

Cinematic Portrayals of Women's Health: Gendered Narratives and Development Discourses in Hindi Cinema

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the intersection of gender and development in three mainstream Hindi films: Toilet: Ek Prem Katha (2017), Padman (2018), and Janhit Mein Jaari (2022). These films foreground women's health, agency, and socio-cultural constraints, moving beyond the traditionally apolitical narratives of popular Indian cinema. (Fatma, 2025) By engaging with themes such as shame, tradition, and disparity, the films reveal how entrenched taboos and patriarchal norms impede women's access to sexual and reproductive health, hinder self-determination, and ultimately impact broader developmental outcomes. (Reel Women, Real Issues: Gendered Health Narratives and Development Discourses in Contemporary Hindi Cinema, 2026) Employing thematic analysis, this study identifies recurring patterns and symbolic motifs that inform cinematic representations of women's development. By examining themes such as women's health—particularly reproductive health—gender equity, and development, the research demonstrates that development is an intersectional and multidimensional process shaped by cultural forces influencing both policy and perception. (Sharma, 2026) Through a nuanced analysis of the films, the study illustrates how cultural narratives both reflect and challenge dominant discourses. (Fatma, 2025) Furthermore, by treating these films as cultural texts, the research underscores cinema's potential as a platform for socially conscious storytelling and advocates for the integration of gender discourse into broader developmental frameworks. (Reel Women, Real Issues: Gendered Health Narratives and Development Discourses in Contemporary Hindi Cinema, 2026).

Keywords: Reel Women, Health Narratives, Development Discourse, Hindi Cinema.

Introduction

The development of women is fundamentally connected to the broader discourse on societal progress. Women, as one of the most

underrepresented and underdeveloped segments of the global population, comprise nearly half of the world's demographic. (Global Gender Gap Report 2024, 2024) (Galan, 2025) Therefore,

their inclusion in the formulation and implementation of development policies is essential. Gender inequality perpetuates systemic disparities and intersects with other developmental challenges, necessitating a comprehensive approach to address these inequities. A holistic understanding of the issues and challenges faced by women is required to achieve development goals effectively. This research conducts a thematic analysis of select Hindi films from the past decade that address women's development and health, including sexual and reproductive health: *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017), *Padman* (2018), and *Janhit Mein Jari* (2022). The study explores themes such as shame, tradition, and disparity affecting women's health, as well as issues of agency and self-determination that hinder the achievement of development objectives. Mainstream popular Indian cinema has largely neglected the themes of development and sustainability, which have primarily been explored in alternative or documentary filmmaking. (Reel Women, Real Issues: Gendered Health Narratives and Development Discourses in Contemporary Hindi Cinema, 2026) (Chawla, 2025, pp. 647-653) However, these three films represent notable exceptions by integrating these critical themes into the narrative framework of conventional popular Hindi cinema. In doing so, they challenge traditional boundaries and offer a unique intersection of entertainment and socially conscious storytelling. This study seeks to elucidate the concept of development within the contemporary socio-cultural context, examining it through the lens of gender equality and focusing on egalitarian forms of progress. Development should not be viewed as a solitary objective but as an all-encompassing process. Individual issues are frequently shaped by multiple interrelated variables, underscoring the significant intersectionality inherent in developmental concerns. The interplay of these factors amplifies the complexity of each challenge. Additionally, disparities between the conditions faced by men and women, combined with gender inequality, intensify these challenges.

This context necessitates a comprehensive and intersectional approach to addressing developmental issues.

While gender equality constitutes a distinct Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), its relevance extends to nearly all seventeen Goals. The prominence of women's issues underscores their interconnectedness within the broader developmental context. (Reel Women, Real Issues: Gendered Health Narratives and Development Discourses in Contemporary Hindi Cinema, 2026) Entrenched themes such as shame, tradition, and persistent fear of transgression represent significant barriers to achieving gender equality. (Singh & Bhushan, 2025) These cultural and societal challenges impede not only progress toward gender equality but also the attainment of other related developmental objectives. (Sasikumar et al., 2026) This study employs thematic analysis to examine four contemporary Hindi films, uncovering the complex interplay of taboo, tradition, and gender inequality. The findings demonstrate that these interconnected forces profoundly shape developmental outcomes and significantly influence the representation of women's issues. By analyzing how popular Hindi cinema articulates and challenges development aspirations, this research underscores the centrality of gender discourse in understanding broader developmental trajectories.

