

Introduction: This factsheet is not intended to be a definitive guide to Hinduism. Alternatively, it attempts to provide basic known facts as well as some information that is perhaps less well-known. It is based on information contained on the website of The National Council of Hindu Temples (UK), who have kindly given their permission for their website to be used in the production of this factsheet.

Hinduism



A symbol of Hinduism: The Om (Aum)¹

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world, and has an estimated billion followers across the globe. Its origins lie in the Indus Valley in present-day Pakistan, though the greatest concentration of belief is in India where 80% of the population consider themselves to be Hindu. Hinduism is in fact an umbrella description for a number of religious beliefs and ideas. It is not a single doctrine and has no single founder or originating prophet.

Numbers in the UK

According to the 2001 Census, there are a recorded 559,000 Hindus in the UK. This amounts to 1% of the overall population.

Hinduism in the UK developed largely in the 1960's and 1970's through the migration of a large number of people from Africa and India. Of the Hindu population of the UK, up to 70% are Gujarati, up to 15% are Punjabi and the rest have their origins in other parts of India, Sri Lanka and other countries.

The majority of Hindus in the UK speak one or more languages aside from English. These include Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali and Tamil. Sanskrit is greatly used in the religious texts.

Just over 50% of the UK's Hindus live in London – Harrow and Brent having the largest concentration. Other large communities are in Leicester, Birmingham and Bradford. In Leicester, the 2001 Census recorded over 41,000 Hindus in the city (nearly 15% of the population). In Leicestershire the figures were 12,331 and 2% respectively.

Background

The term 'Hindu' is related to the word Sindhu – the name of a river known in English as the River Indus. Because of the difficulty experienced by the Persians in pronunciation, the river Sindhu became the river 'Hindu'. The inhabitants living across the river 'Hindu' became Hindus and the land itself became known as Hindustan. Hence, the majority religion of India (Latin derivative of Hindu) became known as Hinduism.

Hinduism became an umbrella description for a multitude of religious ideas in the Indian sub-continent. Some of these ideas adhere closely to the original Vedic tradition, while over the years many have incorporated local influences with regional, linguistic and doctrinal variations.

¹ Image from Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Om.svg>)

The proliferation of Hindu denominations fall within three main groups:

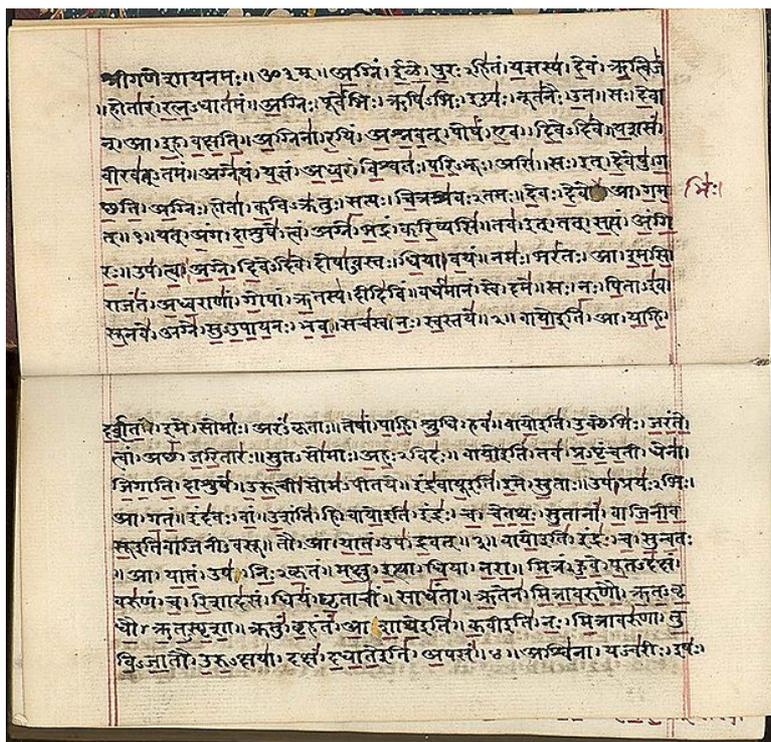
1. **Vaishnavism**: worship of Krishna and His incarnations.
2. **Shaivism**: worship of Shiva.
3. **Shaktas**: worship of Kali.

The all-embracing nature of Hinduism often appears confusing to non-Hindus, but despite external variety, there is much in common philosophically within the Hindu faith.

Hinduism is referred to as *Sanatana Dharma* (the eternal religion) or *Vedic Dharma* (pertaining to the Vedas). A notable feature of Hinduism is that it does not originate from one prophet or teacher. The earliest record of Hindu teaching is found in the Vedas (ca. 3000 BCE), but many authorities claim that Hinduism is as old as the universe, that it is based on eternal truths which actually have no mortal source. Other great religions – Jainism, Buddhism and, more recently, Sikhism – have their origins in the Vedic tradition.

The Vedic Scriptures (Vedas)

The Vedic Scriptures have been described as ‘the oldest religious texts in the world’. They state that prior to 3000 BCE knowledge was passed down by word of mouth. However, with concern for the powers of humans to retain knowledge in this way, the great sage Vyasadeva compiled a series of literature in the Sanskrit language.² Vyasadeva collected the original revealed knowledge or Veda into four divisions (The **Samhitas**) called the **Rig**, **Yajur**, **Atharva** and **Sama Veda**. These describe ritual processes of worship, sacrifices and hymns.



(left³) The Rig Veda. This manuscript is from India and dates from the 19th Century.

It is in Devanāgarī script, the script most commonly used for Sanskrit, an official language of India (one of twenty-two) and one of the liturgical languages of both Hinduism and Buddhism.

Many **Upa-vedas** and **Angas**, or corollaries to the Vedas, were prepared by different writers giving a wealth of scientific information on all aspects of living: agriculture, astronomy, medicine, nutrition, architecture, chemistry and even aeronautics and nuclear physics.

The ideas of the Vedas were expanded in the 108 **Upanishads**, in which Vyasadeva begins instruction about the eternal soul and the relation of the soul to the material world. The Upanishads are essentially

² Sanskrit being an accepted source of Indo-European languages.

