

## Hindu Chaplaincy: Defining a Novel Incarnation of Spiritual Care<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

All things considered, life is exceedingly beautiful, but that does not at all negate the seemingly insurmountable challenges we face. Sometimes, in order to weather those challenges, humans seek help and guidance from others who have relevant expertise or experience. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, we hear from Uddālaka Āruṇi that just like if a person was brought blindfolded to a deserted place far from their home, if that person were wise, they would ask anyone they saw the directions toward their home, similarly, the wise person seeking to overcome their psychological, physiological, and spiritual reactions to the triggers of *saṁsāra* would seek out a competent guide (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 2.14). Our parents and elders serve as amazing resources for our lives, and in Hindu traditions, we are advised that these are the people to turn to in the first instance.

To access both wider and deeper knowledge and experience around the more spiritual issues of life, for Hindus and indeed for Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs, this role has been fulfilled by a Guru, a spiritual teacher who is learned in the philosophies and practices, but is also an accomplished practitioner themselves. In Hindu Dharmas, the expected standard is quite high: the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Ādityahṛdayam* are just two texts that document incidences of spiritual care - with Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa providing care for Arjuna in the former, and Agastya Muni providing care for Bhagavān Śrī Rāma in the latter - that form part of the foundations for the formation of Gurus in their abilities to competently care for their students.

In our modern contexts, such Gurus are few and far between, with the majority residing in India and Nepal. In the United States, a place where the number of traditionally qualified Gurus are quite low, the new field of Hindu Chaplaincy serves to bridge this gap, and by linking back to traditional wisdom and modalities, can serve as a useful companion through the spiritual travails of modern life.

Chaplaincy, however, is not a term one will encounter in our scriptures. So, where does this come from? How can Hindus reinterpret allochthonous models to serve our own people? This document is an attempt to work towards a consensus-based definition of the terms involved for the benefit of those providing care, those receiving care, and those who would employ these care providers.

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## **Origins of Chaplaincy:**

The preponderance of Christian priests in various European kingdoms meant that the Church could mission a priest to provide priestly services and counsel - whilst working as another vehicle of the Church's mandate - to groups of recipients of specific interest to the Church. Most important was the King, and it was common for the highest clergy in the Kingdom to also serve as the monarch's chaplain (i.e. Archbishop of Canterbury being the Chaplain to the HM the Queen).

However, as institutionalised Christianity began to be decentralised from governmental oversight in many areas, the priest-chaplain branched out into their usual evangelical fields: mainly hospitals, prisons, the military, and schools. These places of acute challenge and change often evoke the most probing of questions and emotional upheaval, and people would gladly receive the counsel of a priest-chaplain.

Other religions and spiritual traditions have managed these needs through various means, and especially in the Dharmic traditions, this has been historically managed by the Guru. The Guru would have had the knowledge appropriate to the *purohita* (Vedic/Paurāṇic/Tantric rituals and regulations) but would also have deep appreciation of the spiritual teachings (Vedānta/Yoga/Śaiva/Śākta/Vaiṣṇava), whilst belonging to one themselves.

In the West, it is very unusual for a Guru of such qualifications to be available; indeed even in India this is becoming a rarity. As such, just like the other minority diasporic cultures that have settled in the USA, Hindu chaplains are no longer *purohitas* or *gurus*.

## **Chaplains in the USA**

### **Origin of Chaplaincy in the USA**

The United States Army Chaplaincy was officially created by an act of the Continental Congress upon the request of General George Washington. The Chaplain Corps dates back to 29 July 1775, when the Continental Congress authorized one chaplain for each regiment of the Continental Army, with pay equaling that of a captain. (<https://armyhistory.org/u-s-army-chaplain-corps/>). As of 2011, there are 2,900 paid Chaplains in the US Armed Forces. Since its inception in the US, Chaplaincy proliferated through all sectors in its various Christian iterations. In 1862, President Lincoln appointed the first Jewish Chaplain, but it would take Japanese Prisoners of War in World War II to necessitate the US to think beyond the Abrahamic Religions. The first US professional

Buddhist chaplain came then, and this was followed in the 1970s by members of other traditions.

