

# The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York

*Breaking Convention and Making Home  
at a North American Hindu Temple*



Corinne G. Dempsey

The Goddess Lives in  
Upstate New York

*This page intentionally left blank*



The Goddess  
Lives in Upstate  
New York

*Breaking Convention and Making Home  
at a North American Hindu Temple*

CORINNE G. DEMPSEY

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further  
Oxford University's objective of excellence  
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York  
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in  
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2006 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016  
www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,  
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Dempsey, Corinne G.

The Goddess lives in upstate New York : breaking convention  
and making home at a North American Hindu temple / Corinne G. Dempsey  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978-0-19-518729-8; 978-0-19-518730-4 (pbk.)

ISBN 0-19-518729-6; 0-19-518730-X (pbk.)

1. Rajarajeshvari (Hindu deity)—Cult—New York (State)—Rochester. 2. Śrī  
Rājarājeśvarī Pīṭham (Rochester, N.Y.) 3. Spiritual life—Hinduism. I. Title.

BL1225.R274U634 2005

294.5'35'0974788—dc22 2005045085

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

*Dedicated to Aiya and Amma  
and to the devotees at the Rush temple  
who have given me so much*

*This page intentionally left blank*



# Acknowledgments

The process of researching, thinking, and writing this book has been anything but a solo adventure. Although I can probably never properly thank all those who have contributed in substance and/or support to the following pages, I will at least acknowledge many of them here by name.

To start, Paul Younger alerted me to the existence of the Rush temple. I sometimes wonder when, if ever, I would have stumbled upon such riches without his timely suggestion. Susan Nowak helped me actually locate the temple and, after I moved to Wisconsin, regularly and warm-heartedly provided me with a second home in Rochester. I thank all the Sisters of St. Joseph for their abundant hospitality and for our exquisite Hindu-Catholic conversations in the evenings and over breakfast. A UW-Stevens Point New Faculty Grant supported my first trip back to upstate New York and student transcribers Amanda Fiedler, Angie Kind, and Dan Lesczynski gallantly helped with the tedious task of transforming taped interviews into print.

UWSP colleagues Barbara Butler, Don Fadner, Aurthur Herman, and Alice Keefe deftly helped apply my field data to larger academic conversations. I am also indebted, as always, to Ann Gold and Susan Wadley at Syracuse University for their support and wise counsel at various stages of the process. If it were not for a fellowship from the Madison Institute for Research in the Humanities, this book might never have seen the light of day, at least not for many more years. I am grateful to Dean Justus Paul for his continued support of UWSP's participation in this valuable program in

spite of severe budget cuts and to my chair, Don Fadner, for his unbegrudging support of my year-long absence. I also benefited considerably from thoughtful exchanges with the other fellows at the Institute during the 2002–2003 year. Jeslie and Annapamma's warm hospitality and intense conversations were truly icing on the Madison cake during my extended visits.

Conversations with colleagues Paul Courtright, Whitney Kelting, Pratap Kumar, Vasudha Narayanan, and Selva Raj helped enrich my view of South Asian practices and perspectives in various communities in India and in the diaspora against which the Rush temple sometimes melds and sometimes stands in sharp relief. My loyal ex-student Amanda Fiedler, on site in Tamil Nadu and Delhi while I was writing, similarly helped explore and juxtapose particular practices and perceptions.

In an attempt to make this book accessible to a popular audience, I shamelessly enlisted a number of family members, local friends, and even our Austrian exchange student to read the manuscript at different stages of completion. I am grateful to Pana Columbus, Fran Dempsey, Amanda Fiedler, Terry Flynn, Nick Garigliano, Patricia Garigliano, Florian Hahn, Kathy Hoffman, Kurt Hoffman, Jean Leary, Amarnath Nagarajan, Ken Wagner, and Martha Yonke for their careful consideration and feedback. Students in both sections of my fall 2003 Religions of India course thoughtfully read and anonymously commented on the manuscript as well. I thank all of the above for their generous and astute observations and suggestions that, I believe, helped to make this a better book.

Aparna Hasling and Pathmanathan Kandaiya graciously allowed me to use some of their beautiful photos for the book and John Hartman cheerfully gave of his precious time, advice, and equipment to make sure the photos were in the best possible black-and-white condition before sending them to the press.

