



Condition of Women in Vedic Marriage Sacrament in the Himalayan Region

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Abstract

The marriage as a institution is deeply rooted in socio-cultural structures and is considered a significant rite of passage for humanity. The rituals have been practiced since the dawn of human civilization and have been documented in the Veda which is recognized as the oldest scriptures in the world reflecting the social structure of Vedic civilization of the Himalayan Region. The Vedas, representing the early patriarchal socio-cultural system and its rituals, provide insights into the concept of marriage as a ritual and the role of women within it. In this context, this research aims to delve into the concept of marriage as a ritual and scrutinize the position of females within the framework of Vedic marriage rituals. To achieve this objective, a historical content analysis method has been used to gather data through the hymns of Vedas and interpretations of early Indian history under the qualitative research design. The research uncovers the patriarchal nature of the Vedic context. Despite this, women are depicted as symbols of prosperity and elevation within the Vedic marriage ritual, which does not fully align with the theoretical arguments of patriarchy.

Keywords: *Marriage ritual, Patriarchal social structure, respect of women, Vedic social structure, Himalayan Region*

Introduction

The rituals are the foundation of the human civilization. Human beings are differing than other animal being due to the ritual based specific activities. Creation of the rituals-based activities the specific processes of refinement of human life are called rituals. All of the human behaviors and interactions are shaped by rituals.

Rituals serve as a transformative process in human life. At birth, an individual enters the world as a mere physical entity, but through a series of processes and methodologies, they become integrated into socio-cultural systems (Pandey, 1968).

The rituals have been existed as a form of transformation of human culture in a specialized one. Adhikari (2022) has claimed that the meaning of the ritual is the process of making a specialized and civilized one in the transformation of the culture and it purifies the mental and physical condition of human beings. As a result, it enhances the humane conscience as well as the pure form of creativity. Likewise, Apte (1993) has explained different kinds of rituals like the ritual of farming, the ritual of marriage, and death as well as the rituals of the occasional ceremonies. In other words, every entity undergoes a process of development from its initial state, exhibiting specific qualities or characteristics. This evolution, whether biological or socio-cultural, involves gradual changes or refinements (Matson, 2005). In biological evolution, changes occur over time, while in social development, objects are shaped and refined through the cultural framework of a society. According to the socio-anthropological standpoint, the entirety of human creation is referred to as culture, emphasizing that refinement or purification within social and cultural realms is essentially the refinement of human activities (Harris, 1971). Thus, humans have devised various methods or systems to continually refine themselves and their behaviors throughout their lives. It is commonly held that individuals progress towards greater socio-cultural refinement, civilization, and sanctity through structured activities (Kosambi, 2002). Rituals are the embodiment of these established practices and systems (Apte, 1978). Thus, it can be inferred that rituals are integral components of culture, conceived, practiced, and refined by humans. These refined cultural practices play a crucial role in establishing the significance of human existence within social and cultural contexts. In essence, rituals represent the culmination of one's mental and intellectual development through religious observances or ceremonial acts (Prabhu, 1961). Throughout the evolution of civilization, human connections are forged in the form of rituals. Marriage, a crucial aspect of these connections, emerges as a relationship aimed at fulfilling both biological and socio-cultural requirements of individuals (Farley, 1999). Marriage has long been recognized as the foundation of human existence, serving as a fundamental social institution since ancient times (Ember & Ember, 1999). Vedic hymns and historians provide insights into the social structure of the Vedic period (Adhikari, 2020A & Adhikari, 2020B). The various kinds of rituals have been discussed and explained in the socio-cultural structure of the Vedic era. Among them, rituals of marriage have been practiced and carried on

and on in society from the past to the present day (Adhikari, 2021 & Adhikari, 2022). The explores the social and cultural fabric of early in the southern parts of the Himalayan region and Kashmir, shedding light on the role of women within this ancient civilization. In the text, Kaul highlights how women were not only integral to the domestic sphere but also held significant intellectual and spiritual influence in the society. Drawing from Kalhana's Rajatarangini a historical chronicle of early Kashmir-Kaul discusses how women in this region were respected as custodians of knowledge and were often involved in religious and intellectual pursuits. This reflects broader Vedic values, where women like Gargi and Maitreyi were seen as important contributors to philosophical discourses (Kaul 2018).

