

Culture and Religion

Information Sheet



Hinduism

Hindu Association of Western Australia (Inc)

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Hinduism

Introduction

Western Australia is a multi ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for different religions is an important underlying principle of multiculturalism and democracy.

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

This Information Sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Hindu religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and non profit community sectors in improving service delivery.

Hindus in Australia have migrated from a number of countries particularly India, Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Uganda, Mauritius and the United Kingdom.

Hinduism has no formal conversion into or excommunication from the 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 adopted by Hindu centres and temples, meditation and yoga groups and a number of other spiritual groups. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness is also a Hindu organisation.

Background and Origins

It is somewhat misleading to refer to Hinduism as a religion. It is more a way of life, upholding the principles of virtuous and true living.

The Hindu faith has numerous schools of thought, has no founder, no organisational hierarchy or structure and no central administration but the concept of Dharma, the social and ethical system by which an individual organises his or her life.

The Hindu beliefs, codes of conduct, rituals and other social practices emanate and are drawn from a wide collection of philosophical literature and Scriptures including the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Brahma sutras, the Bhagavad Gita and the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharatha. The Mahabharatha, for example, is approximately six times the length of the Bible.

The Hindu belief is totally non exclusive and accepts all other faiths and religious paths. In fact, an ancient Vedic text says that God or Truth is one and wise people refer to it by very many names.

Who is a Hindu? A Hindu is a believer in an omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient non dual Absolute, which pervades everything as consciousness and whose nature is existence, knowledge and bliss. A Hindu readily accepts that the Absolute can be given any name God, Cosmic Consciousness, Brahm etc. A Hindu views the entire universe as God's 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 all of us.

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Key Beliefs

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.

An important principle in the Hindu thought is the law of Karma. It is the law of cause and effect in which each and every action has a reaction, generating conditions to be experienced within this lifetime or the next. Life is looked upon as a continuum in the sense that the pristine life energy is never destroyed. Death is accepted not as a denial of life but as a process of life. As a result, the Hindu view accepts and believes in re incarnation or the cycle of life death rebirth until such time as the individual soul, on self realization of its own essential divinity, emerges into the Absolute. A Hindu accepts on scriptural authority that self realization is possible and attainable within one's own life time and indeed it is the goal and eventual destiny of all life.

Those outside the Hindu faith are often confused by the Hindu pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. The Hindu thought has developed a high degree of symbolism to convey the truth and to determine one's choice of path to attain self realization. Gods and Goddesses are symbols depicting various attributes, functions and manifestations of the one Supreme Divine Absolute. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are manifestations of the one Divine Absolute operating in the three primordial functional activities in the universe creation, sustenance and reabsorption respectively. Hindu images and practices have literal as well as symbolic meanings.

A Hindu 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. Ritualistic worship, chanting of prayers, devotional surrender to a higher ideal (the Deity representing the qualities).
2. Through service.
3. Through yoga and meditation.
4. Through inquiry (know thyself).

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 is particularly valid 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 be relevant for a second or third generation Australian Hindu.

Demographics

There are approximately 1.0 billion followers of Hinduism around the world. Between the 2001 and 2006 Census, the number of people in Australia who identified themselves as Hindu had increased to 148,117, an increase of 52,644 or 55.1 per cent. In the 2006 census there were 8,159 Hindus in Western Australia, an increase of 3,189 persons or 64% compared to the previous census.

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Greeting

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

Names and Titles

The use of family surnames is not universal among Hindus. The practice varies between regions in India. 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 Sri Lanka the use of surnames is uncommon. The following is an indication of the practice amongst Tamil speaking Hindus.

A male uses the initial of 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 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.¹

Seating

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

Dress and Appearance

Dress codes amongst 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 festival and prayer.
- A Hindu woman may put on wedding bangles on her marriage and breaking or removing wedding bangles is considered a bad omen and will greatly distress a Hindu woman.
- Married women may wear a Thali or Mangal Sutra, a necklace of special design around their neck and traditionally it 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.
- Some Hindus wear a thread around their bodies which is worn 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.

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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 from India show agreement by moving their head from side to side which may be misinterpreted as 'no'.

Food, Drink and Fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. When hosting people from religious and cultural backgrounds, as a matter of good practice, always serve a selection of vegetarian and meat foods on separate trays. 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 amongst 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, 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 amongst elderly Hindus.
- In a health care environment, the service provider has to be sensitive to the food and dietary needs of the patient.

Religious Festivals and Days of Significance

There are Hindu festivals 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:

Festival	Date/s
Thaipusam	January
Maha Shivarathiri	March (whole night vigil)
Tamil and Kerala 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) ²

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Language and Communication

Language and communication issues include:

- 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.³
- Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone 131450.

Family and Marriage

The differing family characteristics of different religious groups should be appreciated. These include:

- Marriage continues to be a powerful and significant institution for a Hindu.
- Sexual relationships outside marriage is not viewed favourably.
- 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 served by a doctor or nurse of the same sex.

Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant for all religious communities. Some sensitivities relating to the Hindu faith include:

- 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.

Counselling/Interviews

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

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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 Hindu Association of Western Australia with the support of the Office of Multicultural Interests. For further information please contact the President, Hindu Association of WA Inc. on telephone 9455 2097.

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1. Information from "Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands", T Morrison, W.Conoway and G.Borden, 1994, Adams Media Corporation.
2. Information from 'A Practical Reference Guide to Religious Diversity for Operational Police and Emergency Services' – 2nd Edition - National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau.
3. The Western Australian Language Services Policy, 2008, Office of Multicultural Interests, Western Australian Government