

There are many holy books in the Hindu religion. These are called Shastras (scriptures). The most important Shastras are the Vedas. These are the oldest holy books in the world. The word *veda* means knowledge. Hindus believe the Vedas came from God and contain everything to be known about the world.

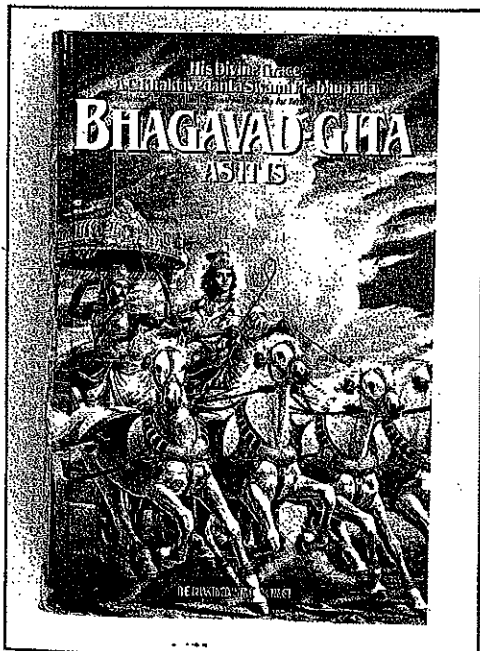
The Vedas include hymns for the priests to sing, prayers, and instructions on how to live and worship. At the end of each Veda are sections dealing with the real meaning of life and the universe.

These sections are called the Upanishads. They are mainly questions and answers. It is as if students are questioning their teachers so they can find out about the ideas of Hinduism.

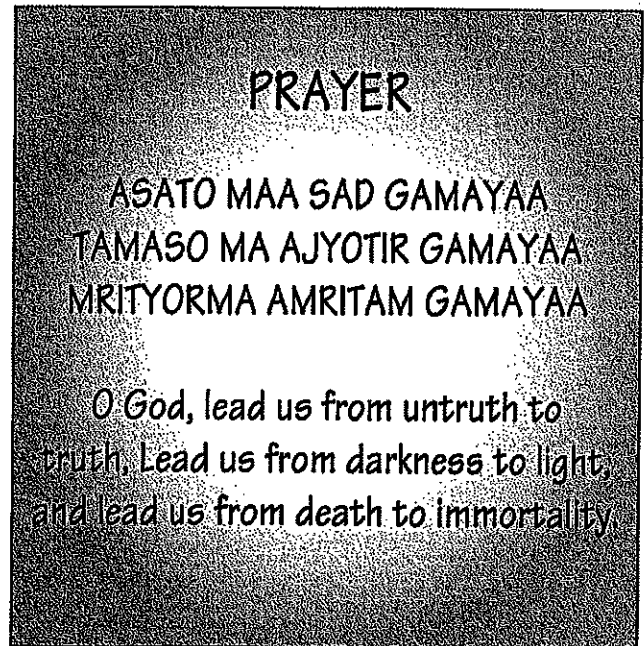
At first holy men and teachers learned the Vedas by heart. But the Aryans wrote them down over three thousand years ago. They were written as poems in Sanskrit, the Aryan language.

● Sanskrit is a very complicated language. I did a degree in Sanskrit, but when our priest speaks Sanskrit I can't understand it! So he speaks Sanskrit in the temple and then he explains it in **Hindi** and English.

