Pioneering Hinduism in Canada: The Life and Work of Swami Sivananda Radha

Swami Sivananda Radha, pionnière de l'hindouisme au Canada

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Pioneering Hinduism in Canada: The Life and Work of Swami Sivananda Radha

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Though Hindus began to arrive in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century, the first Canadian-based Hindu organization was founded by Sylvia Hellman (1911-1995), a German immigrant who arrived in Canada in 1951. Based on a vision of Swami Sivananda Saraswati, she traveled to visit his ashram in Rishikish, India, where Sivananda recognized her talents and where she was ordained as a sannysin and commissioned to spread Sivananda's yoga teachings in North America. Upon her return to Canada, now known as Swami Sivananda Radha, with few resources at her command, she developed what became known as the Yasodhara Ashram in rural British Columbia, and from the ashram, she trained students, wrote books, and developed additional centers in both the U.S. and Canada, and pioneered Hinduism in Canada all the while acting as a self-conscious female spiritual leader.

Bien que les Hindous soient arrivés au Canada dans la première moitié du XX^e siècle, la première organisation hindoue au Canada fut fondée par Sylvia Hellman (1911-1995), immigrante allemande qui s'installe au Canada en 1951. Inspirée par une vision du gourou Swami Sivananda Saraswati, elle visita son ashram à Rishikish, en Inde, où Sivananda reconnut son potentiel et où elle fut ordonnée comme sannysin, avant d'être chargée de répandre la technique de yoga de Sivananda en Amérique du Nord. À son retour au Canada, portant désormais le nom de Swami Sivananda Radha et sans grandes ressources, elle construisit ce qui est aujourd'hui l'ashram Yasodhara en Colombie-Britannique, où elle forma des étudiants et écrivit ses ouvrages. Elle développa également d'autres centres de yoga au Canada et aux États-Unis et fut une pionnière du développement de l'hindouisme au Canada, ainsi qu'une remarquable figure féminine et guide spirituelle.

In the decades following World War II, both Canada and the United States transformed from a country largely dominated by Christianity (with a small but significant Jewish presence) into a religiously pluralistic society with noteworthy minority faith communities representing Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Western Esotericism. Given the continued religious leadership exercised by the branches of Christianity, it is often easy to forget how the founders of these relatively new religious options contributed to the altering of the trajectory of religious life in North America. These new and very different religious teachers were frequently dismissed by their contemporaries as at best irrelevant and at worst as leaders of sinister cults. Such is the case with the founders of Western Hinduism, who launch the story of a heretofore unknown religion on the North American landscape (BERNSTEIN and WEISENBERG 2009; GOLDBERG 2013; KURIEN 2007; MANN, NUMRICH, and WILLIAMS 2007; MELTON 2016).

The first Hindu teacher known to have visited North America, Protap Chunder Mozoomdar (1840-1905), made his initial tour in 1880

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(MOZOOMDAR 1884), and then made a return visit in 1893 along with Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) to speak at the World's Parliament of Religion. After the Parliament, Vivekananda (GHOSH 2003; MAJUMDAR 1999) remained in the United States for several years and founded the first centers of the Vedanta Society (New York, Chicago, San Francisco). He briefly visited Toronto to attend the Pan American Congress of Education and Religion in Toronto on July 18, 1895, but no circle of followers appears to have emerged from his presence in the city. A generation later, Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952), born the year of the Parliament of Religions, arrived in the United States in 1920 to attend the International Congress of Religious Liberals organized by the Unitarians in Boston. He stayed to establish the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) based in Southern California. To introduce SRF, he wrote a set of monthly lessons on kriya yoga, the form of kundalini yoga integral to his lineage of Hinduism, and distributed them as a mail-order course of study, which he advertised across the continent in secular periodicals. The course allowed SRF to attract members from across North America at a time in which few places even in California had enough people open to Hinduism to assemble a regular meeting group¹.

In 1946, Yogananda finished his ground-breaking *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), the first such book produced by an Asian American. Published by a New York publisher, the book immediately found an audience among spiritual seekers looking for alternatives to Christianity². Amid his description of his life and his religious lineage, he introduced his readers to talks about the mysterious yoga teacher known as Babaji, an Indian guru about whom definitive biographical details are lacking. He was reputedly the fountainhead of Yogananda's lineage and had appeared to Yogananda's own guru Sri Yukteswar (1855-1936) and to Yukteswar's teacher Lahiri Mahasaya (1828-1895). As his legend grew, Babaji came to be regarded as an incarnation of the deity Shiva.

