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CHAPTER 10

Hindu Gurus in Europe

Måns Broo

INTRODUCTION

Excluding Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, France, and Germany, European countries do not have large Hindu populations. Further, in comparison to the United States, where a large number of Hindu organisations have been active, particularly after the softening of immigration laws in 1965, and where most of the international Hindu religious movements of the 1960s and 1970s were based, Europe has had a smaller share of Hindu gurus. Nevertheless, the history of Hindu gurus in Europe is fascinating, not the least because it vividly illustrates some of the trajectories Hinduism has been following in the West. From a wily form of paganism, Hinduism grew into a rich source for new religious and spiritual doctrines toward the end of the nineteenth century, and at the beginning of the twentieth century it grew into a philosophy that Westerners could adopt, and then, particularly through the religious movements of the 1960s and 1970s, into a complete lifestyle to which Westerners could convert. Finally, Hinduism in Europe has, since the postwar period and through increased

immigration from South Asia, increasingly become a minority religion. The kind of Hindu gurus active in Europe since the end of the nineteenth century have reflected all these trends.

In this entry, a Hindu guru is defined as a person with a Hindu background or who self-identifies as a Hindu, who systematically acts as a religious or spiritual teacher, and who formalises a relationship with students through some type of initiation. Such a broad definition of a “Hindu guru” means that I have included several gurus who did not see themselves as teaching “Hinduism” (such as Rammohun Roy or B. K. S. Iyengar), and the idea of a formal relationship means that I generally have not mentioned assistant teachers or preachers in organisations with a formal head. This is particularly the case in more recent years, when the sheer number of Hindus active in Europe has grown exponentially. By “in Europe” I mean persons active in Europe. This means both Europeans becoming Hindu gurus elsewhere, such as Krishnaprem (Ronald Nixon, 1898–1965), and Indian gurus Europeans travelled to see, such as Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), are both excluded.

Instead of focusing on particular countries, the presentation below is roughly chronological, while also trying to group different gurus thematically.

THE FIRST HINDU GURUS IN EUROPE

The first recorded contact between India and Europe took place in antiquity (Karttunen 1989, 2017), but few concrete details are known to us. That is not to say that fanciful stories do not exist. The Sikh amateur historian Harpal Singh claims that Gurū Nānak visited many places in Europe as a part of his worldwide travels, going all the way to Bergen, Norway, where he discussed theological questions with local traders in Persian in the summer of 1520.¹

Gurū Nānak is not the only Indian saint who is claimed to have been well travelled. The Bengali yogi Bābā Lokanāth (1730?–1890) is said to not only have visited Mecca and Medina, but also many European countries (Loknathbaba 2018). An ascetic called Shivapuri Baba (1826?–1963) reportedly stayed in Britain for several years during the late 1890s, meeting Queen Victoria no less than eighteen times—meetings that regrettably were carefully expunged from the queen’s published diary (Bennett 1965: 28–29). Nevertheless, even when we turn to facts, it is in Britain that we need to begin. The Hindu reformer Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) visited Britain and (briefly) France between 1831 and 1833, and he passed away in Stapleton near Bristol. Although Rammohun Roy is today best remembered as a religious reformer and as the founder of the

¹ Harpal Singh, “Two Singing Preachers from India In Norway ‘Preacheur Parler’--1545, Says Indian Chief, Donnacona,” available at: <https://satguru.weebly.com/satguru-nanak-sahib-in-bergen-norway--donnacona-1545.html> (accessed February 23, 2018).

Brāhmo Samāj, he visited Britain primarily as an ambassador for the Mughal court, and while in Britain he took a lively interest in the political and juridical issues of the day. Often viewed by his English contemporaries as a Unitarian Christian, Rammohun Roy was wary of any such designations and continued publishing works on Hindu theology while in Britain (Carpenter 1866: 248–49), while also adhering to “non-idolatrous” *brāhmaṇa* customs, and famously retaining his sacred thread until his death (ibid.: 155).

Rammohun Roy’s friend and fellow Brāhmo, the industrialist Dwarakanath Tagore, founder of the famous Jorasanko branch of the Tagore family (1794–1846), was a staunch British loyalist who visited Britain several times and also passed away there. While Dwarakanath Tagore did arrange for a grand epitaph for the grave of Rammohun Roy, it is doubtful that he or his contemporaries saw Roy as a guru in Europe. This was not the case with the later Brāhmo leader Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–84), who spent six months in Britain in 1870, lecturing widely and meeting Queen Victoria. Sen showed a great interest in Christianity while in India, so much so that many leading Christians in Britain hoped to see him become a high-ranking convert to their faith. Sen was greeted with much enthusiasm in Britain (Collett 1871: 4–50), but he did not convert to Christianity; rather, the sectarian infighting among various churches in Britain and the aggressively masculine attitudes of Church leaders were a great disappointment to him.