It has been my great pleasure and privilege to work, once again, with editor Cynthia Read and associate editor Theo Calderara and, this time around, with production editor Christine Dahlin and editorial assistant Julia TerMaat at Oxford University Press. Encouraging and challenging remarks by anonymous readers spurred me both to have confidence in my approach and to hone further some of the book's arguments. Copyeditor Margaret Case's fine polishing is, as always, unparalleled. Any shortcomings in the finished product are, of course, my very own.

At home, the three men in my life, Nick Garigliano and Jack and Sam Dempsey Garigliano, have supported my adventures with the Rush temple from the very beginning. Nick, in particular, has listened with apparent interest to the stories I enthusiastically brought home with me and has nurtured and fed my fledgling insights. All three have good-naturedly weathered the absences that fieldwork and writing periodically require.

Finally and most fundamentally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Rush temple participants, all of them, for their extraordinary generosity and patience. Dur-

ing the several-year period when I was most focused on interviewing temple members, Aiya used to joke that Corinne, like the goddesses born with weaponry in their hands, was born holding a tape recorder. Some people (including me) joked how crowds would scatter when they spied me and my tape recorder approaching, but the truth is that temple members were not only generous about making time to speak formally with me but also in the level of openness with which they shared their stories and their hearts. Many of those who never managed to sit for official taped interviews graced me with their trust and honesty, as well. For the plentiful sense of welcome and warmth I have received from temple participants, I am truly grateful.

It would be difficult to single out the many devotees whose kindness, support, and generosity have sustained me over the years, yet I feel I must mention a few whose support was instrumental to the researching and writing of this book. From the very beginning, Charulata Chawan has taken a hearty interest in my work and has gone out of her way to organize interviews, administer questionnaires, and engage in lengthy conversations about the process and product of research. Although her life's work is currently with the Syracuse University library, she might just consider a second career as an ethnographer. Aparna Hasling's sensitivity, moral support, and keen insight have sustained not only my work from beginning to end but also, more personally speaking, a crucial connection to the temple when geographical distance has separated us. Sudharshan Durayappah has been an invaluable source of information, analysis, and comic relief. The hours we have spent discussing the temple and its place in larger religious and academic frameworks have produced insights without which this book would not be the same. Now that I have written from my vantage point, it is his turn. Amma's stable, wise, and supportive presence at the temple is a quiet force of inestimable value. The genuine concern she has offered me and many others in her sphere of influence should never be underestimated. Her depth of spiritual and practical dedication and vision makes her truly one of a kind.

The person primarily responsible for the substance and tenor of this book—not to mention the substance and tenor of the temple itself—is Aiya, who bore my steady stream of questions and omnipresent tape recorder with patience and good humor. Not one to keep his views to himself, he regularly was candid with me about the ups and downs of being a guru, of dealing with the needs of temple participants, and of running an organization that adheres to yet stridently strays from traditional principles. On rare occasions, he would even ask my advice. The extent to which Aiya shared with me the teachings of his tradition and furthermore trusted me with his thoughts and opinions is of no small significance to me. His generosity, openness, and honesty—and my admiration for them—give significant substance to this book. More than anything, his towering faith in the Mother of us all has left me a different person than when I began this project.

*This page intentionally left blank*



# Contents

Note on Transliteration, xiii

Introduction:  
A Temple Trip, 3

## PART I Encounters with Divinity: Ritual Power and Miracles

1. Temple Entryways, 15
2. Perspectives on Ritual Power:  
The Cost, Science, and Grace of Divinity, 33
3. Visions and Versions of the Miraculous, 57

## PART II The Work of a Guru: Bridge Building and Boundary Breaking

4. Maverick Guru with a Cause, 83
5. The Changing Faces of Temple Worship:  
The Young, the Women, and the Rest, 105
6. A Fine Balance:  
The Give and Take of Religious Discipline, 129

## PART III Temple Inhabitants: Making Home in a World of Impermanence

7. Grounding the Sacred:  
Traveling Deities and Sanctified Terrain, 149

8. Expanding Turf for Racial and Religious Others, 169

9. Making Home at the Śrī Rājarājeśwarī Pīṭham, 191

Conclusion:

A Good Place to Start, 209

Glossary, 215

Notes, 221

Bibliography, 245

Index, 255



## Note on Transliteration

This book employs diacritical marks for Tamil and Sanskrit words, following Library of Congress style. For readers unfamiliar with Indian terms, it is my hope that the benefits of familiarizing oneself with diacritics and with more accurate pronunciation will outshine the drawbacks of the (initially) confusing array of dots and dashes.

