

Handbook of Hinduism in Europe

Volume 2: Hindu Presence in European Countries

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Hinduism in Italy

A Condensed History of a Meteorological Phenomenon

Andrea Maria Nencini and Federico Squarcini

1 What Is It Like to Make a Map? Criteria and Rationale for Mapping “Religions”¹

Since the end of August 2005, the name “Katrina” has been widely used to indicate a specific form of “windstorm,” a form that was delineated, shaped, and carved out from a much wider system of atmospheric air circulation that is conventionally classified, labelled, and hierarchically organised as “storm,” “thunderstorm,” “tornado,” “hurricane,” “cyclone,” “monsoon,” etc.

Just as “Katrina” is the name given to a specific and isolated case of air flow and dynamic pressure called a “hurricane,” the label “Hinduism” is the conventional semantic aggregative functor that,² since being coined in English usage (from 1750 onward), has been extensively adopted to address and reify a vast array of different “climates,” atmospheres, and contexts, which are all vaguely but tightly bound to geospatial locating factors. Today, in fact, media, columnists, and political influencers of various kinds continue to reiterate that “Hinduism” *is* “a religion with Indian origins.”

Mapping religions within such a simplistic rational pattern seems to be a rather easy task: It merely requires reporting the location, in space and time, of an identifiable “object.” Seen from this perspective, in order to describe the historical situation of a “religious object” called “Hinduism” in Italy, it would be sufficient to assume that such an “object,” after it *departed* from India and *reached* American and European territories, *landed* on the northern Mediterranean peninsula. The basic job for refining and completing the task would be to diligently apply a somewhat more sophisticated time scale, as well as geolocated markers. Libraries are in fact saturated with atlases of religions,

1 Although this chapter has been planned and written collegially, Andrea Maria Nencini (Sapienza University of Rome) has to be considered responsible for sections 5 to 8 and Federico Squarcini (‘Ca Foscari’ University of Venice) for sections 1 to 4. In memory of Gerald James Larson (1938–2019).

2 Within these pages the words “Hinduism” and “Hindu” are presented and intended as semantic functors and naming devices to underline their being the outcomes of historically and politically positioned acts of “identification” and “de-nomination.”

a literary genre in itself, and scholars of religion, at least since William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and Émile Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), are educated and accustomed to looking at "religions" as plural forms of a singular "object," although this is constructed conceptually. Those among them who are not aware of or concerned about the topological, epistemological, and semiotic consequences of such "skilled vision" (Machery 2009; Pylyshyn 2007; Millikan 2004; Lakoff 1990), continue to see, trace, and depict "forms," "variants," "versions," and "shapes" of the *same*, singular "thing"; therefore, not only running the risk of *naïve* essentialism—if not brutal objectification (Fuchs 2001; Honneth 2008)—but also of underestimating, excluding, and ignoring the constituted, relational, negotiated, and systemic networks within which "religions" are always and everywhere immersed (Levine 2015; Shaviro 2003; Buchanan 2003).

But, as the historian of religion J.Z. Smith noted decades ago (Smith 2004, 1987, 1978), for critical geographical scholarship, as well as for religious studies, "map is not territory" (Harley 1988, 1991; Bryant 2014: 111–286; Parry and Perkins 2011; Farinelli 2009a, 2009b; Fitzpatrick and Reynolds 2009; Cosgrove 2001, 2008; Christian 2004; Zerubavel 2003; Gaddis 2002; Blaut 1993). In fact, situated, concrete, and pragmatic historical realities are rather different from what pictures and screenshots show. Those who are not aware of the inner implications of mapping fail to recognise that limits, confines, zones, boundaries, fronts, and differences are arbitrary attributions that are superimposed by social and historical agencies; agencies that are variously struggling toward the political institutionalisation of their territorialising semiotic grids and devices.³ Intoxicated by the will to know what a map *means*, scholars are risking to miss what the map *does*. Nevertheless, ignoring invitations to caution, drawing maps of religious presences has been a widespread academic practice for decades.⁴

Indeed, prompted by a ready-made pragmatism, the majority of geographical mappings of contemporary religions consists of a series of operational acts of localisation and identification, which are carried out primarily by interlocking geolocated markers with nominal labels, as in toponyms. This same rationale is often used in mapping the presence of various identity-forming systems of belief promoted by historical agencies specialised in giving behavioural

3 Such devices rule and shape also the correlations between area studies' research design and policy, as well as the disposition of methodological constructions and object of study's definitions, see Pollock 2016; Szanton 2004; Hollander 2008.

4 Reputed as "classics" of the field, see Sopher 1967; Deffontaines 1948; Park 2005. The relationship between geology and religion has been similarly intertwined, see Kolbl-Ebert 2009.

rules and norms. A rationale that produces “clear” descriptive outputs but is grounded on “confusion” and tautology: since places where particular people meet and gather *are* mapped as “religious places,” those whom are accustomed to gather in such places *must be* “religious people.”

Such portraits and infographics of “religious cultures” (Bhabha 1994; Manganaro 2002), although fit for smartphone screens and browsers, are highly reductive and dramatically dependent on hypostatic, outdated, and reifying combinatory systems of imagined boundaries, labels, and localising semantic functors.⁵ Scholars thus encounter too many inconveniences and risks in keeping alive the tradition of describing and mapping an idealised “Hinduism” that is localised within a stereotyped territorial compound called “Italy.”

Nevertheless, anyone writing about “Hinduism” *in* “Italy” needs to struggle with locative markers and nominal labels since he has to adopt and deal with at least two highly conventional—although extremely fuzzy—concepts and tangible “ideas”: the *idea* that “Hinduism” is a homogeneous “religion,” and the *idea* that “Italy” is a coherent and undifferentiated geo-cultural space.

However, although labels and localisations are mandatory for exchanges of information, they can have alternative constructions, intensions, and uses that do not betray the factual temporalities of the constant human and terrestrial mutations: Labels like “Hinduism” and “Hindu,” for example, can still be employed while maintaining a critical awareness of their historical contextuality and political situatedness, as well as of the fact that they are often derived from a “scientification” of a local, “native,” and “indigenous,” identity-forming practical lexicon.⁶ The same caution must be used in regard to passively assuming that “Hinduism” *is* a geographically situated variant of a “larger phenomenon” called “religion,” a passivity that eventually leads to ignoring decades of specialised scholarship on the topic (Devadevan 2016; Sharma 2013; Nicholson 2010; Jha 2009; Oddie 2006; Llewellyn 2005; Pennington 2004; Sweetman 2003; Lorenzen 1999; Hawley 1991; Von Stietencron 1989).

Analogous concerns should be expressed regarding the limitations imposed by standardised location and spatial mapping tools, most of which could be improved after consulting and profiting from disciplines and scientific practices that are more accustomed to spatially moving phenomena, as is the case of topology, social kinetics, geophilosophy (Allen 2016; Woodard 2013; Fogle 2011; Kavanaugh 2010; Zamberlin 2006; Bonta and Protevi 2004; Bhabha 1994), and

5 On the problems related to South Asian’s religious identity boundaries, see Schmalz and Gottschalk 2011; Nicholson 2013; Doniger and Nussbaum 2015; Tweed 2005; Pace 2013.

6 On claiming indicators and categories such as “scientific” or “etic,” which are derived from pragmatic and “emic” contexts, see Saler 1993, 2009; Schilbrack 2018, 2013; Von Stuckrad 2014; McCutcheon 2001.

climatology and meteorology (see section 2 below). Constructing and using interdisciplinary mapping tools, which primarily instruct one how to read practical contexts and semiotic relationships synoptically, would reduce the number of the abovementioned risks: Looking at “religious presences” located within real spaces through similar lenses would magnify the importance of studying boundaries, confines, crossroads, and intersectional spaces, within which matching, intertwining, and blending practices are always taking place and are shaped as a result of sociopolitical situated contingencies.

2 Mapping “Religious” and “Hindu” Atmospheres as Climate Momentum: What Meteorology Can Add

Climate, atmosphere, ambience, season, weather, environment, sphere, zone, areal ambient, etc., are all words that are often combined with the adjective “religious,” both in contemporary scholarship and in many classical textual traditions. Indeed, lexical borrowings and conceptual blendings between these domains are conspicuous and long lasting. However, the contiguity of climate and religion is neither the outcome of an occasional meeting nor a simple coincidence. Climate experts and religious people have faced—and are still facing—two similar problems:⁷ They must both relate present situations to past conditions and causes, and—even more importantly—they must foresee and predict future developments from past and present situations.⁸

For such reasons we decided to look at our subject from the perspective of a “religious atmospheric climatology” in order to entirely readdress the issue of conceptual and lexical communality and contiguity. By speaking about “Hinduism” in atmospheric, climatological, and meteorological terms, therefore, we intend to improve the quality of the phenomenon description in various respects: in what follows the Italian setting of “Hinduism” will be seen as the temporary coagulation of a contingent system of correlations which, as

7 The problem of boundaries, delimitations, and definitions, for example, is a common dilemma, see Burroughs 2003. Furthermore, just as human communities struggle to use and profit from earth’s resources and climatic conditions (Ruddiman 2010), religious agency plows, extracts, and injects their products into the surrounding social climates.

