



# Facing the Challenge: What **Hindus** believe

A training session for home groups and cell groups

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## Introduction to the Leaders' Guide

Welcome to this training session on 'What do Hindus Believe?' This is designed to be used with the 'Facing the Challenge of Other Faiths' course. This course is designed for home groups, cell groups and Christian Unions. You can also use it in youth groups or in schools, or for personal study.

Our purpose in 'Facing the Challenge of Other Faiths' is to explore what the Bible says about how we as followers of Christ should interact with people of other faiths. This training session is designed to be used by people who live near Hindu communities or who encounter Hindus socially or at work, and who want to learn more about their beliefs and way of life.

'Facing the Challenge of Other Faiths' takes eight sessions to complete. When you use it with a group, each session is designed to last about 50 minutes. This is so the group will have time to do other things together too (pray, talk, eat and drink...). We recommend using this training session on 'What do Hindus believe?' **in place of** one of the sessions from the course – for example, in place of the last session.

This session has a slightly different format from the other sessions, because it contains more information specifically about Hindu beliefs and practices. It will probably take about two hours to complete. Alternatively, you could split it into two fifty-minute sessions.

This is the leader's guide. It's designed to help you lead your group through the session. If there's more than one leader, each leader needs a copy of this guide. However, don't give it to members of the group! Do give each member a copy of the question sheet that goes with the session.

Give out this sheet in advance of the session, if you can. This will help members of the group to get the most out of the study, by giving them a chance to think about the questions and to look up the Bible passage before the session. If you do this, you may want to give group members an opportunity at the beginning of the session to mention any particular questions or difficulties they may have. Don't necessarily respond to these straight away, but do make sure that you cover them in the course of the session.

## **What does the session include?**

### **Purpose**

A brief explanation of the purpose of the session – what we hope group members will learn through this session. The purpose of this session is to understand what Hindus believe and practise as a way of life, and how we can engage them most positively with the good news of Jesus Christ.

## **Getting started**

The session begins with a question to get people thinking and talking about the key issues.

## **The Bible**

This section includes a Bible passage to look up, and a question to help group members think about it. For more information on the passage referred to, we recommend [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org). Use the '[List articles... by passage](#)' link to help you find the appropriate resources.

## **Real life**

This part of the session looks particularly at what Hindus believe and practise, and at what is involved in living as a Hindu.

## **To do**

This encourages the group to spend some time praying for Hindus they know, and to think through what specific steps they can take next.

## **Going deeper**

This includes information about some books for people who want to go into the subject in more depth.

*You may copy or print the question sheet that goes with the session, to give out to members of the group.*

We would like to hear how you get with using this material, and how it could be improved for future users.

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## What do Hindus believe?

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to understand what Hindus believe and practise as a way of life, and how we can engage them most positively with the good news of Jesus Christ.

### Getting started

1. Have you had an opportunity to talk to Hindus? What were the main things that they said about Christianity?

Here are four very common perceptions that Hindus have:

*'All religions are the same. There is no real difference; all are aiming at the same goal but from different backgrounds and in different ways.'*

*'Christianity is fine for Western people, and black people. We have our own culture and way of life and you have yours. We want to keep our culture and we don't want to*

*follow Western ways, especially immorality and family breakdown.'*

*'Religion is very demanding. We practise fasting, meditation, daily worship, pilgrimage and many other things. You Christians seem to lack devotion and commitment.'*

*'Christians in India came from the lower castes and a background of poverty. They wanted to gain education and economic progress. The same thing is happening today. It's not a valid motive for changing your religion.'*

Have you heard any of these views - or others?

## **The Bible**

2. Read Acts 17. 22-31. How does Paul approach people with their own religion (which was very similar to some branches of Hinduism)?

- He acknowledges and respects their religious devotion (verses 22-23)
- He connects with beliefs they had in common: the Creator God (verses 24-26a); the universal sense of God (verses 27b-28); different ways of seeking God (verses 26b-27a) (Does Paul condemn these?)
- He challenges their view of images of God: images cannot reflect the Creator (verses 24b, 25, 29)
- He shows that the coming of Jesus brings decisive change, and calls for repentance (verses 30-31)

## **Real life – what do Hindus believe and practise?**

750 million people around the world call themselves Hindus. However 'Hinduism' is more like a network of religions than a single unified set of beliefs. There is amazing diversity within Hinduism:

- Hinduism has no founder
- Its historical origins and development are not universally agreed
- there are 330 million gods and goddesses
- the Hindu scriptures are a 'library of libraries.'

So be very cautious as you try to understand Hinduism. It's much better to learn from your Hindu friends what they believe and practise – and this is one of the best ways to get to know them and build a relationship.

Hinduism is strongly based on traditions that go back for generations, and on family ties that are binding. It is a source of deep spirituality for many.

### **Who is a Hindu?**

Hinduism is a **way of life**, based on some common beliefs and held together by its enduring social structure. **Family and community are fundamentally important.**

You become a Hindu by being born into a Hindu **family**. From birth you absorb the behaviour, the culture of living, and the stories.

You take part in **rituals**: in the temple and at home. Every home has its own shrine – a room or a shelf where the gods are displayed and daily worship is held (led by the women). Festivals are important, celebrated with noise and colour, food, sweets and sometimes fireworks.

You are also born into the wider community of your extended family and **caste**. Caste is a complex social system, whose exact origins are unknown. It is both religious, with the division of four major groupings, and occupational, with hundreds of different sub-groups. There are strong ideas both of pollution and separation (and the need to maintain distinctions, especially with regard to marriage and food habits) and of mutual inter-dependence (with each group performing its functions for a larger whole). For most people their loyalty and commitment are to their own caste people.

