

From Sacrament to Social Regulation: The Transformation of Hindu Marriage in Pre-Modern India

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Abstract

This article examines the historical evolution of Hindu marriage in pre-modern India from the Vedic period to the Digest and Commentaries era (c. 1500 BCE–1800 CE). It argues that Hindu marriage gradually transformed from a relatively flexible religious institution into a highly regulated social and legal mechanism. Over time, marriage became a key instrument for preserving lineage, regulating property and inheritance, maintaining caste boundaries, and reinforcing patriarchal authority. While the early Vedic period afforded women comparatively greater autonomy and participation in religious and family life, later legal and religious developments increasingly restricted their rights and freedoms. The emergence of Dharmashastra literature and subsequent juridical commentaries formalized caste endogamy, inheritance rules, and gender hierarchies. However, the evolution of Hindu marriage was not uniform, as regional customs and local practices often modified or diverged from textual norms. The study concludes that Hindu marriage developed through a continuous interaction between religious ideals, legal doctrines, social realities, and economic needs, offering important insights into the relationship between law, religion, caste, gender, and family in Indian society.

Keywords: Hindu Marriage, Pre-Modern India, Caste, Patriarchy, Dharmashastra, Women's Status, Hindu Law.

1. Introduction

Marriage has historically occupied a position of exceptional importance within Hindu social, cultural, and religious life. Unlike the modern legal conception that frequently treats marriage as a contractual relationship between two autonomous individuals, classical Hindu thought has traditionally understood marriage as a sacred sacrament (*sanskara*) deeply embedded within the normative framework of *dharma*, kinship obligations, ritual duties, and social order (Kane, 1973). Within this worldview, marriage represented far more than a personal or emotional union; it constituted a foundational institution through which individuals fulfilled religious obligations, ensured the continuity of lineage, and participated in the broader moral and social structure of society.

The significance of marriage in pre-modern India extended well beyond the private sphere of domestic life. It functioned as a crucial institutional mechanism linking individuals and families to larger systems of caste organization, lineage continuity, property relations, ritual performance, and social authority (Kapadia, 1966). In a society characterized by agrarian modes of production, hierarchical social stratification, and the close interrelationship between religious authority and political governance, marriage served as one of the principal means through which social order was reproduced and maintained across generations.

The pre-modern period, stretching from the Vedic age to approximately the middle of the eighteenth century, witnessed substantial transformations in the political, economic, and intellectual foundations of Indian society. These developments inevitably influenced the institution of marriage. Changes in patterns of land ownership, the expansion of agrarian settlements, the consolidation of caste structures, the growth of legal traditions, and the increasing importance of lineage-based inheritance contributed to the gradual reconfiguration of matrimonial

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practices. As a result, marriage evolved from a relatively flexible religious institution into a more structured and legally regulated framework that governed not only familial relations but also broader questions of social hierarchy and economic organization.

This article seeks to examine the evolution of Hindu marriage through four major historical phases: the Vedic period, the Upanishadic and Sutra period, the Smriti and Epics period, and the Digest and Commentaries period. Particular attention is devoted to transformations in women's status, patterns of marital choice, inheritance systems, caste regulations, and the increasing juridification of family relations. By tracing these developments across a broad historical canvas, the study seeks to identify both continuities and discontinuities in the institution of marriage and to demonstrate how matrimonial practices responded to changing social and political circumstances.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative and interpretative historical doctrinal approach. It draws upon primary textual sources, including Vedic literature, Dharmasutras, Smritis, epic narratives, and legal commentaries, while simultaneously engaging with modern historical, sociological, feminist, and legal scholarship. Through this interdisciplinary framework, the study aims to illuminate the complex interaction between religious ideology, legal norms, economic interests, caste structures, and gender relations in shaping the institution of Hindu marriage.

