

Faith Guides for
Higher Education

Hinduism



A Guide to Hinduism

Maya Warrier



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Published by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies

Higher Education Academy

School of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Leeds

LS2 9JT

First Published September 2006

Reprinted July 2007

ISBN 0-9544524-8-8

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Printed by Alden Group Limited, Oxford, UK

CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE FAITH GUIDE SERIES	IV
NOTES ON THE AUTHOR	VI
1. INTRODUCING HINDUISM	I
THE HISTORY OF HINDUISM AND KEY DIVISIONS	I
HINDU BELIEF STRUCTURE	5
CALENDAR OF HINDU FESTIVALS	9
HINDUISM IN THE UK	11
DEBUNKING COMMON STEREOTYPES	13
2. SPECIFIC ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION	15
KEY SENSITIVITIES	15
CULTURAL ISSUES	17
RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION	19
3. RESOURCES	20
BOOKS	20
WEBSITES	21
ORGANISATIONS	21

PREFACE TO THE FAITH GUIDE SERIES

In the 2001 National Census, over 70% of the UK population identified themselves as belonging to a religious community; and the issue of religion is rarely out of the news, often being discussed in relation to highly-charged controversy and emotion. There is often a lack of understanding as to what a religion is, and what it means to be a member (or not) of a specific faith group. Confusion can result in all walks of life and higher education (HE) is not exempt from this. Indeed, institutions are increasingly, and with varying degrees and different levels of success, seeking to respond to and understand specific faith requirements, as they relate (or not) to particular areas of higher education, in continually changing contexts. This series of Faith Guides from the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies will not necessarily solve all the controversies or confusion, but may bring some answers to some of these basic questions, through providing individuals, departments, and institutions with resource information on issues relating to teaching people of faith in a higher education environment.

The introduction of the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 suggested a broader social commitment in the UK to the creation of culturally inclusive places of work. Following their introduction, not only is there an ethical and moral duty to consciously avoid discrimination on the basis of religion and belief, but there is now a statutory duty. Both the Home Office and the Department for International Development have expressed their commitment towards working more closely with faith communities and encouraging interfaith dialogue. All these developments suggest a need for staff in UK higher education institutions to develop the skills and knowledge that reflect this growing concern for cultural and religious literacy in British society. This series offers an accessible route into this area of knowledge. By providing concise guides, all those involved in the higher education academic process have an opportunity to quickly acquire a basic awareness of issues, in a format as free from jargon as possible.

The Subject Centre has brought together a broad range of subject specialists who can draw upon their personal experiences of and interactions with specific faith groups and individuals, acquired through their own academic work, and in some cases utilising personal experiences as members of a particular tradition. The guides detail students' feelings about modern life on campus; information obtained through the authors' longstanding teaching experience and, in some cases, informal focus groups set up to garner student opinion.

The rich variety of issues contained in this series of guides acknowledges substantial diversity within and between faith groups, in particular in relation to identity issues and ideas about what it means to be religious. The format for each guide has some stress on a commonality of themes, but has allowed authors the opportunity to explore themes that are individual and specific

to a particular world view. Editing this series has raised some interesting issues, and it is acknowledged that it is not possible to accommodate perspectives as varied as Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism in the same format—and that there are disparate (and occasionally conflicting) perspectives within diverse faiths, not all of which can be referred to within a series of concise guides. This series is not intended to be a ‘politically correct’ tool, but seeks instead to support the enrichment of the teaching and learning experience for all those engaged within the higher education sector. It is based on the idea of encouraging awareness and understanding of the cultural and religious dynamics of student experience in higher education, with a view to supporting the development and sharing of good practice.

In tackling these concerns, the guides seek to provide a basic introduction to religious world views, before tackling some general issues associated with students and staff from specific faith backgrounds, and their interactions in the higher education sector. It also provides advice on where to go for further information. The series will thereby save the reader time and effort in locating significant source material and advice on higher education issues associated with faith communities and individuals.

This series will be expanded to accommodate further religious (and other) world views, including some of those related to the religions contained in the initial set of titles, and updates to the present volumes will also be provided in due course—so feedback to the present series would be particularly welcomed. The editor is grateful for the input of all the authors in the evolution of this series, and to members of the Subject Centre and its Advisory Board who provided significant contributions at every stage of the production process.

All web links listed in this guide were correct and verified at the time of publication.

Further information and resources on issues relating to diversity can be found on our website at:

<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/themes/diversity/index.html>

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I. INTRODUCING HINDUISM

Hinduism is not a religion in the sense that we might understand Christianity, Islam or Judaism to be. It was never founded, by any one person or group of persons, as a unified body of faith and practice. It has no central creed or doctrine, and no central religious authority. It has no central scripture or body of scriptures comparable to the Bible or the Qur'an. As an umbrella term of relatively recent coinage, encompassing a variety of creeds, textual traditions, religious figures of authority, and religious groups and organisations, 'Hinduism' is very difficult to pin down in a definitive sense.

The term 'Hindu' has a longer history than the term 'Hinduism'. It was used, as far back as the middle of the first millennium BCE, by Persian conquerors, to refer to indigenous populations living along and beyond the river Sindhu, flowing along the north western frontiers of the Indian subcontinent. The term had no obvious religious significance. It referred only to a geographically defined population which, over time, came to be marked by immense diversity of language and custom. Gradually the indigenous peoples began to use this term to distinguish themselves from 'foreigners'—for instance, Muslim conquerors and settlers from central Asia, European traders and explorers, and also travellers and merchants visiting India from other parts of the world.

