**ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies**
July-September 2026 3(2)
https://shodhsamajik.com/

Original Article

# THE POSITION OF MEN IN THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL SYSTEM: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS THROUGH THE LENS OF INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS

**Deepak Rathour** [1*], **Dr. Jitendra Kumar Tiwari** [2]
[1] Research Scholar (Sociology), Bundelkhand University, Jhansi, India
[2] Head, Department of Sociology, Bundelkhand College, Jhansi, India

## ABSTRACT

Patriarchy is conventionally theorised as a system that privileges men over women, yet contemporary gender scholarship increasingly recognises that patriarchal norms also discipline, burden and sometimes marginalise men. Drawing on feminist theory, Indian knowledge traditions and recent empirical work on masculinities, the paper examines the position of men in the Indian patriarchal social system. It first revisits classic definitions of patriarchy from Lerner and Walby and situates them within S. C. Dube's framework of plural Indian traditions, emphasising how gender relations are embedded in layered cultural formations. It then analyses classical texts such as the Kamasutra, Dharmashastra literature and Brahmanical law codes to show how ideals of the "perfect man" were constructed around virility, lineage, moral guardianship and control, while some indigenous and tribal traditions may have supported alternative, more cooperative masculine roles, though this requires community-specific evidence. The paper reviews selected survey and interpretive studies, recent work on men's role strain, stigma, and gendered vulnerability, to argue that patriarchy operates as a dual-edged structure: it confers institutional advantages on men while imposing rigid emotional and behavioural scripts that generate anxiety, isolation, and role strain. A critical synthesis of recent literature reveals key research gaps around men's subjectivities, life-course embodiment, mental health, and the under-explored interface between masculinities and Indian knowledge systems. The paper concludes that Indian sociology and gender studies must re-conceptualise patriarchy as a relational, historically layered system in which men's transformation is integral to any project of gender justice.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Masculinity, Nagaraka, Indian Knowledge Traditions, Economic Uncertainty, Perfect Man, Dual-Edge Structure

## INTRODUCTION

Classical feminist scholarship defines patriarchy as a historically constructed system of male dominance, institutionalised through family, economy, polity, and culture. Gerda Lerner describes patriarchy as "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general" Lerner (1986). Sylvia Walby offers a related but more differentiated model, theorising patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women across six overlapping domains: household production, paid employment, the state, male violence, sexuality, and culture Walby (1990).

These formulations remain foundational, but by centring women's subordination they can leave men relatively invisible as subjects of the same normative order. Recent work on men and masculinities in India complicates this invisibility by showing how

*Corresponding Author:
**Email address:** Deepak Rathour (deepakrathour383@gmail.com), Dr. Jitendra Kumar Tiwari (drjitendratiwari.bkd@gmail.com)

**Received:** 28 July 2026; **Accepted:** 19 August 2026; **Published:** 12 September 2026
**DOI:** 10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v3.i2.2026.156
**Page Number:** 163-167
**Journal Title:** ShodhSamajik: Journal of Social Studies
**Journal Abbreviation:** ShodhSamajik J. Soc. Stud.
**Online ISSN:** 3049-2319, **Print ISSN:** 3108-2009
**Publisher:** Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India
**Conflict of Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
**Authors' Contributions:** Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.
**Transparency:** The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.
**Copyright:** © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

hegemonic ideals of manhood like breadwinner, protector, and controller, are prescriptive roles that many men struggle to inhabit, particularly under conditions of economic uncertainty and rapid social change. At the same time, Indian sociology has long insisted that gender relations cannot be read off a single template; they must be situated within the country's layered social and cultural formations, including classical, folk, peasant, tribal, colonial, and emergent national form that shape everyday life differently across region, caste, and class Dube (1990).

The paper asks three linked questions: how do classical Indian texts conceptualise ideal manhood and male authority; how do contemporary patriarchal structures both privilege and burden men; and how might Indian sociological frameworks help reconceive patriarchy as a system that shapes men's emotional, relational, and moral lives alongside women's, without losing sight of the asymmetry between the two?

## THEORETICAL FRAMING: PATRIARCHY AND MASCULINITY

Feminist theory has long used the concept of hegemonic masculinity Connell (1995) to explain how a particular model of manhood becomes culturally dominant and gets built into family life, work, and the state. In the Indian context, this framework can help explain how men are often disciplined by ideals of toughness, control, heterosexuality, and filial duty. A recent study of Indian men's experiences of gender-based discrimination found that hegemonic masculinity does not only legitimise male power; it also channels men into emotionally restrictive roles, penalising deviation and generating real experiences of stigma, anxiety, and marginalisation among men who cannot or will not conform Dochania and Dochania (2025).

