



Home Office

Hindu fasting in the workplace

An awareness guide for staff and managers



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Introduction

A note on the words 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism'

The words 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' are anachronistic and do not appear in scripture. Most Hindus refer to their faith as Sanātana Dharma, loosely translated into English to mean the 'eternal law' or 'eternal way'. Sanātana Dharma is a spiritual way of life and culture and not a religion in the western sense. The ancient Persians and Greeks coined the word 'Hindu' upon first encountering the indigenous people following Sanātana Dharma along the river Indus in India. 19th-century British academics then added the 'ism' to 'Hindu' and coined 'Hinduism' which classified Sanātana Dharma as a religion.

We therefore have used the more appropriate term Hindu Dharma rather than 'Hinduism' throughout this guide.

Why we created this awareness guide

Fasting is an integral aspect of Hindu Dharma. Fasting, in various forms, is a practice common to many other faiths, including Christianity, Islam and Judaism. However, in the Home Office and wider Civil Service the associated practices of fasting in Hindu Dharma are relatively unknown. This awareness guide provides staff and managers with information regarding fasting in Hindu Dharma to ensure a fair and inclusive working environment.

Brief overview of Hindu Dharma

Hindu Dharma, or Sanātana Dharma, is the world's oldest living faith. It comprises of rich and diverse philosophies, traditions, and practices that have been followed primarily throughout Asia for thousands of years. Today, Hindu Dharma is a global faith with over 1 billion adherents living on every continent, and comprising majorities in three countries: India, Nepal, and Mauritius.

Hindus believe Brahman, used interchangeably with the 'Divine', 'God' and the 'Absolute' pervades the entire universe. Brahman is present in all living beings, eternal, and full of bliss. There is a broad spectrum of understandings about the nature of Brahman within Hindu Dharma. Some Hindus believe that Brahman is infinite and formless and can be worshiped as such or in different forms. Other Hindus believe that Brahman is infinite and has a transcendental form. For example, Lord Śiva, Lord Viṣṇu or the Divine Mother Devī.

Hindus believe every living being has ātman or an eternal soul. The soul is reborn in a different body upon death in a cycle of birth, death and rebirth called saṃsāra. The law of karma governs rebirth: every action has a reaction or outcome in this life or the next. Most Hindus believe the ultimate goal of life is to break this cycle of rebirth and achieve mokṣa or union with God.

Hindus recognise the Vedas as the most ancient and authoritative body of scripture. The Vedas are the foundational scriptures common to all Hindu traditions. Hindu scriptures describe the rationale and the practices for fasting.

Please contact the [Hindu Connection](#) for further information about Hindu Dharma. We have developed a range of resources that aim to provide a clearer understanding of Hindu Dharma for line managers and staff.

Why do Hindus fast?

Fasting is a moral and spiritual act where the aim is to purify the body and mind to acquire divine grace. Most Hindus will fast to:

- Increase God consciousness or become closer to God.
- Cleanse and purify the mind and body.
- Participate in life cycle sacraments called saṃskāras.
- Celebrate festivals or holy days.
- Counter negative forces during inauspicious occasions.

According to the scriptures, fasting helps create an attunement with God by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. This is thought to be imperative for the wellbeing of a human being as it nourishes both his / her physical and spiritual demands.

There are many physical and spiritual benefits of fasting.

Physical benefits of fasting

The physical benefits of fasting include: improved health, reduced cholesterol, removed toxins, reduced stress upon the digestive system and other organs in the body, improved blood circulation and the functioning of the heart and brain.

Some studies have shown that fasting has improved mental health by making people feel good about themselves with increased self-esteem, self-confidence, willpower and discipline.

Spiritual benefits of fasting

Fasting is an essential part of worship. Symbolically, fasting is an act of sacrifice, in which one sacrifices food and hunger to God as a mark of devotion and surrender.

Fasting purifies the mind, controls passion and the senses and checks emotions. Fasting, for many Hindus, is also a sort of penance as it provides a window to escape from sins. Fasting also controls the tongue, which can cause harm when let loose.

Fasting practices in Hindu Dharma

How do Hindus fast?

The method of fasting is not imposed within Hindu Dharma. Hindus will observe fasts of varying strictness depending on individual beliefs or practices. Here are some examples of common fasts observed by Hindus:

- not partaking any food or water for a set number of days.
- limiting oneself to one specific vegetarian meal during the day.
- eating or drinking only certain food types for a set number of days.
- abstaining from eating certain food types for a set number of days.