³ Source: Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rigveda_MS2097.jpg)

mystical and philosophical teachings. The **Vedanta-sutra** is a book of highly condensed texts describing the entire Vedic philosophy. Appreciating the difficulty of people in understanding the Vedas and Upanishads, Vyasadeva compiled the 18 **Puranas**, which are a set of histories describing events of previous epochs/eras and in different parts of the universe, which reveal the super-human pastimes of the Lord as He appeared in His many incarnations. Of all the Puranas, the **Bhagavad-Purana** or **Shrimad-Bhagavatam** is the most popular because it relates in detail the appearance and activities of Lord Krishna.

The **Ramayana**, written by the sage Valmiki, tells the story of the Lord's incarnation as Prince Rama who, having been exiled to the forest with His wife, Sita and His brother, Lakshmana, rescues the former from the evil king Ravana with the help of Hanuman, the Monkey God. It is a story rich in symbolism and morality and it has inspired drama, art and dance for many centuries. The **Mahabharata** describes the history of India some 5,000 years ago and its 100,000 verses make it the longest poem ever written. At that time, Lord Krishna was present on the Earth and one chapter of the Mahabharata, known as the **Bhagavad-Gita** (*Song of God*), contains His instructions to Arjuna, His disciple and friend. The Gita is accepted by Hindus as the highest expression of Vedic religious understanding and has been revered by great thinkers all over the world.

Some of the earliest writings on peace are contained within Hindu scripture. The following is taken from the Rig Veda⁴:

*“Come together, talk together,
Let our minds be in harmony.
Common be our prayer,
Common be our end,
Common be our purpose,
Common be our deliberations,
Common be our desires,
United be our hearts,
United be our intentions,
Perfect be the union among us.”*

Transmission of Knowledge – the role of a Guru

Within Hinduism it is stressed that the complex and profound wisdom of the Vedas cannot be fully appreciated without the help of a genuine spiritual master or a *guru*, one who has no selfish motives and who is fixed in service to God. A special relationship develops between the guru and the student and the guidance from the guru is seen by Hindus as being essential for those seeking the ultimate goal of life.

Within the Bhagavad-Gita⁵ it is said:

“Just try to learn the truth by approaching a spiritual master. Inquire from him submissively and render service unto Him. The self-realised soul can impart knowledge unto you because He has seen the truth.”

Hinduism – A philosophy to live by

The Sanskrit word *dharma* is usually translated as ‘religion’. It does, however, have deeper significance. Dharma refers to our essential nature. As the dharma for fire is to burn, so the Vedas teach that the dharma of all human beings is to serve others. As examples, the dharma of a parent is to serve children; of a doctor, to serve his/her patients; of a soldier to serve his/her country etc. For a Head of State, the dharma is to serve the people, and all human beings serve the needs of the body.

Hindus therefore argue that their culture and religion teaches all people the duties and responsibilities they need to uphold according to their respective life status and occupation. For someone to claim to be an

⁴ Rig Veda 10-191:2. Taken from BBC website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/hinduethics/war.shtml>)

⁵ Chapter 4 Text 34.

effective parent, teacher, doctor, businessperson, Head of State or guru, it is essential for them to follow the dharma inherent in that position.

Hinduism can be seen therefore as a synthesis of mystic philosophy and practical application in everyday life. In the Bhagavad-Gita⁶, Lord Krishna describes the perfect attitude to life as follows:

“One who is not envious but who is a kind friend to all living beings, who does not think himself a proprietor, who is free from false ego and equal both in happiness and distress, who is always satisfied and engaged in devotional service with determination and whose mind and intelligence are in agreement with Me – he is very dear to Me.”

For Hindus, ultimately, there is only one God, the creator and father of all beings. Just as one thing such as the Sun can be known by different names, so God therefore, having revealed Himself to all people, is known by His innumerable names. The Vedas teach a non-sectarian appreciation of any religious path, which raises the worshipper to pure love of God.

The characteristics of Vedic (Hindu) culture are as follows:

- Tolerance of race and religion.
- Non-violence (*ahimsa*⁷)
- Detachment from material acquisition.
- Self-satisfaction through inner devotion to God.

Understanding the principles of dharma gives one a strong sense of duty (as evidenced, for example, in the close ties in the Hindu extended family), but beyond the dharma of one's own material situation – which is temporary – there is the eternal dharma of the spirit soul (*Sanatana dharma*), which is to render service to God with love.⁸ Sanatana dharma is seen by Hindus as being the intrinsic nature of the soul and is universal for all beings, for all time, place and circumstances, although when covered by *maya* (illusion), Hindus point out that we may not be aware of this most important duty to serve God.



The Swaminarayan Hindu Mission (left) and the Shree Girnara Soni Samaj (right) are both on St James Street near to Leicester City Centre⁹

⁶ Chapter 12, Texts 13-14.

⁷ See also the factsheet on Jainism, and specifically the section on Jain Society.

⁸ Sanatana dharma, it will be recalled, is synonymous with Hinduism itself, as an eternal religion.

⁹ Photographs copyright © Julian Harrison 2008.

The Supreme

The Vedic or the Hindu philosophy can be divided into two traditional beliefs about God – the philosophies of **Dvaita** and **Advaita**.

- The philosophy of **Dvaita** focuses on the belief that there is only one God (a Supreme Person) known as Bhagwan or Ishwar. This Supreme Person takes *avatars* (incarnations or descends) in different forms. Thus, Hinduism is usually perceived by many to be polytheistic (worship of more than one God), but essentially only one Supreme Being is worshipped. Besides the one Supreme Person there are numerous *devas* (demi-gods) and *devis* (goddesses). Each deva and devi is believed to have a specific function within the material sphere. The traditional use of various symbols, names, terms and images are a result of this. The ultimate goal of the individual in the Dvaita tradition is to realise that one is an eternal servant of God and to act in a way consistent with this realisation.
- a) The other philosophy is called **Advaita**, centred on the idea that God ultimately is not a person and is called **Brahman**. Brahman is a supreme being who is all pervasive energy, which has neither a name nor a form. The ultimate goal of the individual in the Advaita tradition is to become united with, and thus become one, with Brahman by worshipping any deity chosen for personal devotion.

