



Theorizing Patriarchy in the Indian Context

Ananya Sharma

Independent Scholar, Email: ananyaa240103@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Indian woman's experience cannot be flattened into a singular category of oppression, but must be understood through the complexities of caste, class, and gender. Patriarchy in India is deeply embedded within its social, cultural, religious, and economic structures, shaping gender roles and expectations for centuries. Rooted in traditional norms, it manifests in various aspects of daily life—ranging from family dynamics and marriage customs to economic opportunities and political participation. Theorizing patriarchy in the Indian setting is much more complex than the Western model of patriarchy, which frames it as a binary gender issue. Indian patriarchy is interlaced with caste hierarchies, religious prescriptions, colonial legacies, and class-based exclusions. I am influenced by the works of Nivedita Menon, Uma Chakravarti, CT Mohanty, and Judith Butler, particularly for their incisive feminist scholarship that probes deeply into the roots of social realities. I aim at building on the argument concerning women's resistance to a system that is both external and internalized, as well as the cost of tradition when it becomes a mechanism to oppress those already less able to defend themselves.

Introduction

Indian patriarchy works through an intersectional lens—it is not merely about male dominance but about the layered oppression that women face due to their caste, class, religion, and regional identity. Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women experience patriarchy differently than upper-caste Hindu women. In



“Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India,” Uma Chakravarti explores how caste and gender are related, and how this intersectional patriarchy results in a higher level of oppression of lower caste women, as well as the need for control over the sexuality of upper caste women to maintain caste purity (Chakravarti,1993). For example, Dalit women are often victims of sexual violence used as a tool of caste oppression, while Brahmin women are subject to intense surveillance and control in the name of honour and lineage. As many feminist writers and thinkers have established, caste is not just about hierarchy but about control—especially of women’s bodies, labour, and sexuality.

Negotiating the Patriarchal Bargain

The patriarchal bargain, a term first coined by Deniz Kandiyoti in her 1988 article “Bargaining with Patriarchy”, refers to how a woman may choose to comply with patriarchal expectations in exchange for certain advantages—whether material, emotional, or social (Kandiyoti, 1988). These bargains manifest in diverse ways, as women’s lived realities are shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, class, religion, and ethnicity. A classic example of the patriarchal bargain in the Indian society is the Indian marriage system, where women submit to male dominance in youth in exchange for the symbolic power they may wield later in life, especially as mothers-in-law. In exchange for compliance, they receive protection, status, and a place within the social order. Understanding this framework helps us move beyond victim-oppressor binaries, recognizing how women are also agents of their own survival, even if their actions uphold patriarchal values. In India, a woman is expected to sacrifice, serve and nurture the family selflessly to be tagged “ideal.” Many women internalize this role, agreeing to patriarchal expectations in exchange for social acceptance and familial stability. They later patronize this role for the women of the next generation, when they hold the position of power over them. Marriage, thus, becomes the primary site of the patriarchal bargain. A woman may endure control over her mobility, career, or sexuality in return for financial security and societal respect. Once she becomes a mother-in-law, she may exert the same control over her daughter-in-law—thereby continuing the cycle.

The Patriarchal Bargain is also intensified by caste structures as much as they are by gender, where women’s sexuality is policed to maintain caste purity. Upper-caste women may conform to strict behavioural codes to protect family honour, while Dalit and Adivasi women are often excluded from such protections and are instead hypersexualized or subjected to violence. In both cases, control over a woman’s body becomes central to the preservation of caste and social order. Yet, upper-caste women may participate in upholding caste hierarchies, for example, by managing dowry negotiations or enforcing endogamy within their households. As Uma Chakravarti notes, women become the



“gatekeepers of caste,” using their own restricted roles to protect caste and patriarchal power simultaneously (Chakravarti, 2003). A rich, layered, and profound question is raised here: “What does it mean to be “good” in a culture that punishes rebellion?” In a patriarchal culture like India’s, being a ‘good’ woman comes with a heavy load of meeting cultural expectations. Here, the idea of a good woman is not neutral- it is deeply politicized and moralised. To be “good” often means to be compliant, sacrificial, silent, and pleasing—not for one’s own sake, but to maintain social order. In such a state of affairs, not justice but obedience is goodness, not voice but silence is virtue. A woman who demands dignity, who is vocal about her autonomy and pleasure, disrupts this social order—and is labelled as rebellious, dishonourable, or “too much.” In other words, rebellion is not punished because it is wrong, it is punished because it threatens control. So, what does it mean, then, to truly be good? From a feminist lens, specifically in integration with the works of Bell Hooks, Simone de Beauvoir, and Nivedita Menon, being “good” should not mean disappearing into others’ expectations. Instead, it should mean acting with integrity, freedom, and solidarity—even if it means defying the roles others have written for you. In fact, rebellion may be the most ethical choice in a system built on injustice. A woman who questions the patriarchal bargain is not morally deviant—she is morally awake. In resisting the performance of "goodness," she practices a deeper, more radical form of goodness—one rooted in truth, selfhood, and liberation.

