

JUNE 2025 ISSUE

# The India Centre

## NEWSLETTER



FLAME  
UNIVERSITY





**JUNE, 2025**



**THE INDIA CENTRE NEWSLETTER**

# **Contents**

<b>Research Highlights</b>	<b>01</b>
<b>Media Coverage</b>	<b>02</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>Recognition</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>Training and Workshops</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>TIC Happenings</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>Podcasts By Prof. Pankaj Jain</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>Upcoming Events</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Meet Our Team</b>	<b>15</b>



## Research Highlights



### VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF INDIAN FILMS

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND CULTURAL  
TRADITIONS IN BOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

Edited by  
Pankaj Jain



### Visual Anthropology of Indian Films: Religious Communities and Cultural Traditions in Bollywood and Beyond

## Book Reviews

- Kshetrimayum, Melody (2024). Linda C. McClain and Aziza Ahmed (Eds.), The Routledge Companion to Gender and COVID-19. The International Journal of Community and Social Development, 6(4), 470–472.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/25166026241301889>.
- Kshetrimayum, Melody (2024). Anjoo Upadhyaya, Åshild Kolås and Eileen Connolly (Eds.), Women's Empowerment in India: From Rights to Agency. Oxon: Routledge. 172 pp., ₹1295. ISBN: 9781032881386.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/25166026241306601>.

## Media Coverage

### US Scholarship Freeze Sparks Uncertainty For Indian Students

**Dr. Pankaj Jain**

Prof. Pankaj Jain was interviewed for a recent article discussing shifting global education trends. He noted that this moment “may be a blessing in disguise for India,” as it could reduce brain drain and inspire students to pursue excellence within the country. He emphasized the need to “rediscover India intellectually and academically” across all disciplines.



Source: [Getty Images](#)

### Decolonizing the Mind: FLAME University Sparks a Knowledge Renaissance

**Dr. Pankaj Jain & Dr. Sanchari Basu Chaudhuri**

The Daily Guardian recently featured The India Centre in an article titled “Decolonizing the Mind: FLAME University Sparks a Knowledge Renaissance.” The piece explores the Centre's efforts to revitalize India's intellectual heritage by reintroducing indigenous knowledge systems through an Indo-centric lens. The article discusses the importance of engaging with primary sources in regional languages. It highlights the growing interest among Gen Z in traditional wisdom amidst contemporary challenges like AI and climate change. It also emphasizes the role of universities in preserving and promoting indigenous philosophies through experiential learning and community engagement.



“Illustrated Manuscript of Dakhinpat Sattrā (Bhagawat),” by Unknown Author, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0,  
[Source](#)

### Tracking Time: Dhyāna In Zen Gardens

**Dr. Sanchari Basu Chaudhuri and Dr. Pankaj Jain**

This article delves into the contemplative aesthetics of Zen gardens, tracing their philosophical roots in the practice of dhyāna (meditation). It reflects the India Centre's ongoing commitment towards intercultural and interphilosophical dialogue. The piece illustrates how temporal awareness, silence, and spatial design cultivate a deep meditative stillness. It invites readers to reflect on how embodied experiences of space, particularly within garden environments, can offer profound encounters.



“A nice view of Pu La Deshpande Garden,” by Mvkulkarni23, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0,  
[Source](#)

# Interviews

## Indic Talks: Caste in Indian Society

### PART 1. VARṆA IN TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

- First Jain Tīrthaṅkara Ṛṣabha and his son Bharata
- Puruṣa Sūkta (R̥gveda 10.90)
  - Brāhmaṇa ब्राह्मण
    - Spiritual teachers, priests, and scholars
  - Kṣatriya क्षत्रिय
    - Rulers and warriors
  - Vaiśya वैश्य
    - Traders and entrepreneurs
  - Śūdra शूद्र
    - Service folks (doctors, engineers, plumbers, etc.)

Prof. Pankaj Jain was recently featured in an insightful Indic Talks episode, hosted by the Centre for Indic Studies at Indus University. In this engaging conversation, he traces the evolution of the caste system in India, from its origins in the ancient Varna framework to its present-day complexities. Prof. Jain unpacks the historical, philosophical, and social dimensions of caste, offering a nuanced perspective on one of the most debated aspects of Indian society.

