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► **To cite this version:**

Pierre-Yves Trouillet, Raphaël Voix. Hinduism in France. Knut A. Jacobsen; Ferdinando Sardella. Handbook of Hinduism in Europe, 35, Brill, pp.992-1019, 2020, Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section 2 South Asia, 978-90-04-42942-0. 10.1163/9789004432284_039 . halshs-02405889

HAL Id: halshs-02405889

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02405889v1>

Submitted on 9 Oct 2020

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To cite this chapter: Trouillet Pierre-Yves & Raphaël Voix, 2020, “Hinduism in France”, in Jacobsen Knut & Ferdinando Sardella (eds.), *Handbook on Hinduism in Europe*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 992-1019.

Chapter 38

Hinduism in France¹

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/p.992/

As in other Western countries, the presence of Hindus and Hindu traditions in France is linked to the worldwide migrations of Hindu populations and to the diffusion of religious movements of Hindu origin in the West. Thus, on the one hand, this article focuses on the immigration of Hindu groups to France and their main religious practices, and on the other, on the diffusion of Hindu ideas and practices within French society. The specificity of the national sociopolitical context also deserves attention, for it explains and determines many aspects of Hinduism in France.

1. The specificity of the French context

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. Indeed, during the colonial period, the French had much less influence in the Indian subcontinent and controlled much smaller territories than the British. A commercial imperial enterprise was established in 1664 under the name of Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales (French East India Company), but the French colony was comprised of only five small, separate enclaves, which were trading posts that had originally been acquired by the French East India Company. These trading posts were Pondichéry (Puducherry), Karikal (Karaikal), and Yanaon (Yanam) on the Coromandel Coast, as well as Mahé on the Malabar Coast and Chandernagor (Chandannagar) in Bengal. As a result, today France shares less historical, cultural, political, and economic ties with India than Britain, which is well known for being one of the main centres of Hindu migration.

¹ This piece is partly based on several sections from a chapter on Hinduism in France that was previously published in volume five of *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (2013).

Nevertheless, like the British (and the Dutch to a lesser extent), the French also organised the migrations of hundreds of thousands of **/p.993/** Indian workers (coolies) within the framework of the indentured labour system to overseas territories during the colonial period in order to replace slaves in the colonial estates after the abolition of slavery in 1848. Most of them were Tamils who were sent mainly to the French West Indies, French Guiana, and La Réunion (Singaravelou 1987; Nagapin and Sulty 1989; Ghasarian 1997; Benoist 1998). Many settled for good in these territories where Hinduism developed quite well and still plays a significant role in their cultural and religious landscape. Today, this overseas Hinduism is structured by the small but numerous shrines built by the coolies on the estates and by the large urban temples, whose architecture and rituals lean towards the Āgama- and Śaiva Siddhānta-based traditions. According to the last report of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (2015), 368,000 people of Indian origin (PIO), most of whom are Hindus, live in these French overseas territories.

Secondly, during the colonial period, the French management of the religious and cultural diversity of its citizens has promoted an “assimilassionniste” model, which is based on integration and requires everyone’s adaptation to French laws and customs, ignoring the notion of religious or ethnic minorities. For instance, Hindus were forced to convert to Catholicism in the overseas territories, especially in La Réunion (Ghasarian 1997). The French policy, with regard to the treatment of cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, is not a multicultural model at all, but a “uniformist” one: All French citizens are considered the same, without any distinction—be they ethnic or religious—which implies that there is no data on ethnic origins or religions collected by the French census, and which makes the evaluation of the Hindu presence in France difficult.

The 1905 French law on the Separation of the Churches and State (loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l’État) was passed by the Chamber of Deputies on December 9 1905. This law is seen as the backbone of the French principle of laïcité. The law was based on three principles: the neutrality of the state, the freedom of religious exercise, and public powers related to the Church. “The Republic does not recognize, pay, or subsidise any religious sect. Accordingly, from 1 January following the enactment of this law, will be removed from state budgets, departments and municipalities, all expenses related to the exercise of religion.” The 1905 law put an end to the French government’s, and its political subdivisions’, funding of religious groups. At the same time, it declared that all religious buildings were the property of the state and local governments; cathedrals remained the property of the state and smaller churches that of the local municipal government. This led to a great inequality: whereas the Christian buildings were previously subsidised by the French state, all new religious buildings (mosques and Hindu **/p.994/** temples, for instance as well as churches built after 1905) cannot receive any governmental help to finance them.

Thirdly, since the law of 1905, the interpretation of what secularism (laïcité) actually implies has been the object of regular political debates and controversies (Baubérot 2017). In 1996, confronted by new religious movements—some of Hindu origin—the French state created the Observatoire Interministériel sur les Sectes (Interministerial Observatory on Cults); it was replaced by the Mission Interministérielle de Lutte contre les Sectes (Interministerial Mission

of the Fight against Cults) in 1998 (Altglas 2005: 71–80), which aimed at fighting against “cult abuses” (derives sectaires). Following years of political turmoil around the Muslim headscarf, the law of 15 March 2004 prohibited “in public schools, colleges and lycées, the wearing of signs or clothing by which pupils ostensibly demonstrate a religious affiliation.”² This introduced a departure from the legal construction elaborated by the founding fathers of the 1905 law; the obligation of neutrality only applied within the public, state sphere, that is, it only applied to the state’s agents within their place of work (in this case, the teachers in their schools). Over the years, France developed a “republican” conception of its “nation” whereby all individuals share a common citizenship that overrides all other identities. Any public display of religious particularism is interpreted as negating citizenship and the republican ideal; it is thus considered as a threat to the state (Luca 2008: 105–106).

This background had a significant impact on the nature, expression, and development of Hinduism in France for both Hindu communities and guru-based movements. Nevertheless, Hinduism and Hindus in France take advantage of the romantic perception of India that was shaped by Orientalists in the nineteenth century (Champion 1993; Lardinois 2007). Furthermore, for fifty years, political attention has been much more focused on the larger Muslim communities that originate from North and West Africa, where France had more colonies, than on Hindus and South Asians (unless they originate from Pakistan or Bangladesh).