Patriarchy teaches women to be tailors of their own silence. It teaches women not only how to behave, but how to stitch themselves into the very roles that confine them. It is through this invisible stitching that gender norms are enacted and internalized. When a woman is accepting the patriarchal bargain, she is embroidering her own cage, thread by thread. Instead of breaking silence, she learns to mend it. She knits shame into her body, and stitches smiles into moments of pain. This is internalized patriarchy at its most visible: it feels like care, love, and culture. But it is a slow sewing shut of one’s own voice. Each expectation, whether it be from the family or the society, is a thread. Together they become a beautiful, traditional, and suffocating tapestry of control. Accordingly, if women were taught to stitch themselves into roles, they can also learn to pull the thread—undoing the patterns, unmaking the garments of compliance. It will be slow, like unravelling a tight weave, but with each thread pulled, the fabric of suppression will soon come undone. To paraphrase Judith Butler’s words, if gender roles are performed like a pattern, then unlearning is a refusal to keep stitching (Butler, 1986). Resistance, then, becomes an act of unweaving, of refusing to repair what no longer serves us. In this quiet unravelling, women begin to reimagine freedom: not as a rupture, but as an entirely new pattern woven from agency, desire, and voice. In my own words, each time a woman repeats her mother’s silence, she adds another thread to the



cloth. But every question she asks is a pulled stitch. Resisting the patriarchy is not done only by grand acts of disobedience, but also in ordinary moments. The patterns that have long defined womanhood do not break all at once, they come undone slowly, stitch by stitch, through everyday acts of refusal and reimagination. In every story told, every boundary set, every silence broken, women stitch a future that does not repeat the past. As bell hooks writes, “The process begins with the individual’s willingness to be transformed... to critique, to imagine, and to create new visions of belonging and being” (Hooks, 2000). It is in this willingness to re-stitch meaning that resistance becomes not only possible, but powerful.

Defying the Religious Script: Tradition as a Mechanism of Oppression

Tradition, in the Indian context, is often cloaked in the language of reverence. What starts as a legacy of culture often hardens into a system of control, especially when tradition is gendered and moralized, like in India. Religious customs often offer women symbolic power in return for obedience. Especially in a country like India, where religion and rituals are held highly by the masses, it is difficult to not let age old social norms control the society as a whole. When women today are expected to be patient, forgiving, self-sacrificing, and modest, it is not just society telling them—it is centuries of religious patriarchy whispering through generations. Indian customs like *kanya Daan*, *Karva Chauth*, or menstrual exclusion may appear beautiful and harmless on the surface, but they secretly script a woman’s place in the family and society— always giving and sacrificing, rarely speaking, and never claiming. This exploration raises a key inquiry: Why are religious and cultural traditions oppressive? Well, I would like to contend that traditions become oppressive not because they are old, but because they are unchallenged. They are glorified without context, rehearsed without critique, and passed on without scrutiny. As Nivedita Menon notes, the danger lies not in cultural difference, but in how certain ideas— such as a woman’s virtue being tied to obedience or purity— become naturalized as universal truths (Menon, 2012).

From a more philosophical lens, the problem is not tradition *per se*, but rather the absolutism of tradition. When rituals are ripped off of choice, and customs leave no room for dissent, they stop being the tools of expression and become tools of discipline. In this way, tradition is like an invisible architecture: it builds homes that look safe, even sacred, but their walls are often made of authority, expectations, and silence. Simone de Beauvoir calls this immanence— a state where women are locked in repetitive, expected roles, denied transcendence or self-definition (Beauvoir, 1949). Therefore, the cost of tradition, when it transforms into a mechanism of oppression, is not merely personal— it is mental, emotional, generational, and political. When traditions, that are often upheld as sacred, unchanging blueprints of identity, begin to police women’s bodies and dictate their worth, they shift from being cultural



inheritances to instruments of control. The patriarchal bargain functions exactly through such traditions that encourage women to comply in exchange for social acceptance. But what women do not realise is that the cost that they must pay for this is steep: internalizing their own subjugation, normalizing emotional labour, and passing down these patterns under the guise of virtue. As a result of this “stacking of oppression,” resistance becomes increasingly difficult for every coming generation of women when exploitation is disguised as duty and tradition is equated with morality. Accordingly, women today are faced with the challenge to not only examine discrete practices, but also interrogate the broader cultural rationalities that shield them from scrutiny. When a tradition demands silence over truth, sacrifice over selfhood, and shame over autonomy, its cost is nothing less than the cessation of freedom itself.

