

Marital Vows in the Hindu Marriage System: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the Hindu marriage ceremony (*Vivaha Sanskara*). It argues that the traditional Sanskrit vows create a partnership of equals, rather than a system where men control women. By closely studying the “Seven Conditions of the Bride” (*Kanyake Sat Vachan*) and the “Seven Steps” (*Saptapadi*) dialogue found in the *Vivaha-Sanskara-Paddhati* (Gita Press), this research interprets the ritual words using Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist ideas. The analysis shows that the bride actively bargains for her rights. She explicitly demands control over household money (*madadhīnam*), the freedom to keep her friends (*sakhīparivṛtā*), and a role in business and religion. The paper argues that these conditions meet Beauvoir’s definition of “real love” because they build a relationship based on friendship. The groom even calls the wife a “Friend” (*Sakha*) rather than a servant. Finally, the study concludes that these religious texts provide a strong argument for gender equality, challenging the common social view that a wife is inferior to her husband.

Keywords: Gender agency, hindu marriage, immanence vs. transcendence, kanyake sat vachan, madadhīnam (economic control), sakha (friendship), saptapadi, simone de beauvoir, vivaha-sanskara-paddhati

Introduction

Background Information

The Hindu marriage (*Vivaha*) is traditionally conceptualized not merely as a social contract or a romantic union but as a *Samskara* (sacrament), a pivotal rite of passage essential for the fulfillment of the four aims of life: *Dharma* (duty), *Artha* (prosperity), *Kama* (pleasure), and *Moksha* (liberation). The theological foundation of this union is not the erasure of the female identity, but the harmonization of two distinct natures into a cohesive unit. This ideal is famously illustrated in the description of Lord Shiva’s household. As Swami Ramsukhdas elucidates in *How To Lead a Household Life*:

रुद्रो मद्रण्डधरो भद्रजङ्गसहितो गौरी तद्र सदभूषणा
स्कन्दः शम्भुसुतः षडाननयुतस्तुण्डी च लम्बोदरः ।
सिंहक्रेल्लिमूषकं च वृषभस्तेषां निजं वाहन-
मित्थं शम्भुगृहे विभिन्नमतिषु चैक्यं सदा वर्तते ॥

“Lord Śaṅkara wears garland of skulls and snake while Pārvaṭī wears beautiful ornaments. Śaṅkara’s son Kārtikeya has six faces while Gaṇeśa has a long trunk and big belly. Their vehicles—bullock, lion, peacock and rat also devour each other. In spite of different (contradictory) natures there is always unity in lord Śaṅkara’s family.” (5)

Swami further elaborates that “In the same way every person should live with the members of his family, who have different natures, with affection, renouncing his pride and pleasure, keeping in mind the welfare and convenience of others” (5). This theological precedent for “unity in difference” informs the liturgy of the *Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati*, where the bride constitutes the *Vamangi* (left half), a position she accepts only conditionally.

Central to the Hindu marriage ceremony is the *Saptapadi* (seven steps), the “Seven Statements of the Bride” (*Kanya ke Sat Vachan*) and the “Five Statements of the Groom” (*Var ke Paanch Vachan*), and the exchange of vows. Unlike the monolithic view of Vedic rituals often presented in colonial and post-colonial discourse, the actual liturgy involves a dialogue. The bride constitutes the *Vamangi* (left half), a position she accepts only conditionally. These conditions take the form of the *Sat Vachan* (Seven Statements), to which the groom must assent, followed by his own *Paanch Vachan* (Five Statements) assuring her of her status and rights.

In modern Hindu weddings, these statements are frequently romanticized. Wedding priests and cultural commentators often present them as a proto-feminist manifesto where the bride exerts “veto power,” refusing to marry unless her dignity and rights are assured. This interpretation has gained traction in a diasporic context where there is a strong desire to reconcile ancient tradition with modern egalitarian values.

The Hindu marriage is a pivotal *Samskara*. As Lynne Gibson notes in *Living Hinduism*, marriage is the fifteenth *Samskar*. In his words:

The fifteenth samskar takes place when Hindus get married. It is one of the oldest and most significant rites of passage.

At the beginning of the wedding ceremony the couple place garlands around each others necks as symbols of acceptance. Then they sit side by side under a specially erected canopy facing the priest. **Prayers** are said for the couple and **mantras** from the **Vedas** are recited. The couple go on to make offerings of ghee (clarified butter) and grains into a sacred fire, which they walk around seven times while the priest, relatives and friends say prayers for their future happiness. For the first three rounds, the bride leads the groom and, for the next four, the groom leads the way. At the end of this they take seven steps together facing north. With each step, they pray for specific blessings such as food, happiness and strength. If the

wedding takes place in India, the marriage is now legal and binding. Hindus living in other countries may also need to have a civil wedding if they want their marriage to be legally recognized. (Gibson 46)

The Hindu marriage, or *Vivaha*, stands as the central pillar of the Grihastha Ashrama (householder stage), one of the four stages of life in Vedic sociology. Unlike the contractual nature of civil marriage in Western jurisprudence, Hindu marriage is conceptualized as a *Samskara*—a transformative sacrament that is theoretically indissoluble and extends beyond a single lifetime. It is the rite of passage where the individual (particularly the male) becomes a complete social being, capable of performing Dharma.