## Podcast Feature: Ambedkar and Hinduism



In a recent episode of the That's So Hindu podcast by the Hindu American Foundation, Prof. Pankaj Jain discusses Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's complex and often misunderstood views on Hinduism and the caste system. The conversation offers insight into Ambedkar's legacy and nuanced engagement with Indian religious and social thought.





# Recognition

- Prof. Melody Kshetrimayum was appointed to the Board of Managers of Social Development Issues, a journal published by the University of Georgia (formerly by the University of Michigan).

# Training and Workshops

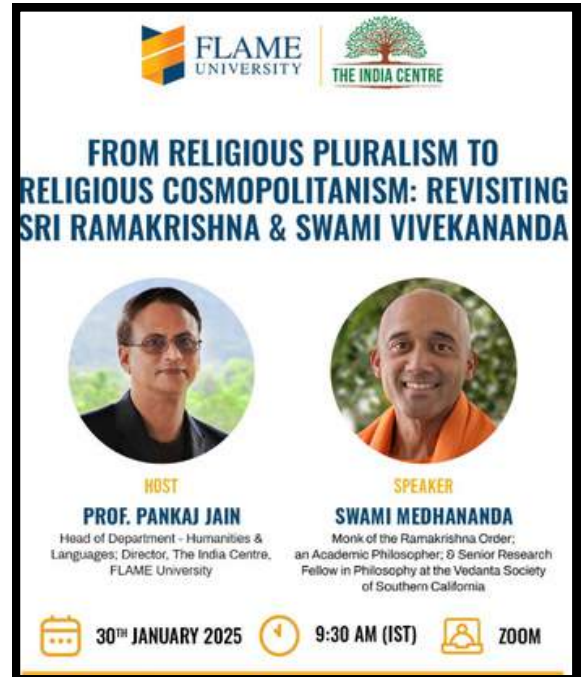
- Prof. Balaji Kalluri delivered a 1-day workshop for faculty at NICMAR University, Pune.
- Prof. Balaji Kalluri conducted a capacity-building program for rural educators of VOPA, a Pune-based NGO.
- Prof. Balaji Kalluri co-led an 'after-hours' social event at IIT Delhi with Prof. Jay Dhariwal, using the Energetic board game. Participants from sectors such as insurance, policy, industrial automation, and IT gathered to discuss India's energy transition in megacities.
- Prof. Balaji Kalluri facilitated an immersive game-based civic engagement session for the Civic Participation team at Janaagraha, simulating urban governance challenges.
- Prof. Balaji Kalluri co-conducted training for city officials of Greater Chennai Corporation in partnership with Prof. Indumathi Nambi at IIT Madras.
- Prof. Balaji Kalluri delivered an interactive session using the BiBo (Building-in-a-Box) game for residential building stakeholders, hosted by the Centre of Excellence in Urban Planning and Design at IIT Kharagpur.
- Prof. Balaji Kalluri launched FREE 6-day game-based summer camps across Mumbai and New Delhi as part of a social research experiment exploring how children shape urban futures.
- Prof. Tarinee Awasthi conducted a workshop on Bhāvarthādhikaraṇa in Mīmāṃsā for PhD students at the Manipal Institute of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, Manipal Academy of Higher Education.

# TIC Happenings

## WEBINAR: JANUARY 2025

Swami Medhananda explored the teachings of the Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), who famously affirmed, “As many faiths, so many paths.” Ramakrishna emphasized that diverse religious traditions, whether theistic or nontheistic, can all serve as equally valid paths to experiential knowledge of the Infinite Divine. His expansive vision challenges narrow interpretations of religious pluralism and asserts the equal value of multiple spiritual goals, ranging from devotion to a personal God to the realization of nondual Pure Consciousness.

The session also highlighted how Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna’s foremost disciple, transformed these insights into a bold vision of religious cosmopolitanism. Vivekananda advocated tolerance and mutual enrichment across traditions, encouraging a dynamic spiritual openness and the possibility of multiple religious beliefs.