### **Hindus in the UK**

There are about 500,000 Hindus in the UK. The largest groups are **Gujarati**, **Punjabi**, and **Tamil** (mostly from Sri Lanka). Recently the number of **Nepalis** in the UK has increased.

There are very large temples in Neasden, NE London (Gujarati), East London (Tamil) and Birmingham (S Indian). There are many more small temples, which function as community centres.

Hindus in Britain are generally successful and prosperous, well integrated into the larger society, many of them professionals. Despite this, there is a tendency to feel marginalized, because of the much higher profile of Muslims, especially since 9/11 and 7/7. There are also deep concerns about conversion, especially the perception that poor people are still being converted in India (which is seen as evidence of exploitation).

The majority just want to get on with life and live peacefully. Young people in particular face issues of identity in our multi-cultural but still divided society. Most have faced discrimination in some form.

### **What do Hindus believe?**

There is great variety, as we have mentioned. However, these are fundamental ideas, held with variations by most Hindus:

Hindu beliefs start from wrestling with questions about God – how to relate to God and how to deal with the questions of life, especially the suffering and injustice that are so evident. So the starting point is one that is common to all humans.

**God:** God is at the centre of life for Hindus, manifested under many different names, forms and images.

God may be thought of as impersonal, absolute energy, the ultimate and only reality.

God may also be seen as having personal attributes, receiving worship and devotion.

God is in you, the 'divine spark' within (*atman*)

**Suffering and justice:** How do you explain the injustice and pain of life?

The Hindu answer is the law of *karma*, cause and effect in the moral realm. Whatever you do, good or bad, you will reap the consequences.

This principle is extended to many thousands of lives, past and future. All human and animal life is caught up in the cycle of birth and re-birth (reincarnation). This is known as *sansara*. ('the wheel').

**Duty and a way of life:** For the average Hindu the most important thing is to fulfil your duty - to the gods, your guru, your family, according to your unique place in the social structure. This duty is called **dharmā**, a word which can also be translated 'religion', a principle behind the universe. Fulfilling your **dharmā** could be the best summary of **the Hindu way of life**.

**Family and society:** Every Hindu is born into a network of relationships, within the family and caste group. This social structure has held together all the diverse beliefs and practices of Hinduism.

**The goal of life:** There are different goals according to stages of life and place in society. But the ultimate goal is liberation or release from the succession of lives, known as **moksha**. For many Hindus the hope of **moksha** is quite distant and the search for peace (**shanti**) and protection is much more immediate.

**Paths to salvation:** There are many ways to reach salvation, such as meditation, devotion and worship, fulfilling duty, or performing rituals.

- The way of Knowledge – *jnana marg*
- The way of Devotion - *bhakti marg*
- The way of Action - *karma marg*
- The way of Sacrifice and Ritual
- The Release of Power – *shakti*

## **How should we respond?**

### **i. Love**

At a personal level this will include friendship and hospitality. At a wider level, it will include concern for justice and social issues.

3. Are you aware of any particular issues that Hindu communities near you are facing?

Examples might include discrimination, concern for children and young people, generation gap, identity.

4. Have you had any experience of giving and receiving hospitality with Hindus? Were there any difficulties?

## **ii. Listen and learn**

Ask questions! When you meet Hindus and talk to them, asking about their family is natural and acceptable.

5. How could you listen and learn effectively? What are some helpful questions that you could use?

## **iii. Present Christ positively**

- Focus on Jesus
- Don't push or hurry
- Don't argue or criticise
- Understand family structures and culture

6. How can you present Christ positively? What are some things to emphasize? What are some things to avoid?

## **iv. Pray**

It's important to pray for Hindu friends and particularly for families. Sometimes they welcome us to pray with them, for example when facing difficulties or pressures

## **To do**

Take a few moments to pray for any Hindus you know.

What specific steps do you plan to take next?

If you have the opportunity, visit a Hindu family.

**When a Hindu friend comes to your church, or would like to follow Christ...**

**Do** understand family structure. Hindus are part of their family and community; that's what makes them Hindu and gives them identity. So look for ways to include the whole family rather than just the individual - through prayer, through sharing the good news.

**Don't** expect them to change their culture, eat different food, dress differently. This pressure from Christians can be very subtle. Look for ways to affirm their culture.

**Don't** expect them to attend lots of meetings. Give them time and space to stay within their family.

**Don't** talk about 'becoming a Christian'. Focus on following Jesus or being a 'follower of Christ'.

**Don't** push or be in a hurry. It may take time for a person to understand and then to consider the implications of the Gospel for them personally and for their family. For many Hindus the first step is to pray to Jesus as one of the gods, then as the most important one and finally as the only Lord.

**Don't** argue or criticise. All of us are sensitive about things that are important to us. For many Hindus their religion is linked to their culture and identity, so very much a source of pride and value.

**Do** show friendship and love. Give time; open your home and family as far as this is possible. Are we willing to provide the love and warmth of family care that is so important in Hindu culture?

**Do** pray - not just for individuals, but also for their whole families, to experience all God's blessings and know His

love through Jesus. It's often appropriate to pray *with* people. Hindus, like all Asians, welcome prayer and may be very happy for you to pray for them and their family in their presence.

## Going deeper

- 30 Days Prayer for Hindus, available from South Asian Concern, PO Box 43, Sutton, Surrey SM2 5WL. Telephone 020 8770 9717. *This free booklet has a lot of valuable information about Hindus and ways to pray.*
- Gidoomal, R, and Thomson, R, *A Way of Life: Introducing Hinduism*, (Hodder, 1997)
- Knott, K, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford Paperbacks, 2000)
- Burnett, D, *The Spirit of Hinduism: a Christian perspective on Hindu life and thought*, (Monarch Books, 2007)

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