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Marketing for Gurus—Gleaned from Premodern Indian Texts

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is a close look at some (i) Old Indian texts on (ii) *gurus* from the perspective of (iii) marketing. (i) We focus on six different texts, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Taittirīya Upaniṣad (TaiU), Āpastamba-Dharmasūtra, Mānava-Dharmaśāstra, Kāṭhaka-Gṛhya-Sūtra, and Vaiṣṇava-Dharmaśāstra. (ii) We understand *guru* as a (spiritual) teacher of (young) students, followers in a “sect”, or the king to whom the *guru* turns for patronage. (iii) When applying ideas from marketing to our topic, we are guided by the famous “4P”: “product”, “place”, “price”, and “promotion” (the so-called “Marketing Mix”). Not every marketing behavior by the *guru* is clearly attributable to only one of the four instruments.

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I. Introduction

The aim of this paper is a close look at Old Indian texts on *gurus* from the perspective of marketing. As Scharfe (277) explains: “The word [*guru*] originally meant ‘heavy, weighty,’ and calls to mind the Latin expression of a *vir gravis*, ‘a weighty man,’ i.e. a man of importance and dignity.” Indeed, Sanskrit *guru* and Latin *gravis* derive from a common Indo-European word.

We understand *guru* as a (spiritual) teacher. Its particular meaning depends on the people he may teach. For example, he may be a teacher of

- (S) (young) students (so that the *guru* is an *ācārya*, see below)
- (F) followers in a “sect” (with the *guru* as the leader or founder)
- (K) the king to whom the *guru* turns for patronage²

With respect to the first bullet, the *guru* “who teaches young boys and men in his house the sacred texts of the *Veda*, is called an *ācārya* – meaning literally either the man ‘who teaches the right conduct’ or, more likely, ‘he who must be approached’” (Scharfe, 277-278).

One may, of course, question whether the *gurus* were trying to attract students and followers and to be rewarded by the king. The Upaniṣads leave no doubt in that respect. In Taittirīya Upaniṣad 1.4³, the teacher’s prayer reads:

Students, may they come to me! Svāhā!
 Students, may they flock to me! Svāhā!
 ...
 Students, may they be tranquil! Svāhā!
 May I be famous among men! Svāhā!
 More affluent than the very rich! Svāhā!

In Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.1.1⁴ we read:

Once when Janaka, the king of Videha, was formally seated, Yājñavalkya came up to him. Janaka asked him: “Yājñavalkya, why have you come? Are you after cows or subtle disquisitions?” He replied: “Both, your majesty.”

We consider these texts:

- Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BĀU), around the seventh to sixth centuries BCE
- Taittirīya Upaniṣad (TaiU), around the sixth to fifth centuries BCE⁵
- Āpastamba-Dharmasūtra (ĀDhS), around the third to second centuries BCE⁶
- *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (Manu), around second to third centuries CE⁷
- Kāṭhaka-Gṛhya-Sūtra (KGS) with Devapāla’s commentary, before 500 BCE⁸
- Vaiṣṇava-Dharmaśāstra (ViDh), around the seventh century CE⁹

The idea behind this paper is to apply the famous 4P from marketing (introduced by McCarthy) to the Old Indian texts that deal with *gurus*. The 4P are “product”, “place”, “price”, and “promotion” and are also addressed as “Marketing Mix”. Van Waterschoot and Van den Bulte have proposed an “Improved Classification of the Marketing Mix” (88-91) that we follow here. These authors (89) distinguish between

- product instruments (configuration of something valued by the prospective exchange party)
- distribution instruments (placing the offer at the disposal of the prospective exchange party)

² We disregard the “family *guru* who performs all the life cycle rites and eventually also teaches the *Veda*” (Scharfe, 120, fn. 33) and also that the term *guru* is sometimes used for the mother and the father (see Scharfe, 277).

³ Olivelle (1998, 292-295).

