

## Preface

Looking back at the beginnings of the research that was to become this book with DVD I see that circumstances and material that turned up unexpectedly guided me as much as the research plan I designed originally. In spite of the clear research proposal necessitated by the literary genre of applications to a research funds granting institution, the actual outcome of my work was not predicted therein. First the book and then the DVD took shape in very dynamic processes. They became what they are now because I decided where to go while I was on my way.

When I set out in 1996 for my encounter with the South Indian Brahmin group called Vaikhānasa, not much had been published about their present-day communities and ritual practices. Until then this group had been treated mainly as a textual tradition of a relatively recent Vedic school. I became aware of the Vaikhānasas' living tradition first through Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya's letter to Willem Caland, which Caland published in his preface to his edition of the *Vai-khānasaśrautasūtra* ("A short note on the Vaikhānasasūtra"; Caland/Vīra 1941: xxviii-xxx). In his letter Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya emphasised that the present day Vaikhānasas are temple priests with a rich ritual literature, and that they are in several respects distinct from other vaiṣṇava groups.

Then Gérard Colas' erudite book *Viṣṇu, ses images et ses feux. Les métamorphoses du dieu chez les Vaikhānasa* was published in 1996. This enlightening and exhaustive study of the Vaikhānasas' texts on temple rituals pulled me further into investigating this group's textual heritage along with their contemporary ritual practice. However, trained mainly as a philologist, texts were my first points of reference. In order to collect hitherto unknown texts of this tradition, I applied for a travel grant which was generously granted by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). So I spent eight busy weeks in early 1998 in South India, visited many centres of Vaikhānasa activities in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, and collected two big trunks full of Vaikhānasa publications. Back in Germany I applied for a Habilitandenstipendium, which was granted by the DFG in 2000. This stipend enabled me to visit those scholars who had already done work on the Vaikhānasa tradition, namely Professor Gérard Colas in Paris and Professor Guy R. Welbon in Philadelphia. Both contacts were invaluable for my further research, not only because these scholars generously shared their

knowledge with me, but also because they helped me immensely in refining my research questions.

I then set out for another research trip to South India, this time for eight months. The “heart” of this book is based on the Sanskrit text *Daśavidhahetuni-rūpaṇa*, which I read in Chennai with the Sanskrit Paṇḍit Professor Śatakopan at the Kuppusvami Shastri Research Institute (KSRI).<sup>1</sup> He not only helped me understand difficult passages of the text, but also gave me a first introduction into South Indian Vaiṣṇavism,

In South India I spent my time not only in libraries and in diverse Indological research institutes, but also in following several invitations to witness, document, and participate in domestic Vaikhānasa life-cycle rituals. A. Rangacharyulu and Dr S. Muttubhaṭṭar are two people who call for special thanks. They established valuable contacts for me with several families and with Vaikhānasa communities in South India. Rangacharyulu in Vijayawada, president of the “Sri Vaikhānasa Samajam,” helped me in many ways. He introduced me to his uncle, the late Anantacarya Padmanabha, a kind person and rich source of knowledge, and he also arranged for me to witness and document two viṣṇubali performances in Vijayawada. Parts of the video coverage of these two events are presented on the accompanying DVD. S. Muttubhaṭṭar, Sanskrit lecturer at the Vivekananda Sanskrit College in Chennai, kindly put me into contact with the Vaikhānasa association “Sri Vaikhānasa Divya Vivardhini Sabha” in Tirumalai (Andhra Pradesh) and its secretary, the late D.V. Chari. He also established contact for me to the Vaikhānasa family in Cidambaram, where I took still pictures of a performance of the prenatal life-cycle ritual known as viṣṇubali. The viṣṇubali ritual is central to this book. Some of these pictures are also presented on the DVD. Moreover, S. Muttubhaṭṭar patiently discussed with me all of my questions, large and small, regarding the Vaikhānasa tradition.

During my stay in India, when the opportunities arose, I set out for diverse domestic rituals, equipped first with a borrowed, then with my own video and still cameras, as well as with an audio tape recorder. Although in the beginning I had nothing but a vague plan for “using” my documentation, I recorded whatever I could. And in fact, the repeated listening to and viewing of my documentation helped me immensely in understanding and analysing the performances.