Vivekananda and Yogananda were not, of course, the only Hindu teachers in North America through the first half of the twentieth century, as there were a dozen or so others, but these two were the most successful and the only ones to establish a network of affiliated centers. Through the first decades of the century,

¹ The term Hinduism, coined by European scholars in 18th century, remains a contested category with many practitioners referring instead to their practice of the "Sanatana Dharma" or eternal tradition. In the West, however, the majority of practitioners appear to have made peace with the term Hinduism and have integrated its use in a variety of ways, including the naming of temples. Some Hindus have rejected the inclusion of their practice within the category of "religion" and prefer instead to think of what they do as science, especially many who practice a form of yoga. Sivananda, Swami Radha's guru, was such a teacher.

² In the 1950s meditation circles of SRF members formed in Canada but the only one to be formally recognized as a Meditation Center was the one in Toronto (1954).

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both the United States and Canada discouraged immigration from Asia, the former most famously passing the Asian Exclusion Act and National Origins Act of 1924, which prevented immigration from India and other Asian nations and additionally denied the possibility of Asians already in America from owning property or gaining citizenship. While a number of Indians had made the trek to North America, apart from the SRF and the Vedanta Society, few Hindu centers opened and most of these were in California. The image of India and Hinduism was significantly damaged in the 1920s by a bestselling book, Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), which portrayed Hinduism in the most negative fashion.

Sylvia Hellman's early life

It was this world largely devoid of any sign that Hinduism might exist to which a middle-aged German woman, Sylvia Hellman (1911-1995), migrated in 1951. Hellman's long and eventful life (RADHA 1990; RADHA 1991; RADHA 2010; FORSEE 1998; MCKAY 1996) began in 1911 when she was born into a relatively wealthy and socially connected German family, her father being a dealer in Oriental art. She grew up with privileges unavailable to many, but had to live through two World Wars, both focused upon her homeland. Her mother was a beautiful woman, but emotionally distant, and her parents had divorced in 1922. She was sent to a boarding school where she remained until she came of age. She then launched a career that included interpretive dancing and creative writing.

In 1940, even as World War II began, she became the first woman admitted to the Berlin School of Advertising, and subsequently the first to graduate. In 1942 she also graduated from the Berlin School of Photography. Along the way, in 1941 she married an idealistic aristocrat who would become involved in trying to protect Jews from the Nazis. The marriage was brief, however, as he was soon arrested and executed in 1943. Her parents also died during the last years of the War. She married a second time in 1947, again a short-lived experience as her second husband died only a year later.

Her family's wealth having been lost during the war years, she was very much on her own in post-war Germany. Thus in 1950 she chose to leave her homeland for the United Kingdom, where she initially found employment as a maid. Following a year in England, in 1951 she moved on to Quebec where she was able to secure a job in the advertising office of a chemical company. By this time, she had largely left her family's religion behind and had yet to manifest even miniscule intimations of an alternate possibility with links to India.

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From Sylvia Hellman to Swami Sivananda Radha

Hillman's earliest connections to India, which had been instilled by her father's business and by a few vivid dreams, would be powerfully reawakened in 1954 by her attendance at a gathering of a small group of members of the Self-Realization Fellowship in Montreal. She had been invited to the gathering by a co-worker at the office where she was employed. During the evening, while having a conversation with another attendee on a thoroughly secular topic, she had a vision of someone she only later identified as Swami Sivananda Saraswati. In the vision, he beckoned her to "Come on. Let's go," and then led her away (MCKAY 1996, 58-60). Subsequently, in steps not altogether clear, she finally discovered the identity of the one who appeared to her, figured out his address, and wrote him a letter.

In 1955, she scraped the money together to travel to India to meet Sivananda. At the time, her trip was still unique enough that the local Montreal newspaper interviewed her about the trip's purpose. During her six months stay in Rishikesh, she experienced a spectrum of life-changing events that began rather inauspiciously with her having to adapt to life in India, both the different social mores and the challenges of life without Western comforts. She, however, soon found a place in the community around Sivananda, and a few days after her arrival, he called upon her to dance for those who had gathered to hear the one whom she now recognized as her guru.

During her first weeks at the ashram, Hellman adapted to the daily routine that began with hatha yoga every morning and satsang (meeting with the guru) most evenings. She had sporadic personal one-on-one meetings with Sivananda as they worked their way through the initial stages of a relationship. Finally, some six weeks into her stay, he suggested that it was time for her to have an Indian name. In the further exchange to elucidate what he was suggesting, she suddenly blurted out, "Give me back my old name," to which he responded just as suddenly, "Radha." This incident suggested to her that she had lived a prior life under the name Radha, and that Sivananda had been present at that time. In traditional Hindu lore, Radha was the consort of the god Krishna. As he explained that Radha meant "cosmic love," she felt it was her correct name and experienced a wave of love coming from Sivananda to her. After leaving Sivananda's presence that day, she found someone to inform her more fully of the life of Krishna, an incarnation of the God Vishnu.