### **Chaplaincy Standards in the USA**

The Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE), the Association for Professional Chaplains (APC) and the Canadian Association for Spiritual Care (CASC) are the major multifaith institutions that set and govern the standards for Chaplains and their endorsing bodies in North America, which are numerous. Healthcare is a setting in which there is a heightened, expedited return on any professional input into care, and as such, their regulatory practices have been established on expert analysis of years of evidence in the field. As the Higher Education sector has realised, the potential for exploitation - knowingly or unknowingly - of care recipients by providers is mitigated to a large extent by the adoption of similar professional standards as recommended by ACPE/APC/CASC. Similar situations are coming to light in the sectors of Corrections, Military, and Community chaplaincy, and as such, NAHCA is of the view that adopting the highest standards not only enables us to provide the best care possible for recipients, but also represents us hearing the call of our Dharma.

Chaplains are certified based on the completion of an undergraduate degree, a graduate degree and then 21 further competencies in four areas: Integration of Theory and Practice, Professional Identity and Conduct, Professional Practice Skills and Organizational Leadership. Additionally, they are required to maintain certification by undergoing periodical reassessment of their capabilities in all four fields of competency (ACPE, APC, et. al, 2020. *The Impact of Professional Spiritual Care*).

### **Hindu Spiritual Care Providers in North America**

#### **Need for Defining Hindu Spiritual Caregiving**

Chaplaincy needs to be conceived of not in terms of its Christian origins, but under a Hindu epistemological lens if Hindus are going to be able to reach the spiritual depths required to provide spiritual care. The intention of this effort is to revisit our traditions and free them from the shackles of the political realities of 1900s India (which has supplanted the ancient modalities of Dharma currently), so that, in keeping with our ancient heritage of adaptation, evaluation, and updating (*Mahābhārata* 12.257), we will be able to respond to the needs of today.

## **Towards *Hindu* Chaplaincy**

Chaplaincy, a term with specifically Christian origins, is perhaps best described within a Hindu epistemological framework by the term Spiritual Care Provider. As mentioned, the role of the Spiritual Care Provider did exist as one of the facets of the Guru. In history, there have been many competent renunciants or scholars that have given counsel to figures in our history - think of Vaśiṣṭha and the Ikṣvāku dynasty for but one example. Almost always, these were Gurus.

Gurus are, by requirement, male, female or non-binary renunciates (or householders, in some specific traditions) who are *śrotriya* and *brahmaniṣṭha*. This means that on top of their 12 years of training in the Vedas and auxiliary scriptures, they will have successfully performed spiritual practices that would result in their own Guru ratifying them as a competent Guru. These days, the majority of such Gurus reside in India and Nepal, which, by extension means access to Hindu spiritual care from an authentic Guru in the US today is extremely difficult.

In absence of qualified Gurus, it is still possible to make provisions for spiritual care. Just as the first US Chaplains were Christian Clergy, but towards the latter half of the twentieth century spiritual care was isolated from the liturgical role of a priest and training developed accordingly, this approach was initially adopted by all other traditions. In the case of Hindus, we are able to distill that which is necessary for spiritual care provision from the example and teachings of the Gurus, and in the form of the Hindu Spiritual Care Provider, offer such wisdom in the service of Hindus in the USA.

### **On Spiritual Care in the Hindu Context**

Spiritual care (emotional, social, and spiritual support) depends on someone who has a good knowledge of emotional management, social history and contemporary issues, and spiritual philosophies and praxis, and as such, these are the basis for the training of Hindu Chaplains in the United States:

#### *Emotional Management*

Based upon the Yogasūtras & Vedānta, tempered with 'real-life loopholes' as depicted in the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, etc.

#### *Social History and Contemporary Issues*

A deep appreciation of the nuance that regionality and Dharmic affiliation lend to the Hindu experience, as well as the ability to guide Hindus through the sources belonging to the Court (Kings & Mīmāṃsaka Brāhmaṇas) and Forest (villagers of all socio-economic classes and tribal origins & renunciates) cultural complexes. The hermeneutics derived therefrom will enable the Hindu Spiritual Care Provider to provide spiritual accompaniment from a place of authentic depth.