The central argument advanced here is that the evolution of Hindu marriage reflects a broader historical process through which social institutions became increasingly regulated in response to changing economic, political, and cultural conditions. While marriage retained its religious significance as a sacramental union throughout the pre-modern period, it simultaneously emerged as a powerful instrument for preserving lineage, regulating property, maintaining caste hierarchy, and reinforcing patriarchal authority. The history of Hindu marriage, therefore, offers a valuable lens through which to understand the wider dynamics of social organization, legal development, and cultural continuity in pre-modern India.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Engagement

The institution of Hindu marriage has occupied a central place in scholarly discussions concerning Indian society, attracting sustained attention from historians, sociologists, anthropologists, legal scholars, and feminist theorists. Because marriage functions simultaneously as a religious sacrament, a social institution, a legal relationship, and a mechanism of cultural reproduction, its study has generated diverse and often competing interpretations. The existing body of literature reveals significant shifts in scholarly approaches over time, moving from descriptive and textual analyses to more critical examinations of power, gender, caste, and legal pluralism.

Among the earliest and most influential contributions to the study of Hindu marriage are the works of P. V. Kane (1973) and A. S. Altekar (1959). Their scholarship emerged within a broader intellectual tradition that sought to reconstruct the historical foundations of Hindu civilization through the examination of religious and legal texts. Kane's monumental *History of Dharmasastra* remains one of the most comprehensive studies of Hindu legal traditions. His analysis situates marriage within the wider framework of *dharma*, emphasizing its religious significance and its indispensable role in the fulfillment of social and ritual obligations. For Kane, marriage was fundamentally a sacred institution through which individuals entered the householder stage of life and fulfilled duties toward family, ancestors, and society.

Similarly, Altekar's work on the status of women in Hindu civilization presents a largely positive interpretation of early Indian society. He argues that women in the Vedic period enjoyed a comparatively elevated social position, participating in education, religious rituals, and intellectual discourse. According to this perspective, many of the restrictions that later characterized women's lives emerged gradually and represented departures from earlier traditions rather than their continuation. Although highly influential, both Kane and Altekar have been criticized by later scholars for relying heavily on prescriptive textual sources and for presenting idealized portrayals of social reality that may not fully reflect historical practice.

During the mid-twentieth century, sociological approaches introduced new analytical perspectives to the study of marriage. Scholars such as K. M. Kapadia (1966) and William J. Goode (1963) shifted attention away from purely religious and textual concerns toward the structural functions performed by marriage within society. Kapadia's pioneering work on marriage and family in India examines matrimonial institutions as components of broader systems of kinship, social organization, and cultural continuity. He argues that marriage serves crucial social functions, including the regulation of sexual relations, the formation of alliances between families, and the transmission of social values across generations.

Goode's comparative analysis of family systems similarly emphasizes the functional significance of marriage within agrarian and traditional societies. From this perspective, marriage is understood not merely as a cultural or religious practice but as an institution necessary for maintaining social stability, organizing economic relationships, and ensuring the reproduction of social structures. Structural-functional analyses therefore highlight the ways in which marriage contributes to the preservation of social order and the continuity of collective life.

A major shift in the scholarship occurred with the emergence of feminist and critical historiographical perspectives during the late twentieth century. These approaches challenged earlier narratives that portrayed traditional institutions primarily as sources of social harmony and cultural continuity. Instead, they drew attention to the ways in which marriage could function as a mechanism of social control and gender subordination.

Among the most influential contributions in this regard is Uma Chakravarti's (1993) formulation of the concept of "Brahmanical patriarchy." Chakravarti argues that caste and gender cannot be understood as separate systems of social organization; rather, they are deeply interconnected. According to her analysis, the regulation of women's sexuality became a central mechanism through which caste hierarchy was maintained and reproduced. Marriage played a crucial role in this process because it controlled reproductive relationships and ensured the transmission of caste status across generations. Practices such as caste endogamy, restrictions on widow remarriage, and the emphasis on female chastity therefore served not only moral or religious purposes but also broader political and social objectives.

Patricia Uberoi (2006) extends this critical perspective by examining the ideological and disciplinary dimensions of family and marriage in Indian society. She questions romanticized portrayals of traditional family structures and emphasizes the ways in which marriage has historically contributed to the maintenance of gender inequalities. Her work highlights the importance of examining not only the symbolic and cultural meanings associated with marriage but also its role in structuring power relations within households and communities.