Hindu marriage system does not allow divorce. Implying this message, *Markandeya Purana* writes:

पत्यानुकूलया भाव्यं यथाशीलेऽपि भर्तारि दुःशीलापि तथा भार्या पोषणीया नरेश्वरा। (६९.५९)

“O King (Nareśvara)! Just as a wife should remain faithful and favorable to her husband even if he is of bad character (conduct), similarly, a wife of bad character must also be supported and maintained by the husband.” (69.59, qtd. in Saraswati)

The text presents a symmetrical obligation: A wife must not leave a bad husband, and a husband must not leave a bad wife. This is treated as “equal justice.” However, Beauvoirian critics might argue that the text admits to keeping women “dependent” based on biology/psychology—a form of **biological determinism** that Beauvoir rejects with her famous maxim: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (283).

In *Manusmriti* and other *Dharmashastras* (religious texts), marriage is considered to be of eight types, the names of which are as follows:

(1) **Brahma**, (2) **Daiva**, (3) **Arsha**, (4) **Prajapatya**, (5) **Asura**, (6) **Gandharva**, (7) **Rakshasa**, and (8) **Paishacha**.

Of these eight marriages, **Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, and Prajapatya**—these four are considered superior (*Shreshtha*). The offspring of such couples are endowed with *Brahma-tejas* (divine radiance/intelligence) and are respected by cultured people.

The sons born from the remaining four marriages, starting with **Asura**, are cruel, speak untruths, and are opposed to the Vedas, Brahmins, and religious acts like *Yajnas* (sacrifices). Among these, the **Asura** and **Paishacha** marriages are considered unrighteous (*Adharma-yukta*), so these marriages should not be performed-

पैशाचश्चासुरश्चैव न कर्तव्यौ कदाचन । (*Paishacha and Asura [marriages] should never be done.*) - (Manusmriti 3.25, qtd. in *Sanskar Prakash* 530).

In the contemporary epoch, the youth are increasingly captivated by the allure of unions forged in the fires of mutual passion classically defined as the *Gandharva* marriage, now known as love marriage. However, when viewed through the discerning lens of eternal scripture, such alliances do not ascend to the zenith of marital sanctity. While recognized, they occupy a median stratum in the hierarchy of rites; they are valid, yet they lack the

supreme spiritual elevation accorded to the superior forms of union, which are rooted not merely in desire, but in duty and divine destiny.

On the topic of women's equal rights, Khaptad Swami in *Dharma-Vigyan* critiques the modern perspective:

The issue of equal rights arises only when two things are essentially different. In our culture, however, *Dampati* (couple) is the combined name for husband and wife. Both are halves of each other (*Ardhang*), two manifest forms of the same soul. (qtd. in Pradhan 111)

The text presents a traditional perspective on gender roles within Hindu philosophy, contrasting it with modern concepts of rights originating from the West. It argues that because husband and wife are spiritually one unit (*Dampati*), the concept of "equal rights" implies a separation that should not exist in that worldview.

Drawing on Baba's ideas, Rabindra Prasad Pradhan presents a traditionalist argument that contrasts modern/Western concepts of "equal rights" with Hindu spiritual philosophy. Pradhan's ideas can be presented as follows:

The Spiritual Unity of Gender (The "Dampati" Concept): Pradhan argues that the demand for "equal rights" implies a conflict between two separate and distinct entities. He claims this premise is flawed within Hindu culture because a husband and wife are not separate; they are **Dampati**-a combined unit. They are regarded as *Ardhang* (halves of each other) and two manifest forms of a single soul. Therefore, the concept of competing for rights against one another is spiritually illogical (111).

Women as Superior, Not Just Equal: Hindu culture does not merely offer women equality but accords them a status **superior** to men.

- **Scriptural Evidence:** He cites the *Manu Smriti*, stating that a mother is a thousand times more venerable than a father.
- **The Shakti Principle:** He uses the theological metaphor that Shiva (the male principle) is merely a *Shava* (corpse) without Shakti (the female principle). Power and energy are inherently female.
- **Cultural Practice:** He points out that in Hindu tradition, the Goddess's name is always spoken first (e.g., Gauri-Shankar, Sita-Ram, Lakshmi-Narayan), whereas Western culture places the male first (e.g., Mr. and Mrs., Adam and Eve, Romeo and Juliet) (112).

Critique of Western Feminism: The struggle for women's rights is a specifically Western phenomenon necessitated by the flaws of Western society.

- **Origin of Conflict:** He argues that because Western society was historically male-dominated and spiritually hollowed out by material development, the fight for voting and economic rights (starting in the 18th century and post-Industrial Revolution) was necessary there.
- **Misapplication:** He believes it is inappropriate to apply these "slogans" to Hindu society, where women were already the "nourishing images of ideal motherhood" and the guardians of the home (113).

Complementary Roles (Home vs. Outside):

The author defends the traditional division of labor women managing the home and men working outside—not as evidence of inequality, but as a necessary managerial division.

- **Management vs. Earning:** While men may be responsible for the “external” task of earning money, Pradhan argues that the “internal” power the management, expenditure, accumulation, and ultimate right over that property lies with the woman.
- **Interdependence:** He concludes that just as policy cannot be separated from righteousness, the domestic sphere cannot be separated from the external sphere; they are an integrated whole managed by two partners (113).

Pradhan concludes that women are revered as superior to men (specifically in the role of the mother) and that the concept of “fighting for equality” lowers this elevated status to a mere equal footing. The rituals of the Hindu marriage system strengthen women’s dignity and equality, resulting in the co-existence of husband and wife, who are two bodies of the same soul.

