

# Evaluate the changing roles of men and women in Hinduism Theme 3F

## Answer 1

The writings of Manu Smriti state (III.56): 'Where women are honoured there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured no sacred rite yields rewards.' Despite this declaration, it could be argued that the status of women is ambiguous in Hinduism. On one hand, they are seen as the heart of the family, have strong positions in terms of running the home and educating the children, performing their stri dharma (dharma for women) with great pride and celebration. Indeed, this strong and dignified femininity is promoted in stories of the goddesses. On the other hand, many historical practices, such as sati and female foeticide, together with ritual purity issues and the status of widows and childless women, reveal a darker side of the treatment women have encountered by men and in Hindu society. Despite the distinctive identity and celebration of stri dharma, the over bearing emphasis in Hinduism appears to be on male dharma and the idea that male children are a blessing whereas female children are a burden. This suggests that women, ultimately, may not be valued as highly as men.

It is true that all history and all religions have a tendency to be greatly influenced by men, and also that many Hindu movements are progressive. The real contention is whether or not there is enough 'progression' to redress any imbalance and inequality between genders.

Whilst women are expected to conform to stri dharma, is almost exclusively on the householder ashrama and the emphasis is upon the support of the husband in the execution of his dharmic obligations. Women in turn are expected to raise children, care for the home and family including elderly relatives, provide hospitality, take care of the home shrine and perform worship. As the Yajur Veda (33:59) states, 'A wife, obedient to her husband... attains to happiness when she lives peacefully with her husband, and nicely cooks the food highly efficacious.'

The historical practices of female infanticide and sati are clear evidence that Hindu women have been discriminated against. Even today, a woman's dharma is still defined by her marital status. Without a husband she is inauspicious; male children are a blessing and female children a burden, both economically

and religiously. This appears to be the reality for Hindu females.

Paradoxically, however, it is also true that the feminine divine is valorised and worshipped in Hinduism. Beneath this surface, however, it is also true that varied interpretations of the roles of goddesses are made. Sita may be worshipped as an exemplary woman, she is also the image of a woman oppressed by a masculine partner. Alternatively, Shakti worship endorses the female divine as supreme with the image of Kali dancing on the corpse of Shiva! The Saundariya Lahari states that 'Lord Shiva only becomes able to perform creation in this world with Shakti; without her, even an inch he cannot move.'

In today's world, it is common agreement that discrimination against any 'group' cannot be justified, and therefore, it could be argued that when religion is used to justify an act of discrimination it must be that there is some misunderstanding of religion itself. Religions teach that all humans are equal, and in the case of Hinduism, Gandhi, amongst many others noted that all people are 'children of god' and could therefore expect fair treatment. Many reform movements in Hinduism have argued that practices which discriminate against women have no roots in religious teachings and should be eradicated.

The Indian Women's movement is growing and slowly influencing social reform; the Hindu scriptures are being read in new ways that favour women - even stories about the goddesses are being revised to enable them to be truly inspiring to modern Hindu women. However, as Kim Knott wrote in the Journal of Religion in 1996, 'It is my contention that when contemporary Hindu women speak about fate, karma, divine agency and freewill, what they say can only be understood with reference to their dharma as women.' Therefore, we can readily ask, 'are the attempts to redress the imbalances between men and women in Hinduism a light touch rather than a complete overhaul?'

## Comments:

This is a wide-ranging discussion showing understanding of the debate about women in Hinduism. Of the three answers, this is the best. The arguments are discussed and assessed rather than just being stated, with some pertinent use of quotes. There is a clear path of reasoning through to the final conclusion and some intelligent questions are asked. The knowledge base has been reasonably well selected. This does not mean the answer is perfect. Possibly, more specific examples could have been used to improve the answer. Also new perspectives, such as other feminist positions, could have been introduced.

## Answer 2

The fact that the twentieth century saw the first female Prime Minister in India means that things are progressing in Hinduism. Indeed, many Hindu women today work. The goddesses are worshipped which is contrast to many other world faiths, and so the fact that Hinduism sees women as divine immediately tells us that they are held in high esteem.

