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Hinduism in Finland

Måns Broo

Introduction

This article gives an overview of Hinduism in Finland, focusing first on its history and then on the organisations representing it in Finland today and on their relationships to Finnish society in general, but also on their ritual practices and how these have been affected by the Finnish context. Finally, I will write something about the impact various Hindu practices have had on Finnish popular culture. [The number of Hindus in Finland is very small \(around 6000\)](#); members of specific Hindu movements and organisations are much fewer still. ISKCON (The International Society for Krishna Consciousness), a well-known worldwide Hindu movement flourishing in India today, had no more than 82 officially registered members in 2014.

Not only the Hindu community in Finland is small, so is the country itself. While eight-largest in Europe area wise, the population of Finland is no more than 5,5 million, most of which lives in the southern part of the country. Independent since 1917, Finland is a parliamentary democracy bordering Sweden in the West, Russia in the East and Norway in the North. After decades of Finns emigrating to particularly Sweden, Finland started receiving more immigrants in the 1990s. As of 2014, there were 322,700 people with a foreign background living in Finland (5.9% of the population), most of whom are from Russia, Estonia, Somalia, Iraq and the former Yugoslavia.

From Theosophists to Yogis

Until the early 20th century, Finnish perceptions of Hinduism were predominantly negative (Tarvainen 2017). For many, Hinduism represented a particularly nasty form of heathendom, full of superstitions, scary idols and "strange customs", as reported in school textbooks as late as in the 1950s (Koskela 2011). Individual Hindus could be wicked heathens or perhaps noble, fascinating foreigners. In either case, Hinduism remained something intrinsically foreign, something a Finn could learn nothing from, let alone ever become. Perhaps the first Finnish woman to marry a Hindu, Emilia Roy (b. Karikko, 1869–1965) had to go to court to prove she really had married a "total heathen" (Hyttiäinen 2018). In part, the Theosophical Society changed this situation.

Founded in New York in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), Henry S. Olcott (1832–1907) and W.Q. Judge (1851–1891), the Theosophical Society (from *θεοσοφία*, divine wisdom) strove to recover the secret teachings on which [they claimed](#) all the religions of the world [were](#) based. Through these teachings, the Society wished to form "a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color". The Theosophical Society soon became an international organisation, and even though it has split several times since Blavatsky and stagnated since the Second World War, it has wielded an enormous influence on the spread of [New Age and other spiritualities](#) in the West.

Until her death, Blavatsky was the ideological leader of the movement. While originally focused on Spiritism and Western esotericism, her interests gradually turned east, towards Buddhism and Hinduism. Blavatsky had no knowledge of Sanskrit or any other Asian languages, but she was an avid reader of 19th century translations of the texts of these religions, and

incorporated much of what she read in her writings – though often referring to the mystical Great White Brotherhood of Tibet, with which Blavatsky claimed to communicate telepathically.

Even though Olcott did convert to Buddhism in Ceylon in 1879, Theosophist rarely recommended conversion: after all, the theosophical doctrine represented the basis of all world religions, while the religions of the times were seen as degenerate descendants of this original truth. Nevertheless, as Theosophists saw Hinduism and Buddhism as being closer to these original truths, they became (in selected parts) the focus of enthusiastic study within Theosophy. Rudolf Steiner (who went on to found an offshoot, the Antroposophical Society) lectured on the *Bhagavadgītā* in Helsinki in 1913. Inspired by Theosophical ideas, Nino Runeberg (1874–1934), grandson of the Finnish national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–1877), had published a translation of this text already in 1910 (Ahlbäck 1995).

Aside from such a selective appropriation of Hindu thought, it was only in the 1970s that Finns started appropriating Hindu rituals and devotions, this time through the new religious movements. The first such movement to get a footing in Finland was Ananda Marga, founded by Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (Anandamurti, 1921–1990). Unlike the earlier, Theosophically inspired movements, Ananda Marga offered its adherents a communal lifestyle and an opportunity to engage fulltime in a religious life. Ananda Marga attracted a fair number of young intellectuals during the 1970s, such as the politician Heidi Hautala (1955–) and the musician Pelle Miljoona (1955–), though most of them eventually left the movement. Other movements, such as Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the Divine Light Mission, soon followed Ananda Marga (Junnunaho 1996).

While these movements are founded by Hindus and based on Hindu teachings, their members would hesitate to call themselves Hindus. In the beginning of the 1980s, ISKCON established a permanent presence in Finland. As the other movements above, ISKCON has never had many [registered](#) members in Finland, but in contrast to the other movements, it has succeeded in attracting the support of the growing community of Indian Hindus living in Finland. Even though ISKCON in Finland generally avoids the word “Hindu”, its members are respected for their perceived religiosity, strict ethics and ritual expertise. As ISKCON (at least in the capital area) offers religious education to Hindu children in state schools and for a long time operated the only Hindu temple open to the public in Finland, it enjoys the support of many Hindus who in India might have chosen to back some other organisation (Broo & Kontala 2007, Broo 2010).