Legal scholarship has further enriched the study of Hindu marriage by emphasizing the dynamic and evolving nature of Hindu law. J. D. M. Derrett (1978) demonstrates that Hindu legal traditions cannot be understood solely through reference to sacred texts. Rather, legal norms emerged through continuous interaction between textual authority, judicial interpretation, customary practice, and changing social circumstances. Hindu law, in this view, was never a static or monolithic system but a flexible body of principles capable of adaptation and reinterpretation.

Werner Menski (2003) develops this argument further through his concept of legal pluralism. He contends that Hindu law evolved through a complex dialogue between scriptural norms, community customs, political authority, and practical considerations. This perspective is particularly valuable for understanding the Digest and Commentaries period, during which legal scholars sought to reconcile earlier textual traditions with contemporary social realities. The resulting legal system reflected both continuity with classical norms and responsiveness to changing historical conditions.

Despite the richness and diversity of existing scholarship, an important gap remains in the literature. Many studies focus primarily on specific historical periods, individual texts, or particular dimensions of marriage, such as gender or law. Relatively few works systematically trace the long-term evolution of Hindu marriage across multiple historical phases while simultaneously engaging with issues of caste, gender, legal development,

and social power. The present study seeks to address this gap by adopting an interdisciplinary approach that synthesizes insights from historical, sociological, feminist, and legal scholarship. In doing so, it aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Hindu marriage evolved as both a religious institution and a mechanism of social regulation.

3. Analytical Framework and Central Arguments

The historical development of Hindu marriage cannot be adequately understood through a single explanatory framework. Marriage has functioned simultaneously as a religious sacrament, a social institution, an economic arrangement, and a legal relationship. Consequently, this study adopts an interdisciplinary analytical framework that integrates historical, sociological, feminist, and legal perspectives in order to examine the changing nature of marriage across different periods of pre-modern Indian history.

At the centre of this analysis lies the argument that the evolution of Hindu marriage reflects a broader process of institutional transformation within Indian society. Social institutions rarely remain static; rather, they adapt to changing political, economic, and cultural circumstances. Marriage was no exception. Across the centuries, matrimonial practices evolved in response to shifts in patterns of property ownership, state formation, social stratification, legal codification, and religious ideology. These changes gradually transformed marriage from a relatively flexible social and religious arrangement into a more formalized and highly regulated institution.

The first central argument advanced by this study is that the historical trajectory of Hindu marriage reveals a movement from relative social flexibility toward increasing institutional regulation. Evidence from early Vedic sources suggests the existence of diverse matrimonial practices, greater scope for female participation in marital decisions, and relatively flexible attitudes toward issues such as widow remarriage. Over time, however, religious and legal authorities increasingly sought to standardize and regulate matrimonial relationships. The development of Dharmasutra literature, the codification of social norms in the Smritis, and the extensive legal commentaries of the medieval period contributed to the gradual narrowing of acceptable marital practices and the expansion of institutional control over family life.

The second argument concerns the relationship between marriage and caste. The study contends that marriage served as one of the most important mechanisms for reproducing and preserving caste hierarchy. Caste was not maintained solely through occupational specialization or ritual distinctions; it also depended upon the regulation of social and reproductive relationships. Endogamous marriage practices ensured that caste status could be transmitted across generations and protected from external influences. The increasing emphasis on caste endogamy, restrictions on inter-caste unions, and concerns regarding lineage purity demonstrate how matrimonial institutions became deeply intertwined with the maintenance of social stratification.

This perspective draws significantly upon Chakravarti's (1993) concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, which highlights the intersection of caste and gender in the organization of social power. From this standpoint, the regulation of marriage was inseparable from the regulation of female sexuality. The control of women's reproductive capacity became essential for ensuring caste continuity and preserving social hierarchy. Marriage thus functioned as a crucial site through which both caste and gender inequalities were reproduced.