Brahman is considered to be the Absolute. For Hindus, the Absolute manifests His governance and direction through three significant interdependent and inseparable qualities in which different aspects/attributes of Brahman are contained and recognised. These are known as the Trinity or *Trimurti*:

1. **Brahma** – The Creator of the Universe. Brahma is not worshipped by Hindus in the same way as other deities as the evidence of his work (creation) is all around us.
2. **Vishnu** – The Preserver of the Universe. It is believed that Vishnu has been incarnated at various times in human history to rid the world of tyranny and help preserve the human race from natural disasters. Vishnu's incarnations (*avatars*) include Krishna, Rama and Buddha (the founder of Buddhism). Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort, also appears in different manifestations as the consort of his incarnations. Hence, Radha (Rukmini) is the consort of Krishna and Sita of Rama.
3. **Shiva** – The Destroyer of the Universe. Shiva has an important role. He is seen as the source of both good and evil, as controlling the movement of the universe and as being associated with fertility. At times when evil is deemed to predominate He is the effective destroyer of the world in order to eradicate evil and restore purity and harmony in its recreated form. As such, it is believed by His worshippers that He fulfils all three roles of the Trinity – creator, preserver and destroyer. Shiva's consorts include Kali, Parvati and Durga.

Hindus tend to be separated into three groups of worshippers¹⁰:

- a) Those who worship Vishnu and His incarnations.
- b) Those who worship Shiva.
- c) Those who worship the Mother Goddess, the various female consort incarnations (e.g. Shakti, Lakshmi, Kali, Durga etc). Shakti is also the embodiment of female energy and is particularly associated with the festival of Navaratri.

The Hindu Temple

Although every Hindu home contains its own altar (a place for personal worship), the temple holds a special place in the life of the people, as the 'home of God'. The Hindu temple is known by different names, depending on language and where you live in the world. A common name is *Mandir*, which is derived from the Sanskrit word *mandira* meaning 'house', but with special significance in relation to deity.

Hindus believe that God is omniscient¹¹ and all-pervading, yet He is personally present in the temple in His Deity manifestation to provide His devotee with the opportunity to render direct service to Him. Hindus believe that the Lord is father to all mankind and it is therefore the duty of people to go before Him, to submit their account to Him, to request forgiveness for their sins and wrongdoings and to beg for strength to live in constant remembrance of His will.

¹⁰ According to the form of Brahman worshipped.

¹¹ Knows everything infinitely.

Worship in the temple is considered more beneficial than worship at home, because the association of so many other devotees and the spiritual atmosphere free from domestic distractions nourishes faith and devotion.

The rituals while visiting the temple evoke the appreciation of the Lord's personal presence. At the entrance to the temple building, everyone removes their shoes out of respect for the sacred area. The worshipper then rings a bell upon entering the hall where the Deity is resident. Going before the Deity to take *darshan* (take sight or audience of the Lord), the worshipper offers respect (*pranaams*), either by the folding of hands or perhaps by bowing down and laying prostrate. In this simple act of devotion one can feel close communion with God.

It is customary for every visitor to the temple to bring an offering of some kind – food, gifts for the Deity or donations of money. No offering is too great or too small.

In the Bhagavad-Gita¹², Lord Krishna states:

“If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit or water, I will accept it.”

At the end of the hall is the main altar where the predominant Deities of the temple stand. There may be other side altars as well. Only the priest enters the Deities' room, while everyone observes from outside. The Deities should be dressed in the finest fabrics and decorated with ornaments, jewellery and garlands of flowers. The Vedic tradition teaches that when much time, effort and opulence is afforded in decorating the Deity, then everyone can come and enjoy the extraordinary beauty of the temple and be inspired with a mood of sacrifice and selflessness. Hindus believe that if service is not centred on the Deity, the tendency of the people will be to expend their efforts on individual improvement of material standards, by which they develop an attitude of selfishness, greed and separatism. In other words, they will be focused more on achieving personal material gain rather than spiritual service and contemplation.

Most Hindu temples are open every day of the year from morning to night, except for a short period in the afternoon, but visitors tend to like coming at the times of the *arati*¹³ ceremonies which are performed several times a day and involve worship on the altar. During arati, the priest offers different articles of worship to the Deity. These include incense, ghee lamps, water for bathing, a small napkin for drying, flowers and peacock and yak-tail fans. A conch is blown at the beginning and end of the arati, and throughout the ceremony the priest rings a small bell to attract the attention of the Deity and the audience to the worship.

During arati the devotees sing special hymns, and then *kirtan* (call-and-response repeated chanting). Kirtan is sung using *mantras* (short verses composed of the names of God) such as the following **Maha Mantra** (also known as the **Hare Krishna Mantra**):

*“Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare,
Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.”*

Here, Krishna and Rama refer to God Himself, whereas 'Hare' is a deferential suffix.

One or more decorated thrones can also be seen in the main hall. These are called *vyasanas* and are used by learned teachers. The term *Satsanga* refers to association with a spiritually advanced soul – in effect being in pious company – and is used as a reference to such teachers and the benefits of being in their presence and learning from them. These are important practices in the development of God consciousness.

It is customary that visitors receive *prashad* (food offered to the Deity) before leaving the temple, even if this is only a small, token amount. Prashad is highly honoured as the 'mercy of the Lord'. In India, the distribution of prashad is a serious welfare activity, the principle being that no-one should go hungry within ten miles of the temple.

¹² Chapter 9, Text 26.

¹³ Arati or Aarti is a Hindu ritual in which light from wicks prepared in a particular way is offered to one or more deities. It also refers to the devotional songs sung during the process of offering lamps/light.

Aside from the daily ceremonies, there are many particular rituals, which a priest may perform in the temple for the benefit of the devotees, e.g. marriage ceremonies, the giving to babies of their first solid food, and the first cutting of a young child's hair.

In many places in India, Hindus will attend the temple once or even twice a day. In Britain, long distances and busy work schedules make it difficult for many to visit the temple more than once a week. However, on special holy days, many people from the community congregate in the temple for a festival programme of kirtan, lectures, arati and religious dramas. On these occasions, prashad is distributed to all.

There are over 170 Hindu temples in the UK. More than twenty of these are in Leicester and Leicestershire, a significant percentage of the overall total.



Leicester temples: The Shree Swaminarayan Temple on Loughborough Road (left) and the Shree Ram Mandir (right) on Hildyard Road¹⁴

The Deity Form of God

Consider the following question from a Hindu perspective: The soul is spirit and the body is matter. When the soul leaves the body, human beings cannot see it depart because their material eyes cannot perceive 'spirit'. How then can they see God, the supreme spiritual Person?

