

Hinduism

in Belgium

A journey
towards
recognition



The Hindu Forum of Belgium
A platform for Vedic spiritual traditions

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Welcome Message

Welcome to this issue of our magazine — a journey into the heart of Hinduism as it lives and thrives here in Belgium! This publication aims to introduce you to the diverse traditions within Hindu spirituality and explore how they positively contribute to our society.

In these pages, you will find an introduction to the foundational texts of Hinduism, an overview of the colorful festivals celebrated across Belgium, and insights into remarkable Belgian Indologists who

have helped deepen the understanding of this ancient tradition. Also, you will discover profiles of Hindu centers that serve as welcoming places for spiritual growth and cultural exchange.

We hope that this magazine provides you with a nuanced perspective on Hinduism, showcasing its diversity, depth, and positive impact on Belgian society. Enjoy reading, and may it inspire a deeper appreciation and understanding of Hinduism's presence and contributions in Belgium.

The Road to Rec

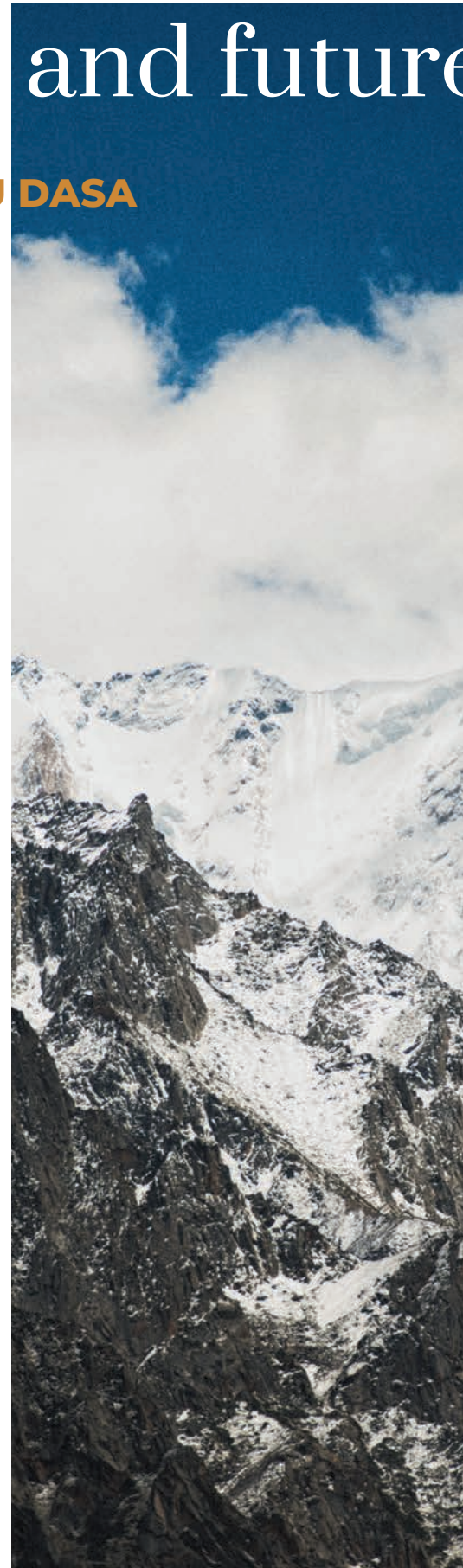
Hinduism's role and future

MARTIN GURVICH / MAHAPRABHU DASA

Governments of democratic societies that uphold human rights interact with religions in three important ways:

- 1 They guarantee their citizens the freedom to believe or not to believe in a particular faith/religion or philosophical/spiritual conviction. This right to freedom of conscience and belief is protected by major international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and the European Convention on Human Rights.
- 2 They protect the physical safety of their citizens irrespective of their faith or belief. This means that individuals are protected from any form of persecution, ensuring that no harm is tolerated based on one's faith or belief.
- 3 They acknowledge the social role and impact of various religions, beliefs, and philosophical convictions. While systems of interaction and support between governments and religious or philosophical communities vary by country, most nations provide some form of engagement or assistance to these groups.

Belgium is one of these countries and is a signatory to the aforementioned documents. This ensures



Recognition

e in Belgium



that the freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and philosophical conviction of its citizens are protected by the Belgian Constitution. Citizens belonging to various religious and philosophical communities are safeguarded from physical harm, damage and destruction of property, or perse-

cution. Moreover, Belgium acknowledges the positive contributions of both religions and nonconfessional philosophies to society. Consequently, many religious and philosophical communities receive formal support in several ways: salaries of spiritual counselors (such as priests, imams, rabbis) are covered; faith- and conviction-based education is offered in public schools; spiritual care is provided in hospitals, prisons, and military facilities; airtime is allocated on public radio and television; and places of worship and spiritual practice are maintained for all recognized communities. In essence, religion and nonconfessional philosophies are considered valuable and integral to the Belgian society, warranting generous support. The Hindu Forum of Belgium (HFB) believes that Belgium's approach to these issues is highly commendable.

However, the HFB also believes that the current system requires reform to better reflect today's world with its new religious demographics. It should be made more transparent and equitable, with clear legal procedures for the recognition of new religious or philosophical communities.

In this context, Hindu communities and organizations in Belgium founded the Hindu Forum of Belgium in 2007 to represent their interests and advocate for the official recognition of Hinduism. To advance this goal, HFB submitted an official request to the Ministry of Justice in 2013. While there were no formal procedures for accepting or rejecting such requests, HFB's request was not denied, and the organization frequently interacted with the "offices des cultes." In 2016, HFB sought the Ministry's support to subsidize its secretariat, aiming to enhance its efforts toward gaining full recognition

Hinduism has been present in Belgium since the late 1960s, brought from India by immigrants and later adopted by the Europeans.

for Hinduism. This move was seen as the Government's first step toward recognizing Hinduism. Following a lengthy process, a law was passed in January 2024 establishing the principle of a subsidy for the Hindu Forum of Belgium.

To mark the completion of the

first step in the recognition process, the HFB has produced this magazine in conjunction with an event to be held at the Royal Library of Belgium on 22 November 2024. This event will bring together political and religious leaders, media representatives, members of NGOs, etc., to learn about Hinduism, a major world religion, and its presence in Belgium.

As the world's third largest religion in terms of adherents and the oldest living religion, Hinduism offers valuable contributions both to the world and to Belgium. In an era plagued by hatred, racism, violence, bigotry, extremism, intolerance, divisiveness, increasing materialism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, etc., every religion, faith, or philosophical conviction has shared values and unique insights that can enrich society. Therefore, religions and nonconfessional philosophies should play a key role in promoting tolerance, inclusiveness, spirituality, social cohesion, and interfaith dialogue.

Hinduism has been present in Belgium since the late 1960s, brought by immigrants from India and adopted by Europeans interested in various Hindu and Vedic spiritual traditions. Since then, the number of adherents has grown to about 25,000 Belgian citizens or residents of South Asian origin (from countries such as Afghanistan, Bali, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mauritius, Nepal, Sri Lanka, etc.) and another 20,000 Europeans who follow a variety of Vedic spiritual traditions. They contribute to Belgian society in various areas, including business, culture, yoga, Ayurveda, vegetarianism, meditation, festivals, music, dance, and art, among others. We look forward to the day when the Belgian Parliament and Government fully

recognize Hinduism as a positive influence on Belgian society, allowing Hindus to be proud of their identity as Belgian Hindus in a country that recognizes their contributions and presence.

This magazine features articles designed to introduce the Belgian public to the diverse traditions of Hinduism and to the various Hindu organizations and communities in Belgium.

Finally, we are committed to these goals and to

raising awareness of Hinduism within Belgian society. By expanding our network, partnering with educational authorities, and collaborating with other religious and philosophical groups, we strive to contribute to a more unified and inclusive Belgium. We encourage anyone interested in our mission to join us in this important endeavor. Together, we can ensure that the rich traditions and values of Hinduism positively impact the future of our shared society.

The Hindu Forum of Belgium is committed to

- Expanding its network of member and affiliate organizations and communities;
- Collaborating with educational authorities, experts, and other faith communities to develop a Hinduism curriculum for public schools;
- Training spiritual counselors to serve the many followers of Hinduism in Belgium;
- Mapping all local centers where Hindu organizations and communities are active;
- Partnering with recognized religions and nonconfessional philosophies to promote dialogue and social cohesion while addressing divisiveness, intolerance, and extremism;
- Engaging in public discussions on significant ethical issues and dilemmas.

Hinduism

A brief introduction to the world's oldest living religion

DR. REMBERT LUTJEHARMS

Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and University of Oxford



Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam. There are an estimated 1.2 billion Hindus in the world today, and Hinduism is often said to be the oldest living religion. But it is also one of the world's most intimidating religions to approach. Hinduism can seem amorphous and overwhelmingly complex. It is not uncommon to hear that Hinduism has no founder, no central sacred text, no doctrines that all Hindus must hold to be considered Hindus. Some Hindus will argue that there is no conversion in Hinduism: one must be born a Hindu to be one. Others will argue that anyone can be a Hindu, or that Hinduism is universal. Many Hindus consider themselves to be monotheistic, and yet one of the elements that strikes the outsider first is the vastness of the Hindu pantheon. To confuse matters even more, some religious groups that are widely considered to be part of Hinduism argue that they are not Hindu at all, because none of their sacred texts use that term.

The meaning of the term “Hindu”

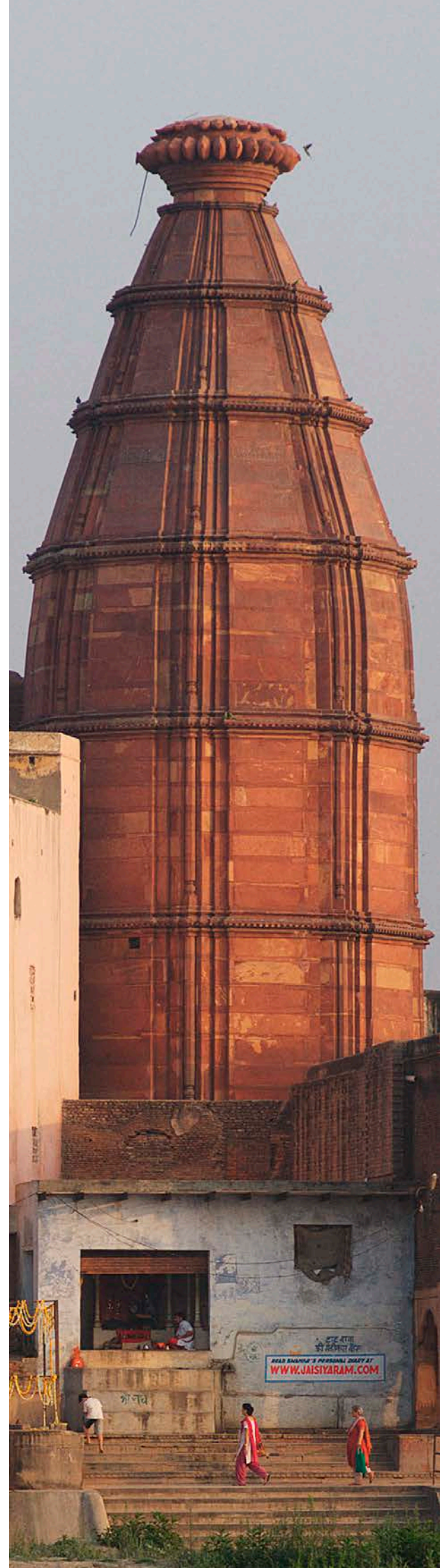
How do we make sense of all this? Perhaps a good place to start is with the origin of the term itself: Hindu. This is indeed a term that is not found in the most influential Hindu sacred texts, which are written in Sanskrit, the classical language of the Indian subcontinent. “Hindu” is not a Sanskrit word, but a Persian one. It is the term used by the ancient Persians

around the sixth century BC to refer to the river Indus, which originates in the western Himalayas of Tibet and flows southwest into the Arabian Sea, crossing what is now Pakistan. This river, known in Sanskrit as Sindhu, was known in Persian sources as Hindu and in ancient Greek as Indós (Ἰνδός) (from which we derive our Latin—and later English—name Indus). These two names came to signify not only the river itself but also the land beyond it and the people inhabiting it. Thus, “Hindu” simply means “Indian”—the former is derived from the Persian, the latter from the Greek. Originally, the term “Hindu” was not a religious designation, but referred to a geographic region. Moreover, it is a term used by outsiders, not by the people it now refers to, and in a language they do not speak. The oldest “Hindu” sacred texts, the Vedas, therefore do not use the term, and do not consider those who follow the Vedas to be Hindus.

How did it become a religious designation? Two millennia later, around the fourteenth century, the meaning of the term had shifted, and “Hindu” came to be used in a religious context. In large part, this was because the religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent had changed considerably. In addition to the many religious traditions indigenous to the subcontinent, Islam had now spread widely. Both Hindus and Muslims recognised their distinct religious cultures and used the term Hindu (i.e., “Indian”) to refer to the former in order to distinguish them from the latter. However, the term was used only in contrast to Islam. Hindu religious texts from this period do not use the term as a primary religious identification.

This changed under the British colonial rule of India. Whether the British were the dominant or even determining cause in this is debated, but there is no doubt that their interest in categorising their subjects at least strengthened that identification among Hindus, who increasingly began to regard themselves, among themselves, as Hindu. It was also during this period that the English term *Hinduism* emerged—a noun, not an adjective, denoting the ideology (-ism) or religion of the Hindus. As a result, Hinduism became recognised as one of the world’s major religions, though it remains quite distinct from the others.

The confusion we mentioned earlier arises when we think of Hinduism in the same way we view other religions. Christianity, for example, encompasses a







wide range of denominations, each quite diverse, yet all stem in some way—historically or spiritually—from the figure of Jesus, regarded as Christ. Hinduism too encompasses a wide array of traditions; however, it is a term applied retrospectively. It is not the starting point but rather a term used to make sense of a diversity that emerged over the centuries by acknowledging the many shared elements.

Over the centuries, a variety of religious traditions have emerged on the Indian subcontinent centred around a common set of texts, but each with its own individual sacred texts, lineages of teachers, and practices. Considered collectively, it would be very difficult to find a single characteristic—or even a set of characteristics—that *all* these traditions share and by which they are defined. But we can find family resemblances—characteristics that mark an extended family but not others, even if not all the individuals in that family possess all those traits or if no single characteristic is shared by all members. This is how the term “Hindu” came to be applied to these diverse religious communities.

Seen in this light, Hinduism is not particularly daunting to comprehend. While Hinduism *as a whole* lacks a founder, a single central sacred text, or a religious doctrine shared by all Hindus, this does not imply that *individual* Hindus or Hindu groups do not have those. For example, many Hindus, when asked about their principal sacred text, will have a ready answer, although this may differ from the answers given by other Hindus from different communities. Similarly, while many Hindus regard their religion as eternal, they will also readily admit that their particular faith was articulated or founded by a specific historical figure.

At the risk of oversimplification, I will now discuss three distinct forms of Hinduism: (1) the world-affirming way of *dharma*, (2) the desire for liberation (*mokṣa*), first expressed in the Upaniṣads, and (3) the devotional vision of the *bhakti* traditions. While far from exhaustive, these three forms are representative of the majority of Hindus, even if many Hindus will also mix these forms in various ways, as we will see.

Dharma: Ritual and social action

Dharma is a term for which there is no English equivalent. It has frequently been translated as “religion”, but also as “duty” and as “law”. While the concept of *dharma* contains elements of all three, it is much more than that. It is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *dhṛ*, “to uphold, to maintain”, and thus refers to those actions that are considered to uphold or sustain things in their nature and order. While the term *dharma* is not used in quite this sense in the Vedas, the most ancient Hindu sacred texts, the concept is developed from Vedic ideas.

The Vedas teach that there is an order (*ṛta*) to the world and that all things are interconnected. When individuals act responsibly in accordance with their place in this order, the world is, as it were, upheld. In the Vedic texts, the emphasis is primarily on ritual action, especially the Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*), in which offerings are made to the many deities these texts venerate.

In *Dharma-śāstra*, the classical Sanskrit treatises on *dharma*, the term is specifically used to refer to the social responsibilities of individuals that flow from their nature—and, in that sense, sustain them—but are also necessary to uphold both the social and cosmic order. *Dharma* sees the human person as fundamentally

relational: We are who we are through our relations with others, and as such we have a responsibility to all others. Integral to this vision is the idea that all people are not alike, and therefore their responsibilities are not alike. In those texts, then, the analysis of *dharma* focuses on the *dharma* of four distinct social classes (*varṇa*): (1) the *brāhmaṇa* or priests, (2) the *kṣatriya* or ruling class, (3) the *vaiśya* or the traders, and (4) the *śūdra* or the labourers. Each of these classes has a duty to contribute to the larger society in its own way. According to the *Dharma-śāstra*, one belongs to these classes by birth—we are who we are through our relationships with others, beginning with our relation to our parents. This is the origin of the notion that Hinduism knows no conversion.

Dharma is world-affirming. Its practices are understood to sustain the world — both cosmically and socially. Religiously, it is in part a sort of legal code (from which the concept of caste later develops), but also a ritual system. It involves the worship of many deities, but none that are transcendent to this world. In the Vedas, the gods and goddesses are primarily deities of the natural world — sun, wind, rain, dawn, etc. — over which they govern. They, too, are therefore part of the cosmic order (*ṛta*) of which we are a part. Those who follow *dharma* attain the realms of the gods at death, but they do not leave this world behind; they remain part of its order.

Mokṣa: Liberation from birth and death

Although *dharma* has defined Hindu society, most Hindu traditions have reacted to it in varying degrees. While acknowledging the validity of this perspective, they argue that it is superficial because it is not grounded in a proper understanding of the self. This is the critique of the Upaniṣads, a collection of philosophical texts that regard themselves to be the Vedānta, or “the ultimate conclusion (*anta*) of the Vedas”.

