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Hinduism in France

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► **To cite this version:**

Pierre-Yves Trouillet. Hinduism in France. Knut A. Jacobsen and Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, Vasudha Narayan. Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Volume Five, Brill, pp. 235-239, 2013. halshs-00874224

HAL Id: halshs-00874224

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00874224>

Submitted on 22 Jul 2014

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[Published in K. Jacobsen, H. Basu, Malinar A. & V. Narayan (eds.), *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Volume Five, Leiden, Brill]

To cite this article: Trouillet, Pierre-Yves, 2013, "France", in K. Jacobsen, H. Basu, Malinar A. & V. Narayan (eds.), *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Volume Five, Leiden, Brill, pp. 235-239.

France

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/p.235/

As in other Western countries, the presence of Hindu traditions in France raises the issue of the globalization of Hinduism through two topics: the worldwide migrations of Hindu populations and the global diffusion of religious movements of Hindu origin in the West. Indeed, these traditions take on two main forms in France. The first concerns the ritual and community practices imported by South Asian Hindus mainly in Paris and its suburbs. The second form corresponds to the philosophical, religious, spiritual, and bodily practices adopted by more and more South Asians as well as French people.

The specificity of Hinduism in France is mainly due to the colonial history of the host country and to its particular sociopolitical context regarding immigration and religion. First, although the colonial relations between France and South Asia were significant, they were quite different from the ones established by the British. Second, since the colonial period, the French management of the religious and cultural diversity of its citizens has promoted an "*assimilassionniste* " model, based on integration, requiring the adaptation by all to French laws and customs, and ignoring the notion of religious or ethnic minorities. Third, since the law of 1905 establishing the separation of church and state, the French Republic has been fiercely attached to secularism (*laïcité*), assuring freedom of consciousness and worship but limiting the display of religious identities in the public space. This specific background has a significant impact on the nature, expression, and development of Hinduism in France, for both Hindu communities and new Hindu movements. Nevertheless, Hinduism and Hindu people take advantage in France of the romantic perception of India shaped by Orientalists in the 19th century (Champion, 1993; Lardinois, 2007). Furthermore, for 50 years, political attention has been much more focused on larger Muslim communities originating from North and West Africa, where France had more colonies.

The relations between France and India officially date back to the 17th century, with the foundation of the Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales (French East India Company) in 1664. The presence of Hindu populations in France, which is attested in the 1720s, has changed through centuries following distinct stages. Few Hindus first settled in port cities in the 18th century, but they have been acquiring a visibility since the 1990s, due to the ethnic places and spaces they set up in Paris and its suburbs. Some even consider that Paris is the second largest “Indian city” in Europe (Servan-Schreiber & Vuddamalai, 2007). The elite of the French society began to take an interest in Hindu spirituality in the 19th century, owing to the fascination of philosophers and writers with the Orient in general and India in particular, but new Hindu, yoga and ayurvedic associations multiplied along with the counterculture of the 1970s (Ceccomori, 2001; Altglas, 2005).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the first Hindu newcomers were sailors (called “lascars”) of the Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales settling confidentially (sometimes clandestinely) in the ports of Nantes, Bordeaux, and La Rochelle (Noël, 2002), and servants coming with merchants and noblemen from the French trading posts in India: Chandernagore (Chandannagar), Pondichéry (Puducherry), Mahé in Kerala, Yanaon (Yanam), and Karikal (Karaikal). However, most of these domestics were converted to Christianity and the Hindu presence in France during the 18th century was minimal.

Since the first half of the following century, companies of Indian dancers, musicians, snake charmers, and elephant trainers came from Pondicherry. That was the time of colonial and universal exhibitions during which other Hindu people were presented in the Jardin d’Acclimatation in Paris in 1902 and 1906 (Servan-Schreiber, 2002). After the exhibitions, many of them stayed in France, working in circuses or music halls. Gandhi, who was studying in England between 1888 and 1891, came to France for the first time on the occasion of the universal exhibition of 1889 (Servan-Schreiber, 2002).

