As Handelman puts it, “[t]he ritual frame, then, is not an *a priori*—the frame does not exist until the frame comes into existence through the doing, the practice of framing.”<sup>88</sup> Moreover, ritual performance in the case of *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* does not consist of a mere re-enactment of a set of predefined rules. On the one hand, the *pārāyaṇ* is understood to reiterate a model. On the other hand, it opens up possibilities of creating new meaning with each performance. Ritual works in two directions--normative and pragmatic, or as Tambiah puts it, “[ritual], points in two directions at once—in the semantic direction of cultural presuppositions and conventional understandings and in the pragmatic direction of the social and interpersonal context of the ritual action, the line-up of the participants and the process by which they establish or infer meanings.”<sup>89</sup> Thus, from the vantage point of the readers, the ritual serves as a way “to act in the world,” and, therefore, the challenges of urban living, including limitations of space, irregular work schedules etc., influence how any person or group participates in “the performance and understanding of ritual.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Kreinath, Jens, Constance Hartung, and Annette Deschner. *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals: The Transformation of Religious Rituals within Their Social and Cultural Context* Toronto Studies in Religion (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 15.

<sup>88</sup> Handelman, Re-framing Ritual, In *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals*, 18.

<sup>89</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, “A Performative Approach to Ritual” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1979): 154.

<sup>90</sup> Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 252.

## Physical Presence: The Body of the Text Matters

A devotee-reader treats the *pothī* “as if” it were a *guru* or a god. This is why the readers of the *Gurucaritra* treat the body of the text with utmost reverence and consider that it has invocatory potential. This is evident from their actions with regard to the *pothī*. On one occasion, a devotee-reader referred to the *pothī* as follows: “That is a not a book like any other book. It must be attended properly; it must be offered the right things. [*te kāhī nusta pustak nāhī. Tyāce niyam pālāve lāgatāt. Tyacī pūjā jhālī pāhije*].” At the culmination of a community *pārāyaṇ* the reading group at a private residence conducts a procession through the neighborhood, placing in a palanquin the *pothī* and photos of the *gurus* of the Dattātreya tradition. As the palanquin progresses, members of the neighborhood community come out of their homes and touch the *pothī* and offer an *aukṣaṇ*<sup>91</sup> to the *pothī*.

During the *pārāyaṇ*, the *pothī* is never placed directly on a floor. It is placed on a platform. Once placed in a ceremonial manner on the first day, the *pothī* is not moved during the entire period of the *pārāyaṇ*. Each *pārāyaṇ* session starts with offerings of flowers, incense sticks and oil and ghee lamps to the *pothī*. Finally, a *pārāyaṇ* session culminates by offering food to the *pothī*. The blessed food is then distributed to friends as *prasād* of the *pothī*. As will be shown in chapter five, the rules to follow for buying the *pothī*, for wrapping it, and for disposing of it when it is torn are well-defined.

Further, a consideration that disseminating *pothīs* is a merit-making activity has led to the promotion of the material product itself. The publishers of the best-selling versions of the *Gurucaritra* have donated copies to community reading centers in Pune. Several individuals also donate copies of the *Gurucaritra* to readers. Moreover, the materials (the paper and the ink) and the humans involved in the writing/printing process (scribes, publishers respectively) are considered to be blessed. The foregoing discussion has established that the “attendant material

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<sup>91</sup>Waving of lamps, gold, betlenut etc. The waving action symbolizes praise of the object it is waved at.

culture<sup>92</sup> surrounding the religious reading is an integral part of the reading process itself. The body of the text—i.e., the *Gurucaritra pothī*—affects the minds of its readers, as it is perceived to be an embodiment of the *guru* on earth. Ultimately, the *Gurucaritra pothī* serves as a “concrete, publicly accessible”<sup>93</sup> object imbued with affective power.

The above discussion about ways in which readers engage with the *Gurucaritra* has established several points. First, the written text of the *Gurucaritra* liberates the discourse surrounding the text from its author. The readers of the *Gurucaritra* approach and appropriate the message of the text on their own terms. Second, considering the emphasis on the exercise of the reading, it is clear that the religious reading of the *Gurucaritra* is not limited to what is internal to the scripture. By contrast, the social praxis that surrounds the textual reading is also integral to the reading. However, the rules and boundaries of the social praxis are porous, so that they get defined by the readers in the context of the concerns of their present. Third, the reverence towards the physical body of the text is an integral part of the reading process. But, ultimately, what is it that the readers achieve by engaging with the text in so many ways? How do readers of the *Gurucaritra* create the norms of their religiosity with reference to their urban contexts? And how does it matter to us as scholars of religion?

As mentioned before, readers of the *Gurucaritra* were not very eager to discuss the details of the literary content of the text with me. However, in their narratives they did refer to some stories from the text and explained how those stories can be interpreted today. Readers referred to specific stories from the text and explained how they could relate to those stories in the context of the present of the readers. However, when asked about other chapters from the text, readers went blank, or replied, “Sorry, I don’t remember details from chapters.” In some instances readers mentioned that they get “bored” while reading chapters containing information about the Vedic corpus (chapter 26), chapters about pilgrimage (especially chapters 42 and 44)

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<sup>92</sup>Ronald L. Grimes, "Ritual," *Material Religion* 7.1 (2011): 76-83.

and a chapter that has a long section with a Kannaḍ poem (chapter 51). Thus, they chose which parts of the text to emphasize and which to de-emphasize.

What is more, the interpretation of content is not the only area that the readers take into their own hands. Many male readers stress that anyone, regardless of their caste and gender, should be given access to *pārāyaṇ*. In fact, although most people who perform *pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra* are male brāhmaṇs, many community reading groups recruit non-brahman and non-male members for *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* activity. Thus, people change the norms of gender and caste with reference to their ideas of religiosity in urban settings as a result of the changed nature of public space, where the traditional segregation rules based on caste and gender are altered.

Another instance of negotiating tradition is readers' critical approach towards the rules of praxis surrounding the reading activity. The author of the *Gurucaritra* outlines several rules related to preparation of ritual space, ritual time, dietary restrictions and other quotidian matters in the text. Readers make alterations to the prescribed rules based on their living conditions, work schedules and lifestyles. For instance, a young professional male who lives by himself on a rental basis in Pune mentioned that he cannot follow the dietary restrictions about eating home-cooked food as he eats at a cafeteria at work every day. A woman in her late forties said that she prefers to sleep on a comfortable mattress, even though the author of the *Gurucaritra* prescribes sleeping on the floor during the *pārāyaṇ* cycle. Many readers brought their copy of the *Gurucaritra* into their living rooms, as they could not fit it in their small home shrines. Such modifications to the prescribed rules speak to the modern outlook that the readers take towards their religious tradition. As much as re-traditionalization, then, the *pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra* serves as a means of becoming *modern* for the readers. The readers create their self-actualized modern religiosity both by interpreting the content of the text and by negotiating the rules of the praxis surrounding the *pārāyaṇ* activity.

## Key Terms and Their Definitions

### *Pārāyaṇ*

According to M. Monier Williams' Sanskrit-English dictionary, *pārāyaṇ* is "going over, reading through, perusing, studying; reading a Purāṇa or causing it to be read; the whole, totality."<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Molesworth's Marathi-English dictionary glosses *pārāyaṇ* as "perusal, reading through (esp. of a Purāṇa) or as going through or across."<sup>95</sup> The readers of the *Gurucaritra*, however, define this term as reading of the *Gurucaritra* in its entirety over a limited period of one, three or seven days. In addition to the reading of the book in its entirety, following ritual observances and restrictions is defined as a salient feature of the *pārāyaṇ* process.

### *Pothī*

The word *pothī* refers to a manuscript. Although traditionally the word was strictly associated with a handwritten version, contemporary *Gurucaritra* readers use the term *pothī* to refer to printed copies of the *Gurucaritra* as well. Typically *pothīs* are printed in a landscape orientation.

### *Vācak/pārāyaṅkār*

In my fieldwork conversations, people I spoke with used the terms *vācak* (reader) and *pārāyaṅkār* (one who does a *pārāyaṇ*) interchangeably to refer to a person who undertakes *pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra*.

## Significance of the Study

This work, with its dual focus on text and ritual, juxtaposes concerns of anthropology and literary theory. The direction of research exemplified here focuses on the role of a scripture in the life of a religious community. With reference to Hindu traditions, this dissertation adds a new

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<sup>94</sup>M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-Marathi Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas Publishers Private Limited, 2005 [1899], 619.

<sup>95</sup>J. T Molesworth, T. Candy, and George Candy. *A Dictionary, Marāṭhī and English*, (Bombay: Bombay Education Society's Press, 2000 [1857]), 555.

angle to the study of scriptures by emphasizing the social praxis associated with scriptures. In addition, within the field of Hindu studies, the relevance of this research lies in its promise of offering new knowledge about a largely neglected but historically important deity that has influenced religious patterns of western India from medieval times to today. Ultimately, this dissertation project examines modern Hindu religiosity, which strives simultaneously to traditionalize and re-invent.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the course of this dissertation one of my aims is to theorize religious reading by looking at the social praxis surrounding *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ*. I argue that we need to analyze the modalities of interaction between the *reader* and the *read/text* in the context of religious reading. Thus, this is not a study of the *Gurucaritra* in the true sense of the term; it is a study of the *Gurucaritra* as it is *read*. These two are different in that the former would focus on the literary analysis of the text, which focuses on the meaning of the words in it, while the latter refers to its functional, operative dimensions. This is not to suggest that the meaning of the sentences in the *Gurucaritra* is insignificant to its readers. However, deciphering the meanings of the words, sentences or even stories is not of primary importance for the readers of the *Gurucaritra*. In the process of reading the *Gurucaritra*, readers become modern by making a conscious selection from their tradition. In the process of approaching their tradition through the text, what they achieve is a sense of continuity and a faith that nothing can go wrong with the support of the *guru*. However, in the process of choosing elements from their tradition, they ultimately achieve a sense of being modern individuals who work out rules of religiosity for themselves.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to narrate the journey of an ethnographer-in-making. A brief introduction to the sites of data collection, the interlocutors, as well as the process of data analysis will set the background for understanding the social *praxis* surrounding the reading of the *Gurucaritra*, which is to be discussed in the following chapters.

I was pursuing my Masters in Political Science from the University of Pune in 2000. Prof. Vora—the then head of the department—invited me to volunteer for organizing an international conference titled “Cultural Aspects of Regional Consciousness in India.” My curiosity to know how scholars other than Indians study India led me to take on this task. In that three day conference I heard academic papers on varied topics ranging from Indian calendars to Maratha history to rivers and femininity. Although I could not follow theoretical insights from most of the papers at that time, ethnographic insights from those papers stayed with me for a long time. That conference made me reflect on the scope and nature of social sciences and humanities in the western academy for the first time. Two things came to me as revelations: one, the boundaries of disciplines such as political science, sociology, and women’s studies, are essentially artificial, as ultimately all disciplines aim at understanding how human societies work in specific cultural and political contexts; two, understanding the working of human societies calls for direct interaction with the people under study. More importantly, studying people calls for a nuanced understanding of their language, their specific cultural and social contexts, as well as their cognitive understanding of the universe. I realized that direct interaction with over 200 people over a period

of two years had added a nuanced texture to Feldhaus' study on rivers and femininity in Maharashtra.<sup>96</sup>

Inspired by this conference, I decided to pursue my further education at a western university and to choose a topic for my dissertation that would allow me to interact with people. This ethnographic impulse was further compounded by my own living experiences in Maharashtra. I became interested in understanding urban religiosity (which shaped my childhood to an extent growing up in Pune) that stressed the worship of *iṣṭadevtās* (self-chosen deities) such as Devī, Gaṇeśa, Hanumān and Dattātreya. Two trends seem to be over-arching in the worship of *iṣṭadevtās*: reading a religious text to find solutions to problems in material life, and religious gatherings in public places. For instance, working women reading various *vrata-kathās*<sup>97</sup> and other verses on morning local trains is a common sight in Mumbai. Once when I was travelling from Pune to Mumbai, a group of middle-class, middle-aged, working women hopped on the train around 8:30 AM. After settling down a bit, they took out their little booklets from their purses and started reading. It became clear in our brief interactions that they were doing a votive observance related to a goddess. I was amazed at the portability of their religion as well as the flexibility of their ritual practice. Moreover, I wondered how these women related to the words in the books they were reading.

Upon a closer look, I realized that reading religious texts is a predominant mode of religiosity in the urban settings in India. In bookstores one comes across a variety of *vrata-kathā pothis*<sup>98</sup> in their abridged and long versions. For instance, votive observances for *Satyanārāyaṇa pūjā*<sup>99</sup> are commonplace in contemporary Maharashtra. Typically, devotees perform prescribed rituals followed by a perusal of *vratakathās*. They also follow certain ritual observances related to

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<sup>96</sup>Feldhaus 1995.

<sup>97</sup>*Vrata kathā* refers to the religious narrative associated with votive observances. Typically, the narrative is recited at the culmination of the observance.

<sup>98</sup>My interlocutors used the term *pothī* to refer to a printed copy of the *Gurūcaritra*. Molesworth notes the other uses of the term *pothī* as following: "a book, a pamphlet, manuscript." See, Molesworth, *A Dictionary, Marāṭhī and English*, 577.

<sup>99</sup>*Satyanārāyaṇ pūjā* is a votive observance dedicated to Viṣṇu. *Satyanārāyaṇ pūjā* is arranged on a full-moon day after every major rite of passage in a family. It is also organized on an annual basis in some Marathi homes.



food for the duration of the *vrata*. Similar to the *vratakathās*, people also engage in reading religious texts such as the *Gurūcaritra*, *Bhāgvatam*, *Devī Mahātmya*, *Dāsboḍh*. Compared to the *vrata-kathās*, these books are longer and therefore are read in small portions over a period of days or (sometimes) week/s.

Growing up in Maharashtra, I had some exposure to the *Gurūcaritra pāṛāyaṇ* tradition. From the decorations and lighting at the Dattātreya temples in the neighborhood where I grew up, I also knew that Dattātreya devotees gather to celebrate Dattātreya's birthday and the culmination of *Gurucaritra pāṛāyaṇ* every year in December or January. However, unlike other gods such as Gaṇeśa, Dattātreya was somewhat distant from my childhood universe. This was because he was always characterized as a god who demands accuracy in following rules about pollution [*pāḷāve lāgtem*]. A passing remark from a family member at a family get-together decades back triggered my interest in studying to the *Gurūcaritra pāṛāyaṇ* tradition in detail. At this family gathering, to which I had accompanied my father; I overheard someone mention that women should not read the *Gurucaritra*. As a high school student I had no interest in pursuing this matter with that person. However, this comment had a greater impact on my mind than I had realized. Although I had a tertiary exposure to the to the *Gurūcaritra pāṛāyaṇ* tradition, I did not know any *pāṛāyaṇkārs* from my family connections. Probably a little more research about relatives of relatives or relatives of neighbours would have led to some success in finding readers of the *Gurucaritra*. However, as a novice ethnographer I did not want to start from my family, as that would have limited my research potential. I also did not want to limit myself to brāhmaṇ men by pursuing my family connections further.

If pursuing family connections was not an option, how else could I find readers of the *Gurucaritra*? Experiences from graduate life in Canada and Arizona proved to be insightful in this context. In my graduate studies at the University of British Columbia and at Arizona State University, I had learned that publishing flyers with your contact information at community centers is the most effective way of reaching out to a community. I created Marathi flyers with my phone number and posted them at various Dattātreya temples. They read as follows,

I, Mugdha Yeolekar, am visiting Pune for pursuing my doctoral research on the *Gurucaritra pāṛāyaṇ* tradition. I am originally from Pune and am pursuing my doctoral degree from Arizona State University. If you or anyone you know does *pāṛāyaṇ*, I would much appreciate your time to share your experiences about the *pāṛāyaṇ* tradition with me.

In addition to posting this advertisement at the temples, I also published it in a leading Marathi newspaper. Pressed by the urge for brevity, I used the Marathi word “*anubhav*” in my advertisement and that initiated discussion with many readers. I received phone calls from ten readers on the day after I published the advertisement and all of them asked what I meant to imply by the word “*anubhav*.” They wanted to know if I was interested in hearing about their spiritual experiences or in learning about processual details of the *pāṛāyaṇ*. I responded by stating that I was interested in both, but my motivations for the study were strictly academic. I ended up meeting seven readers (out of the ten that had called up in response to my advertisement) in person. They provided me contacts of other readers, and through such “snowball sampling,” I was able to meet several readers in two months.

As all these readers were male readers, my queries about women’s participation had not yet been addressed. Responses to my inquiries about women’s participation in the *Gurucaritra pāṛāyaṇ* varied from orthodox to liberal. On the one hand, I met with male readers who approved of my reading the *Gurucaritra* considering my academic orientation; on the other hand, I also met with liberal male readers who said, “We live in the 21st century now. Women have excelled in all kinds of professions and spirituality should not be an exception to that.” Despite the range in opinions about women’s participation in the *Gurucaritra* reading, I had not met anyone who knew a woman reader. I wondered why I wanted to pursue this further. Upon reflecting closely, I realized that the remark from my childhood memories had triggered this interest in women.

Our interactions focused on the following topics: the origin of tradition in the family, preparations required before the *pāṛāyaṇ* cycle, the distinction between the seven days of *pāṛāyaṇ* from the other times of the year, the choice of a particular edition of the *pothī*, the involvement of family members in the *pāṛāyaṇ* process, challenges in finishing the *pāṛāyaṇ*, rituals at the end of the *pāṛāyaṇ* cycle etc.

After the initial advertisement, finding readers was not a challenge anymore. However, breaking the ice once I met a reader in person was a challenge. My interlocutors were curious to know my motivations for this project. In particular, they wanted to know if I was a follower of the Dattatreya tradition. I used to respond to their query by talking about the nature and scope of religious studies as a discipline. Further, I made it clear that my attitude toward this work was strictly scholarly and not missionary. This disappointed some readers. Knowing my academic motivations, they asked me about the choice of my dissertation topic and my advisor. I responded to the earlier query by pointing the scarcity of research on the Dattātreya tradition and the significance of the tradition in the Marathi region. Telling them about some of the recent publications of my research advisors was enough to address my interlocutors' query about my choice of advisors.

Although these questions were straightforward, answering some questions was tricky. One of those difficult queries was about my familiarity with the *Gurucaritra*. My interlocutors wanted to know if I had read the *Gurucaritra*. By "reading," some referred to the contents, but others referred to *pārāyaṇ*. Once a reader asked me if I got any revelations in the process of doing *pārāyaṇ*. On such occasions, I had to revisit my earlier conversations about my dispassionate, academic attitude to this work.

After talking about the nature and scope of religious studies in the western academy and the work of my advisors, everything seemed to fall in place. A confirmation about my genuine intentions and motivations created an ease in our conversations. Despite my taking all efforts to communicate my academic intentions, people treated me with utmost warmth. They referred to me as "*āpālī*."<sup>100</sup> Sometimes readers made statements such as "although you think you are doing this work for academic reasons, you don't realize that Dattaguru has chosen you to do this work. I see nothing but the spiritual in this work. You will realize that later in your life." I treated these remarks as revealing a difference of opinion and left it at that.

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<sup>100</sup>The word "*āpālī*" literally means "ours." My interlocutors stressed that I was part of their culture while introducing me to other potential interlocutors. Thus "insider" identity aided me in developing trust with the readers.

The sense of belonging that I felt and that my interlocutors felt for me worked at several levels. Many people volunteered to help me find addresses and went out of their way to get me to crucial resources. A reader drove more than 30 miles after work to bring copies of his collection of articles about the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. Another reader brought a copy of his *pothī* noting that I had shown interest in his *pothī* in our meeting. Yet another reader, the manager of a corporate office in Pune, could not take time off to talk to me for a few months. But one evening he invited me to his office and stayed in the office for a couple of hours after work to share his experiences. A shop-owner who ran a shop in a very busy location in Pune answered my queries in between selling things to customers. Women who were busy running errands talked to me on walks to and from their children' schools. Devotee-readers who were generally very cautious about the purity rules in their home gave me access to their home shrines.

In most cases, I met with people at their homes. As I made appointments prior to meeting with them, the purpose of our meetings was quite clear. One advantage of this arrangement was that even when our discussions went off-topic, it was easy to bring them home with a gentle reminder. For instance, people were interested in my lifestyle in the USA, they were concerned about my six-month -old baby etc. However, the pre-determined agenda of our meetings was sometimes a challenge in communication. Sometimes discussions with some readers were so direct and focused that they took a very mechanical turn.

This was not always the case, though. There were times when readers became very emotional while sharing their experiences of reading the *Gurucaritra*. One time when a reader was telling me how he got rid of his alcohol addiction after reading the *Gurucaritra*, he was in tears. On another occasion, a woman was in tears while recounting how her twelve-year-old got cured of brain tumor. At moments such as these, it was a challenge for me to be empathetic to the emotions of the person without getting emotional myself.

I had to leave aside the scholar in me at times. Two instances from my visit to the Diṅḍorī *āśram* come to mind. I had mentioned to a member of the Diṅḍorī Kendra that I was visiting from the USA. After my meetings with the authorities, a member approached me. He dialed a number on

his phone and, handing his phone over to me, said, “Tāi, could you please talk to these girls from my village? They have a study group. I think if you give them some advice about studies they will be really motivated.” I was caught unawares. I realized the genuineness in that person’s appeal but I was afraid that I would have nothing to offer to the girls.

Later that day, Annasaheb More, the head of the Diṅḍorī Kendra, honored me by offering to let me lead the *ārati* session for the day. Did I really deserve this opportunity? After all, I was a dispassionate scholar doing my field work there. Was it appropriate for a person like me to lead an *ārati* session for a devoted audience of five thousand people? Such occasions made me reflect on my identity.

### Philosophy

Religion interests me because it provides people with a means of ordering and articulating their worlds. But how do people come to an agreement about ordering their world? In the case of *Gurucaritra* reading practice, how does the devotional reading of the *Gurucaritra* articulate the (religious, social, gender-related) needs of people living in a modern urban context? With more and more interaction with the readers of the *Gurucaritra*, I became more interested in understanding the process than the result. In other words, I became interested in understanding how people come to make and unmake their identities in the process of the reading. Over the period, I observed variations in ritual practices in the *pārāyaṇ* process and I realized that beneath the general agreement about the ordering of the universe, people are constantly negotiating and re-assigning meanings to their actions. Visiting Dattātreya temples in Pune on a regular basis, detailed discussions with the readers of *Gurucaritra* about the process of *pārāyaṇ* and visits to pilgrimage places of Dattātreya offered occasions for direct interactions with devotees of Dattātreya.

Due to my familiarity with the locale, I decided to conduct my research in Pune. At a personal level, performing fieldwork in Pune I had the benefit of years of association with the language, the wider culture and the topography. My local roots were useful in making contacts with interlocutors initially and in establishing trust after the initial contact.

## Research Design

The data for this project came from interviews conducted during eight months of fieldwork in India during 2010 and 2011. The goals of the two-month pilot study in 2010 were as follows: to establish initial contacts from Datta temples around Pune, to locate academic and religious literature about the Dattātreya tradition in various libraries and bookstores in Pune, to acquire copies of various versions of the *Gurūcaritra pothī*, and to find various locations where community readings of *Gurūcaritra* are organized. I spent four to five hours every day at the two most visited Datta temples in Pune for a two-month period. During this time, I observed various ritual practices associated with Datta. I looked for regular visitors to these temples and made initial contacts with them. Gradually, as devotees came to know about my work, they introduced me to the temple authorities. The priests eventually introduced me to the trustees of the temple. My discussions with the priests and the trustees gave me a sense of the history and growth of the two temples. Further, these discussions also helped me understand how certain ritual practices such as “*pālkhī kaḍhaṇem*” were added much later than the establishment of the temple. The authorities of the Dagaḍuṣeṭh Halvāi Datta temple directed me to Dr. Kulkarnī, who organized community *pārāyaṇ* sessions at Ānand Āśram. I decided to return to the field during the *pārāyaṇ* period as I could observe the people in action then.

I returned to India in December 2011 to do full-fledged field work. I had heard that there are many *Gurūcaritra* readers in Maharashtra, and it was clear from my initial field visit that several places around Pune organized community reading sessions. However, I did not know any reader personally nor did my family members. The format of my conversations with them was that of semi-structured and/or unstructured interviews. My queries were based on the comfort level of the interlocutors and shaped by their responses.

The questions<sup>101</sup> gave some structure to my meetings with interlocutors. However, I to avoid rigidity in conversations, I avoided sticking to the sequence and topics of questions as far as possible. This was vital for understanding “their terms, phrasings, classifications, and theories” about the *pārāyaṇ* process.<sup>102</sup>

The idea of sampling was irrelevant to this project, as my aim was not to give an exhaustive account of the phenomenon under study, i.e. ritual reading. I did not go to the field with any proposed number of interlocutors. I decided to keep meeting with readers until a point where the kinds of connections people made between reading and everyday lives became repetitive. Thus, a principle of data saturation was followed without aiming for any specific number of interlocutors.

One of the major limitations of this study is the generalizability of the results. My data came from a particular urban setting. Although I attempted to include a variety of interlocutors by meeting people across genders, ages, castes, classes, towns (immigrants from other towns) and levels of religious commitment (from orthodox brāhmaṇ to relaxed undergrad students), after all they all came from one urban area. I was not able to conduct detailed discussions with readers who lived in Datta places such as Vāḍī or Audumbar. Additionally, perspectives of wandering *yogis* in the Datta tradition on reading *Gurucaritra* could have enhanced the overall quality of my work. Despite these limitations, I hope that the richness of the data gathered has generated thorough accounts of the phenomenon under study.

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<sup>101</sup> Please refer to Appendix A, 198-201.

<sup>102</sup> Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 139.

## Interactions with Readers

Soon after I had established myself in the Datta temples in Pune, I began to take part in the life of devotees as much as I could. Although I never enjoyed attending family functions as a child, I looked forward to invitations to attend festive events from birthday parties to weddings when I visited India for field work. There were several reasons for this change: first, shyness from childhood had been replaced by nostalgic eagerness to connect with people now. Second, such functions proved to be crucial for putting the word out about my academic work. After learning of my topic, people often volunteered information about Dattātreya places, *gurus* and ritual. At a birthday party, a woman came forward and asked if I had visited Diṇḍorī *sevā keṇdras*, where women read *Gurucaritra*. She mentioned that she had noticed some women reading the *Gurucaritra* in a public space in the Maharshinagar area early in the mornings. I visited that place the next morning and found out that twenty women gathered and read the *Gurucaritra* there. This was a major breakthrough for my research, as it brought forth the non-brāhman and non-male character of this *pārāyaṇ* tradition. I travelled to Diṇḍorī, Nasik District, and met with the father-figure of the Diṇḍorī tradition, Annāsāheb More. He directed me to the heads of Diṇḍorī tradition Kendras in Pune. Through these contacts I was able to meet with several women readers over the next few months.

At yet another social event, I came to know about a woman who was scheduled to give a talk (*pravacan*) on the *Gurucaritra*. I attended the talk and came to know that the speaker had been trained as a woman priest. This was another major insight for my research. After doing some research, I was able to locate *Udyān Prasād Kāryālay*, a place where classes for women's ordination into priesthood are conducted. I got contact information about women priests' groups in Pune from there. While inquiring about the classes for women's training as priests, I bumped into a woman who did *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* with several other women priests in the Salisbury park area. The ritual practices of the women priests differed radically from those in the Diṇḍorī tradition. From these two encounters I realized that women's participation in the making of



contemporary urban Marathi religion was an important topic in itself. Thus, through visits to temples, advertisements in local newspapers, “snowball sampling,” and attending public lectures related to the *Gurucaritra*, I was able to meet ninety interlocutors (men and women) over the period of eight months.

#### Interlocutors

Of my ninety interlocutors, fifty-four were males and thirty-six were females. The majority of the men (except for a few businessmen) were salaried, middle-class individuals. Their professions and working schedules were varied. Of the fifty-four men, six were employed at private or public banks, two were employed by the Maharashtra State Electricity Board, six were working as information technology professionals, and eleven were employed at the Kirloskar Cummins factory, Pune (a leading manufacturer of gas and diesel). Among the other male interlocutors were rickshaw drivers, teachers, and a distributor of herbal care products. In addition, I also met with two male priests who conducted all the rites of passage except for funeral rites.

It was difficult to get hold of businessmen. I managed to visit several times a shop owner who sells educational supplies. I wanted to interview him, as he was the organizer of one of the community reading centers. I visited his shop over a dozen times, each time for about two hours. He shared information about the organizing process of the *pārāyaṇ* in bits and pieces in-between shoppers' visits. Another businessman, a distributor of clothes, was also difficult to get hold of. In my first visit I waited for a couple of hours to speak with him. Since he did not find any time to communicate with me, he suggested that I write down all my questions on a piece of paper. I did leave questions for him. But then I was not too comfortable with this written format as it would have reified all his responses. I requested to visit him at his home on a holiday and he agreed to that. This worked out much better. Yet another businessman, the director of a leading Information Technology company, was available on the phone and by internet chatting more easily than in person. After a few chats and phone calls, I was able to meet with him from 7PM to 10PM one evening in his office.

Meeting with retired professionals was comparatively easier. I met with them in public parks after their evening walks, at *rikshaw*-stands and in temples. In some instances, there were specific communication problems with the retired readers. For instance, a ninety-two-year-old retired journalist was blind and was suffering from hearing loss. On another occasion, I met with a ninety-four-year-old retired bank employee. He was deaf but could see quite well. It was crucial that I meet with this individual as he had handwritten the *pothī* of the *Gurucaritra* used by the followers of the Tembe Svāmī tradition.

Although locating female interlocutors was difficult in the first two months of field work, I was eventually able to meet them easily, as most of them read the *Gurucaritra* in groups. The majority of the women I met were either retired or housewives. Generally they preferred to meet with me in the afternoon at tea time in their homes. Instead of using a sit-down approach, it was easier for me to converse with them on-the-go. This meant that our conversations went on as they were doing their daily chores, such as preparing tea for elderly people in their home, sorting and cutting vegetables for dinner, or cleaning the pots and pans from lunch. Sometimes I participated in their chores to create comfort in conversations. At times, their children came home from school during our conversation. Conversations with women took much longer than those with men.

In addition to the ninety readers of the *Gurucaritra*, I also met several interlocutors who did not do *pārāyaṇ* but shared important information about the Datta *sampradāy*, the *Gurucaritra* and the *pārāyaṇ* process. These included the priests and trustees of various Dattātreya temples in Pune as well as in Narsobācī Vāḍī, Audumbar and Gāṇagāpur, professors and independent scholars at the Ṭīlak Maharashtra Vidyāpīṭh, the Bhāṇḍārkar Oriental Research Institute, Deccan College, and the University of Pune.

#### The Interview Site

There were several reasons that the interviews mostly took place at interlocutors' homes. First, in their natural settings. I wanted to see, hear and experience their everyday lives. I wanted

to take photographs of their home shrines. Two, I did not want my interlocutors to lose interest by asking them to commute to meet with me. This is because, considering the pollution and traffic conditions in Pune, people were generally not too enthusiastic to commute after work. Three, meeting at homes eased the initial discomfort in conversations. Sometimes, a probe or two from other family members could be useful in directing conversations as well. Interlocutors showed me the places where they sat for *pārāyaṇ*, the way they prepared the ritual space, and the way they kept the *pothī* at times of the year other than during the *pārāyaṇ* cycle.

As much as the benefits, meeting at homes had its perils too. My interviews tended to be less focused. Some interlocutors were distracted by other family members. In one instance, the husband (who was the main informant) was not very articulate about his responses, and his wife took control of the interview. At times, discussions were truncated due to interventions from unexpected guests, neighbors, or children playing. Finally, sometimes after an hour-long trip to the address, I was disappointed to see that the people I was to meet were not at home.

### Conversational Dynamics

At the beginning of every interview, I assured my interlocutors about their anonymity as well as the confidentiality of the information acquired through their interviews. Further, I also asked for permission to record personal interviews and to take notes. Many times, this changed the nature of our conversation radically. The casual nature of our conversation took a serious turn, which in some cases also led to the withdrawal of the interlocutor from the interview itself. Further, the only interviewers that most of interlocutors were familiar with were government employees who ask census-related quantitative questions. Thus, participating in a conversation involving articulate responses about lived religious experiences was a novel experience for many of my interlocutors. Due to this situation, they were not too sure (or comfortable) about their knowledge about the subject. However, this initial discomfort went away in most cases upon mentioning the name of the person who had referred me to them. Thus, “snow-ball” sampling was useful in establishing initial trust. This was not always true, though. Despite mentioning

recommendations and my genuine interest in knowing what people had to say about *pārāyaṇ*, some of the people were not interested in my work at all.. This was because of their conviction that the spiritual is something to be experienced on your own, and not to be learned from other people's experiences.

My experience of having lived in Pune was useful in establishing initial links. In some cases, people started talking to me freely after knowing about our commonalities, such as the undergraduate college that I had gone to or the cultural programs I participated in while in Pune. Often talk about high schools, colleges and issues such as traffic-jams was useful in breaking the ice. The shared lived experiences were as important in connecting with people as was my "*āpālī*" (native/one of them) status. Despite this comfort, the world of my readers was very foreign to me. And this "*āpālī*" girl was still an "outsider" for "them." However, due to my "insider" identity and comfort in speaking in Marathi, there were many occasions when conducting focused discussions was a challenge. On many occasions, discussions derailed from the *Gurūcaritra* to topics such as everyday-life experiences in the United States, liberal arts studies, the process of finishing a doctoral degree, gender relations in Western culture. Most of these "intellectual" questions came from men. In general, discussions with women were more relaxed and unstructured. I used to go at tea-time to meet them. By this time, they would have taken care of their housekeeping chores. This was also a period before their "television serial" time began. Women used to be in a relaxed mood at this time of the day. This was great in terms of establishing initial rapport. However, it turned into a challenge of a kind at times. Once, a woman burst into tears while narrating a story of ill-treatment from her brother-in-law. At the end of her narration, she asked me to give my personal opinion about a family matter. I found myself in a very awkward situation. At times like these, re-routing our discussions to the topic of *pārāyaṇ* became a daunting task.

## From the Field to the Desk

Based on the ritual and social praxis surrounding the *Gurucaritra*, it became clear that devotee-readers create an understanding of themselves by referring to the medieval text, i.e. the *Gurucaritra*. Thus, I had to deal with the textual genre. But more than that, my challenge was to understand how people deal with the text. Therefore, my approach for analyzing the data was to combine ethnography with philology. The first step in this direction was to transcribe the interviews I had conducted over a period of eight months. After the transcription exercise, I did translations of the interviews. The first goal of data analysis was to understand what matters to my *interlocutors*. In the context of pursuing readers' meanings, I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the verbatim transcripts. I paid particular attention to "the words, phrases, and categories that members used" in their interactions with me.<sup>103</sup> I looked for the recurring phrases in interlocutors' responses. I let the topics develop naturally from my study at this stage. I wanted to go beyond my set of questions and understand what was significant for my *interlocutors*. I highlighted the recurring words and phrases that my interlocutors used. With this exercise, I came up with the following themes: *śraddhā*, *pathya pañem*, *sovle*, *samāḍhān*, *saṃkalp*, *pārṇe*, *pothī*, *sānudāyik pārayaṇ*, *guru*, *sevā*, *aḍcaṇī*, *vācan*, *Audumbar*, *pracīti*, *dattakṣetre*.

Although this exercise helped me to retrieve the voice of the "native," it was not yet useful in making the "native" available to the "academy." This challenge was addressed by using other types of coding in the later stages of analysis. I went back to my initial questionnaire as well as to insights from the literature review. Memoing was a particularly useful technique in analyzing how the data are connected. Memoing consisted of taking running notes about the coding and about the potential hypotheses. I noted down my thoughts as I read the transcriptions. These memos were crucial in understanding relations among themes. The search for exploring and establishing relationships was further sharpened in the form of substantive codes. My goal in substantive coding was to understand relationships among data. At this stage, my goal was to get all the "vivo

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<sup>103</sup>Ibid. 112.

codes” so I followed principles of “open coding.” By this, I mean that I coded the transcriptions in every possible way for as many categories as might fit. Second, I picked themes from my questions. Codes such as *ritual space*, *beginning of p̄rāyaṇ*, *rules and restrictions of a successful p̄rāyaṇ* developed in this way. The codes based on questions were useful for comprehending the details of the ritual process.

Finally, my goal was to develop an integrative framework to present my “story.” The exercise of abstraction of the relationships in the data was useful in this direction. The abstraction of the particular data ended in producing theoretical codes such as “materiality and *pothi*,” “purity and *pathya*,” “meaning-making and everyday life (*dainaindin jivānātil vicār āṇī vācan*)”. These, in turn, have become the key themes of my overall work.

## Ethical Considerations

### Gender

Bernard<sup>104</sup> comments that “to a certain extent, participant observation must be learned in the field.” This was true for me in many cases. Although I had a list of topics to address in each interview, there were many occasions when I was caught unaware by my interlocutors. Questions about my background in *Gurucaritra* reading were particularly difficult to address. Before sharing their thoughts about *p̄rāyaṇ*, many readers asked me if I had done a *p̄rāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra*. This was a tricky question considering my female identity. As women are prohibited from doing *p̄rāyaṇ* of *Gurucaritra*, my interlocutors were curious if I did it personally. My response that “I had read it for content but not as *p̄rāyaṇ*” was disappointing for many of them. Making a distinction between academic and spiritual pursuits was enough for some interlocutors. Some insisted that doing a *p̄rāyaṇ* was absolutely necessary even for my academic enterprise. Overall, my female

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<sup>104</sup>Russell H. Bernard. *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Fourth edition ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2006), 359.

status was not interpreted as a hindrance in my academic pursuit. Only on a rare occasion was I criticized for studying what is an “exclusively-male” scripture.

One day while I was with a reader, I got a phone call. This was a male-interlocutor I had tried to contact a few times earlier. When I picked up the phone, I heard someone talking angrily,

Hey lady, who told you to start work like this? Datta *Sampradāy* is not an area for women. It is not meant for you. Do you not desire the well-being of your family and child? There are so many good topics out there. Why don't you choose something else?

