

Hindu Identities

Followers of the teachings of the Vedas are called Hindus. Hindu staff and students form a substantial part of the La Trobe community. Acknowledging and respecting Hindu identities at La Trobe therefore requires, in part, a basic understanding of what Hinduism and being a Hindu is about.



Hindus in Australia

- Hinduism was first introduced to Australia in the early 19th century with the arrival of Asian people as crew on trading ships and as labourers on cotton and sugar plantations.
- In the 19th century there were also Hindu merchants, traders and camp followers associated with the British military and police, where they worked as cooks and horse stablers.
- In the 2001 Census, over 95,000 people in Australia identified as Hindu. Of these, 82% were born overseas with 34% born in India and 11% in Sri Lanka. In the 2006 Census, over 148,000 people identified as Hindu.

About Hinduism

Hinduism originated and developed in India over the last 3,000 to 3,500 years. It is the majority religion in India. Hindus believe in one Supreme God who manifests him/herself in many different forms. Some of these include Siva, Vishnu, Krishna, Durga, Ganesh, Sakti (Devi), Surya and Skanda (Murugan).

Hindus believe:

- in the Vedas (scriptures);
- there is one Supreme God who is the creator of the universe;
- in reincarnation;
- that everyone creates their own destiny (karma);

There are four major Hindu denominations classified according to their respective focus of worship.

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Vaishnavism

Vaishnavites worship Vishnu and his incarnations, particularly Krishna and Rama, as the Supreme God.

Saivism

Saivites worship Siva (also spelt Shiva) as the Supreme God.

Shaktism

Shaktas worship God as the Shakti, Sri Devi or the Divine Mother in her many forms.

Smartism

Smarta Hindus view the different manifestations of God as equivalent. They accept all major Hindu gods and are commonly known as liberal or non-sectarian.

Hindu Religious Observance

Place of worship

The Hindu place of worship is the temple. Most temples make up to five daily offerings of food to the gods. Hindus also maintain one or more shrines in their homes as the focus of worship. Worship can take place daily, at any time.

Religious text

The most important sacred text of Hinduism is called the Vedas which is a Sanskrit word meaning knowledge and wisdom. There are four Vedas:

- Rig-Veda (Veda of Hymns).
- Sama-Veda (Veda of Chants).
- Yajur-Veda (Veda of Sacrifice).
- Atharava-Veda (Veda of Atharvan).

Each Veda is divided into three strata, namely:

- Samhita: collections of hymns, chants and sacrificial formulas as appropriate.
- Brahmana: expository texts.
- Upanishad: speculative treatises.

Another very important scripture is the Bhagavad Gita.



Hindu symbols

The Aum is considered the most important Hindu symbol and is chanted at the beginning of many prayers and rituals. It consists of three syllables a-u-m which are sounded progressively from the throat to the lips. The three sounds represent three states of consciousness – waking, dreaming and deep sleep. The entire symbol represents the fourth state which is the awareness of one's own spirituality. Aum is often used as an emblem of Hinduism.

Sri Yantra is a mandala formed by nine interlocking triangles. Four of these are situated upright and represent Siva – the masculine. The remaining five triangles are inverted and represent Shakiti – the feminine.

Hindu dress code

Traditional Hindu women wear the sari. Traditional male Hindus wear the white cotton dhoti.

Women in particular may wear a dot (tilak) of turmeric powder or other coloured substance on their foreheads as a symbol of their religion. For women, tilak is also considered a beauty mark.

Dietary requirements and restrictions

- The cow is considered sacred. Hindus therefore avoid eating beef.
- Some Hindus are vegetarian and do not eat meat, fish, eggs or products made from these foods. Vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods cannot be cooked together.
- Fasting is commonly practised on new moon days and during certain religious festivals.

