

# Hindu thoughts made simple to readers

THIS is the prescribed textbook for secondary three students who have opted to study Hinduism under the Religious Studies Programme of the Singapore GCE 'O' and 'A' level Examinations.

The book is divided into five parts entitled, "The Basis of Hinduism", "Life and Religion", "Hindu Contribution to World Culture", "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata".

The earlier half of the book is devoted to explaining the meaning and significance of the names by which Hinduism is known and also giving a summary account of the source books of the religion.

While the opening chapter has the undoubted merit of succinctly stating the meaning of eternal religion, it could have dealt with, in greater detail, some foundational principles and doctrines of the tradition.

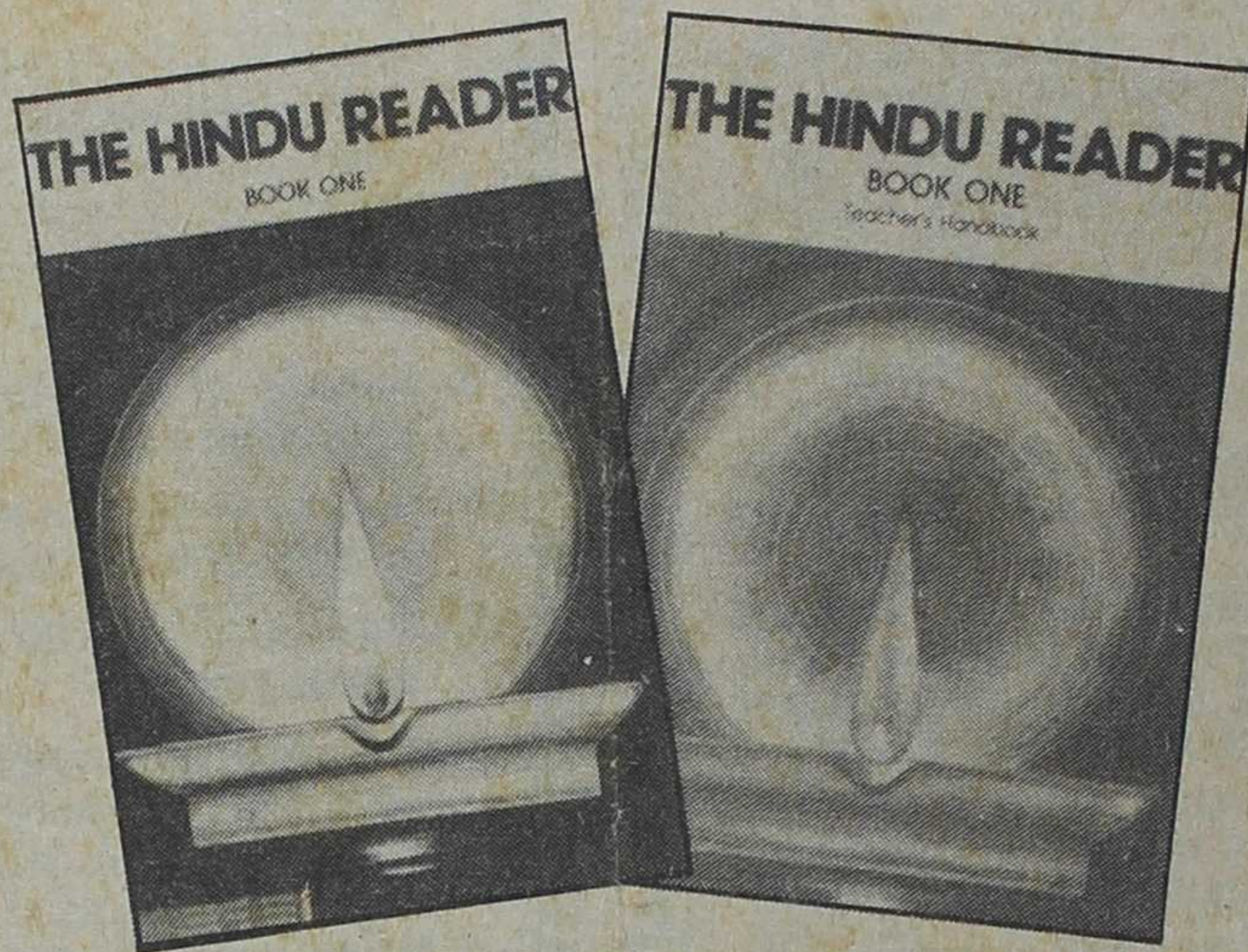
For example, the basic idea behind the *karma* theory, the principle of "individual responsibility" which is oftentimes misunderstood not merely by those who do not belong to the tradition but the adherents as well, could have been explained more fully.

