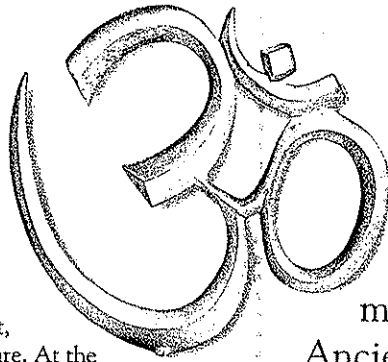


Symbol

This symbol is the written form of the most sacred sound in Hinduism, aum, or om. Aum represents the sound of God and means everything—past, present, and future. At the start of every day, and before and after prayers or rituals, Hindus say or sing this sacred sound aloud.



Hinduism

MORE THAN 5,000 years ago, the faith known as Hinduism began in India. It evolved out of the many different practices of the Ancient Indian people. So, Hinduism is not a single religion, but a family of religious traditions. Although they show their faith in different ways, most Hindus believe in God, who is worshipped in many forms. They also believe in rebirth in a new body.



Sacred animal

These children in Nepal are reaching out to touch a sacred cow for good luck. Hinduism teaches that every life is sacred. Cows are especially holy, so they are treated with great respect.



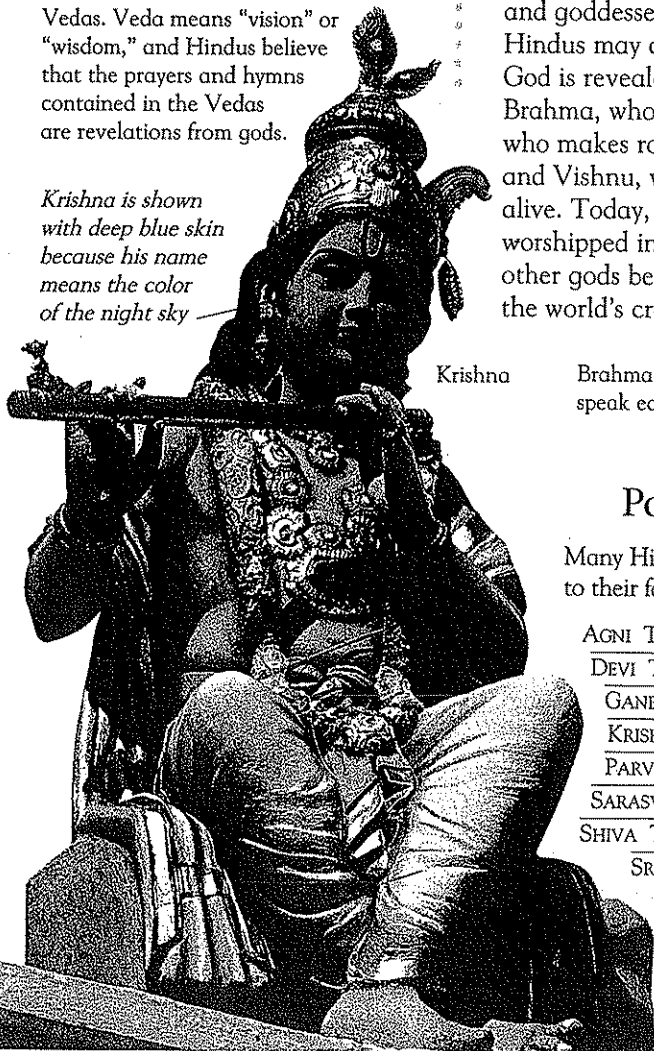
Holy book

The oldest Hindu sacred writings are a set of four books called the Vedas. Veda means "vision" or "wisdom," and Hindus believe that the prayers and hymns contained in the Vedas are revelations from gods.

Krishna is shown with deep blue skin because his name means the color of the night sky

God's different names and forms

Most Hindus believe that God is everywhere. Everything in nature is part of God, as are the hundreds of gods and goddesses (who look like people or animals) that Hindus may choose to worship. One way in which God is revealed is as a trio of gods: Brahma, who creates life; Shiva, who makes room for new life; and Vishnu, who keeps things alive. Today, Brahma is not worshipped in the same way as other gods because his work—the world's creation—is done.



Krishna

Brahma has four faces, one to speak each of the four Vedas.

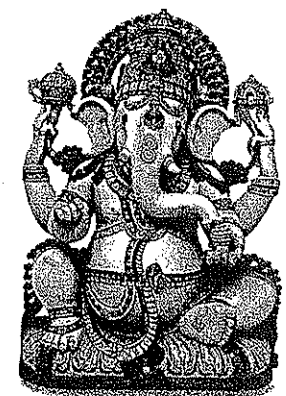


Shiva the destroyer dances in a circle of fire.

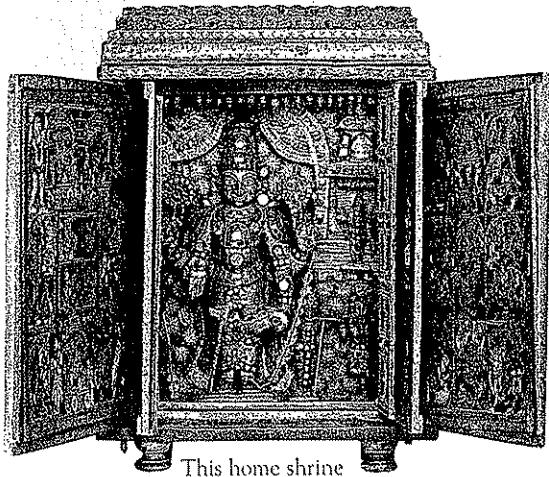
Popular gods and goddesses

Many Hindus worship a god because he or she is special to their family or controls a particular aspect of life.

- AGNI The god of fire and guardian of homes
- DEVI The mother goddess
- GANESH The god of success
- KRISHNA The god of love and divine joy
- PARVATI The goddess of love
- SARASVATI The goddess of truth and wisdom
- SHIVA The god of destruction and re-creation
- SRI-LAKSHMI The goddess of money and beauty
- VISHNU The god of protection and preservation



Ganesh has an elephant's head.



This home shrine honors Vishnu, considered a lucky god.

