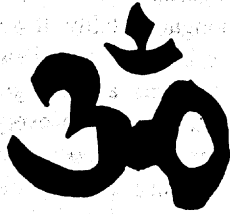


## HINDU FAMILIES



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### Who makes up a 'Hindu family'?

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Just as it is wrong to assume that an English family will consist of two parents and 2.4 children, so Hindu families in India, the UK and elsewhere vary enormously in the way they are made up. The popular notion of the 'joint family' is to some extent a stereotype, based on systems of land inheritance which are weakening even in India today. The Hindu family next door to you may simply consist of a mother, father and teenage daughter, or an elderly grandparent may live with them. On the other hand, married sons and their wives and children may live in the terrace next door or round the corner to the sons' parents and share meals, household tasks and responsibility for childcare. A woman widowed early may bring up her children alone, a divorced woman take over the parental role for a niece or nephew. In the 50s and early 60s, when Britain was keen to encourage workers from Commonwealth countries to

seek employment here, it was common for groups of young single men to rent houses together. By contrast, three generations of a Hindu family often arrived together from countries in East Africa in the late 60s and early 70s, fleeing from Africanisation policies. Economic, political and social factors all affect the shape of Hindu families which have never been immutable.

Nonetheless, if a Hindu child were asked how many people there were in the family, he or she might count aunts, uncles and 'cousin brothers and sisters' as well as members of the grandparents' generation. And even if these relatives were spread out across several British cities (say, Leicester, Cambridge and London) or countries (say, Sweden, Canada and India), they would still be thought of in very close terms. For this reason, the idea of the 'extended family' is perhaps the most helpful one. It applies not just to Hindu families, but to Muslim, Sikh and others

whose families derive from South Asia as do many of the points about family structures and values which follow.

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### The Indian connection

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Whether visits are frequent or rare, links with relatives in India remain vitally important to most Hindu families and are maintained through letter, phone and video. It is a source of great pride to parents who have brought up their children to speak their mother tongue, (say, Gujarati or Hindi or Tamil) to hear them speaking it to their grandparents, even if with a Birmingham accent! Part of that gift of language is a whole series of terms for different family members. For example, in some North Indian languages, *masi*, *mami*, *bu*, *tai*, *chachi*, are words for one's mother's sister, mother's brother's wife, father's sister, father's elder brother's wife, father's younger brother's wife respectively. English 'aunt' is very tame by comparison!

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### Family values

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Embedded within these variegated family terms are key values, such as respect for elders. A young child not only learns the proper way to address family members, but also family friends, and sees others in the family acting with deference to those who are deemed senior. Children brought up speaking English only will be encouraged to call their parents' contemporaries 'auntie' or 'uncle', rather than just using their first names. At festival times, they may be expected to bend down to touch their parents' feet as a sign of respect and will see their parents doing the same to honour their grandparents.

This concept of honour is one which is crucial not just within the family but for the

family as a whole in relation to outsiders. The behaviour of one family member reflects on all the others, so young people are brought up to consider the implications of what they do, not just for themselves but for the rest of the family too. Individualism is played down, which may be hard for people from a Western background to grasp. It may also cause friction between generations in a Hindu family.

Another common South Asian value is hospitality. It is seen at its most lavish (to some, ostentatious) at occasions like weddings, when as many guests as possible are fed. But it is part of everyday life as well. Not just food, but accommodation and contacts are readily offered, particularly to members of the same *biraderi* or section of a caste. These are the wider social groupings within which many Hindu families see themselves and they still retain considerable significance in terms of marriage and social support in the UK. Hospitality is not exclusive, though.



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### Family roles

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A strong sense of role definition can go along with defined places in hierarchies. The new daughter-in-law's subservience is reflected not just in the way she may cover her head before her parents-in-law and other senior relatives. The customs of a different family are expected to become her own. She serves guests in an unobtrusive role. She may be summoned from her nearby house by her

father-in-law to wash up after they have been entertained. In interviews about the influence of the epic characters, Rama and Sita (see below), young British women indicated that they thought their brothers still wanted wives who were submissive, knew how to run a household properly and would sacrifice their own careers for the sake of their children.

However, yet again there is a danger of a misleading stereotype emerging, this time of 'oppressed' Hindu women. Even in a 'traditional' Indian home, the daughter-in-law's status and role changes when she bears children. Roles may be used to enhance and negotiate women's power in the family, including financial control. Many women are freed to work and have careers by the support of the extended family offering childcare. Others have to work, for economic reasons. There are men who help with household tasks. At public functions, men may run the catering. Just as in other families, Hindus adopt, question, reject and negotiate given roles very variously.

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### **Family worship and rituals**

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In many families, it is the mother's role to maintain worship in the home, whether or not other members are overtly 'religious'. She may offer daily prayers at a small home shrine. She will make the all-important social and ritual arrangements at times of life-cycle rites, festivals and for particular *pujas* (worship) when a priest may come to the house. She may ensure that even meat-eating members of the family are served pure vegetarian food at such times. She may fast on particular occasions for the sake of her husband and bring up her daughters to do the same.

Family bonds are clearly expressed in festivals like Raksha Bandhan, where girls and women tie a coloured thread or bracelet round the wrist of each of their brothers (or other male relatives or friends). Each male in turn promises protection to his sister, usually expressed in a gift of money or clothes. Wider family solidarity is also expressed where *puja* is performed in the home. In some families, a symbolic portion of the food to be eaten in the day is offered in the morning. All share the meal later. In others, each family member present is given a small portion of a sweet or fruit offered during worship.