While Section Two is designed to indicate the relevance of Hinduism to inter-personal life-situations, Section Three is aimed at laying bare the significance of Hinduism in a wider context.

It is significant, however, that the author has chosen to devote almost one half of the book to the two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* which are well-known to contain the quintessence of Hinduism.

The richness of the Hindu tradition is such that its leading ideas are found reflected in the vast literature produced in the Indian sub-continent down the ages and the epic literature deserves special attention in this context.

The sheer length of the two epics (the *Ramayana* alone with its 2,400 verses is considered to be longer than the *Iliad*, and the *Mahabharata* with its 100,000 couplets, is considered to be eight times



**The Hindu Reader Book One  
CDIS and Fed. Publications  
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larger than the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* put together) coupled with the suggestive and oftentimes symbolic significance that the "narratives" possess make summarising them a formidable task.

And the author has indeed succeeded in this. His treatment of the two epics matches the discreteness with which he has introduced the moral, ethical and spiritual values upheld by Hinduism in the earlier half of the book.

## Responsible

In a textbook like this intended for use by students taking Hinduism as a formal course of study, both brevity and clarity are important.

More often than not, when the former is observed scrupulously, the latter is inadvertently sacrificed, but the book under review has proved an exception, — clarity not having been sacrificed at the altar of brevity. Hence the book needs to be commended and the author congratulated for the endeavour.

Another commendable feature of the book is the quality of the drawings which should prove helpful to the pupils.

The Hindu Reader Book

One (Teacher's Handbook) by the same author is much more voluminous than the textbook for students. The book on the whole is well thought-out and shows the painstaking attempts of the author both to cater to the needs of the teachers who undertake the great and responsible task of explaining to their young wards the deeper significance of the cardinal principles of Hinduism and to students who are about to be initiated into a specific and deliberate study of Hinduism.

Section One of this book entitled "Observations on the Text" makes interesting reading, and is bound to be helpful to the teachers in explaining the text in a thought-provoking way.

In this context it is helpful to "take stock of the situation" in regard to textbooks on religious traditions in general and a prescribed course of study of religion as part of the school curriculum in particular.

Unlike the other subjects taught or the papers offered, courses on religious traditions are intended to provide an intellectual understanding of the traditions concerned and also to mould and shape the personality of the adolescent who is "exposed" to them.

With a proper understanding of the principles of the various religions the students study, an insightful understanding of the religion that is taken up for specific study and a healthy attitude towards the "other religions" is bound to be developed, with the imperceptible but indelible effect of making for a truly multicultural society.

Considered in this light, the book under review has, in no small measure, attempted to provide the teachers with the necessary background knowledge against which the leading ideas of Hinduism could be presented.

Both incidental to and significantly important for this purpose are essays on the source-books in Sanskrit and Tamil, such as the Gita, the Kural, the Saiva Siddhanta, Silappadikaram, Manimekalai and the Panchatantra.

Also included are legends, anecdotes and parables from the Hindu tradition, — the subject-matter of Section Three and Four of the handbook.

## Personalities

Equally important are the glossary of terms and brief notes on leading luminaries — thinkers, saints and religious personalities — of the tradition. These are dealt with in Section Two of the book. Section Five provides a key to the pronunciation of Sanskrit and Tamil terms.

One other significant feature of the handbook is that even though systems of Hindu philosophy are to be dealt with only in Book Two of the prescribed text, an introduction to them is given here itself, since, as the author observes, "the knowledge of an outline of the systems might be necessary at any stage."

The author is also quite appreciative of the fact that even an initiation of students into the study of Hinduism as a religion cannot fight shy of keeping the philosophical aspects completely out of the picture for the reason that religion and philosophy in the Hindu tradition are inextricably woven together.