This was one of those moments of realization that participant observation must be learned in the field. I did not know how to react to a critical response like this, as I was familiar only with the encouraging and (at the most) curious responses from interlocutors. I tried to keep the conversation going by saying,

Kākā, I am not being disrespectful to anyone in my work. And knowledge of any kind is desirable, right? I am not analyzing the truth or falsity of people's experiences. What we do is to understand how people come to believe what they do in the study of religion.

In a milder tone, he explained,

Yes, that is all OK. But I still tell you, this is not your cup of tea. You should not delve into these matters (*hā nasatā udyog tumhāla koṇī sāṅgītāy?*). You will pay for your mistake if you don't listen to me.

This was an exceptional response in that my work, motivations and methodology had been received in an encouraging and positive manner even in such orthodox pilgrimage places as Narsobācī Vāḍī, Audumbar and Gāṇagāpur.

Gender also played a big role in the context of access to spaces. Being a woman, I could not enter in the sanctum sanctorum of some Datta temples. My husband and father came to help as they accompanied me to temples where I had limited access.

Little things like putting on a *sāṅī*, putting a dot on my forehead and wearing bangles were helpful in making a connection with my interlocutors. In some cases, I looked more “orthodox” in dressing than the women my age. As I have already said, when I went to Diṅḍorī to interview Annāsāheb More, I was asked to lead the *āratī* for the day in front of a large crowd of about 5000 people. After that *āratī*, Annāsāheb announced, “Today I am going to introduce you to our special guest, Mrs. Mugdhā tāī, who, despite living in America, is doing important work of preserving our

culture. (*āj mī tumhālā ekā viśeśa pāhunyañcī oḷakh karun deṇār āhe. Mugdhātāi yā amerīket astāt. Tithe rāhun dekhīl āpalī saṃskṛtī rākhanyāce kām tyā karat āhet.*)

On another occasion, a woman from the Diṇḍorī *mārg* who was the head of one of the Sevā Kendras in Pune advised me, “Tāt, I think you should keep doing *pārāyaṇ* continually. That is the only way to understand it. After all, spirituality is a matter of practice, not of reasoning (*ādhyātma hā pracitīcā viśay āhe, abhyāsācā nāhī*).

Not everyone was as vocal as Annāsāheb and the leader of the Sevā Kendra,<sup>105</sup> however, it was clear from their remarks that they did not make a categorical distinction between preaching faith and studying religion. The remarks of one reader were eloquent:

Your work is really inspiring. You are spreading *Datta Sampradāy* in a foreign country. I feel somewhere that Dattātreyā inspired you to do this work. Otherwise, why would you choose this type of work, right?

Despite introducing my methodology and motivations for this project at the beginning of every interview, there seemed to be some disjunction between my perceptions and those of my interlocutors. I realized that the problem was not merely at the level of communication. It was deeper. In India, the location of the study of religion is in departments of sociology, political science and Indology. The lack of religious studies departments as independent units is partially responsible for the lack of the above categorical distinction. My strategy in this type of setting was to introduce the study of religion in the west before going into specifics about my project. On one particular occasion, an informant referred to my work as “*devāce kārya*.” I explained what the study of religion entails as follows:

Well, I don't know what inspires me to do this work. But positive responses from people like you are really encouraging. But you know Kākā, I am not doing “*devāce kārya*” in the real sense of the term. In the western universities, they have an academic discipline called “religious studies.” One of the methods of studying religion is to observe people who practice it. But of course, the job of a good scholar is to connect the particular pieces of information to the general frameworks. So, for example, my job would be to understand the *pārāyaṇ* process based on your comments and then make some understanding about the phenomenon of ritual readings across religions. [*He kām karanyāsaṭhī nemakī kāy preraṇā āhe te malāhī māhit nāhī. Paṇ tumacyāsarkhyā lokānce positive response malākharī preraṇā detāt. Pan kākā, tumhālā sāngu kā? Mī kāhī devāce kārya karat nāhī.*

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<sup>105</sup>The term “Sevā Kendra” is used in the Diṇḍorī tradition to refer to regional centers of the Diṇḍorī tradition.



*pāścīmātya deśānmadhe “religious studies” nāvāche ek department Universitymadhe asate. Dharmācā abhyās karāycī ek paddhat mhaṇaje dhārmik lok jyāprakāre dharmā ācartāt tyāche nirīkṣaṇ karaṇe.arthāt, ekā cānglyā abhyāsakāche kām avghad asate kāraṇ nirīkṣaṇ kelelyā chhotyā māhiti madhun tyālā ek svatahcī goṣṭa sāngāyacī asate. Ātā hech baghā nā, mājhe kām āhe pārāyaṇ prakrīyā samjāvun ghevun vividh dharmātil dhārmik vācanābaddal kahītarī vaicārik maṇḍaṇī karaṇe}.*

The dynamic of representing the academy to practioners and practioners to the academy is inherent in any ethnographic work.

#### Beyond Insider/Outsider status

As mentioned before, being a native was advantageous in establishing initial rapport. Performing fieldwork in Pune on the *pārāyaṇ* tradition, I had the benefit of years of association with the language, the wider culture and the geography. My local roots were highlighted in places like Diṇḍorī. I was introduced as *āpālī*<sup>106</sup> to temple priests at Vāḍī and other significant Datta places. But was I really an *āpālī*? Was I able to grasp and later represent the voice of the “native” authentically?

Despite knowing their everyday language, the language of spirituality that my interlocutors used was foreign to me. Moreover, my academic approach to understanding *pārāyaṇ* distanced me from my interlocutors. Despite this distance, there were occasions where I had to choose between being an “insider” or an “outsider.” Personal invitations to *pujās* unrelated to my work as well as cultural programs are case in point. Once I was invited as a *savāṣṇī*<sup>106</sup> for a meal in the house of one of my informants. On the one hand, going for a meal would be crossing the boundaries of my academic work. On the other hand, choosing not to go would be disrespecting my interlocutor’s wish. I decided to accept her invitation. Throughout my research I took an approach of shifting identifications between insider and outsider. Ultimately, I perceive my interlocutors as people with whom I would like to connect through ties of reciprocity. And, in this

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<sup>106</sup>The word “*savāṣṇī*” refers to a married woman who is not widowed. A married woman is considered to be especially auspicious if she has offspring. In many Marathi homes, married women with children (before the children’s puberty) are invited for lunch at occasions of celebrations of vows. At these occasions, the “*savāṣṇī*” is offered a plentiful meal along with other gifts such as money, clothing, or other objects. A satisfied *savāṣṇī* is believed to empower the host family with health and wealth.

sense, the distinction between an “insider” and an “outsider” was not very relevant in my fieldwork.

### **Conclusion**

Growing up in Maharashtra, I was always intrigued by the reading of religious texts in private and public spaces. I wanted to understand the dynamics of ritual reading in public and private contexts. This quest was sharpened by academic scholarship and I was inspired to conduct a full-fledged study of ritual reading of the *Gurucaritra* in the Dattātreya tradition. During my data collection and analysis, I realized that reading, as I had thought, was not the central or only activity involved. When my interlocutors used the word “*vācan*,” they implied reading in a ritual context. Naturally, our topics ranged from reasons for reading the text to ritual preparations, and from the challenges in completing the reading cycle to celebrating the end of the reading. I became more interested in looking at reading as a process than an event. A detailed analysis of the reading and ritual process is to follow in chapters four to six. My status as an insider had advantages in terms of networking and accessibility of local places. However, it also posed unique challenges in terms of communicating about my purpose, motivations and inspirations for this project. After all, I left my six-month-old -daughter with my parents and in laws for hours every day. I had to desert my husband for months to do the fieldwork. I took an enormous amount of the invaluable time of hundreds of readers. When I look back, I think that I will be indebted to all these people—my parents, my in-laws, my husband, my daughter, and my advisors for showing trust in me, and to the readers for taking time off for me from their hectic schedules, for respecting my genuine academic urge and for their love and warmth!!

CHAPTER 3  
THE GURUCARITRA AND THE DATTĀTREYA SAMPRADĀY

**Introduction**

In the introduction of this dissertation I have argued that urban readers of the *Gurucaritra* become modern in the process of *pārāyaṇ* by making a conscious choice of elements from their tradition so that they re-traditionalize and modernize both at the same time. They re-traditionalize by gaining information about the roots of their religious tradition and by getting instructions on chartering their social ethical conduct. I have also argued that despite re-traditionalizing, urban readers of the *Gurucaritra* modernize in the process of taking a critical outlook towards their religious tradition. The purpose of this chapter is to take this argument further by analyzing how readers of the *Gurucaritra* re-traditionalize and modernize through their engagement with the content of the *Gurucaritra*. However, before we go into details about readers' engagement with the text, we will take an overview of the figure of Dattātreya and the rich religious tradition, Dattātreya *sampradāy*, that has developed in Maharashtra over the past seven hundred years. As will be shown throughout this chapter, both the integrative nature of the figure of Dattātreya and the assimilative world of the book of the *Gurucaritra* attract the modern religiosity of the contemporary followers of Dattātreya. The plan for the remainder of the chapter is as follows: section one sets the stage with a preliminary introduction to the figure of Dattātreya with reference to literary and iconographic sources. Section two presents how the Dattātreya *sampradāy* has flourished in contemporary Maharashtra through a lineage of *gurus* (*guruparamparā*), and through ritual practices and literary works. Section three introduces the *Gurucaritra* with reference to its two central themes, i.e., the *guru's* grace and devotion to the *guru*. The final section focuses on how contemporary readers of the text relate to its contents.

## Dattātreya: The Guru and “the Giver”

Dattātreya’s *avatār* is strikingly different from all other gods. Other gods manifest on earth when things are taking a chaotic turn. They come to earth to restore the good and do away with the evil. By contrast, Dattātreya is always here [on earth]. He is a *smṛṭṛgāmi* who comes to visit his devotees instantly when they think of him. Moreover, other *avatārs* emphasize that one should not think about the fruits of their actions and should devote themselves to gods in a desireless manner. By contrast, Dattātreya is a giver. He fulfills desires of his devotees all the time. This giving quality of Dattātreya appeals to me the most.

This description of Dattātreya given by a woman devotee gives an apt introduction to the way he is worshipped by his contemporary devotees.

With the exception of a handful of temples that have a one-headed icon of Dattātreya, in contemporary Maharashtra Dattātreya (also referred to as Datta) is commonly depicted in his three-headed form, with Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva represented by these heads (see fig. 1, fig. 2, and 3). Although references to the figure of Dattātreya are found in late Upaniṣads, the Purāṇas and the epics, the iconographic representation of the deity is a much later development. Moreover, the representation of Dattātreya in three-headed form became well-known in Maharashtra only after the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A scholar of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, Antonio Rigopoulos, explains the rise of the three-headed form of Dattātreya as a response to the socio-cultural context of sixteenth-century Maharashtra, which was shaped by the rift between the Śaivites and the Vaiṣṇavites and by the encounter between two theological systems, i.e. the Hindu and Islamic worldview.<sup>107</sup>

Contemporary followers of Dattātreya refer to him with different names, including “*Datta*,” “*Dattaguru*,” and “*Gurudev Datta*.” Dattātreya is worshipped as “*guruṇām guru*” or the *guru* of *gurus*. Unlike other Hindu gods, Dattātreya brings the human and divine realms closer through his character of being the *guru*. The *guru*-nature of Dattātreya has been foundational to the development of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. Followers believe that Dattātreya manifests himself

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<sup>107</sup>Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin And Avatāra: A Study Of The Transformative And Inclusive Character Of A Multi-faceted Hindu Deity Dattātreya*, 250.

through human *gurus*. Due to this belief, making offerings to human *gurus* along with the deity is a common practice in Maharashtra. In particular, the role of two *gurus*, Śrīpād Śrīvallaḥ and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī, has been foundational in giving a cohesive character to the modern Dattātreya *sampradāy*. The places where these two *gurus* traveled-- Narsobācī Vāḍī, Audumbar, Gāṇagāpūr, Pīṭhāpūr, and Kuravpūr—later became pilgrimage places of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*.

Along with his *guru*-nature, another distinctive quality of Dattātreya is his *yogin* nature. Dattātreya's ascetic nature is stressed both in iconographic depictions and in literary sources. Except for the Mahābhārata, where he appears as a married man,<sup>108</sup> Dattātreya is referred to as an ascetic. As an ascetic, Dattātreya is believed to be constantly in transit. According to the *Gurucaritra*,<sup>109</sup> he bathes at Pāñcāleśvar, takes his afternoon meal at Kolhāpūr, and sleeps in the fort at Māhūr at night.<sup>110</sup> The ascetic nature of the deity attracts *sanyāsīs* to the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. During my field work, I noticed several *sanyāsīs* in Gāṇagāpūr. I met with one Svāmī at Kumasī, Karnataka, who was on pilgrimage on foot to various Dattātreya places. He was visiting Kumasī because Narsīṃha Sarasvatī is mentioned to have gone to Kumasī in chapter twenty-four of the *Gurucaritra*.

The iconographic details in sculptures of Dattātreya as well as in calendar art illustrate his *yogin* nature. Unlike some of the other Hindu gods that are depicted wearing a lot of jewelry, Dattātreya is typically depicted as an ascetic wearing a loincloth. A *jhoḷī* bag for *bhikṣā* or alms, *bhasma* or ashes on his arms, a staff and a water-pot in his hands and wooden sandals on his feet are emblems that indicate his *yogin* nature. Moreover, in contemporary calendar art, he is always depicted somewhere in the middle of the forest in a natural setting-- away from human habitation.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>109</sup> The *Gurucaritra* chapter 5:35.

<sup>110</sup> Māḍhavrao Dikṣīt, " Śrī Datta Digambar Dattāvadhūt: Dattajayantī Viśeṣāṅka." *Pimparī Cincwad Samācār*, December 12, 2008):8.

Despite being an ascetic, Dattātreya is acclaimed by householders for his quality of being a *smatṛgāmī* (the one who goes to devotees instantly upon remembering him). Dattātreya is described in *purāṇic* and epic sources as a sage who grants boons to his disciples. This “giving” character has made him popular among householders. As a woman devotee described, “Unlike other Hindu gods, who become manifest to establish religion or to protect good people, Dattātreya assists you with your problems in life on earth. He grants you material resources, including health, wealth, and offspring. I think women can relate even more with his “giving” quality as they are also ‘givers’ by nature.”

In short, Dattātreya’s integrative figure and *guru* nature have attracted devotees across castes, classes, genders and religions. The ascetic character of Dattātreya has long appealed to *saṃnyāsīs* and barefooted ascetics whereas the healing stories associated with him have attracted physically and emotionally troubled people. His “antinomian”<sup>111</sup> nature draws equal attention from heterodox and orthodox elements. Due to his healing character, Dattātreya is also associated with the *sufi sants* in some communities.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Rigopoulos uses the term “antinomian” to refer to Dattātreya’s connections with varied types of religious circles, including orthodox and liberal. See Rigopoulos, 46.

<sup>112</sup> I visited a pilgrimage shrine for a *sufi sant* called Maunibābā Karañjī in Nāsik (Taluka Niphād). At this shrine there was a tomb *ordargāh* built in commemoration of the *Sufi sant*. What was striking was that this *dargāh* was built alongside a Dattātreya temple. I learned from the manager of the temple celebration of Datta Jayantī and Mauni Babā’s Jayantī attract a huge crowd.



Figure 1. Three-headed Dattātreya. A mural on the wall of a Dattātreya temple in Kolhāpur



Figure 2. Three-headed Dattatreya from Dattatreya Temple in Lokmānyanagar, Pune.  
Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar





Figure 3. One-headed Dattatreya from Nārāyaṇpur, Pune. Photo: <http://www.aroundpune.com/narayanpur.htm>, accessed on January 15, 2013

## Dattātreya in Literature

The earliest references to the figure of Dattātreya are found in the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. Here he is depicted as the son of the ṛṣī Atri and his wife Anasuyā. In the *purāṇic* genre, the deity gets portrayed as an *avatār* of Viṣṇu and as a teacher of Yoga. The *yogin* qualities of Dattātreya are further enhanced in the *upaniṣadic* and *tāntric* literature. Finally, the deity's association with Viṣṇu is stressed in medieval Marathi literature. In what follows, I will give an overview of the evolution of the figure of Dattātreya based on the references to Dattātreya in *purāṇic*, *upaniṣadic*, *tāntric* Sanskrit literature and medieval Marathi literature.

### *Purāṇic* Literature

The earliest references to the figure of Dattātreya are found in the Mahābhārata as well as in various *purāṇas*, including the *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Brahma*, *Brahmāṇḍa*, *Viṣṇudharmottar*, *Garuḍa*, *Padma*, *Agni*, *Vāyu*, *Matsya*, *Skanda* and *Bhāgavatapurāṇas*. Despite variations in his biographical details, Dattātreya's association with Viṣṇu is constant in all these narratives. Rigopoulos notes that, whereas Dattātreya is mentioned as a ṛṣī (sage) in the Epic period,<sup>113</sup> he acquires the status of an *avatār* in the later *Garuḍa* and *Bhāgavata purāṇas*.<sup>114</sup>

The progression of Dattātreya from a ṛṣī to an *avatār* is significant, as it alludes to the gradual development of the figure of Dattātreya as well as the development of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* in two divergent directions: i.e. the orthodox tradition, which portrays a sanitized, brāhmaṇical character of the deity; and a heterodox tradition that builds on the *tāntric*, *yogic*, and healing character of the deity. With *avatār* status, Dattātreya's association with Viṣṇu is strengthened.

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<sup>113</sup> Epic period in Hinduism refers to the period of writing of the two epics, *purāṇas* as well as development of the devotional worship. Roughly speaking, this period spans over from 500BCE to 500 CE.

<sup>114</sup> Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin And Avatāra: A Study of The Transformative And Inclusive Character Of A Multi-faceted Hindu Deity*, 42.

Dattātreyā is an *avatār* of *Viṣṇu*--he who is the soul of living creatures. This *avatār* was forgiving. He restored the status of the Vedas, rekindled the interest of people in the Vedic religion, criticized the laxity in the *cāturvarṇya* order, uprooted *aḍharma* and untruth. And he strengthened the weakening populations [by his deeds].<sup>115</sup>

Moreover, the idea of purity is stressed through an argument that restoring the brāhmaṇical traditions restores *dharma* (*Brahmapurāṇa*). Comparing the *Mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa* and *Brahma purāṇa*. For example, the *Brahmapurāṇa* and the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* stress the sanitized, brāhmaṇical character of the deity by alluding to the savior nature of this *avatār*.

However, Dattātreyā of the *Mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa* is more complex than the brāhmaṇical, sanitized deity as depicted in the above-mentioned *purāṇas*. Rigopoulos considers the *Markaṇḍeya purāṇa* the “*locus classicus*” of Dattātreyā due to its elaborate treatment of the figure of Dattātreyā. The nature of Dattātreyā in the *Mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa* is more complex than that in other *purāṇas*. Similar to other *purāṇas* that stress Dattātreyā’s more complex ascetic qualities, the *Mārkaṇḍeya purāṇa* also depicts him as an ascetic. However, what is puzzling is that he is in the company of beautiful women, he is addicted to liquor, and he enjoys “this-worldly” pleasures. This heterodox behavior is explained by his *unmatta* nature:

Dattātreyā appears as the type of *Yogin* who is in the world and yet outside of it, and who, though not mad, acts as if he were intoxicated or a lunatic (*unmatta*), dissimulating his true nature, as already seen in case of his “brother” Durvās.<sup>116</sup>

The majority of the *purāṇas* portray him as a *yogin* and a teacher of “good reasoning.” Some *purāṇas*, however, such as the *Padma purāṇa*, emphasize his generous nature through stories of his granting children to kings. In the *Skanda purāṇa*, he even rescues a brāhmaṇ who is trapped by a Vetāḷa.

More specifically, *purāṇas* establish the figure of Dattātreyā through narratives of his birth. There are five narratives related to the birth of Dattātreyā in the *Mahābhārata* and the *purāṇas*.<sup>117</sup> A common theme among all these narratives is that Dattātreyā is born as a result of a

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<sup>115</sup> Dhare, *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa*, 5.

<sup>116</sup> Rigopoulos, *Dattātreyā: The Immortal Guru, Yogin And Avatāra: A Study of The Transformative And Inclusive Character Of A Multi-faceted Hindu Deity*, 27, 32.

<sup>117</sup> Dhare, *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa*, 10-13.

boon from the gods to his father Atri or to his mother Anasuyā. The idea of *tapas*<sup>118</sup> is central in the stories in which Atri is the cause of Dattātreya's birth, whereas as the idea of *satitva* is key in the narratives associated with Anasuyā. Overall, the stories from the minor *purāṇas* emphasize the theme of Anasuyā's chastity, whereas the stories from the Mahābhārata and the major *purāṇas* stress Atri's role in the creation of Dattātreya.

There are at least three variants of stories where Dattātreya is born due to his father's austerities. The story from the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* (4.1.15-33) is the least complicated of the three. In this narrative, the sage Atri performs austerities on a mountain in order to beget a son. Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are pleased by the austerities and penance of the sage and promise to fulfill his wish. Atri asks for sons like the three deities, and gets three sons—Soma from Brahmā, Datta from Viṣṇu, and Durvās from Śiva, respectively. The story from the *Brahma purāṇa* (144:2-4) is similar to the one from the *Bhāgavata* with respect to the idea of a father performing austerities in order to get a child. The slight variation in this particular version is that in addition to asking for sons, Atri wishes to get a daughter.

Unlike the above two versions, in which Atri gets progeny as a result of his intentional *tapas*, in the Mahābhārata version (*Anuśāsan Parva* 261) of the birth of Dattātreya, he is born as a reward given to Atri for his work of illuminating the earth with sunlight. In this version, Atri rescues the sun from Rāhu,<sup>119</sup> and consequentially the earth gets light from the sun.

The theme of austerity figures differently in stories in which Anasuyā begets Dattātreya from gods. Unlike Atri, she does not perform intentional *tapas* in order to get son. It is the power she derives from being a virtuous and a chaste woman that compels the gods to offer their *avatārs* to Anasuyā.

Dhere summarizes the narratives from the *Vāyu*, *Brahmāṇḍa* and *Kurma purāṇas* as follows:

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<sup>118</sup>*Tapas* refers to "to torment one's self, undergo self-mortification, practice austerity." See, M. Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit-Marathi Dictionary*, 436.

<sup>119</sup>"The seizer, or the name of a *daitya* or demon who is supposed to seize the sun and moon and thus cause eclipses." See, *Ibid.*, 879.

A brāhmaṇ named Kauśik lived in the city of Pratiṣṭhān. He used to have sex with a prostitute despite being a brāhmaṇ. He never cared for his chaste wife. Later in his life, he became ill with leprosy and his body organs became dysfunctional one after the other. The prostitute abandoned him and when he had nowhere to go, he came back home to his wife. His wife did not hate him despite his physical condition. She took care of him under all circumstances. Although she took so much care of him, Kauśik did not love her. He used to think about the prostitute all the time. One time he told his wife to take him to the prostitute. As his wife was taking him to the prostitute, he bumped into sage Maṇḍavya. Sage Maṇḍavya was being hung to death by mistake. Since the sage had been hurt by Kauśik on his death bed, he cursed Kauśik, “You will be dead at sunrise tomorrow.” Kauśik’s wife stopped the sun from rising with her *satitva*--the power of chastity. However, this disturbed the cosmic balance. Then the gods approached Anasuyā to convey Kauśik’s wife to restore the nature-cycle. As a reward for being a successful mediator, Anasuyā got three divine sons.<sup>120</sup>

The author of the *Gurucaritra* adapts the the theme of Anasuyā’s chastity from the version in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*. In this version, the wives of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva become jealous of the powers Anasuyā acquires due to her chastity. As a result, they conspire with their spouses. The three gods, disguised in the form of mendicants, visit Anasuyā while her husband is away from home. They beg Anasuyā for food. As Anasuyā approaches with food to offer, they ask her to serve them with no clothes on. With her powers of chastity, Anasuyā turns the beggars into babies and then serves them the food with no clothes on. In this way, she fulfills the wish of the beggars without tarnishing her chastity. Pleased by her dedication and wisdom, the gods offer themselves to her in the form of her sons.

#### *Upaniṣadic Literature*

Dattātreya is mentioned in eight of the minor *upaniṣads*, composed sometime between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries.<sup>121</sup> In all, these *upaniṣads* belong to three categories: *Yoga upaniṣads*, *Samnyāsa upaniṣads* and *Viṣṇu Upaniṣads*. In contrast to Dattātreya’s *avatār* status, discussed in the previous section on *purāṇic* literature, Dattātreya’s Śaiva character is emphasized in most of the *upaniṣadic* literature. For example, Dattātreya is equated with Śiva in the third chapter of the *Śāṇḍilya upaniṣad*, where he is described as the originator of the universe.

<sup>120</sup> Dhare, *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa*, 11.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 17; Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin And Avatāra: A Study of The Transformative And Inclusive Character Of A Multi-faceted Hindu Deity*, 77.

The *Jābala Upaniṣad*, chronologically the oldest, belongs to the category of *Yoga Upaniṣads*. This text depicts Dattātreya as a *jñāna-yogī* who illustrates the eight *aṅgas* of Yoga to his disciples. Similarly, the *Śāṅḍilya Upaniṣad* depicts Dattātreya as a *Haṭha-yogī*.

In the later *Samnyāsa upaniṣads*, such as the *Bhikṣuka*, *Āśrama*, *Avdhūt*, and *Nāraḍa Parivrājaka Upaniṣads*, Dattātreya is described as a *paramahansa yogī*, a constantly wandering ascetic who, having no material possessions of his own, accepts alms from all caste-clusters. The *Dattātreya Upaniṣad* deserves special mention in consideration of the *Viṣṇu Upaniṣads*. Allegedly composed after the development of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*,<sup>122</sup> the *upaniṣad* integrates Datta's Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava identities by referring to Dattātreya as Nārāyaṇa in the beginning and as Śiva in the end. Besides its integrative character, the *Dattātreya Upaniṣad* sets itself apart from other *upaniṣads*, as it consists of mantras devoted to Dattātreya.

#### Tāntric Literature

The relationship between the Dattātreya *sampradāy* and tantric traditions can be traced from spatial, iconographic and literary sources. Dhare asserts that Dattātreya originated in tantric circles.<sup>123</sup> Although he is considered to be an *avatār* of Viṣṇu in the later literature, his ascetic nature and *yogin* character correspond with Śiva more than Viṣṇu. Moreover, Dattātreya is credited as author of many Tantric texts, such *Datta-Bhārgav-Samvād* (part of the *Tripurā Rahasya*), and the *Paraśurāmakalpasūtra*. Finally, there is a strong spatial connection between the worship of Devī and Dattātreya, in that several important sites associated with Dattātreya worship predate as places of goddess worship. Māhur, Kolhāpur, and Audumbar are cases in point.

#### Nāth Tradition

Nāth tradition shares philosophical, literary and spatial connections with the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. The philosophical connections are based on two ideological commonalities: 1) the

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<sup>122</sup> Raeside, *Dattātreya*, 490.

<sup>123</sup> Dhare, *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa*, 21.

emphasis on yogic practices as a means of liberation from *saṃsāra*; and 2) the significance of a *guru* on the path of liberation. Dattātreya is mentioned in many texts of the Nāth tradition, such as the *Gorakhbānī* by Gorakṣanāth and the *Gorakh-Dattātreya saṃvād* by Cindaḍ Śaṅkar. Likewise, references to works of the Nāthas are not uncommon in texts from the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. In the *Nav-Nāth-bhakti-sār*, an eighteenth-century Marathi work about the Nāth *sampradāy*, Dattātreya is depicted as the founder of the Nāth *sampradāy*.<sup>124</sup>

In *Dattaprabodh*, Kavadi Baba (Kavaḍībābā), the author of the text, devotes 12 chapters to works of important figures from the Nāth tradition. Mount Girnār, a mountain in the Saurāṣṭra region of western India, is prominent in the religious histories of both the Nath and the Dattātreya traditions.<sup>125</sup> The legend that Gorakṣanāth got instruction from Dattātreya on this mountain is foundational in making this place a pilgrimage place for devotees of both traditions.<sup>126</sup>

#### Mahānubhāv Literature

Similar to the Dattātreya of the Nāths, who is essentially ascetic in character, the Dattātreya of the Mahānubhāvs is also an ascetic. He is described as the “originator” of the Mahānubhāv tradition (*yā mārgāsī ādi kāraṇŚrī Dattātreya prabhu kī gā*). Central books of the tradition, including the *Sahyādrī Varṇan*, *Dattātreya bālkṛīḍā*, *Dattātreya Māhātmya*, and *Ātmatīrthaprakāś*, refer to the figure of Dattātreya. Dhare argues that the role of Mahānubhāvs in the development of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* is foundational, as they were the only ones to spread the figure of Dattātreya beyond Maharashtra after the followers of the Nāth tradition.<sup>127</sup> Although Mahānubhāvs trace their origin to Dattātreya, their description of the deity is radically different from that in the mainstream Dattātreya *sampradāy*. The Dattātreya of the Mahānubhāvs is not an incarnation of Viṣṇu. He is considered to be eternally present in all four *yugās*. Further,

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<sup>124</sup> Charles Pain with Eleanor Zelliott, "The God Dattātreya and the Datta Temples of Puṇe." in *Essays on Religion in Maharashtra*, ed. Eleanor and Maxine Berntsen Zelliott (Albany: SUNY, 1988), 97.

<sup>125</sup> H.S. Joṣī, *Origin and Development of Dattātreya Worship in India*, 199.

<sup>126</sup> Raeside, 1982.

<sup>127</sup> Dhare, *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa*, 66.

unlike the later three-headed depiction, the Dattātreya of the Mahānubhāvs is one-headed.<sup>128</sup> I will discuss the question of one-vs.-three heads below.

The evolution of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* cannot be fully grasped without considering the status of Dattātreya in other religious movements of Maharashtra. Apart from the two oldest traditions, those of the Nāths and the Mahānubhāvs, Dattātreya is also mentioned in the literature of various religious movements of Maharashtra that developed later. Whereas Jñāneśvar makes references to the *yogin* nature of Dattātreya in his *Abhaṅgagāthā*, the later *sants* of the Vārkarī movement, including Eknāth and Tukārām, stress the wish-filling nature of the deity. The author of the famous Dattātreya *ārati*<sup>129</sup> sung commonly in Marathi households today is none other than Tukārām. References to Dattātreya are also found in the writings of Rāmdās, the founder of the *Samarthsampradāy* in Maharashtra. Similarly, Śrīdharsvāmī and Śrīkriṣṇa Dayāṛṇav of the *Ānandsampradāy* refer to the figure of Dattātreya in the course of writing about the *Dattamāhātmya*, the *Gurūgīta* etc. Finally, Dattātreya is revered in the manuscripts of many *sants* that did not belong to any structured religious tradition.

The above survey illustrates the evolution of the character of Dattātreya in literature from a *ṛṣī* to an *avatār* of Viṣṇu. Further, as has been discussed above, the figure of Dattātreya has associations with the major religious circles of medieval Maharashtra, including the Tāntric and Nāth sects, the Mahānubhāv sect, and the Vaiṣṇav Vārkarī sect. Besides the integrative nature of Dattātreya, his status as *iṣṭa-devatā* has shaped the nature of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* to a great extent. In short, the boundaries of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* have always been more porous than those of the other religious traditions in Maharashtra as the “integrative”<sup>130</sup> elements in the character of Dattātreya appeal to a varied range of devotees, from orthodox brāhmaṇs to radical tāntrics.

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<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, 194.

<sup>129</sup> *Arati* is a type of song that praises a god (or sometimes multiple gods). The Marathi phrase “*Arati karaṇem*” refers to singing praise songs of deities at homes or in temples. See Molesworth 75.

<sup>130</sup> Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin And Avatāra: A Study of The Transformative And Inclusive Character Of A Multi-faceted Hindu Deity*, xii.



### Iconography: One-headed or three-headed?

Apart from references about his nature, literary texts make iconographic references to the appearance of Dattātreya as well. Texts such as the *Agni purāṇa* describe the one-headed form with two hands, whereas the *Dattātreyakalpa*, the *Śāṅḍilya Upaniṣad*,<sup>131</sup> and Mahānubhāv texts such as *Sahyādrī-varṇana* describe a one-headed image of Dattātreya with four hands.<sup>132</sup> According to the *Dattātreyakalpa*, Dattātreya is fair-skinned, and he has one head and four hands. Yet another variation with one head and six hands is popular among the followers of some *gurus*, such as Dāsopant (1551-1615), Nirañjan Raghunāth (1782-1855), Nārāyaṇmahārāj Jālavaṇakar (1793-1838), and Pantmahārāj Baḷekundrikar (1855-1905). In the Vāsudevānand Sarasvatī (also known as Ṭembe Svāmī) tradition, Dattātreya has one head and two hands.<sup>133</sup> The differences in iconographic details can be instructive in understanding the evolution of the deity in the Marathi region. As mentioned before, in contemporary Maharashtra, the most common image of Dattātreya is with three-heads and six hands. He is also accompanied by four dogs and a cow.

Rigopoulos speculates that the “sonic correspondence” between the ending of the deity’s name, “-treya,” and the numeral adjective “traya” (three) has been a cause of triadic characterization of the deity.<sup>134</sup> Often the name of the deity is written with the numerical adjective “traya” in popular Marathi writings.<sup>135</sup> In my fieldwork, many devotees of Dattātreya explained the etymology of the term Dattātreya based on the three heads of the deity. However, based on the Sanskrit etymology, the word Dattātreya can be explained in two ways. The first is based on the two terms--*Datta* and *ātreya*. In this case, the word *Datta* is taken as the past passive participle form of the root verb “dā.” *Datta* means “given.” *Ātreya* is taken as a derivative noun based on the

<sup>131</sup> H. N. Kunden, *Ekmukhī Śrīdatta* (Pune: Ulhās Ciṅtāmaṇī Lāṭkar, 1997), 144-5.

<sup>132</sup> Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin And Avatāra: A Study of The Transformative And Inclusive Character Of A Multi-faceted Hindu Deity*, 223.

<sup>133</sup> Mādhavrao Dikṣīt, “Śrī Datta Digambar Dattāvadhūt: Dattajayantī Viśeṣāṅka,” 8.

<sup>134</sup> Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin And Avatāra: A Study of The Transformative And Inclusive Character Of A Multi-faceted Hindu Deity*, 229.

<sup>135</sup> By popular Marathi writings, I refer to newspaper articles and articles in the weekly magazines dedicated to religious content.

noun *atri* and is translated as “Atrī’s”. Thus, the meaning of Dattātreya, according to this etymology, is “the given son of Atrī.”<sup>136</sup> In the second version, the word Dattātreya is believed to be a combination of two words—*Dattā* and *treya*. In this case, *treya* is taken as a reference to the three *guṇās* and Datta is translated as “giving up.” This leads to the interpretation of the word as follows: Dattātreya is the one who gave up all the three *guṇās*. This is an indication of his ascetic character.<sup>137</sup>

The three heads of Dattātreya represent Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Although Viṣṇu is in the middle in most cases, it is not hard to find Dattātreya images with Brahmā or Śiva in the middle.<sup>138</sup> Typically, the three-headed images have six hands holding objects symbolic of the three deities. The hands of Brahmā hold a garland and a water-pot (*kamaṇḍalu*), the hands of Viṣṇu hold a conch and a discus, and the two hands of Śiva hold his drum and trident. Stressing the integrative nature of the deity, Kunden maintains that the conch and discus represent the *rajo guṇa* of the deity, the trident and drum symbolize the destructive or *tamo guṇa* of the deity, and the garland and *Kamaṇḍalu* symbolize the *sattva guṇa* or ascetic nature of the deity.<sup>139</sup>

The presence of dogs and a cow around Dattātreya icons is indicative of the “antinomian” character of the deity. The cow is believed to represent the heavenly wish-fulfilling cow. Sometimes she is also symbolized as earth, in which case, her master—Dattātreya—is considered to be the master of cosmic events. The presence of dogs around Dattātreya is striking, as dogs are associated with impurity in many Hindu traditions. Kunden speculates that the inclusion of dogs in Dattātreya’s iconography is linked to the Nāth tradition (see fig.4).<sup>140</sup> One of my readers explained the association of Datta’s dogs with the Vedas (see fig. 5). This man said: “You see, the idea is that the four Vedas became known to Dattātreya like dogs (who

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<sup>136</sup>Rigopoulos, 27.

<sup>137</sup> For detailed discussion of the two etymologies of the word Dattātreya, see *ibid.* 27-28.

<sup>138</sup>Kunden, *Ekmukhī Śrīdatta*, 134.

<sup>139</sup>Kunden, *Ekmukhī Śrīdatta*, 120.

<sup>140</sup>*Ibid.* 120. M.S. Māṭe also notes, “verses from *Harivaṃśa* stress that the figure of Dattātreya “revived the study of the Vedas[and] re-established Vedic rites and sacrifices,” see M.S. Māṭe, “Gāṇagāpūr-Dattātreya ” In *Temples and Legends of Mahārāṣṭra* (Bombay: Bhāratiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988).

become available to their masters with ease).”<sup>141</sup> Rigopoulos contends that “contrasting the presence of the “impure” dogs with the sacred cow highlights the deity’s brāhmanical orthodoxy.”<sup>142</sup>

In addition to the three-headed Dattātreyā icons, there are several places in India that host a one-headed image of Dattātreyā. I came across about a dozen one-headed Datta temples in Pune, including the Rāste Vāḍā temple, the Parāñjape temple in Somvār Peṭh, Haribhāu’s temple from Sahakārnagar, and the Kātraḥ Datta temple. The one-headed marble image of Dattātreyā from Narāyaṇpur (approximately 20 miles south of Pune) has evolved into an important pilgrimage place of the Dattātreyā *sampradāy* over the past 25 years. Devotees hold the one-headed icon of the deity in Narāyaṇpur to be *jāgṛt*.<sup>143</sup> Outside of Pune, one comes across one-headed Datta icons at Indapur, Āṃbejogāi, Miraj, Gondvale, and Paṇḍharpur. One-headed Dattātreyā icons are also found outside Maharashtra in Bhaṭgāon (Nepal), Devās, Genḍigate (Baḍodā, Gujarat) and Dattanagar (Śimlā, Himachal Pradesh).