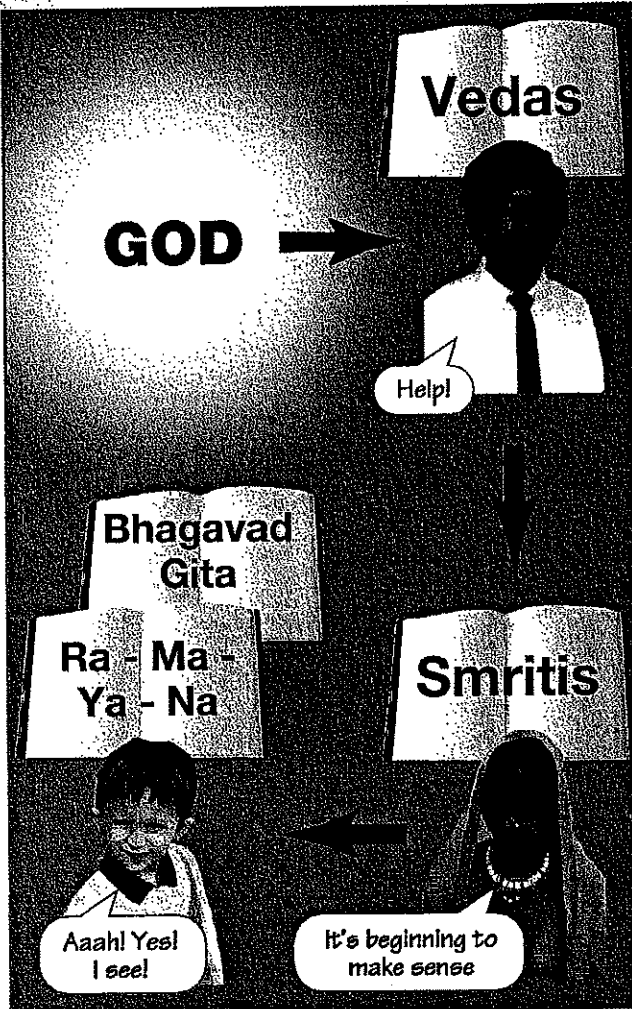
The Upanishads contain many of the ideas of the holy men who meditated in the forests, and who spoke of God as Brahman. They sought a way for the soul to be unified with God, and to escape the material world.



▲ English translation of the Bhagavad Gita



▲ A Sanskrit prayer, with English translation



▲ The Hindu holy books

The Vedas are in four collections, and the Rig Veda is probably the most popular, with its many hymns in praise of the deities. The Vedas also contain a great deal of knowledge about science, mathematics and medicine, which was very advanced for its time.

'Upanishad' means 'to sit at the feet' and this meant that disciples went out to learn from holy men in the forests. There are thirteen main Upanishads.

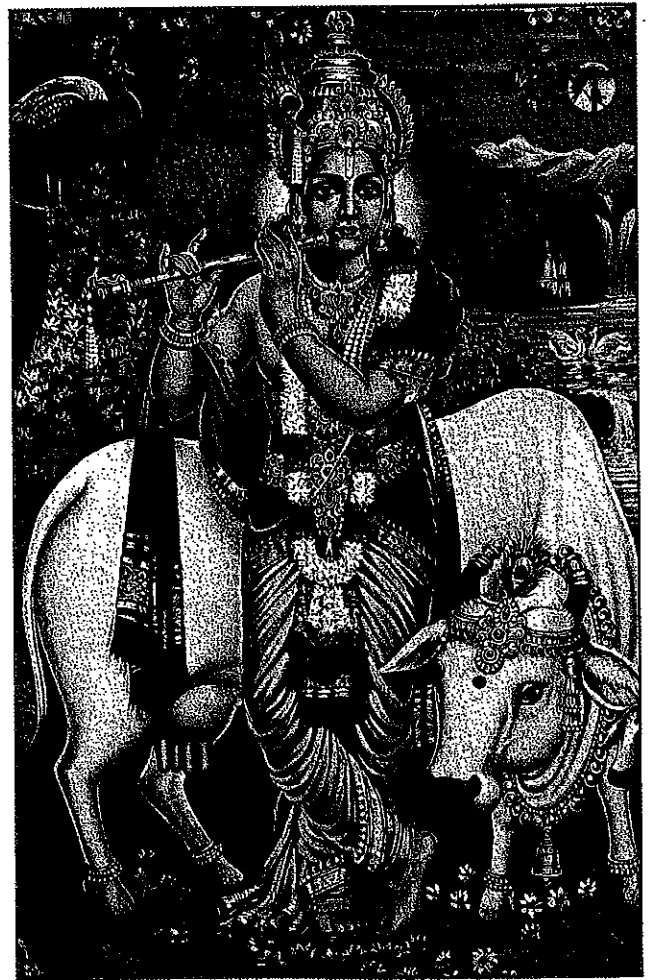
The Vedas are not easy for most people to understand. So Hindu teachers wrote the Smritis to try to explain them. The most important Smritis were written about 2,500 years ago.