VIVEKANANDA AND THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT

The neo-Vedāntist Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a key figure in the introduction of ideas about *vedānta* and yoga in the West, visited London in 1895 and 1896, and during that time he also travelled to Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Germany, after which he return to London and then to India by way of Italy. Vivekananda returned to Europe in 1899; first landing in Marseilles and then spending two weeks in London on his way to the United States. During his final tour of the West, the Swami spent a few months in France in the fall of 1900, after which he toured Austria, Turkey, Greece, and Egypt before returning to India in December.

Unlike previous Hindu visitors to Europe, Swami Vivekananda managed to attract several important disciples who followed him to India. The most important were perhaps Margaret Noble (eventually Sister Nivedita, 1867–1911), his stenographer J. J. Goodwin (1870–98), as well as Captain James Henry Sevier (1845–1900) and his wife Charlotte Sevier (1847–1930), the founders of the Advaita *āśram* in Mayavati in the Himalayas. He is therefore justifiably called “the first Hindu missionary” (for a discussion on whether or not Hinduism can be called a missionary religion, see Sharma 2011). He also left behind an institution; his work in London

and Paris was carried on by Swamis Saradananda (1865–1927) and Abhedananda (1866–1939) until 1909.

After a long hiatus, Swami Avyaktananda was sent from India in 1934 to continue the work in Britain. After some years, however, the Swami started to teach what he called “spiritual communism” and disassociated himself from the politically unaffiliated Ramakrishna Mission, founding an organisation called the Vedanta Movement instead. In his stead, Swami Ghanananda (who passed away in 1969) was sent from India; he reestablished a Vedanta Centre in London in 1948. It remains to this day and is now overseen by Swami Dayatmananda. The Paris Centre was established in 1936 by Swami Siddheswarananda (1897–1957) and is now headed by Swami Veetamohananda (1941–), who is an enthusiastic champion of interreligious dialogue.

There are other Vedanta Centres in Europe: Swami Yatishwarananda (1889–1966), who travelled and spoke widely all over Europe in the 1930s, ran a centre in Wiesbaden, Germany between 1933 and 1938. This work was revived in 1959 and there are now three *āśrams* in Germany, each with a resident Swami. The Geneva Centre was founded in 1962. The centre in the Netherlands was founded in 1986 and has had a resident Swami (with some interruptions)

since 1990. The two centres in Russia (in St. Petersburg and Moscow) have had a resident Swami since 1991. In contrast to the Ramakrishna Movement in India, where only the president is a guru (in the sense of initiating disciples), all of the heads of the Vedanta Centres are allowed to initiate disciples.

BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

The Theosophical Society, founded by H. P. Blavatsky, W. Q. Judge, and H. S. Olcott in New York in 1875, was not a Hindu movement, but it did inspire an interest in Hindu scriptures and teachers. Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) was a South Indian Brahman who, as a boy, was adopted by Theosophical leaders who were convinced he was “the Coming Maitreya” and was brought over to Britain in 1911. After a few years of schooling, Krishnamurti travelled and lectured in several European countries as the head of the Theosophical Order of the Star of the East until publicly disavowing his position and dissolving the order at a retreat in the Netherlands in 1929. Nevertheless, based in Ojai, California, Krishnamurti continued travelling and teaching students and friends all over the world until his death. Another purported world saviour who visited Europe several times in the 1930s was Meher Baba (1894–1969), the silent saint. Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1953) also briefly visited Europe in 1936.

The Ramakrishna Movement was not the only one to teach Advaita Vedānta in Europe after the First World War. The scholarly Hari Prasad Shastri (1882–1956) also started teaching Advaita Vedānta in London in 1929, and he founded the still active Shanti Sadan in 1933 to carry on the dissemination of Vedānta. The Bengali ascetic Swami Ananda Acharya (1881–1945) came to Britain to teach in 1912 and relocated to a small village in Norway in 1917, where he remained until his death. Mixing Buddhist and Hindu thought, Swami Ananda had been profoundly affected by the terrors of the First World War and wanted to create “Universities of Peace” all over the world, a dream that is shared by his followers to this day (Jacobsen 2013).