Men's practices are, of course, far from uniform. They are shaped by caste, class, region, religion, and age, and Indian scholarship on masculinity increasingly treats "masculinities" as plural which include hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, and marginalised, rather than as a single discourse. Historical work on early India makes a parallel point: masculinity itself was internally differentiated, constructed in opposition to femininity as well as to other, "deficient" forms of manhood, and organised as much by varna and function as by sex Shah (2023).

The analysis here adopts a relational perspective: patriarchy is a system of gendered social structures within which masculinities are produced, negotiated, and contested. In broad historical and sociological terms, men have often benefited from patriarchy through greater political representation, stronger claims to authority within households, and wider social freedom than women. At the same time, they are expected to continuously conform to dominant ideals of masculinity in order to maintain their social status and avoid social sanctions. This framing makes it possible to examine the costs of patriarchy for men including emotional isolation, risk-taking, exposure to violence, and, more recently, legal and reputational vulnerability without diluting attention to women's persistent structural disadvantage.

## INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

Classical texts and kama-sastric discourse Indian knowledge traditions are plural and layered, spanning Sanskritic sastric texts, regional literatures, and a range of local and indigenous epistemologies. Texts concerned with kama (desire), dharma (duty), and artha (power and wealth) offer rich material on how masculinity was imagined in early India. Sukhdev Singh's study of the nagaraka (the cultivated urban male) in the Kamasutra shows that masculinity in the text is presented as malleable rather than fixed: it is built and refashioned through economic stability, aesthetic cultivation, social reputation, and mastery of erotic and conversational arts, and it declines when economic standing declines Singh et al. (2021).

Singh's reading is significant because it identifies internal tension within the text itself. The text also refers to differentiated social and erotic roles, including the vesya (courtesan) and persons described as tṛtiya prakṛti (third nature), which complicate any singular model of masculine authority. Singh's interpretation suggests that the text registers anxiety around women's participation in domains of erotic knowledge, indicating that masculine authority is not entirely self-secure even within a male-centred text Singh et al. (2021).

Dharmashastra, Brahmanical patriarchy, and the "perfect man" Dharmashastra literature and Brahmanical law codes provide an altogether different, and much more explicitly normative, model of male authority in the family and the community. Uma Chakravarti's influential work of reading what she calls "Brahmanical patriarchy" is that caste and gender hierarchy formed part of the condition for, and not, patrilineal succession and caste: domination of the sexuality of the upper-caste woman was crucial for maintaining both forms of hierarchy, and that it was the role of women to act as "gateways" to policed caste bounds Chakravarti (1993). This reading complicates readings of patriarchal suppression as exclusively concerned about gender as from the start it was linked with caste privilege, such that the men who gained most under these laws was themselves a narrow-caste category of person.

Within this textual tradition, the ideal man is portrayed as a virile householder who fathers sons, protects those dependent on him, and upholds the values of self-control, generosity, and adherence to caste dharma. Shalini Shah's historical work on masculinity in ancient India extends this picture by showing that the sex-gender system of the period was organised around a masculinist centre: male bodies and roles were treated as normatively central, while non-normative men including ascetics and those regarded as unable

to procreate, protect, or control, were both included in and stigmatised within the same discourse. The "perfect man", in other words, was defined partly by contrast with men who were seen to fall short of it Shah (2023).

Continuity and variation across Indian traditions It is worth being cautious here rather than overreaching. Indian gender scholarship generally holds that Brahmanical, textual models of masculinity do not describe the whole of Indian society; caste, region, and community produce real variation in how gender roles are organised, and some communities are known to depart from a strict patrilineal, patrilocal template. Establishing the details of that variation with confidence, however, calls for engagement with dedicated ethnographic and historical literature on specific communities rather than a general claim asserted in passing. The paper does not attempt that fuller comparative account and flags it instead as a genuine limitation and a direction for further research.