The central question of our lives, the Upaniṣads insist, should not be “What should I do?”— as in the ritual

The Vedas teach that there is an order (*ṛta*) to the world and that all things interconnect. When individuals act responsibly in accord with their place in this order, the world is, as it were, upheld.



tradition of the Vedas and the *Dharma-sāstra* — but rather “Who am I?” Seeking who we are in relation to the body is inadequate, and even identifying with the mind and its desires, thoughts, and knowledge is preliminary. The self (*ātman*) of each living being is neither the body nor the mind, but consciousness itself: We are aware of the body and, through the body, of the world around us, just as we are aware of our thoughts. While body and mind are ever-changing, consciousness itself remains constant and independent. This body we inhabit is not special, since the self has been reborn countless times and has thus identified with countless bodies that no longer exist. This perspective demands a complete reorientation.

First of all, ritual action becomes less important. As the Upaniṣads put it, the self “is not affected by what it has done or what it has not done” (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.22); “it does not become great by good actions or small by bad actions” (*Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 3.8). Ritual action belongs to the body and mind, and therefore only brings temporary results. Even the at-

tainment of heaven, the realm of the gods, is considered temporary, because it too will end with death, since it is still within this material realm. True immortality can only be attained by finding the immortal self.

The idea of the interconnectedness of all existence that the Vedas discuss is central here, too. According to the Upaniṣads, we are not just disconnected individuals but part of the great being that is *brahman*, from which everything emerges, by which everything is sustained, and to which everything ultimately returns. Thus, beyond all the gods and goddesses of this world, there exists a single supreme being, *brahman*, which is identified in the Upaniṣads with existence itself. This means that all that exists is *brahman*, and therefore to be truly true to one’s own nature—as the principles of *dharma* enjoin—one would also have to contemplate the self as rooted in this ground of all existence.

How this is understood varies. Some, such as the non-dualistic (*advaita*) schools inspired by the eighth-century theologian Śaṅkara, see *brahman* as the only reality, and all appearance of difference, such



as we experience now, as an illusion that can only be overcome by an awareness of *brahman*. For them, individuality is also an illusion and the self is divine; all the many gods are either illusory or temporary manifestations of *brahman*.

Other schools argue that, while everything is indeed part of *brahman*, all difference—including individuality—is not illusory. They understand *brahman* in theistic terms, as God. Each self is an individual, and the world is real, but neither has an existence separate from God. For them, all the gods are but different servants of this supreme deity, in charge of governing the different aspects of this world. Like us they are individual selves (*ātman*); the differences between us and the gods merely lies in the different bodies we have attained at birth according to our past actions (*karma*).

Whatever their exact understanding of *brahman*, both these traditions agree that the goal is to transcend this world and attain “liberation” (*mokṣa*), which can only be achieved through awareness of the true nature of the self and of the divine. Such traditions therefore emphasise contemplative practices, such as the practice of awareness (*jñāna*) and various forms of meditation (*dhyāna*), rather than ritual or social action — both of which arise from false understandings of the self. For some traditions, such practices must be accompanied by total renunciation: only by ceasing to act in accordance with our false identities, they argue, can we gain the liberating insight into our true nature. One must thus become an ascetic (*sādhu*) or a monk (*sannyāsin*) and thereby cease to act as much as is possible for an embodied being.

This is not the mainstream position, however: many Hindus would argue that there is a place for ritual and social action even in the pursuit of awareness of *brahman*. The *Bhagavad-gītā*, for example, one of the most influential Hindu sacred texts, teaches a kind of middle way: rather than externally renouncing the world, as ascetics do, one should practice inner renunciation, by acting without desire or attachment to the results of one’s actions.

Bhakti: love of God

The Upaniṣads set the tone for most Hindu traditions, even if many don’t directly engage with these texts. Their ideas shape most of Hindu thought, but there is one particular development that is especially important to note because of its distinct application of Upaniṣadic ideas and, even more so, because of its overwhelming prominence. This is the idea of *bhakti*, often translated as love or devotion.

As we have seen, some interpreters of the Upaniṣads saw *brahman* in theistic terms: for them *brahman* is God. All beings are part of God’s existence, and so the natural state of each self is “to share” in God—which is one of the meanings of the Sanskrit verbal root *bhaj*, from which the noun *bhakti* is derived. While the Upaniṣads themselves advocate mere awareness of *brahman*, some Vedāntic theologians, such as Rāmānuja (eleventh century) or Madhva (thirteenth century), argue that to know God is to love God. And to love is to serve the beloved. This is what is meant by *bhakti*.

The practice of *bhakti* takes many different forms. For some it is primarily a meditational practice in which one contemplates the qualities of God, but for most it involves the active service to the divine. The devotee sings the name of God, praises God and God’s devotees, and worships him. Such worship usually centres on the image (*mūrti*) of God, in the temple or at home, which is traditionally seen not as a symbolic representation of the divine—something that merely points to God—but rather as God himself, compassionately making himself accessible to his devotees in this form, once it has been properly consecrated. Such worship allows the devotee to develop a deeply personal loving relationship with the divine, which is its ultimate goal.

There are three main *bhakti* currents. Superficially, these are distinguished by which deity is identified with *brahman*, but historically and textually they represent three distinct currents of religious thought.

The oldest and dominant form of *bhakti* is deeply rooted in Vedāntic texts, such as the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad-gītā*, in which God is identified as Viṣṇu, who appears in many other forms, such as Kṛṣṇa or Rāma. These devotees are called Vaiṣṇavas. Prominent Vaiṣṇava teachers include Rāmānuja, Madhva, and Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (sixteenth century), the latter of whom inspired the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement.

But there are others who consider Śiva to be supreme. These are called Śaivas, and, historically at least, they have drawn on a very different set of texts, the Tantras. While all Vaiṣṇava traditions are devotional in nature, most Śaiva traditions are not; most emphasised ritual action or gnosis and did not consider *bhakti* to have any salvific power. But one dominant strand of Śaivism, the school known as Śaiva Siddhānta, became

profoundly devotional around the thirteenth century, and is now one of the most significant *bhakti* schools in southern India.

The third current is one in which God is seen to be utterly beyond form and representation. This current, represented by a teacher like Kabīr (fifteenth century), is a broad religious community that emerged about half a millennium ago, and is the product of the meeting of several influences: chiefly Vaiṣṇava devotion, but with some elements of more gnostic Hindu traditions, and finding echoes in Indian Sufi Islamic teachings. They teach radical love of God that abandons all conventional forms of religion, such as ritual, scripture, and scholastic theology, and instead centres on the singing of God's name.



The unity of Hinduism

As we have seen, there is considerable diversity within the traditions now considered “Hindu” — far more, indeed, than can be summarised in an essay as brief as this one. This is not to say, however, that the term is meaningless. As noted before, there is considerable continuity across these traditions, which often use similar theological texts or terminology but evaluate them very differently. There are good reasons why the term “Hindu” became useful in the context of the encounter with Islam half a millennium ago, because there are several aspects of Hindu thought and practice that allow Hindus—regardless of their mutual differences—to see themselves as belonging to the same religious community. I would like to highlight

two aspects here: (1) the inclusive nature of Hindu thought and (2) the idea of eligibility (*adhikāra*).

Inclusivism

One of the striking aspects of Hindu thought is its inclusivism: Other ideas are not rejected as false, but seen as partially true. There is a tendency to see one’s own views in those of others. This is made easier because Hindu traditions share a religious culture: Even when different sacred texts are prioritised, those texts see themselves as belonging to the same, very broad corpus. They engage with similar concepts and terminology, but those concepts are reinterpreted or evaluated differently. When differences do emerge, however, Hindu thinkers through the ages have tended





to include the other in their theology rather than to exclude it altogether. Vaiṣṇavas, for example, identify *brahman* with Viṣṇu, but will not deny the existence of Śiva, whom Śaivas consider supreme, nor would they demonise him. Rather, many Vaiṣṇavas honour Śiva as Viṣṇu's greatest devotee, and some, like the Vaiṣṇavas who follow Kṛṣṇa Caitanya, even argue that Śiva is in some sense God and in some sense not God—just as yoghurt is milk and yet is not milk.

But this inclusivism extends beyond subtle theological reasoning. As discussed earlier, the Upaniṣads critique Vedic ritualists' concerns yet see themselves as part of the Vedic canon, and a text like the *Bhagavad-gītā* can censure those seeking total renunciation, while advocating the importance of renunciation in action. Classical India developed a rich culture of philosophical debate, but such debate was supposed to lead to consensus rather than mere defeat: Participants were supposed to recognise the other's truth while holding true to their own.

Eligibility

The second element that gives meaning to the use of the term “Hindu” is the idea of “eligibility” (*adhikāra*). This is an ancient idea, first articulated in the context of Vedic ritual, that asks the basic question: Who is this for? Who is eligible for this? For example, Hindu ascetic texts that teach that liberation from the cycle of death can only be attained through total renunciation of the world will at the same time argue that not everyone can do this: Those who have not attained the detachment and spiritual insight necessary for such a radical lifestyle should not pursue it, because they are not (yet) eligible for it—theirs is a different religious path. Similarly, a popular devotional scripture such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which teaches that the pursuit of love of God is the only good in this world, also teaches (11.20.9) that as long as people have no faith in devotional practices and are not disinterested in worldly

gain, they should just pursue the conventional religious acts of the world of *dharma*.

In other words, while the possibility of conversion is recognised, there is no concept of coercion. Devotional Hindu traditions in particular often engage in proselytising, spreading their message of love while recognising that not everyone is receptive. The unfaithful, lamentable though they be, are not doomed or to be eradicated. They are simply ineligible: They have not yet attained the spiritual maturity to embrace this path. As the *Bhagavad-gītā* (3.26) puts it: “One should not disturb the understanding of the ignorant”.

This idea of eligibility is strengthened by the common Hindu understanding of rebirth. There is no final judgement at death. Instead, individuals are reborn again and again according to their actions (*karma*) until that cycle is broken. Hindu sacred texts usually exhort their readers to strive for the ultimate goal, but if that goal is not achieved before death, the journey continues in the next life.

Conclusion

There is considerable diversity within Hinduism because it refers to a family of religious traditions that have developed in dialogue with each other, each attempting to make sense of the Vedas and their legacy. While individual Hindus may hold very different ideas from other Hindus and debate points of theology or religious custom and practice, and while such debates may become quite heated, there is also a wider recognition of their shared religious culture. Though Hinduism as a whole lacks a single defining characteristic—whether theological idea, sacred text, religious practice, or religious figure—this does not mean that these elements are absent. In other words, rather than having a single centre, Hinduism has many, but none of them are isolated: each has been shaped, and continues to be shaped, by those surrounding it—their very nature thus reflecting one of its recurring teachings, that all is interconnected.

Hinduism in Belgium

Profiles of Hindu organizations

BHAKTIPRABHAVA SWAMI

ISKCON ANTWERP

The Antwerp branch of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was founded in the early 1980s, originally serving as a hub for book distribution. Over time, it developed into a preaching center located on the Amerikalei, where weekly Sunday temple programs were held. Many devotees underwent training, participating in missionary activities before moving on to other devotional responsibilities or personal commitments. The center played a key role in educating and guiding newcomers, helping them to become well-trained and knowledgeable Vaisnavas.

Community engagement and activities

ISKCON Antwerp has organized numerous activities that have had a lasting impact on the city's residents. Notably, the Food for Life initiative, active in the 1990s and early 2000s, provided free, high-quality lacto-vegetarian meals to the community. Although the program has scaled back, the center still provides at least two thousand free meals annually during the Ratha Yatra festival (chariot festival) and during the weekly Sunday programs and other events.

This initiative, along with the annual Ratha Yatra and the India Festival, has become a hallmark of ISKCON Antwerp's presence. These festivals draw thousands, including members of the Indian community, ambassadors, and representatives of various Hindu faith groups.

Currently located at Gloriantlaan in Antwerp Linkeroever, the temple is financially sustained by its congregation. Their monthly contributions support the temple's worship, services, and regular programs.



Educational outreach

Over the years, ISKCON Antwerp has actively promoted various educational initiatives, including school programs, events at congregational members' homes, seminars, and presentations by qualified speakers. The center has introduced Hinduism to schools across Belgium, and conducted numerous cooking classes, teaching both Indian and Western vegetarian cuisine.

Interfaith dialogue and spiritual guidance

ISKCON Antwerp plays a key role in promoting interfaith dialogue in the city. It is an active member of VZW Orbit and VZW Parel, organizations that represent a diverse group of religious and humanistic organizations. The temple also offers guidance to individuals and groups in the practice of *bhakti-yoga*, helping practitioners advance on their spiritual path.

For over 45 years, ISKCON Antwerp has regularly conducted *harinama*, or chanting Krishna's names, in the streets of Antwerp, usually once a month. The temple has distributed thousands of spiritual books and, during the month of Damodara (October/November), celebrates the Festival of Lights, with daily evening programs of prayers and offering lights to Damodara, a childhood form of Krishna.

Vision for the future

ISKCON Antwerp envisions continuing the distribution of books and making the teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada available to everyone. The temple aims to introduce the path of *bhakti* to the public in innovative ways, including seminars and educational programs tailored for various organizations. Part of its mission is to educate and guide individuals toward happier lives through *bhakti* practices.

A key component of ISKCON Antwerp's long-term vision is the establishment of a farm community near Antwerp, centered around cow protection and sustainable agriculture, set to begin within the next few years. This eco-farm will produce *ahimsa* milk, that is, milk sourced from cows that are cared for and never slaughtered, promoting a more compassionate and



sustainable lifestyle. Additionally, the center plans to revive the previously mentioned Food for Life program.

The center also offers Indian-style dance and music classes, including instruction on playing the *mridanga* (a traditional Indian drum). There are plans to resume yoga classes and to teach children devotional practices and knowledge through storytelling and educational activities.

Through these efforts, ISKCON Antwerp aims to enrich lives and promote the values of *bhakti* and spiritual growth within the wider community.

Contributions to the Hindu Forum

ISKCON Antwerp actively participates in the Hindu Forum, driven by the belief that Hindus in Belgium must unite and work together to form a strong community. This unity will play a key role in achieving greater recognition for the Hindu faith, allowing for greater participation in areas such as education, where the teaching of Hinduism in schools can be supported, and assistance can be provided to community members in need.

As a member of the Hindu Forum of Belgium, ISKCON Antwerp seeks to enhance the knowledge in the broader Hindu society, particularly for those whose faith is rooted more in cultural practices than in a deep understanding of their philosophical or religious traditions. This contribution strengthens both individual and collective spiritual growth within the Hindu community.

BRAHMA KUMARIS



BRAHMA KUMARIS

Belgium

Know yourself. Renew your spirit



A brief history of the Brahma Kumaris in Belgium

The Brahma Kumaris, a spiritual organization originating in India, established a presence in Belgium in the late 20th century. Founded in 1936 by Lekhraj Kripalani in Hyderabad, Sindh (now in Pakistan), the Brahma Kumaris expanded internationally with a mission to promote spiritual awareness, meditation practices, and values-based education.

In Belgium, the first meditation center was opened

in 1977 in Kortrijk, where a small community of individuals began practicing Raja Yoga meditation, a core practice of the Brahma Kumaris. Over time, additional centers were established, allowing the organization to reach more parts of the country. The primary objectives of the Brahma Kumaris in Belgium mirror those of the global organization, focusing on inner peace, personal transformation, and world service through spiritual education. All the activities of the Brahma Kumaris are offered free of charge as a community service, welcoming all to spiritual growth.

Key accomplishments of the Brahma Kumaris in Belgium

Over the years, the Brahma Kumaris in Belgium have made significant contributions to personal and social transformation:

Establishment of meditation centers

Multiple centers have been established in major cities, such as Brussels and Antwerp, to offer Raja Yoga meditation courses, workshops, and spiritual education to individuals seeking inner peace.

Interfaith and intercultural dialogue

The Brahma Kumaris (Belgium) have been actively involved in interfaith dialogues and partnerships with various cultural organizations to promote understanding and harmony among diverse communities.

Environmental and sustainability initiatives

The Brahma Kumaris organization worldwide has been deeply involved in advocating for sustainable living. In Belgium, it has organized workshops and initiatives that promote eco-friendly practices, conscious consumption, and spiritual solutions to environmental challenges.

Social programs and community outreach

The Brahma Kumaris in Belgium have implemented community programs to support mental health, stress management, and inner well-being through meditation. Their outreach programs are offered to schools, corporate institutions, and local communities.

Future vision for the Brahma Kumaris in Belgium

Looking ahead, the Brahma Kumaris in Belgium aim to expand their reach and impact:

Broader outreach and digital platforms

They plan to expand their digital presence to connect with younger generations and those unable to visit physical meditation centers. Their vision includes online courses, virtual workshops, and social media engagement.

Sustainability and social impact

Building on their commitments to sustainable living, the Brahma Kumaris in Belgium seek to intensify their efforts in environmental awareness. This includes collaborating with local green organizations and advocating for spiritual approaches to climate change solutions.

Promoting inner leadership

Another area of focus is leadership development, with programs designed to foster values-based leadership among individuals across various sectors of society.

The role of the Brahma Kumaris in the Hindu Forum Belgium

The Brahma Kumaris joined the Hindu Forum Belgium as part of their commitment to fostering spiritual unity and promoting shared values within the Hindu community. While the Brahma Kumaris is a spiritual movement with a unique identity, it shares many philosophical foundations with Hinduism, including the concepts of *karma*, *dharma*, and the cycle of time.

By joining the Hindu Forum, the Brahma Kumaris can actively engage in interfaith dialogue, promote mutual respect among diverse Hindu organizations, and represent the spiritual aspect of Hinduism in broader discussions on religion and society in Belgium. Through sharing its expertise in meditation and spiritual education, the organization also contributes to conversations on Hindu culture and its relevance within modern Belgian society. This partnership helps to strengthen cooperation on social, cultural, and environmental issues.



NAMASKAR BRUSSELS

Introduction

Namaskar is dedicated to promoting Hindu culture and began its activities in Brussels in the early 2000s. Our primary objective was to reunite Mauritians and help them maintain a strong connection to their cultural roots.

Mission and objectives

Recognizing that integration into Belgian society had gradually distanced the Mauritian youth from their cultural roots, Namaskar specifically sought to reach out to this demographic. It also sought to support families in times of need, including organizing prayers for the deceased. Its overarching message is one of tolerance and harmony, achieved by appreciating other cultures while sharing our own Mauritian religious practices.

