

# RELIGION & GENDER

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## **Review of Nanette R. Spina, *Women's Authority And Leadership In A Hindu Goddess Tradition*, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017, xiv + 327 pp., 22 tables, 1 figure, £80.00 hardcover, ISBN 978-1-137-58908-8**

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Nanette R. Spina is Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of Georgia, USA. This book builds upon her ethnographic fieldwork among Hindu Tamil immigrants in Toronto, Canada, and investigates how female devotees express and negotiate ritual authority in the transnational tradition of goddess Adhiparisakthi.

Focussing on the intersection between religion and migration, the study's primary aim is to analyse how the Adhiparisakthi tradition is shaped and reconstructed in a diasporic setting. Through an analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, Spina traces how the global and the local converge in worshippers' experiences, giving expression to a truly transnational movement: while maintaining ties with the tradition's headquarters in Melmaruvathur, Tamil Nadu, India, and with Sri Lanka, country of origin of most of the Tamil migrants, it also adapts to the demands of its Canadian setting. The confluence of such specific conditions brings the Toronto Adhiparisakthi movement 'to reconfigure paradigms of gendered religious leadership and democratize ritual participation' (p. 2). This translates into the replacement of traditional gender- and caste-based worship restrictions with, on the one side, the promotion of women's ritual authority and leadership and, on the other side, an ethics of 'inclusivity' that manifests as a collective style of ritual service in substitution of traditional priest-mediation.

One of the main contributions of the book is the detailed record of the structural and epistemological transformations that a contemporary Hindu tradition undergoes when reproduced in a diasporic setting. The author achieves this by providing descriptions of rituals and behaviours as they unfold in the Toronto temple (*mandram*) (Chapters 5–7), often juxtaposing them to corresponding performances in the mother temple (Chapter 7) or to expectations characteristic of the larger pan-Indian setting (Chapters 8 and 9). An exhaustive number of

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tables and their evaluations (Chapters 2–4) complement the detailed descriptive parts of the book.

The book is organised in two parts, prefaced by an introductory chapter. The introduction gives an overview of the Adhiparisakthi tradition and its guru, Adigalar, addressed by his devotees, along with the goddess, as Amma (Mother). After some notes on methodology, the chapter concludes with a succinct overview of the book.

Part one, 'The Community and Temple', consists of four chapters that provide a sound introduction to diasporic contexts and a demographic overview of the temple visitors. Chapter 2 sets the Tamil diaspora within the wider diasporic framework in Canada and provides a chronological overview of the development of Canadian immigration policies, from early twentieth century precepts to present day attitudes of multicultural openness. In Chapter 3 the author first presents in detail the historical and political reasons underlying the ethnic conflict and cultural identity struggle that ultimately led to the Tamil diaspora; successively, she discusses the temple's dual function as religious centre and place for emotional assistance. Whereas the wider social setting does offer means of support, these means often forego traditional approaches to healing that build upon a community's collective memory; the focus on common ethnicity, language and creed prevailing among the devotees instead nurtures a sense of belonging that makes the temple one of the first sources sought for support. The welfare dimension of the temple, Spina argues, relies in great part on women's leadership, which reflects their compassion and desire to help. The fourth chapter focuses on the diaspora's demographic profile, providing information about the worshippers' social and spiritual status. With Chapter 5, the book begins to focus on the elaborate rituals performed at the temple by worshippers as part of their *sādhana* (spiritual practice). In describing daily rituals, Spina shows how devotees not only cultivate a personal relationship with the divine, but also strengthen their connection with the community. One distinctive feature of the *mandram* is the shared ritual experience, as devotees perform their offerings collectively and directly without the mediation of priests.

After this general overview, in part two, 'Women's Leadership', the book concentrates on the role women play in the temple activities and their impact. In Chapter 6, Spina discusses how women's roles are reinterpreted and religious festivals reframed in light of conditions specific to the diaspora, such that '...a significant paradigmatic shift in values with regard to what it means to be female in this Hindu religious context' occurs (p. 168). Whereas in orthodox Hindu traditions women are excluded from ritual authority, here they are encouraged to assume leadership as ritual specialists; similarly, whereas in mainstream traditions women undergo purity restrictions, especially with regards to menstruation, in the Adhiparasakthi *mandram* they are allowed to worship any time. Spina suggests that here religion performs a sacralising and an emancipatory function: women's roles are established as sacred, and women can transcend orthodox behavioural restrictions. Chapter 7 narrows down on the innovations (identified as necessary, spontaneous or deliberate) that differentiate the temple in Toronto from the mother temple. The author cautions that '[i]nnovation in this context does not represent a break with the Melmaruvathur tradition, but it does address the current needs of the community in the diaspora' (p. 200). Chapter 8 illustrates how women at the *mandram*, while familiar with Western feminism, base their understanding of empowerment on a combination of their

immediate circumstances and their perspectives as Tamil Hindu women. Within this framework, authority, wisdom, compassion and the principle of Mother/matrix, all associated with Adhiparisakthi, gain chief relevance. Chapter 9 further delves into how women negotiate their identities as both, Sri Lankan Tamils and Canadian Hindus, with particular reference to Vasanthi, the woman who heads the Canadian Adhiparisakthi temple administratively and spiritually. Chapter 10 delineates how the *mandram* community becomes a substitute family for devotees whose extended familial networks have been disrupted. Importantly, this substitute family allows for crucial life-cycle rituals, traditionally carried out by family members, to be maintained; Spina skilfully shows how once again the *mandram*, in its ritual adaptations, responds to demands for both, tradition and change.

Throughout the book Spina carefully traces the ways in which women navigate novel and traditional territories, as they continuously redefine their identities as Sri Lankan Tamils and Canadian Hindus. The author shows how, while operating this fine act of balancing, women in diaspora exercise their authority to adapt ritual traditions, at times to challenge, at times to perpetuate established practices. Spina chisels out with great insight the tension and constant negotiation between homeland and country of residence, which lie at the heart of women's authority and leadership, without ever falling prey to framing them within inadequate mainstream western epistemologies or gender theories of emancipation.

However, at times a more elaborate analysis could have benefitted the book. One example is the author's treatment of menses, limited to a rather descriptive discussion that foregoes many of the symbolic meanings surrounding them. As is by now known, menstrual taboos in South Asian Hindu contexts are not only based upon menses' perceived impurity, but equally upon their ascribed auspiciousness. One may wonder, then, if women's increased freedom of movement, derived from the rejection of the notion of menstrual impurity, comes at a cost, as an interpretation of menses that foregoes their symbolic significance deprives them also of their inherent auspiciousness. Similarly, it remains unexplored what may underlie the significant figure (22%) of respondents who do not identify as either male or female (p. 103). Considering the pervasiveness of gender prescriptions among the community and, at the same time, the custom of addressing the (male) guru as Amma, Mother, an analysis of such a response could perhaps have led to important considerations about gender and identity. Finally, given the specificity of the tradition observed, the title could have hinted at its diasporic nature.

This book is a welcome addition to the fields of gender, migration and diaspora, Hinduism, goddess traditions and religious studies amongst others, and will be of great benefit to students and scholars alike.