In addition, in today's world equality is encouraged in all areas, including across the work place. Although a woman's traditional dharma is housekeeping modern living shows that this can also be done in addition to earning a wage in support of her spouse and children.

Some may see Hinduism as oppressing women because it teaches that males are superior. A Veda says, 'Women are to obey men at all times.' There are more male gurus than female ones and celebrations are often led by males.

In conclusion, modern India is moving towards equality with a new interpretation of Hinduism for the modern day.

### Comments:

This is a weak attempt at evaluation. The answer only has one line of argument but and there is no real discussion or awareness of any challenges to this. There is reference to a religious text but this is inaccurate and examples are just stated rather than developed as part of an argument! There is a partial attempt at a conclusion in the last line. Again, it is not developed. The answer seems to confuse India as a secular country with Hinduism as a religion.

This is more of an AO1 skill answer than an AO2. It consists of reciting some arguments but not weighing the relative strengths and weaknesses of those arguments.

## Answer 3

Women in Hinduism are the heart of the family, running the home and educating the children. Indeed, this strong and dignified femininity is promoted in stories of the goddesses. However, many historical practices, such as sati and female foeticide suggest that women are oppressed. Indeed, the main emphasis

in Hinduism appears to be on male dharma and the idea that male children are a blessing whereas female children are a burden.

Hinduism is not unique amongst religions for this; indeed, most religions have a tendency to be greatly influenced by men. The traditional roles of women in Hinduism appear to be no different to those in other religions. Women are expected to conform to stri dharma which is almost exclusively on the householder ashrama and the emphasis is upon the support of the husband in the execution of his dharmic obligations. Women are expected to raise children, care for the home and family including elderly relatives, provide hospitality, take care of the home shrine and perform worship. The male dharma is much more comprehensive and unrestrained.

The historical practices of female infanticide and sati are clear evidence that Hindu women have been discriminated against. Even today, a woman's dharma is still defined by her marital status. Without a husband she is inauspicious; male children are a blessing, and female children a burden, both economically and religiously. This appears to be the reality for Hindu females.

The world argues today that discrimination in any form and against any 'group' cannot be justified. Indeed, many would argue that when religion is used to justify an act of discrimination it is an abuse of religion. Religions teach that all humans are equal, and in the case of Hinduism, Gandhi, amongst many others noted that all people are 'children of god' and could therefore expect fair treatment. Many reform movements in Hinduism have argued that practices which discriminate against women have no roots in religious teachings.

In conclusion, the Indian Women's movement is growing and slowly influencing social reform; the Hindu scriptures are being read in new ways that favour women - even stories about the goddesses are being revised to enable them to be truly inspiring to modern Hindu women. Things are changing despite there being some negative discriminations still existing in some areas.

## Comments:

This is a fair attempt at an evaluation. Despite recognising that there are a variety of views within Hinduism, the argument does limit itself by not being able to explore in more depth through specific examples. It also has little scholarly support. The conclusion does follow from the argument and does concede an

'apparent' weakness as the only counter argument.

## QUESTION 1

### Evaluate the importance of the Upanishads for Hindus today Theme 1D

#### Answer 1

The Upanishads are the teachings of gurus and therefore give Hindus guidance about beliefs and instruction which gives them importance in any age. However others would argue that they are not simply books of instruction but esoteric texts and their true meaning is deliberately obscured using language that makes no sense to the casual reader. Therefore their importance to the ordinary Hindu can be questioned.

They are important because they teach jnana which is regarded as the highest path to liberation. However this knowledge is experiential and is designed to be accompanied by explicit instruction from someone who already has jnana. This kind of instruction can be difficult to find and follow especially in a non-Hindu environment. Many Hindus therefore look for guidance from other sources.

The Upanishads, it can be argued, deal with the most important beliefs in Hinduism and understanding these beliefs are fundamental to every Hindu. Therefore the importance of the Upanishads cannot be questioned. The main concern of the Upanishads is the nature of Brahman and atman. They contain many wonderful images for the nature of Brahman which helps Hindus in their understanding.

However, many Hindus would argue that the Upanishads are ancient scriptures and were written in an ascetic context which for many today is an alien way of life. This can diminish their importance to Hindus living their religion in the 21st century.