How Hindus worship

Hindu worship is called *puja*. Hindus believe that God is in everything, so they honor and worship God in every aspect of life. They also worship at shrines at home and in buildings called temples. At the heart of every shrine or temple is an image of a god or goddess. Hindus believe that the gods live within the shrines and that viewing their image is the same as being with them. Hindus pray, sing, and make offerings to their favorite god.

Rites of passage

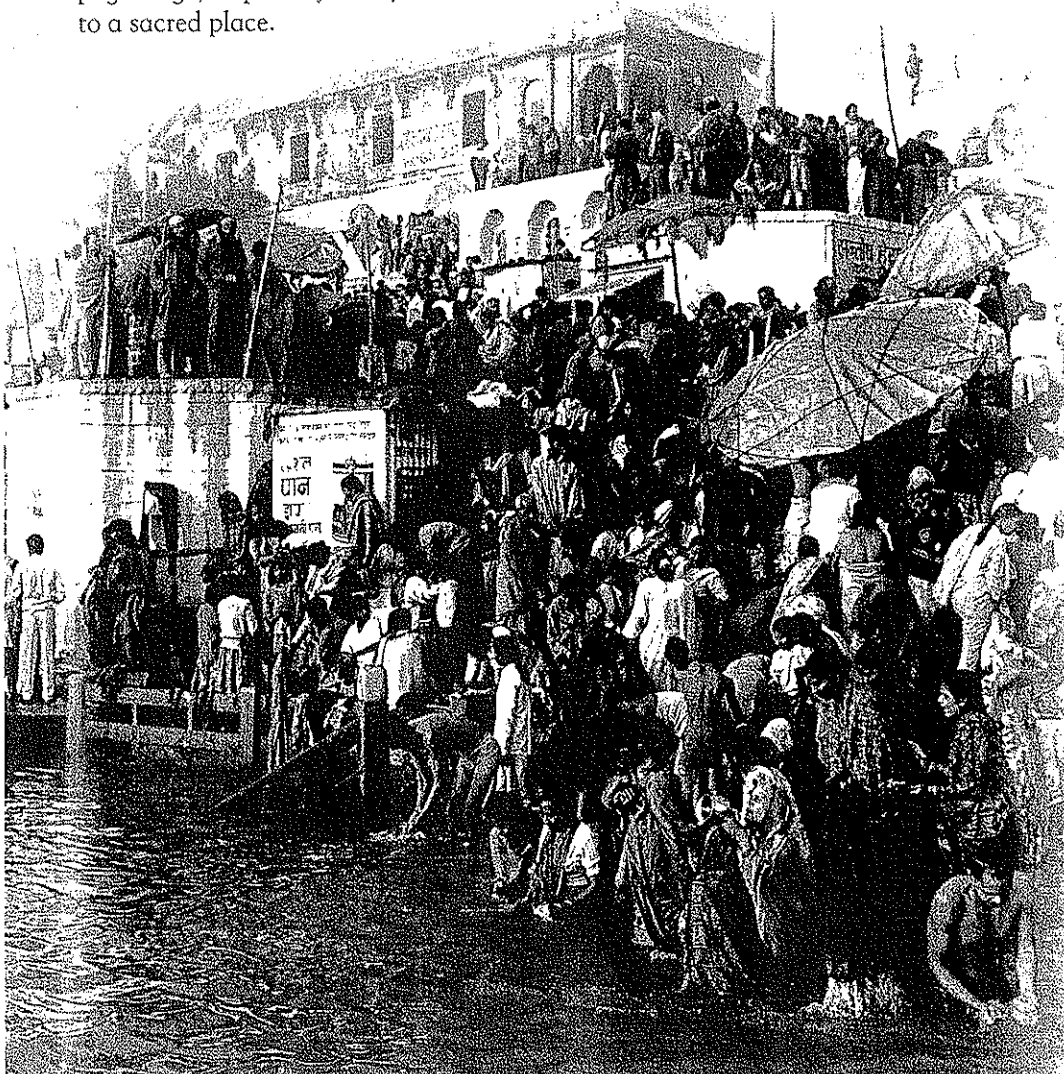
Hindu children are born into their faith. Important ceremonies include a blessing after the birth, a naming ceremony by a priest, and shaving the head for spiritual purification.



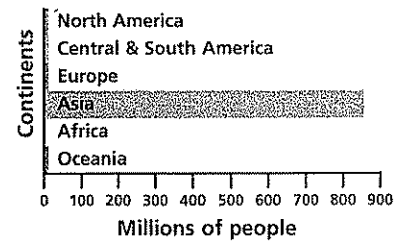
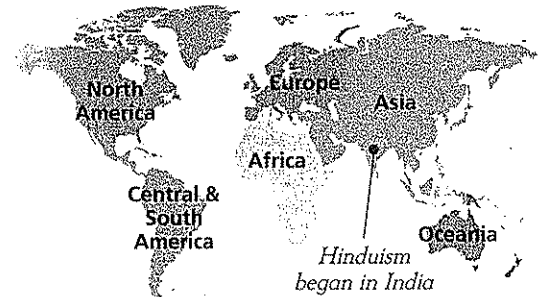
Holy rivers and pilgrimages

Rivers are sacred places to many Hindus. The act of bathing in a river cleans the body as well as the spirit, helping to wash away sins. In India, the most famous holy river is the Ganges. Thousands of Hindus come to this river on a pilgrimage, a special journey to a sacred place.

Pilgrims gather on the banks of the Ganges River in Varanasi, northern India.



Where Hindus live



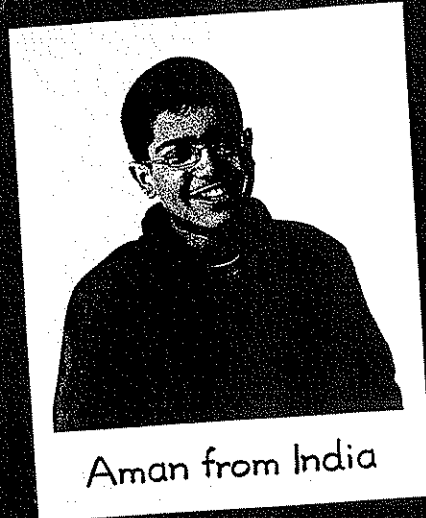
The vast majority of Hindus—about 95 percent of the faith’s population—live in India. There are also other substantial Hindu communities in Africa, Europe, and North America.