**FROM RELIGIOUS PLURALISM TO RELIGIOUS COSMOPOLITANISM: REVISITING SRI RAMAKRISHNA & SWAMI VIVEKANANDA**

**HOST**  
**PROF. PANKAJ JAIN**  
Head of Department - Humanities & Languages; Director, The India Centre, FLAME University

**SPEAKER**  
**SWAMI MEDHANANDA**  
Monk of the Ramakrishna Order; an Academic Philosopher; & Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy at the Vedanta Society of Southern California

**30<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2025** **9:30 AM (IST)** **ZOOM**

## LECTURE: FEBRUARY 2025



**INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS**

**MODERN JAIN WOMEN ACTIVISTS: FROM HOUSEHOLDERS TO ASCETICS**

**HOST**  
**PROF. PANKAJ JAIN**  
Head of Department - Humanities & Languages; Director, The India Centre, FLAME University

**SPEAKER**  
**PROF. VEENA R. HOWARD**  
Professor of Asian Religious Traditions, Department of Philosophy, California State University, Fresno

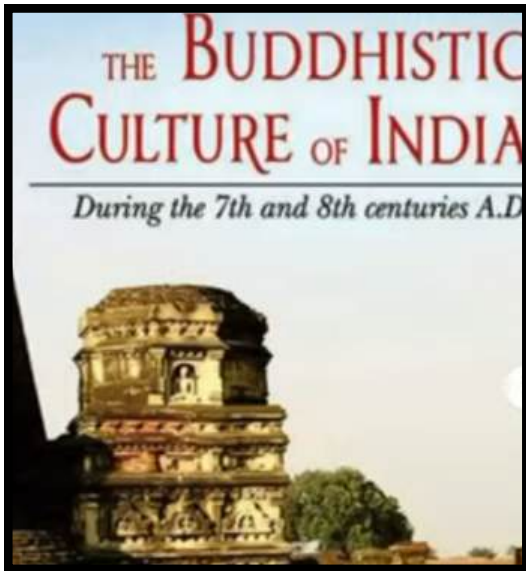
**25<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2025** **12PM – 2PM (IST)** **ZOOM**

The India Centre at FLAME University was pleased to host Prof. Veena Howard, who discussed gender, religion, and social transformation through the lens of Jainism in a talk that combined historical insight with contemporary relevance. Howard examined the enduring legacy of the Sarabhai family and how Jainism, a tradition often associated with renunciation, nonviolence, and monasticism, has shaped and been shaped by women's societal roles.

Prof. Howard highlighted the lives of modern Jain women actively redefining liberation's meaning. As householders, social reformers, and ascetics, these women are carving out powerful spaces for themselves, contributing to spiritual discourse and grassroots social change. Their work continues to push the boundaries of empowerment, particularly for women and marginalized communities. The talk offered valuable perspectives on the intersection of gender, faith, and activism, opening new avenues for understanding women's issues in contemporary society.

# Podcasts by Prof. Pankaj Jain

## Degeneration of Buddhism in India



In this reflective podcast, Prof. Jain revisits his academic years at Columbia University and examines the decline of Buddhism in India through the lens of scholarly research. The podcast highlights one major cause of the religion's disappearance: internal moral decay among monastic communities. Drawing on ancient accounts from Chinese travelers and Indian historians, the speaker points to a loss of ethical discipline and rising corruption within Buddhist institutions over a millennium ago. This episode is the first in a series to explore further the complex reasons behind Buddhism's historical retreat from its birthplace.

This podcast series examines how the decline of Buddhism in India after the 7th century CE was rooted in the erosion of its intellectual dynamism. Unlike earlier periods marked by rich philosophical innovation, later centuries saw a stagnation in scholarly and creative output. While earlier bursts of renewal had kept the tradition relevant, especially during the 1st and 6th centuries, Buddhism failed to undergo a similar revival in the 11th century. This lack of fresh engagement with evolving societal contexts ultimately contributed to its diminishing influence within India's cultural and religious landscape. The podcast highlights how internal divisions among Buddhist sects played a crucial role in this decline. Drawing on the work of Prof. Lal Mani Joshi and the travel accounts of Yuan Chwang, it underscores how Buddhism fragmented into competing schools, undermining the unity of the Sangha. The Buddha warned against such disputes, identifying sanghabheda (discord) as one of the five deadly sins. While Buddhism flourished abroad in regions like Tibet, China, and Japan, these internal conflicts weakened its presence in India. Finally, the segment explores why Buddhism waned at home yet prospered internationally: unlike Hinduism and Jainism, which remained deeply rooted in India's cultural landscape, Buddhism evolved as a mobile, international tradition. When monastic life in India became unsustainable, practitioners migrated to Nepal, Tibet, and China, whereas the land-tied nature of Hinduism and Jainism enabled them to adapt and persist through social and political changes.