Many of the terms used have both Tamil and Sanskrit forms. In such instances I follow temple usage and thus the Tamil form. Most typically this means adding an *m* to the end of a Sanskrit word such that *prasada* becomes *prasadam* and *linga* becomes *lingam*, etc. The glossary at the end of the book likewise lists such recurring terms in Tamil form. Place names and personal names of individuals are Anglicized, written without diacritics, to conform to their common usage when writing in English.

### Basic Guide to Pronunciation

#### *Vowels*

Long vowels are pronounced differently and are given more emphasis than short ones; they are distinguished by placing a line over the vowel.

*a*     like *u* in *up*  
*ā*     like *a* in *father*  
*i*     like *i* in *pit*

*e*     like *e* in *met*  
*ē*     like *a* in *lake*  
*ai*    like *i* in *hike*

$\bar{i}$	like ee in <i>sheep</i>	$o$	like the first o in <i>potato</i>
$u$	like u in <i>put</i>	$\bar{o}$	like the o in <i>oak</i>
$\bar{u}$	like oo in <i>troop</i>	$au$	like ou in <i>shout</i>

*Consonants*

Consonants with corresponding sounds that differ most strikingly from English are

$\acute{s}$ , $\acute{\eta}$	like <i>sh</i> in <i>shut</i>	$r$	is rolled like a Spanish single <i>r</i>
$c$	like <i>ch</i> in <i>chat</i>	$\ddot{r}$	like <i>ri</i> in <i>river</i> (rolled <i>r</i> )

Consonants with dots beneath them like  $\dot{l}$ ,  $\dot{n}$ ,  $\dot{\eta}$ , and  $\dot{t}$  are retroflex. They are pronounced with the tongue curled back so it touches the roof of the mouth. Double consonants like  $kk$ ,  $cc$ , or  $ll$ , are given greater emphasis or held longer than single consonants.

