

Faith and Society Files: Encountering Hindus

In this document, author Paul Weller provides background information about Hindu beliefs and practices to aid dialogue.



Introducing people of different religions or beliefs

As set out in the resource on the *Religion or Belief Landscape of the UK*, (downloadable from www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/516106/Religion_or_Belief.aspx) Baptist Christians in the UK are likely to encounter people of various religion and belief traditions in a whole variety of ways and contexts. This can include at school/college/university; in work; in leisure contexts, in public settings; and when visiting places of worship.

We have produced a series of resources that aim to provide a brief introductory overview to people of other than Christian religions or beliefs. Just as Christians can understandably become uncomfortable and even distressed when words and concepts central to our understanding of Christianity are misused or misunderstood, so also can others be concerned when the words that they use are ignorantly misused or are replaced by other words that are not part of their traditions.

Even though this is rapidly changing, Christians in the UK have the relative advantage that many key Christian words and concepts have, over the centuries, entered into the English language. By contrast, many of the key words and concepts used by people of other than Christian traditions to signify things of importance to them can seem unfamiliar and perhaps, initially, off-putting. Using the terms that people use about themselves (and which, within these resources are signaled by the word or words concerned *appearing in italics*), we are respecting how our neighbours understand themselves and showing our readiness to learn how others describe themselves, their beliefs and practices.

Hindu Individuals, Communities and Organisations

Encountering Individual Hindus

Although some groups of Hindus have distinctive outward signs, there is generally no visual way in which one would always know that one was encountering an individual Hindu. However, individual Hindus may often, for example, have an AUM (see below) symbol hanging in the window of their car.

Encountering Hindu Communities

Hindus in the UK have considerable linguistic, social, philosophical and other diversities. This includes a range of different linguistic and regional groups, including Gujaratis, Punjabis, Bengalis and Tamils.

Sampradayas or spiritual movements – such as *Swaminaryan* and *Pushtimarg* are also important. In devotional practice, Hindu individuals and groups tend to focus upon *ishta-devata*, their chosen deity. This focus of devotion is often associated with a particular *sampradaya* or movement.

- 1 *Vaishnavas* are devotees of Vishnu in terms of the *Dvaita* (see further below) understanding
- 2 *Shaivas* are devotees of Shiva
- 3 *Shaktas* are devotees of Shakti or Durga/Parvati/the Goddess
- 4 *Swaminaryans* build upon the teaching of Sahajananda Swami
- 5 *Pushtimargis* follow the teachings of Vallabha and worship Krishna
- 6 *Krishna Consciousness* follows the teachings of A C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
- 7 *Arya Samajis* are devotees who follow the teachings of Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Hindu individuals or groups may also be encountered in terms of their relationship with one of the many thousands of groups known as *jatis*. Many of these are linked with traditional occupational groups and continue to play a significant role, especially among Gujarati Hindus. Each of these is classically associated with one of the four broad, ideal classes of the *varnas* (see further below). Examples include:

- 1 *Patidars*, who are traditionally, traders
- 2 *Mochis*, who are traditionally, shoemakers
- 3 *Lohanas*, who are traditionally, traders
- 4 *Anavil Brahmins*, who are traditionally, agriculturalists
- 5 *Khattris*, who are traditionally traders
- 6 *Rarhi Brahmins*, who are traditionally, priests
- 7 *Baidyas*, who are traditionally, doctors

Hindu Places of Worship

The Mandir/Temple

The practice of domestic worship is widespread. In their own homes, most Hindus have a shrine or small area for worship (*ghar mandir*, 'house temple') containing pictures and/or *murtis* (see below) of favourite deities. Some fairly large gatherings for worship may also take place in private homes. *Havan* (see below) may also be performed at home on important occasions. The majority of Hindu *mandirs* (temples) in the UK are converted public or religious buildings and private houses, with only a relatively small number being purpose-built buildings. As well as a hall for worship, *mandirs* may also have other facilities on their premises, such as social, cultural, educational, and administrative rooms.