Main festivals

- Holi** Spring festival, Hindu New Year *February/March*
- Mahasivaratri** Festival of Shiva *March*
- Ram Navami** Celebrates Rama’s birthday *April*
- Janamashtami** Celebrates Krishna’s birthday *August*
- Navaratri** Nine nights’ worship of goddess Durga *September/October*
- Dussehra** Celebrates Rama’s life *the day after the end of Navaratri*
- Diwali** Festival of light *October/November*

Diwali

A FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS



Aman from India

MY NAME IS AMAN, and I am 13. I enjoy art and playing the keyboard and guitar. I love playing sports, especially cricket. I might be a cricket player when I grow up. To me, the best thing about Hinduism is that we are free to follow our faith as we want. It is a tolerant religion. My favorite festival is Diwali. Everyone is happy on this day, and streets and homes are full of lights and sounds.

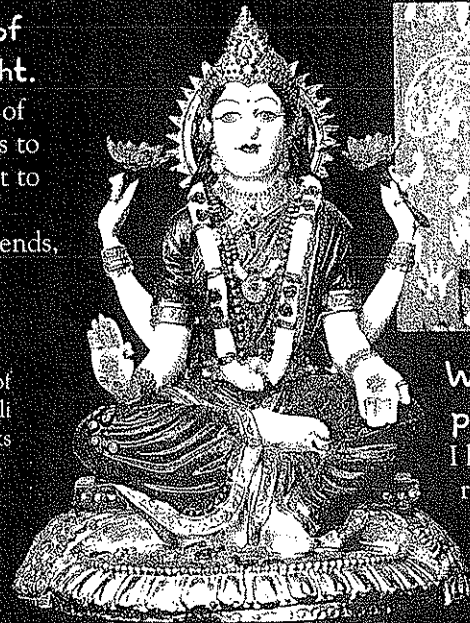


Diwali celebrates the return of King Rama. We celebrate the night Rama returned home after defeating the evil Ravana. We fill our streets with lights to guide Rama and his wife home.

We let off lots of fireworks at night. Diwali is the festival of lights. When it starts to get dark, I can't wait to go and let off fire crackers with my friends, but first I pray with my grandparents.



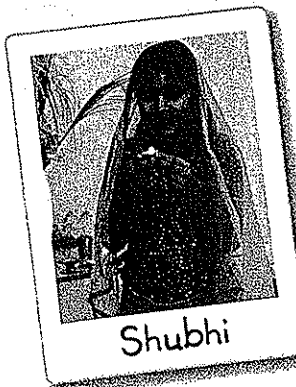
Bundle of Diwali fireworks



Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth



We paint colorful patterns called rangoli. I help my mother make flower rangolis outside our doors. The patterns welcome guests and also the goddess Lakshmi. A visit from Lakshmi means a good year is ahead.



Shubhi

UK
I love celebrating Diwali in England because when you put the candles around the house it stands out from ALL the other houses in the street and it looks so beautiful.



Aashti

Canada
My responsibility at Diwali, as daughter of the house, is to place diyas around at home and light the first one. I think about Lakshmi and how the light will lead her to our home. Diwali is a way for me to understand my Indian religion in a another country.



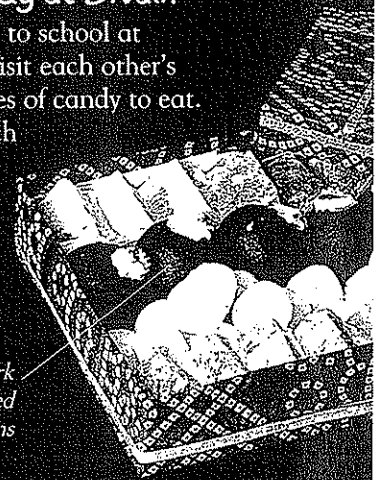
Holi festival

Another popular festival is Holi, which remembers the tricks that the god Krishna played. People play tricks on each other and there are noisy parades. The best part is throwing colored powder at one another and having water fights.



I like giving candy at Divali.

We don't have to go to school at Divali. Instead, we visit each other's homes and take boxes of candy to eat. Everybody greets each other very happily. My family, like many others, wears new clothes on this day.



These dark candies are called gulab jamuns

Our house looks beautiful lit up with diyas

We send cards to our families.