Hindu spirituality arrived in France thanks to Vivekananda, the Indian religious reformer who strove to make Hinduism and yoga accessible, and to spread Advaita Vedānta among non-Hindus. He stayed for two long visits, in 1893–1897 and 1899–1900, which were appreciated by French intellectuals (Servan-Schreiber & Vuddamalai, 2007). His message was formulated in French and circulated by Romain Rolland in 1930, in his book *La vie de Vivekananda et l’Evangile universel*. [p.236/](#) The French writer also published the biography of Ramakrishna the year before. In 1937, Swami Siddheswarananda was sent by the Ramakrishna Math and Mission of Calcutta to come to France and present conferences. The Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna, which is actually an āśrama, was founded in 1948 in Gretz, near Paris. The visits of members of the intellectual and artistic Bengali elite since the 19th century, such as Rabindranath Tagore, are also noteworthy.

The first Jain, Parsi, and Hindu businessmen, most of whom were jewelers, settled in Paris around 1900, increasing to approximately 50 families in the 1920s (Servan-Schreiber & Vuddamalai, 2007). Gujaratis were well represented among them. Hindus used to celebrate dīvalī in a famous Parisian restaurant, the Pocard. During World War I, Hindu Indian soldiers, many from Lahore and Meerut, fought in the French trenches but also in Italy and

North Africa. Within almost four years, 90,000 military men of the Indian Army and the Imperial Service Troops, a third of whom were Hindu, spent time in France (Makovitz, 2007). Their involvement in the battlefields is honored by several memorials and museums.

The number of South Asians and Hindus in France has been constantly increasing since the 1960s–1970s. Be they from India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius or Réunion, most Hindu migrants in France are of Tamil origins. Nevertheless, a small batch of Hindu Bengalis arrived in France after the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. They are now a few thousand in the Paris area where they form a small community, as well as Hindu Gujarati merchants who arrived around the end of the 1980s.

The first substantial batch of Hindu immigrants arrived after the Independence of India, when the French colonies were retroceded in 1954 after the blockade of Pondicherry, the capital city of “French India.” In 1962, France proposed to its former Indian nationals to adopt French nationality. Finally, around five thousand Tamil families became French citizens by a written declaration. In addition, other Pondicherrians, working for the French colonial administration in Vietnam, came to France after the defeat of the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the fall of Saigon in 1975 (Vuddamalay & Aly-Marecar-Viney, 2007). Nowadays around 60 thousand French people originating from Pondicherry and Karikal live in France. Half of them live in the suburbs of Paris, while the others live in major cities such as Marseille, Lyon, or Montpellier (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2011). They are Hindu, Muslim, and Catholic, for many of them or of their forefathers were converted during the colonial period. While Muslim and Catholic Pondicherrians continue to worship and be involved in their communities (Sébastien, 2002), religious practices among the Hindu Pondicherrians in France is waning, notably among the second- and third-generation migrants (Dassaradanayadou, 2007). Prayers have become mainly domestic and private, dedicated to mūrtis imported from India, but they have lost their religious habits and references of the South Indian everyday life. Temple worship is obviously less frequent than in India, except for the great Tamil religious festivals (tiruvilā). Besides, Muslim Pondicherrians from Vietnam (the so-called Marecars, belonging to the Maraikayar community) played a very important role in the Indian settlement in Paris, since they were their main employers (Vuddamalay & Aly-Marecar-Viney, 2007).

The arrival of approximately 60 thousand Indo-Mauritians since the 1970s (Carsignol, 2007), after the independence of the Creole island, has diversified the Hindu presence in France as well. Most of them came to work, but many students also came to French university cities. Two-thirds of Mauritians are settled in the Paris area. As migration networks are based on community, (Hindu) Bhojpuris and Muslims are in the majority among Indo-Mauritians in the capital city, whereas Tamils are the most numerous in Strasbourg. Since the French government gave migrants the right to form associations in 1981, Mauritian societies have multiplied based on ethno-religious identities as they exist in Mauritius (Carsignol, 2007). Thus one finds the Association Franco-Hindoue Mauricienne, the Association des Hindous Mauriciens de France, the Association Tamoule Lumière, the Association des Musulmans Mauriciens de France, and so on. Despite communal differences, ethno-religious boundaries become fluid on many occasions, such as the Catholic pilgrimages to Pinterville and Lourdes, or the vināyakacaturtti festival in honor of Vināyakaṅ (i.e. Gaṇapati/Gaṇēśa) organized by the

Sri Lankan Tamils in Paris.

It is the arrival of more than a hundred thousand Sri Lankan Tamils since the end of the 1970s that accounts for the majority of Hindu people in France. Sri Lankan Tamils sought asylum in Western countries due to the civil war in Sri Lanka, and a tightening of the British immigration laws in the early 1980s left many of them stranded in France en route to the United Kingdom (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2011) /p.237/. Due to their number, their involvement in Hindu religious activities, and their work, notably in retail trade, Hinduism became much more visible in France. Soon they had their own Little Jaffna in the area of La Chapelle, Paris.

