

**GCE A LEVEL**



**WJEC A-LEVEL  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

**Theme 4C  
Hindu Bioethics**

## Contents

Glossary Key Terms	3
Infertility in Hinduism	4
Types of Assisted Reproductive Technology	6
References to Infertility in Hindu Scriptures	8
Issues for discussion	11
Bibliography (for books not already referred to in the document)	12
Other Useful Resources	12

## Glossary Key Terms

**Crawford, S. Cromwell** – Professor of Religion, University of Hawaii associated with Hindu bioethics.

### Other useful terms

**AID** – Artificial insemination by donor.

**AIH** – Artificial insemination by husband.

**Bhattacharyya, Swasti Dr.** – Author of Magical Progeny, Modern Technology. Professor of Philosophy & Religion at Buena Vista University.

**IVF** – In vitro fertilisation, which involves joining the sperm and the egg together to create an embryo, which is placed into the woman's womb.

## Infertility in Hinduism

According to a 2018 report by the Indian Society of Assisted Reproduction, infertility currently affects between 10 to 14 percent of the Indian population, with higher rates in urban areas where one out of six couples are affected. Nearly 27.5 million couples who are actively trying to conceive suffer from infertility in India. (<https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/indias-hidden-infertility-struggles/>)

*“Infertility is an under-researched condition that is wrecking marriages and even people’s lives ... Childbearing is considered an essential role in life and a yardstick by which women’s worth is measured. So infertility invites social stigma. It is time we recognize it as a perilous personal and public health issue.”* Dr. Sama Bhargava, consultant IVF expert at Fortis Hospital, NOIDA.

Both Indian men and women suffer from infertility and this can cause great distress in Hindu families, where having children, and in particular sons, is regarded as a duty within the Grihasta ashrama stage (marriage). Infertility is viewed as being due to poor karma, in what is referred to as ‘karmic debt’, and results in a great deal of social and psychological distress when there are constant pressures from family and society to reproduce. It is therefore unsurprising that infertility treatments have gained in popularity in India. On the other hand, some of those who believe in karmic debt may view infertility treatments as being wrong as they must pay off their karmic debt.

### Key Quote

*“To be mothers were women created, and to be fathers men; religious rites, therefore, are ordained in the Veda to be performed (by the husband) together with the wife.”* Manusmriti

Traditionally in Hinduism, having at least one child is a biological duty. Men who could not fulfil their obligations in the grihasta ashrama because of impotence (or indeed homosexuality) were termed rather derogatorily as being sexually dysfunctional or a non-man. In the Laws of Manu these men were not allowed to take part in any sacred rituals and were also refused their inheritance. Only by producing children, were a man and woman considered biologically fulfilled.

If a woman is barren, it is believed to be due to past events which may be either in this life or in the one before. A story based on the Mahabharata illustrates this point. At the end of the war, queen Gandhari is informed that all her hundred children have been killed. When she tries to find out why she should lose all of her sons a sage tells her, *“In your last life, you sat on a stone under which there were a hundred turtle eggs. The eggs were crushed. So the mother-turtle cursed you that you too would experience the loss of hundred children.”* (Dr Malpani’s Blog <http://blog.drimalpani.com/2014/03/infertility-in-hindu-mythology-dr.html>)



## Types of Assisted Reproductive Technology

Hinduism largely accepts scientific methods for assistive reproductive technologies. However, strict guidelines are laid down for Infertility treatments:

### IVF

In vitro fertilisation may be considered acceptable if the sperm and egg are preferably not donated. However, more modern Hindus might be more open to anonymous donors.

One issue with IVF for Hindus is that it is common for more than one embryo to be produced and for some to be left over. Whilst these embryos can be frozen for use later by the couple, there is also the possibility of them being used for research purposes or may be destroyed. The issue for Hindus is whether the atman is present in the embryo. Whilst some Hindus believe the atman is not yet present in the embryo, others maintain that it is present from the moment of conception. So, if the atman is already present, both testing on unwanted embryos and destroying any unused ones is clearly an act of violence and therefore against the principle of ahimsa.

### Embryonic Transfer

Any reproductive technologies in which egg fertilisation takes place outside of a woman's body and in a lab will require the embryos to be transferred back to her uterus. This is the last step of the process in IVF. Before transferring fertilised eggs to the woman's uterus embryologists will evaluate their quality in order to determine which ones will be chosen. Any viable spare embryos will be cryopreserved for later use.