To help people overcome this inability, the Vedas explain that God manifests before the devotee as the Deity form. Although appearing in wood, stone or metal which are visible to our eyes, the Deity is not material, but pure spiritual energy. This may seem inconceivable, until the appreciation – through Hindu eyes – that God, being the source of all spirit and matter, can transform one to the other by His own will.

It is not proper to refer to the Deity as a 'statue' or 'idol'. The correct Sanskrit phrase is *archa-vigraha*, meaning 'the worshipful form of the Lord'. The word *murti* which means simply 'form' is often used, though this is less preferable to *archa-vigraha*.

The Deity neither represents God nor is God in the Deity. The Deity is understood to be God Himself standing before His devotees and able to be both seen and served. In Hinduism, not just any form can be conceived, produced and worshipped. The Deity must be carved to the exact specifications of the Vedas. Service to the Deity, such as offering food and *arati*, bathing, dressing and decorating with ornaments is direct service to the spiritual body of God.

Seeing the many forms of Deities and photographs in a temple, it is often said that 'Hinduism is a religion of many Gods'. However, the Vedas state that although there is only one Supreme Personality of Godhead, He may take innumerable forms to reciprocate the loving sentiments of His devotees. The Vedic literature reveals a record of the Lord's appearance at different times. Some of these forms are manifested as the temple Deities. Not all the pictures within a Hindu temple are of the Lord's incarnations. Some of the pictures of saints and others may be of the devas, empowered cosmic representatives of the Lord.

¹⁴ Photographs copyright © Julian Harrison 2008.

Most temples have Deities of **Radha-Krishna** or **Sita-Rama**. Krishna and Rama are the same Supreme Personality of Godhead, and Radha and Sita are Their respective eternal consorts, the personification of the Lord's devotional energy.

There is often an altar for Shiv-Linga, a special deity form of Lord **Shiva**, and for goddess Durga or Amba, who is considered the mother of the universe, the Lord's material energy.

Hinduism – ‘Not just a Religion, More a Way of Life’

Hindus tend to consider religious practices as part of their daily routine rather than a once-a-week observance. Indeed, the Vedic culture is structured to give every person ample opportunity to deepen his/her relationship with God while fulfilling all the family needs. Spiritual life is not just to be practised by the *sadhu* (holy man) who withdraws from society by living in the mountains, but by all men and women, old and young, rich and poor.

The Vedas recommend that people rise early, bathe and take full advantage of the relatively peaceful morning hours by engaging in devotional activities – prayer, meditation, chanting the holy names of God and study of the sacred scriptures. In a Hindu home, there is a small altar with pictures or Deities. Morning and evening, the family joins together for worship. A ghee lamp (**diva**) is lit, and a simple arati ceremony performed.

Lord Krishna requests in the Bhagavad-Gita¹⁵:

“All that you do, all that you eat, all that you offer and give away, as well as all austerities that you may perform, should be done as an offering unto Me.”

Each daily activity can be done in a spirit of service to God. For example, human beings need to eat. In Hinduism, the family cooks for the pleasure of God and offers the food on the altar with suitable prayers. Only then will the meal be served to the family. The principles of non-violence and offering all food to God are the philosophical basis of the **vegetarian** diet. Hindus will not touch any meat, fish or eggs. However, India can perhaps claim the most extensive culinary tradition in the world. The Vedas describe thousands of delicious and nutritious preparations, combining a wide variety of vegetables, grains, lentils, fruits, nuts, milk products and carefully blended spices.

Hinduism teaches that to understand spiritual science, the mind must be clear. Hindus therefore refrain from any form of intoxication, including alcohol and even cigarettes. Many will not even take tea or coffee. Gambling is also forbidden as it is perceived to detract a person from their real duty in life.

In Hinduism, the institution of marriage is sacred. Divorce is therefore forbidden. To ensure the proper development of love and respect between husband and wife – which is the basis of their close relationship – neither pre-marital nor extra-marital sex is allowed. Incidentally, although traditionally the practice of arranged marriages has been strong, increasingly Hindus have turned to other ways of meeting their prospective partners, including Internet matchmaking.

It is also important to clarify misconceptions in relation to ‘arranged’ and ‘child marriages’. Firstly, Hindu scriptures actually forbid any use of force or coercion with regard to marriage. There is a significant difference, therefore, between an arranged marriage and a so-called ‘forced’ marriage. The latter is prohibited and the former is undertaken with the consent of both bride and groom. Child marriages, likewise, are banned in India. Of course, this is not to say that neither forced or child marriages ever occur. Nevertheless, the significance of the scriptures in terms of what they have to say on these matters should always be borne in mind.

Hindus argue that through a simple lifestyle incorporating these practices, one's mind is purified; one's heart feels peace and one can tangibly experience a fuller, deeper realisation of God's guidance.

¹⁵ Chapter 9, Text 27.

Hindu Society

In Hindu society there are eight interdependent parts, with four distinct social roles – known as **varnas** – and four spiritual roles (**ashrams**).

Varna is a Sanskrit term which has a variety of meanings (including letter, cover, class and caste) depending on its usage. Varna is associated with the caste system though the two are not completely synonymous. The latter for example includes many more social groupings not specifically identified in the Hindu scriptures, as will be explained shortly in the passage concerning **jāti**.

The four varnas are as follows:

1. **Brahmins**: priests and intelligentsia such as teachers.
2. **Kshatriyas**: administrators and military figures that are known for their courage and leadership.
3. **Vaishyas**: agriculturalists and merchants whose work involves producing and trading.
4. **Shudras**: workers who provide labour and service.

In the Bhagavad-Gita¹⁶, it is said that:

“Brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras are distinguished by the qualities born of their own natures in accordance with the material modes, O chastiser of the enemy.”

The four ashrams are as follows:

1. **Brahmachari**: the celibate life of a student who is given guidance by a guru.
2. **Grihastha**: a householder, which involves being married, having a family and educating one's children and taking care of the elderly and people with disabilities.
3. **Vanaprastha**: where the person retires to a forest after completing all their social responsibility such as marrying off their children and clearing any debts. This stage is primarily related to a person's transformation towards their spiritual life.
4. **Sannyasi**: when the person renounces all earthly ties.

Although the ashram stages are less likely to be fully operational in modern society, they present a powerful ideal for many Hindus as they are seen to present a natural progression through life.

