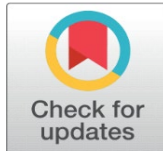
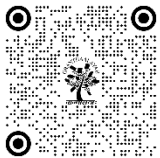


# THE SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF PRE-WEDDING RITUALS OF HINDU MARRIAGES PERFORMED IN THE STATE OF BIHAR

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## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i7.2024.3537](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i7.2024.3537)

**Funding:** This Research Paper is a Part of ICSSR Funded Minor Research Project Titled “Hindu Semiotics: A Study of Hindu Marriage Rituals in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh And Uttarakhand.

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## ABSTRACT

The paper critically analyses the semiotic dimensions of Hindu pre-wedding rituals performed in the state of Bihar, delving into the meanings and philosophies embedded in these rituals and artifacts associated with them. By interpreting these rituals (symbols), the study seeks to preserve the rich tradition of Indian weddings, with special focus on the traditional and cultural heritage of Bihar. Using Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, the study explores how these rituals and artifacts convey layered meaning, reinforce social values, and articulate collective identity within the community. Moreover, the paper also focuses on discussing in brief the impact of modernization, social status and gender in the performance of the hindu pre-wedding rituals.

The research employs qualitative methods with an interpretive approach, focussing on the interpretation of the hindu pre-wedding rituals performed in Bihar in relation to its contextual data. The study aims to identify the denotative and connotative meanings of the rituals and artifacts used in these rituals, decoding their relevance within the socio-religious context as cultural myths.

The findings suggest that these rituals serve as a cultural text, embodying historical continuity, spiritual significance, and social stratification. By applying semiotic analysis, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how these rituals contribute to the construction of collective identities, familial bonds, and cultural heritage in a rapidly modernizing society.

**Keywords:** Connotation, Cultural Myths, Denotation, Pre-Wedding Ritual, Semiotics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Hinduism, *saṃskāras*<sup>1</sup> refers to rituals of daily life, “including those connected with birth, marriage, and death” (Mishra, 2019, p.xxiv). The term *saṃskāra* has originated from the Sanskrit roots *saṃ* (together) and *kāra* (action or deed) that symbolizes rituals representing spiritual growth and marking the transition to a new stage of life.

<sup>1</sup> Rites of passage (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p.8)

The *Yajurveda*, “the Veda of *karma* and rituals” (Mishra, 2019, p.75), outlines methods for performing these *samskāras*. (p.77) While the number of *samskāras* have been reduced from 40 to 16 in modern times, three are still widely observed by Hindus – “*upanayana*<sup>2</sup>, *vivāha*<sup>3</sup> and *antyeshti*<sup>4</sup>” (p.xxiv). According to Ashok Mishra:

*Vivāha* is the single most important *samskāra* that a Hindu performs in his lifetime. It is also one of the most ancient, first finding mentioned in the *Rgveda* itself. (p.xxiv)

*Vivāha* (marriage) epitomizes a significant transition into a new phase of life, transforming an individual’s status from a *brahmācariṇ*<sup>5</sup> to the distinct social role of a *grihastha*<sup>6</sup> within the community (Mishra, 2019, p. 303). However, in contemporary marriage celebrations, the religious essence of *vivāha samskāra* (marriage) has been largely sidelined, with elements like cocktails, *mehndi*, and other festivities overshadowing its core significance (p.153).

In India, marriage (*vivāha*) is not merely a union of two individuals but a confluence of families, communities, and cultural legacies. As a foundation of human social structure, marriage (*vivāha*) is deeply embedded in cultural traditions and rituals, each rich with symbolic meaning. Pre-wedding rituals in Hindu traditions serve as a significant prelude to the marital union, offering insights into the values, beliefs, and social frameworks that govern a society. In the state of Bihar, these rituals reflect a combination of ancient Vedic traditions, local customs, and socio-religious influences, creating a vibrant tapestry of cultural expression.

This paper employs Roland Barthes’ semiotic lens to analyze the pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages performed in Bihar, emphasizing on the role of these rituals as carriers of cultural meaning. Marriage (*vivāha*) is a set of behaviour that “can be read or interpreted, with as many potential reading as there are readers for it.” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p.24). These can be understood if placed in a proper context. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior, provides a robust framework to decode the layers of meaning embedded in these rituals. Through use of artifacts and performances, these rituals convey narratives of purity, prosperity, and familial allegiance, while also serving as markers of caste, regional identity, and social stratification.