### *Spiritual Philosophies and Praxis*

Ideally, the Hindu Spiritual Care Provider would have a Guru-Paramparā/Philosophy of which they are themselves practitioners of. They should also know the wide array of alternatives, and desire to further their knowledge of traditions that are represented in their care recipients. At no point in time would a Hindu Spiritual Care Provider mistake their task to be spiritual *ministry*: they are not here to convince you to join their own *paramparā*. Instead, they are simply there to provide spiritual support in appreciation of the care recipients' spiritual proclivities and heritage.

Should a Hindu Spiritual Care Provider have to perform *pūjās*? The answer is: as the context requires. If a Hindu Spiritual Care Provider was asked to perform *saṁskāras*, (sacraments like weddings and funerals), extra training would have to be sought from authentic *Purohitas*, and as that process is lengthy and requires life-style alterations for the most part, the preference is for the Hindu Spiritual Care Provider to be a bridge for people to the *Purohita* and vice-versa, as the *purohitas* are the ritual specialists.

A Purohita/Paṇḍita in Hindu traditions are people who know either the Veda or the Tantras from memory, who are schooled in the Vedāṅgas or Prātiśākhya of the specific recension, who have deep understanding of the significance of each ritual and the required parameters as described in the ritual texts such as the *Nirṇayasindhu* etc., are deemed competent at the performance of the sixteen *saṁskāras*, and are also schooled in the rituals of their own spiritual lineage. This training process is a 12-year undertaking and is still taught in Gurukulas in India and Nepal. Hindu Spiritual Care Providers tend to be people more interested in the spiritual care of the care recipient, and as such do not invest 12 years into the training **required** to be a Hindu Purohita/Paṇḍita. Yet, due to their training, the Hindu Spiritual Care Provider is expertly situated to counsel people through their interactions with Purohitas/Paṇḍitas and are thus powerful partners in all stages of life.

### **Roots of Hindu Spiritual Care Provider Training:**

As the Hindu Spiritual Care Provider is different to the Guru and the Purohita, it is important to understand the principles behind the training entailed. A Hindu Spiritual Care Provider is

guided by the notion of the *hitaisī*, an unbiased companion who is focussed on a person's holistic wellbeing, informed by the principles of Dharma calibrated as such, including:

- **Maitra-karuṇā: friendship in compassion**

***adveṣṭā sarva-bhūtānāṃ maitraḥ karuṇa eva ca |  
nirmamo nirahankāraḥ sama-duḥkha-sukhaḥ kṣamī ||  
santuṣṭaḥ satataṃ yogī yatātmā dṛḍha-niścayaḥ || Bhagavadgītā  
12.13-14a***

*One who harbours no hatred towards any living being, who is of a friendly, compassionate disposition, who has abandoned the sense of proprietorship, who works to mitigate their own false-ego, who has trained in remaining stable amidst their own emotions, and is truly patient. They should be content and always engaged in their own spiritual practice, who has self-discipline especially with regards to boundaries, and is content in their conclusion (that they want to serve in the capacity as a spiritual care provider).*

- **Para-Duḥkhe Upakāra: Offering Selfless Assistance from a place of deep Empathy**

***pīra-parāyī jāṇe re, para-duḥkhe upakāra kare to ye, mana abhimāna na  
āṇe re || Narsiṅh Mehtā (c.1460s).***

*One who has deep awareness and empathy of the situations of others, selflessly serving those who are suffering, without letting any trace of ego grow in the mind.*

- **Samadṛṣṭi: non-judgemental appreciation of the uniqueness of all and their inherent human rights.**

***vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini |  
śunī caiva śvapāke ca paṇḍitaḥ samadarśinaḥ || Bhagavadgītā 5.17***

*The wise person will see a scholar who is endowed with knowledge and gentleness, and an elephant, a cow, a dog, and an eater of them all with an equally caring heart, in as much as they are all vessels of ātman.*

