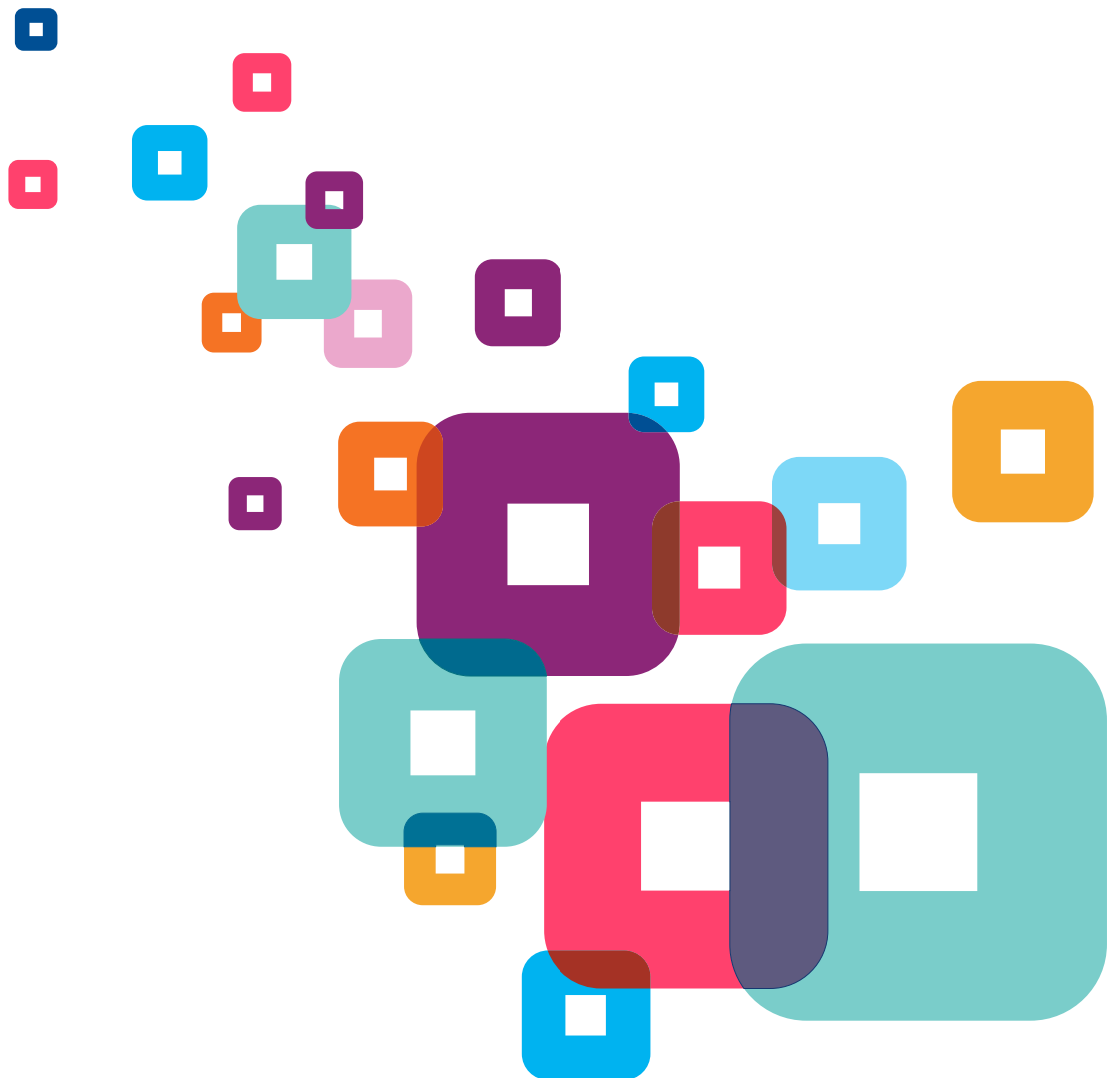


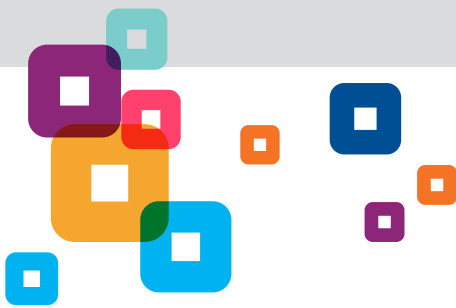


# Culture and Religion Information Sheet

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## Hinduism





## Aim

**This information sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Hindu religious and cultural practices to assist with providing culturally appropriate services, activities and information.**

## Introduction

Western Australia is a multiethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for all religions are integral parts of our shared culture and are important underlying principles of multiculturalism and democracy.