As in other Hindu diasporic communities, Sri Lankan Tamils began to worship the religious prints that they brought from their homeland and installed on shelves of the rooms they rented (Robuchon, 1993). When they could afford to rent flats, the shelves became special rooms for the gods. Quite astonishingly, the first shrine they publicly worshipped at was the famous basilica of the Sacré-Coeur, located on Montmartre (Robuchon, 1987). Although it is a Catholic shrine, its location on a hill and its big white domes overlooking the capital city make the Sacré-Coeur look like a South Asian shrine, prompting the weekly visits of Sri Lankan Hindus in the early 1980s (Robuchon, 1993).

Today Sri Lankan Tamils are the main representatives of Hinduism in Paris and in France. They have their own shrines where all Hindus are welcome, although their mass arrival upset the other Hindu communities to a certain degree, especially the Poncherrians from India and Vietnam (Sébastien, 2002; Vuddamalay & Aly-Marecar-Viney, 2007). Their worship is a form of Tamil Śaivism, which is centered on the figure of Śiva and associated deities, like Vināyakaṅ/Gaṇeśa, Murukaṅ and Ammaṅ. As in Sri Lanka and South India, Tamil Śaivism in France mingles folk traditions, Āgamas and Śaiva Siddhānta. But, Perumāḷ (Viṣṇu) and Ayyappaṅ are also worshipped in Hindu temples in France, the latter becoming increasingly popular.

In 1985, Sri Lankan Tamils initiated the building of the first Hindu temple in France, the Śrī Māṅikkavināyakaṅ Ālayam dedicated to Vināyakaṅ /Gaṇeśa. The founder is a Vellalar from Jaffna, who arrived in the 1970s in France and imported the temple statue (mūlavar) from Sri Lanka in 1983 (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2008). Collective worship began in 1985 in his own apartment, but neighbors quickly complained about the noise and the flow of devotees, and was subsequently moved to two houses in 1992 and 2010, both near Montmartre. This Hindu temple, like other ones, is managed by an association registered at the local prefecture (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2008). Indeed, Hinduism is not recognized officially as a religion in France, since it is not /p.238/ regulated by a centralized institution, which necessitates the founding of separated structures for administration.

Sri Lankans oversee most of Hindu temples in France, which are fewer than 20 and mainly located in apartments or shops in Paris (four) and its suburbs (a dozen). Pondicherrians and Mauritians also founded a few Hindu temples in Paris and its vicinity, and in the provinces, like in Rillieux-la-Pape near Lyon.

Since 1995, the Śrī Māṅikkavināyakaṅ Ālayam has been organizing what is popularly known as the “Gaṇeś festival” (vināyakacaturtti /gaṇeśacaturthī) every year in September. This great

one-day procession is the main Hindu event in France, gathering Hindu people living everywhere in the country (some come also from abroad), without distinction of sect, language, or origin – be they from Sri Lanka, India, Mauritius, or French overseas territories. As in other countries of the diaspora, this religious festival (tiruvilā) is a special opportunity for the display of Hindu and Tamil identities in public space. The yearly procession is conducted in La Chapelle area, in the streets surrounding the temple, as in India and Sri Lanka, which spatially defines the territory of Little Jaffna. It is the main occasion when one can see Hindu gods and Brahman priests circulate on great chariots (tēr), and crowds of Tamils wearing ritual vēṣṭis and cāris (sarees). On this occasion, some ecstatic dances as well as dances of kāvatṭis (the ritual shoulder arch decorated with peacock feathers specific to the Murukaṅ worship) take place in the procession as well. The number of participants is growing, reaching tens of thousands nowadays.

Hindu procession in Paris during the Gaṇeśa festival (photo by Pierre-Yves Trouillet ©).



Another important Hindu event in France is the rathayātrā (chariot procession), which is conducted in Paris every year in July by ISKCON as in many other capital cities around the world. This procession is attended by South Asians and French people, and it testifies to the settling of Hindu traditions in France and to its increasing visibility in the French landscape as well.

