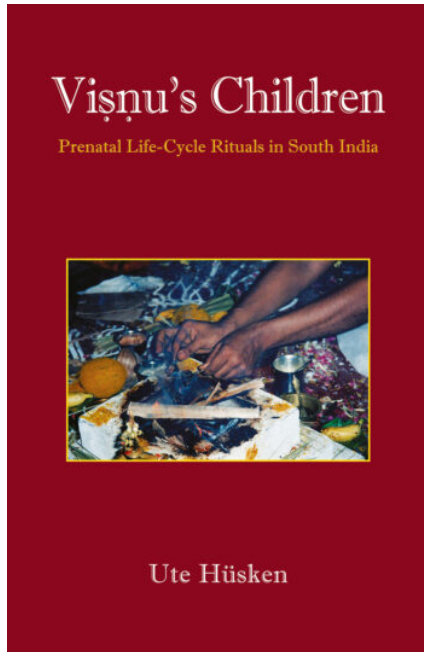


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Visnu's Children: Prenatal Life-Cycle Rituals in South India



About the Book

The Vaikh?nasas, a group of Brahman priests serving in South Indian Vi??u temples, can look back on a long and history, at times marked by the effort to assert their status against a rival priestly group. The focus of this monograph is a centuries-old controversy about what entitles a person to perform the rituals in Vi??u temples: Does birth or initiation establish the ideal mediator between God and humans? Since the 14th century CE, discussions in the relevant Sanskrit texts have revolved around the question of whether Vaikh?nasa priests must undergo initiation with branding on their upper arms, or whether their special prenatal life cycle ritual, Vi??ubali, entitles them to perform temple rituals. As hereditary temple priests, the Vaikh?nasas' position is unequivocal: they see themselves as Vi??u's children, destined for temple service even before birth. In addition to the textual perspectives, three local conflicts from the 19th and 20th centuries are analyzed regarding the question of whether Vaikh?nasas must undergo initiation. Furthermore, three examples of current performances of the Vi??ubali ritual are presented and interpreted in light of the relationship between text and performance.

Author: Ute Hüsken

Publisher: Dev Publishers

Year: 2025

Dimension: 23.5 x 15.5 x 2
cm

No. of Pages: 322

ISBN: 9789359444703

Binding: Hardcover

Price: Rs 1995

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Dev Publishers
& Distributors

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