

The Hindu Community in Scouting



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THE HINDU COMMUNITY IN SCOUTING

The values of Scouting, such as honesty, a willingness to do things and a respect for others, and an emphasis on personal development, are particularly compatible with Hindu teachings. Young people in Scouting are encouraged to develop mentally, physically, socially and spiritually, which are key principles in Hinduism.

Approximately 1 million of the 25 million Scouts world-wide are Hindu. There are at least 360,000 Hindus living in the United Kingdom today, of whom 40% are under 20 years old. The majority of Hindus living in the United Kingdom have their origins in the Gujarati State in western India and the Punjab in northern India & Pakistan. Smaller British Hindu communities originate from other Indian states, such as West Bengal, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, and from East Africa and the Caribbean. However, it is more often the case that these young people will now be second or third generation Hindus who have been born and brought up in the United Kingdom.

The word 'Hindu' was originally a Persian word meaning 'people who live beyond the River Indus', and came to mean Indians who were not Muslim or Buddhist. In this way 'Hinduism' connected people from many different cultural traditions, and as a result does not have a rigid set of beliefs, a single founder/ prophet, scripture or creed. Hinduism does not expect its followers to believe in certain things, but to live in a certain way, and consequently Hinduism affects every aspect of a Hindu's daily life. As with any world religion Hinduism is made up of hundreds of thousands of individuals, and each person finds their own way of expressing their faith. This fact sheet aims to highlight the major common elements that exist among the majority of Hindus.



HINDUISM

Hindus believe in one personal Supreme Being or God – **Parabrahma** – that can be found in everything. The Hindu symbol and the syllable **AUM** symbolise the trimurti (trinity) which represents God's relationship with the universe. God is creator Brahma (A), preserver Vishnu (U) and destroyer Shiva (M), which can also be explained as Generator, Operator and Destroyer (GOD).

Hindus also worship representatives of God or incarnations, which they see as different forms of a single reality that is greater than all human thought. These incarnations may be human or animal, male or female.

Despite the diversity of belief and worship, Hindus are connected by several collective concepts.

TWO KEY BELIEFS

1. **Dharma:** a Hindu's 'duty' to behave rightly and to fulfil their obligations to their family, society and God. Many Hindus use 'Dharma' to describe the faith.
2. **Karma:** the law of cause and effect, where every action has an effect, even upon their future lives.

FOUR AIMS IN LIFE:

1. **Dharma:** to do their duty.
2. **Artha:** to make wealth to help others.

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3. **Kama:** to fulfil their ambitions without becoming attached to their success.
4. **Moksha:** to gain release from the cycle of rebirth known as **samsara** which is the ultimate aim of every Hindu.

A Hindu can only reach fulfilment, or be reborn with a greater level of spirituality, if they have fulfilled their Dharma. Hindus believe they can do this by living correctly, and by performing good actions in order to achieve good karma. Though Hindus are not bound by a creed, as a society they are bound by rules associated with their family and caste. Every Hindu is born into a caste (**jati**) which is a social group with its own duties and place in the social hierarchy. Castes correspond to (1) the mouth (2) arms, (3) thighs, and (4) feet of God. Traditionally these castes were:

1. **Brahmins:** temple priests and teachers of doctrine.
2. **Kshatriyas:** administrators and soldiers.
3. **Vaisyas:** commercial and artisan clan.
4. **Sudras:** farming and humbler jobs.

Sikhism and Buddhism have their origins in Hinduism, as do some modern sects such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission.

HOLY WRITINGS

Hindus follow teachings from a number of sacred books called shastras ('texts that explain and guide the way people behave in life'). These teachings were passed on orally for hundreds of years before they were written down, and are some of the world's oldest-known writings. Most are written in the ancient Indian language Sanskrit, which most Hindus believe is a sacred language. The Bhagvad Gita, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are some of the holy texts.

There are two types of holy writing: **shruti** (heard and revealed) and **smriti** (remembered).