The colonial era also saw a slow but steady increase in the presence of Vaiṣṇava gurus in Europe. The first one was Baba Premananda Bharati (1857–1914), a Bengali ascetic connected with the neo-Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava movement founded by Prabhu Jagadbandhu (1871–1921). Best known for his book *Sree Krishna, the Lord of Love*, and for founding a (short-lived) Krishna temple in Los Angeles, Premananda Bharati made a short stop-over in London in 1902 while on the way to the United States. Again, although he did become a guru in later years, his stay in London seems to have been more motivated by pecuniary needs than by missionary zeal. Premananda Bharati worked as a journalist in London, collecting money for a further journey, one made in the footsteps of the great Vivekananda (Carney 1998).

Another of Prabhu Jagadbandhu's followers that also stopped in Europe on the way to the United States was Mahanambrata Brahmachari (1904–99). In the United States, he earned a doctorate at the University of Chicago and became close friends of and inspirations to Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and many others. Sent by the head of his order as a representative to a "World Fellowship of Faiths" congress in Chicago in 1933, Mahanambrata Brahmachari travelled as a deck-passenger to Venice, and from there he travelled by train to Genua, Paris, and Le Havre, subsisting on the grace of God and the goodwill of strangers along the way (Brahmachari 1987: 1–17).

That same year, the first Vaiṣṇava missionaries to remain in Europe for a longer period arrived: Swami Bhakti Hridaya Bon (1901–82) and Swami Bhakti Pradipa Tirtha (1877–1954), followers of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava reformer Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati (1874–1937), the founder of the Gaudiya Matha. The Swamis arrived in London toward the end of April 1933. With the help of influential people such as Lawrence Dundas, the second marquess of Zetland (1876–1961) and the secretary of state for India, they formed the Gaudiya Mission Society in 1934, with Lord Zetland as the president. Based in London, Swami Bon lectured widely in Britain and also Germany, where he was first invited in December 1933. Swami Bon returned to Germany in

October 1934 and remained there until May 1935, during which time he met many of the leading Indologists and religious thinkers of the day and made some converts as well. Swami Bon collected funds for building a Hindu temple in London, but with the passing of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati early in 1937, the eventual splintering of the Gaudiya Matha, and the outbreak of the Second World War, the plans were dropped (Sardella 2013: 146–73). Nevertheless, the small Vāsudeva Gaudiya Math temple in Cricklewood, London, is a tangible heritage of this missionary work; it was founded by a British convert of these Swamis.

After the war, Swami Bon engaged in the field of education, founding a “Vaiṣṇava Theological University” in Vrindavan. He returned to Europe in September 1960 to attend the tenth International Congress for the History of Religions in Marburg. After the conference, the Swami lectured in universities in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. His final European visit was in 1973, when he lectured at the fifteenth World Congress of Philosophy in Varna, Bulgaria.

YOGA GURUS

The first Europeans to be personally interested in yoga were mainly Theosophists. New Thought author William Walker Atkinson, also known as Yogi Ramacharaka (1862–1932), may

have lectured in Hull and perhaps elsewhere in Britain as early as 1902, but the first Indian guru to focus on yoga in the modern sense of a structured, posture-based practice, may have been Selvarajan Yesudian (1916–98). He arrived in Hungary in 1936 and started teaching yoga. He soon teamed up with Elisabeth Haich (1897–1994), and they moved their yoga school to Zürich in 1944. Switzerland was also one of the first destinations of B. K. S. Iyengar (1918–2014), who was brought to Europe by his friend, the violinist Yehudi Menuhin (1916–99), for the first time in 1954. Iyengar was to return regularly, teaching, among many others, the queen mother, Elisabeth of Belgium (1876–1965), in the 1950s and 1960s.

Even before Iyengar, the Bengali Shyam Sundar Goswami (1891–1978), a descendant of Advaita Ācārya, the companion of Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1533), and the founder of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, arrived in Sweden in 1949. He spent the rest of his life there, teaching yoga and also travelling to many other European countries.

In recent years, countless Indian yoga gurus have visited Europe. It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the renunciants mentioned above and below, many of the most famous yoga gurus have been householders and have trained their descendants to take over their teaching tradition. The Astanga tradition of Mysore has been represented in Europe by K. Pattabhi Jois

(1915–2009), his son Manju Pattabhi Jois (1944–), and his grandson Sharath Jois (1971–). Since the passing of B. K. S. Iyengar, his children Geeta (1944–) and Prashant (1949–) are the caretakers of his heritage, together with many European and American teachers. From North India, O. P. Tiwari (1933–) and his son Sudhir Tiwari have been teaching *prāṇāyāma* according to the Kaivalyadhama lineage.