Indeed, some would argue that other scriptures have the same importance and validity. The Vedas are often put forward by many Hindus as the benchmark for authenticity. Moreover, for many Hindus the Bhagavad Gita is the most important source of beliefs and practices for Hinduism. Others would argue that the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics are the most important source of beliefs and practices in Hinduism. They include stories about Krishna and Arjuna and Rama and Sita as role models for Hindus in matters of love, devotion and relationships.

In conclusion, both the Upanishads and the epic writings, together with the Vedas are all important for Hinduism depending upon the individual path a Hindu may follow.

## Answer 2

The Upanishads are important because they teach jnana, which is regarded as the highest path to liberation. They are important scriptures for Hinduism. Hindus mainly use them for meditation and there is a lot in them about the last stage of life and achieving moksha. Therefore the importance of the Upanishads cannot be questioned. The main concern of the Upanishads is the nature of Brahman and atman. They contain many wonderful images for the nature of Brahman which helps Hindus in their understanding. Many Hindus would argue that the Upanishads as ancient scriptures are therefore considered to be the most important source of authority.

However, the Upanishads were written in an ancient context which for many today is an alien way of life. This means that they are not as important to Hindus living their religion in the 21st century. Indeed, to many Hindus the Bhagavad Gita is the most important source of beliefs and practices as it deals with the main teachings of Hinduism. ISKCON would also concur. Some would also argue that the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics are the most important source of beliefs and practices in Hinduism.

In conclusion, ancient texts like the Upanishads are more a reminder of history and where Hinduism has come from rather than being practical for Hindu living today.

## Answer 3

It could be argued that the Upanishads are the teachings of gurus that give Hindus insight and guidance that has great importance for any age. They are crucial for those who follow the jnana- marga which is regarded as the highest path to liberation. However, this knowledge is experiential and is designed to be accompanied by explicit instruction from someone who already has jnana.

However others would argue that they are not simply books of instruction but esoteric texts and their true meaning is deliberately obscured using language that makes no sense to the casual reader. Therefore their importance to the ordinary Hindu can be questioned. This kind of instruction can be difficult to find and follow especially in a non-Hindu environment. Therefore, many Hindus look for guidance from other sources.

The Upanishads can be argued deal with the most important beliefs in Hinduism and understanding these beliefs are fundamental to every Hindu. Therefore the importance of the Upanishads cannot be questioned. The main concern of the Upanishads is the nature of Brahman and atman. They contain many wonderful images for the nature of Brahman which helps Hindus in their understanding.

The Upanishads are particularly important for Hindus who follow Vedanta philosophy and since the Upanishads form the basis of Vedanta philosophy they are crucial for Hindu teaching and philosophy. They explain the specific and detailed relationship between Brahman and atman which many Hindus consider the most important belief and the basis for all other beliefs. The Chandogya Upanishad includes the famous dialogue between the guru Uddalaka and his son Svetaketu and ends with the famously quoted 'tat tvam asi' or 'you are Brahman' (6:8) and 'Sarvam khalvidam brahma' which means 'all this is Brahman' (3:14). Indeed, the truths contained within the Upanishads help Hindus to gain moksha.

The relationship between Brahman and atman is also important to Hindus because it also highlights the significance of the concept of reincarnation. For example, the Katha Upanishad explains that the achievements of this and other lives affect the destination of the atman.

In addition, the Upanishads also contain detailed information on the kinds of practices necessary to follow and achieve the jnana path. Indeed, the Upanishads focus on advice and instruction for meditation which many Hindus believe is the basis of all Hindu practices and the gateway to moksha. As the Katha Upanishad states, 'Having realized Atman, which is soundless, intangible, formless, undecaying, and likewise tasteless, eternal, and odourless; having realised That which is without beginning and end, beyond the Great, and unchanging—one is freed from the jaws of death.'

Nevertheless, although crucial for those who follow Vedanta philosophy as well as those who are spiritually advanced in the practice of yoga, it also follows that the Upanishads are not as significant for the many Hindus who either follow other philosophical schools of thought or simply follow the bhakti path of devotion. Indeed, many Hindus may argue that the Upanishads are not read or understood as a source of belief by a high proportion of Hindus; the help of a guru is required and is not easily accessible or possible combined with a busy life. Hence, the Upanishads were written in an ascetic context, usually associated with the later stages of life, for which for many today is an alien way of life. This can diminish



their importance to the many other Hindus living their religion in the 21st century.