⁴ Olivelle (1998, 102-103).

⁵ For the Upaniṣad datings, see Olivelle (1998, 12-13).

⁶ See Olivelle (2000, 10).

⁷ See Olivelle (2005, 25).

⁸ See Winternitz (23, 47-51).

⁹ See Olivelle (2009, 13-15).

- price instruments (determination of the compensation and sacrifices to be brought by the prospective exchange party)
- communication instruments (bringing the offer to the attention of the prospective exchange party and influencing its feelings and preferences about it)

For the purpose of this paper, the “prospective exchange party” in these definitions refer to one of the three groups above (students, followers, king).

There may well be particular marketing measures that belong to two or more of the four instruments. Nevertheless, the paper is structured along the 4Ps as defined by van Waterschoot and Van den Bulte above. Section VI concludes.

II. Product instruments

Product policy might concern all three target groups, S, F, and K. We first concentrate on young students that come to live in a *guru*’s house. These teachers usually transmit established knowledge. In the last subsection, we consider innovative *gurus*.

The *ācārya* offers a bundle of goods and services:

- Teaching of the *Veda*
- Rituals
- Status as twice-born through *upanayana*
- Bed and board (see distribution instruments below)

A. Teaching of the *Veda* (S)

The *ācārya* offers teachings of the *Veda* (for example). Some sort of a sender-receiver model of teaching seems to underlie TaittU I3.2-3: “the preceding word is the teacher, the following word is the pupil, their union is knowledge, and their link is instruction.”

According the ViDh 27.15-17¹⁰ or ĀDhS I1.19¹¹, the period of study begins before the pupil is 8 years (for a Brahmin), 11 years (for a Kṣatriya) or 12 years (for Vaiśya). The length of study varies. If one needs 12 years for each of the three *Vedas*, one has to study 36 years. Indeed, Manu 3.1-2¹² says: “He should carry out the observance relating to the three Vedas at his teacher’s house, an observance lasting thirty-six years, or one-half or one-quarter of that time, or else until he has learnt them. After he has learnt in the proper order the three Vedas or two of them, or at least one, without violating his chastity, he should undertake the householder’s order of life.”

In some texts, we find a sort of “continuing education” (also called “further education”). ĀDhS I13.19¹³ recommends: “If a man, after he has married and settled down, wishes to study the *Veda* further, he should live at the house of his teacher with a collected mind for two months every year.”

B. Educational *saṃskāras* (S)

Veda teaching occurs in the framework of well-established rituals.¹⁴ In particular, the beginning of the student’s stay in the teacher’s house is called *upanayana* (leading [the student] near [the teacher by his guardians]).

The end of studies is often marked by the ceremony called *snāna* (bath) and/or *samāvartana* (returning). “After learning the *Veda* and receiving the teacher’s permission, he should

¹⁰ Olivelle (2009, 92, 307).

¹¹ Olivelle (2000, 24-25).

¹² Olivelle (2005, 108, 447).

¹³ Olivelle (2000, 46-47).

¹⁴ An overview of Hindu *saṃskāras*, including educational ones, is given by Pandey.

give him a gift and take a bath. Alternatively, he may live out the rest of his life at the very house of his teacher” (ViDh 28.42-43¹⁵).

C. *Status as a twice-born (S)*

The educational *samskāra* of *upanayana* was vital for the social standing:

In this manner, he should learn one Veda, or two, or three; thereafter the Vedic Supplements [pronunciation, meter, etymology, grammar, astronomy, ritual, HW]. When a Brāhmaṇa expends great effort in other matters without studying the Veda, he is quickly reduced to the status of a Śūdra, along with his children. His first birth is from his mother, while the second takes place at the tying of the Muñja-grass girdle [part of *upanayana* ceremony, HW]. At his birth, the Sāvitrī verse is his mother, and the teacher is his father. By this alone do they attain the status of twice-born.
(ViDh 28.34-39)¹⁶

This aspect could also be seen as a communication instrument (in the sense of influencing the student’s feelings and preferences).