Hindu scriptures state that girls and women, whether married or unmarried, have exclusive privileges over their private earnings. An unmarried woman’s income is her own property, and parents should not use it for their own benefit. Even after marriage, a woman’s dowry remains her sole possession. Husbands have no right to claim their wives’ property. Furthermore, the scriptures recommend that husbands avoid using their wives’ personal earnings for their own expenses. For Beauvoir, a woman’s ability to earn and hold private property is not just a financial matter; it is the fundamental prerequisite for her existence as a free human being. Her earnings are her only path to freedom or autonomy; without them, she is a subordinate.

Hindu scriptures state that marriage is essential. Every son is born with three spiritual debts: *Deva-rina* (debt to gods), *Rishi-rina* (debt to sages), and *Pitri-rina* (debt to ancestors). He repays the debt to the gods by worshipping them and offering oblations into the sacred fire. He repays the debt to the sages by studying religious scriptures every day. Similarly, he repays the debt to his ancestors by getting married, having children, and performing rituals like *Tarpana* and *Shraddha* to honor those who have passed away. Beauvoir analyzes marriage not as a spiritual debt (as in Hindu scripture) but as a social and economic institution. From her feminist viewpoint, the “necessity” of marriage for a man is functional and advantageous, rather than existential; it serves primarily to secure a domestic servant, allowing him to remain free in the public world.

Against this background, the marital vows within the Hindu marriage system will be examined through the lens of Beauvoir’s feminist philosophy.

Problem

Despite the existence of the reciprocal vows of the bridegroom and the bride, the sociological reality of Hindu marriage has often been characterized by the systematic erasure of female autonomy. The ritual of *Kanyadaan* (the gift of the maiden) is frequently interpreted as

objectifying the woman, transitioning her from the property of the father to the property of the husband. This creates a dichotomy between the *textual* reality of the vows which demand consultation and respect—and the *practiced* reality of subordination. Feminist critique has often discarded the entire ritual structure as inherently patriarchal without examining the specific clauses within the vows that allow for female agency.

The central intellectual problem this report addresses is the dissonance between the popular, egalitarian interpretation of Hindu marital vows and their deep, structural patriarchal grammar. When a bride asks for “respect” or “consultation,” is she demanding equality, or is she negotiating the terms of her servitude?

There is a lack of rigorous critical theory applied to the *text* of these vows. Most literature either catalogues the rituals descriptively or critiques the sociological outcomes (dowry, domestic violence) without deconstructing the liturgical script that normalizes the gender hierarchy. Using Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* to study these vows helps us reveal the hidden beliefs about women found in the Sanskrit verses. The problem is not just *what* the bride asks for, but *why* she must ask for it, and *what* the groom’s silence or assent signifies in the economy of the ritual.

Objective

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the specific Sanskrit scripts of the “Seven Statements of the Bride” and the “Saptapadi” dialogue from the *Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* (Code 2191) to determine if they support a feminist reading of equality. Secondary objective is to map these vows onto Beauvoir’s philosophical requirements for equality in marriage, specifically looking for evidence of the “mutual recognition of two liberties” rather than the subjugation of the wife as the “Other.”

Hypothesis

This research posits that the classical Sanskrit vows constitute a proto-feminist manifesto embedded within the Hindu liturgy. It is hypothesized that these vows satisfy Beauvoir’s criteria for an egalitarian union by establishing the wife not as a relative being (an “Other”) but as an essential subject whose consent is conditional upon her partner’s recognition of her autonomy in economic, religious, and domestic spheres.

Literature Review

The interpretation of Hindu marriage system has oscillated between Orientalist romanticization and feminist condemnation. Early Indologists like Sir William Jones and H.T. Colebrooke viewed Sanskrit texts as static laws, often emphasizing the *Manusmriti*’s dictum (5.148): “In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent” (Jones 143; Colebrooke 2: 121).

However, Eastern scholars like A.S. Altekar in *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* argue that the Vedic period offered women significantly higher status, which deteriorated in the Smriti period. He notes that the marriage hymns of the Rigveda presuppose a mature bride who has a voice in the selection of her husband (Altekar 56). This suggests that the

foundational texts envisioned a union of consenting adults.

Contemporary scholarship also engages with this dialectic. Ram Prasad Joshi, in *Hindu Samskritima Shodash Samskarako Mahattva*, writes: “In Hindu marriage, a woman does not become a mere instrument for the satisfaction of lust (*kāmavāsanāpūrtikī yantra*) but enters as a *Dharmapatni*....Husband and wife are two panels of the same door, two eyes of the same face, two banks of the same river, and two wheels of the same chariot” (Joshi 163-64).

Modern feminist scholars have engaged deeply with this history. Madhu Kishwar, in her analysis of Indian traditions, argues against the wholesale rejection of tradition, suggesting that cultural symbols can be sites of resistance. Conversely, Western feminist interpretations often struggle to reconcile the ritual of *Kanyadaan* with modern concepts of agency (Kishwar 269).

The scholarship on Hindu marriage is vast, yet divided. From the theological and traditionalist perspectives, scholars like Pandurang Vaman Kane in his monumental *History of Dharmashastra* (Vol. II) present the Vivaha as a harmonious union essential for social order. Kane argues that the wife is Ardhangini (half-body) (428) and Sahadharmacharini (partner in Dharma) (556), implying a spiritual equality. He emphasizes that no religious rite is complete without the wife, suggesting her indispensability. Rajbali Pandey similarly views the marital vows in Hindu Samskaras as a check on male caprice, designed to ensure the wife’s proper treatment (198).

