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## What is Patriarchy ?

Kamla Bhasin

CHRIS BEASLY  
What is feminism





theories regarding its origin are introduced here, but very briefly. For a more detailed understanding other readings will be necessary.) It is intended for activists who may not have access to books and journals or the kind of time required to go through them all; but I hope that the writers whose work I have drawn upon will be illuminating and will encourage at least some activists to read more on the subject. What we desperately need is more conceptual work on the nature, origin and roots of patriarchy in South Asia so that we can understand our own situation better.

The material is presented in a question and answer style, a format that I have used earlier in a pamphlet on *Feminism*, and one that people find easy to assimilate.

## What is Patriarchy ?

Q. What do we mean by patriarchy?

A. (The word patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or the "patriarch", and originally it was used to describe a specific type of "male-dominated family"—the large household of the patriarch which included women, junior men, children, slaves and domestic servants all under the rule of this dominant male. Now it is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterise a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways. In South Asia, for example, it is called *pitrasatta* in Hindi, *pidarshahi* in Urdu and *pitratontro* in Bangla. <sup>Tamilian</sup>

The subordination that we experience at a daily level, regardless of the class we might belong to, takes various forms — discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence — within the family, at the place of work, in society. The details may be different, but the theme is the same. <sup>pushed into stereotypes</sup>

Q. How does patriarchy actually manifest itself? Can we recognise it in our own lives?

A. Anyone who has experienced even subtle discrimination, bias or non-acceptance feels and knows it, even though they may not be able to name it. Whenever women have talked about their experiences as women in workshops or trainings, they have actually described the different forms of patriarchal control that they have personally experienced. A few examples will illustrate what I mean. Each of them represents a specific form of discrimination and a particular aspect of patriarchy.

"I heard my family was unhappy when I was born. They wanted a boy." (*Son preference*)

"My brothers could demand food, they could stretch out their



hands and take what they wanted. We were told to wait for it to be given. We sisters and our mother had to make do with whatever was left over." (*Discrimination against girls in food distribution*)

"I have to help my mother with the household work, my brothers don't." (*Burden of household work on women and young girls*)

"It was a struggle to go to school. My father thought it was not necessary for us girls to study." (*Lack of educational opportunities for girls*)

"I could not go out to meet friends or to play."

"My brothers can come back at any time but I have to be back before dark." (*Lack of freedom and mobility for girls*)

"My father used to often beat my mother." (*Wife-battering*)

"My brothers are worse than my father. They don't want me to talk to any boys." (*Male control over women and girls*)

"Because I was not willing to give in to the demands of my boss I was thrown out of my job." (*Sexual harassment at work*)

"I have no share in my father's property. My husband's property is also not mine. Actually there is no home I can call my own." (*Lack of inheritance or property rights for women*)

"I have to submit my body to my husband whenever he wants it. I have no say. I fear sex. Don't enjoy it." (*Male control over women's bodies and sexuality*)

"I wanted my husband to use family planning methods but he refused. He also did not give me permission to get operated myself." (*No control over fertility or reproductive rights*)

As we begin to reflect on them the fragments of these experiences gradually start forming a pattern, and we realise that each one of us has had to struggle in one way or another against this discrimination. The feeling and experience of subordination destroy self-respect, self-esteem and self-confidence and set limits on our aspirations. Every courageous act we perform to assert ourselves is condemned as "unfeminine". We are called *beparda* (shameless) as soon as we try to step out of our defined spaces and roles.

Norms and practices which define us as inferior to men, which

impose controls on us, are present everywhere: in our families, social relations, religions, laws, schools, textbooks, media, factories, offices.

As we listen to each other we realise that this subordination is not the fate of a few of us who are unfortunate, nor is it some "vicious" men who exploit or oppress some women. We begin to understand that what we are up against is a system, a system of male domination and superiority, of male control, in which women are subordinate.