The Goddess Lives in  
Upstate New York

*This page intentionally left blank*



# Introduction

## *A Temple Trip*

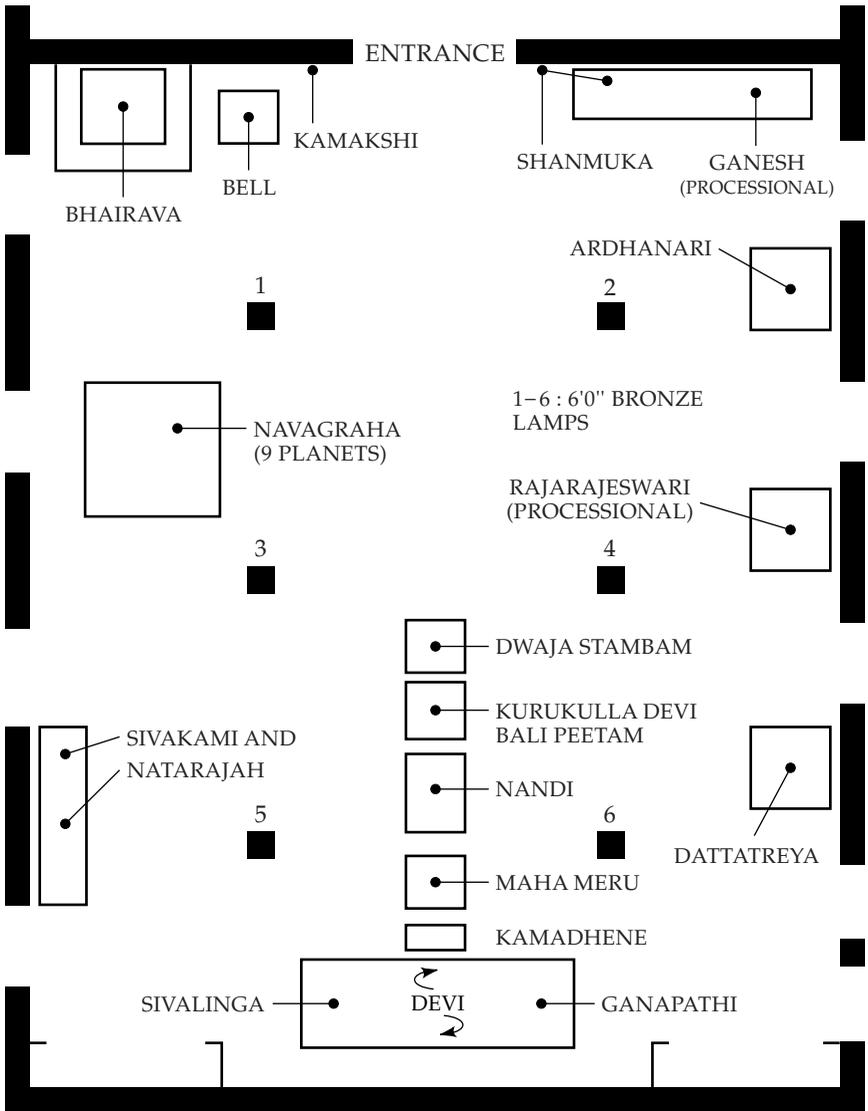
Imagine for a moment that I have visitors whom I decide to take on a day trip to the Śrī Rājarājeśwarī Pīṭham, the “seat” (*pīṭham*) of the goddess Rājarājeśwarī. Since they have never been there before and I do not tell them where we are headed, they are in for a bit of a surprise. As we near the temple, we look out at the lovely rolling landscape of rural upstate New York and remark, depending on the season, on the deep green of the rain-drenched hills, the electric fall foliage, or the sparkling winter wonderland around us. After winding through long stretches of farmland dotted with barns, silos, and cows, our car takes a turn down a long, narrow driveway that leads toward a small, neatly painted, one-story yellow barn. We leave the car in the parking lot and, as we near the barn, we encounter a four-foot statue of Ganeś, the rotund, elephant-headed Lord of Beginnings and Remover of Obstacles. Ganeś, appropriately, is our first clue that something Hindu is afoot.<sup>1</sup> Carved in typical south Indian style from black granite, he tastefully wears splendid silks and gold-colored ornaments. Peering out from his clear Plexiglas shrine, he may or may not sport sunglasses to keep the sun’s glare from his eyes; this also depends on the season.

Entering through the side door, we add our shoes to the rows of footwear and, because morning worship (*pūjā*) is in full swing, we hear the faint sound of chanting coming from beyond the next door. As we pass through this door and into smoky air thick with incense, we are greeted by a chorus of Sanskrit chants, the clanging of bells, boisterous Karnatic temple music (electronically piped in) and, most dramatically, an array of gleaming gods and goddesses. Upstate New

York farmland, in essence, could not seem farther away. Focusing more closely on the deities in our midst, our eyes are drawn first to the goddess Rājarājeśwarī, “Empress of Emperors,” to whom the temple is dedicated.<sup>2</sup> She sits in regal splendor on the opposite side of the temple, flanked by (another) Ganēś on her right and a Śiva *lingam* on her left.<sup>3</sup> Resplendently decorated with gold jewelry, draped in silk, and heavily garlanded with flowers, these three deities are exquisitely carved from black granite. Directly to our right are the nine planets or Navagr̥ha, crafted in mostly human form and each accompanied by a female consort and an animal *vāhana* or vehicle. Plated in gold and nattily dressed in color-coordinated silk sarongs and turbans, the Navagr̥ha and their entourage stand at eye level on a square platform.<sup>4</sup> Although temple activity revolves around Rājarājeśwarī and her powers, the remaining deities lining the side and back walls are embodiments of the Śaiva-Śākta tradition. Gold-plated and dressed in silk, they belong to the family of gods and goddesses associated with the divine pair, Śiva and Pārvatī.<sup>5</sup>

