

The Formation of Patriarchy and the Subordination of Women

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Abstract

The article, The Formation of Patriarchy and the Subordination of Women, explores the genesis and perpetuation of patriarchal systems and their role in institutionalizing women's subordination. The primary objective is to analyze how patriarchal norms have historically evolved and become entrenched in societal, familial, and institutional structures. Using a descriptive research methodology, the study synthesizes theoretical perspectives and historical data to illustrate the mechanisms of male dominance and the reinforcement of gender hierarchies. It examines the interplay between cultural traditions, economic systems, and institutional practices in sustaining gender inequality. The study concludes that patriarchal systems are not only cultural constructs but also tools of socio-economic control, deeply rooted in historical processes.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender subordination, Historical analysis, Socio-economic systems and Gender inequality etc.

Introduction :

Nur Yalman posits that a foundational principle of Hindu social organization is the establishment of a restrictive framework to preserve three key elements: control over land, protection and regulation of women, and maintenance of ritual purity.¹

This structured approach sustains the hierarchical integrity and cultural continuity within Hindu society. The interrelationship among land ownership, ritual purity, and the regulation of caste hierarchy is deeply structural, with female sexuality serving as a critical axis. Maintaining these elements requires stringent social mechanisms to regulate women, as they are central to preserving both property rights and ritual integrity. Without such controls, neither the sanctity of caste-based purity nor the security of landholdings can be sustained, given the pivotal role women play in this sociocultural framework. The caste system, as outlined in *Dharmashastras* such as the *Manusmriti*, emphasizes the bilateral nature of ritual purity, asserting that an individual inherits this quality equally from both parents.

Consequently, the system upholds the principle that both parents ideally belong to the same caste to preserve the sanctity of lineage and maintain ritual purity. This ideological framework is foundational to the caste hierarchy, reinforcing strict endogamy as a normative social practice across generations. The *Dharmashastras* prescribed harsh, highly stratified penalties for transgressions, reflecting the rigid social hierarchies of the time. In cases of violations involving caste boundaries, the punishments were particularly severe. A man from a lower caste who violated these norms could face capital punishment, while women implicated in similar offenses were often subjected to physical punishments, mutilation, or social ostracization. These measures aimed to enforce compliance with the prevailing caste order and maintain its ritual purity. Such practices underscore the deeply entrenched inequality and the use of punitive measures as tools of control within the hierarchical framework of ancient Indian society.²

Kaliyuga and the Fear of Subversion

The Religio-legal texts of Brahmanic Hinduism illustrate a deep connection between class, caste, gender, and the state, particularly in their vision of *Kaliyuga* as a period of societal decline. In this dystopian framework, the disruption of established norms is marked by women and lower castes failing to fulfill their prescribed duties, leading to the feared intermingling of castes (*varnasamkara*). The *Bhagavad Gita* describes *Kaliyuga* as a time when families are broken,

rites are forgotten, women are defiled, and from this corruption comes the mixing of castes.³ The concern over caste mixing, reinforced by the ideology of texts like the *Manusmriti*, persisted as a key theme in the early centuries of the first millennium CE.

Textual evidence from Brahmanical traditions reveals an implicit recognition of the disruptive potential of women who defy societal norms, emphasizing their capacity to destabilize the foundations of Hindu social order. These texts frame upper-caste women as central to a “moral panic,” portraying their deviation from prescribed roles as a threat to the established hierarchy of property, caste, and status. This anxiety was addressed through the institutionalization of women’s sexual subordination, enforced not only through ideological frameworks but also by the authority of the state. The texts frequently underscore the need for conformity among women and lower castes to sustain the hierarchical order. Mechanisms to ensure compliance included economic dependence on male family heads, societal privileges granted to compliant upper-caste women, and the veneration of their subservience. When persuasion failed, coercion was employed to maintain control. Gerda Lerner’s analysis of ancient Mesopotamian systems highlights a parallel dynamic in which women’s complicity was secured through a combination of ideology, class-based privileges, and force—a pattern evident in Brahmanical patriarchy as well.