In contrast, the perspectives of feminist and subaltern critiques, are worth noting.

Feminist historians have dismantled the “Golden Age” myth of Vedic equality. Uma Chakravarti, in *Gendering Caste*, argues that this narrative was constructed to mask the structural linkage between caste purity and the control of female sexuality (Chakravarti 6). Similarly, Tanika Sarkar notes that the glorification of the domestic sphere was a nationalist strategy to resist colonial hegemony, rather than a reflection of historical gender justice (Sarkar 24). Leela Dube’s anthropological work on the Seed and Earth metaphor exposes the biological reductionism in Hindu kinship: the man is the active seed (Beeja), the woman is the passive field (Kshetra) (118-19). The field has no claim to the crop; it merely nourishes it (119).

Leela Dube’s analysis of the *Beeja-Kshetra* (Seed and Earth) metaphor is a cornerstone of Indian feminist anthropology, but it is not without its limitations. While her work powerfully exposed the *normative* structures of patriarchy found in texts like the *Manusmriti*, critical engagement with her specific claim that the woman is merely a “passive field” with “no claim to the crop” (children reveals several nuances).

Dube’s analysis relies heavily on Brahmanical legal texts (Dharmashastras) which prioritize the male lineage. However, this reading arguably flattens the complex Hindu metaphysical landscape. By focusing on the *passive* definition of the “Field” (*Kshetra*), Dube overlooks the competing and equally powerful traditions of Shaktism and Tantra. In these traditions, the feminine principle (*Prakriti* or *Shakti*) is the active, dynamic, and creative force, while

the male principle (*Purusha*) is the passive witness. Theological critics would argue that the «field» is not just inert dirt but the divine matrix without which the seed is impotent. Dube's interpretation captures the *social* reality of high-caste patriarchy but perhaps negates the *spiritual* power attributed to the feminine in broader Hindu thought. Presenting the *Beeja-Kshetra nyaya* as the defining feature of "Hindu" kinship erases the histories of millions of Hindus who lived by matrilineal or bilateral codes where the woman was central, not marginal.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship largely ignores the specific content of the *Saptapadi* dialogue, the "Seven Statements of the Bride," and the "Five Statements of the Groom" found in ritual handbooks like the *Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati*, focusing predominantly on the visual aspect of the seven steps. There is a lack of analysis that juxtaposes the bride's specific demand for economic control (*madadhīnam*) against Beauvoir's critique of the "confined wife." This paper fills that gap.

The gap in current literature lies in the specific textual analysis of the *dialogic* nature of the marital vows through an Existentialist lens. While sociologists analyze the *practice* of dowry and submission, fewer studies deconstruct the *linguistic contract* of the marital vows or statements using Beauvoir's specific definition of "fraternity" in marriage.

While there is extensive critique of *Manusmriti* and general social practices, there is a surprising scarcity of direct, line-by-line philosophical analysis of the marital vows themselves. Most feminist critiques focus on the material consequences (dowry deaths, widowhood) rather than the ritual language that initiates the union. Furthermore, the specific application of Beauvoirian existentialism to the Sanskrit liturgy of the *Saptapadi* remains an underexplored avenue. This report fills that gap by treating the vows not just as cultural artifacts, but as philosophical propositions about the nature of female existence.

Research Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in Feminist Literary Theory and Existentialist Ethics. The primary theoretical framework is derived from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), specifically the chapters "The Married Woman" and "The Independent Woman."

Beauvoir argues that "The couple shall not be regarded as two fractions of a totality... but as the juxtaposition of two autonomous existences" (765). She further asserts that "Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms" (765). This study applies these concepts to the primary Sanskrit texts found in the *Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* (Code 2191).

Theoretical Framework: Existentialist Feminism

Beauvoir argues that marriage has historically been a mechanism to confine the woman to "Immanence" (stagnation, repetition, domesticity) while the man engages in "Transcendence"

(creative, public, historic action). She famously states, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (283).

For marriage to be ethical, Beauvoir asserts it must not be an abdication of the self. She envisions a relationship where:

The couple shall not be regarded as two fractions of a totality... but as the juxtaposition of two autonomous existences... Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms; each lover would then experience himself as himself and as the other: neither would abdicate his transcendence, they would not mutilate themselves; together they would reveal values and ends in the world (765).

Beauvoir’s seminal 1949 text provides a robust toolkit for analyzing the ontology of gender. We will rely on the 2010 translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier for citations. The core concepts applied are:

- **The Subject/Other Dichotomy:** Beauvoir asserts that “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other”. The “Other” is defined not in herself, but in relation to the Subject. We will analyze if the vows position the groom as the protagonist and the bride as the supporting character.
- **Immanence vs. Transcendence:**
 - *Transcendence* is the active, creative projection of the self into the future (building, governing, discovering).
 - *Immanence* is the passive, repetitive maintenance of life (cooking, cleaning, gestation).
 - Beauvoir argues that marriage historically confines women to immanence: “Marriage constitutes for the woman a retreat... into the circle of her own person and the home”. We will test if the vows explicitly assign immanence to the bride.
- **The Patriarchal Bargain:** Beauvoir notes that women often accept their status as the Other because it offers protection. “To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal... this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste”. We will view the “conditions” or statements of the vows as the terms of this alliance.
- **Data Source:** The analysis relies on the specific Sanskrit Shlokas of the Saptapadi, “Seven Statements of the Bride,” and “Five Statements of the Groom” from *Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* (Code 2191), specifically pages 85-93.