The term Hinduism was coined relatively recently, in the 19th century, as the term 'Hindu' began to be invested with religious significance. It was used to refer to a diversity of socio-religious beliefs and practices that have long been prevalent in the Indian subcontinent, and whose origins date all the way back to the second millennium BCE. This usage followed in large part from British orientalists' discovery of ancient Indian liturgical and philosophical traditions in Sanskrit. The term 'Hinduism' came to be identified with the religious traditions of Indian people, and Indian reformers too in due course came to use this term to refer to the 'religion' of the Hindus.

HISTORY OF HINDUISM AND KEY DIVISIONS

The earliest traces of what we understand today as 'Hinduism' go back to 2500 BCE. Between about 2500 and 1500 BCE, an ancient urban civilisation flourished along the banks of the river Indus. Archaeologists excavating various sites associated with this civilisation have unearthed terracotta figurines which bear a striking resemblance to images of later Hindu deities. There is to date no systematic evidence to confirm historical continuity between present day Hinduism and the ancient civilisation of the Indus Valley. Following the rather sudden decline of this civilisation between 1800 and 1700 BCE, there arose the civilisation of the Aryans, and the history of Hinduism as we understand it today is the history of the next 2,000 years of Aryan culture in the Indian subcontinent.

VEDIC HINDUISM

The language of the Aryans was Sanskrit. Knowledge about early Aryan belief and practice derives from the **Vedas**, a corpus of Sanskrit texts compiled over hundreds of years, which many Hindus today consider to be the repository of sacred knowledge and a crucial marker of Hindu identity. The earliest Vedas were liturgical texts used in sacrificial ritual, the cornerstone of early Vedic society. These rituals were believed to help ensure the well-being of society. Towards the later Vedic period (600 to 300 BCE) alongside ritual performance there grew a rich tradition of philosophy and speculation about life's meaning and purpose. The gaining of spiritual knowledge through self-discipline and control came to be seen in some sections of society as more important than the mere performance of ritual. Various schools of philosophy and spiritual questing arose, and techniques of yoga, self-discipline, asceticism and renunciation came into being, some of them in opposition to Vedic ritual practice. Buddhism and Jainism, both of which rejected the authority of the Vedas, originated at this time, alongside several other groups seeking spiritual meaning through austerity and asceticism.

THEISM

From the later Vedic period onwards and through much of the first millennium CE, worship of gods and goddesses became increasingly popular in India. The most popular deities were the great gods Vishnu and Shiva, and their followers were referred to as **Vaishnavas** and **Shaivas** respectively. Devotional practices, doctrinal teachings and mythology centring on the sectarian worship of these gods evolved, and were recorded in Sanskrit texts called the **Puranas**. The followers of each understood their respective god to be the supreme transcendent Lord. Shiva was associated with a divine family through whom he exercised his godly powers. Vishnu, the kingly guardian of the world's order, was understood to incarnate himself on earth in human or animal form every time chaos threatened to upset the balance of the world.



A sculpture of a Hindu deity carved into the wall of a temple

By the end of the Puranic period, ten principal incarnations or avatars of Vishnu had been recorded. Among the most significant of these are Rama and Krishna, both worshipped as independent deities in their own right. Besides Vaishnavas and Shaivas, a third sectarian group was that of the **Shaktas**, dedicated to the worship of the goddess (*Devi*) and the manifold manifestations of female divine energy.

During this time, Vedic sacrifice came to be increasingly marginalised, giving way to devotional worship, or **puja**. Puja is a ritual of love or devotion (*bhakti*) to a deity with whom the devotee often establishes an intense and personal relationship. Corresponding to the growth of theism and devotionism, Sanskrit narrative traditions evolved. Most important of these, besides the Puranas mentioned above, are the **itihisas** (historical epics)—the **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**—and devotional poetry in several Indian regional languages. The **Bhagavad Gita**, ‘The Song of the Lord’, contained in the Mahabharata, is one of the most famous Sanskrit narrative texts. In the Bhagavad Gita, the great god Krishna reveals his divinity to his friend Arjuna, and expounds the main concerns of Hindu orthodoxy—responsible action, the maintenance of social order and stability, and the importance of devotion to the divine transcendent as a personal god.

Temple towns grew and flourished in this period. Vast temple complexes, dedicated to one or another of the Puranic deities, and located at the heart of the town, served as the ritual, as well as commercial and administrative, centres of the kingdom. Kings derived legitimacy for their rule through their patronage of these ritual sites, with their kingship often modelled on the ideal of divine kingship symbolised by the great god Vishnu.



