

What do you know about Hinduism?

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

About Hinduism

Hinduism originated and developed in India over the last 3,000-3,500 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 Krishna, Durga, Ganesh, Sakti (Devi), Vishnu, Surya, Siva 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.

Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism 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 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)
- Atharva-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



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 Celebrations

Navaratri/Nine Nights

Navaratri is a nine day festival dedicated to the worship of the deity Sakti. The tenth day is known as Vijaya Disami (Day of Victory) in which prayers of thankfulness are offered.

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 spaces. It is also a time

for wearing new clothes and feasting with family and friends. Diwali/ Deepavali is set by Hindu lunar calendar and therefore varies each year. Translated to the Gregorian calendar, it usually falls in October-November.

Ganesha Chaturthi

This festival 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.

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.



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 2006 Census, over 148,000 people in Australia identified as Hindu.
- In the 2006 Census, 0.7% of the total population identified as Hindu.

Respecting Religious and Cultural Diversity at UWS

UWS Equal Opportunity Policy

It is the policy of the University of Western Sydney to provide equal opportunity for all staff and students regardless of sex, pregnancy, race, marital status, homosexuality, age, family responsibilities, disability, transgender, political conviction or religious belief.

Multifaith Facilities

Multifaith facilities are available for students and staff on all UWS campuses. For Meditation and Prayer Room locations: <http://www.uws.edu.au/students/ods/chaplains>

References and Further Information

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Hindu Council of Australia

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Hindu Festivals

<http://www.hinduism.co.za/newpage3.htm>

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<http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/index.htm>

The Heart of Hinduism: The Four Main Denominations

<http://hinduism.iskcon.com/tradition/1200.htm>

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ABC: The Sacred Site

<http://www.abc.net.au/compass/explore/hindu.htm>

Religions in Canada

http://www.forces.gc.ca/hr/religions/engraph/religions00_e.asp