Although the Hindu social system of dividing people according to varna is now largely hereditary, the scriptures emphasise that originally a person would be categorised according to personal qualities, rather than as a result of birth. The original system was therefore less rigid, but later it became hereditary with individuals identifying themselves with a hereditary group called **jāti**, which are associated with a varna. These jāti groups are also referred to as castes and sub-castes. These can be used to indicate a person's social responsibility and status and are mainly relevant with regard to social activities such as arranged marriages.

Key Hindu Beliefs

- **Dharma (religion)**: This relates to the purpose of one's life, which has a deeper meaning in Sanskrit than the word 'religion' can convey. A common factor about this purpose (which is unchanging) is the intrinsic value of a soul to serve God, which according to the Dvaita tradition will continue even after achieving *moksha* (liberation). This can also relate to the religious pathway that the soul takes in achieving moksha. Therefore, according to this faith, the highest level of achievement the soul of an atheist may achieve is in heaven.
- **The Atma (spirit soul)**: Hindus believe that there is a spirit in all life forms known as *atma*. The atma is eternal and repeatedly embodied every time the cycle of birth and death is regenerated until it reaches its goal. Actions in one life will determine the nature, circumstances and the form in which the soul is embodied. In the Bhagavad-Gita¹⁷, it is stated that:

“For the soul, there is never birth nor death. Nor having once been, does he [i.e. the soul] ever cease to be. He is unborn, ever-existing, undying and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.”

¹⁶ Chapter 18, Text 41.

¹⁷ Chapter 2, Text 20.

- **The Law of karma (action and reaction):** The concept of karma relates to one's actions, noting that with every action there is an equal or opposite reaction. These can be good, bad or mixed depending on the nature and intentions of the action. Hindus believe that the law of karma applies to everyone whether they are a believer or non-believer. Karma plays a large part in the reincarnation process where a person's karma can determine their future being.
- **Moksha (liberation):** For Hindus, the ultimate goal for every living being is to transcend to a stage of liberation known as *moksha*. In the Advaita tradition, this means that the soul has escaped the cycle of birth and death and will be united with Brahman. In the Dvaita tradition, achieving moksha means becoming the eternal servant of God. The cycle of reincarnation and worldly attachments are believed to cause great suffering (*dukha*) to any being when going through birth, death, old age and disease. Breaking this cycle therefore leads to moksha.
- **Universe:** The universe is seen by Hindus to be manifested in three forces: the creative force (**Brahma**), preservative force (**Vishnu**) and a dissolving force (**Shiva**). Three together represent parts of the eternal cycle of everything being created, maintained for some time, and then destroyed.
- **Reincarnation:** Hindus believe that the soul, spiritual in nature, is part and parcel of the Supreme. The soul, being 'unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval', at the time of death transmigrates to another body to experience a new life. According to the law of karma, as was mentioned previously, one's present actions will determine the type and circumstances of one's next body.

Festivals and Holy Days

Hindus believe that spiritual life should not necessarily be sombre. By contrast, they believe that it should be a continuous celebration. Hinduism is therefore full of colour and festivities. Throughout the Hindu year there are a large number of festivals and sacred holidays, each of which has its own unique character and mood. In Hinduism, religious festivals are vital to the spiritual development of the people and are considered to be the 'mother of devotion'.

The most important festivals commemorate the pastimes of the Supreme Lord, for it is stated in the Bhagavad-Gita¹⁸:

"One who knows the transcendental nature of My appearance and activities does not, upon leaving the body, take his birth again in this material world, but attains My eternal abode."

There is no set day of the week designated for worship. Hindu festivals usually coincide with the movements of the sun and moon and with seasonal changes. The Hindu calendar is set around the lunar months. Every year, therefore, the dates of festivals change accordingly.

Some of the major Hindu Festivals are as follows:

- **Pongal** (January 14th or one day on either side): In the Tamil language, Pongal means 'it has boiled', referring to the sweet rice offered at this time to Surya, the sun god, to celebrate the end of the main harvest period. It is also called **Lohri** (in the Punjab) and **Makar Sankrant**, the time when the sun enters Capricorn beginning its Northern path and when days and nights are of equal duration. The festival period is celebrated with the burning of old clothes and the wearing of new ones, in India with the washing and decoration of cows, and travelling to visit friends and relatives. It is associated with the principles of rebirth and respect for all living beings.
- **Maha Shivaratri** (February-March): This festival celebrates the appearance of Lord Shiva, famous for His dance of destruction at the end of each creation. On this day, His devotees fast, and – often carrying offerings of sacred water – visit His temples and shrines. There they observe the worship of the *linga* or *lingam*, the symbol which represents their worship of Lord Shiva.

¹⁸ Chapter 4, Text 9.

- **Holi** (February – April): Holi is a festival of fun and colour, when all Hindus, young and old, throw water and coloured dyes over each other in sportive, celebratory mood. The lighting of bonfires is also commonplace. One story told at Holi is about a prince, Prahlad, who refuses to obey his atheistic father, the demon king Hiranyakashipu. In this story, Hiranyakashipu's wicked sister, Holika – with her brother's consent – tries to kill Prahlad by carrying him into a blazing fire. She herself has a protective power making her immune from fire. Nevertheless, in this instance, the saintly Prahlad is protected by Lord Vishnu, whilst his evil aunt's magical powers vanish and she is burnt to ashes. Lord Vishnu subsequently kills Hiranyakashipu and Prahlad becomes a wise and just king in his father's place.
- **Rama Navami** (March-April): Rama Navami, the appearance of Lord Rama is observed in the spring. This is the birthday of Lord Rama (Ramachandra in full), considered to be an incarnation of Vishnu or Krishna. He is green in colour and is the hero of the Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana. He appears with His consort (Sita), His brother (Lakshman) and His faithful servant, the monkey warrior, Hanuman. On this day, Hindus hear stories from the Ramayana, clean and decorate their houses and make cradles in which they place the beautiful form of the baby Rama. At noon, the covering on the cradle is removed, prashad (sacred food) is offered to Rama and then celebrations continue with chanting and feasting. Rama Navami is an occasion for moral reflection and of the importance of charity.



(left¹⁹) The Ramayana. A Thai depiction of the battle between Lord Rama and the evil king, Ravana.

