

The Hindu guru and the nonexistent State.

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A vivacious debate has been stirred by a self-appointed ruler of a fictitious State – Arunachalam Rajasekaran, more widely known as Paramahansa Nithyananda, whose followers recognize as “Supreme Pontiff” of the Sanatāna Hindu tradition (a traditionalist Hindu movement inspired by ancient Dharmic doctrines). The case of Nithyananda is also marked by a series of unresolved legal controversies. He has been accused of multiple criminal offenses under the Indian Penal Code, including Section 120(b) (criminal conspiracy), Section 295 (defilement or desecration of a place of worship with intent to insult religion), Section 376 (sexual assault), Section 377 (unnatural offenses), Section 420 (cheating and dishonestly inducing delivery of property), and Section 506(1) (criminal intimidation). His defense is mainly focused on allegations of defamation and claims of manipulated evidence directed against his accusers and certain press organizations¹. These complex situations have significantly delayed the trial process – already hindered by the structural inefficiencies of the Indian judicial system, which is often criticized for its procedural backlog and systemic delays. The proceeding is currently pending and, as of now, no final conviction has been rendered².

The presumption of innocence has nonetheless been subtly circumvented by numerous press organizations, which have described Guru Nithyananda using a variety of qualifications³. The risk posed by such characterizations, as perceived by the general public, is that they often result in stigmatizing labels failing to reflect the complexity of the Hindu religious phenomenon.

Returning to the fictitious State, it is widely known that its purported foundation dates back to 2019 and that, borrowing its name from an ancient Hindu temple, it has been designated as the State of “Kailasa”⁴.

¹ The legal proceedings involving the guru – both as claimant and as respondent – are numerous. For a partial and chronological reconstruction, reference is made to the following judgments: *Criminal Petitions nn. 141 and 142 of 2012*; *Criminal Petitions nn. 2328 and 2344 of 2010* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/60167930/>); *WPHC n. 108 of 2012* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/13985038/>); *W.P. n. 19094 del 2012* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/158791091/>); *C.S. n. 409 of 2012* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/6145196/>); *AKR n. 126 of 2014* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/114871044/>); *C.Ps. nn. 211, 224 and 240 of 2018* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/5065470/>); *C.R.L. Ps. Nn. 6920 and 6927 of 2018* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/183989034/>); *C.P. n. 594 of 2020* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/154255120/>); *W. Hansaraj Saxena vs State Through Rep. By on 13 April, 2023*, concerning the *Crl.O.P. n. 1917 del 2016 e i Crl.M.P. nn. 980 and 3051 of 2016* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/71911837/>); and *Janardhana Ramkrishna Sharma vs State Of Gujarat on 2 February, 2024* (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/71852357/>).

² On this point, brief observations can be found in PRATIBHA MURTHI, *Evolution Problem and Challenges in the Indian Judiciary*, in *Jus Corpus Law Journal*, vol. 3, n. 2, 2023, pp. 103-112.

³ To cite just a few: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/5/wanted-indian-guru-resurfaces-to-announce-new-cosmic-country> (Al Jazeera); <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-12-11/Rape-accused-fugitive-Indian-guru-announces-cosmic-nation-MkXoljJNfO/index.html> (Cgtn); <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-18443881> (BBC); <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/south/story/swami-nithyananda-arrest-the-story-of-why-he-is-in-trouble-105601-2012-06-13> (India Today).

⁴ On this point, see the following journalistic sources: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/decoding-the-fictional-country-of-kailasa-that-catfished-30-us-cities/articleshow/99005350.cms> (The Times of India); <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/newark->

Its self-declared “representatives” have entered into cultural partnerships with mayors of several U.S. cities⁵, established various *Āśramas* worldwide, and acquired plots of land in parts of the Amazon region in Latin America. The most recent of these acquisitions took place in Bolivia and further amplified the public profile of Paramahansa Nithyananda and his followers. It is reported that representatives of certain Indigenous groups – namely the *Baure*, *Ese Ejja*, and *Cayubaba* peoples – from the Tim II area (a Multiethnic Indigenous Territory) allegedly signed contracts with emissaries of the so-called State of Kailasa. These agreements, in exchange for several hundred thousand dollars, granted the Kailasa representatives full rights over the land⁶ for a thousand years and included a commitment, by the Indigenous groups, to recognize and defend the State of Kailasa, its future inhabitants, and its leader against any external threats. Bolivian civil authorities intervened, declared the agreements void, and mandated the expulsion of the Kailasa representatives⁷.