A week later, Sivananda opened a new topic for her to consider, "Can you do some work for me in Canada?" Up to that time, Hellman had been thinking of possibly moving to India and working at Sivananda's ashram, and as she

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grappled with this new possibility, he continued, "I want you to work for me in America. Over there you can be of greater service to me." He then laid out a program that she could follow, even though she was a relative neophyte in his teachings.

The following day, he gave her the initial mantra initiation, a ritual that is seen as joining the guru and the chela (disciple) in a sacred relationship. The ritual is also believed to accelerate the student's spiritual development. Sivananda personalized the ceremony during a time of refreshments, following it by singing a song specifically directed at her indicating that this life could be her last incarnation. He implied that she was already a person of great spiritual accomplishment and was thus ready to slip off the wheel of reincarnation.

Several days later Sivananda introduced her to a couple from Kashmir at the Ashram, and pointing to her, asked, "Doesn't she look like a Kashmiri?" and added, "Do you have the pictures?" The couple produced two pictures and handed them to Hellman. The pictures were of a Kashmiri temple, which Hellman recognized as identical to a building she had seen in a vivid dream initially experienced by her in 1948. The dream maintained a vividness in her consciousness as it had reoccurred on several occasions in the years since. It had become a mystery that so impinged upon her waking hours that she had sought out books that might give her some clue as to where the building might be found. Now that she had discovered that it was a real building located in India, she also concluded that Sivananda possessed prior knowledge of her past incarnation in Kashmir and had asked the couple to bring the picture to verify the experience.

This incident provided further evidence of her developing belief that she and Sivananda had shared one or more past lives together. In the remaining time they shared while she was in India, Sivananda added confirmations that the two of them had shared previous lives in which they had worked together. As additional confirmation, he pointed to her quick mastery of several disciplines, including complicated forms of Indian dance, which indicated to him that she was remembering what she had learned in past lives rather than being just a very quick student in the present (RADHA, 1990, 143-44).

The intense few days surrounding her mantra initiation would be followed by several months of life in the ashram and visits to nearby locations for specific learning experiences. As her visa was running out and her time in India was reaching its end, a second set of events would provide an intense culmination to her time with her guru. It began with Radha asking if she could perform a pada puja ceremony in which the chela shows her devotion to the guru by making an

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offering at his feet. The ceremony is additionally seen as assisting the chela to directly connect with the guru's energy. In this case, her request was an immediate response to Sivananda's suggesting that the various gifts she had brought to him from Canada were relatively worthless, as she had not yet given herself to him. The ceremony itself centers on placing flowers on the guru's feet and pouring milk over them. It concluded with Sivananda presenting her with a necklace of flowers and the announcement that she had become a sannyasin. For Radha, it was as intense a moment as she had had since coming to India, but her experience was not over.

As she contemplated what had just happened to her, she decided to retire for a time of meditation on the meaning of the event. She found her way to a nearby temple ruin, and while meditating realized that she was not alone. She looked up to see an Indian man, who radiated a great dignity and presence. She came to a sudden realization that it was none other than the legendary Babaji. During their encounter, Babaji instructed Radha in the Divine Light Invocation, a practice that she would continue to use throughout the rest of her life (RADHA, 2010). As later taught by Radha, the Divine Light Invocation is a means of identifying with Divine Light, recognizing that Light within oneself, and then sharing the Light with others. The instruction complete, Babaji ended his visit, even as Radha entered a trance-like state during which she wandered away from the temple ruins. A man found her on a bridge not far from the ashram and initially thought her drunk. He assisted her back to her room.

Two weeks later, Swami Chidananda, Sivananda's assistant and later his successor as head of the Divine Light Ashram, informed Radha that a formal ceremony of induction into sannyas was needed. It occurred on February 14, 1956, and included a symbolic cutting of hair and her reception of a saffron robe of renunciation.

Several days later she received two documents, one formally verifying her initiation as Swami Radhananda (or more commonly Swami Sivananda Radha) and a second specifically commissioning her to work in Canada (and the United States) where she would teach, initiate, and open centers. A duplicate of the commissioning document was forwarded to the Canadian embassy. With the formalities out of the way, Radha's visit to India was concluded with a farewell party with speeches by Sivananda and Chidananda. She left for Canada, her few months in India having completely refocused her life.