Q. Does the term patriarchy then sum up the kind of male domination we see around us all the time?

A. Yes, you could say so. But it is more than just a term: feminists use it like a concept, and like all other concepts it is a tool to help us understand our realities. It is defined by different people in different ways. Juliet Mitchell, a feminist psychologist, uses the word patriarchy to refer to kinship systems in which men exchange women, and to the symbolic power that fathers exercise within these systems. This power she says, is responsible for the "inferiorised" psychology of women. Sylvia Walby in her book, *Theorising Patriarchy* calls it "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". As I said earlier and as Sylvia Walby reminds us, it is important to understand patriarchy as a system because this helps us to reject the notion of biological determinism (which says that men and women are naturally different because of their biology or bodies and are therefore assigned different roles) or the notion that every individual man is always in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one.

Linked to this system is the ideology that men are superior to women, that women are and should be controlled by men and that women are part of men's property. In some South Asian languages, for example, the words used for husband are *swami*, *shauhar*, *pati*, *malik*, — all words which mean "lord" or "owner".

Q. Is patriarchy the same everywhere?

A. No, not always. Its nature can be and is different in different classes in the same society, in different societies, and in different periods in history. The broad principles remain the same, i.e., men are in control, but the nature of this control may differ. For example the experience of patriarchy was not the same in our grandmothers' time as it is today; it is different for tribal women and for upper-caste



Hindu women; for women in the USA and women in India. Each social system or historical period throws up its own variations on how patriarchy functions, and how social and cultural practices differ. We will discuss this in detail a little later, but it is important to recognise these differences so that we can, both, analyse our own situation better and come up with appropriate strategies to deal with it.

Q. What is it that men control in a patriarchal system?

A. Normally the following areas of women's lives can be said to be under patriarchal control.

### 1. Women's productive or labour power

Men control women's productivity both within the household and outside, in paid work. Within the household women provide all kinds of free service to their children, husbands and other members of the family, throughout their lives. In what Sylvia Walby calls the "patriarchal mode of production", women's labour is expropriated by their husbands and others who live there. She says housewives are the producing class, while husbands are the expropriating class; their back-breaking, endless and repetitive labour is not considered work at all and housewives are seen to be dependent on their husbands.

Men also control women's labour outside the home in several ways. They force their women to sell their labour or they may prevent them from working. They may appropriate what women earn; they may selectively allow them to work intermittently. Then women are excluded from better-paid jobs, they are forced to sell their labour at very low wages; or work within the home in what is called "home-based" production, a most exploitative system.

This control over and exploitation of women's labour means that men benefit materially from patriarchy; they derive concrete economic gains from the subordination of women. In other words, there is a material basis for patriarchy.

### 2. Women's reproduction

Men also control women's reproductive power. In many societies women do not have the freedom to decide how many children they want, when to have them, whether they can use contraception, or terminate a pregnancy, etc. Apart from individual male control, male

dominated institutions like the church or state (i.e. religion and politics) also lay down rules regarding women's reproductive capacity. This is institutionalised control. For example, in the Catholic Church the male religious hierarchy decides whether men and women can use birth control methods, which methods are permissible, whether women can abort unwanted children, and so on. The continuous struggle by women for the freedom to choose when, whether and how many children to have, in practically every country in the world, is an indication of how strong this control is and how reluctant men are to relinquish it. We will discuss why this is so in the next section.

In modern times, the patriarchal state tries to control women's reproduction through its family planning programmes. The state decides the optimum size of the country's population and accordingly, actively encourages or discourages women to have children. In India there has been an aggressive birth control programme to limit family sizes drastically. In Malaysia, women have been urged to have several children, in order to ensure a sizeable domestic market for the country's industrial products. In Europe, where birth rates are very low, women are lured through various incentives to have more children. They are given fully-paid and very long maternity leave, opportunities for part-time jobs, childcare facilities, etc.; some countries even provide for "male maternity leave". The ideology and policies of the state also change according to the demand for labour by the economy. For example, after World War II in Germany, when labour power was required to rebuild the country, women were called upon to take up jobs and participate in nation-building. Conversely, in Britain, once the war had been won, women who had participated actively on the frontlines were told to go back home now that the men could engage in peace-time activities. The famous Baby Boom of the 1950s in the U.S. is an illustration of this, and of the state's implicit endorsement of the ideology of motherhood.