The paper aims to contribute to the understanding of cultural practices as evolving texts, offering insights into how rituals act as a mirror to societal structures and values. In decoding the semiotics of pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages performed in Bihar, the research highlights the role of these rituals in constructing not only the individual and familial identity, but also the broader cultural and social fabric of the region.

Furthermore, this research examines the impact of gender, modernization and urbanization on these rituals. By situating the analysis within this dynamic context, the study sheds light on how pre-wedding rituals in Bihar serve as a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity.

Rituals, as a critical aspect of cultural practices, have been extensively studied in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. They are often seen as performative acts laden with symbolic meaning that reinforce societal norms, express collective identities, and communicate shared values. This literature review situates the semiotic analysis of pre-wedding Hindu marriage rituals in Bihar within the broader scholarly discourse on semiotics, rituals, and Indian marriage traditions.

## 2. RESEARCH GAP

While existing literature provides valuable insights into rituals, Indian marriage traditions, and regional practices, there is a lack of focused semiotic analysis of pre-wedding Hindu marriage rituals in Bihar. Moreover, the impact of gender roles, social status and modernisation is underexplored.

<sup>2</sup> Sacred thread ceremony

<sup>3</sup> Marriage/wedding

<sup>4</sup> Last rites

<sup>5</sup> The first of the four stages of life of a Hindu; unmarried who lives under spiritual guidance.

<sup>6</sup> The second of the four stages of life of a Hindu; married; individual devotes their time in working, maintaining their home, and raising their family.

## 2.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aims:

- To analyze the symbolic elements, that is pre-wedding rituals and artifacts used to perform these rituals, of Hindu marriages performed in Bihar.
- To contribute to the understanding of how these rituals function as cultural texts, reflecting both continuity and change in the social fabric of the region.
- To explore the influence of gender and social status on the Hindu pre-wedding rituals performed in Bihar.
- To study the impact of modernisation on the performance of Hindu pre-wedding rituals in Bihar.

## 3. METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

### 3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed a qualitative research design, integrating ethnographic methods and Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to explore the symbolic meanings embedded in pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages in Bihar. The research is grounded in the semiotic framework, which emphasizes the analysis of signs, symbols, and cultural codes. Drawing on the theories of Roland Barthes, the study interprets rituals as systems of signs that convey layered meanings.

### 3.2. PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Ethnographic methods were employed to gather primary data on pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages performed in Bihar. Thirty respondents (both male and female), aged between 40 to 60 years, were interviewed to understand the historical and cultural significance of these rituals. Respondents were married couples and their families, priests, and local elders. Textual analysis was performed on the data collected through the interview as well as the data available on different websites.

### 3.3. ROLAND BARTHES' SEMIOTIC THEORY

Using a semiotic lens, the study decodes the signs and symbols present in the rituals, focusing on:

- **Denotation and Connotation:** The literal (denotative) and implied (connotative) meanings of the hindu pre-wedding rituals and the artifacts used to perform those rituals in Bihar like - the relevance of *Haldi Kutai* and *Haldi ceremony* as a pre-wedding ritual, and the significance of turmeric (*haldi*) used in the ceremony. Similarly, the importance of the *Matkor ceremony* and the soil (*maati*) used to perform the ritual.
- **Cultural Codes:** How rituals encode and communicate values such as purity, fertility, communal and familial ties, family honor, and social hierarchy.
- **Myth and Symbolism:** Analyzing the myths and narratives associated with rituals and their connection to broader cultural ideologies.

### 3.4. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The scope of the present research is that it focuses on pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages specific to Bihar. Moreover, it analyses the impact of gender, social status and modernisation on pre-wedding rituals.

However, the study may not fully capture the diversity within every sub-community due to time and resource constraints. The subjective interpretation inherent in semiotic analysis could vary based on the researcher's perspective. The dynamic nature of rituals in the context of globalization might make it challenging to document standardized practices.

