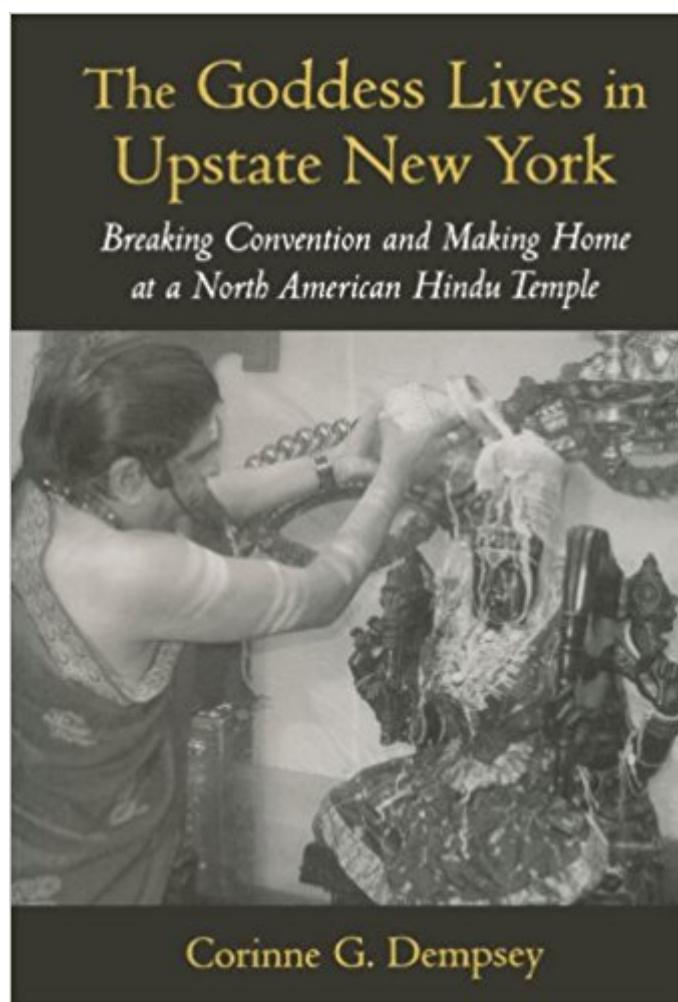


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# The Goddess Lives In Upstate New York: Breaking Convention And Making Home At A North American Hindu Temple



## Synopsis

The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York is a profile of a flourishing Hindu temple in the town of Rush, New York. The temple, established by a charismatic nonbrahman Sri Lankan Tamil known as Aiya, stands out for its combination of orthodox ritual meticulousness and socioreligious iconoclasm. The vitality with which devotees participate in ritual themselves and their ready access to the deities contrasts sharply with ritual activities at most North American Hindu temples, where (following the usual Indian custom) ritual is performed only by priests and access to the highly sanctified divine images is closely guarded. Drawing on several years of fieldwork, Dempsey weaves traditional South Asian tales, temple miracle accounts, and devotional testimonials into an analysis of the distinctive dynamics of diaspora Hinduism. She explores the ways in which the goddess, the guru, and temple members reside at cultural and religious intersections, noting how distinctions between miraculous and mundane, convention and non-convention, and domestic and foreign are more often intertwined and interdependent than in tidy opposition. This lively and accessible work is a unique and important contribution to diaspora Hindu Studies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Highly recommended." --Choice "Dempsey's study of an unconventional, but successful, Hindu temple community in upstate New York reveals important dynamics of diaspora Hinduism. These include issues of gender and caste, ethnic community, and spiritual enthusiasm -- the last of which, especially, has been little treated in current studies of the South Asian diaspora. Just as important, by demonstrating vividly both the logic of tantric ritual and the power devotees see in it, Dempsey

offers important insights into Hindu tradition generally. Her engaging writing, together with the perceptive questions she raises, should make her book one that will absorb students and scholars alike."--Daniel Gold, author of *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion: Modern Fascinations*"Corinne Dempsey's study of the Rush Temple in Rochester, New York makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the fluidity of modern religious life amongst diaspora Hindus. For the scholar of religion, the book is full of interesting and illuminating examples of rituals, beliefs, and temple practices that make the Rush Temple unique and an important case study."--*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*"Dempsey illuminates how this particular congregation negotiates domestic and foreign sensibilities, religious and scientific worldviews, and intergenerational expectations. Her historic, comparative, and self-reflexive insights help locate this temple not only in the history of Hinduism but in contemporary North American religiosity and religious studies more generally." --*Journal of Religion*"The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York provides an engaging and accessible portrait of a thriving Hindu temple in Rush, New York, foregrounding the ethos of its charismatic founder through a thoughtful discussion of key topics. ...[A] fine study." --*Journal of Asian Studies*

Corinne G. Dempsey is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point. Her first book, *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India* (OUP, 2001), won the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies award for best monograph in Hindu-Christian studies, 2000-2002.

I am lucky to live in Rochester, close to the temple that Corinne Dempsey so lovingly describes in this book. I'm no Sanskrit scholar, so I can't comment on the way chants are pronounced there. But I know commitment and passion and bhakti when I see it. The pujas and fire offerings at the Sri Rajarajeshwari Pitham are done with devotion and care, and the entire temple is lit up with such a sense of presence that the book's title seems like a simple statement of fact. The book isn't a promo piece for Aiya and the temple community that's grown around him. Neither Aiya nor the temple promote themselves; they're just happy to welcome anyone who finds them and likes what they're doing. Instead, it's a scholarly study of a vital and unusual moment in the history of Hinduism, taking place right now in the unlikely setting of Rush, New York. What's unique about it? In just about every other Hindu temple the gods are in a sanctuary, partially closed off from the worshipers. The only people allowed to approach them are Brahmin men. At the Sri Rajarajeshwari Pitham the murti are in the open--free to walk around with the people, as it were. The people have the same freedom.

Aiya isn't a Brahmin, and as far as he and the temple are concerned there are no caste distinctions and virtually none between men and women. The egalitarianism and "priesthood of all believers" certainly appeal to Dempsey, who came of age in the heyday of liberation theology. There's no doubt that she admires Aiya, too, but the admiration was something he earned. She's a highly-respected scholar of religion who came to the temple to do field work. What she saw changed her from an observer into something between observer and participant. Her book is almost unique in giving a view of religious life that's open to the inside and outside alike. Dempsey's interest is mostly sociological. The S.R.P. is a Srividya temple--Srividya being an esoteric tantra with a large following among south Indian Brahmins--and she doesn't get much into specifics about Srividya practice itself. She concentrates on the lives and stories of the community members and the difficulties and joys of making something that's both new and ancient in a world very different from home. And she carries Aiya's voice to the reader as well as the voices of many of those who have joined with him. I'm biased, of course; part of my pleasure in the book is that it reminds me of time at the temple. But it says something objective about both the author and the subject that she's gotten high praise in scholarly journals for her insight into the dynamics of diaspora Hinduism and its implications for Indian religion--and her book is also for sale in the temple bookshop. I highly recommend the book, and if you're anywhere in the area you should look up the temple, too!

Very informative and introspective. Paints a detailed picture of Hinduism at the temple near Rush, New York, and Aiya's efforts to bring a new enthusiasm to Hinduism in the diaspora.

The book itself is a really fascinating story. The author's perspective, even though as an outside observer, was extremely rich in detail and interesting to read. The book arrived in a timely manner and in good shape.

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