How Hinduism Fares in Europe
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Lands of Opportunity And Hardship, Friends And a Few Firebombs

Europe's Hindus range from insecure refugees to the well-established second and third generation of Indians born in the United Kingdom. Hindus in Germany and France, especially the political refugees from Sri Lanka, are in a much more unsettled state. Small in numbers, lacking in advanced education and the professional status of their brothers and sisters in the UK, many languish on government doles and--in Germany--live in increasing fear for their personal safety as attacks by neo-Nazis impact all foreigners. Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, spent most of June touring London, Germany and Paris, France, at the invitation of his Sri Lanka devotees. Natarajaswami, Sadhaka Thondunatha and Deva Rajan, traveling with him, collaborated on this first-hand update exploring Hinduism in Europe. United Kingdom The BIG issue in the UK even among non-Hindus is the scheduled closing of ISKCON's Bhaktivedanta Manor shrine to public pujas on March 16th, 1994. At issue is the local village of Hertsmere's permission, given about 1973, to allow the manor to function as a theological college with 19 residents. Over the years, the manor developed into much more, with thousands of devotees visiting Sundays and up to 25,000 coming for major festivals. A turning point came several years ago when some ISKCON devotees attempted to buy property in the small, affluent, 400-year-old village of only 100 homes. The town council, which had no obligation to allow the increased use, then issued an "enforcement notice" to limit the manor to a theological college and prohibit the public functions, which townspeople found disruptive. Appeals through the courts and political channels, costing US$750,000 so far, have failed to reverse the notice. A June 10th meeting attempted to raise financial support among the Indian community for a more activist strategy. The very militant tone of the meeting did not sit well with all of the participants. A BBC radio report stated, "There was the first hint of the trouble to come when the message was driven home with a play that some other religions wouldn't take Hertsmere village's enforcement order lying down." The play's Sikh stated, "We Sikhs would never ever allow one of our Gurdwaras to be closed. We would fight, fight and fight until they were defeated. Please, please, my Hindu brothers and sisters, give up this act of cowardice that you shame me with and arise and fight!" The BBC report said there was objection from the audience. "'Stereotyping the allies and the enemies isn't the best way,' according to Nitin Mehta from the Indian Cultural Center in Croyden who stood up and said so.' 'I think it was very racist. This is really the wrong way of going about

things.'" The BBC went on, "Frank Ward, a Hertsmere council member and staunch supporter of the [Hare Krishna] temple, took to the microphone and predicted that the slumbering Hindu tiger might one day get on its feet and 'bite off the nose' of not only the government, but also of the people of the village. Ward maintained that the opposition to the temple amounted to a British version of ethnic cleansing. Wasn't he raising the temperature using such terminology? [asked the BBC commentator] 'Well, [Ward said,] the temperature has got to go up ... unless the Hindu community is prepared to fight, the temple will close.'" Ward also said Hindus should "be prepared to go to prison to keep this temple open," and that the "more [Hindu] radical elements" will demand action if it is closed to the public. Another speaker impassionately declared,"We have to take this fight to the streets, it is the only way to success." The BBC continued, "Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami declared himself disgusted by the proceedings. He told them God was as much in the little old lady in the village worried about the value of her property as everywhere else.... 'Rabble rousing, fear-evoking rhetoric' he called it later, expressing concerns that one day it could lead to violence. 'We believe in working with the community, not against it. All Hindus, whatever country they live in, should respect and obey the laws of their country.'" After the meeting several members of the Indian community expressed their agreement that ISKCON's speaker's call for militant action had gone too far. In other developments, a leadership conference on Hinduism in Britain was held last November in Birmingham with representatives from the Gujarati, Punjab, Tamil and other communities. Harslad Chauhan, vice-president of the National Council of Hindu Temples in the UK, told Hinduism Today that the conference produced an "Action Plan for Hindus in Britain" which calls for a united national Hindu body. Harslad humorously relates that they have 76 suggestions for such a body's name. The committee has involved the youth and set up a women's wing, "but we are struggling to get women on our board." Discussions by the group on the use of the word Hindu concluded "to use another word would do more damage than good." Among the problems such a national Hindu body could address are media bias, employer relations and government policy in the areas of education, local authority, race relations and immigration. Subramuniyaswami held a press conference at the Mandeer restaurant in London to introduce his new book, Dancing with Siva, and to answer questions from the British media on the hot issue of "fundamentalism." The 1,008-page Hindu catechism was an instant success. Subramuniyaswami explained that, "fundamentalism comes up in a group of unreligious people who are being suppressed by the government. They can't release their feelings in an ordinary way and feel they are being punished by God. Then they go get a few lines out of their scripture which they are not too familiar with and become adamant about following that. Fundamentalism could not possibly come up within Hinduism, because all Hindus are tolerant." The press conference was chaired by Dr. Vidya Anand, one of England's leading Hindu politicians. Germany One need read no further than the headlines of the world's newspapers to realize life for a foreigner in Germany is hazardous. Just a few weeks ago an arson attack killed five Turks in one city. Firebombings at refugee camps have become a nightly affair, with the police claiming themselves powerless to catch the culprits. "Sad stories," was the two-word summary of Germany by our

