



We are happy to announce that eleven years after introducing a formal request for Hinduism to be recognised by the Belgian Government and eight years after our formal request for a subsidy for Hindu Forum of Belgium, the Belgian Parliament has voted on 11 January, 2024, to grant the Hindu Forum of Belgium a subsidy, which is the first step towards recognition of Hinduism in Belgium.

As the oldest living and third largest religion on the planet, Hinduism has over a billion followers worldwide. Although the vast majority of Hindus live in South Asia (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, etc.), there are now millions of Hindus throughout the world due to migration and adoption of Hindu/Vedic spiritual traditions by millions of Westerners. With approximately three million Hindus (both of Asian and Western origin), Europe is no exception. And Belgium itself is home to approximately 20,000–25,000 Hindus of Asian origin and 15,000–20,000 Belgian or Western followers.

The Hindu Forum of Belgium (HFB) – a platform for Vedic spiritual traditions – was created in 2007 to represent the Hindu communities and organisations in Belgium and to work towards Hinduism's recognition by the Belgian Government. To this end, in 2013 the Forum submitted a request and a dossier to the Ministry of Justice, which accepted the proposal. Subsequent meetings with the Ministry of Justice's department overseeing religions ("Cultes") led to a request to the Minister of Justice in 2016 for a subsidy to fund the Forum's secretariat, so it could professionalise its work towards full recognition of Hinduism in Belgium. The HFB presented a budget of approximately € 74,000 for 2017 (which increased to € 83,000 for 2023), and Minister Koen Geens, after meeting HFB's leaders in 2017, promised that this subsidy would be granted soon. Unfortunately, the Government fell shortly after, so the subsidy was never granted.

After Minister Van Quickenborne took charge of the Ministry, HFB engaged with him and the new government to finalise the first step of recognition. The Minister promised that the subsidy would be granted and made available in early 2023. The HFB and all the Hindu communities and organisations in Belgium are, of course, delighted to learn that after many years of waiting, the subsidy has finally been voted upon by the Federal Parliament and that funds will be available this year. But above all, Hindu communities and organisations feel that the first step towards recognition has finally been achieved.

The Belgian State rightfully considers that religions and non-confessional philosophies contribute to its citizen's wellbeing, and hence it supports them. Of course, the Forum strongly feels that this laudable principle should be maintained, yet it also believes that the present system for implementing this principle needs



to better reflect Belgium's present religious demography. Also, it is in favour of more clearly establishing a legal framework for the recognition process and subsequent State funding.

Hinduism has been present in and positively contributed to Belgian Society for many decades in the form of meditation, yoga, vegetarianism, ayurveda, art, music, dance, cuisine, festivals, as well as by being active in business, science, education and medical settings, etc. By taking the first step towards recognition of Hinduism Belgium will become more multicultural and multireligious, thus reflecting a global trend. Of course, depending on the location, all religions are either in the minority or in the majority. Still, Belgium's gradual acknowledgement of both majority and minority religions as well as non-confessional philosophies is a sign of its ever-increasing inclusiveness.

The HFB is grateful that Belgium has made a very positive step towards recognising Hinduism, signifying recognition for the positive contributions the diverse Hindu communities make to Belgium. In the coming years, the Hindu Forum of Belgium will endeavour to increase its membership and representation and will furthermore emphasise training and establishing standards for Hindu spiritual counsellors; develop a study programme for teaching Hinduism in public schools; train chaplains to minister to prisons and hospitals; produce publications to present Hinduism to the Belgian leaders and society at large; organise events that introduce Hinduism to the Belgian public and authorities; actively engage in interfaith activities and projects, etc.

The Belgian Hindu communities and organisations sincerely hope that once they are ready, the Government will fully recognise Hinduism without delay and thus allow all the Belgian Hindus to feel fully accepted as a community with its own unique and positive contributions to society.

Martin Gurvich

Executive Director of Hindu Forum of Belgium

For more information: Martin Gurvich/Mahaprabhu Dasa, +32 498 54 58 38