Murtis/Images

Inside the *mandir*, there is usually a main hall with a shrine where the *murtis* (sacred images or figures that represent deities) and pictures of holy people reflective of the range of *sampradayas* that use the temple can be found. For outsiders to the Hindu tradition, it can be difficult to gain an accurate understanding of the nature of *murtis*. They are more than purely symbolic representations of deities being understood as full of divine energy and yet Hindus also do not believe that the reality of a deity is limited to a particular *murti* in a particular place. *Murtis* are installed following several days of ritual. Once dedicated, they are venerated as deities and are dressed in the finest fabrics and decorated with ornaments, jewellery and garlands of flowers in order to foster a mood of *seva* (sacrifice and selfless service).

Murtis are usually made of marble, but can also be made of other kinds of stone, wood or metal. Ganesha is represented by an elephant-headed *murti* with four arms; Krishna is represented as a cowherd seen standing with one leg crossing the other at the ankles, playing a flute, and accompanied by his favourite devotee, a *gopi* (cowherd girl) Radha. Deities are often accompanied by *murtis* of their *vahana* (a vehicle, the animal or bird on which they ride). For example, Shiva rides on the bull, Nandi. Brightly coloured and sweet-smelling flowers are laid before the *murtis* or hung over them as garlands. The *murtis* may be housed in a *garbha-griha* (inner sanctum), which only the priest is permitted to enter.

Other Temple Features

In the main hall there may also be one or more *vyasanas*. These are decorated thrones on which *swamis* (religious teachers) sit when they deliver discourses to religious gatherings. In a *mandir* it is also likely that there will be incense to purify the air and create a spiritual atmosphere; the *AUM* (or *OM*) symbol to symbolise the primaeval sound representing God in the simplest form; and the *swastika*. This is, of course, not to be confused with the swastika of Nazism, the original Hindu form of this symbol being a sign of auspiciousness.

One might also find a conch shell, the sound of which assists concentration on worship; a *trishul*, which is the trident weapon of Shiva and represents God, the soul and the ignorance through which the soul is held in bondage; a coconut, which is believed to represent the three-eyed Shiva and is symbolic of life by being hard on the outside but sweet on the inside; images of the lotus, which is an ancient symbol of the cosmos, of wisdom and of humanity; and a *kalasha*, which is a pot representing the human body.

The mouth of a *kalasha* is considered as Vishnu; its base as Brahma; and its middle as Shiva. The water within it stands for purity and love of the divine, and relates to the *Pancha Mahabhuta* (the five physical elements).

Devotional Activity

Hindus who visit a *mandir* customarily take some kind of offering for the deity, such as fruit, milk, money or flowers, *haldi* (turmeric) and *kumkum* (red powder). Anyone entering a *mandir* for any purpose must remove their shoes. A bell may be hung for worshippers to ring on entering, to invite the presence of the deities and to ward off evil spirits. When the worshipper comes face to face with the *murti* it is called taking *darshan* (sight) of the deity. The worshipper offers respect by folding hands or bowing down, and may then offer prayers and a gift, or sip a few drops of *charnamrita* (holy water used to bathe the deity). These activities are called *puja*.

More formal *puja* is performed by the temple priest. The *arti* ceremony is performed several times a day by a priest offering articles of worship, representing the five physical elements of life (earth, air, fire, water and space), including lighted ghee lamps, incense, water for bathing, coconut, flowers and grains. Prior to *arti*, food is offered to the deity and is known as *prasad* or *prasadam* is blessed for later distribution. Other corporate devotional activities include *bhajan* and *kirtan* (singing songs and mantras); *pravachan* (sermon); and the *arti* ceremony (see below). Private devotions, in the temple and at home, include *japa* (mantra meditation), prayer, *puja* (worship of the *murti*) and the study of sacred texts. In *havan* (the sacred fire ceremony), a fire is lit and Sanskrit *mantras* are recited, while offerings are made through which worshippers offer their obeisance to the formless God. No Hindu sacraments, especially weddings, are complete without it.

Visiting a Hindu Mandir

Almost all Hindu *mandirs* welcome people from all religions to visit them and, if they wish, to take part in the worship. Clothing should be modest for both men and women, with shoes being removed and put on the racks provided before going into the *mandir*. Clean and presentable socks, stockings, or tights are therefore a good idea. Sometimes women are requested to cover their heads and some Hindu women do not go to the *mandir* during menstruation. Visitors should walk in quietly and find a place to sit on the (usually carpeted) floor. Since the floor is generally used for seating, women should avoid wearing short dresses or skirts. In some *mandirs* men and boys sit on one side of the room and women and girls on the other. One should sit with crossed legs or with legs to one side as sitting with legs and feet pointing towards the sacred area at the front of the *mandir* can be considered disrespectful. In some *mandirs* guests may be expected respectfully to stand during *arti*.