This ideology of motherhood is central to the radical feminist analysis of women's situation. According to them women are subjugated mainly because the burden of mothering and nurturing is forced on to them, and only on them, by patriarchal societies. Motherhood is forced by depriving young women of adequate contraceptive information; the contraceptives it does make available



are inconvenient, unreliable, expensive and often dangerous. Patriarchy, they assert, limits abortions and often seeks to deny them entirely, but at the same time subjects women to intense and unremitting pressure to engage in sexual relations.<sup>1</sup>

Further, patriarchy not only forces women to be mothers, it also determines the conditions of their motherhood. This ideology of motherhood is considered one of the bases of women's oppression because it creates feminine and masculine character types which perpetuate patriarchy; it creates and strengthens the divide between private and public, it restricts women's mobility and growth and it reproduces male dominance.

### 3. Control over women's sexuality

This is another very important area of women's subordination. Women are obliged to provide sexual services to their men according to their needs and desires. A whole moral and legal regime exists to restrict the expression of women's sexuality outside marriage in every society, whereas customarily, a blind eye is turned towards male promiscuity. At the other end of the spectrum men may force their wives, daughters or other women in their control into prostitution, i.e. trading their sexuality. Rape and the threat of rape is another way in which women's sexuality is dominated through an invocation of "shame" and "honour". In order to control women's sexuality their dress, behaviour and mobility are carefully monitored by familial, social, cultural and religious codes of behaviour.

A radical feminist analysis says that women under patriarchy are not only mothers, they are also sexual slaves, and patriarchal ideology typically opposes women as sexual beings to women as mothers. With the partial exception of mothers, the male culture defines women as sexual objects for male pleasure. According to it, rape may not have existed in every society but it is a defining feature of patriarchy. It sees rape as an effective political device, a political act of oppression exercised by members of a powerful class on members of a powerless class. Radical feminists also focus their attention on institutionalised prostitution, pornography and forced heterosexuality as other examples of control over women's sexuality under patriarchy.

### 4. Women's mobility

In order to control women's sexuality, production and reproduction,

men need to control women's mobility. The imposition of parda, restrictions on leaving the domestic space, a strict separation of private and public, limits on interaction between the sexes, and so on, all control women's mobility and freedom in ways that are unique to them—that is, they are gender-specific, because men are not subjected to the same constraints.

### 5. Property and other economic resources

Most property and other productive resources are controlled by men and they pass from one man to another, usually from father to son. Even where women have the legal right to inherit such assets, a whole array of customary practices, emotional pressures, social sanctions and, sometimes, plain violence, prevent them from acquiring actual control over them. In other cases, personal laws curtail their rights, rather than enhance them. In all cases, they are disadvantaged. This is amply illustrated by UN statistics: "Women do more than 60 per cent of the hours of work done in the world, but they get 10 per cent of the world's income and own one per cent of the world's property."

Q. You earlier said that all economic, political, religious, social and cultural institutions are by and large controlled by men. Can you elaborate?

A. An analysis of the main institutions in society shows that they are all patriarchal in nature. The family, religion, media, the law are the pillars of a patriarchal system and structure. This well-knit and deep-rooted system makes patriarchy seem invincible; it also makes it seem natural. Let us deal with each patriarchal institution separately.

#### (i) The family

The institution of the family, that basic unit of society, is probably the most patriarchal. A man is considered the head of the household; within the family he controls women's sexuality, labour or production, reproduction and mobility. There is a hierarchy in which man is superior and dominant, woman is inferior and subordinate. The family is also important for socialising the next generation in patriarchal values. It is within the family that we learn the first lessons in hierarchy, subordination, discrimination. Boys learn to assert and dominate, girls to submit, to expect unequal treatment. Again, although the extent and nature of male control may differ in different families, it is never absent.