# Podcasts by Prof. Pankaj Jain

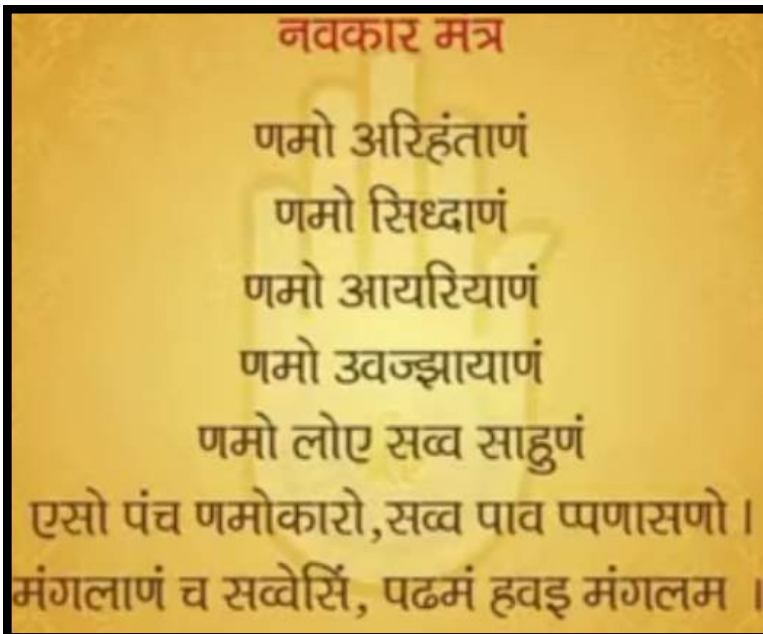
## Contemporary Indian Buddhism

This episode explores the revival of Buddhism in India over the past century, spotlighting three key forces behind its resurgence: S. N. Goenka, the Tibetan Lamas, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

S. N. Goenka popularized Vipassana meditation globally, reintroducing Theravada teachings through experiential practice. Following their exile from Tibet, the Tibetan Lamas established thriving monastic and cultural centers in India, notably in Dharamshala. Dr. Ambedkar, meanwhile, led a historic mass conversion in 1956, positioning Buddhism as a path of social liberation for India's marginalized communities. These efforts have reawakened interest in Buddhism's teachings and its place in contemporary Indian society.



## Navkar Mantra



April 9th marks International Navkar Maha Mantra Day, a significant observance for the Jain community dedicated to reciting and reflecting on the Navkar Mantra, a foundational prayer in Jainism. Unlike Navratri, the Navkar Mantra focuses not on celebration but on reverence, saluting enlightened beings across spiritual hierarchies. The mantra honors Arhants (realized beings), Siddhas (liberated souls), and Acharyas (spiritual leaders), recognizing their paths to liberation and wisdom. Figures like Mahavir, who renounced royalty to attain enlightenment, exemplify the ideal of conquering inner adversities, or Arhant. Chanting the Navkar Mantra is believed to purify the mind, remove karmic obstacles, and bring spiritual auspiciousness.

## Podcasts by Prof. Pankaj Jain

### Why Kumbh?

Prof. Jain reflects on the Kumbh, a sacred pilgrimage site deeply rooted in India's reverence for water. This journey becomes a tribute to the civilization that has long worshipped rivers like the Indus and the Ganges as life-giving forces. The narrative highlights how these rivers have sustained thriving cultures for thousands of years, and how the Kumbh symbolizes more than a ritual. It embodies a collective spiritual connection. Taking a holy dip in the Ganges is described as a personal act of faith and a moment of unity with nature and humanity. The experience, deeply personal yet universally resonant, speaks to the enduring bond between ecological consciousness and spiritual tradition.



### Theravada vs Mahayana Buddhism



This short podcast compares the two major branches of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. It explores how Theravada Buddhism emphasizes individual effort, personal discipline, and self-reliance on enlightenment, echoing the Buddha's final message to "be a light unto yourself." In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism, which emerged later, presents a more devotional and communal approach. It reimagines the Buddha as a transcendent figure and emphasizes compassion, altruism, and the aspiration to guide others toward liberation. The episode provides listeners with a concise understanding of Buddhism's diverse philosophical landscape.