INTERNATIONAL HINDU GURU MOVEMENTS

Most of the Hindu gurus of movements with international success in Europe taught “yoga” in some form, but in contrast to the “yoga gurus” mentioned above, postural practice was generally not primary here, some type of meditation or devotion was focused on instead. Nevertheless, in some cases, the division is rather arbitrary. The first guru from these new movements was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008), the founder of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement. The Maharishi visited London for the first time in 1959 and found immediate success. He returned on a yearly basis and extended his European tours to France, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy. He famously met the Beatles in 1967, but while being their spiritual mentor (for a short time) propelled him to great fame, he was already well-known, which was the reason the Beatles contacted him. In 1968, he settled down in Seelisberg, Switzerland, which was to remain the world headquarters of the TM

movement until it and the Maharishi moved to Vlodrop in the Netherlands in 1990. It was there that he passed away in 2008.

In contrast to the Maharishi, most of the famous international gurus in this era had their strongest support in the United States and only visited Europe sporadically. Osho (1931–90), perhaps the most controversial of these international gurus, only visited Europe in 1986, and unsuccessfully tried to gain entrance into several countries until eventually returning to India. Prem Rawat (previously known as Guru Maharaj Ji, 1955–) was only thirteen when he came to the United States for the first time, but the movement his father had founded and spearheaded in the West, the Divine Light Movement, soon grew international and had *āśrams* in several European countries. Prem Rawat renamed his movement Elan Vital in 1983 and discarded its overtly Hindu forms, which included closing the remaining *āśrams*; however, he still visits Europe regularly.

Swami Muktananda (1908–82), the controversial founder of Siddha Yoga, visited Italy, France, Switzerland, and Britain during his three world tours between 1970 and 1981, and he founded several *āśrams* and meditation centres, many of which remain and are now overseen by his

successor, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda (1955–). Swami Satchidananda (1914–2002) of Woodstock fame visited Britain in 1969.

In September of that same year, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977) arrived in Britain, after having sent some American disciples over a year earlier to prepare the field. Prabhupada founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement, in New York in 1966 and, fuelled by his extraordinary charisma and the counterculture milieu, it quickly grew into a worldwide movement. The European expansion of the movement was materially assisted by early disciples, finding an important ally in the Beatle's George Harrison (1943–2001), whose fame helped find many converts among the young.

Prabhupada travelled to Europe on a yearly basis after 1969. Apart from Britain, he visited France several times, as well as Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. He also went to Moscow once, in 1971, planting seeds for the very strong ISKCON presence in Russia that would emerge decades later. His final Western journey was to the English headquarters—Bhaktivedanta Manor, a mock-Tudor mansion donated by George Harrison in 1973—just a few months before his passing in 1977 (Goswami 1993).

After the passing of Prabhupada, eleven of his leading disciples were appointed as successor gurus. Three of them were based in Europe. Later, many more were added and the total now amounts to eighty-eight (GBC 2018),² at least several of whom visit Europe regularly. While the growth of ISKCON, particularly in Western Europe, has stagnated, the movement still maintains temples and centres in almost all European countries, with a particularly strong presence in Britain, Ukraine, and Russia. Since the 1980s, gurus from competing Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava lineages have also started to regularly visit, recruit, and encourage followers of both European and Indian ethnicity, but with much less institutional backing than the ISKCON gurus.

Swami Omkarananda (1930–2000) visited Switzerland for the first time in 1965, founding the first permanent Swiss Hindu *āśram* the next year in Winterthur, near Zürich. After spending seven years in prison, convicted of being complicit in a bomb plot in 1975, the Swami was banished from Switzerland and settled down in neighbouring Austria, where he passed away.

² The “List of Initiating Gurus in ISKCON” is available at: <https://gbc.iskcon.org/list-of-initiating-gurus-in-iskcon/> (accessed February 10, 2018).

The Advaita tradition was prominently represented in Europe by Sant Keshavadas (1934–97), who travelled to Germany and Britain regularly from 1966 onward, using both his music and his teachings to influence many people. U. G. Krishnamurti (1918–2007; not to be confused with Jiddu Krishnamurti, mentioned above), would regularly teach in Switzerland. The very influential Advaita teacher “Papaji,” H. W. L. Poonja (1910–97), also visited Europe regularly from 1966 until the end of his life.

Hariharananda Giri (1907–2002), a codisciple of Yogananda Paramahansa, spent several years in Europe in the 1970s before moving to the United States.

