

Putting up with patrilocality

 indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/putting-up-with-patrilocality-8546112

April 9, 2023



Anshu Saluja writes: In marriage ceremonies where the entire wedding party is lodged in the same resort, the bride leaves her own quarters after marriage to go to her husband's temporary abode, a few feet away. (Representational/File)

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Different aspects of marriage have undergone widespread scrutiny in India. Aspects such as marriageable age, right to divorce and maintenance, and protection and custody of children have been debated upon from time to time. Recently, multiple pleas seeking to legalise marriages between LGBTQ+ persons have been taken up by the Supreme Court, challenging the very understanding of marriage as a heterosexual union of two partners. These instances show that the institution of marriage is in no way immune to questioning.

Still, some key constituents of marriage that deepen inequality between men and women have received little attention. Patrilocality is a clear case in point. It enjoins women to permanently move into their husbands' homes following marriage. This dispersal of the women lacking sound finances visibly disempowers them. It renders their position in their new home incomparable to that of their husbands, who continue to live amidst their own kin.

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Patrilocality is widely eulogised in popular culture. Symbolically, its normative hegemony is upheld even in marriages where a couple opts for neolocality (a practice in which both partners set up a home away from their respective families). In such instances too, the bride is duly sent off to her husband's family home for the time being. We often go to ridiculous lengths to sustain this charade.

In marriage ceremonies where the entire wedding party is lodged in the same resort, the bride leaves her own quarters after marriage to go to her husband's temporary abode, a few feet away. Thus, the system of patrilocality gets reaffirmed.

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In instances where the bride has no option but to move in with her affinal family, her predicament becomes quite precarious. She is largely left to her own devices to cope with the anguish of leaving her home and family. Scholars studying intergroup conflicts have noted how people displaced from their homes as a result of these situations experience acute loss of place, belonging and dignity.

Such is the unsaid power of the patriarchy-patrilocality dyad that a woman is, in one instance, uprooted from her own accustomed habitat, and transferred to a new home and family after marriage. The sense of loss she encounters becomes the obligatory price she pays to sustain the moral compulsions built into marriage. Confronting the established normative hegemony of patrilocality, she often has little choice but to operate within its overarching framework.

Cutting across caste, class and community lines, women have been dispersed to meet the norm of patrilocality. They have negotiated with it, strategised to subvert it and made compromises. In some instances, they have managed to break away. But they have not been able to undermine the moral authority of patrilocality or hold it accountable for favouring men and discriminating against women.

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Patrilocality is crucial to sustaining the preference for male children and the practices of affording better food, health and educational facilities to sons vis-à-vis daughters. These daily discriminations are intrinsically linked to patrilocality. A daughter will have to be married off, often with a huge dowry. A son, on the other hand, will carry the family name forward, offer the promise of support to elderly parents, and even compensate for financial losses incurred in arranging the daughters' marriages by obtaining dowry. He will ultimately secure through marriage another caregiver, whose labours will also sustain the family. So slogans like "Save daughters, educate them and treat them at par with sons" ring hollow. For achieving substantive gains, we have to question disempowering structures like patrilocality. However, the workings of everyday patriarchy and the unabashed patriarchal conditioning of our children serve to limit such questioning.

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First published on: 09-04-2023 at 07:15 IST