In the hierarchical framework of caste and gender, the honor and social status of upper-caste men are perceived to be intrinsically tied to the conduct and control of their women. Consequently, upper-caste women are often subjected to stringent monitoring of their sexuality to preserve caste boundaries and maintain social order. They are metaphorically and literally regarded as “gateways” to the caste system, symbolizing points of entry and vulnerability that necessitate strict protection. An illustrative example is found among the Kotai Pillaimar community in Tamil Nadu, where women are confined within fort-like residences, symbolizing extreme measures of seclusion, while only the men venture beyond the gates.⁴ This rigid system also aims to prevent any form of interaction or access by lower-caste men, whose sexuality is perceived as a threat to the purity of upper-caste lineage. Such measures are institutionalized through systems of surveillance and segregation, effectively maintaining the caste hierarchy by controlling inter-caste dynamics, particularly through the regulation of women’s mobility and agency. Violations of *pratiloma*, particularly in the context of caste-endogamy, were historically met with severe punishments, including excommunication, ritual death, and even the drowning of mother and child, as noted in Yalman’s fieldwork. To maintain social order, the compliance of upper-caste women was essential. This was achieved through a dual mechanism: the ideological reinforcement of *pativrata* and *stridharma*, which emphasized women’s roles in upholding caste purity, alongside coercive measures by male kin and the state.⁵ Such control ensured the continued subordination of women within the patriarchal system.

Control of Female Sexuality

The rise of social stratification is closely linked to the intensifying regulation of women’s reproductive roles, both by political authorities and within the family structure. Evidence suggests that the state’s power, often embodied by the king, and the authority of the household head, played pivotal roles in restricting female autonomy over their sexual and reproductive choices. These mechanisms of control were not limited to legal or economic forces but were deeply ingrained in cultural and ideological practices, which sought to govern women’s sexuality as a means of ensuring social stability and maintaining patriarchal power. This control was reinforced through various systems, including marriage laws, property inheritance, and caste structures, all of which contributed to the subjugation of women by limiting their sexual freedom and reproductive agency. Between 800 and 500 BCE, the transition to an agricultural economy and the second phase of urbanization led to the emergence of class divisions and early attempts at caste hierarchies. During this period, the Brahmins asserted their dominance, claiming ideological and ritual authority over society, despite challenges from other groups. While caste-based systems were not fully established, the foundations of private land ownership and patrilineal succession took hold.⁶ This shift is reflected in early Buddhist texts (600-300 BCE), which depict the rise of private property, family structures, and rudimentary social divisions. As tribal and clan-based societies collapsed, a new patrilineal system emerged, extending to kingship. Consequently, women’s sexuality, especially that of wives, became increasingly controlled by male authority, as exemplified in the *Apastamba Dharmasutra* (11.6.13.7), dated to circa the fifth to the third centuries B.C., which mandated that husbands ensure their wives remained sexually exclusive to preserve their lineage.

The establishment of patrilineal succession and private property necessitated a strict separation between female sexuality and motherhood. In this context, female sexuality was confined to a controlled reproductive structure, ensuring that women reproduced exclusively with one man to maintain patrilineal lineage. As the caste system became more entrenched, mating was further regulated to maintain caste purity, limiting sexual relations to specific, prescribed partners. Motherhood, particularly the production of male heirs, was idealized and ritualized, with a series of ceremonies designed to ensure a safe childbirth and the birth of a son. These rituals, spanning from marriage to conception and childbirth, were crucial in safeguarding the transmission of lineage, and have been extensively explored by Sukumari Bhattacharji in her work on gender and social structure.⁷

In the context of ancient Hindu texts, the portrayal of women was deeply intertwined with their sexuality, which was often linked to notions of impurity. From early sources like the *Mahabharata* and the *Satapatha Brahmana*, women were represented as inherently sinful and flawed. In the *Mahabharata* (XIII.38.30), it is suggested that women, from the very moment of creation, were imbued with an innate sinful nature. This notion is reinforced in the text, which portrays women as deceitful, frivolous, and marked by vices such as anger, treachery, and bad conduct. The *Manu Smriti* also assigns negative traits to women, such as a tendency toward deceit and carelessness, framing these as part of their essential nature. Moreover, in texts like the *Ramayana*, women are frequently depicted as emotionally unstable and fickle, prone to abandoning their husbands during times of hardship, as noted by the sage Agastya (*Ramayana* III.13.5). The myth of brahmicide, where the guilt of killing a brahmana is transferred to women by the god Indra, further deepens their association with impurity. This guilt was symbolically linked to menstruation, which was considered a physical manifestation of women's innate impurity, blending their sexuality with notions of sin and impurity.⁸

