

CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS OF PATRIARCHY AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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1. ABSTRACT

This study delves into the contemporary workings of patriarchy, and exposes how dynamic and resilient it continues to be as it navigates through social and cultural contexts today. Patriarchy has diversified into countless social structures, cultural environments, and individual encounters. The patriarchal order not only perpetuates a division between the genders based on claimed superiority and hierarchy, fostering inequality in our private and public lives but is also constantly reinvented through everyday actions, cultural norms and institutional practices which allow it to remain prominent within our modern lives. It explores how patriarchal notions are entrenched, subtly reproduced, and negotiated on an everyday basis within society. We contest that the traditional yardstick to measure patriarchy has become archaic.

Within this larger context, the study will explore the manifestation of this system via social media as a contemporary space where patriarchal notions are reproduced and simultaneously challenged. While such platforms do provide avenues for feminist conversations, organizing, and representation of minority narratives, it is also true that dissemination of gender stereotypes, discriminatory attitudes and harassment continue to be facilitated on the internet through algorithms and digital practices. Ultimately, the need for digital literacy and a greater degree of accountability on the part of the institutions will be discussed in order to effectively confront the complex workings of patriarchy.

2. INTRODUCTION

Indira Gandhi was once called “The only Man in the Indian cabinet”, to compliment her decisive and assertive leadership style. Which she considered an insult, replying– "Why should I be considered a man when I am not", when questioned. This exposes something deeper. Women

have had to prove that their power is equal to that of a man instead of being seen as power in their own right.

The contemporary manifestations of patriarchy are evolved and are woven into the fabrics of society so deep that it is now indistinguishable from 'normal'. Now patriarchy is not directly imposed, it works behind the scenes, shaping social norms and institutions. All this creates an illusion of progress. This "illusion of progress" should push us to reevaluate the metric of gender equality in the 21st century.

Recently however, despite the visibility of feminist activism especially on social media, the question remains the same about its impact on the system of patriarchy. In India, where most social media users are men, the situation is worsened by cultural and caste differences. When further exacerbated by algorithmic and engagement methods that support patriarchal institutions, women fall prey to online anonymity fueled sexism.

This is how, even when technology gets better, males still retain the power that comes with it.

This study asks: Has patriarchy really vanished in contemporary India or has it just changed its form?

We aim to question this new 'normal' to understand modern patriarchy. And in an era of social media fueled pseudo-feminism augmenting this 'illusion' of progress, such a study holds great relevance in furthering the cause of gender equality. Understanding the modern dynamics is crucial for assessing gender equality, the effectiveness of activism and developing policies to lead to an inclusive society.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A narrative and critical analysis of the history of patriarchy made me arrive at these findings. Many scholars now believe that agriculture was the starting point of patriarchy. Settled agriculture led to growth of material wealth, living as a society, growth of social norms for kin, etc. All of which led to the increasing importance of reproduction for 'betterment of society'.

This rigidified the gender roles for the purpose of efficiency. Meanwhile there is another faction that argues that the timelines of commencement of agriculture and patriarchy do not add up. And that while the system of change may have started from the commencement of agriculture, the oppression came much later. And cannot be associated with the natural progression of human civilization to an agrarian society.

Not only is there a debate on the starting point of patriarchy, there is also a major debate on whether this patriarchy is the natural order of society or something that is acquired by an originally egalitarian society.

What is common in all these theories and literature is the utilitarian lens of analysing the progression of society. They argue that gender roles became defined because females involved in procreation and males in physical labour, just made development more efficient. Males being biologically 'superior' to females, it logically makes sense for them to take on the protective roles and for females to nurture.

Is it further embedded patriarchy that has normalised gender inequality so much that it now seems rational? We use anything and everything at our disposal to justify a conditioned belief, to just not shake the status quo of the society we live in. Even exploring an idea like this appears too radical today and is frowned upon.

Patriarchy has not disappeared in contemporary society but has reshaped. The previous yardsticks for measuring gender inequality are increasingly becoming obsolete. Early waves of feminism argued for overt equality and rights. Today while those exist in India to govern the public sphere of rights, the private sphere has remained vulnerable. A woman may theoretically have equality, but behind closed doors, falling prey to social norms, if this equality disappears, how truly empowering is it? It is just blatant mockery of women in the face of patriarchy.

The question of the hour is if we truly can laude these laws for eliminating gender inequality, if they remain absent in the private sphere.