2. Immigration of Hindu populations and their religious practices

The presence of Hindu populations in France, which was already attested to in the 1720s, has changed through the centuries. There were very few Hindus in France until the second half of the twentieth century, but they have been acquiring a much better visibility due to the ethnic places and spaces /p.995/ they continued to set up, mostly in Paris and its suburbs. Some scholars even consider Paris to have become the second largest “Indian city” in Europe (Servan-Schreiber and Vuddamalai 2007), although the majority of the current Hindu population in France originates from Sri Lanka. No data about the religion or ethnic origin of French citizens are collected by the national census, but other official sources mention that 36,000 Indian immigrants, 46,600 natives of Sri Lanka, and 32,000 people born in Mauritius lived in France in 2014 (INSEE 2016). Additionally, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs estimated that 18,000 “non-resident Indians” and 90,000 “persons of Indian origin” lived in France in 2015. Some scholars also estimate that approximately 60,000 Indo-Mauritians (Carsignol 2007), 60,000 French people originating from Pondicherry and Karikal, and more than 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamils live in France today (Goreau-Ponceaud 2011).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the first Hindu newcomers were sailors (called “lascars”) from the Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales, who settled confidentially (sometimes clandestinely) in the port cities of Nantes, Bordeaux, and La Rochelle (Noël 2002), and servants coming with merchants and noblemen from the French trading posts in India.

² Code de l'éducation, article L. 141-5-1.

However, most of these domestics had converted to Christianity. A few students belonging to the Bengali and Parsi elite also came to study French culture and literature, and they socialised with the French intellectual elite (Niklas 2006). Nevertheless, the Hindu presence in France during the eighteenth century was minimal.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 shortened travel time between India and Europe by several weeks. From this period until the beginning of World War I, many companies of Indian dancers, acrobats, musicians, snake charmers, yogīs, and elephant trainers came to France from Ceylan—notably through the intermediary of Carl Hagenbeck’s family (Thode-Arora 2002)—and from Pondichéry (Servan-Schreiber 2002). This was the time of colonial and universal exhibitions, during which Hindu people were presented in the Jardin d’Acclimatation in Paris, a place where Sinhalese had built a provisional Buddhist temple in this place in 1886. It was especially the case in 1902 and 1906, when a Hindu caravan settled in the city and a temporary Hindu temple was built there as well. After the exhibitions, some of them did tours in the south of France (Nice in 1908 and Marseille in 1910), but many stayed to work in circuses or music halls. Gandhi, who was studying in Britain between 1888 and 1891, came to France for the first time on the occasion of the universal exhibition of 1889 (Servan-Schreiber 2002). Ulrike Niklas (2006) notes that a number of Indian merchants, including R. D. Tata, the cousin of the founder of the “Tata empire,” came to settle in France in the nineteenth century, especially to trade pearls.

/p.996/ Hindu intellectuals, businessmen, students, and other rich people, including Gujarati and Bengali families, also used to come or even settle in Paris during this period. The first Jain, Parsi, and Hindu businessmen, most of whom were jewellers, settled there around 1900, and they increased to approximately fifty families in the 1920s (Servan-Schreiber and Vuddamalai 2007). During this period, Hindu families used to take part in the five-day festival of lights *Dīvālī* celebrated during the Hindu Lunisolar month Kartika (between mid-October and mid-November) in a well-known Parisian restaurant, the Pocard, and some Maharajas came, especially to have famous jewellers (i.e., Cartier) craft their personal jewellery. It must also be emphasised that French territories in India and Europe became places of refuge for important personalities linked to the Indian nationalist movement. From 1905 onwards, anti-British activists began to settle in France. Among them were the Parsi lady Bhikaiji Cama (1861-1936), a prominent figure of the independent movement, who moved to Paris in 1905, and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the famous author of the ideological pamphlet *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923), who stayed in Madame Cama’s house for a while before being arrested in 1910 (Niklas 2006).

During World War I, Hindu Indian soldiers, many from Lahore and Meerut, not only fought in the French trenches but also in Italy and North Africa (see the chapter by Myrvold in this volume). Within almost four years, 90,000 military men from the Indian Army and the Imperial Service Troops, a third of whom were Hindu, had spent time in France (Omissi 1999; Markovits 2007). Their involvement on the battlefields is honoured by several memorials, as in Neuve-Chapelle, and museums. Nevertheless, until the 1960s and 1970s, the Hindu presence in France

was very minimal. Afterwards, the number of South Asians and Hindus in France increased—and continues to increase.

The first substantial batch of Hindu immigrants arrived after India's independence, when the French colonies were ceded in 1954 after the blockade of Pondicherry, the capital city of "French India" (Chandernagor had been ceded in 1949). In 1962, France proposed that its former Indian nationals could adopt French nationality, and around 5,000 Tamil families became French citizens by a written declaration. In addition, other Pondicherrians, who were 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 then again after the capture of Saigon by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the Viet Cong in 1975, which marked the end of the Vietnam War (Vuddamalay and Aly-Marecar-Viney 2007). /p.997/ Currently, around 60,000 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). Approximately 40 to 45% are Hindu, 10 to 15% Muslim, and 40 to 45% Roman Catholic (Niklas 2006)—many of them, or more precisely their forefathers, 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). Devotional worship ritual (*pūjā*) has become mainly domestic and private, dedicated to *mūrtis* (religious images, statues or objects) imported from India, but they have lost their religious habits and references to South Indian everyday life. Temple worship is obviously less frequent than in India, except for the great Tamil religious festivals (*tiruvilā*). Muslim Pondicherrians from Vietnam (the so-called Marecars, who belong to the Maraikayar community) played a very important role in the Indian settlement in Paris, since they were their main employers (Vuddamalay and Aly-Marecar-Viney 2007).

The inauguration of the India House (*Maison de l'Inde*) in 1968 opened the way for Indians to come and study in France. It figures among the thirty-seven houses that constitute the "Cité Internationale," a huge campus that was set up in Paris in 1925 to promote an "institutional relationship" and "intercultural dialogue" by accommodating international, academic scholars studying in France. On top of providing accommodations to Indian academics and artists, the India House serves as a symbol of India in Paris. Among its official objectives is to expose Indian "spiritual and secular values" to the international community. Its administration being autonomous from the Council of the Cité, it benefits from a relative freedom. Since its inception, different Hindu activities have been celebrated there, ranging from Indian dance to the celebration of Hindu festivals, notably the annual festival of *Durgā Pūjā* during which Hindus, especially in western India, revere and pay homage to the Goddess Durgā in the lunisolar month of Ashvin (September-October).

