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# UNIT 1 WOMEN AND PATRIARCHY

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the first unit of this Block, we will attempt to introduce you to the relationships between gender and power, and the root causes of gender oppression based on unequal power structures. What is the basis of gender discrimination in a male dominated society? You will agree that male dominance is pervasive across all societies and that most societies of the world are positively biased towards males, albeit, differing in extent. The underlying structure of male domination is described by feminists as “patriarchy”. Therefore, it is important for us to understand patriarchy as a concept and how it operates in human society. In this unit, we will contextualize women’s positions within patriarchy, by examining the historical background of patriarchy as well as by obtaining a broad understanding of capitalist patriarchy. Let us begin by looking at what will be the learning outcomes of reading this unit.

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## 1.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning of the term ‘patriarchy’;
- Locate patriarchy in a historical context and explain its origins;
- Describe the relationship between patriarchy and Marxist thought;
- Describe the relationships between patriarchy, class and caste in India;
- Discuss and analyze the concept of ‘capitalist patriarchy’; and
- Distinguish between private and public forms of patriarchy through an analysis of the structures which produce these.

### 1.3 LOCATING “WOMEN” AND “PATRIARCHY” IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

It might seem too obvious for you to say that any thinking or research in the field of women and gender studies must begin by focussing on “women”. When the women’s movement emerged in a new form in the 1960s and 1970s in many parts of the world with the cry of “women’s liberation” and “equality for women”, one of the sites of struggle was that of knowledge creation. Whose knowledge and what knowledge was relevant, and what had been left out or suppressed? Many of the activists of the women’s movement were simultaneously writing about women, both within institutions such as universities and outside them. There is no uniform or single story to be told here, as situations varied a great deal across the world, including countries like Britain, France and the United States where feminists were more visible than elsewhere.

In India, the pre-independence women’s movement appeared to have retreated after independence. According to one of our foremost feminist scholars **Neera Desai**, the reason for this retreat was that the women leaders of that generation believed that the new nation-state led by Jawaharlal Nehru would deliver on its promises of equality for women and men, and that the new claims of national development (after colonialism) would indeed bring about progress for all. It was in the 1960s and especially the 70s that the nation entered an economic and political crisis. People’s movements struck out to protest issues such as rising prices, the exploitation of the poor, the loss of tribal lands, and so on. A small group of scholars and policy makers were brought together in the early 70s to collect data and undertake research on the “status of women in India”. Their research resulted in the compilation of a Government of India Report entitled *Toward Equality*, (by the Committee on the Status of Women in India) which was completed in 1974 and was prepared for the United Nation’s Women’s Year of 1975. Its findings were a shock to all, since with only a few exceptions, the data showed that women’s status, far from gaining ground, had been declining in the past decades. Neera Desai established the first Research Centre for Women’s Studies in Bombay (in SNDT Women’s University) in 1974. So in India, too, the 1970s saw a new focus on women, as subjects of research.

We have to imagine the many ways in which “woman” as a new subject have changed our understanding and perspective on the world:

- Some feminists have emphasized the absence of women in the classroom curriculum and textbooks.
- Others have talked about how their assumptions of equality between women and men were belied.

Therefore an early impulse in women’s studies has been to question such absences and such assumptions of equality.

#### Box No. 1.1

*In India, “women’s studies” was conceived by a founding generation as bringing to the social sciences (that is to say, those disciplines most engaged with questions of development) the missing perspective of women’s lives.*

One of the routes that was followed in the work that was published from the 1960s onwards was to question the 'invisibility of women' in social life and in knowledge production. Economists, sociologists, and subsequently teachers of literature, history and other subjects, including many outside the academy have been undertaking pioneering research in a range of fields. Most of their efforts have gone to show that, far from being absent in history, society or literature, women have been fundamental, often creative in their own right. Thus anthropological work has demonstrated the critical roles women played in many different cultures, whether "primitive" or "advanced". Economists have questioned the non-recognition of women's labour, arguing that if all the work done by women were to be counted (whether paid or unpaid), women as a group do more work than men. Scholars in the field of literature have been discovering a wealth of writing by women, hitherto unknown or not considered worthy of attention. A powerful example in India would be the twin volumes *Women Writing in India: From 600 B.C. to the Present* (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, 1993). These volumes contain writings by women from across the sub-continent, across time and region, astounding literary scholars and the general reader but hitherto largely unknown or belittled. Many more examples could be given.