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

The place of worship is the **mandir** (temple), though most Hindus have a shrine in their home where they can perform **puja** (worship) daily. Any quiet place where meditation is possible can be used as a place of prayer, which could be a place of worship of another faith. Everyone is welcome in a mandir, providing they respect Hindu principles. Anyone visiting the mandir must remove their shoes before entering the main body

of the temple where the deities are installed as a mark of respect. Hindu women will often cover their heads before entering, and will not enter while they are menstruating.

There are many shrines in the temple which contain **murti** (statues) of incarnations. These images are a visible sign of God which helps the devotee concentrate their mind during worship. Temples in the United Kingdom usually have shrines for the followers of Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva and the Mother Goddess. A **pujari** (person who leads the worship) or **pandit** (a priest who also acts as a religious adviser) performs a series of rituals, behind curtains, which prepare the murti. The curtains are then drawn back so that the devotees can see and be seen by God. This moment is called darshan. The pujara then performs the **Arti** (lights) ceremony. First, the pujara places five lamps on a tray which he then moves in a clockwise circle in front of the deity. While he does this, devotees sing a special **bhajan** (sacred song), and then ask God to "bless me with ever-increasing faith, divine love and spirit of service". Devotees then warm their palms over the lights in the shrine or on the arti tray, and place their hands over their eyes, forehead and head in a single movement, thus symbolically taking the light of God in to their mind and heart. Devotees are then offered prashad (blessed food) by the pujara which gives them God's blessing. The syllable **AUM** is often recited at the beginning and end of prayers and when bhajans or mantras are sung.

Most shrines have a **Shikhara** (peak) rising over it, to symbolise Mount Meru, a mountain that is the centre of the universe and where the Gods reside. There are different patterns on the **dhvaja** (flag) placed on each shrine symbolic of that particular god.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is not a requirement of the Hindu faith, but is seen as a form of devotion and a way of gaining **punya** (religious merit). A pilgrimage can be to anywhere of religious significance whether that is a river, mountain or temple. Many Hindus from the United Kingdom also travel to India to meet members of their family or to see where their friends and family grew up. One of the most important places of pilgrimage is the town of Varanasi on the River Ganges. Hindus believe that the river flowed in Heaven before coming to Earth, and that Varanasi is the crossing place from that world to this. Hindus believe that bathing in the river can cleanse away bad karma from

previous lives, and that dying at Varanasi or having their ashes scattered on the river will allow them to achieve moksha (release from the cycle of rebirth).

HOLY DAYS AND FESTIVALS

The Hindu calendar is based upon the lunar year – when a new moon appears this denotes a new month. The seven days of the week have names that correspond to different solar bodies. The lunar year is shorter than a full solar year, which is the basis of the western calendar, so an extra month is added every few years.

A Hindu will not necessarily observe all the festivals listed, and the way they will celebrate festivals is dependent on the form of worship the Hindu practises, e.g. whether they follow Shiva or Vishnu. This often depends upon which region of India their family is from. It is important that you ask your Hindu Scouts when and how they will celebrate their festivals. It may be appropriate to include some activities for all the Scouts in your Group, and Hindu Scouts may be absent from meetings at these times.

Diwali (Festival of Lights or the Festival of good triumphing over evil) is held for five days every year in October or November. Diwali marks the start of the Hindu New Year. It celebrates Rama's triumphant homecoming to his home town of Ayodhya from his 14 year exile after he defeated the wicked king. People celebrate by placing divas (lamps - and hence diwali) in the windows of their homes to invite a blessing on the household from Lakshmi the goddess of prosperity, and by setting off fireworks. Hindus also give cards and gifts. These include a new set of clothes which are worn on Diwali day to symbolise a new life ahead.

Navratri (or Dassehra or Durga Puja) is held for nine nights, twelve days before the beginning of Diwali. It is the worship and devotion to the Mother Goddess, who acts as a safe refuge for the devotee as a mother does for her child.

Dassehra (literally 'tenth') is celebrated on the last day of the festival. Dassehera is celebrated ten days after Navratri, and commemorates Rama's victory over Ravana.

Ram Navami is the celebration of the birth of Rama, said to have taken place at 12 noon on the ninth day of the month **Chaitra** (March/April). In many Hindu temples an image of Rama is uncovered and rocked at noon as the congregation sings passages from the Ramayana.