There are also other scriptures that have the same importance and validity, if not more so. The Vedas are often put forward by many Hindus as the benchmark for authenticity as they have established the religion and practice as it stands today. This argument would suggest that those who accept the Vedas as the most important religious texts are truly Hindus. The Vedas are shruti scriptures authorised by gods and not human beings. They are not smriti. The Vedas cover a lot of different aspects of life including art, medicine, maths, science and philosophy.

Other Hindus may also argue that in the 21st century there are other texts that offer more practical and relevant guidance than the Upanishads such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

They would suggest that the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics are the most important source of beliefs and practices in Hinduism since they include teachings on the importance of dharma in the story of Krishna and Arjuna and in the story of Rama and Sita, presenting them as readily accessible and practical role models for Hindus in matters of love, devotion and relationships. Indeed, for many Hindus the Bhagavad Gita (part of the Mahabharata) is the most important source of belief and practice; they see it as the heart of Hindu teaching in that it deals with the principal themes of Hinduism in a more accessible and practical way: Brahman, atman, karma, dharma and bhakti.

In conclusion, although important and revered, the importance of the Upanishadic writings must not be taken out of context. Hinduism is an organic whole and each aspect has its part to play without one part being the most crucial aspect.



## Question 2

**Gandhi's achievements were more political than religious. Evaluate this statement.**

### Answer 1

Mahatma Gandhi was a major worldwide figure of last century. It could be argued that Gandhi's reinterpretation of Hindu teaching and advocacy of ahimsa had a profound effect on all Hindus and others worldwide. He also developed the religious concept of satyagraha which ultimately influenced his political philosophy. This was the belief that truth has an inherent force and that those who speak and act with truth have a particular strength and authority because they are being truthful. This influenced his political campaign since truth force would lose its moral coherence if it degenerated into violence and would no longer be true. The classic example of this was his defiance and resilience demonstrated in the Salt March. However some would argue that one of his failures is not of ahimsa but satyagraha and that truth has been lost in Indian politics today.

Gandhi also asserted Hindu identity and encouraged Indians to join the campaigns for Indian independence from the British. Gandhi's vision for the new national identity of India was profoundly universalist. It could be argued that this came from his religious belief of sarvodaya, the 'welfare' or 'well-being' that is 'for all'. Gandhi campaigned for Indian pupils to be educated in their native tongue as he saw English-language education as robbing the nation of its soul. He also promoted the teaching of practical skills because the economic development for people living in rural villages lay in the acquisition of such skills. In fact, this was so successful that his view was continued in his approach to industry and mechanisation which can be seen in India today.

Another religious success for Gandhi was the establishment of a model community which lived by his values and inspired others. He also revitalised Hindu values and way of life in reassertion of the truths of ahimsa, satya and moksha. It is also possible to see Gandhi as an early prophet of the sustainability movement – he promoted the idea of living simply rather than exhausting the earth's resources for the benefit of a few while the rest suffer – as such, living according to need and not want.

Gandhi also re-interpreted the concept of ahimsa and used it politically. In this context he was influenced by the pacifist teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to practice agape love and to turn the other cheek when assaulted. His allegorical interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita's advice to join battle for what is right, influenced many who saw that the battle is not outside but within each person. The enemy to be fought against and overcome is individual greed and self-interest. This reflects his interpretation and application of brahmacharya. His interpretation of the ashramas, especially the brahmacharya stage influenced many Hindus. The ideal life for a brahmacharya is being without possessions and the desire for possessions.

Mahatma Gandhi attempted to act as an apologist for the caste system in India. In 1932, he resorted to fasting 'to block an affirmative action' planned by Britain in favour of the outcastes, the so-called 'untouchables'. Gandhi tried his best to undermine the centuries-old caste system and to remove the blot of untouchability from Hinduism. He spoke out against the mistreatment of women. However, some would argue that these goals were not achieved. Although not fully succeeding as he wished, he changed attitudes towards untouchability in a significant way. Although he did manage to open some temples to the untouchables, generally Dalits were not accepted or treated in a way that he desired overall.