Even the Smritis are quite difficult to follow. So there are many more books, in simpler language. They help Hindus to understand their religion through stories.

The stories are about the various Hindu deities, kings, heroes and other famous people. They give examples of the best way to live. This Hindu woman explains what happens in her Temple.

- Since I've been here, I haven't heard anybody reading the Vedas. Mostly the priest teaches about Bhagavad Gita and **Ramayana**. He reads Sanskrit first and then he explains in Hindi.

The Mahabharata and Ramayana are two long poems about the adventures of ancient heroes, many of whom are seen as divine. The Gita is part of the Mahabharata. There are also the Puranas, popular tales about the deities and their appearances on Earth. The most popular is the Bhagavad Purana, especially the tenth book which tells about the life of Krishna.



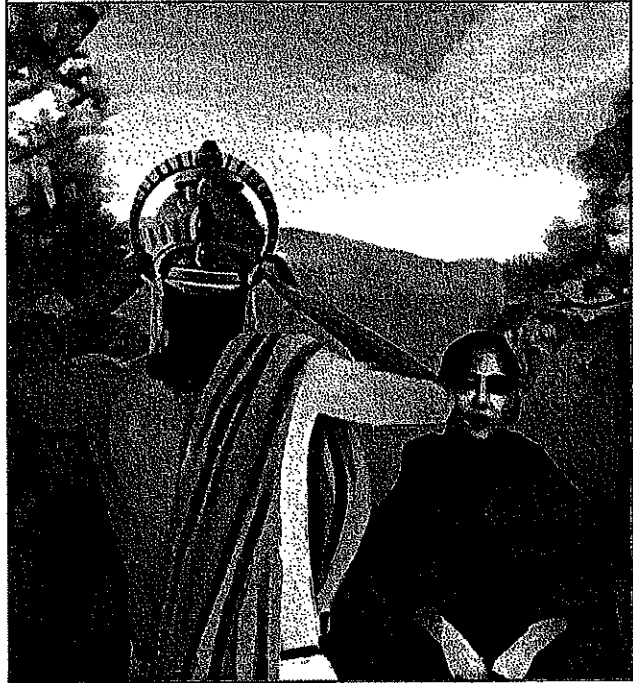
▲ Lord Krishna

The Mahabharata is the 'great history of ancient India'. It is about a battle between the forces of good and evil. It is based upon a struggle for the throne, and the threat to the lives of five princes.

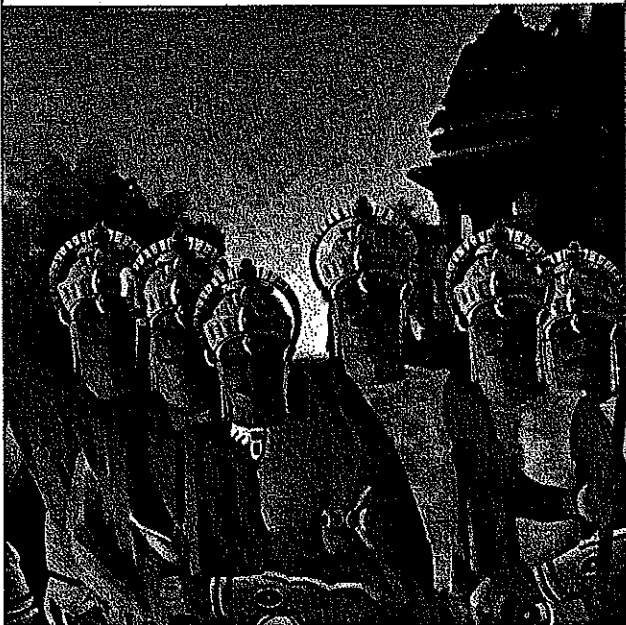
The eldest brother of the Kurus was blind, and so he could not become king. His brother, Pandu, became king, instead.



Pandu wanted to live as a holy man, and so he gave the kingdom to his brother, Dhritarashtra.



The king took Pandu's five sons into his palace and treated them as his own. His own sons were jealous, and planned to kill them. They escaped to the forest, led by Prince Arjuna.