There are a number of international treaties and national laws that recognise freedom of religion and belief as fundamental human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 and the Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986.

In Western Australia it is unlawful under the Equal Opportunity Act 1984 to discriminate against a person because of their religious conviction in certain areas of public life including employment, education, the provision of goods, services and facilities, in accommodation, clubs and in application forms (see the Equal Opportunity Commission website <http://www.eoc.wa.gov.au/Index.aspx>).

- ▣ The information contained in this Office of Multicultural Interests (OMI) information sheet is made available in good faith, is derived from sources believed to be reliable and accurate at the time of release and does not necessarily reflect the views of OMI. All efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the material; OMI cannot accept responsibility for any omissions or errors. If you would like to give feedback, please contact OMI on [harmony@omi.wa.gov.au](mailto:harmony@omi.wa.gov.au).

Service providers and employers who recognise, value and promote cultural and religious diversity can address more fully the needs of their clients and staff, thus providing services based on good practice. Respecting the roles of religion in various cultures is part of courteous, ethical and professional behaviour, which promotes a just and equitable society.

## History of Hinduism in Western Australia

The first Hindu migrants are believed to have arrived in Australia in the 19th century. However, most Hindus arrived in Australia and WA from the late 1970s, after the removal of the 'White Australia Policy' and migrated from a number of countries, particularly India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and the United Kingdom.

## Demographics

Globally, there are nearly 1.2 billion followers of Hinduism. In 2016, there were 440,303 Australians who identified with Hinduism, compared with 275,535 people in 2011. This indicates an increase of 164,768 people affiliated with Hinduism between 2016 and 2011 across Australia. For WA, the corresponding figures were 38,741 and 21,026.

Followers of Hinduism in WA were born mainly in India. Next most common birthplaces were Nepal, Malaysia, Kenya and Sri Lanka. Most of them identified with Indian ancestry, followed by Nepalese, English and Australian ancestry.

Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and Nepali were most common languages they spoke at home. WA's Hindu community lived mainly in the Metropolitan Local Government areas of Stirling, Gosnells, Canning, Wanneroo and Swan.





## Hinduism: background and origins

Sanatan Dharma, better known as Hinduism, underlines a Hindu's approach to life and translates to Sanatan (Eternal) Dharma (set of prescribed principles of virtuous living). Dharma itself comes from the Sanskrit root '*dhri*,' which means 'to sustain'/'integral to something.' For example, the *dharma* of sugar is to be sweet. A person's *dharma* consists of duties that sustain him or her, according to their innate characteristics. In *Sanatan-dharma*, the person's spiritual identity is atman/Soul. There is no formal process of conversion into or excommunication from the Hindu faith. Sanatan Dharma followers do not impose their world views on others nor accepts other's imposing their world-view on self.

Hinduism is not viewed as a religion by its adherents because it is a way of life that upholds the principles of virtuous living and humanism in relation to the world around. Hinduism has no single founder, no single holy book, no organisational hierarchy or structure. Although Hinduism contains a broad range of philosophies, it is linked by shared concepts, recognisable rituals, cosmology, shared texts and pilgrimage to sacred sites.

The Vedas form the basis of Hinduism and also inform religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism, though these religions may not explicitly accept the Vedic framework. The Vedic concepts of *Dharma* and *Karma* are common to all four religions. The Vedas have been in existence since time eternal and passed on through the ancient practice of parampara (tradition) or succession of teachers. Vedic scriptures are classified into *Śruti* ('heard') and *Smṛti* ('remembered'). All traditions accept the unquestionable authority of the *Śruti* ('that which has been heard or revealed'), which enabled Vedic knowledge to be passed on orally from one generation to the next.

