



An Analysis Of Women's Evolving Roles In The Indian Family System From Reformist Era (1857- 1947) To The Modern Period (1947-2025)

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of women's roles in the Indian family system from the reformist era (1857–1947) to the contemporary period (1947–2025), highlighting both continuity and change. It traces how reform movements, colonial legislation, and nationalist struggles redefined women's domestic and social positions, while Partition exposed their vulnerabilities within families. Post-independence, the Constitution and family laws—such as the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and the Hindu Succession Amendment (2005)—expanded women's legal rights in marriage, inheritance, and protection from violence. National surveys like the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reveal significant progress: higher female literacy, greater participation in decision-making, delayed marriages, and economic contributions. Yet, persistent challenges—including dowry violence, unpaid care burdens, and son preference—underscore the resilience of patriarchal traditions. The study argues that the Indian family is not a static entity but a dynamic arena where women negotiate between empowerment and restriction, illustrating how legal reform, education, and cultural continuity collectively shape women's lived experiences across two centuries.

Keywords: Empowerment, Family, Gender, Patriarchy, Reform

Introduction

The family has long been regarded as the foundational unit of Indian society, shaping not only kinship and everyday life but also broader questions of culture, morality, and identity. Within this structure, women's roles have been central yet contested—celebrated as preservers of tradition while simultaneously constrained by patriarchal norms. The history of Indian families thus provides a lens through which one can trace both continuity and transformation in women's lives across two centuries.

From the mid-nineteenth century reform movements to the post-independence legal framework, women's roles within families have been a subject of political debate, social reform, and lived negotiation. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar linked the improvement of women's status to the moral regeneration of society, focusing on issues such as sati abolition, widow remarriage, and female education. By the late colonial period, nationalist leaders and women's organizations—including the All India Women's Conference (founded in 1927)—framed the family as a site where the ideals of modernity, morality, and citizenship converged. However, scholars such as Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid argue that these reforms, while progressive in appearance, often reinscribed patriarchal authority by redefining but not dismantling women's domestic subordination.[1]

The Partition of 1947 added a new dimension, exposing the fragility of women's position within families. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin document how women bore the brunt of displacement, abduction, and forced re-domestication, underscoring how national crisis refracted through the intimate sphere of family life.[2] With independence, the Constitution promised equality, and subsequent family laws sought to formalize women's rights in marriage, inheritance, and divorce. Yet, the landmark Towards Equality Report (1974) revealed a persistent gap between legal reform and lived reality, showing that patriarchal practices continued to shape household dynamics.[3]

In contemporary India, census data, National Family Health Survey (NFHS) reports, and court judgments testify to significant changes in family structures, decision-making, and marriage practices.[4] Women now participate more actively in household decisions, inherit ancestral property, and challenge marital inequalities through law. Yet, dowry-related violence, the persistence of unpaid care burdens, and uneven labor force participation reveal that families remain contested spaces where empowerment coexists with restriction.

This paper situates women's roles in the Indian family system within a *longue durée* framework, tracing their evolution from the reformist era (1857–1947) to the present (1947–2025). It argues that the Indian family is neither a static nor a uniformly patriarchal institution; rather, it is a dynamic arena where legal reforms, social ideals, and cultural traditions continuously negotiate the meaning of women's place. By analyzing both historical reforms and contemporary realities, the study highlights the enduring tension between change and continuity in shaping women's lived family experiences.

Review of Literature

Reformist Era

Scholarship on women and family during the reformist era highlights the intersection of reform, nationalism, and lived experiences. Geraldine Forbes (1996), in *Women in Modern India*, provides a comprehensive narrative of how reform movements, women's organizations, and legislative debates reshaped family norms, while also showing how patriarchy persisted within households.[5] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's edited volume (1990), *Recasting Women*, offers critical essays that deconstruct the colonial discourse of reform, showing how debates on issues like widow remarriage, child marriage, and female education often reinforced traditional family roles even as they promised progress.[6]

Partition is another key turning point. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998), in *Borders & Boundaries*, emphasize how Partition fractured families and disproportionately impacted women, who faced displacement, abduction, and forced re-domestication. This complements the oral testimonies of survivors, showing how women's roles within families became sites of both vulnerability and resilience. Tanika Sarkar (2001), in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, further highlights how nationalist discourses often idealized women as custodians of family honor, fusing domesticity with political identity. Similarly, Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar's edited *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (2007) contextualizes how reforms were deeply tied to questions of religion, community, and the family system, complicating simplistic notions of progress.

