



A Day in the Life of a Brahmin Priest

BY PEGGY BENDET

*When I wake up in the morning, as soon as I open my eyes, I look at my hand and
recite:*

karamabde mahalakshmi

karamabde saraswati

karamobde govindam

parabde darshanam

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The hand itself contains the mantras. The fingers are Mahalakshmi, the power of abundance, because it is with these fingers that we work and earn wealth. The face of the palm is Saraswati, the power of intellect, because the palm is steady and strong and unbending. And in the heel of the palm, at the crevice, is Govinda, a form of Lord Vishnu. The moon, or the mind, is in the pad under the thumb and Venus, or beauty, is in the pad under the little finger. And the path is between these two — in other words, you need a beautiful mind to go to God.

It's a very good way to start the day: you look at your hand and you think of God.

And then, before I put my feet on the earth, I touch the floor twice with my hand, and bow and address the earth, saying, "You are so great. The ocean is your cloth, the treasures within the ocean are your gems, the mountains are your breasts, and all of their streams are your tributaries. All of the gods and goddesses serve you. With great gratitude I put my feet on you."

So in this way, each day I honor the earth before I step on her broad face.

— Vivek Godbole

It's 4:30 A.M. The sky is still dark as the brahmin Vivek Godbole rises to begin his day. He lives with four generations of his family in an ashram on a side street of Satara, a rural Maharashtrian town several hours east of Pune. From the street, Bharataji Maharaj Ashram looks like any of the houses around it. But from an almost featureless exterior, the front door opens onto a covered courtyard, containing temples to Shiva and Hanuman and the *samadhi* shrine of a local saint who died more than a century ago. On one side of the courtyard are low tables, where Vivek performs intricate *pujas* for the benefit of various citizens of Satara and where his father, seventy-year-old Laxman Godbole, teaches the Vedas. Some of his students come each day and some live with the

family. On the wall above are shelves holding precious cloth-wrapped bundles — handwritten copies of Vedic mantras. The manuscripts are as much as two hundred years old. The paper and ink are of such high quality that during a recent monsoon when a careless student left some of the pages outside, they sat for a month in several inches of water with no apparent damage.

Vivek and his wife, Vedavati, begin each day with an hour's walk — to a Ganapati temple and back. The streets are still dark, but shopkeepers are sluicing the dirt lanes with buckets of water, and scores of townspeople are walking briskly past on their way to one or another of Satara's temples for early morning worship.

Vivek pauses several times to look at the night sky and point out various constellations and stars — Jupiter, for instance, the Guru planet, which is thirteen hundred times as large as earth. "The Guru is very powerful," Vivek says with a smile. All brahmins know some astrology — they are expected not only to perform *pujas* but also to determine the auspicious time to hold them — and Vivek has studied the stars a great deal. One of his prize possessions is an observatory-sized telescope with which he can see Jupiter before him like a ball with a hazy yellow glow.

However, his main area of expertise is the *Krishna Yajur Veda*. It takes fifteen years of study, working ten or twelve hours a day, to truly learn one Veda — to understand it, to be able to recite it from memory. This is just one of the reasons, Vivek says, that families today are reluctant for their sons to become practicing brahmins.

When I was seven, I took a general examination in school and scored zero in mathematics. It was a shockingly bad grade — I hadn't concentrated at all when the teacher was talking. After the exam I went to Pune to visit my grandparents. When my grandfather heard

about my math score, he decided to teach me himself — math, history, geography. And learning that way, I caught on to everything fast.

As we worked together, tears started coming to my grandfather's eyes. He was thinking, "He's an intelligent boy. I don't want to be teaching him mathematics and history. I should be teaching him the Vedas." He started teaching me sandhya, the prayers that a brahmin recites three times a day every day of his life. It took me just five days to learn it. And that made the tears come to his eyes even more.

My grandfather had two sons: my father, who studied the Vedas, and my uncle, twenty years younger, who studied engineering. My uncle did very well in school. Out of over fifty thousand boys, he was the first in his examination board. He went to the University of California, and there, too, he won top honors. He lives in Pune now, director of a large electric manufacturing firm. Of course, my father did very well in his study of the Vedas, but my father never prospered

financially, and my uncle was always very wealthy. It's not that there were hard feelings in the family, but it was so obvious: my father, who studied the Vedas, was poor, and my uncle, who studied engineering, was rich.