The land sale by Indigenous groups is, in itself, a particularly compelling issue, since land constitutes a fundamental element in the development of the cosmogonic and chthonic traditions characteristic of such communities⁸. The assimilation of Indigenous lifestyles into Western paradigms, alongside the perceived imperative to conform to these models, constitutes one of the numerous detrimental consequences wrought by colonial processes on Indigenous cultures. However, this does not constitute the subject of inquiry within the scope of these brief pages. Nor will the argument referred to the constitutive and essential criteria necessary for statehood recognition under International Law. Rather, the purpose herein is to provide a concise reflection on the cultural motivations that may underlie the followers of a religion in simulating the establishment of a State, and to advance an alternative interpretation to those posited by media and political stakeholders who have addressed the case.⁹

[sister-city-scams-kailasa/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sister-city-scams-kailasa/) (CBS News); <https://www.vice.com/en/article/kailasa-fake-country-nithyananda-scam-crime/> (Vice); <https://www.boomlive.in/explainers/nithyananda-united-states-of-kailasa-united-nations-21219> (Boom).

⁵ See the following journalistic sources: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/nithyanandas-fake-country-kailasa-cons-30-us-cities-with-sister-city-scam-report/article66633024.ece#:~:text=Self%2Dproclaimed%20godman%20and%20fugitive,agreement%20with%20the%20fictional%20country> (The Hindu); <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/16/newark-officials-duped-kailasa-nithyananda> (The Guardian);

⁶ About that, see – *ex plurimis* – the following journalistic sources: https://www.repubblica.it/venerdi/2025/04/11/news/amazonia_bolivia_setta_guru_indigeni_truffa_viaggi_da_fermo-424121685/ (La Repubblica); <https://www.ilpost.it/2025/04/08/stato-induista-kailasa-terre-nativi-bolivia/> (Il Post); <https://eldeber.com.bo/pais/estado-ficticio-tienta-indigenas-para-que-alquilen-sus-territorios-por-mil-anos-506807/> (País).

⁷ As specified by the bolivian Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores on the following website link: <https://cancilleria.gob.bo/mre/2025/03/21/20491/>

⁸ As explained by MIRCEA ELIADE, *Trattato di storia delle religioni*, a cura di PIETRO ANGELINI, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2008.

⁹ With regard to political commentary, a representative example can be found in the following source: <https://www.foxnews.com/media/politicians-cities-forging-ties-fake-hindu-cult-leader-reveals-pitfalls-inclusivity-buck-sexton> (Fox News). During a live broadcast, several commentators—sympathetic to American conservatism—did not withhold criticism of the city mayors who had entered into cultural partnerships with representatives of a non-existent state. While the observations made may appear reasonable, in my view, they lose credibility insofar as they are instrumentalized for political purposes—that is, employed solely to perpetuate a disparaging campaign against political opponents, in this case, members of the American Democratic Party.

In this regard, several preliminary considerations must be made. First, it is worth noting an important detail available on the official website of the self-proclaimed “United States of Kailasa”: that the creation of this entity was inspired – at least from a political and legal perspective – by the model of Vatican City State¹⁰. Second, it is of particular interest to examine the reasons that may have contributed to the development, among Kailasa’s adherents, of a group-level perception of antagonism from state and media powers. It remains unclear whether this sentiment is the result of the guru’s manipulation of his devotees, or whether it is a direct consequence of the political and media backlash following the “founding” of the State. Finally, it is important to underscore the central role played by the website of this puppet State. This digital platform – an actual interface modeled after official governmental websites – features sections providing information on a wide array of topics: history, documents, embassies, legal hierarchy, and everything that might offer users the impression that Kailasa is, in fact, a real State¹¹. This erroneous belief is further reinforced by both the meticulously designed website and the considerable assets owned by the Swami – through the Life Bliss Foundation¹² – as well as the reported global following of the cult, estimated at over two million adherents.

Given these premises, while not excluding the possibility that the creation of the fictitious State may serve as a defensive instrument in the hands of a mass manipulator akin to Jim Jones, it is nonetheless worth considering alternative perspectives – particularly those concerning the devotees and Hinduism as a broader religious phenomenon, understood in its interaction with Western modernity¹³.