D. *Bed and board (S)*

The students obtain lodging and food at the *guru*’s house (see the distribution instruments below). This is certainly an aspect of product instruments. In return, the students had to beg for food and to provide personal services to the *guru*. These services and the humility that comes with providing them may also be considered a product given (!) to the students. Here, product instruments and price instruments (see below) overlap.

The student had to obey certain rules of conduct. For example, ĀDhS 12.18-21¹⁷ stipulates that “[he] shall submit to his teacher in all things except those that entail a sin causing loss of caste. He shall promote his teacher’s welfare, never contradict him, and occupy a lower seat and bed.”

E. *Doctrines and rituals (F, K)*

Tentatively, we offer a few remarks on religious entrepreneurs. One might approach them in a manner similar to firms or political parties. Firms fashion their products in different dimensions (see figure 1¹⁸). Political parties define their political programs (see figure 2).

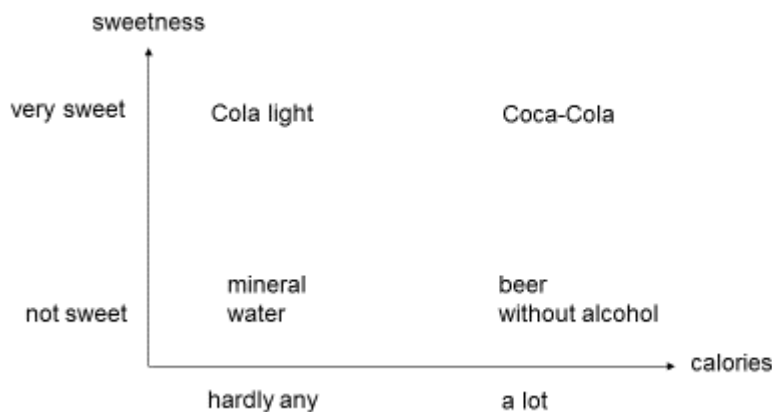


Figure 1: A commodity space

¹⁵ Olivelle (2009, 94, 311).

¹⁶ Olivelle (2009, 93-94, 311).

¹⁷ Olivelle (2000, 26-27).

¹⁸ Pfähler and Wiese (238).



Figure 2: A political space

For religious matters, Durkheim (50) is famous for his quote: “Les phénomènes religieux se rangent tout naturellement en deux catégories fondamentales: les croyances et les rites.” For our purpose, we prefer to think of religious phenomena in terms of doctrines (rather than beliefs) and rites. After all, we want to talk about the *guru* as an actor. He cannot offer beliefs, but what he does is teach doctrines. Figure 3 presents an example from the Christian realm.