### 3.5. DATA VALIDATION

Triangulation will be used to ensure the validity of findings by cross-referencing data from ethnographic observations, interviews, and textual/visual sources. This approach will provide a comprehensive and reliable understanding of the semiotics of pre-wedding Hindu marriage rituals in Bihar.

By employing this robust methodological framework, the study aims to unravel the complex semiotic dimensions of these rituals, shedding light on their role in cultural expression, social cohesion, and identity formation.

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Wedding rituals are rich in symbolism. They function as a cultural text that communicates shared values, social hierarchies, and spiritual beliefs. Using Roland Barthes semiotic theory, the study explores the hindu pre-wedding rituals as signs and symbols, conveying layered meanings, and constructing a cultural narrative that intertwines traditions and community identity.

### 4.1. SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF HINDU PRE-WEDDING RITUALS

The denotative and connotative meanings, and the cultural myths associated with pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages performed in Bihar and the artifacts used in these practices are as follows:

#### 4.1.a. *Roka or Cheka ceremony*

It is the first in the Hindu wedding ceremony order performed in Bihar. This pre-wedding ritual holds a significant meaning in Indian culture as it marks the beginning of the wedding preparation and is considered to be an integral part of the Hindu wedding process (Nandy, 2024; Singh, 2024).

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** *Roka or Cheka* is a pre-wedding ritual that signifies the official commitment between the two families. The term *roka* or *cheka*, 'to stop' or 'to finalize', represents the end of the search for a suitable match. This ceremony is held in temples or alternative venues like restaurants, relatives' places, etc., rather than at the home of the bride-to-be or groom-to-be. The match is finalized by offering *nenk* or *sagun* (cash) to the groom-to-be and bride-to-be. Traditionally, this ritual involves performing *aarti*, applying *tilak*, and exchanging gifts and sweets.
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** *Roka or Cheka* is a social announcement that publicly declares the engagement, paving the way for upcoming wedding preparations. As a ritual, it symbolizes commitment, marking the formal agreement between the couple and their families to the marriage and strengthening their bond. It also represents a union of families, celebrating the harmony and mutual respect between them. Furthermore, *Roka or Cheka* signifies blessings and prosperity, as elders bestow their good wishes upon the couple, wishing them happiness, health, and success, reinforcing the value of family blessings in life decisions.
- 3) **Cultural myths:** In India, marriage is regarded as a sacred, predestined, and eternal bond. The *Roka or Cheka* ceremony serves as a ritual that emphasizes the sanctity of marriage by infusing the engagement with spiritual significance. Additionally, it is considered a sign of good fortune, as the wedding date and time are often finalized during this occasion based on astrological charts, reflecting the cultural importance of aligning with divine forces for auspicious beginnings. Furthermore, the ceremony is seen as a protective measure, with rituals like applying *tilak* and performing *aarti* believed to ward off evil spirits and safeguard the couple from misfortune (Singh, 2015). Finally, the *Roka or Cheka* embodies the preservation of cultural and familial traditions, symbolizing the ideal of unity in diversity.

#### 4.1.b. *Phaldan Ceremony*

It is one of the significant pre-wedding rituals in Hindu marriage that is performed at the groom's residence. In Bihar, *Phaldan* ceremony is usually attended by the male members of the bride's family and is performed before the *Tilak* ceremony.