**The Virupaksha Temple,
Hampi, India**

HINDUISM IN THE COLONIAL ERA

From the 11th century CE onwards, large sections of the Indian subcontinent were conquered and ruled by Muslim kings and emperors from central Asia. The rule of the last Muslim emperor in India came to an end in the 19th century, and British forces, initially in the form of the East India Company, and later the British crown, came to assume control over the economy and administration of the Indian subcontinent. Western Indologists and Orientalists took considerable interest in the Hindu traditions they encountered in India, either reviling Hindu belief and practice as heathen and depraved, or glorifying certain textual and Sanskritic aspects of Hinduism for their wisdom and intellectual prowess. Hindus, who had tended to be relatively insular, now began to respond to the British, and more importantly Christian, presence in their midst. Hindu reform movements arose, led by educated Indians, many of whom relied on a notion of a glorious Hindu past in order to assert a sense of a distinctively Hindu identity and pride in the present. It was at this time that Hinduism came to be first understood as a religion. The reform movements, often collectively referred to as the Hindu renaissance, absorbed many of Christianity's rationalist elements, and were often closely linked with India's nationalist struggle for freedom from colonial rule. Independence was finally achieved in 1947.

HINDU NATIONALISM

After gaining independence, India defined itself as a secular state. In recent times, however, particularly since the 1980s, India has experienced a resurgence of religious nationalism. **Hindutva**, the ideology of Hindu nationalists, manifests itself in India today as an organised and militant form of Hindu supremacism, which demands the setting up of a state in which civic rights, nationhood and national culture would be defined by Hinduism. Its proponents have, in recent times, been responsible for a number of acts of religious violence. One of the most significant of these was the destruction of a mosque, the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya in 1992. They demanded that a temple be established at the site of the mosque, which some Hindus believe to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. Hindutva activists justify incidents such as this by arguing that Muslim rulers destroyed Hindu temples in the past, thereby damaging Hindu pride. They see the present destruction of ancient mosques as crucial for recovering a sense of Hindu dignity and pride. There have been several incidents of violence and rioting between Hindus and Muslims in recent times, linked directly with this temple-mosque controversy.

INTERNATIONAL HINDU PRESENCE

In India today about 80% of the population of over one billion is Hindu. In neighbouring Nepal, where Hinduism is the state religion, over 90% of the population is Hindu. Hinduism has long had a presence beyond the Indian subcontinent in countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, Bali, Myanmar, Malaysia, Mauritius and other parts of southeast Asia. The early part of the

19th century saw the movement of Hindus to countries in East and South Africa, Trinidad, Surinam and Guyana, Fiji, and Mauritius. More recently, in the 20th century, sizeable Hindu populations moved to Britain, North America and Australia. Differences in terms of colonial traditions and immigration policies have led to different patterns of settlement and community formation in each of these host countries.

HINDU BELIEF STRUCTURE

Given the diversity in Hindu belief and practice, it is nearly impossible to define such a thing as ‘the Hindu belief structure’ in the singular. There is no one worldview shared by all Hindus; instead there are multiple Hindu worldviews. Identifying elements common to all of these is a tricky exercise. Outlined below are some of the more popular beliefs and practices in Hinduism today. Hindus tend to treat these selectively, combining preferred elements of one with preferred elements of another, depending on such things as their social background, caste grouping and sectarian affiliation, age and sex, and also their personal preferences and inclinations.

KARMA—SAMSARA—MOKSHA

Later Vedic texts, which tend to speculate about the meaning and purpose of life, contain crucial ideas about action in this world and life after death. These ideas today appear in various forms and guises in the belief systems of the majority of Hindus and in the teachings of Hindu gurus.

It is believed, firstly, that all beings are reincarnated into the world over and over again. Life is therefore not finite, and does not come to an end with the death of the individual. Instead the soul lives on and is reborn into the world in a new body. The cycle of birth, death and rebirth, without beginning and without end, is referred to as samsara.

Secondly, one’s actions, karma, in this life determine the course of events in future lives. Good action in this life leads to conditions conducive to happiness in a subsequent life, and bad action leads to suffering. However, samsara as such refers to a world marked largely by suffering. The ultimate spiritual goal is therefore not merely to engage in good deeds and secure some measure of happiness in future incarnations; it is instead to secure release from the samsaric cycle altogether. This release, moksha, can be achieved through striving for inner discipline, cultivating detachment from the affairs of this world, and seeking spiritual enlightenment.

ATMAN AND BRAHMAN

Ideas to do with spiritual enlightenment and disciplining of the mind are inextricably linked with notions of Atman and Brahman as developed in the later Vedic texts. Brahman refers to the essence of the universe, the unity believed to underlie all apparent diversity. Atman, in contrast, is the essence

of the individual self, which leads a fragmentary existence, caught as it is in the unceasing samsaric cycle. According to some of the more popular Hindu philosophical traditions, Atman and Brahman are intrinsically one. The apparent duality between the two is illusory. So long as the Atman fails to realise this oneness, it remains trapped in the samsaric cycle. Once it does realise this unity, however, all duality disappears, such as that between the self and the other, between joy and sorrow, or between the human and the divine. To realize this is not merely to have knowledge of this truth but to experience it directly in an immediate and intuitive sense. This self-realisation is understood to be an experience of bliss and infinitude, and is believed to secure, for the individual, ultimate release from samsara.

ASCETIC TRADITIONS AND GURU ORGANISATIONS

Ideas about different paths to spiritual enlightenment and liberation from samsara have developed in several renunciatory traditions in India, many of which emphasise asceticism and meditation as important techniques for disciplining the mind and the body.

