

[How London Hindus Tackle Their Children's Education](#)

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How London Hindus Tackle Their Children's Education

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Hindu parents in Britain, since the sixties, have been anxious to give their children an education which can provide them with the best of the two worlds: the best of English curriculum as well as religious knowledge and experience. There have been several experiments in independent schools where children are taught religious values which originated in Vedanta-the Theosophical School of Annie Besant, the Krishnamurthy School in South England and Satish Kumar's small school in Devon which is along the lines of a traditional Hindu gurukulam. But none of these schools are large enough to accommodate the needs of ordinary children who need to be prepared for the UK's hostile job market. Large Hindu schools, similar to the ones created in Holland for the Hindu children of Surinam origin, remained only in the dreams of Hindu parents here.

Since 1991, Swaminarayan School in North London has been trying to achieve a happy blend of things East and West. It is the first and essentially only full-scale Hindu school in England. It not only provides a Hindu environment for the children, but is able to approach subjects such as history through Indian-rather than British-eyes.

Dr. Paul Hancock, of Anglo-Scottish descent, is the headteacher of the Swaminarayan School. His parents decided to become Hindus when he was very young and since then he has seen the real moral hope in Hinduism. Hancock is not a Swaminarayan devotee himself. His personal God is Ganesh, and his room is full of Ganesha statues and pictures. "Hinduism is a simple, positive religion. Simple beliefs such as karma and moksha set a wonderful agenda for teaching."

The Swaminarayan School has 315 pupils from age of two to seventeen years-all of Indian origin. Ninety percent of them are Hindus, and almost all belong to Gujarati-speaking families. This is the second cheapest private school in Britain, so poor families can send their children, too. They get no grants from the government, but are generously subsidized by the Swaminarayan mission (providing 40% of fees). "Religious Studies" as such constitute 2.7 hours a week (10%) of the curriculum. Half of the syllabus for Religious Studies consists of Swaminarayan teachings, 40% is Hinduism in general and 10% is devoted to other religions.

There are two teachers of Religious Studies, one of them proficient in Sanskrit. There is an assembly room where prayers are held. Children pray to the God they believe in. One can hear "Om Shivaya Nama" as well as Swaminarayan slokas in the Gujarati language. The school also enjoys the facilities of a large Swaminarayan temple in its vicinity. The swamis from the temple often visit the school for lectures and ceremonies.

The Swaminarayan School follows the UK national curriculum, but according to Paul Hancock, "We do far more. Before the school was opened, we looked at an enormous number of schools. I visited around 60 schools far and wide in Britain to study their syllabus. Fortunately, the wonder of culture is that it can pervade much of the timetable. A Tagore poem in English is as good an instrument for teaching poetry as one by Wordsworth, and our children get both.

"The main moral drive is assumed to come from the home, but we wish to be supportive of the children as they grow up and some of our teenagers can talk to us in a way that they would find difficult at home. Given the struggles in the open world that await them, we do like our children to become extroverted." Making the students extroverted may have unintended consequences-at least one parent complained that the level of discipline at the school is too low.

Parents are invited to join educational courses especially designed for them. In fact, there is an efficient "triangular partnership" between the child, the family and the school. Because of the request of parents from far away places, the Swaminarayan School will soon have boarding facilities.

The school is on 3.2 acres of land and has the largest gymnasium in the area. One can play cricket, hockey and even football in this gym at any time of the year. The teachers come from a wide-ranging background, from Hindus to Jews to Afro-Caribbean and Evangelical Christian upbringing.

In terms of religion, the Junior Swaminarayan students are better than senior students. Five-year-old children learn Sanskrit slokas much quicker than their big brothers. Almost all pupils can answer simple questions about Hinduism.

Hancock said, "We have festivals such as Ganesha puja. Some festivals are celebrated in combination with each other. Diwali is celebrated at the same time as Sanhainn, a Celtic festival. Christmas celebrations happen to be at the same time as Guru Pramukhswami's birthday."

Children wear Hindu clothes to school on festival days but, according to Hancock, the parents were not in favor of a Hindu-looking daily uniform. Instead they opted for the standard English school outfit. One-third of the teachers regularly come in Hindu clothes. One parent complained that her daughter's teacher objected to the girl's wearing a pottu to class. After some negotiation, the teacher allowed a "very tiny" pottu. Hancock said he was unaware of the incident, and that there was no restriction on the wearing of sectarian marks such as pottu, vibuthi or sandalwood.

The Swaminarayan school provides a Hindu environment for the children, enhanced by the support of the nearby temple and large Swaminarayan monastic community whose swamis frequently visit. Hancock summarizes the school's impact: "There is no child in this school who is ashamed of Asian culture."

After School Hindu Schools

Hindu parents who don't send their children to the full-time school or alternatives such as St. James [see sidebar right] have other options. The fact is that nearly the same amount of actual class time-about three hours at Swaminarayan-can be gotten by sending children to weekend and evening schools

to learn Hindu culture, arts and religion. There are many of these in London, led by the prestigious Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan [see below].

There School of Cultural Heritage has two centers in London. One is in the North and held every Saturday at Kingsbury High School. The other is in Tooting, south of London. There are a total 16 classes to train pupils in achieving self-confidence, public performance in dance and music and Hindi and Gujarati. Havan is frequently held at each. There are 43 paid staff members, mostly Hindu. Dinesh Pandya, the principal, says, "We invite sadhus and swamijis to give lectures. Prominent gurus such as Satyamitra Swami and Chitravan have visited the schools."

One-hundred-forty students age five to sixteen gather weekly at Bal Bhavan to study Gujarati language and the arts. It is more of a cultural organization than a school. In the assembly room, pupils recite slokas. Vipul Bhai Thakor, who started off as a teacher of Sanskrit, is running this school with the aim of not encouraging narrow mindedness.