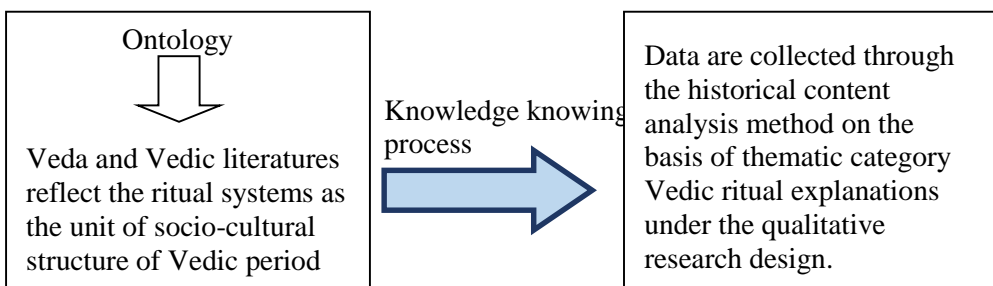
The mentioned literature discussed only the concept of the Vedic rituals as the refinement process of human behavior. However, the roles and positions of women in the marriage ritual process of the socio-cultural structure of the Vedic period have not been explored yet. So, this article is focused to explore and analyze the roles and position of women within the context of Vedic marriage ritual base activities.

Objective and Research Method

The objective of this research is to explore the roles and positions of women in the ritual processes of marriage in the socio-cultural structure of the Vedic Period. The research is guided by a qualitative research approach. To obtain the objective, secondary data have been collected through historical content analysis method from Vedas and ancient Vedic history-related references. The data have been derived from the rituals-related stanzas from Vedas in revealing the existing rituals in the ancient Vedic period (Figure 1). The Vedic hymns, translated by Gautam (2012), are scrutinized through thematic review, while the interpretations provided by early Indian historians are analyzed using historical content analysis.

Figure 1

Methodological Framework

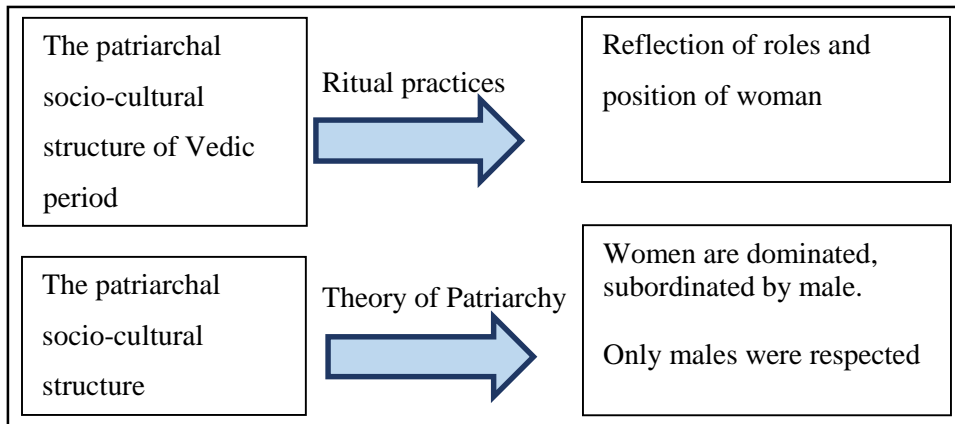


This involves examining comments, analyses, and descriptions from these historians to gain insights into the Vedic period and early Indian society in Himalayan region. The observation method has been also applied through the tools of the observation checklist to gather the primary data. Based on ritual-based performance, an Observation checklist was scheduled.