# Podcasts by Prof. Pankaj Jain

## Buddhism in Three Versions

In this engaging short podcast, listeners are introduced to the life of the Buddha and the rich evolution of Buddhism over the centuries. Born in Lumbini (present-day Nepal), the Buddha attained enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, delivered his first sermon near Kashi, and passed away in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh. The podcast outlines how Buddhism developed into three major traditions after the Buddha's passing. Theravada, originally known as Hinayana, emphasizes the path of the elders and remains dominant in Southeast Asia. Mahayana broadened the philosophical and devotional scope of the tradition. Vajrayana later emerged with strong roots in Tibet and parts of the Himalayan region. These branches reflect Buddhism's vast geographic and cultural spread across Asia and beyond.



## Islam in India



In this short podcast, Prof. Jain discusses the historical presence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in India, particularly focusing on Kerala, where these religions have found significant roots. The narration highlights three primary waves through which Islam arrived in India: invasions, Sufi influences, and trade routes. Notably, the Cheraman Juma Mosque in Kerala is emphasized as one of the oldest mosques in India and the world, founded during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. The ancient interactions of these major religions in a region like Kerala showcase the diverse and multicultural fabric of India's religious history. It also establishes Kerala as a significant point of convergence for these faiths right from their inception.

# Podcasts by Prof. Pankaj Jain

## Christianity in India

The short podcast focuses on the rich and ancient history of Christianity in India, emphasizing the influence of St. Thomas, one of Jesus Christ's apostles, who is believed to have arrived in India shortly after Jesus' crucifixion. The Indian Christian community, particularly the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala, has maintained a unique identity, describing themselves as "Christians by religion, Hindu by culture, and Indian by citizenship." The video highlights how this community weaves Christian beliefs with Hindu cultural practices, showcasing shared rituals evident in their prayer services. This demonstrates the intermingling of two prominent religions in India and points to the support and acceptance granted by Hindu kings of the region in nurturing this unique tradition. The longevity of Christianity in India parallels that of Judaism, underlining its historical significance in the subcontinent.



## Judaism in India



This short podcast explores the long-standing history of Jewish communities in India, particularly in regions like Mumbai and Goa. It explains the significance of the synagogue as a place of worship and situates Judaism as the oldest of the Abrahamic faiths, predating Christianity and Islam. The video traces the Jewish diaspora's arrival in India nearly 2,000 years ago, following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Unlike many parts of the world, India offered a rare refuge—Jewish communities here flourished without facing anti-Semitism. Even as many migrated to Israel after 1947, the absence of discrimination in India remains a point of deep appreciation within the Jewish community, highlighting India's unique role as a historical sanctuary for diverse faiths.



## Podcasts by Prof. Pankaj Jain

### Lotus Temple, Bahai, and Zoroastrianism in India: Two Iranian Religions Flourishing in India

This short podcast offers a thoughtful reflection on a visit to Delhi's Lotus Temple, a stunning monument dedicated to the Bahá'í faith, one of the world's youngest religions. Unlike many traditional places of worship, the temple lacks idols and imagery, inviting silent contemplation through sacred texts. It also draws an intriguing connection between the Bahá'í faith and Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest known religions, with both traditions originating in Iran. Through its modern-day followers, the Parsis, Zoroastrianism continues to thrive in India, just like the Bahá'í faith. By linking these two Iranian-born faiths with their vibrant presence in India, the podcast underscores India's role as a living crossroads of ancient and modern spiritual traditions.



### Jains in North America

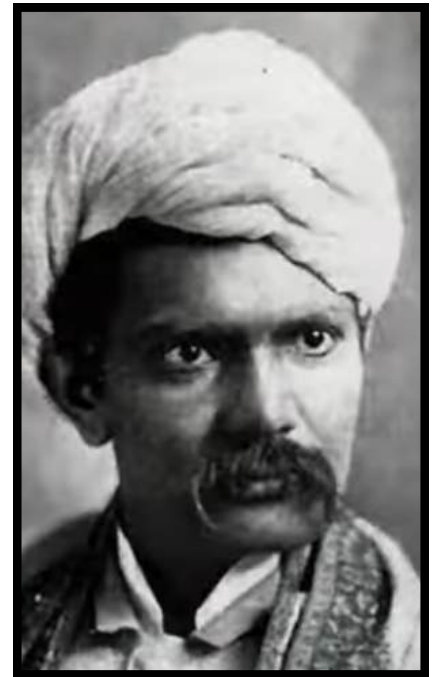


This short podcast highlights the achievements of the Jain community. With a population of approximately 200,000 in North America, Jains have played a remarkable role in preserving and promoting their religious and cultural heritage. It highlights the establishment of over 100 Jain temples across the U.S. and Canada and the digitization of a vast array of Jain scriptures and texts. These efforts ensure the global accessibility of Jain teachings and values. In addition, the community has supported numerous academic chairs across North America, Europe, and Asia, furthering scholarly engagement with Jain philosophy and ethics. This can be a model for cultural preservation and proactive legacy-building.