In West London, Chandulal Kanani runs the Lohana community two-hour Saturday school, founded about 10 years ago. They teach basic Gujarati at the primary level to pupils from five to nine years. At this age, they learn Sanskrit prayers.

The Tamil Academy of Language and Arts was founded in April, 1985 by a group of Tamilians living in the Southeast. Its aim is to help members of the community achieve their aspirations in the Tamil academic and artistic fields. TALA conducts classes in Tamil language, carnatic music, bharata natyam dance, mridangam drum and information technology.

UK Hindu Education Policy

Hinduism is now a part of the UK's national curriculum and, in theory at least, taught in every school. Dr. Pinja of the Hindu Swayam Sewak Sang has worked on the Hindu part of this model syllabus. He consulted more than 15 Hindu

organizations. "We wanted to present Hinduism as a living faith. What we find is that most of the Hindu teaching manuals are written by westerners." Dr. Pinja is not happy with the current situation in which only Islam and Judaism are taught apart from Christianity. "I want to see Hinduism taught in every British school regardless of whether there are Hindu pupils in the class or not. After all, when geography is taught, teachers don't exclude Pakistan from the course simply because there is no Pakistani pupil in the class."

This is all part of a concerted effort by educators and parents, Hindu and non-Hindu, to respond to the increased ethnic mix (and consequent tensions) through better religious education. In many respects the UK is ahead of other western countries in facing this challenge.

St. James School-An Eclectic Alternative

St. James School in Central London is an excellent institution in the finest tradition of English education. The student body (30% Hindu) is from decidedly upscale families-witness the Rolls and Mercedes dropping off students each morning-able to meet the relatively stiff fees. Prominent UK Hindus such as C.V. Patel send their children here. The academic and character building standards are high; discipline is strict. Meals are healthy and all vegetarian. There are actually four schools here with separate facilities and under separate headmasters-junior and senior boys; junior and senior girls-about 200 students in all. It appeals to Hindus because of its philosophically Vedic orientation; however, it is not a "Hindu school," and according to Senior Boys Headmaster Nicholas Debenham "not a Christian one either. It is not a religious anything. It is intended to be something new. It is a philosophic teaching that should appeal to anyone, that would strengthen their own faith." The school's origins are unique.

St. James' founder, Leon MacLaren, first founded the "London School of Economics" in 1920, a philosophy school based on the mystical teachings of Gurdjieff and his disciple, P.D. Ouspensky. St. James was begun as a place to educate the children whose relatively affluent parents belonged to the London School of Economics. Consequently, it has from the beginning been an unusual blend of the British upper crust and deep spirituality. In the 1960s MacLaren met Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and through him, Swami Shankarananda Saraswati, the previous Shankaracharya of Jyotir Mutt in India, with whom he developed a close association. Shankarananda offered much guidance for St. James. As a result, the school is permeated with Advaita Vedanta philosophy, plus teachers and most students participate in daily meditation following Maharishi's TM method. Students study the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Gita. An authentic form

of Vedic mathematics is taught as well. Basic Sanskrit is a required subject and Sanskrit chants begin and end the day.

The school has an eclectic approach to religion. It is formally associated with the Church of England, and most teachers are members. The senior boys' assembly has a 15-minute period of worship which includes the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father, who art in heaven..."), responses, hymns and psalms-all drawn from the Church of England prayer book. The senior girls have the same service; the junior boys and girls do a Sanskrit prayer, the Lord's Prayer and a scriptural reading which is most often from the Christian Bible, but also from Hindu scripture. Debenham said a few Muslim (but no Hindu) students had challenged the mandatory attendance and were told if they did not go to the assembly, they could not attend the school. He believes there is nothing in "the prayers that would upset anyone."

On the other hand, ten years ago the Standard, a prominent UK newspaper, wrote a series of articles (later made into a book) accusing the school of being "some kind of cult." The paper said they wear uniforms like a British school, call themselves St. James, but teach Hinduism-a backhanded compliment as far as Hindus are concerned.

So Hindu parents must weigh the benefits (first-class education and a spiritual environment) against the drawbacks (mandatory participation in Christian prayer and the predominance of Christian scripture) in deciding to send their children here.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan: Preeminent in Cultural Arts

A secular and nonpolitical institution, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in West London, is known for its rich cultural activities including dance, music, drama and the teaching of Indian languages, including Sanskrit. Bhavan even produced a play in Sanskrit recently which was much acclaimed by the critics. It was founded in 1973 with Lord Mountbatten (and later Prince Charles) as Patron-in-Chief and enjoys continued support from both UK and Indian politicians. It receives the highest amount of sponsorship grants of all such institutions in London. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan was founded in 1938 in India. It has expanded to 44 centers worldwide and published over one thousand books in English on India and Hinduism.

Nearly 90% of the London center's 172 weekly classes for 1994 are in music and dance. There are 16 classes in Indian languages. Their brochure also mentions philosophy, religion, meditation and yoga-but there are only two classes a week on hatha yoga (mostly attended by non-Indians), one on meditation, and none identified as religion or philosophy. Classes are very popular and beginning in 1990 have also been held away from the main center, in response to demand.

Mr. Mathoor Krishnamurthy, the artistic director of the Bhavan, is himself a Sanskrit scholar. His lectures on Bhagavad Gita and Vedas have been well received. He is often invited to appear on television as well as at numerous multifaith meetings to teach about Hinduism. Krishnamurthy has recently adapted teaching of Hindu scriptures for the young audience. He has also prepared video cassettes on Hinduism. Krishnamurthy's efforts most directly fulfill the need to systematically transmit religious (rather than cultural) teachings to the younger generation.