reporters. East Berlin was positively dangerous for foreigners and none of the Sri Lankans would willingly venture there. The German government provides refugees with a substantial guaranteed monthly income. But any earnings they make result in a deduction from the subsidy. Since refugees are restricted to only a few jobs--cooking, dishwashing, newspaper delivery and the like--it is nearly impossible to improve upon the basic dole. Free education is provided by the government, especially in language, but since the refugees mostly intend to return to Sri Lanka when the situation is resolved in their native land, there is little incentive to improve one's condition. The overall result is a depressed and largely idle community. The situation in Stuttgard, Dortmund and Hamm, all located in the former West Germany, is better. Here more refugees are availing themselves of the education opportunities, and getting better jobs. Each town, including Berlin, has a small--make that very small--temple. And, as was the case in England and France also, all of the temples are hidden behind European facades. It is unlike the situation in the US where dramatic, traditional Hindu temples are found in many cities. Stuttgart Hindus reported Christian conversion by Pentecostal groups was making some inroads, especially among the women. However there is also traffic the other way, with Hindus reconverting from Christian faiths, such as the Jehovah Witnesses. In addition to promoting Dancing with Siva, Subramuniyaswami's second purpose was to visit members of the Sri Lanka Tamil Hindu community. In fact, he was the first swami to visit the Sri Lankans in Europe. In evening meetings he advised them to follow three basic sadhanas: 1) get up two hours before sunrise and perform puja; 2) be vegetarians, no fish, meat, eggs or chicken, because, he said, "when we eat meat we eat the animal mind and emotions, bringing fear, jealousy and anger;" and 3) don't hit or hurt their children, but raise them in a kind, caring way. He also set up a committee of elders, former members of his ashram in Alaveddy, Sri Lanka, to look after new arrivals, and to encourage all to train themselves and attempt to settle into a better life. He especially advised them to see that their children are well educated. the effort will counter a "leave them alone" attitude that is unraveling Hindu family by offering no guidance or training. A great treat for all in Berlin was the presence of Swami Sadhasivacharya from Moscow. He is the spiritual leader of a group of 1,000 families which are practicing Saivism in Russia. [Next issue will contain a profile of this swami, his work and the growing popularity of Hinduism in Russia.] France The Hindu community here is also small, about 50,000, consisting of some long-time residents and a lot of recent arrivals. Like England and Germany, the French government is really quite kindly and helpful with the plight of the Tamil refugees. Thirty-five thousand Hindus live in Paris, about 60% are Tamils. They are served by several small temples. V. Sanderasekaram, who founded a Ganesha temple, reports that more than 300 Hindus have been converted, largely on promises of jobs. Many are turning to the Catholic Church for some form of religious solace, but without converting. In May, 10,000 Sri Lanka Tamils made a pilgrimage to the 13th-century gothic cathedral at Chartres, outside Paris, "just to have some place to go," according to Sanderasekaram. Last year a Hindu couple not converted to Christianity was married at Lourdes Cathedral 500 miles south of Paris in a hybrid Hindu/Christian wedding conducted by Christian priests. Most surprising of all is that there is no

provision for cremation in France. All who die must be buried, and the rites are by law conducted by a Christian priest. Sanderasekaram did not know of any place in Europe where proper Hindu cremation rites were being done. Another problem facing the community is divorce, often caused when both husband and wife are working and the husband subsequently loses his job. Many of these unemployed men have taken to drinking and their marriages have fallen apart. The economic situation overall is good for Hindus; 30% of new arrivals buy their own homes within five years. Work permits and permanent residency are not difficult to acquire. Consequently, most Sri Lanka Tamils intend to stay in France, unlike Germany where permanent resident status is very difficult to acquire, and most refugees expect to eventually leave. The overall impression gathered by our staff in Europe was one of oppression toward Hinduism. It wasn't so much a deliberate and specific anti-Hindu attitude, but the result of a general bias against all foreigners and against non-Christian religions.