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** The pre-wedding ritual of *Phaldan* begins with a small puja that involves the elders of both the families and is performed in the guidance of the priests of both the families. As the term suggests, *phaldan* is offering of fruits either as ceremonial exchange or offering to the deities. The male elders of the bride's family offer fruits, including coconuts, bananas and mangos, to the groom, typically as an offering. The father or the brother of the bride offers coconut, betel leaf (*paan ka patta*) and betel nut (*supari*) along with *nenk* or *shagun* to the groom during the puja.
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** Beyond its literal practice, *Phaldan* ceremony holds profound symbolic significance. Offering of ripe fruits serves as a symbol of growth, prosperity, and the hopes for a flourishing life together (for the newlywed couple), representing fertility and abundance. Additionally, the offering of fruits embodies the sweetness anticipated in marital life, signifying harmony and joy within the relationship. Through *Phaldan* ceremony, the couple forges a spiritual connection by offering fruits to the deities, symbolizing their submission to divine will and their gratitude for blessings. In Bihar, the exchange of fruits between the bride's and groom's families further reflects mutual respect, unity, and the desire for a harmonious union, thereby strengthening interpersonal bonds.
- 3) **Cultural Myths:** The *Phaldan* ceremony is deeply intertwined with Hindu mythology, where fruits hold significant roles in stories symbolizing divine blessings and abundance, such as the "myth of the golden fruit," that is mango, and the "myth of Parvati's penance (*tapasya*). The golden fruit represents divine knowledge, prosperity, and blessings, while Parvati's penance relates fruits with fertility, harmony, and prosperity in married life. The *phaldan* ceremony, therefore, becomes a symbolic act to invoke blessings for the couple and establishes fruits as carriers of these sacred qualities. Beyond its spiritual meaning, *Phaldan* ceremony symbolizes cultural continuity, preserving traditional values and passing them down through generations. It also fosters family and community bonding, as the exchange of fruits strengthens relationships between the bride's and groom's families. Additionally, the ceremony functions as a cultural text, communicating shared values such as fertility, divine blessings, and the sanctity of marriage, reinforcing its importance as a cornerstone of cultural tradition.

#### 4.1.c. *Tilak ceremony*

Following the *Phaldan* ceremony, the *Tilak* ceremony takes place at the groom's residence. In Bihar, this ritual is hosted by the groom's family, where the male members of the bride's family (either the father or brother) perform the ceremony in the presence of priests from both families (Nandy, 2024; Singh, 2024).

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** In this pre-wedding ritual, formal exchange of gifts and the application of a *tilak* (mark) on the groom's forehead by the bride's family takes place. The *tilak* represents auspiciousness, conveying blessings for the groom and recognizing his role as the future son-in-law of the family of the bride. The exchange of gifts signifies goodwill and the formation of a bond between the two families.
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** The *Tilak* ceremony carries profound symbolic meanings that reflect cultural values and social structures. The application of *tilak* on the groom's forehead (a prominent part of the body) by the bride's family signifies divine blessings, invoking prosperity, health, and success for the groom, while also emphasizing his elevated status within the familial hierarchy (Singh, 2015). This ritual symbolizes the bride's family's acceptance of the groom as a suitable match, marking the formalization of their alliance. Furthermore, the exchange of gifts represents goodwill and fosters a harmonious relationship between the two families, symbolizing the unity of their lives. By highlighting the involvement of the bride's male family members as key participants, the ritual reinforces the patriarchal framework of Indian society, where men often take a leading role in significant ceremonial interactions.
- 3) **Cultural myths:** Due to the involvement of priests (*pandit*), the *Tilak* ceremony propagates the idea that marriage is a sacred and divinely sanctioned union, where rituals are necessary to ensure blessings and prosperity for the couple. The pre-wedding ritual represents and underpins traditional gender roles and familial hierarchies. The family of the bride approaching the groom and offering gifts advocates the superior position of the groom and his family in the marital alliance. The ceremonial exchange of gifts and blessings promotes the idea of marriage as a union not only between individuals but also between families, emphasizing the communal nature of Indian weddings and the importance of maintaining social harmony.

#### 4.1.d. *Mandappachadan Ceremony*

It is a pre-wedding ritual that involves decorating the wedding canopy (*mandap*) by elderly men of the bride's family (Nandy, 2024; Singh, 2024).

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** The central location for performing the sacred act of wedding in hinduism is *mandap* (wedding canopy). It is a sacred space for the couple to undertake vows. In order to perform wedding rituals, the seven married men of the bride's family, such as father, brother(s), paternal uncle(s), occasionally maternal uncle(s), meticulously decorate the *mandap* with natural materials that represent auspiciousness, such as banana leaves, mango leaves, jaggery, seasonal fruits and vegetables. In the presence of the priest (*pandit*), along with traditional songs and blessings, the *Mandappachadan* ceremony takes place one to two days before the wedding.
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** Decorating *mandap* connotes purification, making the space both physically and spiritually clean. The natural materials like mango and banana leaves symbolize all the blessings - fertility, growth and abundance - which a newlywed hopes to experience. This ritual also highlights the communal aspect of weddings as all the family members and community work together to create the *mandap*. The use of age-old decorations highlights the preservation of cultural heritage, passing traditions down through generations.
- 3) **Cultural myths:** The ritual highlights the vitality of a happy and sanctified beginning to the married journey. Through the participation of family members and the community, the ritual signifies marriage as a communal event that emphasizes on societal and familial ties rather than only a union between two individuals. The use of natural materials like mango and banana leaves connotes a cultural narrative that connects human beings to nature, as a source of life, prosperity, and spiritual purity. The married men of the bride's family are traditionally seen as the protector or guide of the family. Their involvement signifies blessing and support to the family.