Stories from the Ramayana are told during Rama Navami.

- **Hanuman Jayanti** (March-May): Many villages in India have temples and shrines dedicated to Hanuman, the monkey warrior and hero of the Ramayana. He is well-known for his strength, energy and ability to leap great distances (once carrying a whole mountain) as well as for finding Sita in Sri Lanka after she had been kidnapped by the demonic king Ravana. Hanuman is also renowned and worshipped for his selfless devotion and his dedication to God. This festival marks his birthday and celebrations begin before sunrise, often with the recitation of a popular prayer called *Hanuman Chalisa*. There are local variations of this festival. In India, for example, colourful processions are commonplace and some people imitate the monkey warrior by wearing masks and tails. However, generally, the celebrations involve special *pujas*²⁰ and offerings and a period of fasting before the consumption of a feast.
- **Narasingha Chaturdashi** (May): This festival celebrates the appearance of the man-lion incarnation of Vishnu or Krishna. One of the ten incarnations, he rescued Prahlad by killing the wicked king Hiranyakashipu. On this day, devotees listen to narrations of the story (also connected – as seen previously – with Holi) and fast until dusk.

¹⁹ The Ramayana Fresco from the Wat Phra Keaw Buddhist Temple in Bangkok, Thailand. Source: Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wat_phra_keaw_ramayana_fresco.jpg).

²⁰ A Puja is a religious ritual performed by Hindus either in the home or in the temple. It involves the giving of a gift or offering to a deity or someone of importance and receiving blessing.

- **Ratha Yatra** (June-July): The original festival, said to be thousands of years old, still takes place each summer at the seaside town of Puri. The deity of Lord Jagannatha (the Lord of the Universe) is carried on a huge chariot whilst His brother (Balarama) and sister (Subhadra) ride on similar chariots. Each 'ratha' (cart) stands over fifty feet high and rides on twelve wheels, six foot in diameter. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus take turns in pulling the chariots by rope whilst they chant the names of God. Since 1969, this festival has been celebrated annually in London. It is also traditionally celebrated in Leicester.
- **Raksha Bandhan** (August): This festival, falling in the full moon day of Shravan, is celebrated mainly at home. Raksha Bandhan literally means 'a thread for protection'. Girls and women tie colourful bracelets on the right wrists of brothers. The men in return give gifts or money and promise to protect their sisters throughout their lives. The bracelets – called *rakhis* – symbolise the renewal of the ties of affection and are made from colourful thread and tinsel. The festival has in modern times developed so that, for example, priests may tie rakhis around the wrists of their congregation, and rakhis are tied around the wrists of soldiers and close friends.
- **Janmashtami** (August-September): Janmashtami marks the appearance (birth) of Lord Krishna some 5,000 years ago in a town now called Mathura, about ninety miles south of Delhi. Hindus throughout the world celebrate the birthday of Lord Krishna, whom many Hindus consider to be the Supreme, or God Himself. At home, or in the temple, a small deity form of Krishna is placed in a cradle which is gently rocked. The main deities, usually of Krishna and His consort Radha, are given new clothes and decorated with jewellery and flower garlands. There is a fast until midnight, the time when Krishna is believed to have been born. People dance, sing devotional songs and hear stories about Krishna. At midnight there is a beautiful arati ceremony followed by a feast.
- **Ganesh Chaturthi** (August-September): Ganesha or Ganapati is the son of Lord Shiva and is distinguished by his elephant's head with a broken tusk, four arms and large profile. He is considered to be the remover of obstacles. For this reason he is worshipped at the start of any religious ritual or important undertaking. This festival, popular in Western India, is a celebration of his birthday and is observed at home as well as in the neighbourhood. In India and other places where the festival is popular, a clay image is installed in a temporary pavilion for the ten day festival period, during which arati is performed and prashad distributed. After the final arati, the deity is immersed in the river or sea.
- **Navaratri**²¹ (September-October): The 'Festival of Nine Nights' (Nava meaning 'nine' and ratri meaning 'nights') is one of the greatest and most popular of Hindu festivals, symbolising the triumph of good over evil, the greatness of the Mother Goddess and also the joys of a good harvest. The festival is divided into three three-day sets, revolving around the worship of Shakti (Parvati), the Mother Goddess or 'Great Divine Mother'. The division into three reflects the different incarnations of Shakti – Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Navaratri is celebrated in Hindu communities all over the world, not solely in India. In the household a brass image of Shakti is installed, puja is performed twice daily and a ghee lamp²² burns continuously for the entire nine days. A single strand garland is offered daily and special food offered at midday. Each night of the festival, Hindu families get together to enjoy *rasa-garbha*. These are folk dances in which short sticks are knocked together in time to devotional songs. They are usually performed around a six-faced moveable shrine, dedicated to the goddess Shakti. Navaratri then is a celebration of the motherhood of God, the emphasis on which is something that makes Hinduism different from other major faiths.
- **Dussera** (September-October): Dussera (alternatively Dasera or Dasshera) is a time when Hindus remember how Lord Rama killed the evil king Ravana in battle. Effigies of Ravana are burned in celebration of Rama's victory. Dussera also marks the end of Navaratri.
- **Diwali** (October-November): Diwali is the most popular of all Hindu festivals and is celebrated globally. It is also observed by Jains and Sikhs and in Leicester it is an occasion for all communities to come together. Indeed, the Diwali celebrations in the Belgrave Road area of the city are believed to be the largest outside of India. For many Hindus, Diwali is a New Year festival and festivities last for five days. The name 'Diwali' comes from 'dipavali', a Sanskrit word meaning 'row of lights'. Light is therefore a strong feature of the festival. Diya lamps are lit and serve to decorate houses. Electric lights adorn streets and roads and fireworks displays are commonplace. There are many stories connected with the

²¹ Navaratri is known as **Durga Puja** in the West Bengal state of Eastern India, though it takes place on different dates.

²² Ghee is a type of butter that has its origins in the Indian subcontinent. It is used as a fuel in the Hindu *Diya* lamp.