Cultural preservation and multiculturalism

Namaskar preserves and promotes the Mauritian Hindu culture while embracing and celebrating diversity within a multicultural context; it aims to enrich Belgium's diverse cultural landscape. Namaskar emphasizes that Hinduism transcends its Indian origins, with the unique Mauritian religious culture illustrating how Hinduism can be experienced globally. This global perspective is reflected in the various forms Hinduism takes in different countries, including Mauritius and Suriname.

Activities and community engagement

Initially, our focus was on organizing significant cultural events such as Durga Puja, Diwali, and Maha-shivratri celebrations, alongside various other cultural activities.

< G. L. N. Simha, *Ardhanarishvara*, 2007, pigments on paper, 59 x 45 cm. (Courtesy of MOSA)

With a community of around 120 members, we soon recognized the need

for a dedicated meeting space to better accommodate and serve them.

Funding and legal structure

To sustain our activities and hire a priest to help the younger generation reconnect with their cultural roots, we sought funding through subsidies. Establishing a legal structure and partnering with organizations that share our objectives became essential. Consequently, Namaskar played an active role in founding the Belgian Hindu Forum, further solidifying our commitment to promoting and preserving the rich cultural heritage of Hinduism in Belgium.



< Drdha Vrata Gorrick, *Hannuman*, 2003, pencil on paper, 45 x 35 cm. (Courtesy of MOSA)

BRUSSELS MANDIR

History of the Brussels Mandir

The Indian Cultural Centre (ICC), known as the Brussels Mandir, serves as a vital hub for Hindu worship and cultural activities in Belgium's capital. The ICC has roots that stretch back nearly three decades, when devoted community members organized regular Jagrata Navratri events (night-long gatherings with bhajans and prayers to Goddess Durga) in local school halls throughout Brussels. Over time, the growing need for a permanent cultural and spiritual space inspired the formation of the ICC.

In 2010, the Indian Cultural Centre ASBL was formally established after years of grassroots efforts, during which community members went door-to-door, shop-to-shop, tirelessly seeking donations. This immense commitment led to the purchase of the current property and the inauguration of the Brussels Mandir in February 2012. The temple is more than just a structure; it embodies the collective hard work, dedication, and spiritual aspirations of the community, built on the contributions of volunteers, trustees, and supporters who continue to uphold this vision.

Today, the Brussels Mandir remains a vibrant spiritual and cultural center, welcoming all who respect Hindu traditions. It is sustained by a dedicated team, including twelve trustees who are actively involved.

Key contributions and activities

Establishing a place for worship and cultural exchange

The Brussels Mandir provides a sacred space for Hindus in Belgium to practice their faith, engage in traditional rituals, and connect with their spiritual heritage. Regular services such as *pujas*, *bhajans*, and discourses create a lively atmosphere that attracts devotees from diverse backgrounds. Importantly, the Mandir opens its doors to all, regardless of race or background. Many Belgian schools—both French- and Flemish-speaking—visit

the temple for educational tours, offering students a deeper understanding of Hinduism beyond what is taught in textbooks.

Community events and celebrations

The temple serves as the focal point for celebrating major Hindu festivals, including Diwali, Holi, Navaratri, and Ganesh Chaturthi. About twenty festivals are celebrated each year, ensuring that important cultural and religious events are honored with the appropriate reverence. The Sunday program, a weekly gathering open to all, features satsang (spiritual discourse), *kirtan* (devotional singing), and arati (ritual of light), and food distribution, providing both spiritual nourishment and a strong sense of community.

Youth and family engagement

One of ICC's primary goals is to connect younger generations with their cultural roots, particularly those who have not had the opportunity to visit India. Special programs, such as the Independence Day celebrations on August 15th, feature activities like drawing competitions, cultural performances, and discussions about Indian heritage. These events aim to engage children and help them understand their cultural identity, ensuring that the values and traditions of Hinduism are passed on to the next generation.

Future vision for the Brussels Mandir

Enhancing cultural roots for future generations

The future vision for the Brussels Mandir is to grow as a center that nurtures spiritual and cultural connections within

the community. One of the main goals is to ensure that younger community members stay connected to with their heritage. For many children born and raised in Belgium, the temple offers an opportunity to experience Indian culture firsthand and to help bridge the gap in understanding their roots.

Growth and facilities expansion

The temple aims to grow both in size and in influence. There are plans to expand the current facilities to accommodate the increasing number of devotees and to offer more services such as weddings, naming ceremonies, and other life-cycle events. The goal is to ensure that every visitor's experience is uplifting and creates lasting memories and a sense of belonging.

Interfaith dialogue and social initiatives

The Mandir also aims to play a more active role in promoting cultural integration and interfaith dialogue, contributing to peaceful coexistence within Belgium's multicultural society.

Brussels Mandir and the Hindu Forum of Belgium

The Brussels Mandir is a member of the Hindu Forum of Belgium. The decision to join the Forum was primarily driven by the need for greater recognition of Hinduism in Belgium. By joining a collective that advocates for Hindu interests, ICC aims to ensure that Hindu temples and cultural organizations across the country receive formal recognition.

The Forum provides a platform for dialogue with the Belgian government and works to secure recognition that benefits Hindu temples and individuals alike. The Brussels Mandir actively contributes to the Forum by offering guidance, organizing cultural programs, and supporting community initiatives. This collaboration helps ensure that the Hindu community in Belgium remains united, engaged, and empowered to positively contribute to Belgian society.



CENTER FOR BHAKTI-YOGA BRUSSELS

Establishment

The Center for Bhakti-Yoga (CBY) was officially founded on July 1, 2004, in a residential area of Schaerbeek, Brussels. It later moved closer to the city center and has been operating for over a decade in Etterbeek, near the European Quarter.

Mission

CBY's mission is to provide an inviting space for local practitioners of *bhakti-yoga*, an ancient and revered form of devotional yoga from India, to gather, discuss, and deepen their spiritual practice. The center emphasizes building a supportive community of practitioners and introducing newcomers to Vaisnava culture and religion.

Objectives

PROMOTE the practice of *bhakti-yoga* as a path for spiritual growth and self-realization.

CREATE a welcoming space where people from diverse backgrounds can come together in unity through shared Vaisnava spiritual and cultural experiences.

COLLABORATE with organizations such as the Hindu Forum to promote and gain recognition for Hinduism on European and national levels.

REPRESENT Vaisnava culture by providing vegetarian meals, highlighting its rich culinary traditions to the Brussels community.

Programs and language diversity

In its early years, CBY offered programs primarily in French. As the Center relocated downtown and the

community grew more diverse, participants from Indian, Russian, and other backgrounds began attending. Currently, weekly meetings are held in English, with simultaneous translation often available in French and Russian as needed.

Cultural and religious involvement

For many, CBY serves as their introduction to Vaisnava Hinduism. Through its close collaboration with the Hindu Forum, it plays a vital role in promoting Hinduism and increasing its appreciation on both European and national levels. CBY emphasizes the philosophical and devotional aspects of Vaisnava culture and offers a platform for religious discussion, learning, and practice. Essential to its educational role are seminars, workshops, and courses on *krishna-bhakti*, along with organizing of festivals and vegetarian cooking classes within the broader framework of Hinduism.

Community outreach and service

CBY extends its spiritual mission into the community through active outreach, preparing and distributing hundreds of vegetarian meals each week to various organizations and individuals throughout the Brussels capital region. This initiative demonstrates the Center's commitment to the service-oriented principles of *bhakti-yoga*. Additionally, CBY assists many families of Indian origin by conducting ceremonies and customized programs in their homes, helping to preserve religious and cultural traditions.

Vision

CBY envisions a welcoming and inclusive environment where people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds can cultivate friendship, tolerance, mutual appreciation, and peace through the joyful devotional practice of *krishna-bhakti*. This vision complements the Center's efforts to provide a platform for the Hindu Forum to promote unity within the diversity of Hinduism.



BHAKTIVEDANTA COLLEGE



BHAKTIVEDANTA COLLEGE

A short history of Bhaktivedanta College

Founded in 2002 in Durbuy, Belgium, Bhaktivedanta College was inspired by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). The College was established to provide formal education rooted in Vaisnava (Krishna-centered) theology and philosophy, blending traditional scriptural studies with a modern academic approach.

Bhaktivedanta College's curriculum is designed to offer students a broad understanding of both spiritual and secular subjects. It aims to equip students with skills in leadership, teaching, and personal development while fostering their spiritual growth.

Achievements of Bhaktivedanta College over the years

Bhaktivedanta College has garnered recognition for its academic excellence and has expanded its curriculum to include various accredited undergraduate and other educational programs in theology, philosophy, and religious studies. The college also offers courses in yoga and *kirtan* as well as spiritual retreats.

Since the early 2000s, the College has developed partnerships with accredited universities, such as the University of Chester (UK), allowing students to earn internationally recognized degrees. The College has also hosted academic conferences, published scholarly works in the field of Hindu studies, and contributed to the global dialogue on religion and spirituality.





By integrating academic, vocational, and spiritual education, Bhaktivedanta College offers holistic programs that serve both the Hindu community and non-Hindu audiences interested in learning about Hinduism.

The College has cultivated a vibrant student community that provides a well-rounded educational experience that includes the practical application of devotional practices, community service, and leadership training. Through its alumni — some of whom hold key positions within ISKCON and other spiritual organizations — Bhaktivedanta College has made a significant impact on the global Vaisnava community.

Future vision for Bhaktivedanta College

Looking ahead, Bhaktivedanta College envisions expanding its academic offerings by including more interdisciplinary studies that integrate traditional Vaisnava wisdom with contemporary issues such as sustainability, mental health, and ethical leadership. The College plans to increase its research output, become a leading institution in Hindu studies, and contribute to global academic discourses on religion, ethics, and spirituality.

The College is also focused on expanding its online programs and outreach initiatives to make its teach-

ings accessible to a global audience. As the demand for spiritual education increases in today's rapidly changing world, Bhaktivedanta College strives to be at the forefront, providing a balanced education that cultivates both intellectual and spiritual development.

Bhaktivedanta College's membership in the Hindu Forum

Bhaktivedanta College joined the Hindu Forum to align itself with the wider Hindu community and contribute to the collective representation of Hindu values in global and European contexts. Through its membership, the College seeks to strengthen its ties with other Hindu organizations and share its educational and spiritual resources.

As a member, Bhaktivedanta College promotes interfaith dialogue, advocates for the values of peace, compassion, and mutual respect, and provides expertise in Hindu theology and practice. It also helps to represent the interests of the Vaisnava tradition within the wider Hindu framework, ensuring that its unique teachings are included in broader conversations about Hinduism in the modern world. The College's contributions to the Forum help advance Hindu education and cultural preservation efforts across Europe.

DOMAINE DE RADHADESH





History and establishment

Radhadesh is a branch of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a global religious movement rooted in Chaitanya Vaisnavism, a Hindu tradition from India. It follows the teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and represents a spiritual lineage passed down through a succession of spiritual teachers known as a *parampara*. This lineage belongs to the four bona fide Vaisnava *sampradayas* that trace back to Sri Krishna, regarded as the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Radhadesh teaches how to integrate *bhakti-yoga*, the yoga of devotion, into both family and professional life while also offering opportunities to pursue monasticism.

The history of Radhadesh dates back to the late 1970s when Dutch devotees purchased the Radhadesh castle in 1979. The first challenge was to restore the medieval castle. By 1980, deities were moved into a temporary temple room on the first floor. The restoration and transformation of the castle took many years and continues to this day.

During the 1980s, a communication gap emerged between the largely Dutch-speaking devotees and the French-speaking local population, leading to tensions. Efforts to bridge this gap began in the 1990s, and over time, relations have improved through the dedicated public relations efforts of the devotees.

Radhadesh soon became a popular tourist destination. Tourist buses regularly visited for guided tours, and facilities such as a boutique, restaurant, and art museum were established. These activities, along with visits from school groups, provided a steady source of income.

Achievements

Radhadesh:

INTRODUCED Vaisnavism, a major branch of Hinduism, to the general public through guided tours, seminars, and yoga classes, and over the years, became a spiritual sanctuary for practitioners of *bhakti-yoga* in Europe, including Indian expatriates.

BECAME a popular tourist attraction in the Ardennes region.

PROMOTES interreligious dialogue and welcomes visits from nuns, monks, and representatives of other faiths.

SERVES as a pilgrimage site for Hindus, particularly from the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany, and surrounding areas.

HOSTS major festivals such as Rama Navami, Holi, Diwali, Gaura Purnima, and Janmastami, attracting over 5,000 visitors, including diplomats and ambassadors.

EXHIBITS Indian art, including sculptures, ancient deities, paintings, and poetry, significantly contributing to the cultural heritage.

SET an example of cow protection with a recently built *ghosala* (cow shelter).

EMBRACES permaculture, which promotes self-sufficient ecosystems in harmony with nature.

PROMOTES *krishna-bhakti*, or pure devotional service to God, helping visitors cultivate a relationship with the divine through *bhakti-yoga*, leading to inner peace and happiness.

DISTRIBUTES thousands of spiritual books and regularly organizes public *kirtans* (chanting) attended by hundreds of people.

Additionally, the medieval castle has been fully restored, a guesthouse with many rooms was built, and a road was constructed to connect the project to the main road.



Illegible text in a framed inscription on the right wall.



Radhadesh is recognized as a center for spiritual education in Vaisnavism. It offers training in Vaisnava philosophy and a lifestyle based on the teachings of the *Bhagavad-gita* and other Vedic scriptures.

taught is mantra meditation, which focuses on chanting of God's holy names, particularly the Hare Krishna mantra. This practice, known as the *yuga-dharma* (the spiritual practice of the age), is seen as a powerful way to purify one's heart of lust, anger, and greed. Through *sankirtan* (group chanting in public), the holy names become accessible to all, making God relevant in everyone's life.

The uniqueness of Radhadesh

Radhadesh is uniquely appealing, especially for Indian visitors to Belgium and neighboring countries, combining a medieval castle with a Vedic temple. This unique blend provides Indian expatriates a sense of home and cultural connection, inspiring them with the presence of their native culture in Wallonia. It also encourages them to see Westerners actively embracing and practicing their traditions.

Spiritual education

Since its inception, Radhadesh has been recognized as a center for spiritual education in Vaisnavism. It offers training in Vaisnava philosophy and lifestyle based on the teachings of the *Bhagavad-gita* and other Vedic scriptures. Teachers provide instruction in mantra meditation, deity worship, and congregational training, helping members deepen their practice.

Radhadesh encourages engagement in the *varnasrama* system, which aligns one's service with one's psycho-physical nature, which promotes contentment and reduces attachment to material results. Spiritual education aims to provide peace and harmony, assisting individuals in connecting with their true identity in a God-conscious atmosphere. A key practice

Radhadesh and the Hindu Forum

As a member of the Hindu Forum, Radhadesh plays a crucial role in representing Vaisnavism, the personalistic branch of Hinduism. It provides a balanced perspective in discussions, particularly by contrasting the non-dualistic (Advaita) views of Sankara, which emphasize an impersonal Absolute Truth. Gaudiya Vaisnavism, practiced at Radhadesh, maintains a clear distinction between the devotee and a personal God, offering a rich, theistic tradition within the broader spectrum of Hinduism.

Through ISKCON, Radhadesh provides a strong philosophical foundation and traditional practices that complement and enhance other Hindu traditions that focus more on cultural and ritual aspects.











SWAMINARAYAN TEMPLE ANTWERP



BENGALI COMMUNITY BRUSSELS







Celebrating Hindu Festivals: Tradition and Community

MAHABHAVA DASA

Every year, Belgium hosts a variety of Hindu festivals that attract large crowds, both for worship and for joyous celebrations with friends and family. Among these events, seven festivals stand out and offer unique cultural experiences that bring communities together. Let's explore these vibrant festivals and how they are celebrated across Belgium.

MAHA SHIVARATRI: HONORING LORD SHIVA

Maha Shivaratri ("The great night of Shiva"), usually celebrated in February or March, is an auspicious festival dedicated to Lord Shiva. Devotees fast and pray throughout the night, as it is said that sincere worship on Shivaratri brings inner peace and blessings. Temples resonate with chants of *om namah shivaya*, and rituals include bathing the Shiva *linga* (a rounded, pillar-like stone resting in a circular base) with milk, honey, and water, symbolizing purification.

In Belgium, Maha Shivaratri is celebrated in various temples. Prayers throughout the night create a contemplative and spiritual atmosphere. Though

more subdued than other festivals, Shivaratri's focus on inner devotion and discipline resonates with Belgians interested in meditation and spirituality.

Five things to know about Maha Shivaratri

- 1 Maha Shivaratri, "The great night of Shiva," marks the transformative power of Shiva as winter ends and spring begins.
- 2 The festival celebrates Shiva's cosmic dance, which represents the cyclical renewal of the universe.
- 3 Shiva's act of drinking poison to save the world inspires devotees to pray for resilience.
- 4 Shiva and Parvati's union on this day represents the balance of masculine and feminine energies in creation.
- 5 Observances include fasting, meditation, and worship, with some communities celebrating for over two weeks with family rituals.

Prasanta Dasa, *Shiva*, 2014, oil on canvas, 80 x 70 cm (Courtesy of MOSA) >







HOLI: A COLORFUL SPRING CELEBRATION

Holi, the “Festival of Colors,” celebrates the arrival of spring. Known for its exuberant play with colored powders, Holi breaks down social barriers as people of all ages and backgrounds smear each other with vibrant hues. Traditionally, Holi begins with a bonfire the night before, which symbolizes the burning of the demoness Holika, and continues with a joyful day of throwing colored powder, music, and dance.

In Belgium, Holi celebrations are gaining popularity, with large gatherings at the Domaine de Radhadesh. These events include the traditional bonfire and color play, accompanied by music and dance. Food stalls offer snacks like gujiya (sweet fried dumplings) and samosas (spiced potato-filled pastries), adding a taste of Indian cuisine and culture. The joyous atmosphere of Holi in Belgium reflects its universal message of harmony and renewal, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds. The festival has become a vibrant occasion for people of all ages.