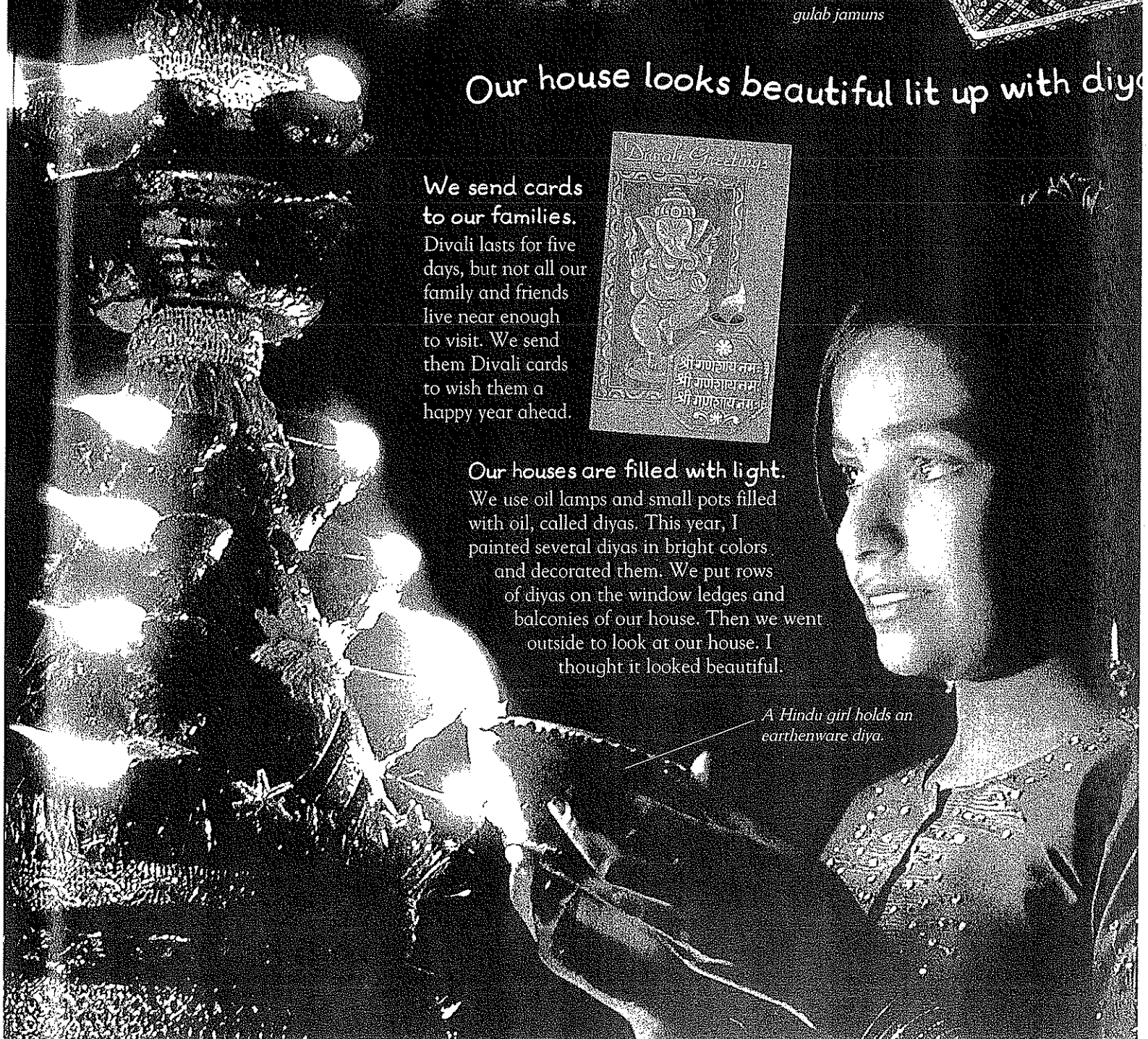
Divali lasts for five days, but not all our family and friends live near enough to visit. We send them Divali cards to wish them a happy year ahead.



Our houses are filled with light.

We use oil lamps and small pots filled with oil, called diyas. This year, I painted several diyas in bright colors and decorated them. We put rows of diyas on the window ledges and balconies of our house. Then we went outside to look at our house. I thought it looked beautiful.

A Hindu girl holds an earthenware diya.



Places to pray

WORSHIP AT SHRINES AND TEMPLES



Tara from the US

MY NAME IS TARA. I am eight years old, and I like horse riding. I am also learning to play the piano. I'm fascinated by all the different Hindu gods. My mother reads me many stories about them. We have a shrine at home, and we go to the temple for special occasions, like Divali. Hindus can pray anywhere, not just at shrines. I say my prayers in bed before I sleep.



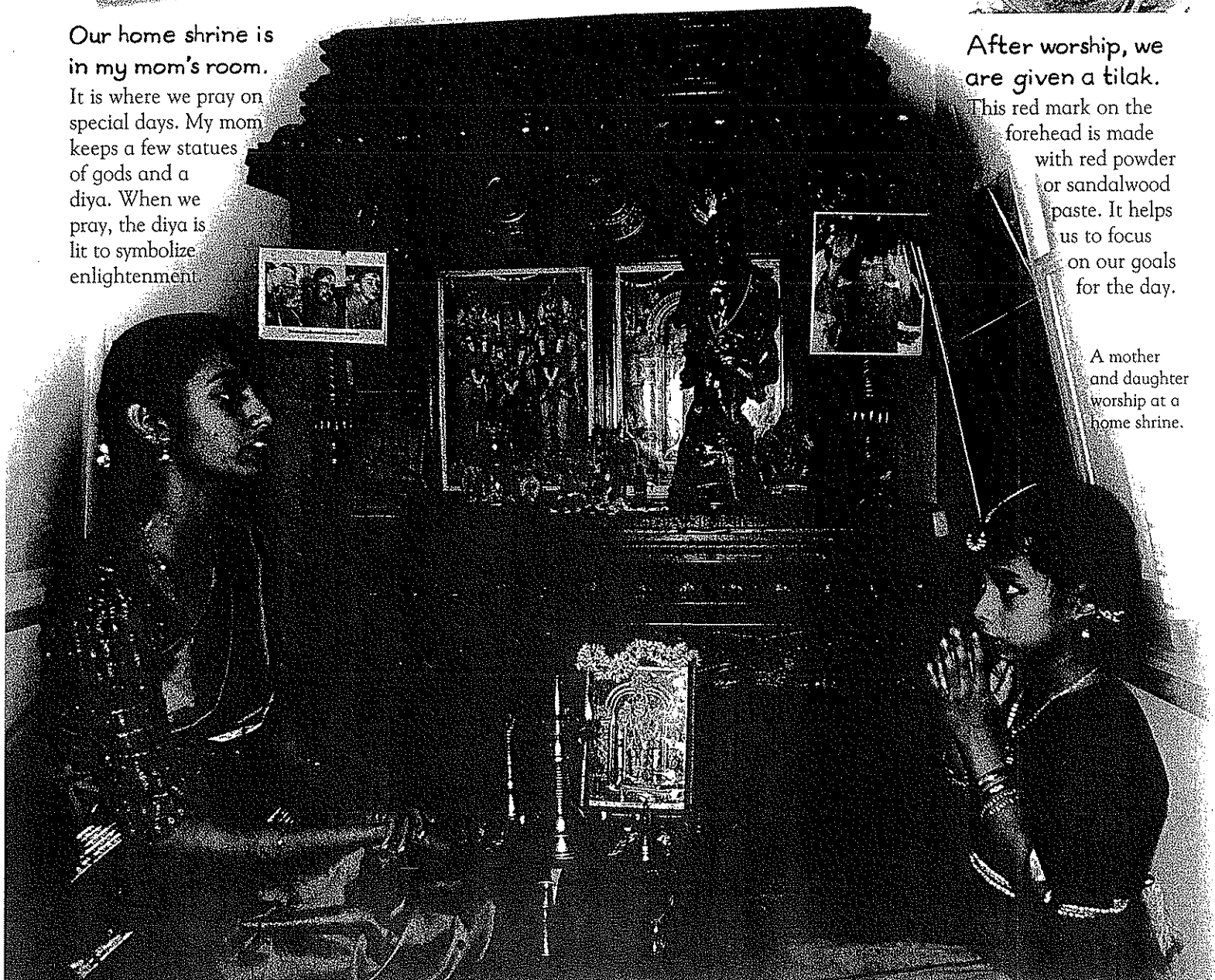
Our home shrine is in my mom's room.