A small group of Hindu Bengalis also arrived in France after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 after which what was Eastern Pakistan became an independent country under the name of Bangladesh. They now number a few thousand in the Paris area, where they form a small community along with Hindu Gujaratis who arrived around the end of the 1980s from rural

areas and small towns, and who work mainly in retail trade and to a lesser extent in catering (Moliner 2009). Nevertheless, most Hindus in France are of Tamil origin, be they from India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, or La Réunion. /p.998/

The arrival of approximately 60,000 Indo-Mauritians since the 1970s (Carsignol 2007), after the independence of Mauritius, 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 the Mauritians also 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 and are based on ethno-religious identities that 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 *vināyakacaturthī* festival in honour of Vināyakar (i.e., Gaṇapati/Gaṇeśa) that is organised by the Sri Lankan Tamils in Paris.

Indeed, the arrival of more than a 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamils since the end of the 1970s accounts for the majority of Hindus in France. Sri Lankan Tamils sought asylum in Western countries due to the civil war in Sri Lanka, an intermittent insurgency which was launched in 1983 against the government by the so called Tamil Tigers fighting to create an independent Tamil state on the north and east of the island, and which lasted until 2009, when the Sri Lankan military defeated the Tamil Tigers. But the tightening of British immigration laws in the early 1980s left many of them stranded in France en route to Britain (Goreau-Ponceaud 2011). As for Gujaratis, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sikhs (Moliner 2009), France was a second-choice destination when Britain closed its doors (Goreau-Ponceaud 2011). Due to their number, their involvement in Hindu religious activities, and their work—notably in retail trade—Hinduism became much more visible in the country. 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 they brought from their homeland, which they installed on shelves in the rooms they rented (Robuchon 1993). When they could afford to rent flats, the shelves were replaced with special rooms for the gods. The first shrine they publicly worshipped at was the famous basilica of the Sacré-Coeur that is located on Montmartre (Robuchon 1987). Although it is a Catholic shrine, its location on a hill and its large white domes overlooking the capital city make the Sacré-Coeur look like a South Asian shrine, which /p.999/ prompted the weekly visits of Sri Lankan Hindus in the early 1980s (Robuchon 1993). Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that this Hindu worship at a Christian shrine is not merely due to migration; Tamil Hindus do worship at Catholic churches in South Asia, be they Indian or Sri Lankan. Furthermore, similar practices have been observed by Bradley (2018) at the largest Catholic Church in Montréal, Quebec, Saint-Joseph’s Oratory.

Today, Sri Lankan Tamils are the main representatives of Hinduism in Paris and France. They have their own shrines where all Hindus are welcome, despite the fact that their mass arrival sometimes upset the other Hindu communities to a certain degree, especially the Pondicherrians from India and Vietnam (Sébastien 2002; Vuddamalay and Aly-Marecar-Viney 2007). Sri Lankan Tamils oversee most of the Hindu temples in France, which are approximately twenty 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. All of these temples are managed by non-profit associations, because Hinduism is not recognized as a religion in France (since it is not regulated by a centralised institution), which requires the founding of separate structures for administration. In 1985, Sri Lankan Tamils also initiated the building of the first Hindu temple in France, the Śrī Māṅikka Vināyakaṛ Ālayam, which is dedicated to Vināyakaṛ /Gaṇeśa and which remains by far the most famous and popular temple in France, even if its building is almost invisible on a small street in Paris. Since 1995, this small but very influential temple has been organising what is popularly known as the “Gaṇeś festival” (*vināyakacaturthī / gaṇeśacaturthī*) every year in September. This festival (*tiruvilā*), which has already been mentioned, celebrates the arrival to earth from Mount Kailash of the elephant-header god Gaṇeśa, also known as Vināyaka, with his mother goddess Pārvaṭī. It includes a large, one-day procession, which is the main Hindu event in France, and gathers tens of thousands of people, mostly Hindus living in different parts of the country (although some also come from abroad), without distinction of sect, language, or origin—be they from Sri Lanka, India, Mauritius, or France’s overseas territories. As in other countries of the diaspora, this festival is a special opportunity for the display of Hindu and Tamil traditions in a public space. Just like in Sri Lanka or India, the procession is conducted in the streets surrounding the temple, which defines the divine jurisdiction of the local deity, and which matches with the ethnic area of Little Jaffna (in the La Chapelle area), as Anthony Goreau-Ponceaud (2011) has pointed out. On this occasion, one can see Hindu gods and priests circulating on great chariots (*tēr*) and crowds of **/p.1000/** Tamils wearing ritual *vēstī*s and *cāris* (sarees). Some ecstatic dances, as well as *kāvaṭi* dances (the ritual shoulder arch that is decorated with peacock feathers and is specific to the worship of Murugaṅ, the Tamil name of Kārtikeya, brother of Gaṇeś), take place in the procession as well. The number of participants is growing, and currently reaches into the tens of thousands.



Fig 1. Hindu procession in Paris during the Gaṇeś festival (photo by Pierre-Yves Trouillet ©)

More broadly speaking, the worship of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus is mostly a form of Tamil Śaivism, which is centred on the figure of Śiva and associated deities, like Murukaṅ, Vināyakaṅ/Gaṇeśa, and the goddess Ammaṅ (including Mariyammaṅ and Kālī). As in Sri Lanka and South India, Tamil Śaivism in France mingles folk traditions, the canonical texts called Āgamas, and Śaiva Siddhānta traditions, which propound a salvation embedded in a dualistic philosophy, the goal being to become an enlightened soul through Śiva’s grace. But, Perumāḷ (Viṣṇu) and Ayyappaṅ, the son of Śiva and Mohini, a feminine form of Viṣṇu, are also worshipped in Hindu temples in France, and the latter is becoming increasingly popular (Morelli 2010).

