

HINDU PERSPECTIVES ON HUMANITARIAN WORK: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

1. India has been home to refugees for centuries. From the time when almost the entire Zoroastrian community took refuge in India fleeing from the persecution they were then subjected to on religious grounds, India has, from time to time, continued to receive large numbers of refugees from different countries, not necessarily from the neighbouring countries alone. Since its independence, India has received refugees not only from some of its neighbouring countries, but also distant countries like Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. In keeping with its secular policies, India has been the home to refugees belonging to all religions and sects.

Some key Hindu concepts

2. Hindus call 'Hinduism' *Sanatana Dharma* the 'eternal law'. *Dharma* is universally valid law according to the way in which the Universe works and which individuals' function within society. Within this framework a great many different religious communities with specific beliefs, rituals and places of worship, flourish.
3. The four tasks for all Hindus:
- *Dharma*: Do one's duty as per one's stage in life and one's station
 - *Artha*: Provide for the material existence with the right means
 - *Kama*: Express desire in the right way within a moral framework
 - *Moksha*: Work towards release from the cycle of birth and death
4. Some of the basic beliefs in Hinduism are:
- One impersonal Ultimate Reality – *Brahman*
 - Which manifests as many personal deities *Ishvara*
 - True essence of life - *Atman*, the soul - is *Brahman* embodied in matter
 - Reincarnation – the conditioned *Atman* or *Jiva* is continually born into this world lifetime after lifetime (*Samsara*)
 - *Karma* actions good or bad – the egocentric actions of the *Jiva* keeps it bound to this world
 - Performing good actions or *Dharma* takes it towards

- Ultimate goal of life – to release Atman and reunite with the divine *Yoga*, becoming as one with Brahman (*Moksha*)

Community and interdependence

5. Concepts of community and interdependence are emphasized in Hindu cultures, as opposed to individualism and autonomy. The world is to be seen as ‘one family’ and the implication here is that there is a collective responsibility for community and societal issues. In Hindu culture, interdependence and interconnectedness are considered the foundation of well-being. This is illustrated in the tradition of a joint family system and where there is care and support given to all members of the extended family. Actions that weaken the community diminish the individual. Equally, the community is strengthened by the contributions of the individual. People work together to care and provide for each other, rather than focus on individual needs.

6. A collective value orientation is antithetical to ideas of privacy, personal space, and individualism.

7. *Dharma* is a key concept in Hinduism and Hindus speak of Hinduism as *Sanatana Dharma*: the Eternal Law. *Dharma* in its widest sense means that which upholds, from the macrocosm to the microcosm and from the universe to the atom. There is a transcendental principle which governs the universe. At the personal level, *Dharma* emphasizes the obligations to family and the community based on the values of Truth, Non-violence and Discipline, including selfless service.

Types of organisations with different means and ends:

8. Hindu Faith-based organisations (FBOs) working in the humanitarian sector of have a strong sense of doing *seva* or service in the communities in which they exist. *Seva* is the individual’s pathway to inner purification and ultimate liberation. This can take many forms: from charity given as material donations or time effort and energy expended for a particular task done without any expectation or reward.

9. The service may be done within three different organisational structures: Temple and similar religious organisations, community organisations based around linguistic and geographical origins and national/international organisations which may be umbrella bodies. The way in which these function will also be different. For example, there may be religious elements incorporated in the way in which temple organisations work with prayers and rituals, whereas community organisations tend to function in a more social secular way.

10. For example in the United Kingdom, the Church Urban Fund, which has been funded by the government, uses the channel of bilateral FBOs (e.g. Hindu Christian Forum) to implement community projects on the ground. These tend to function according to common faith-based values which can be reflected in the work which is being carried out.

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