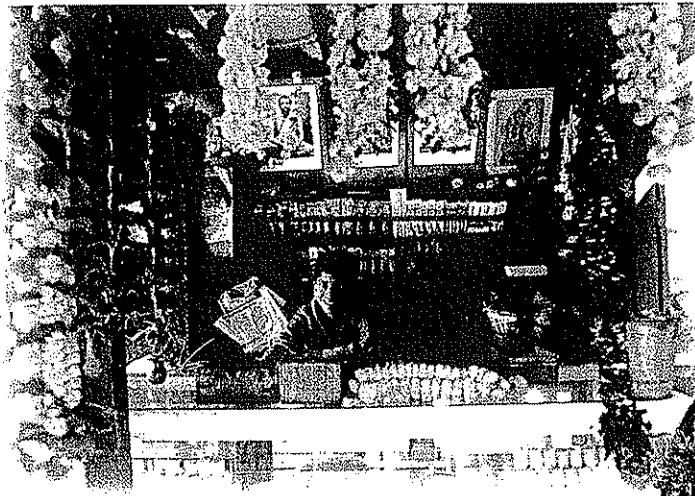
It is where we pray on special days. My mom keeps a few statues of gods and a diya. When we pray, the diya is lit to symbolize enlightenment.

After worship, we are given a tilak.

This red mark on the forehead is made with red powder or sandalwood paste. It helps us to focus on our goals for the day.

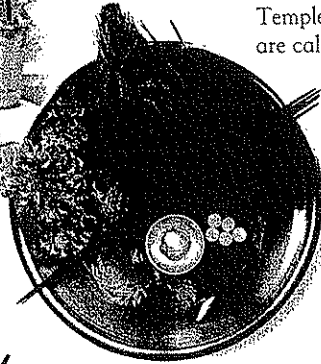
A mother and daughter worship at a home shrine.





Before we go to the temple, we buy offerings for the gods. Inside the temple, we offer the candies, fruit, and flowers to the gods during prayer. The priest takes our offerings, blesses them, and returns them to us to distribute. We call worshipping our gods puja.

Temple offerings are called prashad.

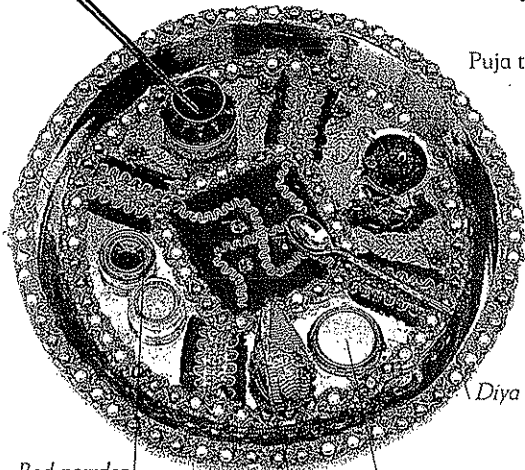


Brightly colored carvings of 72 gods and goddesses

Singapore's oldest Hindu temple, built in 1843

We offer candies and fruits to the gods

Puja tray



Diya

Red powder for tilak marks

Incense to purify the air

Milk and water to wash the gods



Arti is a way of worship.

All the Earth's elements—fire, water, earth, and air—are represented. Every day, many Hindus worship God in this way. After arti, everyone shares the prashad blessed by the gods.

The priest in the temple helps us pray. He prays on our behalf because he is wise and knows the religious texts. The priest uses these objects on a puja tray for temple worship. He also looks after the various gods. He washes their statues with milk and water.

India

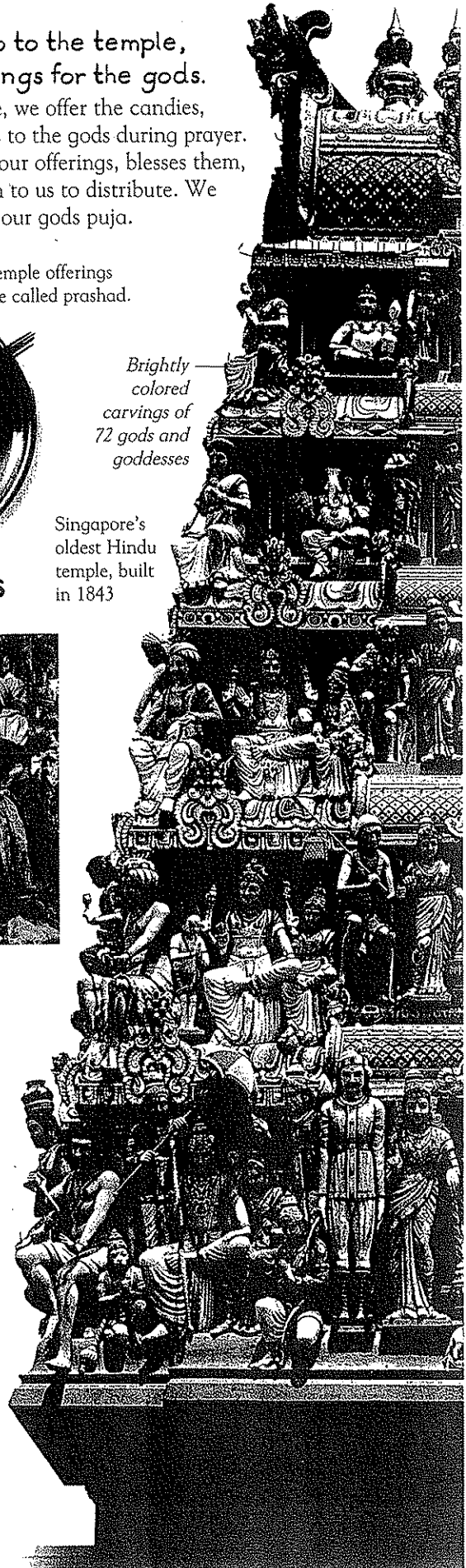
My favorite god is Rama because he fought for my religion and won against evil Ravana. Believing in my religion is important to me so that is why I pray to Lord Rama. I have been to a temple that has a statue with Rama in it.