#### 4.1.e. *Matkor Ceremony*

*Matkor puja* is a pre-wedding ritual performed just before the *Haldi Kutai* and *Haldi ceremony*. It is traditionally performed separately at the bride/groom's ancestral land or land near a water body. Five married women (*suhaagin*) from the paternal side perform this ritual.

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** During *Matkor puja*, married paternal aunt(s) (*bua, chachi*) and sister(s)-in-law (*bhabhi*) dig the soil with the help of spade (*phawra*), collect soil from the pit, and worship it. In addition, they apply vermilion (*sindoor*) to each other. While performing the ritual, the married women sing folk songs, and bring the digged soil at home for use in other wedding rituals.
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** The *Matkor* (*maati*/soil; *korna*/digging) pooja is organized to worship and acknowledge the nurturing aspect of mother earth. In Indian tradition, soil signifies fertility, growth, prosperity and grounding, which are also the foundational strength of the marital union. The act of digging the earth symbolizes the couple's connection to nature and their role in perpetuating life and family lineage. Folk songs and prayers chanted during the ritual invoke divine blessings for the marital union.
- 3) **Cultural myths:** The *Matkor* ritual mythologizes marriage as a community-approved institution connected to nature and heavenly forces, rather than just a private affair. Traditionally, earth is considered as a mother figure (*dharti mata*), who bestows favours and sustains life. Digging soil from ancestral land or land near a water body symbolizes earth's blessing and support. Traditional gender roles are reflected in the active participation of married women, portraying them as nurturers beyond merely symbols of domestic success and fertility. The ceremony connects the couple to their heritage by obtaining soil from ancestral lands, signifying generational continuity and reaffirming the historical identity of the community.

#### 4.1.f. *Haldi Kutai and Haldi Ceremony*

Next in order is *Haldi Kutai* ceremony followed by *Haldi* ceremony as pre-wedding rituals in Bihar. The *Haldi Kutai* ceremony and the *Haldi* ceremony are performed separately by both the bride's and groom's families at their respective residences (Nandy, 2024; Singh, 2024).

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** In Bihar, the *Haldi Kutai* ritual involves grinding turmeric roots (*haldi*) into a paste, traditionally carried out by five married women (*suhaagins*) from the family. This turmeric paste is then prepared for use in the *Haldi* ceremony. During the *Haldi* ceremony, which takes place either on the morning of the wedding or a day before, family members apply the turmeric paste to the bride and groom's skin in the presence of a priest (*pandit*), who chants mantras. The ritual is accompanied by local songs and the blessings of elders, adding joy and sanctity to the occasion. Turmeric (*haldi*) is known for its medicinal, therapeutic and beautifying properties that makes it an ideal herb to perform physical and spiritual cleansing. The key purpose of performing these rituals is to purify and prepare the bride and groom for their wedding.
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** The ritual of grinding turmeric (*Haldi Kutai*) symbolizes the efforts and care that is invested in sustaining married life and traditions. Following it is the *Haldi* ceremony, which is associated with purification and auspicious beginning. In addition, since turmeric is associated with protection against evil and negativity, these rituals are a representation of creating a protective aura around the couple, ensuring their well-being and happiness. It prepares the couple to enter a sacred phase of life free from negativity and impurities. As turmeric (*haldi*) paste symbolizes blessings for a prosperous and harmonious married life, as it is often associated with fertility.
- 3) **(iii) Cultural myths:** The rituals, *Haldi Kutai* and *Haldi* ceremony, emphasize regional identity and communal participation. Thus, reflecting a shared cultural memory and continuity of tradition across generations. The participation of five married women (*suhaagins*) is believed to bring good fortune and ensure a prosperous and harmonious married life of the couple.