Significant Hindu Festivals and Celebration Dates

Makar Sankranti

Makar Sankranti is the first Hindu festival of the solar calendar and falls on 14 January each year. It falls on the day when the sun enters the zodiac sign of Makar (Capricorn) and when day and night are of equal duration. Variations exist in the way Makar Sankranti is celebrated throughout India. For example, Tamils of southern India refer to Makar Sankranti as the Pongal or Harvest Festival where families gather to rejoice and share their harvests. Offerings of rice and milk are made to the deity Surya, symbolising the sun.

Mahasivaratri/Siva's Great Night

Mahasivaratri is a Hindu festival dedicated to the worship of Siva as deity beyond time, form and space. This involves an all night vigil which does not finish until dawn when devotees may break a day long fast. It is considered mandatory for all Saivites. Mahasivaratri is based on the Hindu lunar calendar, therefore dates vary each year. Translated to the Western (Gregorian) calendar, Mahasivaratri falls in February-March.

Navaratri/Nine Nights

Navaratri is a nine day festival dedicated to the worship of the deity Sakti. Three days are devoted to Durga, three to Lakshmi and three to Saraswati. The tenth day is known as Vijaya Disami (Day of Victory) in which prayers of thankfulness are offered. The festival involves cultural celebrations, especially in the form of dance and music.



Ganesha Chaturthi

This festival celebrates Lord Ganesha's birthday. It is celebrated on the chaturthi or "fourth day" after the new moon in the Tamil month of Avani (August-September). Ganesha receives special pujas (prayers) throughout the day, and his worship often incorporates a large festival parade. This festival is celebrated by nearly all Hindus regardless of sect and is especially pronounced in North India.

Deepavali/Diwali/Festival of Lights

Diwali (north India) or Deepavali (south India) is the most important and widely celebrated Hindu event symbolising both the lifting of spiritual darkness and the renewal of life. It is celebrated by the lighting of oil lamps called diyas in houses, shops and public places. It is also a time for wearing new clothes and feasting with family and friends. Diwali/Deepavali is set by the Hindu lunar calendar and therefore varies each year. Translated to the Gregorian calendar, it usually falls in October or November.

Hindus have traditionally respected other religions' pathways to God. Religious tolerance has characterised India for many centuries.

Holi

Holi is an annual festival that celebrates spring and commemorates various events in Hindu mythology. It is celebrated with feasts, bonfires and decorating oneself, friends and relatives with coloured powder and water. Holi is based on the Hindu lunar calendar and therefore dates differ each year. It usually falls in February-March in the Gregorian calendar.

New Year

Celebrating Hindu New Year varies according to geographical location. For example, Tamil Hindus of southern India celebrate New Year on 14 April each year except in a leap year when it is celebrated on 13 April. Hindus from Gujarat (northwest India) celebrate New Year at the same time as Diwali/Deepavali.

For specific dates, see the Cultural Diversity calendar at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip>

Other points for reflection

- It is not customary to greet a Hindu by hugging and kissing. Handshakes or the Hindu namaskar (clasping of palms together and holding them near the chest) is the more appropriate way to greet a Hindu.
- Some Hindus may show agreement by moving their heads from side to side which may be misconstrued as a 'no'.
- Hindus have traditionally respected other religions' path ways to God. Religious tolerance has characterised India for many centuries.

Some common misconceptions about Hinduism

- Hindus do not worship the cow. Rather, they honour and respect the cow as a symbol of all life.
- Hindus do not worship many gods, rather, they worship one Supreme Being manifested in a number of different names and forms.

Further Reading

ABC Religion and Ethics: Hinduism
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s790133.htm>

Hindu Council of Australia
<http://www.hinducouncil.com.au/>

Hinduism Today: Hinduism
http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/2003/10-12/44-49_four_sects.shtml

Hindustanlink.com: Hindu Festivals
http://www.hindustanlink.com/festivals/hindu_festivals.htm

IndiaOz: A-Z of Hinduism
<http://www.indiaoz.com.au/hinduism/index.shtml>