### Sperm Donation

The most important requirement for a married couple is that the sperm is donated from either the husband (AIH) or a close relative.

Some Hindus may regard having children from a donor outside of the marriage, as the 'lesser of the two evils' if it means having children. Indeed, such donors may view helping childless couples to have children as an act of positive karma. Artificial insemination by an unknown donor (AID) is a method that is difficult for any Hindu to accept as male ancestry is important within the varna system. Indeed, AID may be unacceptable as it could be regarded as a form of adultery.

### Key Quote

*“On failure of issue (by her husband) a woman who has been authorised, may obtain, ... the desired offspring by (cohabitation with) a brother-in-law or relation (of the husband).” (Manusmriti)*

Interestingly the custom of **niyoga** (literally means ‘delegation’) in ancient Hindu tradition shows that sperm donation was being practiced. If her husband was impotent or dead, a wife could ask to be impregnated, usually by a relative or revered man in the community. Any child born in this way would be considered the child of the husband and wife and not that of the appointed man. In this way the family of the impotent or dead husband would be preserved.

### Adoption

Although not a method of assisted reproductive technology adoption does have some relevance to the topic of infertility. Hindu personal law will allow adoption from relatives in cases of infertility as this removes any doubt about varna and male ancestry. Hindus believe that it is good action or karma to provide a loving home to a child who may be in need of one, and so may opt for adoption rather than fertility treatment.

## References to Infertility in Hindu Scriptures

Hindu stories suggest a familiarity with the 'idea' of artificial insemination, for example there are references to 'magic potions' being created for queens of childless kings that enable the women to become pregnant. This raises the questions regarding what exactly these potions were or whether they were simply metaphorically speaking about sperm donation.

There is one story in which the god Shiva spurted semen when he saw Vishnu in the form of the enchantress Mohini. This semen was collected and given to Vayu the wind god who poured it into the 'ear' (a common mythical metaphor for the womb) of Anjani, a monkey, who gave birth to Hanuman, the monkey-god. Could this be referring to artificial insemination?

### Infertility in The Mahabharata - as discussed by S Cromwell Crawford in his book *Hindu Bioethics for the Twenty-first Century*

According to tradition a king had to marry but a man who was impotent was not allowed to be king. Crawford refers to an account in the great Epic the Mahabharata, when king Pandu learns that he has been cursed and will die the moment he has sex with his wife, and so he must renounce his crown. According to funerary traditions he needs to have sons both to continue his line and also to perform the funeral rituals when he dies, so he persuades his wife Kunti to find someone who will help her to become pregnant. Although Kunti initially refused she later used the boons given to her by a sage to bear three sons by three different deities. Pandu's other wife Madri, also used the boon to give birth to twin boys. This is an example of the practice of *niyoga*.

Crawford also refers to another account in the Mahabharata, this time of Gandhari, the wife of the blind King Dhritarashtra. Gandhari had conceived one hundred sons but was unable to give birth to them, remaining pregnant for two years. Finally, she aborted a "*ball of clotted blood*". Vyasa (the author of the Epic) appeared and ordered that one hundred clay pots be filled with ghee. Having then sprinkled water onto the ball of flesh it split into one hundred embryos which were then placed in the pots. Eventually each embryo grew, and the King and Queen had their one hundred sons. Whilst this story can be seen as being similar to the use of test tubes in IVF, Crawford uses it to suggest that this kind of technique implies that it is acceptable for couples to have children through IVF as a last resort.



## Infertility in the Mahabharata – as discussed by Dr Swasti Bhattacharyya

Dr Bhattacharyya's lectures and written work illustrates how stories found in ancient Hindu texts can be used to better understand contemporary bioethics. She points to a case about a couple named Sue and Robert who have three healthy children, all conceived following IVF. They feel they have now completed their family and do not wish to have any more children. Four embryos remaining in cryopreservation (frozen storage). Their obstetrician offers them three choices: disposing of the embryos that they judge to be excess to their needs; donating the embryos to another couple; or donating the embryos for research. They cannot remain cryopreserved indefinitely and will be destroyed after five years according to legislation in their state. Their situation is, she says, not unlike that of the central characters in the Mahabharata.

