



# Culture and Religion Information Sheet

## Hinduism





## Aim

**This information sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Hindu religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and not-for-profit community sectors to improve service development and delivery.**

## Introduction

Western Australia is a multi-ethnic, 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

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accommodation, clubs and in application forms (see the Equal Opportunity Commission website <http://www.eoc.wa.gov.au/Index.aspx>).

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 Hindus were brought to Australia in the 19th century to work on cotton and sugar plantations. Many stayed to settle as small business owners and merchants.

However, most Hindus arrived in Australia and WA since the late 1970s, after the removal of the 'White Australia Policy'. They migrated from a number of countries particularly India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and the United Kingdom.

## Demographics

There are approximately one billion followers of Hinduism around the world.

In the 2011 Census there were 21,063 Hindus in Western Australia, an increase of 12,891 people, or 157.7 per cent, compared with the 2006 Census.

Between the 2006 and 2011 Census the number of people who identified themselves as Hindu in Australia increased to 275,290, an increase of 127,167 people, or 85.9 per cent.



## Hinduism: background and origins

Hinduism is more than a religion. It is a way of life, upholding the principles of virtuous and true living. Hinduism as a religion has no single founder, no single holy book, no organisational hierarchy or structure. As a way of life, it is based on the concept of Dharma (Righteousness), the ethical and social system by which an individual organises his or her life.

The Hindu philosophy, beliefs, codes of conduct and other social and cultural practices come from a wide and varied collection of scriptures and philosophical and religious literature. The Vedas, four in number, which include the Upanishads, are the primary authority, known as the Struti, meaning 'that which has been heard or revealed'. The other scriptures are the Smritis, 'those which are remembered' and are human compositions. These are the Dharma Sastras, Ithihasas (Epics) such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (which has within it the Bhagavad Gita—the Song of God), Puranas (Mythology), Agamas (Theology) and Dharshanas (Schools of Philosophy).

The Hindu world view is non-exclusive and accepts all other faiths and religious paths. In fact, an ancient Vedic text in the Upanishad says that "Truth (God) is one, sages call it by different names". Hindus believe in one God and all paths lead to this one God.

A Hindu is a believer in an all-present, all-powerful and all-knowing non-dual Absolute which pervades everything as Pure Consciousness and whose nature is Existence (Sat), Knowledge (Chit) and Bliss (Ananda). A Hindu readily accepts that the Absolute can be given any name—God, Cosmic Consciousness, Brahman, for example. A Hindu views the entire universe as God's creation and everything in the universe as God. Hindus believe that each person is intrinsically divine and the purpose of life is to seek and realise the divinity within one.

There is no formal process of conversion into or excommunication from the Hindu faith. The following of Sanatana Dharma, a set of eternal and universal ethical and moral principles of virtuous and true living, is acceptable whether or not one is born a Hindu.

In Australia, the Hindu philosophy is followed by Hindu centres and temples, meditation and yoga groups and a number of other spiritual groups, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

Those outside the Hindu faith are often confused by the Hindu system of Gods and Goddesses. Gods and Goddesses are symbols depicting various attributes, functions and manifestations of the one Supreme Divine Absolute. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are the manifestations of the one Divine Absolute operating in the three primordial functional activities in the universe of creation, sustenance and dissolution, respectively. Hindu images and practices have literal as well as symbolic meanings.

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

## Key beliefs

Hindus believe:

- in one all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, Creator and Unmanifest Reality
- in the divinity of the four Vedas, the world's most ancient scripture, and venerate the Agamas equally. These primordial hymns are God's word and the bedrock of Sanatana Dharma (Eternal Religion)
- that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution

- in Karma, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates their destiny by their thoughts, words and deeds. Karma is therefore not fate, for people act with free will, creating their own destiny. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determines our future
- that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved and moksha, liberation from the cycle of life, death and rebirth (samsara), is attained. We are not the body in which we live but the immortal soul that inhabits many bodies in its evolutionary journey through samsara. Not a single soul will be deprived of this destiny
- that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments and personal devotionals create a communion with these divine beings and Gods
- that an enlightened master or satguru is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, pilgrimage, self-inquiry, meditation and surrender in God
- that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered and therefore practise ahimsa, non-injury or non-violence in thought, word and deed
- that no religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others but that all genuine paths are facets of God's Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

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 and eventual destiny of all life. He or she is enjoined to seek personal purification on the path to self-realisation through one of four—or any combination of the four—paths which are:

1. Bhakti yoga—ritualistic worship, chanting of prayers, devotional surrender to a higher ideal (the Deity representing the qualities)
2. Karma yoga—through service
3. Jnana yoga—through enquiry and knowledge
4. Raja yoga—through meditation.

To the purified, the Absolute reveals itself as one's own essential being (the Self) and hence the term self-realisation. Hindus are, therefore, encouraged to embrace all and live in the interest of and in peace and harmony with the larger self or the society and the environment as a whole. They are encouraged to be flexible and adjust to situations as they arise.

As a faith, Hinduism is not dogmatic and does not rigidly impose beliefs and practices on an individual or a family unit. This observation may be valid particularly for Hindus living in Australia. In all matters, the wish of the individual or the family unit is paramount and cultural and religious sensitivities and practices identified in this information sheet may not have the same hold for a second or third generation Australian Hindu.

**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.**

1. The Western Australian Language Services Policy, 2008, Office of Multicultural Interests, Western Australian Government.



