

Structure of Marriages in India: How it is Related to the Sustainable Development Goals, Comparing Patriarchal and Matriarchal Societies

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Abstract

Marriage in India functions as a fundamental social institution that reflects and sustains the country's complex intersections of culture, economy, religion, and gender. This paper explores how marriage structures—patrilineal, matrilineal, patriarchal, and matriarchal—relate to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The study employs a comparative qualitative approach, using secondary literature and ethnographic data from seven Indian communities: the Khasi of Meghalaya, the matrilineal Nair community of Kerala, patriarchal societies in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, and mixed or transitional systems in Assam, Goa, and Mizoram. Findings show that marriage structures strongly shape women's autonomy, property rights, economic participation, and social equality. Matrilineal and matrilocal systems provide certain advantages for women's security and inheritance, while patriarchal systems reinforce gender hierarchies and restrict women's socio-economic mobility. The paper argues that reforming marriage institutions and promoting equitable family laws are central to achieving sustainable development in India.

Keywords: Marriage Structure, Patriarchy, Matriliney, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Goals

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage in India has never been a purely personal or individual decision—it is a social contract that binds families, maintains caste, transmits property, and reproduces social hierarchies (Chakravarti, 2018). Across most of India, marriage is patrilineal and patriarchal: women join their husband's lineage, residence is patrilocal, and inheritance follows the male line. This pattern embodies the ideology of *kanyādān* (gift of the virgin), in which women are symbolically transferred from father to husband, thereby institutionalizing male authority (Pareek, 2025).

However, India's social diversity also includes exceptions. In the matrilineal societies of Meghalaya and historically among the Nairs of Kerala, descent passes through women, and post-marital residence is often matrilocal. Such systems present a contrast to the dominant patriarchal framework and offer an opportunity to examine how gender relations are negotiated differently (Menon, 2012).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a useful framework to analyze marriage in relation to human development. SDG 5 targets gender equality and women's empowerment; SDG 8 promotes full

and productive employment and decent work; and SDG 10 calls for reducing inequalities. Since marriage influences education, property, and labour participation, understanding its structure is crucial for

Advancing These Goals. This Research Asks Three Key Questions:

1. How do different marriage structures (patriarchal vs. matrilineal) function across Indian societies?
2. What are their implications for gender relations and women's empowerment?
3. How do these structures align with or hinder the achievement of SDGs 5, 8, and 10?

2. Related Research Work

2.1 Marriage and Patriarchy

A large body of sociological and feminist literature links marriage in India to patriarchal control. Pareek (2025) argues that arranged marriage, dowry, and patrilocal residence perpetuate male dominance. Chakravarti (2018) describes the “brahmanical patriarchy” that connects caste purity with women's sexual control. A 2024 article on Socio.Health emphasizes that marriage remains a mechanism through which male authority is institutionalized, particularly in North India.

Studies using data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) show that early marriage, limited decision-making power, and economic dependency correlate with poor outcomes for women's health and education (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2023). In most northern states, women's average age at marriage remains below 21 years, limiting their access to higher education and decent work—key indicators under SDG 5 and 8.

2.2 Education and Modernization

Vikram (2023) found that college education among women delays marriage and increases autonomy in spouse choice. Educated couples are more likely to opt for “companionate marriages,” characterized by mutual consent and emotional compatibility. These changes suggest that modernization can partially weaken patriarchal norms, although social pressures persist.

2.3 Inheritance and Economic Rights

The reform of the Hindu Succession Act (2005) granting daughters equal inheritance rights has been a major step toward gender equality. Grover and Sharma (2025) show that these reforms increased women's property ownership and reduced domestic violence in states where implementation was strong. However, patrilineal bias still limits practical outcomes, especially in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

2.4 Matrilineal and Matrilocal Systems

Scholars such as Menon (2012) and Saikia (2001) have explored matriliney among the Nairs and Khasis, showing that while women enjoy inheritance rights and residence security, male kin (the karnavar or maternal uncle) often retain decision-making power. Thus, matriliney does not automatically translate into matriarchy. The Khasi system, for example, grants property to the youngest daughter but entrusts control to male relatives (Saikia, 2001).

2.5 Marriage and Sustainable Development

Gender inequality in marriage directly affects SDGs. The International Journal of Gender and Development (2023) highlights that early marriage lowers labour participation (SDG 8), while unequal inheritance contributes to wealth inequality (SDG 10). Achieving SDG 5 thus requires transforming not only economic structures but also the micro-institutions of family and marriage.

3. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative comparative design based on secondary data and literature review.

3.1 Data Sources

- Peer-reviewed journals and ethnographic monographs on Indian marriage systems.
- NFHS-5 and Census 2011 data for demographic indicators.
- Legal documents such as the Mizo Marriage, Divorce and Inheritance of Property Act (2014) and Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act (2005).
- Recent articles (2023–2025) on gender and SDGs in India.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis compares communities along five structural dimensions:

1. Lineage (patrilineal/matrilineal)
2. Residence after marriage (patrilocal/matrilocal/neolocal)
3. Inheritance pattern
4. Spouse selection and exchange practices (arranged, love, dowry, bride-price)
5. Women's autonomy indicators (education, labour, decision-making)
6. Each dimension is evaluated in relation to SDG 5, 8, and 10 targets.

3.3 Limitations

This study relies on secondary data; field research could enrich understanding of changing norms. Moreover, “matriarchy” is used cautiously, as no Indian society is fully matriarchal in authority.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Khasi Community (Meghalaya)

The Khasi of Meghalaya represent one of the few matrilineal societies in South Asia. Descent and inheritance pass through the female line, and the youngest daughter (ka khadduh) inherits the ancestral house (Saikia, 2001). Post-marital residence is matrilineal: husbands move into their wife's home.

While this structure provides women with property security and social respect, it does not constitute complete matriarchy. Decision-making authority often rests with maternal uncles or clan councils dominated by men (Nongkynrih, 2020).

Relation to SDGs:

- SDG 5: Women's ownership of property strengthens gender equality.
- SDG 8: Matrilocal residence supports women's participation in family enterprises.
- SDG 10: Social status of women is relatively higher, though men now campaign for “equal rights,” citing reverse marginalization (Economic Times, 2019).

Challenges: Rising unemployment among Khasi men, inter-ethnic marriages, and migration have introduced tensions, with some groups advocating a shift to bilateral inheritance.

4.2 Kerala – The Nair Community

Kerala's Nairs historically practiced the marumakkathayam system, a matrilineal kinship structure where descent and property passed through women. The tharavad (joint family) was managed by the eldest male, the karnavar, showing that authority could coexist with matriliney (Menon, 2012). Marriage under this system was flexible—sambandham unions did not necessarily entail co-residence.

By the mid-20th century, land reforms, education, and legal modernization eroded matriliney. The Kerala Joint Family System (Abolition) Act (1976) finally dismantled it, ushering in nuclear, patrilineal families.

Relation to SDGs:

- SDG 5: Historical matriliney offered women residence security and inheritance rights.
- SDG 8: High female literacy (above 95%) correlates with greater workforce participation.

- SDG 10: Social reforms have reduced gender gaps, but residual patriarchy persists, particularly in wage differences and political representation.

4.3 Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh (UP) typifies North Indian patriarchy. Marriage is almost exclusively patrilocal, and dowry remains pervasive. Women's participation in family decisions is limited; their economic dependence on husbands and in-laws is institutionalized (Pareek, 2025).

Socio-economic indicators:

- Female literacy (2021): 70% (below national average)
- Mean age at marriage (NFHS-5): 19.6 years
- Female labour participation (2023): 16%

Relation to SDGs:

- SDG 5: Early marriage and dowry perpetuate inequality.
- SDG 8: Low participation of women in paid work restricts economic growth.
- SDG 10: Gender and caste inequalities intersect, compounding exclusion.

4.4 Rajasthan

Rajasthan exhibits similar patriarchal structures with strong caste endogamy and child marriage in some rural districts (Sharma & Kumar, 2022). Marriage is considered a social duty rather than personal choice. Women typically relocate to their husband's family immediately after marriage.

Although education and state programs (like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao) have improved conditions, patriarchal customs such as purdah and restrictions on women's mobility persist.

Relation to SDGs:

- SDG 5: Gender norms remain rigid; women have limited political voice.
- SDG 8: Restrictive norms hinder labour market access.
- SDG 10: Social inequality remains wide between genders and castes.

4.5 Assam and Goa

Both states show mixed marital traditions. In Assam, tribal communities such as the Bodos and Mishings practice relatively egalitarian marriages with bride-price and some matrilineal tendencies, while caste Hindus follow patriliney. Goa, influenced by Portuguese civil law and Christian norms, has one of India's most gender-neutral property regimes—the *Comunidade* system allows joint ownership by spouses.