Ultimately it must be asked whether or not Gandhi was politically or racially motivated. In other words, did his political views influence his religious beliefs or vice-versa? Did Gandhi use his religious ideas to achieve his political goals? Is Gandhi remembered more as a political leader or a religious leader generally? These are complicated questions and it could be argued that Gandhi was both religious leader and politician. Indeed, both his political and religious achievements were many. Gandhi created a distinctively Indian discourse of politics. He fought for swaraj – home rule and had the insight to see this as an opportunity for real social revolution. Gandhi sought a new national identity not imposed by the west but developed at home in order to articulate what was special and unique about India. However, it could be argued that the means to achieve this came from his deeply held religious beliefs and convictions which he never swayed from.

In conclusion, it all depends upon how Gandhi's achievements and successes are measured, either independently, or in relation to other aspects of Hinduism? For example, he had little effect on deities and popular practices within the religion. He also had little interest in some aspects of Hinduism such as

worship. Some would even argue that as a figure, Gandhi was more appreciated by those outside of India and that his influence on Hinduism is an over-emphasised Westernised view, for instance, in the influence of films such as Attenborough's 'Gandhi'. Politically he was influential; in terms of religious ideals he was powerfully consistent. It could be argued that neither were totally successful but that both were incredibly influential so as to merit a significant degree of success.

## Answer 2

Mahatma Gandhi believed that truth has an inherent force and brings authority in itself. This influenced both his religious and political campaigns.

Politically and religiously Gandhi wanted a Hindu identity and encouraged Indians to join the campaigns for Indian independence from the British. Gandhi also promoted Hindu values and way of life in reassertion of the truths of ahimsa, satya and moksha. Gandhi also promoted the idea of living simply, so that everyone can live relatively well – an idea called sarvodaya.

Gandhi fought against the caste system in India and spoke out against the mistreatment of women. He did manage to change attitudes towards untouchability in a significant way and manage to open some temples to the untouchables, but in the end Dalits were not accepted or treated in a way that he desired.

Both Gandhi's religious ideas and his political ideas are linked. He was both a successful politician and a great religious leader who is remembered so well today. One only has to look at the film 'Gandhi' to see how important and successful he was. I think that his religious belief of sarvodaya was the greatest achievement of all.

## Answer 3

Mahatma Gandhi, a major worldwide figure of last century had a profound effect on all Hindus and others worldwide. Gandhi asserted Hindu identity and encouraged Indians to join the campaigns for Indian independence from the British. Gandhi campaigned for Indian pupils to be educated in their native tongue as he saw English-language education as robbing the nation of its soul.

Gandhi is well-known for the establishment of a model community which lived by his values and inspired others. He also revitalised Hindu values and way of life in reassertion of the truths of ahimsa, satya and

moksha. Gandhi also re-interpreted the concept of ahimsa and used it politically. In this context he was influenced by the pacifist teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to practice agape love and to turn the other cheek when assaulted.

Gandhi also attempted to act as an apologist for the caste system in India. In 1932, he resorted to fasting 'to block an affirmative action' planned by Britain in favour of the outcastes, the so-called 'untouchables'. Gandhi tried his best to undermine the centuries-old caste system and to remove the blot of untouchability from Hinduism. Although not fully succeeding as he wished, he changed attitudes towards untouchability in a significant way.

Is Gandhi remembered more as a political leader or a religious leader generally? These are complicated questions and it could be argued that Gandhi was both religious leader and politician. Gandhi sought a new national identity not imposed by the west but developed at home in order to articulate what was special and unique about India. However, it could be argued that the means to achieve this came from his deeply held religious beliefs and convictions which he never swayed from.

In conclusion, it all depends upon how Gandhi's achievements and successes are measured, either independently, or in relation to other aspects of Hinduism? For example, he had little effect on deities and popular practices within the religion. He also had little interest in some aspects of Hinduism such as worship. Some would even argue that as a figure, Gandhi was more appreciated by those outside of India.