The blind king heard of this, and returned half the stolen kingdom to the Pandavas (sons of Pandu). The Kurus even cheated them out of this. A great battle started that lasted for eighteen days. Eventually, the Pandavas won and ruled wisely.



The Bhagavad Gita or Song of the Lord is a very popular part of a longer poem. It tells the story of how two groups of cousins go to war to decide who should be the next king. On the battlefield, Prince Arjuna does not want to fight his own relations. In his dilemma, he is overcome by grief and confusion. He turns for advice to Krishna who is acting as his chauffeur. Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna for nearly an hour.

Finally Krishna convinces Arjuna that it is his duty to fight. He tells Arjuna that only the soldiers' bodies will die. Nobody can destroy their souls. So Arjuna's army fights and wins the battle.

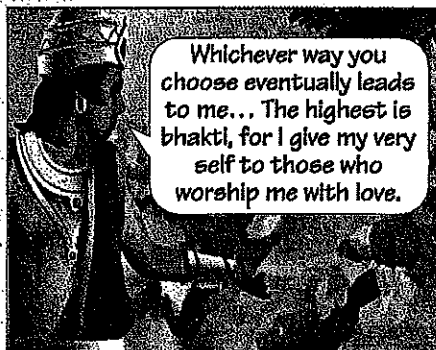
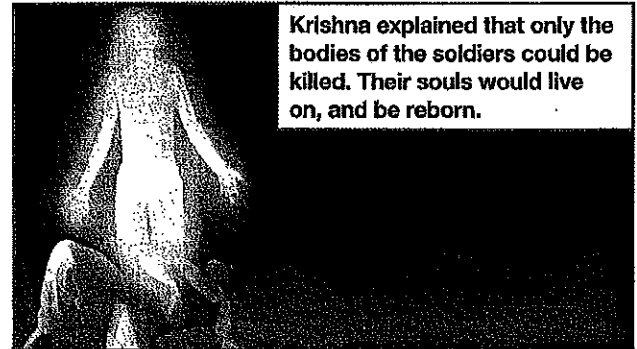
The Gita sums up the main beliefs of Hinduism. Its message is that you will only be satisfied with your life if you do your duty with an attitude of loving service to God. For many Hindus, it is their favourite holy book. The Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi wrote:

● When doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagavad Gita and find a verse to comfort me. I immediately begin to smile in the midst of **overwhelming** sorrow.

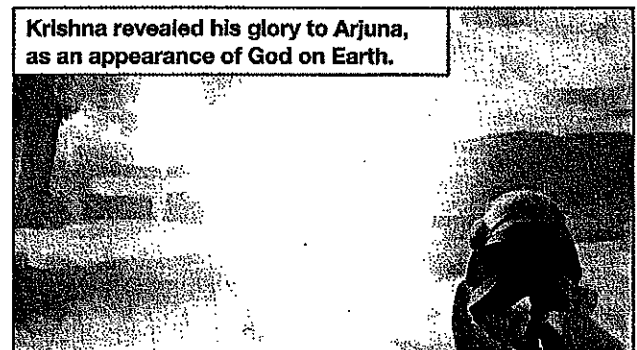
My life has been full of tragedies. If they have not left any visible effect on me, I owe it to the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita.

▼ Krishna teaches Arjuna and reveals himself as God

Prince Arjuna faced members of his family in battle. He did not want to fight them, but they had done wrong and cheated many people.



Krishna explained that there are many ways to God, such as meditation, good works, and also loving service, bhakti.



1. a) Unscramble these letters to find Hindu holy books.
DASHAINSUP, SISIFRIM,
DASEV, HAVADAGB, AGTI.
- b) Write a sentence about each to explain what it is.
- c) For each one, say why it is important to Hindus.
2. a) Tell the story of Arjuna in pictures.
- b) What can you learn from this story?
- c) Do you think hearing stories is a good way to learn about how you should behave? Give your reasons.

3. Make up a story about a struggle between good and evil. This can be set in the past, today, or in the future. Design a cover for it and conclude it with a moral, and with two or three wise sayings about how we should live our lives.
4. a) Read what Mahatma Gandhi wrote about the Gita. What effect did reading it have on him?
- b) Write about a time when something has cheered you up.