***sarvabhūtastham ātmānaṃ sarvabhūtāni cātmani |***

***paśya tvam yogayuktātmā sarvatra samadarśanaḥ || Yogavāśiṣṭha 6.53.43***

*A person who is connected to the wisdom of Oneness should see every single individual being honouring their diversity and their unity: knowing that as every living being shares the same essential qualities as oneself, therefore, that one is also present in all other beings.*

- **Brahmaniṣṭha: Grounded in Brahman**

***śrotriyaṁ brahmaniṣṭham || Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 1.2.12***

*One who is well-learned in the teachings, and who is grounded in the awareness of Brahman.*

For the Hindu Spiritual Care Provider, it is important that there is an investment in their own spiritual progress. Ideally, they would have access to a source of spiritual instruction and evaluation, as spiritual progress is a life-long endeavour. All Hindu traditions warn against ignorance, and this is especially true for ignorance in regards to Hindu spiritual teachings and spiritual care theories for those who are Hindu Spiritual Care Providers.

- **Vairāgya: Awareness of Boundaries**

***abhyāsa-vairāgyābhyāṁ tan nirodhaḥ || Yogasūtras 1.12***

*The evaluative practice of detachment leads to the calming of one's emotions.*

For a Hindu Spiritual Care Provider, one needs to have a good handle on their own emotional state, as above. The dangers of emotional attachment to a care recipient is well-documented, and it is thus a cardinal requisite of all professional spiritual care education. For Hindus, it is of even more consequence as it is a detriment to one's spiritual progress, and the ability to effectively provide care that is in the best interests of the care-recipient.

- **Ahiṁsā: Non-Violence**

***ahiṁsā satyam akrodhas tyāga śāntir apaiśuṇam |  
dayā bhūteṣv aloluptvaṁ mārḍavaṁ hrīr acāpalam || Bhagavadgītā 16.3***

*Non-violence, truthfulness, a lack of temper, lack of selfish interest, calmness, lack of fault-finding, compassion to all beings, lack of greed, modesty with regards to accomplishments, gentleness, and not being easily agitated.*

The notion of non-violence in thought, word, and deed is amplified for Hindu Spiritual Care Providers as not only does it need to manifest in their ethics towards animals, ecosystems, and the environment, but also in regards to the care of people: the balance of too little and too much care is a fine one.

There are many more principles that undergird the training of Hindu Spiritual Care Providers, but these are a few that were highlighted as of particular importance when discharging the duties of spiritual care provision.

### **Credentials of a Hindu Spiritual Care Provider**

A Hindu Spiritual Care Provider will typically hold a graduate degree, and then have specialised training in spiritual Care either through the Clinical Pastoral Education programmes or through academic certification in Hindu spiritual care. Most Hindu Spiritual Care Providers tend to deepen their knowledge of Hindu theory and practices as it becomes apparent which components are required given their context of employment. In terms of the USA, Hindus Spiritual Care Providers are generally employed under the rubric of Hindu Chaplain/Hindu Spiritual Care Provider/Director for Hindu Life, whether full- or part-time if professionally trained, or as Volunteer Hindu Chaplain/Hindu Spiritual Care Provider if not. For specific details of the standards adopted by NAHCA, please refer to the document entitled *Hindu Chaplain: Requisite Qualifications* (NAHCA, 2021).

### **Summary: Definition of a Hindu Chaplain**

'Hindu Chaplain' as a designator of a category of employment refers to professional providers of spiritual care from a Dharmic lens best expressed as a Hindu Spiritual Care Provider, and have endorsement and professional training appropriate to the contexts of their care recipients (e.g. Higher Education, Healthcare, Military, Corrections, etc.) Their role includes but is not limited to offering spiritual accompaniment by embodying the well-established tenets of the various Hindu Dharmas, encouraging a deepened understanding of the Dharmas and issues pertaining thereto due to their familiarity with the history of the philosophy and praxis of a wide variety of Dharmic traditions, and thus can serve as a reliable interlocutor between the traditional sources and the requirements of contemporary society.