However, it should be clear to you even at this stage that only focussing on the lives and work of women, unrecognized in history and society is not enough. Surely one cannot escape the question, if indeed women have been so essential, why has this not been acknowledged? Why have women been hidden from history, undervalued in their work, treated as secondary to men? Why have only exceptional women been remembered? To appreciate the nature of the problem more fully, it became necessary therefore to examine reasons for the overall marginalisation of women. Towards this aim, certain concepts came to be used. One of the first major ones is that of patriarchy to which we will turn now.

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## 1.4 INTRODUCING PATRIARCHY

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It would be interesting for you to know, the term patriarchy was by no means invented by feminist scholars. This term comes from nineteenth century anthropology and literally means '**the rule of the father**' (from latin, *pater*=father and *arche*=rule). This is a term that lends itself to easy translation into other languages, so, for example, in Hindi the term is *pitir- sattha*. This concept emerged in the mid nineteenth century in the context of studies of kinship and investigations into the origins of human societies. Some European scholars of that time proposed that the earliest human societies (referring to pre-historic times for which no direct evidence is available) took the form of a matriarchy, where, as the term would suggest, groups living together were under the control of a mother figure (matriarchy = mother rule). Because of women's capacity to give birth to children and the power associated with this unique capability, these historians speculated that women themselves could have been very powerful figures. This social system then gave way to a patriarchal form of organisation, where the eldest male of the clan held power over both other men and all women in the group. It is not possible here to go into the details of these more or less speculative theories of that time. There is no evidence that there ever were matriarchies at the dawn of human history, in the sense of women who had complete control over their group. However, the idea that different stages of human development were associated with different kinds of family and kinship relations continued to be debated. We must keep in mind that these debates focussed on societies that were relatively simple in structure, without

the kinds of complex divisions that we are used to today, and without states in which authority was centralised.

The first person to use the term patriarchy to denote a generalised form of male dominance over women was Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). In a sense this makes him the first “feminist” to give a different kind of meaning to the term, one shaped by questions of women’s oppression by men. Engels was a close companion of Karl Marx (1812-1883), who wished to complement the materialist account of history as a series of successive class-based societies. In his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1886), Engels made the famous proposition that the earlier, more egalitarian forms of organization, gave way to “the world historic defeat of the female sex” following the emergence of private property. In the Marxian scheme of conceptualising stages in history, Engels postulated that the earliest societies were classless and relatively egalitarian in structure, with a simple division of labour between men and women and common property relations. This system gave way to distinctions based as much on property as on controlling women’s sexuality and reproduction in the family through relations of servitude. While Engels’ frames of thinking such as using evolutionary biology and some of his sources of evidence have now been superseded and many appear dated, there is little question that the value of his efforts lay in trying to give a history to women’s marginalisation in society rather than to assume this to be simply a natural fact not worthy of further attention.

The concept of patriarchy has had mixed fortunes. Other than in Engels’ work, the term continued to be used by various anthropologists to denote what we would today call patriliney, that is to say, kinship systems where descent and inheritance is through the father. By the early twentieth century the term patriarchy (and matriarchy) lost their credibility as kinship theories shifted their concerns, and anthropology itself moved away from this field. It is therefore of considerable interest to us to appreciate how, several decades later, a new generation of feminists and women’s studies scholars, from the 1970s onwards re-invented this term. They took it out of kinship and anthropology to denote a more general structure of male dominance, which enabled men to control the labour and sexuality of women. It was this control, especially within the family, that was meant to explain women’s lack of value and status both historically and socially. Now that we have come to have some basic understanding of the term, let us examine patriarchy in its historical context.