The third argument focuses on the progressive consolidation of patriarchal authority within the institution of marriage. While early historical evidence suggests the existence of relatively greater female participation in religious and social life, subsequent legal and religious developments increasingly confined women to domestic roles. The codification of gender norms through Dharmashastra literature and later legal commentaries reinforced male authority within the household and limited women's autonomy in matters relating to marriage, inheritance, and family life. The idealization of female obedience, chastity, and devotion became central components of normative discourse.

At the same time, this study rejects any simplistic or linear narrative of decline. Social change rarely occurs uniformly across all regions and communities. Local customs, regional traditions, economic conditions, and heterodox religious movements frequently challenged or modified orthodox norms. Consequently, the evolution

of Hindu marriage involved both continuity and contestation. Textual prescriptions often coexisted with alternative practices, and legal ideals did not always correspond to social realities.

By combining historical analysis with sociological, feminist, and legal perspectives, this framework seeks to illuminate the complex processes through which marriage evolved as a key institution of social regulation in pre-modern India.

4. Social Context of Marriage in Pre-Modern India

To understand the evolution of Hindu marriage, it is essential to situate the institution within the broader social environment of pre-modern India. Marriage did not develop in isolation from other social structures. Rather, it was deeply embedded within a society organized around agrarian production, caste hierarchy, kinship networks, religious obligations, and patriarchal authority (Sharma, 2005; Srinivas, 1962). The nature and functions of marriage were shaped by these interconnected social realities, and its evolution reflected broader transformations occurring within Indian society.

In pre-modern India, the family rather than the individual constituted the fundamental unit of social organization. Social identity was largely determined by birth and was structured through the interconnected categories of caste, lineage, gender, age, and kinship. Individual aspirations and personal choices were generally subordinated to collective interests, and social life was organized around obligations owed to family, community, and religious tradition. Within this context, marriage emerged as one of the most significant institutions through which social continuity was ensured and collective identities were reproduced.

The predominance of agriculture exerted a profound influence on family organization and matrimonial practices. Land represented the principal source of wealth, economic security, and social prestige. The management, transmission, and protection of landed property depended upon stable kinship structures and clearly defined inheritance systems. Marriage therefore performed vital economic functions by establishing alliances between families, creating legitimate heirs, and ensuring the orderly transfer of property across generations.

The widespread prevalence of joint family arrangements further enhanced the social significance of marriage. In many regions, several generations lived together within a single household, sharing economic resources and collective responsibilities. Marriage consequently involved much more than the union of two individuals; it represented the integration of two kinship networks and the creation of enduring social relationships with important economic, political, and ritual implications.

5. Vedic Period: Marriage as Flexible Sacrament

The Vedic period marks the earliest identifiable stage in the evolution of Hindu marriage. During this time, marriage was primarily understood as a sacred union associated with religious duty, household responsibility, and procreation. However, unlike later periods, it retained a relatively flexible and less rigidly structured character.

Marriage in Vedic thought was closely linked to the concept of dharma and the householder stage of life. It was considered essential for participation in ritual life and for fulfilling obligations toward ancestors, gods, and society. The husband and wife were seen as partners in religious life, with the wife often described as *sahadarmacharini*, a co-participant in ritual duties.

Women in the Vedic period appear to have enjoyed relatively greater social and intellectual participation compared to later eras. Figures such as Gargi and Maitreyi (Radhakrishnan, 1953) demonstrate that women could engage in philosophical discourse and religious learning. Marriage was often conceptualized as a partnership rather than a hierarchical structure, and women could participate in rituals alongside their husbands.

There is also evidence suggesting that women had some agency in marital choice. Practices such as *swayamvara* indicate that, at least among elite groups, women could choose their husbands from a set of suitors. Marriage at

this stage was generally contracted at a more mature age, and strong evidence for child marriage is absent in early Vedic texts.

Widow remarriage was not strictly prohibited in this period, and social restrictions on widows appear to have been less rigid (Altekar, 1959; Sharma, 2005). Economic structures were largely pastoral, with cattle serving as a primary form of wealth. Marriage involved exchanges of gifts rather than formalized dowry systems, and property considerations had not yet fully structured matrimonial arrangements.