'Festival of Lights'. One such story narrates how Lord Rama, after killing Ravana (the wicked king of Sri Lanka) and recovering His consort, Sita, returned triumphantly to His own kingdom of Ayodhya. It was a dark, moonless night and finding the way was therefore extremely difficult. All the people, therefore, lit the way for the returning troops by hanging lamps along the route. In addition, for many Hindus, Diwali honours Lakshmi, an incarnation of Shakti and the goddess of wealth. It is customary therefore for people to leave windows and doors open and use lights to allow Lakshmi to enter their houses and bless their inhabitants. At Diwali, Hindus remember how light will always triumph over darkness, how good will always conquer evil, and how by faithfully following God's instruction, they will always remain victorious.

The dates of these festivals in 2009 and 2010 are shown below:

	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>
• Pongal	Wednesday 14 th January	Thursday 14 th January
• Maha Shivaratri	Monday 23 rd February	Friday 12 th February
• Holi	Wednesday 11 th March	Sunday 28 th February
• Rama Navami	Friday 3 rd April	Wednesday 24 th March
• Hanuman Jayanti	Thursday 9 th April	Tuesday 30 th March
• Narasingha Chaturdashi	Thursday 7 th May	Wednesday 26 th May
• Ratha Yatra	Wednesday 24 th June	Tuesday 13 th July
• Raksha Bandhan	Wednesday 5 th August	Tuesday 24 th August
• Janmashtami	Friday 14 th August	Thursday 2 nd September
• Ganesh Chaturthi	Sunday 23 rd August	Saturday 11 th September
• Navaratri	Saturday 19 th September	Friday 8 th October
• Dussera	Monday 28 th September	Sunday 17 th October
• Diwali	Saturday 17 th October	Friday 5 th November

Ethics, Customs and Practices

- **Abortion:** Hinduism is generally opposed to abortion unless there is a need to save the life of the mother. Though classical Indian texts strongly oppose abortion because of the perceived contradiction with ahimsa (non-violence), there is also opposition within Hinduism on the grounds that it contravenes the duty to produce children and impacts on the process of reincarnation²³. Nevertheless, in day-to-day life, abortion is practiced.
- **Animal ethics:** It is not possible to have a definitive Hindu view on this due to the multitude of religious ideas contained within the broad faith of Hinduism. Hindus treat animals with respect and, in the case of cows, with reverence. This again relates to the concept and practice of ahimsa. The following generalisations should be noted:
 - Beef is not eaten.
 - Most Hindus are vegetarian.
 - Some Hindu deities have animal characteristics, e.g. lion, monkey, elephant.
 - Sacred animals are kept in some Hindu temples.
 - Animal sacrifice is permitted.
- **Baby and child rites:** Hindu rituals or rites are known as *sanskars*²⁴ or *samskaras*. With regards to babies and the process of birth, *sanskars* begin before the baby is delivered and even prior to conception when the *Garbhadana* prayer is said to remind a Hindu couple of their obligations to parenthood. Three months into pregnancy the ceremony of *Punsavana* is performed as a way of spiritually protecting the ongoing development of the foetus. For similar reasons – though with an emphasis on ensuring that both mother and unborn child are in good mental health – the *Simantonyana* is performed during the seventh month. At birth the newborn child is welcomed into the world with *Jatakarma*. Honey is placed in the child's mouth and God's name is whispered into his/her ear.

²³ Abortion, it will be argued, cannot end reincarnation and therefore existence *per se*.

²⁴ They are also known as such in Sikhism.

With variations, further traditional sanskars are performed at various stages in the child's development, as follows:

- *Namakarna* (naming ceremony)
- *Nishkarmana* (the child's first outing)
- *Annaprāsana* (eating solid food for the first time)
- *Karnavedha* (ear-piercing, believed by Hindus to have similar effects to acupuncture)
- *Mundan* (first haircut)
- *Upanayana* (at the beginning of formal education)

- **Birth control:** Birth control is not banned in Hinduism. There is advice on conception within some Hindu scriptures, and in India much of the concern and debate over birth control has focused on issues related to overpopulation and the environment rather than on faith and ethical considerations.
- **Capital punishment:** Again the concept and practice of ahimsa is a significant influence on Hindu thought in this area. Nevertheless, the death penalty has been retained in India.
- **Cows:** Cows are considered to be sacred. In India, killing them is banned and they are allowed to roam wherever they like. Eating beef or beef products is taboo to Hindus. There is a Cow Protection Project at Bhaktivedanta Manor, near Watford in Hertfordshire.²⁵ Bhaktivedanta Manor is the UK home of the Hare Krishna Movement (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness or ISKCON).
- **Cremation:** The sanskar/samskara associated with death is called *Antyeshthi*. Upon death, Hindus are cremated (traditionally in India on funeral pyres, though this is against the law in the UK) and their ashes are scattered in selected places. In India, the scattering of ashes is famously associated with the River Ganges. In Leicestershire, the River Soar near to the village of Barrow has been approved as an official 'substitute' – including its anointment with water from the Ganges itself – and increasing numbers of Hindus (as well as Sikhs) have had their ashes scattered in the heart of the Leicestershire countryside. In addition, prayers are said, offerings are made and food is served to the relatives, mourners and to the poor. Despite the sanctity of the River Soar, there have long been calls in Leicester and Leicestershire for a facility that fully respects and can cater for all practical and spiritual aspects of multi-faith – including Hindu – cremations.
- **Euthanasia and Suicide:** There are differing views on euthanasia and suicide within Hinduism. Some Hindus link both to killing and would therefore view both unfavourably as detrimental to the natural process of reincarnation and to the acquisition of good and positive karma. Others would also point to the impact and relationship – particularly with regard to euthanasia – on ahimsa. However, some Hindus – though very much in the minority – would also emphasise that assisting others to die actually fulfils the moral obligation of the alleviation of pain and suffering. Suicide could also be seen in this light, though Hindus would probably make a distinction between suicide *per se* and the practice of *prayopavesa* (fasting to death). *Prayopavesa* is subject to specific Hindu laws and is seen as acceptable for elderly people who have fulfilled life requirements and have no more immediate responsibilities. It is also seen as a non-violent process and does not use means that are deemed to be 'interfering' or 'unnatural'.
- **Hindu state school:** The UK's first Hindu state school – the Krishna-Avanti Primary School – opened in Edgware, North London in September 2008. The school follows the National Curriculum but also includes Hindu values and beliefs as part of its core ethos. The opening of the school received much publicity²⁶ and the prospect of a similar school being opened in Leicester has also received considerable attention.²⁷
- **Meditation:** Meditation is an important practice in the lives of Hindus. The Hinduism pages on the BBC Religion website include a fascinating section on meditation from a Hindu perspective. The words of a spiritual teacher²⁸ are quoted and meditation is described as "*silence, energising and fulfilling.*"

²⁵ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/living/cowprotection.shtml> or <http://www.manorvolunteering.com/sub/cow-protection.html>.