Janmashtami is the celebration of the birth of Krishna, said to have taken place on the eighth night of the month **Bhadrapada** (August/September). Hindus believe that he was born at midnight, and so at Janmashtami everyone stays up until then to greet the baby Krishna. He is greeted with songs, dances and offerings of butter and curds, and is then rocked in a cradle.

Maha-Shivratri is the Festival of Shiva (who represents the power to destroy and recreate) and is held in January/February. Shiva is often represented as the **Linga** (an ancient fertility symbol), and some Gujarati communities celebrate the festival by pouring milk over the Linga as an offering to the god.

Holi is an ancient Spring Festival, held on the full moon of the month **Phalgun** (usually March), and celebrates the triumph of good over evil. Hindus light bonfires to commemorate the burning of the demoness Holika, who perished while planning to burn alive Prahlad, a devotee of Lord Vishnu. It is also the Festival of Colours of Spring which celebrates the joy of life and new life (as things come in to bloom). At this time Krishna and his devotees sprinkled coloured water on one another to symbolise Krishna showering spirituality in all its richness on all. Hindus re-enact this by throwing red and yellow dye or powder at one another.

Raksha Bandhan (Festival of protection from evil and family love) expresses the love between brothers and sisters, and reminds men that it is their duty to always care for their sisters. Women tie a **rakki** (a charm against evil) around their brothers wrist to protect them, and receive money and presents in return. Rakkis can be anything from red threads to ornate bands. Raksha Bandhan is celebrated in July/August.

Ganesh Chaturthi celebrates the birth of **Ganesh** (the remover of obstacles) and occurs in August/ September.

BEHAVIOUR AND VALUES

There are 11 principles by which a Hindu will live:

1. to tell the truth;
2. to not steal;
3. to use their intelligence;
4. to understand the difference between right and wrong;
5. to develop a knowledge of God;

6. to be peaceful;
7. to love everybody;
8. to be kind to all creation;
9. to behave non-violently;
10. to not have false attachments to worldly goods;
11. to have faith in God.

Some Hindus, especially **sadhus** (holy men) practise ancient Indian exercises called yoga, as a way of controlling their body and mind in order to build up their spiritual power to gain moksha.

The scriptures recommend 16 **samskars** (sacraments) to achieve moksha. Samskars are rituals performed at key stages of a Hindu person's life from before they are born to after their death, and include:

- **the naming** of a baby;
- a baby's first **hair-cut** (between their first and fifth birthday) where the karma of their previous life is washed away;
- **the sacred thread ceremony** (upanayana) where boys in the highest three castes (at eight, 11 and 12 years old respectively) make a vow to remain celibate until marriage, and to fulfil his duty to God, his parents and to his religious teacher;
- **marriage** – the 12th samskar – which Hindus regard as the bond of two families rather than of two people. The wedding rituals are performed by the bride's parents, and then conducted by a priest who reads mantras from The Vedas. The ritual includes the couple taking seven steps together, which represent food, strength, prosperity, happiness, children, the enjoyment of pleasures, and lifelong friendship;
- **cremation** (the final samskar), after which the person's ashes should, if possible, be scattered in running water. Fourteen days after the funeral the family holds a feast, who then take part in an annual ceremony on that date as a way of remembering the person who died.

Though the rules of caste are less restrictive in modern Indian cities and in the United Kingdom, most Hindus' lives are still affected by caste. Some older Hindus in the United Kingdom comply rigidly with the rules, and most Hindus will still marry within their caste. Some Hindu communities have **jati** (caste) associations, where members of the same caste can meet and run classes and activities for their children.

THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Living as a member of an extended family is an important part of a Hindu's life. Grandparents and aunts and uncles are as significant in the upbringing of a Hindu child as their parents and siblings, and as a result first cousins are often called brothers and sisters. Living as an extended family is not always possible in the United Kingdom, and so there is often an increased emphasis on a Hindu's responsibility to all members of their community, particularly in the respect and care of their elders (an important part of Hindu family values).

Names and naming

As the naming of a child is one of the Hindu samskars, sacraments, it has a prescribed ritual. After a baby is born, the family's priest will consult an almanac and use this to suggest syllables that can be used for the baby's name. Then, on the twelfth day after it was born, the baby will be given their name.