The roles and responsibilities of women in Indian society have changed. In traditional society women majorly worked domestically. In the contemporary world however, women are actively engaged in a wide range of fields beyond home. Society claims that women are getting equal opportunities but they still face challenges resultant of patriarchy being infused into normalcy.

Another component of the contemporary world that must be spoken about is social media.

Today with the emergence of digital media, women are increasingly trying to break traditional gender roles. Despite the plethora of access and opportunities available to women online, challenges such as increasing digital inequality and online bullying have practically still left them impaired.

In a time when social media platforms have over 5 billion users globally, the idea of digital empowerment hides a troubling fact; 68% of women say they experience gender-based harassment online. This shows that these spaces often reinforce, rather than dismantle, male dominance. The "illusion of progress," where technology improves but entrenched male power adjusts, should challenge our view on gender equality in the 21st century.

Women still bear a larger share of unpaid domestic work, a situation worsened by the digital commercialization of femininity. Femininity becomes a tool exploited by capitalism, and is sold to people as the ideal. In places like India, where the majority of social media users are male, these issues are compounded by cultural and caste factors. This normalizes objectification and allows for the continuation of harmful ideologies, like "red pill" beliefs and online 'rape academy'.

While activism led by users can create opportunities for change, we can not ignore how algorithms and user engagement metrics deepen gender hierarchies by promoting toxic content and cyber-harassment. It includes a theoretical review, empirical findings, implications, and suggestions for reforming platform policies.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a mixed study. We have used pre-existing data points (including historical records) along with our observations to come to an understanding of the contemporary manifestations of patriarchy. This is coupled with some archival research to understand existing theories.

We have essentially attempted to connect the dots and bring to light a nuanced understanding of the patriarchy society around us.

As we have not collected any primary data, one hurdle we faced was in scaling the reliability of our source. As we are challenging an existing structure that comes along with its prejudices, choosing unbiased and accurate data was a challenge. However, we have ensured reliability of data by connecting and crossverifying them with theories explaining patriarchy and feminism.

We have tried to cover multiple manifestations of it today, along with explanations for why they exist.

5. KEY FINDINGS

Patriarchy today is less visible in laws than in everyday practices—such as unequal domestic responsibilities, secondhood of girls' education, employment norms, and online harassment. Women may have legal equality in public spaces, but private and cultural norms continue to restrict true empowerment.

First: patriarchy originated through state and social institutions, which later shaped family structures and gender roles. Because it is embedded in laws, customs, and social norms, men and women unknowingly sustain it, even though men benefit more from it.

Second: evidence from early human societies suggests that in context with minimum material accumulated, gender relations were relatively more equity-oriented. The absence of transferable wealth limited the ability to control women's mobility and reproductive choices, thereby restricting emergence of rigid patriarchal structures.

Third: the rise of early states played a role in institutionalizing patriarchy. In order to sustain population growth, labor supply, and military capacity, these states promoted rigid gender roles; women were increasingly promoted to partake in reproductive and domestic functions, while men occupied positions in warfare, governance, and resource control. This top-down pressure filtered into family structures, normalizing practices such as patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal marriage.

Fourth: this study finds that patriarchy is not a natural outcome of human society, but a historically constructed system shaped with the changes in economic organisation, property relations, and political powers.

Fifth: patriarchy being ingrained within the family unit, is a mechanism of its persistence. The exclusion of women from property inheritance and patrilocal nature of marriage reinforces economic dependence and limits autonomy.

Sixth: although the public sphere is reasonably protected, whether these laws extend protection to the public sphere should be questioned. Real equality requires changing mindsets and everyday social norms, not just creating laws.

Seventh: Patriarchy has historically been contested but consistently justified masked as effectiveness. This also suggests that what is seen as “natural” gender hierarchy may actually be socially conditioned and normalized over time.

Overall patriarchy is neither a fixed historical inevitability nor a system that has disappeared—it is dynamic and adaptive. While its origins remain debatable its persistence is evident in how it has shifted from overt, institutional control to more subtle forms embedded in private life, and to digital spaces today.

6. DISCUSSION

Patriarchy in its origin was very different from the very meaning of the word patriarchy. Indicating our flawed understanding of it. Patriarchy means “rule of the father”. Indicating that oppression/inequality began at home. However, rather than beginning within the family, history points instead to patriarchy emerging from those in power in the first states. Demands from the top filtered down into the family, forcing ruptures in the most basic human relationships. No longer were people living for themselves and those closest to them. Now, they were living in the interests of the patriarchal state.