Research Objectives

- Investigate the relationship between women's development and broader development discourses
- Analyze cinematic portrayals of women's health and empowerment
- Identify and categorize key issues influencing women's development

Literature Review

The intersection of national development and the status of women has long attracted scholarly attention. While the importance of women's health has been acknowledged in academic

discourse, most research has concentrated on policy and sociology rather than cinema. Cinema, as a powerful mass medium, plays a significant cultural role in shaping perceptions of gender inequality and mainstreaming health discourses. (Fatma, 2025) Scholars have critically examined gendered representations in Hindi cinema, emphasizing how these portrayals both reflect and reinforce existing patriarchal norms in society (Chatterjee, 1998; Gopal & Moorti, 2008; Butalia, 2002; Mazumdar, 2010). Over the decades, the representation of women in Hindi cinema has changed considerably. Mainstream films from the early years until the 1980s predominantly depicted women in traditional roles, often idealized as selfless mothers, obedient daughters, or devoted wives (Dwyer, 2000; Viridi, 2003). The primary exception was the portrayal of independent women in Indian New Wave or parallel cinema. Following liberalization and globalization in the 1990s, representations shifted substantially, with female protagonists gaining greater agency and autonomy (Roy, 2012; Chakravarty, 2011). The late 2000s and 2010s witnessed an increase in women-centric narratives in Hindi films such as *Kahaani* (2012), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2014), and *Pink* (2016). This transformation reflects rapidly changing societal attitudes toward gender roles (Kumar, 2018; Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). The evolving depiction of women in Hindi cinema illustrates a complex interplay between tradition and transformation. (Singh & Kumari, 2024) Although mainstream popular cinema has historically perpetuated regressive gender stereotypes, it has also, at times, served as a catalyst for progressive discourse (Dethero, 2023). The emergence of feminist narratives in the late 1990s marked a significant shift, challenging entrenched gender inequalities and presenting alternative portrayals of women's empowerment (Mishra & Bhargava, 2024).

Contemporary films such as *English Vinglish* (2012) and *Tumhari Sulu* (2017) address themes of female education, employment, and self-reliance, reflecting the increasing aspirations of Indian women in a rapidly evolving society

(Sangwan, 2024). Despite the growing visibility of women-centric narratives, the representation of women's health in Hindi cinema remains limited. (*Reel Women, Real Issues: Gendered Health Narratives and Development Discourses in Contemporary Hindi Cinema*, 2024, pp. 1-9) Topics such as menstruation, reproductive health, and mental well-being have only gained prominence in the past decade. (Fatma, 2025) *Pad Man* (2018) represents a pivotal moment in mainstream cinema's engagement with menstrual hygiene awareness (Gopee, 2024). Similarly, *Dear Zindagi* (2016) contributed to the discourse on mental health by challenging societal stigmas and providing a nuanced portrayal of psychological well-being (Sharma, 2016). However, while some films attempt to normalize health-related discussions, these efforts often occur within commercial constraints. As a result, narratives may become diluted or sensationalized (Sangwan, 2024).

Hindi cinema significantly influences public perceptions of women's issues, including health, by serving both as a reflection of society and as a catalyst for social change (Mishra & Bhargava, 2024). Collaborations between public health campaigns and the film industry have become more prevalent, aiming to raise awareness about issues such as domestic violence and maternal health. (UNESCO supports Indian film on domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis, 2022) However, ongoing concerns about the commodification of women's narratives and the persistence of exploitative tropes highlight the necessity for more nuanced and ethically responsible storytelling (Dethero, 2023). Existing literature on Hindi cinema's influence on women's development and health highlights its dual function as both an enforcer of traditional norms and a driver of progressive change. (Agarwal & Kumar, 2024) Despite this, significant gaps persist in the comprehensive portrayal of women's health concerns, indicating a need for further scholarly investigation. (Reddy et al., 2011, pp. 210-213) Future research should examine audience reception, policy implications,

and the real-world effectiveness of cinematic interventions in improving health outcomes.

Methodology

A thematic analysis was conducted on three contemporary Hindi films that explore women's health, reproductive health, gender equity, and development. These films were selected using purposive sampling to ensure direct engagement with the thematic issues under investigation.

Film Selection and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select films that engage with the identified themes. The inclusion criteria required that each film:

- Explicitly portrays issues related to women's health and reproductive health.
- Critically engages with themes of gender equality.
- Situates these concerns within broader developmental narratives.

This purposive sampling ensured that the chosen films matched the research themes and allowed for a detailed analysis of how gender dynamics and development intersect. (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 652-661)

This research used Braun and Clarke's Reflective Thematic Analysis model (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After becoming familiar with the data, the study examined the meanings in the films by analyzing their narratives, dialogues, situations, music, and visuals. The analysis looked at how these themes appear in the films and how they relate to each other. It explored not only individual issues such as women's health and gender inequality, but also how these issues connect within a broader developmental context.