Many of the performers and Vaikhānasa Paṇḍits I met had a great interest in making information available to me, and were open with me even with regard to legal cases over who could perform the rituals (see esp. 3.1). Some of the priests

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1 I also want to thank the always friendly and cheerful staff of the KSRI, especially Dr Ka-meshvari, Dr Balasubramaniam, Dr Vasudevan, and Mrs Lalita.

even took me along with them, so that I became familiar with their actual working conditions, and with South Indian vaiṣṇava rituals in general, which was at that time an entirely new field to me. It was certainly not always an easy task for all those who helped me: as a single woman and foreign scholar, I am sure that I often behaved improperly, even if it was just out of ignorance. Moreover, I was not in command of the local languages Tamil or Telugu. Therefore my direct communication was often restricted to those among the actors who spoke English, who then also acted as interpreters. And if all else failed, I had to manage with Sanskrit. I was and still am amazed by the great hospitality and generosity of many people who, although we never met before, invited me to stay in their house, and to share their water and food.

Back in Germany I submitted my thesis in German, but decided to publish a reworked version in English, in order to make it accessible to the many people who so generously shared their thoughts and time with me.

In 2006 I had the chance to re-visit some of the places and people, and could collect some more information especially on the legal cases pertaining to ritual performance in southern Tamil Nadu (see 3.1.2). At that time I also got the consent of the concerned participants to publishing the audio-visual material and was able to clarify some more aspects of the performances I had witnessed and documented. And, to my great joy, I met Govinda, son of Balaji and Shrividya in Cidambaram, a “child of Viṣṇu,” whose prenatal life-cycle ritual viṣṇubali I had witnessed five years earlier (see the picture on the cover of this book).

Will Sweetman (New Zealand) kindly agreed to do a draft translation into English and to go through the work again, after I had made some changes. The collaborative research program on “The Dynamics of Ritual” provided the stimulating intellectual background for many revisions of the work and the funds for the draft translation. The discussions there encouraged me even more to publish the edited audio-visual material along with the book. Anand Mishra and Bao Do (both Heidelberg) helped me at various stages of the production of this book. Finally, the DFG granted the funds for producing and publishing the book with DVD, and the experienced cameraman and cinematographer Manfred Krüger produced the DVD with me.

The materials on which this work is based are diverse, and so are the methods applied. In this book, being part of the series “Ethno-Indology,” a combination of textual and contextual approaches are employed (see Michaels 2005a). First the texts are taken as witness of the tradition. Most of the works dealt with here are Vaikhānasa texts and thus self-representations, which in part are oriented inwardly, but in part also towards others. Here, especially the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*, and the Vaikhānasas’ ritual literature in Sanskrit occupy the central

place (for this study only printed texts, not manuscripts, have been drawn on). In dealing with these texts I follow Colas who says (2005: 32):

Ritual handbooks make no claim to be perfect works either from a linguistic or literary point of view. ... Therefore, a philological approach focussing exclusively on classical grammatical and linguistic criteria is less appropriate to their study.

As the Sanskrit texts dealt with here are mainly written to communicate subject matter which should be comprehensive to ritual practitioners, and as they are to be read and understood in close connection with practice (see Colas 2005b: 32), I decided not to correct the occasional “irregularities” of the language,<sup>2</sup> especially as these “irregularities” are no obstacles to understanding the content. The evident “irregularities” of the Sanskrit used in the Vaikhānasa ritual texts that I look at are the result of the dynamics of the non-classical, living priestly Sanskrit (see Deshpande 1996). Unfortunately, only in very few cases can the texts dealt with here be chronologically classified. The order in which they are presented is therefore determined by their content. Moreover, as many of these texts are preserved only as short citations, they cannot be reconstructed as they were structured as complete texts (see esp. 2.2.3–6).

However, since this work relies on the study of the relevant texts and on fieldwork, the frame of mind that guides this work is based not only on the (seemingly) stable textual representations, but also on my interaction with those people who “own” and perform these rituals today, and to whom these rituals are meaningful constituents of their identity. My research confirmed that ethnography and ethnology can help gain a better understanding of what is not obvious in the texts. However, being aware that ethnography can also be misleading because we might be tempted to read ancient texts in the light of present day practices (see Colas 2005b: 28f.), I present the diverse material and its analysis separately and only combine the findings in the final section of the book. John Strong calls this method “exegetical exploration” (Strong 1992: xii): not a single text or other material, but a particular issue is focused on for presenting and discussing the problematics of a given tradition. The effort to understand these issues is further developed “by the perspectives of different contexts and co-texts” (Strong 2004: xv). Nevertheless, what I present, in the book as well as on the DVD, is my perspective and interpretation of situations and texts, adding just another point of view to the perspectives of the members of the Vaikhānasa tra-