²⁶ See, for example, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7615539.stm> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/living/school.shtml>. The school has its own website - <http://www.krishna-avanti.org.uk/index.php?id=1>

²⁷ See http://www.bbc.co.uk/leicester/content/articles/2007/08/30/hindu_faith_school_feature.shtml and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/leicestershire/6615209.stm>.

²⁸ Sri Chinmoy.

- **Organ donation:** Organ donation is practised by Hindus. There is no specific religious law in Hinduism that prohibits the donation of organs or indeed tissues.
- **War and conflict:** The doctrine of ahimsa, the preaching of non-violence, is a powerful indication of Hindu views on war and other violent means of conflict. Nevertheless, this shouldn't be translated as automatic pacifism. The Rig Veda, for example, lays down particular rules of war²⁹ and force is deemed to be acceptable if used in self-defence. In addition, there is also the existence of a specific warrior caste of administrators and military figures, the Kshatriyas.
- **Weddings:** Wedding sanskars are known as *Vivah Sanskar*. Marriage, of course, marks the beginning of the second ashram, Grihastha³⁰ and the wedding process involves many different stages reflecting the importance and magnitude of marriage itself and its spiritual significance within the Hindu life cycle. In addition to the bride and groom, it involves parents and members of both families and a Priest (*Purohit*) and concludes with the walking of seven steps, the saying of seven vows, the tying of a symbolic matrimonial knot and then blessings. Again, the section on the BBC website is methodical and detailed in describing Hindu weddings and is to be recommended.³¹

Links to Other Religions

There are obvious links between Hinduism and Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism in particular. These relate to many things including geographical roots and the likes of meditation and reincarnation. Also, both Buddha and Mahavira (the last tirthankara, whose teachings formed the basis of Jainism) are believed to be incarnations (avatars) of Vishnu, and Guru Nanak (the first Sikh Guru) is considered to be a Saint. The Festival of Diwali is also observed by Jains and Sikhs as well as being an occasion for considerable multifaith and multicultural celebration.

Leicestershire Contacts

As mentioned in one of the sections, there are more than twenty Hindu temples in Leicester and Leicestershire, the vast majority being in the city. The largest and probably most prominent temple in Leicester is the Shree Sanatan Mandir on Weymouth Street. Examples of other temples in the city include the Shree Geeta Bhavan Temple and Hindu Community Centre on Clarendon Park Road and the Shree Swaminarayan Temple on Loughborough Road.



Shree Sanatan Mandir (left) and the Shree Geeta Bhavan Temple and Hindu Community Centre (right)³²

²⁹ Not to attack a child or woman, or the sick or elderly, for example.

³⁰ See section on **Hindu Society**.

³¹ Go to <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/ritesrituals/weddings.shtml>.

³² Photographs copyright © Julian Harrison 2008.

In Loughborough, there is the Geeta Bhawan on Leymington Street near to the town centre, the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir (Moira Street) and the Shree Ram Krishna on Alfred Street. A number of important community projects are run in the Shree Ram Krishna Centre catering for Hindus and non-Hindus alike.



Loughborough Temples: Geeta Bhawan (left) and Shree Ram Krishna (right)³³

As far as Hindu organisations are concerned there are many based in Leicester who also cater for the county e.g. the Hindu Council of Leicestershire. In the Belgrave Road/Loughborough Road area of Leicester (the so-called 'Golden Mile'), there are numerous examples of organisations, shops and other bodies serving the Hindu and other predominantly Asian communities.



A statue³⁴ of probably the world's most famous Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, was unveiled on Belgrave Road on Friday 26th June 2009. The ceremonial opening attracted many visitors from outside the city (some from as far away as India) as well as the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson MP, the Indian High Commissioner (His Excellency Shiv Shankar Mukherjee), spiritual leader Swami Satyamitranand and Keith Vaz, the MP for Leicester East.

There are also local Hindu organisations and bodies specifically serving members of the Hindu community in parts of the county. A community organisation has recently been established in Oadby and Wigston, for example.

The BBC Leicester website has a number of topical features on Hinduism and Hindu festivals. Over the previous couple of years, there have been features on the potential Hindu Faith School, on Navaratri, Ratha Yatra and Diwali, on Annakut (Govardhan Puja)³⁵ as well as a series of images of the Hindu year in the city (http://www.bbc.co.uk/leicester/content/image_galleries/hindu_year_in_leicester_gallery.shtml).

³³ Photographs copyright © Julian Harrison 2008.

³⁴ Photograph copyright © Julian Harrison 2009.

³⁵ Annakut or Govardhan Puja is the celebration of the victory of Lord Krishna over Indra, the God of Weather and War. Part of the festival includes the display of food.

Credits and Sources of Further Information

BBC Leicester (www.bbc.co.uk/leicester/faith/features/)
 BBC – Religion and Ethics (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/)
 Heart of Hinduism (<http://hinduism.iskcon.com/>)
 Hindu Council UK (www.hindu counciluk.org/newsite/index.asp)
 Hindu Forum of Britain (www.hfb.org.uk)
 Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh UK (www.hssuk.org/)
 Hindu Website.com (www.hinduwebsite.com/)
 Hinduism For Schools (www.hinduism.fsnet.co.uk/)
 Leicester Council of Faiths: Hindus factsheet (www.leicestercounciloffaiths.org.uk/)
 Oadby and Wigston Hindu Community (www.owhc.org.uk/)
 Shree Sanatan Mandir (<http://sanatanmandirleicester.com/>)
 This is Leicestershire/Leicester Mercury (25th June 2009)
 Wikipedia
 World Religions: An Illustrated Guide (Star Fire, 2007)

We are particularly grateful to The National Council of Hindu Temples (UK) for allowing us to use information from their excellent website as a basis for this factsheet. We would thoroughly recommend the website (www.nchtuk.org) for a thorough grounding, understanding and appreciation of Hinduism.



The Om symbol adorns the flag and wall of the Shree Sanatan Mandir in Leicester³⁶

³⁶ Photograph copyright © Julian Harrison 2008.