However, over time, especially in the later Vedic period, increasing agricultural settlement, property accumulation, and social stratification led to gradual changes. Concerns about inheritance, lineage purity, and caste identity began to shape marriage practices more rigidly, laying the foundation for later institutional developments.

6. Upanishadic and Sutra Period: Transition toward Regulation and Codification

The Upanishadic and Sutra period (c. 800–200 BCE) marks a critical transitional phase in the historical evolution of Hindu marriage, during which the institution increasingly moved from relative flexibility toward structured regulation (Lingat, 1973; Kane, 1973). This transformation unfolded alongside profound changes in the broader socio-political and economic landscape of the Indian subcontinent. The expansion of settled agriculture, the growth of urban centres, the emergence of territorial kingdoms (mahajanapadas), and the consolidation of administrative authority collectively contributed to more complex systems of governance and social organization. Within this evolving order, marriage became an important site for regulating inheritance, kinship, and social hierarchy.

Intellectually, the period is associated with the composition of the Upanishads, which introduced sophisticated metaphysical reflections on the nature of existence, the self (atman), and liberation (moksha). These texts, while primarily philosophical in orientation, occasionally reflect an inclusive intellectual environment in which women such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi participated in high-level philosophical debate. Their presence indicates that, at least within elite intellectual circles, women could still engage meaningfully in spiritual and metaphysical inquiry. The philosophical emphasis on unity and transcendence of social distinctions appears, at least ideologically, to gesture toward a world in which caste and gender hierarchies were not yet fully rigidified.

However, these philosophical ideals increasingly diverged from the evolving social realities of the time. As political authority became more centralized and economic relations more complex, the need for formal regulation of social life became more pressing. This shift is most clearly reflected in the emergence of the Dharmasutras, attributed to scholars such as Gautama, Baudhayana, and Apastamba. These texts represent one of the earliest systematic attempts to codify social norms, including those governing marriage, inheritance, caste duties, and family relations. In doing so, they laid the foundational framework for later Dharmashastra jurisprudence.

Within this developing legal consciousness, marriage assumed a more explicitly regulatory function. It was no longer understood only as a sacred rite but increasingly as an institutional mechanism for maintaining caste order, ensuring legitimate succession, and stabilizing household structures. The Dharmasutras began to classify and evaluate different forms of marriage, thereby introducing normative hierarchies that shaped acceptable matrimonial practices. Although earlier diversity in marital customs was not entirely eliminated, increasing emphasis was placed on conformity to prescribed norms.

A significant development during this period was the strengthening of caste endogamy. As varna distinctions became more deeply embedded in social organization, marriage increasingly served as a mechanism for preserving caste identity and purity. Inter-caste unions were not entirely absent but were often socially downgraded and carefully regulated. This growing emphasis on endogamy reflected broader concerns about lineage preservation, ritual status, and social hierarchy.

Parallel to these developments, the position of women underwent a gradual but noticeable transformation. While women continued to participate in household rituals and retained certain social roles, their autonomy became

increasingly circumscribed. The Dharmasutras increasingly framed women as individuals requiring male guardianship throughout their lives under the authority of their fathers in childhood, husbands in marriage, and sons in widowhood. This conceptual framework marked an important step toward institutionalized patriarchy.

Marriage also became increasingly obligatory for women, with growing social expectations that defined female identity primarily through marital and reproductive roles. Ideal womanhood came to be associated with obedience, modesty, devotion, and service to the husband and family. These norms contributed to a gradual narrowing of women's social agency and reinforced domestic confinement as the primary sphere of female activity.

Economic transformations reinforced these changes. The expansion of agriculture and private property intensified concerns about inheritance and lineage continuity. Legitimate heirs became essential for maintaining family wealth and ensuring the performance of ancestral rites. As a result, control over women's sexuality and marital choices became closely tied to property relations and family honour. Marriage thus increasingly functioned as an instrument for regulating both economic and social order.

Ritualization of marriage also intensified during this period. Marital ceremonies became more standardized, and religious symbolism associated with marriage gained greater prominence. The sacred fire rituals, vows, and other ceremonial components began to define marriage as a formally recognized and socially sanctioned union, further reinforcing its institutional character.