Hindu worship is made to a wide variety of deities, generally seen as expressions of one transcendent reality. Individuals worship their own chosen form of God, but as a family they may worship a particular *kuldev*, or deity associated with their own lineage within a caste. Some families as a group belong to particular devotional movements, like the Pushti Marg, for example, or follow a particular guru or teacher, like Morari Babu. Some even time their annual leave to coincide with Morari Babu's recitations here or abroad.

A popular text for his teaching is the *Ramayana*, the story of Rama and Sita, who act as models for family roles and values. A television version of this story, with record-breaking viewing figures, was shown in 1987-88 on Indian television and is now available on video. Critics fear that this may create a monolithic interpretation of the story which for centuries has been told and retold differently, as people have explored their own family, linguistic and social identities. Young people interviewed show that they are as able to appropriate and reinterpret this story as

previous generations, making it their own in various ways.



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### Family differences and breakdown

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'Love who you marry, don't marry who you love' is a popular saying amongst Indians of various religious backgrounds. Marriage vows are considered to be made for life. Marriage is the proper context for having children and many Hindus still desire a son to perform their funeral rites correctly. Some will not practise contraception, others do, though government enforcements of sterilisation in India have been widely criticised. In retirement, a couple may devote themselves to pilgrimage or reading sacred texts. Some older people even renounce family life altogether to become ascetics. This is not seen as a breaking of marriage ties but of the death of the individual to society in search of liberation from rebirth.

A popular Western stereotype is of the arranged marriage, understood as something forced and denying individuality. Many Hindus now prefer to think of marriage as 'assisted'. The bridal couple have some choice, though learn to know one another throughout life. Marriage is, however, usually much more than a matter of just two individuals, but of whole families as well. Divorce is still rare, largely because of this family involvement and the value of family honour, which may help to maintain a marriage in both

positive and negative ways.

Nonetheless, relationships may break down and South Asian communities like others are now starting to recognise publicly the painful issue of domestic violence and rape. Some Indian feminists even feel that role models like Sita, seen as a woman who submits to male humiliation, help to foster such suffering. Others see Sita as a strong woman, sure of her own purity and faithfulness, who refuses to be downtrodden in the end. Family values, here as elsewhere, continue to be scrutinised, lived and tested, to pull apart and to pull together, for, as is said of the *Mahabharata*, India's other great epic, in the Hindu family, 'all life is here'.

### Further reading

- Robert Jackson and Eleanor Nesbitt *Hindu Children in Britain*, Trentham Books, 1993.  
Jacqueline Suthren Hirst *Sita's Story*, Bayeux Arts, Canada, 1997.  
Rama Mehta *Inside the Haveli: The Women's* Press, 1994.  
Julius Lipner et al *Hindu Ethics: Purity, Abortion and Euthanasia* SUNY, 1989.

### Questions for discussion

1. What family values are important to us, from a Roman Catholic stand-point, how do we pass them down and what freedom do we allow to our children to reinterpret and remain within a tradition?
2. What are two points of similarity and two points of difference between RC marriage / family life and Hindu marriages / family life?
3. What stereotypes of families, Hindu and others, do we hold? How can we learn to recognise and learn from diversity?

*This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series "Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" and this further series on "Family Life" offer useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.*

*The family is the original cell of social life where people first learn to talk and listen to each other. The health of society depends on the health of family life. It is hoped that this series will promote the value of family life and help families of different Faith traditions to become better acquainted for the good of society.*

*The Committee is grateful to Dr Jacqueline Hirst for this contribution.*

**+ Charles Henderson**  
**Chairman**

## **COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS PUBLICATIONS**

**"Family Life in..." series:** "Catholic Family Life" (in preparation), "Jewish Family Life", "Family Life in Islam", "Family Life among Sikhs", "Hindu Families", "Family Life in Buddhism" "Japanese Religion in Family Life": set of leaflets £1.00 post free. Bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free.

**"Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" series:** "Catholics and Other Faiths", "Our Neighbour's Faith and Ours - a Catholic introduction to living with neighbours of other Faiths". "What is Islam?", "What is Buddhism?" "Who was the Buddha?", "What is Hinduism?", "The Mosque", "What is the Baha'i Faith?", "Our Sikh Neighbours", "Is God at work outside the Church?", "Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation", "What is Daoism?", "Prayer and Prayers in Islam", "What is Jainism?", "Hindu Festivals", "What is Shinto?", "Who are the Zoroastrians?" "Aspects of Judaism", "African Traditional Religion". The full set, one each of 18 leaflets, is available for £3.00 post free. Orders up to 25 leaflets will be charged at 10p per leaflet plus £1.00p postage and packing. Orders in bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free for each 50.

The eight page leaflet **"Ways of Sharing Faith"** is also available at 20p each post free. Hospital Chaplaincy & Other Faiths, 20p, £6.00 for 50p.

**ORDERS may be sent to:** CFOF, 6a Cresswell Park, London SE3 9RD. Please make cheques payable to: **NCF (Other Faiths)**

*Copies of these leaflets can also be obtained from. Westminster Interfaith Centre: St. Anne's, Underwood Rd, London E1 5AW.*