

PATRIARCHY AND WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the concept of Patriarchy that can be defined as that kind of society where the supreme authority is enthroned in the hands of males. Such a system is socially acceptable in most of the societies and thus supporting the biological distinction of gender. It throws a light on the different types of Patriarchy prevailing in the society, public patriarchy and private patriarchy and how patriarchy changes slightly its form and colour as we study different regions, cultures, societies and classes. It is continuously shaped and re-shaped.

Key words: *Patriarchy, Mutilated male, Masculinity, Feminine, Monogamy, Marriage, Domestic Violence*

Introduction

India was and continues to be a patriarchal society, with the general subordination of women and their disempowerment that patriarchy normally entails. It is a form of social organization in which the father is the supreme authority in the family, clan, or tribe and descent is reckoned in the male line, with the children belonging to the father's clan or tribe. Negatively, it can be said that patriarchy is a social system in which power is held by men, through cultural norms and customs that favour men and withhold opportunity from women. Aristotle

called males active, females passive. For him female was “mutilated male,” someone who does not have a soul. In his view, the biological inferiority of woman makes her inferior also in her capacities, her ability to reason and, therefore, her ability to make decisions. Because man is superior and woman inferior, he is born to rule and she to be ruled.

There may be very many ways to interpret and understand patriarchy. Most men will be on the defensive when they hear the word ‘patriarchy;’ and most women will feel oppressed and dominated with its mention. As Allan B. Jonson says “force and violence are supported in a patriarchal society; it is because women are designated as desirable and legitimate objects of male control, and because in a society organized around control, force and violent work.” In reality the patriarchal system is characterised by power, dominance, hierarchy and competition. According to him, patriarchy is “a kind of society that is more than a collection of women and men and can’t be understood simply by understanding them.” So, Patriarchy is a kind of society organized around certain kinds of social relationships and ideas. Paradoxically, our participation both shapes our lives and gives us the opportunity to be part of changing or perpetuating it.

Understanding Patriarchy

Understanding patriarchy is a complex matter. It is not just its male-dominated, male-identified and male-centred character. It is much more than this and the link that there is between its different parts. At its core patriarchy is a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversation to literature and film. Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things, including men, women and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of “other.” It’s about how

social life is and how it's supposed to be; about what's expected of people and about how they feel. It's about standards of feminine beauty, and masculine toughness, images of feminine vulnerability and masculine protectiveness..." (Johnson). Patriarchy believes in the notion that women are weak and men are strong. In patriarchal societies, both men and women are mocked at if they do not confine to their roles.

In pre-patriarchal times, a woman's experience, intelligence and virginity was respected and treated positively as against the negative treatment and powerlessness associated with women in the current patriarchal times. Abeda Sultana says, in her article "To keep women under men's control, patriarchy operates some social customs, traditions and social roles by socialization process. To preserve the male supremacy, patriarchy created 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics, private-public realms by gendered socialization process. Socialization is considered to take place primarily during childhood, when boys and girls learn the appropriate behaviour for their particular gender. All agents of socialization process such as the family, religion, the legal system, the economic system and political system, the educational institutions and the media are the pillars of a patriarchal system and structure."

Theories of patriarchy by Walby clearly talk about private and public realms of patriarchy. Whereas private patriarchy is practiced at home, which is based on materialism; where a home maker has no power because she does not earn money, despite of the work and her contribution to the household, in the form of services and emotional support. The other, public patriarchy is practiced at public places, i.e. work place and state. The system of patriarchy, more often than not, creates obstacles for women's growth and development both in their careers, society and personal life. Patriarchy debars women from their legal rights. Patriarchy is a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways. The

subordination that they experience at a daily level, regardless of the class they might belong to, takes various forms – discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence – within the family, at the place of work and in society.