According to Gerda Lerner, the family plays an important role in creating a hierarchical system and keeping order in society. She writes, "The family not merely mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order."<sup>2</sup>

#### (ii) Religion

Most modern religions are patriarchal, defining male authority as supreme. They present a patriarchal order as being supernaturally ordained. The feminine principle of power which existed before the evolution of institutionalised religions has been gradually weakened, goddesses have been replaced by gods. All major religions have been created, interpreted and controlled by upper class and upper caste men; they have defined morality, ethics, behaviour and even law; they have laid down the duties and rights of men and women, the relationship between them. They have influenced state policy and continue to be a major force in most societies; in South Asia their power and presence are enormous. In India, for instance, in spite of the fact that it is a secular country, a person's legal identity with regard to marriage, divorce and inheritance is determined by his or her religion.

There is sufficient analysis now to show how almost every religion considers women to be inferior, impure, sinful; how they have created double standards of morality and behaviour; how religious laws often justify the use of violence against "deviant" women; how inequitable relationships are sanctioned and legitimised by recourse to "religious" creeds and fundamental tenets.

#### (iii) The legal system

The legal system in most countries is both patriarchal and bourgeois, i.e., it favours men and economically powerful classes. Laws pertaining to family, marriage and inheritance are very closely linked to the patriarchal control over property. In South Asia every legal system considers man the head of the household, the natural guardian of children and the primary inheritor of property. Systems of jurisprudence, the judiciary, judges and lawyers are, for the most part, patriarchal in their attitudes and in their interpretation of the law.

#### (iv) The economic system and economic institutions

Within a patriarchal economic system, men control the economic

institutions, own most property, direct economic activity, and determine the value of different productive activities. Most productive work done by women is neither recognised nor paid for; their contribution to the creation of surplus through what Maria Mies has called "shadow work" is completely discounted, and housework is not evaluated at all. Moreover, women's role as producers and rearers of children and of labour power is not considered an economic contribution at all.

#### (v) Political systems and institutions

Almost all political institutions in society, at all levels, are male dominated, from village councils to parliament. There are only a handful of women in political parties or organisations which decide the fate of our countries. When some women do assume important political positions (Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Khaleda Zia) they do so, at least initially, because of their association with some strong male political personalities, and they function within the structures and principles laid down by men. In spite of being the only region in the world that has had so many women heads of state, the percentage of women in parliament has never and nowhere been more than ten per cent, in South Asia.

#### (vi) Media

Media are very important tools in the hands of upper class, upper caste men to propagate class and gender ideology. From films and television to magazines, newspapers, radio, the portrayal of women is stereotypical and distorted. Messages about male superiority and female inferiority are repeated constantly; violence against women is rampant, especially in films. As with other sectors, women are highly under-represented in the media, professionally, and biases in reporting, coverage, advertising and messaging are still very sexist.

#### (vii) Educational institutions and knowledge systems

Ever since learning and education became formal and institutionalised, men have assumed control over whole areas of knowledge: philosophy, theology, law, literature, the arts, science. This male hegemony over the creation of knowledge marginalised women's knowledge and experiences, their expertise and aspirations.

In many cultures women were systematically prevented from studying the scriptures, and even today there are very few who are



allowed to reinterpret religious and legal texts. Gerda Lerner says,

We have seen how men appropriated and then transformed the major symbols of female power: the power of the Mother Goddess and the fertility goddess. We have seen how men constructed theologies based on the counterfactual metaphor of male procreativity and redefined female existence in a narrow and sexually dependent way. We have seen, finally, how the very metaphors for gender have expressed the male as norm and the female as deviant; the male as whole and powerful, the female as unfinished, mutilated and lacking in autonomy. On the basis of such symbolic constructs... men have explained the world in their own terms and defined the important questions so as to make themselves the centre of discourse.<sup>3</sup>