The Vedic rishis (spiritual scientists) narrated the thoughts that emerged when they were in a deep state of meditation. The similarity between these thoughts from many rishis in different regions at different times is striking. The rishis do not take ownership of these thoughts but ascribe these to the Divine. In this sense, the *Śruti* is 'heard'. Over the course of time this succession was broken and therefore, the science as it is, appears to be lost. Yet, the *Patanjali Yoga Sutra* are available which is like a manual on meditation and enables us to connect to the Divine. Sanatana Dharma goes beyond intellectual exercise and makes it experiential by the practice of Yoga. The *Pranayama* (mindfulness) is quite popular in the Western world.

The Vedas (including Upanishads), are the primary authority and were compiled into four (Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva) written text between 17th and 5th centuries BCE.

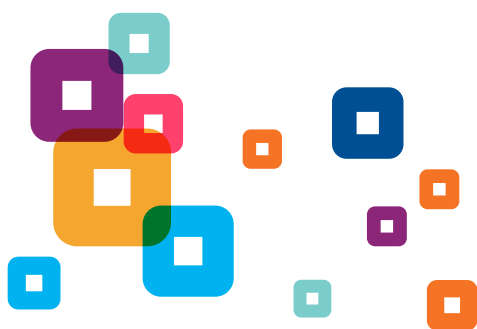
Rig-Veda is the oldest and most important, divided into ten books (Mandalas) and contains 1028 hymns including Gayatri mantra and, 'Purusha Shukta' (Story of the Primal Man or the Cosmic Homology). Vedic knowledge covers every aspect of human life and experience: philosophical, social, moral, psychological, medical, religious, law, arts, language and grammar, history, astronomy, society, martial arts, architecture, warfare, rituals, music, dance.

There is a strong Hindu tradition of questioning authority to deepen understanding. Vedic scriptures/literature include the Dharma Sastras, Itihasa (history) such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (which includes the Bhagavad Gita—the Song of God), Puranas (ancient religious texts), Agamas (theology) and Dharshanas (schools of philosophy).

There are two important bodies of supplementary literature that relate closely to the Vedas: Vedanga/science required to understand and apply the Vedas, and Upaveda

which is usually considered *Smriti*, and deals with the four traditional arts and sciences. Comprising 18 chapters and 700 verses, the Bhagavad Gita discusses time, karma, material nature, *atman* (individual consciousness/soul/jiva) and the *brahman* (universal consciousness/Supreme Soul/God). God is an 'in-dweller' so there is a constant quest to explore the divinity within.

In Australia, Hindu philosophy is followed in Hindu places of worship, centres of Vedic learning and, organisations practising meditation, yoga, spirituality and ayurveda. The Hindu world view considers all living entities as belonging to one family (*Vasudeva Kutumbhakam*) and accepts all faiths/religious paths. The Upanishad says that 'Truth (God) is one, sages call it by different names'. Gods and goddesses are energy forms, functions and manifestations of the one Supreme Divine Absolute. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are the one Divine Absolute operating in the three respective primordial functional activities of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe. Hindu images and practices have literal and symbolic meanings. The Sanskrit word '*murthi*' means, 'a manifestation of the Divine', in other words, Worship of the image/deity/*murthi* is worship of the Divinity they represent.



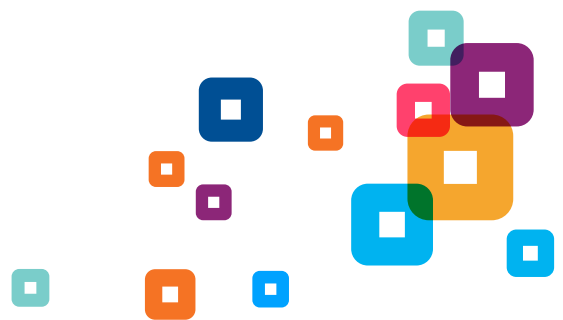
## Key beliefs

The Hindu ethical code attaches great importance to values such as truth, right conduct, love, peace, compassion and nonviolence. All Hindu ceremonies, rituals and worships end with a prayer for universal peace and harmony.