Apart from the iconic representation of the deity in one- and three-headed form, the aniconic representation of Datta in the form of his *pādukās* (Dattātreyā’s footwear and by extension his feet) holds a special significance in the Dattātreyā *sampradāy*. The feet or footwear of god or a holy man have been an object of devotion in Hinduism as they (feet and footwear) represent the active presence of the deity and are considered to hold the energy of the deity (see fig.6). In the absence of the deity, Dattātreyā’s footwear is believed to hold his essence (see fig. 7).<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Personal communication with a Dattātreyā devotee from Pune on January 17, 2010.

<sup>142</sup> Rigopoulos, *Dattātreyā: The Immortal Guru, Yogin And Avatāra: A Study of The Transformative And Inclusive Character Of A Multi-faceted Hindu Deity*, 231.

<sup>143</sup> *Jāgṛt* literally means “awake.” See Monier, Williams 417. Here it refers to the qualities of being awake/active all the time.

<sup>144</sup> Devotees believe that the original footprints of Dattātreyā are believed to be located on the lonely peak at Mount Girnār.



Figure 4. Dattātreya and the Nāth Tradition: picture from a roadside poster seller



Figure. 5: A sitting dog at the entrance of the Dattātreya temple in Audumbar. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar



Figure 6. *Pādukā* worship at a Dattātreya temple in Pune. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar



Figure 7: Dattātreya *pādukā*, Grinār. Photo Courtesy: Dattatreya Lakshman Rukke Guruji, Narsobācī Vāḍī. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

### **Dattātreya Sampradāy**

Although Dattātreya as a deity is mentioned in several religious texts written in the first millennium, the Dattātreya *sampradāy* flourished only around the middle of the second millennium. During this later period, Dattātreya's three-headed form became more popular; the tradition became more cohesive due to written literature (the *Gurucaritra*); and pilgrimage centers were established as a result of the travels of two *gurus* (Śrīpād Śrīvallabh and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī), who are hailed as *avatārs* of Dattātreya. Following the works of these two Datta-*avatārs*, the Dattātreya *sampradāy* has continued to attract devotees from several strata of society over the past six centuries.

### *Guruparamparā* (the genealogy of *gurus*)

The flowering of the *sampradāy* in different directions is, perhaps most importantly, the work of the *gurus*. As Dattātreya is perceived to be the *guru* of *gurus*, the relationship between a *guru* and his/her disciple is at the crux of the *sampradāy*. In this context, the works of several *gurus* must be mentioned. The Sarasvatī tradition refers to the chain of disciples of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. Dhare reports that the names of seven direct disciples of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī are available to us. These are: Mādhav, Bāl, Kṛṣṇa, Upendra, Sadānand, Jñānajyoti and Siddha. One can say that the *Gurucaritra* tradition thrives through the lineage of these seven disciples of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. However, this is not to suggest that the *Gurucaritra* is read exclusively by disciples in the Sarasvatī tradition.

Several *gurus* that did not have a direct connection with the Sarasvatī tradition have also been vital in the evolution of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. Three figures were responsible for establishing the Dattātreya *sampradāy* in the century after the death of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. These were Eknāth (1433-1521), Janārdansvāmī (1504-1575), and Dāsopant (1551-1615). Janārdansvāmī was instrumental in spreading the Dattātreya *sampradāy* beyond Maharashtra, especially in Andhra Pradesh. The distinction of Janārdansvāmī's sect lies in its effort to bring together Hindus and Muslims. Dhare notes that Cānda Bodhle—a Muslim Marathi *sant*-- was Janārdansvāmī's *guru*.<sup>145</sup>

If Janārdansvāmī presents the unity of two religions, Eknāth represents a classic case of the confluence of two religious *sampradāys* in Maharashtra. Although Eknāth belonged to the Vārkarī tradition, Dattātreya and Viṭthal are mentioned interchangeably in Eknāth's *abhaṅgas*. In Dasopant's *Padārṇava*, which consists of poetry about various Hindu deities, Dasopant devotes about one thousand verses to Dattātreya.<sup>146</sup> Besides these three *gurus*, the works of Mukteśvar, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Marathi poet, refer to Dattātreya. What is distinctive about Mukteśvar's writing is that he mentions a Śiva-natured Dattātreya.

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<sup>145</sup> Dhare, *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihāsa*, 138.

<sup>146</sup> Kunden, *Ekmukhī Śrīdatta*, 78.

Numerous *gurus* in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries further elaborated the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. These include Kinrām Aghorī (1620-1772), Cidaṃbar Dīkṣit (1758-1815), Anantasūta (also known as Kavaḍībābā 1776-1863), Nirañjan Raghunāth (1782-1855), Nārāyaṇmahārāj Jālavaṅkar (1807-1867), Māṇik Prabhu (1817-1865), Akkalkoṭ Svāmī (19<sup>th</sup> century), Viṣṇudās (1835-1917), Śrīpant Mahārāj Bālekundrīkar (1855-1905), Vāmanrāo Vāmorīkar (1848-1901), Nārāyaṇ Mahārāj Keḍgāvkar (1885-1945), Śrīraṅga Avdhoot (1898-1968), Guḷvaṇī Mahārāj (1886-1974), Rāmānand Bīḍkar Mahārāj (1838-1913), Rāvsāheb Sahasrabuddhe (1883-1954), Śrī Kṣirsāgar Mahārāj (1934-1999), and More Dādā (1974-1988).<sup>147</sup>

The followers of Māṇik Prabhu (1817-1865), whose followers consider him the third *avatār* of Dattātreya, established a tradition in Humanābād, in the Bīdar district of the state of Karnataka. The Māṇik Prabhu tradition, also known as *Sakalamat Sampradāy* is distinctive from other sects in the Dattātreya *sampradāy* that emphasize asceticism, whereas Māṇik Prabhu's tradition's stress is on the ample use of gold, pearls, gems and music. As the name *Sakalamata* (literally, including opinion of all) suggests, this tradition is inclusive in that it celebrates "the Sankrāntī festival of the Lingāyat community, the Moharram festival of the Islamic community and Datta Jayantī of the brāhmaṇs."<sup>148</sup>

A contemporary of Māṇik Prabhu, Akkalkoṭ Svāmī (late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century), is also considered by members of the Dattātreya *Sampradāy* to have been an *avatār* of Nṛsimha Sarasvatī. Apart from his arrival in the village of Akkalkoṭ in 1857, other details about his life are unknown. The sect that developed around him is not as homogenous as the *Sakalamat* tradition. I met with followers of two different sub-traditions of Akkalkoṭ Svāmī: one that developed in and around the area of Akkalkoṭ, and another that developed in Diṇḍorī, a village near Naśik. Finally, Śrī Vāsudevānanda Sarasvatī (also known as Ṭembe Svāmī, 1854-1914) is also perceived as an incarnation of Dattātreya by his followers. He was born in Māṇagāv, a small

<sup>147</sup> This list is not of inclusive nature. For more detailed information about the names of various *gurus* in the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, refer P.N. Jośī, *Śrī-Dattātreya Jñān-Koṣ*, especially pages 381-518.

<sup>148</sup> Kunden, *Ek mukhī Śrī datta*, 71.



village in the south Konkan area of Maharashtra. Like Akkalkoṭ Svāmī, Ṭembe Svāmī also travelled throughout India. His contribution to the development of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* lies in his prolific writings. He authored nineteen books, including *Dvisāhastrī Gurucaritra* (1889), *Datta Purāṇa* (1892), *Datta Māhātmya* (1901), and *Saptaśatī Gurucaritra Sār* (1904). Tembe Svāmī's direct disciples Raṅgāvadhūt Mahārāj, Guḷvaṇī Mahārāj, Gāṇḍā Mahārāj, Datta Mahārāj Aṣṭekar Mahārāj, Bālamukund Sarasvatī, Nānā Mahārāj Tarāṇekar and Nārāyaṇ Mahārāj Keḍgāonkar carried forward his teachings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In Gujarat, the Dattātreya *sampradāy* flourished through the teachings of Śrīraṅgāvadhūta, a *guru* from the Vāsudevānanda Sarasvatī tradition. Śrīraṅgāvadhūta made the *Gurucaritra* available to the Gujarātī-speaking community by translating it into the Gujarātī language under the name *Gurulilāmṛta*. In addition, he also composed *Dattabāvanī*, an abridged version of the *Gurucaritra* consisting of fifty-two verses. I met some Dattātreya devotees in Datta temples in Pune who chanted and wrote verses from *Dattabāvanī* every day.

### **Ritual Practices**

Followers of Dattātreya participate in a variety of ritual practices including *pāḷkhī* sessions, *pārāyaṇ* sessions of the *Gurucaritra* and pilgrimages to Dattātreya temples at Narsobācī Vāḍī, Audumbar, Gāṇagāpūr, Kuravpūr and Pīṭhāpūr. *Pārāyaṇ* or religious reading of major texts of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, is another important activity conducted in various Dattātreya temples (see fig. 8). As can be seen from the range of ritual practices discussed below, there is no unified sense of community among followers of Dattātreya. The unboundaried nature of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* allows and encourages the multiplicity of ritual practices.

#### *Pāḷkhī Kaḍhaṇem*

In many Dattātreya temples, *pāḷkhī* (palanquin) sessions (*pāḷkhī kaḍhaṇem*) are conducted every week. In most communities, Thursdays are the preferred day for weekly sessions. In some cases, *pāḷkhī* celebrations are organized only once every month, typically on the full-moon night. During the processions, a decorated palanquin, or *pāḷkhī*, which is kept in temple storage space at other times, is brought out. The icon of Dattātreya is placed inside the

palanquin and taken around the temple three or more times. At Audumbar, the *pāḷkhī* is also carried out on Saturdays, full-moon nights and special occasions. Typically, devotees make three circumambulations around the temple, stopping at pre-decided intervals to sing songs in praise of Dattātreyā.<sup>149</sup> At Narsobācī Vāḍī, the *pāḷkhī* is taken out every evening after the *āratī* (praise-songs).<sup>150</sup> At Vāḍī, only priests sing the praise-songs, whereas in various other temples women participate in singing songs along with their male counterparts. Gāṇagāpūr has a tradition of organizing a *pāḷkhī* procession every Thursday after the evening *āratī* session. Māṭe describes the procession as follows:

The evening program on that day includes the *pāḷkhī* or palanquin procession. The *ustavmūrtī* of the *guru* is seated in the palanquin decked out in excellent garments and ornaments. The procession goes around the shrine thrice, special songs written for the occasion being recited along the way. The *pāḷkhī* is then brought to a halt, *āratī* is sung and the program from *karpurāratī* onwards follows as usual [as on other days of the week].<sup>151</sup>

Among all the other sites dedicated to Dattātreyā, Kuravpūr is distinctive in that it celebrates the *pāḷkhī kaḍhaṇem* for nine days before the *Datta Jayantī* festival. S. S. Deshpande (Deśpāṇḍe) notes, "The procession icon (*ustavmūrtī*) is brought to the Kṛṣṇā river and removed from the palanquin for bathing. A large number of devotees stretch themselves on the ground side by side so the *pāḷkhī* can be carried over them."<sup>152</sup>

<sup>149</sup>Suḍhāṃśu. *Śrīkṣetra Audumbar* (Audumbar, Sāṅglī: G. K. Rāykar, 1977), 29.

<sup>150</sup>The procession icon is brought to the temple ceremonially and placed on the royal seat (*siṃhāsana*) during the evening *āratī* session. The *pāḷkhī* is then taken around the temple three times, making four stops for people to sing *āratī* each time.

<sup>151</sup>Māṭe, "Gāṇagāpūr-Dattātreyā" In *Temples and Legends of Mahārāṣṭra*, 92.

<sup>152</sup>S. S. Deśpāṇḍe, *Siddhabhumī Kuravpūr* (Pune: Śrīpād GaṅgāḍharJośī, 1969), 84-5.



Figure 8: *Pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra*, Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

#### Pilgrimages

Every year there is a large turnout to the places associated with two *avatārs* of Dattātreya. Improved means of communication, easy access to means of travel, and better financial resources have increased the number of visitors at these and other pilgrimage places over the past few decades. The *Gurucaritra* reading groups I interacted with were well-travelled to the major Dattātreya centers in Maharashtra, including Narsobācī Vāḍī, Audumbar and Gāṇagāpūr.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>153</sup> At Narsobācī Vāḍī, Dattātreya *pādukā* are called “Manohar *pādukā*.” Gāṇagāpūr they are referred to as “*Nirguṇpādukā*,” and at Audumbar as “*vimalpādukā*.” H. S. Joṣī discusses the use of *padukās* in the Dattātreya *Sampradāy* in detail. He notes that the reason for using *padukās* is that “the subtle vibrations of a man are always stored up in abundance in the feet rather than in any other limb.” Further, he also alludes to the iconoclastic attitude of Muslims and their destruction of icons from Hindu temples as a reason for the popularity of *padukās* over the anthropomorphic image of Dattātreya. See H.S. Joṣī, *Origin and Development of Dattātreya Worship in India*, 188-90.

In particular, women of the reading group from the Salisbury Park area mentioned that they visited one pilgrimage place at the culmination of every reading session. I also met with several individuals who had visited Kurvpūr and Piṭhāpūr (places associated with the first *avatār* of Dattātreyā, Śrīpād Śrīvallabh) as well as Kārañjā (the birthplace of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī-- the second *avatār* of Dattātreyā). In addition, Mount Girnār is a pilgrimage place for Datta devotees due to Dattātreyā's association with the Nāth tradition.

Narsobācī Vāḍī—previously known as Amarāpūr but later named Narsobācī Vāḍī after Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī—is located about eight miles away from the Jaisinghpūr railway station. Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī is believed to have resided in Narsobācī Vāḍī for twelve years. The temple is located on the banks of the river Kriṣṇā. Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī established worship of the *pādukā* (which are known as *manohar pādukā*) in the temple.

Audumbar is situated on the banks of Kṛṣṇā river as well, about 8 km from the Bhilavaḍī Railway station on the Miraj-Pune railway line. The place got its name from the abundance of Audumbar trees in the area. Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī lived for four months at this place. Similar to Narsobācī Vāḍī, where Dattātreyā is worshiped in the form of *pādukā* (rather than a three-headed image), is considered to be more important.

Gāṇagāpūr—located on the confluence of Bhīmā and Amarjā rivers in Karnataka—is popular among Dattātreyā devotees as Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī spent most of his life here. Unlike the *pādukā* at Narsobācī Vāḍī and Audumbar, the *pādukā* here (also known as *nirguṇ pādukā*) are not easily accessible to the devotees, due to the barrier of a wall between the *pādukā* and them.

The wanderings of the deity and his *avatārs* Śrīpād Śrīvallabh and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī have deeply influenced the pilgrimage process in the *samprāday*. One often comes across Datta devotees travelling to the towns associated with the two Datta *avatārs* either for casual visits or for ritual readings of the *Gurucaritra*. In Narsobācī Vāḍī, I met with a brāhmaṇ, middle-class couple in their sixties from Mumbai who had visited Vāḍī (as it is fondly referred to by Datta devotees) on every New Year's Eve for the past thirty years. Apart from this, many Dattātreyā

devotees told me that they visit one of the Datta places on an annual or sometimes monthly basis.

Apart from pilgrimages to places associated with the figure of Dattātreya and his *avatārs*, pilgrimages to the places of various later *gurus* attract a large number of followers every year. Humaṇābād (Andhra Pradesh) for Maṇik Prabhu, Bāḷekundrī (Karnataka) for Pant Bāḷekundrī Mahārāj, Akkalkoṭ (Karnataka) for Akkalkoṭ Mahārāj, Garuḍesvar (Gujarat) for Raṅgāvdhūt Mahārāj are only a few examples.

Another distinctive feature of pilgrimage in the Dattātreya *sampradāy* is its association with the redemption of evil spirits (*bhūt-pret-piśācca*). The *Gurucaritra* includes stories in which the *guru* rescues evil spirits and grants liberation to evil spirits from the cycle of *saṃsāra* (chapters 20 and 28). At Gāṇagāpūr, I noticed several men and women being taken to the shrine and then to the eight sacred places, known as *aṣṭa-tīrtha*, on the banks of the confluence.<sup>154</sup> The visitors gathered around the pole in the main temple around the evening *āratī* time to watch the “*bhūt kāḍhneṃ*” procession of troubled beings. Men and women were cursing Dattātreya with names such as “Dattā” as they jumped up the pole. They looked uneasy. One of the attendees explained me, “This is how the god makes the evil spirits uneasy and ultimately they leave. Right now this woman is suffering, but it is not her. It is actually someone else that has captivated her, you see.” The associations with the “*bhūt kāḍhneṃ*” practices are also significant in other Dattātreya communities such as Vāḍī and Audumbar.

#### Literary Works

Due to the centrality of the *gurus* to the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, literary works authored by various *gurus* hold a special place among the devotees of Dattātreya. However, among the numerous works of the *gurus*, four texts are cardinal to the *Dattātreya sampradāy* in Maharashtra. They are: *Gurucaritra*, *Dattaprabodh*, *Dattamahātmya*, and *Gurulīlāmṛt*.

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<sup>154</sup>The term “*aṣṭa-tīrthas*” refers to the eight sacred places on the banks of the confluence of the Bhimā and Amarjā rivers.

The *Gurucaritra* was written by Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara around the year 1558. It consists of 51 chapters with 7491 verses. The text narrates of the birth of Dattātreya followed by stories about two incarnations of Dattātreya, i.e., Śrīpād Śrīvallabh and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. The stories about the Datta incarnations explain the centrality of the *guru* in the lives of disciples. In addition to the life and works of *gurus*, several other topics such as a code of conduct for brāhmaṇas and one for married women, as well as descriptions about Hindu pilgrimages and votive observances, make the text appealing to contemporary readers. Besides its lucid language and everyday-life topics, the text has acquired a quasi-Vedic status among followers due to a belief that each word in the long composition has mantric powers. Consequently, followers read it in its entirety as a votive observance in hopes of getting specific desires fulfilled. Since the narratives in the *Gurucaritra* address crises in everyday lives of ordinary people, the *Gurucaritra* has acquired a central place in the Dattātreya *sampradāy* compared to the later compositions.

*Dattaprabodh*, written by Anantasūta alias Kavaḍībābā in the year 1860, is much larger than the *Gurucaritra*. It consists of 61 chapters with 14,236 verses. It also differs from the *Gurucaritra* in terms of its orientation. Unlike the lucid and engaging narrative style of the *Gurucaritra*, the style of *Dattaprabodh* is highly philosophical and aimed at a more elite audience. Whereas the universe of the *Gurucaritra* is brāhmaṇical in character, the universe of *Dattaprabodh* is influenced by two traditions—the Nāth tradition and the Vārkarī tradition—which have appealed devotees across castes. One-fourth of the *Dattaprabodh* is devoted to stories of Siddhas and their association with Dattātreya. The text's author, who belonged to the Niṃbarāj tradition, was also associated with the Vārkarī tradition. Due to this, the author stresses the oneness of Dattātreya and Viṭhobā in the text.

Similar to the *Gurucaritra*, *Śrī Gurulīmāmṛt* stresses the significance of the *guru's* grace in the material and spiritual well-being of his followers. This text, written in 1863, is devoted to the life and works of Akkalkoṭ Svāmī. Believed to have disappeared in 1878, Akkalkoṭ Svāmī is considered to be a third incarnation of Dattātreya, after Śrīpād Śrīvallabh and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. Vāmanrāo Vāmorikar, the author of the text, was a devotee of Akkalkoṭ Svāmī (fondly referred to

as Svāmī Samarth). *Śrī Gurulīmāmṛt* consists of 55 chapters with 9,757 verses. During my fieldwork, I met several devotees of Svāmī Samarth who do *pārāyaṇ* of *Śrī Gurulīmāmṛt* at least once a year.

Finally, *Dattamāhātmya*, authored by Vāsudevānand Sarasvatī (also known as Ṭembe Svāmī among the devotees) deserves special mention. Vāsudevanand Sarasvatī's (1854-1914), contribution to the literary development of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is immense. His corpus includes 19 books about Dattātreya in Sanskrit and Marathi. *Dattamāhātmya*, the translation of *Dattapurāṇa*, was intended for larger audiences who could understand Marathi. The text was intended to educate people about the life and works of Dattātreya. Compared to the *Gurucaritra*, *Dattamāhātmya* is much smaller, with only 5,513 verses in it.

Besides the four literary works mentioned above, several other works are well known in the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. These works fall under two categories: works authored by individual *gurus* of sub-traditions within the Dattātreya *sampradāy* and abridged versions of the four principal literary works discussed above. In what follows, I shall discuss the nature and content of the *Gurucaritra*.

### **The *Gurucaritra***

“*Gurucaritra*” literally means the life story of a *guru*. The stories in the *Gurucaritra*—the central scripture of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*—revolve around the deeds of two principal *gurus*—Śrīpād Śrīvallabh and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. The followers of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*<sup>155</sup> regard these two *gurus* as incarnations of Dattātreya. The universe of the *Gurucaritra* consists of stories about the everyday life of ordinary people. It focuses on such topics as healing and health, children, instructions on cooking food, pilgrimages, rites of passage, and ideals for married men

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<sup>155</sup>Monier Williams defines the term *sampradāyas* “tradition, established doctrine transmitted from one teacher to another, traditional belief or usage, any peculiar or sectarian system of religious teaching, sect.” See, M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-Marathi Dictionary*, 1175. However, in the colloquial usage, people make a categorical distinction between *sampradāy* and “tradition.” Whereas the word “tradition” implies a sort of homogeneity and continuity, the Marathi word *sampradāy* is used more like an umbrella term for loosely related sects developed around the figure of a deity.

and women. Further, the narrative builds from the perspective of disciples whose lives are bettered because of their unwavering devotion to their *guru*. G.B. Sardār,<sup>156</sup> a Marathi scholar of religion, aptly describes the *Gurucaritra* as a “book for householders (*saṃsārī maṃsācā granth*).” As noted in chapter one, through the reading of the *Gurucaritra* in public or private settings, it has gained the status of *the* sacred text of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. In the universe of the *Gurucaritra*, no one is excluded from getting the guru’s grace. The *Gurucaritra* has something to offer everyone, from orthodox brāhmaṇs to farmers to outcastes, and from a childless woman seeking a child to a leprous person disliked by society. Lucid language, references to everyday life, dialogic form, and the belief in its *māntric* status have made the *Gurucaritra* popular among the followers of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*.

Period and original manuscript

The two leading characters of the *Gurucaritra*— Śrīpād Śrīvallabh and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī, lived in the 14th and 15th centuries, respectively.<sup>157</sup> Most scholars hold year 1558 to be the date of first manuscript of the *Gurucaritra*.<sup>158</sup> However, some scholars, such as Vishnu Keshav Palekar (Viṣṇu Keśav Paḷekar, alternatively known as Aprabuddha), disagree with this date, as they claim to have uncovered hand-written *pothīs*<sup>159</sup> dated earlier than 1558. Although there is disagreement about the time-period of writing of the *Gurucaritra*, this debate seems to be restricted to the scholarly realm, as none of my interlocutors mentioned it. Among many other

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<sup>156</sup>G.B.Sardār, *Saṅt Vaṅgmāyaci Sāmājīk Phalaśrutī* (Pune: Marāṭhi Sāhitya Pariśad Prakāśan 1962).

<sup>157</sup>M. V Kulkarṇī, *Śrīgurū Caritra: Sarvāṅgiṇ Abhyās* (Belgāon: Āśā V. Javaḷkar, Belgāon, 1993), 76.

<sup>158</sup>Ibid. There seems to be general agreement about this date among scholars, including Pangarkar (Pāṅgārkar), Khare, Dhare and P.N. Joshi.

<sup>159</sup> See, Molesworth, *A Dictionary: Marāṭhī and English*, 577. Molesworth defines *poṭhī* as “a book, a pamphlet, manuscript”. However, the semantic range of this term is not as wide as these English terms connote. My interlocutors’ usage of the term restricted to the religious books used commonly for *pārāyaṇ* purposes. Thus, when they used the term *poṭhī*, they meant a religious book (handwritten or printed) which is used for *pārāyaṇ*.



versions that are available, *pothīs* published by Ḍhavḷe *prakaśan* and Anmol *prakaśan* are especially widely used and easily available for purchase.

The debate about time-period is salient because the original *pothī* is no longer available, for it is believed to be buried in the walls of the house of the author. Rāmcaṅdra Kāmat, the editor of the *pothī* published by Ḍhavḷe *prakaśan*, recounts a story he learned from someone about how the original manuscript was lost over the course of a feud among the descendants of Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara:

Sāyamdev--an ancestor of Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara who is believed to have met Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī, lived in Kaḍghaṅcī, a village in the Gulbarga district of the Nizam Ilākhā. Formerly known as Kāncī, the village was home to four houses of Sāyamdev's clan. Gaṅgādhara, the direct descendent of Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara, the author of the *Gurucaritra*, is 25 years old. He is a mentally unstable widower whose current whereabouts are unknown. His cousin Kriṣṇāppā is also mentally unstable. Other family members give him his share of work as Kuḷkarṇi of the village. Previously, Gaṅgādhara launched a complaint that he was not getting his share and the house was confiscated. At that time, they hid the original *pothī* written by Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara somewhere in the walls so no one could find it.<sup>160</sup>

When asked about Kaḍghaṅcī, a couple of my informants shared similar versions of the above story to explain how the original *pothī* was lost. My own visit to Kaḍghaṅcī left unanswered my questions about the original *pothī*.<sup>161</sup> After visiting Gāṅgāpur, my driver and I left for Kaḍghaṅcī, which is about 40 km away from Gāṅgāpur. We had to find our way through several villages. The driver found out that there were three villages named Kaḍghaṅcī in the area. Even after we mentioned Dattātreya and the *Gurucaritra*, people could not tell which Kaḍghaṅcī was associated with them. Finally, we found our way to "our" Kaḍghaṅcī. Upon arrival, we saw a brand-new temple built in marble right next to a big house that belonged to the Gaṅgādhara family. The temple was maintained by a Hindi-speaking *svāmī*. When asked about the original *pothī*, the Svāmī said, "I think that the original *pothī* is underneath the *sanctum sanctorum* of this temple. I believe that it will come up at an appropriate time."

While I was interviewing this Svāmī, my driver (a fluent Kannada speaker), was visited by members of the Gaṅgādhara family. After he explained the purpose of our visit, the members of

<sup>160</sup> Rāmcaṅdra, Kṛṣṇ. Kāmat, *Guru-Caritra* 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bombay: Ḍhavḷe Prakāśan, 1968), 706.

<sup>161</sup> I visited Kaḍghaṅcī on February 22, 2010.

the family warned us about the authenticity of the information given by the Svāmī. In my interviews with the readers of the *Gurucaritra*, I often brought up my experience at Kaḍghaṅcī. My readers would be curious to hear my story, but the questions about getting there and finding the original copy were not so important to them.

#### Author

Unlike the issues of time period and original manuscript, the issue of authorship of the *Gurucaritra* is straightforward, as Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara gives information about his ancestors, birthplace, etc. at the beginning of the book:

I, the author, was born in the Apastambh branch,  
[he] belongs to the *kaunḍinya* gotra,  
In the famous family of Sākhre to which Sāyaṃdev belonged  
After Sāyaṃdev came Nāgnāṅh, to whom a son named Devrāv was born  
[His son] Gaṅgādhara was always engrossed in thoughts about *Śrīguru*  
(*Gurucaritra* Chapter 1:40-42)

Gaṅgādhara also gives details of his mother in terms of her maiden name and *gotra*, and establishes that his mother's ancestors were also followers of Dattātreya. Besides family history, the author gives a disclaimer that he is not a native Marathi speaker and that he is a novice writer (*Gurucaritra* Chapter 1:38 and 39).

#### Structure and Style

The *Gurucaritra* is a dialogue between Nāmdhāra and his *guru*, Siddha Sarasvatī. In all, the *Gurucaritra* consists of fifty-three chapters, of which the last one is a summary that reminds readers of the preceding stories. Some of my women informants said that reading the last chapter of the *Gurucaritra* is an equally meritorious deed as reading the entire book. The fifty-one chapters of the book can be divided into three sections: section one (chapters 1-4) gives preliminary background information for the main topic; section two (chapters 5-10) discusses the

life and deeds of the first *avatār* of Dattātreyā; and section three (chapters 11-52) focuses on the life and deeds of the second *avatār* of Dattātreyā.

Section one: preliminary introduction

The first chapter is the chapter of *naman*,<sup>162</sup> wherein the author prays for divine assistance to finish his endeavor without interruptions. In addition, the author convinces his readers of the efficacy of the *Gurucaritra* in terms of getting knowledge of spiritual realms as well as addressing material concerns. In addition to giving cosmogonic narratives and the significance of the *guru* in the *kaliyuga*, chapter two serves the purpose of introducing readers to the ideal relationship between a disciple (Deepak) and his *guru* (Vedadharmā). Chapter three is a precursor for chapter four, as it discusses the motive for the birth of Dattātreyā in the form of a curse given by the *ṛṣi* Durvāsa to king Aṃbariṣa. Chapter four describes the birth of the three-headed Dattātreyā to a *sāttvik* couple—*ṛṣi* Atrī and *pativrata* Anasuyā.

Section two: *Śrīpād Śrīvallabh*: The first *avatār* of Dattātreyā

The author of the text devotes five chapters to describing the life and deeds of Śrīpād Śrīvallabh, whom contemporary Datta devotees refer as the first *avatār* of Dattātreyā. According to the *Gurucaritra*, Śrīpād Śrīvallabh was born to a brāhmaṇ couple, Āpaḷarāj and Sumatī (husband and wife, respectively) from Pīṭhāpūr, Andhra Pradesh, as a result of a boon from Dattātreyā to Sumatī. Māṭe summarizes Śrīpād's birth narraive as follows:

Dattātreyā was one morning moving around begging for *mādhukarī*. He went to a house where the *śrāddha* ceremony was in progress. It is a common custom that no food is served to any one on such an occasion before the priests are fed. But the lady of the house gave alms to the *atithī*, ignoring the custom. Dattātreyā was greatly pleased and

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<sup>162</sup> The word *naman* means “bowing.” In this case, it refers to remembering the important deities before beginning the writing, see, M. Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit-Marathi Dictionary*, 528

offered a boon to the lady. She asked that she become the mother of a son as worthy as the god....In due course she got a son who was named Śrīpād.<sup>163</sup>

Thus, Sumatī got the boon from Dattātreya because she offered him *bhikṣa* (food) in a time of ritual crisis. Sumatī's and Āpaṅarāj's offspring Śrīpād was extraordinary in character. When the parents discussed matters of matrimonial alliance with the teenager, he refused to marry and alluded to his intentions of becoming a renouncer. After becoming a renouncer, Śrīpād saved a widow and her mentally-retarded son from committing suicide. On another occasion, he also gave a boon promising a washerman that he would become a Muslim king in his next birth. Both these stories express the grace and powers of the *guru*. In the former story, the *guru* comes to rescue troubled souls, whereas in the latter story the *guru* rewards a disciple with material happiness.

### Section three: Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī

Whereas the author dedicates only five chapters to Śrīpād Śrīvallabh, he devotes forty chapters to describing the life and deeds of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's extraordinary powers are evident from his utterance of "Om" at birth and then his chanting of the Vedas at the time of his *vrata-bandha*. Shortly after the *vrata-bandha* ceremony Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī renounces his home and embarks on several pilgrimages. It is on these journeys that he meets sick, poor, and helpless people. The stories in the *Gurucaritra* are thus essentially associated with geographical places. The story found in *the Gurucaritra* is a narrative of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's journeys, including a four-month stay at Audumbar on the banks of the Kṛṣṇā river and a twelve-year stay at the banks of the confluence of the Kṛṣṇā and Pañcagaṅgā rivers. This is followed by a final twenty-four years at the confluence of the Bhīmā and Amarajā rivers before he disappears in the Kadaṅ forest on ŚrīŚailya mountain in Andhra Pradesh. In the following section, I have selected excerpts from various chapters to illustrate these two central themes.

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<sup>163</sup>Māte, "Gāṅagāpur-Dattātreya "in *Temples and Legends of Mahārāṣṭra*, 83.

## Thematic Introduction to the *Gurucaritra*

*Guru- Bhakti*: unconditional surrender to the *Guru*

The author illustrates the idea of devotion to the *guru* with various stories from *purāṇas* as well as from the lives of *avatārs* of Datta. The central theme of these stories is the necessity of unconditional surrender to the *guru* at all times. Devotion to the *guru* is ranked even above devotion to the divine. To quote from the *Gurucaritra* (2:24):

*The guru can save a disciple from Viṣṇu and Śiva if they are mad at the disciple, but if the guru gets angry with the disciple, even Siva cannot save him.*

The relationship between a disciple and a *guru* is dependent upon the disciple's unconditional surrender to the *guru*; by his grace, the *guru* empowers his followers in terms of health, wealth and spiritual knowledge. The following verse from the *Gurucaritra* explains as follows the significance of devotion to the *guru*:

The *Gurucaritra* 10:11 Devotion to the *guru* never goes waste. He always liberates [his disciples]. He always takes care of his devotees.

The author also uses stories from *purāṇas* as well as from the life of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī to set the example of devotion to the *guru*. From *purāṇic* literature, he picks three examples—the story of Vedadharmā and Deepak, that of Dhaumya and Āruṇi, and that of Dhaumya and Upamanyu. The story of Vedadharmā and Deepak can be summarized as follows:

There was an *anāśram* of the sage Aṅgīrasa on the banks of the Godāvarī river. Vedadharmā, the son of the *ṛṣi* Aṅgīrasa, also had many students living with him. Deepak was one of his sincere and hardworking students. Vedadharmā called upon all his disciples one time and told them that he had almost burnt off the bad *karma* of the deeds in his past lives. However, since it was not burnt off completely, he needed to go to on a pilgrimage to Vārāṇasī. Vedadharmā asked his disciples to volunteer to accompany him. Deepak agreed to go with him. Vedadharmā warned him that he would be afflicted with leprosy followed by loss of vision and hearing. Despite this warning, Deepak promised to take care of his *guru* for twenty-one years. As per his promise, Deepak took his *guru* to Vārāṇasī. Although Vedadharmā's health deteriorated day by day, Deepak looked after him. Śaṅkar was pleased with Deepak's loyalty to his *guru* and asked him to demand something that he desired. Deepak answered instantly that he would need to consult with his *guru*. Then he came to his *guru* and asked if he could ask the god for recovery of his *guru's* health. The *guru* told Deepak not to ask god for recovery of his health. Deepak

conveyed the same message to Śaṅkar. Śaṅkar was even more pleased with Deepak's answer, and soon even Viṣṇu came to know about it.<sup>164</sup>

The narrative of Vedadharmā and Deepak exemplifies several underlying themes of the *Gurucaritra*. First, Deepak decides to accompany his *guru* on the pilgrimage despite knowing about his future condition about his *guru's* health. Second, he takes care of his *guru* irrespective of his *guru's* tantrums due to his ill health. Third, he does not aspire for any kind of reward for his devotion. Thus, Deepak exemplifies a devoted disciple who follows his *guru's* directions unconditionally and selflessly.

If Deepak sets the example of ultimate surrender to the *guru* no matter what physical condition the *guru* is suffering from, then the narratives of Dhaumya and his disciples illustrate that disciples should follow *guru's* instructions, even putting their lives at stake. In the first story, Dhaumya assigns to one of his disciples, Āruṅī, the task of watering the crop in the forest. The task would have been simple and straightforward under normal circumstances. However, Āruṅī gets worried at the sight of the overflow from the water tank. After a few futile attempts at obstructing the water, ultimately he lays his body down to slow down the water flow. In this way, he channelizes the water so that some of it flows to the farm and the rest gets diverted. Āruṅī offers his life to keep his *guru's* word. His *guru* comes looking for him in the evening, and after learning about Āruṅī's attempts at obstructing the water-flow, he gives Āruṅī all types of knowledge and skills. Similar to Āruṅī, Dhaumya's other disciples Veda and Upamanyu offer their lives to follow their *guru's* orders. In return, the *guru* saves them and offers his grace by empowering them with spiritual knowledge.

The use of *purāṇic* stories in the *Gurucaritra* seems intentional, as it creates a sense of belonging to the larger Hindu community by establishing that there is coherence in message between the established scriptures and the *Gurucaritra*. Moreover, knowing that the readers

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<sup>164</sup>For a complete version in Marathī, refer, Vikās Pāṭil, *Śrīgurūcaritrātīl Śrīgurūh̄cyā Sākṣatkārī Kathā* (Dombivalī (W): SriGurū Prakāśan, 2007), 22-28.

would be familiar with the *purāṇic* stories, the author blends in *purāṇic* stories with the stories from Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's life. Although every chapter in the book makes reference to the theme of *guru-bhaktī*, the examples of Narahari brāhmaṇ, Bhāskar brāhmaṇ and the *śūdra* farmer epitomize the ideal *guru-bhaktī* in the times of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. Here I provide summaries of these three stories:

#### Naraharī Brāhmaṇ (The Leprous Brahman)

During the *guru's* [Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's] stay in Gāṇagāpūr, a brāhmaṇ named Naraharī came to the *guru* one day. He said, "I have made fun of everyone in my life and as a consequence I have become a leper. I have learned *Yajurveda* but no one respects me for my knowledge any more.

Everybody avoids me due to my disease. I am really frustrated with my life. I went on several pilgrimages and performed different kinds of votive observances in hopes of getting cured. But alas! This disease has no cure. I came to you to request you to rescue me from these miseries or else I will commit suicide." The *guru* was disturbed after learning about Naraharī's physical condition. He said, "Naraharī, you have committed a lot of bad deeds in your previous births. If you follow my instructions, your bad actions will be burnt off and you will be able to restore your health." As the *guru* was saying this, a man came there with a dry wooden stick of an Audumbar tree. He was going to use that wood to cook his food. The *Guru* noticed that and told Naraharī to bring the wooden stick to the banks of the river, hide it there, and then make offerings to the spot where it was hidden. The *Guru* instructed Naraharī that if he made these offerings continually for seven days then his health would be restored.