This basic understanding of patriarchy’s origin is very important, to understand why it still exists today. It is crucial to recognize that patriarchy is a system that begets sexism and misogyny and is not about the individuals. That system is institutionalized; it is represented in the very structures of society. Women also play a sizable role in perpetuating and sustaining the patriarchal culture, although they face disproportionate damages.

A drift from this understanding, as it has been for centuries, is what causes people to trivialize patriarchy. Patriarchy is hence considered to be ‘normal’. And once we consider it to be normal, we attach justifications to it. We call it the rule of nature, evolution and what not.

Patriarchy has evolved, the ‘normalized’ system that it is today is very different. Therefore lauding ourselves for eliminating aspects of patriarchy that had plagued society over a millennium ago and thinking we have solved the issue of gender discrimination is ludicrous.

Why this is relevant today is to understand the contemporary manifestations of patriarchy. Today patriarchy is not denying voting rights or job opportunities. It has become more covert. Being around for centuries, it has perpetuated deep into the fabrics of society making distinguishing it from normal arduous.

In the modern democracy, laws are in place, sophisticated authorities process complaints. Women seem to be protected in the system. But how truly pragmatic are these laws in terms of tackling gender inequality when they remain absent in the private sphere?

This is where the patriarchy lies today. In the normals, the workarounds, in practices that seem too comfortable to question.

Right to Education Act, mandates free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14. The law is followed but with a workaround. Middle class families who can afford to educate their children, send their sons to a private school and their daughters to a government school.

The mentality behind this is that they do not want to spend on a girl's education believing it will be of no use to her once she is married. A married woman working is a big no no irrespective of her education. Pursuing a higher education for girls is not even a conversation. Getting married and then caring for their husband is seen as the ultimate goal and therefore any 'extra' spending on education is considered a waste of money. This mindset affects the quality of a girl's education, most not even making it till graduation. Less than 50% of girls in rural India complete 10th standard.

(I do not intend to demean studying in a government school but it is unfortunately true that the facilities and quality one gets in a private school by enlarge is better than those in government ones.)

Effectiveness of schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao is also questionable. Its objectives revolved around improvement of sex ratio, girl child education participation, prevention of female foeticide and changing negative mindsets about female children. In reality, only 25% of the allocated funds were ever spent by states, among which ~79% was spent only on media/advertisements. Secondary school enrollment of girl children increased by just 2.49% over 9 years. The lack of significant 'real' change brought by it, is another example of the 'illusion of progress'.

Furthermore, the constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender, providing women the right to work (Article 15). Affirmative action and special provisions for the upliftment of women is also constitutionally recognized (Article 15(3)). There are numerous laws for women at the workplace, safeguarding them against workplace sexual harassment (even mandating a committee to address complaints), guaranteeing paid maternity leaves, equal pay, and non-discrimination in promotions, among others.

The public sphere seems to be well protected. It seems like a level playing ground, but how truly level is it? For a woman, to even reach the workplace is a challenge. A traditional housewife is expected to engage in domestic chores, but when she starts working outside for a pay, it does not replace the chores in her workload, it becomes an addition to it. Gender expectations and societal norms allocate caregiving and domestic duties primarily to women, irrespective of their employment level.

The primary metric of judgement of character of a woman socially is how well she manages her household. When she works outside, the metric remains the same.

While both partners are professionally active, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of household and caregiving responsibilities, leading to higher role conflict, emotional exhaustion, and reduced professional identity compared to men.

‘Working women’ are at times praised to be ‘superwomen’. Is this really a compliment? This tag places unreasonable expectations on them to excel both at home and at her job, while there remain no such expectations on a man.

Even if a man and a woman have the same monetary resource and talent to start with, a woman encounters more barriers to reach the same potential due to her woman identity. They carry this gender baggage that slows them down.

Capitalism expects you to work unconditionally in order to sustain and grow. Men have historically been provided the ecosystem to do so, women have to struggle to create one for themselves. Therefore the likelihood of them succeeding is lesser.

Only 10% of the world's billionaires are women, not due to lack of skill, but due to lack of a support system.

Living in such private spheres, it becomes practically impossible for women by enlarge to step outside without becoming subjects of condemnation. This is where the patriarchy lies today, newer expectations coupling with traditional ones, where their co-existing is just monstrous.

There definitely has been progress. A woman's role has evolved, a man's has not, and this is where the problem today lies.

Social media– foe or friend?

Over 500 million people (Roughly 34% of the population) in India use social media. Among these women users amount to only a maximum of 34%. This indicates that even with reasonable financial growth, even women are able to afford smart phones, but their presence on social media is still limited.

