

Hinduism and Mental Health: engaging British Hindus

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Understanding service users' symptoms in the context of their cultural background can be of great assistance in diagnosing and managing their illness and possibly even more so when trying to engage them in services. It only stands to reason then that with many service users using spirituality or religion as way of making sense of who they are, some understanding of the spiritual principles on which many cultures are based, would be useful. In this paper we will be looking at the teachings of Hinduism and how they may influence Hindus suffering mental health problems, in particular, British Hindus.

Keywords: spirituality; Hinduism; mental health

When I was first asked to write this, I was enthused as Hindu scriptures are very clear and positive about the role the mind and mental health have in one's spiritual journey. On the other hand I was a little bit apprehensive as British Hindus' views would vary depending on how inspired they were by philosophy or influenced by political, social and cultural factors. What would the average British Hindu's views be when there may not be such a person? Let me explain myself. Someone once said to me "if you ask three Hindus what Hinduism is, you will get three completely different answers." So what is Hinduism?

The term "Hinduism" was a nineteenth-century British invention. The term "Hindu" was first used by the ancient Persians to refer to the people living near the River Indus. It then became convenient shorthand for the rulers of India; it defined those who were not Muslims or Christians but followed the teachings of a large body of books called the "Vedas." Hence, in essence Hinduism is an umbrella term for a number of practices from the Vedas. The knowledge in the Vedas is eternal but the written Vedas are approximately five thousand years old, originate in what is now called India and were composed by Vedavyasa who is said to be an incarnation of God who simply wrote down knowledge which had previously been passed down orally, through a succession of disciples. It is said that he did this after he foresaw that the people of the future would not be able to retain such vast quantities of knowledge after just hearing it.

"Veda" means knowledge. The Vedas contain both material and spiritual knowledge. Some of the material topics covered include astronomy, medicine, law, mathematics, music and astrology. The main books which give details of the spiritual path are the "Bhagavata Gita" and the "Srimad Bhagavatam." The teachings of the Vedas are universal and

support that there are many paths to one God, thus all other religions are accepted as bona fide spiritual paths as long as the goal is to surrender to God. This is reflected in most people's experience of Hindus as being friendly and respectful of other people's religious beliefs.

At this point it would be useful to take a closer look at some of the fundamental teachings of the Vedas as most Hindus will be at least familiar with these concepts and even if not fully understood or accepted they almost certainly play a role in how Hindus would view mental illness, whether or not they would engage in mental health services and how services can meet their needs better.

Who/What am I?

The spiritual teachings of the Vedas say that every living entity is made up of a gross body, a subtle body (by which is meant mind, intelligence and an everyday sense of self/false ego) and the soul. Of these three, only the soul is permanent and is therefore the real self. The soul's origin and ultimate destination is the spiritual world. The soul or real self is eternally blissful and wise. The fundamental point a practitioner has to understand in order to progress spiritually is that they are not their body or mind and the material world is not their permanent home. As long as they have desires and attachments for things in the material world their actions (Karma) will result in them having to take another material body once the current one dies. What type of body they get next is determined by their desires, actions (Karma) and what they were thinking of at the time of their death. If, however, they have developed such an attachment to God that their desires and actions reflect this and at the time of death they think of God, then they will permanently shed their gross and subtle body and return to the spiritual realm.

Developing surrender to God and hence detachment from the material is achieved through a number of practices including reading and hearing scripture, congregational chanting and deity worship, however, prayer and mantra meditation are the main processes. As one progresses, one starts to uncover the real nature of the soul and qualities such as forgiveness, tolerance, kindness, honesty, mercifulness and unconditional love manifest themselves.

Who/What is God?

According to the Vedic view God comprises three aspects.

The first is "Brahmajyoti," which describes the impersonal energy or effulgence of God and practitioners who meditate on this and are successful, go on to attain liberation and merge with the energy of God.

The second is "Paramatma" or "Supersoul." This is the aspect of God which resides in every living entity alongside the individual soul. This aspect of God is said to also be present in every atom and molecule.

The third is "Bhagavan" or God the person. This is the highest level of realisation and here the goal of all meditation, prayer or practice is to know, surrender to and love God who has many names, of which Krishna, Rama and Vishnu are just three. When an individual has achieved full surrender they leave this world and return to the kingdom of God eternally where they experience the bliss and ecstasy of a relationship with God. This bliss and ecstasy can also be experienced by those who are still here and are fully surrendered.

Although Hinduism is a monotheistic tradition, God is understood to have many “avatars,” that is, manifestations/incarnations. This can give rise to the misconception that Hinduism is a polytheistic tradition. Add to this that many Hindus don’t worship God and aren’t in pursuance of self-realisation but worship a demi-god simply for material benefit, one then sees how the many branches and practices under the umbrella term of Hinduism arise. However, amongst British Hindus the most commonly worshiped “Avatars” are Krishna, Rama, Vishnu, Shiva and Laxmi (the feminine aspect of God). Amongst the demi-gods Ganesh is very popular. Those who have achieved self realisation or pure love for God are also revered by Hindus and one of the most popular devotees is Hanuman.