Ascetic spiritual seekers, often known as Sadhus, are a common sight in Hindu society. These are persons believed to have renounced everyday social life altogether, choosing a path of austerity, celibacy and self denial in their quest for moksha. Some appear as wild, scantily clothed figures, with matted hair and ash smeared bodies, carrying a begging bowl and wandering from door to door seeking alms. Others are clothed in robes of white or saffron (the colours marking renunciation) and may be tonsured. These persons are treated with great respect and veneration in the Hindu world, as they are believed to be well on the path towards spiritual enlightenment.

The path towards enlightenment, however, is understood to be tricky and full of potential danger. For this reason, it is often considered best to seek



A Sadhu in modern day India

enlightenment at the feet of a guru—a spiritual preceptor who has already secured enlightenment and can guide others along the same path. India has innumerable renouncer traditions based on guru-disciple links going back several centuries. Each such renouncer order is distinctive for its emphasis on particular aspects and techniques of spiritual seeking, and for the unique personalities and often charismatic appeal of its leading guru figures. Some charismatic gurus attract a very large following, both of ascetic spiritual seekers and lay Hindu householders. They also attract vast amounts of donations from followers, and often use this inflow of material resources to erect vast institutional empires, some of which transcend national boundaries.

DEVOTIONALISM AND WORSHIP

Alongside austerity and self-discipline as a means for securing moksha, **bhakti** or devotion is seen as another important path towards liberation. Bhakti, intense devotional love for a personal god or goddess, is a central feature of Hinduism, evident most of all in such popular religious practices as temple worship, rituals of deity worship observed in many Hindu homes, and the observance of festivals venerating individual gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. Several renouncer orders emphasise devotion to a chosen deity, and initiates to the order share secret knowledge of a central Sanskrit mantra or chant dedicated to the deity.

While some paths towards self realisation and spiritual enlightenment, with their emphasis on asceticism and austerity, may appear world-denying, the path of bhakti entails a keen appreciation of the everyday world. It is founded on the belief that divine power pervades all things and may be experienced through one's sense and emotions. Verbal, visual, and auditory images are central to the expression of bhakti. The arts of painting, music, dance, recitation, sculpture and architecture are seen as modes of expressing devotion to the deity through sensual and emotional, even sensuous and erotic means.

Puja, the central ritual of devotional worship, is an important expression of this sensual and emotional way of relating to the deity. It involves honouring the deity through a series of steps where the image of the deity (believed to be infused with divine power) is first bathed and purified, then clothed, adorned, fed, and finally venerated symbolically through the waving of a lamp before the image. The puja ritual is conducted, often in a very elaborate fashion, at periodic intervals in Hindu temples. More abbreviated versions are usually performed by individuals and families before the household shrine.



**Bronze statue of a deity,
adorned with marigolds**

Hinduism

The ritual represents, at one level, the worshipper's reception and honouring of a distinguished and adored guest. It involves an exchange or transaction between devotee and deity where both are believed to benefit. At another level, it also marks a moment of communion between worshipper and worshipped. Through the performance of puja, the worshipper momentarily transcends his or her mundane existence and attains identity with the worshipped. In some devotionalist traditions, the deity and its image are only a symbolic representation of an undifferentiated divine essence or Brahman. The symbolic representation serves to make more immediate and tangible what is otherwise too abstract to readily conceptualise.

The sacred, in the Hindu scheme of things, is ubiquitous. It is contained in temples and sacred images, and also appears in nature—in stones and trees, mountains and rivers. In some Hindu traditions, animals like the monkey, the rat and snake are considered sacred. The cow, the most sacred of animals in Hindu perceptions, is widely revered as a source of well being and prosperity. Some men and women too, believed to be self-realised and therefore spiritually enlightened, are venerated as sacred beings.



Hindu temple in Singapore

CALENDAR OF HINDU FESTIVALS

The Hindu calendar is lunar and is divided into 12 months based on the phases of the moon. The dates of festivals and other religious events are calculated on the basis of the lunar calendar, and therefore fall on slightly different dates each year. Most of these festivals mark aspects of Hindu mythology relating to the gods and goddesses.

JANMASHTAMI

This festival celebrates the birth of the popular Hindu god, Krishna. (July-August)

GANESH CHATURTHI

A festival dedicated to the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, the remover of obstacles. (August-September)



**Sculpture of
Ganesh**

DUSSEHRA

A celebration to mark the victory of the popular god Rama and his monkey army over the demon king Ravana. Hindus also celebrate **Navaratri** during this period. This is the festival of nine nights. For Bengalis from eastern India, Navaratri culminates in a grand celebration dedicated to the worship of the goddess **Durga**. (October-November)

DIVALI

The festival of Lights follows shortly after Dussehra. This is a five-day festival, when Hindus worship **Lakshmi**, the goddess of wealth and beauty. It also celebrates the triumphant return of **Rama**, accompanied by his wife **Sita**, to his hometown of Ayodhya. Hindus observe Divali by cleaning and beautifying their homes, illuminating their homes with lamps, wearing new clothes, and exchanging sweets and other gifts. For some Hindu communities, Divali marks the beginning of their new year.