Each Hindu does not have to believe exactly the same things as every other Hindu. Each expects that others will have some different beliefs. It will depend on their background, their education or what they have worked out for themselves. But there are some beliefs which nearly all Hindus accept.

There is one God behind the many shapes and forms around us. God might be called by different names, usually Vishnu, Shiva or Krishna – words meaning ‘protecting’ or ‘auspicious’ or ‘all-attractive’. God is everywhere, in everything and eternal. But we cannot see God with our present eyes, or hear him with our material ears. God is spiritual. This is what Mahatma Gandhi wrote about God.

- Whilst everything around me is ever changing, ever dying, there is underlying all that change a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates. That power or spirit is God.

And this is how Brahman is described in the Upanishads.

- You are woman. You are man.
You are the dark-blue bee
and the green parrot with the red eyes.
The lightning is your child.
You are the seasons of the year
and the sea.
You are part of everything.
You are everywhere.
Everywhere that is, is born of you.

The part of Brahman which is in people, and in all living things, is called the Atman, the eternal soul. Deep down, we are all really a part of God. Here are two explanations of this idea.

- The soul is the real you. The body is like a car that you're driving for this particular life.
- The body is just like a bag. It's a bag full of blood and bones and organs. It's not as important as the soul.

When the body dies, the soul moves to live in another body. This change is called samsara or reincarnation. It happens many times. But we do not usually remember our other lives.



▲ The Namaste greeting

Hindus greet each other with 'Namaste', meaning 'I bow to you in respect'. Something of God lives in everyone.

The Upanishads declare 'Tat tvam asi' or 'You are That'. Each soul is a tiny part of God, who is great. We are the soul within. That is why Hindus bow and join their hands in respect when meeting someone. They bow to the Atman within.

One of the Upanishads explains why love must be shown to all living things:

- A wife loves her husband not for his own sake . . . but because the Atman lives in him . . . Children are loved not for their own sake, but because the Atman lives in them . . .

There are many layers to what makes up a person – feelings, thoughts and conscience, for example. What is the conscience? Hindus believe that this is the part of us that hears and responds to God. Deep at the centre of our lives, the deepest layer, is God, who dwells in all living things.

Think of this as two birds in a tree: one is smaller, eating berries; the other is larger. Each individual person is one, and God is a friend, a companion bird who is greater. The body is like the tree, and we are like the bird eating the fruits. This is aware of a greater presence, of God as all around, filling the universe. Each soul perceives God through the conscience and our intelligence.

Or, think of a light bulb lighting up a room. The sunlight shines in, too, when the sun comes up, and is greater and stronger than the little light.

As we go through life the body changes and grows. We think differently as a teenager, than as a young child and even differently as an adult. But who is the real person within? What changes and what stays the same?

In a way, we are always different, always changing. In another way, we are the same person within, doing the changing. Think of a parable:

- A man once lent his friend £20. The friend moved away, and the years passed. They lost touch with each other. One day, they met in a crowd. Though it had been so long, they thought they recognised each other. They looked carefully at each other and then they talked. The man remembered the £20. 'What do you mean?' asked his friend, 'I'm not the same person as I was then. I'm different!' Would the man have been impressed by this?

We can point to different parts of our bodies. But can we point to ourselves?



▲ Three generations of a Hindu family in South London. What different outlook on life will each generation have?



▲ Can you point to yourself?

- 1 a) On a piece of paper, draw an outline of a body and label this 'Atman'. Inside the body, draw anything that is personal or special to your life, the things which make you you.
- b) You are more than just your physical body. Discuss this in class.
- c) Try this game: point to your head, point to your left hand, point to your ear, point to your knees, point to

your elbow, point to yourself. What did you do for the last command?

d) Hindus see the individual atman as a part of God, like a raindrop and the ocean. Think of some other comparisons to explain the relationship of the soul to God.

e) Think of some other examples of the relationship of the soul to God, the self to the Self, like the birds in the tree.

Everything we do makes something else happen. And everything that happened in our soul's previous lives makes things happen in the next life. This link between actions is called the law of karma. You earn good or bad karma for everything you do.

If you have lived a good life, the soul will be born as a person who is more important or happier. If your life has not been so good, the soul will be born as a more unlucky person. It may even be as an animal, tree or plant.