8 On the intricacy and pervasiveness of meteorological metaphors and concepts, see Buchanan 2013; McCormick 2011. It is noteworthy to recall that the Russian philosopher and theologian Sergej N. Bulgakov represented the arrival in Europe of “Theosophical doctrines”—specifically mentioning “Hinduism” and “Buddhism”—by using the image of “winds” blowing towards the West. In his essay *Trup krasota* (The Corpse of Beauty), originally published in 1915 (see Italian transl. *Il Cadavere della Bellezza*, 2012: 26–29), Bulgakov described such “winds” as dangerous carriers of religious values and conceptions not fit for European climates.

in climatology and meteorology, will be “mapped” correlating functional, diachronic, modal, and synchronic aspects.

Insofar as the correlation of functional and diachronic aspects is concerned, this option allows us to benefit from decades of scholarship devoted to the empirical study of the foggiest “thing” one can think of: the weather. In fact, it is important to note that, since its early inception, pioneers in the field of meteorology—among whom are names like Aristotle and Epicurus (Bakker 2016; Wilson 2013; Kupreeva 2012; Cronin 2010)⁹—seriously inquired into how to understand and explain climatic correlations and interactions (such as wind, rain, and the formation of cloud conglomerates, or seasonal variants and the relative principles, signs, rules, and laws provoking them). Following their footsteps, contemporary climatologists and meteorologists have contributed significantly to the sophistication of the discipline and are now well aware of the performative power of labels and, at the same time, of the arbitrary nature and the approximate value of localising a climate phenomenon (Fleming 2016, 2010; Harper 2008). Specialised meteorological analysis of the different layers of density—perceivable as nuclei and dust—(Xuhui 2018; Harrison 2015) within an extended air system can contribute to the study of anthropogenic and anthropomorphic environments, which also appear in compact and dense “centres” surrounded by scattered “peripheries.” As in the past, scholars of religion can use their reflections and technicalities to a great advantage.

Regarding the utility of correlating modal and synchronic aspects, the adoption of a meteorological outlook can help us not forget the intrinsic combinatory dynamism that shapes every social phenomenon, which is always a result of systemic interactions. By favouring a synoptic approach to localised religious contexts, we can avoid the perpetuation of brutal abstractions that are removed from their situated contingencies, as well as prejudicial disjunctions of goals from means and effects from causes.¹⁰ In fact, like meteorological phenomena, religious institutions and collectives always generate and operate within complex atmospheres of given, circulated, and shared meanings that are actively responsible for what happens to the articulation of those same institutions. Precisely in these regards, meteorology provides good reasons for remembering that institutions and collectives are not only deeply situated in space and time, but they are also fundamentally shaped by their acting

9 Interest in meteorology was also rather strong among Renaissance philosophers, see Martin 2011.

10 Nowadays, climatologists are used to reasoning synoptically, paying attention to both a specific climate-related activity and to biostratigraphical, geochronological, and palaeoclimatological factors, see Bott 2016.

within an immersive and historically structured “semiotic sphere” (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1986), a culturally moulded *Lebenswelten* that constitute and function as emotional “atmospheres” (Böhme and Thibaud 2016; Griffero 2014; Büttner and Theilen 2017; Goldstein 2017: 157–61; Aali et al. 2014; Daniels and Cowell 2011). Such perspective permits us to see that those who are dwelling and moving in such affective domains deeply resent the pressures and constraints of the surrounding environment. Having to live under the shadow of the *Esprit du temps* it is like living in a “bubble” (Sloterdijk 2011; Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens 2011), within which “things” and “ideals” are floating and spreading around, reaching and touching the skin of the many who are breathing the air of such “living landscapes” and “animated aesthetic spheres.” This is to say that any “religious sphere” can be interpreted as a situated “atmosphere” that is composed of shared representations and built out of embodied words (Gerrig 1998), images, rules, norms, and collective memories: Simply by walking into such an atmosphere, and merging sensorially and somatically in it, established contents and forms are incorporated and embedded in us (Calleja 2011; Segal 2009; Shaviro 2003). As for climate formations, situational contingencies and contextual affordances have played crucial roles in the history of religions by affecting and moulding collective and individual preferences.¹¹ It is also worth emphasising that the contents of such “religious spheres” are not only received and experienced through intentional thinking and conscious reflection, but they are also seen with the eyes and felt with all the senses (Obhi and Cross 2016; Gabriel 2015; Butler 2015; Berleant 2010).

Therefore, by not divorcing theory from practice, which would lead to a petrified portrait of any living community, the act of “mapping religions” can grasp the *continuum* of those aforementioned four main correlations, representing their interactions synoptically, as it is done in multifactorial “axonometric” projections. Before the “great divide” took place—immediately following the modernist debate (Kelly 2003; Sorrel 2003; Colin 1997; Poulat 1996)—scholars seemed to master such complexity: During the early decades of the nineteenth century, complementarity and correlation between the natural and human sciences were definitely less exceptional and, at times, were even more intense and courageous than today. The British physician and biochemist William Prout (1785–1850), for example, was devoted to reshaping classical theories of “natural theology.” Prout employed his own erudition to illustrate the correlations that, in his view, linked together aspects and phenomena usually perceived as disconnected, unrelated, and diverse. It is important to note here that

11 On the important notion of *Affektökologie*, see Angerer 2017. Furthermore, on these various aspects, see Mühlhoff 2018; Fleury 2014; Hauf and Forsterlin 2007; Gibson 1986: 127–43.

some of his writings were meant to highlight the close relationships between chemical factors and climate, or between digestive functions and meteorology (Prout 2009). Awkward, strange, or bizarre as it may appear today, Prout's efforts pioneered interest in synoptically understanding the ordering principles of reality and achieving further degrees of punctuality in the description of natural and social phenomena among scholars of the natural sciences. More than a century later, this interest oriented the research of the MIT mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz (1917–2008). In 1963, he dismissed linear and fragmented statistical models of the atmosphere and developed a new “chaos theory,” which was meaningfully represented by the now well-known—though mostly misunderstood—“butterfly effect” metaphor (Lorenz 1963; Hilborn 2004; Devaney 2003).

Contemporary scholars of religion can not only learn how to cope with problems related to the localisation of the phenomena they are dealing with from climatology but also how to limit the invasive effects of their labelling devices and signification *dispositifs* by combining long-term, “paleoclimatic” awareness (Cronin 2009, 1999) with contingent, “meteorological” punctuality. If they do not do this, just as in the case of climatologists who forget long-term diachronic and synchronic factors and allow them to disappear from the scene by dismissing the synoptic and concrete blending of diachronic and synchronic conditioning factors, scholars of religion will lose touch with the ongoing and pragmatic exchanges of energy and goods.¹²

We are aware of the discomfort that an uncommon visual posture might provoke in those not accustomed to it, but we believe that the dynamic concreteness exhibited by the synoptic scenes depicted in the following sections will help the reader to adjust to it rapidly. Although the sets of criteria we employed for mapping “Hindu” *realia* in Italy may look less “pleasant” (or “beautiful”) than the ones we are used to, this way of setting the scene is motivated by the ambition to keep a large number of factors, situations, variants, and effects, strongly linked and contiguous.¹³ This ambition is not so much concerned with

12 An interrelated and co-implicated system that, as with climate, is constituted by the constant blending of patterns, processes, and teleconnections, see Bridgman and Oliver 2004; Cohen 2012.