According to some feminists, patriarchal thought and knowledge are characterised by divisions, distinctions, oppositions and dualisms. Patriarchy, they claim, opposes mind to matter, self to other, reason to emotion, and enquirer to object of enquiry. In each of these oppositions one side of the dualism is valued more than the other. Patriarchal knowledge systems are also seen to emphasise specialisation, to be narrowly compartmentalised and fragmented and unable to see the wholeness of phenomena.<sup>4</sup>

Male dominated knowledge and education have created and perpetuated patriarchal ideology, created what Sylvia Walby calls "a variety of gender-differentiated forms of subjectivity".<sup>5</sup> Men and women behave, think, aspire differently because they have been taught to think of masculinity and femininity in ways which condition difference.

**Q. Don't some feminists believe that there is institutionalised violence against women in many societies?**

**A. Yes, they do and according to them different kinds of violence may be used to control and subjugate women; such violence by men may even be considered legitimate.** In fact, violence against women is so pervasive that Sylvia Walby calls male violence a structure. She writes, "Male violence constitutes a further structure despite its apparently individualistic and diverse form. It is behaviour routinely experienced by women from men. Male violence is systematically

condoned and legitimated by the state's refusal to intervene against it except in exceptional instances."

Violence against women was one of the first issues taken up by the international women's movement for discussion and analysis. Feminist scholarship has theorised this violence in many ways, all of which are agreed on at least one point: that it is systematic and institutionalised.

According to Mary Daly, the rulers of patriarchy (males with power) wage an increasing war against life itself. "The state of patriarchy is the state of war, in which periods of recuperation from and preparations for battle are euphemistically called 'peace'." For Daly, the custom of widow-burning in India, the Chinese ritual of foot-binding, the genital mutilation of young girls in Africa, the massacre of women as witches in "Renaissance" Europe, gynocide (female killing) under the guise of American gynaecology and psychotherapy are all examples of female hating and violence against women, practiced in different cultures of the world.<sup>6</sup>

In South Asia violence against women has been extensively documented and commented upon and attempts have been made to see the relationship between violence and the economic exploitation of women, violence and sexuality, violence and caste and class, etc. In a conference of autonomous women's organisations (Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan) held in India in 1988, the following resolution was passed:

Women face specific forms of violence: rape and other forms of sexual abuse, female foeticide, witch-killing, sati, dowry murders, wife-beating. Such violence and the continued sense of insecurity that is instilled in women as a result keeps them bound to the home, economically exploited and socially suppressed. In the ongoing struggles against violence in the family, society and the state, we recognize that the state is one of the main sources of violence and stands behind the violence committed by men against women in the family, the work-place and the neighbourhood. For these reasons a mass women's movement should focus on the struggles against them in the home or out of it.<sup>7</sup>



Q. Can we say that male control over all these institutions benefits them directly?

A. Generally speaking, we can. Men benefit not only in terms of greater privilege and control, but economically and materially as well. Patriarchy has a material basis. This is what Sylvia Walby means when she says women are the producing class and men are the expropriating class. Heidi Hartmann, a feminist scholar who sees a very close link between patriarchy and capitalism says:

The material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men's control over women's labour power. Men maintain this control by excluding women from access to some essential productive resources (in capitalist societies, for example, jobs that pay living wages) and by restricting women's sexuality. Monogamous heterosexual marriage is one relatively recent and efficient form that seems to allow men to control both these areas. Controlling women's access to resources and their sexuality, in turn, allows men to control women's labour power, both for the purpose of serving men in many personal and sexual ways and for the purpose of rearing children. The services women render men, and which exonerate men from having to perform many unpleasant tasks, occur outside as well as inside the family setting. . . The material base of patriarchy, then, does not rest solely on child bearing in the family but on all the social structures that enable men to control women's labour.<sup>8</sup>