While most of the teachers from this time period focused on Britain and continental Europe, the Nordic countries did get some visitors as well. Swami Narayananda (1902–88) came to Denmark for the first time in 1971 and returned every year until just prior to his passing, often spending more than half of the year there. The *āśram* and press that he established in the village of Gylling are still active. It is also in Denmark that Swami Janakananda (1939–), a Danish disciple of Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923–2009) of the Bihar School of Yoga fame, began his work teaching yoga and tantra in Scandinavia, though he is currently based in Sweden (Jacobsen 2015: 365–66).

Sri Chinmoy (1931–2007) made his first European tour in 1970, eventually establishing centres in many European countries. He had perhaps the most success in Iceland, where seventy percent of the Icelandic parliament once (unsuccessfully) nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize, and where he once lifted the prime minister as part of a weightlifting demonstration.

FEMALE GURUS

Mataji Nirmala Devi (1923–2011), the founder of Sahaja Yoga, began teaching yoga in London in 1974 after moving there with her husband. After declaring herself a complete incarnation of Adi Shakti, the Maitreya, and the Mahdi in 1979 (Furnish and Rubin 2005: 165), she started travelling and teaching all over Europe. Although she did visit India and the United States from time to time, Europe remained her base and she passed away in Genoa in 2011. Another female guru who claimed to be an *avatāra* of the supreme Śakti is Mother Meera (1960–) who lives in a small German town where she receives visitors, generally remaining silent.

The best known of the female gurus who regularly visit Europe is Mata Amritanandamayi, better known as Amma or the Hugging saint (1953–). The daughter of a Keralan fisherman, Amma underwent many mystic experiences as a child and started to attract followers while in

her twenties. Although she is based in Amritapuri in Kerala, Amma visits Europe every fall. In 2017, she visited Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, Britain, the Netherlands, Finland, and Spain, drawing thousands of people from all over the world to her *darśanas*.

Dadi Janki (1916–), the head of the Brahma Kumari movement, spent several decades in Europe before being elevated to leadership of the movement, and he has visited several times since then.

HINDU GURUS CATERING TO THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF SOUTH ASIANS IN EUROPE

Some of the “megagurus” of contemporary, urban Hinduism, such as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (1956–) and Sadhguru (Jaggi Vasudev, 1957–), also visit Europe regularly, attracting students from various ethnic backgrounds. However, since the 1980s in particular, a new trend is for Hindu gurus to visit Hindus of South Asian origin who are living in Europe, rather than trying to convert Western followers. Below, I will mention some of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva gurus who visited Europe.

Apart from ISKCON, the other Vaiṣṇava movement with a visible presence in Europe is the Swaminarayana Movement. The Swaminarayana gurus visiting Europe have not primarily been

interested in converting Europeans but rather in catering to the spiritual needs of the Gujarati diaspora. The two most recent *ācāryas* of the Northern or Naranārāyaṇa Deva Gaḍḍī, Tejendraprasadaji Maharaj (1944–) and his son and successor Koshalendraprasadaji Maharaj (1971–), have both visited Britain regularly since the late 1980s to oversee the thirteen temples affiliated with this branch of the movement. The current *ācārya* of the Southern or Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa Deva Gaḍḍī, Rakeshaprasadaji Maharaj (1966–), also visits regularly, although this branch has a smaller presence in Europe.

The one branch of the Swaminarayana Movement with by far the strongest presence in Europe is the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (Bocāsanvāsī Akṣara Puruṣottama Saṁsthā) (BAPS). Yogiji Maharaj (1892–1971) was the first guru from the movement to visit Europe (in 1970), and his successor, Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921–2016), was a regular visitor to the growing community in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. The current guru, Mahant Swami Maharaj (1933–), continues this tradition.

Several of the Goswamis or hereditary gurus from the other great Gujarati Vaiṣṇava movement, Puṣṭimārg, begun by Vallabha (1479–1531), have also visited Europe in recent years, something unthinkable even a couple of generations earlier.

There are likewise many Śaiva gurus catering to the diaspora in Europe. The Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus of Norway, for instance, have been visited by Yogi Ram Sunthar from Sri Lanka. Yogi Ram Sunthar is the founder of the Universal Kriya Babaji Yoga Sangam, an organisation connected to the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta tradition but also influenced by the Kriyā Yoga tradition of Lāhiḍī Mahāśaya (1828–95). Another Tamil Śaiva guru who visits Norway, but of a rather different sort, is Sadguru Murali Krishna Swamikal, who claims to be an *avatāra* of Murukan. Some claim that the latter, through his emphasis on miracles and the Sai Baba of Shirdi (1838–1918), is trying to win over the followers of the deceased megaguru Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) (Jacobsen 2015: 366–69).

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