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## 1.5 PATRIARCHY IN HISTORY

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Harking back to Engels’ efforts a century ago, one of the most famous attempts to give patriarchy its place in history has been the work of **Gerda Lerner**, an American historian and Professor in women’s studies. Her major work *The Creation of Patriarchy* was published in 1986. This was the culmination of many years of research into one of the earliest civilisations of ancient Mesopotamia – which corresponds broadly to the regions of contemporary Iraq in Western Asia. As she herself describes her aims, Lerner wanted to search for the history of the patriarchal system, one which had emerged thousands of years ago. She believed no single factor would serve as an adequate explanation, and, further, that whatever came to be created must have been created jointly by both men and women. Lerner is closer than she perhaps realises to the nineteenth century searches of origins, when she begins her work by going all the way back to the early neolithic hunter-gathering societies, where the precariousness of life necessitated an

initial division of labour between women who did the mothering as well as economic activities that could be combined with childbearing like food gathering, while men were more singularly engaged in big game hunting. Lerner was particularly keen to look for different explanations for changes in the relations between men and women due to the developments associated with agriculture, sedentary social forms of living and the emergence of new, more unequal family structures. With agriculture, production becomes central, and so does the need for more labour. She believes this led to men wishing to acquire the reproductive potential of women, since children are now an economic asset. Her hypothesis is that the entry of agriculture brought with it greater inter-tribal warfare, and also with men having more leisure time than women to manage surpluses and enhance their power. Women, in her view, are captured from other tribes while their men are killed, so that such captured women were not only the first slaves but also the first forms of private property. She therefore contests Engels' hypothesis that private property preceded the greater control over women's sexuality, by effectively arguing the opposite – women as slaves may well have constituted the first forms of private property apart from animal husbandry. Over time, women thus come to be valued yet controlled in a relation of dependency. The position of women becomes more complex with the further creation of wealth, the development of urban centres and states. In her own investigations into Mesopotamian history from approximately 3000 B.C. to 1000 B.C., for which archaeological evidence exists, Lerner reconstructs an account where women occupy very different positions in the social structure, from royal wives and other women of significant rank and limited power (as stand-ins for their men), concubines (some of whom could also rise socially), labouring women and slaves (who were the most exploited). Thus women could be active in economic, political and religious life (though in quite different ways), while simultaneously being in relations of dependency to the ruling elite, male relatives and/or husbands. This is a more dynamic form of thinking about patriarchy in its historical emergence, according to Lerner, who believes that patriarchy underwent further changes in subsequent periods of history. Nor should one assume that all societies went through the exact same processes.

Inspired in part by the work of Lerner, the historian **Uma Chakravarti** has investigated the history of early India for signs of forms of patriarchy in our past. Interestingly, while Lerner emphasized the significance of slavery and class in her work, Chakravarti brings caste into her account of patriarchy in ancient India. The term she uses is "brahmanical patriarchy". Looking at ancient texts such as the *Dharmasatras* (including the *Manusmriti*), as well as subsequent Buddhist sources, Chakravarti reconstructs early Indian society from approximately 1000 B.C. onwards. Social organisation is reconstructed through these texts to show how the control over women by men was mediated through the creation of caste and class hierarchies and differences. Such reconstruction is bound to be an extremely complex task, given the paucity of sources and the dilemmas of providing a coherent account about actual social structures on the basis of a limited set of texts. In her own interpretation and use of the work of other scholars, Chakravarti argues that maintaining the necessary distance and control over lower castes by upper castes was as crucial as were differential forms of control over women, their sexuality and labour. Chakravarti takes her cues from the ways in which for instance the *Dharmashastras* prescribed severe punishments equally for lower caste men who violated their place and for women who behaved in transgressive ways. Retaining ownership over land and maintaining caste purity thus required regulating women's sexuality and reproduction, who are then the pivots in this interlocking

structure. While upper caste men have maximum leeway in such a system, lower caste men are both directly oppressed in terms of their labour, as well as prevented from having access to upper caste women. While upper caste women are thus the most severely guarded and monitored by their male kin as part of their upper caste privilege, lower caste women can never be sure of such protection, and suffer multiple privations. This uneven form of control over women's labour and sexuality is brahmanical patriarchy.