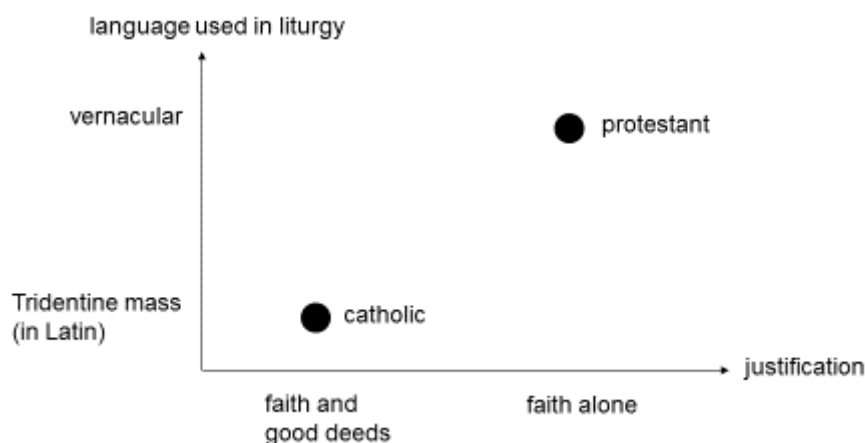


Figure 3: A religious space

In the Indian case, doctrine may refer to

- *astika* (accepting the authority of the *Veda*, believing in world beyond, etc.) versus *nāstika* (not doing some or any of the above)
- accepting different means of proof
- different conceptions (if any) of *saṃsāra*
- different conceptions (if any) of *karma*
- the six schools:
 - Nyāya – the School of Logic
 - Vaiśeṣika – the School of Atomism
 - Sāṃkhya – the School of dualistic Determination
 - Yoga – the School of classical Yoga
 - Mīmāṃsā – the School of Vedic Exegesis
 - Vedānta – the School based upon the Upaniṣads

With respect to religious space, doctrines and rituals may well be interdependent. They have to be alligned in some sense or other (figure 4).

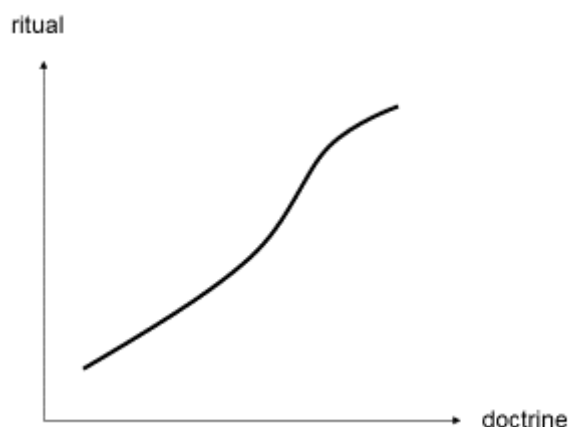


Figure 4: Doctrine and ritual aligned

Religious entrepreneurs operate in religious spaces. If a religious entrepreneur finds a new “religion”, he needs to differ from others. However, he has to offer something that people can relate to. This is done by claiming to build on a tradition, by claiming to correct a distorted view and/or practice. If some disenchantment with the current belief set has grown, more radical newcomers may have a chance as, for example, Buddhism in the West.

Here, we have offered only some sparse remarks on how entrepreneurship in religious and philosophical matters might be approached. It is quite a challenge and may well be close to impossible to fill in details in the Indian case.

III. Distribution instruments (S, K)

Distribution is mainly about the place of teaching.

- Kings have called teachers into their palaces. For example, Droṇa was asked to teach Bhīṣma’s nephews in the Mahābhārata.
- Wandering teachers (Buddhist and others) also offered their services (see Scharfe, 282). If Olivelle’s translation of *caraka* is correct, itinerant students may also have roamed India (BĀU 3.3.1¹⁹).
- The standard teaching model for many centuries is the *ācārya-guru* who offers his services in his own house, the so-called *ācāryakula* or *gurukula*.

The behavior of students in the teacher’s house is regulated (see price instruments).

IV. Price instruments

The *guru*’s income as an *ācārya* has three components. First, he lets the student beg for alms. Second, he has the student do all kinds of services in the house. Third, the *ācārya* obtains a gift called *dakṣiṇā* when teaching has finished. These three aspects of price instruments are described in subsections A through C. Subsection D is concerned with the king’s giving to a revered *guru*. And subsection E concerns the king’s giving in a competition.

A. Begging for alms (S)

One of the student’s tasks is to beg for alms. For example, ĀDhS I3.25²⁰ requests: “Morning and evening he shall go out to beg with a bowl, soliciting from those who are not degraded or heinous sinners, and bringing all he receives to his teacher.”

¹⁹ Olivelle (1998, 80-81).

²⁰ Olivelle (2000, 28-29).