Regarding priesthood, as in many other Tamil diaspora countries—for instance, Canada or Mauritius (Trouillet forthcoming)—many of the Sri Lankan /p.1001/ temple priests are Brāhmins who belong to the sub-caste of the “Śivācāryas” (i.e., the “priests of Shiva”), and who are also known under the name of “Āṭisaivas” (“the first Śaivites”). Most of these priests are śaivite Brahmins because, just like in Tamil Nadu or Sri Lanka, the majority of the Tamil diaspora temples are dedicated to śaivite deities. As Chris Fuller (2003) has pointed out, Śivācāryas are considered the fifth sub-caste of the Smārta Brahmins, who are one of the two main groups of Tamil Brahmins, alongside the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas. Due to the shortage of Brahmin priests in the diaspora, these Śivācāryas are recruited, especially from Sri Lanka or Tamil Nadu,

to work in Hindu temples, generally for a few years. Thus, they can be considered “migrant priests” (Trouillet forthcoming) who circulate within Tamil diasporic spaces. This is the case, for example, of a Sri Lankan priest for a temple in Paris that is dedicated to the goddess Mariyamman; he had previously worked in Singapore, Malaysia, and even India, which confirms the transnational and circulatory patterns of the Tamil diaspora’s temple priesthood (ibid.). Another significant example dating back to 2017, is that of the three priests working in the small but famous Gaṇeśa temple in Paris, all of them Indian Brahmans who came from Tamil Nadu (Kumbakonam). Nevertheless, not all temple priests in France are Brahmans; for instance, the priest and founder of a rather important Ayyappan temple, belongs to the Vellālar caste and is quite a charismatic person (Morelli 2010). This is a reminder that, in Sri Lanka, many temple priests claim the title of initiated temple priests (*kurukkal*) even though some of them do not belong to the Śivācārya Brahman community but to the dominant caste of Vellālar (Derges 2013: 77). Furthermore, if they are regarded as skilled and experienced priests, some non-Brahman temple priests can be recruited from other important Tamil diaspora countries, like Mauritius (Claveyrolas 2014). Besides, Tamil Hindu temples are not the only ones that have priests from their lands of origin, since, for instance, the priest, manager, and founding member of an important Bhojpuri Mauritian temple association in Paris is a Brahman *paṇḍit* who originates from Varanasi.



Fig 2. Śivācārya priest performing an evening pūjā at the Gaṇeś temple in Paris (photo by Pierre-Yves Trouillet ©)

Finally, the overall predominance of Tamils among Hindus in France might also explain why the Sangh Parivar (the family of Hindu nationalist organisations) has never gained an important following in this host country, whereas it benefits from a quite ancient presence there. Indeed, a local branch (*sakha*, for Sanskrit *śākhā*) of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) was set

up in the 1970s. Moreover, during “the Emergency” in India (an 18-month period from 1975 to 1977, during which the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi [in office 1966-1977, 1980-1984] was constitutionally allowed to rule by decree, and during which elections were suspended and civil liberties curbed), Paris was the **/p.1002/** European base for the Friends of India, an association aimed at defending the RSS movement when it was banned on Indian soil. Actually, for decades, the main political issue imported to France from South Asia was the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). For instance, before the end of the war, in addition to the rumours of some Sri Lankan immigrants’ affiliation with the LTTE, the controversial Tamils Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) NGO, whose objective was to provide relief to the refugees, used to raise money from devotees and visitors near the main Hindu temple in Paris during the Gaṇeś festival.

3. Diffusion of Hindu ideas and practices within French society

Thanks to the work of travellers, missionaries, scholars, spiritual seekers, and later to Indian artists and gurus, Hindu ideas entered France earlier and mainly independent from the South Asian presence in the country (Bies 1974: 9–28). Although these different institutional fields are quite interdependent, and the **/p.1003/** boundaries that separate them highly porous, for the sake of convenience we will present them as distinct here.

Until the mid-seventeenth century, with few notable exceptions³, it was mainly from translations of foreign works that the French public had access to descriptions of India and Hindus.⁴ However, from the mid-seventeenth century onward, direct publication in French grew fast, notably among French travellers. François de la Boullaye le Gouz’s (1610-1668) *Voyages et observations*, published in 1653, covers important information on the religious life of the Gentiles (Subrahmanian 2017: 103–143). The most important French work on India came from François Bernier (1620-1688), who travelled to northern India in the 1660s. His book, *Voyages*—its early eighteenth-century title—was to become the “most successful travel account of the period” (Dew 2009: 131). The latter half of the seventeenth century saw a growth of these *récits de voyages* to Asia, which were regularly republished and translated, from authors like Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689), Jean Thévenot (1633–1667), and Jean Chardin (1643–1713). The philosophers—notably Montesquieu—would mine these different accounts for information about the non-European world (ibid.: 132).

Among French missionaries, the Society of Jesus, which was founded in 1534, became one of the main sources of knowledge about India and Hinduism in France in the eighteenth century. French Jesuits had established missions in the two French trading posts of Pondicherry (founded in 1676) and Chandernagor (founded in 1688). Published from 1702 until 1776, their *Lettres Edifiantes* were widely read in France (Sweetman 2003: 127–153). The main reason the Jesuits

³ India and Indian are quoted numerous times in the famous *Essais* of the French writer Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592).

⁴ The translated works are by foreign Jesuits, like the Italian Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) or the Portuguese João de Brito (1647–1693), among others. They also came from travellers, noteworthy among them are the Italians Nicolò Manuzzi (1638–c.1720) and Pietro de la Valle (1586–c.1652) who both lived in India for a long time.

wrote and sent these letters was to reveal to the French public the conditions of their existence in India so as to prevent any attack or criticism from other Catholic orders on their methods or other issues. But it also had political (gaining support from the King), economic (gaining funding), and most of all apologetical ambitions: It was “an instrument of propaganda on the level of religious ideas” (Murr 1983: 238–239) and thus was full of prejudice. With the dissolution of its order between 1773 and 1774 “a major conduit through which information on India had passed into France [...] was no longer open” (Subrahmanian 2017: 265). It was, however, prolonged for a time with the publication of Abbé J. A. Dubois’ (1746–1848) *Moeurs, institutions et cérémonies /p.1004/ des peuples de l’Inde* (1806). In 1723, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* was published, and in the part on India, Bernard and Picard compiled what they considered “to be the most authoritative accounts available in Europe at that time” on the religion of the Indian “gentiles” (Subrahmanian 2017: 38–39).

In the eighteenth century, scholars constituted another source of knowledge on India and Hinduism: Paris was the first place in Europe where oriental manuscripts could be found, and French was the main scholarly language in use in Europe during the Enlightenment (Lardinois 2018: 71). In 1718 the abbot Jean-Paul Bignon, the King’s librarian, opened the oriental manuscript collection to include India and China. Indian manuscripts were sent to Paris and the first grammars of Indian languages were published in French. The royal, scientific Academies also started to become interested in India; by 1744, the Académie des Inscriptions Belles-Lettres started to think of the history of India as being worthy of study in itself.