Naraharī followed his *guru's* instructions without any doubt. He fasted for seven days. In addition, he watered the dry wood every single day. The people living in the neighborhood were baffled by Naraharī's actions. They wondered why he watered the dead plant every day. Naraharī told them, "My *guru* is the ocean of grace. He takes care of his disciples under all circumstances." The people mocked him for his behavior and belief. But Naraharī kept watering the dead plant. He did not drink even a drop of water for the entire week.

The *Guru* said, "Whoever keeps faith in the *guru's* teachings gets the desired things in life." (*Gurucaritra* 40:111). At the end of the seven-day period, the dead plant suddenly turned into an Audumbar tree and, just as iron turns into gold by the touch of the *ciñtāmaṇī* gem, Naraharī's leprosy got cured instantly by the touch of the branch of that Audumbar tree (*Gurucaritra* Chapter 40).

#### Bhāskar Brāhmaṇ (The Poor Bhāskar Brāhmaṇ)

The *guru* (Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī) never accepted money as an offering from his followers. Instead, he suggested using that wealth to offer food to everyone in the vicinity. A poor brāhmaṇ named Bhāskar came to the *guru* one day to offer alms. He had brought enough uncooked rice, wheat flour and miscellaneous food items for three people. As he was going to offer alms, he was offered food by another disciple of his *guru*. He placed the uncooked food items underneath his pillow and went to sleep. The same thing happened again the next day and the next. Someone or other would offer him uncooked food every day and he would bring it home and store it under his pillow at the end of the day. After noticing this pattern for several days, other disciples started ridiculing him.

Three months passed and the *guru* came to know about how his disciple was being mocked due to his poverty. He called upon the poor brāhmaṇ Bhāskar one day and told him that he (*guru*) planned to eat the food cooked by Bhāskar that day.

Bhāskar was very happy to learn the *guru*'s wish. He brought two kilograms of *ghee* and some fresh vegetables from the market and cooked food after a bath (with a pure body and mind). He cooked food instantly and let his *guru* know about it. When his *guru* sent him to the river to get the other disciples, they said, "It will take a long time for you to get alms of uncooked food and then cook it. It will be night by the time the food is ready, so we will come by a little later." Bhāskar reported his *guru* how the disciples had turned him away, and suggested that the two of them (Bhāskar and the *guru*) should take their meal. The *guru* said, "I want to take my meal with all other brāhmaṇs today. If that is not possible, I will skip taking a meal from you." The *guru* sent another disciple to get the other brahmans/disciples and announced, "Bhāskar is going to offer food to everyone today. Get ready with your leaf-plates at once." The brāhmaṇs laughed at Bhāskar one more time, saying, "We wonder if we can get even smallest of the portions from your food. Knowing the limited amount of food you have, are you not ashamed of offering us food?"

Bhāskar made offerings to his *guru*. The *guru* was pleased and asked Bhāskar to cover the cooked food with his garment (*uparaṇem*). The *guru* sprinkled some water on the food and chanted *mantras*. After that the food multiplied so much that there were abundant leftovers even after four thousand people had been served. Then the *guru* invited everyone from the village, including the *śudras*, for a meal. Everyone was satisfied with food in the end. Finally, the *guru* asked Bhāskar to offer the leftovers to the fishes in the lake. The *guru* assured Bhāskar that he would never be worried about lack of wealth from that time onwards. Thus, Bhāskar became rich and happy due to the *guru*'s grace. (*Gurucaritra*, Chapter 38)

The farmer from Gāṇagāpur (*śudra*)

There lived a *śudra* farmer named Parvateśvar in Gāṇagāpūr. He was very devoted to the *guru*. The *guru* used to take a bath at the confluence [of the Bhīmā and Amarjā rivers] every morning. On his way back, the *guru* met with the farmer every day. The farmer made sure to prostrate himself to his *guru* every time he passed by. He did this with ultimate devotion for years. One day the *guru* asked the farmer if he wanted to request something specific from the *guru*. He said, "I wish to have a good harvest this year." The *guru* asked, "What did you sow this year?" He answered, "*jondhale* [a type of grain]. The yield looks healthy this year due to your grace. If you grace my fields, I am sure I will get a good harvest this year. Please do not ignore me because I am a *śudra*." The *guru* went to the field and told him, "Make sure you cut all the yield before I return from my bath at noon." Parvateśvar came back to the village asking for help to cut the crop. He promised the tax-collectors to double the quantity of grain given as tax. When the farmer's family members prohibited him from cutting the crop, he hit them. When the *guru* came back in the afternoon he said, "You should not have cut the crop. I was not serious when I told you to cut the crop." The farmer said, "Every statement of yours is like a *kāmdhenu* (the heavenly wish-fulfilling cow) for me, so I followed your instructions." Then the *guru* assured him that everything would be fine.

The farmer's family members were worried about the loss of the crop, as that was their only means of survival. However, the farmer was not worried at all. There were heavy rains in the village that year, and all yields from the village were wiped out. By contrast, the *śudra*'s fields flourished beyond imagination that year. Then the farmer's wife and other family members were convinced of the *guru*'s grace. (*Gurucaritra*, Chapter 47)



In the second story, Bhāskar calls upon brāhmaṇs from the banks of the river upon his *guru's* instructions. He does not doubt the possibility of feeding an infinite number of people with his poor resources. This steadfast faith brings him wealth in the end. Likewise, in the first story, Narahaṛī follows the *guru's* instructions despite knowing the apparent uselessness of the prescribed action. The third story epitomizes the idea of *guru-bhakti* in that the *guru* asks the disciple to get himself in trouble first. Similar to Āruṇī, who puts his life at stake, the farmer puts his life at stake by cutting the crop. However, like Āruṇī's life, the farmer's life is blessed with all joys in the end. The *Gurucaritra* defines *guru-bhakti* as an unconditional and unquestioned faith in the *guru*.

### *Guru-prasād*

The *guru* of the *Gurucaritra* does not teach his disciples that material existence is unreal, nor does he encourage the idea of praising the divine with withdrawal from this world. On the contrary, he empowers his disciples in every aspect of their lives, including wealth, health and knowledge. After all, the *guru* is concerned about the well-being of his disciples and their families.

To quote from the *Gurucaritra*:

One who understands how to serve his *guru* gets knowledge about everything. With the *guru's* blessings, one commands even the Vedas and *śāstras*. (*Gurucaritra* 16:31)

The *guru* is like the fabulous wish-fulfilling tree from heaven who gives his disciples whatever they desire. What is more, he bestows things upon them even before the disciples wish for them. Indeed, the *guru* is like the heavenly wish-fulfilling cow. (*Gurucaritra* 3:35)

During his stay at Narsobācī Vāḍī, Audumbar and Gāṇagāpūr, Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī cured several people from deadly diseases; he also blessed some of his disciples with hidden treasures and enlightened his followers with knowledge. The following selection of stories gives a glimpse of what the *guru* can offer to his disciples.

### Stories

Wealth:

All the *guru* expects from his disciples is absolute and unquestioned commitment. That is why the *guru* tests his disciples from time to time before gracing them with worldly goods. In the first story below, Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī tests a brāhmaṇ by taking away his only source of livelihood. In the second, he demands alms from a lady knowing that she has nothing to offer.

The *guru* takes away a bean vine

The *guru* lived in Aurvād and surrounding villages for twelve years. During his stay, he went to Amarāpur village often to get alms. A learned brāhmaṇ lived in Amarāpur with his *pativratā* (deeply devoted) wife. The brāhmaṇ begged only dry (uncooked) items for alms. He used the beans from the vine of beans on days when he could not acquire dry items as alms.

One day the *guru* came to the brāhmaṇ begging for alms. The brāhmaṇ's wife made offerings of sixteen kinds to the *guru*. And she gave the meal of cooked beans to the *guru*. While leaving their house, the *guru* blessed them that their poverty would cease.

And then the *guru* plucked the vine root. The wife and other family members of the brāhmaṇ were disheartened, as the *guru* had taken away the one and only means of their survival. The reverent brāhmaṇ was angry with at his family members and told them that the *guru* would take care of them no matter what. He pulled out the roots of the vine and offered them to the river. Since the vine had taken deep roots underneath the earth, he was forced to dig deep. While digging, he found a huge pot full of money. The brāhmaṇ took that pot to the *guru* and prostrated himself to the *guru*. The *guru* told him to use the treasure without sharing this news with anyone. The poor brāhmaṇ and his family were blessed with wealth in this manner. (*Gurucaritra* Chapter 18)

A barren cow starts lactating

During his years in Gāṇagāpūr, the *guru* used to come back to the village at noon to beg for alms. Once he came to a poor brāhmaṇ's house. The brāhmaṇ had a very old, barren cow. The cow was of no other use except for carrying dirt from the brāhmaṇ's house to the groves on the bank of the river.

As the *guru* approached the brāhmaṇ's house, other learned brāhmaṇs mocked the *guru* for visiting the poor and ignorant brāhmaṇ. They asked, "We have a variety of tasty vegetables and desserts. Why is the *guru* choosing this poor brāhmaṇ over the tasty food that he would get from us?"

The *guru* did not pay attention to the learned brāhmaṇs. He did not care about the financial status of his followers; instead, he cared for the integrity and devotion of his followers. So he went to the poor brāhmaṇ's home. Unfortunately, the brāhmaṇ had nothing to offer to the *guru*, as he had not earned anything that day. The brāhmaṇ had gone out to beg alms at noon when the *guru* visited his place. The brāhmaṇ's wife came out and prostrated herself in front of the *guru*. She assured the *guru* that she would be able to offer good food to the *guru* upon her husband's arrival. The *guru* smiled and said to the woman, "Why do you say that you have nothing to offer despite having this cow?"

The woman said in a sad tone that the cow was infertile and that they used her instead as a draft animal. The *guru* ordered the woman, "Why are you telling lies? Try

milking the cow in front of me and prove that she is infertile.” The woman trusted the *guru*’s words and fetched a pot to hold the milk from the cow. And the cow started miraculously lactating. The woman realized that the *guru* was not an ordinary man. She took the milk into her kitchen and heated it on the stove. Thereafter, she offered it to the *guru* in lieu of alms (*bhikṣā*). The *guru* blessed the woman saying that goddess Lakṣmī would reside in her house forever and that she would never be poor again. (*Gurucaritra*, Chapter 22)

Health:

The *guru* empowers his followers in matters of their material as well as spiritual well-being. As a result, in the book there are many stories about curing the disciples’ ailments. The stories of Nandī brāhmaṇ, Ratnābāī, and a Muslim king are typical.

The *guru* heals Nandī brāhmaṇ from leprosy

A brāhmaṇ named Nandī had developed leprosy all over his body. He stayed in Tuljipur to practice votive observances for the goddess. His stay was in vain, as the leprosy got worse during that time. Then he was instructed to go to Cāṇḍāla Parameśvarī. He stayed there for seven months. He did a lot of fasting there. In a dream, he was instructed to go to Gāṇagāpūr to the *guru*. However, he was angry with the goddess Cāṇḍāla for not curing him in seven months. He insisted that the goddess cure him and he stayed at her place in Tuljipur. The temple priests forced him to leave the temple and to visit the *guru* in Gāṇagāpūr as per his dream. Finally, he arrived at the *guru*’s place in Gāṇagāpūr. He narrated the tragic story of his life to the *guru* as follows, “I was diagnosed with leprosy after my wedding. My wife abandoned me upon knowledge of my disease. I was depressed and came to Tuljipur in hopes of getting cured. I did numerous votive observances, but everything was in vain. Finally, I got instructions to visit you. I request you to tell me my prospects. I am not afraid of death any more.” The *guru* told his other disciples to take Nandī to the banks of the river and to give him new clothes after his bath. When the brāhmaṇ came out of the river after his bath, his leprosy was all gone. He looked radiant and energetic. The place where he left his old clothes turned into marsh land. Nandī came to the *guru* full of joy. Upon the *guru*’s order, he looked over his whole body and noticed a small white patch on his thigh. He was curious to know the reason for that small patch. The *guru* said, “You came here with doubts about my capabilities. So this small patch serves as a reminder of that doubtful mind. However, if you write poems in praise of me, you will be cured completely.” Nandī smiled, then said, “I have no skills to write. I don’t know how to compose poems at all.” The *guru* instructed him to open his mouth and placed a little bit of *vibhūti* (ash purified with mantras) on his tongue. He was able to compose poems praising the *guru* instantly. Eventually, the small patch of leprosy was all gone and Nandī was cured completely. (*Gurucaritra*Chapter 45)

Another example about curing leprosy comes at the end of the book, when the *guru*’s sister, Ratnābāī, visits him in Gāṇagāpūr. In Ratnābāī’s case, it is not doubt about the *guru*’s capabilities, but her deeds from a past birth that haunt her through leprosy. She gets cured upon following the *guru*’s instructions to bathe at a pilgrim place in Gāṇagāpūr (Chapter 48).

## The *Guru* cures a brāhmaṇ's stomach pain

Once when the *guru* was visiting Vāsarabrahmeśvar, he noticed a brāhmaṇ suffering from stomach pain on the banks of the river. The *guru* discovered that the brāhmaṇ had come to the river with the intention of committing suicide. The *guru* told his disciples to bring the brāhmaṇ man away from the water. When he came back with the disciples, the *guru* asked him, "Don't you know that by committing suicide one accumulates enormous bad *karma*? What makes you take this extreme decision?" The brāhmaṇ answered, "My life is going waste due to stomach pain. With this stomach pain, I can eat fruit barely once in a fortnight. We say that food is the source of energy, but in my case, it has become a source of pain. Hey *guru*, please help me overcome this stomach pain."

At that time a brāhmaṇ named Sāyaṃdev was passing by to take a bath on the banks of the river. He prostrated himself before the *guru*. The *guru* instructed Sāyaṃdev to feed a full meal to the sick brāhmaṇ. Sāyaṃdev was worried that he could kill the brāhmaṇ with a full meal, considering his stomach condition. However, he followed his *guru's* instructions and gave the brāhmaṇ a full meal. The brāhmaṇ enjoyed all the items in the meal with no stomach problem and was cured thereafter (*Gurucaritra*, Chapter 13).

The *guru* comes to the rescue of his followers not only in times of crisis but also in fulfilling their wishes. The following narrative illustrates this point:

### A woman conceives children at sixty

During the *guru's* stay in Gāṇagāpūr, a woman used to visit him every day. She was a *pativratā* and took care of her husband very well. One time the *guru* asked the lady, "Why do you come here every day? Do you have a particular wish?" She said, "When I go to the banks of the river to do laundry every day, I see women carrying their children and talking to them fondly. I am unlucky, as I have no offspring in this life. At sixty, I cannot hope to have a child any more. However, I desire to have a child in my next birth. I come here to get your grace to get a child in my next life." The *guru* said, "Who knows what will happen in the next birth? I assure you that you will have children of your own in this very life." The lady told the *guru* how all her efforts, votive observances and pilgrimages over the years had been futile in terms of conceiving a child. The *guru* instructed her to go to the confluence of the Bhīmā and Amarjā rivers and water the *Aśvattha* tree every day. The woman watered the *Aśvattha* upon the *guru's* instructions without any doubts about the result. On the third night she dreamed of a brāhmaṇ who told her that her wish had been fulfilled. The next day when she arrived at the *guru's aśram*, the *guru* offered her two fruits and promised that she would conceive a boy and a girl.

The entire village was shocked to see a sixty-year woman pregnant. She gave birth to a daughter the first time and then conceived a son. (*Gurucaritra*, chapter 39)

The stories of the brāhmaṇ from Aurvāḍ, the barren cow, Nandi's leprosy, the stomach pain of a brāhmaṇ, and the woman's conception of a child at the age of sixty emphasize a single point—steadfast devotion to the *guru*. The *guru's* instructions go against common-sense logic in most of these stories. Uprooting the vine, which is the only means of survival for the family, must have been devastating for the family. Similarly, the *guru's* instruction to fetch a pot to collect the

milk from a cow that had never given milk must have been puzzling for the woman. In the same vein, the characters in the other stories mentioned above are asked to do apparently illogical things. However, these characters follow the instructions of their *guru* without doubting. The unwavering devotion to the *guru* fetches the devotees the desired results in the end. Thus, the central point of these narratives is to set an example of *guru-bhakti*—unquestioned piety towards the *guru*.

### Contemporary Readers: Re-traditionalizing and Modernizing

Followers of the Dattatreya *sampradāy* consider the authority of the *Gurucaritra* to be equivalent to that of the Vedas. The comparison of the *Gurucaritra* with the Vedas is based on the notion that each verse in *the Gurucaritra* has *māntric* power. Although each verse is considered to have mantric power, the Vedic emphasis on correct pronunciation is not retained in ritual readings of the *Gurucaritra*. This is why, unlike the Vedas, one can read the *Gurucaritra* without any formal training in pronouncing the mantras with precision.

Devotees of Dattatreya believe that *pārāyaṇ* of *the Gurucaritra* leads to bringing peace [*śānti*], satisfaction (*samādhān*), material welfare (*aihiksamṛaddhī*).<sup>165</sup> The author lists the fruits of the *pārāyaṇ* as follows:

*Gurucaritra* 1:57 This story gives sweet fruits [desired results] for those who aspire to have a child.

Those who read an engaging story like the *Gurucaritra* every day get financial stability all through their lives.

1:58 That house gets abundant wealth and wife and children live happily.

There is not ailment, due to *guru's* grace.

1: 59 One gets detached from the bonds of this life if one listens to the [entire] story without any doubts in its power.

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<sup>165</sup>It must be noted here that, apart from the readers that read the *Gurucaritra* with specific desires in mind, many readers do read the scripture without any specific expectation in their mind. In my fieldwork, I met with several readers who compared the annual *pārāyaṇ* to other family traditions such as celebrating the Gaṇeśa festival around September.

Although the author recommends reading the book anytime “when the mind is pure,” doing the *pārāyaṇ* during the week leading to Datta Jayantī (the birth celebration of Dattātreya) is considered to be extraordinarily powerful. Reading sessions are organized in community centers and private homes during that week. In addition, followers consider *pārāyaṇ* at places such as Narsobacī Vāḍī, Audumbar, Gāṇagāpūr, Pīṭhāpūr, or Kuravpūr to be extra-ordinary due to their association with the two central *gurus* of the tradition. In the process of reading the *Gurucaritra*, the readers re-traditionalize themselves so that they develop a renewed sense of what it means to be a Hindu in their urban contexts. And yet, they modernize by becoming highly intentional about how they interpret the narratives from the text and by taking a critical approach toward their tradition. In what follows, I will illustrate the ways of re-traditionalizing and modernizing by analyzing specific narratives from my interlocutors.

#### Re-traditionalizing

The readers I met with lived in an urban setting where they were engaged in a lifestyle radically different from that in villages. In contrast to villages, where people are part of joint-family systems, residents in urban settings opt for a nuclear-family system where families are smaller, consisting of parents and their children. In a nuclear-family setting, parents of the family do not always have elders of the family to give them guidelines for conducting rituals and to assist them in making arrangements for traditional religious festivities. Moreover, due to the crunch of time and space, making elaborate arrangements for festivities becomes challenging. This leads to simplifying elaborate ritual procedures.

However, another side of the story is that there is an anxiety of uprootedness in the case of migrants and a sense of ‘being on their own’ in the case of nuclear families. In this context, religion provides a sense of continuity and belonging in urban settings. Particularly, the *Gurucaritra* offers what can be called as a ‘crash course in Hinduism’ to literate people in several ways. First, the author of the *Gurucarita* refers to the ancient scriptures of Hinduism in several

chapters. Stories from the *purāṇic* genre are often used in contexts of introducing specific votive observances (chapters 3, 6, 8, 19, 20, 35, 37, and 43) and the author devotes one entire chapter (chapter 26) to discussing the Vedas. A male reader, an electrical engineer by profession, noted:

I like that 26<sup>th</sup> chapter a lot. It is really long and a bit challenging to follow too. But I like it because it gives me a summary of the four Vedas in an hour. I am really interested in learning more about my past. But it is impossible for me to read the Vedas. I do not know any Sanskrit, and I don't have time to learn it.

Secondly, the *Gurucaritra* functions as an instruction manual for ritual behavior. Several chapters (7, 15, 42, and 44) describe rituals and pilgrimages in detail. Many readers mentioned that they got lost in the information while reading these chapters. As one liberal reader put it:

Sometimes I cannot relate to the pilgrimage places mentioned in the *Gurucaritra*. My commitment to religion is really low. I cannot do much [in terms of religious activities] with my business. I have not been to any of those pilgrimage places mentioned [in chapter 42]. But I still read that chapter because that is only way I can know about these places.

Another reader, a young professional who works for a bank, stressed the significance of reading the chapters on pilgrimages and ritual procedures:

Let us consider chapter 36. It is really long. It lists details of how to conduct daily *pūjā*. The topics of details noted in this chapter range from the procedure for taking a bath before performing daily *pūjā* to picking the right kind of flowers for the *pūjā*. When I read this chapter, *pūjā* seems like a tedious procedure to me. Today it is really not possible to follow all the rules. But chapters like these give us a glimpse into our tradition. We get an idea about how our ancestors conducted their ritual life in about the sixteenth century. [*āpalyā ājacyā jīvanāt jarī ase niyam pālaṇe śakya nasale tarī soḷavyā śatakāt āpale purvaj kaśā prakāre dhārmik vidhī karat yācī āplyālā kalpanā yete*].

Thirdly, the *Gurucaritra* works as an ethical treatise for contemporary readers. Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara, the author of the *Gurucaritra*, discusses the *karma* theory in several chapters through narratives about householders. In one chapter, he presents a story in which a wife suffers from leprosy in her later life as a result of her extra-marital relationships in her youth. Gaṅgādhara's urge to re-instate ethical behavior is clear in several other stories as well. He devotes one chapter to discussing the topic of ideals for social conduct for brāhmaṇs (chapter 37). In yet another chapter (chapter 31), he discusses "*pavitravatecā ācār*," or "rules of ideal conduct for a married woman." A retired bank officer described the role of the *Gurucaritra* in his life as follows:

The *Gurucaritra*, to me, is a guideline about what one should achieve in life. Sometimes I think to myself, "Yes, I am married. I have children. I have a stable and well-paying job.

But what next?" If one wants to learn that, then they should read the *Gurucaritra*. The *Gurucaritra* gives guidance about how one should conduct [oneself] properly in society. When people read it in a reflective manner, they certainly become well-rounded and get *sadgatī* [liberation from *samsāra*]

A statement from another male reader echoes the same spirit:

The stories [from the *Gurucaritra*] resemble our lives. They are about householders like us [*āpalyāsarkhyāc grahasthāśramī lokāncyā goṣṭī āhet*]. They make us reflect upon our conduct in the society. For instance, there is one narrative in which a person who is on the verge of dying is saved by another person [chapter 44]. These stories make me self-reflective. [As I read these stories] I ask myself, "How should I behave with others—with my seniors at work and with my family members at home?" We get insights into leading a successful and happy life through these stories.

Yet another male reader who has been reading the *Gurucaritra* for thirty years said, "I have no enemy in this world. When you read the *Gurucaritra* your thinking and behavior with other people are influenced at a subtle level [*nakaḷatpaṇe tumacā itarāñśī vyavahār badalto*]. Ultimately, the *Gurucaritra* serves as an instructive manual for Hindus across generations by providing a guideline about Hindu rituals, ethics, pilgrimages, and ancient scriptures. A reader of the *Gurucaritra* who has read other scriptures written in Marathi described the *Gurucaritra* as a "*sarvāṅgīn granth*," a holistic book. He said,

I have read the *Jñāneśvarī* and *Dāsboḍh*. There is no doubt that these books are milestones in the history of Marathi literature. But ultimately these are philosophical treatises that are really difficult for a common man to understand. I have also read *Gajānana Vijay* and other *pothīs*. Compared to the *Jñāneśvarī* and *Dāsboḍh* they are easy to understand. There is no doubt that they hold a very special place among the followers of those *gurus*. However, the content of those *pothīs* is about specific *gurus*. The *Gurucaritra* is not like that. You do not have to be a follower of a specific *guru* to appreciate it. It is a *sarvāṅgīn granth*. It touches upon a varied range of topics from rules of social conduct to ritual procedures. It is written in simple language that a common person can easily follow. And yet, it has *mantra-śaktī*—every word in that book has the power to heal, the power to bring wellness and the power to bring peace of mind.

#### Modernizing

As noted in the previous section, the *Gurucaritra* serves as a crash course in Hinduism for its contemporary readers by providing glimpses into their tradition's past. By re-visiting ancient Hindu scriptures and rituals in the course of reading the *Gurucaritra*, contemporary readers bring a greater vitality to their religious tradition. However, what is distinctive about the urban readers of the *Gurucaritra* is that they become highly selective about how they interpret the message of the



text and about how they reconfigure ritual practice. The intentionality of the readers was evident in my field work in three distinctive ways: in readers' explanations about their preference for reading over other religious activities, in their interpretations of the message of specific narratives from the text, and in their critical outlook toward the Dattātreya *sampradāy*.

### **Reading over other religious activities**

Several readers noted that they preferred reading over daily *pūjā* and visiting temples. The explanations that they gave for reading were not necessarily based on the message or meaning of the narratives. The reasons given for their preference for reading were not strictly religious either. Readers took a modern approach towards reading as a process by stating that reading gives them an opportunity to be self-reflective. For instance, a male reader working in an industrial firm maintained:

Reading is really distinctive from other types of religious activities. When you go to a temple for *darśan*, you are with god only for a fraction of a second. So many things are going on around you. Mobile phones ringing, people talking to each other.... You cannot avoid these distractions when you visit a temple. Doing daily *pūjā* at home is much better. It gives one an opportunity to sit calmly and concentrate for at least some time. But with my lifestyle that demands that I be out of my home for more than eleven hours a day, I cannot accommodate a daily *pūjā* in my schedule. With all these challenges, I like *pārāyaṇ* a lot. First of all, it gives at least a couple of hours each day for one week each year when I can sit and concentrate. Second, as I know that I will be engaged for a week, I re-arrange my work schedule accordingly so I can devote time to this activity. Reading makes me self-reflective. With each *pārāyaṇ* my capacity to accept the surrounding circumstances increases. My thoughts are more positive. The *Gurucaritra*, for me, works as a magnet that channelizes north and south poles and makes me think clearly.

In the above narrative, the reader stresses that his preference for the reading activity is based on the idea of the effects of reading, i.e., that it leads him to think clearly. Rather than focusing on how he relates with the specific content of the text, this reader stressed the benefits of the reading process itself. Several readers emphasized the benefits of the reading as well. A primary school teacher, who faced challenges earlier in his career, recounted:

The *Gurucaritra* has played an important role in my life. I am 33 now and much more focused in my career than I was about five years ago. I wanted to go to the United States to pursue my Masters in Business Administration. I applied for some schools even though my G-MAT scores were not spectacular. I did not get admission anywhere. I was really frustrated. All my friends were in the U.S. but I could not join them. At that time my friend

recommended that I read the *Gurucaritra*. I have been reading it for the past five years now. And my life is much more focused than before. I have learnt to face the moments of frustration in a better manner. We all go through bad patches in our lives, but we do not always have the strength to survive those periods. I get that through the *Gurucaritra*. An act as simple as sitting in one place for a *pārāyaṇ* session develops a determined attitude [*maṇasācī jidda vāḍhate*]. The real strength of the *Gurucaritra* is that it gives you an opportunity to reflect upon your mental processes. And a result you get peace of mind [*“niścīntpaṇā”*].

Whereas the above two accounts illustrate the personal benefits of reading the *Gurucaritra*, the leader of the Diṇḍorī *mārg*, Annasaheb (Aṇṇāsāheb) More, explained the importance of reading in the Diṇḍorī *mārg* based on the idea of personal effort for spiritual development. He said:

In our Diṇḍorī *mārg*, when people approach us with personal problems we prescribe that they read certain religious books. The books are: the *Durgā Saptaśatī*, the *Gurutilāmṛt* and the *Gurucaritra*. We believe that spiritual development [*adhyātma*] can be achieved only through one’s own efforts. This is why it has to be unmediated. Some people avoid reading religious texts on their own due to a fear of making mistakes in reading. I tell them that it is OK to make mistakes. When a mother hears the first words of her baby, she does not care if the baby’s pronunciation is correct. She just enjoys the fact that her baby is saying something.... Similarly, when one reads god’s book [*devāce pustak*], that makes god happy. God does not punish you for making mistakes in reading.

Annasaheb More’s argument for religious reading is based on two key points: one, reading is desirable over other religious activities, as it makes god accessible to everyone at once; and two, reading makes every individual chart his/her own path towards god.

The foregoing examples demonstrate the intentionality of the contemporary readers in terms of their choice of reading over other religious activities. As has been shown, contemporary readers explain the benefits of reading based on reasons other than the content of the text. Although the content of the text is not unimportant to their religiosity, readers’ anecdotes about the psychological benefits of reading and the Diṇḍorī *mārg*’s outlook towards reading as a source of making religion available to the masses are examples of modern sensibilities towards religiosity.

### **Interpretations of the message**

Contemporary readers of the *Gurucaritra* make an attempt to relate to the content of the text at some level. Some illustrated how the stories of the *Gurucaritra* can be helpful to

understand their own present, while others explained that the underlying messages of the stories are of universal nature. Readers' intentionality is evident in both cases, as they aim to go beyond the literal meaning of the text and use the content of the text to make sense of their own lives.

A reader narrated that the underlying message of the *Gurucaritra* re-instates the importance of hard work as follows:

The *Gurucaritra* has influenced both my personal and my professional life. One thing that is stressed throughout the stories of the *Gurucaritra* is that the *guru* offers his grace only to those who work hard. Do you remember the story about the leprous person [chapter 40], where the *guru* instructs the man to water a lifeless plant? If you remember, the dead plant comes to life again at the end of the story. When I gave serious thought to this story, I realized the importance of working hard. Think for a minute, why did the *guru* make the leprous person water a dead plant when the *guru* possessed the power to bring it to life instantly? Moreover, the *guru* could have saved the leprous person instantly.... First of all, the reason why the *guru* did not cure him instantly is that he wanted the person to surrender to him [to the *guru*] with no doubt in his mind. But, more importantly, the *guru* also wanted him to work hard before he got the desired result.

Similar to the above reader, who stressed a need to understand the ethical values underlying the stories of the *Gurucaritra*, several readers argued that the message of the stories of the *Gurucaritra* is constant despite the passage of time. A woman reader who is a Sanskrit scholar said,

The *Gurucaritra* was written sometime in around 1550. It is an old text. We live in a world that is radically different from the world of the *Gurucaritra*. The author of the *Gurucaritra* must have included narratives from the *purāṇas* at that time to get attention from ordinary people. Back in those days, the literacy rate was not as high as it is today. Priests would read out books like this one [she pointed to the *Gurucaritra*] in public places. When I think about the social and religious context of the time in which the text was written, I can easily understand the structure of the book—the inclusion of narratives from the *purāṇas* and stories about the *guru's* miracles. What strikes me more about this book [the *Gurucaritra*] in our times is the message that it delivers. We must go beyond the miracles of the *guru* if we want to understand the *Gurucaritra* in the truest sense of the term.

You see, there is this story about Sāyamdev, who works for a Muslim king. When Sāyamdev is about to be killed at the hands of this Muslim king, the *guru* comes to his rescue. Some years ago I was injured severely while driving my two-wheeler. Someone came to me and took me to the hospital. I am alive today because of that person. I think I met my *guru* that day when he came to my rescue.

This reader of the above narrative claimed the universality of the message of the text by making a connection with the story. I met many other readers too who explained how the message of the text helped them to make sense of circumstances in their lives. Different readers' take on the narrative of the "vine of beans" (chapter 18) will illustrate this point. A woman living in

the village of Aurvāḍ (about 2 miles east of Narsobācī Vāḍī) who claimed that she belonged to the eleventh generation of descendants of the protagonist of the story summarized the plot as follows:

Seven hundred years ago Svāmī Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī visited our Kulkarni family in the form of Datta Mahārāj to get alms in this place. But our ancestors who lived here at the time were very poor. They had planted a vine of beans and used to eat boiled beans from that vine at meals. Svāmī Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī came for alms: “Hey lady, please honor me with some food.” Then the lady of the house said, “We do not have any food to offer. We have these boiled beans. Can I offer you those?” Svāmī replied, “Yes,” and ate a stomachful of boiled beans right here. He thought that couple was *sāttvik* and that they should not be poverty-stricken any more. So he took away the vine of beans as he left their house.... When the husband returned from selling beans he noticed that the vine was missing and asked his wife about it. She said, “A renouncer came and asked for alms. I offered him alms and when he left he took out the vine.” Saying this, she started cursing Svāmī. The brāhmaṇ was wise. He told her, “Please don’t say bad things about the renouncer. You never know who visits you in what form.... Let us approach the renouncer and ask him further.” The couple went to Vāḍī to visit Svāmī. the Brāhmaṇ asked Svāmī, “How can we survive from tomorrow?” Svāmī said, “Please do not worry about that. Do not leave even the root of that vine. Take it and throw it into the Kṛṣṇā river.” While digging for the roots of the vine, the brāhmaṇ found a pot filled with gold coins. The brāhmaṇ was *sāttvik* and honest. He told the *guru* about the pot of gold. The *guru* said, “Do not tell anyone about it. You and your future generations will never be poor in terms of food and clothing [*anna vastralā kadhīhī kamīipadnār nāhī.*] (Personal communication on Jan 25, 2011)

Readers of the *Gurucaritra* related to different parts of this story. There were at least four distinctive takes on the story. One, the central message of the story is that the *guru* takes care of you at all times. As one reader, who had been laid off from a company, put it, “The *guru* took away everything from the couple but then he did not just leave them like that [without any means of survival]. He blessed them in return [for the vine] with a pot of gold.” Two, the vine in the story represents bad thoughts. A woman reader explained, “The vine represents bad thoughts. The *Guru* comes and takes away those bad thoughts from you so that you can start all over again. In the story, the brāhmaṇ is forced to look for other means of survival as the *guru* takes away his only means...” Yet another interpretation,(the third one here) centered on the *guru*’s instructions at the time of giving the pot of gold. A reader who was at first hesitant to talk about his experiences of the *pārāyaṇ*, said, “If you remember chapter 19 from the *Gurucaritra* you will understand why I am not too eager to talk about my experiences of the *pārāyaṇ*. In that story the *guru* instructs the brāhmaṇ not to tell anyone about the *guru*’s gift. The *guru* gives you things in

return for your hard work, but you must maintain secrecy about those gifts. I believe that the spiritual experiences that you get by doing *pārāyaṇ* should not be shared with anyone, as they are special gifts from the *guru*.” Finally, some readers interpreted the vine in the story as representing stagnancy and said that the *guru*’s action of taking it away represents carving a new path leading to progress.

The reason for noting different takes on the same narrative is to show that contemporary readers interpret content based on their present. The first and third interpretations from the above paragraph illustrate how readers used parts of the story to make sense of what was happening to them. The stories of the text, then, do not merely inform readers about their ancient past or tradition. In fact, the readers make a cosmological understanding of the narratives by making use of the stories to articulate who they are and how the world works.

### **Critical Outlook**

The last two sections illustrate readers’ intentionality in doing *pārāyaṇ* by discussing their reasoning for reading as well as their interpretations of the specific contents. Readers’ attempts to historicize their tradition presents yet another example of their modernity. A reader who has written extensively about the Dattātreya *sampradāy* in Marathi took a historical approach at explaining the avatar of Dattātreya. He said,

The *Gurucaritra* is not about *Dattaguru* in the truest sense of the term. The stories of the text revolve around Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. Once we start from this observation it is not difficult to accept that a man cannot have three heads.

Another instance of a critical outlook that needs to be mentioned here is the work of a man named S.R. Kulkarni. Kulkarni, a devotee of Dattātreya himself, has done sixty-plus *pārāyaṇs* of the *Gurucaritra*. After reading the text over and over again, his interest in the history of the Dattātreya *sampradāy* was piqued, and, as a result he conducted a research trip to places mentioned in the *Gurucaritra*. He started from Mahābaḷeśvar and ended his journey at Śrī Śailam in Andhra Pradesh. Altogether this trip lasted two months. On his return to Pune, he has been giving several public talks in which he emphasizes the authenticity of the *Gurucaritra* by showing

pictures taken on his trip. Kulkarni's approach towards his religious tradition is modern in that his search is for authenticity of the tradition. With this critical outlook, Kulkarni wants to undertake a "dōlas śraddhā," [a faith that can be explained rationally], to use his words. He explained his endeavor as follows:

The *Gurucaritra* portrays the travel of the gurus and their works in those places. At first I used to think that the stories in the *Gurucaritra* are not real. But I had travelled to some places mentioned in the book. I wondered if the other places mentioned in the book also exist in reality. Two of my colleagues from the bank [his workplace] joined me in my adventure. None of us knew rafting. We took training for months before we finalized our tour on the Kṛṣṇā river.... Then one year, after the monsoon season was over, we travelled to the places mentioned in the book and finished the entire path of the *guru's* travels in thirty days. At the end of the journey, we realized that the places mentioned in the book exist and the travel on the river made me realize that the *Gurucaritra* is not only a book of entertaining stories but these stories have happened for sure at some point of time in history.

The above two instances demonstrate that urban readers of the *Gurucaritra* take a modern approach towards the scripture by looking at it from an analytical lens.

As has been shown, the readers relate to the contents of the *Gurucaritra* at several levels. They re-traditionalize themselves through a preliminary introduction to Hinduism through the *vratas*, *purāṇic* stories and pilgrimages mentioned in the text. But they become modern by engaging with stories of the *guru* in the context of their present. Thus, the readers make a selective choice from their tradition by making a choice about what to take and what to transmit from their it.

## Conclusion

We have looked at the descriptions of Dattātreya in various types of literature, including epics, *purāṇas* and *upaniṣads*. Further, we explored the development of Dattātreya in classical Marathi literature. It was clear from these sources that the three-headed depiction of Dattātreya was a later development. In addition, based on the *purāṇic* references to the *Śaiva* and *tāntric* character of the deity, we saw that the deity must have acquired his *Vaiṣṇava* character in a later historical period.