When do Hindus fast?

Hindus may fast at anytime for a specific purpose. Here are a few common purposes for fasting:

Fasting during festivals and holy days

Certain Hindu festivals and holy days require devotees to observe fasting as part of their worship. For example, Navarātrī, the nine-night celebration of the Feminine Divine that occurs five times a year (the spring and fall celebrations being among the more widely celebrated).

Many Hindus will observe a period of fasting during the month of Śravaṇa which falls in July / August or August / September depending on the regional calendar being followed. Many Hindus consider Śravaṇa to be the holiest month of the year.

Fasting on specific days

Many Hindus believe that certain days of the week are dedicated to a particular deity and will observe fast to honour that particular deity. For example, devotees of Lord Śiva tend to fast on Mondays, while devotees of Lord Viṣṇu tend to fast on Thursdays.

Many Hindus fast on certain days of the month. For example, on Pūrṇimā (full moon) and Ekādaśī, the eleventh day after the full moon and the new moon, i.e. once a fortnight.

Some Hindus will fast during inauspicious occasions to make them psychologically stronger and counter negative forces. Many Hindus are guided on the days to fast by their priest.

Fasting during sacraments

Observance of certain saṃskāras or sacraments also require fasting for the whole duration or for a specific time. For example, couples who are getting married normally fast for the whole day.

Fasting Guidance

Hindu staff who are fasting may ask for flexibility within their working arrangements or time off work.

Guidance for Hindu staff

Staff should meet with their line managers as early as possible to discuss any work place adjustments necessary during periods of fasting. This reduces the risks of any confusion or misunderstandings.

Time off work

Give your manager as much notice as possible if you plan to take time off during periods of fasting. You should use annual or flexi leave, or a combination of both where you have remaining leave entitlement. You also have the option to use unpaid leave. Staff are reminded that line managers are under no obligation to automatically give staff time off for religious holidays or festivals.

Flexibility in work

You may request flexibility in your working hours. For example, changing your shift pattern or decreasing your working hours to be made up later.

You may request to work from home or another location closer to home if there is no business need for you to be in your office.

If you wish to pray then you may request to take your breaks at a more convenient time during the day.

You may also request a change in duties to make work more comfortable if necessary. For example, opting out of certain duties such as the handling of food or certain types of food.

Guidance for line managers

Line managers should be more considerate regarding the practicalities of fasting and any workplace adjustments necessary to staff working hours. Line managers should consider requests carefully and sympathetically, and in line with business needs and departmental policies.

Line managers should be reasonable and flexible where possible, and discuss the request and explore any concerns with the employee. If the original request cannot be accommodated, it may be possible to come to a compromise arrangement, and the use of creative and flexible solutions by managers and staff is encouraged.

Refusing a request without a good business reason could amount to discrimination.

In addition to the aforementioned requests that Hindu staff may ask during periods of fasting, line managers should also be considerate of planning team away days and training courses, while making an effort to engage with their staff to identify the dates of major festivals and holy days, which require staff to observe fast.

Managers can email the [Hindu Connection](#) for further advice and support.

About the Hindu Connection

Who we are

A faith, inclusion and wellbeing staff support network.

Our vision

is a truly inclusive and supportive workplace for **Hindus and all staff**.

Our mission

 is two-fold:

1. **represent, support and service** the needs of Hindu staff and our members.
2. **promote** wellbeing and Hindu Dharma to enrich the lives of all staff.

Our goals

 are:

1. creating an **inclusive** environment for Hindu staff.
2. enhancing staff **wellbeing** using Hindu Dharma's holistic approach.
3. developing **partnerships** with networks and individuals to improve departmental diversity and inclusion.
4. **reaching out** to the wider Hindu community.

What We Do: Our Services

 include:

- **providing advice and support** to line managers and members about Hindu concerns at work.
- **organising events** to celebrate Hindu Dharma and diversity and inclusion.
- **delivering wellbeing sessions** to enhance staff wellbeing and resilience.
- **reviewing policies** to ensure they do not adversely impact on Hindu staff.
- **reaching out** to the wider Hindu community to promote the Civil Service as an inclusive employer.

Contact us

 at hinduconnection@homeoffice.gov.uk to:

1. **learn** more about the Hindu Connection.
2. **access** our services.
3. **apply** to become a member.