The inherent unpredictability of women has often been linked to the challenge of controlling their perceived excessive and uncontrollable sexuality. In various traditional texts, women are metaphorically compared to kings and creeping vines—constantly seeking and embracing whatever comes their way. This imagery underscores the idea of women being naturally adulterous and insatiable. A story from the *Jataka* tales (I.155) vividly illustrates this notion, stating that, like “greedy cows” in search of new pastures, women, too, are seen as perpetually unsatisfied, continually desiring one mate after another.⁹ This portrayal emphasizes the idea that women's desires are boundless, constantly shifting, and evolving. The *Manusmriti*, a key text in ancient Indian Brahmanical tradition, presents a framework that deeply ties women's identity to their sexuality and reproductive roles. *Manu* explicitly articulates that women, regardless of age, must be vigilantly monitored at all times. According to *Manu*, this surveillance serves multiple purposes: safeguarding the family's honor, preserving lineage purity, and maintaining societal order. The wife, in particular, occupies a central role in this patriarchal structure. *Manu* asserts that by protecting his wife, a husband secures his legacy, ensures the legitimacy of his offspring, and upholds his spiritual and social merits. These are some of the stereotypes he creates:

Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; thinking that it is enough if he is a man, they give themselves to the handsome and the ugly.

Through their passion for men, through their mutable tempers, through their natural heartlessness they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded (IX.15–16).

The crucial place occupied by the wife in the whole system of perpetuating the social order and enabling men to gain immortality through their sons is explicitly articulated by *Manu*:

The production of children, the nurture of those born, and the daily life of men, of these matters the wife is visibly the cause.

Offspring, the due performance of religious rites, faithful service and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and for oneself depend on the wife alone (IX.26–27).

Manu further conceptualizes marriage and reproduction in symbolic terms, stating that after conception, the husband metaphorically “becomes an embryo” and is reborn through the wife. This view underscores the transactional and duty-bound nature of the wife's role, where her primary purpose is to produce heirs and sustain the family lineage. Such a perspective portrays women as inherently in need of restraint and control, rooted in the belief that their nature necessitates external regulation for societal stability. This framework has historically legitimized strict controls over

women's autonomy while reinforcing gender hierarchies within the caste system. The patriarchal structures of ancient India, as reflected in both normative and narrative literature, perceived women's reproductive power as a critical yet threatening element within society. Men's dependence on women for lineage and social order created an inherent tension, leading to the portrayal of women's sexuality as inherently dangerous and uncontrolled. This was not only exaggerated but also framed as a source of societal instability. Women's "innate" qualities were depicted as both necessary and problematic, requiring strict regulation to maintain the patriarchal social order. Texts like the *Mahabharata* provide examples of this perspective, such as the aged ascetic Astavakra's claim that women are consumed by an insatiable sexual passion, which persists regardless of age and across all realms. Such portrayals emphasized the so-called "wickedness" and uncontrollable desires of women, further legitimizing their subordination and the imposition of restrictive norms. These narratives served to justify male dominance by framing women as inherently flawed, reinforcing the need for surveillance and control over their autonomy. This ideological foundation significantly contributed to the institutionalization of gender hierarchies and the systemic oppression of women in historical patriarchal societies.

***Strisvabhava* and *Stridharma*: Ideology in Reproductive Structures**

The ideological framework of *strisvabhava* (women's innate nature) and *stridharma* (women's prescribed duties) highlights the conflict between women's perceived natural instincts and the societal roles assigned to them within patriarchal systems. Unlike the harmonious alignment of lower castes' innate nature with their caste duties, women's *strisvabhava*, characterized by their sexual and reproductive power, was seen as being at odds with their *stridharma*, which demanded fidelity and subservience to their husbands. Myths often depicted *strisvabhava* as a "demonic" maternal inheritance, in contrast to *stridharma*, which was framed as a paternal legacy instilled by Brahmanical authorities.¹⁰ These narratives justified the need to discipline women's sexuality, transforming it from an untamed natural force to a controlled element within the structured cultural order. Historically, the reproductive power of women was originally accepted as a natural aspect of their being. However, as caste- and class-based societies emerged, this power was subjected to paternal regulation to align with social and political frameworks dominated by men. This transition underscores the systematic efforts to control women's autonomy, making their sexuality subservient to the demands of societal reproduction and lineage preservation.