Method of Analysis: The marital vows of the Hindu marital system are tested against Beauvoir’s concepts of Immanence, Transcendence, and Equality in this paper.

Analysis and Results

The analysis is divided into two parts: the preliminary conditional statements of the bride (*Kanya ke Sat Vachan*) and the ritual dialogue of the Seven Steps (*Saptapadi*).

Part I: Seven Statements/Conditions/Contracts of the Bride (“Kanya ke Sat Vachan” in Saptapadi)

Before the bridegroom presents five conditional statements to the bride, she presents seven

conditional statements to him. These are detailed in the *Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* (Code 2191) on pages 89-93.

Vow 1: Inclusion in Religious Transcendence

Sanskrit: तीर्थव्रतोद्यापनयज्ञदानं मया सह त्वं यदि कान्त कुर्याः। वामाङ्गमायामि तदा त्वदीयं जगाद वाक्यं प्रथमं कुमारी ॥१॥

“O Beloved! If you promise to take me along with you in pilgrimages (*Tirtha*), fasts (*Vrata*), religious observances (*Udyapana*), sacrifices (*Yajna*), and charity (*Dana*), only then do I accept to come to your left side (become your wife). This is the maiden’s first statement.” (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 89)

Beauvoir critiques traditional marriage for excluding women from the realm of “Transcendence”—the ability to engage with the wider world and higher values. By demanding participation in Yajna (sacrifice) and Teerth (pilgrimage), the Hindu bride refuses to be left in the Immanence of the kitchen. She asserts that the husband’s path to Moksha (liberation) is invalid without her active participation.

Vow 2: Beyond Servitude: Shared Transcendence

Sanskrit: हव्यप्रदानैरमरान् पितृककंश्च कव्यप्रदानैर्यदि पूजयेथाः। वामाङ्गमायामि तदा त्वदीयं जगाद कन्या वचनं द्वितीयम् ॥२॥

“If you promise to worship the immortals (gods) by offering oblations (*Havya*) and the ancestors (*Pitrs*) by offering libations (*Kavya*), only then do I accept to come to your left side. This is the maiden’s second statement.” (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 89)

From a superficial sociological perspective, this condition might appear to enforce traditional religious servitude. However, a structural feminist analysis reveals it as a claim to **Shared Transcendence** and **Legitimacy**. Therefore, the second condition challenges the notion of the Hindu wife as a silent observer. Instead, it positions her as the gatekeeper of *Dharma*, ensuring that the husband’s pursuit of the divine is impossible without the equal participation of the wife.

Vow 3. The Rejection of Parasitism: Securing the Material Basis of Dharma

Sanskrit: कुटुम्बरक्षाभरणं यदि त्वं कुर्याः पश...नां परिपालनं च. वामाङ्गमायामि तदा त्वदीयं जगाद कन्या वचनं तृतीयम् ॥३॥

“If you promise to protect and support the family (*Kutumba*) and take care of the livestock (*Pashu*), only then do I accept to come to your left side. This is the maiden’s third statement.” (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 89)

This condition can be deconstructed using Beauvoir’s concepts of **Economic Agency** and the **Rejection of Parasitism**. Thus, the third condition is a pragmatic assertion of rights.

It reveals the Hindu bride not as a romantic idealist, but as a realist who understands that the “transcendence” of spiritual life relies on the “immanence” of economic stability. By demanding this stability as a precondition, she asserts her status as a rational subject securing her future.

Vow 4: Economic Agency and Consultation

Sanskrit: आय व्ययं धान्यधनादिकानां दृष्ट्वा निवेशं प्रगृहं विदध्याः। वामाङ्मायामि तदा त्वदीयं जगाद कन्या वचनं चतुर्थम् ॥४॥

“If you promise to manage income (*Aya*), expenditure (*Vyaya*), grain, and wealth only after consulting me and keeping the household in mind (*Pragriham*), only then do I accept to come to your left side. This is the maiden’s fourth statement.” (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 90) Beauvoir writes extensively on the economic dependence of wives, stating, “Civil liberties remain theoretical as long as they are unaccompanied by economic freedom” (770). This condition is crucial. The bride demands control over the Artha (wealth) of the household. She is establishing herself not as a servant, but as a manager and partner whose intellect (*Buddhi*) must be consulted.

Vow 5. Temples, Tanks, and Transcendence: The Bride’s Claim to Historical Agency

Sanskrit: देवालयारामतडागक...पवापी विदध्या यदि प...जयेथाः। वामाङ्मायामि तदा त्वदीयं जगाद कन्या वचनं च पञ्चमम् ॥५॥

“If you construct temples (*Devalaya*), gardens (*Arama*), ponds (*Tadaga*), wells (*Kupa*), and tanks (*Vapi*), and perform worship there, only then do I accept to come to your left side. This is the maiden’s fifth statement.” (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 90)

This condition can be interpreted through Beauvoir’s concepts of **Transcendence**, **The Project**, and the rejection of **Immanence**. The fifth condition demonstrates that the Hindu bride envisions her role as extending far beyond the walls of the home. By demanding the construction of public infrastructure as a condition of marriage, she secures her access to the realm of Transcendence, ensuring that her life, through the agency of the marriage partnership, impacts the wider world and history itself.

