

London school sets criteria for 'practising Hindu'

Britain's first state-funded Hindu school has come up with a unique definition of 'practising Hindus' as part of its admissions policy - those who pray daily, do voluntary work at temples, follow a vegetarian diet and abstain from intoxication.

The school, named Krishna-Avanti Primary School, is located in the London borough of Harrow, which has the highest concentration of Hindus in any council in Britain: 40,000. The school is promoted by a charity organisation called the I-Foundation.

The admission process has started for the intake of the first batch of students in September 2008. Places are limited to 30 and are expected to be heavily over-subscribed. The official faith advisor to the school is ISKCON UK, which will advise on aspects of how the Hindu faith can be integrated and taught within the school.

According to the admissions policy, among the criteria to be used while considering applications are: 'Looked after children from Hindu families, 10 nominations by Bhaktivedanta Manor of practising Hindu families, children from practising Hindu families, children from Hindu families who are broadly following the tenets of Hinduism.'

The policy defines 'practising Hindus' as those who perform daily prayer and deity worship either at a temple or at home, and accept and follow Vedic scriptures, in particular the Bhagavad Gita. They must also be involved in at least weekly temple related voluntary work, attend temple programmes at least fortnightly and abstain from meat (including fish and eggs), alcohol, smoking and drugs.

According to the policy, 'broadly following' the tenets of Hinduism is defined as: at least monthly visits to the temple, attendance of key festival programmes (Diwali, Janmashtami and Ramnavami) at a local temple, following a vegetarian diet and avoidance of intoxication.

Asked if children of Hindu families who preferred non-vegetarian food or may not be ritualistic Hindus or who followed traditions within Hinduism that went against the school's definition of practising Hindus would be ineligible for admission, a spokesman of the I-Foundation told IANS: 'The rules do not exclude anyone who does not qualify under the criteria. The policy is not meant to exclude people.'

'Under the rules of funding of faith schools, the school is obliged to have a set of criteria for admission that is relevant to the faith. The criteria - for example, the one about abstention from meat and intoxication - reflect the mainstream Hindus in this country.'

'The definition in the admissions policy is a reasonably good way to understand whether a person is a practising Hindu or not. Of course, there are Hindus who prefer non-vegetarian food and drink, and they are welcome to apply if places are available.'

He, however, pointed out that a large number of applications were expected for the 30 places. He said the school will 'take people on trust' when they claim to meet the criteria of 'practising' Hindus or 'broadly following' the tenets of Hinduism.

'Obviously, we are limited to what we can do. You take people on trust. But if there is a problem, we

will look into it. You need to have some criteria and you need to start somewhere,' he added.

Applications submitted on the basis of Hindu faith will be required to be accompanied by a form signed and supported by a local temple priest acting as referee. A recent advertisement said its head teacher needs to be 'preferably a practising Hindu'.

According to the admissions policy, the school is keen to encourage applications from other faith backgrounds, but since demand for places is expected to outstrip availability, opening admissions to non-Hindu applicants 'at this early stage has been viewed as inappropriate'.

Among the ideals the school seeks to promote are: 'Nurturing character and conduct consistent with Vaishnava-Hindu virtues, most notably respect, empathy, honesty, self-esteem, self-discipline, thoughtfulness and appreciation of the divine.'

It also aims to promote 'pupils' holistic health through the provision of a safe, caring environment, a balanced vegetarian diet and opportunities to practise yoga, meditation and the arts'.

The school announced that since its building will not be complete in time for the September 2008 start, children will be taught for the majority of the first academic year in portable cabins.

The school's promoter, the I-Foundation, describes its aim as promoting 'sustainable projects that are based on Hindu culture and philosophy and integrated within the local community'.

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