SHIVARATRI

A festival dedicated to the worship of the great god Shiva. Shiva worshippers observe a fast to mark Shivaratri and stay awake overnight to pray to Shiva. (January-February)

HOLI

This is a spring festival, during which Hindus drench each other in water and smear coloured powder on one another's faces. It commemorates the death of **Holika**, who, according to popular myth, plotted to kill her nephew to punish him for his ardent devotion to the great god Vishnu. (February-March)



A stall in India selling coloured powders, for the Holi celebrations

HINDUISM IN THE UK

According to the 2001 Census, which collected information about religious identity across Britain, just over three quarters of Britain's population reported having a religion. Of this, 72% (over 42 million) said they were Christian. After Christians, Muslims were the second most populous faith group. Nearly 3% (1.6 million) described themselves as Muslim. Hindus came third, with 1% (559,000) describing themselves as Hindu.

Hindu settlement began in Britain early in the 20th century as a result of Britain's colonial relationship with India. The majority of Hindu immigrants arrived in the 1960s and 1970s from East Africa following the impact of nation-building policies in the newly independent states. There are also Hindus in the UK today who have moved here from places like Trinidad and Fiji, and those who have moved to Britain directly from India. In recent times these have been mostly professionals, migrating to Britain to take up jobs in healthcare, education and business. Most Hindus in the UK have tended to achieve high educational levels and good standards of living, demonstrating considerable resourcefulness and flexibility in adapting to conditions in their new country.

HINDU TEMPLES

Temples often serve as a focal point for members of a local religious community to come together and engage in common spiritual and social activities. Through classes in religion and spirituality, temples socialise young entrants into the values and beliefs of the community. Temples are often the preferred venue for such social events as the celebration of religious festivals, and birth, initiation and marriage ceremonies. In the case of some Hindu religious communities, temples bring individuals together to engage in acts of social service directed at the poor and needy. They also provide the venue for religious and spiritual discourses, music and dance performances, and the collective singing of **bhajans** (devotional songs) by the congregation.

One of the most spectacular of Britain's Hindu temples is the **Shri Swaminarayan Mandir**, in the north London suburb of Neasdon, set up through the efforts of a local community originally from the state of Gujarat in northwestern India. The temple is used by followers of the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission, the British branch of a devotional order in Gujarat whose origins date back to the 18th century. The temple, the first of its kind in Europe, was built according to Hindu scriptural specifications using natural materials imported from different parts of the world, and erected using voluntary labour. Across the road from the temple is a Hindu day school. The temple and school are part of a wider network connecting hundreds of thousands of Gujarati Hindus world-wide in common worship of a deity known as Swaminarayan, whom they regard as their supreme lord. The network boasts a chain of over 370 Swaminarayan temples across the world, provides single-sex educational and spiritual programmes for people of dif-

ferent age groups, engages members actively in voluntary work, and hosts cultural festivals in all the countries in which it has a significant presence.

GURUS AND GURU ORGANISATIONS

The Swaminarayan movement is one of a number of popular sectarian groups operating within the Hindu diaspora. Some of these movements, like that of the Swaminarayans, draw members almost exclusively from among people of Indian and Hindu origin. Others have a more mixed membership, drawing adherents from non-Indian and non-Hindu backgrounds as well. The devotional networks centred on the popular Indian gurus Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi, and also the ISKCON movement, (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the **Hare Krishna** movement) attract sizeable numbers of both Indian and Western followers. So do the Transcendental Meditation group led by the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (which attracted the interest of the Beatles in the late 1960s), and Mataji Nirmala Devi's **Sahaja Yoga** movement.

Gurus are important mediators of tradition in what is often seen as the alienating environment of the West. They serve as sources of religious and spiritual authority for those seeking knowledge or guidance. Gurus may base their authority on their knowledge of ancient Sanskrit texts, on their ability to perform miracles, or on sheer personal charisma and appeal. Some prescribe techniques of spiritual discipline which require considerable effort and dedication, while others make simpler recommendations for living life in ways conducive to happiness and fulfilment. Many gurus today head vast international institutional empires, commanding a very large following, and promoting and publicising themselves and their message through transnational media networks.

HINDU DIVERSITY

It is important to bear in mind that there is no single version of Hinduism operating among Hindu immigrant communities in Britain. There is considerable variation in religious orientations between Hindu groups originating from different parts of India, following different migration routes to Britain, speaking different Indian languages, and belonging to different caste backgrounds. There is further variation between people of different economic backgrounds. Different people have been influenced in different ways and to different degrees by the world-views and orientations of their host cultures. While it is impossible to make sweeping generalisations about Hindus in Britain, it may be true to say that there is an inherent tension in Hindu immigrant communities between two kinds of attitudes or ideologies. The first asserts the need to create, perpetuate, and sustain a sense of unified Hindu identity which can be articulated publicly and which can place Hinduism on par with other world religions. Overseas organisations linked with Hindu nationalist groups in India support this position and seek actively to promote, in Britain as elsewhere, a sense of Hindu identity, pride, even chauvinism, among Hindus. The second, more prevalent among intellectuals and

scholars, challenges this position, claiming instead that notions of a unified Hindu identity are ahistorical and unnecessary. Persons of this persuasion see assertions of Hindu identity and chauvinism as detrimental to good relations between Hindus and peoples of other religions, and detrimental also to the pluralism and diversity inherent within Hinduism itself.