6 Q. Are women completely powerless in patriarchal systems?

A. In general men hold power in all the important institutions of a patriarchal society; this however does not imply that women are totally powerless or totally without rights, influence and resources under patriarchy. In fact, no unequal system can continue without the participation of the oppressed, some of whom derive some benefits from it. This is true of patriarchies as well. Women have risen to power by becoming queens or prime ministers, have occasionally been in control, have wrested benefits in greater or smaller measure. But all this does not change the fact that the system is male-dominated -- women are merely accommodated in it in a variety of ways. To give a parallel, in a capitalist society workers play a very

important role, they may even participate in management to some extent, but this does not mean that they are, in control.

Gerda Lerner makes a telling point:

Men and women live on a stage, on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance. The play cannot go on without both kinds of performers. Neither of them "contributes" more or less to the whole; neither is marginal or dispensable. But the stage set is conceived, painted, defined by men. Men have written the play, have directed the show, interpreted the meanings of action. They have assigned themselves the most interesting, most heroic parts, giving women the supporting roles.

In other words the problem is not with what women do or are, it is with how they are valued and who has the right to assign value to people. It is not that women are absolutely excluded from power or prestige in patriarchy — the problem is with the framework itself, and the framework is determined by men.

Q. But women also support the rule of men. Without their cooperation patriarchy would not exist. Why do they do this?

A. For a variety of complex reasons, some of which are familiar. We know, for example, that without the help of local soldiers, policemen, civil servants, a handful of British rulers could not have managed to rule large countries and continents. Without the tacit cooperation of slaves, slavery would not have lasted for so long. It is the same with women. They are very much part of the system, they have internalised its values, they are not free of patriarchal ideology, and as we said earlier, they obviously derive some benefits from it too. An equally complex set of relationships keeps their co-operation—or complicity as some feminists call it — active. According to Gerda Lerner:

This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining 'respectability' and 'deviance' according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class



privileges to conforming women. . . a form of patriarchy best described as *paternalistic dominance*.

Women have always shared the class privileges of men of their class as long as they were under 'the protection' of a man. For women, other than those of the lower classes, the 'reciprocal agreement' went like this: in exchange for your sexual, economic, political, and intellectual subordination to men you may share the power of men of your class to exploit men and women of the lower class.<sup>9</sup>

In order to retain privilege, women are continually renegotiating their bargaining power, so to speak, sometimes at the cost of other women. But it is important that we look at the overall system and analyse the reasons behind this. It is true that women often treat their sons better, deprive their daughters of education, restrict their freedom, mistreat daughters-in-law and so on. All this needs to be analysed in the context of the respective power and position men and women have in the family and in society. A rural woman explained this very graphically. She said, "Men in our families are like the sun, they have light of their own (they own resources, have income, they are mobile, have the freedom to take decisions, etc.) Women are like satellites without any light of their own. They shine only if and when the sun's light touches them. This is why women have to constantly compete with each other to have a bigger share of sunlight, because without this light there is no life."

**Q. Do all men benefit as men from patriarchy ?**

**A.** The answer is yes and no. Yes, because men, whether they want to or not, enjoy certain privileges as men. Even working class men who are powerless vis-a-vis bourgeois men, have power over their women. In South Asia, all men enjoy greater mobility, access to resources, as men, even to basics like food and health. In other ways, as discussed earlier, social, religious, legal and cultural practices privilege them as men, and consequently, accord them more rights in practically every area.

But in another sense men are also disadvantaged by patriarchy. Like women they are pushed into stereotypes, into playing certain roles; they are expected to behave in a particular way, whether they want to or not. They too are obliged to fulfil social and other

obligations that require them to function in a specific way. Men who are gentle and unaggressive are harassed and mocked for being sissies; those who deal on equal terms with their wives are "hen-pecked". I know a man who was forever subjected to ridicule because he was training to be a Kathak dancer and was fond of sewing and knitting, all feminine activities, unfit for a "real" man.