The historical facts have been explored on thematic analysis through the historical content analysis method. The research has been based on the ancient period of the historical social structure. It has become impossible to visit, observe, and touch the ancient historical social structure period nowadays. The historical content analysis method has more applicable in this context((Adhikari and Acharya, 2020; Adhikari, 2020C; Adhikari and Khadka, 2020; Adhikari, 2020D). So, the historical data have been collected, and accumulated for the analysis of the ancient socio-cultural structure of the Vedic period and to reveal the facts as well as the social condition that existed in the past. The assumption is that the accumulated data of the ancient historical socio-cultural structure of the Vedic period would reveal the socio-cultural structure of the Vedic period as its ontology.

Figure 2

Conceptual and Theoretical Frame Work



The patriarchy refers to the superiority of males over females in each and all activities and affairs in day-to-day life. Gender role disparities stem largely from the patriarchal system, characterized by hierarchical power dynamics favoring men. Within this framework, men control women's roles in production, reproduction, and sexuality, reinforcing societal stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Walby (1990) defines patriarchy as a male-dominated family structure, where men are

positioned as superior. This system promotes motherhood, limiting women's freedoms and burdening them with childcare responsibilities. Patriarchy persists through various forms of power, including physical force initially employed by men, as well as economic, ideological, legal, and emotional means. Ritzer (2000) suggests that women can achieve equality by challenging the patriarchal division of labor and restructuring key institutions. Women are dominated, subordinated, suppressed, oppressed, silenced, and made voiceless in a patriarchal sociocultural structure. The article is going to test the mentioned patriarchal theoretical argument in the marriage ritual process of the Vedic period

Results and Discussion

The result and discussion of the ritual of marriage has been critically presented in the thematic order based on the socio-cultural structure of the Vedic period.

Marriage as a Social Institution

A social institution refers to a structured system of social connections characterized by shared values and established procedures, serving specific fundamental needs. It represents a stable framework of societal roles and interactions that individuals engage in according to accepted and unified methods, aiming to fulfill essential social requirements (Henslin, 1997). Turner suggests that the term "social institution" lacks clarity in both everyday language and philosophical discourse. However, contemporary sociology tends to offer a more consistent interpretation of the term. In contemporary sociology, "social institution" typically denotes intricate social structures that sustain themselves, including entities like governments, families, languages, universities, hospitals, corporations, and legal systems. Giddens (1976) has explained that a social institution is a comprehensive framework comprising various positions, roles, norms, and values within specific social structures. It orchestrates enduring patterns of human behavior concerning essential tasks such as resource production, individual reproduction, and the maintenance of functional societal frameworks within a defined environment. Turner (1997) contends that institutions represent the enduring aspect of social existence. He further categorizes institutional orders into various forms, including modes of discourse, political systems, economic frameworks, and legal structures.

Similarly, Harre (1979) It is noted that an institution was described as a connected dual structure comprising individuals occupying roles or positions, along with corresponding social practices aimed at achieving both expressive and practical objectives. According to Austin (1962), social institutions are established and

sustained through collective acceptance, which is a constructivist perspective. According to this view, institutional facts and institutions themselves exist only to the extent that they are collectively believed to exist or are part of a collective attitude. These collective attitudes cannot be simply reduced to individual attitudes or their aggregates. Furthermore, collective acceptance is not merely a matter of psychological attitudes having a straightforward causal relationship with the external world, unlike common intentions, including joint intentions that define basic joint actions.

Marriage stands as a foundational institution within society, serving as an original gateway for human beings. Physical needs are essential for both human and non-human species on Earth. Just as all creatures seek to fulfill their physical desires, resulting in reproduction, this is also true for human beings. Hensline (1997) argues that Marriage, as a social institution, involves the recognition by custom or law of a relationship between one or more men and one or more women. It entails certain rights and responsibilities for both the parties entering into the union and any children born from it. Prabhu (1961) describes Vivaha, or marriage, as one of the sacraments that sanctify the body, through which every man and woman must pass at the appropriate age and time.