But the soul always has the chance to improve. Then it will be born into a better life next time round. This is how one of the Upanishads describes it.

- Those whose conduct here has been good will quickly **attain** a good birth. But those whose conduct here has been evil will quickly attain an evil birth – birth as a dog, or birth as a pig.

A person makes for himself his next life as a result of his hopes, actions, failures, disappointments and achievements performed during this present life. A caterpillar, before it leaves one leaf, makes sure that his front feet have been firmly fixed on the next leaf. So a soul creates its next life even before it departs from the present one.

People have a duty, called *Dharma*, to do what is right and just. We know this in our conscience, and through the Scriptures. *Dharma* is also used to describe a Hindu's religion, the Eternal Law or Truth.

Another Hindu teaching is *Ahimsa*, non-violence. This means that people should not do anything to hurt other living beings.

Dharma and *ahimsa* can sometimes seem to clash. Some Hindus believe that it is right to fight in a just cause, just as Krishna advised Arjuna. Others take a vow that they will never use violence. This does not mean that they ignore their duty. Gandhi was a brave leader in the 1930s and 1940s who spoke out, held peace marches and demonstrations, and he was beaten and imprisoned, though he taught his followers to practise *ahimsa*.



▲ A peaceful protest in Mumbai

1 a) Draw this grid in your book and fill it in using the clues below

			B				
			A				
2							
3							
4							
			N				

- 1 the law of
- 2 non-violence
- 3 the soul
- 4 being born again

b) Now write down the word going down. What does this word mean?

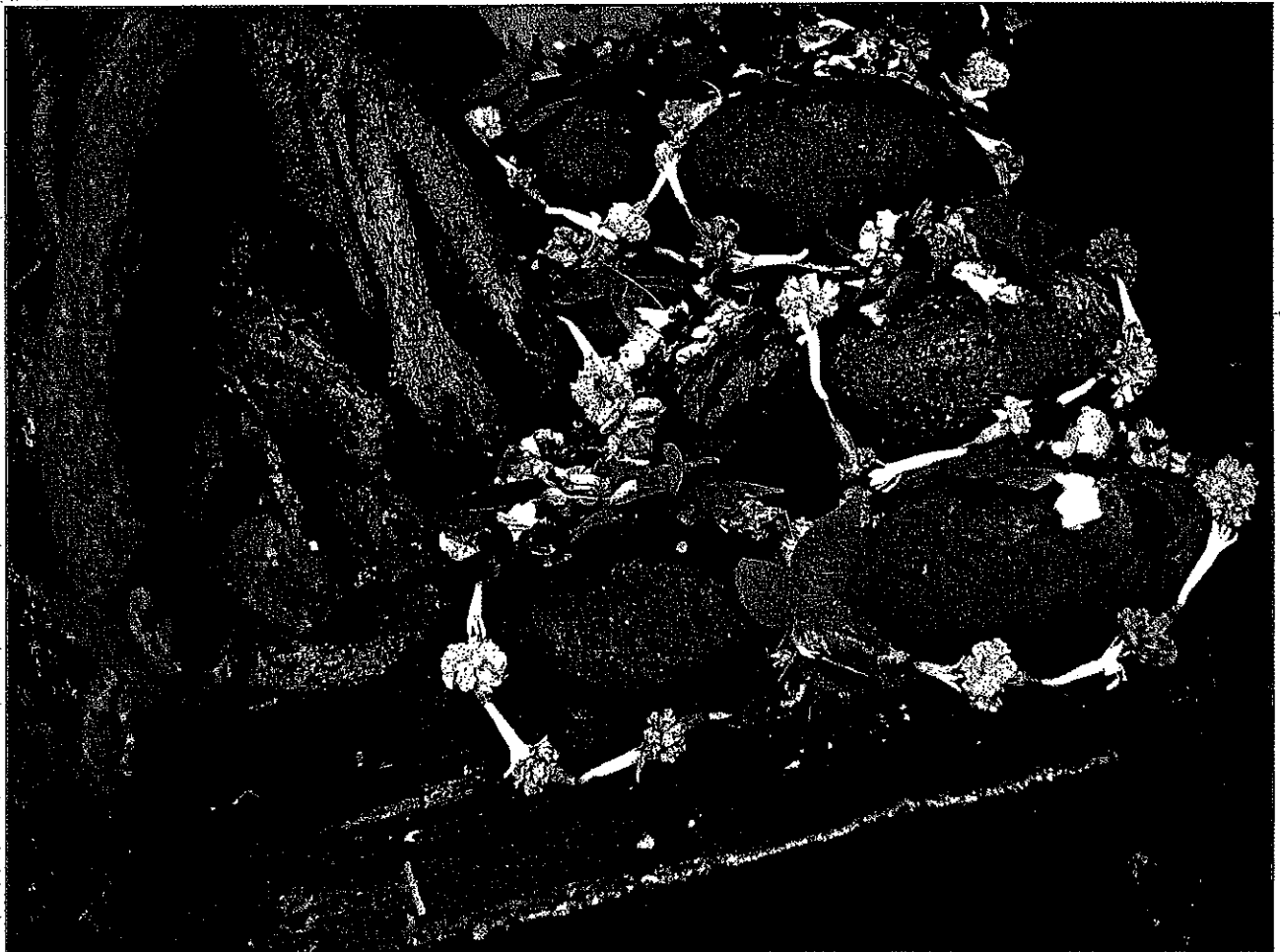
Hindus show respect to all nature. They should have a strong concern for the environment as they believe:

