

South Asian Religion in Hong Kong

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South Asian religious life in the HKSAR is characterized by diversity that reflects the rich variety of South Asian communities that have settled there in the course of the last century and a half (estimated to number some 40,000 individuals). It also reflects a pursuit of continuity and connection with established religious traditions, while also adapting to the context of Hong Kong's fast pace, cosmopolitanism, and commercial ethos. The general tendency for specific South Asian diaspora communities to sustain ethnic identities through religious associations and practices is in Hong Kong balanced by more mixed association in some organizations, particularly those that emphasize one or another form of yoga practice and meditation, to which local Chinese and westerners are attracted.

Here we provide a very brief overview of South Asian religious groups and activities, focusing mainly on those of specifically Indic origins (hence acknowledging, but not describing here, the presence of an active and sizeable South Asian Islamic community, as well as the existence of South Asian Christians and Jews). We use the inclusive term "South Asian" rather than specifically "Indian" religion, particularly to include those groups – specifically Sindhis and Punjabis – who have migrated from areas now part of Pakistan, who represent largely Hindu and Sikh traditions respectively.

Zoroastrianism, though originating in ancient Iran, deserves mention here as the religious culture of the Parsi community of Hong Kong, due to its early presence and considerable influence in the territory despite its small size. The Zoroastrian community of Hong Kong presently claims some 200 members, yet it boasts a tradition of philanthropy in the city dating back to the late nineteenth century, with the public charity of Sir Hormusjee Naorojee Mody. The community headquarters is the Zoroastrian Building in Causeway Bay, where regular religious observances and social gatherings are held (including open-house outreach events). The community has its own cemetery (in Happy Valley).

Slightly larger in membership than the Hong Kong Parsi community is that of the territory's Jains, whose similarly ancient religious tradition originated in South Asia proper, as a shramanical (ascetic) rejection of the dominant brahmanical (later Hindu) worldview. The Shree Hong Kong Jain Sangh (established in 1994, in Tshim Sha Tsui) maintains a temple dedicated to the Tirthankar Adinath Bhagavan Murti (having been founded by the Shethambara Murti-pujaka sect of Jainism, which allows the worship of its saints in the form of physical images -- *murtis*). This temple is supported by some 400 Jain families (largely from Gujarat and Rajasthan) who, significantly, are affiliated with various Jain traditions including others than that of the temple's founding.

A well-established Sikh community thrives in Hong Kong, originating with nineteenth-century Punjabi Sikh members of the British army regiment stationed in the territory. The centre of Sikh religious life in Hong Kong is in Wan Chai, at the Khalsa Diwan (Hong Kong) Sikh Temple, also known as the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, a *gurudwara* originally built in 1901 and enlarged twice (and presently undergoing a third, more extensive enlargement). As in the Punjab of north India, Pakistan, and elsewhere in the world, the Hong Kong *gurudwara* holds daily functions of singing and scriptural readings (*kirtan* and *katha darbar*) and recitation or meditation on the divine name (*Waheguru simran*). Here is also held regular classes for learning to read the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib (*gurbani* classes). Also as in other Sikh *gurudwaras*, the Hong Kong Sikh Temple offers regular *langar*, the service of free meals to all persons on the basis of equality before God.

Coming to what may be termed ‘mainstream Hinduism’, one notable centre of Hindu practice is the Happy Valley Hindu Temple, established (in 1950) and maintained by the Hindu Association of Hong Kong. Here the effort is to offer a pan-sectarian venue for worship and other religious activities, including marriages and widely celebrated festivals, including Krishna’s birthday (Janmashtami), the Night of Shiva (Shiva Ratri), and Rama’s Victory (Dussehra). Regular weekly devotional gatherings (*satsang*) are held on Sundays, and occasional visiting religious teachers from India (*swamis*, *sannyasis*) are hosted. This temple also provides a venue for a monthly Amma Satsang, dedicated to the teachings of the contemporary Kerala woman saint Amritanandamayi. The Happy Valley Hindu Temple reflects a trend of contemporary Hindu diaspora practice, whereby an ethos of ‘accommodation’ is maintained in order to bring together different South Asian ethnic groups and several traditions of worship focused on particular divinities and following particular teachings.

Another type of expression of Indian religious life found in Hong Kong can be seen in a variety of groups with Hindu orientation that are marked by a missionizing spirit, generally inspired by one or another specific guru (religious teacher) and his or her teachings. Such establishments (often located in high-rise apartments) may be frequented not only by people of South Asian origin, but also by local Chinese and westerners. Examples are the Divine Life Society Yoga Centre; the Sathya Sai Baba Center of Hong Kong (est. 1976); Chinmaya Seva Ashram, Hong Kong (since 1991); and Swami Teonram’s Prem Prakash Mandali. These will typically have various weekly gatherings (*satsang*), in members’ homes, sometimes catering to a particular group (e.g. Sindhi-speaking; or women only) involving readings, scriptural study, and singing of devotional songs (*bhajan*).

A relatively small but significantly growing centre of religious culture with South Asian origins is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), whose Founder-Acharya, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), visited Hong Kong in 1972. ISKCON’s Sri Sri Gaura-Nitai Mandir in Tsim Sha Tsui is noteworthy for its full daily program of temple worship (*murti-seva*), including six daily offerings of vegetarian food cooked in the temple kitchen, each offering followed by a worship ritual (*arati*), beginning at 4:30 a.m. and ending at 9:00 p.m. The temple maintains daily

morning classes in *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, regular evening lectures on the teachings of *Bhagavad-gita*, and weekly Sunday programmes. Here the emphasis is on outreach while also catering to Hong Kong's South Asians, especially during several annual festivals and the hosting of visiting itinerant preceptors (gurus, *sannyasis*). ISKCON also hosts visiting high school and university students for introductory classes and, since 2007, sponsors the Professorship for Indian Religions and Culture in the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies at Chinese University of Hong Kong.

This brief overview of South Asian religious life in Hong Kong can only hint at the rich variety of its practice in Hong Kong, suggesting that the territory of Hong Kong reflects in microcosm the wealth of traditions practiced in South Asia since ancient times. As South Asians typically maintain regular contact with relatives and friends in their homelands, naturally there is a steady nourishment of religious life from South Asia to Hong Kong. At the same time, there is a conscious effort by many Hong Kong South Asians to keep alive their traditions in order to pass them on to the next generation, as a means of establishing and preserving ethnic identity. The counter-force of cosmopolitanism leads to blending of traditions and the participation of non-South Asians, especially in practices associated with yoga and meditation, but increasingly also in devotional (*bhakti*) practices.

References

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