Unlike other living creatures, human beings require marriage as the primary legal and socially accepted means of engaging in sexual relations to satisfy physical desires. Marriage has become an essential aspect of human relationships but is not necessary for other species. Various sociologists and anthropologists have outlined different stages in the evolution of mankind. Herbert Spencer argues that during the hunting and gathering age, there was no significant distinction between human and non-human beings in terms of sexual relations, hence the lack of institutionalized marriage systems. Engels (1902) quoted to Morgan (1877) and it is noted that during the hunting and gathering ages, the marriage system predominantly involved consanguine marriage. Under this system, sexual relationships were permissible between siblings sharing the same mother. Over time, this system evolved into punalua (inter-group marriage), syndasmiyan, patriarchal, and eventually monogamous forms of marriage.

While marriage is deemed necessary for perpetuating human existence, diverse perspectives exist regarding its nature. Western and Eastern conceptualizations of marriage offer contrasting viewpoints. Pandey (1968) asserts that Oriental literature regards marriage as a ritualistic system. Manusmriti (2039) Marriage is described as the mutual commitment between a man and a woman to acknowledge each other as

husband and wife by the prevailing laws, religious beliefs, or cultural traditions of society. Essentially, marriage is regarded as the threshold to conjugal and familial life. Likewise, Kane (1992) argues that In Eastern cultures, particularly among Hindus, marriage is perceived as a path to salvation, and the marital bond is believed to persist even after death. This perspective emphasizes the importance of honesty and fidelity within the marital relationship. Conversely, the Western concept of marriage does not incorporate ideas of salvation or similar commitments as seen in Eastern traditions. Instead, it views marriage primarily as a contract between a man and a woman to fulfill their sexual desires. Consequently, the duration of marriage in Western societies is often uncertain, as divorce is considered an option that remains open indefinitely. In contrast, Eastern cultures strive to uphold the sanctity of marriage by discouraging divorce.

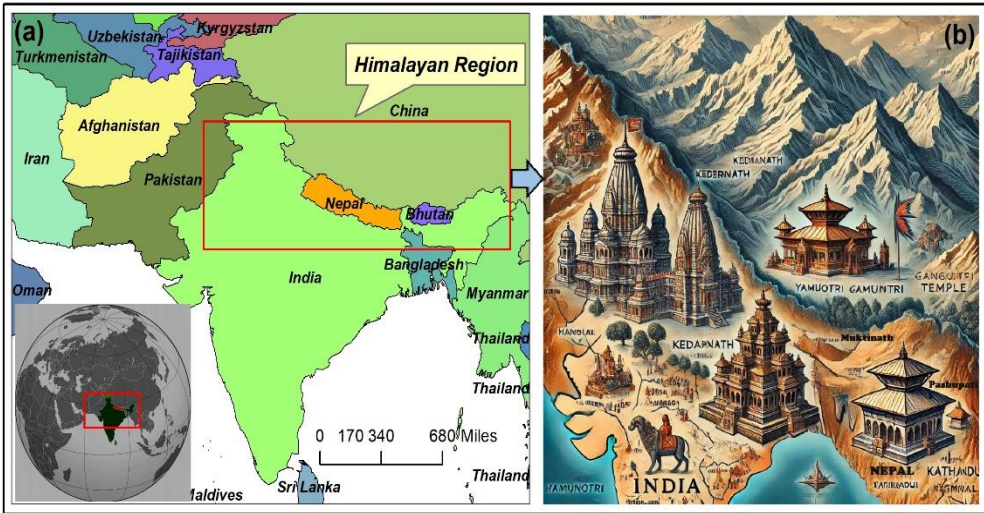
Patriarchal Social glimpse of Vedic Period of Civilization

The Vedas considered the sacred scriptures and foundation of Hinduism, are composed of hymns written in an ancient form of Sanskrit (Singh, 2008). It is widely believed that they were composed between 1500 and 1000 B.C and Vedic civilization. Shonaleeka Kaul's *The Making of Early Kashmir: Landscape and Identity in the Rajatarangini* explores the analysis suggests that, the reverence for women was intertwined with the natural and spiritual landscape of Southern part of the Himalayan region civilization especially Kashmir(Kaul, 2018), where they were seen as vital to both familial lineage and the preservation of cultural identity (Figure 3).