Five things to know about Holi

- 1 Known as the “Festival of Colors,” Holi is celebrated on the full moon of Phalguna (the twelfth month of the Hindu lunar calendar, usually between February and March).
- 2 The festival commemorates the story of Prahlada and Holika, in which Prahlada, a devoted follower of Vishnu, survives a fiery attempt on his life by his aunt Holika. The story symbolizes the triumph of devotion, humility, and resilience.
- 3 Holi also celebrates the love between Radha and Krishna, emphasizing friendship, unity, and equality.
- 4 Holi marks the beginning of the spring harvest and is a time of renewal, leaving behind negative habits as winter ends.
- 5 Holi traditions vary worldwide, with celebrations ranging from a single afternoon to a vibrant 40-day festival in some regions.



RATHA YATRA: THE CHARIOT FESTIVAL

Ratha Yatra is one of the most anticipated Hindu festivals in the world. It celebrates the annual journey of Lord Jagannath, a form of Krishna, along with his brother Baladeva and sister Subhadra, in massive chariots. Devotees pull these decorated chariots through the streets, and thus the deities spread their blessings by visiting the public rather than the public visiting them in the temple. The event signifies community unity, as everyone, regardless of status, is encouraged to participate in pulling the chariots and joining in the festivities.

In Belgium, the Ratha Yatra is prominently celebrated in Antwerp, attracting devotees and onlookers alike. Organized by Hindu communities and supported by the local authorities, the chariots are paraded through the streets with lively fanfare. The festival includes *kirtan* (devotional singing), dancing, and the distribution of *prasadam* (sanctified food). Food stalls offer vegetarian dishes that reflect the spirit of sharing, making Ratha Yatra an accessible and festive occasion for all. This unique procession, with its colorful chariots and joyous atmosphere, offers Belgians a window into Hindu devotional practices and strengthens cultural bonds in the community.



Rabindra Mahapatra, *Puri Rathayatra*, pigments on treated cloth, 122 x 246 cm (Courtesy of MOSA)





Five things to know about Ratha Yatra

- 1 In India, Ratha Yatra involves pulling deities Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra on chariots from the Jagannatha temple to the Gundica temple in Puri.
- 2 Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra represent Krishna and his siblings in a state of love and longing for Krishna's childhood home, Vrindavan.
- 3 The festival's spiritual significance lies in Krishna's desire to return to Vrindavan and strengthen his bond with devotees.
- 4 The unfinished attempt to carve the deity forms of Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra was done under divine guidance after being commissioned by King Indradyumna.
- 5 The chariot procession is so revered that it inspired the English word "juggernaut," which indicates an unstoppable, powerful force.



GANESH CHATURTHI: WELCOMING THE ELEPHANT-HEADED GOD

Ganesh Chaturthi celebrates Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity of wisdom, prosperity, and the remover of obstacles. Traditionally held in August or September, this festival begins with devotees bringing home clay representations of Ganesha, inviting the god's presence in their lives. The representation is then worshipped through daily prayers, hymns, and offerings, which creates a joyful atmosphere that unites families and communities. The celebration ends with the ritual immersion of the representation in water, marking his return to the divine realm and the cycle of creation and dissolution.

In Belgium, Ganesh Chaturthi brings together the Hindu community and curious visitors who join in the celebration's warmth. Temples like the Indian Cultural Center (ICC) in Brussels organize ceremonies that include traditional *puja* (worship rituals) and conclude with the immersion mentioned before. Food stalls offer traditional sweets such as modak, said to be Ganesha's favorite, and the festival often features live music and dance performances that appeal to

people of all backgrounds. This open approach allows Belgians to learn about and participate in Hindu culture, creating connections across religious lines and encouraging mutual respect.

Five things to know about Ganesh Chaturthi

- 1 Ganesh Chaturthi honors Lord Ganesha's visit to Earth and represents life's cycles and the removal of obstacles.
- 2 Children are especially drawn to Lord Ganesha for his playful stories and unique appearance.
- 3 Brings individuals and communities together to celebrate through processions, cultural events, and shared meals, creating a sense of unity and joy among participants.
- 4 Ganesh Chaturthi is widely celebrated across India and globally.
- 5 Bollywood celebrities engage with Ganesh Chaturthi through social media greetings and public appearances.

Prasanta Dasa, *Ganesha*, 2014, oil on canvas, 90 x 60 cm (Courtesy of MOSA) >





JANMASHTAMI: LORD KRISHNA'S BIRTHDAY

Janmashtami celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna, who is revered for his divine playfulness and wisdom. This festival is marked by fasting, singing devotional songs, and re-enactment of scenes from Krishna's childhood. Midnight, the hour of Krishna's birth, is the highlight, with joyous chants of "Hare Krishna" filling temples and homes.

In Belgium, Janmashtami draws thousands of devotees and curious visitors to Radhadesh, a Gaudiya Vaisnava temple in Durbuy. The celebration includes bhajans (devotional songs), dance performances, and dramatic plays depicting Krishna's life. Food stalls offer traditional vegetarian meals and invite visitors to experience the flavors of Hindu culture. The midnight arati (ritual offering of light) is particularly moving, as it marks the divine moment of Krishna's arrival. This event has grown to become a major cultural attraction in the Benelux, inviting people of all backgrounds to experience the richness of Hindu traditions.

Five things to know about Janmashtami

- 1 Janmashtami celebrates the birth of Sri Krishna with midnight prayers marking the exact time of his birth.
- 2 In the Dahi Handi tradition, groups form human pyramids to reach and break a pot of curd, re-enacting Krishna's childhood mischief.
- 3 Fasting and feasting go hand in hand, as devotees observe a fast until midnight and break it with sweets and traditional foods in Krishna's honor.
- 4 In some regions, children dress up as Krishna and Radha and participate in playful competitions and re-enactments of Krishna's childhood adventures, adding charm to the festivities.
- 5 Janmashtami is celebrated worldwide, with temples and communities hosting elaborate events, especially at major centers of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness).



DURGA PUJA: HONORING THE DIVINE MOTHER

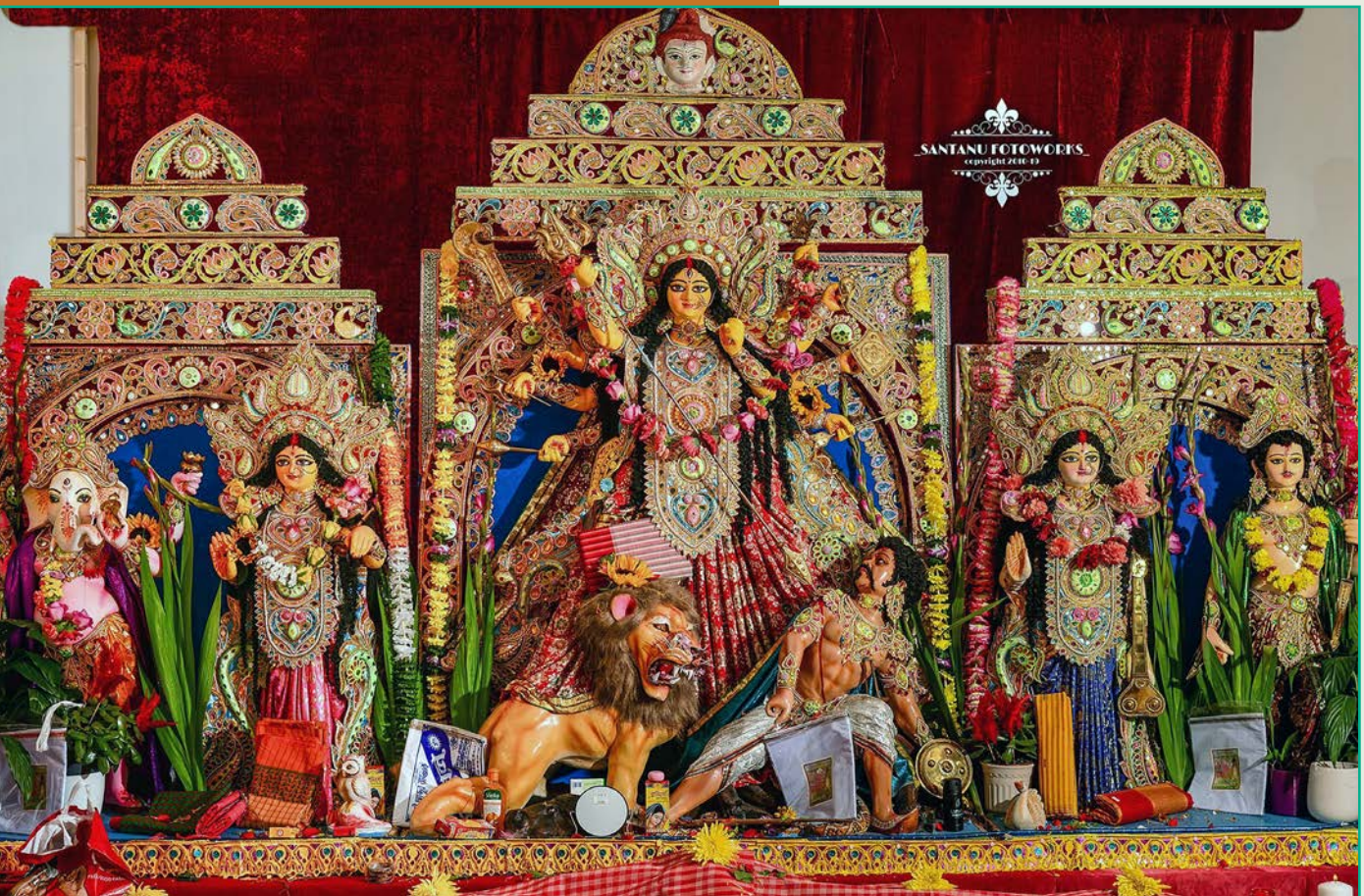
Durga Puja celebrates the victory of goddess Durga over the buffalo demon Mahishasura, reflecting the triumph of good over evil. This vibrant festival includes prayers, music, and dance dedicated to Durga, the embodiment of divine feminine power. In traditional celebrations, beautifully crafted forms of Durga are worshipped before being immersed in water at the end of the festival.

In Belgium, Durga Puja is celebrated at several Hindu temples where devotees gather to worship and celebrate. Events include daily *aratis* and *bhajans*, while food stalls offer traditional Bengali dishes such as *khichdi* (a spiced rice and lentil dish) and sweets, allowing participants to enjoy a cultural feast. The festival Durga Puja festival serves as a reminder of the diverse regional traditions within Hinduism and their preservation in the Belgian context.

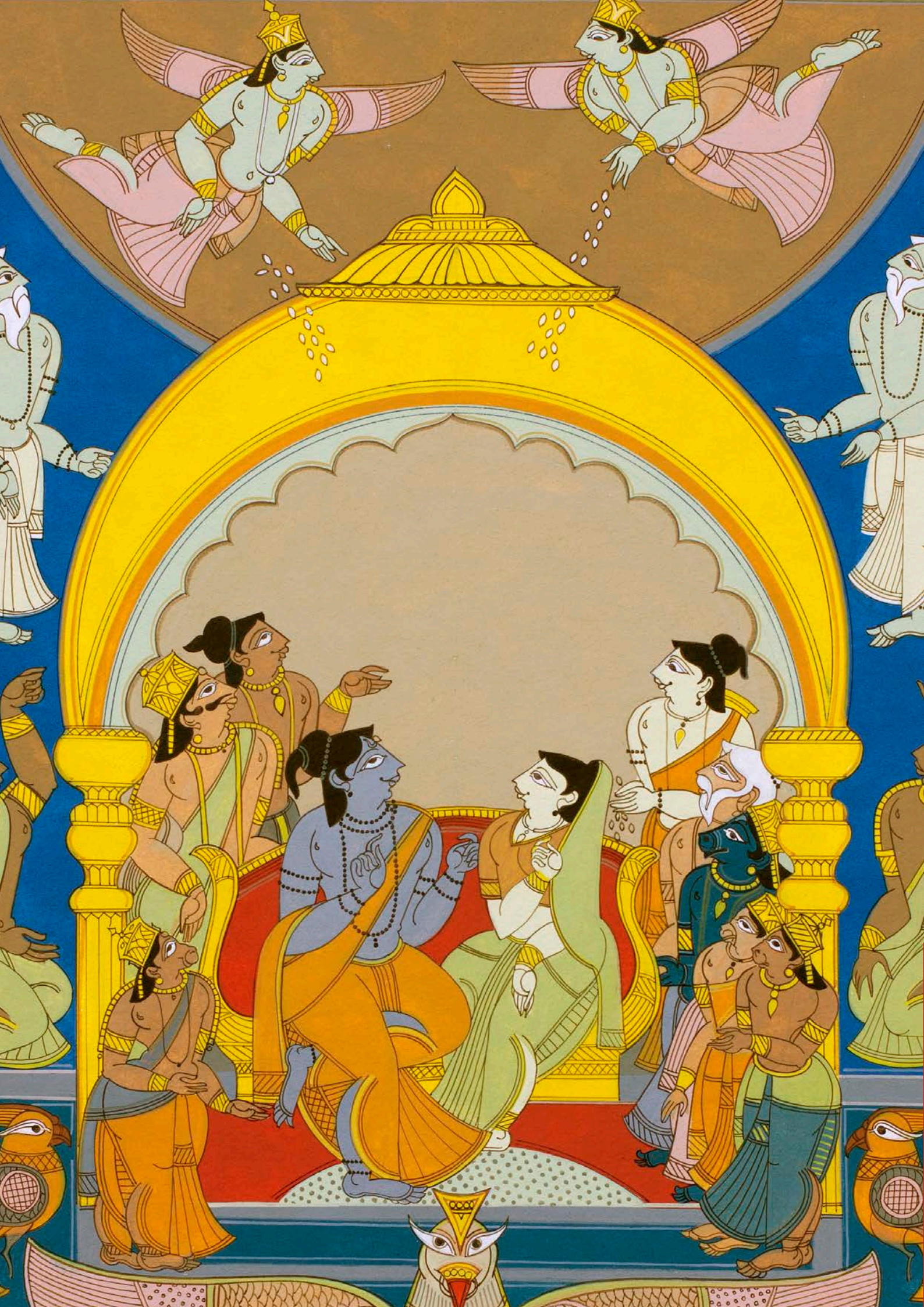
Five things to know about Durga Puja

- 1 The October Durga Puja celebration originates from Lord Rama's worship of Durga before his battle with Ravana (described in the epic Ramayana), while the original Durga Puja, Chaitra Basanti Puja, takes place in March.
- 2 Holy soil from the courtyards of courtesans is used in sculpting Durga deities, emphasizing the festival's themes of purity and inclusivity.
- 3 Chakshu Daan, the ritual of painting Durga's eyes, is performed in darkness by the artist and priest to represent spiritual insight.
- 4 Kola Bou (banana bride), a banana plant wrapped in a sari (traditional draped garment for women) is worshipped alongside Lord Ganesha to represent nature's sacredness.
- 5 The choice of Durga's arrival and departure vehicles (such as lion, elephant, horse, etc.) are believed to predict prosperity or hardship for the coming year.

K. S. Sreehari, *Durga subdues Mahisha 1*, pigments & gold leaf on paper, 38 x 28 cm
(Courtesy of MOSA)







DIWALI: THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

Diwali, the Festival of Lights, celebrates the victory of light over darkness and illuminates Belgian homes and hearts each autumn. Traditionally celebrated by lighting lamps, bursting firecrackers, and exchanging sweets, Diwali is a time for family gatherings, gratitude, and prayers for prosperity. Homes are cleaned and decorated with lamps and *rangoli* (colored designs) to welcome Goddess Lakshmi, the deity of wealth and prosperity.

In Belgium, temples and homes are lit with *diyas*, or *dipas* (lamps), creating a radiant atmosphere that symbolizes hope and renewal. The festival often features fireworks displays, dance performances, and food stalls offering sweets like *laddoos* (dense, round sweets) and *jalebis* (crispy, syrup-soaked spirals). However, Diwali celebrations have spread beyond private homes and temples. For instance, Art India organizes an annual two-day open-air Diwali festival at the iconic Atomium in Brussels, showcasing the festival's growing prominence in Belgium's cultural landscape. Also, the Brussels Mandir in Evere serves as a focal point for community celebrations, where devotees gather for Maha Lakshmi Puja (a Hindu festival dedicated to Goddess Lakshmi, the deity of wealth, prosperity, and abundance), followed by fireworks and feasting.

Five things to know about Diwali

- 1 Diwali symbolizes the triumph of good over evil and is celebrated with lamps, fireworks, and gatherings.
- 2 It commemorates Prince Rama's return from exile and his victory over Ravana, as told in the Ramayana.
- 3 Diwali also honors Krishna's victory over the demon Narakasura.
- 4 The five-day festival includes special rituals each day, from charitable giving to family gatherings and worship.
- 5 Diwali is celebrated by Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists, with each tradition highlighting unique meanings associated with liberation, peace, and knowledge.

The celebration of these festivals in Belgium represents more than just the preservation of cultural traditions; they serve as bridges between communities, inviting all citizens to participate and experience the rich tapestry of Hindu culture. As Martin Gurvich, President of the Hindu Forum of Belgium, notes, "Hindu festivals are so much more than religious celebrations; they're moments of togetherness. Each festival brings a unique beauty, and here in Belgium, they allow everyone—not just the Hindu community—to experience the timeless traditions of Hinduism."

As Hinduism continues to grow in Belgium, these festivals will play an increasingly important role in the country's cultural landscape—providing a spiritual and cultural anchor for the Hindus while contributing to the multicultural fabric of modern Belgium.

< Opposite page L Ahmed M., Kamal, *The Return to Ayodhya*, 41 x 31 cm (Courtesy of MOSA)



Indology Studies

Armchair scholars and travel

PROF. WINAND M. CALLEWAERT¹

Indological studies — studies of mainly ancient Indian languages and texts — in Europe are a spin-off of imperial colonialism. The exploration and conquest of India brought about a growing fascination with the ancient history and very rich culture of the subcontinent. It was also soon evident that knowledge gave power, and this was definitely one of the reasons why the study of Sanskrit (and later of vernacular languages) became popular with the East India Company in London and India, and later on the European continent. Sanskrit also appeared to be the most ancient Indo-European language, used for the creation of an immense literature and ‘spoken’ by traditional *pandits* even up to the present day.