- we should be grateful for the gifts of God given through nature.
- all living beings have the soul within them.
- we have a responsibility to look after what God gives us.
- we should only accept those things granted to us and not steal that which belongs to another.

Hinduism sees the Earth as our mother. We all depend upon the planet, and food grows upon it. One old wise saying states, 'The Earth is our mother, and we are all her children.' Motherhood is very important in Hinduism, whether the Earth, a mother at the centre of the family, or cows and goddesses.

Hindus show special respect to the cow as a sacred animal. Krishna devotees in England look after cows in a special sanctuary. One devotee, Indriyasha Das, says, 'After a busy day, I love to relax and unwind by stroking and feeding the cows.'

If nature is filled with God, then forests and flowering trees are seen as sacred. Worship and offerings may be made at these places. The Mahabharata says, 'even if there is only one tree full of flowers and fruits in a village, that place becomes worthy of worship and respect.'



▲ A tree offering in Calcutta



The cow provides milk



This gives butter, ghee, yogurt, cream and cheese



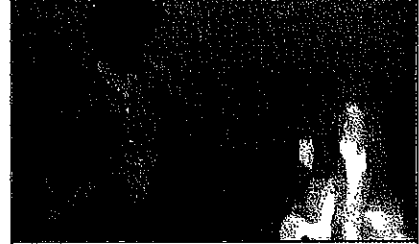
Ghee is used for offerings



Oxen pull carts and ploughs



They are also used for milling and irrigation



Dried dung is used for walls, floors and for fuel and fertiliser

▲ The cow is sacred and special to Hindus for all of the above reasons

Cows are sacred because they provide so much for humans in rural India, and are seen as 'mothers'. The sages of ancient times tried to protect them, and, in time, they were seen as holy, as a gift from God.

Hindus are encouraged to be vegetarian, but this is only expected of priests, sadhus, and certain devotees, such as members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Killing a living thing is seen to bring bad karma upon you. Even killing a plant can bring some bad karma, but by offering vegetarian food to God, this is cancelled.

Hindus prepare meals and offer some on a plate to a sacred image of a god in their home before they share this out. This is in thanksgiving for their meals, and forms an essential part of Hindu worship.



▲ Offering food at a home shrine in England

1. a) Talk in groups about situations where you think it would be right to fight.
 b) Might there be situations where fighting would make things worse? What alternatives might there be?
 c) Gandhi refused to fight, but he still did his duty, his dharma. How?
2. a) Draw a leaf or a tree and on each stem or branch write reasons why Hindus should respect the environment.
- b) Write a poem about the Earth as our mother.
- c) Work out a ceremony for either planting a new tree or encouraging people to respect a very old tree.
3. a) List the many things that cows can provide humans with.
 b) Why do Hindus see the cow as sacred?
 c) Why are many Hindus vegetarian?