Further details on this case can be read here

<https://spaces.hightail.com/space/3OtJRdKsGs/files/fi-57672697-b097-419b-b040-c8f571fb411a/fv-45b603e8-34d6-4d4a-b78f-8bd3cdcc1492/A%20Level%20Theme%204C%20Religious%20Perspectives%20on%20Embryo%20donation%20including%20Swasti%20Bhattacharyya.pdf>

Dr Bhattacharyya points out that just like Sue and Robert in the example above, the central characters in the Mahabharata struggle with infertility and take action to evade their inability to have children. Kunti gives birth to sons thanks to impregnation by deities and Gandhari's children are born thanks to extraordinary and magical actions by Vyasa,

In the stories of these two queens and other religious texts such as Bhagavad Gita and the Laws of Manu, we find central principles that contextualize human actions that are relevant to Sue and Robert's case, such as how our actions relate to society's needs and our dharmic responsibility to determine the best course of action on an individual basis. Dr Bhattacharyya points out that the Bhagavad Gita reminds Hindus to act while not being attached to the actions or to the fruits of actions. If Sue and Robert's case is then applied to the 'Hindu' principles throughout the Mahabharata's stories, there are a number of parallels.

There is an understanding of the desire to have children and be parents, as we see Kunti and Pandu use the boon given to them to fulfil their desire to have children. However, their use of the boon was tempered with their societal responsibilities. Since they knew that the god Dharma, the god of order, merit and righteousness, would refuse to participate in their plan if it was unlawful and against societal norms, they called upon him first. So too should Sue and Robert consider the needs of society as they move forward.

The principles of dharma, karma and ahimsa acknowledge the difficult struggle regarding what Sue and Robert should do with the remaining embryos. The couple understands these embryos are potential humans, for the three children they now have were once embryos. A commitment to ahimsa places value on life, in its variety of forms, and aims to do the least amount of harm possible. To this end, Sue and Robert are hesitant to simply destroy them. Sue's desire to donate them for infertility research to help others is considering the larger societal needs while at the same time doing the least amount of harm. The principles discussed here would also not preclude them from donating the embryos to another infertile couple. Indeed, if Sue and Robert were to act without attachments, they could donate the remaining embryos both to other couples and for further research.

Extract above taken from Religious perspectives on embryo donation and research by Clinical Ethics

<https://bit.ly/2P3P17G>

## Issues for discussion

Is it acceptable to use IVF for gender selection?

To what extent is the use of IVF compatible with Hindu teaching?

Are there any social or historical limitations of Hindu ethical teachings in relation to bioethics?

Is it acceptable or even relevant to compare modern issues with accounts in the Hindu scriptures?

## Further Resources

<https://resources.edugas.co.uk/Pages/ResourceSingle.aspx?rId=1246>

- Edugas Component 1E Hinduism : Scheme of Work

## Books

Cromwell Crawford, S. 'Hindu Bioethics for the Twenty-first Century', SUNY Press, (2003), ISBN:9780791457801.

Links to sections from Crawford's book below:

<https://spaces.hightail.com/space/bg8H4/files/fi-3203399c-f43b-45e7-8082-a5970c8d2d66/fv-61c6d097-efc9-4d7b-9775-49b6c07c5865/A%20Level%20Theme%204F%20Hindu%20Bioethics%20of%20the%20Twenty-First%20Century.pdf>

<https://spaces.hightail.com/space/bg8H4/files/fi-fc96008d-fc0a-4431-be14-45a1efd13693/fv-c74df437-7772-4e1b-b7b9-960d2f127c21/A%20level%20Theme%204F%20Hindu%20Bioethics%20S.%20Cromwell%20Crawford.pdf>

<https://spaces.hightail.com/space/bg8H4/files/fi-f0b88e8b-ab00-472c-88a5-03788799af88/fv-5734ca10-7777-41a4-80f8-8fa93d5b97c4/A%20Level%20Theme%204F%20Religious%20Perspectives%20on%20Embryo%20donation%20including%20Swasti%20Bhattacharyya.pdf>

Swasti Bhattacharyya, 'Magical Progeny, Modern Technology: A Hindu Bioethics of Assisted Reproductive Technology', SUNY Press, (2006), ISBN:9780791467923

Link to an article by Dr Bhattacharyya below:

<https://bit.ly/2P3P17G>

## Websites

<https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/05/indias-hidden-infertility-struggles/> - and article by Neeta Lal on 'India's Hidden Infertility Struggles' found on The Diplomat.com

<http://blog.dr malpani.com/2014/03/infertility-in-hindu-mythology-dr.html> - an article by Dr Devdutt Pattanaik on 'Infertility in Hindu Mythology' from blog.dr malpani.com.