13 Having to illustrate the Italian scenario, we decided to present it employing a rather unconventional scenography. This was a choice made in order to avoid the many dystrophies that uses of the terms “label” and “localisation” generate, see Millikan 2017, 2004. We invite the reader to view this proposal not only as a “war” against reified definitions and concepts, but also as a move in favour of the primacy of the relations and contexts that are topologically intended, see Fodor and Pylyshyn 2015; Machery 2009.

the degree of “beauty” a map must exhibit but rather with the degree of “truth” to which the effort of mapping aspires (Orrell 2012).¹⁴

3 “Indian Hinduism”? What Is It Like to Be a “Hindu” before Hemispheric Transfers

Those who are familiar with scrutinising the horizon in order to formulate a weather forecast can easily understand why it is necessary to simultaneously refer to many different atmospheric factors and conditions: Geopotential factors strongly contribute to the reduction or increase in the barometric pressure of air, and they therefore evoke and provoke rain, winds, temperature fluctuations, and many other climate variations. Consequently, cloud systems on the horizon and coastal temperature conditions must be considered as intimately correlated aspects, and they must be scrutinised synoptically in order to understand their reciprocal influences and reliably forecast consequential developments. In this respect, it is important to know what the identity profile of “Hinduism” was before transferring to the Mediterranean region (Marshall 2009; Chidester 2014; Masuzawa 2005) in order to grasp the derivative, long-term side effects and the morphological mutations in visual appearances, ritual practices, and forms of belonging.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, South Asia experienced significant cultural and religious turbulence. It was a season characterised by anticolonial struggles, communal tensions, and political conflicts. The interactions between the British colonial administration and locally emerging religious and political leaders simultaneously generated both alliances and divergences (Yelle 2013; Sardella 2013; Quack 2012; Hatcher 2007). Vast metropolitan and urban contexts were gradually filled with new forms of “religious belonging,” which were forged within national and anti-British discourses, while the peripheries and rural areas tended to become increasingly more isolated and marginalised. A similar combination of mixed feelings toward India and its traditions existed within the Atlantic and Mediterranean regions of those days, where “Indomania,” “Indophilia,” and “Indophobia” were attested, diffused, and visible for decades (Altman 2017; Harris 2012; Subrahmanyam 2017; Lardinois 2007).

Although “pluralism” was not a *nouvelle vague* for the South Asian territories (Fisher 2017; Stein 2018; Stoker 2016), to be a “Hindu” within India’s mid-twentieth-century political climate meant different things: Aside from

14 For an early critique of the problematic status of “bello” in history writing, see Croce 2017: 19–26.

the “Hindu” denominations that endorsed and welcomed British liberal culture and values, there were “Hindu” denominations that strongly criticised and rejected “Western” and European ideas and ways of life that, in this manner, nurtured claims to nationalistic and religious identities (Scott 2017; Sharma 2013; Bapu 2012). In those days, presenting oneself as a “Hindu” was a choice that was neither clear-cut nor without cost (Jha 2009; Pandey 1993; Smith 1993).¹⁵

Many of the “Hindu” gurus and teachers who left India for American and European regions following World War II and who had grown up in such ambivalent and dialectical atmospheres were, therefore, more or less close to and favourable toward their Anglophone interlocutors. Nevertheless, just as climate changes operate without regard to political boundaries, the “monsoon” of Indian religious ideals and messages spread across borders, profiting from contingent and unexpected, massive, global atmospheric variations and paying very little attention to reified geographical, social, and gender boundaries (Greenblatt et al. 2009). Due to the overall transcontinental dynamism of meteorological variations, the Mediterranean’s “religious climate perturbations” of the mid-twentieth century transcended regional limits and individual intentions.

What followed these pragmatic, religious climate interactions and blending processes robustly nurtured the morphogenesis of powerful, imaginative narratives: In Indian migrants, such dynamics generated nostalgic and utopian, retrospective, myths of an original land of the “religion of the fathers,” while in anxious Italian “spiritual seekers,” they enhanced the longing for idyllic, romantic, exotic, and yet-to-come “otherworldly and Oriental” atmospheres. Indeed, just as raindrops take on colour and flavour as soon as they touch dry fields and distant, foreign grounds, the “Hindu religious” atmospheres that were transferred through the early nineteenth-century cultural climate adapted osmotically to the grounds they found on arrival. Similar encounters always modify the profiles of both the newly arrived and the host climates: The features of a climate are constantly modified due to areal atmospheric encounters.

4 Italy before “Hinduism”: the Italian Climate at the Time of the Arrival of “Indian Monsoons”

Let us now turn our attention to the other side of the coin, which is the socio-political, “atmospheric,” situation of Italy in the mid-twentieth century, and highlight the “geopotential” of the places where “Hindu clouds” released their conceptual, rainy contents. Following World War II, the vast majority of the

¹⁵ Antagonistic identity counterclaims are also abundant, see Ilaiah 2002.

Italian population was labelled Catholic, which was a physical religious presence that was distributed quite homogeneously throughout the entire peninsula, as can be seen from the capillary distribution of churches and bell towers. The activity of Catholic agencies, institutes, and organisations was therefore eminently visible and constituted Italy's mainstream lifestyle. The Italian "religious atmosphere" of those decades has been portrayed in terms of a fading and semivisible Christianity (Burgalassi 1970), or as merely derived from the major denominations (Bellah 1974).

In the 1980s, Italian scholars of religion began to illustrate the national landscape using different images, such as the idea of a "diffused religion" or that of the "persistence of religion" (Cipriani 1988; Garelli 1986). This was when new religious movements gained public visibility in Europe and the United States, thereby modifying and shaping attested religious lifestyles and provoking scholars' understandings of religious forms of belonging (Stark 1996; Stark and Bainbridge 1979; Cowan and Bromley 2015).

Within a similar climate, the Italian urban population faced the arrival of "Indian monsoons" and began to explore and ponder the heretofore unknown forms and variations of a "religion" called "Hinduism," a seasonal variant in which it was common to find examples of cross-blended religious traditions. In fact, at the end of the 1980s, the Italian scenario had already acclimated to Catholic or Buddhist approaches to yoga, as well as Christian or Jewish guidelines for "Oriental Meditation." But, as in the case of those regulatory mechanisms that urge certain airmasses not to create contrasting fronts with "autochthonous" climates, so the encounters and exchanges of religious climates developed into cogenerated regulatory systems that managed to produce a sort of blending zone into which the new religions encountered could fade.¹⁶ In this regard, it is important to mention that, from the end of the 1950s until today, the percentage of the Italian population that adheres and belongs to "Hinduism" has never surpassed the rather low limit of 3%,¹⁷ thus they can be safely assigned the status of a "religious minority."

This being said, what we propose in the following pages are the outcomes of the combination of a systemic and synoptic approach to "Hindu" and "Italian" climates and atmospheres, which are organised into three main weather and

16 In this regard, it should be noted that the decade from 1980 to 1990 registered the striking presence of American "deprogrammers" in Italy; they engaged in kidnapping members of "Oriental religions" for deprogramming them since their families thought they had been brainwashed by the "sects," see Usai 1996; Cantoni and Introvigne 1996; Shupe and Darnell 2017; Melton 1995; Shupe et al. 1980.

17 This 3% of the entire Italian population includes "Hindus" belonging to both native and migrant conditions (which, in 2017, were approximately 150,000, as specified in section 7.2), see Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2013; Fizzotti and Squarcini 1999.

seasonal variations, from the initial reception of the newly arrived up until the current scenario. Seeing things from this perspective, in the following sections we deal with three main periodisations, three interconnected and overlapping seasonal variations of the “Hindu” presence in Italy, which are organised according to dates and places of arrival. These sections are mainly meant to illustrate: the profiles and characters of the newcomers; doctrinal and traditional belonging; the forms of public visibility that are chosen and gained; and variances in the stages and ranges of acclimation to the surrounding atmospheres and social environments.

5 First Seasonal Variations (1950–80): the Arrival of Exotic Gurus and Early “Indian Monsoons”

During the 1950s, Indian gurus, *yogins*, and “masters” were floating in the air of the Western hemisphere, travelling about due to zonal wind trajectories and weather patterns. Their names, pictures, and teachings could be heard and seen in many American and European metropolises; years in which Asian winds were blowing and pushing far away, from remote places, those massive monsoon aggregates of “Indian spirituality” eventually reached the Italian peninsula. These climates and seasonal variations of the 1950s brought previously unheard of and unseen forms of religious acting, performing, and belonging to the attention of Italian urban residents. Among the early new arrivals, there were figures and groups that deserve particular attention,¹⁸ as they constitute eloquent examples of exactly what it means to adapt to new climates and unknown atmospheres.

5.1 1951: the Arrival and Establishment of the Self-Realization Fellowship

Mukunda Lal Ghosh (1893–1952), better known as Paramahansa Yogananda, promoted *kriyā yoga* (“yoga of action”), a practice that attaches particular importance to meditation as a way to contact the “divine.” In 1920, Yogananda was invited to the United States by the United Church of Boston, and there he decided to settle until his death. His own institution, the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), was founded in 1920 and has been based in Los Angeles since 1925 (Foxen 2017).