Vow 6. Breaking the Domestic Sphere: The Bride’s Claim to Commercial Agency

Sanskrit: देशान्तरे वा स्वपुरान्तरे वा यदा विदध्याः क्रयविक्रये त्वम् वामाङ्मायामि तदा त्वदीयं जगाद कन्या वचनं च षष्ठम् ॥६॥

“If you engage in trade or buying and selling (*Kraya-Vikraya*), whether in foreign lands (*Deshantara*) or within our own city, and involve me in it, only then do I accept to come to your left side. This is the maiden’s sixth statement.” (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 90)

This condition can be deconstructed using Beauvoir’s concepts of **Economic Agency**, **Mobility**, and the rejection of the **Domestic/Public Dichotomy**. The sixth condition is a radical assertion of economic partnership. It refutes the patriarchal ideal of the secluded wife who is ignorant of her husband’s affairs. Instead, it presents a model of marriage where the wife is a co-proprietor of the family enterprise, securing her right to economic power and

public agency-the very foundations of liberty in Beauvoir's philosophy.

Vow 7. Sexual Symmetry: The Bride's Demand for Reciprocal Fidelity

Sanskrit: न सेवनिया परकीयजाया त्वया भवे भाविनि कामिनीश्च. वामाङ्गमायामि तदा त्वदीयं जगाद कन्या वचनं च सप्तमम् ॥७॥

“O future husband! If you promise not to pursue other women (*Parakiyajaya* - another's wife) or strangers (*Kamini*) and remain faithful to me alone, only then do I accept to come to your left side. This is the maiden's seventh statement.”

The seventh condition acts as the final seal on the feminist manifesto of the *Saptapadi*. It rejects the double standard of patriarchal sexual morality. By demanding exclusive fidelity as a non-negotiable condition for her presence, the Hindu bride asserts her dignity and establishes the marriage as a partnership of equals, where neither party has the right to treat the other as a disposable or replaceable object.

This condition serves as a critical intervention in the history of patriarchal marriage, interpretable through Beauvoir's concepts of **Subjectivity**, **The One and the Other**, and the rejection of **Polygamous Privilege**. Beauvoir critiqued the historical double standard where men could have mistresses but wives had to be chaste. The bride's demand for the monogamy deconstructs male sexual privilege. This highlights that this vow strips the male of his traditional patriarchal “right” to multiple women.

After listening to the seven conditional statements of the bride, the bridegroom accepts them. Then, the bridegroom also puts forward five conditional statements to the bride, to which she agrees. Their marriage then takes place, and they become **one soul** after their first sexual consummation. Due to space constraints, the bridegroom's five statements or conditions are not presented here.

Part II: The Saptapadi (The Seven Steps) – A Dialogue of Action

Before the bride's seven conditional statements or marital vows, the most critical part of the ceremony involves the seven steps on the fire. This is not a silent walk; it is a scripted dialogue (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 85-88).

Describing the ritual manual of the Saptapadi, Kulchandra Gautam writes that a pure white cloth is spread out towards the north side of the marriage altar (*Vivahavedi*). On this cloth, seven *mandalas* (circles or geometric figures) or boundary lines are prepared in a row from south to north using vermilion (*sindoor*), red powder (*abir*), and saffron (*kesar*). After this, the groom (*vara*) makes the bride (*vadhu*) stand facing north. Holding the big toe of her right foot with his right hand, the groom, one by one, steps forward with the bride's right foot sequentially over each of the seven *mandalas* from the first to the seventh. This process involves walking from south to north while chanting seven mantras one by one (219).

The First Step of the Saptapadi: The Demand for Total Economic Control

This is the dialogue spoken during the first step of the sacred fire (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 85).

Groom's Mantra:

ॐ एकमिषे विष्णुस्त्वा नयतु ॥१॥

“May Lord Vishnu guide you in the first step for provision/food.”

Bride's Response (The Vow):

धनं धान्यं च मिष्टानं व्यञ्जनाद्यं च यद् गृहे मदधीनं हि कर्तव्यं वधुराद्ये पदेऽब्रवीत् ॥

“Whatever wealth, grain, sweets, and food exist in the house, you must place them under my control/subordination (*madadhīnam*). Only then can I properly serve the family (mother-in-law, father-in-law, relatives, guests, servants, and others). The bride spoke this in the first step.” (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 85).

The phrase *Madadhīnam* (subordinate to me/under my control) is radical. In a patriarchal reading, the wife is subordinate to the husband. Here, the text inverts this: the material resources of the patriarch are subordinated to the wife. Beauvoir argues that a woman cannot be free if she is a “parasite.” By seizing control of the household economy, the Hindu bride secures the material basis for her existence.

The Second Step of the Saptapadi: Emotional Sovereignty: The Bride as Guardian

This is the dialogue spoken during the second round of the sacred fire (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 86).

Groom's Mantra:

ॐ द्वे ऊर्जे विष्णुस्त्वा नयतु ॥२॥

“May Lord Vishnu guide you in the second step for strength (*Urja*).”

Bride's Response (The Vow):

कुटुम्बं रक्षयिष्यामि ते सदा मञ्जुभाषिणी दुःखे धीरा सुखे हृष्टा द्वितीये साऽब्रवीद्वरम् ॥

“I will protect/nourish your family (*Kutumba*), always speaking sweetly. I will remain patient in sorrow and happy in your happiness. The bride spoke this to the groom in the second step.”