Any expression of an act of rebellion gets framed as betrayal: of community, of family, of the culture itself. The women who resist are often labelled as a deviation from normative femininity, as unnatural, westernized, or selfish. But in truth, their resistance is deeply rooted, not in the rejection of heritage, but in the longing to inherit it differently. Just imagine traditions to be a saree woven with memories, put on with obedience, but at times wrapped so firmly that it feels difficult to move. Women in India are now making their own culture, stitching it together a little at a time, tailored for their unique identities. My goal, as a feminist, is to unwind the saree’s tightness and design it to accommodate me as I move, and to be able to help other women as much as possible, to do the same. Challenging old traditions in India may not happen by rejecting them, but by carefully updating them to suit feminist values. Indian women, no matter where or when they live, are changing their cultural traditions to respect the values that they instil, but at the same time to reject the inequalities they may imply. In rural communities, on academic campuses, digital platforms and during poetry slams, women are challenging expectations about who they should be and are also developing new roles. Their resistance does not always look like rupture. It often looks like revision. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, it is better for postcolonial women to rewrite and redo their cultures rather than try to completely abandon them (Mohanty, 2003). Indian women are doing exactly this: reclaiming tradition as a site of redefinition, not imprisonment.

Scripting Freedom: Feminist Remaking of Indian Tradition

As we discussed in the previous section, tradition is often treated as sacred inheritance — a set of fixed customs, rituals, and roles passed from one generation to the next. But what if we look at tradition as not a closed relic, but a living text — one that demands reinterpretation with every new reader? In India, women across castes, religions, and regions are engaging in precisely this act: they are not discarding traditions altogether, but are reading them anew, revising oppressive scripts, and inscribing new



meanings into old practices. This section explores how exactly they do that. I hereby propose that the reformation of culture in contemporary India carried out by the feminist resistance operates not by rejecting cultural inheritance, but by transforming tradition into an open dialogue, where women reclaim the right to edit, annotate, and imagine alternative futures. Women are rendering tradition as a site of agency rather than subjugation through reinterpretation of rituals, myths, and communal practices.

Imagine traditions as manuscripts—centuries old, often authored by dominant powers, canonized by social institutions, and shielded from critique by the aura of sacredness. Throughout the history of our patriarchal cultures, women have only been allowed to be the *readers* of these traditions, expected to recite, and realise their meanings without questioning them. Feminist scholars like C T Mohanty and Nivedita Menon remind us that claiming the right to revise and rewrite tradition is itself a radical political act. reformation of culture in contemporary India carried out by the feminist resistance operates not by rejecting cultural inheritance, but by transforming tradition into an open dialogue, where women reclaim the right to edit, annotate, and imagine alternative futures. Whether it is reimagining *kanya Daan*, or rejecting *Karva Chauth*, these seemingly minor shifts are representative of a symbolic unbinding from gendered obligations. These reimagining disrupt the moral foundations of patriarchy, showing that resistance is not anti-tradition, but anti-oppression.

Hindu practices have seen many such feminist rewrites. In marriage ceremonies, women have actively re-scripted age-old rituals. For example, a recent NPR report notes that a Bengali collective of women priests (“Shubhamastu”) is being hired by couples to conduct weddings. NPR reports that Lauren Frayer found that these “feminist priestesses” conduct ceremonies that are free of practices like *kanya Daan*. Now, the idea of ‘giving away’ the bride has shifted to celebrating her as a strong partner. According to Nandini, the founder of Shubhamastu, they remove any male-dominated recitations and add in new joint-verses and vows. Instead of seeing their vows as what wives give their husbands, these women present them as a promise they give each other. People are finding new ways to observe Hindu festivals and reimagine temple lives. In 2021, Shubhamastu’s women were selected to perform the rituals of Durga Puja in Kolkata, something only Brahmin men were allowed to do before. Their actions reflect a wider occurrence: more and more female Hindus are returning to worshipping goddesses. Telling old tales again from a feminist perspective has proven to be a powerful means of resistance. Pratibha Ray’s *Yajna Seni: The Story of Draupadi* is written in first person, with Draupadi, one of the key female characters of the great Indian mythology relic *Mahabharat*, narrating her story to her best friend Krishna. Ray, by blending together feminist, humanist, and ecological perspectives with elements of Hindu philosophy, is successful in portraying Draupadi as a deeply empathetic figure engaged in an existential struggle to



understand the purpose of her life (Luthra, 2014). Similarly, in mythic retellings like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita is reimagined not as a passive sufferer, but as an agent of her own destiny — effectively rewriting the Ramayana from the inside out (Luthra, 2014). It is interesting to note here that such women-centred interpretations of the Indian epics seem like a small and insignificant step towards battling patriarchy, but it is in these baby steps that the way to victory against oppression lies. Such literary and ritual revisions allow Hindu women to keep cultural symbols like gods, mantras, festivals, while changing their meaning.

