



January 2008

Book Review: "The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York: Breaking Convention and Making Home at a North American Hindu Temple"

Eliza F. Kent

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kent, Eliza F. (2008) "Book Review: "The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York: Breaking Convention and Making Home at a North American Hindu Temple";" *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 21, Article 21. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1420>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

***The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York: Breaking Convention and Making Home at a North American Hindu Temple.* Corinne G. Dempsey. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, xiv + 261 pp.**

IN *The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York*, Corinne Dempsey offers a detailed ethnographic portrait of a charismatic religious leader and the community which has grown up around him in the unlikely locale of Rush, New York. Here a bright yellow barn set amidst rolling green hills and grain silos serves as the pitha, or "seat" of Sri Rajarajeshwari, a tantric goddess especially important to the Srividya lineage. The Rush temple is at once typical and atypical of North American Hindu temples, which makes Dempsey's account of her five years of participant-observation in it an ideal introduction for students to the study of diaspora Hinduism. On the one hand, the temple is equipped with iconographically correct granite images (murthis) shipped directly from artisan workshops in south India. Its rituals are performed on a grand scale, stinting no expense nor extravagance, and yet conducted with meticulous attention to liturgical precision. On the other hand, the conventions that typically limit contact between ordinary devotees and the enshrined deities in Hindu temples are here eschewed in favor of open access. Regardless of caste, gender, age or place of national origin, all devotees are encouraged to participate fully in worship. As Dempsey demonstrates, the founding guru-priest, Sri Caitanyananda, known affectionately as "Aiya" by his followers, self-consciously seeks to anchor the authority of the temple in strict adherence to agamic standards, as transmitted by his guru lineage, precisely so that he can push the envelope in other ways: giving prestigious roles in ritual to women, making the secrets of Srividya ritual technology freely available through self-produced audiotapes and books, and encouraging all his followers – male and female, young and old, Sri Lankan Canadians and Hispanic Americans – to chant along in Sanskrit during puja.

A non-Brahman originally from Sri Lanka, Aiya defied convention in his own life by learning the closely guarded secrets of the

Srividya tradition from a guru in Zambia, Sri Amritananda. Normally the preserve of an elite Brahman subject, the Smarta community, Srividya is a tantric path that emphasizes the power of ritual to harness divine energies and transform the self. In the late 1970s, Aiya and his wife emigrated to the U.S., charged by their guru with the mission to spread Srividya to anyone interested. In a pattern seen frequently in North American Hinduism, the community that formed around Sri Rajarajeshwari initially worshipped in a small shrine in the couple's converted attic, and then in their garage before finally settling into the big yellow barn besides the couple's home in the verdant hills of rural upstate New York. Though the book is divided into three parts designed to focus on the goddess, the guru, and the community in turn, it is Aiya, the "maverick guru," who comes through most vividly. Dempsey's sympathetic yet candid account of this religious virtuosi's life and teaching is reminiscent of established classics such as Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

In addition to providing a rich description of the challenges and opportunities in diaspora Hinduism through the lens of Aiya's life and work, Dempsey delivers significant insights into a crucial yet understudied dimension of religious life, namely, miracles. Recognizing the limits of conventional social scientific modes of investigation into experiences that people believe have their source in the transcendent, the author pushes herself not only to render the worldview of Aiya and other devotees of the Goddess as empathetically as possible, but also to grant that worldview reality, both on an intellectual and a personal level. In this regard, readers familiar with Dempsey's work will see a deepening of methodological and intellectual concerns that animated her first book, *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 2001 [Winner of the Best Book in Hindu-Christian Studies prize for 2000-2002]). In the last chapter of *Kerala Christian Sainthood*, the author left us with a picture of herself overcome by grief at the apparently insurmountable barrier preventing full participation in an "other" religious community's most powerful rituals. She writes, "I felt as though I was watching a wonderful party from a distance but was not, in fact, invited to take part...In other words, I was stranded outside of something I understood to be profoundly rich but did not know how I could, ultimately, enter into it" (160). At the Rush temple, in contrast, these barriers to full participation appear to have been broken. Without losing her sense of belonging to the Roman Catholic tradition, Dempsey takes a mantra from Aiya, marking her initiation into the Srividya path. Moreover, Dempsey herself experiences the Goddess' grace in the form of extraordinary sensations brought forth by the temple's rituals.

In challenging scholarly conventions that seek to preserve scholarly objectivity by maintaining emotional distance from one's subject matter, Dempsey joins the company of recent anthropologists of religion like Meena Khandelwal and Loring Danforth, who practice a form of self-reflexive anthropology. The danger, of course, is that such intense self-reflexivity will collapse into the kind of academic navel-gazing aptly called "me-research." In my view, Dempsey completely avoids that trap. Rather, her attention to her own and other people's complex emotional, physical and psychological responses to events and people provides an immensely valuable window into the dynamics of guru-seshya and community relationships so central to Hindu spiritual life.

Readers of this journal whose interest in

religious encounters across the boundaries of tradition has taken them to the study of North American Hinduism will find much to appreciate in this book. A kind of symmetry exists between the work people must do to indigenize Christianity in a non-Western land (a prominent theme in Dempsey's previous book), and that required to transmit Hinduism in North America, with its predominately secular and Christian culture. I was somewhat disappointed not to see these parallels examined at greater length. Yet in *The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York*, the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism takes place more subtly, at the level of persons rather than abstract ideas or macro-level social processes. We see this, for example, when Dempsey's own formation as a Catholic with sympathies toward Liberation Theology gets challenged by the extravagance expenditures undertaken in the rituals honoring Sri Rajarajeshwari (pp. 16-22), and in Aiya's experiences of miraculous interventions by a canonized Catholic priest named Padre Pio, whose memory he still honors through the installation of his portrait in the temple office (pp. 188-190).

When Dempsey directly asks Aiya if there is an aspect of North American religions that he integrates into his own practice, he answers that it is the testimonial, "a personal story geared to empower and increase the faith of the listener" (p. 75). Dempsey follows suit: the book is a garland of stories, deftly connected to one another through analysis, comparison and thoughtful self-reflection. The result is a delightful study of diaspora Hinduism that will, at minimum, increase the reader's faith in the anthropology of religion.

Eliza F. Kent
Colgate University

The History of the Holy Servants of the Lord Siva: A Translation of the Periya Puranam of Cekkilar. Alastair McGlashan. Victoria, B.C. Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2006, pp. xii + 417.

THE Saivite tradition of Tamil Nadu, India has had a long history of hymnic, philosophical,

mythological, and hagiographic literature in Tamil language. In each of these literary