It is likely that the begging efforts were successful. In any case, householders were asked to react sympathetic to students begging *gurvartham*, i.e., “for the sake of his teacher”.²¹ In any case, it might be dangerous not to give, according to ĀDhS I3.26²²: “When women refuse a steadfast student, he robs them of their sacrifices, gifts, oblations, offspring, cattle, sacred learning, and food supply. One should never refuse a group of students come to beg, therefore, for among them there may be one who is like that and who keeps that vow.”

Nevertheless, if the student is not successful, it is the teacher’s duty to give him food. Thus, alms begged by the student are an uncertain income for the teacher.

If the student went to other teachers on top of the one who initiated him, it is the initiating teacher who obtains the alms. This is clear from Devapāla’s commentary of KGS 13²³. Thus, the literature provides general rules that deal with possible conflicts between teachers.

B. Services in the guru’s house (S)

According to ĀDhS I4.24²⁴, “he should say when he goes to sleep: ‘I have taken care of the man who takes care of the Law.’ ” And ĀDhS I6.1-2²⁵ stipulates: “Every night he should get his teacher ready for bed by washing and pressing his feet, and, when permitted, lie down to sleep himself”.

In KGS 30²⁶, we read: “In the evening and in the morning, [the student should] venerate the dawn, go for alms, and kindle the fire.” Here, religious services are mentioned together with services for the *guru*’s household.

C. Dakṣiṇā (S)

Before a student leaves his teacher’s house, he is expected to present a gift. The instructions to a departing students might have been as follows:

After the completion of vedic study, the teacher admonishes his resident pupil: “Speak the truth. Follow the Law. Do not neglect your private recitation of the Veda. After you have given a valuable gift to the teacher, do not cut off your family line.

...

Treat your mother like a god. Treat your father like a god. Treat your teacher like a god. Treat your guests like gods.”

(TaiU 1.11²⁷)

The amount given is left to the student. This arrangement may well have been to the advantage of the teacher, by some process of gift differentiation (corresponding to price differentiation in microeconomics or marketing). That is, a student from an affluent family can and will give more generously than a student from a poor family.

Interestingly, stealing for the teacher’s benefit might be allowed. ĀDhS I7.19-21²⁸ says: After learning as much as he can, he should present the fee for vedic study, a fee that is procured righteously and according to his ability. If his teacher has fallen into hardship, however, he may seize it from an Ugra or a Śūdra. Some maintain that it is lawful at all times to seize wealth for the teacher from an Ugra or a Śūdra.²⁹

Learning and teachers are highly valued in pre-modern India. This is very clear from the papers by Sadananda Das and Maria Schetelich in this volume. Thus, a general positive “feeling” (see the definition of the communication instrument) can be assumed. For example, “one should know that when a gift is given to one’s teacher [*guru*], one’s mother, one’s father and a Vedic

²¹ This is stipulated in Manu 11.1-2 (Olivelle 2005, 215, 837).

²² Olivelle (2000, 28-29).

²³ Dreyer (16).

²⁴ Olivelle (2000, 30-31).

²⁵ Olivelle (2000, 32-33).

²⁶ Dreyer (30).

²⁷ Olivelle (1998, 296-299).

²⁸ Olivelle (2000, 36-37).

²⁹ An Ugra has a Kṣatriya father and a Śūdra mother according to the Kauṭilya-Arthaśāstra 3.7.22 (Olivelle 2013, 194).

savant, each time the resulting merit or sin becomes increasingly a hundred-thousand times greater”³⁰. Or similarly Manu 7.85³¹:

A gift to a non-Brahmin yields an equal reward; a gift to one who is a Brahmin in name only yields twice that; a gift to a teacher [ācārya] yields one-thousand-times that; and a gift to one who has mastered the Vedas [vedapāraḡa] is infinite.

Similarly Bṛhaspati 14.10, 11-12³².

Thus, there are many good reasons for giving generously to one’s teacher. Inversely, it is clearly in the teacher’s interest to instill these *guru* and *Veda* friendly attitude in his students.

