



## **FIRES OF CONTROL: PATRIARCHY IN INDIA'S EVERYDAY ECONOMY**

### **ABSTRACT:**

'Patriarchy' in Indian society is no more a mere structural issue, it a pulsing fact and a lived reality. And sadly it is often revealed through extreme acts of 'gendered' violences, sometimes in isolation, while in others in form of organized crimes. This article was inspired by a recent Supreme Court decision in *Shankar vs. State of Rajasthan*, which upheld the life sentence of a man who burned his wife alive over a domestic dispute. An act so cruel at same time, unfortunately so common for an average Indian reader that it was casually brushed off by many who came across it. But in reality, decisions like these underscores how entrenched patriarchal norms continue to shape both private and economic life of women in the nation. This article, situates such incidents within a broader historical and economic framework, arguing that despite legal and developmental progress, patriarchy still remains embedded in India's social as well as economic 'institutions'.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Supreme Court's decision in the matter of *Shankar vs. State of Rajasthan*, reveals a brutality that compels a deeper examination of patriarchy beyond mere abstract theory. This case first came to light in October 2012, where a man in Rajasthan, in an inebriated state, set his newly wedded wife on fire after demanding that she cook for him, an act the Supreme Court later described "*not as an aberration but as a reflection of a diseased social order*".<sup>1</sup> In its 2026 judgment, the highest Court observed that 'patriarchy still deeply permeates everyday life,' with domestic violence and coercion functioning as 'normalized expressions of gender hierarchy'. This decision and framing is significant because it links individual acts of violence to systemic conditions rather than treating them as isolated crimes.

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<sup>1</sup> Choudhury, Ritwik. "Patriarchy a Daily Reality: Supreme Court Upholds Life Term of Man Who Killed Wife over Food." *Bar and Bench - Indian Legal News*, 7 Apr. 2026, <https://www.barandbench.com/news/patriarchy-a-daily-reality-supreme-court-upholds-life-term-of-man-who-killed-wife-over-food>.



To understand this continuity better, one must study modern patriarchy within its age-old historical foundations, through the very texts that are considered as ‘guiding forces’ of the modern States. Prescriptive texts such as the *Manusmriti*, one of the widely known and referred ‘*smiritis*’ very clearly and categorically, institutionalized women’s dependence and expressed their ‘inferior’ status as compared to men, with justifications in order to ensure its continuity. Similarly, practices like child marriage, purdah, and widowhood restrictions also curtailed their autonomy and economic participation. Although legal reforms from the colonial and post-independence periods have up to some extent formally dismantled many of these practices, the underlying ‘logic of male authority’ persisted, merely adapting itself to contemporary economic and social arrangements.

### **EMBEDDED INEQUALITIES: PATRIARCHY WITHIN INDIA’S ECONOMIC STRUCTURE**

The Supreme Court’s observations in the *Shankar case*, highlight how patriarchal norms continue to govern household dynamics, which in turn also shape economic outcomes. The judges in this matter explicitly noted that even as gender roles evolve in urban areas, in rural and semi-urban contexts “*authority within the household is still overwhelmingly male,*” and women’s autonomy remains conditional. This has direct economic implications, for e.g. women, even when employed, are expected to perform the bulk of ‘unpaid’ domestic labour, including but never really limited to cooking and caregiving. According to a survey conducted by the Government of India, Indian women spend significantly more hours on unpaid work than men, once again highlighting their limited participation in the formal employment. This data also aligns with the documented decline in female labour force participation from 42.7% in 2004-05 to 23.3% in 2017-18, again illustrating how social expectations translate into economic exclusion<sup>23</sup>.

The facts of the *Shankar case* starkly illustrate how deeply normalized such expectations are. The conflict that led to lethal violence arose from the expectation (obligation) that the wife must immediately return and prepare food, even after leaving due to prior abuse. The Court’s

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank, *Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) – India*.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017–18* (Govt. of India 2019).

acknowledgment that such acts are symptomatic of broader social conditioning connects domestic labour expectations directly to patriarchal control. This reflects a wider cultural framework in which women's roles are defined in relation to service within the household, limiting their economic agency and reinforcing dependence.

Similarly, patriarchal preferences also shape the demographic and human capital outcomes. A preference for 'son' ("*ghar ka chirag*") despite the *Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994*, further contributes to a skewed child sex ratio<sup>4</sup>. (estimated at around 917 girls per 1,000 boys in recent data)<sup>5</sup>. Further, the notion of daughters as '*paraya dhan*' also discourages long-term investment in their education and economic independence. Simultaneously, institutional participation remains constrained, women's representation in the Lok Sabha hovers around *10-15% only* and even in local governance, proxy representation through '*Panch Pati*' arrangements undermines substantive empowerment. These patterns reveal how patriarchy operates not only within households but also across political and economic institutions.

Violence remains a critical mechanism through which patriarchal control is enforced. The Supreme Court, in its postscript, cited over *4.48 lakh* 'recorded crimes' against women in 2023 underscoring the scale of the issue<sup>6</sup>. Domestic violence, dowry deaths, and honour-based crimes function as tools of regulation, deterring women from asserting autonomy.<sup>7</sup> The *Shankar* judgment reinforces that such violence cannot be dismissed as exceptional; rather, it reflects enduring inequalities embedded within social and economic systems.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

The *Shankar vs. State of Rajasthan* judgment offers more than legal closure; it provides a critical lens to examine the persistence of patriarchy in India. The Court's observation that constitutional promises of equality remain elusive for many women, even decades after independence, highlights the gap between formal rights and lived realities. Economic growth and legal reform have not dismantled patriarchal norms; instead, these norms continue to shape labour markets, household roles, and access to opportunities.

Addressing this requires structural as well as cultural transformation. Recognizing unpaid domestic labour in policy frameworks, expanding support systems such as childcare and safe working conditions, and ensuring effective enforcement of laws against domestic violence are necessary steps.

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<sup>4</sup> Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, No. 57 of 1994, India Code.

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, *Sample Registration System (SRS) Statistical Reports* (latest available).

<sup>6</sup> National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2023* (Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, No. 43 of 2005, India Code.

Equally important is challenging the social norms that assign disproportionate responsibility for household labour to women. As the Court itself noted, the persistence of such inequalities ultimately reflects collective societal attitudes. Without confronting these foundational norms, patriarchy will continue to adapt, embedding itself within India's evolving economic landscape.

