

Cultural Guidelines for Setting

School Policies concerning Hindu Children

PLEASE NOTE: I WAS REQUESTED BY A PRIVATE SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL TO GIVE A SHORT TALK AND REPLY TO EACH QUESTION BRIEFLY. MY TIME WAS LIMITED.

I pray that this will assist school authorities to have a better understanding about certain Hindu traditions.

Good day and greetings to one and all.

My name is Priest/Pandit Narottam Das.

Today, I'd like to begin by telling you a bit about the Hindu religion, then I'll proceed to address some common questions that learners and educators may have about the Hindu religion.

Question: What is Hinduism?

Answer: According to many scholars, Hinduism is the world's oldest religion, with roots and customs dating back more than 5,000 years. It comprises several varied systems of philosophy, belief and ritual.

Hindus believe in the doctrines of samsara (which is the continuous cycle of life, death, and reincarnation); and karma (the universal law of cause and effect).

One fundamental principle of Hinduism is the idea that a person's thoughts and actions directly determine both their current life and their future lives. Hindus strive to achieve 'dharma', which is a code of living that emphasizes virtue and morality.

Hindus revere all living creatures and consider the cow a sacred animal.

Hindus speak several different dialects including Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati and so forth. Although Hindus speak these various dialects, they all fall under the Hindu 'umbrella' and they all follow very similar religious principles, rituals and traditions.

In terms of holy books, Hindus value many sacred writings as opposed to just one holy book. The primary sacred texts, known as the Vedas, were composed over 5,000 years ago.

Unlike other religions, Hinduism has no one founder but is instead a fusion of various beliefs embracing many religious ideas. It encompasses a web of customs, obligations, traditions and ideals that far exceed the Western tendency to think of religion primarily as a system of beliefs.

Hinduism is not just a religion, it's a way of life.

Question: What is the purpose of wearing Red Strings tied around the wrist?

Answer: The ritual of tying the red string originated thousands of years ago in the Hindu scripture named "Sarva Deva Pratishtaa Paddhati", which explains that after a Hindu prayer is completed, the priest traditionally "powers up/charges/imbues" the red string with a sacred hymn (mantra). This raksha sutra (red string) is then tied on the left wrist for a female, and on the right wrist for a male. The power of this mantra on the red string protects the wearer from evil influences and wards off dangers, diseases and enemies. Strings should be thin and presentable. It should not be a fashion statement, instead, its spiritual purpose should be commemorated.

Question: What is the significance of wearing earrings?

Answer: In the Hindu scripture, "Sushruta Samhita", the ceremony for piercing of ears or the "Karna Vedha Samskara" - is performed for both males and females. The Sushruta Samhita states that "The ears of a child should be pierced for protection from diseases and for decoration."

In women, ear-piercing is said to aid in providing regularity for menstrual cycles. Other Ayurvedic texts go on to explain that the nerves in the ears are pierced during an early part of a child's life to ensure proper brain development. The central point of the ear is said to play many significant roles including:

- in reproductive health,
- improving eyesight,
- improving hearing through various acupressure points,
- and aiding in the prevention of OCD, anxiety and nervousness.

These are just a few of the most significant reasons for Karna Vedha or piercing of one's ears. The practice is not merely ritualistic but has profound holistic relevance. Nowadays, ear piercing has become a fashion statement, but its significance should not be forgotten. In schools, earrings on both ears should not be flashy or opulent -- rather a simple stud or plain earring should suffice.

References: Sat Kriya Sara Dipika, Srimad Bhagavatam, Veeramitrodaya Samskara Prakaasha.

Question: What is the significance of wearing a Nose Ring?

Answer: The Hindu ritual of "The Nath" or nose ring has long been an essential and integral part of Indian culture and religion. The religious practice is an age-old tradition that dates back thousands of years and has great significance even today.

The ancient Ayurvedic scripture called the "Sushruta Samhita" indicates that nose piercings were prevalent in ancient times. Back then, Indian girls at an early age, were mandated to get a nose piercing to seek and maintain their cultural identity. Usually, a young woman would get her nose pierced upon her physical maturity - that is, the beginning of menstruation - as an indication that she was now eligible for marriage.

Apart from tradition, the practice is also said to have added health benefits such as protecting against nasal infections. Most Hindu women prefer to wear the nose rings on the left nostril since the nerves leading from the left nostril are associated with the female reproductive organs. Piercing the nose in this position is said to ease the pain of childbirth. Nose piercings are also thought to decrease pain during the menstrual cycle.