In the late eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century, it was thanks to two facts, which were relatively independent from each other, that knowledge of Hinduism grew rapidly in France (ibid.: 73). First, the creation in Calcutta of active English orientalist centers with the foundation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1785 and of Fort William in 1800. These two institutes’ publications on Indian culture and languages were translated into French and read by the intellectual elite. The *Asiatic Researches* are, for example, translated from 1802 onward. The second element is the construction of the French orientalist field: In 1795 the “École spéciale des langues orientales” was founded and was designed for the teaching of living languages⁵ (with a course in Hindustani from 1828 onward); in 1815 the “chair of Sanskrit” in the Collège de France was opened, which became the first public chair in Europe for this language and Indian ancient culture;⁶ and in 1822 the “Société Asiatique de Paris” was founded (ibid.: 9).

Thanks to the translation work of these orientalist scholars, for the first time, Hindu ideas were not presented through the “biased regard” of intermediaries, such as travellers or missionaries, but directly and through their own texts. At first, these Hindu texts were translated into French from previous English translations. In 1787, the abbot J. P. Parraud translated the *Bhagavadgītā* from Charles Wilkins’ 1785 English translation. /p.1005/ Between 1801 and 1802, Anquetil

⁵ The school is still active today as the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO).

⁶ It was almost continuously held until 1952, when it was extended to include Indian Literature, and later Indian History as well (see Lardinois 2018).

Duperron (1731–1805), who was probably the “first European to visit India [from 1754 to 1762] for purely scholarly purposes” (Sweetman 2003: 127), published *Oupnek’hat*, a Latin translation of some Upaniṣads that were from a Persian manuscript he had collected. It was from 1815 onward that Hindu texts were directly translated into French from Indian languages (Sanskrit, Persian, Hindustani).⁷ This was also the time when serious academic work on Hindu mythology starts to appear in French. In 1809, the posthumously published work of Colonel de Polier (1741–1795), a Swiss member of the Asiatic Society who had spent time in India as a general in the English army, becomes the first work on Hindu mythology to be published in French. Victor Cousin published the first book to mention the different Hindu *darśanas* (lit. “points of view”, a term used to designate the schools of philosophical thought) in 1829. Coming from scholars who had a textual approach to Hinduism, this first diffusion of Hindu texts in France in the nineteenth century mainly reached an audience of specialists.

French knowledge of Hinduism quickly expanded through the creation of Sanskrit chairs in different universities, as well as the creation of new institutions offering Indological studies: the 4th and 5th sections of the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE) in 1868 and 1887; the École Française d’Extrême Orient (EFEO) in 1898; and the Institut d’Etudes Indiennes in 1927. Also, in India, the French Institute of Pondichéry was founded in 1955, and it also became an important place for research on South Indian Hinduism. After World War II, the development of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the foundation of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) expanded the possibility of French academic research on India and Hinduism. The Centre d’Études de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud (CEIAS), founded by the French sociologist Louis Dumont (1911–1998), became the rallying point for anyone interested in contemporary India (Lardinois 2013). Moreover, the knowledge of Hinduism diversified. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and the subsequent development of the steamboat and, after 1947, the expansion of the plane industry, have /p.1006/ enabled regular roundtrips to India. Thus, since the late nineteenth century, with only a few exceptions, all professional, French Indologists have accumulated knowledge of Indian texts through a direct acquaintance with South Asia (Fussman 2009). However, the importance and lifespan of the Indology center in France contrasts with how little of its knowledge was diffused to the wider public. Indian philosophy has never been integrated into the school curriculum, a situation that has been labelled as “Philosophical Amnesia” (Droit 1989), which is in contrast to the importance that India has had, even for the French Lumières movement (Fourcade and Zupanov 2013).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a milieu of “non-academic” scholars emerged who added an exploration of India’s mysteries to the textual approach to Hinduism. They gathered a larger audience of people who aspired to new “spiritual” practices. In France, they

⁷ Leonard de Chezy was the first to hold the Sanskrit Chair, between 1814 and 1832, and he published extracts of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and different *Purāṇas*. Alexandre Langois (1788–1854) published the *R̥gveda*, starting from 1848 onward; Barthelemy de Saint Hilaire (1805–1895) the *Sāmkhyakārikā* in 1852; Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852) the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and the *Bhagavadgītā* in 1861; Hippolyte Fauche (1797–1869) the *Mahābhārata* in 1867; Victor Henri (1872–1940) the *Athārvaveda* in 1891; and we must not forget the numerous translations by Emile Senart (1847–1928) between 1875 and 1930.

were noticeably active within various esoteric currents. Among them was the Theosophical Society, which was founded in New York in 1875 and which began to spread its ideas in France through the spiritualist milieu and their different publications, notably *La revue spirite*, the mouthpiece of the “Société scientifique des études psychologiques,” from 1878 until 1882 (Delalande 2007: 320–338). The movement spread to various circles and locales in France, which enabled them to found an official French section in 1899 that published its own journal, *La revue théosophique française, le Lotus bleu*. In 1908, the section became the “Société théosophique française” and helped to diffuse ideas on Hinduism and yoga to the broader public through their own writings and, as we will see, the publication of Vivekananda’s lectures. Boosted by Annie Besant’s public appearance in Paris, the Theosophists acquired a certain status and prestigious headquarters in Paris. However, they were also ridiculed by the press and had to endure a double condemnation. On request of the Jesuits, a Roman decree in 1919 not only forbade Catholics from becoming members of the Theosophical Society, but it also forbade them from attending their conferences or reading their publications (ibid.: 649–650). The “most bitter and lasting condemnation,” which sounded the death knell for the expansion of the movement in France, however, came from the publication, in 1921, of the book *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion* by the famous “unclassifiable intellectual” (Philippe Faure) René Guénon (1886-1951), which qualified the Theosophists as “the most dangerous mistake for the contemporary mentality” (ibid.: 667).