Analysis and Discussion

These films were released a few years after India entered the new century, adopted the SDGs (United Nations India, 2015), and began to focus on modernity, technology, and development. In this context, Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, Padman, and Janhit Mein Jaari are important to study. They explore village life, taboos, traditions, and injustices, especially the struggles women face.

(Yadav, n.d.) These stories reflect the broader challenges India faces today. (Mohammed, 2025) The films show a contrast between characters who want change and those who resist it, highlighting the ongoing struggle between tradition and progress. (Kapadia, 2024) This tension is brought to life through their narratives.

Defecation, Dignity, and Development: Sanitation and social change in Toilet: Ek Prem Katha

According to the latest WHO data, over 1.5 billion people around the world do not have access to basic sanitation, such as private toilets or latrines. Of these, 419 million still practice open defecation, often using street gutters, bushes, or open water sources (WHO, 2024). The situation in India is particularly notable. Despite rapid economic growth, higher literacy rates, and better access to water, the 2011 Census found that nearly 70% of rural households in India still lacked a toilet or latrine (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). Compared to other developing regions, this remains a serious concern. For example, about 35% of people in rural sub-Saharan Africa defecate in the open, while in rural Bangladesh the figure is 5%, and in rural China it is just 2% (UNICEF and WHO 2012). The Indian government has worked for years to address this problem. The Nirmal Bharat Abhyan, also known as the Total Sanitation Campaign, ran from 1999 to 2012 to eliminate open defecation and promote toilet use and general sanitation. The Swachh Bharat Abhyan, a major initiative of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, continues this effort. While there has been progress, the challenge remains. World Bank data shows that open defecation in India dropped from 65.97% in 2000 to 39.84% in 2015 (wssinfo.org, n.d.). In 2015, about 41% of India's rural population practiced open defecation, but by 2022, this number had fallen to 17% (Mahapatra, 2023). Open defecation is linked to diseases such as cholera, bacterial vaginosis, and hookworm, and has also been connected to crimes against women. For women, the lack of toilets means extra effort to find privacy, often

making them more vulnerable. (Babbar et al., 2023, pp. 1177-1186) Rituals and traditions also play a role, especially for women. (Pintchman, 2007) Although government organizations have focused on this issue, it remains closely tied to women's experiences. The film *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* looks at these challenges, particularly those faced by women. The movie begins with a long scene showing a group of women heading out before dawn. There is a sense of togetherness, and for them, this is a normal part of daily life. They go to relieve themselves before the town wakes up, doing what is natural for all humans and animals, but in darkness. This opening scene sets the tone for the film and quickly shows the daily reality faced by millions of women.

People in these communities lack basic amenities that others take for granted. However, this is not just about poverty or economic underdevelopment. Instead, it is often a firm refusal to give up what is called the traditional way of life, both in the film and in reality. The problem of open defecation is not simply due to a lack of money to build toilets, but rather a refusal to do so, even though the government has run several programs to help and encourage them. (Gauri et al., 2020, pp. 266-290) The film highlights tradition from the start, showing the protagonist Keshav marrying a buffalo in a lavish ceremony meant to bring good luck. While the scene is light hearted, it reveals the serious reality of how rural and small-town India is deeply connected to tradition and rituals. This moment sets up the main obstacle to building a toilet at home, both in the film and for many people in real life. It also points to how tradition and ritual are central to issues affecting women. (Coffey et al., 2017) The female lead asks for a toilet and refuses to follow the town's practice of open defecation. She faces strong opposition, not just from village elders but also from women who have accepted this way of life. The film repeatedly shows how tradition blocks progress and holds back women's empowerment. (Beyond toilet decisions: Tracing sanitation journeys among women in informal housing in India, 2021, pp. 10-19) A strong woman who challenges tradition

is seen as being corrupted by modern ideas and education. This prejudice appears throughout the film, as characters blame Jaya's education for her questioning of social norms. (Ghosh et al., 2015, pp. 347-363) When she first meets the women of the 'Lota Party' and criticizes open defecation, one woman responds, "you're very beautiful and you done a love marriage. This is what girls do after getting educated." Later, her education is again blamed when she argues with her husband Keshav about having a toilet at home, and he accuses her of throwing tantrums: "Jaya: You are thinking these are tantrums, don't you think it is a woman's right to have a toilet? Keshav: This is nothing new, for years women have been adjusting and learning the traditions of their in-laws' family, your education has spoiled you" There is an urgent need for substantive reforms to improve women's status in India. Enduring traditions, India urgently needs real reforms to improve the status of women. Long-standing traditions, cultural norms, and institutional biases are major barriers to gender equality. (Gopalakrishnan, 2024) Women's choices about their careers and education are often unfairly criticized and seen as negative rather than empowering. (Ghosh et al., 2015, pp. 1-9) The film shows how these issues, devaluing education, focusing too much on tradition, and not empowering women, hold back progress.