18 Many other “Hindu” groups and denominations could be included in the following sections, but for the sake of brevity, we decided not to mention groups that follow gurus such as Swami Sivananda, Sri Chinmoy, Ramana Maharshi, Sri Anandamurti of the Ananda Marga, Swami Satyananda, or international organisations like the Brahma Kumaris.

Yogananda's first contact with Italy dates back to 1935; travelling and teaching in Europe, he gave lectures in Rome and visited Assisi to pay homage to Saint Francis. As early as 1951, the year of the publication of the Italian edition of his most famous book (*Autobiography of a Yogi*, first edition 1946), the Italian representatives of the SRF organised public events and set up the first meditation groups. Owing to Yogananda's convictions regarding the homogeneity of his teachings with Christianity, the Italian SRF succeeded in not being perceived as an extravagant and out-of-place reality. By pioneering initiatives for interreligious dialogue—especially with Christian partners—the Italian branch of this organisation managed to establish groups of affiliates and followers throughout Italy, without coming into conflict with the surrounding religious scenario. On July 3, 1998, the SRF was officially recognised by the Italian government as a “religious cult” (*ente di culto*).

The SRF's core membership is organised in a sort of “monastic order,” whose ministers perform specific priestly and ritual functions (such as marriages and funerals). Faithful to the syncretic aspect of Yogananda's teachings, SRF's ceremonies are not only dedicated to the gurus of the lineage but are also held to celebrate other Hindu and Christian holidays. Today, the SRF numbers 10,000 Italian members in three principal centres, twelve groups, and fifty-three meditation circles that are distributed throughout the peninsula. The centres offer open meditation sessions, prayer services, and they organise study groups.

5.2 *1960: the Arrival and Establishment of Transcendental Meditation*

Transcendental Meditation (TM), which defines itself as a nonreligious method, became quite an important phenomenon in the 1960s, thanks also to the welcome it received during those years from prominent personalities, such as Mia Farrow and the Beatles (Weber 2014). The founder of TM was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918?–2008), an Indian guru who, having had a “World Plan” in mind since 1955, organised the “Spiritual Regeneration Movement” and started his first world tour in 1958. Within decades of this activity, he planned to create at least 3,600 centres all over the world. Notably, influenced by the surrounding neopositivist atmosphere, TM has been one of the first “systems of Indian techniques” to boldly appeal to and make use of scientific research to validate its own efficacy.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi visited Italy in 1960, and since that year, thousands of Italians have decided to learn his meditation techniques. Today, there are in fact fifty-four TM centres located throughout the country. In Italy, TM also succeeded in presenting itself as a simple, scientific, and lay method, which only requires about twenty minutes of practice twice a day. Although some objections have been raised with regard to its laicity (starting from the fact

that, in order to facilitate concentration, the followers recite mantras taken from “Hindu” religious contexts), such formulas reveal themselves to be quite attractive to Italian audiences. As an example of the Italian climate variants, it is relevant to note that, in 2014, Ashley Deans, the director of the Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment (MSAE), which is based in Iowa in the United States, was invited to Italy to illustrate the benefits of TM techniques, as well as its approach to education, to more than 2,000 public school principals, teachers and parents, with the aim of creating TM training courses for schools. The Italian branch of the David Lynch Foundation, which was created by the famous director to spread TM ideals and practices, has stated that it is ready to cover part of the expenses for such a project, while Lynch himself appeared on one of Italy’s most famous television programmes to promote TM.

5.3 *1972: the Arrival and Establishment of the Shri Ram Chandra Mission*

This mission was created by Shri Ram Chandra of Shahjahanpur (1899–1983) to spread the *sahāj mārg* (“natural path”), which was derived from the *rāja yoga* (“royal yoga”) taught to him by his master, Shri Ram Chandra of Fatehgarh (1873–1931), who was also known as “Lalaji.” The mission provided the disciples of “Lalaji” with an organised form of diffusion. In 1972, it could count several meditation centres in Europe, and in the same year, it arrived in Italy.

The aim of the mission was to spread a yogic discipline in accordance with the necessities of the contemporary European lifestyle. In order to convey a simple and accessible technique, it did not focus on specific yogic postures, breathe control exercises, or moral and ethical precepts. Through an antiritualistic and nonscenographic approach (the mission did not prescribe a specific dress code or change of name, things that are typically seen as “ostentatious” in movements claiming “Oriental” origins), this denomination managed to pass relatively unnoticed, without particular contrast with the Italian religious panorama. The Italian branch of the mission was legally constituted in 1988. To date, the mission can count 300 or 400 Italian practitioners, and it is organised in twenty-eight centres scattered throughout the country, where affiliates gather for monthly meetings and meditation groups.

5.4 *1973: the Arrival and Establishment of the Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON)*

The Hare Krishna movement, also known as ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), was founded in New York to spread the teachings of the medieval figure Caitanya (1485–1533). This movement arrived in Italy in 1973, and its first centre was established in Rome at the specific request of the

ISKCON branch responsible for southern Europe. In 1974, the founder of the movement, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), visited Rome for the first and only time, where he held a public conference. Shortly afterwards, centres in cities and rural communities, as well as vegetarian restaurants called Govinda, settled in various parts of the country.

From the point of view of climatic acceptance and adaptation, the Hare Krishna movement rapidly became synonymous with “Hindu religion” and immediately recognisable by the Italian public (Bartolomei and Fiore 1981; Fizzotti and Squarcini 2004), to the point where it was perceived as the prototype of an “Oriental religious movement.” With their “orange robe” dress code, Hare Krishna members appeared in many Italian cities daily, performing the public chanting of mantras and selling Bhaktivedanta’s books and booklets, which were the movement’s main source of income.

The most flourishing period of the Italian branch of the movement was in the first half of the 1980s, when urban areas became so “acclimatised” to its presence that it appeared in films and commercials. In 1986, ISKCON underwent a major arrest, owing primarily to the clamorous abandonment by its regional leader, Bhagavan dasa Goswami, who initially inspired the Italian branch of the movement and was considered by many to be the true successor of Bhaktivedanta. Despite external and internal tensions, the Italian government recognised ISKCON as a “moral institution” (*ente morale*) in 1998. Today, the Italian branch of ISKCON numbers four main official centres with a total resident population of 150 to 200 full-time members. One of the movement’s most important sites remains Villa Vrindavana, a large seventeenth-century villa located in the hills outside Florence.

The five decades of ISKCON’s Italian presence, in many respects, exemplify how “Hindu” denominations have gradually acclimated to the peninsula’s religious atmosphere. As the residential and full-time membership diminished, ISKCON managed to rethink its initial approach and policy. In exchange for an elitist and monastic setting, ISKCON opened itself to the surrounding social environment, opting for more cooperative interactions. Today, ISKCON centres host large festivals, even if they are not strictly related to its doctrinal tenets, and appear decidedly more open to otherness: “Hindu” calendar celebrations are now included in ISKCON’s schedule of public events (i.e., the “Colour Festival,” celebrating the popular Indian tradition of Holi); inter-religious conferences are regularly promoted by the movement’s leaders; and “Bhakti Festivals” are held at ISKCON sites, sometimes in conjunction with associations that promote different forms of yoga (like acro-yoga workshops, a rather recent discipline born in Canada).

5.5 *1977: the Arrival and Establishment of the Sathya Sai Baba Organisation*

The Sathya Sai Baba Organisation was founded in 1965 to promote the message of its founder Satyanarayan Raj, who is better known as Sai Baba (1926–2011). At present, it has more than 2,000 centres located in 140 countries. The first Italian Sathya Sai Baba Centre was founded in Turin in 1977 by an Italian engineer. Over the years, Sai Baba became the Indian guru with the most followers in Italy. The Sathya Sai Baba Organisation considers interreligious dialogue a fundamental part of its communication policy, relying on Sai Baba's teachings on the fundamental unity of all religions. Within the Italian context, the figure of Sai Baba, surrounded by a "sacred aura" due to his many "miracles," found easy acceptance and resonated with the many popular miracle cults that were still part of the collective imagination. To date, the Satya Sai Italia Organisation has twenty-six centres located throughout Italy, with over 2,000 active members. In line with its international policy, the Italian branch is also divided into four sectors: one specifically devoted to "spirituality"; one looking after educational activities that spread the message of the founder; one promoting charitable and voluntary activities; and one oriented toward the formation of young people. The Satya Sai Italia branch broadcasts its message on Radio Sai Italia and has its own publishing house.