Modern Period

Post-independence scholarship shifts focus to the gap between legal reform and lived realities. The Towards Equality Report (1974) stands as a landmark study, documenting how despite constitutional guarantees, women remained disadvantaged in family roles, property rights, and labor participation. Demographic surveys such as the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) and National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) quantify these disparities, showing persistent gender gaps in household decision-making, health, and education.

Legal frameworks like the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and Hindu Succession Amendment (2005) have been extensively studied as milestones in women's family rights, but court cases reveal their contested application. Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum (1985) highlighted the vulnerability of divorced women, Shayara Bano v. Union of India (2017) challenged patriarchal divorce practices, while Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma (2020) ensured daughters' equal coparcenary rights in ancestral property. These cases demonstrate how family law remains a terrain of both resistance and reform.

Recent scholarship also examines structural violence within families. The National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) Crime in India reports and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) highlight the persistence of patriarchal control despite legal safeguards. Meanwhile, labor force surveys (PLFS 2022–23) expose the “double burden” of unpaid care work and declining female labor participation, showing how family responsibilities continue to limit women's economic roles.

Statement of the Problem

Women's roles in the Indian family system have undergone significant changes from the reformist era (1857–1947) to the present (1947–2025). While reform movements, legislation, and education have expanded women's rights and opportunities, patriarchal traditions and social practices continue to limit their autonomy within households. The central problem lies in this tension between legal-progressive change and persistent cultural continuity, which raises the question of how far reforms have translated into real transformation in women's lived family experiences.

Methodology

This paper employs a historical and analytical approach to examine the changing roles of women within the Indian family from the reformist era to the present. It draws on primary sources such as the Constituent Assembly Debates, All India Women's Conference reports, speeches of reformers, census data, and oral histories of Partition survivors, which reveal how women's family roles were debated and experienced. These are supplemented by secondary sources, including feminist historiography, sociological studies, and recent surveys, which help situate these changes within a wider socio-historical framework.

The analysis is structured both chronologically and thematically—beginning with the immediate post-independence decades, where law and reform reshaped marriage, education, and property rights, and extending to present-day realities through data from NFHS and PLFS. A human-centered perspective is applied throughout, recognizing the family as a lived space where women continuously negotiate between empowerment and restriction. By combining legislation, statistical evidence, and personal narratives, the study highlights the interplay of tradition and modernity in shaping women's roles across time.

Objectives

1. To explore how women's roles within the Indian family have changed from the time of independence to today, focusing on how education, marriage choices, participation in work, and legal rights have reshaped family life and gender relations.
2. To understand the balance between change and continuity in women's everyday experiences within families, showing how new opportunities created by laws, education, and social progress often clash with long-standing patriarchal traditions that still restrict true equality.

Discussion

Reformist Era

The period from 1857 to 1947 was one of deep transition in Indian society. The revolt of 1857 marked the end of the Mughal Empire and the beginning of direct British Crown rule, which reshaped the Indian social fabric. During these ninety years, Indian families evolved under the pressure of colonial policies, economic changes, social reform movements, and nationalist struggles. Women's position within the family reflected this tension: while tradition continued to bind them to domestic responsibilities, reformers, intellectuals, and political leaders began to challenge restrictive customs, slowly altering family life.

Traditional Roles within Patriarchal Families: For much of this period, women's roles remained confined within a patriarchal framework. They were expected to be dutiful daughters, obedient wives, and nurturing mothers, with their worth tied to preserving family honor and lineage. Practices like child marriage, dowry, purdah (seclusion), and the denial of inheritance rights reinforced their dependency. Widows often lived lives of austerity, and remarriage was stigmatized. Decisions about women's education, marriage, and property remained largely in the hands of male relatives.

Impact of Reform Movements: The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of social reformers who sought to humanize family structures. Raja Ram Mohan Roy campaigned against sati, while Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated for widow remarriage. Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule worked for girls' education among the lower castes. Though reformist ideas were initially resisted, they gradually reshaped domestic norms in progressive regions like Bengal and Maharashtra.

Legal and Legislative Reforms: Colonial legislation began to challenge existing family customs. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act (1856) legalized widow remarriage; the Age of Consent Act (1891) raised the age of consent from 10 to 12; and the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) (Sarda Act) set a minimum age for girls' marriage at 14. The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act (1937) granted widows limited inheritance rights.[7] Though enforcement was uneven, these laws laid the groundwork for changing women's roles in families.

Women's Education and Its Influence on Families: Institutions like Bethune School (1849) and missionary efforts led to the slow but steady spread of female education. Reformers like Savitribai Phule played a key role. Educated women influenced household decisions, raised children differently, and symbolized modernity in urban middle-class homes. However, many conservative families feared that education would challenge traditional gender norms.