## MEN'S CONTEMPORARY POSITION UNDER INDIAN PATRIARCHY

**Empirical evidence of men, violence, and role strain** Contemporary empirical research helps show how patriarchal norms operate in men's everyday lives in India. The ICRW–UNFPA study on masculinity, intimate partner violence, and son preference surveyed 9,205 men and 3,158 women aged 18–49 across seven Indian states including Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, using a masculinity index built around men's controlling behaviour and gender-inequitable attitudes Nanda et al. (2014). The study found that men who more strongly endorse rigid, controlling masculine norms are more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence and to express a preference for sons, and that these attitudes are closely linked to broader patterns of daughter discrimination Nanda et al. (2014)..

The same body of research points to the flip side of this picture: many men report real pressure to fulfil provider and protector roles under conditions of unemployment and economic uncertainty, which in turn is associated with frustration, alcohol use, and household conflict. This aligns with the findings of Dochania and Dochania (2025), who show that men who do not conform to dominant ideals of masculinity because of disability, unemployment, or non-heteronormative sexuality often experience discrimination and humiliation. These experiences are more likely to arise from other men and institutional structures than from women. Patriarchy, on this evidence, is not simply a male-versus-female binary; it is a stratified system that rewards men who embody its dominant norms and penalises those who do not, while consistently positioning women in a subordinate role relative to men as a category Dochania and Dochania (2025).

**Men as both beneficiaries and subjects of patriarchal control** Men's position under Indian patriarchy is therefore paradoxical rather than simply advantaged. Across many historical and institutional settings in India, men have held advantages in politics, property, and legal authority that women have been denied or granted only unevenly. At the same time, the same study highlights emerging vulnerabilities among men, including legal disputes following marital breakdown, mental health challenges associated with failing to fulfil expected social roles, and social isolation experienced by those who are unable to meet the traditional provider ideal Dochania and Dochania (2025). These pressures have also contributed to the emergence of a men's rights discourse in India, which frequently frames men as vulnerable to the misuse of gender-protective laws; this claim, however, remains contested and requires careful empirical scrutiny.

## PATRIARCHY AS A DUAL-EDGED STRUCTURE

Drawing these strands together, patriarchy in India can be theorised as a dual-edged structure: a set of gendered social relations that simultaneously privileges and disciplines men. On the one edge, it provides men with structural advantages, including greater political representation, historically stronger claims to inheritance and family authority in many patriarchal settings, greater social legitimacy and mobility in public spaces across many patriarchal settings, and cultural legitimacy as authority figures within the family. On the other, the same arrangements restrict men's emotional expression, narrow their acceptable scripts of success and honour, and generate real anxiety when men cannot meet normative standards of provision and control.

The textual material discussed above suggests that the ideal of the "perfect man" in Indian tradition combined multiple demanding roles. He was expected to be a virile householder, a moral guardian, and, in some traditions, a spiritual aspirant. Meeting all of these expectations was likely beyond the reach of many men, even during the periods in which these texts were composed. Contemporary social change, including economic restructuring, media expansion, and legal reform, appears to have intensified uncertainty around masculine roles for some men, which have expanded women's rights and visibility while leaving many men uncertain of their place in a changing gender order. Men respond to this uncertainty in different ways. Some turn to violence or social withdrawal, while others adopt more egalitarian or, alternatively, more reactionary versions of masculinity.

Reading patriarchy as dual-edged helps avoid two related errors: romanticising men as victims in a way that obscures women continued structural disadvantage, and treating men as a monolithic oppressor class in a way that obscures the very real constraints patriarchal norms place on men themselves. From this perspective, patriarchy is a relational and historically layered system that can be traced from the sastric texts to contemporary survey data. It shapes gendered expectations for everyone, but its effects are distributed unevenly.

## IMPLICATION FOR INDIAN SOCIOLOGY AND GENDER STUDIES

This analysis has several implications for Indian sociology and gender studies. First, it argues for a broadened conception of patriarchy that explicitly incorporates men's position as subjects of gender norms, without equating men's experiences with women's. This is consistent with the emerging Indian literature on masculinities, which treats gender as a relational system in which the analysis suggests that male privilege and male burden are relationally co-produced within patriarchal arrangements. Dochania and Dochania (2025).

Second, Indian knowledge traditions supply both legitimising narratives for patriarchal masculinity and resources for its critique. Texts such as the Kamasutra are not simply repositories of patriarchal norms; Singh et al. (2021) reading shows that even this text registers instability in its own construction of masculine authority, particularly around the entry of women into domains of erotic knowledge. Recovering this internal complexity is useful for contemporary debate, which too often treats "tradition" as a single, settled thing.