5.6 *1978: the Arrival and Establishment of the Mirapuri Community*

The Mirapuri community was founded in 1978, on Lake Orta in Piedmont, by a group of German followers of the Bengali guru Arvind Ackroyd Ghose (1872–1950), who is better known as Sri Aurobindo. They were guided in this venture by the cyber-rocker Michel Montecrossa, the son of an American musician. Defining itself as a nonreligious and nonpolitical community, Mirapuri activities were dedicated to the practice of "integral yoga," a discipline that would lead to the awareness and realisation of an "universal consciousness." Initially, the Mirapuri community did not seek involvement with the surrounding environment, a fact that led Lake Orta residents to view it with suspicion. Over the years, Mirapuri became more accessible and managed to organise large public events, like the "Spirit of Woodstock Festival," which is held every year at Mirapuri and hosts national and international rock groups. Today, the community promotes educational projects for children and, through its Mirapuri International Research Academy (MIRA), sponsors open seminars on meditation and New Age spirituality. The Mirapuri community has its own line of food products, a grocery, and a restaurant.

6 Second Seasonal Variations (1980–1995): the Arrival of New Waves of “Hindu” Competitors

Interdenominational rivalry, differentiation, and a competitive spirit were what characterised the second phase of the “Hindu” transplants onto the Italian soil, a phase that strongly resonated with the climates and seasonal variations generated by the early “Hindu” presences.¹⁹ New arrivals had to face the procedures of domestication and institutionalisation that were prompted by previous interactions between pioneer “Hindu denominations” and local Italian atmospheres. These provoked conflicting phenomena, such as delegitimising quarrels between groups and denominational exclusivism—events also well documented in modern Buddhism studies (Bell 2002; Faure 2004).

The growth of the “Hindu” presence in Italy fostered groups’ needs to differentiate themselves, and it encouraged many denominations to specify the reasons why they must be considered *the* special bearer of authentic “Hindu” truths and practices to their audiences. This provoked a differentiation that was manifested, in many respects, in everything from advertising campaigns to initiatives aimed at earning government and institutional recognition: When too many “Hinduisms” swirl within the same representative and factual space, equivalence and denominational ecumenism are obliged to rapidly disappear.

As a notable side effect of these new presences on the Italian soil, it is important to mention how Italian scholars of Indology interacted with these climate changes. After more than a century of highly specialised philological, linguistic, literary, and historical scholarship (De Donno 2019; De Giorgi and Greselin 2018; Daffinà 2017; Sferra and Boccali 2016; Clerici et al. 2015; Vicente 2012; Piano 2010; Tucci 2005; Fatica 2005; Botto 1993; Daffinà 1993; Heilmann 1991; Gallotta and Marazzi 1985–89; Heilmann 1952), in the 1980s the concrete presence of “Hinduism” was knocking at the door of the “Orientalist” ivory tower and seeking attention. It is in those years, in fact, that Italian Oriental studies and Indological departments began to devote portions of their research activities to “modern Hinduism” and the phenomenon of the “Hindu” diaspora, as well as to the European and Italian reception of Indian philosophies and religions, and they became progressively more concerned with present “Hinduism,” rather than with its remote past.

19 Since the word “Hinduism” it is intended as a semantic functor and a naming device (therefore as the outcome of a historical act of “de-nomination”)—as stated in note 2 above—in what follows we will refer to “intra-denominational” positioning policy, although we are aware of its ecclesiological background, see Collins and Ensign-George 2011.

6.1 *1981: the Arrival and Establishment of the Sahaja Yoga Movement*

Beginning in 1979, Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi (1923–2011), who described herself as the incarnation of the “Divine Mother,” taught *sahāja yoga* (“spontaneous path”) worldwide and founded the Vishwa Nirmala Dharma Movement. This organisation arrived in Italy in 1981, which was when Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi presented her meditation techniques in Rome. From that time on, Sri Mataji resided primarily in Italy, although she travelled extensively. The teachings of Sri Mataji were characterised by a syncretic and universalist approach; however, she claimed to belong to a tantric lineage from the Indian region of Maharashtra. Her teachings can be considered as one of the first opportunities for urban Italian audiences to hear words in Sanskrit, like *cakra* and *kuṇḍalinī*, which today are widely used in advertising.

Although the Sahaja Yoga movement never achieved the popularity of other “Hindu” meditative practices in Italy, it represents an interesting point of departure. Sri Mataji, in fact, was a harsh critic of the teaching and presence of many “false spiritual leaders” in her time, denouncing the sectarianism of the related organisations. Owing to her ability, Sri Mataji was able to engage in dialogue with global organisations and present herself as a testimonial for peace and women’s rights; she enjoyed rather favourable media coverage in Italy, to the point of being named “personality of the year” by the Italian government in 1989. Today, this movement has roughly 700 members, and it revolves around the international Ashram of Cabella in the Ligurian Apennines, where it offers European members ritual services and training.

6.2 *1986: the Arrival and Establishment of the Sri Aurobindo Centre*

The Sri Aurobindo and Mère Centre was founded in 1986 in the Province of Modena by Giovanni Tonioni, an Italian follower of Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) and his spiritual partner, the French woman Mira Alfassa Richard (1878–1973), who is better known as Mère, the “spiritual mother.” During the years following the centre’s opening, Tonioni was seen by the attendees and disciples as the new guru of Aurobindo’s lineage. From its inception, the Sri Aurobindo and Mère Centre was meant to be a community and was named “Aurora” in order to be seen as the Italian version of the famous Auroville, the “city of the future” founded by Mira Alfassa in Puducherry (India) in 1963. Today, the Sri Aurobindo and Mère Centre community consists of about twenty people and is quite active in creating opportunities for encounters with the surrounding population. The “Germoglio Group,” a cooperative managing construction, publishing, and other commercial activities through which the community supports itself, operates inside the centre.

6.3 1989: *the Arrival and Establishment of the Babaji Movement*

This movement takes its inspiration from the figure of Babaji, a legendary guru of *kriyā yoga* who is considered an immortal figure in modern Śaivism and who, tradition claims, repeatedly appeared in the Haidakhan forest at the foot of the Himalayas. In 1970, a young man called Haidakhan Baba (?–1984) claimed to be the embodiment of Babaji and began preaching while living in a cave in the Himalayan region. At his death in 1984, his followers, convinced that the spirit of Babaji could reappear under new guises, created the worldwide association Haidakhandi Samaji led by Sri Maha Muniraji.

In Italy, this lineage's first centre was founded in 1979 in Cisternino, which is in the southern Province of Brindisi. During the years that followed, different groups who were inspired by the message of Babaji established small centres—like the one in Asti, which was set up in 1989 as a community and a place of retreat—but remained separate from one another, as though they were different realities. Since 2008, at Maha Muniraji's request that Babaji's Italian followers formed a single movement, the Herakhandi Samaj Association has functioned as a focal point for the members of the affiliated associations. To date, five associations are affiliated with the Italian Herakhandi Samaj. They promote and spread Babaji's teachings and organise seminars, ritual activities, and festivals. A mobile application in Italian has also been developed, the "Babajicenter App," which allows the followers to remain in contact with the Hairakhandi Love Center in Villa Rosa, which is close to Perugia.

7 Third Seasonal Variations (1995–2018): Unforeseen Effects of Acclimation

The stabilisation of weather perturbances and climatic conditions results in acclimation: a precarious phenomenon achieved via multifactorial atmospheric negotiations and processes of temperature regulations. Similarly, the rise and development of strategies to establish and institutionalise the many Italian "Hindu" presences are characteristic of this third phase: A phase of policy labelling and institutional settings that are conducted in strict symbiosis with religious climates and seasonal, sociopolitical variations of the time. Notably, at the end of the 1990s, the Italian religious scenario resulted in various configurations, giving visibility to new forms of religious observance and belonging (Pace 2013; Garelli 2006). This is an intertwined climatic situation that should be interpreted as one of the principal long-term side effects of the climate exchange of the period.

In those years, although still highly influential in the public sphere (Panara 2011; Possamai et al. 2011), the Roman Catholic Church did not openly oppose or interfere with the stipulation of agreements by the government and the religious traditions of Asian origin. In April 2007, in fact, the Italian Buddhist Union (IBU) managed to formulate and present its request for official recognition to the Italian government, which was finally approved in December 2012. The Italian Hindu Union (IHU) also presented its request for official recognition in April 2007, and it was also approved in December 2012.