Women in the Nationalist Household: Women became active participants in the nationalist movement. Figures like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, and Kamala Nehru inspired others to join in Swadeshi protests, Gandhi's non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns. This involvement challenged traditional roles and redefined women as both homemakers and citizens.

Changing Marriage Practices and Family Structures: By the early 20th century, reformists and organizations like the All India Women's Conference (1927) advocated for later marriages, companionate relationships, and women's rights within marriage and inheritance. While arranged marriages remained dominant, legal reforms began to shift gender dynamics within households.[8]

Economic Role and Household Contributions: In elite families, women focused on domestic duties. In contrast, rural and working-class women worked in fields, crafts, tea plantations, textile mills, and as domestic laborers—contributing significantly to household economies, albeit with little recognition or protection.[9]

Tensions between Tradition and Modernity: By the 20th century, families were divided between conservative values and reformist ideals. The image of the 'New Woman' emerged—educated, nationalistic, and family-oriented.[10] This figure symbolized a delicate balance between preserving tradition and embracing modernity.

Between 1857 and 1947, Indian women's roles within the family underwent gradual but profound change. Patriarchy persisted, but education, reform, legislation, and nationalism opened new avenues. By independence, women were seen not just as preservers of family honor, but as active citizens of a modern nation.

Modern Period

Changing Family Roles: The Indian family system has undergone a profound transformation since Independence. In 1950, family life was overwhelmingly joint, patriarchal, and centered on male authority. Decisions regarding education, marriage, finances, or property were largely concentrated in the hands of fathers and elder brothers. Over time, urbanization, migration, and state reforms created conditions for smaller, nuclear households. Census 2011 shows a marked rise in nuclear family setups, especially in cities, where younger couples move for jobs and education. Women, once confined to reproductive and domestic labor, now play an active role in household decision-making. Data from NFHS-5 (2019–21) reveal that nearly 88% of women report participating in major household decisions (compared to much lower figures in NFHS-1, 1992–93). This shift suggests that women are no longer passive dependents but active participants in shaping the family's well-being. Yet, the persistence of dowry deaths (NCRB 2022 reported over 6,500 such cases) reminds us that traditional hierarchies still resist change. The modern Indian family is thus a hybrid space—equal partnership coexists with vestiges of patriarchy.

Education and Empowerment: Education has been the single most significant driver of women's empowerment within families. The Constitution's guarantee of equality (Articles 14–16) and the debates of the Constituent Assembly (1948–49) reveal that women's education was seen as essential for building a modern nation. However, early decades saw little change: literacy rates for women were just 9% in 1951. The "Towards Equality" Report (1974) sounded the alarm, pointing out that despite legal reforms, women remained educationally disadvantaged, which limited their participation in the economy and in decision-making. Since then, state programmes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act (2009) have accelerated progress. By 2011, female literacy had crossed 65%, and among youth, gender gaps are rapidly narrowing. IHDS and NFHS surveys further show that educated women marry later, have fewer children, and are more likely to use contraception and participate in health decisions. Education doesn't just create opportunities outside; it reshapes dynamics within families—daughters demand equal treatment, wives question oppressive practices, and mothers encourage sons and daughters alike to aspire for careers.

Marriage and Family Choices: Marriage has always been the bedrock of the Indian family, but its meaning and practice have evolved significantly. The Hindu Marriage Act (1955) established monogamy, divorce rights, and age limits, breaking away from older customs. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) criminalized underage marriages, which NFHS data confirm are steadily declining—though rural areas still report higher prevalence. For Muslim women, the struggle for dignity within marriage culminated in the *Shayara Bano v. Union of India* (2017) case, where the Supreme Court struck down instant triple talaq as unconstitutional, reaffirming equality under Article 14. Similarly, the Special Marriage Act (1954) enabled interfaith and inter-caste marriages, representing a legal challenge to caste and community barriers, though social resistance remains strong. NFHS-5 shows that more women are marrying at later ages, and female autonomy in choosing spouses is gradually increasing, though often within family-sanctioned frameworks. Importantly, *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018) decriminalized adultery, affirming that marriage cannot be a site of control over women's sexuality. The modern Indian marriage, while still a social institution, is shifting from being purely a family-arranged duty to a personal, sometimes negotiated, choice.