Third, the empirical focus on men's experience under patriarchy has direct relevance for policy and intervention design. Programmes aimed at reducing gender-based violence increasingly try to engage men directly rather than treating them only as the object of restriction, but the evidence reviewed here suggests such programmes need to reckon with structural pressures such as economic uncertainty, rather than framing men's violence purely as a matter of individual attitude change Nanda et al. (2014).

Finally, by examining men's position within patriarchy through Indian textual traditions and empirical evidence rather than relying solely on European or North American frameworks, this paper contributes in a modest way to contribute to ongoing efforts to provincialize Euro-American gender theory and develop concepts grounded in Indian social though. It treats Indian sources as a foundation for developing original theoretical insights, including the dual nature of patriarchy outlined above, rather than merely using them as case material to fit existing frameworks.

## WAY FORWARD

Given the dual-edged nature of patriarchy, any meaningful way forward in India must simultaneously challenge men's institutional privileges and transform harmful constructions of masculinity Walby (1990), Dochania and Dochania (2025). At the societal level, early life-skills and gender-equity education in schools and community programmes should normalise emotional expression, non-violent conflict resolution and shared care work for boys as much as for girls UNESCO. (2024), Verma (2016), Talash Society. (2018). At the legal–policy level, debates on gender-neutral drafting and safeguards against misuse can be guided by constitutional morality, protecting all victims while retaining focused protections for structurally vulnerable groups Kaur and Malik, (2024). At the level of everyday practices, feminist-aligned initiatives need to create safe spaces for men, critically reflect on and transform harmful masculine norms, and experiment with egalitarian, caring masculinities in family, workplace, and public life International Center for Research on Women, and Nirantar. (2025), Sastry (2018). Finally, research and advocacy must converge so that men's transformation is treated as integral, rather than optional, to gender justice and democratic social reform UNESCO. (2024), Asian Development Bank. (2024).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

Asian Development Bank. (2024). Engaging Men and Transforming Masculinities to Achieve Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Asian Development Bank.

Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State. Economic and Political Weekly, 28(14), 579–585.

Connell, R. W. (1995). Masculinities. University of California Press.

Dochania, R., and Dochania, A. (2025). Burdened by Masculinity: Exploring Men's Discrimination in India Through the Lens of Hegemonic Masculinity. Journal of Psychosexual Health, 7(4). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/26318318251334872

Dube, S. C. (1990). Indian Society. National Book Trust.

International Center for Research on Women, and Nirantar. (2025). Men, Masculinities, and Feminism: A Literature Review Exploring Theoretical Approaches for Gender Equality with a Focus on India. ICRW/ALIGN Platform.

Kaur, H., and Malik, V. (2024). SANF in India: A Juridical Reflection on men's Rights and Gender Neutrality. Innovation and Integrative Research Center Journal, 2(12), 121–134. https://dx.doi.org/10.29121/ShodhSamajik.v3.i2.2026.156

Lerner, G. (1986). The Creation of Patriarchy. Oxford University Press.

Nanda, P., Gautam, A., Verma, R., Khanna, A., Khan, N., Brahme, D., Boyle, S., and Kumar, S. (2014). Study on Masculinity, Intimate Partner Violence and Son Preference in India. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) & UNFPA.

Sastry, M. (2018). 10 Things Men Can do to Dismantle Patriarchy in the Time of #MeToo. Feminism in India.

Shah, S. (2023). Men, Masculinism and Masculinities: Ancient Indian Antecedents. Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 30(1), 1–22.

Singh, A., Chokhandre, P., Singh, A. K., Barker, K. M., Kumar, K., McDougal, L., James, K. S., and Raj, A. (2021). Development of the India Patriarchy Index: Validation and testing of temporal and spatial patterning. Social Indicators Research, 158(3), 989–1015.

Singh, S. (2021). Nāgaraka in the Kāmasūtra: An Introduction to Masculinity in Early India. Masculinities and Social Change, 10(1), 54–76.

Talash Society. (2018). Masculinity: Developing an Understanding – Desk Research. Talash Society.

UNESCO. (2024). Engaging Men and Boys: A Report on Pathways to Gender Equality in India (Transforming MEN'talities). UNESCO.

Verma, R. (2016). Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality in India: Policy and Programme lessons. ICRW Working Paper Series, 4(1), 1–32.

Walby, S. (1990). Theorizing Patriarchy. Basil Blackwell.Walby, S. (1990). Theorizing Patriarchy. Basil Blackwell.