Dattātreya *sampradāy*, as it grew after the medieval period, has been different from the other religious traditions in Maharashtra in terms of its centripetal, “un-boundaried” and heterogeneous nature. Both brāhmaṇical Sanskritic and non-brāhmaṇical forces are equally important in the contemporary Dattātreya *sampradāy*. The Ṭembe Svāmī *paramaparā* represents the former while the Diṅḍorī *mārg* represents the latter. Several *gurus*, such as Nānāmahārāj Tarāṅekar and Janārdansvāmī Kher have made efforts to integrate both brāhmaṇical and non-brahmanical elements in their ritual practices.

Despite the differences of affiliation as well as *gurus* in the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, the *Gurucaritra* has acquired the status of the central book of the *sampradāy*. This sixteenth-century text has been important to devotees of Dattātreya as a “wish-fulfilling” book. As has been shown, although contemporary readers of the text relate to the content of the text as a repository of their religious tradition, they become modern by interpreting the message of the text with reference to concerns of their present. What is striking is that, apart from its fascinating narratives about devotion to the *guru* and the consequences of undoubting devotion to the *guru*, the text gains importance to *praxis* at least in two distinct ways: first, by being recognized as *the* text of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, and second, through communal and personal ritualized reading. This is why discussing the *praxis* associated with the reading of the text becomes inevitable for a fuller understanding of the *pārāyaṇ* process.

## CHAPTER 4

### PĀRĀYAṆ

#### Introduction

While generally the key actors in the reading process are the reader and the text, religious reading or *pārāyaṇ* also includes ritual as another important component. This chapter focuses on understanding *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* in its ritual dimensions. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, the notion of purity holds a central place in the ritual performances associated with *pārāyaṇ*. Although the notion of purity is vital for understanding the ritual actions of the devotee-readers, the degrees of ritualization vary in the *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* tradition. On the one hand, I met orthoprax devotee-readers who emphasized that the efficacy of *pārāyaṇ* depends entirely upon following correct ritual procedures; on the other hand, I also met devotee-readers who stressed that *śraddhā* (unconditional faith in the guru) is of utmost significance in the success of a *pārāyaṇ*, implying that rituals are of secondary importance for the success of a *pārāyaṇ*.

#### ***Pārāyaṇ*: Etymology and Salient Features**

##### Etymology and Definition

The practice of reading religious texts in their entirety is not uncommon in the Hindu world. *Pārāyaṇ* of texts such as *Bhāgvat Purāṇa*, *Jñāneśvarī*, *Dāsboḍh*, and *Devī Māhātmya* are common in public spaces as well as private homes in Maharashtra. When *pārāyaṇ* sessions are organized in public spaces, the text is read in the morning and explained in the afternoon sessions. The purpose of undertaking such a reading is explained in two different ways: one, for



gaining *sāttvika* status, and, two, for the talismanic promise mentioned in the texts. *Sāttvika* status, as will be discussed later, refers to a “pure” state of body and mind. Further, as C. Mackenzie Brown<sup>166</sup> notes, “Far more frequent than this use of the text as a talisman is the mention of the fruits of writing or copying the text itself and then giving it away in charity.”

Molesworth’s Marathi-English dictionary<sup>167</sup> glosses *pārāyaṇ* as “perusal, reading through (esp. of a Purāṇa) or as going through or across.” Readers of the *Gurucaritra*, however, offered another etymology of the word. For example, a reader said, “*pārāyaṇ* is derived from two words: ‘*par*’ and ‘*āyan*.’” The word “*par*” was associated with the word *Parameśvar* or the divine principle, whereas the word “*āyan*” was explained as a noun meaning “going.” In this way, *pārāyaṇ*, according some readers of the *Gurucaritra*, refers to “going towards the divine” or “journey to the divine.” [*pārāyaṇ yā śabdācī vyuṭpattī “par” āṇi “āyan” yā don śabdānmadhūn ghetālī tar para mhaṇaje dev āṇī āyan mhaṇzje jāne yāvarūn pārāyaṇ mhaṇaje parameśvarāprat jāṇyācī prakriyā asā artha ghetā yeto.*]. Another reader shared a similar perspective; he said, “*pārāyaṇ* means *ayan* of *ātman*. *Ayan* here means going. Ultimately, this is a process of unconditioning of the *atman* [*ātmyāvar rojacyā vyāvahārik jagācyā anubhavāmuḷe jhālele samskā dūr karnyācī hī prakriyā āhe*]. But the *atman* is essentially conditioned by the body.” He implied that one needs to “uncondition” the body first in order to “uncondition” the *ātman*. But one may ask further what the term “unconditioning” connotes, in this case. It is by following the rules/*karmakaṇḍa* and ritual observances/*pathya* accurately that one “unconditions” one’s body and *ātman* from material pleasures. And this leads to the *ayan* or going to the divine.

#### Salient Features

*Pārāyaṇ* centers on four processes: treatment of the *pothī*, reading of the text, following ritual procedures (*vidhī*), and following ritual observances (*pathya*).

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<sup>166</sup>C. Mackenzie Brown, "Purāṇa as Scripture: From Sound to Image of the Holy Word in the Hindu Tradition." *History of Religions* 26, no. 1 (1986): 66.

<sup>167</sup>Molesworth, *A Dictionary: Marathi and English*, 555.

### The status of the *pothī*

The *pothī* or manuscript of the *Gurucaritra* holds a special place in the success of a *pārāyaṇ*. The rules about buying a new *pothī* of the *Gurucaritra*, keeping it at times when it is not being read and disposing of it when torn illustrate that the *pothī* as a physical object is revered just like its literary contents. On one occasion, I was interacting with a ninety-year-old devotee of Dattātreya who has handwritten the *Gurucaritra pothī* of the Ṭembe Svāmī tradition. At the end of my visit, he offered me a copy of the *Gurucaritra pothī* as a *prasād*<sup>168</sup> for my future research work. Unaware of the rules about stowing the *pothī*, I put it with a bunch of other books that I had already bought from a bookstore that day. The devotee-reader objected to the way I had stowed the copy he had given me and instructed me to keep the *pothī* on top of all the other books I had. In further discussions, he explained that keeping the book underneath other books would mean treating it like other, “general” books. This was the first time I understood the material power of the *pothī*. The materiality dimension became clear in many other interviews. A reader mentioned that the *pothī* should not be moved during the entire *pārāyaṇ* period. In most cases, the *pothī* was kept in home shrines at times other than *pārāyaṇ*. I also noticed that it was typically wrapped in a saffron or yellow silk cloth when it was not being read.

As will be discussed later, some readers do *pārāyaṇ* to keep their family tradition alive. Specifically, in cases where multiple generations are engaged in *pārāyaṇ*, the *pothīs* used by the ancestors are considered to be extra-ordinarily “*pavitra*”<sup>169</sup> for doing *pārāyaṇ*. In other words, doing *pārāyaṇ* with a *pothī* used by one’s ancestors is considered to be meritorious. I wondered what people did with old, torn *pothīs*. This query was addressed in some interviews: some people revealed that they buy new *pothīs* for reading but keep the old ones in their home shrines. The materiality aspect of *pārāyaṇ* will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that the *pothī*, i.e., the book as a physical object, is vital in the significance-making process.

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<sup>168</sup> *Prasād* refers to the food blessed by a deity during a *pūjā*.

<sup>169</sup> The term *pavitra* was used by readers to refer to objects that are considered to be intrinsically pure.

## Reading and comprehension of the text

Although proper treatment of the *pothī* is vital for a successful *pārāyaṇ*, reading is the central activity during a *pārāyaṇ* cycle. Considering the resemblance in the Marathi used in the *Gurucaritra* and contemporary colloquial Marathi, following the literal meaning of the text was not a challenge for most of the readers I spoke with. However, some chapters from the *Gurucaritra*, especially chapters 35 and 36, which consist of summaries of Vedic texts, were mentioned as being difficult to follow. In addition, a *stavan*<sup>170</sup> written in Kannada that forms part of chapter 41 is another challenging section.

During conversations, the topic of significance-making came up in several contexts. Readers talked about differences between the historical conditions at the time when the *Gurucaritra* was written and contemporary times, difficult and favorite narratives from the text as well as the lucidity of the text's language. However, they did not make references to specific portions of the text. The following discussion with a woman reader from the Diṇḍorī *mārg* illustrates this point.

Mugdha: Tāī, do you keep count of the number of *pārāyaṇs* you have done so far?

Reader: I don't keep a count. But I have completed more than 200 *pārāyaṇs*. You see, since I was assigned this *vācansevā*<sup>171</sup> at our Kendra, I have kept doing it. I start one *pārāyaṇ*, get it done in one week and start the next.

Mugdha: Wow. It must be tough to manage reading along with managing everything on the home front.

Reader: Now it is not that difficult. Doing *pārāyaṇ* is part of my daily schedule now. I just do it. I don't feel like I am doing something extra-ordinary.

Mugdha: Hmm. The *Gurucaritra* has many narratives. Is there any narrative that appeals more to you [than the others]?

Reader: Well, all narratives are equally good. I cannot recollect any one in particular at this time. The point is that one should read the *Gurucaritra* with unconditional surrender to the *guru*. You must have faith in the *guru* [*guruvar śraddhā asalī pāhije*]. All the narratives make the same point, which is that the *guru* comes to your rescue when you are in difficulty if you have faith.

This woman reader stressed the vitality of the idea of *śraddhā* in her discussion. Similar to this reader, most of the readers were not able to mention specific stories in response to my

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<sup>170</sup> *Stavan* translates as "praise." In this context, it refers to praising god.

<sup>171</sup> The followers of the Diṇḍorī tradition used the word *vācansevā*, which literally translates as "reading service." By reading service, they implied reading of religious texts such as the *Gurucaritra*, *Devī Māhātmya*, *Bhāgavat Purāna*, *Gurulilāmṛt* etc.

question. Moreover, they rarely made any references to the content of the text. However, the idea of *śraddhā* was emphasized by everyone. Thus, it is not the meaning of the specific linguistic formulations of the text that the readers remember, but it is the overall message of the narratives that they consider to be vital.

### **Following ritual procedures (*vidhī*) and ritual observances (*pathya*)**

My conversations with devotee-readers centered on the ritual dimensions of reading the text more than on its content. Readers discussed in detail topics such as ritual space, ritual time, ritual objects, the beginning and the culmination of the *pārāyaṇ*. As will be shown later, although an idea of following ritual procedures was associated with the success of *pārāyaṇ*, the ritual procedures mentioned were not universal.

Like any other ritual, following certain observances related to eating and other everyday life activities is considered to be vital for the success of a *pārāyaṇ*. The purpose of food taboos and restrictions on other activities was explained as a means of disciplining body and mind in order to (re)gain *sāttvik* status.

An excerpt from an audio-recording of an interview with a woman reader defines *pārāyaṇ* in terms of its important dimensions:

Mugdha: Kāku (Auntie), I have seen that people chant mantras [and] read chapters from certain books at the end of their daily puja. How is reading in *pārāyaṇ* different from other religious reading?

Reader: You know, Mugdha, ultimately the purpose of all religious reading is the same. So there is no major difference in these types of readings. But we are all *samsārī* beings. I have to take care of my chores as a married woman. I will tell you my story. I do daily puja every morning. But when I do *pūjā*, several other things are taking place. I usually put my pressure cooker with rice and lentils on the stove before I start *pūjā*. By the time I am done with my *pūjā*, I have heard three whistles [three whistles indicate that the food is cooked]. This way I get two things done at a time. In addition, the television is on most of the times. I can hear it while I chant my *mantras* here [points to the home shrine].

*Pārāyaṇ* is very different. You have to take time off from all the other things you do. At a minimum, you need a fixed place [*tharāvīk jāgā*] and a fixed time [*niyamit ve*] for those eight days. You must concentrate fully and read. You must follow all the prescribed ritual observances.

Mugdha: How would you define *pārāyaṇ* to someone who does not know anything about it?

Reader: I would say it is “unbroken reading of the entire *pothī* [*athpāsun itīparyānt kelele vācan*]. It is disciplining of your body and mind. It is a transition from *saguṇ*<sup>172</sup> worship to *nirguṇ* worship. It is not just reciting. When you sit in one place and read for that long, it makes you contemplate what you read, at least to some extent. This is what makes *pārāyaṇ* different from religious reading of other sorts.

To summarize, *pārāyaṇ* consists of an unbroken reading of the entire text conducted in the same space with regular intervals of time accompanied by disciplining of the body (and thereby the mind) by means of ritual observances.

### Mapping the Ritual

Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara, the author of the *Gurucaritra*, takes a liberal position towards ritual observances. In chapter 52:85, he tells readers to do *pārāyaṇ* any time when “your soul is pure.” In addition to this liberal outlook, he also gives specific instructions for conducting a successful *pārāyaṇ*. These are found in chapter fifty-one. In response to my question, “How do you conduct *pārāyaṇ*?” my readers often quoted this portion from the *Gurucaritra*. It became clear to me in later discussions that, although they were aware of the expectations set by the author of the *Gurucaritra*, readers rationalize and make adaptations to the prescribed ritual process. The issue of adaptations will be discussed in detail later with respect to the reasons and degrees of adaptation. Here suffice it to say that Gangadhar’s instructions work as guidelines for chartering ritual actions of *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ*. Due to this, a translation of verses from the *Gurucaritra* that prescribe the *pārāyaṇ* procedures will not be out of place here.

A disciple asks the *guru* to explain how to go about reading the entire the *Gurucaritra* in a week (*Gurucaritra* 52:83). In response, the *guru* gives the following detailed instructions about ritual procedures and observances during the period of *pārāyaṇ*:

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<sup>172</sup> *Saguṇ* refers to the depiction of a god with qualities whereas *nirguṇ* refers to a qualityless god. The former worship includes devotion towards icons whereas the latter would imply devotion offered to an absolute principle, which is described without any specific attributes. In general, Hindus believe that the absolute goal of a devotee should be to worship the divine in an attributeless/qualityless manner. However, worshipping *saguṇa* god or a god with attributes is considered to be the first step in that direction.

52:85 One should read the *Gurucaritra* every day when one's soul is *pavitra*, as this brings goodness in material and spiritual realms.

[However, if this is not possible]  
there is another way to do it.

52:86 Let me tell you the correct procedure for reading [the *Gurucaritra*] in a week

If read following ritual manuals (*śāstra rīti*), *saptāh*<sup>173</sup> brings a lot of merit.

52:87 After confirming that the constellation of stars is good (*dinśuddhi*)

One should start [in the morning] with a bath and *saṅdhyā*<sup>174</sup> rituals.

Then [decide on] the place for reading the book.

Decorate it [the place] with *raṅgoḷī*.<sup>175</sup>

52:88 After doing a *saṃkalp* (ritual dedication) about the place and time

[one should] offer a puja following the standard ritual procedures.

to the book, which embodies the divine.

[It is desirable] to offer *pūjā* to a brāhmaṇ as well.

52:89 [One should] keep the space for reading constant throughout.

Avoid participating in casual discussions unrelated to [*pārāyaṇ*].

Follow instructions on sexual conduct [avoid sexual actions].

52:90 Tend lights to illuminate the space.

Start reading by sitting in a position such that you face the northeast

Venerate [*Vaṅdun*] gods, brāhmaṇs and elders [of the family] before beginning.

52:92 Read the first seven chapters the first day. Up to eighteen the next day. Up to twenty-eight the third day. Up to thirty-four the fourth day, to thirty-seven the fifth day. To forty-three the sixth day. After finishing fifty one chapters, on the seventh day one should read the *avataraṅikā*.<sup>176</sup>

52:93 After finishing the reading session, one should do the *uttarāṅg pūjā*<sup>177</sup> every day.

Then, after bowing to the *guru*, one should eat a small portion of food [sometimes this refers to fruit].

52:94 In this way, by following ritual procedures and resting on the bare floor at night, one should be in a *śucirbhūt*<sup>178</sup> state of mind for seven days

52:95 At the end of the seven-day period, offer a meal to a brāhmaṇ and a married woman. Offer them *dakṣiṇā*<sup>179</sup> as per your financial capacities. Make everyone satisfied (*saṃtuṣṭa*).

52:96 If done in this way, a weekly *anuṣṭhān* makes the *darśan* of a *guru* possible; [in addition] the inflictions of *bhūt* and *prets*<sup>180</sup> are destroyed. One gets *saukhya*.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> *Saptāh* translates as a week. In this case, it refers to week when *pārāyaṇa* cycle is conducted.

<sup>174</sup> *Saṅdhyā* refers to rituals to be carried out three times day by a Hindu man who has undergone the initiation ceremony.

<sup>175</sup> *Raṅgoḷī* refers to designs made with a type of sand. In addition to decorations, *raṅgoḷī* serves the purpose of demarcating ritual space.

<sup>176</sup> *Avataraṅikā* refers to the last (in the Anmol and Kāmat poth) fifty-second chapter). This chapter consists of *ovīs* that summarize the narratives from all other chapters of the *Gurucaritra*. There is an unresolved debate about whether this chapter was written by the author or was a later addition.

<sup>177</sup> *Uttarāṅg* refers to the specific ritual procedures to be carried out at the completion of a ritual cycle.

<sup>178</sup> *Śucirbhūt* translates as “one who has become *śuchis* or ritually pure.”

<sup>179</sup> *Dakṣiṇā* refers to the remunerations offered to a priest for his ritual services. Sometimes this word is also used to refer to donations offered to people who are invited for a meal at the end of a ritual process.

<sup>180</sup> *Bhūt* and *pret* refer to ghost and dead body respectively.

<sup>181</sup> *Saukhya* translates as happiness.

Thus, the ritual observances prescribed by the author are about ritual time; ritual space; the specific ritual procedures during the *pārāyaṇ* cycle, such as *saṃkalp*, lighting lamps, ritual observances related to sex, conversations, food, and resting; a list of the number of chapters to be read each day; and ritual procedures to be followed at the end of the cycle. Two points from my fieldwork become pertinent in understanding the practice of ritual observances: one, although the *Gurucaritra* mentions only the above observances, readers have elaborated these observances in many ways; two, many readers make adaptations or (sometimes) drop the observances prescribed by the author. In what follows, we will get an overview of the *pārāyaṇ* cycle in the context of the above categories as they are interpreted during the ritual process of *pārāyaṇ*.

#### Ritual Timing

Concepts of time and purity are closely associated in Hinduism. Some months are more auspicious than others, so are some days of the month. More particularly, some hours of the day are considered to be more auspicious than others. Finally, the constellation of stars some particular times of the day is more auspicious than others for Hindus. Anthony Good points out that worship in Hindu temples is “kairotic,” as it is scheduled on the same principles that govern the movements of sun, moon and planets.<sup>182</sup> For this reason, *pārāyaṇkārs*, readers, prefer to read in the mornings rather than other times of the year. However, contemporary readers tend to interpret the idea of “pure time” in a flexible manner.

Traditionally, *pārāyaṇ* is done in the morning after the reader has completed a bath and *sandhyā* rituals in the case of brāhmaṇ males. The annual *pārāyaṇ* cycle is scheduled on the same dates every year, such that it starts seven days prior to Datta *Jayantī*<sup>183</sup> (on the fifteenth day of the Hindu month Mārgaśīrṣa, approximately mid-December). In some exceptional cases,

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<sup>182</sup>Anthony Good, "Congealing Divinity: Time, Worship and Kinship in South Indian Hinduism." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6, no. 2 (2000): 283.

<sup>183</sup>Datta *Jayantī* is a festival to celebrate the the birth anniversary of Dattātreya. Every year around December, the devotees enact the birth of Datta in rituals. The *pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra* is scheduled in such a way that the last day of *pārāyaṇ* occurs on the day of Datta Jayantī.

such as in the case of the Diṅḍorī tradition, in addition to the annual *pārāyaṇ* in December, *pārāyaṇ* is also organized in April before the *Jayantī* of Akkalkoṭ Svāmī,<sup>184</sup> the spiritual *guru* of the Diṅḍorī tradition. Finally, many readers do *pārāyaṇ* in the Hindu month of Śrāvaṇ (July-August). Very occasionally people do *pārāyaṇ* at other times of the year too.

In lieu of the seven-day *pārāyaṇ* cycle, some readers prefer to read the entire book in three days. This is called a “three-day *pārāyaṇ*.” I also met a (very few) readers who read the entire book in one day. On occasion, I also met readers who had worked out their own scheme for the *pārāyaṇ* cycle. For instance, a male follower of the Vāsudevānanda Sarasvatī<sup>185</sup> tradition explained as follows how he worked out his own *pārāyaṇ* rules:

I used to do it [*pārāyaṇ*] in 7 days before, but now I do it in three and a half days. People don't get this calculation. The logic for prescribing a certain number of chapters in *pārāyaṇ* books is generally based on the links in their content. So as long as we do not break those links in our readings, it should be fine.

He told me that the reason for this re-working of the prescribed *pārāyaṇ* was that, due to his work schedule, he had to leave unfinished chapters for the next day. The left-over reading from the previous day added added to the time it took to do the *pārāyaṇ*. He stressed that it was much easier for him to take off from work for three and a half days and concentrate entirely on reading. In this scheme, he reads two times every day, early morning and afternoon.

Thus, one comes across four variations in the *pārāyaṇ* cycle: one-day, three-day, three-and-a-half-day and seven-day periods. Despite the variations in the period for conducting *pārāyaṇ*, devotee-readers prefer to do it in December due to a belief that reading the text before Datta Jayantī is extraordinarily meritorious. More importantly, the majority of reader-devotees preferred to do the *pārāyaṇ* over a seven-day period rather than taking the one-day or three-day options.

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<sup>184</sup> Akkalkoṭ Svāmī (1878) is an important *gurū* of the Dattātreya tradition who has followers in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. He is considered to be the fourth *avatār* of Dattātreya in the Dattātreya tradition.

<sup>185</sup> Vāsudevānanda Sarasvatī (1854–1914) *aka* Ṭembe Svāmī was a *guru* of the Dattātreya tradition. Followers of Ṭembe Svāmī consider him to be an *avatār* of Dattātreya.



A seven-day *pārāyaṇ* cycle requires readers to spend between two and four hours every day to finish reading the prescribed portions of the text. Each reading session marks the boundaries between ritual time and ordinary time by certain rituals at the beginning and end of the reading session. The *pārāyaṇ* cycle tapers off with concluding celebrations that consist of offering a meal and other types of offerings to a married woman and a brāhmaṇ.

Readers work out the author's suggestion of doing *pārāyaṇ* in the mornings according to the rhythms of their work schedules. A retired bank officer said, "[During the *pārāyaṇ* cycle] I used to get up at 3 AM and do reading from 4AM to 7AM so I could leave home for my job at 8AM." Similarly, a male reader who has been doing reading for over thirty years explained that he had to finish his reading cycle before 8:30 AM in order to reach his workplace on time.

I also met with readers who read at other times of the day due to their work schedules. A male rickshaw-driver who carries children from their homes to school said that he had to choose the time-slot of 2PM to 5PM for reading, as that was the time when his business was slow. A primary-school teacher who works a morning shift said, "I know that one should read it in the morning. But it is not possible for me to read in the mornings as I have the morning shift at school. When I come home in the evening I take a bath and do my *sandhyā*. Then I start my reading."

Women from a women's reading group from the Salisbury Park area interpret the notion of ritual time based on their domestic duties. A retired Sanskrit scholar who is the organizer of this women's reading group explained,

Most of our members are retired and come from a middle-class background. Although they are retired from work, their domestic duties are not over. Many of them have to take care of their grandchildren, help their working daughter-in-law with domestic chores etc. This makes it difficult for them to meet for more than two hours at a stretch. So we meet twice a day during the period of *pārāyaṇ*. We meet for two hours in the mornings from 10AM to noon, and two hours in the afternoons, from 3PM to 5PM.

Although readers are flexible about the time of day for *pārāyaṇ*, they stress the importance of the idea of keeping the time of day constant throughout a *pārāyaṇ* cycle. A woman reader in her early fifties explained, "I did my reading during the day-time last year. But I also

remember doing it in the evenings in the past. It does not really matter what time of the day or night you chose, the key thing is that you must keep the time constant in one reading cycle. You must do it at the same time you start it the very first day.” In this way, this woman stressed the idea of constancy in ritual timing over the idea of intrinsic auspiciousness of certain hours of the day.

The concept of ritual time is interpreted in distinctive ways in private and public settings. Due to space restrictions in urban dwelling situations, some readers have started meeting at communal spaces to do *pārāyaṇ*. A detailed description of the process of communal *pārāyaṇ* is to follow. Here it is sufficient to say that meeting in communal spaces alters the traditional notion of ritual time. In centers where the reading halls are open for twenty-four hours, readers sign up for a two-hour slot for *pārāyaṇ* according to their work schedules. In this context, the idea of auspicious time becomes irrelevant.

Certain situations were mentioned as barriers in the continuity of ritual time. In particular, three human conditions were associated with impurity—menstruation, death, and birth. One reader, a retired, male bank officer, said, “I had to halt my *pārāyaṇ* on the fifth day one year as my paternal aunt died. Then I resumed reading after ten days when the *sūtak*<sup>186</sup> was over.” Another male reader who had done an eight-day *pārāyaṇ* for forty years changed his reading plan due to a death in his family. He told me that since the *sūtak* ended three days before Datta Jayantī that year he did the *pārāyaṇ* over the last three days only after the *sūtak* was over.

Women readers mentioned menses as another instance for pausing the *pārāyaṇ* cycle. A woman from the Diṇḍorī tradition mentioned two ways of dealing with the menses situation: “[In the case of a monthly cycle] you can either find another woman who can finish the leftover portions of reading for you or complete the rest of the reading yourself after your menses are over.”

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<sup>186</sup>*Sūtak* refers to the status of ritual impurity that one acquires when there is a death in a family. For a detailed discussion about *sūtak* observances, see Edward B. Harper, “Ritual Pollution as an Integrator of Caste and Religion.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23, no. (1964):161.

Along with death and menstruation, the birth of a child was also considered as a reason for pollution. A reader from the *Mṛtyuñjayeśvar sāmudāyik pāṛāyaṇ* group mentioned that he had to halt his *pāṛāyaṇ* cycle the previous year due to “*vṛddhī*”<sup>187</sup>—the birth of a grandchild—in his family. In these instances, the ritual clock was stopped and re-started after the polluted time was over.

Apart from these acts of pollution, readers said that noon to 12:30PM should be avoided for reading. The explanation for this comes from a belief that Dattātreya cannot participate in the reading session, then as he goes to get *bhikṣā*<sup>188</sup> (alms) during this time.

Temporal considerations during the *pāṛāyaṇ* cycle are exceedingly complex. Readers treat the entire period of the reading cycle as a distinctive ritual time, different from other times of the year. A male reader described the period of *pāṛāyaṇ* as follows: “Those eight days seem almost magical (*mantarleḷeṃ*). The vibrations I get at home are [positively] different from the ones I get during other times of the year (*tyā kālāt gharāt yeṇārya laharī ervī pekṣā vegalyā asatāt*). And reading leaves impressions for the entire family, not just the reader.”

#### *Jāgecī nivaḍ: Ritual Space*

Typically *pāṛāyaṇ* occurs indoors, either in private homes or in temples. Most devotee-readers who do *pāṛāyaṇ* at home prefer to do it in the proximity of their home shrines. Only in rare cases is this arrangement altered. The alterations come from reasons such as lack of space in the home shrine to accommodate the *pothī*, inability of the reader to sit in a cross-legged position on the floor, and temporary changes in home spaces due to construction. Conducting *pāṛāyaṇ* at temples entails making several changes to the existing space. In some cases, temple halls

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<sup>187</sup> Childbirth (which was referred as *vṛddhī* by my informant) is both auspicious and inauspicious in the Hindu world. This is because although the event of a new birth is considered to be joyous and auspicious, the child’s mother and kin are ritually impure for twelve days or more, depending on the caste conventions. T.N. Madan’s discussion about categories of *śubha* and *śuddha* is relevant in this context. See, T. N. Madan, “Concerning the Categories of *śubha* and *śuddha* in Hindu Culture: An Exploratory Essay.” In *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, ed. John B. Carman and Frédérique Apffel Marglin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 19.

<sup>188</sup> The term *bhikṣā* refers to food and other substances offered to people as alms.

become inaccessible to visitors for the period of *pārāyaṇ*. Further, the space where readers sit is demarcated with ropes, a *maṇḍap*<sup>189</sup> etc. In what follows, I will discuss the dynamics of ritual space related to the *pārāyaṇ* cycle with reference to its boundaries, orientation, preparation and temporality.

The author of the *Gurucaritra* does not offer detailed instructions on the choice of a space for *pārāyaṇ*. As noted above, all the text says is that, once chosen, the space should be decorated with *rāṅgoḷī* (see fig. 9).

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<sup>189</sup> *Maṇḍap* is an outdoor pillared pavilion erected temporarily for public rituals. For details about the architectural specificities of a *maṇḍap*, see, Binda Thapar, *Introduction to Indian Architecture* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 2004), 143.



Figure 9. The wife of a reader decorating the ritual space with *rāṅgoḷī*. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

This brief instruction is interpreted by the reading community in an elaborate manner. Several considerations are important in the choice and preparation of the ritual space. In his discussion about the notions of *śubha* and *śuddha* in the Hindu world, T. N. Madan<sup>190</sup> observes, “these two notions are associated with certain places, objects, and persons... [T]he kitchen (*caukā*) and the room reserved for daily worship are particularly auspicious places in a house so long as it is

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<sup>190</sup>Madan, "Concerning the Categories of *Śubha* and *Śuddha* in Hindu Culture: An Exploratory Essay." in *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, 13.

inhabited.” Shrines in homes are generally chosen as a ritual space for conducting *pārāyaṇ*. The home shrines are designed such that they face either east or west, based upon the association of these directions with sunrise and sunset. In rare cases, when such a cardinal principle has not been followed in choosing the orientation of the home shrine, or when readers choose to do *pārāyaṇ* in a place other than in front of the home shrine, they make sure that they sit facing either east or west.

Generally speaking, the ritual space for *Gurucaritrapārāyaṇ* has a tripartite structure: the space for placing the *pothī* and other iconic objects, the space for placing ritual accessories used for embellishment purposes and the space for the reader. A retired male reader described his elaborate arrangements in setting up the ritual space as follows:

“I place a framed photo of Dattātreya and a small icon of Gaṇapati from our home shrine on a four-legged wooden platform (*cauraṅg*).<sup>191</sup> On the first day of *pārāyaṇ*, I also place a coconut on top of a silver *kalaś*<sup>192</sup> filled with water in front of the icons on the *cauraṅg*. As in any other puja, I place a low wooden seat (*pāṭ*)<sup>193</sup> in front of the *cauraṅg*. On this *pāṭ*, I place five leaves (*vidyācī pāne*), a turmeric seed, a dry date, a betelnut, dry coconut and some uncooked rice. Then other things, such as incense sticks, a lamp with ghee and another with oil, are placed alongside the *pāṭ*. I make *rāṅgoṭī* patterns on the sides of the *pāṭ* with accessories. Finally, I place another *pāṭ* for myself” (see fig.10).

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<sup>191</sup> *Cauraṅg* refers to a very low wooden platform with four legs. *Cauraṅg* is an important ritual object in some *pūjās* such as *satynārāyaṇ pūjā*. Typically, it is decorated with red lacquer and some auspicious patterns such as elephants, flowers etc.

<sup>192</sup> A metal pot made of gold, silver, copper or brass is called as a *kalaśa*.

<sup>193</sup> The term *pāṭ* refers to another important ritual object. A *pāṭ* is a wooden seat, which can be used only in a squatting position due to its very low height.



Figure 10. *Pūjā Māṇḍaṇī* with *kalaś*, *vidyācī pāne* (betelnut leaves) and *pothī*. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

In short, the tripartite division of ritual space consists of level one, where the icons are placed; level two, where ritual accessories are placed in the space in front of the icons; and level three, where a seat for the reader is placed in the space in front of the ritual accessories.

I noticed degrees of ritualization in terms of the arrangements for setting up the space. At level one, some readers place only Gaṇapaṭī and the *pothī*, whereas others place their *kuḷadevtā*<sup>194</sup> in addition to the *pothī*, Gaṇapaṭī and a picture frame of Dattātreya. Variations in setting the ritual space are not uncommon at the second level either. A very few readers included *vidyācī pāne*,<sup>195</sup> an areca-nut, fruits and other objects. In some cases, a *kalaś*<sup>196</sup> filled with water

<sup>194</sup> A *kuḷadevtā* is the deity of a clan.

<sup>195</sup> *Vidyācīpāne* are to betelnut leaves, which, along with other leaves, such mango leaves are considered to be auspicious.

<sup>196</sup> Certain objects are considered to be auspicious in the Hindu world. A metal pot made of gold, silver, copper or brass is called as a *kalaś*. Traditionally, this pot used to be filled with water from a river, but in my field work in the urban spaces, I noticed people used ordinary tap water to fill

with coconut and mango leaves on top was placed by itself on the second level. Once I noticed two *pāṭ* (wooden seats) where the reader was supposed to sit. Knowing that only one reader was doing *pārāyaṇ* in that household, I asked about the reason for placing two *pāṭ*. A reader explained, “You have to put out one *pāṭ* for the *guru*. He comes and listens to you while you read. *Guru* here refers to Dattātreya or Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. (*guru mhaṇaje Dattātreya kiṃvā Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī*).”

On another occasion, I noticed another addition to the arrangement of the ritual space. A businessman placed a plate full of *kuṃkum* (vermilion) powder in front of the *pothī* for the entire period of reading. He said, “If you look closely you will notice footprints of Dattātreya on this *kuṃkum* powder by the end of the *pārāyaṇ*.” Among my ninety informants, only one interlocutor placed *kuṃkum* powder and only a couple placed an extra seat for the *guru*.

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the pot. The pot filled with water is kept on the temporary ritual altar for the entire period of *pārāyaṇ*. Leaves of a mango tree placed in this pot filled with water symbolize fecundity. The water put into the pot at the beginning of the ritual is considered to be consecrated by the reading and is sprinkled over the family members and guests present at the completion of a *pārāyaṇ*. For more information on *kalaś*, see Madan, "Concerning the Categories of *Śubha* and *Śuddha* in Hindu Culture: An Exploratory Essay." In *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, 13.



The rules for setting up ritual space are also flexible in that they are modified in the modern, urban social contexts as well as according to the physical conditions of readers. I met several readers who set up the *pūjā* space in a tripartite manner but sat on chairs while reading, as sitting in a cross-legged position for long hours was physically challenging.

A male reader in his early forties, whose home shrine was located in the kitchen, said, “In today’s work-style we are hardly required to sit in a cross-legged position. At least, I am out of practice for that kind of sitting position. After doing my daily *pūjā* and rituals, I sit on a chair [points to chairs and dining table] and read comfortably. After all, if you are not physically comfortable, how can it bring you peace of mind?”(See fig. 11)



Figure 11. Alterations in seating arrangements due to space constraints and physical inabilities. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

Similarly, another reader, who is a well-known Marathi writer about the Dattātreya tradition, lives in a one-bedroom apartment. He chose to do *pārāyaṇ* in his living room instead of sitting in front of the home shrine, which is in his bedroom. He explained the reason for this modification as follows, “On the last day of *pārāyaṇ*, I invite my friends to take *darśan* of the

*pothī*. I offer them *prasād* according to my financial capabilities. But I cannot accommodate 20-25 people in my bedroom. For this reason, I set up the *pūjā* in the living room.”

A conversation with a ninety-year *pārāyaṅkār* about the choice of space for *pārāyaṅ* illustrates the principle of flexibility in *pārāyaṅ*. When he was in his early 30s, this reader, a follower of the Ṭembe Svāmī tradition, made a hand-written copy of the entire *Gurucaritra* for Ṭembe Svāmī. His hand-written *pothī* later got published as the official *pothī* of the *Gurucaritra* for the Ṭembe Svāmī *paramparā*. His hearing loss added a special dimension to our communication. His oral responses to my written questions shed light on several aspects of the *pārāyaṅ* process. Describing the experience of writing the entire *pothī* by hand, he said,

“You know, this apartment complex is a recent construction. Years ago, when this used to be a *vāḍā*,<sup>197</sup> I used to sit in that corner to write the *Gurucaritra*. I never changed my place. And no one came there during the four or five months of my writing. This is very important for *Gurucaritra pārāyaṅ* too. The choice of space is important. [*jāgecī nivaḍ mahttavācī asateṃ*.] Once you choose a space, don’t change it. And make sure no one uses that space during your *pārāyaṅ* cycle.”

Preparation of the ritual space takes a couple of hours on the first day of *pārāyaṅ* and a few minutes on the following days. Although very few women engage in the actual reading process, they are actively involved in setting up the space for *pārāyaṅ*. A former employee of the Maharashtra State Board of Electricity said,

“My wife is actively involved in the entire *pārāyaṅ* process. Now she is retired but when she was working as a high school teacher, she used to make sure that there were enough yellow *śevaṅṭi* flowers for my *pūjā*. On the last day of *pārāyaṅ*, she used to take off from work and prepare food for the celebrations.”

Illustrating the process of preparing ritual space, his wife said, “You know something? We moved to this apartment complex about ten years ago. But before that we lived in a not-so-furnished home. At that time we used to paint our house every year before *pārāyaṅ*. Now we have luster color here so we don’t need to paint every year. But I do dusting every year before the *pārāyaṅ* cycle begins and then I also wipe with a wet cloth all the walls of the room where he [my husband] sits [for *pārāyaṅ*].”

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<sup>197</sup>The term *vāḍā* refers to an architectural style of buildings that was popular until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Pune.

Another woman, the wife of a rikshaw-driver, told me, “I sprinkle *gomūtra* (the urine of a cow) in the entire house before the *pārāyaṇ* period. *Gomūtra* purifies the entire space [*gomutrāne sagaḷī jāgā śuddh hote*]. During the period of *pārāyaṇ*, I make sure I get up at least 15-20 minutes before him [points to her husband] and clean the house. First, I sweep everything with a broom. After that I clean the floor with a wet mop. Finally, I take a shower and make *rāṅgoḷī* designs around the *pāṭ* and arrange accessories for the *pūjā*. I also make sure that he [my husband] has sufficient supplies of oil, clarified butter, flowers etc. before he sits [for a reading session].”