The impact this book had on the destiny of the Theosophical Society in France was due to the growing influence and charisma of its author. René Guénon studied Advaita Vedānta in his early twenties and was deeply inspired by it. After the publication of *A general introduction to the study of Hindu doctrines* (p.1007), also in 1921, he became one of the very first non-academic scholars to divulge Hindu ideas to the broader public. As a researcher and “spiritual” seeker who was guided by a reactionary vision of the social world and the belief in the existence of a “Primordial Tradition” shared by all cultures, he painted a picture of an idealised India—a country he had never visited—using Hindu ideas as a tool to express a profound and deep criticism of Western civilisation, which he considered perverted (Bridet 2004: 29). Acting almost as a prophet, he gained an influence that went far beyond the esoteric or occultist groups (Lardinois 2013). During this period, sometimes directly inspired by Guénon, other French spiritual seekers found Hindu thought to be a source of inspiration for metaphysical experiences and for a social critique of their society. Such was the case for: Georges Gurdjieff (1866?–1949), a mystic and guru, who was the founder of an esoteric group in Paris; his disciple, René Daumal (1908–1944), a writer and mystic who, despite his short life, had a great impact on the literature of the times (Random 1966; Bies 1974); Lanza del Vasto (1901–1981), a disciple of Gandhi who founded an intentional community (the “Communauté de l’Arche”) based around the practice of non-violence; Alain Danielou (1907–1994), a French musicologist and disciple of Swami Karpatri (1907–1982) who resided in India from 1932 to 1962 and who published best-selling but controversial books on the Hindu religion; and Philippe Lavastine (1908–1999) a writer who opened Peter Brook’s eyes to the dramatic potentials of the *Mahābhārata*, which led the way to a successful theatre creation at the end of the 1980s (Clémentin-Ojha forthcoming).

Although this distinction between academic scholarly interest in texts and non-academic scholarly interest in spiritual seeking was important in the eyes of the actors of the time, some rare figures that crossed the border between the two spheres also existed. The renowned French Indologist Lilian Silburn (1908–1993) was one of them. As revealed by one of her close students (Chambron 2015), Silburn was both a ‘scholar’ who, since 1947, specialised in the study of Kashmir Śaivism—notably, she was associated with Swami Lakshman Joo—as well as a ‘practitioner’ who had taken initiation with a Hindu Sufi guru. Under the latter’s spiritual guidance, Silburn went through “intense mystical experiences,” to the point that she “became a spiritual master herself and had a group of disciples that she guided on the way, while still pursuing a brilliant academic career” (Matringe forthcoming).

The nineteenth century saw an explosion of Indian influence in the intellectual and literary life of American, English, and German intellectuals. Although translations of Hindu literature were received with a certain ambivalence by **p.1008/** the literary milieu in the nineteenth century (Leblanc 2014), from 1920 onward, India became known in France through the voices of its own contemporaries who visited France and whose works had an impact on French intellectual life. The works of Rabindranath Tagore (who visited Paris in 1920 and briefly met with André Gide, who had translated his renowned *Gītāñjali* into French, Bergson, Sylvain Lévi and Anna de Noailles, and then again in 1921, meeting then for the first time with Romain Rolland, with whom the relation was to last) and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi were translated and published on a regular basis, and their writings also appeared in major French journals (Bridet 2014: 20). In the late 1960s, Hindu culture also arrived in France through artistic circles. On top of the opening of the India House, which has already been mentioned, the Theatre du Chatelet contributed to diffusing Hindu culture by regularly programming Indian music, mainly classical but also some more popular styles. In 1978, the Mandapa centre in Paris also became an important site for the teaching of Hindu arts and music as well as the Theatre du Soleil, an avant-garde theatre founded in 1964, that have often presented plays on Indian Mythology (The Mahabharata, La Chambre en Inde) with sometimes Indian musicians (notably Bauls) as performers.

Hindu gurus who travelled directly to France, or who have been represented by French disciples, constitute another source for the diffusion of Hindu ideas and practices in France. The very first of them seems to be the Bengali Vivekananda (1863–1902) who, after his first tourist visit to Paris in August 1895, came back to the French capital in 1900 and gave a few talks: one at the International Congress on the History of Religion (Congrès International de l’Histoire des Religions) and two other talks at the School for Higher Studies (École des Hautes Études). Although they were appreciated, compared to the fame they had in the United States, his talks had limited success in France. In fact, Vivekananda did not gather any French disciples during his lifetime (Ceccamori 2001: 27, 43). This is may be partly due to his inability to speak French, which meant a translator was required for his talks to be understood. Vivekananda’s books were translated and published on a regular basis by the French section of the Theosophical Society and diffused among its circles. It was only after World War I that Vivekananda’s fame grew in France. Romain Rolland (1866–1944), a French dramaturge who won the Nobel Prize (1915), published the biography of Ramakrishna (Rolland 1930a) and

formulated Vivekananda's message in French in his book *La vie de Vivekananda et l'Évangile universel* (Rolland 1930b). In 1937, Swami Siddheswarananda was sent to France by the Ramakrishna Math and /p.1009/ Mission of Calcutta to organise conferences. In 1948, he founded the Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna in Gretz, near Paris, which is still active today, as we will see below.

Another Hindu figure who gathered an important following in France was Aurobindo Ghose, the Bengali ex-revolutionary who had escape from the British police and retired from political activism in 1910 to live in—the then French territory of—Pondicherry as a mystic and prolific writer (Heehs 2008). After the French Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973) settled with him in 1920 and became known as “the Mother,” many French became their disciples and participated in the founding of an *āśram* and, from 1968 onward, in that of the building of Auroville, an intentional community. Among the many French disciples that Aurobindo and “the Mother” had, Jean Herbert (1897–1980) played an important role in spreading Hindu ideas to the larger public through the foundation of a popular book collection titled *Spiritualités vivantes* (within the ‘Albin Michel’ publication house), which has diffused many Hindu hagiographies and French versions of the teachings of such Hindu mystics as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, or the saintly wandering ascetic Swami Ramas (1884-1963). During the Bengal famine of 1943, Aurobindo welcomed Bengali orphans at his *āśram*, and when the French territory of Pondicherry became a part of the Union Territory in 1954, some of them settled in France. This is the case of Ajit Sarkar who, in 1977, founded Le Soleil d’Or, the first centre dedicated to the diffusion of Indian art (music, dance) and yoga, which also organised conferences on Indian philosophy. Also brought up in Aurobindo’s *āśram* in Pondichery, Kyran Vias (born in 1944), an Indian consultant for UNESCO in Paris, in 1983 founded Tapovan, a centre in Paris that specialises in Āyurveda. To a lesser extent, Bernard Enginger (Satprem, 1923–2007), a close disciple of “the Mother,” also disseminated Hindu-inspired teaching through his “Institut de recherche évolutive,” which was created in 1977.