DEBUNKING COMMON STEREOTYPES

GENERALISING ABOUT HINDUISM

A common mistake made by Hindus and non-Hindus alike is to treat Hinduism as a unified category. The beliefs, practices, sensibilities and sensitivities of Hindus are in fact best understood not as representing 'Hinduism' in a generalised sense, but as reflective of the regional and linguistic background of the persons concerned, their caste status and sectarian affiliation. An upper caste Hindu, for instance, whose family has known all the benefits and privileges traditionally accorded upper caste members, may have a different set of sensibilities than a Hindu of a lower caste, whose caste group may have suffered centuries of discrimination and exploitation. Equally, a British Hindu whose parents arrived in Britain from India fifty years ago would have very different sensibilities from one who was born and brought up in Trinidad and moved to Britain as an adult in search of employment. Hindu followers of, say, the Swaminarayan movement described earlier would again have sensibilities very different from those of ISKCON members.

CONFLATING 'HINDU' AND 'INDIAN'

Another such mistake is to treat the categories 'Hindu' and 'Indian' as interchangeable. It is important to remember that not all Indians are Hindus. India has a sizeable non-Hindu population. Equally, not all Hindus in today's globalised world are Indian. Some Hindus may have Indian roots often going back several generations, but may prefer to see themselves not as Indian but as, for instance, Trinidadian, or Fijian, or Balinese, or British. Others, such as Western followers of ISKCON who call themselves Hindu, may have no Indian roots at all.

'OTHERING' AND STEREOTYPING HINDUS

The problem only gets further compounded when Westerners draw exaggerated contrasts between the 'Western self' and the 'Hindu other'. Three strands of 'othering' Hindus are commonplace. The first tends to describe Hindus as idolatrous, polytheistic, and primitive. It emphasises such relatively rare Hindu practices as animal sacrifice and widow burning as the defining characteristics of Hinduism, and contrasts these with supposedly 'civilised' elements of Christian and Western selfhood. The second perception tends to glorify Hinduism, highlighting particular aspects of Hindu philosophy as its defining features, and setting up a contrast between Hindu spirituality and Western materialism. The third view tends to exoticise Hinduism, seeing it

as mysterious, elusive and alluring. None of these are helpful perceptions. All three tend to represent Hinduism (and indeed Western worldviews) in stereotypical terms which have little bearing on the complexities of the real world.

RACISM

The most common problem faced by Hindus is one shared by most immigrants of South Asian origin. They are often the victims of racial intolerance and religious bigotry, or simply of Western ignorance and indifference. A lack of understanding about differences between, for instance, Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis, or between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains, leads to a lack of sensitivity to, and disregard for, the multiplicity of belief systems, life styles and religious orientations prevalent among South Asian immigrants. Equally, a lack of understanding of their socio-economic conditions, of their everyday struggles and challenges, and of the gradual changes in their values and beliefs resulting from their exposure to British society, leads to racial prejudice.

2. SPECIFIC ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

KEY SENSITIVITIES

INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS FAMILY VALUES

A potentially sensitive issue for many Hindus has to do with their sense of familial loyalty and bonding. Hindu children are often brought up to respect the authority of their parents. This can potentially put a constraint on their individualism. Situations which require Hindu children to act contrary to the wishes of their parents can often be trying, and may remain unresolved or lead to inter-generational conflict. This may be particularly true with respect to decisions about pursuing higher studies, choosing a career, or choosing one's marriage partner. While not all Hindu parents expect unquestioning obedience from their children, some do. In these cases, children often find it hard to resolve the conflict between self-interest and loyalty to parents, and are best treated with sympathy and understanding. Popular comedy series like 'Goodness Gracious Me' and 'The Kumars at No 42' often dwell on this theme of parental authority and over-protectiveness in an exaggerated and caricatured fashion. (Similar themes are addressed in the popular film 'Bend it Like Beckham' in the context of a Sikh family.) These are themes that relate particularly to second and third generation British Hindus, whose values and orientations often diverge considerably from those of first generation immigrants.

PATRIARCHY AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The status of women can also be a potentially sensitive issue for Hindus. Several Hindu communities in Britain tend to foster patriarchal values, and these impose considerable constraints on the behaviour patterns and social activities of their womenfolk. Ideas of what it is to be a 'good' Hindu woman often revolve around themes of modesty and self-effacement, the preservation of a virginal status prior to marriage, obedience to one's parents, husband, and in-laws, chastity, a sacrificing spirit and selfless service to the family. This may have important implications for the kind of studies or employment women may take up, the extent of their social interaction with men, their style of clothing, and also their freedom of movement outside the home. While most second and third generation Hindu immigrants in Britain are tending to be increasingly liberal in this respect, there remain in some quarters vestiges of a more conservative patriarchy which can be constraining for women and can influence the choices they make. Where this is the case, any potentially problematic issues need to be dealt with using considerable caution and care.