According to one reader, “Once it is placed on the first day, the position of the *pothī* should not be changed during the period of *pārāyaṇ*. In fact, the *pothī* acquires an extraordinary state of purity (*sov/e*).<sup>198</sup> So it should not be touched except for the purpose of reading. The reader picks it up and places it on a special seat (*āsan*) while reading it. But then, when he is done reading, he must put it back in its original place [the place allocated on the first day of *pārāyaṇ*]. Thus, the idea of keeping the *pothī* in one place for the entire *pārāyaṇ* period is vital in the making of the ritual space.

The dynamics of ritual space are altered at *sāmudāyik pārāyaṇs*. Typically these *pārāyaṇs* are conducted in public spaces such as temples. In most cases, a corner inside a temple is reserved for *pārāyaṇ* for eight days. Temples can accommodate between 12 and 40 readers at one time. For example, the Ānand Āśram *pārāyaṇ* group can accommodate up to 40 readers at one time, whereas the Svāmī Samarth Maṭh *Sāmudāyik pārāyaṇ* group can accommodate only 14-15 readers (see fig. 12 and 13).

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<sup>198</sup> The *sov/e* refers to an unstitched silk cloth that is used specifically for ritual purposes. The choice of that cloth is based on a belief that that cloth is intrinsically pure.



Figure12. *Sānudāyik pārāyaṇ* in Ānand Āśram Saṁsthā Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar



Figure13. Alterations in ritual procedures *and spaces* at the Svāmī Samarth Maṭh *Sānudāyik Pārāyaṇ* Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

At *sānudāyik pārayaṇ* centers such as the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar temple in the Kothruḍ area, the Omkāreśvar temple in Śanivār Peṭh etc., the boundaries between the space for *pārayaṇ* and other space are clearly demarcated with ropes or bamboo sticks. The *pārayaṇ* space becomes temporarily inaccessible to visitors to the temple. For example, a *sānudāyik pārayaṇ* group in the Sahakārnagar area meets at the private home of Mr. Goḷe. During the *pārayaṇ* period, Goḷe's living room is temporarily turned into a ritual space. Similarly, the living room is temporarily turned into a ritual space at Mrs. Abhyaṅkar's private home in Salisbury Park, where a women's group meets for *pārayaṇ* sessions.

The *sānudāyik pārayaṇ* centers take a minimalistic approach to *maṅḍanī* (arrangement of the *pūjā* during a *pārayaṇ* session). Each reader is assigned a space to sit and place the *pothī* in front of him. This limited space cannot accommodate a tripartite arrangement like the one at private homes. A common *pothī*, a picture frame of Dattātreyā and other ritual accessories are placed in the front area so that they are visible to the readers while they read. The ritual objects placed at different community centers vary. At Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar, there is a painting of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī made by a local devotee artist. At some centers, such as the Svāmī Samartha *maṭh* in Śukravār Peṭh as well as the Lokmānyanagar center, the organizers of the *sānudāyik pārayaṇ* do not arrange a separate *pothī* for *pūjā* due to lack of space. In the Svāmī Samartha *maṭh*, readers sit in the loft of the *maṭh*. At a private residence where a *sānudāyik pārayaṇ* is organized every year, the *maṅḍanī* consists of a pair of silver *pādukā* that symbolize Dattātreyā and a framed picture of Dattātreyā.

At these centers readers bring their own *pothīs*. As Āppā Sāṭhe, the chief organizer of the *sānudāyik pārayaṇ* held at Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar temple, said, "They [readers] bring their own *pothīs* to the temple the very first day. After each reading session, they close the *pothīs* and leave them in the *maṅḍap* for the next day. We cannot offer space for everyone to keep a *kalaś* and coconut. But they have space to keep one coconut on the floor." In my discussions with Sāṭhe it became clear that the same space is shared by multiple readers. Wondering about the coconut

arrangements, I asked, “But if each reader brings one coconut on the first day and each seat is used by multiple people, then does that mean that we see multiple coconuts next to every seat?”

Āppā Sāṭhe explained, “Yes, you see multiple coconuts next to each seat. But at the end it does not matter who got which coconut. After all, all the coconuts are sanctified in the reading process. So readers take one at the end and make sweets with those coconuts as *prasād* at the end of the reading cycle.” In this way, the treatment of the ritual objects is modified in the context of the community readings (see fig. 14).



Figure14. Readers in a reading session at the *Mṛtyuñjayeśvar Sāmudāyik Pārāyaṇ*. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

Among all the community reading centers, the centers of the Diṅḍorī tradition have a distinctive seating arrangement. Similar to other communal reading centers, they arrange a common *pūjā* of the *pothī*. However, they include several other figures of the tradition along with the *pothī*. The head of a Diṅḍorī *Sevā Kendra*<sup>199</sup> in the Maharṣīnagar area explained, “We have a *durbār* in every center. We have Gaṇapaṭī, Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇ, Datta Mahārāj, Navnāth and Akkalkoṭ Svāmī Mahārāj in the middle. When we do *pārāyaṇ*, we make sure that one of us does *pārāyaṇ* of *Navnāth Bhaktisār* and one of us does *pārāyaṇ* of *Devī Māhātyma*<sup>200</sup> while all others read the *Gurucaritra*.”

Most of the communal reading centers have exclusively male members. A male reader from the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar *pārāyaṇ* group stressed that they would welcome women if they approached. He said, “We have all kinds of members here. We have a police inspector, a security guard, a barber, an architect, an electrical engineer, a medical doctor, a delivery man, the owner of a bicycle shop and bank officer. After all, caste should not be a barrier in doing *pārāyaṇ* [and so is the case with gender]. If women approach us in the future we will certainly accommodate them. But we do not have any as of now.”

In those communal reading centers that do accommodate both men and women, one can see the principle of gender segregation at work in the seating arrangements. In the Maharṣīnagar Diṅḍorī *kendra*, women sit on the left and men on the right side of the reading hall.

It is clear from the above discussion that the ideas for setting up the ritual space are modified based on several considerations such as space restrictions, the availability of time for setting up the space, and the influence of other rituals performed in the family. Despite the degrees of variation in the arrangement, the notion of a fixed position for the *pothī* is important to the *pārāyaṇ* process.

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<sup>199</sup> The term “*Sevā Kendra*” is used in Diṅḍorī tradition to refer to regional centers of the Diṅḍorī tradition.

<sup>200</sup> *Devī Māhātyma* is a part of the *Markaṇḍeya Purāna*. The text depicts the universe as created, sustained and withdrawn into Durgā. Traditionally only men had access to this text but I met with several women from the Diṅḍorī tradition who did *pārāyaṇ* of *Devī Māhātyma*.



### *Karmakanda/Ritual Procedures*

The *pārāyaṇ* process involves three stages, including *saṃkalp*, daily reading sessions, and *pāraṇa*. In what follows, we will take a brief overview of each stage.

#### ***Saṃkalp: Why pārāyaṇ?***<sup>201</sup>

Although people make adaptations to the ritual observances according to their resources, many factors, including commitment of time, spatial limitations in homes in urban areas, as well as restrictions about food, make *pārāyaṇ* a daunting task. This made me wonder, why do people make the choice to read the *Gurucaritra* in *pārāyaṇ* style rather than reading it at their own pace? In other words, I wanted to understand the motivations behind their commitment. My query was answered during my conversations in various ways. For some, doing *pārāyaṇ* was a matter of continuing a family tradition, for others it was a matter of curiosity about the content of the text. Yet others told me that when done with a specific intention, *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* has the potential to address specific concerns. As one reader who was a scholar of the *Gurucaritra* summarized this view, “The *Gurucaritra* is read either for fulfillment of a specific desire [*kāmya*] or with no specific intention [*sahajpaṇe*]. When it is done in the latter way, it can be in fulfillment of a family tradition or based on someone’s recommendation.”

During fieldwork, I met with several readers who used the term “*rivāṅ*” to describe their reason for reading. By “*rivāṅ*” they referred to a tradition of rites performed in their families over generations. In some cases, the specific narrative about the beginning of the tradition of *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* was known, while in others it was not. For instance, a third-generation reader recounted,

Well, I don’t know the origin of this tradition. But I know that my grandfather had written the entire *Gurucaritrapoṭhī* by hand. And we were told that he used to read it every year. My grandmother used to sit next to him and listen to him as he read. He died before I was

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<sup>201</sup> The word *saṃkalp* refers to a specific sequence of chants given at the beginning of the *Gurucaritra*. Toward the end of the *saṃkalp* verses, one is asked to read out the specific desire for which the *pārāyaṇ* is being undertaken. Most of my male brāhmaṇ interlocutors were either reluctant to tell me their specific reasons for reading or stressed that they do the reading with no specific desire.

born so I did not get a chance to interact with him much. But my grandmother used to tell us stories from the *Gurucaritra*. Then when I grew up I also saw my father doing *pārāyaṇ* every year. My mother would do all the preparations for *pūjā* the previous night and we could hear him reading early in the morning even [while we were still] in bed. When I was 16 years old, I felt from within that I should try this [*pārāyaṇ*] once. I asked my father and sat next to him that year. Since then I have been doing *pārāyaṇ* for the last thirty years. My father passed away a couple of years ago. But I still keep his *pothī* right next to my *pothī*. I keep an *āsan* (seat) for him.

This particular reader did not know the origin of the tradition of *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* in his family. However, I met with several readers who narrated the origin of the *pārāyaṇ* tradition in their families. A retired bank officer told me that his grandfather had been advised to do a *pārāyaṇ* as he had not been able to get offspring despite having tried for a long time. Another reader gave the following a detailed narrative about the beginning of his family's tradition:

My grandfather was afflicted by a *brahmasaṁbandh*.<sup>202</sup> This story is from about a hundred years ago. The *brahmasaṁbandh* was torturing my grandfather for quite some time. So my father's uncle did *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ* underneath an Audumbar tree. He stood on one leg for the entire time of the *pārāyaṇ*. As an effect of that *pārāyaṇ*, my father was saved. But the *brahmasaṁbandh* cursed him that he [father's uncle] would have no offspring. So my great grandfather was childless. He received a pair of *pādukās* as a *prasād*. We have those *pādukās* in our home shrine still today. And my grandfather started reading the *Gurucaritra* every year after that. My father read it, and then my father's brother read it. It started like that in our family.

Apart from readers who have had a *pārāyaṇ* tradition in their families for generations, I also met readers who had taken on this task for the first time in their family. For instance, I met a reader who started reading as he was offered *prasād* at the culmination of a *pārāyaṇ* at a friend's place. The friend who did *pārāyaṇ* inspired him to do it. In another case, a *pārāyaṇkār* told me that he had noticed the community *pārāyaṇ* in Ānaṅd Āśram as a child and his curiosity about the process motivated him to undertake the *pārāyaṇ*.

I also met with several readers who did *pārāyaṇ* with specific desires in mind. A businessman from the Rāsta Peṭh area in Pune shared a distinctive narrative about this:

I never do *pārāyaṇ* without specific intentions. I take a new sheet of paper every year and write all my *saṁkalp* before I start my *pārāyaṇ*. My son-in-law was suffering from a disease that had no cure. I did *pārāyaṇ* for him and he got cured. My niece appeared for a state-level competitive examination twice and failed the exam. I did

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<sup>202</sup>The term *brahmasaṁbandh* refers to the spirit of a boy who has died before his thread ceremony.

*pārāyaṇ* for her the next year and she got success. My nephew was working on his exams to become a Chartered Accountant, and I did *pārāyaṇ* for him.

I keep the paper with my list of *saṃkalp* in my *poṭhī*. After I get the things for which I do *pārāyaṇ*, I make a check mark there. I believe that if you can surrender to god 100 percent then he helps you.

Although keeping a log of *saṃkalp* was unique to the above case, the idea of doing *pārāyaṇ* in hopes of resolving some conflicts in life was not uncommon. On one occasion a woman from the Diṅḍorī tradition burst into tears while narrating her reasons for reading the *Gurucaritra*. She said,

Sometimes it [doing *pārāyaṇ* for a specific reason] works and other times it does not. When you read you get peace of mind. In addition, you can get rid of your *pāp* that you might have committed inadvertently. I was very concerned about my sister-in-law. She was not able to conceive for many years. People used to taunt her and consider her to be infertile. In our culture, people consider it is the woman's fault if a couple is not able to conceive. Who knows whose fault it is? She always wanted a child but, due to all this situation [of not being able to conceive], she used to be unhappy.

I even made her sit for *pārāyaṇ* one time. But it did not work out, as she had no support from her family. You see, if one wants to attend the *Gurucaritra* properly, one needs to follow rules of purity during those seven days [*gurucaritrāceṃ karāyaceṃ mhaṇaje pālāveṃ lāgatem*]. Her husband did not cooperate with her. He used to eat non-vegetarian food during the period of *pārāyaṇ*. He used to drink [alcohol] too. She was not even able to concentrate, as she was afraid that she would reach home late. Then I did *pārāyaṇ* last year with the *saṃkalp* that she should conceive. I prayed to god to bestow on her a child. She did conceive.

### Daily Reading Sessions

As noted before, although the majority of my interlocutors insisted on reading the prescribed chapters early in the morning, the actual times for reading are adjusted based on other considerations, such as availability of space, avoiding disturbances from other family members, and the work schedules of the readers themselves.

Ritual reading, as mentioned in chapter one, is different from leisurely reading. A devotee-reader needs to prepare his/her body and mind for reading. This readiness involves entering into the frame of the ritual by purifying the body. The idea of *sov!e-ov!e*<sup>203</sup> is foundational in this context. Thus, a reader must take a shower before starting the daily reading session.

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<sup>203</sup> *Sov!e-ov!e* refers to the rules of ritual purity. The rules about ritual purity are associated with food, clothing, and contact with certain objects, animals and other human beings in specific bodily states.

Some devotees emphasized that they apply *bhasma* to their bodies in order to make them even more pure.

*Bhasma* can be translated literally as “ashes.” Ashes acquire special significance in the Dattātreya tradition in the context of the *bhasmācā doṅgar* at Gāṇagāpūr. According to the narrative, Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī conducted many sacrificial rituals during his stay in Gāṇagāpūr<sup>204</sup>. The left-over ashes from these sacrificial rituals then turned into a hillock. During my visit to Gāṇagāpūr, I noticed that devotees were keen on going to the *bhasmācā doṅgar*. One pilgrim explained the significance of a visit to the *bhasmācā doṅgar* in the following manner:

Today this may not look like a hill to you. But it used to be a hill during the times of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī. He conducted many *yajñas*, here and the ashes from each *yajña* accumulated in this same place. Those ashes turned into a hill over the years. You see, this *bhasma* is very powerful. It heals sick people and cures mentally disturbed people. That is why every pilgrim wants to bring some home. Some people are thoughtful; they take only a pinch [so others get some, too]. But not everyone is like that. This is why this hill looks flat today. All the *bhasma* is already gone.

The association of *bhasma* with healing and [thus] purifying makes it an important object in preparing oneself for *pārāyaṇ*. Although the above narrative makes reference to the *bhasma* from Gāṇagāpūr, in practice, devotee-readers may not always use *bhasma* from Gāṇagāpūr. In one case, a male reader in his early sixties said, “If I can visit Gāṇagāpūr before the *pārāyaṇ* period starts, I get *bhasma*. But it is not always possible. When I don’t have *bhasma* from Gāṇagāpūr, I use the left-over ashes from the incense sticks burned at the home shrine. I chant mantras there and so these ashes are also powerful.”

Besides applying *bhasma*, wearing certain types of clothes is seen as an act of purification as well. For example, male readers insisted that they wore *sov/e* (pure clothing) for the daily reading session. Unlike the overarching concept of *sov/e-ov/e*, which refers to the dichotomy of purity and pollution, in this context people refer to a particular type of cloth as *sov/e*. This particular silk cloth is unstitched and is used as a lower garment in ritual sessions. Generally

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<sup>204</sup> Gāṇagāpūr is an important pilgrimage place associated with Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī who is believed to be an incarnation of Dattātreya. It is located in Karnataka, India.

*sovḷe* is kept somewhere near the home shrine so that it is accessible only to the “pure” person.

The exclusive usage of the cloth symbolizes its association with purity.

In cases where readers did their *pārāyaṇ* in communal places, they took their *sovḷe* cloth to the center on the first day of *pārāyaṇ* and kept it there for the entire period of *pārāyaṇ*. In some cases where *sovḷe* cloth was not available, *dhūt-vastra* is used. *Dhūt-vastra* translates as “washed clothing.” But the meaning of *dhūt-vastra* extends beyond its English translation. As one reader explained,

You must wash that cloth yourself. After washing you hang it up to dry. The trick is that no one should touch it or use it after you wash it.

The specifications of clothing are relatively less rigid in the case of women. A woman priest who reads *Gurucaritra* every year said,

God does not ask you to follow all the rigid rules [*karmakāṇḍa*]. I do not follow any specific clothing restrictions. This does not mean that I don’t care about purity or *sovḷe*. I make sure I wear a clean and washed sari every day for my reading session. But that is all. After all, how would god judge you based on the type of cloth you wear? Ultimately, what matters is your faith in god.

Some male brāhmaṇ readers mentioned that they use a new *jānava*<sup>205</sup> each year for the *pārāyaṇ* session.

The next level of purification comes through chants. Brāhmaṇ male readers insist on performing *sandhyā* before starting the readings from the *pothī*. As instructed by the author of the *Gurucaritra*, readers offer their homage to elderly members of their family.

After these preparations, readers sit next to their home shrine or in the chosen place for reading. One reader explained the ritual procedures during the reading session as follows:

First, I offer prayers to Gaṇapati. This is to insure that my *pārāyaṇ* gets completed without any hassles. After that, I offer a prayer to our *kuḷdevtā*, then one to my *guru*. Some people have a *guru* and some don’t. If you don’t have a *gurū*, you offer a prayer to Dattātreyā. After this, I start to read my chapters for the day.

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<sup>205</sup> *Jānava* refers to the cotton neck-chord that a person wears at the time of his ritual initiation. In Maharashtra, many brāhmaṇ men wear a new chord every year in the month of Śrāvaṇ. As wearing a new chord symbolizes revitalizing the ritual initiation, *brāhmaṇ pārāyaṇakārs* wear it before beginning a new *pārāyaṇ*.

The format of rituals in terms of offering prayers to Gaṇapati and Dattātreya and then *devpūjā* followed by the *pothī pūjā* is constant. However, the ritual actions carried out during the reading sessions are varied. Some readers prefer to keep incense sticks burning continually for the entire reading session, while others light them only once, at the beginning of the reading session. Similarly, some readers tend an oil lamp for the whole period of a reading session, whereas others tend it day and night for eight days. In addition to the oil lamp, some readers keep a ghee-lamp lit during the reading session.

Another variation in ritual actions is associated with the style of reading. Some readers read the prescribed chapters silently, whereas others read them aloud. Readers gave several reasons, including better concentration, good vibrations, and clarity in pronunciation. One young reader who works for 10-12 hours every day explained,

I read early in the morning at around 4AM. I am not used to getting up that early. I feel sleepy many times during reading sessions. For this, it is always better to read out loud. Sounding it out makes me concentrate much better than reading silently.

Yet another reader, who reads in a public setting, explained the point about better concentration from a slightly different angle:

You see, we have 12 to 15 readers at one time. We sit right next to each other. It is impossible in such a setting to ignore what the person sitting next to you is doing. In addition, we read at a temple. So there are visitors to the temple during the daytime. The presence of other readers and visitors disturbs me at times. So I read out loud. I cannot read very loudly as others can get disturbed if I do so. But I make sure to at least mutter it so that I can concentrate better.

Besides better concentration, some readers also gave other practical reasons for reading aloud.

A young high school teacher who had done *pārāyaṇ* five times so far described the interest of other family members in listening as the reason for reading out loud. He said:

I come from an orthoprax family. My father and mother appreciate it a lot that I do *pārāyaṇ*. Due to old age they cannot read much these days. My mother has developed a cataract problem and she needs to get operated on so she can read again. So she requests me to read out loud so she can listen while I read.

Similarly, a *rikshaw* driver (who is mentioned in the context of preparation of ritual space on page 134) whose wife helps him set up *pūjā* every day explained the reason for reading loud as being to make the scripture available to his wife.

Apart from the above-mentioned practical reasons, some readers put forth theological reasons for reading out loud. A retired bank officer, who is well-known among the Dattātreya devotees in Pune for exploring the *Gurucaritra* by travelling to places mentioned in it, asked a very pertinent question during one of our meetings. He asked,

Tell me one thing. How would you describe the content of verses, *āratīs* and various religious books including the *Gurucaritra*? If you pay close attention to the type of content, you will realize that all these literary pieces consist of praising god in one way or another. If this is the case, then why would you praise someone silently? On the contrary, I would say it is a must to read it out loud so god can listen to it.

In one of our later meetings, I asked him, “Why is it important to praise god?” He replied,

You see, god does not get anything from your praise. In fact, he does not even need all that from you [*tyāla te sarva nako asateṃ*]. What happens in this process is you listen to your words when you say them out loud and they work as a reminder to yourself. This is a reminder that you are a tiny, little piece in the workings of the universe. [*āpalā khujepaṇā jaṇavato āpalyālā, bāki kāhī nāhī.*]

Some readers emphasized the association of sound with purity with reference to reading *the Gurucaritra* out loud. A female reader who did *pārāyaṇ* for the first time recounted,

We are used to listening to our *gurūjī* (priest) every year. He reads it out loud. He could not make it to our place this year. He had other appointments already. So I decided to read it myself. I consulted with him about ritual procedures for *pārāyaṇ* the day before it started. He told me specifically to read it out loud, so I did. He told me that when we read mantras aloud, they purify our home.

Readers who preferred to read silently justified their choice with a variety of reasons as well. Readers who did their *pārāyaṇ* in community settings mentioned the possibility of disturbing other readers as a reason for reading silently. Readers who read silently at home mentioned restrictions of space as a reason for reading silently. One male reader who had started reading based on the advice of his father-in-law said,

The *Gurucaritra* mentions many rules and observances. I cannot follow any of them. My father-in-law, who gave me this *pothī* [points to a copy of the *Gurucaritra*], reads it out loud. I cannot do that. If I read out loud, it disturbs other family members. I like to do things for god without interfering in matters of other family members. So I read it silently.

Readers’ choice about reading silently vs. out loud is mainly guided by their practical circumstances. I also met with some readers who are flexible about this matter.

For instance, a Marāṭhā male reader, who has done *pārāyaṇ* for about thirty years said:

I started reading with my father some 30 years back. I followed his example by reading aloud. But now I read it out loud if I can. Otherwise I read it silently. How you read it does not matter really. The more important thing is that you read it during the period of *pārāyaṇ*.

### *Pāraṇa*: Celebrations at the End

The third and last part of a *pārāyaṇ* consists of *pāraṇa* or *udyāpan*.<sup>206</sup> The terms *pāraṇa* and *udyāpan* refer to the celebrations at the end of the reading cycle. The celebrations symbolize two distinct things: a successful completion of the reading cycle and enacting the birth of Dattātreya. The enactment of the birth of Dattātreya is relevant only for the reading cycles that end on Datta Jayantī in Mārgaśīrṣa. Although Datta devotees consider it to be more meritorious to do *pārāyaṇ* around Datta Jayantī, they also do it at other times of the year; and in that case the *udyāpan* does not celebrate Datta's birth.

Similar to the end-of-the-ritual celebrations of other Hindu *vratas* such as *Vaibhavlakṣmī Vrat*, and *Soḷā Somvār Vrat*, feasting and fasting are the two essential components of the *pāraṇa/udyāpan*. When a *pārāyaṇ* is conducted around Datta Jayantī, readers finish all the chapters from the *Gurucaritra* (except for the *avatāṇikā*) the day before Datta Jayantī. Then, on the day of Datta Jayantī they read the *avatāṇikā* chapter, which consists of summaries of all the other chapters. After this, they read again the fourth chapter, which narrates the birth of Dattātreya, until they reach the verse that announces Dattātreya's birth. After reading the birth announcement from the text, they offer flowers to the *pothī* and celebrate the birth of the deity.

Typically, the reader and his/her spouse fast on the day after the end of the *pārāyaṇ*, which, if it has been conducted before Datta Jayantī, falls on Datta Jayantī. At noon, they offer specific foods to a married couple or a brāhmaṇ and a married woman. Readers who do *pārāyaṇ* at home invite friends and family members to take *darśan* of the *pothī* on this day. *Prasād* made out of fruits from the *māṇḍaṇī* is distributed.

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<sup>206</sup> M.Monier-Williams glosses *pāraṇaas* "carrying through, accomplishing, fulfilling, MBh.; conclusion (esp. of a fast), with or sc. *vrata*)." See, M.Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-Marathi Dictionary*, 619.



In the case of communal settings, the celebrations vary based on the availability of financial and spatial resources. At a communal reading center in the Sahakārnagar area, readers take out a palanquin with a framed picture of Dattātreya within a radius of a couple of kilometers from the center where they read. As they take out the palanquin, women and men sing various devotional songs praising Dattātreya. Women from the neighborhood come out of their houses and offer puja to the palanquin. According to the organizer of a reading center, about two hundred people from the neighborhood come over to take *darśan* of the *pūjā* and then to take the *mahāprasād* (a full meal) on that day. Whereas *prasād* consists of one or two items, *mahāprasād* consists of a full meal containing rice, *varaṇ* (cooked lentils), one or two vegetables, desserts, and condiments such as *pāpaḍ*. The number of vegetables and desserts in a meal varies from place to place and depends on the financial means of the host. More on the specific items cooked for the *pāraṇa* of *Gurucaritra pārayaṇ* will follow below.

A similar pattern is noticeable in the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar temple in the Kothruḍ area (see fig. 15 and 16). A reader who has done *pārayaṇ* 300 times organizes the *sā mudāyik pārayaṇ* in the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar temple. According to him, the *pāraṇa* celebrations of the *maṇḍal* are comparable to “wedding celebrations.” He described the process of organization of *pāraṇa* as follows:

On the last day we invite Mahābaleśvarkar *gurūjī* [a priest who is famous for his Vedic knowledge and clear pronunciation]. He presides over the *yajña*<sup>207</sup> ceremony. One of our readers volunteers to sit with his wife as the host of the *yajña*. After the *yajña* we offer a full meal to 800 people. 500 people eat on-site and about 300 take to-go lunch-boxes. We need ten big tins of cooking oil, seven gas cylinders, and 70 kg of rice and so on. Now we have someone who offers 15 kg of ghee, 15 kg of cracked wheat, A 15 kg of sugar every year. Someone takes responsibility for giving enough *jilebīs* every year.

During the *pārayaṇ* cycle, I stay in the temple. When I am not in a reading session, I talk to visitors and collect donations. Everyone wants to donate certain things. But the problem is everyone wants to give donations of rice. But only rice is not enough to give a full meal. We need other things, such as sugar, ghee, *tūr ḍāl*, spices and salt. Then we also need gas cylinders to cook. We have to offer 14,000 Rupees to the chef. If everyone offers only certain things then it is of no use. I convince people to donate different things, including salt, *goḍā masālā*, and red chili powder. But sometimes they are hesitant to give offerings other than cracked wheat, milk, ghee and sugar, as those are the conventional offerings.

<sup>207</sup> *Yajña* refers to Vedic sacrificial ritual.



Figure 15. *Pāraṇa* celebrations at the *Mṛtyuñjayeśvar Sānudāyik Pārāyaṇ Maṇḍaḷ*. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar



Figure 16. Readers are offered hot water for a bath and hot tea before every reading session at the *Mṛtyuñjayeśvar Sānudāyik Pārāyaṇ Maṇḍaḷ*. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

In the Diṇḍorī *Sevā Kendra*, one comes across a similar pattern in celebrations where large-scale celebrations are organized as part of the *pāraṇa* at centers. A woman reader from Maharashtra *Kendra* explained:

We arrange for 13 items in the *naivedya* on the last day. Each of us is assigned one item. We take turns bringing lemon wedges, salt, rice and then items that Swāmī [here she refers to Akkalkoṭ Svāmī, who is considered to be an avatar of Dattātreyā in the Diṇḍorī tradition] likes. In Svami's *pothī* we learn that he likes *besan lādū*, *jilebī*, *motiūr lādū*, and *śrīkhaṇḍ*. But especially Svāmī likes *besan lādoo* and onion fritters....since we do celebrations there, I don't do anything special at home for *pāraṇa*.

Some members from Diṇḍorī did *pāraṇa* celebrations at home in addition to the celebrations at the *Kendra*. A female reader mentioned that she invited a married couple for lunch on the day after the celebrations at the *Kendra*.

Although community *pārāyaṇ* centers show a pattern of large-scale celebrations, it is not possible for all *maṇḍaḷs* to conduct large-scale celebrations. For instance, the organizer of the women's reading group in the Salisbury Park area prefers to go on a pilgrimage for two or three days rather than arranging a big celebration.

Specific details about who is invited, the time at which they are invited and the foods offered vary from case to case. A woman reader from the Diṇḍorī *Sevā Kendra* mentioned,

Tāī, you can invite any married couple. But the only condition is that they should be married to each other in a "proper way," meaning the wedding must have been witnessed by gods. [*devā-brāhmaṇāncyā sākṣine lagna lāvāleleṃ asaleṃ pāhijem*]

A male reader offered a different opinion in this matter. He said:

Dattātreyā is a renouncer. He is not a *grhasthāśramī*.<sup>208</sup> So how can we invite a married couple for celebrations related to him? We invite a married woman [*suvāsini*] and a brāhmaṇ for lunch that day. We never invite a married couple for this particular purpose.

Yet another variation in the practice of offering food relates to the types of foods offered to the invitees. In the *avataraṇikā* chapter of the *Gurucaritra*, the author does not mention any specific foods. In verse 95 of chapter 52, he prescribes offering donations to a brāhmaṇ and a *suvāsini*<sup>209</sup> (a married woman), according to the reader's financial conditions. In practice, readers

<sup>208</sup> *Grhasthāśramī* refers to a married man who is actively engaged in the householder tradition.

<sup>209</sup> The word "*suvāsini*" is referred to a married woman. A married woman is considered to be especially auspicious if she has an offspring. In many Marāṭhī homes, married women with

invite a married woman and a brāhman or a married couple for lunch. In addition, they offer money and other types of gifts as well.

Although the author does not mention any specifics about foods, the majority of the *pārāyaṅkārs* emphasized that a particular vegetable, i.e., beans [*ghevḍyācī bhājī*], should be included in the menu. Further, they also mentioned a pudding with cracked wheat and milk [*gavhācī khīr*] as a must for that meal. In her explanations about the inclusion of beans in the menu, a reader responded,

You must make a make *ghevadyācī bhājī* and *gavhācī khīr* for the *naivedya*<sup>210</sup> that you offer on the last day. You remember, there is one chapter about the vine of beans in *the Gurucaritra* where the *guru* comes and takes away the vine.

Mugdha: You are referring to *śrāvaṅ ghevḍā* (green beans), right?

Reader: No, no. It is a different kind. We call it *puśī ghevḍā*. I don't know what they call it here in Pune.

On the one hand, I met people who were keen on on the choice of foods offered at *pāraṅa*; on the other hand, I also met readers who took a minimalist attitude to *pāraṅa*. A school teacher whose family members have chronic illnesses was one example of the latter type. He said,

I cannot do much in terms of offerings. I have no help at home. So I buy the groceries required to feed two people and donate them at the *maṭh* [Ṭembe Svāmī *maṭh* in the Eraṅvaṅā area of Pune]. In addition, I make sure I visit at least one of the Datta places after the *pārāyaṅ*. Sometimes I visit Vādī, other times Gāṅagāpūr. It depends on the number of days I can take off from work. I make offerings when I visit these places.

Similarly, readers who go on a pilgrimage after each *pārāyaṅ* make offerings to people during their pilgrimages. A woman, who had just done *pārāyaṅ* for the first time, recounted,

We have a Dattātreya temple in a small village in the Konkaṅ. I still remember the *pārāyaṅ* week at our temple. Men would sit and do the readings while a few widows would sit in the back to listen to them as they read. We used to have large-scale celebrations on Datta *Jayantī* at the end of the week. All our relatives used to travel from Mumbai and other big cities to Satkoṅḍī for Datta *Jayantī*.

Being a woman, I never got a chance to read the *Gurucaritra* all these years. Recently my son bought this *pothī* at a used bookstore. I was curious to find out what is the content matter of the *pothī* is since he had bought it for me. I decided to do a *pārāyaṅ*

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children (before their puberty) are invited for lunch at occasions of celebrations of vows. At these occasions, the “*suvāsini*” is offered with plentiful of meal along with “other gifts such as money, clothing, or other objects. A satisfied *suvāsini* is believed to empower the host family with health and wealth.

<sup>210</sup> *Naivedya* refers to the food offered to god.

and so I did. But I did not do anything special at the end. Being a used book, this *pothī* was torn. When I finished reading it all, I bought a new wrap and put it on the *pothī*. That was all in terms of my *pāraṇa*.

In the case of *pārāyaṇ*, the idea of making offerings to others at the culmination was explained with reference to two different contexts—merit-making and honoring. The idea of merit-making relates to the act of almsgiving, whereas the idea of honoring relates to the belief that Dattātreya visits the reader at the culmination of the *pārāyaṇ*.

A young, male computer professional explained as follows the logic of making offerings:

You see, it does not matter whether you offer a fruit or a full meal. What matters is that you offered something. It is like sharing the merit you have earned during *pārāyaṇ*. Moreover, the joy of sharing is unique, isn't it?

I still remember the day I visited my friend who introduced me to *pārāyaṇ* in the first place. He had invited me to his home in the evening for Datta Jayantī celebrations. That was the first time I saw someone do a *pārāyaṇ*. I saw the *pothī* [*Gurucaritra pothī*] for the first time. I ate the *prasād* of *pārāyaṇ* at his place and part of his merit got transferred into me. This resulted in me taking on the mission of doing *pārāyaṇ* from the next year. When you make offerings, you share your *puṇya* with others.

Apart from this general Hindu association of almsgiving with merit-making, some readers mentioned a more foundational belief as an explanation for the offerings. Readers expressed the idea of Dattātreya visiting the house of a reader during the period of *pārāyaṇ* in several ways.

One reader set out a plate full of vermilion (*kumkum*) powder at the beginning of the *pārāyaṇ*. He said,

If you pay close attention, you see the footprints of Datta Mahārāj [honorific way of addressing god] by the end of the *pārāyaṇ* every year.

Another reader said:

I make sure I keep two *āsana* [seating mats] for *pūjā*. Datta Mahārāj likes to listen to us when we praise him.

According to yet another reader:

One should make sure not to read between noon and 12:30PM. You know, it is Datta's time for *bhikṣā* [gathering food as of alms]. If you read during that time, he will not be able to be present.

The idea of offering specific foods during the *pāraṇa* stems from this belief too. Offering the foods mentioned in the stories of the *Gurucaritra* works as a way to please the god, who is believed to be visiting in the form of the invited guests. Two narratives from my interviews are

particularly illustrative of this belief. A woman whose husband and father both read the *Gurucaritra* recounted a narrative from her childhood about the visit of a stranger during Datta Jayantī celebrations as follows:

I think I was ten or eleven years old at that time. My father used to do *pārāyaṇ* every year. And we invited people for *prasād* on Datta Jayantī. My father used to work two shifts every day—from 8 AM to noon and 4PM to 8PM. One day he had just come back from his first shift. We were planning to have our lunch like every day. A strange man came and knocked at the door. Bābā [her father] opened the door and asked him to join us for lunch. He said he wanted to do a *pūjā* at our place. We gathered all accessories such as *tāmhaṇ*<sup>211</sup> (plate), *haḷad-kumkum*, fresh flowers for him. He did *pūjā* and gave us two *prājakta* flowers. Do you know that *prājakta* flowers stay fresh only for a few hours? The flowers that this man gave us as *prasād* of the *pūjā* he did stayed fresh for many days after he left. He came to us at noon. Who else was he? He was Dattātreyā visiting in the form of a strange man.

A narrative given by a woman who did *pārāyaṇ* to keep the family tradition unbroken expresses a similar belief:

Like I told you, our *gurūjī* who reads the *Gurucaritra* for us every year could not make it this year. And my husband was away for work. But someone had to read the *Gurucaritra* to keep the tradition unbroken. I was in a dilemma as to who would read it for us. Since I found no one to do it, I decided to do it myself. My intention was not to do anything bad. I was not going to steal anything; neither was I causing any trouble to anyone. What harm could reading a book about divine energies bring to us? With this thought, I started reading it. But since it all happened suddenly, I had no time to plan for ritual procedures. In fact, I did not invite anyone for lunch on the last day of *pārāyaṇ*. I made all the *naivedya* at noon to offer to god for a successful completion. My sister, who lives in a different part of the city, called me around noon to inform me that she was going to visit me that afternoon. I invited her for lunch. Then her husband called her for some reason and I asked him if he could join us for lunch. He could make it to lunch. When they left home, I realized that I had offered food to a married couple. I realized that Dattātreyā had visited me in the form of my sister and brother-in-law that day.

It is clear from the above discussion that there are variations in the celebrations and offerings made at the culmination of *pārāyaṇ*. The degrees of celebration and the types of offerings depend upon several factors, including whether the setting is public or private, the financial condition of the reader, and the format that a particular family follows for religious celebrations.

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<sup>211</sup> A *tāmhaṇ* is a special ritual object made of copper or silver. It is a plate that is used to bathe small icons of deities from home shrines. It is also used to offer flowers etc. to small icons.