Some other Hindu gurus also benefited from French intermediaries who acted as *passeurs de culture*. An important figure among them is Arnaud Desjardin (1925–2011), who was a producer at the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française from 1952 to 1974. He made television documentaries on many spiritual traditions, including Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, and Sufism from Afghanistan. He embraced Advaita Vedānta through his initiation with Swami Prajnanpad (1891–1974), a Bengali guru who spoke fluent English (Roumanoff 1989). The fact that he was a high-profile disciple brought many French to the Vedāntic school of thought. Among other important Hindu figures that had a certain following in France, one finds the saintly woman Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982), represented by her disciple Vijayananda, a French doctor, and his own disciple, the psychiatrist Dr. Jacques Vignes /p.1010/ (b. 1856) who has published a number of books partly inspired by Hinduism and dealing with such themes as spirituality and meditation.

From the 1970s onward, Hindu guru-based movements started entering France. Among them are: the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON); Transcendental Meditation; Siddha Yoga; The Divine Life Society; the Art of Living Foundation; the Brahma

Kumaris; Embracing The World (Mata Amritanandamayi); and the organisations around Mother Meera and Sri Tathata, just to name a few. Centred on the figure and message of their gurus, most of these transnational organisations promote meditation, yoga, and breathing techniques inspired by Hindu traditions. These Hindu movements are global networks connected to a main centre, which is generally located in India. Adepts of the smaller groups gather in one member's residence to practice collective meditation, with or without devotional songs. Group size varies from two to around fifteen 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 Hindu notions and practices for their own personal development. However, with the exception of Siddha Yoga and The Divine Life Society (Altglas 2005), social scientists have not conducted an in-depth study on any of these groups.

In December 1995, a report on “cults,” which led to the creation of the Interministerial Observatory on Cults, which was mentioned in the first part of this paper, named 173 groups that were considered by the state as serious threats to the society and individuals (Hervieu-Léger 2004). Among them were ten groups founded by Hindu gurus, including: ISKCON, Transcendental Meditation, the Brahma Kumaris, Osho Rajneesh, Sahaja Yoga, Sathya Sai Baba, Sahaj Marg, and Sri Chinmoy. And a few others were Hindu inspired, like the infamous Mandarom, a group founded by Gilbert Bourdin (1923-1998), also known as Swami Hamsananda Sarasvati, or S. Hamsah Manarah, that built a controversial monastic community in the Alps. Although the report mentioned that no legal action could be taken against these groups, many of them were confronted with difficulties for planting themselves in France, and this ranged from not being delivered a building permit and difficulty acquiring a building for a temple, to strict finance regulation controls, etc. Since then, as a result of the report, most of these Hindu guru-based organisations have kept a rather low profile and do their best not to be stigmatised as a “cult.” A good example of this is ISKCON, which, in spite of an early presence in Paris (1969), has never managed to grow a large following in France. In 1995, its qualification as a cult, and the consequences that followed, obliged ISKCON to sell the properties, notably /p.1011/ the castle of Ermenonville, it had acquired. Since then, most French-speaking converts are from Belgium. In France, ISKCON has reduced its presence to a minimum and mainly among individuals who were born into Hinduism. Since 2005, its temple in the suburbs of Paris has been visited mainly by local Gujarati families, and its presence in Paris is limited to the yearly organisation of the *rathayātrā* (chariot procession) during the first week of July. Attended by hundreds of South Asians and French, this procession, along with the Tamil Gaṇeśa festival mentioned in the previous section, testifies to the settling of Hindu traditions in France and also to Hinduism's increasing visibility in the French landscape.

Most of these Hindu organisations are thus legally registered as “association Loi 1901,” a legal status that enables the state to keep a close eye on their collective activities and finances, while also urging the participants to show the democratic functioning of their activities, which would be a far cry from French society's negative image of “gurus” as autocratic. Nevertheless, Hindu-based community-life experiments in France have been quite unsuccessful in comparison to the numerous Buddhist monastic communities that are legally recognised as “religious

congregations” and have settled in France (Obadia 1999; Campergue 2017). So far, Sivananda’s Divine Life Society is the only Hindu organisation that has succeeded in attaining this legal status, which it did in 1997 (Altglas 2005), and which enabled the society to acquire property and funding. It was founded by Swami Sivananda (1887-1963), a Tamil Nadu born spiritual teacher and a proponent of Yoga and Vedanta who spent most of his life near Rishikesh.

In 2015, the president of the Ramakrishna Mission—the oldest Hindu groups in France—launched the “Fédération Védique de France.” Initiated on the advice of the Embassy of India in France, this organization aims to be a representative and interlocutor for “Vedic spirituality”—an expression used by those involved in order to avoid the label “Hindu,” which is considered too restrictive. In 2019, eight Hindu guru-based movements that call themselves “associations of the Vedic tradition” were members of the federation: ISKCON, the Brahma Kumaris, the Ramakrishna Mission, and the organisations led by the disciples of Mata Amritananda, Sri Chinmoy, Shri Tathata, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and Shri Ram Chandra. For the first time in French history, different Hindu organisations presented themselves as united under the umbrella of being the “bearer of the spirit and essential values of the Vedas.” Although its activities are yet to be studied—for now it only offers a website, conferences, seminars, and publications—its creation reflects a political impulse: to reclaim some interest in “Indian spirituality” (a loose term) /p. 1012/, through the promotion of exclusively “Indian based organizations” that “respect individual freedoms, laws and regulations in force in France”.⁸

Quite different but not totally independent from the venue of Hindu gurus in France is the development of modern postural yoga in France. While some knowledge of yoga was present within spiritualist circles in the late nineteenth century, the first writings specifically on yoga were published in French around the first decade of the twentieth century. They were mainly confined to theosophical ideas and circles and had almost no practice associated with them. In the 1930s, under the impulse of the philosophical writer, journalist and founder of the journal *Psyché* Maryse Choisy (1903–1979), who had been initiated in yoga at Shantiniketan in 1922, publications on modern postural yoga, which were aimed at a broader circle, appeared in occultist and women’s magazines (Ceccomori 2001). In 1936, Felix Guyot, known as Constant Keirnez (1880–1960), who had learned some yoga in London, published the first French treatise on the subject. In the same year, the Romanian historian of religion, fiction writer, philosopher, and professor at the University of Chicago, Mircea Eliade, who had studied yoga under the supervision of Surendranath Dasgupta in Calcutta and Sivananda in Rishikesh, published his thesis on the history of yoga in French, and the first results of Dr. Therese Brosse’s scientific experimentation with yogīs in India were published upon her return to France. Mentioned may also be made here of Ali Cajzora (1903–1975?), an American dancer, who transmitted a very esoteric yoga in the south of France.