The subordination of women during this period was a foundational aspect of enabling effective control over their sexuality. Women were denied economic autonomy, particularly control over productive resources, and legal independence, reducing them to appendages of men. Women were perceived as property, with their reproductive and productive labor under the control of men. Even in the realm of domestic rituals, women lacked autonomy. While they participated in these rituals, they could not perform them independently or for their benefit. Instead, their roles were limited to fasting and observances intended to benefit male relatives, such as husbands, sons, or brothers.

This general subjugation of women formed the basis for the specific mechanisms of patriarchal control imposed upon them. These mechanisms operate at three distinct levels: ideological, familial, and state-enforced. Ideologically, women were indoctrinated into *stridharma* or *pativratadharmā*—codes of wifely behavior that emphasized chastity and fidelity. These ideals were internalized by women, who strove to embody the constructed image of the *pativrata* (faithful wife). Familial control was granted to male kin, who were authorized to discipline and supervise women. At the state level, kings could punish women for transgressive behavior. In upper-caste Hindu society, the patriarchal framework was meticulously structured by Brahmanical authorities, ensuring that women's chastity and fidelity were exalted as the ultimate expressions of their identity.

The effectiveness of any societal system can often be seen in the seamless functioning of its ideology. In this context, the concept of *pativrata* stands out as a strategic cornerstone of the Hindu normative framework. It represents one of the most sophisticated ideologies devised by a patriarchal system, where women were conditioned to regulate their sexuality, believing it to be a pathway to power and respect. The *pativrata* ideal can be considered the ideological equivalent of a "purdah" for Hindu women, positioning chastity and wifely fidelity as essential virtues for attaining salvation. This ideology not only perpetuated inequality and hierarchical structures but also masked the mechanisms of control, making patriarchy appear natural and immutable.

The *stridharma* or *pativratadharmā* was a rhetorical and ideological tool designed to exert control over women, particularly their biological roles. As posited by Manu and other commentators, women were depicted as wild and

untamed by nature. However, through adherence to *stridharma*, their biological identities were redefined within a social framework, transforming them into paragons of virtue through the idealization of the wife. By resolving the perceived conflict between nature and culture, women internalized their subordination and came to view it as a mark of distinction.

Mythology played a crucial role in reinforcing the *pativrata* ideal. While legal texts such as Manu's laws explicitly dictated women's dependence on male figures throughout their lives—father, husband, or son—mythological narratives were subtler in embedding these norms. Among such texts, the *Ramayana* stands out as a powerful ideological tool. It provides enduring role models, with the ideal of Sita epitomizing the *pativrata* norm. Sita is portrayed as the embodiment of patience, loyalty, and chastity, which continue to influence cultural perceptions of ideal womanhood. The narrative of Sita's unwavering virtue is a key illustration. Despite being held captive by Ravana, her chastity remained intact, shielded by her inherent virtue. When falsely accused of impurity by Rama, Sita underwent the *agnipariksha* (ordeal by fire), emerging unscathed as a testament to her fidelity. Rama publicly acknowledged that her chastity protected her, likening her virtue to the unassailable strength of a shoreline against the sea. This narrative not only solidified Sita as the purest woman but also perpetuated the ideology that a woman's virtue was her ultimate defense, even under extreme circumstances.

The integration of such narratives into cultural and religious frameworks ensured the naturalization of patriarchal control, cementing its hold over societal structures and women's lives. Ancient Indian texts and mythology present dual models of wifely virtue and its consequences: idealized devotion versus punishment for deviation. Women like Arundhati, Savitri, and Anusuya epitomize the power and honor accorded to virtuous wives (*pativratas*). Their unwavering devotion granted them supernatural abilities, such as halting celestial bodies, reviving their husbands from the dead, or transforming those who threatened their virtue into powerless forms. These narratives reinforced the *pativrata* ideal, portraying women's chastity and loyalty as sources of extraordinary strength.