The first European Indologists were missionaries who wanted to understand the ancient texts known only to Brahmins. They also wanted to become familiar with the vernacular languages in order to preach and convert. In 2010, in the library of an Italian monastery near Rome, Dr Toon Van Hal, a linguist at the Leuven University (now in charge of the Sanskrit course), discovered a manuscript thought to be lost, of a Sanskrit grammar: *Grammatica Grandonica*, written by the German Jesuit Johann Ernst Hanxleden (1681–1732).² This was not the very first Sanskrit grammar by a European. That honour goes to another Jesuit, Heinrich Roth (1620–68), but Hanxleden’s grammar is the direct source of Paulinus a Sancto Bartholomaeo’s own Sanskrit grammar, the first one to be printed in Europe, in 1790.



s in Belgium

vellers



As the British East India Company consolidated its power in India — from around 1750 onwards — the need for ‘Indologists’ became very urgent. The Company agents not only wanted plenty of trade and a little culture, they also needed an insight into the jurisprudence and the political organisation of the (mainly Hindu) Mahārājā territories. To the East India Company, the Persian language of the Mogul empire in India was more easily accessible.

Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), an agent of the Company in Calcutta, was the first Briton to study Sanskrit thoroughly. In 1785 he completed the first English translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*. This small gem of c. 200 BCE is now, after the Bible, the most translated text in religious literature of the world. The Sanskrit grammar of Wilkins, published in 1808, became the basis for all other grammars published by later Europeans. Indological research at that time was very much promoted by the *Asiatick Society*, founded in Calcutta by the British scholar William Jones (1746–94). The French, too, had ‘invaded’ India, but lost their position as a result of the Seven Years’ War in Europe (1756–63) and military defeats in India. They tried in vain to regain access under Napoleon, but their contribution to Indological studies should not be underestimated. Part of their colonial loot was a selection of manuscripts that found their way into the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. Alexander Hamilton (1762–1824) had, in India, gained great proficiency in Sanskrit, and on his way back to England he wanted to consult these manuscripts in Paris. The French arrested him as a spy! His house arrest in Paris was a boon for later Sanskrit studies in Europe, because Hamilton became the guru of enthusiastic students from France and Germany. That was the end of the period when Europeans had access to ancient Indian texts and philosophy only through French or German translations of English translations — now the study of Sanskrit itself had begun.

This was the beginning of a glorious tradition that had its impact in Belgium, too. Sanskrit is taught in four universities today: UGent, ULiege, UCLouvain and KULeuven.³ In this chapter I should like to introduce the most important Belgian Indologists, from the beginning in the 19th century. This is not an exhaustive survey, but an introduction to famous scholars and important areas of research, as well as some interesting trends.

The pioneers

Eugène Jacquet (1811–58) from Brussels claimed he was the very first ‘Belgian’ Indologist; sadly, he died at the age of 27, after having spent all his life in Paris working at the Société Asiatique. In the obituary in *The Asiatic journal* we read:

[Jacquet] had made extraordinary advances in oriental learning. He had devoted himself especially to the study of Sanscrit and Chinese, and, young as he was, he could not only read the former [Sanskrit] with great ease, but had followed it into the languages derived from it.⁴

‘Louvain’ is the French and English name for the city of Leuven, where in 1425 a university was established. In the bilingual context of Belgium, this university was in 1968 divided on a linguistic basis. Leuven (Louvain) remained the place of the Flemish/Dutch Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KULeuven, with c. 50,000 students in 2016), while on a new campus (‘Louvain-la-Neuve’) 25 km to the south the French-speaking Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain, with c. 30,000 students in 2016) was established.

In the field of Sanskrit palaeography ‘he was supposed to know more than any other continental scholar’.

Sanskrit was taught for the first time in a Belgian university in 1841, the University of Louvain, by Félix Nève, then 25 years old. Like several Sanskrit scholars after him, Nève was allowed to teach the language as an optional course, in addition to his regular classes of Latin and Greek. One year after his appointment as Professor of Sanskrit in Louvain, Nève published his first book, *études sur les hymnes du Rig-Véda avec un choix d’hymnes traduits pour la première fois en français* (1842). In this study he thought he could discover traces of monotheism in pre-Vedic times. This ambition would remain in all his later research. The defence of his Christian faith was the foundation for Nève’s Indological studies. He was convinced that an ‘Eastern renaissance’ could enrich European civilisation without harming Christianity. It must be noted that this was a common trend in Nève’s days.

His second book was a state-of-the-art Indological product, published in Paris in 1847: *Essai sur le mythe des Ribhavas, premier vestige de l'apothéose dans le Véda, avec le texte sanscrit et la traduction française des hymnes adressés à ces divinités*, a text edition based on manuscripts found in France, Berlin and London, along with a French translation. Even Max Müller was impressed; he wrote that he did not know anyone who so successfully 'combined the French and the German spirit', whatever he may have meant by that. Later on, Nève published a dozen articles about Buddhism and two articles about the (mythological) flood. He claimed that the origin of the myth was to be found in the Bible, while others maintained that it originally developed from India. Nève's thesis illustrates the Christian attitude with which Indologists in his day conducted their research. Nève's career spanned 50 years. In 1877 he retired from his academic duties and died in Leuven in 1893.⁵

I should mention here that in 1845 Léopold van Alstein (1791–1862) was appointed to teach at Ghent University (UGent) and became the pioneer of Oriental studies there. He was 54 years of age then, and is in fact more remembered for his unique library than for his research. Born into an aristocratic family in Ghent, he did not need to take up paid employment and could devote his time and money to book collecting and the study of languages. He may have been a self-taught scholar, but he was highly esteemed by professionals and he corresponded with well-known Indologists and linguists of his time. He spent much time alone in his room and was extremely shy and modest, but very helpful to anyone who wanted access to his vast library. He had a personal supplier of books in Paris and he also went to many auctions. When eventually his own library was auctioned, there were 15,513 entries in the catalogue: including a vast collection of Bibles, dictionaries and grammars of all kinds of languages and dialects, a set of volumes printed in China, more than 100 oriental manuscripts in Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit, as well as a large collection of medieval manuscripts.⁶

One of Nève's students, the classicist Charles Michel (1855–1929) started teaching Sanskrit at the University of Liège in 1880, and in 1885 at Ghent University (returning to Liège in 1892). One of his first students in Liège was the lawyer Eugène Monseur (1860–1912),

who himself compiled (according to L. Sternbach) a good, pioneering edition of the *Cāyak ya(nīti)* (1887) and started a Sanskrit course at the University of Brussels in 1888.⁷

It was not only academics and scholars who were attracted to Indology. The remarkable Philippe Van der Haeghen (1825–86) was a contemporary of Félix Nève. He was a typical product of the enthusiasm for Sanskrit studies in European fashionable circles in the 19th century. Initially, he was an employee and then librarian for a nobleman; a staunch Catholic, he was an amateur who endeavoured to study a great variety of research areas. He published about works on education in Belgium (a work honoured by the Belgian Academy in 1850), the history of the (French) Languedoc region, a French translation of a German article about German elements in the French language, a Dutch translation of a Swedish tale, a translation of an Italian text and an anti-British pamphlet about the Anglican Church and torture in India, and so on!

His main contribution to Indology was in the field of Dravidian languages (South India), especially Tamil. At the age of 30, in 1855, he contributed his first article in the *Bulletin* of the Belgian Royal Academy ('De l'étude du Tamoul'). For the printing of this publication a Tamil font had to be ordered from Leipzig (Germany). In 1858 Van der Haeghen published a review of 100 Tamil proverbs and in 1863 he acquired the original manuscript of the Tamil-French Dictionary by Constanzo Beschi, written in 1744. He also compiled a list of Tamil grammars and translations by Europeans since the end of the 17th century.

Van der Haeghen may have been less thorough than an academic Indologist, but he did draw the attention of scholars to a vast and at that time less researched area in India (Tamil). He did not really succeed in this: in 1874 he gave another article to the Academy, but Nève rejected it, stating that Tamil was an inferior language when compared to Sanskrit. That was, unfortunately, also the last linguistic contribution by Van der Haeghen.⁸

Another less known non-academic Indologist of that time is the abbot A. Girard, who perhaps studied with Nève and died in Liege in 1887. We have only his preliminary study on *Le Rig-Véda et ses derniers exégètes* (1886), but we know through Charles Michel that

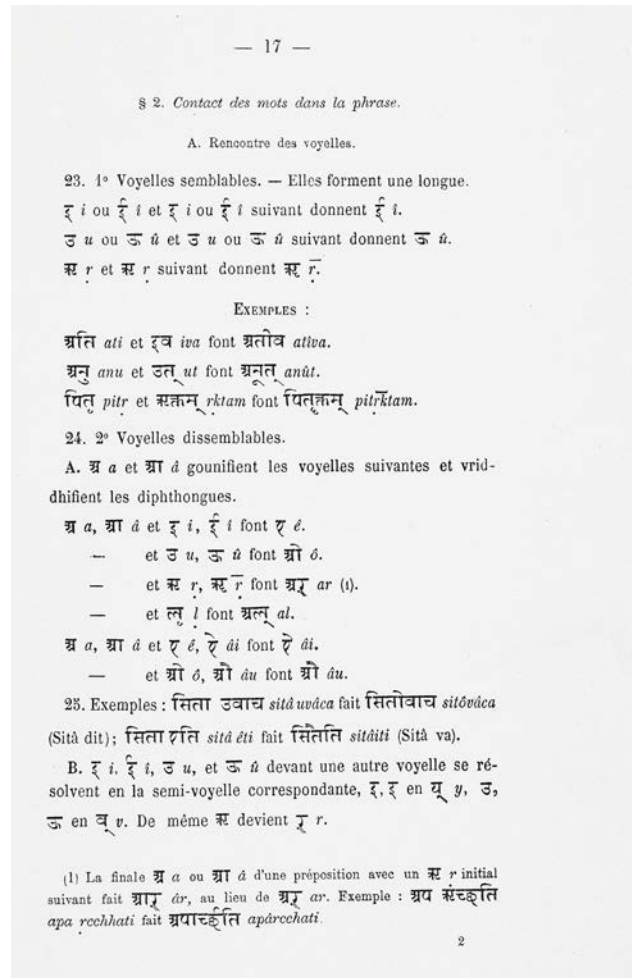
he had completed a French translation of the whole Rigveda (unfortunately lost).

The giants: de Harlez, de La Vallée Poussin, Lamotte

If Nève has the honour of introducing Indological studies in Belgium, we may speak of the founding of an Indological school when the knighted Monseigneur Charles de Harlez (de Deulin) (1852–99) was appointed in Louvain in 1871. His career can be divided into two periods: one of Iranian studies (1871–85), and one of Chinese studies (until 1899). In both fields of research he made pioneering contributions cited even today. His weak health forced the young de Harlez to stay in his room when his peers in high school were outside, engaged in sports. At the age of 25 he was already promoted as Doctor in Law. He decided to break with the political tradition of his family and joined the Catholic seminary, to be ordained a priest three years

later. Before he was 50 years old he was appointed on the Chair of Oriental Languages in Louvain. For each language he studied, he composed his own grammar: *Grammaire pratique de la langue sanscrite* (1878, second edition 1885), *Manuel de la langue de l'Avesta* (1879) and *Manuel du Pehlvi* (1880).

His magnum opus is the translation into French of the *Avesta*, the collection of religious texts attributed to Zarathustra. A further translation into Gujarati (1887) made de Harlez very popular with the Parsi community in Bombay/Mumbai, who claimed to be the descendants of the Zoroastrian Persians who had fled the invading Muslims in Persia/Iran in the 7th century and migrated to the western part of India. We should remember that the statements of de Harlez regarding the *Avesta* were not accepted by all of his contemporaries. In 1883 he left that area of research and started to study Chinese, at the age of 51. In 1882, he started *Le Muséon*, the still famous Belgian journal of Oriental studies.⁹



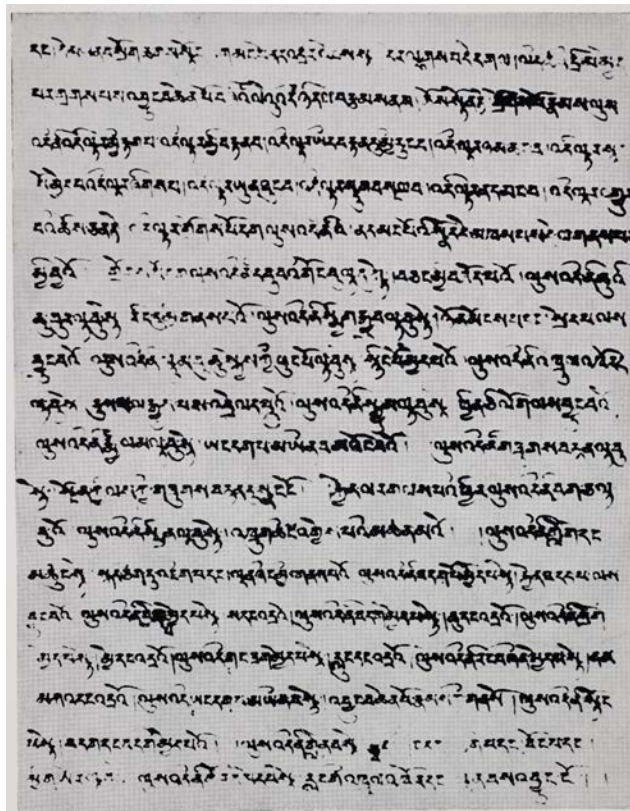
A page from the Sanskrit grammar by C. de Harlez (*Grammaire pratique de la langue sanscrite*, Paris-Louvain-Bonn 1878).

De Harlez was the first real expert in Louvain and Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869–1938), disciple of de Harlez, as he declared himself, was the first at Ghent University — which was inaugurated in 1817 (Dutch became the official language in Ghent only in 1950), where he was appointed in 1892 for Sanskrit and comparative grammar of Greek and Latin, as a successor to Charles Michel (who had gone back to Liege). Besides these, he studied other languages as well and was, in 1965, called ‘ie plus grand indianiste beige’ by his own disciple, the great scholar Mgr Etienne Lamotte (see below).¹⁰

With Louis de La Vallée Poussin of Ghent we remain in the world of nobility and aristocrats in Belgium in the 19th century. In 1832 his French grandfather had been invited by the first Belgian king, Leopold I, to assist in the organisation of the (nascent) Belgian army. Louis had lost his mother when he was seven and was raised in the home of his grandparents. He was inspired by Oriental studies in France and, after studying classical languages in Liege, he went to Louvain to study Sanskrit, Pali, Avestan and comparative linguistics with Professors Charles de Harlez and his successor, Philémon Colinet. De La Vallée Poussin

completed his PhD in Oriental studies in Louvain in 1891. He continued his studies in Paris (1893–1905) and Leiden (1904) with the famous Professor Kern. During the Great War he emigrated to Cambridge, and eventually studied and lectured in London and Oxford. He self-studied Tibetan and, at the age of fifty, also started to study Chinese. A knowledge of all these languages was a must for Buddhism, his chosen field of research. It is amazing that at that time only a few books were available to him: *Petit dictionnaire chinois-français* by A. Debesse and *Vocabulary of Chinese Buddhist Terms and Names* by O. Rosenberg. Eventually, de La Vallée Poussin became an authority on Chinese Buddhism.

In 1898 (at the age of 29) he published an important work, *Buddhisme: ktudes et Matériaux*. In academic circles the book was not received enthusiastically, however, because of its main topic, Tantric Buddhism. De La Vallée Poussin then applied his immense scholarship to the study of other forms of Buddhism and eventually reached the highest levels of recognition. In 1956, the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha’s birthday was celebrated, and in Japan golden medals were given to the eight most outstanding scholars. The only European to get one was de La Vallée Poussin. He certainly



A Tibetan manuscript from the ninth century
Source: E. Lamotte, *L’Enseignement de Vimalakirti* (Louvain-Leuven 1962)

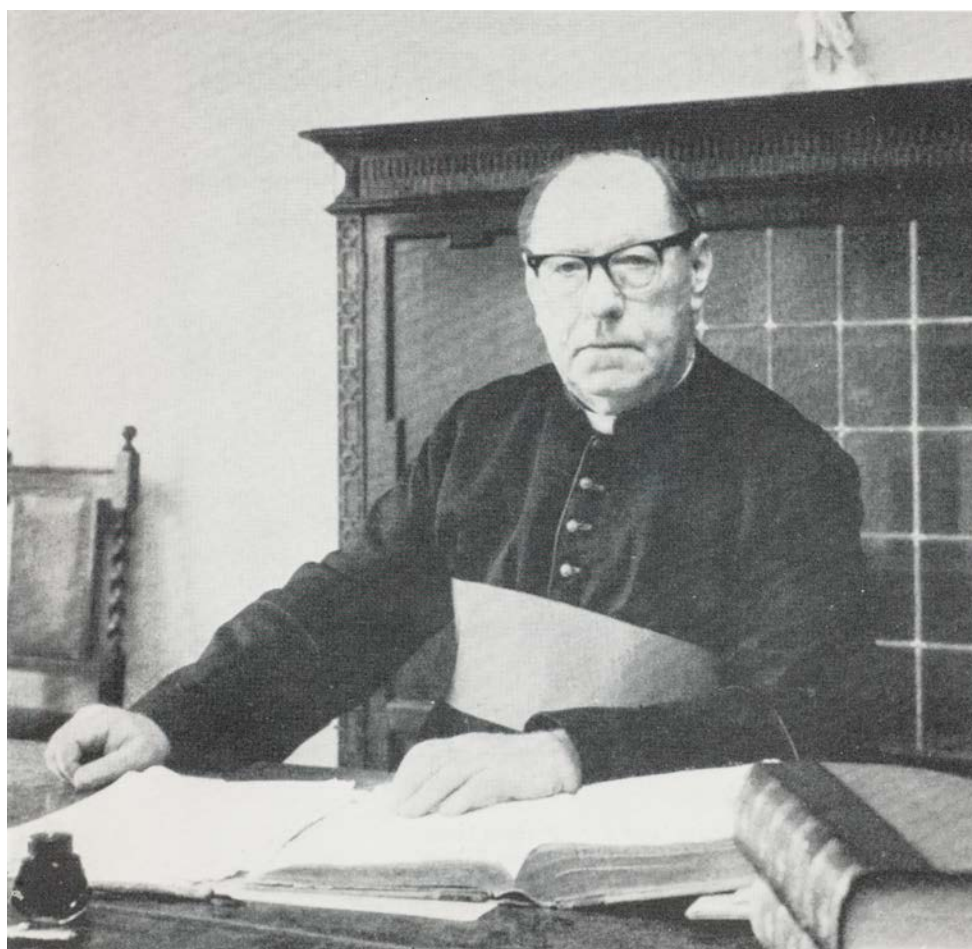
deserved it; his list of published works comprised 524 titles, of which 20 were extensive works. He published his translation of the *Abhidharmakosa* of Vasubandhu, the Indian monk (4th century CE) who is considered the most important personality in the history of early Buddhism, in five volumes. With this publication de La Vallée Poussin paved the way to the discovery of classical Buddhism.