D. King’s reward for personal teaching (K)

In BĀU 4.1.1³³ we read: Yājñavalkya visits Janaka, the king of Videha and manages to amaze the king with his wisdom. Several times, the king exclaims: “I’ll give you a thousand cows together with the bulls and elephants!” Perhaps out of modesty, Yājñavalkya declines this easy opportunity for wealth: “My father believed that one should never accept a gift before giving instruction. Let’s hear what else they have told you.” The wise Yājñavalkya disproves again and again assertions such as “*Brahman* is breath” or “*Brahman* is sight” (see BĀU 4.1.2-7³⁴).

It seems that Yājñavalkya’s initial modesty pays off immensely:

About this self (*ātman*) one cannot say ‘not–, not–.’ He is ungraspable, for he cannot be grasped. ... He is not bound; yet he neither trembles in fear nor suffers injury. Truly, Janaka, you have attained freedom from fear.” After Yājñavalkya had said this, Janaka of Videha replied: “May that freedom be yours too, Yājñavalkya, you who have taught us that freedom from fear. Homage to you! These people of Videha and I myself—here we are at your service.”

(BĀU 4.2.4³⁵)

E. Philosophical competition (K)

A philosophical debate was another method to gain income. We read in BĀU 3.1.1³⁶:

Janaka, the king of Videha, once set out to perform a sacrifice at which he intended to give lavish gifts to the officiating priests. ... So he corralled a thousand cows; to the horn of each cow were tied ten pieces of gold. He then addressed those Brahmins: “Distinguish Brahmins! Let the most learned man among you drive away those cows.”

Yājñavalkya is bold enough to have the cows driven away by his son. Consequently, he is challenged by eight Brahmins and manages to silence each of them. A philosophical debate has a second purpose that we turn to in the following section.

V. Communication instruments

A. Drawing attention (S)

A *guru* may win a philosophical debate and thus gain students and followers in this manner. A second method is presented in BĀU 6.2.1-2³⁷:

Śvetaketu, the son of Āruṇi, came one day into the assembly of the land of Pañcāla and approached Jaivali Pravāhaṇa while people were waiting upon him. Seeing Śvetaketu, he said: “Son!” Śvetaketu replied: “Sir?” Jaivali asked: “Did your father teach you?” Śvetaketu replied: “Yes.”

Do you know how people, when they die, go by different paths?”

“No,” he replied.

³⁰ Brick (74, 274), citing Dānakāṇḡa and there Nandi Purāṇa.

³¹ Brick (83, 286), citing Dānakāṇḡa).

³² Brick (83, 287), citing Dānakāṇḡa).

³³ Olivelle (1998, 102-103).

³⁴ Olivelle (1998, 102-109).

³⁵ Olivelle (1998, 110-111). We do not discuss here the question of whether “not–, not–” is the appropriate translation of Sanskrit *neti neti*. See Acharya for the newest addition to this very difficult problem.

³⁶ Olivelle (1998, 74-77).

³⁷ Olivelle (1998, 144-145).

Jaivali keeps on asking questions to which the boy has no answer. Jaivali invites the boy to stay, but the latter runs off to his father Gautama and tells him about it. The father goes to Jaivali and some bargaining begins:

Jaivali gave him a seat and had some water brought for him. Then he presented him with the refreshments due to an honored guest and said: “We will grant a wish to the Reverend Gautama.”

Gautama said in reply: “Now that you have promised to grant me a wish, tell me what you told my boy.”

“But that, Gautama, is in the category of divine wishes,” responded Jaivali. “Why don’t you make a wish of a human sort?”

Gautama replied: “As you know, I have my share of gold, cows, horses, slave girls, blankets, and clothes. Do not be stingy, your honor, in giving me more than that—in giving me the infinite and the boundless.”

“Then, Gautama, you will have to request it in the correct manner.”

“I come to you, my lord, as a pupil.”

With these words did the people of old place themselves as pupils under a teacher. And Gautama lived there openly as a pupil.