Until the early 1990s, Indians permanently living in Finland were very few. The growth of Nokia and the IT sector in general changed this, simultaneously creating a visible bifurcation between “Nokia Indians” and “Restaurant Indians”, where the latter group may just as well be Bangladeshis or Nepalis and inhabit a very different socio-economic world than that of the upper-middle class IT Indians. The growing immigration has led to the founding of Hindu organisations based on ethnicity. Largest is Hindus (sic) Community of Finland, a group of around 250 Tamils from Sri Lanka and India who have their own temple in Malmi, Helsinki – incidentally very close to the ISKCON temple – with gatherings every Friday and a Pandit who caters to the ritual needs of particularly South Indians in Finland. The temple has as of yet no installed image, but a picture of Murugan is worshipped there.

A Plurality of Theologies and Worldviews

It is interesting that two so different Hindu movements as ISKCON and Hindus Community of Finland should both have their temples within a stone’s throw of each other in Helsinki. ISKCON is a modern form of Gauḍīya- or Bengali Vaiṣṇavism, a mediaeval reformist movement

emphasising devotion to the divine pair of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Hindus Community of Finland is a Śaiva movement, explicitly said to follow Lord Śiva (Suomen Hindut 2018). – Unlike in for example Sweden, the predominantly Gujarati Svāmīnārāyaṇa saṃpradāya does not have a visible presence in Finland.

The third great strand of Hinduism, Śaktism, is in Finland most visibly represented by the movement centered on the South Indian female saint and preceptor (*guru*) Mata Amritanandamayi (1953–). While many Hindu Swamis and gurus have visited Finland regularly since the 1980s, nobody has had the same success as Mata Amritanandamayi, popularly known as Amma (Mother). She has visited Finland almost yearly since 1998. Her gatherings, famous for her hugging everyone coming to see her (*darśana*) are not presented as Hindu programs; neither so her teachings, said to encompass universal spiritual principles of love and community. Nevertheless, the rituals of these gatherings (such as the *pūjā* and the singing of *bhajan*- songs) are typical of devotional Hinduism. In her teachings, Amma touches on many commonly Hindu themes, and she herself is by many followers seen as an *avatāra* or descent of the supreme goddess.

In its classical, heavily ritualised form, Tantric Hinduism is hardly represented in Finland – who has the time for hours of rituals daily, particularly if you have moved to a new country to make a better life for yourself and your family? – but the modern, primarily sex-focused Tantrism is most visibly represented in Finland by the controversial yoga school Natha. Natha (internationally usually known as MISA) was founded in Romania by Gregorian Bivolaru (1952–) and operates a school and an ashram in Helsinki. Natha does not see itself as a Hindu movement (or as a religious movement at that), but the Kashmir Śaivism that is one of the pillars of the theology of the movement is of course a well-established Hindu tradition.

There is no central organisation for Hindus in Finland, such as the Buddhist Union of Finland. Co-operation between the different organisations is rare. One recent example is when ISKCON leaders felt themselves to have been unfairly treated by the city of Helsinki in a real-estate matter and (successfully) sought the support of Hindus and Hindu groups in Finland. Nevertheless, individual members of the various groups do move between groups in the search of experiences, teachings and perhaps also good food!

Few Indian Hindus in Finland are exclusive members of any particular *saṃpradāya* but may have many different gods on their home altar and attend the festivities of both ISKCON and Amma and arrange spiritual gatherings (*satsaṅg*) in their home following yet another tradition. Such an inclusive view of theology is common among urban, middle-class Hindus of today, who like to present Hinduism as a relaxed, free religion in contrast to an Islam perceived as law-bound and rigid (Saavala 2010).

Hindu Rituals in Finland

The case of Finland also reflects the ritual plurality of Hinduism. Many Hindus have a home altar where generally the women of the family do *pūjā* with incense, lights, flowers and fruits to the gods of the family and community. Many refrain from meat and intoxicants for religious reasons and particularly women engage in regular fasts for the welfare of the family. Some meditate regularly, sing religious songs and hymns and recite texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā* or the *Cāṇḍī (Devīmāhātmya)*. Nevertheless, many people who for cultural reasons see themselves as Hindus are not religious in any conventional sense; social reasons can also be a motivator for any attendance at religious gatherings.

Many Hindus place great importance on rites of passage (*saṃskāra*). The ones most often celebrated in Finland are name-giving (*nāmakaraṇa*), usually celebrated a month after a child's birth, eating the first grains (*annaprāśana*), first cutting of hair (*cūḍakarana*), receiving the sacred thread (*upanayana*), marriage (*vivāha*) and the last rites (*antyeṣṭhi*). Local circumstances have affected most of these rituals. Some ingredients are hard to procure in Finland (e.g., Betel and Mango leaves) and need to find replacements; some are expensive (e.g., flowers) and are used in much smaller amounts than in South Asia. A lack of space and the long distance to relatives also lead to a much smaller amount of guests at religious gatherings.

