

INSIDE VED PATHSHALAS



Pics: Shyam Sonar & Mandar Deshpande

A unique mix of the old and the new at some of the city's oldest institutions of Vedic learning

Avijit.Chatterjee@timesgroup.com

It's still a few hours until day-break. But amid the stillness around, a four-storied building in Budhwar Peth is humming with activity. Boys barely aged nine or ten are up and about, gathering their books, ready to begin their lessons. They sit in a circle around their avuncular teacher and, on cue, begin to recite the Sanskrit slokas learnt a day earlier.

Welcome to the world of Ved Pathshalas. With renewed interest in tradition, these institutions are alive and kicking. In Pune alone, there are nine Ved Pathshalas — some more than a century old.

At the 138-year-old Pune Ved-pathshala in Budhwar Peth, as in other such institutions, the thrust is on learning by committing to memory. "We follow the oral tradition of learning. Students learn by listening to the teacher. Books are for students to check if pronunciation is correct," says Vaze guruji Rugved Smail Chhodamani.

Established on October 12, 1881, the residential school has 40 students between the ages of nine and 23. "As per Vedic tradition, we

admit those who are Brahmins. Students come here after their thread ceremony and after they have attained the age of 8. Generally, most come after they have studied till the fourth or the fifth standard in a regular school," he says.

Instruction here is through the Gurukul system. It is focused on *Rig Veda* — Shakal branch and *Krishna Yajurved* — Taittiriya branch. In addition, students also learn 'Yadnik' in detail, which is essential for *Karmanushthana*, says Chhodamani.

Which Veda one needs to study depends on one's family's vedic tradition.

According to Chhodamani, it takes more than 12 to 15 years to study one single Veda.

"*Rig Veda* has around 10,500 verses. Yajurveda samhita includes around 1,875 verses that build on the foundation of verses in *Rig Veda*. The middle layer of Yajurveda text in-

cludes Satapatha Brahmana, one of the largest Brahmana texts in Vedic collection. The youngest layer comprises the newest collection of *Upanishads*."

Remembering all these mantras is a very difficult task, which leaves students with hardly any time to do anything else. But only after a student has completed the entire training module, can he be called a Vedik.

Since the entire focus of vedic education is on a student's ability to recall verses verbatim, the admission process involves assessing an applicants' ability to memorise lessons and pronunciation.

"We hold a workshop for one month from April 16 to May 15 every year, during which we figure out the students' ability to memorise the Vedas and whether they can stay here. Our entire system of education is oral; we don't have a written

exam," says Chhodamani. The academic session begins from June.

In keeping with the times, Pune Vedpathshala has introduced subjects such as History, Geography, Science, Maths, Marathi, Hindi, English and even Computer Science for those who want to move into the general stream later on.

"We prepare students for all subjects until about Class IX so that they are able to easily appear for the Class X board exams. Since we don't teach Class X here, we give a Class IX pass certificate with the help of which students can either take admission in a regular school or appear in the board exam as an external candidate," says Ulhas Anant Phadke, an official.

Interest in vedic studies has remained alive mainly due to the eagerness of the people to learn about their roots

— Moreswar Vinayak Ghaisas | PRADHAN ACHARYA

But those who want to concentrate only on Vedic studies can continue their lessons here, he adds.

A typical day begins here at 4.30 am when students wake up to revise their lessons. They

have breakfast around 8.30 am following which they learn new lessons. They are taught in groups according to the class they study in. The boys study till noon and then break for lunch. Studies again commence from 2pm till about 5.30pm. From 5.30pm to about 6.30pm, they participate in sports. After the *arti*, around 7.30pm, they study till 9.30pm and have dinner at 10pm. They have to be in bed by 10.30pm.

Every year, the Ved Pathshala admits between five and 10 students. "Since we have a limited capacity, we cannot admit more students. Moreover, they study here free of cost. Their food and lodging are taken care of, too," says Phadke.

Mostly, students from the Marathwada and Konkan regions of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Goa, come to study at the ved pathshala. "This year, we got two students, aged around 8, from Lucknow," says Chhodamani.

Nearly 18 km away, Ved Bhavan, in Kothrud's Paud Road, has been keeping alive the tradition of teaching the ancient scriptures for the past 73 years. Here, students are imparted lessons in *Dashgranthas*, namely the *Rigved Samhita*, *Aitareya Brahmana*, *Upanishads*

(*Aranyakas*), *Vedanga*, *Shiksha-chatushtaya*, *Ashtadhyayi*, *Nairukta Shrauta* and *Griha Suktas*. "We focus entirely on *Rig Veda* unlike other Ved Pathshalas," says Moreswar Vinayak Ghaisas, the Pradhan Acharya.

"Students stay here for a minimum of 10 to 12 years to complete their studies. Some students stay much longer since it takes several years to complete each of the texts. For example, one has to spend around four-and-a-half years to complete *Rigved-Samhita*. *Aitareya Brahmana* contains 40 *Adhyayas* (chapters), and takes one-and-a-half years to complete," he says.

Though students are admitted in April, actual studies start on Vijay Dashami.

"*Veda adhyan* starts after doing *sankalp* on Vijay Dashami. That is why Vijay Dashami and Dussehra are important to us," says Ghaisas.

Ved Bhavan too follows the Gurukul system of learning and students stay here until age 25, following which they enter the second phase of life, known as *Grihastha* (householder).

"Currently, there are 16 students at the academy. Most students come here from across Maharashtra, but we have a few students from Himachal Pradesh and Kashi (Varansi) too. This year, eight students came from Karnataka to study

GAMES AND TECH: A game of cricket often keeps students busy towards the end of the day. The Web also allows students to stay up to date. Pune has nine Ved Pathshalas, some over a century old

here but we could not admit them due to their unfamiliarity with Devanagari script," he says. "Despite the strides made by modern system of education, interest in vedic studies has remained alive over the years mainly due to the eagerness of the people to learn about their roots. Hopefully, it will continue to draw students several years hence," says the Pradhan Acharya.