Like the Catholic University of Louvain, founded in 1425, Ghent University was initially French-speaking. In 1929 it became more and more obvious that the university (situated in Flanders) would become Flemish-/Dutch-speaking, and (French-speaking) de La Vallée Poussin (then 60 years of age) asked to be released from his academic duties. The famous scholar Mgr Etienne Lamotte at the (then completely French-speaking) Catholic University of Louvain

(until 1968) tried in vain to invite him to Leuven. De La Vallée Poussin preferred to retire. He died in 1958.

Monseigneur Etienne Lamotte (1903–83) is the third renowned expert among the Belgian Indologists. After his studies at the seminary in Malines/Mechelen and also in Rome, he gained his PhD in Oriental languages in 1929 (at the age of 26), with a dissertation about the *Bhagavadgītā*. He then went to Paris to study Chinese, Tibetan and Pali. For this selection of languages he followed the advice of de La Vallée Poussin, who gave the young man the privilege of meeting him at his home, twice a week, to study and discuss Sanskrit and Tibetan texts. In 1934 Lamotte started to teach these languages at the Catholic University of Louvain.

The beginning of the Second World War was disastrous for this university and its Indological studies:



Etienne Lamotte

Source: *Premier colloque Etienne Lamotte (Brussels and Liège, September 24-27, 1989)* (Louvain-la-Neuve 1993)

in 1940 a fire broke out in the central library and the complete collection of de La Vallée Poussin, which Lamotte had managed to bring there, was destroyed. Several important books that were essential for Lamotte's research were also destroyed. Lamotte himself had a narrow escape four years later when the allied armies bombed the city. All this forced Lamotte to shift his interest to Chinese studies and specifically to a huge Chinese text (printed in Japan), attributed to the famous Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE). For nearly 36 years Lamotte worked on this text and eventually published the resulting work in five volumes: *Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse* (2,600 pages).

Besides the numerous articles and books, worth mentioning is Lamotte's standard *Histoire du bouddhisme indien* (862 pages), which appeared in 1958 (and was translated in English in 1988). Lamotte told me that he sent a handwritten manuscript to the press (in several alphabets).

Lamotte has been greatly respected and honoured as Doctor honoris causa at Ghent University and several foreign universities. In 1964, and later, he was special advisor for non-Christian religions at the Second Vatican Council in Rome. In 1968 (543 years after its foundation in 1425) the Catholic University of Leuven/ Louvain was divided into two universities, one Flemish-/Dutch-speaking, one French-speaking (see above, fn. 3). Lamotte had been teaching and publishing only in French, and he moved to the French-speaking university. The division of the university on two different sites (along with half the library) was a very difficult process. Lamotte continued to teach until his retirement in 1974, at the age of 70.

In 1977, for the first time in his life, he undertook an adventurous journey to the Buddhist country of Japan. In great triumph he travelled there and was honoured for his immense contribution to Buddhist studies. In his Notice on Lamotte, Professor Ryckmans could not help remarking: 'En dépit de sa magistrale compréhension de la doctrine bouddhique. Il m'a confié un jour qu'il n'en avait pas vraiment subi la séduction' ('With all his impressive knowledge of Buddhism, Lamotte told me one day that he never gave in to the temptation to be seduced by it').¹¹

In 1980 Lamotte was given the traditional Festschrift, with articles by scholars from all over the

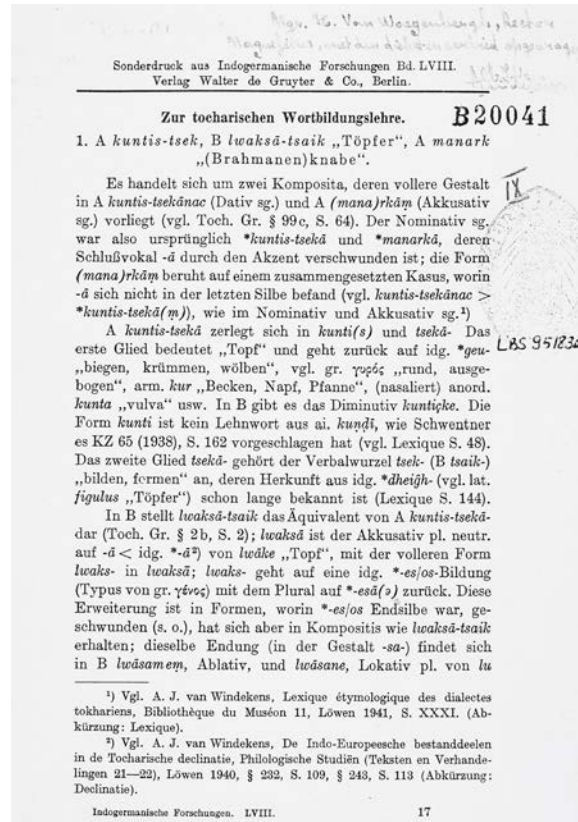
world. In it, we find a splendid photograph of Etienne Lamotte, in a solemn cassock and the broad sash of a Catholic Monseigneur. I had the opportunity of meeting him in that impressive attire in 1971, when I had just returned after seven years in India. Full of admiration for my years of study at different universities in India, he told me that he had never dared to travel to India because he was afraid of snakes. Several years after his death a young Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka came to see me, trying to visit the (sacred) places where Lamotte had lived.

I am still wondering how scholars like Lamotte and his predecessors managed to master all these languages with so little basic material at their disposal. Equally impressive is the fact that they produced their lengthy volumes with a handwritten final copy sent to the press, giving (in the original script) quotations in Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan and Chinese.

Indology in Louvain/Leuven

In Leuven, there were quite a few renowned Indologists between de Harlez and Lamotte. Some concentrated on Sanskrit, while others focused on comparative studies of Indo-European languages. Philémon Colinet (1853–1917), the disciple and successor of de Harlez, devoted his PhD research to the *Bhagavadgītā*, and after that specialised in comparative grammar and linguistics. His work was continued by Albert Carnoy (1879–1961), author of *Grammaire élémentaire de la langue sanscrite comparée avec celle des langues indo-européennes* (1925, second edition 1937). Carnoy began teaching Iranian languages in 1904 and taught Vedic Sanskrit until his retirement in 1951. He was also minister of Interior Affairs in the Belgian government from 1927 to 1929.

I should like to mention here several outstanding scholars who were Belgian Jesuits in India involved in various fields of Indology: Vedānta studies with Georges Dandoy (1882–1962), Pierre Johanns (from Luxemburg, 1882–1955), Michel Ledrus and Richard De Smet (1916–97); Hindi, Sanskrit or Bengali studies with Camille Bulecke (1909–82), Robert Antoine (1914–81) and Paul Detienne (1924–2016). Between 1935 and 1971 an Indological course (including Sanskrit) was organised for the Belgian Jesuit missionaries at the 'Juvénat indien' of the Institut Saint-Robert-Bel-



Mahaveer Swami >
 Vyasadeva, natural pigments
 on handmade paper, 23 x 13 cm.
 (Courtesy of MOSA)

First page of an article
 by A.J. Van Winde-
 kens on Tocharian
 morphology. Source:
 A.J. Van Windekens,
 "Zur tocharischen
 Wortbildungslehre,"
 in: *Indogermanische
 Forschungen*, LVIII
 (1941)

larmin, at La Pairelle (Wépion), affiliated to the Jesuit University College of Namur.

The main focus for Carnoy in Louvain was on Indo-European languages and philology. A number of scholars, mentioned below, studied for their PhDs with him: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, Walter Couvreur, Adriaan Scharpé and Albert Joris Van Windekens.

Tocharian languages became the special field of Albert Van Windekens, who was born in England (during the Great War) but returned to Belgium with his parents after the war and became the disciple of Professor Carnoy. From him he gained an enthusiasm for Tocharian and for comparative grammar. After graduating in classical studies, Van Windekens went to Paris where he studied under the guidance of Jean Filliozat, resulting in a PhD (in 1939) on the shifts in the Indo-European sounds in Tocharian A and B. A second PhD two years later in Louvain, on Oriental languages, produced an etymological lexicon of the two languages. From 1946 onwards until 1965, he taught Sanskrit in Louvain (following Carnoy, Vedic and also elementary Sanskrit for the Dutch-speaking students; the main courses of Sanskrit being taught by Lamotte) and comparative grammar. He edited six vol-

umes and wrote eight books and nearly 300 articles.¹²

At the time of Lamotte and Van Windekens, there were also in Louvain, as occasional teachers in Indology, two students of Lamotte: Marcel Hofinger (1915–97), whose PhD in 1946 was an étude sur le Concile de Vaisālī (later he published two volumes of *Le Congrès du lac Anavatapta*, relying on Tibetan sources) for the course on the history of Asia (his main academic subject was in classics), and Joseph Masson (Society of Jesus, 1908–98), whose PhD in 1942 was on *La religion populaire dans le canon bouddhique pali*, for the Satsuma chair.

Pierre H.L. Eggermont (1914–95), of Dutch parents but born in Indonesia, joined the KULeuven in 1968 after the division into the Flemish-/Dutch- and the French-speaking universities. Until 1984, he taught Indian art and history as well as Pali, focusing his research on Alexander the Great and Emperor Ashoka. His publications made him an authority in this field.

In the same period Gilbert Pollet (1930–2014) taught Hindi and Sanskrit and focused his research on the languages of the Bhakti period in North India (his PhD at SOAS, London, in 1963, was on the *Bhaktamāla* of Nābhādās). He wrote several articles about this

॥ व्यास ॥



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and edited three books. With Eggermont and Greta Van Damme (PhD in 1990 on Pañcatanta literature) he published one volume of the *Corpus Topographicum Indiae Antiquae*, a joint project with Ghent University. At his retirement in 1995, the full course in Indology was discontinued at the KULeuven, where now only an introductory course of Sanskrit is taught.

However, the rigid discipline of textual studies was continued in Leuven by Winand M. Callewaert (1945–) who went to India in 1965 and studied Hindi, Sanskrit and philosophy at the universities of Ranchi, Benares/Varanasi and Pune. After his PhD (1975) and DLitt (1993) in Leuven, he continued to travel to India (more than 60 times), mainly in search of manuscripts. During a year of study at the Sorbonne, Paris, in 1971, he was inspired by Professor Charlotte Vaudeville to enter the field of Bhakti studies in northern India. This research focused on a rather neglected area in Indological studies: the Bhakti poets who from 1500 onwards sang their inspiring songs no longer in Sanskrit, but in the vernaculars of each region. Until the 1960s, most Bhakti songs were preserved only in manuscripts and very little was published (now this field is represented in most international conferences on Indian studies).

Callewaert travelled all over northern India and visited temples, libraries and private collections, looking for manuscripts dated 1600 CE onwards. Eventually, he copied about 15,000 folios, creating on film the most extensive databank on Bhakti literature (now preserved in Heidelberg University Library). He also prepared a scanned version of 30 text editions (now preserved in the Lausanne University databank of Bhakti literature).

Between 1974 and 2019 Callewaert published 58 books and 139 articles in English, Hindi and Dutch. His *magnum opus*, *Dictionary of Bhakti: North-Indian Bhakti Texts into Khari Bolī Hindī and English*, appeared in New Delhi in 2009: 2,187 pages in three volumes, giving about 40,000 entries with context references and Hindi and English translation. After Pollet's retirement in 1995, Callewaert also taught Sanskrit until 2018 (in addition to a course on Hinduism and Buddhism).

Two former students from the KULeuven have also continued careers in the field: Heidi Pauwels at the University of Washington (Seattle; PhD in 1994), with research in medieval and modern Hindi litera-

ture. As a freelance author, Koenraad Elst focused on *hindutva* and published several books about this topic.

In the French-speaking Universite Catholique de Louvain, the tradition of Mgr Lamotte was interrupted after his retirement in 1974, although some of his final students continued to publish: Hubert Durt (1956–2018; PhD in 1970 on *La version chinoise de l'Introduction historique de la Samantapāsādikā*), Jose Van den Broeck (PhD in 1976–77 on *La version chinoise de l'Amrtarasa de G/īo nLn*), Marcel Van Velthem (PhD in 1976–77 on the *Abhidharmāvatāra-sāstra*) and Jean Dantine (PhD in 1982–85 on the *Ak obhyav ytiha*).

At the Oriental Institute on the new campus of Louvain-la-Neuve, the teaching of Sanskrit was continued, first (after an interim by the French scholar Bruno Dagens) by the classicist Daniel Donnet (1938) and Dominique Forthomme (1957; PhD in Paris on the *Dhātukāvya* of Nārāyanabha a), and from 1996 onwards (until today) by Christophe Vielle (1967–). Vielle started with Indo-European studies (his PhD dissertation, in 1996, was a comparative study of the Greek and Sanskrit epics). Then, after a postdoctoral position in Oxford, he specialised in *kāvya* and *sāstra* philology, in the historiography and epistemology of Western (pre-)Indology, and in the cultural history and anthropology of pre-modern Kerala (based on Sanskrit, Malayalam and Western sources). Kerala is a South Indian state where Vielle has travelled extensively since 2000. His DLitt (2007) was an edition of the hitherto unpublished *Jaiminī yasamhitā* of the *Brahmāy idapurāya*, on the basis of Malayalam-script manuscripts. His student, Emmanuel Francis (PhD in 2009 on the history of the Pallava dynasty), is now a researcher at the CNRS (Paris), specialising in Tamil epigraphy and manuscripts.

At the Universite Catholique de Louvain, the Jesuit Jacques Scheuer (1942–; PhD in Paris with Madeleine Biarreau) taught Buddhism and Hinduism and their relation with Christian traditions. Scheuer retired in 2008. Robert Deliege (1953–; PhD from Oxford) taught social and cultural anthropology, focusing on tribal cultures, the Gandhian legacy, the caste system and untouchables. He retired in 2018. Lambert Isebaert (1955–) taught Pali and Tocharian until his retirement in 2019.

Indology in Ghent

The Rijksuniversiteit Gent (RUG), now Ghent University (UGent), is the only Belgian university with a complete course in Indology. The study of Sanskrit and of Tocharian has continued and at the same time new areas and languages have been introduced, specifically Jaina literature and its affiliated languages.

After the Second World War, in 1944, Adriaan Scharpé (1913–86) was appointed. Scharpé wrote his PhD dissertation in Leuven on *The Classical Sanskrit Romance* and his DLitt in Utrecht (with Jan Gonda) on *Bāna's Kādambarī*. He taught Sanskrit and comparative Indo-European grammar. In three (small) volumes he wrote a (Dutch) Sanskrit grammar, in which he printed the Sanskrit words in Roman script, convinced that for students it was a sheer waste of time to learn the Devanāgarī alphabet. His main contribution to Indology is in the study of Kālidāsa and, with his interest in Indian topography, he supervised the publication of two volumes of the *Corpus Topographicum Indiae Antiquae* (1965 and 1966).

Walter Couvreur (1914–96) initially also taught comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages, but specialised in Hittite and Tocharian languages. This tradition in Ghent was continued by Eddy Moerloose (1945–), who lectured from 1991 to 2010 (Sanskrit, Tocharian and history and literature of Central and South Asia). His publications are in the field of Tocharian Buddhist texts.

The most famous student of Scharpé was Ludo Rocher (1926–2016), a giant in the field of ancient Indian law. Doctor in Law in 1950, his PhD in 1952 was on the *Dayalaviveka* of Vardhamāna, to which he added a DLitt in 1956 on the *Vyavahāracintāmani* of Vācaspati Miśra. He taught Sanskrit at the University of Brussels from 1956 to 1967, where he met his future wife, Rosane Rocher (born Debels; PhD in 1965; *La théorie des voix du verbe dans l'école pāninienne*, published in 1968), until his departure to the USA where he became Professor at the University of Pennsylvania in 1966. The American scholars Richard Salomon and Patrick Olivelle are among his students.

As a student of Scharpé and Couvreur, Jozef Deleu (1925–94) started, in Ghent, the new research area of Jaina literature. With Scharpé as supervisor he prepared his PhD dissertation on Rājaśekhara's *Praband-*

hakośa (1957). This Middle Indian text brought Deleu to Jaina studies, with main publications *Chapters I–ID of the Mahānisiha, Critically Edited* (1963), *Viyāhapanatī (Bhagavatī)* and *The Fifth Anga of the Jaina Canon* (1970). In 1971 he travelled for the first time to India to improve his spoken Hindi.

Frank Van Den Bossche (1955–) continued the Jaina studies with his dissertation *Zijn en Niet-zijn in de Anekāntajayapatākā van Haribhadra Śūri* (of the 8th century CE). He taught from 1986 until 2013, and thus became the guru of numerous students in a great variety of Indological disciplines. He also published a *Basic Manual of Middle Prākṛit Grammar*.

Eva De Clercq (1976–; PhD in 2005) is now in charge of the Indian studies programme at Ghent University, working mainly on Jaina studies (with a study of a Jaina *Rāmāyaya*) and specialising in Apabhramśa. She teaches both Sanskrit and Hindi.