Sonam

My temple is white and pure-looking.

My mother and father take me there on special occasions. There are many gods there, all beautifully decorated. The incense sticks give off a lovely smell.



The four goals

KAMA, ARTHA, DHARMA, AND MOKSHA

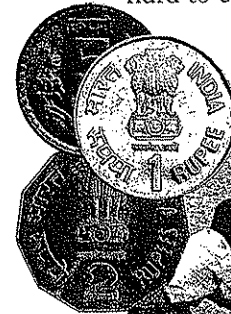
MY NAME IS SHIVANI, after the god Shiva. At home we have a shrine to Shiva where we worship every day. I enjoy helping others, and when I leave school I'd like to be a nurse. My religion teaches me a lot about good and evil. I learn how important it is to obey rules, follow God's path, and to help and be good to others. Reaching for the four goals in my life helps me to be a caring, respectful person.



Shivani from Australia

It's important for Hindus to provide for their families.

The goal called Artha means working hard at school or at your job and being as successful as you can. Some children perform Artha by helping their parents with the family business. Others work hard to earn an allowance.



Indian rupee coins



Kama is about enjoying life. I enjoy playing my guitar and dancing, especially Indian dancing. I also like making puri (fried circles of flat bread), and I have fun playing with sparklers at Divali.

These children help to harvest and gather wheat in north India.



Treating animals with respect is part of Dharma.

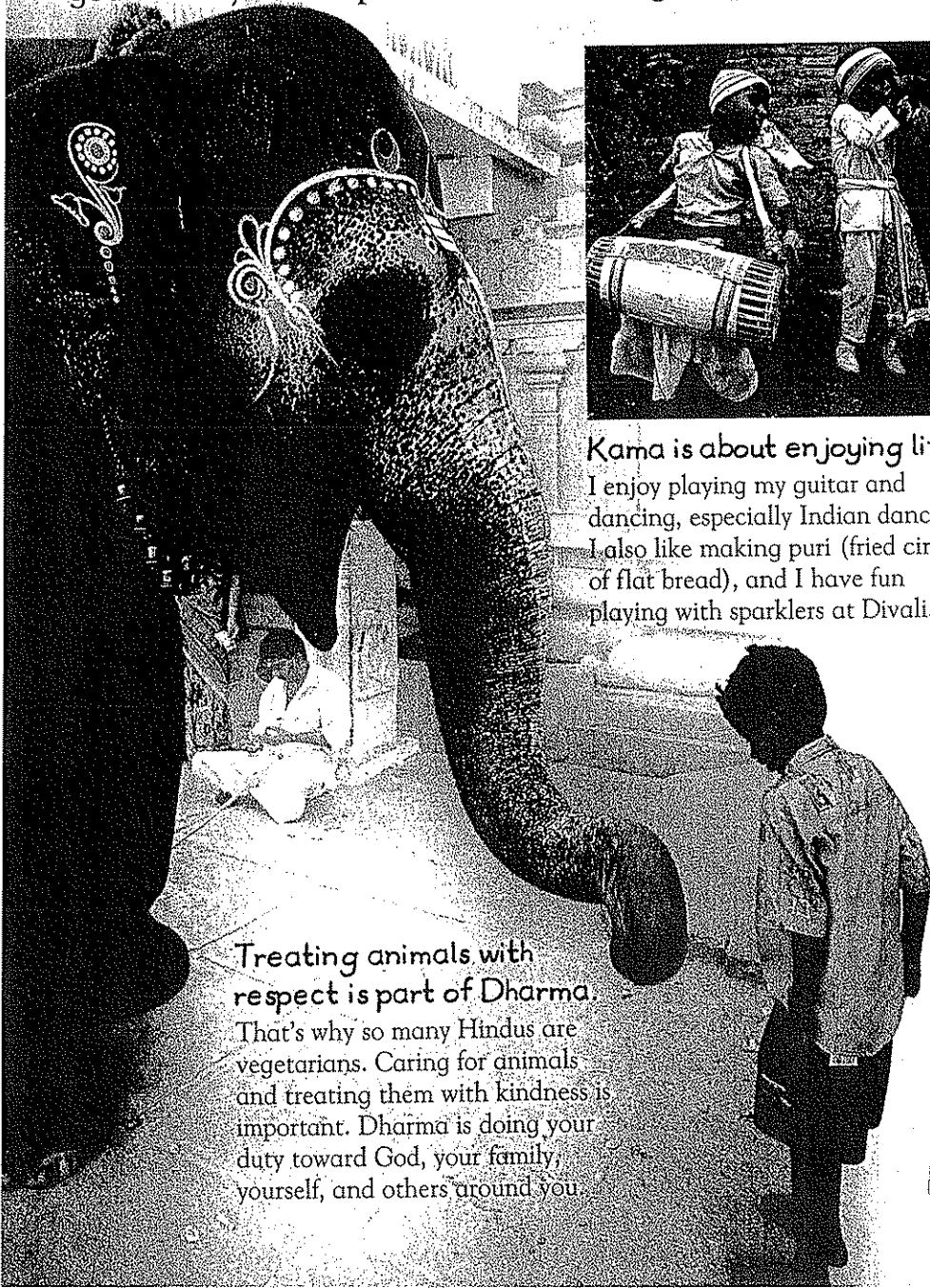
That's why so many Hindus are vegetarians. Caring for animals and treating them with kindness is important. Dharma is doing your duty toward God, your family, yourself, and others around you.



Vipul

US

Hinduism teaches you to do good things without expecting something in return. You learn to give value to friendships. If my friend needs help I will help him without thinking "please do me a favor also."