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2 Sanskrit terms and texts are transcribed according to the standard conventions. Tamil terms and textual passages are transcribed according to the conventions used by the Madras Tamil Lexicon. In transcribing these texts, which are printed in Telugu, in Grantha and in Devanāgarī script, I follow the texts as printed, and make no corrections to the spelling.

dition.<sup>3</sup> I decided to change the names of those persons mentioned in the section 3.1 dealing with past and ongoing controversial issues. In contrast to that, in the section 4.3 on the ritual events I attended the names of the actors are given: they invited me, they agreed to being filmed, they received a copy of the unedited film after the event, and they act. So we should learn their names.

The DVD that goes with this book presents the video coverage and still pictures of three *viṣṇubali* performances. I perceive this visual representation also as a “way of knowing” (see Grimes 2006: 40), which at the same time grants access to data. Apart from the introduction to the DVD, I chose to use subtitles instead of voice-over, in order to retain as much of the sensorial experience of the ritual as possible. The DVD thus adds sound, colour, and motion to the textual descriptions and interpretations of the events. I wish to convey that the rituals talked about and analysed are not performed in a remote past, but that they are integral part of the everyday religious life of those who perform them.<sup>4</sup> However, when I shot the rites, I was a novice in the field of videoing, and in the beginning I planned to use the coverage mainly as a visual notebook. The DVD is not a documentary of the events, although one of the performances is given in full. Instead, I decided to arrange the material in a way that reflects my analysis, guided by a comparative perspective.<sup>5</sup> The material presented, edited and already pre-interpreted as it may be, gives the reader/viewer the possibility “second level participation.”

I wish to thank all the performers and participants in the rituals, who not only so generously invited me to take part at these important events, but who also patiently bore with my ignorance and shared their knowledge, opinions and experience with me: K. Balaji Bhattachar and his wife Shrividya, their families, and the priest Katukallur S. Manivanna Bhattacharya with assistants, Jvala Narasimhacharyulu and his wife Kalyani with their families, and the priest Parankusha

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- 3 However, it is important to note that the views and perspectives represented in the book as well as on the DVD are for the most part male ritual specialists’ perspectives: men authored and transmitted the ritual texts, men are the main agents in the performances (as priest and as officiator), and men offered their interpretations of the rituals to me. The women’s voices and their understanding of the rituals were not within the scope of my investigation, but are certainly not less important than male perspectives.
  - 4 The attitude I aimed at is perhaps best described by what Peter Köpping calls ‘surrender’: “Surrender implies the attentiveness with which we listen to musical performances, or that is characteristic of lovers’ relationships, this relationship which leads not to a losing of self but to finding of it” (Köpping 2002: 259; quoted in Rao 2003: 20).
  - 5 A detailed description and suggestions on how to view the DVD is given as Appendix 2 in this book.

Rangacaryasvami and assistants, Shrinivasa Cakravartin, his wife Vasudhara and their families, and the priest Parankusha Vasudevacharyulu and his assistants.

Obviously, this work would not have come into existence without the help of many individuals—only some of them can be mentioned here by name. I am especially indebted to Dr S. Muttubhattar (Chennai) and A. Rangacharyulu (Vijayawada), who helped me in many ways. Thanks are also due to Dr S. Sudarshan, the late D.V. Chari, P. Jagganatha Charyulu and his family, Dr Lakshmi Narasimha Bhatta, P. Bhatta Brahmacharyulu, Dr M. Narasimhachari, Dr K.K.A. Venkatachari, Dr M.A. Venkatakrishnan, Venkatakrishnan Parthasarathy Bhattacar, Ch.B.R.K. Charyulu, A.G. Krishnamacharyulu, Dr Kameshwari, N.S. Parthasarathy Bhattachar, Dr Dominic Goodall, Parthasarathi Bhattacharya and Gopalakrishna Bhattacharya, Gopalakrishnabhattacharya, Anjana und Michael Das-Hasper, G. Prabhakara Charyulu, S. Raghuvirabhattacharya, P.V. Ramanacharyulu, the late Vedantam Ananta Padmanabhacharyulu Garu, Sylvia und Raghu Stark-Raghunathan, P.K. Varadha Bhattachar and his family, Nalluru Vikhanasa Bhattacharyulu, N.S. Dikshitalu, Sthapathy A.B.L. Guhanathan and Mrs Lalita.

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