In Ghent University, there is also the Ghent Centre of Buddhist Studies (since 2007), which, in the footsteps of Louis de La Vallée Poussin, the great precursor, brings together scholars of Chinese, Indian and Japanese Buddhist studies. Its leaders are the Sinologists Bart Dessein (specialist in the *Abhidharma*) and Ann Heirman (specialist in the *Vinaya*), both students of Charles Willemen (whose PhD in 1971 was on the Chinese *Udanavarga*, his DLitt in 1975 was on the *Abhidharmahrdaya*). Several students of Ghent University have continued a career outside the academic arena. Jan Van Alphen (1953) worked in museums in Brussels and Antwerp, and the Rubin Museum of Art in New York. Rembert Lutjeharms is a specialist of Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava Sanskrit poetry and poetics and is member of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies.

Indology in Liège and Brussels

After Charles Michel (1853–1929; see above), Sanskrit was taught at the University of Liège by scholars of classical Greek and Latin: Joseph Mansion (1877–1937), René Fohalle (1899–1984) and Louis Deroy (1921–2003). After the retirement of the Iranologist Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (1910–2012) in 1980, the Chair of 'Indo-Iranian philology' was started, with the scholars Jean Kellens (1944–), Eric Pirart (1950–) and now Philippe Swennen (1968–), focusing, for the Indian side, on Vedic philology and religion. I should



maharaj

also mention Jean-Marie Verpoorten (1958–; PhD in 1974), who specialised in Mimāṃsā philosophy and published important studies in the field.

At the University of Brussels, after Eugène Monseur, the Veda scholar Paul-Émile Dumont (1879–1969)¹³ taught Sanskrit between the two wars, before leaving for the John Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he was appointed professor in 1929. Between 1945 and 1954, Sanskrit was taught by his student, the classicist Roger Goossens (1905–54).¹⁴ After him, Ludo Rocher (see above) was in charge of the course.

After an interim by the French scholar Jean Nau dou (1921–2018) between 1967 and 1976, Sanskrit was taught by Francine Mawet (1948; a student of Maurice Leroy) until 2008. She published a useful *Grammaire sanskrite à l'usage des étudiants hellénistes et latinistes* in 2012. A course in the history of Indian art was given by Claudine Picron-Bautze (1952–) from 1992 to 2017. Now there remains only an introductory course of Sanskrit given by the historian of Indian mathematics Jean-Michel Delire (1956–; PhD in 2002 on the *Baudhā yana Sulbasūtra*) at the Institut des Hautes Études de Belgique.

Conclusion

Indological studies in Belgium have an impressive history, with outstanding scholarly publications. The studies originated in a Christian interest for other religions, and that religious accent remained in the specialisation of many scholars: Buddhism in de La Vallée Poussin and Lamotte, and the mysticism of *bhakti* in Callewaert. The main interest, however, remained philological, focusing on ancient languages and texts. Many scholars started with Greek and Latin and eventually turned to Sanskrit, at the same time studying other languages: Avestan, Pali, Tocharian, Brajbhasha, Apabhramsha, Chinese and Tibetan.

It keeps amazing us that scholars in the early period managed to become so proficient in old languages with so little material available. Often they wrote their

own grammars. Some were very young doing this: de La Vallée Poussin received his PhD degree at the age of 19. At the same time,

until the second half of the 20th century, most scholars never went to the countries that were the object of their studies. Adriaan Scharpé, who taught Sanskrit in Ghent until 1980, even continued to use the Roman alphabet, not the Devanāgarī script. Lamotte wrote his immense works with a pen, giving citations in Chinese, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Pali.

Notes

¹ This article is a revised version of my article in Dutch (see Callewaert 2015). I thank my colleague Prof. Dr Christophe Vielle (UCLouvain; see footnote 3), who gave me important information and valuable suggestions about Indology studies in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

² See Van Hal and Vielle 2013.

³ 'Louvain' is the French and English name for the city of Leuven, where in 1425 a university was established. In the bilingual context of Belgium, this university was in 1968 divided on a linguistic basis. Leuven (Louvain) remained the place of the Flemish/Dutch Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KULeuven, with c. 50,000 students in 2016), while on a new campus ('Louvain-la-Neuve') 25 km to the south the French-speaking Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain, with c. 30,000 students in 2016) was established.

⁴ See *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British and Foreign India, China and Australasia. New Series*, 28 (London, January–April 1839), Asiatic Intelligence, 164. See also Nève 1856.

⁵ For an evaluation of the work of Nève, refer to Isebaert 1995.

⁶ See *Catalogue des livres et manuscrite formant la bibliothèque de feu Mr P. Léopold Van Alstein, Professeur agrégé à l'université de Gand, dont la vente aura lieu le Mardi 26 Mai 1863 et jours suivants ...*, Gand, in: C. Annoot-Braeckman, 1863, 'notice', ix–xii. Also Auguste Voisin, *Bibliotheca Hulthemiana*, vol. 6, Gand, in: J. Poelman, 1837, xxxviii n.

⁷ Later, Paul-Émile Dumont (1879–1968; see below) started to study Sanskrit with Eugène Monseur.

⁸ My brief note on Van der Haeghen is based on the detailed and very well-informed publication of Christophe Vielle (2012).

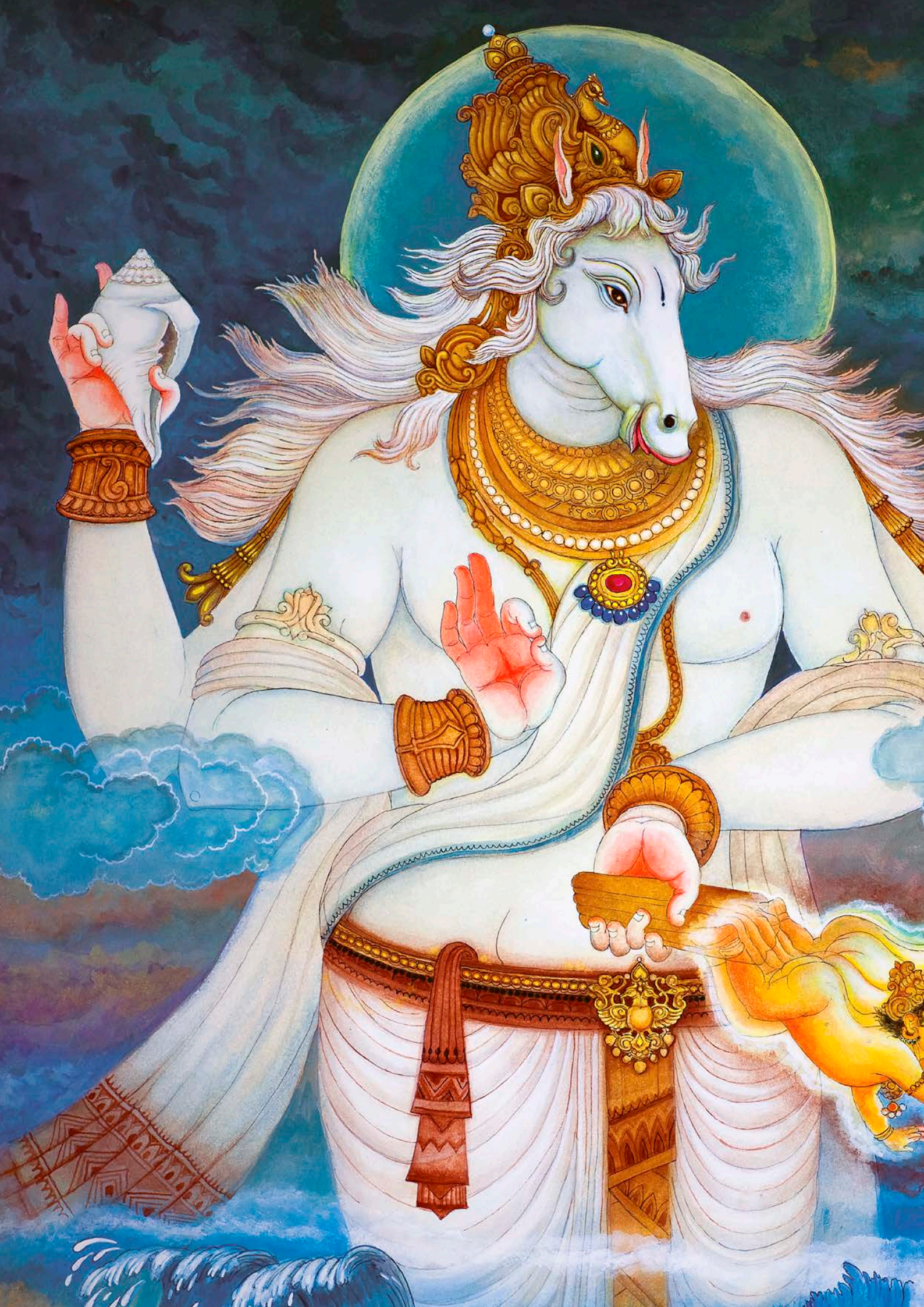
⁹ See Etienne Lamotte's Notice on de Harlez (1953).

¹⁰ See Lamotte 1965.

¹¹ Ryckmans 1987; on Lamotte, see also Daniel Donnet (1980) and the long article by Lamotte's disciple, Hubert Durt (1985).

¹² See the bibliography of Van Windekens with 91 titles in the *Liber Amicorum*, in: G. Pollet, ed., *India and the Ancient World. History, Trade and Culture before A.D. 650*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, 25 (1987), ix–xii.

< Mahaveer Swami
Lady worshipping a Shiva linga,
natural pigments on
handmade paper, 13 x 8 cm.
(Courtesy of MOSA)



Sacred Voices

Debating the divine in the Hindu sacred texts

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In the sixteenth century, a Hindu scholar named Sanātana Gosvāmī wrote a marvellous story, entitled *Bṛhad-Bhāgavatāmṛta* (“The Great Essence of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*”), in which he describes the soul’s journey to God. At one point on his lengthy journey, the hero of this narrative finds himself surrounded by brilliant personalities, who turn out to be the personifications of all sacred texts. Sincerely, our hero asks them how to attain the highest good, but he is quickly surprised by the answer. Or rather, he is surprised by the *many* answers he receives. His inquiry soon leads to a debate among these personified texts, in which the various scriptures argue vigorously but cannot reach a consensus.

This image of all scriptures as an assembly of learned scholars is a useful one for understanding the nature of Hindu sacred texts. “What is the Hindu bible?” is a question often asked of Hindus and scholars of Hinduism. Since Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have a religious book that their adherents consider to be in some way revealed and that in some way forms the foundation of their theology and practices,

< G. L. N. Simha, *Hayagriva delivering the four Vedas to Brahma*, 2004, pigments on paper, 60 x 50 cm (Courtesy of MOSA)

it is commonly assumed that other religions must similarly be founded on a text that is considered to be revealed.

But Hinduism, as a whole, has no single text that occupies such a place. The concept of sacred texts is not alien to Hindus. Indeed, Hinduism is in many ways a profoundly textual faith. Hinduism has a long scholastic tradition that is concerned with the meaning of its sacred texts. Many of its traditions ground their theology in the careful exegesis of scripture, and religious teachers throughout the ages have argued that ritual practices should strictly follow the injunctions of those sacred texts. But Hinduism doesn't have a bible. There is no single text that all Hindus revere equally or accept without reservation as the primary source of their faith. Hinduism has a library of texts, each with its own voice and vision, all talking to — or debating with — each other. We will here give a brief overview of the main voices in that debate.

The Vedas

The Vedas are often considered to be the closest there is to a central Hindu sacred text. In classical times, acceptance of the Vedas was indeed seen as the dividing line between what we now call Hindus and other religious groups that emerged in South Asia, such as Buddhism and Jainism, which rejected the authority of the Vedas. But very few Hindus engage with the Vedas, nor do they perform Vedic ritual practices. For most Hindus, the other texts we will discuss here are of far greater significance. But since those other texts constantly refer to the Vedas — or at least to the *authority* of the Vedas — any inquiry into Hindu scriptures must start here.

What are the Vedas? The Sanskrit word *veda* means “knowledge”, and the term has come to refer to a collection of sacred texts, composed in Sanskrit, that deal primarily with ritual action. Exactly which texts are part of this collection depends on how broad one wants to make the category. Some Hindus to-

The Vedas are often considered the closest there is to a central Hindu sacred text.

day consider *all* Hindu texts to be Vedic texts, and while this way of thinking is useful to stress the interconnect- edness of all Hindu thought, using such a broad

brush also risks losing sight of the many voices of each of those texts.

Traditionally, the Vedas are regarded as eternal texts without an author—no being, whether human or divine, composed these texts. They were received by “seers” (*ṛṣi*) who taught them to their disciples in ancient times, thereby bringing them into history. Academic scholars consider them to be the oldest Hindu texts, and while they debate the exact dating, they usually regard them as being at least 3,000 years old.

There are four Vedas. Most are simply named after their contents: the *R̥g Veda* contains hymns (*ṛc*) to the gods; the *Sāma Veda* contains chants (*sāman*); the *Yajur Veda* consists of ritual “formulas” (*yajus*) recited by the main priest of the Vedic ritual. The fourth, the *Atharva Veda*, is a more complex texts containing a variety of textual passages, including some philosophical poems. The Vedas are thus primarily ritual texts: they are either recited during Vedic rituals centred around the fire sacrifice (*yajña*), or they discuss the esoteric nature of Vedic ritual.

But because the Vedas are considered to be unauthored, eternal texts, they are also widely regarded as containing all wisdom, even if only in seed form. Other Hindu scriptures thus often claim to make more easily accessible that which is hidden in the Vedas—which, because it is protectively hidden, is of a higher order than the knowledge of ritual.

The Upaniṣads and Vedānta

The Vedas themselves contain a plurality of voices, but the Upaniṣads are the first major dissenting voice. While they see themselves as part of

G. L. N. Simha, >
*Saraswati, the goddess
of learning and arts,*
2008, pigments on board,
71 x 61 cm (Courtesy of MOSA)





Jnananjana Dasa, *The Pandavas cheated*, oil on canvas, 70 x 100 cm (Courtesy of MOSA)

the Vedic canon—and are traditionally regarded as having the same status—their primary concern is not Vedic ritual. Instead, they focus on philosophical questions, such as “Who am I?” “What is the nature of reality?”

Like the Vedas, the Upaniṣads are a collection of texts. Over the centuries many texts with *Upaniṣad* in their title have been composed, but less than a dozen—the oldest ones—are considered primary. The most important of these are *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka*

Upaniṣad, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, and *Īśā Upaniṣad*.

The *Vedānta-sūtra* or *Brahma-sūtra* (“The *sūtras* on the Upaniṣads” or “The *sūtras* on *brahman*”, two titles for the same text), attributed to the sage Bādarāyaṇa, is the most influential attempt to systematise the teachings of the Upaniṣads. In very concise aphorisms (*sūtra*), this text attempts to show the coherence of the Upaniṣads, to defend its views against rival schools of thought (Buddhist, Jaina, as well as some other Hindu



views), and to offer keys to interpret difficult passages. From the middle of the first millennium onwards, various religious teachers—Śaṅkara (eighth century CE) and Rāmānuja (eleventh century CE) being the most famous—wrote lengthy commentaries on the *Vedānta-sūtra*, leading to the formation of distinct schools of thought. Collectively, these are often referred to as schools of “Vedānta”.

Dharma-śāstra

Dharma-śāstra (“Treatise on *dharma*”) refers to a group of texts that is concerned with the social world. The oldest of these texts—like *Āpastambadhharma-sūtra* or *Baudhāyana-dharma-sūtra*—are deeply rooted in the world of Vedic ritual, while later texts, such as the *Manu-smṛiti*, incorporate other practices, like temple worship. *Dharma* is understood here primarily in social terms: it refers to the duties of the different social classes (*varṇa*) and the different stages of life (*āśrama*). It is these texts that historically have shaped Hindu society.

Their influence has greatly diminished with the rise of modernity, however, and they tend to have little direct relevance to Hindus in the diaspora or to Hindu converts.

Mahā-bhārata, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Bhagavad-gītā*

The *Mahā-bhārata* (“The Great Tale of the Descendants of King Bharata”) and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (“The Journey of

Rāma”) are India’s two great epics. They are narrative texts that tell the story of two of the most popular Hindu deities, Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, respectively. But they are also texts on *dharma*. The *Mahā-bhārata*, in particular, continually problematises the nature of *dharma*, demonstrating that it is difficult to know what is the right thing to do, especially for those in positions of leadership. This is done primarily through the narrative itself, but also through long didactic passages inserted at key points in the story.

The most influential of these passages is the *Bhagavad-gītā* (“The Song of God”), a dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and his friend Arjuna on the eve of the battle that forms the core of the *Mahā-bhārata*. In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa reveals himself as God and advises Arjuna on how to integrate his worldly responsibilities as a prince and warrior with his spiritual pursuit for self-realisation and, ultimately, love of God. Although the *Bhagavad-gītā* is an integral part of the *Mahā-bhārata*, it has been circulated for centuries as a stand-alone text. The *Bhagavad-gītā*’s popularity is primarily due to its ability to synthesise spiritual teachings from a variety of sacred texts, so that it came to be widely regarded, in the words of the eighth-century commentator Śaṅkara, as “the essence of all scriptures”.

The Purāṇas

The Purāṇas (“Ancient Tales”) are a large collection of long narrative texts that tell, and retell, popular Hindu mythological tales. They often cover a wide range of topics, though the most influential Purāṇas primarily teach about love of God (*bhakti*). Although Hindus are generally very familiar with the Purāṇic stories, most of the Purāṇas have not been widely read. There is one enormous exception: the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, popularly known simply as *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (“The Beautiful *Bhāgavata*”). It is the most sophisticated of all the Purāṇas, blending deep Vedāntic theological discourse with rich poetry. Continuing the narrative of the *Mahā-bhārata*, it tells the story of Arjuna’s grandson, Parīkṣit, who in the prime of his life was cursed to die within seven days. He asks the sage Śuka what a person who is about to die should do, and over the course of a week, they engage in a wide-ranging conversation about the nature of this world, the nature of the self, and above all the nature of God, weaving these ideas

into many popular Purāṇic stories. The focus of the *Bhāgavata*, however, is on Kṛṣṇa—the close friend of Parīkṣit’s grandfather—who is regarded here as the fullest embodiment of divinity who has descended to earth to bless his devotees.