There is no expectation that visitors join in the formal prayer and worship, accept the offering of *prasada*, or to make an offering, unless they wish to do so. Visitors are, however, likely to be offered one piece of *prasada* that they can either eat or take home. If uncomfortable for religious reasons, explain this with a quiet "No thank you" which, if possible, should be explained to the hosts in advance as being for personal religious reasons and not out of any disrespect. If accepting *prasada*, hold it in cupped hands with the right hand uppermost. For a visitor to make an offering would be welcomed as long as it does not violate the principle of *ahimsa* (not-harming). Thus, for example, fresh fruit or nuts can be appropriate.

Hindu Beliefs and Practices

Origins of Hinduism

What is today generally known as Hinduism has its origins in the Indian subcontinent. It has no single founding figure or point of historical origin and Hindus perceive what they see as the *Sanatana Dharma* to be the eternal way. It has developed in very diverse schools of thought, religious practice and focii for devotion.

The Divine

In a way that can be difficult for those outside the tradition to understand, Hinduism includes both monotheists and monists. The Divine can be understood either as an impersonal Brahman, as in the *Advaita* position; or as a Supreme Person, as in the *Dvaita* position (for both see further below). Hinduism also has many *devas* and *devis* or gods and goddesses, which are seen as presenting aspects of the divine and different foci for devotion. Among these are:

- Indra (god of rain)
- Surya (sun god)
- Chandra (moon god)
- Ganesha (remover of obstacles)
- Yama (god of death)
- Sarasvati (goddess of learning)
- Lakshmi (goddess of wealth)
- Hanuman (the ardent devotee of Rama)
- Murugan (who, with Ganesha, is one of the two sons of Shiva and Parvati).

Philosophical Systems

Classical Hinduism has six *Darshanas* or systems of Hindu philosophy, each of which focuses upon particular aspects of knowledge. Among those generally encountered among contemporary Hindus are *Yoga*, which offers training for the body and mind, and *Vedanta*, which is concerned with ultimate reality and spiritual knowledge. *Yoga* has, of course, also developed in the western world as an approach to physical exercise, in which the practice of various postures and of breathing is detached from the philosophical or metaphysical underpinnings of it that are apparent when encountered in the context of the Hindu tradition.

The *Vedanta*, literally meaning 'the conclusion of all knowledge' is found in *dvaita* (dualist) and *advaita* (monist) forms, together with a number of variants.

Dvaita is a monotheistic understanding of the nature of the divine, seen in terms of an unlimited

supreme personality, in which the divine and the human soul are understood as distinct even though they might enter into union. *Advaita* is a monistic understanding in which there is no ultimate difference between the divine, understood as Brahman, and the human soul. In this approach, realisation of the identity between God and the soul is what brings about liberation. Brahman is seen as having been manifested in many different times and places.

Basic Concepts

Alongside the Hindu tradition's diversities of belief, philosophical orientation and practice, Hindus generally share a number of basic concepts.

- 1 *Atman*, the eternal principle which animates all life and brings consciousness.
- 2 *Moksha*, the liberation which is the ultimate goal of all beings
- 3 *Dharma*, meaning 'religion', 'law', 'duty' or 'righteousness', according to context
- 4 *Karma*, which is that all actions have consequences that shape one's destiny
- 5 *Maya*, which is life in ignorance of the *Sanatana Dharma* (the eternal truth)

The Four Aims and Pathways

Hinduism sees human life in terms of four *purusharthas* or aims. These are:

- 1 *dharma*, which is concerned with religious life
- 2 *artha*, which is concerned with economic development
- 3 *kama*, which is an appropriate gratification of the senses
- 4 *moksha*, which is liberation from the cycle of birth and death known more generally as reincarnation

Hinduism also traditionally teaches that the spiritual life has four main pathways:

- 1 *karma yoga*, which is the way of action
- 2 *jnana yoga*, which is the way of knowledge
- 3 *raja yoga*, which is the way of self-control
- 4 *bhakti yoga*, which is the way of devotion