Muslim women in India have similarly invoked reform from within Islam's framework. India's first women-only mosque is being built in Jharkhand, where Muslim women will serve as imams and caretakers. Within jurisprudence, groups like the Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) are reinterpreting tradition. BMMA leaders have waged legal battles, even winning the ban on triple *talaq*, by arguing for equality grounded in the Quran. Their mission is to reinterpret Quran from the feminist perspective, dismantle gender-biased readings of the holy book, and ultimately to recast Islamic law itself as gender-just. In their own words, "The goal is to secure the constitutional rights of Indian Muslim women by referring to Islamic law and the teaching of the Quran." What is significant here is that resistance occurs against the narratives surrounding faith, not against the belief system itself. Every day, young Muslim women are choosing to frame their choice of hijab or niqab as personal rather than something required by religion. By doing these things, Muslim women are reinterpreting the rules from religious references, not just walking away from faith.

Often, when Dalit women lead the resistance in India, they also fight to end the caste system. In this sense, reclaiming their culture includes defying not only the traditional roles of Brahmanical customs, but also those of the gender. Among those helping drive changes was Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who rewrote Hindu family laws in the 1950s as a leader of Dalits and advocate for women. He made sure daughters and widows could inherit property the same way as sons via the Hindu Code Bill (Bannigan, 1952). If, as Ambedkar recommended, the daughter and widow are treated as equals in inheritance, the old system of favouring males would be challenged. Many Dalit feminists today continue Dr. Ambedkar's work. They make sure to address the way these two forms of oppression interact, changing the approach to social change by calling for recognition of caste-gender problems. Dalit women writers in literature and folklore such as Mahasweta Devi, reinterpret epic characters—her story Draupadi places a victimized tribal woman as a bold leader like the old Draupadi of myths did. In this manner, Dalit women help to change laws and tell new stories. They decided not to ignore the earlier cultural



revolution, but to reverse its meanings: treating cast-off traditions as calls for unity and reading old myths as tales of resistance.

Philosophical Reflection: Editing Without Erasure

In all these contexts, a common pattern can be seen: women do not just discard their heritage; they remake it from within. The feminist act of rewriting tradition offers a third way between two extremes: blind preservation or violent rejection. Philosophically, this process calls to mind the concept of the palimpsest—a manuscript that has been written over, where traces of earlier writings remain visible beneath new inscriptions. Each example above – from weddings to scriptures, from mosques to mythic stories – illustrates cultural alchemy: like turning base metals to gold, the forms of tradition stay, but their meaning is transformed. Festivals and rituals become reframed as affirmations of women’s worth, and sacred texts are reinterpreted to bless gender justice. In the grand scheme, women become co-authors of culture itself. This approach resonates with Bell Hooks' notion of transformation not through alienation, but through critical love — loving a culture enough to demand it serve justice, not merely tradition (Hooks, 2000). Where traditional models of revolution envision an overthrow of the old order, the feminist reworking of tradition adopts a more nuanced, layered approach. Women now are not attempting to burn down the house of culture; rather, they are renovating its interior, dismantling its oppressive architecture while preserving its foundational spirit.

When social norms transform into instruments of restriction, dismantling them becomes not only necessary but liberating. By treating tradition as a living text, women are engaging in an act of critical authorship. They recognize that traditions are neither natural nor immutable; they are the result of countless human choices, exclusions, and interpretations over time. As Judith Butler argues, norms are maintained through repetition—and thus they can also be destabilized and reconstituted through acts of conscious deviation (Butler, 1990). In this sense, reinterpretation becomes a radical act of agency: a refusal to accept inherited meanings as final. Moreover, editing without erasure avoids the violence of cultural dislocation. It allows communities to see themselves in the arc of feminist transformation, rather than experiencing it as an imposition from outside. By keeping themselves grounded in tradition on one hand and facing forward toward change and freedom on the other, women build a way that is both comfortable and novel. So, the way feminism transforms Indian traditions suggests a more expansive philosophical belief:

- Freedom does not mean forgetting everything; it is about making new experiences meaningful.



- Resistance does not just mean saying no; it often means taking authorship in shaping community, and restoring what justice can do in community.

Women activists and thinkers are showing that you can love tradition and yet transform it. They are not abandoning their roots; they are watering them with new meanings, ensuring that the tree of culture grows towards liberation rather than oppression. In choosing to edit rather than erase, Indian feminists embody the deepest kind of transformation: not an abandonment of roots, but the radical flourishing of new possibilities from ancient soil. Tradition, then, becomes not a chain but a canvas — not a duty but a dialogue — a vibrant testament to the fact that heritage need not be a prison if women hold the pen.

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