Since my visitors are familiar with south Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil traditions, they recognize most of the surrounding deities, the ongoing ritual, and note the temple’s distinct south Indian flavor. Yet two things immediately stand out. One is the temple’s floor plan. Its deviation from south Indian norms is nearly as dramatic as discovering a glittering gang of Hindu deities in the middle of North American farm country. Rather than inhabiting enclosed individual shrines that allow for exclusive priestly access, the gods and goddesses brazenly stand (or sit) out in the open. The temple design encourages any and all visitors to approach and pay their respects. Yet official priestly ritual is also in evidence, witnessed by the ongoing *pūjā* and the remains of earlier offerings—flowers of various shapes, hues, and freshness, tucked into every conceivable granite and gold crevice.<sup>6</sup> The spirit behind the temple’s open design is further expressed through the *pūjā* itself. One temple member—a woman—honors the deities with physical offerings of flowers, incense, water, fruit, and flame while a group of others, sitting among the congregation, chant along in Sanskrit and perform ritually prescribed hand gestures (*mudrās*) at appropriate moments. Rather than enacting the typical divide between a male priest who mediates divine blessings and devotees who receive them, the *pūjā* confuses traditional lines of temple participation.

Like this trip with my imaginary visitors—with surprises at every turn—this book’s extended trip to the Śrī Rājarājeśwarī Pīṭham of Rush, New York, is a study in unexpected twists and turns that define and enliven the temple and its community. The reality suggested by the book’s title, that the Goddess lives in upstate New York, sets the stage for our exploration in three ways. On one level, the elaborate rituals performed at the Rush temple create an atmosphere where deities and their powers—particularly the powers of Rājarājeśwarī—are made to thrive. This commitment to enlivening divinity through ritual finds itself juxtaposed against and influenced by today’s secular scientific



Temple floor plan sketched by Aiya, November 2003.

worldview. Second, the guru-mandated openness of temple practices—in which ancient ritual performances and esoteric teachings break through their traditional confines—brings the Goddess to life in ways unavailable, if not unthinkable, for devotees at more conventional temples. Finally, the rather everyday sense in which the Goddess lives, or resides, in upstate New York has important implications for deities and human participants alike. The dynamics of south Indian temple life as it works to settle and flourish in rural

North America—imaged by elaborately adorned deities amid U.S. cows and silos—present opportunities and challenges for all involved. These three areas of exploration, reflecting the work of the deities, the guru, and the devotees, respectively, ensure that the Goddess lives and thrives in upstate New York. They also, for our purposes, help set the book’s itinerary.

The book’s first part, exploring the dynamic between miraculous and scientific worldviews, highlights the workings of and faith in Rājarājeśwarī, known as Devī or Mother to her devotee children.<sup>7</sup> Key to locating Devī’s place in Rush temple practices and in the lives of her devotees is the Śrīvidyā tradition to which the goddess and temple belong. Śrīvidyā, or “auspicious wisdom,” is a tantric path that honors the great goddess Tripurasundarī and places considerable emphasis on harnessing her powers through ritual. Tripurasundarī herself transcends description, and manifests for her devotees as three different goddesses with distinct attributes—the eldest of the three, according to temple tradition, is Rājarājeśwarī.<sup>8</sup> The Śrīvidyā tradition, flourishing primarily in northern Kashmir and parts of south India since at least the sixth century, is today practiced most widely—and usually secretly—in south India.<sup>9</sup> The community traditionally responsible for formalizing its practices, guarding its secrets as their own, is the Smārta community, an elite subcaste within the brahmanical fold. Although historical and textual evidence suggest that Śrīvidyā is meant for men and women of all castes, its elitism and association with the brahman community in India and Sri Lanka is rarely challenged.<sup>10</sup>