In India, most of the rituals mentioned above would be celebrated at home. While neither of the two Hindu temples in Finland are custom-built but operate in buildings originally intended for other purposes, the ISKCON temple, being by far the larger of the two, provides facilities for such rituals for those who do not have enough space at home and prefer to outsource cooking and so on. Some families prefer to celebrate the larger of these ceremonies – that of the sacred thread and marriage – among relatives in India. This is a common trend among Hindus all over the Western world (Narayanan 2006). Nevertheless, domestic rituals such as consecrating a new house (*grhapraveśa*) or Satyanārāyaṇa pūjā remain popular among particularly upper middle class Hindus.

The one ceremony that has undergone the greatest change are the final rites. Cremation is very common in Finland, with over 80% of deceased being cremated in the capital city of Helsinki in 2016 (Seurakuntalainen 2017), but while the dead in South Asia are generally cremated on the same day or on the next, long queues and Finnish bureaucracy seldom allows for this. Open-air cremations, as famously performed for example on the [Manikarnika and Hariścandra ghāṭs](#) in Varanasi, is not allowed, neither is keeping the dead body on *lite de parade* in the home. In a Finnish crematorium, many of the rites performed in India are not possible to do. However, it is allowed to bring the ashes to the Ganges or another holy river in India for the final rites, and some Hindus in Finland chose this alternative.

When it comes to yearly festivals, some of the Vaiṣṇava ones are celebrated in the ISKCON temple, others by informal volunteer organisations in temporarily rented facilities. Often such rituals are shortened. One example of this is Durgā Pūjā, which in Bengal today usually spans five days, but which Bengalis in Finland celebrate during one day only. Holi, the festival of colours and life in spring finds hardly any space in Finland, both because it is hardly spring yet during that time of the year in Finland, and also because it is difficult to find localities where throwing around coloured powder and water would be acceptable. The same is true for other public celebrations such as the immersion of the temporary images of gods after festivals. For a small minority it may feel safer to conduct one's religion to the home rather than to celebrate in public, especially since the visibility of religion in the public sphere is small in Finland in general (Ketola 2008).

Hindu Influences on Finnish Culture

The influence between Finnish culture and Hinduism goes both ways. Hindu influences are easy to spot in Finnish popular culture, where some phenomena with Hindu roots have become household words, often as parts of international trends. Sandhja, Finland's contestant in the European Song Contest in the year 2016, whose mother is of Indian ancestry, has the gāyatrī mantra tattooed on her arm – as do many others around the world. In interviews, she has called herself “spiritual” rather than religious (Penttilä 2016).

Nevertheless, the importance of Hinduism for such trends should not be exaggerated. Within modern yoga, for example, Hindu influences are very limited. Studies show that more than 90% of practitioners engage in yoga for purely mundane reasons, such as relaxing after a stressful day in the office (Ketola & Broo 2013). Much of the physical side of yoga was developed during the early 20th century under the influence of Western body culture and the spirituality than some yoga teachers promote is at least as much influenced by New Thought and other Western trends as by Hinduism (De Michelis 2004).

Still, whether or not yoga can be combined with Christianity is a question that periodically still surfaces within Christian circles. Yogic postures (*āsanas*) often go by the Sanskrit names, some schools begin their classes by reciting Sanskrit verses to the (unspecified) teacher and to Patañjali, and Hindu symbols and statues of Hindu gods are common decorative elements. Some schools recommend travelling to India to study with Indian teachers, closer to the original source of yoga, as it were. The leading yoga magazine of Finland, *Ananda*, regularly publishes columns by a Hindu monk and several of its editors are (converted) Hindus.

As part of a larger trend towards alternative medicine, *āyurveda* has gained some popularity in Finland. While *āyurveda* traditionally has been seen as a secular science in India, it is in Finland often linked to yoga, meditation and some kind of vague “Eastern spirituality”. Westerners who attend *āyurvedic* resorts in India are often offered meditation and yoga beside therapies and nutritional advice.

A peculiarly Hindu devotional practice that has attained some popularity among urban yoga practitioners is *kīrtana*, the congregational singing of the praise of one or more gods, where one person leads the singing and the others respond, generally to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Here also adaptations have been made. In South Asia, *kīrtana* participants generally face in one direction, towards the images of gods in a temple or in a home; in Finland, the leader and the musicians generally face to rest of the participants as if it were a small concert. The repertoire of *kīrtana* songs is also much more eclectic: during on *kīrtana* in Finland hymns to many different Hindu gods may be sung – and sometimes to Jesus and Allah (Broo, Moberg, Utriainen and Ramstedt 2015).

Conclusion

In Finland, the impression of Hinduism has changed drastically within the last century. From an especially dangerous form of heathendom, Hinduism has through the new religious movements and particularly immigration become not only one of several minority religions in Finland, but also the source for exciting cultural and spiritual phenomena that large circles find it acceptable to incorporate into their personal worldviews. Any greater spread of Hinduism within the near future is unlikely, though: the new religious movements have stagnated since years back and people seem unwilling to exclusively commit even to as charismatic leaders as Amma. Instead, the continuing immigration from South Asia is likely to broaden the diversity of Hinduism in Finland. It will be particularly interesting to follow the development of the second generation of immigrant Hindus, born and brought up in Finland, and to see how they, just as the singer Sandhja, will form their own, Finnish Hinduism.

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