Marxist feminists have attempted to analyse not simply 'patriarchy' but the relationship between patriarchy and the capitalist mode of production. This is because they do not believe that the subordination of women can be absolutely separated from the other forms of exploitation and oppression which exist in capitalist societies, for example, class exploitation and racism; yet they reject the ways in which orthodox Marxism and socialist organizations have marginalized women theoretically and within their practice and have regarded the oppression of women as simply a side effect of class exploitation (Beechey, 1979). Generally, power of authority in family, society and state is lying in the hands of the male. In a society where men consider themselves to be superior to their feminine counterparts, women find it difficult to educate themselves; their families give priority to the education of the male child, especially in developing societies, where resources are limited, and government is unable to give good quality free education to all the children. There is different treatment given to the male and the female child, with preference to the male child. Women of most households accept the system of patriarchy so unknowingly that they themselves encourage the system in their own households.

Marriage and Patriarchy

It is considered important to marry off the female as soon as possible so that she can go and settle down in her husband's house and take care of her in laws. Sometimes, even if the woman wants to study and pursue a career, due to lack of family support, unhappily she has to give it up for the sake of her parents or her husband. Upon marriage, the wife's family name is changed to that of her husband or the family name of the husband is added to the

name of the wife, while the husband's name remains unchanged. Similarly, children are given the family name of their father. For her, her family, her husband, her in laws and her children must always come before her because this is the order of the patriarchal social order. Her own wishes and needs are often sacrifices. If a woman goes ahead and neglects what she is supposed to do, in accordance to the patriarchal social system, she is criticized and sometimes not accepted as a good woman. On the other hand the man can do whatever he wishes. A woman may be lucky to find a loving and a caring husband. If not, she is a victim of physical, emotional or sexual violence at the hands of her husband. As per the research done by 'Satyamev Jayte,' a television series, which highlighted some very important evils, problems and systems in the Indian society, at least 70% women in India are subject to domestic violence. This does not necessarily happen in the poor or uneducated households, it happens in every section of the Indian society irrespective of class and caste.

At home, in most households, under the patriarchal system, the man's word is the last word. Women are often considered foolish, who are unaware of what is going on in the world. Hence, the man is in charge. The woman is there to take care of the needs of everybody without once bothering to feel herself as much a human being as the men of her household. The man can insult her whenever he likes; he can tell her off and treat her in a manner he wishes because she is his 'property.' Any resistance would lead to violence or separation. If there is a divorce, often the woman is blamed for her inability to adjust, and her mother for being inconsiderate about the so called 'good' upbringing of her children.

At the workplace, a woman is seldom equally paid and often does not get equal opportunity for growth. There is sexual harassment at the workplace; and it is considered better to stay quiet and not complain about it considering the patriarchal system, where the men have the right to even sexually abuse women. In marriage, physical relations without a

woman's permission are not considered rape in our country. Does that mean that a married woman is a slave to her husband? She cannot say 'no' only because she is a woman. In most countries, whether developed, developing or under developed, women feel uncomfortable to go out alone at night. Why? Because under the patriarchal social order the male specie considers himself as 'man' and woman as a subordinate, who is an object of his desire, which he is unable to control, because that is not important. It is the women who are supposed to protect themselves or their men, their owners must take care of them and protect them if they do not wish harm to come their way.

By giving elaborate examples of a corporate and the game of monopoly, Jonson separates an individual from a system. When an individual enters a corporate or works there, s/he behaves in a manner expected in that corporate. However, the individual may not necessarily behave as s/he does in a corporate setup; and totally behave as a different being outside of the office. Similarly, when s/he is playing a game of monopoly, s/he behaves as per the rules of the game, which make s/he a greedy person. The same person may not be a greedy selfish being in real life.