#### 4.1.g. *Dhritdhaari and Matripoojan Ceremony*

*Dhritdhaari* and *Matripoojan* are the two pre-wedding rituals that are deeply respected in Bihar. These rituals are held at the residence of the bride and groom, separately. It is performed by the priest (*pandit*) in the presence of the family members (Nandy, 2024; Singh, 2024).

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** During *Dhritdhaari* and *Matripoojan* rituals, parents of the bride and groom perform the pooja at their residence in the presence of the priest (*pandit*). On this auspicious day, the parents of the bride and groom offer money, clothes and food to ancestors and elders of the family. This process is known as *Paunpooji*. It is performed to honour the ancestors and elders of the family, and to seek blessings and forgiveness from them for a harmonious married life.
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** The emotions, associations and societal implications related to the two rituals (*Dhritdhaari* and *Matripoojan*) represent community bonding as family members and loved ones unite to perform the sacred ceremony. These rituals symbolise purity and transition as the couple move towards the new phase of life under the divine guidance of their ancestors and elders of the family. Moreover, *Dhritdhaari* and *Matripoojan* serve as an act of gratitude and acknowledgement to the ancestors and elders for their presence in these sacred rituals. These rituals connote respect and reverence for the family lineage and its guiding figures.
- 3) **Cultural myths:** These rituals are deeply rooted in honouring ancestors, weaving the union into the fabric of familial and cultural heritage. They embody the belief that marriage is more than a social contract; it is a sacred bond blessed by higher powers. Such practices reinforce the faith that rituals can invoke divine blessings, ensuring prosperity, health, and fertility in the couple's married life.

#### 4.1.h. *Silpoha Ceremony*

In Bihar, the *Silpoha* ceremony is performed by the groom's mother on the day of the wedding just after the sunrise (Nandy, 2024; Singh, 2024).

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** The *Silpoha* ceremony refers to the act of grinding poha on a traditional stone grinder (*sil* and *lorha*) performed at the residence of bride and groom by their mothers. After grinding the poha into paste, the mothers of bride and groom apply that paste on their *dupatta*.
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** The act of grinding is often regarded as a metaphor for fertility and the bride's preparedness for married life. The grains represent prosperity and abundance, symbolizing the wealth and harmony the bride is anticipated to bring to her new household. This ritual signifies protection against bad omens and invokes blessings from ancestors or the *kul devta*. It serves as a tradition that underscores the preservation of cultural identity and values, passed down through generations.
- 3) **Cultural myths:** It is believed that performing this ceremony invokes the blessings of ancestors for a prosperous and harmonious married life. The *Silpoha* ceremony is performed to protect the marital union from bad omen. The grinding process is sometimes seen as symbolic of removing negativity or impurities from the bride's life, preparing her spiritually for the union.

#### 4.1.i. *Imli Ghutai Ceremony*

In Bihar, *Imli Ghutai* (tamarind swallowing) is performed as a traditional pre-wedding ritual on the groom's side, whereas, this ceremony is performed on the day of the wedding in case of the bride (Nandy, 2024; Singh, 2024).

- 1) **Denotative meaning:** *Imli Ghutai* ceremony performed by the maternal uncle (*mama*) of the bride/groom, where he makes them symbolically consume tamarind (*imli*), often in a festive setting accompanied by traditional songs and blessings. On the groom's side, just before the starting of *baraat* (*baraat prasthan*), the maternal uncle (*mama*) of the groom feeds him with five mango leaves which the bride holds with his teeth. The mother of the bride takes it away from him and eats it herself. The groom is then gifted with clothes as a token of blessing by their maternal uncle-aunt (*mama-mami*). On the bride's side, the same process is followed after *sindoor daan*. At some places, the maternal uncle (*mama*) of the bride feeds her tamarind (*imli*). Afterwards, the mother of the bride makes her eat sweets. The bride is then gifted with clothes as a token of blessing by their maternal uncle-aunt (*mama-mami*).
- 2) **Connotative meaning:** The combination of sweet and sour flavour of tamarind symbolically represents the duality of married life, that is, challenges and joys. Through this ritual, the maternal uncle of the bride/groom wards off her/him from any bad omen, and explains to her/him the importance of harmony and balance in their married life. The role of the mother of the bride/groom in *Imli Ghutai* ceremony, connotes a mother protecting her child (bride/groom) from any bad omen by taking it on herself. The ritual marks the start of the bride/groom's married journey and represents her/his entry into a new stage of life.
- 3) **Cultural myths:** The *Imli Ghutai* ceremony signifies marriage as a partnership that necessitates harmony, understanding, and acceptance from both the individuals. By including both families in the festive act, the ritual reinforces the concept of marriage as a union of not only two individuals but also families, thus emphasizing on the social and community aspect of Indian marriages. The two distinct flavours of tamarind serve as a metaphor for navigating the complexities of married life. Traditionally, in Hindu culture, maternal uncle (*mama*) is regarded as a key figure. Therefore, his involvement in the ritual signifies the well being of the bride/groom, reinforcing familial bond and the protective role of the extended family.