Conversely, myths also depicted the dire consequences faced by women who deviated from these ideals. The story of Renuka, wife of sage Jamadagni, exemplifies this. Her momentary distraction at the sight of a celestial being was interpreted as a lapse in chastity, leaving her unable to perform her usual sacred duties. Her punishment was severe: her husband ordered their son Parshurama to execute her, which he dutifully carried out. Such narratives institutionalized the expectation that women maintain strict adherence to *stridharma* without external enforcement. This self-regulation was seen as the most effective form of control, but coercion and violence were normalized as secondary mechanisms to ensure compliance. Texts such as the *Manusmriti* emphasized the necessity of women's perpetual dependence on male guardians throughout their lives, framing this control as essential for preserving family honor, lineage, and social stability. *Manusmriti* explicitly instructed that women, if left unguarded, could jeopardize both their natal and marital families. The husband, in particular, was tasked with safeguarding his wife to prevent infidelity, which was framed as a threat to the legitimacy of his progeny and lineage. If familial control failed, societal and state mechanisms were invoked. Adultery was categorized alongside theft as one of the gravest offenses, and the patriarchal state asserted the authority to punish women, including through capital measures. In extreme cases, local clans or communities could enact penalties, framing errant wives as threats to the collective moral and social order. The *Jataka* tales even depicted adulterous acts as transgressions against a husband's "property," warranting reparation or punishment. The *Arthashastra* (III.3.7-10) offered a structured approach to the "inculcation of modest behavior," sanctioning the use of intimidation or physical discipline as necessary. Physical chastisement was codified and regulated, indicating an ingrained belief in the utility of force to maintain order. This ethos is exemplified in the *Ramayana*, where Lakshmana's mutilation of Surpanakha for her perceived impropriety reflects societal norms around disciplining women. Her disfigurement symbolizes the broader punitive mechanisms for controlling female sexuality and behavior, which persist in various forms, often manifesting as retributive violence for perceived disobedience. Thus, ancient Indian texts reveal a deeply entrenched patriarchal framework that combined ideological conditioning, familial oversight, and state enforcement to regulate women's behavior, particularly their sexuality. These systems of control were justified and perpetuated through mythological and legal narratives, embedding patriarchal norms into societal structures.

The Intersection of Caste, Gender, and Patriarchy in Ancient Indian Adultery Laws

In the context of a caste-based society, the most severe form of adultery was considered when women engaged in sexual relations with men from lower castes. According to Manu, the wife who knowingly violates her duties to her husband—her “lord”—is subjected to the harshest punishment, which includes public humiliation. This penalty reflects the king’s role in maintaining and reinforcing the existing social hierarchy, which was closely tied to land ownership and caste relationships. The purity of women was not merely a reflection of personal virtue but was also linked to the preservation of caste purity and, by extension, the stability of the social order.¹¹ This understanding of adultery highlights the deep connection between caste, class, the state, and patriarchy in early Indian society. The archaic state functioned as both a class/caste apparatus and a patriarchal structure. These systems were intertwined, creating a framework of social institutions that governed gender relations. In this system, women’s chastity was viewed as a cornerstone for maintaining the social fabric, ensuring the continuity of both caste and gender hierarchies across generations.

In conclusion, patriarchy as a systemic structure has been deeply ingrained in societies across time, perpetuating male dominance and women’s subordination. This framework not only shapes gender dynamics but also enforces rigid norms that limit women’s autonomy, particularly concerning their sexuality and societal roles. While patriarchy is often justified through cultural and ideological mechanisms, it is also perpetuated through social practices and the active complicity of both men and women. Women, despite being the primary subjects of this subjugation, often internalize and uphold these structures, either consciously or through societal pressures. This reflects the enduring nature of patriarchy, where historical and cultural factors converge to maintain unequal gender relations. As such, the persistence of patriarchy highlights the need for continued resistance and rethinking of societal frameworks to achieve true gender equality. Patriarchy’s resilience across contexts reveals its adaptability, underscoring that dismantling it requires addressing both ideological and structural dimensions to effectively challenge its deep-rooted dominance.

Endnotes :

1. Nur Yalman, ‘On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 93 (1962), pp. 25-28.
2. Uma Chakravarti, ‘Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and the State’, *EPW* 27, 14 (3 April 1993), p. 579.
3. Ibid., p. 580.
4. Kamala Ganesh, *Boundary Walls: Caste and Women in a Tamil Community* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1993).
5. Uma Chakravarti, ‘Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy,’ pp. 579-85.
6. Ibid., pp. 581-82.
7. Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women and Society in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Basumati Corporation, 1994), pp. 16-41.
8. Ibid., p. 266.
9. *Jataka story*
10. Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Wife According to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryamba-kayajavan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 251.
11. The preceding paragraphs are also drawn from Uma Chakravarti’s article, ‘Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy’.