Indeed, since the counterculture of the 1970s, the coming of gurus (like Muktananda, who visited twice during that decade) and the diffusion of Hindu spirituality through mass media, yoga classes and French writers (by authors like Jean Herbert and Arnaud Desjardin), Hindu spirituality has been spreading in French society (Altglas, 2005). The messages of Jiddu Krishnamurti, Anandamayi Ma, and Ramana Maharshi are also well received and readily available in bookshops. Moreover, besides ISKCON and the Ramakrishna Mission, one can find most of the famous new Hindu movements in France, like Transcendental Meditation (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), Siddha Yoga, The Divine Life Society (Sivananda), the Art of Living, the Brahma Kumaris, Embracing The World (Mata Amritanandamayi), and the organizations around Mother Meera and Sri Tathata, just to name a few. Centered on the figure and the message of their gurus, most of these transnational organizations promote meditation, yoga and breathing techniques inspired by Hindu tradition. These new Hindu movements are global networks connected to a main center, generally located in India. A main national center often unites the different groups scattered all over France and maintains the Web site of their movement on the national scale. Adepts of the smaller groups gather in the residence of one of them to practice collective meditation with or without devotional songs (Weibel, 2007). Group size varies from 2 to around 15 people, most of whom are not of Indian origin, although many South Asians attend large European meetings (Weibel, 2007). Moreover, most French people who join these movements are much more interested in the use of several new Hindu notions and practices for their personal development than in really embracing Hinduism (Altglas, 2005; De Michelis, 2004).

However, the multiplication of Hindu organizations since the 1970s and their public display and visibility since the 1990s, like the Gaṇeś festival and the rathayātrā, are not welcome by all local residents and politicians, due to the French laws on secularism (*laïcité*) forbidding the ostentatious display of religious signs in public space and campaigning against sects that are considered “serious threats to the State, the society and the individuals” (see Altglas, 2005, 73). For this reason the state created the Observatoire Interministériel sur les Sectes (Interministerial Observatory on Sects) in 1996, which was replaced by the Mission Interministérielle de Lutte contre les Sectes (Interministerial Mission of the Fight against Sects) in 1998 (Altglas, 2005, 71–80). As a result, most Hindu organizations, be they linked to a temple or a new Hindu movement, keep a rather low profile and do their best not to be stigmatized as a sect. The statute of association of the Hindu organizations enables the state to keep a close eye on Hindu collective activities in France, while also urging Hindus to show the democratic /p.239/ functioning of their activities in spite of their “gurus,” a negative term in French society. Thus far, Sivananda’s Divine Life Society is the only Hindu organization that has succeeded in attaining the status of a religious congregation, in 1997, a more legitimate status (Altglas, 2005).

In spite of this, Hinduism keeps on spreading and developing in France, as well as inciting new migrations. Indeed, in order to resemble the temples of the homeland, Hindu shrines in France need architects (*stapati*), skilled craftsmen (*cirpi*), and Brahman priests originating from India and Sri Lanka. As everywhere else in the diaspora, most of the Brahmans officiating in the Śaiva Tamil temples belong to the Ādiśaiva/Āticaiva caste. Yet, a temple dedicated to Ayyappan in La Courneuve does not have a Brahman but the Vellalar founder of

the temple itself as priest (Morelli, 2010). Tamils are not the only Hindus who recruit priests from their lands of origin; the current celebrant of a Bhojpuri Mauritian temple association in Paris is from Varanasi. Among new Hindu movements, following in the footsteps of Vivekananda in the 1890s and Muktananda in the 1970s, living gurus like Mata Amritanandama, Gurumayi, Sri Tathata, Mother Meera, and Sai Maa visit France regularly. All of these priests, craftsmen, and gurus are important actors of the transnational flows and circulations that characterize contemporary Hinduism, with its diasporas and spread to the West.

Hinduism also plays a role in France's overseas territories, notably the French West Indies, French Guiana and Réunion, where Hindus settled during the colonial period (Singaravelou, 1987; Nagapin & Sulty, 1989; Benoist, 1998). Their forefathers came as workers in the sugar estates within the framework of the indentured labor system established to replace slaves after the abolition of slavery (1848). Now, Hindu worship in these territories is structured by the numerous altars and small sanctuaries built formerly in the estates, and by the new or restored urban temples, whose architecture and rituals conducted inside are more orthodox. Many Hindus from the overseas territories come to mainland France and participate in the religious activities, especially the Tamils from Réunion, who share common origins and religious traditions with Sri Lankan and Pondicherrian Hindus.

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