HINDUISM, GURUS, AND GLOBALIZATION

Shandip Saha

According to the 2001 Census of India, Hinduism claims over 800 million adherents in that country alone.\(^1\) Its history on the subcontinent also stretches back more than 4,500 years. The global spread of Hinduism, however, happened rather differently in comparison to other religions such as Islam or Christianity. Hinduism did move beyond the subcontinent already in the early decades of the Christian era, when Indian merchants brought Hinduism to Southeast Asia, where it enjoyed royal patronage into the twelfth century. Yet it was only during the nineteenth century, especially in the context of British rule and incorporation into the worldwide British empire, that significant expansion to other regions occurred. It was also in this context that different spiritual teachers (gurus) began to travel to Europe and North America. The successive waves of gurus that went overseas during the twentieth century, and the positive reception they received from both Hindus and non-Hindus alike ensured that Hinduism became a part of the global religious landscape as gurus became a regular fixture of Western popular culture, as did terms like ‘yoga’, ‘karma’, and ‘reincarnation’.

This essay proposes to trace the pivotal role that gurus have played in spreading Hinduism beyond the borders of South Asia by outlining the reasons for their movements overseas, and the means by which they have successfully transmitted Hinduism to a global audience. In doing so, the chapter addresses two issues. The first is the effect of transnational capitalism on Hinduism, while the second issue is the effect that the globalization of Hinduism has had on defining Hindu identity in India and in the Hindu diaspora.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) See [http://www.censusindia.net/religiondata/Summary%20Hindus.pdf](http://www.censusindia.net/religiondata/Summary%20Hindus.pdf)  
\(^2\) Standard transliteration standards for Sanskrit and Hindi terms have not been used in this essay. This is particularly the case for the proper names of different gurus. The names are transliterated according to popular usage as found on the gurus' official websites and publications.
For Hindus, religion is manifested or embodied in the continuing, successive presence of the guru. It is the guru who reveals the meaning of life and is the principal source of religious inspiration for Hindus. The word ‘guru’, in Sanskrit, means ‘heavy’ or ‘weighty’, and was used in early Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Dharmashastras to refer to one who, on account of his special knowledge and function, was held to be of great power, prestige and weight (Gonda, 1985: 237–241). The guru carried out a number of functions in Hindu society. He acted as political counselor to kings, he was the ritual specialist who used his skills to protect the spiritual health of a sovereign’s kingdom, and he served as the educator to the upper classes of Hindu society in everything from religion and morality to mathematics and warfare (Gonda, 1985: 247–251).

The Upanishads, however, make it quite clear that education is not an end in itself. The acquisition of knowledge (jnana) is essential to the attainment of spiritual liberation (moksha), which is defined in the Upanishads as the realization of the non-duality between the self (atman) and Ultimate Reality (brahman). Therefore—as a living embodiment (jivanmukta) of this state of liberation—the role of the guru was to pass on his knowledge to qualified disciples (shishya) (Mlecko, 1982: 36–37). The philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedanta associated with the eighth century philosopher, Shankara (c. 788–820 CE), defines the guru as a dispassionate, calm, and compassionate individual free of passions and desires who has a deep knowledge of scriptures which he is willing to share freely with his disciples (Prabhavananda and Isherwood, 1970: 44–47, 153). The disciples, in turn, are to listen intently to the guru, question him, and then proceed on the path of liberation—renouncing the world to contemplate and meditate upon their guru’s teachings. The guru, in other words, is viewed as a realized soul who imparts knowledge in order to empower his disciples to find their own path towards religious salvation.

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3 There is a large amount of literature about the position of the guru in Hinduism. In addition to Gonda, see also Brent (1974), Feuerstein (1991), Gonda (1947), Hara (1980), Kane (1942), and Mlecko (1982).

4 This understanding of the guru is taken from two popular Sanskrit hymns attributed to Shankara entitled Vivekachudamani and Prashnottaramalika.