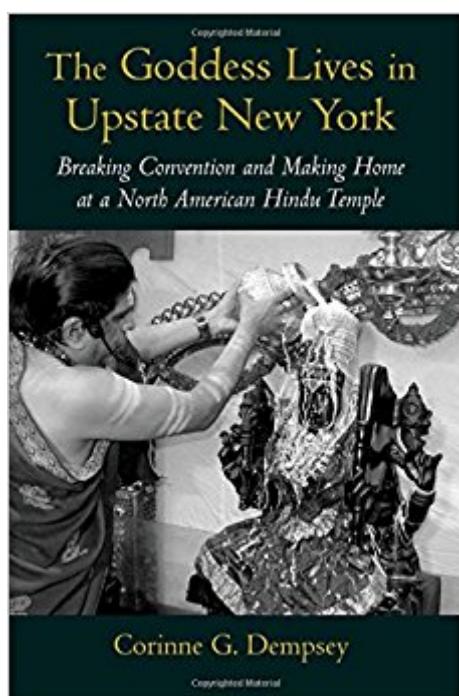


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The Goddess Lives In Upstate New York: Breaking Convention And Making Home At A North American Hindu Temple



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.

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Customer Reviews

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.

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