

### Appendix 3: Text of the “Introduction” to the DVD

In the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka one major group of temple priests in Viṣṇu temples are the Vaikhānasa Brahmins. Viṣṇubali, the prenatal life cycle ritual presented here, is specific to their tradition. This ritual is performed before birth, in the eighth month of pregnancy. It enacts and marks a transformation of the unborn child. Viṣṇubali, “the offering to the God Viṣṇu,” makes the Unborn a Viṣṇu-devotee, and confers on it its future right to act as a temple priest in South Indian Viṣṇu temples. It is understood as a prenatal initiation, performed by the God Viṣṇu himself: Viṣṇu transforms the Unborn into his own child.

I have to admit that in the process of my research I was as mainly guided by unexpected circumstances. When I started, I treated the Vaikhānasa tradition, like most other scholars in Europe and in the US, as textual tradition. But then, during my first trip to South India in 1998, which was designed to collect texts, I realized that a very vivid Vaikhānasa ritual practice exists. This fact, paired with the great hospitality and willingness of the Vaikhānasas to share their knowledge with me, encouraged me to conduct an eight month long field research trip in 2000/2001. Through my friends A, Rangacaryulu in Vijayawada and Muttu Bhattar in Chennai I received several invitations from Vaikhānasas to participate at life-cycle rituals performed in their families. So I set out, equipped first with a borrowed, then with my own video and still cameras and with an audio tape recorder. At that time I did not even think of publishing the audio-visual material, but I recorded whatever came in front of my camera’s lens, because I sensed that I could not possibly understand what was going on by simply participating and witnessing. I intended to use the footage as a kind of visual notebook. And in fact the repeated revisiting of the coverage helped me immensely in understanding what had happened. The subsequent decision to edit and publish parts of the coverage was guided by the insight that a visual representation is also a “way of knowing” and a way of keeping the ritual process alive.

On the thirteenth of November in 2000, I was invited to a family’s prenatal life cycle rituals for the first time. The event took place in Cidambaram, in Tamil Nadu. The head of the family and father of the unborn child was K. Balaji Bhattachar, one of the hereditary priests in the Viṣṇu shrine of the famous Cidambaram Naṭarāja temple. His wife, Śrīvidyā, had not been well for some time and had been strictly confined to bed during the latter half of her pregnancy, the only exception was this event.

Because of her condition I was asked not to take video coverage. At that time videoing domestic rituals was not yet common in this very conservative tradition. And the use of a video camera was perceived as an unnecessary risk to the woman's and child's health. But I was allowed to take still pictures, along with a professional photographer, who was hired by the family. The main priest, Katukallur S. Manivanna Bhaṭṭācārya, is a Vaikhānasa ritual specialists reknowned all over Tamil Nadu. He was assisted by his brother, KS Vāsudeva Bhaṭṭācārya, sitting to the other side of Balaji, the father of the unborn child.

The names of the actors and participants are not given in the subtitles of the DVD. Instead, I chose to refer to their ritual roles which are not necessarily obvious to the untrained eye.

My second chance to witness and record a Viṣṇubali ritual was in Vijayawada, in Andhra Pradesh, only two weeks later, on the twentyseventh of November 2000. There were only a few participants: the concerned couple, Jvala Narasimhacaryulu and his wife Kalyani, the main priest Parānukṣa Rangacaryasvami and the closest relatives of the pregnant woman in whose paternal home the ritual was performed. Because of this simplicity I chose this occasion to represent the full ritual on the DVD. The menu called "parts of the ritual" presents diverse sequences of the ritual as they were performed in either two or all three of the Viṣṇubali rituals I documented. These sections shall facilitate comparison of the diverse ritual events.

My third chance to document a Viṣṇubali ritual was on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2001, again in Vijayawada. The couple, Śrīnivāsa Cakravartin and his wife Vasudharā enacted the ritual in the small Kodandarāma temple, in which the pregnant woman's father served as main priest. The performing priest, Parāṅkuṣam Vāsudevācāryulu came from a nearby small town for this ritual. The scene thus is very different from that of a ritual performed in a domestic setting. Although not connected to the life-cycle ritual as such, the bustle of the temple gives the event an entirely different character.

I am very grateful to all performers and participants, who not only generously allowed me to take part in these important events, but who also patiently bore with my ignorance and answered my endless questions. Working with me - or performing in front of me - was certainly not always an easy task. I was, after all, a single white woman and scholar, at that time not in command of the local languages Telugu or Tamil, and I undoubtedly behaved improperly out of sheer ignorance.

Considering this situation, the hospitality of all those people who invited me to stay with them in their house, to share their water and food, is all the more amazing. As is evident from the video clips, in spite of the camera in front of my

face I was not perceived as disturbing the ritual as a whole. People were comfortable with me, partly due to the interaction before and after the performances. But, as a single researcher in the field, with no experience and no funds, I was confined to the place behind the camera. Therefore the interaction between the participants and me is not shown in the film clips. I hope the material presented here conveys that these rituals are part of an ancient tradition and actually lived religion at the same time.