### **Prescriptions from the book**

Sarasvatī Gaṅgādhara, the author of the *Gurucaritra*, delves only briefly into the topic of the ritual procedures for *pārāyaṇ*. In relation to ritual observances, he offers only four specific instructions: one, abstain from participating in discussions about unrelated [topics those not related to *pārāyaṇ* (*atattvārtha bhāṣaṇī dharāve maun*)]; two, abstain from sexual activities (*kāmādi niyam rākhāveṃ*); three, eat in small quantities (*upahār kāhi karāvā*); and four, sleep on the floor at night (*rātrī karāve bhūmīśayan*). There are no specific instructions about topics such as specific foods to be eaten, clothes to be worn during *pārāyaṇ* etc. However, readers mentioned conventions about these topics in a much elaborate manner.

### **Conventional practices**

The phrase “*pathya paṇem*” was used to refer to ritual observances. At a most basic level, “*pathya paṇem*” can be translated as “to follow the rules.” In the context of the *Gurucaritra*, this meant both following prescriptions and avoiding contact with certain objects. Readers mentioned ritual observances related to eating, sex, shaving, travelling, sleeping, and the use of leather.

The words *śucitā*, *śuddhī* and *sāttvikatā*” popped up again and again in my discussions about ritual observances. *Śucitā* and *śuddhī* were used to describe the purity and pollution rules to be followed during *pārāyaṇ*, whereas by *sāttvikatā* the readers referred to a desired state of body and mind that is acquired at the end of the *pārāyaṇ*.

As Madan observes,

*Śuddha* and its opposite *aśuddha* are attributes of animate beings, inanimate objects and places with which a human being comes into contact in the course of everyday life. For example, a prepubescent girl (*kanyā*), water from a holy river, unboiled milk, ghee and a temple are *śuddha*. On the other hand, contact with certain kinds of human beings (low-caste Hindus or non-Hindus), animals (dogs), objects (goods made out of leather), foods (meat or food cooked in impure utensils), substances (discharge from a human body),

places (cremation ground), etc. causes Brahmins and other upper caste Hindus to become polluted.<sup>212</sup>

It will be clear from the following section that the ritual observances for *pārāyaṇ* are based on the distinction between *śuddha* and *aśuddha* status.

*Anna*: food

It is clear from readers' narratives that following rules related to "proper" and "improper" foods is considered to be crucial for a successful *pārāyaṇ*. Although the distinction between "proper" and "improper" is present in the choice of foods, the rules about foods are not universal. As will be shown later, readers tend to rationalize these categories in their situational contexts.

At a most basic level, the rules related to food are of two types: foods to be eaten and foods to be avoided. This distinction is based on the idea that foods have inherent qualities of three types: i.e., *sattva*, *raja*, *tama*. R.S.Khare<sup>213</sup> notes, "[in Hinduism]...food is viewed through the threefold lens of *guṇas* (inherent qualities)—"good" (*sāttvika*), "passionate" (*rājas*), and "dull" (*tāmas*), closely interrelating a person's this-worldly goals to those otherworldly." Further, it is believed that these innate qualities or *guṇas* influence the mental status of the person who intakes them.

E.B. Harper's<sup>214</sup> observations related to food and eating of the Havik brāhmins of Karnataka are relevant to readers of the *Gurucaritra* as well. According to Harper,

For Haviks, only vegetarian food is permissible. Although within the general purity-pollution system meats are graded as to their relative amount of pollution (starting with the least defiling: eggs, fish, chicken, goats and sheep, wild pork, domestic pork and finally water buffalo and beef), Havik Brahmins absolutely avoid all of them. In addition, certain strong (śakti) foods, for example onions and garlic, are felt to be inappropriate to Brahmanical status, as are foods which resemble meat in color--pumpkins, tomatoes, radishes, and carrots.

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<sup>212</sup> Madan, "Concerning the Categories of *Śubha* and *Śuddha* in Hindu Culture: An Exploratory Essay." in *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, 17.

<sup>213</sup>R.S. Khare, "Anna." In *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 413.

<sup>214</sup>Edward B. Harper, "Ritual Pollution as an Integrator of Caste and Religion," 155.



*Pārāyaṅkārs* referred to specific grains, roasted grains, fruits, milk and milk products as *sāttvik* foods. By contrast, onion and garlic, eggplant, spices, salt, eggs, meat were mentioned as *tāmasī* foods.

Although achieving *sāttvik* status is the goal of all *pārāyaṅkārs*, the definition of *sāttvik* foods is somewhat subjective in that there is no universal rule about what foods are categorized as *sāttvik*. For instance, I met with a range of readers, from one reader who ate only one type of fruit for eight days to someone who ate anything that was available at the canteen where he usually ate.

A female reader from the Diṅḍorī tradition explained rules about food in their tradition as follows:

In our *Kendra*, we are instructed to eat only one grain for the entire week. That grain has to be a *dvidal*<sup>215</sup> grain. In addition, we are told to eat only one time each day. We are supposed to avoid onion and garlic. Some women cook two separate foods—one for the entire family and the other for themselves. The former is a regular food with onion and garlic whereas the latter is prepared without onion and garlic. But you know, it just increases our [here by “our” she referred to “women’s”] work. So I don’t follow all the rules related to onion and garlic. It is always good if you can follow all the rules but sometimes you end up making adjustments for your family.

The definition of *sāttvik* is also shaped by the text itself to an extent. In particular the narrative of the brāhmaṇ and the beans from chapter 18 of the *Gurucaritra* is important in this context. According to this narrative, the *guru* visits a brāhmaṇ at noon and begs for alms. Since the vine of beans is the sole means of support for the brāhmaṇ’s family, the brāhmaṇ’s wife offers some beans from her backyard to the *guru*. The *guru*, then, uproots the vine and the brāhmaṇ finds a pot of gold underground in the same spot. Based on this narrative, beans have acquired the status of *sāttvik* food among some *pārāyaṅkārs*. For instance, I met with a *pārāyaṅkār* who ate only beans and wheat-flour *chapatti* for eight days.

Besides the innate qualities of the foods, the *sāttvik* status of food is also associated with the bodily and mental status of the person who prepares the food. Due to this, foods prepared by some persons are acceptable while those prepared by others are not. For instance, a woman from a Diṅḍorī *Sevā Kendra* in Pune accepted food cooked at her sibling’s place but avoided

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<sup>215</sup>*Dvidal* refers to a sprout which splits into two parts.

foods from other people. In this context, the concept of *parānna* is foundational to the success of a *pārāyaṇ*. *Parānna* consists of two words—“para,” and “anna,” and the phrase is translated as “foods prepared by another.” The definition of “other” varies from place to place. A young reader eloquently explained the rationale behind avoiding *parānna* as follows:

The ultimate purpose of *pārāyaṇ* is to make your mind and body devoid of all “improper” things. (*Śevaṭī pārāyaṇtun kāy sādhyā karāyacaṇ āhe? Āpale man āṇi śarīr śuddha jhāle pāhijem*). You never know what kind of thoughts one has while cooking. If someone is unhappy while cooking then those unhappy thoughts transform into the food that is cooked. Also, if you eat store-bought food, you don’t always know the quality of ingredients they use. If an ingredient you eat is rotten then you may end up with a stomach ache. Ultimately, we don’t want any kind of disturbance during the period of *pārāyaṇ*. This is why I avoid foods other than those cooked by my wife at home.

Although foods cooked by people other than family people are generally undesirable, the definition of “para” is not very rigid. Urban lifestyles and work-schedules of the readers play an important role in the context of making adaptations to the rules about *parānna*. An excerpt from my interview with an engineer who works in a big industrial company in Pune illustrates this point. He observed,

My job requires me to travel. Sometimes I need to travel even during the *pārāyaṇ* cycle. When I am travelling, I cannot follow rules about *parānna*. I buy liquids such as tea, water etc. I still try to take a homemade lunch so that I don’t have to buy food from outside. But sometimes even that is inevitable.

Yet another male reader, who is used to buying lunch at work every day, took a different strategy about food observations,

It is not possible to follow all rules related to *parānna* these days. We get a really good diet-lunch at my work. I eat that every day of the year. I make sure that I don’t eat eggs and meat during that period. But, other than that, I do not alter my arrangements of food even during the *pārāyaṇ* cycle.

*Kāma*: Sex and other observances

The idea of following *pathya* in order to re/gain one’s *sāttvik* status shapes many bodily and mental processes of the readers, including those related to their bodily urges. The organizer of the Mrtyuñjayeśvartemple *sānudāyik* reading group recounted,

When you are doing a *pārāyaṇ*, you have taken a vow [*tumhī vratastha asatā*]. Hence, you should curtail engaging in any activities that give you pleasure. This is why we recommend that our readers abstain from any sexual activities during the *pārāyaṇ* cycle.

But it does not always work. I remember one of the readers approaching us some years ago and telling me that he made a mistake. You know what I am talking about, right? [Here he refers to engaging in sexual activity]. What can we say? He was a newly married man. So, sometimes these things happen. I told him to forget about it and concentrate on the rest of the reading schedule.

Bodily fluids are considered to be a source of pollution in Hinduism.<sup>216</sup> Among other examples, sexual relations with the spouse are a cause of such pollution. Due to this, abstinence from sexual relations is a must during the period of any Hindu ritual.

Apart from abstaining from sexual activities, some readers mentioned that they slept by themselves on the floor [*satrañjīvar jhopṇe*]<sup>217</sup> during the period of *pārāyaṇ*. A woman reader explained this as follows:

I spread a *ghoṅgaḍī* (a woven blanket) on the floor and sleep all by myself during *pārāyaṇ* days. When you are in a *vratastha* mode, you must shun *aiḥīk* (materialistic) pleasures of all types [*aiḥīk sukhānkade pāṭh firavali pāhijem*]. This is the reason you don't sleep on a mattress during the *pārāyaṇ* cycle. The idea is that you remain focused and realize the powers of the divine in this process.

Similar to the idea of *parāṇna*, which is interpreted flexibly, even in the case of *kāmādi niyam*, readers interpret the rules about *parāṇna* loosely. Although the idea of sexual activity as a polluted act is constant, the rules about sleeping on the floor are interpreted somewhat loosely. For instance, I met a male reader who expressed his inability to sleep on the floor during the winter. He stressed,

My wife and I make sure that we do not have any physical contact during those days. But we sleep right next to each other, like always. I have to work odd hours and if I don't get a good night's sleep, that affects my work.

Another woman, who reads the *Gurucaritra* in the Svāmī Samartha *Maṭh* in Sadāśiv Peṭh, said,

I am in my early fifties now. I have a back-ache problem. If I don't sleep on my own mattress, then that problem worsens. I have family responsibilities--I have a son who attends college and a daughter who is working on her degree. I have to pack lunch for them every morning before they leave the house. I don't sleep on the floor because I don't want to take my chances. If I get sick even for a day, the entire system collapses.

Several other ritual observances, including rules about shaving, travelling and using objects made out of leather, were occasionally mentioned. Some male readers avoid shaving

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<sup>216</sup> Harper, 171.

<sup>217</sup> *Satarañjīvar jhopṇe* translates as "sleeping on a mat."

during the entire period of *pārāyaṇ*, while others don't. The following conversation with a male reader, who is a follower of the Ṭembe Svāmī *paramparā*, sheds light on the history of this ritual observance:

Reader: I think the origin of this particular observance goes back to the old days. People, especially brāhmanas, would go to a barber to get shaved back then. Barbers provided their services to everyone from the village. So you had no idea who that particular barber came in contact with before you. This is why they said in the past that it was better to avoid shaving during the period of *pārāyaṇ*.

Mugdha: Do you follow restrictions about shaving?

Reader: Like I said before, the history of this observation goes back to times when people went to barbers. Who has time to go to a barber these days? Moreover, it was not even necessary to shave every day at that time. I run a business and if I go without shaving even one day, it has an adverse effect on my clients. Times have changed and our needs have changed. So we must adapt to the new times. Coming back to your question, I do not follow the rules about shaving.

Similarly, I met with readers who mentioned that they avoid contact with objects made with leather during the period of *pārāyaṇ*. A young, male reader, said:

I use only zip-lock plastic bags during *pārāyaṇ*. I empty the contents of my leather wallet into that zip lock plastic bag the night before the *pārāyaṇ* starts and use that bag for the period of *pārāyaṇ*.

A woman from a Diṇḍorī *Sevā Kendra* mentioned a similar practice in one of our conversations.

Woman: Tāi, I do my *pārāyaṇ* with others at the Kendra. I can concentrate better over there. I feel very calm and happy the moment I enter in the Kendra space.

Mugdha: How do you go there?

Woman: That is the only challenge. There is no Kendra nearby. I have to commute to the Sārasbāg Kendra all the way. I get up early in the morning, prepare lunch boxes for everyone and leave at around 5AM. We have a two-wheeler [vehicle]. So it is much easier. My husband drops me off in the morning. But the challenge is in the afternoon. I come back on my own. I have to walk to the bus stop and my feet start burning with the heat when I come back. And it is not like other times when you can wear any comfortable shoes.

Mugdha: What do you mean?

Woman: We are told at the Kendra to avoid wearing anything made of leather during the period of *pārāyaṇ*. So we don't wear leather shoes. So I wear slippers (flip-flops) made of rubber. But the challenge is that rubber-made products heat up very fast.

Finally, some readers told me that they avoid travelling out of town during *pārāyaṇ*. The topic of travelling came up naturally in my conversation with a reader who has to travel frequently as a personal assistant of a political leader. While understanding his job profile and the nature of his job, I asked if he had to travel during *pārāyaṇ* cycles. He responded,

Usually it works out. Now, after so many years, everyone at work knows that I do this [*pārāyaṇ*]. They also cooperate. But there are times when you cannot do anything about it. In case of emergencies, I have to manage my reading and commute. But you know something, if you put things in perspective, you don't feel bad even if you need to travel...

Mugdha: I don't understand. What do you mean by that?

Reader: In the past, the means of commuting were not as developed as they are today. First of all, people travelled on foot most of the time. Second, there were no proper constructed roads. When people walked through forests they encountered animals and all. The conditions for travelling were not very favorable. Hence, you had this rule of not going beyond the boundaries of your village [*ves olāṅḍāycī nāhī*]. People feared that if they did not make it back in time, they would miss the prescribed reading for that day. But now conditions have changed. So it is OK to travel if you have to.

Thus, it is clear from the above discussions that despite its centrality in *pārāyaṇ*, the concept of purity is constantly interpreted in the situated contexts of individual readers. On the one hand, I met readers who followed the rules about purity and pollution in detail; on the other hand, I also met with readers, especially professionals working at bigger establishments, who took a liberal perspective towards using leather, travelling and other rules.

#### Adaptations/Changes

##### *Sānudāyik pārāyaṇ*

Organized *pārāyaṇs* in communal spaces are an innovation in the *pārāyaṇ* tradition. As the organizer of the Ānand Āśram *Sānudāyik Gurūcaritra Vācan Saṁsthā* in Pune notes, "This is not a community reading in the real sense of the term. Readers come together and sit in one place but they do not read together. In that sense, it is an individualized devotional practice carried out in a communal setting."

The history of *sānudāyik pārāyaṇ* at Ānand Āśram goes back about 58 years. Kulkarnī, the current organizer of the Ānand Āśram *Sānudāyik Gurūcaritra Vācan Saṁsthā*, noted that lack of space in private homes and challenges in following ritual observances in restricted living spaces created a demand for a communal space for reading the *Gurūcaritra* in the first place. The organizer of the Omkāreśvar community reading group told me that, within a couple of years, the limited space at Ānand Āśram was not able to accommodate everyone who approached them for

*sānudāyik pārāyaṇ*. With more demand for common reading space, a new group started conducting *pārāyaṇ* in the ancient Śiva temple known as Omkāreśvar.

With the growing population settling in different areas around the heart of Pune city, members of Ānand Āśram also relocated to new areas such as Kothruḍ. They imitated their *sānudāyik maṇḍal*<sup>218</sup> in the Kothruḍ area and started meeting at the the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar temple about 38 years ago. In contrast to the Ānand Āśram and Omkāreśvar *maṇḍals*, the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar could not restrict its enrollment policies to brāhmaṇs, as the Kothruḍ area had more non-brāhmaṇs residents than brāhmaṇs.

At present the idea of a *sānudāyik pārāyaṇ samsthā* seems to be appealing to people in different places around Pune. In 2011, I visited about a dozen such *sānudāyik samsthās*, including the Omkāreśvar *sānudāyik maṇḍal*, the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar *sānudāyik maṇḍal*, a Lokmāyanagar *sānudāyik maṇḍal* that meets at a Datta temple, a Sahakārnagar *sānudāyik maṇḍal* that meets at a private residence, a Gulṭekḍī *sānudāyik maṇḍal* that meets at a private residence, and a Siṅhgaḍ Road *sānudāyik maṇḍal* that meets in a Dattātreya temple. In addition, the Diṅḍorī *mārg* (tradition) led by Dādāsāheb More organizes *sānudāyik pārāyaṇs* at various centers located in different parts of the city. I visited the Sārasbāg *Kendra*, the Maharṣīnagar *kendra*, and the Eranḍavaṇā *Kendra* in addition to the homes of various followers of the Diṅḍorī *mārg* who are not officially associated with any *kendra*.

A reader from the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar temple and his wife explained to me as follows the reasons for reading in a communal setting:

The main reason is lack of enough space in urban life. I have only a one-bedroom apartment. We are a family of four. I cannot sit and concentrate on reading at home. Moreover, I think that many people want to do *pārāyaṇ*. For instance, I have a friend who lives upstairs who wants to do one. But one may not get support from other family members. In such situations, one may think that it is easier to manage to read in a communal setting than to read at home. They tell you all the rules and observances properly at the temple. That is another advantage. Many people want to do it but they do not have proper guidance. In addition, one may feel a little relaxed at home. One may

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<sup>218</sup> The word *maṇḍal* refers to local organizing committees of religious and secular celebrations. Typically, the members of the *maṇḍal* approach the local residents for fund-raising. They construct small stages in local parks or other communal spaces during the period of celebrations. The stages are used to showcase cultural talents of the local residents.

lapse in finishing the prescribed chapters on that specific day if one reads at home. But it does not work that way when you are reading in a communal setting.

(Wife interrupts) Well, my maternal home is in Vādī. So everyone at home is a devotee of Datta. I have seen people doing *pārāyaṇs* on the banks of the river all the time. However, I never saw a *sāmudāyik pārāyaṇ* before coming to Pune. I think *sāmudāyik pārāyaṇ* is better because you do get all the reading done on time. (*Sagaḷa vācan veḷacyāveḷi hotem*).

(Husband continues) I feel more motivated when I read with others and I can concentrate better because there is no television, no family members, [there is] no distraction there.

Apart from the above-mentioned reasons, members of the Diṇḍorī tradition offer a unique explanation about the communal setting of their *pārāyaṇ*. According to the organizer of the Maharṣīnagar *Sevā Kendra*,

When you read with fifty other people you get the *puṇya* of reading it fifty times. Here at the Maharṣīnagar *Kendra*, we read together. One of us reads every *ovī* on the microphone and the others repeat it after us. This way we get to listen to fifty readers at the same time. This is why I say that we get the *puṇya*<sup>219</sup> of reading it fifty times.

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<sup>219</sup> *Puṇya* is to merit acquired through “proper” actions in a religious context.

The communal setting demands several modifications with respect to the ideas of ritual time, ritual space, ritual objects and *saṃkalp*, the reading process and *pāraṇa*. The rules for ritual procedures are altered in a communal setting in that only one common *pūjā* is performed instead of individual *pūjās*. In addition, one or two members offer a common *saṃkalp* on the first day (see fig. 17).



Figure17. Two women offer a common *saṃkalp* on the first day on microphones at Maharśinagar *Sā mudāyik Pārāyaṇ*. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

Depending upon the availability of space, various *sā mudāyik pārāyaṇ* centers accommodate between 12 (*Svāmī Samarth Maṭh*) and 28 (*Ānand Āśram*) members at one time. Overall enrollment numbers vary from 30 (private residence) to 90 (*Mṛtyuñjayeśvar* temple).

At the *Ānand Āśram* and the *Mṛtyuñjayeśvar Sā mudāyik Pārāyaṇ* centers, the organizers send out letters to the readers about a month before Datta Jayantī to confirm their attendance for the *pārāyaṇ* cycle (see fig.18). The organizers make an announcement on a notice board so that new readers can sign up for a two-hour slot for reading. The *Omkāreśvar sā mudāyik maṇḍal* follows a slightly different procedure for enrollment.



According to the organizer of the Omkāreśvar maṇḍal,

We get a brand-new notebook on Ganesh *caturthī*. We offer a *pūjā* to Datta Mahārāj. Then we write names of all the gods on that notebook. Then write the year and collect the names of all readers. We take that notebook to Gāṇagāpūr on Tripūrī Paurinmā and touch it to the Datta *pādukā* there. We pray to Mahārāj [Dattātreyā], "Mahārāj, the people who have signed up here are going to sit for *pārāyaṇ* this year. We hereby pray you to take care of these people, their family members and other relatives during the period of *pārāyaṇ* so they can finish it with no difficulties. And let this work assigned by you be successful." Then we bring that notebook back.

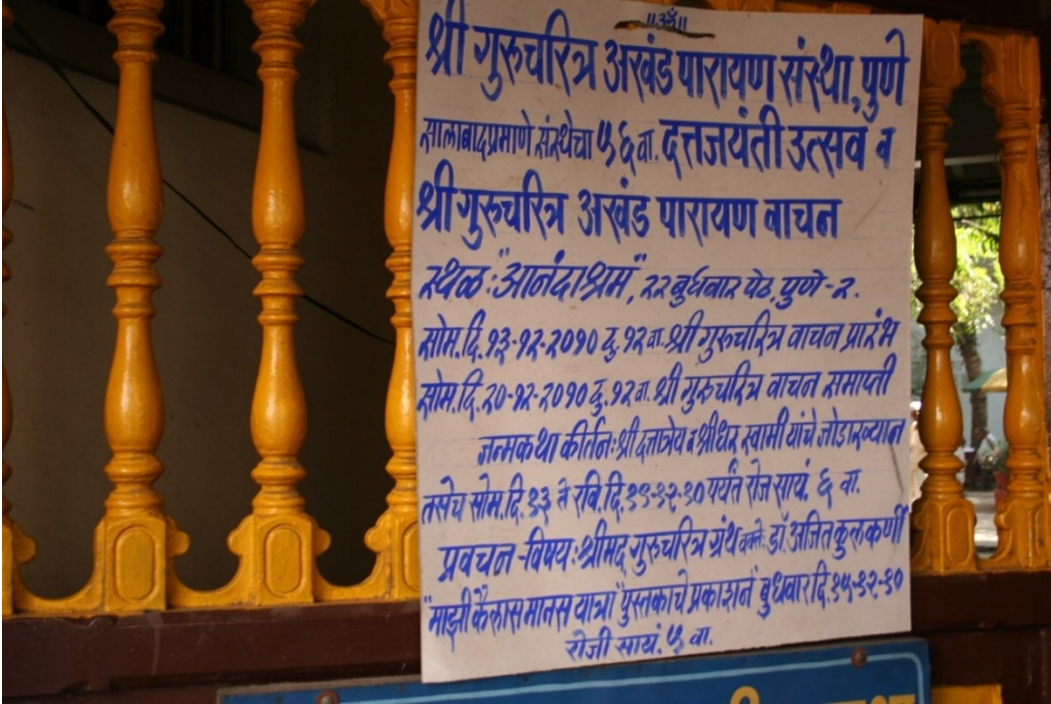


Figure 18. Announcement board for enrollment at the Ānand Āśram Saṁsthā. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar



Figure 19. Announcement board for enrollment at the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar Sāmudāyik Pārāyaṇ Maṇḍal. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

At other places, such as the Mr̥tyuñjayeśvar temple (see fig. 19), the organizers display a notice board and place sign-up sheets in one corner of the temple premises about a month before Datta Jayantī. The sign-up sheets ask the readers to give details, including names, addresses and a two-hour time-slot for their *pārāyaṇ*. At Diṇḍorī *mārg sevā Kendras*, readers are asked to provide only names and addresses as the *sevā kendras* arrange for only one two-hour reading session in the mornings.

Although community *pārāyaṇ* centers follow a similar pattern in organization, the specifications about organization differ from center to center. In some places, such as Ānand Āśram and Omkāreśvar, the organizing committee places one or more *akhaṇḍ pothīs* along with other *pothīs*. The idea of an *akhaṇḍ pothī* is to keep reading the same *pothī* continually for the entire period of *pārāyaṇ*. This is different from the other *pothīs*. A reader from Omkāreśvar explained the difference as follows:

You see, when you sign up for *vācan*, you are given two choices—you can sign up for either the regular *pothī* or the *akhaṇḍ pothī*. If you sign up for the former, you come every

day at the time you sign up and read the prescribed chapters. This way you get the entire *pothī* read by the end of the *pārāyaṇ* cycle. However, if you choose the latter option, it works in a different way. *Akhaṇḍ pothī* requires someone to read it continuously for the entire *pārāyaṇ* period. If you sign up for this, your job is to start reading from wherever the previous reader stopped. You do not get to read the entire *pothī*. This is why readers prefer to read the regular *pothī* over the *akhaṇḍ pothī*.

Readers bring their *pothīs* on the first day of *pārāyaṇ* and keep them at the center for the entire period of *pārāyaṇ*. In addition, they also leave their *sovḷe* cloth<sup>220</sup> at the center for the entire period of *pārāyaṇ*. Many reading centers, except for those organized in private homes, make arrangements for readers to take a bath before reading.

According to Dr. Ajit Kulkarni (Ajīt Kuḷkarṇī), the organizer of the Ānand Āśram *sāmudāyik pārāyaṇ maṇḍal*,

The main goal of the writer of the *Gurucaritra* was to make people think about the foundational ethical principles that govern human existence. But unfortunately 99.99% of our readers do not meditate on this aspect. This is why we organize *pravacan*<sup>221</sup> sessions on the *Gurucaritra* in the evenings at Ānand Āśram. We try to offer our readers the deeper meaning of the chapters that they read every day. These sessions are also open to the general public. This is how we reach out to the masses.

Similar to Ānand Āśram, which has developed a unique tradition of *pravacan* of the *Gurucaritra*, the *sāmudāyik maṇḍal* at the house of Goḷe has developed a distinctive tradition of taking out a palanquin procession (*pālkhī*) of Dattātreya in the neighborhood on the last day of *pārāyaṇ*. The Lokmānyanagar *sāmudāyik maṇḍal* takes yet another approach to involving the

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<sup>220</sup> The term “*sovḷe* cloth” refers to a particular kind of cloth used exclusively during the ritual performances. There are elaborate rules about the treatment of the *sovḷe* cloth. *Sovḷe* cloth is not be touched by anyone other than the person to whom it belongs. Moreover, it is not be touched even by its owner when not in a ritual session. The cloth is typically unstitched and is made from a special type of silk. In some cases, *sovḷe* cloth may be made of materials other than silk. For example, women readers defined the *sovḷe* cloth as a washed cloth (typically a sari), which has not been worn after washing. Generally the *sovḷe* cloth is stored somewhere near the home shrine. In this case, the readers brought their *sovḷe* cloth to the temple on the first day of their reading session and put it there for the entire reading cycle.

<sup>221</sup> *Pravacan* refers to public speech/a sermon on a religious text. Temples in the Pune area organize *pravacans* on various topics, including the *Bhāgavata*, the *Gurucaritra* etc.

community in devotion to Dattātreya (see fig.



20).

Figure 20. Students from Anāth Vidyārthī Gṛh in a reading session at the Lokmānyanagar Sāmudāyik Pārāyaṇ. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

The organizers recruit ten or fifteen students from the *Anāth Vidyārthi Gṛh* [a school for orphan children] school every year to read the *Gurucaritra*. These children read the prescribed chapters in the mornings and are provided breakfast and food after each reading session. Thus, every *sāmudāyik maṇḍal* tends to develop its unique traditions for celebrations.

#### Women's reading

In my fieldwork, I met a considerable number of women who read the *Gurucaritra*. A sizable number of women are now visible in a historically exclusively-male religious space. The women readers I came across were of two types: those associated with the women priest

movement and followers of the Diṅḍorī tradition.<sup>222</sup> There were notable differences with regard to the motivations and aspirations of the women that belonged to these two categories. For example, the readers with connections to the women-priests' movement were trained in Sanskrit recitation traditions; by contrast, the women that belonged to the latter category did not possess any such prior knowledge of a reading tradition. Another difference was with respect to the reasons given for reading. The women priests noted that they had started reading out of curiosity about the content, whereas the women from the Diṅḍorī tradition stated specific reasons related to concerns of their family members.

The following excerpt from an interview with a seventy-year-old woman illustrates how women explain their participation in the *Gurucaritra* reading.

Mugdha: When did you start going to the Rudra class?

W: It has been almost two months now.

M: How did you come to know about it?

W: I have known the teacher of our *Rudra* class for quite some time now. Her husband was friends with my husband. I used to go my friend in the Ganatra Complex here. One day I saw that my friend's book [she meant a book with Sanskrit verses] was all marked. I inquired about it and found out that a lady from our neighborhood teaches *Rudra*. I asked her if I could join the class. She laughed at me. [Laughed and paused. But finding that I was clueless about the reason for laugh she explained]. I have three grandchildren, you know.

I started going to the class. I used to just sit there. But the other students were quite advanced, as they had been doing it for some time. Then that *Rudra* class finished and a new *Gītā* class started. I was very excited about it. But then I could not do that continuously either, as my third grandchild had arrived in our family. I know I should concentrate more, but what can I do? I am a married woman. I have my family [*prapañca*] to take care of. She [my daughter-in-law] works at a reputed company. Isn't it my responsibility to help her out with her children? She did her M.E. [Masters] after marriage. She could not get admission here [in Pune] so she went to Islāmpur.<sup>223</sup> She took one child with her and her mother stayed for one year with her in Islāmpur. I took care of the other grandchild here in Pune, during that time.

M: How did you start reading the *Gurucaritra*?

W: When I was pregnant with my first son I started reading it as I thought my reading and thinking [about god] would make good impressions [*samskāra*] on the child in my womb. I did *pārāyaṇa* at that time.

M: Was it before Datta Jayantī?

W: No. When you feel like doing it, you do it. I did many *pārāyaṇas* when I found time. We were a joint family. Seven or eight people shared two small rooms. So there was no way for me to read out loud. I used to read silently. Also, I did not follow anything [specific rules for *pārāyaṇa*] then. If I had guests, I would take care of them, cook for them.

<sup>222</sup> There might be women readers who do not belong to either of these categories. However, the categories are useful in understanding the current trends in women's religiosity.

<sup>223</sup> A small town located about 120 miles south of Pune.

Sometimes I could not find time to read the entire day. I never felt guilty about it. If I could not do it during the day, I would do it in the evening. But I used to read it.

M:Hmm.

W: But I followed that seven-day rule, no matter what. I finished everything in seven days. You see, Mugdha, your family cannot be happy if you get upset [*cidcid karūn prapañch lābhat nāhī*]. If your mind is stable, then you get spiritual knowledge. Sometimes I used to sit for *parayan* and tell my children to switch off the stove. My children used to tease me for lack of focus on the reading. But that is inevitable [for a married woman.] (see fig. 21).



Figure 21. A woman priest doing *pārāyaṇ* at her home. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

It was interesting to see how this woman charted her own schedules and terms for reading in accordance with her duties as a wife, a grandmother and a host. Moreover, the case of this old woman is not exceptional. The women priests in Salisbury Park adjust their reading schedules according to their duties, such as grandparenting and cooking for family members. A female organizer of a *Gītā* and *Rudra* chanting class and a *Gurucaritra* reading group in the Salisbury Park area said,

We do *pārāyaṇ* readings of good books [she meant religious texts]. Fifteen to 20 women come for these reading sessions. Our members are from the middle class. The middle class follows cultural rules even today [*middle class ajun saṃskṛtī rākhūn āhe*]. They follow the schedules of festivals and maintain relations [by visiting relatives etc.] Middle-class mothers-in-law are engaged in raising their grandchildren [*sāsavā nātvaṇḍāt guntalelyā astāfī*]. It is not possible for them to follow strict rules of *pārāyaṇ*. We cannot meet early mornings for reading. We meet around ten o'clock so women can finish their

cooking etc. Some women have to pick up their grandchildren from school. Sometimes, we prefer to meet twice for shorter sessions considering the schedules.

## Conclusion

One can draw the following conclusions from the discussions above: one, that the treatment of the *pothī*—the way the physical object is held, treated and kept during the other times of the year is vital to the *pārāyaṇ* process; two, looking at the wide range of interpretations about ritual observances, one can say that following ritual procedures and observances with exactitude is not considered to be essential by the contemporary *pārāyaṇkārs*. Third, two prominent changes—participation of women and use of public spaces for *pārāyaṇ*--can be noted in relation to the *pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra* in recent years. It is clear from the above discussion that it is not only the literary content of the text that matters to the meaning-making. In addition to the literary content, two other aspects, i.e. the treatment of the text and the ritual process, are vital to the significance-making process. Recent changes in the *pārāyaṇ* tradition as well as the material dimensions of the process will be analyzed further in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### MATERIALITY

#### Introduction

Focusing on the two pillars of the reading process, i.e., the text and the reader, we have seen in the last chapter how readers engage with the *Gurucaritra* through ritual praxis. Throughout this dissertation I have argued for understanding the scriptures from the angle of their textuality. By “textuality” I have referred to qualities of scriptures that are not directly related to their content. The purpose of the the previous chapter was to investigate how scriptures acquire their scriptural status through social *praxis* surrounding and constituting them. In this chapter, I analyze the ontological status of the *pothī* as a material object in *pārāyaṇ*.

During my fieldwork, readers shared details about the acquisition and dissemination of *pothīs*. In our discussions about the process of *pārāyaṇ*, they also stressed the rules about the treatment of the *pothī*. It became clear to me that *pārāyaṇ* is not merely a cognitive experience for these readers but also a corporeal, sensory experience. For instance, devotee-readers bow down in front of the *pothī* before every reading session during a *pārāyaṇ* cycle. They offer flowers, incense sticks and specific foods to the *pothī*. In this sense, the readers engage with the book in ways they don't with other books. As a consequence, it works as a focal material node in the *pārāyaṇ* by generating emotions of awe, fear, and safety in its readers.

Three observations can be made about readers' engagement with the *pothī* based on their narratives: one, readers of the *Gurucaritra* make a cognitive distinction between *pothī* and *pustak*, where the former is taken as a cultural-religious artifact whereas the latter is considered to be a commodity; two, the *pothī* as a physical thing is perceived to be imbued with power; three, considering that the *pothī* is perceived as a powerful thing, describing interaction between the reader and the *pothī* in terms of subject (former) and object (latter) seems inappropriate. But if we decide to drop the subject-object dichotomy, how else can we speak about this engagement? Are



all *pothīs* imbued with power? How do readers make a cognitive distinction between a *pustak* and a *pothī*? To put it simply, a nested set of social practices turns a book into a *pothī*. In what follows, we will address these questions through people's narratives. The plan for the chapter is as follows: we will discuss the need to reflect on the material dimension of religiosity in the first section, followed by the narratives of readers related to various dimensions of the *pothī* as a material object in the next section.

### **Materiality and Religion**

In recent years, a predominantly belief-centered view of religion has been criticized by several scholars (Webb Keane 1; Meyer and Houtman). On the one hand, the idea that belief is prior to action has been attacked by ritual theorists; and, on the other hand, the idea that the materials involved in the making of religion are only secondary (and therefore, of an illusory nature) is critiqued by theorists of material culture. Houtman and Meyer point out that scholars of religion have taken the relation between religion and things on “antagonistic terms” for the most part.<sup>224</sup> It is due to this perception that things used in religion have been treated only as a medium in the meaning-making process. In the case of scriptures, more attention has been paid to their content, leading to overlooking readers' engagement with scriptures as printed, physical objects. In other words, the assumption underlying the field of scripture studies has been that the book itself does not matter in terms of meaning-making. However, when it comes to religious texts, what sound like peripheral issues may have as significant a role in meaning-making as the content of the text. The so called peripheral issues such as the process of production of a religious text, the commodification of the text, and the treatment of the text as an object, are vital in understanding the *pārāyaṇ* process. Webb Keane acknowledges the role of materiality in religion in a very pertinent way:

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<sup>224</sup>Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, ed. *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1.

Ideas are not transmitted telepathically. They must be exteriorized in some way, for example, in words, gestures, objects, or practices, in order to be transmitted from one mind to another. Materiality is a precondition for the social circulation and temporal persistence of experiences and ideas.<sup>225</sup>

Keane argues that we need to pay attention to the material aspects of religion, as religious discourse is impossible without materials. At a minimum, materials are important to religion as a medium of expressing religiosity. With this view, ritual objects, specific clothes, foods, as well as other natural resources, including space, are taken as media through which religiosity is expressed. This formulation is useful as far as comprehending the sensory dimension of religion. However, the problem with this formulation is that it assigns materials only a second-order status. That is to say, materials, in themselves, do not add to religious meaning. The treatment of matter as a second-order category is based on a dichotomy between “spirit” and “matter” where these two are treated as mutually exclusive. However, do people always treat materials as secondary? If so, why is it important for Hindus to get Ganges water or for Muslims to get water from the Zamzam well while returning from their respective pilgrimages? With respect to scriptures, one could ask: why do devotee-readers save old copies of scriptures even when they get torn?

One can show with numerous examples that believers treat materials, especially religious material objects, as more than media for the expression of divinity. Materials themselves are considered to be instances of divine embodiment in many cases.<sup>226</sup> A *mūrti*/metallic icon in a Hindu temple or the *citras*/paintings of gods and goddesses in the Vallabh *sampradāy*<sup>227</sup> do not just represent the divine in form but are perceived to be divine embodiments themselves. In this

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<sup>225</sup>Webb Keane, "On the Materiality of Religion." *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (2008): 230.

<sup>226</sup> According to Pentcheva, "Icon (ikon, eikōn) in Greek is understood as image, representation, and portrait." Referring to the Byzantium use for the word, Pentcheva shows that icons, as a matter, are meant to be physically experienced as they are perceived to be objects imbued with charis or divine grace. A *pothī* of the *Gurucaritra* functions as an icon as it is perceived to be an embodiment of the guru and his divine grace. The perception of the *pothī* as a divine object leads to making the *pārāyaṇ* a sensory experience as much as a literary experience. See Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon." *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (2006): 631-655.