While traditional interpretations often view this vow as an acceptance of domestic subservience, a rigorous application of Beauvoir's philosophy reveals a nuanced assertion of **Emotional Sovereignty** and **Guardianship**. The bride's response in the second step of the *Saptapadi* redefines the domestic sphere. Instead of a prison of “Immanence,” she frames it as a domain of governance where she exercises protection, diplomatic speech (*mañjubhāṣinī*), and emotional fortitude, thereby establishing herself as an equal pillar of the marital structure.

The Third Step of Saptapadi: The Vow of Joy: Rejecting the Wife as Tool

Groom's Mantra:

ॐ त्रीणि रायस्पोषाय विष्णुस्त्वा नयतु ॥३॥

“May Lord Vishnu guide you in the third step for the increase of wealth (*Raya*).”

Bride's Response (The Vow):

पतिभक्तिरता नित्यं क्रीडिष्यामि त्वया सहा त्वदन्यं न नरं संस्ये तृतीये साऽब्रवीदिदम् ॥

“Devoted to my husband, I will always rejoice/play (*Krīḍisyāmi*) with you. I will not even think of another man in my mind. The bride spoke this in the third step.”

This vow can be interpreted through Beauvoir's concepts of **Erotic Autonomy**, the **Rejection of Functionalism**, and the nature of **Authentic Commitment**.

The bride's response in the third step establishes the marriage as a site of pleasure and exclusive intimacy. By centering the concept of “play” (*Krīḍā*), she challenges the functionalist view of the wife as a mere reproductive or domestic tool, asserting her right to be a companion in the full, joyful sense of the word.

The Fourth Step of Saptapadi: The Politics of Adornment: The Wife as Aesthetic Agent

This is the dialogue spoken during the fourth round of the sacred fire (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 86-87).

Groom's Mantra:

ॐ चत्वारि मायोभवाय विष्णुस्त्वा नयतु ॥४॥

“May Lord Vishnu guide you in the fourth step for happiness (*Mayobhava*).”

Bride's Response (The Vow):

लालयामि च केशान्तं गन्धमाल्यानुलेपनैः। काञ्चनैर्भूषणैस्तुभ्यं तुरीये साऽब्रवीद्वरम् ॥

“I will cherish you by serving you from your feet to your hair, adorning you with scents (*Gandha*), garlands (*Malya*), ointments (*Anulepana*), and gold ornaments (*Kanchana*). The bride spoke this to the groom in the fourth step.”

From the Beauvoirian perspective, the Fourth Step is a powerful, yet unfortunate, **reinforcement of traditional patriarchal conditioning**. The bride, by taking this vow, internalizes the definition of womanhood as being the **Other** who exists to beautify and serve the **Self** (the groom). She willingly chooses **Immanence**, sacrificing her potential for **Transcendence**—her existential freedom to define her own projects and meaning—in favor of a life dedicated to maintaining the groom's comfort and social standing. The text illustrates precisely how society and its rituals construct the married woman as the “devoted accessory” rather than an autonomous Subject. A minute observation of her vow suggests that she intends to remain loyal to her husband by dedicating her time to him rather than to outsiders. On one hand, this signifies her refusal to deceive him. On the other hand, she expects that if she devotes herself to his service, her husband will have no reason to wander outside to seek other women.

The Fifth Step of Saptapadi: The Circle of *Sakhis*: Female Solidarity as Strength

This is the dialogue spoken during the fifth round of the sacred fire (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 87).

Groom's Mantra:

ॐ पञ्च पशुभ्यो विष्णुस्त्वा नयतु ॥५॥

“May Lord Vishnu guide you in the fifth step for the welfare of livestock (*Pashu*).”

Bride's Response (The Vow):

सखीपरिवृता नित्यं गौर्याराधनतत्परा॥ त्वयि भक्ता भविष्यामि पञ्चमे साऽब्रवीद्वरम् ॥

“Surrounded by my friends (*Sakhi*), engaging in the worship of Gauri (Goddess Parvati), I will remain devoted to you (*Tvayi bhakta*). The bride spoke this to the groom in the fifth step.”

In this step, the bride's vow explicitly outlines her social and spiritual life after marriage, and the interpretation focuses on how these activities either lead to or restrict **Transcendence** (existential freedom and self-creation). The fifth step dismantles the patriarchal ideal of the wife who has “no eyes for anyone but her lord (husband).” By insisting on the presence of her *Sakhis* (friends), the bride establishes the marriage as an open structure that must accommodate her social autonomy and female solidarity, rather than erasing it.

The Sixth Step of Saptapadi: Spiritual Equality

This is the dialogue spoken during the sixth round of the sacred fire (*Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* 87-88).

Groom's Mantra:

ॐ षड् ऋतुभ्यो विष्णुस्त्वा नयतु ॥६॥

“May Lord Vishnu guide you through the six seasons (*Ritus*).”

Bride's Response (The Vow):

यज्ञे होम च दानादौ भवेयं तव वामतः। यत्र त्वं तत्र तिष्ठामि पदे षष्ठेऽब्रवीद्वरम्।

“In sacrifices (*Yajna*), fire rituals (*Homa*), and charity (*Dana*), I will be on your left side. Wherever you are, there I will stand. The bride spoke this to the groom in the sixth step.”

This vow addresses the historical exclusion of women from religion and public ethics. It can be deconstructed using Beauvoir's concepts of **Transcendence**, **The Essential Subject**, and **Spatial Equality**. The Sixth Step is a powerful claim to spiritual and ethical co-ownership. The bride defines the marriage as a partnership where the husband's access to the divine and his social standing (through charity) are inextricably bound to the presence and agency of the wife standing at his side.