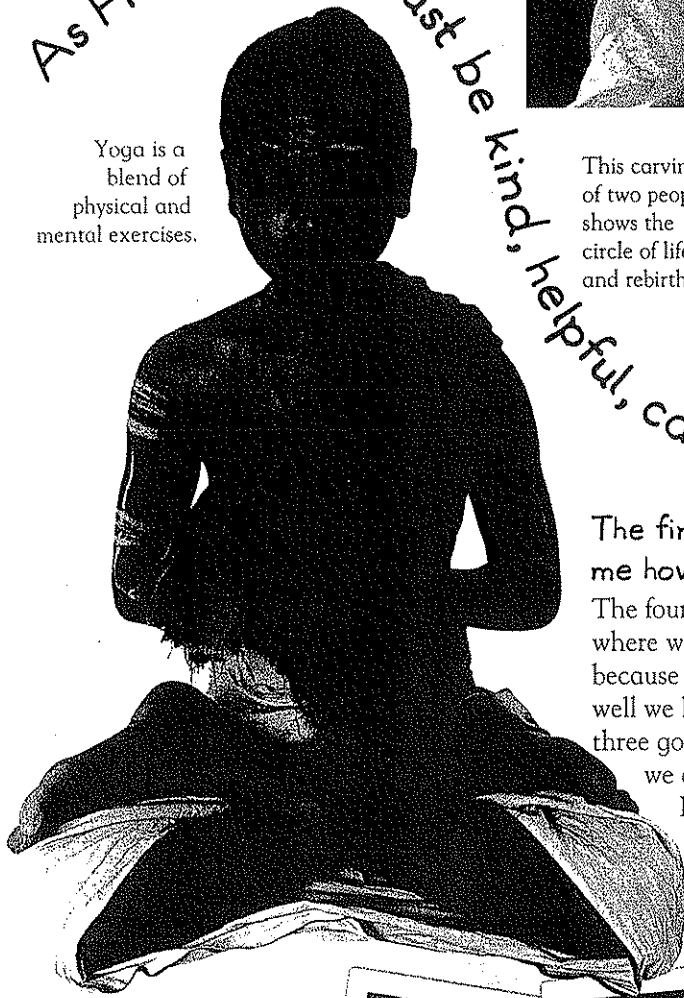


I try my very best at school. My favorite subject is math, and I try hard to learn more about it and get better at it. I find division difficult to understand. My parents help me a lot at home. They give me extra work to help me understand better. I always try to show respect to my parents and teachers. Hindus believe that we get respect if we respect others.

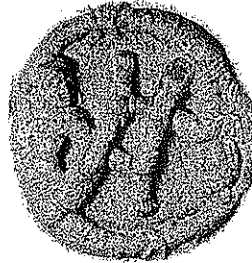


As Hindus, we must be kind, helpful, caring people who respect others

Yoga is a blend of physical and mental exercises.



This carving of two people shows the circle of life and rebirth.



I want to be happy in my next life. I haven't been taught about reincarnation yet, but I do know it means that after you die you come back again as a different person. I must be a good person now, so when I come back I will have a happy life. When I'm older I will understand it better.

The first three goals tell me how to live a good life.

The fourth Hindu goal is Moksha, where we go to live with God because he is pleased with how well we have passed the other three goals. All the good deeds we do in life are rewarded.

Hindus believe they can come closer to finding Moksha through doing yoga.

A sadhu devotes his life to Hinduism.

I believe that sadhus are messengers of God. They live among us, but apart from us, as they prepare for the next life. They don't cut their hair or have any possessions, so we give them alms to help pay for their food and clothes.

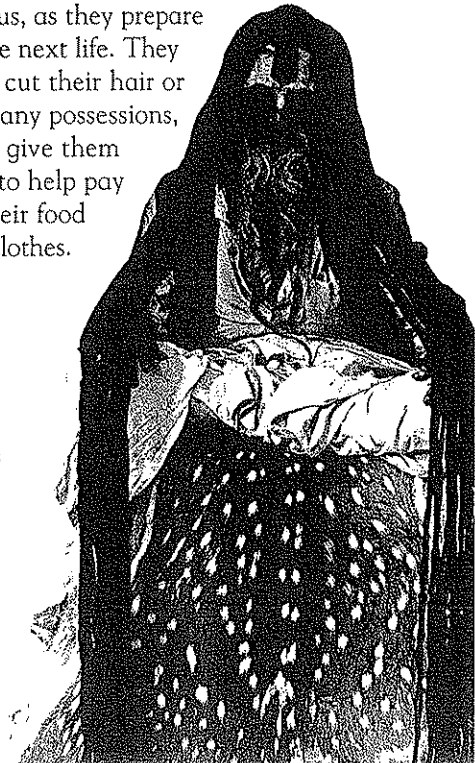
India

I think good actions are that we should always tell the truth and never disobey our elders. We should help around the house. And we should eat our food on time and go out to play.



India

We should never tell a lie and we should always wash our hands before eating and bathe before going to sleep. And we should never eat food that has fallen on the floor.