These third season variations all revolve around institutional concerns, profile settings, and status encoding procedures, which result in numerous side effects and by-products. Just like how accessory cloud aggregates and accidental spills derive from the clashes of massive cloud systems, many subseasonal, “Hindu” denominational variants were generated at this time. In the shadow of newly born and officially recognised “Hindu” institutions, many “Hindu” microclimates persisted and survived unchanged in Italy, while subdenominational aggregates spun off, giving birth to “Hindu” enclaves that were scattered about and locally based. Furthermore, while a flourishing dialectic had emerged between “official Hinduism” and the guru-centred groups, the arrival of the first contingents of the “Hindu diaspora” migrant communities in Italy presented unintended imperatives for acclimation.

Although the unifying semantic functor “Hinduism”—initially used by the Italian media to roughly address and circumscribe the arrival of unknown Indian religious traditions—was now manifesting all its limits and deficiencies, within this context it took on new life. In fact, since institutionalisation implies the reduction of variants and simplification, univocal definitions and the use of the singular appeared unavoidable. Furthermore, since a religion called “Hinduism” now had to be taught within the Italian public school system, and the figure of the “Hindu priest” had to be introduced in public hospitals, the traits and the tenets of this religion needed to be simple and schematic.

7.1 *1995: Steps toward the Establishment of the “Italian Hindu Union” (Unione Induista Italiana)*

The IHU was officially recognised by the Italian government in 2012,²⁰ after a long institutional negotiation that began as early as 2000 at the initiative and under the supervision of Paolo Valle, aka Swami Yogananda Giri. Beginning in 1984, following his entrance into the *giri* order—the Sanskrit name of one of the traditional Vedantic ascetic orders—Swami Yogananda Giri led the Gitananda

20 This official act of recognition is called *Intesa*, and it is a form of agreement designed to confer legal status to religious confessions and denominations other than the Roman Catholic Church.

Ashram of Altare in the Province of Savona. The Indian traditions to which Swami Yogananda Giri adheres are the Śaivasiddhānta and the Śrīvidyā, which are today both present in South India, especially in the region of Tamil Nadu.

The statutory functions of the IHU are to protect, coordinate, and study Hindu religion and culture. Nevertheless, rather than the word “Hinduism”—of which the IHU admits ethnic-geographical origins—the IHU prefers the Sanskrit expression *sanātana dharma* (interpreted as “eternal divine laws”). In line with its intention to play an institutional role of coordination, the IHU had to relate to and interact with the many other “Hindu” denominations and realities, beginning with those present in Italy since the late 1950s. Nevertheless, most of the “Hindu” movements and associations dealt with in the preceding sections did not adhere to the IHU project in the end and were therefore not even able to take advantage of the final institutional results. Despite this partial and limited coverage of the “Hindu” presences in Italy, the IHU still managed to be recognised by the government as a religious confession in 2000.²¹

This was a necessary step toward the possibility of presenting a request for the *Intesa* (agreement), which was initially signed by the Italian government in April 2007 and then ratified in December 2012. The *Intesa* confers on the IHU the unique role of being the official representative of Italian “Hinduism” and “Hindu” denominations. Within the *Intesa*, for example, the celebration of Divālī or Dipāvalī, a traditional Indian “Festival of light,” became a recognised holiday, and the academic values of the IHU teachings imparted to school teachers were set to attain approval from the ministry of the university.²² It is also important to note that, from an economic standpoint, from the date of the final signature of the *Intesa*, the IHU receives the “8 × 1000” quota derived from the annual national income tax revenue, which the government distributes among the religions officially recognised under the *Intesa*.

Today, the IHU officially represents sixteen communities and has three centres in addition to the Gitananda Ashram, which in total numbers approximately 5,000 affiliates, half of whom are Italian, while maintaining relations with more than 50,000 “Hindu” migrants from Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. Apart from offering its members regular ritual and ceremonial services, the IHU is considerably active at the level of national interreligious dialogue, as well as active in establishing the policies regarding religious education in public schools.

21 Before this recognition, the only “Hindu” denomination to have succeeded in a similar matter was the Self-Realization Fellowship (see above), which was registered in 1998.

22 See, as a recent example, the recognition given by the Italian University’s Ministry (MIUR) to the “Course on Hinduism” that the IHU appointed for primary and secondary school’s teachers, see M.I.U.R. n. 170/2016, Decree prot. A00DPIT.852, 30/07/2015.

7.2 *1995: the Arrival and Establishment of the “Hindu Diaspora” and South Asian Migrant Communities*

The level of complexity introduced on the Italian religious scene by the arrival of the “Hindu diasporic waves” was unprecedented and extremely serious. As in other European countries, the administration and governance of migrants fluxes constrained government officials and politicians to act, although largely unaware of the obscure entanglements that rule the relationships between religions, political geography, and ethno-nationalism (Kivisto 2014; Gallo 2014; Blanes and Mapril 2013; Hirschman 2004; Hagan and Ebaugh 2003). Determining the religious identity profiles of the many migrants arriving in Italy from South Asia became an issue, and the notion of “diaspora” assumed a critical status (Knott and MacLoughlin 2010; Vertovec 1997). Religious identification and national distinctions (Neidhardt 2013; Ricucci 2010) were subject to extremely dissimilar treatment, resulting in long-term biopolitical consequences (Squarcini 2011).

But here it is the issue of “identity” that is the real “ghost in the machine.” In fact, as already mentioned, in quantitative mapping, as in demographic counting, fixed units and parameters of comparison are mandatory: Ideal types are crucial for recognising, detecting, and identifying the like among the many. In order to count how many “Hindus” are present in one particular region or nation, one must have a normative identity sample of a “Hindu” profile. A “Hindu” can be *identified* as such only if results are *identical* with the *identity* prototype applied in the act of *identification*. This traditional use of comparing and matching variables with ideal types is, however, highly risky, since it imposes formal and substantial characteristics on what is entirely relational and modular.

To date, in fact, due to structural complexities of denominations (Decimo and Gribaldo 2017), there are no precise estimates for the number of “Hindu” migrants in Italy (see n. 24). We can only obtain clues from the quota of migrants coming from countries where “Hinduism” is counted as the principal religion; as far as Italy is concerned, such countries are certainly India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Although there are also influxes of migrants from other countries where “Hinduism” is the second most populous religion, as in the case of Pakistan, these are the three countries with the highest number of Italian “Hindu” migrants. The case of the Indian Sikh diaspora, which has been present in Italy for decades and whose religious identity is often misinterpreted as “Hindu,” deserves specific mention.²³

23 The large presence of Sikh communities in Italy is not dealt with in this paper. For information on the Sikh communities in Italy, see Bonfanti 2015; Bertolani 2013; Gallo and Sai 2013; Denti et al. 2005; Jacobsen and Myrvold 2011, 2015.

Surveys on migration²⁴ have shown that, in 2017, Indians occupied sixth place for visas granted in Italy and for the acquisition of Italian citizenship, and they were followed by migrants from Bangladesh, who ranked eighth, and from Sri Lanka, who ranked twelfth. In the last two decades, like other European countries, Italy has seen a visible increase in the flow of migrants coming from these Asian countries: In 2003, Indian migrants numbered 47,170, Bengalis 32,391, and Singhalese 41,539; while in 2017 Indian migrants had reached a total of 157,978, Bengalis 132,397, and Singhalese 105,032. Initially, the majority of migrants from these countries settled in the regions of northern Italy, but recently there are municipalities in central south Italy where the numbers stand out.

As mentioned above, only a small portion of the communities resulting from these migratory flows are represented by the IHU. Based on how the diaspora is distributed, today there are approximately twenty “Hindu” temples that are managed by migrants and scattered throughout Italy. Major structures are: the Shri Vishnu Temple in Milan, which was founded in 2011 and offers the local communities daily services and sacraments; the Maha Shiv Shakti Mandir Temple in the Province of Brescia, which was founded in 2016 and holds public worship services every Sunday; the Temple of Pegognaga, which was inaugurated in 2011 by Sanjay Kumar Verma, the consul general of India in Milan, and is foreseen to be the second largest Hindu temple in Italy, after the IHU’s Altare temple. These temples are examples of how the different “Hindu” migrant communities are attempting to maintain direct control of their own “Hinduism” by directly providing for ritual specialists, religious authorities, doctrinal orientations, and forms of worship.