So my grandfather was caught: "If we teach him the Vedas, he'll stay poor like his father. How can that be good?" And, at the same time, he was thinking, "It's so important that someone in our family learns the Vedas. And who is that going to be?" Certainly not my uncle's sons!

When Vivek returns from his walk, he exercises, bathes, and then sits down for his morning sandhya and the puja to his family deity in a tiny meditation closet just off the downstairs bedroom. The space is small — there's only room for one to sit — but the altar is more elaborate than those found in many temples. Countless forms of God are represented there: photographs of Baba and Gurumayi and other great beings, along with tiny statues,

Vivek Godbole performs a birthday ritual for his four-year-old son.



crystals, *shalagrams*, a replica of *Shri Yantra*, and a *Shivalingam* that could be as much as three hundred years old. "It's been in my family for five generations," Vivek said. "This is our family deity." The most recent acquisition on the puja is a small statue of the goddess of nourishment, Annapurna, that was brought by his wife at the time of their marriage.

Vedavati has drawn a *rangoli*, an auspicious design in chalk, on the floor at the entrance and has set out a tray with bowls of curd and milk and honey and sugar and ghee — the various forms of nectar preferred by God. This daily puja involves sixteen different offerings to each of the deities on the altar. Intoning the Gayatri mantra, Vivek begins by removing with care all traces of yesterday's sandalpaste *bindis*, yesterday's floral offering, making room for new entreaties, future blessings. The water he uses is collected in a pot and later fed to the sacred *tulsi* bush and banyan tree in the garden. The flowers he offers come from the garden — halfway through the puja his grandmother walks in with a plate piled high with five-petaled white blossoms, which Vivek then offers liberally to every deity represented on the altar. The full puja takes anywhere from half an hour to an hour and a half, depending on how many times he recites the *Rudram*. This Vedic chant, which is sung in forty-five minutes in Gurumayi's Ashram, is repeated by Vivek in about seven minutes. He sometimes repeats it eleven times in one puja. "The full power of the mantra is there," he says. "It's just more concentrated when you do it faster."

It took him fifteen days, studying four hours a day, to learn the *Rudram* by heart.

The issue of my studying the Vedas came up when I was about nine years old. I started getting dizzy anytime I was in direct sunlight. That happened a lot, and then one day I blacked out. A doctor said I should drop out of school and rest for a year. My parents were really worried about me. Then one day a friend of

the family, who had just dropped in to see us, gave me a very unusual prescription. He said that each day I should eat one pipal leaf — not a leaf that is usually eaten — I should grind rudraksha beads into a powder and drink this with water, and I should repeat the Gayatri mantra twelve hundred times a day.

I did all of this for six months. By the end of that time the dizziness was totally gone and — more important — I had the habit of repeating mantras.

Then one day we received a circular from the Maharashtra government saying that there was going to be a school established on the Vedas: the Rig Veda, the Shukla Yajur Veda, and the Krishna Yajur Veda — which is our family's text. This was like a miracle. I later learned that another government had asked the government of India what was being done to preserve the Vedas. The answer was, "Nothing!" So suddenly this school was planned. Nothing like it had ever happened before — and nothing like it has happened since.

My father applied to be a teacher, and I applied as a student. There were forty student applications for the Krishna Yajur Veda; two were chosen — my friend Chintamani and a boy from Nagpur. I cried for two nights when I heard. Then the night before the school inauguration, I got a telegram: the Nagpur boy wasn't coming, and I was first alternate. So I started school the next day. And from that time I have never stopped studying the Vedas.

