

[Italy's Hindu Controversy](#)

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NEW FRONTIERS

Italy's Hindu Controversy

Swami Yoganandagiri seeks official status for Italian-born Hindus in the land of the Vatican

We have to overcome a misunderstanding asserted by Italian scholars that one has to be born in India to be a Hindu. Our Sangha also hopes to spread the authentic Hindu culture among Italians who take yoga as just a sweet gymnastic," stated Swami Yoganandagiri. His December invitation to Hinduism Today outlined plans for a June international conference in Milan on the controversial subject of conversion to Hinduism, among other subjects. The problem is serious in Italy, for Hinduism is not officially recognized by the government. An individual's conversion and name change cannot be legalized. Tax-deductible status is not granted to Hindu organizations. Hinduism Today accepted the invitation and sent representatives Acharya Ceyonswami and Tyagi Skandanathaswami to the meeting.

Twelve years ago, Italian-born Swami Yoganandagiri established the Gitananda Ashram in Savona, perched in the hills a few miles from the sparkling blue Mediterranean Ligurian Sea above Corsica. He became a yogi in his teens and was trained in India by Swami Gitananda, among others. He learned Sanskrit, absorbed the South Indian Agamic tradition, received sacraments making him a Hindu and was initiated as a renunciate monk.

Skandanathaswami reported later, "I couldn't believe my eyes when we reached Savonna. Swami Yoganandagiri and a small band of dedicated Italian Hindus have established full traditional Hinduism at his ashram. Stepping into his Sri Chakra temple was like being in India. Other swamis teach yoga but often remain at distance from Hinduism. But Yoganandagiri

boldly declares his Hindu heritage, and that--in Italy!"

The conference is the first organized by Swami's newly created Unione Induista Italiana, (Italian Hindu Union), an attempt to unify under a Hindu banner those Italians already immersed in Indian culture. The three days included workshops on Indian dance, yoga, ayurveda and astrology presented by leading Hindus. But the pivotal debate was taking place at meetings that pitted Italian professors of religion against Hindu swamis and delegates on the issue of converting to Hinduism. Chief adversary, Professor Mario Piantelli, opined that conversion to Hinduism is impossible for those not born in India. He was unanimously countered by all the Hindu delegates, who cited Indian Supreme Court decisions and statements by Swami Vivekananda and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, former president of India. That might have been the end of the issue, but the day after the conference ended, a national Italian daily, L'UnitÀ of Rome published Piantelli's opinions in a major article. Swami Yoganandagiri flew to Rome to issue a rebuttal [see below], and the debate entered the national forum.

Swami had many allies. Dr. R. Gopalakrishnan, Director, Radhakrishnan Institute for Advanced Study in Philosophy, University of Madras said, "As an Indian and as a Hindu, I find there is no truth in this statement that those who are born in India alone are eligible to become Hindus." Dr. Atulchandra S. Thombare from Pune, India says, "A man can change his nationality, and even his sex, why not religion?" Indian Ambassador to Italy, Mr. Fabian, a Catholic, said: "Faith is a matter of the heart and personal choice. If someone practises Hinduism and is accepted by Hindus, then he is one."

Swami is allying himself with the Buddhists, who are also pressing for official recognition in Italy. They are, according to Swami, two years ahead of the Hindus in the decade-long process of changing the complex Italian laws relating to conversion.

* Check the HT website for full unedited statements

Impossible for Non-Indians

Mario Piantelli, Professor of Indian Religions and Philosophies, University of Torino, Italy in an interview with L'UnitÀ :

All scholars agree that the category 'Hinduism' is something created by Orientalists. This obviously does not exclude the existence of an Indian spiritual experience. But at a certain point it was decided to use this label, which during Colonialism became a flag for independence, and after that an attempt was made by the people of India to recognize themselves in a common religion. In my opinion, this common religion is nothing but a ghost. So many different experiences sprouted on the Indian soil that it is difficult to place them in a unitary phenomenon. Hinduism is a category born by adopting the term Hindu, a Persian expression used by Muslims to qualify all those that in India who are not Muslims, Jews or Christians; that is, "the others."

There are legal pronouncements that Hindus are Indian citizens belonging to a religion born in India. This means Buddhists, Sikhs or Parsis, even those who did not recognize themselves as Hindus, are to be considered Hindus. After Independence, outcastes previously not admitted into temples were also suddenly raised to the rank of Hindus.

Non-Indian Hindus around the world generally belong to groups, experiences or schools which are irrelevant compared to the Indian experience. They live far from India, trying to get in touch with its reality. But they suffer from identification problems. Indian are questioning whether or not such so-called Western converts can be admitted to temples. While so-called Hindu radicalism finds its strength in [Hindu] ethnic identity, the more traditionalist stratum of Indian society identifies with universal laws which indicate behavior models and the specific varna dharma, or caste rules, which apply only to Indians. Outsiders are "barbarians." ...Hinduism is an impossible choice for those not born in India.

Piantelli, Hindus Do Exist

Italian-born Swami Yoganandagiri, Italy's founder of Gitananda Ashram, Italy:

Contrary to Professor Piantelli's statements, the Italian Hindu Union comprises people who not only love India, but have received a religious formation in India with all sacraments and who identify themselves deeply and seriously with the Hindu faith. The statement that "Hinduism" is a

neologism referring only to those born in India, is a wrong interpretation. The word Hindu has evolved. Today in modern India Hindus are those following the principles of Sanatana Dharma. Its main characteristic is its universality. There are no decrees or scriptures which say only those born in India can be Hindu. What about the children of the Hindus born in America, Africa, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Mauritius and Europe? They call themselves Hindu just like we Italian Hindus. So, how can it be an exclusive religion only for those born in India? On the contrary, the Supreme Indian Court in 1966 codified the definition of Hinduism and in 1995 confirmed that: "Hindus are those who accept the Vedas (sacred text) as the highest religious and philosophical authority and are tolerant and accept that truth can have many facets, who believe in cosmic cycles, rebirth and pre-existence and recognize that many paths lead to salvation."

Finally, referring to Piantelli's statement "Does the phrase 'Italian Hindu' have any meaning?" Italian Hindus, among which there are also Indian citizens living in Italy, already exist and are recognized by Indian Hindus and Buddhists. Many governments have legally recognized Hinduism. Maybe in Italy, the missionary Catholic heritage, which makes the possibility of conversion difficult, still predominates. Someone has stated that it is possible to leave Hinduism and become a Christian, a Buddhist, etc. There is nothing in the universe which, if you can abandon, you cannot adopt.