Despite these changes, the transition was neither uniform nor absolute. Regional customs and local practices continued to influence matrimonial arrangements, and older forms of flexibility persisted in various communities. Nevertheless, the dominant trajectory was clearly toward increasing codification, hierarchy, and patriarchal consolidation.

7. Smriti and Epics Period: Consolidation of Normative Order

The Smriti and Epics period (c. 200 BCE–600 CE) represents a decisive stage in the formalization and consolidation of Hindu marital norms. During this era, legal and religious authorities systematically articulated principles governing marriage, family structure, inheritance, and gender relations through influential texts such as the Manusmriti, Yajnavalkya Smriti, and Narada Smriti, as well as the great epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana. These works did not merely describe social reality; they actively prescribed idealized frameworks that shaped normative expectations for centuries.

Within Smriti literature, marriage is firmly positioned within the broader framework of dharma. It is defined as one of the essential samskaras, indispensable for fulfilling religious obligations and sustaining the social order. The householder stage (grihastha) becomes central to this system, as it is through marriage that individuals assume responsibility for ritual performance, economic production, and social reproduction. The institution of marriage thus becomes inseparable from the functioning of society itself.

One of the most significant developments of this period is the increasing sacralization and indissolubility of marriage. Marriage is no longer treated as a flexible social arrangement but as a permanent and sacred union sanctioned by religious authority. Ritual elements such as kanyadana, panigrahana, and saptapadi acquire heightened significance, transforming marriage into a highly formalized and ritual-intensive institution. The emphasis on permanence reduces the acceptability of dissolution and reinforces the stability of marital bonds.

Caste endogamy becomes even more firmly entrenched during this period. Marriage is explicitly regulated to preserve caste boundaries and maintain social hierarchy. The Smriti texts elaborate detailed classifications of inter-caste unions, often ranking them in hierarchical order and associating them with social stigma. Through these prescriptions, marriage becomes one of the most effective mechanisms for reproducing caste structure across generations.

The position of women is simultaneously redefined within an increasingly patriarchal framework. The Manusmriti, in particular, articulates the principle of lifelong female guardianship, positioning women as dependent on male authority throughout their lives (Doniger & Smith, 1991). While women continue to be

valued within domestic and ritual contexts, their autonomy is significantly restricted. The ideal of the pativrata wife devoted, faithful, and self-sacrificing becomes central to normative constructions of womanhood (Chakravarti, 1993).

Epic narratives reinforce these ideals through powerful cultural archetypes. Figures such as Sita in the Ramayana and Savitri in the Mahabharata exemplify devotion, virtue, and marital fidelity, shaping enduring cultural expectations of ideal femininity (Hiltebeitel, 2001). At the same time, epics also preserve traces of social complexity and diversity, including non-standard marital arrangements and exceptional female agency, suggesting that lived reality remained more varied than normative ideals suggest.

Another important development is the increasing acceptance of child marriage, which becomes more explicitly justified in normative texts. Earlier traditions that appear to have favoured mature-age marriages gradually give way to prescriptions encouraging earlier unions, particularly for girls. This shift is closely linked to concerns about controlling female sexuality and ensuring caste purity.

Restrictions on widow remarriage also become more pronounced. Although not universally enforced across all communities, orthodox textual traditions increasingly discourage remarriage and idealize lifelong widowhood. Widows are often expected to adopt austere lifestyles characterized by renunciation and social restriction, reflecting broader patriarchal concerns about inheritance and family honour.

Economically, marriage becomes deeply embedded in systems of inheritance and property transmission. The production of legitimate heirs, particularly sons, becomes central to the institution of marriage, as sons are responsible for continuing lineage and performing ancestral rituals. Marriage thus functions as a critical mechanism for maintaining both economic stability and ritual continuity.

The epics further reflect the complexity of matrimonial life in practice. While they uphold normative ideals of duty and fidelity, they also depict multiple forms of marriage, including polygyny, arranged unions, and instances of female agency. This duality suggests a tension between normative prescriptions and social realities.