PURITY AND POLLUTION

Some Hindus may consider certain kinds of food and drink, such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, even onion and garlic, and also alcoholic drinks, to be 'impure'. Vegetarian food is considered 'purer' than non-vegetarian food, and some castes and communities may follow a strictly vegetarian diet. Others may be concerned to maintain their dietary purity not throughout the year but during certain phases of their life or on particular occasions. Some Hindu temples and shrines may require all visitors to have remained 'pure' for a few days prior to their visit to the sacred sites. Similarly, some forms of pilgrimage may require a period of preparation, prior to the journey, when the pilgrims must maintain the highest standards of purity. Some phases of the calendar year, such as the months of **shraadh** dedicated to the memory of dead ancestors, may require higher standards of purity than normal. Some Hindus, especially women, often observe fasts at fixed times of the week, months or year, when they avoid food items considered 'impure', often restricting their diet to uncooked food (considered purer than cooked food), fruit, certain kinds of cereal and milk. Many Hindus also consider beef taboo. This follows from the general Hindu regard for cows as sacred animals.

Considerations of purity and pollution often extend to matters other than food and drink. Sexual intercourse prior to, or outside of, marriage may be considered polluting for the families of those involved, especially when the partners do not belong to the same caste or community. Children born out of wedlock may be treated as impure and therefore illegitimate. In many communities female virginity and 'purity' prior to marriage tends to be valued highly. The bride is often perceived as a 'gift' from her family to the family of the groom and ensuring the virginal purity of this gift, as well as the act of gifting itself, is believed to bring spiritual merit to the gift givers. Women are often considered impure during their monthly periods, and are debarred from making visits to the family shrine or to temples and other sacred sites during this time.

HINDU PRIDE AND THE NEED FOR SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

All the above are potentially delicate issues for at least some Hindus, at least some of the time. A far more sensitive issue for most, if not all, Hindus, however, is the suggestion that their religious world-views and practices are primitive, irrational or inferior in some way to those prevalent in the West. Suggestions like these make most Hindus defensive about their religion, and a common response is once again to engage in a process of 'othering' and reverse stereotyping, where the Western 'other' is portrayed as being overly materialistic and therefore unable to appreciate the spirituality of the Hindu 'self'. Needless to say, treating Hindu beliefs and practices in a non-judgemental, non-confrontational, and respectful way enhances the chances of constructive dialogue between Hindus and non-Hindus.

CULTURAL ISSUES

THE CASTE SYSTEM

Traditionally, different social groups (castes) in Hindu society were ranked hierarchically in relation to each other with the 'purest' castes at the top of the hierarchy, and the most 'impure' at the bottom. Caste groups were by and large occupational groups, and one's occupation determined one's level of purity. For instance, the purest castes were those of priests and scholars, who performed rituals, and studied sacred texts. The most impure were occupational groups dealing with organic matter (the source of all impurity in the Hindu scheme of things)—they included for instance washerwomen and men, barbers, and leather tanners. A vast spectrum of other castes were ranged between the two extremes.

One's caste status is determined by birth such that one is born into the caste of one's parents. In traditional Hindu society, caste determined most aspects of one's life—where one lived, with whom one could legitimately interact, with whom one shared food, and whom one married. As a result, social mobility, especially for those at the lowest rungs of society, was highly restricted. In the present, with modern occupations and work places affording individuals a considerable measure of autonomy from caste restrictions, caste has ceased to be the all-important marker of one's identity. This is particularly true of Hindus in urban India and those resident overseas. Hierarchical relations between castes, based on notions of purity and pollution, are fast losing their relevance. Castes, however, still appear as discrete bounded units. Hindu communities in India as well as overseas often form caste associations whose members meet frequently and celebrate festivals together. Also, in many cases caste remains an important factor in negotiating Hindu marriages, with parents often seeking same-caste partners for their sons and daughters.

HINDU FAMILY STRUCTURE AND MARRIAGE

The basic family unit in traditional Hindu society is the joint family. In the joint family system, two, often three or even four generations of a family live together as part of the same household, sharing common living space and kitchen facilities, drawing from a common pool of financial resources, and sharing responsibilities for the upkeep of the family home. Much of traditional Hindu society is patriarchal as well as patrilineal, with the oldest male member of the household heading the family, and family property passing down the male line.

Hindu women, in a traditional context, derived their identity from the male authority figures in their lives. This was usually the woman's father before her marriage, her husband after her marriage, and her sons in her old age. Marriage was, and remains to this day, the central institution ordering and regulating Hindu social relations. In most cases, marriage is seen not as the

formalisation of a romantic relationship between the individuals concerned, but as an arrangement between the families of the bride and groom. Conventionally, bride and groom are from the same or similarly ranked castes, and though in some instances it is permissible for the woman to marry 'up' into a family of higher caste status than her own, the reverse, where a woman marries into a lower caste family, is considered taboo.

In modern times, the joint family structure has given way to the nuclear family. With more and more women entering educational institutions and the employment sector, they need less support from the male members of their families and are able to assert, to some degree, their independence and autonomy. Though the joint family as a practical institution has diminished in importance, the *idea* of the joint family continues to retain a powerful hold over the Hindu imagination. Families, though they may not live in close proximity, tend to be closely networked across generations, and older members of the family continue to exercise considerable authority over younger members. Parents continue to have a major say in the marriage decisions of their sons and daughters, even though the concept of the 'love marriage' as opposed to the 'arranged marriage' is gaining popularity in the contemporary Hindu world. Families come together on occasions like births, deaths, and weddings, reinforcing a sense of solidarity as a group. Hindu epic stories like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which are often retold today in the form of television serials and dramas, also serve to reinforce the ideal of the joint family in popular thinking.