The Vedas are collectively referred to as Sruti, meaning "what was heard," indicating their divine nature (Thapar, 2010). Comprising four primary texts—Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharvana Veda—the latter is considered relatively more modern. Manu describes the Rig, Sama, and Yajur Vedas as the "three Vedas," suggesting their origin from fire, air, and the sun, respectively.

Figure 3

Hindu's Social and Cultural Fabric Southern Parts of the Himalayan Region



Source: Map by Khagendra Raj Poudel, Lecturer of Geography, TU and data source: (a) Countries shape file from <https://hub.arcgis.com/datasets/esri>, (b) Creation through Open AI software.

However, the Rig Veda is regarded as the original text, with the Yajur and Sama Vedas being arrangements of its hymns for specific purposes. Each Veda is further divided into two sections: Mantra, which consists of prayers and praises in metrical form, and Brahmana, comprising treatises of later origin. All Vedic writings are broadly classified into two main divisions: exoteric, known as Karma-Kanda or the "department of works," and esoteric, known as Jnana-Kanda or the "department of knowledge." (Rengarajan, 1999). It has revealed that Veda has had various kinds of Karma-Kandas. The Veda is divided into three sections: the Karma Kanda (ritualistic section), the Upasana Kanda (section on methods of worship and concentration), and the Jnana Kanda (philosophical section). However, Singh (2007) argues that these sections have become more of a fascination in museum displays rather than serving practical purposes in everyday life.

The four Vedas—Rig, Sam, Yajur, and Atharva—are considered the authoritative texts, governing various aspects of life for the Aryans, including God, the soul, humanity, science, religion, philosophy, salvation, and concepts of heaven and hell. The Veda is celebrated as a profound source of inspiration for culture and civilization (Prakash, 1993). Dube (2009) It is explained that the structure of Vedic

society revolved around the patriarchal family. Families united by blood relations constituted a clan, while multiple clans formed a district, and several districts combined to create a tribe, which served as the highest political entity. In the same way, Mishra (1972). It is argued that in early Aryan society, the family held significant social and political importance, serving as the nucleus of social life. The family structure among the Aryans was characterized by simplicity yet effective organization, with the eldest member assuming leadership. Marriage was a crucial institution, featuring various forms such as monogamy, polygyny, and polyandry as depicted in the Rigveda. The Rigveda also acknowledges the presence of women sages and female deities in Aryan culture. The father, known as "grihapati," held authority within the family, with "griha" being a commonly used term for family. The eldest male member, referred to as "Kulapa," served as the protector of the family (Sharma, 2005). Aryan society typically operated within joint family structures, where the father held considerable authority over the children.

Roles and position of women in Vedic marriage ritual process

Women were regarded as the symbol of prosperity in the Vedic era. In this regard, Singh (2008) observes that during the nineteenth century, socio-religious reformers and nationalist historians of the early twentieth century often depicted the Vedic age as a period of empowerment for women. They highlighted that Vedic society worshipped goddesses, included hymns composed by women in the Rig Veda, acknowledged women sages, and allowed women to participate in rituals alongside their husbands. Additionally, women engaged in activities such as chariot races and attended social gatherings like Sabha.

This portrayal of women's elevated status in Vedic society can be interpreted as a response to the oppression and degradation experienced during colonial rule. It aimed to demonstrate that in ancient times, Indians treated women better than Westerners did. Moreover, this perspective could serve as an argument for improving the status of women in Indian society. References to rituals in the Vedas suggest that marriages occurred after puberty, with instances of women selecting their husbands. Remarriage was permissible for widowed or abandoned women. Additionally, unmarried women, such as the Rig Vedic seer Ghosha, are mentioned. Hymn 7.55.5-8 describes elopement, with the man praying for the household of his beloved, including her relatives and even the dogs, to be asleep so that they could sneak away unnoticed (Gautam, 2012).