At the time that Hellman, now Swami Sivananda Radha, stepped foot back in Canada, she had few resources beyond some of Sivananda's closing remarks, "Always think of yourself as Radha. When you can do this, you will

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have incredible power at your disposal” (RADHA, 1990, 193). She also took her role as a sannyasin seriously and thus refused to work and always wore her saffron robe as she moved about the city. Her resolve was strengthened shortly after her arrival in Montreal by a visionary experience in which she saw Sivananda appearing before her in the form of Krishna playing a flute. This event encouraged a form of piety and devotion to Krishna that would grow throughout her life (MCKAY, 1996).

Canadian Hinduism’s Initial Flowering

As of the mid-1950s, Hinduism remained largely invisible in North America in general, and Canada in particular. No temples existed and while the Self-Realization Fellowship had affiliates across Canada, there were no public centers. The initial Vedanta societies in Canada would only form in the later 1960s. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2018) would make a trip across the United States in 1959 and again in 1961, when he also visited Canada, but could not stay. For many years, the sole teacher of Transcendental Meditation in North America was Beulah Smith, who resided in San Diego, though Maharishi would briefly visit the US almost annually before 1965, when the country finally rid itself of the 1924 Asia Exclusion Act and placed immigration from India on the same quota level as most European countries. In 1966, he founded the Students’ International Meditation Society which spread across the continent through the 1970s.

As Hindu groups began to pop up on the larger religious landscape through the 1960s, roughly four types can be distinguished. The first are traditional Hindu movements built around temples where the traditional deities are represented in statues and venerated. Second, are modern sectarian movements which maintain temples but strictly limit the range of deities who are worshipped and usually acknowledge a founder of their tradition. The modern Swaminarayan groups and Krishna Consciousness groups are notable examples. Third, the groups of the Hindu Renaissance that had attempted to respond to British criticism of the Hindu religion through the 19th century. Renaissance Hindu groups abandoned temple worship and tended to emphasize a form of monotheism underlying Hindu polytheism. Both the Vedanta Society and the Self-Realization Fellowship represent the 19th century Hindu Renaissance, as does Sivananda’s Divine Life Society. Fourth are the many guru-oriented groups of the twentieth century which have largely abandoned the worship of the Hindu deities and focus on one or a limited number of spiritual practices drawn from traditional practices of yoga and/or meditation. Maharishi Mehesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation movement represented this fourth type of Hinduism.

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Returning to our narrative of Swami Radha, we discover that she was not the only one that Swami Sivananda had approached with the idea of starting an extension of his mission in North America. The year after Radha returned to Canada, he approached his student Swami Vishnu Devananda (1927-1993), the first professor of hatha yoga at Sivananda's Yoga Vedanta Forest Academy (Vishnu Devananda, 1960; Krishna, 2015), and gave him a small symbolic amount of money along with a request that he bring the ancient teachings of yoga to the West. He arrived in Quebec in 1959 and founded the initial Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre in Montreal, the first of a network of centers that would reach across Canada and the United States into the Caribbean. Sivananda would pass away in 1962, after which several more of his students including Swami Satchidananda (1914-2002) and Swami Jyotirmayananda (b. 1931), would join a wave of post-1965 Indian spiritual teachers to relocate to North America (ANJALI and SHARANDANADA, 1996).

Before any of Sivananda's other students arrived in North America, however, toward the end of 1956 Swami Radha moved to Vancouver. Early in 1957 she founded her ashram with her first seven disciples, all young males. Her first years were quite difficult both personally and professionally. She found that other spiritual groups did not recognize her standing and that Christian communities, in particular, looked upon her as following an alien tradition, a perception punctuated by her persistence in asserting her status by wearing her saffron robe. In spite of her alienated condition, she faithfully worked at fulfilling her commission to establish and develop Sivananda's teachings in the West. She traveled and lectured as opportunity afforded, and slowly but steadily her following increased. Adherents filled the first ashram and founded centers in southwestern Canada and the northeastern United States.

In 1958, she visited India for a second time and spent time at Sivananda's Divine Light Ashram in Rishikish. While visiting with Sivananda was the major purpose of the visit, she returned to the ashram as an accomplished teacher who now possessed a track record of faithfulness in carrying out the mission for which she had been commissioned and as such was recognized by most of the Divine Light Ashram's residents as one of Sivananda's honored students. During this second trip (RADHA 1991) she also was able to meet and speak with a variety of Indian teachers outside of Sivananda's immediate circle, including Ramdas; Sadhu Vaswani (the founder of the Mira School in Poona); the prominent Saivite teacher, the Shankaracharya of Kanchi; and the notable female teacher Anandamayi Ma, whom many considered the most powerful female spiritual leader in India in the mid-century.