The Rush temple guru, Sri Chaitanyananda, known affectionately as Aiya,<sup>11</sup> defies convention when he, a nonbrahman, enthusiastically brings Śrīvidyā’s ritual secrets into the open. Aiya validates his work through his entrenchment within an esteemed Śrīvidyā guru lineage and is quick to point out that the true maverick in his life to whom he owes his position as Rush temple founder is his own guru, Sri Amritananda, known as Guruji. A Smārta brahman from the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Guruji was a professor of nuclear physics at a Zambian university when he and Aiya first met in 1978. Aiya, at the time, was working in Zambia as an architect. Soon after they met, Guruji initiated Aiya and his wife, Amma (the Tamil term for Mother), into Śrīvidyā. Not only did Guruji break with lineage tradition by offering initiation to a nonbrahman couple, he furthermore instructed Aiya to pass on what he learned to anyone interested, regardless of their background. Six months after initiation, Aiya, Amma, and their seven-year-old daughter, Charu, emigrated to the United States, exporting Aiya’s capacity as religious teacher and ritual specialist to new terrain. In the early years, students regularly met in Aiya and Amma’s attic that they had converted into a shrine room. Later, their one-and-a-half-car garage became headquarters for worship and learning. Since 1998, the yellow barn surrounded by rolling hills and silos has hosted the goddess and her entourage.

Part II discusses the temple’s commitment to nonconvention amid its

attention to ritual precision and features Aiya as instigator of both. Aiya himself embodies this space-in-between, reveling in yet rebelling against traditional expectations for religious leadership. As teacher, counselor, philosopher, and storyteller, he fulfills the many-faceted guru role for students of all backgrounds. As ritual specialist, he likewise performs his job as temple *pūjāri* or priest with precision and gusto. Aiya veers from traditional norms when he enthusiastically shares his priestly role with others and, as a guru with blessings from his own guru, when he freely transmits Śrīvidyā's highly secretive, typically exclusive, tradition to almost anyone willing to learn. Because of Aiya's unconventional bearing, visitors to the temple in search of the esteemed priest-guru have been known to walk right past him—past the Sri Lankan Tamil man wearing trousers and a T-shirt, still youthful as he nears his sixtieth birthday, laughing loudly at a joke or comically dodging clear of someone he has just teased. Unable to find the guru they thought they came to see—somber, perhaps orange-robed and bearded, holding forth with religious platitudes—they are eventually directed back to the clean-shaven, rambunctious man in street clothes. Although Aiya's conversations regularly take philosophical turns, and although he dresses more like a typical temple priest while performing ritual, he is not always readily identifiable, based on preconceptions of holy countenance, as an influential religious leader.<sup>12</sup>

Part III's discussion of interchanges between foreign and domestic cultures, religions, and landscapes highlights anecdotes and reflections of community members and temple participants. Throughout the book, I often identify temple participants, by no means a homogenous group, according to their level of commitment. At the perimeter are visitors who come on rare occasions, typically propelled by curiosity or long-distance pilgrimage. These sporadic participants tend to be of Indian or Sri Lankan ancestry, mostly first-generation North Americans and their children. Closer to the core are semifrequent visitors including, for the most part, Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants and their children who live in Toronto. Although Toronto hosts several major Sri Lankan-run temples and dozens of smaller ones, Torontonians regularly make the three-hour trip to Rush. They do so for a host of reasons: to relax in the temple's idyllic rural setting, to take part in its nonconventional atmosphere and, most commonly, to reap the benefits of its elaborate rituals, gleaning the blessings of its powerful goddess, Śrī Rājarājeśvarī.

Temple members identified as inner-core devotees represent the smallest, most dedicated, segment of the temple population. Although the number of people to whom Aiya has given a mantra, and thus initiated into the Śrīvidyā tradition, is nearly impossible to estimate, the ever-shifting group of temple regulars roughly numbers about forty at any given time.<sup>13</sup> From June 1998 through October 2002, I formally and informally interviewed about thirty inner-core devotees, composed mostly of first- and second-generation South Asians from India and Sri Lanka, along with a handful of U.S.-born non-South

Asians. About three-quarters of this group were willing if not enthusiastic about lending their thoughts and experiences to my tape recorder and me on at least one occasion.<sup>14</sup> A number of other devotees who repeatedly and gladly shared with me their reflections over the years nevertheless managed to avoid—either by happenstance or design—being formally interviewed.<sup>15</sup> Their anecdotes and opinions, although not included verbatim, also help form this book.