Soul/spirit

Below are some quotes from the Bhagavata Gita – there are many more scriptural references but I’ve just inserted a few. As mentioned earlier the soul is the real self and spirituality means to discover the real self. The soul/spirit is by nature loving, compassionate, honest, merciful, and forgiving and has many more beautiful qualities. As one nourishes the soul more with spiritual practices, the lower nature or material body, mind and all the fear, envy, greed, etc. that goes with it begins to dissipate and transform.

Bhagavat Gita(Bg) 2.12 – Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings; nor in the future shall any of us cease to be.

Bg. 2.17 – That which pervades the entire body with consciousness, you should know to be indestructible. No one is able to destroy that imperishable soul.

Bg. 2.20 – For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.

Bg. 2.23 – 25 The soul can never be cut to pieces by any weapon, nor burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor withered by the wind. This individual soul is unbreakable and insoluble, and can be neither burned nor dried. He is everlasting; present everywhere, unchangeable, immovable and eternally the same. It is said that the soul is invisible, inconceivable and immutable. Knowing this, you should not grieve for the body.

Karma

Karma literally means “actions pertaining to the satisfaction of the body and mind.” The law of Karma states that every action has a reaction. Every action is preceded by a stimulus then thinking, feeling and willing and every action is followed by a reaction. The reaction one receives depends not only on the original action but also on the intention behind the action. When thoughts, words or actions are done in a way that is pleasing to God or are in pursuit of self realisation then they are not under the influence of the laws of karma, but those thoughts, words and actions give direct nourishment to the soul or real self thus false identification with the body and mind as the self, starts to weaken and diminish and one realises their relationship with God.

Destiny is simply seen as a cumulative result of a number of choices we’re making now and have made in the past. Almost all Hindus will be influenced by the concept of Karma and this can help someone experiencing mental illness or suffering a life event to come to terms with things, but at the same time empower them to also make a change and move forward.

Reincarnation

The soul is described as sat-chit-ananda (eternal-full of knowledge-full of bliss). Since the material realm is not like this and each soul has free will, when a soul comes to the material realm they take on a gross body and a subtle body (mind, intelligence and false ego) based on their desires and how they want to enjoy material nature. As long as a person has desires to remain in the material realm and enjoy here separately from God they will continue to reincarnate and take various different bodies.

Bhagavat Gita (Bg) 2.13 states – As the embodied soul continuously passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. A sober person is not bewildered by such a change.

BG. 2.22 – As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.

Diet

The Vedas recommend follow a vegetarian diet, this is for a number of reasons. One reason is the consequences of killing another living entity simply for satisfaction of the taste buds are very harsh. Another reason is that what we eat affects our consciousness for example, when an animal is killed its consciousness at the time of death is of fear and anger. This negative energy is said to still be present when the flesh is consumed and thus affects our consciousness. Hinduism also promotes non-violence and a practitioner should live their life in such a way that their thoughts, words and actions don't cause unnecessary harm to others. Every aspect of life is seen as an offering to God including the food that is eaten. Food is to be prepared as if it is an offering to God and not simply for satisfaction of the tongue and belly. Food is then offered to God with a prayer and a prayer is also said to thank God for the sanctified food otherwise known as *prasad*.

Although a vegetarian diet is recommended by the Vedas, there are Hindus in the UK and all over the world who include meat in their diet.

Society

According to Bhagavata Gita, one's "caste" or role in society is determined by their qualification, training and nature – NOT by birth which is a common misconception amongst Hindus and non Hindus. There is no hierarchy to the social order as each type or worker is just as important as another in the functioning of society. The four social orders of Brahmins (priests, teachers, healers), Ksatriyas (administrators, managers, politicians and monarchy), Vaisyas (farmers and mercantile class) and Sudras (manual labourers) all have equal opportunity for spiritual advancement and are meant to work in harmony without discrimination, for the progress of society. The understanding is that when we know the strengths and weaknesses of the current vehicle (body and mind) then there are fewer impediments on the spiritual journey.

There are four stages to life brahmachari (celibate student), grihastha (married life), vanaprastha (retired life) and sannyasa (renounced order). One has full access to spiritual advancement no matter what stage of life you're in and the four stages are a natural progression. The protection of women, children, elderly and Brahmins is particularly

advocated in the Vedas as it is stated that when these four types aren't taken care of society becomes degraded, quarrelsome and unhappy.

Strong family relationships and taking care of elders continue to remain commonly held values amongst British Hindus. The 2001 Census found that Hindus are more likely to be married (60.8%) than the general population (43.6%), and less likely to be divorced (2.7% compared to 8.1%).

The average household size for Hindus is 3.2 compared to a national average of 2.4, 48.6% of Hindus have at least one dependent child. The national average is 29.4%. Hindus have the lowest proportion of lone parents of any religious group at 8.3% (national average 22.2%).