Here, it is important to shift back in time and space in order to interpret the current temple settings in relation to the centuries-long social history of temples and religious compounds in South Asia. Specialised scholarship confirms that, in precolonial India, religious buildings and ritual compounds were crucial centres of social life: Temples were the sites where kings, patrons, local elites, ritual specialists, communities of ascetics, politicians, theologians, and thousands of lay devotees gathered together. These large religious structures were sponsored and sustained by sovereigns and kings, and they therefore

24 The following data are mainly derived from the *Rapporti nazionali sulla presenza in Italia delle principali Comunità straniere*—an annual survey conducted by the Italian “Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali”—as it was presented in the issues from 2017 (*La Comunità Indiana in Italia; La Comunità Srilankese in Italia; La Comunità Bangladeshese in Italia*). In November 2019, the private institution Eurispes (Istituto di Studi Politici, Economici e Sociali – Institute of Political, Economic and Social Studies) published its first report entitled *L’Induismo in Italia*. This report counted over 150,000 “Hindus” from South Asia, plus 30,000 “Hindus” of Italian origin.

functioned as political and economic crossroads (Eaton 2000; Prasad 2011; Sinopoli 2003: 63–118; Bakker 1992; Heitzman 1991; Talbot 1991; Presler 1987; Stein 1960). Then, as today, the construction of temples required huge funds and collective investments, and as expensive venues, they had to provide remunerative forms of compensation. In fact, aside from being “places of ritual worship,” temples were also strategically planned urban spaces for political negotiations, economic transactions, identity claims, communal gatherings, and social belonging. Seen as a whole, temples were—and still are—concrete “marketplaces” and semiotically actantial spaces; constituted as dynamic epicentres from which affective “identity-forming atmospheres” irradiate (Fisher 2017).

It would be seriously misleading to deny the attribution of such functions to temples just because they are established and based in different temporal and spatial locations. On the contrary, the many temples erected in America and Europe over the recent decade also function as identity-forming spaces, as well as epicentres, from which “oriental flavours” and “spiritual sensations” emanate and are felt, thereby matching and nurturing consumers’ thirst for new forms of exotic glamour, religious shopping, and “spiritual tourism.” We must expect that Italian “Hindu” temples are destined to follow this same path as in the case of various contemporary Buddhist traditions in Asia, which are apparently “engaged” in shaping religious and cultic places according to a “dis-engaged” commercial policy, primarily aiming at the satisfaction of consumers’ needs for leisure and amusement (McDaniel 2017).

7.3 2000: “Hinduism” Ablation and the Silent Takeover of Yoga, Cakra, and Tantra

We would be remiss, mainly for quantitative reasons, not to close this illustration of the third seasonal variants by referring to the destiny encountered by many of the ideas, beliefs, doctrines and practices mentioned in the previous sections since the beginning of 2000. In mid-2000, the blowing winds of reification, commercialisation, and commodification that affected European “Hindu” and Buddhist denominations (Liogier 2006, 2004; McMahan 2008; Lopez Jr. 2002) were also striking Italy, pushing the diffusion of the “religious *bricoleur*” attitude toward its peak.²⁵ Since then, hundreds of thousands of Italians have been exposed to “Hindu” topics, items and practices, on a daily basis, and they eagerly search for anything conducive to becoming *apt* and *fit*

25 On the global scale, in mid-2000, the characters of mainstream, global, religious climatic changes are already peculiarly visible, see Possamai 2018; Bainbridge 2013; Martin 2014, 2010; Berger and Redding 2010; Einstein 2007.

for the mainstream atmosphere and lifestyle.²⁶ In this general climate, the consumption of rearranged and commodified versions of “Hindu” ideas and objects surreptitiously became necessary. In fact, at the end of 2000, the majority of Sanskrit or Hindi words cited above were all well known to a large portion of the Italian population, although most were learned out of context. By being exposed to and merged into a sort of mainstream “whatever is Indian” atmosphere, many Italians opted for and devoted themselves to the consumption of commodified versions of “Hindu” notions (Burger 2006; Carrette and King 2005: 87–12; Illouz 2008; Phillips et al. 2004); although they saw “cakra,” “tantra,” and “yoga” as *prêt-à-porter* items totally disconnected from “Hinduism.” Analogously to what happens during the meteorological phenomenon called “ablation” (i.e., snow ablation usually refers to removal by melting), within such an atmosphere the idea of “Hinduism” as the religion from which “cakra,” “tantra,” and “yoga” came from was moving toward definitive ablation.

Today, in fact, roughly one million Italians—although mostly unaware of what is actually happening to yoga in India (Khalikova 2017; Pathak-Narain 2017; Sarbacker 2013; Alter 1997)—practice *āsana* postures and various protocols of yogic exercises. It is obviously not easy to establish in what sense these “yogin” and “yogini” are or are not “Hindu” (Nicholson 2013; Balcerowicz 2012), or if they have to be reputed “Hindus” in any case, although not belonging to any “Hindu” institution. Nevertheless, even in Italy, the case of yoga practices clearly shows that such dynamics resemble climatic wavefront blending extensions, similarly mixing and spreading within the atmosphere while largely ignoring rigid identity boundaries (Baier et al. 2018; Hackett 2017; Jain 2015; Chakraborty 2010; Alter 2009; Singleton 2008; Squarcini and Mori 2007; Fish 2006).²⁷

As stated above, since “identity” is not bestowed at a single point in time—nor permanently fixed in time—but is rather the metamorphic, temporary outcome of an endless sequence of “operational acts of identification” (Bayart 1996: 92–102; Descombes 2016; Zima 2015; Davis 2013; Malabou 2012; Hames-García 2011; Nancy 2010; Laplantine 2004), the contexts and factors involved in subjects’ contingent interactions are constitutive of its social morphology. In fact, after decades of presence *within* and interaction *with* local contexts, most of the “Hindu” denominations mentioned above were absorbed into the Italian soil, passing their specific identity-forming contents and properties *to it* but

26 For an example of how a blending procedure can be careless of the contexts, see Vanderburg 2017.

27 Nevertheless, at the end of the twentieth century, there were also very different yoga climates in India, see Jacobsen 2018.

also taking *from it* colours, tastes, and shapes.²⁸ Just as any identifiable atmospheric process is made up of the constant intertwining, entanglement, blending, and interanimation of its constituent parts, so the many “Hindu” waves and clouds of the 1960s mixed and blended with Italian realities, losing their initial aspects and traits and moving toward “integration,” which is just another name for the phenomenon that we call “ablation.” Ablation, in fact, makes it possible to avoid the use of reified “identity-forming types” and does not require postulating the disappearance of any “original” substance: While melting, “snow” simply loses its structural configuration and shape and hides in open spaces (Zerubavel 2015). This is something very similar to what happens to vaporised water after falling on the ground from the clouds: Rainwater gradually penetrates the soil’s surface and reaches the roots of “local plants.” Those same roots, nourished by the rain with the important mineral components necessary for plant nutrition, will then generate flowers and fruits with blended colours, tastes, and flavours.

This reflects what happened after the rather long-term interaction between Buddhism and the North American climate, the outcomes of which are especially visible in literature, music and visual productions, and consumerism (Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff 2014, 2011, 2009). Due to the many decades of such blending processes, metamorphic side effects are therefore conspicuous, and they even significantly affect the ways in which Buddhist sites and temples in Asia are now built and established (McDaniel 2017; Veidlinger 2018; Gerlach 2017; Scott 2009).

Similar commodification procedures can be seen in the concrete processes involved in the spread of yoga, beginning with the book-printing industry. The Italian bibliography on yoga is vast and includes over 650 books, which covers the period from 1909 to 2018, that are written in or translated into Italian and contain the word “yoga” in their titles.²⁹ This collection of volumes includes translations of traditional Sanskrit texts, and also early pro-Western systematisations of *āsana* sequences—presented as “Indian philosophies of life”—illustrated and laid out following fitness styles. This commercial proliferation is visible also in the current phenomenon of yoga video tutorials,³⁰ through which yoga has virally entered Italian homes as a daily fitness routine, bypassing the usual places of yoga apprenticeship. Transferred by the winds of the

28 This can be seen by looking at the outcomes of decades of sharing and dialogue between “Hindu” and Christian “monastic” traditions, see Dobe 2015.

29 One of the first books on yoga written in Italian by an Italian dates back to 1948.

30 For example, today there are about 200,000 subscribers to YouTube channels offering yoga lessons in Italian.

web, like a “rotating wall cloud,” yoga rapidly reached remote geographical locations: from the early “Hindu” *āśram* of the early 1960s to the gyms and studios of the 1990s, as well as to today’s practice in the multimedia living rooms of private homes. To date, Italy counts more than one million yoga practitioners. On a daily basis, many of them are exposed to the reading of translations of “Hindu” texts on yoga, or eat food following dietary regimes based on Āyurveda (Berger 2013; Wujastyk and Smith 2008; Langford 2002), or behave according to *ahimsā* principles. This is, obviously, not enough to allow us to state that they are all “Hindus”; although this is the same situation as those millions of people in Italy who read translations of the synoptic Gospels, observe Friday’s dietary *quaresima* (Lent) standards, and are ethically oriented by Christian dogmas, *without* ever stepping into a Catholic Church. In both cases, regular routines are not sufficient to establish a religious identity, and from this perspective, none of these people could be said to be either “Hindu” or “Catholic.”