One of the more unusual aspects of the place of women in these texts (such as the *Manusmriti* and the *Mahabharata*) is that women are all too frequently identified with their (hetero)sexuality, at times obsessively so. Manu has frequent references to women's essentially sinful nature, with being untruthful and fickle, and having an overflowing and uncontrollable sexuality. The greatest danger for the husband is a woman's promiscuity according to Manu. Or to put this another way, there appears to be a repeated emphasis on men's dependence on women to preserve the family and lineage, which is then justified by claims about women's insatiable sexuality and the consequent need to control it. Chakravarti also goes on to postulate that the need to make upper caste women economically and ritually dependent was therefore particularly necessary in order that such women would consent to perform their duties (*stridharma*) in exchange for their care and protection. Upper caste women were supremely lacking in autonomy and only had paths of virtue (through *pativrata*) by which they could actively consent to their subordination as chaste wives and mothers, especially of sons. Upper caste women's status was thus a complex affair, and included their distinction from those below them in rank. While the *Manusmriti* is direct to the point of obsessiveness about the need to control women, epics such as the *Ramayana* (at least in the popular versions of the story) offer a more fully worked out ideal in the character of the long-suffering and patient Sita, who maintains her virtue even in the face of the most unjust accusations.

We must remember the extent to which such texts are basically addressing upper caste men, so that references to women (unless otherwise specified) are invariably to upper caste women. A fuller account of how brahmanical patriarchy works would, however, have to acknowledge the many differences and hierarchies within this structure, including therefore, diverse patriarchal forms of control. This is the most difficult to track historically, and it is perhaps better to look at more recent historical periods including contemporary times to understand how the graded nature of inequality that characterises caste translates into graded patriarchies. Sociological studies have shown for instance how different the marriage practices can be among so-called upper and lower castes. Till not so long ago, especially in rural India, upper castes maintained very strong norms of seclusion for their women, including extreme forms of treatment towards widows that Uma Chakravarti likens to a form of "social death". Lower caste women, on the other hand, were frequently engaged in agricultural labour outside the home, and widows from these castes were frequently remarried. Of course there have been and continue to be considerable variations in the treatment of women of different castes in different regions of the country. Some scholars have for instance documented efforts on the part of lower castes to emulate the practices of castes above them in the hierarchy, in an effort to gain in status. On the other hand, there are frequent cases where upper castes have claimed sexual access to lower caste women, as part of their upper caste power and privilege. Some of the worst atrocities have been upper caste attacks on lower castes for exceeding their place, including sexually assaulting lower caste women as a form of revenge. What then is the form of control that lower caste men have on their women? We will return to these kinds of questions at the conclusion of this unit. Before that

however, we will look at another significant notion, namely, that of ‘capitalist patriarchy’. But, before going further you can assess your own learning by checking your progress so far.

***Check Your Progress:***

- 1) *Discuss in your own words what do you understand by patriarchy.*
- 2) *Write a note of about 500 words on the origin and history of patriarchy.*

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## 1.6 CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY

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It is important in this discussion to also examine some of the ways in which patriarchy has been used in the contemporary world, including so-called advanced societies such as Britain or the US. Otherwise we run into the danger of supposing that patriarchies only existed in older civilisations and that the term has little use in the present time.

But this is not the case. During the 1970s, a number of feminists who were also Marxists, and were therefore interested in looking at capitalist social relations, came up with the notion of a “capitalist patriarchy”. These were among the earliest explicit efforts on the part of scholars who were very active in both left and women’s movements to theorize the nature of women’s oppression by drawing from existing theories of Marxism and the new efforts to understand male domination. These feminists have looked for ways to integrate Marxism and feminism in terms of finding the relationships between a capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structures.