Work and Financial Contribution: The entry of women into the workforce has reshaped family economies, even though participation rates remain lower than men's. PLFS 2022–23 data record a female labour force participation rate around 37%, higher than earlier years but still lagging behind. Yet, even modest contributions alter household power dynamics. Wives with salaries or entrepreneurial incomes often influence major decisions like children's education or property purchases. The Equal Remuneration Act (1976) laid the groundwork for wage equality, while the Maternity Benefit Act (1961, amended 2017) expanded paid leave and protections. But the Time Use Survey (2019) shows women still spend five times more time than men on unpaid domestic and care work—revealing that their double burden remains. Despite this, NCRB data and household surveys highlight an important shift: women's earnings are increasingly seen as crucial, not supplementary. The lived reality is one of quiet revolutions—daughters paying their brothers' school fees, wives co-financing family homes, and widows using inheritance rights to sustain households. Work, both paid and unpaid, is now central to how women define themselves within families.

Shifting Patriarchy and Legal Rights: Patriarchy is being steadily redefined through law and social reform. Early family laws, like the Hindu Succession Act (1956), initially kept daughters at the margins of inheritance. But the 2005 amendment and its landmark interpretation in *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma* (2020) gave daughters coparcenary rights by birth, symbolically placing them on par with sons. Similarly, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) created civil remedies for women facing abuse within marital homes, ensuring the right to reside with dignity. The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act (2019) criminalised instant triple talaq, reinforcing reforms already initiated by the courts. Cases like *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), though focused on LGBTQ+ rights, also broadened the family imagination, making kinship more inclusive. These reforms collectively signal a transition from unquestioned male authority to a system where women can assert legal and moral rights. Still, NCRB statistics on cruelty by husband and relatives (over 100,000 cases in 2022) remind us that legal advances alone cannot erase deep-rooted patriarchy. The modern family is a site of contest—old hierarchies resist, but new rights keep advancing.

Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Perhaps the most striking feature of modern Indian families is their ability to balance change with continuity. On one hand, daughters inherit property, young couples live in nuclear homes, and educated women demand professional identities. On the other hand, families still gather around rituals, kinship ties, and festivals that anchor cultural belonging. NFHS data reveal a decline in son preference in some states, yet practices like sex-selective abortions (regulated by the PCPNDT Act, 1994) show that cultural biases endure. Families celebrate girls' achievements but may still pressure them into marriages before 25. Husbands increasingly share childcare, but women remain primary caregivers. This duality reflects an ongoing negotiation: modern laws and global influences push families toward equality, while traditions pull them toward continuity. Rather than collapsing, families adapt—reinterpreting customs to fit new realities. The result is a dynamic, evolving family system where a young woman may be both a software engineer and the custodian of family rituals, embodying both tradition and modernity at once.

Conclusion

The evolution of women's roles in the Indian family system, from the reformist era (1857–1947) to the present (1947–2025), reveals a story of both remarkable transformation and persistent continuity. In the colonial and nationalist period, reformers, educators, and political leaders sought to redefine women's place in the household by introducing education, widow remarriage, and inheritance rights, while women themselves—through organizations like the All India Women's Conference—demanded a greater voice in shaping family and social life. Yet, even as legal reforms and nationalist ideals opened new possibilities, the family remained a deeply patriarchal institution where women's autonomy was limited and their identity tied to notions of honor, duty, and sacrifice.

With independence, the promise of equality was written into the Constitution and reinforced through landmark laws such as the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Hindu Succession Amendment (2005), and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005). Court cases—from *Shah Bano* (1985) to *Vineeta Sharma* (2020)—have further tested and expanded the meaning of women's rights within families. National surveys such as NFHS and PLFS demonstrate significant gains: women increasingly participate in household decisions, marry later, and contribute to family incomes. Yet these same surveys and NCRB reports also reveal contradictions—dowry deaths, domestic violence, and the “double burden” of care work persist, showing that law alone cannot undo entrenched cultural practices.

The Indian family system today stands at a crossroads between tradition and modernity. Women are no longer confined to the home but continue to carry the weight of cultural expectations. They inherit property as equals, yet still battle son preference; they pursue higher education and professional careers, yet remain primary caregivers. The family, therefore, is not a static structure but a dynamic space where women negotiate between empowerment and restriction, continuity and change.

This seminar concludes that the history of women in Indian families is best understood not as a linear march toward equality, but as a layered process of negotiation. Women have carved out new roles while also carrying forward older responsibilities, reshaping the family into a more flexible yet still contested institution. The challenge for the future

lies in ensuring that progressive laws and educational gains translate into lived equality—so that women are recognized not merely as custodians of family honor but as full and equal partners in the shaping of both households and society.

End Notes

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