Hindus believe:

- in one all-pervasive Supreme Consciousness/ Soul (*Param Atma*) who is both immanent and transcendent, Creator and Unmanifest Reality This all-present, all-powerful and all-knowing non-dual Absolute pervades everything as Pure Consciousness and whose nature is *Satchitananda* -Eternal existence (*Sat*), Conscious Knowledge (*Chit*) and Bliss (*Ananda*)
- that no religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, because all are facets of God's Light, deserving tolerance and understanding. Since Hindus believe that the Ultimate Truth is one and there can be alternative paths to reach it, Hindus have no issues with what practices others follow to reach Divinity and expect that no one should impose their world-view on others because all paths lead to the same God
- the Absolute can be given any name— God, Cosmic Consciousness, *Brahman*, for example. A Hindu's view is that the world has existed since eternity (*anadi* and *ananta*) and that worship, rituals and personal devotion create a communion with the Divine
- all living entities are intrinsically divine because the *Atman* (soul) that resides in every living entity is part and parcel of the Absolute though not in the same quantity. Purpose of human life is to seek and realise this divinity within one (*Athato Bhramha Jigyasa*)
- all life is sacred, to be loved and revered. Therefore, one should practice non-injury or non-violence (*Ahimsa*) in thought, word and deed towards other life forms
- the Veda is divine and the Agamas are to be equally venerated. The primordial hymns are God's word and the bedrock of Sanatana Dharma

- Vedic scriptures describe both goal of human life and the steps leading to this goal, with specific scriptures corresponding to each step. The scriptures are non-sectarian—they respect people on all ‘steps’ and encourage progress to the next step
- the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution. When measured in time (Kaal):
  1. duration of the material universe is limited. It is manifested in cycles of *kalpas*. A *kalpa* is a day of *Brahmā* (a manifestation of the *Brahman*)
  2. one day of *Brahmā* consists of a thousand cycles of four yugas or ages: *Satyuga*, *Tretāyuga*, *Dvāparyuga*, and *Kaliyuga* (Present day age).
  3. a thousand ages taken together is the duration of *Brahmā*’s one day and another thousand ages taken together is the duration of *Brahmā*’s one night
- in the four *Puruṣārthas*/proper goals of human life, namely:
  1. *Dharma* (ethics/prescribed duties)
  2. *Artha* (prosperity/work)
  3. *Kama* (desires/passions)
  4. *Moksha* (liberation/freedom/salvation).
- all four *Purusarths* are important but, if in conflict, *Dharma* is considered more important than *Artha* or *Kama*. *Moksha* is considered the ultimate ideal of human life. Hindu philosophy emphasises that the test of *Dharma* (ethics, morals, virtues) must be met when engaging in *Artha* or *Kama*
- *Karma* (action, intent and consequences), *Samṣāra* (cycle of rebirth), and the various *Yogas* (paths or practices to attain *moksha*) are inter-connected. *Karma* (the law of cause and effect) is not fate and refers to the totality of our actions in this and previous lives, all of which determine our future
- *Dharma* is the set of divine laws and order that govern creation at every level of existence, from sustaining cosmic order to the moral laws that bind us in harmony with that order
- we are not the body in which we live but the immortal soul (*Atman*) that inhabits many bodies in the soul’s evolutionary journey through the cycle of life, death and rebirth (*Samsara*). The soul takes many births, until all *karmas* have been resolved and the soul attains liberation (*Moksha*) from the cycle of life, death and rebirth
- an enlightened master (*Satguru*) is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, pilgrimage, self-enquiry, meditation and surrender to god (*bhakti*). Such surrender is for the realisation of the Ultimate Reality/Absolute Truth. Once that takes place, then the person goes beyond such worship, becomes a realised soul (*Jnani*). Some Hindus who engage in lifelong *Sannyasa* (monastic practices) to achieve *Moksha* leave their social world and material possessions
- Hindu denominations are traditions within Hinduism, centred on one or more gods or goddesses, such as *Shiva*, *Vishnu*, *Brahma* and *Shakti*. The term, *sampradaya* (transcendental knowledge received through a bona fide disciple succession), is used for particular philosophies on the science of devotion (*bhakti*).