(BĀU 6.2.4-7³⁸)

Thus, in the end, Jaivali does not win the boy as student, but his father instead, presumably for a generous remuneration.

B. Influencing feelings and preferences (S)

As mentioned several times, the feelings and preferences of the *guru*’s customers were quite positive in Ancient India. In particular, the value of teaching was well accepted: “Wealth, kin, age, ritual life, and the fifth, knowledge—these are the grounds for respect; and each subsequent one carries greater weight than each preceding” (Manu 2.136³⁹).

Indeed, the teacher has a treasure to offer:

Now, vedic knowledge came up to a Brāhmaṇa [Brahmane, HW] and said: “Guard me; I am your treasure. Do not disclose me to a man who is envious, crooked, or uncontrolled. Thus I shall wax strong.

A man you know to be pure, alert, wise, and chaste, a man who will not become hostile to you under any circumstance—only to such a man should you disclose me, O Brāhmaṇa, as to a guardian of your treasure.

(ViDh 29.9-10⁴⁰)

In this manner, the product (teaching of vedic knowledge) is valuable and should not be given to just anybody. This is a marketing strategy that has recently been described by Groth and McDaniel in terms of modern marketing.

Another venue of influencing the students’ outlook on learning from a teacher is via ancestor worship. The value of *Veda* teaching and reciting is enhanced by the following observation:

At the beginning and at the end of a vedic lesson, the pupil should clasp his teacher’s feet and recite the sacred syllable OM.

And within this context, when he recites Rg-verses, by that his ancestors become sated with ghee; when he recites Yajus-formulas, with honey; when he recites Sāman-chants, with milk; when he recites Atharvan-formulas, with meat; and when he recites Purāṇas, Itihāsas, Vedic Supplements, and Legal Treatises, with rice.

(ViDh 30.32-38⁴¹)

Other aspects of winning pupils or followers are argued for by the theoreticians of religion Stark and Finke (112). For example, they note that “confidence in the explanations offered by a religion will be greater to the extent that its ecclesiastics display levels of commitment greater than that expected of followers.” In the Indian context, the *guru* is supposed to possess the highest moral, intellectual, and spiritual qualifications. Thus, according to MU I2.12⁴² the teacher

³⁸ Olivelle (1998, 110-111).

³⁹ Olivelle (2005, 102, 426-427).

⁴⁰ Olivelle (2009, 95, 313-314).

⁴¹ Olivelle (2009, 96, 316).

⁴² Olivelle (1998, 440-441).

should be “well versed in the Vedas, and focused on *brahman*.” These aspects could also be mentioned under the heading of product instruments.

VI. Conclusion

This paper builds on the assumption that the teaching efforts by *gurus* can be looked at through the lens of marketing. The successful teacher might be called *yaujāna-śatika*, i.e., a *guru* for whom students travel a long distance – hundred *yojanas* (see Scharfe, 281-282). However, this marketing and business orientation by a *guru* comes at a cost. He cannot profit from vedic knowledge both in this world and in the next:

When someone acquires vedic knowledge and thereby gains a livelihood in this world, that knowledge will give him no reward in the next world, as also when someone uses his vedic knowledge to tear down the fame of others.

(ViDh 30.39-40⁴³)

Several times, we had to notice that quite a number of aspects are not clearly attributable to one of the four instruments. Indeed, the ability to serve several purposes may contribute to the *guru*'s success.

We close with two critical remarks: First, the selected literature can be criticized. After all, education plays a very important role in Hindu culture and many other pieces of literature do cast some interesting light on these matters. The reader is again referred to the articles by Sadananda Das and Maria Schetelich in this volume. Second, it has to be admitted that this little piece is ahistoric. We adduce examples from Old Indian texts but do not check whether these procedures were actually used in a given time and place. The reader interested in the history of Ancient Indian education, is referred to Mookerji and Scharfe.

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⁴³ Olivelle (2009, 96, 317).