The following pages incorporate exchanges with dozens of people peripherally involved at the temple—pilgrims, semiregular visitors, and Rush community members—yet the bulk of this book weaves scenes, stories, and ideas offered to me by Aiya and some of the temple's most dedicated participants. The resulting tone is thus one of an insider, largely supportive of temple practices and policies. It is by no means utopian, however. Religious dedication and community building has its challenges, and life at the Rush temple is no exception. As temple participants concluded during a number of conversations, religious movements that defy the status quo will, by their nature, be works in progress, never finished and finalized as long as the challenge is extended.<sup>16</sup> While providing an exciting and fulfilling ride, such movements experience their share of bumps along the way.

This excitement and tension, typically associated with challenges to convention, also can be linked to the temple's newness. The four and a half years that I officially spent chronicling events and viewpoints mark the beginning stages of Rush temple life (I unfortunately missed the grand installation ceremony by two weeks). This book thus represents a particular moment in time. It reflects on the birth of a temple and its early development, with all their attendant joys and pains. Expanding physically over the years, the building that encloses the temple is now nearly twice its original size and the number of deities and their accoutrements has nearly doubled as well. Also shifting gradually but constantly over time has been the composition of the temple's inner-core members. By the time of this book's publication, most of the members quoted within will remain, a few will have receded, and a few new and peripheral members will have become prominent. Ideas and opinions cited in the book will have, in some cases changed as well. In spite of this inevitable flux, I have found that a certain spirit—one that struck me (and my imaginary visitors) when I visited the temple for the first time—endures within Rush temple life. My hope is that this resilient spirit, constituted by and connecting the temple tripartite—the goddess Rājarājeśwarī, Aiya, and temple devotees—permeates the following chapters as well.

Although the book is largely organized according to three defining and enlivening temple junctures that feature Devī, Aiya, and temple devotees, respectively, I must add that one cannot so easily box in or distinguish these three characters and categories. Naturally, the goddess's presence and power permeate conversations and reflections throughout the book, Aiya's exuberant

voice booms almost constantly, and devotees—without whom the temple and its guru would have little purpose—are never completely absent. According to Śrīvidyā theology, this kind of overlap makes perfect sense: divinities, gurus, and devotees should be difficult to separate from one another since, in the end, no such apparent division actually exists. Likewise, as we will see, the juxtaposed worldviews, practices, and religious cultures featured in the book’s three parts often appear linked while seemingly incongruent, interdependent while purportedly oppositional.<sup>17</sup>

I emphasize junctures and interrelationships—between miraculous and scientific worldviews, nonconventional and conventional practices, and domestic and foreign sensibilities—largely because they provide a good entrée into exploring the temple’s unique spirit. Moreover, classical studies of religion and culture often describe junctures—boundaries of standard space, society, and time—as sacred in their own right. For instance, ruptures in mundane space, represented most powerfully by mountains, are often given sacred qualities; people and states existing outside conventional social structures can glean religious or quasi-religious status; and intervals between seasons, daily cycles, and life stages frequently emerge as moments that allow for if not necessitate ritual performances.<sup>18</sup>

Sacred intersections are often also, by their nature, fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty. Moments-in-between such as springtime or the minutes between dawn and daylight “even at their worst, contain the hope of the best and, even at their best, the threat of the worst” (Bourdieu 1977: 131). “Holy men” whose transgressive lifestyles relegate them to the borders of polite society can emerge, in some cases, as the most exalted yet despised among humans (Ewing 1997: 201). Intercultural borders, opening opportunities and necessities for making and remaking identity, likewise can be a “sign of ambivalence, a permanently fraught hope. They discover over and over that the good and bad news presuppose each other” (Clifford 1997: 7, 10).<sup>19</sup> The junctures that structure this book likewise demonstrate, depending on one’s angle, the mixed news of Rush temple intersections. “Sacred” intersections represent moments in which participants discover miracles and meaning, yet they are not without their risks and frustrations, even for dedicated insiders for whom the costs are well worth the benefits.

Part I’s description of Devī’s power harnessed through temple rituals and their attendant miracles unearths a number of seemingly precarious juxtapositions. It begins by describing how my exposure to the temple caused a gradual, and in some cases uneasy, shift in my understanding of ritual power—a process that unfolds both within and outside my cognitive control. Chapter 2 explores the temple’s blurring of scientific and supernatural worldviews through practices in which devotees invoke and physically manifest divinity through lavish ritual offerings, concise bodily practices, and correct mindfulness. For outsiders, such external rituals can give rise to suspicions that Hindu

temple practices are “idolatrous,” a view rooted, in part, in British colonial attitudes. Although many North American Hindu temples compensate for these suspicions by downplaying the role of ritual power, the Rush temple enthusiastically embraces and celebrates it. Chapter 3 relates stories of miracles that reflect the precarious bridging of earthly and divine realms and offers another view into the ways Rush temple members negotiate, contradict, and ignore conventional perceptions.