One's role in society and contribution to society and family through one's work is also seen as very important. This is also reflected in the findings of the 2001 Census which showed that Hindus are over-represented in the professional and managerial occupations and Hindu men are more likely than average to be self-employed.

This may mean that when mental illness is diagnosed in a family member there may be a reluctance to take help from the NHS and a preference for private healthcare to protect the future prospects of the individual concerned and reduce stigma. However, Hindu families will do all that they can to aid recovery and to help normalise the individual's life as much as possible which may include helping them get back into education, employment or find a spouse.

Controlling the mind

In the Bhagavada Gita it is explained that the gross senses such as touch, taste, smell are considered the most inferior aspect of an individual. Superior to the senses is the Mind (this is understood as where the function of processing inputs from the senses takes place). Superior to the mind is the intelligence or the power of discrimination and superior to the Intelligence is the soul. The soul being the real self should be in control but for one who is in illusion or ignorance about their real nature, they are considered to be controlled by their senses. Mind control is key to spiritual advancement as it can be the gateway to spiritual success or the door that blocks the way. There are six major ways in which the mind blocks spiritual progress; lust, anger, greed, envy, illusion and madness. The biggest illusion and madness is considered to be when we think we're only this body and mind. The mind can be controlled in many ways including: (1) meditation and prayer. (2) Controlling the senses that is, abstaining from meat, fish and eggs, intoxicants, gambling and sex outside of marriage and (3) Spiritualising the intelligence through hearing and reading scripture. As a person advances spiritually, what the mind and body go through affect the individual less and less. An analogy that describes this is that of a car and driver. The car is likened to the body and mind and the driver as the soul. If the driver over identifies with the car then any damage to the car is very disturbing but as one understands that they are not defined by their vehicle then the vehicle may get some scratches but the driver is not disturbed. Madness is seen as only taking care of the car and not the driver so by this definition mental illness doesn't necessarily equate to madness and at the same time one can be suffering from a mental illness but actually be very sane and deeply spiritual.

Mental illness

Every illness whether it is physical or mental is understood to have a biological, psychological and spiritual component. Therefore, treatment which includes all three

areas is considered to be most effective. An example of the spiritual aspect is that everything that happens to us whether it appears to be good or bad is an opportunity to go deeper spiritually. Sometimes when a practitioner makes very deep advancement, quickly it can lead to a situation which mimics depression – very similar to what is described by Christians as “the dark night of the soul.” Some of the practises and philosophy of Hinduism have been of great benefit to service users, in particular meditation and understanding the concept of trying to control the mind rather than be controlled by it.

Case study

MM is a 40-year-old Hindu gentleman who has a longstanding history of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Depressive disorder. He had tried a number of anti-depressants and anxiolytics as well as CBT to help his symptoms but didn't gain much relief. After seeing him a few times in clinic, he raised some ideas he had about trying mantra meditation and “Pranayama” (an ancient Indian breathing technique) as he had heard they help with anxiety. We spent one session going over the technique of “Pranayama” and he connected with his local temple to choose a mantra that he felt comfortable chanting and meditating with. When he was reviewed six weeks later, he had been taking his medication as per usual and was doing some mantra meditation and Pranayama twice a day. He reported a significant improvement in his symptoms particularly, his mood, motivation, energy levels and sleep had improved and his anxiety levels had reduced. After a further six weeks he was discharged from mental health services back to the care of his GP.

Suicide and euthanasia

A Hindu sees their body as belonging to God and a gift from God, they also view it as a temple for the soul and for God. Hence, prematurely killing the body is not condoned. In fact it is viewed as a disrespectful and sinful act for which one will have to suffer the consequences in their next birth. Trying to end one's suffering through suicide or euthanasia is seen as futile as one's suffering doesn't end when the body ends, particularly if one continues to reincarnate as a result of their karma. However, Hindu teachings also discourage unnecessary pain and suffering and hence medication to alleviate pain and suffering is allowed.

Death

Regardless of how serious a practitioner one is, or which branch of Hinduism one follows, death of the body is seen as a transition: an opportunity for the soul, the permanent self to attain pure love for God and liberation from the shackles of the material body or continue in the cycle of birth and death and choose another type of body to occupy. Death is very much a family and religious affair and as soon as one gets some sense of the fact that the time to move on is approaching, preparations begin. Regardless of which branch of Hinduism a Hindu follows, the richness and depth of the philosophy coupled with the strong culture means there is always a reservoir of strength and love to bring solace to the heart in difficult times.

Closing thoughts

With Hindus such as Laxmi Mittal topping the Sunday Times 2009 Rich List, Hindus are certainly making their mark in British Society. It is also refreshing to see that with events such as the first British Government Funded Hindu School, “Krishna Avanti” opening its doors to students in October 2008, they are also being given opportunities to in still the values of Hinduism in the younger generation outside of temples and the home. As Hindus and their beliefs are better understood by society hopefully we will see changes in the way they engage with mental health services.

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