When God created the universe, He endowed it with order, with the laws to govern creation. Dharma is God's divine law prevailing on every level of existence, from sustaining cosmic order to religious and moral laws that bind us in harmony with that order. Related to the soul, dharma is the mode of conduct most conducive to spiritual advancement, the right and righteous path. It is piety and ethical practice, duty and obligation.

## Body language and behaviour

Non-verbal communication has a powerful effect on relationships and effective service provision. 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 moving their head from side to side. This should not be misinterpreted as meaning 'no'

## Greeting

When greeting a Hindu, it is not customary to hug or kiss a member of the opposite sex. The Hindu Namaskar (clasping the palms together and holding them vertically near the chest) or handshakes are acceptable.

## Names and titles

The use of family surnames is not universal among Hindus. The practice varies between cultural and geographic groups. The use of surnames is common among the people who have arrived in Australia from northern, eastern and western parts of India. In Tamil Nadu in southern India and in Sri Lanka the use of surnames is uncommon. The following is an indication of the practice among Tamil speaking Hindus.

A male uses his father's name first, followed by his own personal name. For example, Vijay Thiruselvan is 'Thiruselvan, son of 'Vijay'. For legal purposes he would

be known as Mr V. Thiruselvan. Hindu female names follow the same pattern: father's initial plus personal name. When an Indian woman marries, she usually ceases to use her father's initial; instead she follows her personal name with her husband's name. For instance when S. Kamala (female) marries V. Thiru (male) she will go by the name of Mrs Kamala Thiru.<sup>2</sup>

## Dress and appearance

Dress codes among Hindus vary. The following dress codes are not generally applicable to all Hindus, however, they provide some indication as to Hindu dress practices:

- Hindus may wear traditional clothing during special festivals and prayer.
- A Hindu woman may put on wedding bangles when she gets married, and breaking or removing wedding bangles is considered a bad omen and can greatly distress a Hindu woman.
- Married women may wear a thali or mangal sutra, a necklace of special design that traditionally symbolises marriage. The wearing of red powder in the parting in the hair also symbolises marriage.
- Married women may also wear a bindi or tilak (a red dot between and just above the eyebrows) on the forehead.
- Brahmins among Hindus wear a thread around their bodies which is worn for the first time at the Upanayana religious ceremony and signifies the assumption of responsibilities for becoming a link in transmission of knowledge and for maintaining cosmic truth and order. It passes diagonally across the body from the shoulder to about waist height and traditionally it should never be removed.

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

## Seating

There are no special sensitivities with regard to seating arrangement for Hindus. However, in temples and prayer halls males and females normally sit separately on different sides.

## Food, drink and fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. Always serve a selection of vegetarian and meat foods on separate trays as a matter of good practice when hosting people from religious and cultural backgrounds. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function. The following issues relating to food, drink and fasting should also be understood:

- Hindus believe in the interdependence of life and will not eat any food that has involved the taking of life. Consequently, vegetarianism is common among Hindus. In eastern India, however, fish is part of the staple food.
- Most Hindus do not eat beef or beef products. This is because the cow is held to be sacred and, generally speaking, the taking of a life to feed a person is considered to be unreligious.
- Vegetarians would prefer to use separate dishes and utensils for vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods.
- Orthodox Hindus and most vegetarians are unlikely to consume alcoholic drinks.
- Occasional fasting may be common among elderly Hindus.
- In a health care environment, the service provider needs to be sensitive to the food and dietary needs of the patient.

## Religious festivals and days of significance

There are Hindu festivals in almost every month. They are based on the lunar calendar and hence the dates vary from year to year. Some festivals are based on the change of seasons and others celebrate and glorify the great incarnations or prayer campaigns to invoke and realise the divine within.

The main festivals observed in Australia are:

<b>Festival</b>	<b>Date</b>
Thai Pongal	January
Thaipusam	January
Maha Shivarathiri	March (whole night vigil)
Tamil and Malayalam New Year	April
Ramnavmi	April
Hanuman Jayanti	April
Krishna Jeyanthi	September
Ganesh Chaturthi	September
Navarathri	September/October (10 day festival)
Deepavali/Diwali	October/November (2 days) <sup>3</sup>
Kanda Shasti	October/November
Thiruvemba	December

<sup>3</sup> Information from *A Practical Reference Guide to Religious Diversity for Operational Police and Emergency Services*, 2nd edition, National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau.



## Family and marriage

The 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.

## Medical

A disregard of modesty can cause considerable distress to Hindus and in particular to Hindu women. Even in a health care context, women are generally reluctant to undress for examination. If undressing is necessary, it is preferable for a patient to be treated by a doctor or nurse of the same sex.

## Counselling/interviews

There are no special sensitivities with regard to counselling or interview arrangements for Hindus.

## Death and related issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant for all religious communities. 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 are deemed helpful to cope with the sense of personal loss.
- Modesty remains important even after death. Corpses are bathed and dressed only by persons of the same sex. It is absolutely essential to handle the dead with dignity and modesty.

- Hindus are generally cremated, except for children under three, who are buried. Funerals are deemed most sacred. Ideally, the cremation should be within 24 hours of death.
- A Hindu family will usually want the body to be taken home at some stage before cremation, usually between the funeral parlour and the crematorium.
- 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.

## Other sensitivities

Other cultural and religious sensitivities that need 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 therefore customary.
- Footwear must be removed before entering a place of Hindu worship.

## Further enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Office of Multicultural Interests with the support of the Hindu Association of Western Australia. For further information please contact the President, Hindu Association of WA Inc.

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