After World War II, the modern postural yoga scene became wider and more active in France and included different lineages, some with non-Indian origins. A student of Constant Keirnez, Lucien Ferrer (1901–1964), and later his own student, Roger Clerc (1908–1998), developed a

⁸ See their website, available at: <https://federationvediquedefrance.fr/la-charte/> (accessed 14 April 2019).

French school of yoga that was specifically addressed to “western practitioners” through the founding, first of the “Western academy of yoga” (1948) and then the “Académie de Yoga de l’énergie” (1978). Although none of them had first-hand knowledge of India, in their teachings and publications they mobilised concepts with both Chinese and Hindu origins. Later, other non-Indian yoga lineages grew in importance around figures such as Nil Hahoutoff (1900–1982) and Eva Ruchpaul (b. 1928).

Indian lineages of modern postural yoga have been present in France, first through Indians settling there and then through students of Indian yoga teachers. Mahesh Ghatradyal (1924–2007), an athlete from Karnataka who arrived in France in 1947 to compete in the student Olympic games, settled in Paris and taught yoga from 1950 onward. A student of Sivananda, the Belgian André Van Lysebeth (1919–2004), who has taught from 1963 onward, has gained fame in French-speaking countries through his publications, notably his *Yoga Self-Taught* (1965). Krishnamacharya’s (1888–1989) inspired form of yoga has been present mainly through the teaching of his sons, T. K. V. Desikachar (1938–2016), who travelled to France regularly from 1973 onward, and T. K. Shriharyam (1940–2017), who settled in Nice. Compared to their presence in Britain and the United States, Iyengar’s and Patthabhi Jois’ inspired forms of modern yoga had smaller following in France. It was only at the beginning of the twenty-first century that they started to grow larger. Bikram yoga and other forms pejoratively described as “American yogas” in France also started to grow during this period. On a small scale, the Kaivalyadhama Institute, established by Kuvalayananda (1883-1966) in Lonavla (Pune District) in 1924, has, through different teachers, gained some French followers since the late 1970s.

Presenting themselves as secular and addressing a non-Hindu public, this modern postural yoga does not share an exclusive link with Hinduism. It has integrated non-Indian systems of bodily practice (Singleton 2010), and its medieval roots (*haṭhayoga*) are loose when it comes to their theological background (Mallinson 2014; Mallinson and Singleton 2016). However, its transmission in France, notably within yoga teacher training schools, has often gone in tandem with the study of Hindu concepts and texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā* and, since the 1970s, Patañjali’s *Yogaśāstra*. The modern yoga groups have also provided a platform for different Swāmis to teach in France, notably through the yearly International Yoga Congress that is held in Zinal (Switzerland). Organised by the European Yoga Union (originally European Union of Yoga Federations, which was created in 1971 at the initiative of two French-speaking yoga teachers) since 1973, this congress has played an important role in gathering together non-Indian and Indian lineages of yoga, as well as secularised modern postural yoga and Indian gurus and/or representatives of different denominational Hindu groups. Hindu swamis, mainly belonging to the lineages of Swami Sivananda (1887–1963), taught there on a regular basis, while teachers of the Sahaj Marg (Ram Chandra Mission) (a non-profit organization and a spiritual movement registered in 1945 in India by Shri Ram Chandra [1899-1983] of Shajahanpur), Kundalini Yoga (created by the Punjabi Sikh born Yogi Bhajan (Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, 1929-2004)), or the Brahma Kumaris have, at times, been invited (Desmond 2007). These different invitations, however, have provoked tensions and debates, showing that, although the frontier between secularised forms of yoga and Hindu denominational groups can

be porous, an /p.1014/ effort was made, notably by the French, to build a secular yoga that was distant from a direct Hindu influence, and this came at the price of distancing it from India.

Conclusion

The specificity of the history and development of Hinduism in France is thus deeply linked to the particularities of French colonial history and the national political context regarding the management of religion and immigration issues. French Hinduism can also be considered relatively centralised since, just like the whole French population, the majority of the Hindu populations and temples are based in the Paris region. The La Chapelle area in Paris is by far the main centre of Hinduism in France in terms of religious, cultural, and economic activities, as well as in terms of visibility. Regarding ritual practices, Hinduism is deeply influenced by the Dravidian traditions since the Hindu groups that settled in France are mostly of Tamil origin, originating from South India and Sri Lanka. Moreover, most of the “Indo-French twice migrants”, who originate from the present or former overseas territories (Vietnam, Mascarene, and the Caribbean islands), are also of Tamil origin.

Concerning Hindu ideas, they entered France and influenced its intellectual life from the seventeenth century onward. This is also due to the country’s colonial history in South Asia, and the many travellers and missionaries who brought back accounts of the beliefs and practices of “the Hindus.” The early founding of Indologist centers in Paris, which taught Indian languages, actively translated some of the main Hindu texts into French, and formed generations of Indologists up to today, also played a significant role. However, Hindu ideas in France had a far greater impact through the work of non-academic scholars and spiritual seekers. With its roots in the nineteenth century, an idealising French discourse on India gained importance in the 1920s. Indian ideas, more specifically Hindu ones, have become a tool to express a wide range of aspirations, from a spiritual longing at the individual level to a profound and radical critic of the Western world. However, due to French history with the Church and the legal importance it gives to “congregations,” Hindu guru-based organisations have kept a rather low profile in France; a situation that contrasts sharply with Buddhist communities, which have settled in France in a more perennial way since the 1970s. Until now, these Hindu-based organisations have drawn small audiences that are mainly of non-Indian origin. In contrast, like in many parts of Europe and the United States, some Hindu concepts (*karma*, *cakra*, *guru*, *om*, etc.) have been integrated in popular culture and some practices, such as yoga and different kinds of meditation (*om*), have gained a wide and large audience within the French public. However, the success of these practices within France are the result of an inculturation process, driven by both French and Hindu personalities, that aims to secularise these different practices in order to universalise them. The recent unification of different Hindu-based organisations in France under the umbrella of the “Vedic Federation of France,” as well as the impact of their wish to recall the supposedly Indian origin of these practices, remains to be studied.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Catherine Servan-Schreiber and Denis Matringe for their valued help and suggestions about the history of Hindus and Hinduism in France.

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