The naming system in Hindu families is the same as the English system. The surname, such as Amin, Chandarana, Gupta, Patel, or Shah, is shared by all members of the family and a person may be given one or two personal names. If someone has two personal names the first is usually the one used. The surname usually indicates a division of caste.

Most personal names are either male or female, e.g. Indira, Leela, Meena and Vishni for girls, and Anil, Gopal, Naresh and Surrendra for boys. However, some names are common to both sexes, e.g. Krishna, or are made feminine by the addition of an 'a', e.g. Arun and Aruna.

Kumar and Kumari (prince and princess respectively) may be added to personal names. They are not necessarily used by the person all the time whether formally or informally, e.g. a girl who has written her name Pannakumari Desai will most probably be known as Panna by her friends and will probably on another occasion write her name Panna Desai. Ben (sister) and Bhai (brother) are also added to personal names as a mark of respect, e.g. a boy who is known at Scouts as Amit Mistry would be called Amitbhai by his younger brother.

Food

Hindu writings instruct devotees to respect all living creatures, and so strict Hindus are

vegetarian and will not eat eggs or cheese that contains animal rennet (most English hard cheeses).

Hindus who do eat meat will eat lamb and mutton, and possibly chicken, fish and pork, but beef is strictly forbidden as the cow is a sacred animal.

Strict Hindus will not drink or eat food prepared by, or with, a person who does not share the values of their social group. Women and girls from many Hindu families are also not allowed to prepare food when they have their period.

Dress Code

Most Hindu women wear saris or, if they are from the Punjab, **shulwar and chemise** (trousers and tunic), while men usually wear western clothes. More and more girls and young women wear western clothes most of the time, and only wear saris or shulwar and chemise when they visit the mandir or for special occasions. Therefore Hindu children can usually wear standard Scout uniform.

Traditionally Hindu girls marked their forehead with a **chandalo** when they got married, but this is now something a woman will choose to do, whether for traditional, cultural or fashion reasons. Having a chandalo does not imply that a woman is married, just as not having a chandalo does not imply they are still single. Hindus, both men and women, can also apply a **tilak** (a U-shaped mark) to their forehead, which represents the foot of God and is a sign of surrender to God.

SCOUT MEETINGS

Most Hindus living in the United Kingdom will celebrate festivals on the closest weekend to the traditional date of the festival. However, many families will worship at home on the actual date of a festival, and so a Hindu Scout may not be able to attend a Scout meeting on those days. Hindus would welcome all members of the Scout Group to the mandir if they wished to visit.

Some Hindu children will also go the mandir at weekends or after school to take part in community based activities, such as studying a language, learning how to play a musical instrument, learning a traditional Indian dance, and learning about their faith.

Most Hindu parents would allow their children to attend mixed Scout Groups, provided they had both male and female leaders. However, it is worth consulting local community leaders, and

encouraging adults from the community to join as Leaders and Helpers.

If appropriate, some aspects of Hinduism could be included in Scout meetings, e.g. saying Hindu prayers or enacting stories from sacred texts (such as the Ramayana) at appropriate times. Providing activities which develop cross-cultural understanding, e.g. learning a traditional Indian dance or having a demonstration and lessons on yoga, would also be appropriate.

The Promise

Some Hindus are happy to use the phrase "duty to God" in the Promise, but others would prefer to say "duty to my Dharma" (i.e. the divine force which directs my life) instead. Both of these are acceptable.

Camp

With a little consideration during the planning stages, a Hindu's wish to practise their faith at camp can be facilitated. With help from the local Hindu community, a simple service suitable for all the Scouts attending could be put together, or an area (such as a tent with clean ground sheets inside) could be set aside for quiet contemplation for all Scouts.

Before planning a camp menu ask your Hindu Scouts what their dietary requirements are. Hindu vegetarian options would be suitable for all Scouts. It is also important that you ensure that Hindu hygiene rules are followed when preparing all meals.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The SHAP Working Party on World Religions in Education publishes an annual calendar of festivals which will list the appropriate dates for a particular year. The calendar is available from:

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For a further list of resources on the Hindu community, or other faith communities in the United Kingdom, please contact:

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