Part II looks at how the temple, at Aiya’s instigation, adheres to and defies religious orthodoxy and established practice. Chapter 4 sketches Aiya’s insistent attempts to gain religious knowledge, blocked from him because of his caste. Once on the Śrīvidyā path, he becomes a different kind of nuisance to the status quo—his enthusiastic propagation of an otherwise exclusive tradition is all the more unnerving because of his meticulous attention to ritual detail. Inhabiting the intersection between blasphemy and orthodoxy, he is difficult to ignore. Chapter 5 describes how temple members experience this dynamic, particularly women and young people who, typically marginalized in traditional religious settings, glean great satisfaction from their participation as Śrīvidyā initiates and temple priests. Chapter 6 describes the levity and uncertainty that emerge from the intersection between convention and non-convention. When Aiya expands the boundaries of religious authority, allowing access to divinity in spontaneous and surprising ways, he also leaves a door open for potential dispute.

Part III depicts the temple as a hopeful yet fraught meeting ground between geographies and cultures, as the crossroads between South Asia and mainstream rural America and their respective religious traditions. Chapter 7 depicts the transplanting of South Asian divinity onto North American soil through the travels and miraculous appearances of Hindu deities. Intrinsic to this process is the transposition of South Asian sacred geography—typically inseparable from South Asian religions—to rural upstate New York. Chapter 8 highlights some of the ups and downs of converging ethnicities and religions as experienced by temple participants and Rush community members. Although racism and religious intolerance are typical of the South Asian immigrant experience, cultural interchange sparks unexpected possibilities and outlooks as well. Chapter 9 brings us “home,” to the image of the temple most commonly described by inner-core members, all of whom have been unmoored, at some level, from their cultural or religious heritage. Although seemingly mundane, the temple as home is a concept many devotees hold most sacred. Amid its many balancing acts and incongruities, it is where participants ultimately find comfort, security, and rest.

Although I never heard Aiya refer to the temple or its traditions as sites of potent yet precarious intersections, I have been alert to occasional allusions and inferences. One such instance occurred during the summer of 2001 when Aiya, a handful of devotees, and I were eating lunch around the *homam* fire

pit outside the temple. (In spring 2003 the *homam* pit became part of the enclosed temple structure.) The approximately four-by-four-foot square pit, lined with red bricks and surrounded by wooden planks, is where, during regular *homam* rituals, participants sit, chant, and lower offerings into the fire. During warm weather, the same area becomes a useful, flat place to congregate for lunch. During a lull in a rollicking series of conversations, Aiya leaned slightly in my direction and earnestly asked me the question: “Amma [although Tamil for ‘Mother,’ this is a common form of address for women], do you know when the best time is to draw more deeply into meditation?” Wondering what prompted his question, I shook my head while he continued, “It is the split second after you exhale and before you inhale—just after inhaling and before exhaling. If you focus on those points, you will be able to go more deeply into meditation.” Still not sure why he had interjected this tidbit at me, I made an appreciative comment as the discussion veered into another direction.

Aiya’s description of a fleeting moment in between—of a state of sacred potential when we have in fact stopped breathing—is more than simply handy advice for meditation. It has become part of my repertoire for thinking about ruptures and intersections and their attendant opportunities and risks. Aiya’s example parallels well the idea that, particularly for the temple insider, the positive news of the interstices far outweighs the negative: the fact that someone has stopped breathing between breaths is, although undeniable, not really worth considering. For the most dedicated devotees at the Rush temple, the potential uneasiness of temple junctures is minimized in light of their potential benefits. In some instances risks are not only minimized, they are also negated—transformed into a means for celebration.<sup>20</sup>

*This page intentionally left blank*

PART I

# Encounters with Divinity

*Ritual Power and Miracles*