This Sixth Step of the Saptapadi presents perhaps the most explicit articulation of the wife's prescribed role in relation to the husband's public and ritualistic life. This reiterates the shared transcendence. “Wherever you are, there I will stand” implies a spatial and existential equality. She is not behind him; she is *Vāmataḥ* (on the left), the position of the coordinate

power (Shakti). The phrase “**shared transcendence**” in the context of the Sixth Step of the Saptapadi suggests a reading that moves beyond viewing the wife as merely the subordinate “Other.”

The term reinterprets the traditional roles, asserting that the wife’s prescribed actions are not about her *sacrificing* her freedom, but about her **participating equally** in the couple’s collective journey toward spiritual and worldly goals. In essence, “shared transcendence” is the argument that the traditional wife’s role, particularly in these powerful ritual vows, is not one of subordination but of indispensable partnership, where the couple’s greatest achievements are attained only through their combined, equally necessary efforts.

The Seventh Step of Saptapadi: The Declaration of Friendship (“Sakhe”)

This is the dialogue spoken during the seventh and final round of the sacred fire (Page 88 of Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati 88). The climax of the ritual involves a linguistic shift. The groom addresses the bride in the seventh step:

Groom’s Mantra:

ॐ सखे सप्तपदा भव सा मामनुव्रता भव विष्णुस्त्वा नयतु ॥७॥

“O Friend (*Sakhe*)! Be my companion on the seven steps. Be faithful to me/follow my vows. May Lord Vishnu guide you.”

Om! O Friend (*Sakhe*)! Having walked these seven steps, become my companion. May you be devoted to me. May Lord Vishnu guide you.

This verse is typically found in the **Grihya Sutras** (specifically the *Paraskara Grihya Sutra* or *Gobhila Grihya Sutra*), which says:

“Having taken seven steps, become my friend; may I not lose your friendship, may you not lose my friendship.” (*Paraskara Grihya Sutra* 1.8.1-2)

This mantra is recited by the groom after the seventh step is taken. It is the most critical moment in a Hindu wedding because:

- **Legal Completion:** In Hindu law (*Manu* and modern law), the marriage is technically complete and irrevocable only after the seventh step (*Saptapadi*) is taken.
- **Equality:** The groom addressing the bride as *Sakhe* (Friend) is significant. It implies that the relationship has evolved from the formal “groom and bride” to a partnership of equals based on friendship (*Sakhya*).

Here, the plea for friendship is especially noteworthy. Those who believe that the ancient Rishis kept women as servants should pay attention to this word “Sakhe” (Friend).

Bride’s Response (The Vow):

सर्वेऽत्र साक्षिणो देवा मनोभावप्रबोधिनः। वञ्चनं न करिष्यामि सप्तमे सा पदेऽब्रवीत् ॥

“Let all the gods who know the intentions of the heart be witnesses here; I will never deceive you. The bride spoke this in the seventh step.”

The use of the vocative *Sakhe* (Friend) is the defining moment of the feminist reading. In

The Second Sex, Beauvoir envisions the ideal relationship as one of “fraternity,” where “men and women recognize each other as peers” (765). Friendship is a horizontal relationship, unlike the vertical relationship of Master/Slave or Parent/Child. By concluding the ritual with Sakhe, the groom acknowledges the bride as his peer. The bride responds not with submission, but with an ethical promise: “Vañcanam na kariṣyāmi” (I will not deceive you), marking the union as a contract between two moral agents.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study of the *Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* (a Hindu marriage manual) shows that traditional Hindu marriage is not entirely about men controlling women. Instead, it contains a clear plan for a partnership of equals. Using Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist ideas, we can see that the marriage vows create a relationship where two free people respect each other.

The analysis of the “Bride’s Seven Conditions” (*Kanyake Sat Vachan*) proves that the bride is a rational person who sets terms before agreeing to marry. She demands specific rights: to be consulted on money matters (*aya-vyaya*), to participate equally in religious duties (*yajna*), and to ensure her husband remains faithful only to her. Furthermore, a close look at the “Seven Steps” (*Saptapadi*) dialogue reveals strong female power. In the first step, the bride demands total control (*madadhīnam*) over household wealth, which satisfies the feminist requirement for economic freedom. In the fifth step, she secures her social independence by insisting on keeping her own circle of female friends (*sakhīparivrītā*), refusing to be isolated in the marriage.

Finally, the ceremony ends not by erasing the woman, but by the groom calling her “Friend” (*Sakhe*) in the seventh step. This word changes the relationship from “Master and Servant” to one of friendship and equality. As Nepali scholar Ram Prasad Joshi explains, the couple becomes like “two wheels of the same chariot”—different but equally necessary. Therefore, the Hindu marriage ritual offers a powerful tool for feminists. It proves that equality is not a modern or foreign idea, but a promise found deep within the ancient vows themselves.

This paper focused on the *Vivaha-Sanskar-Paddhati* (Gita Press) and examined its “dialogue of equality.” Future research should conduct comparative analyses of marriage manuals across different regions, castes, and sects to determine if this “dialogue of equality” is universal or specific to certain traditions. Further study is needed to explore how the oral tradition of women’s wedding songs (*Mangal Geet*) either reinforces or subverts the Sanskrit textual tradition.

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