Question: Why is Red powder (Sindhoor) worn on a Hindu female's forehead?

Answer: Sindhoor is the red powder that a married Hindu female applies on her forehead. The Bindu (the circular sindhoor dot) denotes unity, which has no beginning and no end. It also represents the wheel of life and death, and illustrates the fertility and regenerative powers that are inherent in a woman. It signifies that she is the source or energy from which life originates. The Bindu is a Hindu female's most revered and recognized symbol and a proud display of her faith. It is a bold statement to the world that she follows the Hindu culture.

Question: Should the Mangal Sutra or Thali be worn by married Hindu females in school?

Answer: Just as people wear wedding rings to symbolize that they are married, similarly, Hindu females wear a necklace called the Mangal (auspicious) Sutra (necklace), or a bright yellow auspicious thick string (Thali) around their necks. These adornments indicate that she is married in the Hindu culture.

Question: Why do Hindus apply the Holy Ash Dot (Vibhuti) on their forehead?

Answer: Hindu devotees traditionally apply the holy ash dot on their forehead to honour the Hindu God Shiva. Traditionally, applying holy ash signifies that our sins are being destroyed. Holistically, holy ash has amazing analgesic and anti-inflammatory benefits since it is made with various natural herbs. Applying it on the forehead is also said to reduce headache pain.

Question: Is applying the Black Dot on a females forehead necessary?

Answer: The very tiny kajal dot applied on a females' forehead has medicinal as well as religious significance. Kajal is made from natural ingredients and soot. Traditionally, the kajal dot is applied on the forehead to protect a child from evil. Holistically, due to its organic nature, the original and pure version of kajal helps protect eyes from infections. In addition, it gives a soothing and cooling effect when applied.

Question: Why do Hindu's Celebrate Diwali Every Year?

Answer: Diwali is to Hindus what Christmas is to Christians. Diwali, or the 'Festival of Lights' is a major Hindu festival spread over 5 days during October. Diwali celebrates the triumph of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, and good over evil. Clay lamps are lit to symbolize hope for all humankind, and a renewed commitment to family, friends and goodwill.

Every year the major South African Hindu organization called the 'South African Hindu Maha Sabha', of which I'm a member, sets the Hindu festival and prayer dates for the year. Diwali is set for 24th October 2022 this year. Day 3 of this 5-day festival is the main day observed as Diwali.

Question: Why do Gujarati Hindus observe the Bhaidooj Festival just after Diwali?.

Answer: On the 5th and last day of the Diwali festival, the Gujarati community celebrates and observes Bhaidooj, which this year falls on 26th October 2022. On this day, brothers and sisters meet to express their love and affection for each other. Like most Indian festivals, the celebration of Bhaidooj brings families and friends together.

Question: Why do Hindu's from the Hare Krishna movement wear Neck Beads?

Answer: Holy Basil or the Tulsi plant is regarded as one of Hinduism's most sacred plants. The Hindu God Vishnu loves the Tulsi plant, and according to the Hindu scripture, the "Garuda Purana", the Hindu God Vishnu is said to dwell within individuals who wear Tulsi wood beads around the neck. The "Garuda Purana" mentions several advantages to wearing these beads including protection against nightmares, terror, weapons and accidents. It emits positive vibrations in a person's aura and aids in the removal of all bad energy. Wearing Tulsi neck beads is said to improve concentration and help overcome health issues. It is thought to purify a person's mind, body, and spirit.

Children belonging to ISKCON (Hare Krishna movement) usually wear these beads. It can be worn as a long string & hidden under clothes. A shorter version with pendants can also be worn but these should not be large and too flashy. It should not be a fashion statement, instead, its spiritual purpose should be remembered.

Question: Why do Hare Krishna Males grow a Shikha/Tuft of Hair on the Crown of their Heads?

Answer: Shikha is a tuft of hair grown at the back of the head specifically by Hare Krishna male devotees. The shikha is grown on a sensitive spot on the head known as 'Adhipati Marma' -- a vital, delicate point in the body which is the nexus of all nerves. {Ayurvedic scripture - Sushruta Samhitā 6/71}.

Below this spot is the 'Brahmarandhra', which is the seventh chakra (also known as the Sahasrara chakra). This seventh chakra is the highest one in the human body and is considered the seat of wisdom. The Shikha protects this sacred chakra.

For young male devotees, the Shikha should be small, presentable and well maintained. It should not be a fashion statement, instead, its spiritual purpose should be remembered.

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