## 4.2. THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER ROLES AND SOCIAL STATUS ON THE HINDU PRE-WEDDING RITUALS

The impact of gender roles and social status on the performance of pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages performed in Bihar is noteworthy as it replicates the ingrained social and cultural conventions of the society.

**4.2.a. Gender Roles:** Hindu pre-wedding rituals are often gendered with distinct roles assigned to men and women. In Bihar, female –married woman (*suhaagin*) symbolize auspiciousness and prosperity; girl or maiden (*kanya*) symbolize purity and innocence– play a pivotal role in performing rituals like *Mehndi ceremony* and *Haldi ceremony*, which are considered auspicious, and are associated with beauty and fertility. Women, particularly mothers, play an active role in rituals like *Imli Ghutai* and *Silpoha* that are performed to protect the bride or groom from bad omens by symbolically

taking them upon themselves. Men, in Bihar, are more involved in rituals like *Phaldaan*, *Tilak* and *Mandapachaadan* to emphasize their role as facilitators and protectors.

**4.2.b. Social Status:** Social status has a great influence on the wedding rituals. Higher class, both socially and economically, often associate with magnificent and more elaborate pre-wedding rituals, typically involving a large list of guests, expensive decorations, and high-profile venues. For them pre-wedding rituals are opportunities to showcase wealth and social standing. On the contrary, families of lower social status may choose to organize pre-wedding rituals at their residence; to combine ceremonies to reduce costs while maintaining cultural significance. Otherwise, they may experience financial strain.

It is also observed that social status often criss-crosses with caste and regional traditions. Higher castes may follow stricter adherence to rituals perceived as orthodox or prestigious. Whereas, lower-caste or marginalized groups may have unique customs that differ from mainstream practices, sometimes facing societal prejudice.

Pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages are not just religious or cultural practices but also deeply influenced by gender dynamics and social stratification. These rituals often reinforce traditional roles, though modern influences and changing societal norms are gradually reshaping these practices.

### 4.3. THE EFFECT OF MODERNIZATION ON THE HINDU PRE-WEDDING RITUALS

The impact of modernisation and urbanisation has brought notable changes to pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages performed in Bihar. In the urban region of Bihar, wedding rituals have been modified for convenience. The natives of Bihar, living in cities, often alter rituals that they find obsolete to accommodate practical needs, that is, either to save time or reduce expenses. For example, in order to save time and effort, now-a-days decorators are hired for ceremonies like *Mandappachadan*. Moreover, pre-wedding rituals like *Imli Ghutai* and *Silpoha*, which were performed to protect the couple from bad omen, are rarely performed. Grand *Haldi* and *Mehndi* ceremonies have gained popularity because of Bollywood and regional cinema. Event management companies are hired to organize these ceremonies as these ceremonies have become a status symbol. Additionally, the rise of inter-caste and inter-community marriages has led to a fusion and adaptation of rituals across different traditions.