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Upon her arrival back in Canada, Swami Radha was now on her own. Sivananda was at the end of his illustrious career and passed away in 1962. His ashram and the Divine Life Society were left in the hands of Swami Chidananda and his male cohorts. Once Sivananda was dead, although they did not disown Swami Radha, they largely ignored her and threw their support behind the several male representatives of the Divine Life Mission who settled in North America to begin their teaching career in the West—Vishnu Devananda in Quebec, Satchidananda in New York, and Jyotirmayananda in Miami. Radha was somewhat isolated in the Vancouver and Seattle area.

As she gained students, she began to pass along what she had learned, beginning with hatha yoga but adding the additional forms of yoga that made up Sivananda's broad approach to what he termed integral yoga. By 1962, she had gathered enough support that she could begin to search for a more permanent site for an ashram. She located an 85-acre tract of land on Kootenay Bay in British Columbia which she named Yasodhara after Buddha's wife—an affirmation of her feminine spiritual current.

Yasodhara Ashram on Kootenay Bay, BC. Credit: B. Rigal-Cellard, July 26, 2019.

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Having persisted through the tough years of establishing her place in the larger spiritual community, the next two decades formed the essential core of her spiritual career. She developed as a teacher, traveled widely, and integrated her work into what was a burgeoning New Age community. She highlighted those aspects of her teachings that most resonated with the wave of spiritual activities that were sweeping across North America. She introduced students to the various branches of yoga even as they worked on their own personal development as an individual with a need to balance the inner life with a set of outward relationships. Her work was punctuated by the holding of the first Yoga Teachers' Course at the ashram in 1969, writing her first major book, *Kundalini Yoga for the West* (1978), and finally penning her autobiographical *Radha: Diary of a Woman's Search* (1981). In 1983, she formally retired as president of the ashram, though she remained active as a teacher on a reduced schedule. She had a health crisis in 1988, in which many thought she was about to die. It spurred the completion of the major building at the ashram, the Temple of Divine Light³.

Yasodhara Ashram Temple of Light. Credit: B. Rigal-Cellard, July 26, 2019.

³ The temple of Divine Light was originally completed in 1992 but lost in a fire in 2014. A new temple building was completed in the fall of 2017 and officially opened in June of 2018.

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As a last major act, on September 8, 1991, on what would have been Sivananda's 108th birthday, she held an open mantra initiation ceremony for all who wish to attend. She passed away two months later.

Conclusion

Swami Radha left behind a thriving Hindu yoga-centered community—the oldest in Canada. At the time of Radha's death, it had associated centers across southwest Canada and the northwest of the United States. As a Hindu establishment, it preceded both the Yoga Vedanta Society founded by Swami Vishnudevanada in 1959 and the oldest Indian-Canadian Hindu temple, the Hindu Sanstha of Nova Scotia, established in 1967. It also emerged as the most substantial of the several Canadian Hindu Renaissance centers, over against the Vedanta Society and the Self-Realization Fellowship.

In developing the ashram, Swami Radha took the several admonitions from her guru quite seriously. From the moment she returned to Canada from India in 1956, she self-identified as Swami Sivananda Radha and for the remaining years of her life made only infrequent passing references to her previous life as Sylvia Hellman. She established a Canadian Yoga center in the Sivananda lineage and as such saw herself as a representative more narrowly of the Vedanta Yoga tradition rather than any larger "Hinduism."

Swami Radha's presentation of her work reflects both the late 20th-century questioning of the term "Hinduism" by both Indian-Americans and scholars of comparative religions, not to mention the contested nature of the term "religion" as a means of identifying one's spiritual tradition. Radha also saw yoga as a "science" but refrained from actually challenging the separation of church and state as did, for example, Maharishi's Transcendental meditation movement.

In establishing her center, she also created two independent organizations—Yasodhara Ashram for her work in Canada and the Association for the Development of the Human Potential for her work in the United States, rather than attempting to create a formal affiliate branch of the Divine Life Society. Through her ashram, she offered initiation into the yoga tradition via japa yoga (use of mantras). As such, she had to master the use of all the mantras, not just the one given her by Sivananda, and thus develop a feel for each mantra, so she would know which one to give each student.

Lastly, but of most importance, Swami Radha self-consciously affirmed her own role as a female spiritual leader. She was aided in this act by Sivananda's unique promotion of her as an accomplished spiritual guide who was possibly

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living her last incarnation. There is little data on how she saw herself as the larger Hindu community developed across Canada and as she and her ashram emerged as its fountainhead.

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