The *Sanatāna* tradition precedes its followers. In accordance with their worldview and religious practices, devotees regard gurus as human manifestations of the divine, toward whom a posture of devotion is to be maintained¹⁴. However, this religious phenomenon is often interpreted through Western cultural categories¹⁵, which tend to facilitate the stigmatization of both gurus and their followers – casting the former as manipulative figures and the latter as passive subjects of manipulation. In such cases, it is the devotees who tend to suffer the most from these preconceived hermeneutic frameworks – not only because they are labeled as weak and easily manipulated individuals, but also because they are ridiculed for their religiosity¹⁶, which is seen as having rendered them subjugable. This stigmatization, in general, stems from the actions of media

¹⁰ See <https://kailasa.org/sovereignorder/>

¹¹ See <https://gov.kailasa.sk/>

¹² It is the organization founded by Swami Nithyananda concerning spiritual and meditative activities. See <https://lifeblissfoundation.org/default.html>

¹³ On this matter see JACOB COPEMAN, AYA IKEGAME, *Guru logics*, in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, n. 1, 2012, pp. 289–336.

¹⁴ See GAVIN FLOOD, *An introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

¹⁵ The very use of the term “cult,” employed here solely for the sake of argumentative simplicity, reflects the imposition of a Western cultural category onto the Hindu context. For Hindus, religion – perhaps more accurately rendered by the term *dharma* – is a way of life, an orthopraxy grounded in duties; it is not merely a form of worship.

¹⁶ Just think of all the times when gurus are mockingly referred to – in Italian language – as “*santoni*”, or when followers are dismissively or derogatorily labeled as members of a “sect”.

outlets and political groups that “pronounce” judgments and “declare” a guru’s guilt in the media even before any verdict has been issued by the competent judicial Courts. The general public, which is not always well-versed in legal technicalities, is thus at risk of falling into the trap of oversimplified categorization – transforming, in effect, a newspaper headline into an “irrevocable verdict of guilt”.

The reasons put forth by Swami Nithyananda to justify the creation of the fictitious State appear to function as a strategic counter-response to prevailing media rhetoric. On the official website of Kailasa, it is stated that the establishment of the State serves to render the religious tradition “untouchable” and to protect it from “attacks” that could lead to its dissolution. The emulation of Vatican City State, therefore, may be interpreted as a defensive attempt to align with legally established institutional models.

It is important to clarify that giving space to such perspectives should not be construed as a defense of the guru. The aim, rather, is to reflect on the motivations that may have led individuals to commit an offense – namely, that of carrying out activities in the name and on behalf of a non-existent State. In some instances, such motivations may well be rooted in the frustration stemming from the lack of recognition of one’s cultural or religious distinctiveness. Consequently, insofar as the guilt of a few can open the door to media and political oversimplifications, to the denial of diversity, and thus to potential infringements on religious freedom, the idea of conforming to models endowed with greater legal-political legitimacy begins to take shape as a strategic means of securing a space for identity affirmation and freedom.

While the existence of manipulative behavior on the part of the guru cannot be entirely ruled out, it may be necessary to temper assessments of its performative reach. In contrast, the retroactive effect produced by political and media rhetoric appears to be significantly more influential in fostering the retreat of followers into a cultic community and in intensifying their collective identity. These dynamics, in turn, may feed back into the process, reinforcing adherents’ commitment to the religious prescriptions of their spiritual leader and, as a result, potentially amplifying his manipulative capacity.

That an improper exercise of power by the guru may have occurred – with the possible complicity of certain followers – is possible. Yet, beyond accusations and generalizations, it would be appropriate for our critical engagement to include an effort to understand the perspective of the Other, while recognizing that no single part can ever capture the whole. In order to fulfill this task, even in a minimal way, it would suffice to visit the official website of the “State” of Kailasa where it is possible to find, among its stated purposes, commitments to environmentalism and non-discrimination. These goals – though not universally embraced – are nonetheless aligned with the broader teleology of Euro-American democracies, and may, contrary to any superficially hostile reactions, offer a basis for constructive dialogue between profoundly different groups.

As things stand, this vision remains distant. The continued reliance on Western categories of thought, together with a dominant secular rationalism, has made it easier to discredit some religious and cultural traditions than to understand and accept their specific differences. Religious freedom, evidently, has not yet disentangled itself from the colonial structure within which was regrettably – and intentionally – conceived.

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