In order to proceed, they begin with an account of Marxist class analysis: In its barest form, the class relation between the capitalist and the worker has been theorised in two complementary ways: in its economic form as a structure of exploitation, and secondly as a form of consciousness about their condition as workers, thus implying the potential of change through political struggle. Thus, the fact that marxism embodied both a theory of society and a politics has made it very attractive to feminists, who have undertaken analogous investigations into the position of women. They criticise Marx’s writings for having very little to say about women, though acknowledging the efforts of someone like Engels.

An important point made by the socialist feminist **Zillah Eisenstein** in her edited volume *Capitalist Patriarchy and the case for Socialist Feminism* (1979), is to distinguish between the worker (whether man or woman) under capitalism and the woman in the household. Workers are exploited in the workplace (by the capitalist factory owner or the landlord) by paying them wages that are less than the value of the labour they do, so that the surplus goes to the owner. However, most women are dependent for their livelihood and security on a specific set of social relations, defined by marriage and motherhood, and their daily work takes place in the context of these relations. In this situation where women are working in the home but not being paid wages, the nature of their domination in the household is similar and different to that of someone engaging in paid work. It is similar in so far as she has to labour for others – typically she will be engaging in all kinds of housework, cooking, cleaning, looking after children and all those who need care, including her husband and others living with them, – but does not receive the just value for this work. She gives much more than she receives in terms of her own needs, care and protection. This relationship is not very

easy to define, and has been called a relationship of patriarchal oppression by feminists. It should be obvious why it is so difficult to name, because firstly, most women do not think of themselves as workers, since they are not being paid a wage, and secondly, because their labour is interwoven with notions of love, care and duty to the family – typically towards their husband, children and others who may be living with them.

Calling this relationship one of oppression has therefore been a major theoretical and political statement on the part of feminists, and allowed many women to realize that the long hours of drudgery they performed everyday, which is taken for granted by others, deserves to be called work, as much as any work performed for a wage.

**Box No 1.2**

*The situation is even more oppressive for those women who do paid work outside the home, and are yet expected to take primary responsibility for housework – this has been called ‘the double shift’.*

Think, too, of the double shift of domestic workers, who labour in other people’s homes and then have to undertake housework in their own homes as well.

There has been considerable debate by feminists about how to understand the work that women perform in the home, and therefore its relation with the nature of patriarchy. Should women then be paid just wages for this kind of work as a step forward? Or would this only serve to further confine them to the home? Is the solution to transform housework in a social activity, such as through collective kitchens, creches for children and so on, so that women no longer have to undertake this kind of work alone and can be freed up like men to work elsewhere? What about the domestic work of servants, who receive some of the worst wages ever to be paid to a worker anywhere?

**Box No. 1.3**

*The term “capitalist patriarchy” seems to indicate that there is one overall system whereby women in households are responsible for the reproduction of the family and future workers, while production in the form of goods and services in the economy is happening outside the modern home.*

Yet another arena of debate has been to understand the nature of the relationship between all the work done in private homes and the other spheres of work in public offices, factories and fields.

Other feminists believed that the relationship could be more complex. Yet others tried to introduce other terms for exploitation and oppression, such as for those based on race. Thus the nature of oppression is differentiated across class, race (or caste) lines – think of the oppression of a black woman under conditions of slavery in the USA compared to that of her white mistress; or that of working class women compared to elite women, all of whom are engaged in the reproduction of society.

At least one feminist, **Sylvia Walby**, has argued that too much emphasis in most theories of patriarchy has been given to the home. She has argued that patriarchy is as much public as it is private, and that its public form is particularly important in modern societies. She has given a very general theory of patriarchy as being a system of social structures whereby men are in a position to dominate, exploit and oppress women. She emphasizes



the structures of patriarchy which are not the same in different societies or at different stages in history. According to Walby, at present time, patriarchy has six relatively autonomous structures. Needless to say that these are connected to one another, and also by other structures such as capitalism and racism, but she wishes to look at them separately in order to account for the variation in gender relations in contemporary societies, especially western ones. Let us take a quick look at each one of these structures:

- **Patriarchal mode of production**

The first one is like the ones discussed already – women’s labour in the home which is expropriated by men and other members in exchange for her maintenance.