Similarly, Altekar (1959) The marriage ritual was explained to comprehend its purposes and ideals. During the joining of hands of the two parties in wedlock, it was conveyed that their union was ordained by the god Sun. In the marriage ceremony, offerings were made to Pushan, Bhaga, and Aryama, as they represented prosperity, good fortune, and marital fidelity respectively. These deities were invoked to ensure these blessings for the newlywed couple through the nuptial sacrifice. Following this, the couple touched each other's hearts, symbolizing their unity in spirit despite being two individuals in form. They then stepped onto a stone, accompanied by a prayer for their love to be as steadfast as the stone itself. Furthermore, Prabhu (1961) argues that in ancient marriage rituals, women are depicted as obedient, influential figures, and the queens of their households. The Vivaha Sukta, consisting of over eighty hymns, provides insights into the marriage practices of the Vedic period. The wife is described as the supreme ruler (samragi) of the household. Both partners are repeatedly reminded to recognize each other as essential complements for fulfilling various social and domestic responsibilities expected of household heads. The newlywed couple is encouraged to maintain perfect harmony, avoiding conflicts and cherishing each other's happiness. Together, they pray for divine blessings for a complete union of hearts and bodies.

According to Gautam (2012) the thirty-sixth verse of the fifth *Sookta* of tenth Mandala in Rig-Veda, the Rishika Soorya Savitree says " o bride, as I, the husband hold your hand for prosperity....." The husband happily states that he has held her hand as his wife for prosperity, and progress and always forward moving in his life by the support and assistance of in his every step of married life. This verse indicates that the woman has become the symbol of happiness and prosperity for the husband and family in Vedic marriage. The prosperity and honor of the women has been presented in the following stanza:

O bride .as I, the husband hold your hand for prosperity, like that you became acquiring the old age with me, the gods Bhaga, Aryamaa, very wise Pooshaa gave you for me for the protection of the house. (R-10-85-36, Gautam,2012). This extracted stanza of Rig Veda clearly explains that the husband has addressed his bride and that she has come into his life as the symbol of his prosperity, love, care, and honor for him even in his old age. She got married with him not only to care him in the old age but also for the protection of his house, property, and other domestic animals and the goods of the house.

Similarly, in the sixth verse of eighty sixth Sookta of the tenth Mandala in Rig-Veda the Rishika Indraanee thinks that there is not another woman like her and it is mentioned in the following verse:

(Indraanee speaks); Another woman is not more fortunate than me, not fine with son, not destroyer of the enemy than me and not nicely raising the thigh also. Indra is superior to all (R- 10-86-6, Gautam,2012) This extracted verse has clarified that the married woman is not more fortunate than the man and she has multiple roles in dealing various activities in the house. The details given in the verse indicate that women played a significant role in safeguarding the family, ensuring happiness, and fostering prosperity in Vedic society. She has not been regarded as suppressed, oppressed, silenced, and she has not been made voiceless, helpless, and powerless in her position as she has been regarded and defined in the socio-cultural structure of the Vedic period. The Vedic socio-cultural structure has revealed plenty of ritual activities performed. Among the various rituals of the Vedic rituals, *Ashmarohana* – riding on the stone by the female in the ritual of marriage- is one of the rituals performed in the weddings of Vedic culture. In the beginning of this process, the bride's feet are put in the stone and the bridegroom has to perform the activities of worshipping her feet with the promise of chasing away the evils and enemies (Dube, 2009 & Sahaya, 2004).