Wedding

A HINDU MARRIAGE

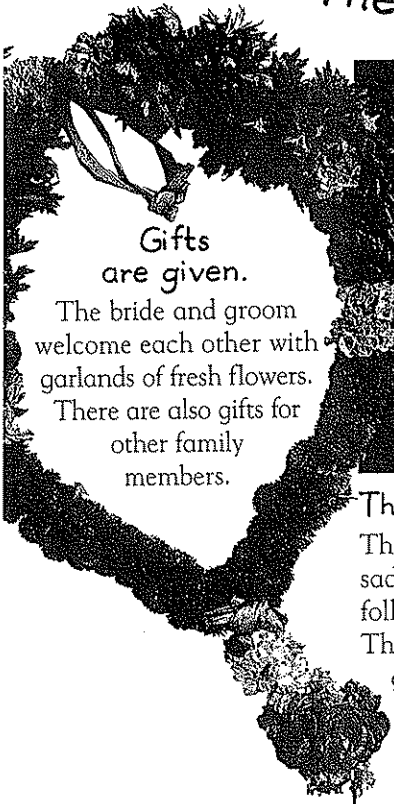
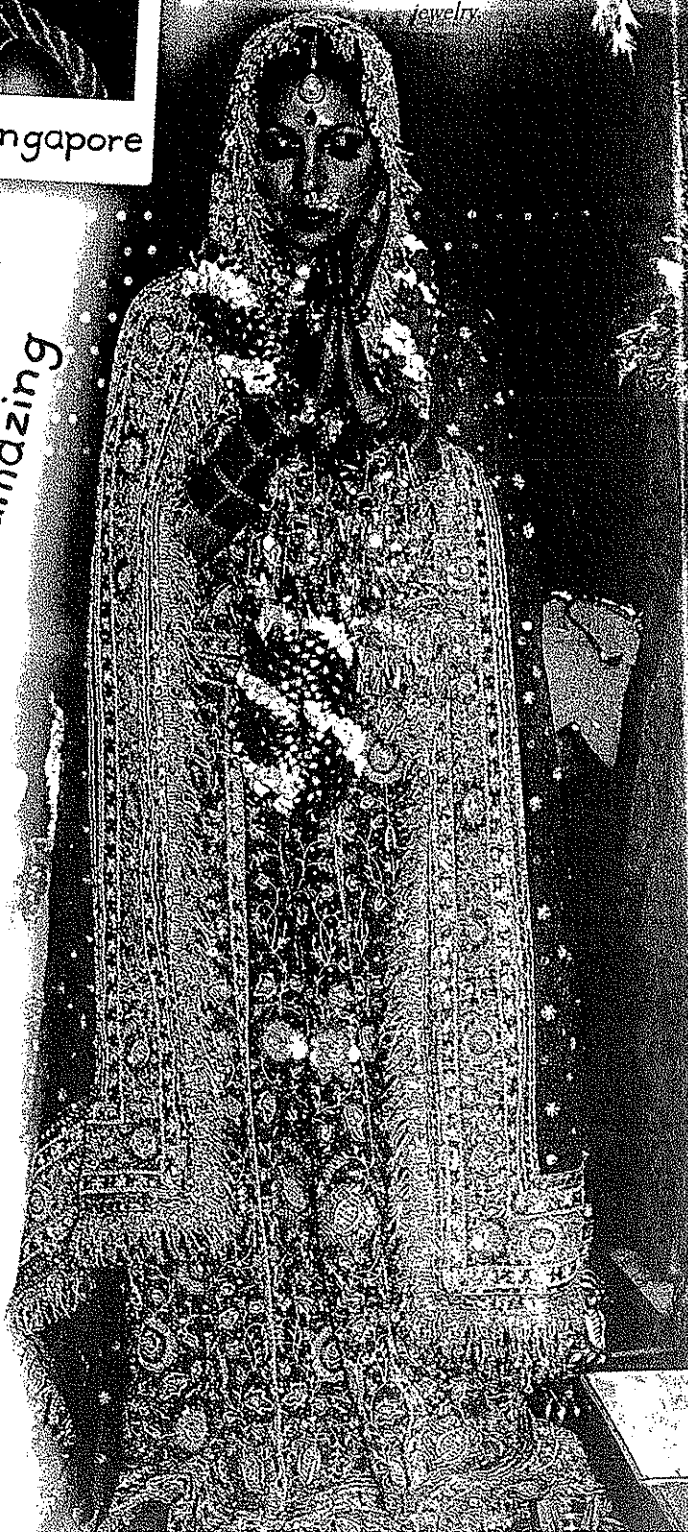
I AM TRISHAL and I am 12. I love going to the beach and surfing the internet. I like being a Hindu because of the peaceful message of my faith. Hindu scriptures tell us that getting married and having a family is an important stage of life for all Hindus. This is why Hindu marriages are often arranged by the parents, who like to suggest a suitable partner for their son or daughter.



Trishal from Singapore



The bride wears a red and gold sari and lots of gold jewelry.



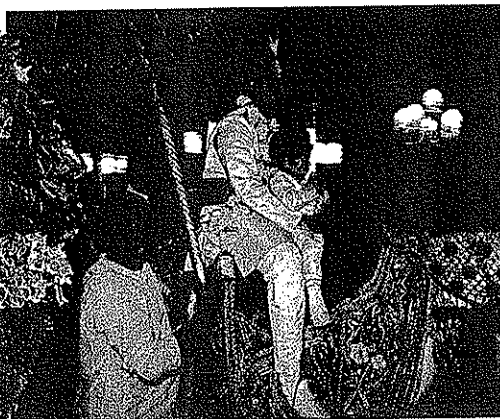
Before the wedding there is a Mehndi ceremony for the bride.

The wedding joins two families, as well as two people. The female relatives prepare by decorating the bride's hands with henna, a paste that leaves a red stain. The designs are called Mehndi.

The bride and groom look amazing

Gifts are given.

The bride and groom welcome each other with garlands of fresh flowers. There are also gifts for other family members.



The groom arrives on a horse.

The horse wears a fancy blanket and saddle. A procession of wedding guests follows the groom. They can be very noisy. The bride's mother greets the groom and guides him to the canopy (mandapa) where the wedding takes place.

The bride and groom take their vows. The priest leads the ceremony. There are prayers to the gods and special rituals. The bride and groom are joined by a white thread to show that they are married. Then they walk seven times around a sacred fire. Each circle they make represents one of seven prayers that they make for their life together. After that, they are husband and wife.

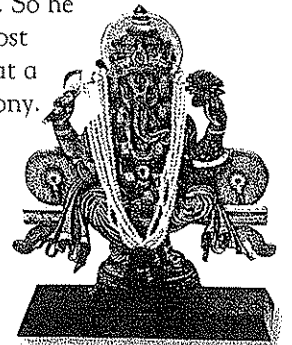
The groom and his male guests may wear turbans.

The priest ties a white thread to the bride and groom.



Everyone in the family dresses up for this important occasion. Boys sometimes wear turbans like the men. After the wedding we shower the couple with flowers and rice. Then we gather at the homes of the bride's and groom's parents for lots of food and fun.

Ganesh's image is placed in the corner of the mandapa. When Hindus start something new, they usually pray to Ganesh, the god of good fortune. So he is always the most important god at a wedding ceremony.



Statue of Ganesh



Purifying sacred fire

Flower petals signify beauty

Coconut is a fertility symbol.



Roja

Australia

As part of the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom take an oath in front of the fire to say that they will both live together for the rest of their lives. The fire is a real fire.



Deepika

US

I have not been to a Hindu wedding yet but hope that I will do this one day. I like the various Hindu festivals and my favorite is Diwali. This is when we thank goddess Lakshmi and seek her blessing and protection.