There are also a few sections of Purāṇas that have gained popularity and are most commonly circulated independently. The *Devī-māhātmya* (“The Greatness of the Goddess”), also known as the *Durga-saptaśatī* (“The Seven Hundred Verses on Durgā”), which forms a part of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, is the most important of these, especially for those devoted to the Goddess, Devī. The text narrates the glory of the Goddess Durgā or Kālī, who is here regarded as the supreme deity, but is nowadays primarily used as a ritual text, recited rather than read by her devotees on the festivals associated with the Goddess.

Tantra

Traditionally, the Vedas and Upaniṣads have been regarded as eternal texts, without an author (either human or divine). These texts are often called *śruti* (“hearing”), stressing their oral nature and their primary mode of transmission, from guru to disciple. The other texts were seen as authored by sages, after whom the texts are often named, to elaborate on the teachings of the Vedas, and were collectively called *smṛti* (“memory”), as they are the recollections of Vedic teachings, some of which, tradition holds, are only pre-

served in these texts. (Some modern Hindus make no real distinction between these two categories, and regard the Vedas

and Upaniṣads in much the same way as the *smṛti* texts, as the reflections of divinely inspired sages.) These two collections—*śruti* and *smṛti*—are the most widely accepted Hindu texts, even if Hindus may disagree as to which of them is of prime importance.

But there is a third category of texts, collectively called Tantra. These are not universally recognised. They are “sectarian” texts, in that they are accepted only by some Hindu groups. While there are many different types of Tantric texts, there are two main groups: the Pañcarātra texts, which are devoted to the worship of Viṣṇu, and the Āgamas, which are devoted to the worship of Śiva. These texts are accepted by Vaiṣṇavas (devotees of Viṣṇu) and Śaivas (devotees of Śiva), respectively, and both regard their own texts as being revealed by their deity. However, Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas often do not regard their rivals’ texts as authoritative, and these texts are usually not accepted outside of these two traditions.

Despite their limited acceptance, the Tantras are very important, because they shape the practices most commonly associated with Hinduism today: temple worship. They are not just ritual texts, however, but contain elaborate theological teachings.

The Vaiṣṇavas view the Pañcarātra, their Tantric texts, as merely an extension of the Vedic tradition, making Upaniṣadic wisdom available to a wider audience and allowing those traditionally excluded from Vedic ritual (those of the lowest social class, women, and those born outside of Hindu society) the opportunity to reach the ultimate goal, which here is considered to be the union with God in love (*bhakti*).

The Śaivas, on the other hand, regard the Āgamas, their Tantric texts, to be superior to the Vedic revelation. They distinguish between two forms of Tantra: right-hand (*dakṣina*) and left-hand (*vāma*) Tantra. The former teaches

Parikṣit Dasa. *Sri Krishna instructs Arjuna on the battlefield of Kuruksetra*, oil on canvas. (Courtesy of The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust)

Most of the Purāṇas have not been widely read. There is one enormous exception: the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the most sophisticated of all the Purāṇas.



a dualistic theology, in which the self and God are seen as eternal individuals, and emphasises the importance of preserving the rules of ritual purity of the Vedic tradition, some principles of which can be incorporated into Śaiva practice. Socially, this has always been the most prominent group. The left-hand tradition, however, is non-dualistic: it teaches that Śiva is the only reality, and that the self is thus Śiva. These texts were primarily (but certainly not exclusively) followed by ascetics living on the fringes of Hindu society, and they teach various antinomian practices that transgress Vedic customs by employing substances deemed ritually impure in rituals, such as meat, alcohol, and also sexual intercourse (which is where, through much distortion, the popular understanding of “Tantra” in the West comes from).

Vernacular songs

The texts most familiar to the majority of Hindus, however, are the many writings, specifically songs, of saints and poets, composed not in Sanskrit—the language of the educated elite—but in the vernacular languages spoken by the common people. Although these songs are not usually accorded the status of “scripture”, they have shaped the faith of most Hindus in far more immediate ways than have these Sanskrit texts. Poets like Nammālvār (eighth century CE), Māṇikkavācakar (ninth century CE), Kabīr (fifteenth century CE), Sūrdās (sixteenth century CE), or Tukarām (seventeenth century CE) are still revered, and many Hindus will know their songs by heart even today. Their works are expressions of their devotion (*bhakti*) to God and held to be both records of their religious experiences as well as vehicles for making those experiences accessible to their followers. Because they are written in the language that Hindus actually spoke, and because different languages are spoken in the different regions of the Indian subcontinent, these poems usually have only a regional signif-

icance, but it is hard to overstate their importance or their authority.

Conclusion

There is considerable variety in Hindu texts, both in terms of content and style. Most Hindus will privilege one or two texts over all others, and read all others in the light of that one text. But while many Hindus will argue that religious practice or knowledge of the divine must be rooted in scripture, the authority of scripture is never absolute. If we imagine all Hindu scriptures as learned scholars gathered for a debate, we must also consider the judge or arbiter of that debate.

In Hinduism, the authority of scripture is thus always shared with the living exponent of those scriptures. According to the *Dharma-śāstras*, this should be a local, learned, but diverse assembly that judges what is in accordance with *dharma*, guided yet not absolutely bound by scripture. Tantric and Vedāntic texts emphasize the role of preceptors (*guru*), who should be well-versed in the texts and traditions they represent and who can thus translate the teachings of those texts to their disciples. They are seen as the embodiment of those texts, as it were, and so some Hindus argue that there is nothing higher than devotion to the *guru*—or, indeed, that nothing else is required. The same emphasis is found in devotional texts, which also extend some of that authority to the devotional community (*saṅga*) to which one belongs.

Practically, this means that not all Hindus are aware that Hindu texts do disagree. This may be because they have found a way to integrate them all into the hierarchical but unifying vision of the texts they have privileged. More commonly, however, this is because their primary access to the texts is only indirect, through the example of religious teachers and saints whom they believe have personally experienced the goal to which the sacred texts point, and whose example is therefore considered as good as those sacred texts.

Jnananjana Dasa, >
Kunti and Draupadi,
oil on canvas, 160 x 120 cm
(Courtesy of MOSA)



Ayurveda:

Knowledge of life, health, and balance

MAHABHAVA DASA

Ayurveda is an ancient system of medicine that emphasizes on the balance between body, mind, and spirit to promote health. The term *ayurveda* literally means “knowledge of life” (*ayus* meaning “life” and *veda* “knowledge”). This holistic system recognizes the uniqueness of each individual and works with personal methods to achieve and maintain harmony.

The philosophy of Ayurveda

Ayurveda’s philosophy is deeply related to nature and the cosmos. Rooted in Vedic philosophy, the entire

The entire universe is seen as an interconnected unity of microcosm and macrocosm, with humans regarded as reflections of nature itself.

universe is seen as an interconnected unity of microcosm (*purusha*, the individual) and macrocosm (*loka*, the universe), with humans regarded as reflections of nature itself. This interconnectedness is expressed in the theory of *pancha mahabhuta siddhanta* — the theory that everything in the universe, including humans, is composed of five (*pancha*) elements (*mahabhuta*): (1) earth (*prthvi*), (2) water (*apas*), (3) fire (*tejas*), (4) air

(*vayu*), and (5) space (*akasha*). Each of these elements has unique qualities and plays a role in bodily and mental functions.

Balancing the doshas

The balance between these elements within the body is governed by the three *doshas*: (1) *vata* (air and space), (2) *pitta* (fire and water) and (3) *kapha* (earth and water). These *doshas* represent the fundamental energies that influence physical and mental processes. Each person is born with a unique *prakrti*, or a combination of these

doshas, which serves as the basis for their health and well-being. When *prakrti* is out of balance, it is called *vikrti*, which can lead to discomfort or illnesses. During a consultation, an Ayurvedic specialist assesses whether the *vikrti* aligns with the individual’s original *prakrti* and provides tai-

lored advice and treatments accordingly.

Restoring balance

A key principle of Ayurveda is the use of corresponding qualities in substances to restore (and support) the body’s balance, which is known as the *samanya-visesha siddhanta* (the principle of similarity and dissimilarity).



For instance, if an individual has an excess of *pitta* (associated with heat and intensity), cooling foods or herbs can help bring it back into balance. Personalized recommendations for right diet, lifestyle, herbs, and treatments are given to address these imbalances in the *dosha's*. Additionally, Ayurveda attaches great importance to the theory of cause and effect, or *karyakarana vada*, which states that every health condition or imbalance has an underlying cause that must be identified and addressed for effective treatment.

Practical uses of Ayurveda

In practice, treatments such as the daily morning routines (*dinacarya*) and herbal knowledge (*dravya guna*) are used to promote health. Cleansing cures (“detox

programs”) such as *panchakarma* are designed to thoroughly cleanse and revitalize the body by balancing the *doshas*. The purpose of these intensive treatments is not only to cure but also to prevent disease by maintaining an overall balance.

Ayurveda in contemporary society

In today's world, Ayurveda offers a valuable approach to healthcare, with a strong emphasis on prevention and well-being. By focusing on balance and harmony, people can maintain both physical and mental health in a fast-paced world, keeping the timeless wisdom of Ayurveda relevant. Its approach encourages a connection with nature for resilience amidst modern challenges.



The Significance in Belgium

Vision and future

The Hindu Forum of Belgium embraces the richness of Hindu/Vedic culture, offering a platform for all spiritual traditions rooted in the Vedic scriptures.

We welcome followers of Vaisnavism (worshippers of Vishnu), Shaivism (worshippers of Shiva), Shaktism (worshippers of the Goddess), Smartism (worshippers of five major deities: Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Ganesha, and Surya), and other traditions, each with their unique perspectives, to come together under one unified platform.

Whether one draws inspiration and inner peace from selfless action of the *karma-yoga* traditions (Vedas), the profound wisdom of the *jñana-yoga* traditions (Upanishads), the serenity of meditation from the *dhyana-yoga* traditions (Yoga Sutras), the joyful devotion of the *bhakti-yoga* traditions (*Bhagavad Gita*), the Hindu Forum is dedicated to supporting all who wish to engage with Vedic spirituality in its entirety.

We also happily welcome diverse philosophical perspectives, including Advaita (non-dualism), which teaches

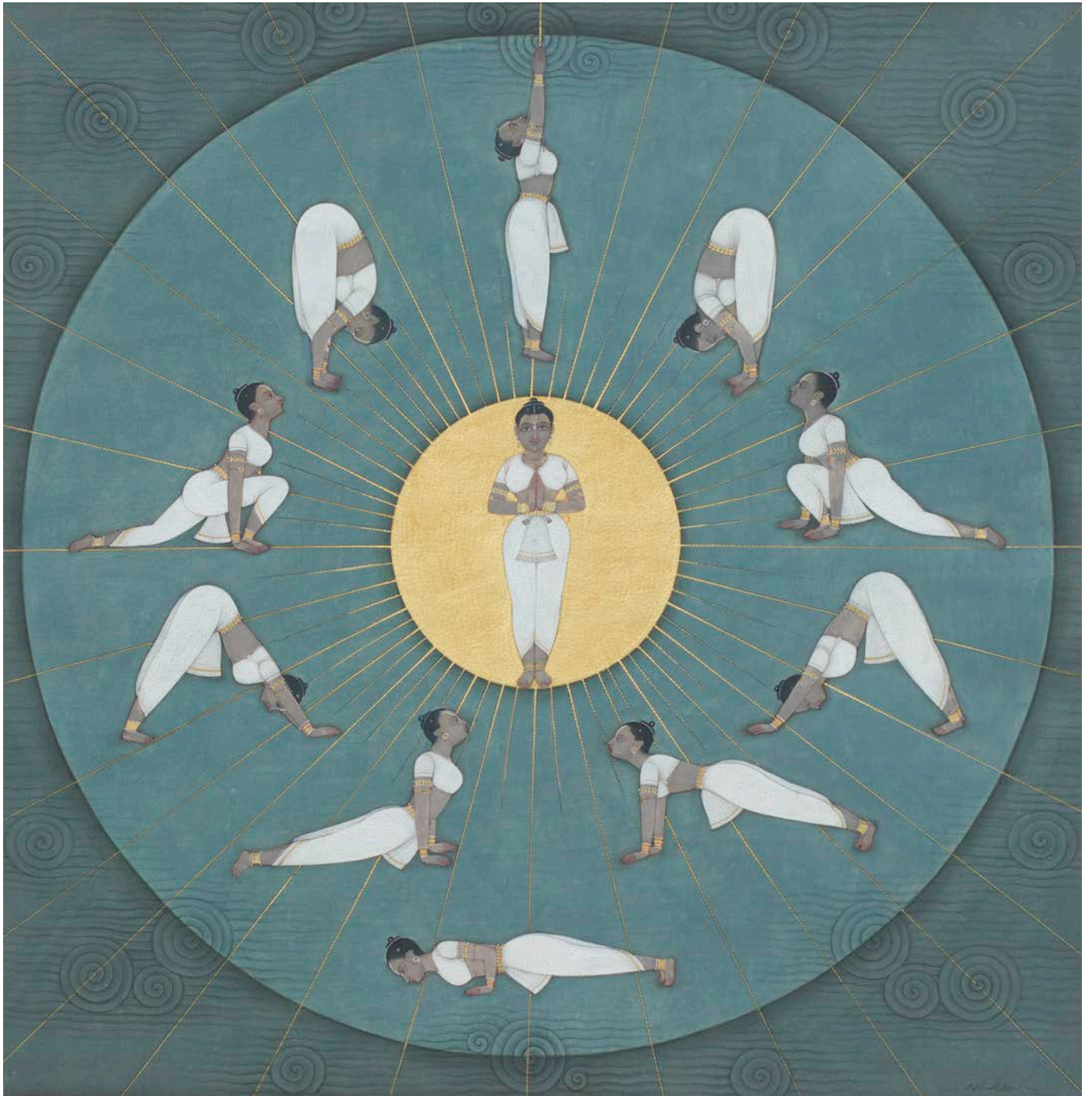
the oneness of all existence; Dvaita (dualism), which emphasizes the distinction between the soul and the divine; and polytheistic traditions that celebrate the worship of many deities representing different aspects of the divine.

Our commitment to inclusivity extends to groups which are syncretic in nature, taking elements from several or all of the above-mentioned traditions.

One might ask, What is the common thread amongst these variegated spiritual traditions? First,

Our vision includes helping establish religious associations, training future spiritual counselors and leaders, and ensuring Hindu teachings become an integral part of Belgium's multicultural landscape.

e of Hinduism



Mahaveer Swami, *Surya-namaskara*, pigments on handmade paper (Courtesy of MOSA)

they accept the Vedic scriptures as sacred. Second, there are some common theological concepts such as *atma*, or eternal soul; *karma*, or the universal law of action and reaction; *samsara*, or the cycle of birth and death; and *moksha*, or liberation of that cycle. Also, the different spiritual traditions within Hinduism follow *dharma*, the path of morality and righteous living.

We aim to connect with and support all South Asian communities, all organisations based on Vedic teachings, and provide a platform to help them flourish in Belgium. Our vision includes helping establish religious associations, assisting in the training of future spiritual counselors and leaders, and ensuring that awareness of the various Hindu manifestations and teachings become an integral part of Belgium's multicultural landscape. In line with this mission, we prioritize collaboration — cultivating relationships not only within Hindu communities but also with other religious and philosophical groups across Belgium. Dialogue, mutual respect, and inclusiveness are at the heart of our values.

Hinduism offers much to Belgian society, especially in promoting well-being and positive values. Rooted in *dharma*, or a sense of duty and morality, Hindu teachings encourage ethical living, while values like non-violence, tolerance, and compassion hold great relevance in today's tumultuous world. Yoga and meditation, key contributions from the Vedic tradition, have enhanced the mental and physical well-being for many in Belgium, regardless of religious or cultural affiliation. These practices, now more popular than ever, provide tools to manage stress, improve focus, and inner peace — all contributing to a healthier society.

Beyond well-being, Hinduism instills a deep respect for family bonds and intergenerational soli-

arity — values that help strengthen Belgium's social fabric. The concept of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, guides ethical decision-making (conscious leadership) and promotes a spirit of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, qualities essential in our interconnected world.

Culturally, Hindu festivals such as Diwali, Janmashthami, Maha Shiva Ratri, Ganesh Chaturthi, Radha Yatra, Durga Puja, and Holi have become vibrant celebrations that bring communities together and create opportunities for intercultural exchange and understanding. Economically, Hindu communities in Belgium are also contributing significantly, impacting sectors such as trade, finance, and IT and supporting the local economy.

In conclusion, the Hindu Forum of Belgium is an open platform uniting the many traditions of Hindu/Vedic spirituality. Through promoting well-being, strengthening family values, and sharing cultural traditions, Hinduism offers valuable lessons and practices for all. We join other communities in building a future that respects diversity and enhances the well-being of everyone.

The present Board of the Hindu Forum of Belgium would like to thank all the previous presidents of the organisation who have helped in achieving this important first step in the recognition process of Hinduism in Belgium: Shushma Thapa, Manik Paul, Anil Chunivan, Ravinder Singh, and Peter Scherrenburg.

The Board of the Hindu Forum of Belgium,

Martin Gurvich/Mahaprabhu Dasa (President)
Jeysen Rungiah (Vice President and Secretary)
Avinash Orié/Gopi Ramana Dasa (Treasurer)



Hinduism

Statistics on the world's
third largest religion



In the World

Approximately **1.2 billion** Hindus worldwide,
making up **15%** of the global population.



In India

India is home to about **94%** of the global
Hindu population.



In Other Countries

Largest populations outside India: Nepal,
Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka.



In Europe

Over **2 million** Hindus live in Europe, with the
population projected to reach 2.7 million by
2050.



In Belgium

Belgium has around **45,000 Hindus**, including
those of Asian and Belgian origins.