After doing his own morning pujas, Vivek moves into the wide, covered courtyard area where the brahmin students have by then set up for whatever pujas are scheduled that day. On this particular morning, there is a *shanti*, or peace, puja for a local family; the recitation of the *Rudram* with a young engineering student who comes each day; and a birthday puja for his own son, Vishvajit, who has just turned four. The boy, who is a perfect miniature of Vivek, sits miraculously still beside his father as the



various auspicious offerings are made to the fire on his behalf — his father sometimes taking the boy's hand and guiding it to pour water on the betel nut, or to sprinkle rice on the mango leaves. According to Vivek, "If you want a child to learn how to do puja, it's easy: you just do puja with him. Then he'll want to do it. And he will learn."

On such days, Vivek eats no breakfast — there is a Vedic injunction against performing puja with a full stomach. And before he eats the midday meal he performs the noon sandhya and a daily fire ceremony in honor of Vaishvadev, the fire of digestion. "This is our own *yajna* pit," Vivek says, indicating his belly. "And it is to this fire that we offer our food." In the ceremony honoring the deity of digestion, Vivek sits in the family's dining area, a spotless room lined on opposite walls with the traditional stools, like wooden *asanas*, that serve as dining seats. The puja is simple and short, but according to Vivek it is essential. "We do this every day," he says. "The understanding behind it is very high. We are offering the food to God. And after we do the puja, we always wait a little bit before we serve the meal — just in case

God wants to eat with us. You know that if someone knocks on your door between the time that you offer this food and you eat it, then that is God and he *must* be fed."

Of course, a guest who knocks at any time is considered to be God paying a visit. To show proper respect, the person must be offered some kind of nourishment — water, at the very least, and, if possible, tea or some kind of snack. But the guest who knocks on the door after this puja is fed royally and as much as the family has to give.

It is through this offering, Vivek says, that food gains its power to nourish. "When you sing mantras," he says, "and you think good thoughts while you are putting food into your mouth, then the food goes to the right place in the body and does the right thing there." He adds that if a person speaks of disease while eating, then he will become ill, and if he speaks of political upheaval then those problems stay in the mind.

After lunch begins the second phase of Vivek's day: in the afternoon people drop by to ask for advice. They may want to know the auspicious date to open a business or to get married; they may want blessings for a house they just rented or a cow they've just bought.

Often people come because they have a problem of some kind and they want to know if Vivek can alleviate it by performing a puja on their behalf. There is a Vedic ritual to handle almost any circumstance, and Vivek does recommend these as solutions — but not always. His advice is often ingenious, often surprising.

Yesterday afternoon a woman came by to see me. She said that her son keeps taking money from her, money she keeps in her house, and he spends it on all the wrong things. He won't listen to anything she tells him. If I told her to do a shanti puja, she wouldn't be able to. How would she get her son to come for a puja and sit there while she prays for him?

So I told her an easy way she could get the same result. I told her to pour some water in a pot, put her hand over the pot and repeat the mantra Shri Ram Jay Ram Jay Jay Ram for fifteen minutes. Then I told her to give that water to her son to drink.

This is also a "shanti puja."

She asked me how many days she should do this. I told her two months, because if she does it for two months she will develop the habit of repeating the mantra and her son will get the power of that mantra for a good length of time. If she does this, she will benefit, her son will benefit — her entire household will be better off.

It was the same thing with a friend of my father. He had borrowed so much money that he had no idea how he was going to pay it all back. He had once been very wealthy, but his property had lost its value and now he was in debt. He had two daughters who couldn't get married unless he had money to give them for dowries. He was so worried about all of this that he couldn't even sleep.

He started talking about suicide, and one day he came over here carrying a rope. He said, "I'm going to hang myself. It's the only way out."

I said, "If you want to kill yourself, you can. But this is not the auspicious time. You should wait two months." I told him that for two

months he shouldn't bother with working, he should just sit in front of his puja and repeat the Gayatri mantra.

After ten days of this, he had relaxed enough to start sleeping again. He came to see me. "I'm going to cancel the suicide," he said.

By that time he had gotten into the habit of japa, and he continued doing the Gayatri mantra for the next six months. Then his whole fortune turned around. An irrigation canal went in beside one of his properties, and he was able to sell that land at a great profit. And then one of his daughters got married. So his debts were paid, and his family responsibilities were being met. But the most important was that his attitude changed.