<sup>227</sup> For details about *citras* in Vallabh *Sampradāy*, see, Woodman Taylor, "Agency and Affectivity of Paintings: The Lives of Chitrajis in Hindu Ritual Contexts." *Material Religion* 1, no. 2 (2005): 198-227.

sense, it is not just the mimetic connection that is important, but the metonymic connection is also at work here. For the readers, the *pothī* is not only a thing with divine words. More than a container of the divine words, it is believed to be a thing imbued with power. And this is precisely why one must follow the rules for its acquisition, as it is considered to be an embodiment of the *guru*. The point here is that religious discourse is not merely aided by, but is “constituted by materiality.”<sup>228</sup> This is why scholars such Meyer et al. urge that it is necessary to conduct “a materialized study of religion that begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it.”<sup>229</sup>

Now let us turn to the question about the subject-object dichotomy. More importantly, the materials involved in the ritual contexts are not merely objects. For the believers, they are not passive recipients of offerings. Once “activated,” they have lives of their own.<sup>230</sup> The notion of *darśan*<sup>231</sup> is useful in understanding Hindu way of articulating the relationship between ritual objects and devotees. In this sense, the *pothī* is perceived to have affective powers as it changes the behavior of the devotees in many ways.

### ***Pārāyaṇ* as a Sensory Experience**

Growing up in a more-or-less secular environment, I was not directly exposed to scriptures. As a result, I often used the word “*pustak* (book)” to refer to a copy of the *Gurucaritra*. However, after a few months of fieldwork I noticed that readers rarely referred to the *Gurucaritra* as a “book.” Instead, they used the term “*pothī*” to refer even to a printed copy of the book. On

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<sup>228</sup>Daniel Miller, *Materiality*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2005.

<sup>229</sup>Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, ed. *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 209.

<sup>230</sup>Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>231</sup>*Darśan* consists of an exchange of mutual gaze where both the object and the subject are actively present.

one occasion, a devotee-reader objected to my reference to the *Gurucaritra* as a book. He interjected at one point in our interview and explained,

It is not just a book, Tāi. It is more than that. *Gurucaritra* is god—lord Dattātreya. It is the *guru* for us [readers].

Intrigued by this explanation, I asked him further to explain how he distinguished between a *pustak* and a *pothī*. His response was as follows:

You see, a *pustak* is any book. You can buy it with money. You can sit or lie down or do whatever while reading it. You cannot do that with a *pothī*. You must sit down and concentrate on reading. You must follow all the rules during a *pārāyaṇ*. After all, a *pothī* is not just a book. It is more than that. When I offer flowers to it in daily puja, I feel blessed. I feel confident that everything is going to go well in my life. I don't keep all books in my home shrine. But a *pothī*'s place is in the shrine, as it is not an ordinary book.

Similar to this reader, many other devotee-readers, whether or not they articulated the difference between *pothī* and *pustak* clearly in their statements, were keen on referring to the copy of the *Gurucaritra* they used for *pārāyaṇ* as *pothī*. As against a *pustak*, a *pothī* is not simply to be read, then. It is also to be touched and looked at. A *pothī* is not just a thing employed in the process of *pārāyaṇ*. On the contrary, to borrow Houtman and Meyer's phrase, it is a "focal material node" of *pārāyaṇ*.<sup>232</sup> It is a thing that is perceived to be imbued with power. And this is precisely why studying the processes through which devotees turn the *pustak* into a *pothī* becomes as vital as the content that devotees find in the book. Through its association with *pārāyaṇ*, the ritual *praxis*, the book/*pustak* of the *Gurucaritra* acquires sacrality and gets distinguished as a ritually significant thing. This in turn leads to defining norms about production, acquisition and dissemination of the *pothī*.

#### Production, Acquisition and Dissemination

With only a couple of exceptions, the majority of readers I observed or interviewed use printed copies of the *Gurucaritra* for *pārāyaṇ*. The two most popular editions are published by

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<sup>232</sup>Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, ed. *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 16.

Dhavle (Ḍhavḷe) and Anmol publishing houses. In some cases publishers have taken on the task of publishing the *Gurucaritra* as a merit-making activity. For example, the owner of a leading publication house in Pune gifted copies of the *Gurucaritra* to two community reading centers. In addition to the two leading publishers, several other publishers have printed copies of the *Gurucaritra*. I was also told that some devotees use hand-written manuscripts of the *Gurucaritra*. As printed copies of the *Gurucaritra* are widely available today, writing the entire *pothī* by hand is not a common practice. However, examples from popular print media about the process of production of the text as well as anecdotes from the interlocutors about hand-writing the *Gurucaritra* shed light on the production process.

## Production

M.V. Kulkarni (M. V. Kulkarnī)<sup>233</sup> presents an interesting narrative about the production process of the text. A popular Marathi magazine from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century published the following advertisement about selling copies of the *Gurucaritra*:

*Shri Datta Prasanna*

*Only ten copies left in stock*

*Gurucaritra (written) with pure ghee*

This text, printed twenty years ago, was printed with ink mixed with pure ghee instead of animal products so that the readers can follow their purity rules with precision. This book is printed on thick glossy paper using a large font. People afflicted by ghosts have been cured after reading this book. The original cost of this book is Rs. 8. Until May 5 it will be available at a discounted price of Rs. 1 with an additional half a rupee cost for postage. Gajānan Cintāmaṇ Deo, Puṇe, Budhwār Peṭh, Library.

In an unpublished letter Gangadhar Mahambare (Gaṅgādhar Mahāmbare), a contemporary Marathi musician, narrates a related story about writing the *Gurucaritra* with pure *ghee*. To quote:

There is an amusing reference about the encounter between the technology of printing and the notion of purity with regard to the *Gurucaritra*. The appointed readers of the *Gurucaritra* [who used printed copies] would take a bath twice—once before reading and once after it was done. One can easily guess the purpose of taking a bath before

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<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

reading.<sup>234</sup> In addition, they took a bath after the reading session in order to get rid of the impurities acquired through association with the book. This was because the books used to be prepared using ink made with animal products.

Gaṇapat Kṛṣṇājī Pāṭīl—the owner of a printing press—came out with the unique idea of preparing ink with vegetarian oils. And after various experiments, he was able to prepare ink with *ghee* made out of cow's milk. This was a revolutionary finding [in the religious world]. Copies of the *Gurucaritra* printed with cow's ghee became very popular around the year 1845.<sup>235</sup>

Although copies of the *Gurucaritra* written with ink infused with pure ghee are not common today, narratives such as this are important for understanding the value associated with the process of production. Why was it important for some readers to add *pure ghee* to the ink? The insistence on using *ghee* can be explained with reference to the idea of avoiding pollution. The use of animal products in the making of ink is avoided by using *ghee*. But to take this further, why would it matter for readers to avoid contact with polluted objects in the production process? This question can be addressed only by analyzing the status that readers assign to the printed words. The urge to use unpolluted objects in the production of the *pothī* alludes to the idea that the printed words in the text of the *Gurucaritra* are not merely words for comprehension, but they are rather agents of the divine presence. Thus, the words on the pages of the *pothī* are not merely a means of conveying their literal meaning, but they are inscriptions of the *guru's* message on the page. This metaphoric connection calls for using unpolluted materials in the production process.

A parallel tradition of hand-writing the *Gurucaritra* has existed alongside the widely popular printed copies. Although very few people engage in this practice, the very idea of writing the entire text by hand manifests the belief that the words in the *Gurucaritra* are divine embodiments. A few readers mentioned that writing the entire *pothī* by hand was an extraordinarily meritorious act. In some cases, the reasons for writing were specific. A woman reader recounted her aunt's experience of writing the *Gurucaritra* as follows:

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<sup>234</sup>Taking a bath before a reading session is a common practice [to purify oneself before reading a religious book.

<sup>235</sup>Gaṅgādhara Mahāmbare, "*Tupāṭale Gurucaritra*." Personal Letter to Joṣī, Owner: Utkash Prakashan, Pune, 2.

My aunt wrote the entire *pothī* [*Gurucaritra*]. She lives in a village called Kasāra. Now she is very old. She cannot hear properly. She could not give birth to a child. She used to conceive but lost her children in the seventh month of pregnancy. She carried out various *vratas*. Then someone told her to write the *Gurucaritra* by hand.

The number of people who write the *Gurucaritra* by hand seems to be insignificant compared to the ones who use the printed versions of the text. However, both cases—the instance of advertisement about copies of the *Gurucaritra* with pure ghee and instances of writing the *Gurucaritra* by hand—draw our attention to the processual dimension of the production of scriptures. As Appadurai argues, “the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing.”<sup>236</sup> Scriptures get signified as religious artifacts through social *praxis*. And once they acquire that status, they have lives of their own.

### Acquisition

Another dimension of the cultural marking of a *pothī* is with regard to conventions about acquiring a *pothī* for *pārāyaṇ*. The idea is that a *pothī*, if not acquired properly, can turn out to be dangerous. A statement that recurred in the majority of my interviews reiterates this point: one must follow rules about the *pothī* [*pothīce pāḷāve lāgtem*]. The rules about acquisition differed from person to person and from one community to another. For example, some readers stressed that a *pothī* should be acquired from someone else in the first place, while others said that it was all right to buy it from a store if it is bought following specific ritual procedures. One devotee-reader recounted the procedure for buying a brand new copy of the *Gurucaritra* from a store as follows:

You need to follow certain rules when buying a new *pothī* of the *Gurucaritra*. First of all, you should not eat any non-vegetarian foods on the day when you buy it. Further, you should go barefoot to buy it. Finally, you must avoid contact with anything made out of leather when going to a store to buy it.

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<sup>236</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64.

The rules mentioned by this reader are based on the idea of avoiding contact with pollutants, i.e., polluting foods and polluting objects. Only a few readers insisted on following these rules, and even those who mentioned them were flexible about making alterations to them. One reader said,

If is of course better if you can follow these rules. But it is not possible to follow them accurately these days. Religious books are available in Appā Baḷvant Cauk [a neighborhood in Pune that has a high concentration of booksellers]. It takes me about half an hour to drive there from my home. It would be a minimum two-hour walk. It is practically impossible for me to go barefoot that far.

Despite the flexibility in contemporary practice, the association of the idea of pollution with the book illustrates the attention that readers pay to the materiality of the book. When I met with readers who were using copies of the *Gurucaritra* published from printing presses other than the two leading ones, I was eager to compare those copies with the popular ones. Readers were eager to show me their copies, but they were reluctant to lend them to me. One reader explained the reason for this resistance:

You can tell me which pages interest you and I can make a Xerox copy for you. You see, if you take it to a store to copy it, you would not know if the person who is copying is clean.<sup>237</sup> I know someone who is good [who would not pollute my *pothī*]. I really appreciate your work but I cannot lend you my copy of *Gurucaritra*.

Another convention mentioned by some readers related to the idea that, unlike books that can be bought from stores easily, a *pothī* of the *Gurucaritra* should not be bought on your own. A male reader whose father did *pārāyaṇ* for several decades said,

When I was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I suddenly thought I should start doing *pārāyaṇ*. I asked my father if I could join him starting that year. My father warned me that it [*Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ*] was a tough task and should be done with utmost respect. Then he approached his friend who had a spare copy of the *Gurucaritra*. You see, you need to borrow a copy from someone the very first year you do it. Then I went to a bookstore next year and bought myself a brand new copy of the text.

A reader whose father-in-law inspired him to do *pārāyaṇ* narrated a similar thought:

You should not buy it yourself. Someone should gift it to you the very first time you read it. In my case, my father-in-law gifted it as a wedding gift to me and that is how I started reading it.

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<sup>237</sup> By “clean” the person referred to bodily cleanliness, which in turn is linked with caste (e.g. people belonging to castes other than brāhmaṇ are considered to be polluted by the upper caste Hindus due to their professional work), menstruation in the case of women as well as bodily cleansing.



## Dissemination

Similar to writing, donating *pothīs* of the *Gurucaritra* is also considered to be meritorious. I noticed that the *pothīs* used in *sānudāyik pāṛāyaṇ* centers were mostly from the same publishers. In some cases, I saw the *pothī* published by Anmol Prakāśan, while in other cases the readers used the one published by Dhavḷe Prakāśan. Mr. Goḷe, who organizes *pāṛāyaṇ* sessions at his home, mentioned that the publisher had given him the copies used there for reading. Similarly, an individual who wanted to be anonymous gifted copies of the *Gurucaritra* to the Mṛtyuñjayeśvar *sānudāyik pāṛāyaṇ* group.

On one occasion I met with a reader who took out his *pothī* from a saffron-colored bag. I had seen people wrapping the *pothī* in an unstitched saffron cloth before (see fig. 22), but using a bag was new to me.



Figure 22. *Pothīs* wrapped in silk saffron-colored cloth at one of *sānudāyik pāṛāyaṇ* centers. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

I asked the reader about the bag and he told me that a devotee-reader had gifted 151 bags to *pāṛāyaṇkārs* the previous year. Upon further discussion, I realized that yet another

devotee-reader from Solāpur had donated 151 *pothīs*. The reader told me as follows about the production of the *pothī*:

There is this Mr. Jośī from Solāpūr who is a devotee of Dattātreya. He used to work in a bank with me. He wrote the entire *pothī* by hand and enlarged the print with a Xerox machine. Then he got 151 copies printed and distributed them to Dattātreya devotees. This *pothī* has photos appropriate to each chapter. So you have photos of places such as Gokarṇa Mahābaleśwar.

### *Disposal*

I met several readers who have a family tradition of reading the *Gurucaritra*. In some cases, using *pothīs* used by earlier generations was considered to be vital and the younger generation insisted on using the same *pothī* that had been used by elders in the family. In some cases *pothīs* had been in use for more than a hundred years. On one occasion, I met with a male reader in his mid-forties who was inspired to do *pārāyaṇ* by his father. He stated,

My father read *Gurucaritra* for fifty years. He passed away a couple of years ago. I used to sit right next to him in that room [he points to a room] and read it every year. We read it early in the morning from 4 AM to 7AM. Now that he is no more, I keep one extra seat next to my seat. I place his *pothī* next to my *pothī*. I feel his presence as I read the *pothī*.

Yet another reader, who started reading with his father as well, observed,

You see, my father is in his early 90s now. He is bedridden. He needs assistance to sit properly now. He cannot do *pārāyaṇ* any more. But I place his *pothī* in my home shrine *pujā* and read my *pothī* sitting right in front of his *pothī*. His *pothī* has become powerful with time. After all, he has done so many *pārāyaṇs* with that *pothī*.

In cases where the *pothī* is no longer legible due to wear and tear, readers buy a new *pothī*.

Disposing of the older *pothī* becomes an issue in such cases. A male reader who possesses a *pothī* from a few generations ago said,

We have a *pothī* printed by a litho press. My father used to read that *pothī*. They used to write the words on rock. Then they filled in the words with ink. They used to print a chunk of blocks of words with ink at once. I did many *pārāyaṇ* on that *pothī*. It is not a bound *pothī*. When I lift a page to read, it falls apart now. It is very old.... We have just kept it at home now. We cannot use it for reading but it is still in our home shrine.

On one occasion, when I asked a graduate student reader about the rules for disposal of old *pothīs*, he said that one could either offer the torn *pothī* to someone who wants to read it or place it in a temple.

## Treatment of the *Pothī*

The foregoing discussion has shed light on the treatment of the *pothī* when it is employed in the ritual as well as at times when it is not engaged in a ritual context. As mentioned in chapter four, *pothīs* are placed within ritual spaces directly opposite the devotee-reader. Once placed on the first day of the *pārāyaṇ*, the *pothī* is not moved during the entire period of the *pārāyaṇ* cycle. This principle also works at the community reading centers where readers bring their *pothīs* on the first day of *pārāyaṇ* and take them back only at the end of the reading cycle.

During the *pārāyaṇ* cycle, the *pothī* works as the central material node in the ritual process, as it is offered daily care through offerings in the form of flowers, incense sticks and foods (see fig. 23).



Figure 23. Offerings of flowers, incense sticks and decorative *rāṅgolī* designs to a *Gurucaritra pothī*. Photographer: Mugdha Yeolekar

Like three-dimensional *murtis*, a *pothī* is offered foods on the first day of *pārāyaṇ*, and those offerings, blessed by the reading process, are offered to visitors as “*prasād*” (left-overs/blessed food) at the culmination of the reading cycle.

A *pothī* is considered to be a powerful object even when it is not directly being used in a reading cycle. When not engaged in a *pārāyaṇ* cycle, it is wrapped in a saffron-color cloth and

placed in a home shrine. In cases where the home shrine cannot accommodate the *pothī* due to its size, it is placed in a place which is not easily accessible to everyone.

Following Richard Davis<sup>238</sup> one could argue that the book is considered “live” or “activated” and acquires agency of its own through the *pārāyaṇ* process. Because the *pothī* is considered to be imbued with life, a devotee-reader considers it important to consult an expert before moving it from one place to another. A narrative from a renowned journalist and a devotee-reader illustrates this point. A reader, now in his 90s, recounted his childhood memories from the small village where he grew up. He noted that the roots of the tradition of doing *pārāyaṇ* can be traced many generations back in his devout family. One of his ancestors had copied the entire *Gurucaritra pothī* by hand as an act of devotion. After moving to Pune, this reader wanted to do a *pārāyaṇ* using that *pothī*. However, he chose not to move the *pothī* from its original place. He stated,

The last chapter [of the handwritten *pothī*] mentions the day, time and the name of the scribe of the *pothī*. I cannot recollect all those details, but I remember that the year mentioned there is *Śake* 1739 [1817]. We still have that handwritten *pothī* in the village. Once when I was doing *pārāyaṇ* [using a printed *pothī* that he has], I thought of bringing it home. It was written on thick paper using a special ink. By coincidence, I met with a Nāth *Sampradāyī* who was then here in Pune. I asked him if it was advisable to do a *pārāyaṇ* with that *pothī*. After some time, he told me to keep the *pothī* where it belongs for now. I have never brought it to Pune. We still have it in the village.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that, as an object of devotion within the *pārāyaṇ* process, the *pothī* takes on a number of different roles, from visually representing Dattātreyā as a *guru* to reminding viewers of the *guru*'s grace through various narratives in the text. The most dramatic role given to the *pothī* is when it is looked at as an object of intent gaze through *darśan*.

The text, through its affective powers, shapes the identities of the devotee-readers. But the affectivity of the text is created in the process of the ritual praxis. Thus, a *pustak* acquires the status of *pothī* in the process of the *pārāyaṇ*. In that sense, the book acquires its status of *pothī* through the praxis of people, and people acquire their new identities by engaging with the *pothī*.

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<sup>238</sup>Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*.

## Conclusion

Based on the narratives associated with the production, acquisition, and treatment of the *pothī* and the rules for its disposal, it is clear that *pārāyaṅkārs* assign an iconic status to the book of the *Gurucaritra*. To summarize, we have established three points in the context of the dynamics of interaction between the reader and the text in the context of *pārāyaṅ*. First, materials involved in religious practices are not just objects, but they constitute the very meaning of religion. Second, ritual materials, just like ritual actors, affect the course of actions of human beings. Third, when it comes to understanding the dynamic interaction between humans and things in the context of religion, subject-object dichotomization, in which humans are referred to as subjects and things are referred to as objects, is not helpful.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

#### **Introduction**

This study began with the observation from my fieldwork that, despite spending one week each year reading the *Gurucaritra*, readers of *the Gurucaritra* rarely referred to the literary content of the text in my conversations with them. This put me in a conundrum: if the meaning of the text is not primary, then what makes the readers so engaged with the book that they read it every year? Further, how and why do readers justify alterations to the prescribed ritual procedures?

In the foregoing chapters, I have addressed this conundrum by proffering alternative (alternative to the text-centered discourse) ways of looking at readers' engagement with scriptures. I have traced the features that religious experience employs in an urban context, using as an example the religious reading of the *Gurucaritra*. As is evident, the *Gurucaritra* plays a defining role in the life of its readers. I have illustrated that readers of scriptures ritualize them in their specific socio-cultural settings. Thus, this dissertation has proposed that a focus on the *reader* rather than the "read" can bring fresh light in understanding how scriptures function in devotional communities. In these final pages, I will summarize the results of this study, highlight several implications of the work undertaken here, and briefly propose avenues for future research.

#### **Summary and Implications**

Reading religious texts in private and public spaces that had surrounded me growing up in Maharashtra stirred my interest in the reading of religious texts in the first place. The quest for understanding the reading of religious texts was further sharpened by recent academic scholarship on scriptures that draws our attention to the devotee-readers. This dissertation

project is the end-product of two forces: the urge to comprehend the lived religion around me, and the urge to analyze the social praxis surrounding scriptures.

The text, apart from narrating stories about what happened to the *guru* and how he helped those in trouble, gains its significance through social praxis: first, by being recognized as *the* text of its readers' religious *sampradāy*, and second, by communal or private ritualized reading. The content of the text re-introduces and reinforces urban readers' religious roots to them in several ways. First, references to the Vedic texts in chapters 12, 26 etc. and references to *purāṇic* narratives in chapters 3, 4, 6, 15, 26, 35, 41, 42 give the readers glimpses of ancient Hindu scriptures. Second, stories about votive observances (*vrata-kathā*) in chapters 3, 6, 8, 19, 20, 35, 37, and 43 provide guidelines for ritual practice in everyday life. Third, descriptions of pilgrimages in chapters 7, 15, 42, and 44 prescribe norms of religious life in public space. Moreover, religious narratives, *vrata-kathās*, and descriptions of pilgrimages give the urban Hindus who read the text a sense of belonging and continuity. Ultimately, the *Gurucaritra* re-asserts the religious value of *guru-bhakti* by stressing that one can be successful in the material and spiritual spheres of life by ultimate surrender to the *guru*.

However, to call religious reading of the *Gurucaritra* simply a means of re-traditionalization is to miss the ways in which the contemporary readers are embedded in their urban social contexts. As a result of the intersection of their tradition with their urban contexts, readers take the religious reading into their own hands. They re-create and negotiate their religiosity based on their modern lifestyles. As modern, literate individuals who can think for themselves, they decide which parts of their tradition to emphasize and which to de-emphasize. This negotiation works at several levels, including interpretation of the content, making the scripture available to all regardless of caste and gender, taking a critical approach towards checking the authenticity of the tradition, recasting traditional rules about sacred space and making alterations to prescribed dietary rules. This list of areas of negotiation illustrates how the readers make religion work for them. The readers, by giving their modern concerns significance

by associating them with tradition, re-traditionalize themselves in the process of *pārāyaṇ* of this medieval text. The *Gurucaritra* works for them as an authentic repository of their religion.

As described in chapter two, the data for this project came from my fieldwork in Pune conducted in 2010 and 2011. In all I met with ninety readers of the *Gurucaritra* over a period of eight months. During my data collection and analysis, I realized that reading is not, as I had thought, the central and only activity involved in *pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra*. When my interlocutors used the word “*vācaṇe*,” they implied reading in a ritual context. Various topics, including the concept of *pārāyaṇ*, ritual practices, the status of the *pothī* as an object, the content of the narratives of the *Gurucaritra*, and the choice of a setting for reading (public vs. private) were addressed in our conversations. My status as an insider had advantages in terms of networking and accessibility of local places. However, it also posed unique challenges in terms of communicating about my purpose, motivations and inspirations for this project.

Inspired by recent works on religious reading by Wimbush,<sup>239</sup> the Iconic Books Project,<sup>240</sup> and Griffiths,<sup>241</sup> which look at scriptures beyond their literal meanings, this dissertation has examined the phenomenon of religious reading in Hinduism, focusing on the ritual and interpretative practices of readers of the *Gurucaritra*. Throughout the course of this dissertation I have argued that the *Gurucaritra* lives in contemporary Marathi society not only in its written form, but, more importantly, in its *performance* or *pārāyaṇ* during recitations at private homes and public temples. I have contended that the theoretical and hermeneutical issues surrounding reading practices go deeper than the literal level, as devotee-readers engage with the printed text of the *Gurucaritra* in several ways, including seeing it as a spiritual *guru*, as a means of purifying their soul, and as a source of physical and psychological well being. Because of this, it is important to analyze the different modalities of interaction between the *reader* and the *read/text* in the context of ritual reading.

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<sup>239</sup> Wimbush, *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*.

<sup>240</sup> <http://iconicbooks.net/> (Accessed on Dec 9, 2012).

<sup>241</sup> Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*.



Chapter one sets the stage for the theoretical discussion by giving an overview of the scholarship on scriptures as well as Dattātreya. Throughout the course of the dissertation, one of my aims has been to theorize religious reading by looking at the social praxis surrounding *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ*. Thus, this is not a study of the *Gurucaritra* in the usual sense of the term; it is a study of the *Gurucaritra* as it is *read*. These two are different in that the former would focus on the literary analysis of the text, examining the meaning of the words in it, while the latter refers to its functional, operative dimensions. This is not to suggest that the meaning of the sentences in the *Gurucaritra* is insignificant to its readers. However, deciphering the meanings of the words/sentences or even stories is not of primary importance for the readers of the *Gurucaritra*. In the process of reading the *Gurucaritra*, readers become modern by making a conscious selection from their tradition. In the process of approaching their tradition through the text, what they achieve is a sense of continuity with their religious past, a sense of rootedness in their nuclear family structure, and a faith that nothing can go wrong if they have the support of the *guru*. Moreover, in the process of choosing elements from their tradition, they ultimately achieve a sense of being modern individuals who work out rules of religiosity for themselves.

The purpose of the third chapter is twofold: to familiarize readers with the figure of Dattātreya and the rich yet fragmented religious tradition that has flourished in Maharashtra surrounding this figure and to approach an understanding of the engagement of the contemporary readers with the content and message of the *Gurucaritra*. It is clear from the review of the description of Dattātreya in epics, *purāṇas* and *upaniṣads* and in classical Marathi literature that the three-headed depiction of Dattātreya was a later development in the history of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*. The integrative and syncretic character of the deity has had an influence in shaping the growth of the Dattātreya tradition itself. The Dattātreya tradition has been different from other Hindu religious traditions in Maharashtra in terms of its centripetal, “un-boundaried” and heterogeneous nature. On the one hand, there are brāhmaṇical Sanskrit *paramparā* such as the Ṭembe Svāmī tradition; and, on the other hand there are non brāhmaṇical *paramparā* such as the Diṇḍorī *mārg*. Several sub-traditions of the Dattātreya *sampradāy*, such as the Tarāṅekar

tradition and the Janārdansvāmī Kher tradition, have also integrated both brāhmanical and non-brāhmanical elements in their ritual practices.

In contemporary Maharashtra, Dattātreya devotees from across castes (brāhmaṇ, Marāṭhā, *nvhāvī* [barber], *koḷī*, [fishermen caste] etc.) and genders read the *Gurucaritra*, the central text of the *sampradāy*, which has acquired a quasi-Vedic status. Scholars have generally cited the year 1558 as the date of the oldest manuscript of the the *Gurucaritra*. The stories in the *Gurucaritra* are centered on the deeds of two principal *gurus*, Śrīpād Śrīvallabh and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī, who are regarded as incarnations of Dattātreya by their followers. The lucidity of language, the narrative style of the text, and the not-so-philosophical nature of the *Gurucaritra* have appealed to its readers. Taken together, the narratives of the *Gurucaritra* are about devotion to the *guru* and the *guru's* grace. While the narratives of Sāyaṃdev, Nandī, Naraharī, Nāmadhārak, Bhāskar brāhmaṇ, and Trivikram Bhārati exemplify the idea of devotion to the *guru*, the stories of Śrīpād Śrīvallabh—a sixty-year-old woman giving birth to a child, the prevention of a woman and her mentally-retarded son from committing suicide, and a dry milk-cow becoming fertile once again—assure readers about the power of the *guru's* grace. However, despite the appeal of the text, readers I spoke with preferred to discuss the social praxis—the ritual process, bodily practices, and treatment of the *pothī* during the *pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra*—over the content of the text. Taking a cue from the statements of my interlocutors, this dissertation has aimed to understand the praxis of the text rather than the text itself.

In this context, chapters four and five discuss the social praxis surrounding the *Gurucaritra* from two angles: ritual and materiality. While generally the key actors in the reading process are the reader and the text, ritual surrounding the reading is an added actor in the case of religious reading. As discussed in chapter four, *pārāyaṇ* consists of four elements: treatment of the *pothī* (the manuscript of the *Gurucaritra* used for the *pārāyaṇ*), reading of the text, following ritual procedures, and following ritual observances. The rules about buying a new *pothī* of the *Gurucaritra*, stowing it at times when it is not being read and disposing of it when it gets torn, illustrate that the *pothī* as a physical object is integral to the process of *pārāyaṇ*. Although proper

treatment of the *pothī* is vital for a successful *pārāyaṇ*, reading is the central activity during a *pārāyaṇ* cycle. Readers discussed in detail such topics as ritual space, ritual time, ritual objects, and the beginning and culmination of the *pārāyaṇ*.

The author of the *Gurucaritra* lays out the rules for observances related to ritual time, ritual space, and ritual procedures during the *pārāyaṇ* activity. In addition to the rules mentioned by the author, readers rework the rules of praxis in the urban environment. The notion of sacred space is reformed in case of *sānudāyik pārāyaṇs* or *pārāyaṇs* in public spaces. Additionally, the scarcity of space in urban dwellings leads to redefining sacred space in cases where the *pothī* is brought to the living room instead of keeping it inside the home shrine. The reworking of the idea of sacred space, then, poses challenges of recruitment. Since the survival of *sānudāyik pārāyaṇ* centers depends on the participation of readers, readers from all castes (and sometimes genders) are recruited in these centers. In the process of coping with the challenges of running the *sānudāyik pārāyaṇs* centers, religious discourse changes in a radical way. The notion of ritual time is also altered in the urban context. The traditional idea of reading scriptures early in the morning does not always work out in urban life, which requires getting to work early in the morning. In response, readers adjust their reading schedules to their work schedules. Thus, both in terms of understanding the message of the text and in terms of the praxis surrounding the reading activity, the readers become highly selective. The individualizing undercurrent in the ritual reading is a result of readers' self-reflection and their perception of themselves as modern individuals.

Both the integrative nature of the figure of Dattātreya and the assimilative world of the book of the *Gurucaritra* attract the modern religiosity of contemporary followers of Dattātreya. Although contemporary readers of the *Gurucaritra* relate to the content of the text as a repository of their religious tradition, they become modern by interpreting the message of the text with reference to concerns of their present. Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that, by reading the *Gurucaritra*, urban readers orient themselves simultaneously in two directions. On the one hand, the readers re-traditionalize themselves by relating their modern concerns to their

tradition. On the other hand, the impact of modernity on the readers results in their perception of tradition, such that they become highly intentional about the elements of tradition that they want to take on. For the readers, modernity comes as a cause of loss of tradition, but then, ritual reading comes as a channel of regaining that tradition. In the case of *Gurucaritra pārāyaṇ*, this tension between tradition and modernity is further complicated by the tension between text and praxis. The dynamic tension between tradition and modernity unfolds in the course of ritual reading such that reading gives birth to a creative space in which the urban religiosity of the *Gurucaritra* readers evolves.

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## APPENDIX A

## LIST OF QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### Pārāyaṇ

1. Do you do *pārāyaṇ* of the *Gurucaritra*?  
If YES, how did you start doing *pārāyaṇ*?  
Since how long are you doing *pārāyaṇ*?

If NO, how do you read it?

(Probes) On a daily basis, monthly? How many verses do you read every day?

### Ritual Process

1. Do you need to do any preparations before *pārāyaṇ*?
2. What do you do at the end of the *pārāyaṇ* cycle?
3. *Gurucaritra* mentions several restrictions related to food and everyday life during the *pārāyaṇ* cycle. What could be the purpose of such restrictions? Do you follow any of these restrictions?
4. What if one has difficulties finishing *pārāyaṇ*?
  - a. Did you have any such experiences?
    1. If YES, what kind of difficulties?
      1. What did you do to overcome those?
5. When do you generally read? Why do you read at that time?
6. What do you do at the end of the *pārāyaṇ* session?
7. Do you use any specific foods are required in the final celebrations?
8. Could you please share how your days look like during the *pārāyaṇ* period?
9. What is the purpose of *pārāyaṇ*?
10. What is the role of your family in *pārāyaṇ*?
11. How do you manage your office schedule and *pārāyaṇ* schedule?
12. How is it different from other types of religious activities?

### Pothī

1. How did you acquire this *pothī*?
  - a. If bought from store: can you describe how you brought it from the store?
  - b. If given by someone—
    - i. Who gave it to you?
    - ii. Why did they give it to you?
    - iii. Did they use it before? Did they buy it from the store?
2. Can I see which *pothī* you use to do *pārāyaṇ*?
3. What do you do with the *pothī* during the *pārāyaṇ* period?
4. What do you do with the book at other times of the year?
5. How do you keep it? (If wrapped, ask why?)
6. Where do you keep it?

### Content

1. What is your favorite part from the *Gurucaritra*? Why?
2. Are there any parts from the *Gurucaritra* that are less interesting to you? Why?
3. Do you relate to the narratives from the *Gurucaritra*?

### Community readings:

1. How did you start going to a community reading center?
2. Have you ever read the *Gurucaritra* at home?  
If YES, when? Why do you go to the community reading center now?
3. How does one sign-up for reading at your center?
4. How many readers do you see on an average?
5. How many readers do you see in each time-slot? Does the number vary according to time-slot?
6. What do you do at the end of the reading cycle?
7. Do you meet with your fellow readers at other times of the year? If YES, for what purpose?

8. How do you distinguish between reading the *Gurucaritra* at home and in a community reading center?
9. Can you tell me what you do in terms of preparation before each reading session at the community center?
10. What is the policy of your center in terms of participation of women and non-brāhmins?
11. Have you noticed any changes over the years in the organizing process of *pārāyaṇ* at your center?

**Marathi Translation of Questions:**

पारायण

१. तुम्ही गुरुचरित्राचे पारायण करता का?  
(करत असाल तर) कशी सुरुवात झाली?  
किती वर्षांपासून पारायण करता?
२. पारायण करत नसाल, पण गुरुचरित्र वाचत असाल तर, कसे वाचता?  
(दररोज? कधीतरी? रोज काही ओव्या?)

पारायण विधी

१. पारायण करण्यापूर्वी काही विशिष्ट तयारी करावी लागते का?
२. पारायणाची सांगता कशी करावी?
३. गुरुचरित्रात अन्नपदार्थ, दैनंदिन व्यवहारयाबद्दल अनेक पथ्ये सांगितली आहेत. तुम्ही यातील काही पथ्ये पाळता?
४. पारायणपूर्तिमधे काही अडचणी आल्या तर....  
तुम्हाला कधी अडचणी आल्याका? कोणत्या? तुम्ही अशा वेळी काय केले?
५. तुम्ही सहसा कधी वाचता? सकाळी? दुपारी?
६. पारायण करत असताना दररोज ठराविक वाचन संपले की मग तुम्ही काय करता?
७. सांगता/पारण करताना काही विशिष्ट स्वयंपाक करावा लागतो का?
८. पारायण काळात तुमची दिनचर्या कशी असते?
९. पारायण का करावे?
१०. तुमच्या कुटुंबाचा पारायण करण्यामधे काही सहभाग लागतो का?
११. पारायणाच्या वेळा आणि कामाच्या वेळा कशा सांभाळता?
१२. पारायण इतर प्रकारच्या धार्मिक विधीपेक्षा वेगळे आहे का?

पोथी

१. तुमच्याकडे गुरुचरित्राची पोथी कशी आली?  
(दुकानातून विकत आणली असेल तर) कशी काय आणलीत दुकानातून?  
(कोणी दिलेली असल्यास) कोणी दिली? का दिली? ज्यांनी दिली ते पूर्वी पोथी वापरत होते? की त्यांनी दुकानातून आणली?
२. तुमची पोथी बघायला मिळेलका?
३. पारायण चालू असताना पोथी कुठे असते?
४. इतर वेळी पोथी कुठे असते?
५. पोथी कशी ठेवता? (गुंडाळून ठेवली असेल तर, का?)
६. पोथी कुठे ठेवता?

## अर्थ

१. गुरुचरित्रातील तुमचा आवडता भाग कोणता? का?
२. गुरुचरित्रात काही भाग विशेष न समजणारे, किंवा न आवडणारे आहेत का?
३. गुरुचरित्रातील गोष्टींचा अर्थ काय?

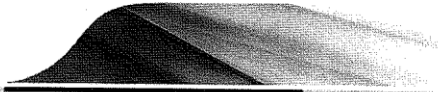
## सामुदायिक पारायण

१. तुम्ही सामुदायिक पारायण कसे करायला लागला?
२. तुम्ही घरी पारायण केले आहेत का?  
(केले असेल तर) केव्हा? मग आता सामुदायिक पारायण का करता?
३. तुमच्या केन्द्रावर वाचण्यासाठी नावनोंदणी करावी लागते का?
४. तुमच्या केन्द्रावर किती लोक पारायण करतात?
५. प्रत्येक टाइम-स्लॉटमध्ये किती वाचक असतात?
६. सामुदायिक पारायणाची सांगता कशी करतात?
७. केन्द्रावरच्या वाचकांना इतरवेळी भेटता का? (हो असेल तर) कुठे? कोणत्या निमित्ताने?
८. गुरुचरित्र पारायण घरी आणि सामुदायिक ठिकाणी करण्यात काही फरक आहे का?
९. सामुदायिक ठिकाणी पारायण सुरु करण्यापूर्वी काय तयारी करावी लागते?
१०. तुमच्या केन्द्रावर महिला वाचक आहेत का? ब्राह्मणेतर वाचक आहेत का?
११. इतक्या वर्षांमध्ये केन्द्रामध्ये काही बदल होताना जाणवलेत का?

## APPENDIX B



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION



Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

**To:** Anne Feldhaus  
ECA

**From:** Mark Roosa, Chair *SM*  
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 12/07/2010

**Committee Action:** Exemption Granted

**IRB Action Date:** 12/07/2010

**IRB Protocol #:** 1011005770

**Study Title:** Text and Contexts: The Dynamics Between Gurucaritra and Ritual Practices in the Dattatreya Tradi

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.