It has the meaning of becoming a supporter and assistance for her in the calamities and crises of her life. Before getting married, they were alone and they had to fight alone but after getting married they would be fighting jointly for their life. The husband is not only the owner of the women but also the slave of her at the time of her need. It has become a miracle in the sense that even in the patriarchal system, the man makes a promise to do everything in her life after her marriage with him. Women has not been treated as the dominant ones but the bridegroom tends to be ready to be the slave of her in the conjugal life. It has been taken as the school of life making it perfect and meaningful. It has been believed that life without the female cannot become complete and perfect as the married life has emphasized in the Vedic socio-cultural structure. It is one of the philosophies of life that a male's life becomes complete only after being wedded and taking the support of the female in a real sense. This ritual of *Ashmarohana* is the ritual of honoring, highlighting, and taking as the symbol of prosperity, and progress, and making the life successful in the combination of both males and females. But later on, it is the cultural process of riding by both male and female during the marriage, and the feet of both are put on the stone and the bridegroom worships the feet of the bride(Pandey, 1968). It has the symbol of taking the commitment to fighting against the enemy and becoming joined, united, and

making the two souls and strength one in facing any kinds of the huddles and obstacles in life. When both stand on the stone, then it is the commitment of being joined into oneness, united, becoming complete one after getting married and the husband becoming prosperous one by being two as one after the wedding. It has become the Vedic ritual to be performed even today if the ritual has been perfectly followed according to the Vedic socio-cultural norms. It is the concept of two halves becoming complete one by the integration of male and female. This ritual of marriage indicates that even in the Vedic period, women were regarded as the symbol of prosperity, happiness, love, care, source of strength, power, and the courage of facing any type of problems in life together. This concept of *Ashmarohana* has pointed out the principle of the path of life in the form of the ritual that has been explained and practiced in the marriage system of the socio-cultural structure of the Vedic period and it has been followed as well as adopted perfectly in the rituals of marriage even today.

Conclusion

Rituals serve as a means of refining human life, with various scriptures offering different interpretations of these practices. Among them, marriage stands out as a crucial social institution within societal structures. It is considered a legitimate avenue for human sexual relationships. The Vedic culture developed marriage rituals to refine and validate human existence, with all rituals and cultural norms molded by socio-cultural frameworks. In the patriarchal social system of Vedic times, rituals were deeply ingrained, including marriage ceremonies. In Vedic society, wives held significant authority as the supreme rulers of their households, and families operated on joint responsibility principles, elevating women to a respectable status. Historians often portrayed the Vedic age as a golden era for women, highlighting their prominent roles in various aspects of life. The Vedic marriage ritual symbolized women as embodiments of prosperity. It has been found that women have not been misbehaved, maltreated, suppressed, oppressed, or dominated, and they have not been found to make the voiceless, helpless, and miserable as it has been depicted in the socio-cultural structure of the patriarchal system of the Vedic period. The principle of the patriarchy is not an analog to the socio-cultural structure of the Vedic period. Instead of the patriarchal portrayed position of women, they are taken as the symbol of prosperity, honor, love, care, happiness, delight, and joys of the family life for the husband, children, other family members, and even the house turning into a paradise for all. Women have been found in a superior position, in due respectful place, taking them as the symbol of the prosperity, progress, forward moving, drawing happiness for all, taking care of the house, and managing the household activities effectively and

perfectly as it has been required in bringing everything possible in the house for the entire family members not with the pressure of the male members but with due honor and respect even in the socio-culture structure of the Vedic period.

Implication of the Research

This article helps in comprehending the readers and the researchers that the Vedic rituals of marriage have provided the importance of conjugal life to males and females. The women have been taken as the complete form of the men's life and in the absence of them, the life of the males cannot become complete as well as the perfect one. It has opened the hidden facts of regarding women as the signs of honor, dignity, prosperity, forward-moving and tackling all the hindrances, obstacles, and huddles of life of the males. It has given the pragmatic example of taking the integrated life of male and female, women as superior to the males in the rituals of marriage, and the cultural practices can never be abolished from the practices of socio-cultural structure in the Himalayan Region. It is supported by having a harmonious and integrated conjugal life with due respect between males and females in the present society. It has become useful for women to observe the secret facts found in the rituals of marriages and encouraged the researchers for the further tasks of doing such research in the various cultures and the rituals of different socio-cultural structures yet to be explored for the readers.

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