Hindu families often tend to be closely knit, and family members, especially women, often play a vital role in transmitting Hindu customs and traditions across generations. Children almost invariably have their first exposure to Hindu belief and practice at home, where they may be encouraged to pray at the family shrine regularly, told stories of Hindu gods and goddesses, and instructed to observe fasts at particular times of the year. Children learn through participation and imitation about how to perform puja at the home shrine. They also learn about Hindu festivals such as Divali, Holi, Shivaratri and Janmashtami. Through participation in the larger Hindu family network, they develop an understanding of customs and ceremonies surrounding such important rites of passage as birth, initiation, marriage and death.

THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN HINDU IDENTITY

Comic books narrating stories from Indian mythology, video and audio tapes of religious events and programmes, and sites on the internet, all contribute towards enhancing awareness about Hindu beliefs and traditions. Most major Hindu religious groups and organisations now have a presence in cyberspace, and information about gods and goddesses, temples, festivals and mythological stories can all be downloaded from the web. Dramatised and serialised versions of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, which were regularly broadcast on Indian television in the 1990s and became extremely popular among Hindu audiences in India, are available on video and DVD, and circulate widely across immigrant Hindu communities in Britain and else-

where. Indian TV channels, many of which are available through cable and satellite transmission in Britain, often relay religious programmes which can be viewed in the comfort of one's home. Besides this, journals and magazines too contribute vastly to the spread of religious images and messages. *Hinduism Today* is one of the more popular such publications, with multiple regional editions, and archived on the internet, for Hindus across the world. It describes itself as a 'Hindu family newspaper' and carries articles on Hindu traditions and beliefs, news items on Hindu practices in different countries, and advertisements and notices relevant to the Hindu readership in particular regions and localities.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

It is impossible to specify general requirements or preferences relating to Hindu students in higher education. There are no dress codes binding on all Hindus, no rules about dating, alcohol, smoking, and dietary habits that apply to all. Some Hindus, especially those from upper-caste backgrounds, tend to be vegetarian and would benefit if vegetarian food options are available on campus and on field trips. Students might also appreciate the occasional screening of Indian films on campus where such provision exists.

Not all Hindus attach the same degree of importance to the observance of festivals, and requests for leave of absence during Hindu festivals would need to be considered on an individual basis. In trying to ease themselves into campus life away from home, students might find it helpful if they are provided with information about local temples, ashrams, yoga classes, and Hindu societies.

Some universities already have active Hindu societies where members organise lectures, religious discourses, discussions, film screenings, and music and dance events on a regular basis. Again, not all Hindus would necessarily be interested in joining such groups. Some such societies may have members with strong Hindu nationalist and chauvinistic sentiments, and the activities of the society may reflect this. Where such sentiments are expressed, they are often communicated in a rhetoric of victimhood, where the Hindu is presented as a victim of centuries of Muslim and Christian oppression. This can potentially lead to tension between followers of the different faiths, and any conflict will need to be resolved with due sensitivity.

3. RESOURCES

BOOKS

INTRODUCTIONS TO HINDUISM

Brockington, J.L., *The Sacred Thread: Hinduism in its Continuity and Diversity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1981, 1996)

Clooney, Francis X., *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children* (New York: Orbis 2000)

Fuller, C. J., *The Camphor Flame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992)

Flood, Gavin, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996)

Klostermaier, K.K., *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1989)

Knott, Kim, *Hinduism—A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000)

Lipner, Julius, *Hindus—Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge 1994)

Zaehner, R.C., *Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962)

Zaehner, R.C., *Hindu Scriptures* (New York: Everyman 1966)

BOOKS ON HINDUISM AMONG ASIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UK AND ELSEWHERE

Ballard, Roger, (ed) *Desh Pardesh: the South Asian Presence in Britain* (London: Hurst 1994)

Burghart, Richard, (ed) *Hinduism in Great Britain: The Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Cultural Milieu* (London: Tavistock 1987)

Jackson, Robert and Nesbitt, Eleanor, *Hindu Children in Britain* (Stoke-on-Trent: Bentham 1993)

Raj, Dhooлека S., *Where are You From? Middle Class Migrants in the Modern World* (California: University of California Press)

Tinker, Hugh, *The Banyan Tree: Overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977)

Van der Veer, Peter (ed) *Nation and Migration: Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press 1995)

Vertovec, Steven, *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns* (London: Routledge 2000)

Waghorne, J. P., *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (USA: Oxford University Press 2004)

Williams, R.B., *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press 1992)

WEBSITES

BBC RELIGION AND ETHICS ON-LINE

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism>

HINDUNET

<http://www.hindunet.org> (operated by a voluntary group called the Hindu Student Council)

ORGANISATIONS

HINDUISM TODAY

Founded in 1979, this organisation, based in Hawaii, publishes a magazine which exists to foster Hindu solidarity worldwide and inform and inspire Hindus and those interested in Hinduism.

<http://www.hinduism-today.com>

GURU ORGANISATIONS

<http://www.ammachi.org>

<http://www.sathyasai.org>

<http://www.tm.org>

<http://www.sahajayoga.org>

<http://www.iskcon.com>

<http://www.indiadinvine.com>

OXFORD CENTRE FOR HINDU STUDIES

<http://www.ochs.org.uk>