The Four Ashramas and Varnas

Hindu life is structured by the *Varnashrama Dharma*, which is concerned with an understanding of one's personal and social roles. The four *Ashramas* are seen in ideal terms as the four stages through which a maturing human life should pass. Whilst often not lived precisely in these stages, its broad outlines remain a powerful influence upon the Hindu perception of life. The *ashramas* are those of the:

- 1 *brahmacharin*, or celibate student
- 2 *grihastha/grihini*, or householder
- 3 *vanaprastha*, or stage of retirement from society (traditionally into the forest)
- 4 *sannyasin*, or renunciant who breaks all social ties

The Four *Varnas* are traditionally seen as complementary in terms of both status and responsibility. Some Hindus see these in primarily hereditary terms that have been interpreted in relation to the externally named social 'caste' system, whilst others have seen them as more reflective of qualitative differences among people. The traditional *varnas* consist of:

- 1 *Brahmins*, comprising the intelligentsia and priests
- 2 *Kshatriyas*, comprising administrators and the military

- 3 *Vaishyas*, comprising the generators and distributors of material wealth
- 4 *Sudras*, comprising labourers and service workers.

In addition, there are those who have fallen outside this traditional system by reason of being involved in occupations that brought ritual impurity and who, in colonial times, became officially known as the 'scheduled castes', but who themselves now often prefer the self-description of *Dalit* (oppressed), among whom were those *Mahatma* Gandhi called *Harijans*, or children of God.

The Scriptures

There are two broad groupings of scriptures. The first group of sacred writings is known as the *shruti* (that which is heard) and the second is the *smriti* (that which is remembered). Some Hindus believe that the *shruti* and the *smriti* are on the same level, whilst the majority view is that the *shruti* are the more authoritative.

The *shruti* include the four *Vedas* which are said, originally, to have been transmitted orally for many years before they were written down. The Four *Vedas* are the:

- Rig Veda*, containing mantras for use in worship
- Sama Veda*, containing sung mantras
- Yajur Veda*, also containing *mantras*, and instructions concerning worship
- Atharva Veda*, containing mantras to be used in various other ways

Each of the *Vedas* has four parts:

- 1 *Samhitas*, concerned with recitation
- 2 *Brahmanas*, concerned with ritual and sacrifice
- 3 *Aranyakas*, concerned with the role of Vedic rituals in the cosmos
- 4 *Upanishads*, concerned with the knowledge necessary for self-realisation

The *smriti* present Hindu teaching in widely accessible ways and have six parts:

- 1 *Itihasa*
- 2 *Purana*
- 3 *Grihya Sutra*
- 4 *Vedanga*
- 5 *Dharma Shastra*
- 6 *Prasthanavaakyas*

The *Itihisas*, or stories, contain the two famous epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The *Ramayana* tells the story of how King Rama fought against Ravana and the forces of evil. Rama and his wife Sita are, for many Hindus, models of right living. The *Mahabharata* incorporates the *Bhagavad Gita*, or Song of the Blessed Lord, which is the record of a discourse between Krishna and Prince Arjuna and has become a centrally important scripture for many contemporary Hindus because of its teachings about *dharma*. There are also, in addition, a range of other texts, including the *Dharma Shastras*, or law books and the *Prasthanavaakyas*, a range of literature which include, for example, the esoteric *Tantras*.

Hindu Calendar And Festivals

Hindu Calendar

Hindus use both the solar and the lunar cycle calendars, but most religious festivals are based on the lunar calendar, counting days based on the waxing and waning of the moon. Since it consists normally of twelve lunar months, the traditional Hindu year is ten days shorter than the Gregorian calendar year. Therefore approximately once every three years an extra month is added to bring the lunar year in phase with the solar year. Thus, except for a few festivals which are timed by the sun and not the moon, Hindu festival dates do not remain the same each year within the framework of the Gregorian calendar that is in general public use in Britain. The Hindu calendar is set out in *panchang* (almanacs) that provide information on the dates of festivals and other rituals to be followed by various Hindu groups. Popular Hindu calendars are the *Vikram*, *Shalivana* and *Yugabda*. The best known of these is the *Vikram Samvat*, which started in the year 57BCE.