- **Patriarchal relations in paid work**

The second structure means that women in the world of paid work are effectively excluded from the better forms of work and confined for the most part in lower levels of work, considered less skilled and more appropriate for women, for which they then receive lower wages.

- **Patriarchal relations in the state**

The third factor, the state, on its part, in its policies and actions is patriarchal towards women, being biased against them.

- **Male violence**

The fourth structure is that of male violence, which is not as individualised as is often made out to be. Only the most extreme forms of such violence – such as rape, or wife beating – have been denoted as a crime, though more recently other forms of domestic violence and sexual harassment are beginning to be recognised.

- **Patriarchal relations in sexuality**

Fifthly, sexual relations constitutes another patriarchal structure, composed of compulsory heterosexuality (that is to say, that the normative form of sexuality is that with a member of the other sex), and, that the onus of chastity and virtue falling on women. The double standards of men are condoned, while women who have sexual relations outside of marriage are more severely stigmatised and punished.

- **Patriarchal relations in cultural institutions**

Finally, Walby looks at institutions such as education, religion and the media. Here, particularly in the field of representation, she believes that biases against women are produced and legitimised.

Walby finally argues that there have indeed over the course of history been changes both in the form that patriarchy has taken and in the degree of patriarchy. Thus, if the gap in wages between men and women closes or both girls and boys go to school, this lessens the degree of patriarchy. Walby’s discussion on the changing forms of patriarchy focusses mainly on what she calls “private” and “public” patriarchy. Where women are largely excluded from public life, whether in the economy or politics, so that their main dependency is on men in the household and the work of reproduction within it, this is private patriarchy. This has existed in many societies, and was certainly the norm for middle class women in the mid nineteenth century in countries such as Britain, who

were never meant to be active outside the home. However, since then, the twentieth century has seen more public forms of patriarchy where women are indeed actively present in work and other public spaces, but in a subordinated position. Moreover, the very effect of women's movements has been to change older structures so that women are participating to a greater extent than before in many spheres of life. However, their participation is hardly open or free but structured by forms of discrimination and disadvantage.

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## 1.7 LET US SUM UP

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As you may have noted already, this unit has been concerned with opening up the relationship between women and patriarchy to further exploration so that we can understand better how these concepts illuminate the inequality of women in society. Patriarchy, as you have seen, has been used both historically as well as in contemporary societies as a description of the unequal social relations that women suffer from. Whatever the origins of the term, it has been widely used by feminists both in India and elsewhere to emphasize the structures that control women. While some have emphasized women's unique control within families and households in terms of their labour, their sexuality and their reproductive capacities, others have looked at differing structures as well. You have seen how the origins of patriarchy can be traced back to ancient times and cultures, as done by Gerda Lerner, in her work on Mesopotamia and the historical emergence of patriarchy. In India, we looked with Uma Chakravarti at the caste system together with patriarchy; with Marxist feminists we looked at capitalism and patriarchy; and with Sylvia Walby we looked at different structures that combine to produce more private and more public forms of patriarchy. You will come across the term "patriarchy" in various contexts throughout this course, as well in other courses of this programme too. It would be helpful for you to relate what you have learnt here to other contexts in order to gain a better and deeper understanding of patriarchy.

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## 1.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Briefly describe the inter-relationships between patriarchy, caste and class in India, as summarized in the work of Uma Chakravarti. Do you agree or disagree with her analysis? Use examples from ancient Indian texts, or from contemporary situations that you are familiar with, to support your answer.
- 2) Explain the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy as described by Marxist feminists. Can you draw similarities between what you have described and some real life examples in India?
- 3) Summarize the different structures that combine to form private and public forms of patriarchy as discussed by Sylvia Walby. Give examples of private and public forms of patriarchy and explain each of the structures in your own words.
- 4) In your view, how can the negative impacts of patriarchy on women be reduced? What are some of the things Indian women need to do to empower themselves and transform the social system?

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## 1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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