We and patriarchy co-exist. Our behaviour defines the social system and patriarchy defines our behaviour. Patriarchy is dynamic; it changes slightly its form and colour as we study different regions, cultures, societies and classes. Also, patriarchy is continuously shaped and re-shaped. We, as individuals may change some rules; and change the social order for good, and prevent ourselves to behave like 'men' or 'women' and make our society less oppressive and less violent and more respectful. Some consider that patriarchy has always existed and is a way to keep order in a society. On the contrary there is another school of thought, according to which patriarchy is manmade and that it can be changed. Historical processes have created hierarchy; it has not always existed.

According to Frederick Engels, both patriarchy and monogamy developed, as a historical process, with the concept of private property. According to Lerner (1989), patriarchy was not one event but a process developing over a period of almost 2500 years (from approximately 3100 BC to 600 BC) and a number of factors and forces that were responsible for the establishment of male supremacy as we see it today. Abeda Sultana, in her paper, talks about ‘Patriarchal Structures in Bangladesh.’ She says that, like in most developing Asian countries, male domination is rampant in Bangladesh. Women are the subordinates in all aspects of life – family, work, legal, social, political and even culture and religion. This leads to violation of human rights and takes the society farthest away from equality. Patriarchy, in Bangladesh, is identified by patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence. Patrilineal descent refers to the male line of name and inheritance, where a female does not hold much value. Only the male member is the upholder of the family name and line.

Patrilocal residence refers to the movement of the woman, after marriage, to her husband’s house. Because of this, the girl, in her house, is not valued. She is considered a burden, which has to be sent away to her husband’s house. That only the son will take care of the parents when they grow old. The moment the woman goes to her husband’s house, she becomes a liability and the property of the husband. She is economically dependent on her husband. Her contribution to the household is of no value. This subordination, from birth to death, destroys girls’ / “women’s self-respect, self-confidence and self-esteem and limits their aspirations.” In Bangladesh, some legal and political changes have taken place; but mostly they are unaccepted at the societal level, and have not helped the development of women in the country. These changes have only helped men to exploit women in newer and different ways. In most cases of female subordination, even the state does not support women and does

not interfere, except in exception cases. Coming to India and the political support, at least on paper, which women enjoy, is a farce. What women need is not reservation for equal treatment, but equal opportunity both at home and in the social sphere? It is imperative to sensitise men and households and make them aware of the fact that their girls are human, and must enjoy as much right to life and happiness as the boys.

Mahi Pal wrote an article ‘Caste & Patriarchy in Panchayats.’ Through her essay, we shall take a peek in this area. In India Panchayati Raj has become an institution of self government. Reservation was made both for lower castes and women. Both the state governments and union government has made a serious effort to uplift women and treat them equally. Towards this attempt, they have called meetings and conducted workshops. Haryana government invited women in power at the Panchayati Raj level to attend a workshop, to discuss their problems and challenges faced in the process of executing their duties effectively. These women in power, at the local level, had many issues. Surprisingly, not one of them mentioned about women, their safety, domestic violence and female rights. These women were unaware of schemes relating to women, child and dalit development. Some of the women sarpanches faced problems from the upper caste and upper class men; these sarpanches were failing to do their duties and carry on development work in their areas, mostly because they were women.

Conclusion

Understanding patriarchy explains why women frequently fight for their rights and occasionally struggle just to survive free from the power and authority of men threatening them. As being capable educationally, financially, socially as well as in terms of their skills,

women professionals have been victorious in challenging patriarchal norms to a considerable extent. Economic role outside the society has earned them financial independence, more bargaining power within the family, and a sense of being empowered, enhancing their role in decision-making which their elder generation seldom had. Even then, they consider their responsibilities to their husbands, children, parents, and other close kin as most central and constantly give their families higher priority than their work. It can be inferred that, though women have entered the public sphere and have become a part of the market forces, they are consistent with their association with the private sphere and associated responsibilities which is patriarchal norm. Only from the sensitivity of their unequal state of being, a feminist worldview can be developed enabling women and men to free their minds from patriarchal thought and practices and at last to build a world free of dominance and hierarchy, a world that is truly human.

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