Hindu Festivals

There are many Hindu festivals, but the following are some of the main ones, with the approximate time of their occurrence referring to the calendar in common use in the UK:

Shivaratri or *Mahashivaratri* (February/March) is focused on worship dedicated to Lord Shiva. Devotees spend the night at the temple chanting singing, and contemplating. Milk is poured continuously, as an offering, on to the *linga*, the symbolic form of Lord Shiva. Some families have a tradition of fasting.

Holi (February/March) is a festival of colours to welcome the spring season. It is associated with many stories of Vishnu and his devotees, and with that of the half-man, half-lion incarnation, Narasimha or Narasingha, and Prahlada, a devotee of Krishna. In India, liquid dyes, coloured powders and water are liberally sprinkled on the participants as fun. In the UK this traditional practice can be curtailed, but many British Hindus enjoy the bonfire that is another traditional feature of Holi.

Yugadi or *Gudi Parva* (March-April) is a festival that, for many Hindus, marks the beginning of the New Year in the *Vikram* and *Shalivan* calendars. *Puja*, feasting and greetings are common. A special mixture of neem leaves and jaggery is eaten to symbolise acceptance of both bitter and happy things in life.

Rama Navami/Hari Jayanti (March/April) celebrates the birth of Lord Rama at Ayodhya in India. Devotees fast, and the *Ramayana*, which contains the story of Rama and Sita, is read aloud in temples. Devotees of Lord Swaminaryan also celebrate his birth on this day singing, *bhajans* and listening to discourses about him.

Janmashtami (August/September) marks the birth of Lord Krishna who is believed to have appeared in human form in the fourth century BCE, in the district of Mathura, India, in order to deliver the pious, destroy miscreants and establish the principles of the *Sanatana Dharma*. Devotees perform *puja* and sing *bhajans*. For this festival, a special *puja* is held in the *mandirs* at midnight.

Navaratri (September/October) means 'nine nights'. It is celebrated with dancing and is held in honour of Lakshmi, Durga and Sarasvati, as well as other goddesses worshipped in this season. It ends with *Dussehra* or *Vijayadashami*, the tenth day, a time of celebration of the victory of good over evil.

Diwali or *Deepawali* (October/November) marks, according to some Hindu groups, the beginning of a new year in the Hindu calendar. It celebrates the victory of light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance. It is also a time when Hindus worship the Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of prosperity) and is known as the 'festival of lights' because of the lighting everywhere of *dipas* or *divas* (small oil lamps) which are lit to celebrate the return, after exile, of Rama (as the incarnation of Vishnu) and Sita (as his consort, Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity) to Rama's kingdom of Ayodhya.

Annakuta or *Nutan Varsh* (October/November) is the day after *Diwali*. Large quantities of sweets and other foodstuffs offered to the deities in celebration of a story from Krishna's childhood and concerned with Mount Govardhan.

Pilgrimages

Pilgrimages also form an important part of Hindu religious observance. Visits to holy places in India may be undertaken with special intentions in mind, such as cure of disease or blessing for the family. In the *Advaita* Hindu tradition, the most holy of all places of pilgrimage is Varanasi (also known as Benares or Kashi). This is situated on the sacred River Ganga (Ganges) and is especially sacred to those Hindus who venerate Shiva and Rama. Pilgrims who have visited the River Ganga often bring home bottles of water from the river to place in their family shrines. Dying people may request to sip Ganges water and also to have their ashes spread in the river. In the *Vaishnava* Hindu tradition, Vrindavan and Nathdwar are of special importance because of their connections with Krishna. Ayodhya, Badrinath, Kedaranath, Mathura, Tirupathi and Vaishnodevi, Kashmir, Dwarka are other important places of pilgrimage. There are also some more recently evolved centres of pilgrimage such as Akshardham, in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, a memorial to Lord Swaminarayan.

Further Materials on Hindus in the UK

For a more extensive introduction to Hindus in the UK, see the chapter on 'Introducing Hindus in the UK', in P Weller, ed (2007), *Religions in the UK: A Directory, 2007-10*, Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby in association with the University of Derby, pp 169-192, to which acknowledgement is made for having drawn upon some of the materials in summarised and, where appropriate, updated form.

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