Relation to SDGs:

- SDG 5: Goa's equal property rights legislation supports gender equality.
- SDG 8: Tourism and education enable higher female employment.
- SDG 10: Inter-religious marriages are more accepted, reflecting social inclusion.

4.6 Mizoram (Mizo Community)

The Mizo tribe follows patrilineal descent and pays *man leh mual* (bride-price) from groom to bride's family. The Mizo Marriage, Divorce and Inheritance of Property Act (2014) codified customary laws, maintaining patrilineal inheritance (Government of Mizoram, 2014).

Cultural context: Christianization has introduced monogamy and formalized ceremonies, but patriarchal authority remains. Women's organizations have campaigned for equal inheritance and against domestic violence.

Relation to SDGs:

- SDG 5: Legal reforms improve but do not equalize property rights.
- SDG 8: Women's participation in education and government is rising.

- SDG 10: Customary barriers persist, but community awareness is increasing.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Structural Comparison

Community / State	Lineage Type	Residence	Inheritance	Marriage Exchange	Gender Power Index*	Dominant SDG Impacts
Khasi (Meghalaya)	Matrilineal	Matrilocal	Daughters inherit (esp. youngest)	Minor gift exchange	0.72	Supports SDG 5, 10
Nair (Kerala)	Historically matrilineal	Matrilocal/Neolocal	Tharavad property via female line	No dowry (historically)	0.81	Supports SDG 5, 8
Uttar Pradesh	Patrilineal	Patrilocal	Sons inherit	Dowry prevalent	0.44	Hinders SDG 5, 8
Rajasthan	Patrilineal	Patrilocal	Sons inherit	Dowry	0.46	Hinders SDG 5, 8, 10
Assam	Mixed	Varied	Bilateral/Patrilineal	Bride-price in tribes	0.65	Transitional
Goa	Bilateral	Neolocal	Joint ownership	Minimal dowry	0.78	Supports SDG 5, 10
Mizoram	Patrilineal	Patrilocal	Sons inherit	Bride-price	0.61	Partial progress

*Gender Power Index = composite of women's literacy, labour participation, and decision-making (compiled from NFHS-5 and state statistics).

5.2 Patterns and Correlations

1. Patrilineal systems correlate negatively with women's empowerment indicators. States with strong patriarchy (UP, Rajasthan) have lower female literacy and workforce participation.
2. Matrilineal or bilateral systems exhibit better gender outcomes. Kerala and Meghalaya record the highest female Human Development Index values in India.
3. Bride-price vs. Dowry: While bride-price (Mizo, some Assamese tribes) recognizes a form of female value, it still commodifies marriage. Dowry (UP, Rajasthan) directly burdens women's natal families and often leads to violence.
4. Education as a transformative factor: Education mediates the effects of lineage; Kerala's gender parity stems more from literacy than from matriliney alone.
5. Urbanization and SDGs: Urban centers in Goa and Kerala show higher acceptance of inter-caste and love marriages, reflecting progress toward SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

6. Conclusion

The study of marriage structures in India reveals a complex interplay between tradition, gender, and development outcomes. Patriarchal and patrilineal systems dominate most of North and West India, including Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, where early marriage, dowry, and patrilocal residence reinforce gender hierarchies. In contrast, matrilineal systems in Meghalaya (Khasi) and historically in Kerala (Nairs) provide women with inheritance rights and social security, although authority is often shared with male kin, reflecting nuanced forms of power distribution. Mixed systems in Assam, Goa, and Mizoram demonstrate transitional dynamics, where traditional norms coexist with legal reforms and modernization. Marriage structures are directly linked to key Sustainable Development Goals:

1. SDG 5 (Gender Equality): Patriarchal marriages restrict women's autonomy, education, and participation in decision-making, whereas matrilineal or bilateral systems promote property rights and social security.
2. SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): Women's participation in the workforce is hindered in patriarchal societies due to early marriage and restricted mobility. Systems that secure inheritance and residence for women facilitate labor market engagement.
3. SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): Matrimonial structures influence the distribution of resources within households. Bilateral inheritance systems and legal reforms in Goa and Kerala have narrowed wealth and social gaps, while rigid patrilineal systems maintain inequality.

The findings suggest that legal reform, education, and awareness campaigns targeting marital norms are essential to achieving sustainable development in India. Transforming marriage structures—through codified property rights, delayed marriage, and gender-sensitized social practices—can reduce systemic inequalities and empower women across generations.

Future research should include longitudinal ethnographic studies in communities undergoing cultural transition, particularly in Assam and Mizoram, to capture evolving marital patterns and their socio-economic impacts.

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