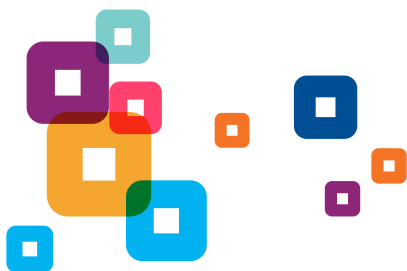
Paths to self-realisation:

A Hindu accepts, on scriptural authority, that self-realisation is possible and attainable within one's own lifetime and indeed it is the goal of all human life. He or she is enjoined to seek personal purification on the path to self-realisation through one of four paths—or any combination of the four paths, which are:

1. Bhakti yoga—Surrender to a higher ideal (The Absolute Truth) through devotional service
2. Karma yoga—Surrender to a higher ideal through actions, deeds, service.
3. Jnana yoga—Surrender through enquiry and knowledge of the higher ideal
4. Raja yoga—through meditation on the higher ideal.

As a faith, Hinduism is not dogmatic and does not rigidly impose beliefs and practices on an individual or family. There is no regimentation and one has the freedom of choice. In all matters, the wish of the individual or family unit is paramount. So, cultural and religious sensitivities and practices identified in this information sheet may not have the same hold for individual Australian Hindus.

It is Western Australian Government policy to provide competent interpreting and translating services to clients who are unable to communicate effectively in spoken or written English.<sup>1</sup> Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone **131 450**.



<sup>1</sup> The Western Australian Language Services Policy, 2020, Office of Multicultural Interests, Western Australian Government.

## Body language and behaviour

Non-verbal communication can vary between cultures. Non-verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable or even offensive in another. Some Hindus originating from India may show agreement by nodding or moving their head from side to side. This should not be misinterpreted as meaning 'no'. Similarly, stepping on books or touching someone with the feet is considered disrespectful or offensive.

## Greeting

When greeting a Hindu, it is not customary to hug or kiss, especially members of the opposite sex. The Hindu Namaskar/Namaste (clasping palms together and holding them vertically near the chest) is preferred to handshakes and implies that s/he is saluting the Divinity in the other person.

## Names and titles

Use of family surnames is not universal among Hindus since the practice varies between cultural and geographic groups. Use of surnames is common among Australian Hindus from northern, eastern and western parts of India. In southern India, Sri Lanka the use of surnames is uncommon and usually as follows.

The girl/boy uses father's name first, followed by own personal name. For example, Vijay Thiruselvan is 'Thiruselvan, son of 'Vijay'. For legal purposes he would be known as Mr V. Thiruselvan<sup>2</sup>. When an Indian woman marries, she usually ceases to use her father's initial or maiden surname; instead she follows her personal name with her husband's name or family name.

<sup>2</sup> Information from *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands*, T. Morrison, W. Conaway and G. Borden, 1994, Adams Media Corporation.

## Dress and appearance

The following dress codes are general and may not apply to all Hindus because dress codes can vary. However, they provide some indication of Hindu dress practices:

- Hindus dress traditionally during festivals, worship/prayers and apply a mark (*tilak*, *bindi*, *pottu*) to the forehead, especially women. Mystically, the dot represents the third eye of spiritual sight/vision to perceive and better understand life's inner workings--to see things not just physically, but with the mind's eye (Ajna chakra) as well. However, the bindi now comes in all shapes, sizes and colours and is largely of cosmetic use
- a Hindu woman may wear specific wedding bangles on getting married. Therefore, breaking or removing wedding bangles is considered a bad omen and can greatly distress a Hindu woman if she or her family believes in this practice
- married women may wear a *thali* or *mangalsutra* (necklace of special design that traditionally symbolises marriage). Similarly, application of red powder (*Sindoor*) on the hair parting also indicates married status
- Hindu Brahmin males generally wear a thread around their trunk that signifies the coming of age for assumption of householder responsibilities and is a link in the transmission of Vedic knowledge. It passes diagonally across the body from the shoulder to about waist height and should generally not be removed.



## Seating

There are no special sensitivities with regard to seating arrangement for Hindus. However, it is not uncommon to find men and women sitting separately in some Hindu temples and prayer halls.

## Food, drink and fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious and spiritual community groups. Always serve vegetarian and meat food selections on separate trays, as a matter of good practice, when hosting people from different faiths. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function.