Despite all the modifications, the pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriages in Bihar still showcase a vibrant interplay of spirituality, cultural identity, and familial connections. These ceremonies serve not only as preparatory rites for the union but also as a mirror of the region's diverse social landscape.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Pre-wedding rituals of Hindu marriage performed in Bihar communicate a range of socio-religious values that reflect the intersection of cultural beliefs, social structures, and religious doctrines. These rituals, performed in the lead-up to the wedding, serve as a vital means of transmitting and reinforcing values that shape familial and societal expectations. Pre-wedding rituals like *tilak*, *haldi*, and *puja* establish marriage as a sacred and divine bond. The rites invoke blessings from deities and ancestors, underscoring the spiritual dimension of the marriage. For instance, the *haldi* ritual uses turmeric, which is considered purifying and auspicious, symbolizing the couple's physical and spiritual readiness for marriage. Marriage is not just a social contract but a spiritual and sacred union that is to be respected and honored by the couple and their families.

Rituals like *matkor* (digging the earth) or the preparation of sacred spaces reflect deep-rooted cultural practices that pass down community traditions and family legacies. These acts are not only symbolic of fertility and prosperity but also serve to preserve the cultural identity of the family and community. Marriage is a continuation of family legacy, with rituals acting as a vehicle for preserving cultural heritage across generations. The grandeur and scale of rituals such as *tilak* or the exchange of gifts often reflect the socio-economic status of the families involved. In upper-caste communities, there are elaborate displays of wealth, while lower-caste or marginalized communities may emphasize simplicity but uphold the spiritual core of rituals. Marriage is a public affair that reinforces caste and social hierarchies, signaling one's position within the community. Rituals also reinforce expectations related to wealth and family honor.

Women play a central role in pre-wedding rituals, from preparing the bride to performing key tasks like the application of *haldi*. These rituals signify women's roles in nurturing, preserving, and passing on cultural traditions. Women are seen as the custodians of family honor, tradition, and culture. They have a central role in the spiritual and

social preparation for marriage. Men typically engage in the formal aspects of rituals like the *tilak* ceremony and providing for the material aspects of the wedding (such as the dowry or gifts). This reflects the patriarchal values within the society, where men are seen as protectors and providers. Men are responsible for maintaining the family's social and economic standing, and their participation in formal rituals underscores their position in public and familial roles.

Pre-wedding rituals are often communal events, with extended family, neighbors, and friends participating. Rituals like the *haldi* or *sangeet* (musical evening) are community-based, fostering a sense of collective celebration.

Marriage is a communal event that connects not just the couple but also their families and communities. It reinforces the value of social cohesion, collective support, and shared joy.

Many pre-wedding rituals, such as the *haldi* and *snan* (bath) rituals, involve purifying the couple physically and spiritually. The use of turmeric, bathing, and the performance of prayers indicate a transition from impurity to purity, signifying the couple's readiness for their sacred and societal roles in marriage. Purification and protection from negative forces are essential for the well-being of the marriage. These rituals emphasize the importance of divine blessings and spiritual harmony for the success of the marital union.

Pre-wedding rituals, particularly the *tilak* ceremony, emphasize the merging of two families, not just the union of two individuals. The exchange of gifts, like clothes, sweets, and money, symbolizes mutual respect and commitment between families, signaling the importance of family bonds and responsibilities in marriage. Marriage is seen as a union of families rather than individuals, and the couple is expected to honor their social and familial roles.

The use of turmeric, the construction of sacred spaces like *vedi*, and other pre-wedding rituals all have deep-rooted associations with fertility, prosperity, and the continuation of the family line. For instance, the *matkor* ritual, which involves digging earth, symbolizes the fertility of the land and the potential for future growth within the marriage. Marriage is also a vehicle for the continuation of life, fertility, and prosperity, stressing the importance of offspring in maintaining family lineage.

In many Bihari marriage rituals, ancestors are invoked and blessings are sought from deities. The bride and groom seek to ensure that the union is blessed by both their ancestors and divine forces, indicating the belief in the spiritual dimension of marriage. Marriages are not only social contracts but also a continuation of divine will, with spiritual blessings and ancestral guidance playing a crucial role in ensuring the success of the union.

Pre-wedding Hindu marriage rituals in Bihar are rich with socio-religious significance, transmitting core cultural values, social hierarchies, and spiritual beliefs. Through these rituals, individuals and families communicate and reaffirm their roles within the community, honor their traditions, and seek divine blessings for a prosperous and harmonious future. The rituals collectively serve as a means to negotiate the complex relationship between the individual, the family, society, and the divine.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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