8. Digest and Commentaries Period: Systematization and Legal Sophistication

The Digest and Commentaries period (c. 600–1800 CE) represents the most advanced phase in the development of Hindu legal and matrimonial thought. During this period, jurists undertook extensive interpretative work to reconcile earlier textual traditions with evolving social realities. Through commentaries (bhashyas) and legal digests (nibandhas), scholars systematized Hindu law into a coherent and adaptable jurisprudential framework capable of addressing complex questions of marriage, inheritance, and family structure.

This period coincides with significant socio-political transformations, including the rise of regional kingdoms, the expansion of agrarian economies, and increasing administrative complexity. These changes necessitated more refined legal structures capable of managing disputes related to property, kinship, and social order. Hindu jurists responded not by abandoning earlier texts but by interpreting and harmonizing them in relation to contemporary conditions.

A major development during this period was the emergence of distinct schools of law, most notably the Mitakshara and Dayabhaga traditions (Derrett, 1968; Kane, 1973). These schools offered differing interpretations of inheritance and property rights, significantly influencing family organization and marital arrangements. The Mitakshara system, widely influential across most of India, emphasized joint family ownership, while the Dayabhaga system, prominent in Bengal, offered alternative interpretations of succession and inheritance.

The joint family system became increasingly institutionalized during this period. The family functioned as a corporate economic unit in which property, labour, and social obligations were collectively managed. Marriage played a central role in sustaining this structure by ensuring legitimate heirs and maintaining continuity across generations. As a result, matrimonial arrangements became closely tied to considerations of property, inheritance, and lineage preservation.

Marriage itself acquired a more explicitly legalistic character. While it retained its status as a sacrament, it also became a regulated institution governed by detailed legal norms concerning eligibility, kinship restrictions, caste boundaries, and inheritance rights. Jurists elaborated increasingly sophisticated rules to ensure clarity in matters of legitimacy, succession, and marital obligation.

Caste endogamy became more strictly enforced than in previous periods. Marriage within caste and sub-caste groups was treated as essential for preserving ritual purity and social hierarchy. Local caste councils and community institutions played an active role in monitoring compliance, and violations could result in severe social sanctions, including exclusion or loss of status.

Patriarchal authority also became more deeply institutionalized. Women's legal identity was increasingly defined through male guardianship, and their participation in public and economic life was often mediated through male relatives. The ideal of womanhood continued to emphasize chastity, obedience, and domestic devotion, reinforcing gendered divisions of labour and authority.

Widowhood remained a socially sensitive issue, with increasing emphasis on austerity and celibacy. Although widow remarriage persisted in certain communities, orthodox norms increasingly discouraged it. This restriction further reinforced male control over inheritance and family property.

Economically, marriage became central to the regulation of wealth transmission. Legal discussions of dowry, stridhana, and inheritance rights reflect the growing importance of property in marital arrangements. While women retained limited forms of personal property rights, control over major assets remained predominantly male-dominated.

Despite these normative developments, regional and customary variations continued to shape lived marital practices. Local institutions such as caste councils and village assemblies played a significant role in regulating marriage, often blending formal legal principles with customary norms. This interaction between textual authority and lived practice created a plural and dynamic matrimonial landscape.

By the late pre-modern period, Hindu marriage had become a highly structured institution embedded within an intricate framework of legal, religious, economic, and social regulations. It functioned simultaneously as sacrament, legal contract, and mechanism of social reproduction, reflecting the deep integration of family life into broader structures of caste, economy, and authority.

9. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Hindu marriage reveals a gradual but profound transformation from a flexible sacramental institution into a complex system of social regulation embedded within law, caste, economy, and patriarchy. This evolution was not linear but shaped by continuous interaction between textual traditions and lived social realities. While marriage increasingly functioned as an instrument for reproducing hierarchy and regulating social order, it also remained a site of adaptation and regional diversity. Understanding this long historical process provides critical insight into the enduring relationship between family institutions, social power, and cultural continuity in Indian society.

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