The following information relating to food, drink and fasting should be understood with regard to Hindus:

- Hindus believe in interdependence of life and in food that does not involve taking of another life. Taking a life to feed a person is generally considered to be unreligious. Consequently, vegetarianism is common in Hindus though this is now a lifestyle choice
- eating beef or beef products is considered unholy because the cow is sacred to Hindus. As described in the scriptures, the cow is worshiped as mother (*Go Mata*). For example, children are often fed cow's milk when breastfeeding stops
- vegetarians prefer to use separate dishes and utensils for preparing, processing, cooking and serving vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods
- orthodox Hindus are generally teetotalers, though this is now a lifestyle choice
- fasting for religious and spiritual reasons is a common practice. Health care providers need to be sensitive to food and dietary needs of Hindu patients.

## Religious festivals and days of significance

Hindus celebrate a festival almost every month. Festivals are based on the lunar calendar and hence festival date varies from year to year. Each festival has a special significance. Some are based on the change of seasons, some celebrate and glorify the many incarnations and manifestations of the Absolute Truth, some invoke and seek realisation of the divine within through devotional congregation (*Satsang/Sankirtan*). Signs of *swastika* and *aum* are typically created prior to religious ceremonies. Used since the Vedic age, the symbol of *Swastika* invokes Divinity from all four directions and is also a sacred symbol of other Indic religions such as Buddhism and Jainism.

## Family and marriage

- Differing family characteristics of different religious groups should be appreciated.
- Marriage continues to be a powerful and significant institution for a Hindu.
- In Hindu societies there is great respect for older family members.

## Counselling/interviews

There are no special sensitivities around counselling or interview arrangements for Hindus.

## Medical

Disregard of modesty can cause considerable distress to Hindus and in particular to elderly Hindus. In a health care context, women may be reluctant to undress for examination. If undressing is necessary, it is preferable to ask the patient if she wishes to be treated by a female doctor or nurse.

## Death and related issues

Death, bereavement and grieving processes are of particular religious and spiritual significance. Some sensitivities relating to the Hindu faith include the following:

- Autopsies are considered objectionable and deeply disrespectful to the dead and his/her family. The preference is not to have autopsies unless required by law.
- Acceptance of death does not abrogate the sense of personal loss.
- Visible expressions of grief are common and considered helpful to cope with the loss.
- Handling the dead with dignity and modesty is an absolute essential. The deceased is bathed and dressed only by persons of the same sex.
- Deceased Hindus are cremated except for children under three because they are buried. Funerals are deemed most sacred and cremation is encouraged as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of death.
- Hindus generally take the deceased home at some stage before cremation.
- The family of the deceased will want the ashes for future spiritual ceremonies or to scatter in a place of spiritual significance like the River Ganges.
- The period of mourning the loss of near and dear departed involves a number of rituals that may have a bearing on official procedures that may need to be conducted.





## Other sensitivities

Other cultural, religious sensitivities to be acknowledged and respected include:

- Footwear used outside is not generally worn inside Hindu homes; removal of footwear before entering a Hindu home is customary.
- Footwear must be removed before entering a place of Hindu worship.

### Listed below are some, not all, of the main Hindu festivals observed in Australia:

<b>Festival</b>	<b>Date</b>
Harvest Festivals including Thai Pongal, Lodhi, Sankranti	January
Thaipusam	January
Maha Shivaratiri	March
Holi (Festival of Colours)	March
Hindu New Year including Gudi Padva, Ugadi, Baisakhi, Vishu, Poila Baisakh, Bihu	April
Ram Navami	April
Hanuman Jayanti	April
Rakshabandhan	August
Krishna Janmashtami	August
Onam	August
Ganesh Chaturthi	September
Navaratri (9 nights)	September/October
Durga Puja	September/October
Dussehra (10 days)	October/November
Deepavali/Diwali	October/November (2-5 days)
Hindu Business New Year	November
Kanda Shasti	October/November
Thiruvemba	December



## Further enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Office of Multicultural Interests with the support of the Hindu Association of Western Australia and Hindu Council of Australia, Perth Chapter. For further information, Correspondence can be forwarded to:

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