Women are technically allowed to use social media, but socio-cultural factors push them back. This is where patriarchy lies today. These social-cultural factors that impede women from accessing media are manifestations of patriarchal expectations of gender norms and roles.

Women in India spend nearly five hours additionally everyday on unpaid domestic work, leaving them with significantly less "leisure time" to explore social media in comparison to men. Women on social media, for many, raises moral concerns. Because access to the internet and content oversteps patriarchal restrictions on a woman's autonomy and identity. They are feared to get corrupted with new ideas. Some panchayats in Uttar Pradesh have even imposed fines on women using social media outside their homes.

For those who make it to social media, staying there is another mammoth task. Women online face the pressure of maintaining a 'respectable' online profile. Yet, more than 80% of urban women on social media have faced online harassment. Around 50% of female content creators in journalism, technology and gaming experience harassment. Apart from harassment they are subjected to trolling more often than their male counterparts.

The reasons they are trolled for are also concerning. While male creators are often trolled for their opinions, positions etc, women are mostly trolled for their appearance and gender. This indicates the level of acceptance for women on social media. Not only is visibility of women from physical spaces pushed back, it continues even on digital ones.

Theoretically platforms like social media should help reduce discrimination and stereotypes, by increasing awareness through more accessible exposure. In reality however, this theory overlooks the basic principle of the functioning of social media- the algorithm. It functions on principles of Algorithmic sorting and Algorithmic targeting. Users are recommended content based on their preferences (this includes their views, prejudices, etc). Over time targeted content about, say, members of certain groups, serve as confirmatory evidence for one's preexisting biases, which algorithms have been able to detect on the basis of 'like' patterns and content-viewing histories. Gradually seeing only their worldviews disproportionately reflected in the content presented to them creates a lack of exposure to other ideologies and perspectives.

This causes individuals to create a stronger sense of social identity and have a very positive attitude towards their own group. Ingroups and Outgroups are created and the algorithm boosts negative attitudes towards outgroups. These reinforce pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices.

On the contrary however, social media does act as a space for women to explore and build their identity. Social media hashtags, campaigns, and digital literacy programmes have promoted self-reliance. 80% of rural women entrepreneurs use social media for business. This coupled with monetization of content creation has opened up a new avenue of earning for women. Through content on social media women build their own social capital, and a means to enter the public sphere. They are reported to have found belongingness and companionship through online groups of shared interests. What is paradoxical is the level of toxicity they encounter on the very platform that enables this access.

In a nutshell, a patriarchal society remains patriarchal even on social media. While there is more access for women online today, that still comes with heavy baggage. An important question to ask, is to what extent this access is truly liberating?

While there has come technical change, the mindsets remain unchanged. Without changing the latter, the former alone risks becoming counterproductive.

7. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that patriarchy continues to exist in Indian society but its structure has evolved. Over centuries patriarchy has grown deep into every social institution. Being a woman in itself has traditionally been treated as a sin.

A woman's role was reduced to that of a caregiver. Today however, is a nuanced scene. Patriarchy in the contemporary world is subtle and hidden in seeming normal. In an organized democracy, the legal and social system have developed an inclusive public sphere. Women having political, economic, social rights and so on. Where it hides, nonetheless, is in the private sphere.

The question we raise is, what importance does the equality that disappears behind closed doors truly hold. When equality that is promised in the public sphere but under social norms (ie. Private sphere) when it disappears, how truly empowering is it? Here, equality is just a mask that society puts on but deep down does not see a need to change their patriarchal status quo.

We observe patriarchy today in workplace discrimination masked as efficiency, unequal division of domestic responsibility in the name of tradition, double burden on working women and digital harassment because men do not want to share their space(even digital) with a woman.

Women are 'given permission' to work and earn yet domestic caregiving is considered their primary responsibility. Careers are if anything an addition to this.

Why? Because feminism has changed women, not men. Women got access to education, job opportunities, political and economic rights. Their roles evolved, but society's attitude towards them stayed stagnant. Therefore there is a significant gap between the laws formulated and the lived reality.

In recent years, social media has played a significant role in patriarchy and feminism. While social media has empowered women in many ways, new forms of oppression have also emerged such as cyber bullying, targeted trolling, etc. Social media increases access of women to the

world, either through content consumption or creation. But increased visibility comes with newer avenues of misogynistic expressions. Society is patriarchal, online or offline

While there has come technical change, the mindsets remain unchanged. Without changing the latter, the former alone risks becoming counterproductive.

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