## Podcasts by Prof. Pankaj Jain

### Virchand Gandhi- The Gandhi before Gandhi

The short podcast focuses on the remarkable contributions of Virchand Gandhi, who played a pivotal role in introducing Indian culture and vegetarianism to the Western world long before the iconic Mahatma Gandhi made his mark. Accompanying Swami Vivekananda to the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Virchand Gandhi captivated audiences with discussions on the principles of Jainism and the significance of vegetarianism. His eloquent speeches caught the attention of major publications like The New York Times, elevating his status to that of a celebrity in both the United States and the United Kingdom. His advocacy for vegetarianism led to successful initiatives in closing down slaughterhouses near important Jain pilgrimage sites, showcasing his commitment to ethical living. A polyglot and a scholar fluent in 14 languages, he is heralded as a key figure in advancing the respect and appreciation for Indian culture abroad. Today, his legacy continues to be recognized and celebrated, particularly within Jain communities in the US and India.



### Why is Makar Sankranti always on January 14th? Makar Sankranti and its significance



Makar Sankranti is a uniquely significant Hindu festival, notable for its fixed date on the Western calendar. It is typically celebrated on January 14th each year. It marks the sun's transition into Capricorn (Makara), symbolizing the northward journey of the sun, Uttarayana, and heralding a period of light, growth, and renewal. Observed across India with diverse regional flavors, Makar Sankranti brings together communities in celebration. In Gujarat, it's known for vibrant kite flying; in Assam, it's celebrated as Magh Bihu with traditional feasts; and in Tamil Nadu, it's observed as Pongal, a harvest festival honoring nature's abundance. Ritual holy dips in rivers such as the Ganges, Yamuna, and Godavari are also central to the observance, signifying spiritual cleansing and renewal. Rooted in gratitude and harmony with nature, Makar Sankranti celebrates light, sustenance, and shared joy.



## Podcasts by Prof. Pankaj Jain

### Beatles' Connections to Indian Music and Spirituality



This short podcast delves into the profound influence of Indian spirituality on The Beatles, particularly during their transformative 1968 visit to Rishikesh to study Transcendental Meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. This journey marked a significant turning point in their artistic and personal lives, with George Harrison emerging as a key figure in embracing Indian music and philosophy. From incorporating the sitar in "Norwegian Wood" to the devotional depth of "My Sweet Lord," Harrison's spiritual engagement, especially with the Hare Krishna movement, left a lasting imprint on Western music. Songs like "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da" reflect traces of this transformative period. From incorporating the sitar in "Norwegian Wood" to the devotional depth of "My Sweet Lord," Harrison's spiritual engagement, especially with the Hare Krishna movement, left a lasting imprint on Western music. Songs like "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da" reflect traces of this transformative period.

## Upcoming Events

### International Symposium on Academic Study of Religion



In collaboration with Wellesley College, the India Centre at FLAME University is pleased to announce an upcoming international symposium on the Academic Study of Religion, to be held on August 7- 8, 2025.

#### Objectives

Despite its unparalleled religious diversity and its historical role as the birthplace of several world religions, India still lacks a robust academic infrastructure for studying religion. The upcoming symposium addresses this gap by fostering critical, interdisciplinary, and inclusive approaches that move beyond purely theological interpretations. It seeks to promote the academic study of religion as a rigorous field in India, initiate dialogue across disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, history, and philology, and bring attention to majority and minority religious traditions.

#### Thematic Panels will include:

- Anthropological Approaches to Religion: Exploring ritual, identity, and community in religious life.
- Psychological Perspectives: Addressing religion's role in mental health, trauma, and personal growth.
- Philological and Textual Studies: Examining sacred texts and traditions across religions.
- Historical Studies: Tracing the evolution of religious institutions and interfaith dynamics in India.

With contributions from scholars worldwide, this symposium will serve as a landmark event to reimagine the academic study of religion in India. It will draw on global insights while grounding discussions in the subcontinent's rich and pluralistic religious heritage.

The dates, speakers, and registration details will be announced soon.





## Meet Our Team

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