The same could be said for the atmospheric travel of many other “Hindu” concepts, around which a vast cloud of commercial and “entertainment” products developed; books and volumes related to “cakras,”³¹ “tantra,”³² or “kundalini” enjoy considerable popularity.³³ Apart from the spread of “Hindu” concepts, what is actually striking today is the widespread presence of a variety of “Hindu” objects and paraphernalia in many Italian houses, the quantity of which is quite massive; things like incense, bells, necklaces, nose ring piercings, clothing, pictures, tattoos, musical instruments, medicinal remedies, domestic fragrances, scented candles, statues of idols, ritual furniture, etc., are everywhere. Viewed from the perspective of ablation, this fragmentation of a whole into dozens of objectified pieces is particularly interesting for historians of religions. Since the daily relationship with “things” and “objects” is a crucial element of the semiosis of subjectivity, “things” and “objects” have to be reputed constitutive factors of the sculpting processes of personal identity, as recent specialised scholarship strongly suggests (Damasio 2018; Cimatti 2018; Harman 2017, 2016; Bodei 2015; Faber and Goffey 2014; Shaviro 2014; Boscagli 2014; Crane 2013; Malafouris 2013; De Boever et al. 2012; Bogost 2012; Berger 2010; Garcia 2010; Bennett 2010; Turkle 2007; Pylyshyn 2007; Henare et al. 2007; Costall and Dreier 2006; Gershenfeld 1999; Appadurai

31 We counted eighty-five books written or translated into Italian that contain the word “cakra” in their titles; spanning from 1949 up to 2017.

32 We counted ninety-nine books written or translated into Italian that contain the word “tantra” in their titles; spanning from 1949 to 2017.

33 We counted forty-three books written or translated into Italian that contain the word “kundalini” (*kuṇḍalīni*) in their titles; published from 1949 to 2017.

1986). Nevertheless, having to deal, on a daily basis, with “things” that are vaguely perceived as if they *were* once “Hindu” generates a rather foggy form of identity. In fact, although the hundreds of thousands of Italians who are regular users and consumers of commodified “Hindu” paraphernalia could not be counted as “Hindu” within national surveys and statistics on religions, most of them definitely perceive and represent themselves as inclined or attracted to, sensible to, and affected by items and atmospheres reputed to be derived from the remote region of “Oriental spirituality.” How are historians of religion going to consider, posit, and map these people into their own analyses of contemporary religious climates? Are they to be interpreted simply as unaware consumers of “religious goods,” or as representatives of newly manifested postsecular and post-New Age waves of human “spirituality”?³⁴ Is it enough just to give them a new name in order to include them in an updated version of the Italian “religious geography”?

Rather than reducing ourselves to merely adding another prefix before the prefixes already used to classify previous waves of “religious behaviours,” it is more fruitful to explore such a “religious climate” from the point of view of topological, semiotic, and pragmatic principles, since individual boundaries and profiles are semiotically moulded and shaped by “what someone does with things” (Engel et al. 2016; Bernstein 2010).³⁵ Anyone accustomed to the use of any sort of ablated and “(no more) Hindu” things—whether referring to “objects” or “concepts”—must be seen as concretely participating in a shared behavioural code, although in “small proportion.” Due to the fact that the range of possibilities for relating with ablated “Hindu” perceptual or conceptual functors on a daily basis is so vast, a share of being an “ablated Hindu” could be attributed to every individual who manipulates, uses, consumes, and constructs himself with the ablated “Hindu” things that are available in markets and on social networks. Indeed, if participation in such a rarefied but pervasive atmosphere is analysed according to topological criteria, therefore recognising the active role played by things in the individual semiosis, this would contribute to our understanding of the pragmatic dynamism nowadays prompted by the extended and widely diffused models of consumers of religious goods. All the exchanges that are taking place in these ecological and biosemiotic environments

34 A classificatory practice largely used at the end of the 1990s, and also in Italian scholarship, see Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Introvigne 2000; Introvigne and Zoccatelli 1999; Filoramo 1999.

35 Seen from topological point of view, things are not “dead matter,” but in many respects, they are rather the opposite, see Harman 2017; Schalley and Zaefferer 2007; Turkle 2007; Bruce 2002.

would then be seen as subject to mainstream economic policies (Chari 2015), therefore contributing significantly to individual social conformity.

This understanding would open the way to a new political ecology of religious things and also to the possibility of a material history of “Hindu religious objects and concepts” (Winfield and Heine 2017; Jacobsen, Aktor, and Myrvold 2015; Chatterjee et al. 2014; Plate 2014; Meyer et al. 2010; King 2010), all of them seen as semiotically active and informative “things,” therefore concretely alluring, affording, eliciting those who are in touch with them. Such a concrete and pragmatic history of the Italian domestication and commodification of “Hinduism” transformed, via misrecognition, what initially was just an identity-forming semantic functor, disposed by historical political agencies of domination, into a fixed and substantial token of “religious identity.”

8 Forecasting Future Climates

All the seasonal variations presented above, including the many unexpected effects of acclimation, reflected the lines of these trajectories, and they resemble the meteorological phenomena that characterise any process of climate adaptation. In fact, since they began to settle down and establish themselves on Italian soil, all these “Hindu” denominations were obliged to participate in and to interact with the local religious climate; a dialectical process that shaped the many forms of presence, coexistence, acceptance, assimilation, institutionalisation, and “normalisation” that “Hindus” assumed over the years. Furthermore, as climate changes are resonating and taking shape within a network that operates on a global scale, whatever has happened to Italian “Hindus” has been affected by the global religious metamorphosis; an identity-forming metamorphosis that generates shapes and profiles heretofore unseen.

In the initial sections of this article it was said that the adjective “religious” is widely applied to a good number of nouns related to meteorological conditions; ordinarily speaking, in fact, climate, atmosphere, ambience, season, weather, environment, sphere, etc., are all words that go well with the adjective “religious.” In reminding the reader about these assonances we meant not only to enlarge the spectrum of our research and to expand the possibility of mapping Italian religious history but also we wanted to keep the variety of dynamic factors that intertwine during climate changes. A variety that, having abandoned the myth of quantitative “exhaustiveness” and the faith in the presence of “essences,” invites us to think about religious traditions and denominations in terms of meteorologically correlated spaces, which are therefore to be interpreted synoptically and to be seen as the outcomes of mutually entangled

transactions. In order to do this, scholars of religion are urged to cross numerous rigid and hypostatic *topoi* and *loci* to avoid the “sacred” versus “profane” partition. A crossing that would get the scholar closer to the actual processes that shape the pragmatic domains under scrutiny, thus allowing to discover surprising ablative connections between aspects that were until then considered unrelated (Gallagher 2014).

Although weather forecasts are still highly probabilistic, they have reached a notable degree of certitude. In order to formulate a forecast, there are no shortcuts; one must work to get closer and closer to the many factors that determine present climate air flows in order to foresee future weather developments.³⁶ Similarly, if predictions and forecasts are also compelling for historians of religions, they can definitely benefit from acquiring knowledge of climate dynamics and atmosphere processes. Meteorological modelling and the interpretation of the stratigraphic intricacy of atmospheric flows can be useful in order to avoid hypostatic essentialism and excessive abstractions, as well as stereotyped conceptual dependence.

As this condensed history of the Italian “Hindu” presence was meant to show, floating religious atmospheres operate through entanglement, blending, and conglomeration. Its understanding, therefore, requires an open space approach, a sort of “connectionist” style of analysis that does not pay respect to reductively geolocalised and conceptually confined religious conglomerates. A synoptical approach that seeks to understand the formation of religious identity boundaries in terms of connected historical outcomes, primarily derived from the constant and pragmatic interactions among coexisting institutional landscapes, collectively embodied atmospheres, and individual mindscapes.

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36 After the studies of Lorenz (1963), linear and statistic meteorological forecasts are not to be considered stable enough to make weather or climatic previsions. Only by knowing and implying a climatic synoptic model is it possible to place, on more robust grounds, meteorologists’ abilities to read, interpret, and foreseen future “climatic changes.” Similar meteorological principles, in fact, are nowadays used in different research fields, see Buchanan 2013.

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