That was the best thing. Everything comes from our attitude.

In the late afternoon, if there is time, Vivek indulges his favorite pastime: voice lessons. The lesson is an impromptu concert in an upstairs bedroom: the teacher, an unassuming man in his sixties, is on the harmonium, a young brahmin student is on the tablas, and Vivek, his face wreathed in smiles, sits in the middle of the floor, lifting his voice in song. Vivek's voice, steadied and strengthened for twenty-five years on the mantras of the *Krishna Yajur Veda*, sails ecstatically over the *bhajans* of Eknath and Mirabai, classical love songs to God. He sings with unabashed delight, smiling when he hits the high notes, smiling even wider when he doesn't.

At sunset he performs the evening sandhya, which on this particular evening he does at an exquisite spot where the Krishna and Vaynza rivers meet. The silvery light of late afternoon plays on the surface of the water as Vivek and one of his students stand knee-deep in the swift current of this sacred river, reciting mantras. With their traditional topknots and *lungis*, these two figures could be brahmins from any age — from hundreds, even thousands of years ago — making their timeless propitiations to the Supreme.

In the evening, eight students, ranging in age from twelve to forty, gather in an informal circle in the courtyard to study with Laxman Godbole. The students sing — some from memory, some reading the text in the soft, yellow light — while Laxman Godbole listens to their pronunciation with an alert ear. Now and then he leaps on some unmastered phrase, stopping the recitation and, in his strong, raspy voice, leading the students through rapid-fire repetitions, again and again and again, until they get it right.

Dinner is at eight or later, and after that the family reads or talks, watches news or a comedy show on television; the children are put to bed. As they sleep Vivek plays tapes of the mantras for his son and for the brahmin students. “It works,” he says. “It makes the mind more receptive to learning. If you hear something while you sleep, you may not remember but it will stay with you.” When his wife was pregnant, he played tapes of the Vedas for the benefit of the unborn children. This obviously bore some fruit: their six-year-old daughter, Vallerie, had recited by heart the fifteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* in school only the day before. Vivek is pleased but not surprised. He says, “Of course she could learn it.” He adds that if a child has trouble learning a mantra, “you can just put your hand on his head as he sleeps and repeat the mantra ten times. The next day he’ll be able to repeat it.”

It is this question of teaching the Vedas to the next generation that most concerns Vivek because, as he puts it, “I don’t see the next generation of brahmins coming forward.”

Most brahmins no longer live by Vedic ritual — they no longer do sandhya or offer their food or pay daily respects to their family deities — and so they have no power to teach their sons. Traditionally, a man initiates his son into the study of the scriptures in his upanayana

ceremony. Upanayana means literally “from the eyes.” It is designed to be a form of Shaktipat. The father looks deeply into the eyes of his child and gives him the Gayatri mantra. If the father has been repeating the mantra himself, there is great power that passes through that look; the boy is truly initiated. But if the father hasn’t been using the mantra, how will he have the power to make that mantra alive for his son?

When I was a student, there were very few other boys studying the Vedas, and now there are even fewer. The old brahmins are beginning to die; I have to wonder — who is going to replace them? The number of brahmins keeps going down and down. There are only about twenty practicing brahmin priests in Satara today. Thirty years ago, when my father was my age, there were four to five hundred. And during my grandfather’s time, there were twenty-five in our family alone.

But if it doesn’t go from father to son, there is another possibility. Three years ago I ran some classes for children. There were about fifty children who came for an hour every day; I taught them the Hymn to Shankaracharya and some bhajans. These children learned very quickly, and when they went home they started singing for their parents. I would see their parents on the street, and they would look at me with so much respect, because suddenly they could see the value of the scriptures: they could see the effect this singing was having on their children. The parents began to have the children sing when guests came to visit. Then I had all the children sing together in a big program at the Ganesh festival. After a while, the parents were getting so much joy out of their children’s singing that they started singing themselves. And then their homes changed, then their homes had so much Shakti.

And that is what I take heart in. Even if the parents aren’t teaching this kind of thing to their children, the children can teach the parents. That’s the way it seems to be happening now.