Men, too, are denied genuine choices: they do not have the option to step out of the mainstream, relinquish the role of provider and protector. Eyebrows are raised in disbelief and contempt if a young, educated man says he "does not work", he looks after the house. "Such answers befit women, not men", he is told.

But this dehumanisation can in no way be compared to or equated with the subordination of women, for two important reasons—men do not, as a whole, experience it as such, and they are not discriminated against or disabled substantially because of it.

**Q. What about matriarchal societies or communities like the Nairs in Kerala?**

**A.** Actually there is no historical evidence of the existence of matriarchy, anywhere. Sometimes people confuse *matrilineal* or *matrilocal* systems with matriarchy. What existed amongst the Nairs of Kerala was matrilineality and matrilocality. It is important to distinguish between these terms. In a matrilineal society, the lineage is traced through the mother, i.e., property passes from mothers to daughters. Such communities may also be matrilocal, i.e. the husband comes to live with the wife who continues to live in her own home. Although the position of women is much better in matrilineal and matrilocal societies, they are still not matriarchal. In a matriarchal society, women would be in a dominant position, in control of state power, religious institutions, economic production, trade, etc. Even in matriarchal societies real control is in the hands of brothers and uncles, but there is no denying the fact that the status of women in such systems is far higher than it would be otherwise.

The matrilineal, matrilocal system which existed among the Nairs of Kerala and in the north-east of India has been weakening and disappearing under the pressure of patriarchal ideology, legal systems which have displaced customary and community diversity, and the pervasiveness of "modernity", which demands uniformity. Their existence, however, proves that there can be and have been



different ways of organising families, inheritance, residence, labour, etc., and that there is nothing fixed or immutable about a particular order. It is, after all, man-made, not pre-ordained.

Q. Nevertheless, you seem to be implying that patriarchy has become more powerful in say the last hundred years or so. Is this so?

A. It is not easy to give a clear-cut answer to this question. It is a complex issue and cannot be generalised for all societies or communities. In some ways women have definitely gained more rights (the right to vote, to inherit, for example); more opportunities (for education, training, jobs, travel), some participation in political decision-making. There is also much greater awareness about women's oppression and the need to tackle it systematically. Women themselves have organised for change. But then there are other ways in which women seem to be worse off — the incidence of violence against them has increased sharply, their objectification by the media and the commercialisation of women's sexuality have reached alarming proportions. In India, among communities where dowry was non-existent it is now being practiced; where female infanticide was unknown, girls are being killed. The project of development and modernisation itself — which some feminists see as intrinsically patriarchal, whether communist, socialist or capitalist — seems to militate against women and marginalise them further.

In agriculture, men have gained more technical education and skills, access to credit and markets, membership in cooperatives and, as a result, acquired more control over decision-making and resources. Women continue to carry the main burden of agricultural work but with much less decision-making power or control over resources. Then, in India, the sex-ratio has been steadily declining in women's disfavour since 1921. In 1921 there were 975 women per 1000 men; in 1991 there are only 929. Globalisation of trade and the international accumulation of capital have radically altered women's role in the labour force, again often to their disadvantage.

Examining the changes in the patriarchal system in Britain, Sylvia Walby points out certain features which seem to be applicable to South Asia as well. She says:

There have been changes both in the degree and form of patriarchy in Britain. Britain has seen a movement from a

private to a public form of patriarchy over the last century. Private patriarchy is based upon household production as the main site of women's oppression. Public patriarchy is based principally in public sites such as employment and the state. The household does not cease to be a patriarchal structure in the public form but it is no longer the chief site. In private patriarchy expropriation of women's labour takes place primarily by individual patriarchs, in public patriarchy it is collective.

On the question of whether there has been progress or regress in women's position, she says, "Patriarchy is not a historical constant. Modifications in gender relations over the last century or so have been interpreted variously as progress, regress and involving no overall change. Liberals typically define them as progress; Marxists as regress followed by stasis, and radical feminists as embracing no significant change."<sup>10</sup>