A key scene in the film shows Keshav being called before the Panchayat because he wants to build a toilet at home. This moment highlights the complicated ties between gender, tradition, modern ideas, and open defecation. It brings attention to the cultural barriers that hold back both women's empowerment and wider social progress.

"Panchayat: We got independence from the British, but now you are trying to enslave us to western culture?"

"Women: We are happy with the situation."

"Man 1: he wants to shit in the courtyard of the house and then sit in the kitchen"

"M2: should we bring the disease in the house? If you'll make people defecate in an enclosed space there will be uncleanness, plus the foul smell will

make the air unbreathable.' Sarpanch: don't try to challenge the culture of the country. (Recites a Shlok in Sanskrit and says) did Ram and Sita make toilets in a jungle?" Keshav angrily counters the argument saying that "you all have made religion a pawn in your hand" The film also explores why women resist change, even though this practice puts them at a disadvantage. Open defecation exposes women to disease, forces them to walk long distances for privacy, creates stress from hiding, and increases the risk of sexual assault. (Saleem et al., 2019) Their reluctance to change makes more sense when considering that open defecation is often their only chance to leave the house, since they lack freedom of movement. This lack of agency is a major reason why women continue the practice, despite its harms. (Sahoo et al., 2017) In many societies, especially in Latin America, women depend on "networks of reciprocal exchange" (Lomnitz, 1977) for support with basic needs like health and child care. However, these networks can also reinforce social control and pressure. The same structures that help women can also uphold traditions and limit their rights and mobility. (Vogel et al., 2022) The 'Lota Party' is a clear example: it is a group of women who go out together to defecate. They have accepted and normalized this routine, so they do not understand why Jaya refuses to join. Even though they suffer more from the downsides than men, they still resist change. The film introduces the Lota Party in the opening scene, showing the women laughing and talking together. For them, it is a break from housework and a rare chance to be outside, even if only briefly. This sense of fun is highlighted when Sama invites Jaya on her first day at Keshav's house, saying, "come on sister, everybody is waiting to welcome you to the Lota party."

The film presents Jaya's dilemma regarding the absence of a toilet in her home, highlighting the social expectation to use the same communal space as others, which fosters socialization and group identity, referred to as the 'lota party.' Through Jaya's critical remarks towards other women, the film challenges the normalization of

this practice, as she accuses them of tolerating the situation and finding satisfaction in the opportunity to gossip about their in-laws. In an interview scene, Jaya asserts that 'freedom is not going out in the open to defecate but to go out when you wish.' (International Journal of Communication Development, 2025, pp. 23-24) The film thus recognizes that open defecation is not solely a matter of health and sanitation, but is also deeply intertwined with gender dynamics. (Coffey et al., 2017, pp. 59-66) Traditions that restrict women's agency and mobility contribute to their resistance to change, as the act of going out provides a limited sense of autonomy, ultimately reinforcing it. The film critically examines the multifaceted relationship between women and development, demonstrating that developmental challenges are interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. (Coffey et al., 2017) It emphasises the necessity of a holistic and integrated approach to understanding these issues. (Talat et al., 2023) Additionally, the film reframes open defecation as a contested break from established tradition, highlighting its divisive status within rural communities. (Rai & Mishra, 2022) It argues that open defecation is opposed primarily for two reasons: it disrupts entrenched patriarchal norms and is viewed as the adoption of foreign, Western practices. (Health and social impacts of open defecation on women: a systematic review, 2019) position of alien, Western practices.

Red Stains and Quiet Voices: Menstruation, Shame, and Societal Progress in Padman

The stigma associated with menstruation continues to challenge the fulfillment of basic menstrual needs for women and young girls. (Addressing Menstrual Stigma: A Scoping Review on Menstrual Health Interventions in India, 2026) The persistent lack of attention and widespread silence surrounding this issue remains notable. (Olson et al., 2022) Menstrual hygiene is essential for the holistic development of females, encompassing health, equitable education, gender equality, and empowerment. (Verma & Pandey, 2025, pp. 82-106) Despite advancements, maintaining adequate hygiene and sanitation

during menstruation remains difficult for many women due to enduring taboos and the prevailing sense of shame, which discourages open discussion (Tiworthy, 2018). The film *Padman* addresses the theme of menstruation and its associated taboos by depicting the real-life story of Padma Shri awardee Arunachalam Muruganatham. Menstrual hygiene is also linked to the achievement of broader development goals. (Singh et al., 2022) Given that 26% of the female population in the country is within the menstruating age group, it is imperative to normalize discussions about menstrual health and hygiene to raise awareness and prevent disease (House, Mahon, & Cavill, 2012).

Padman foregrounds the themes of taboo, stigma, and shame associated with menstruation, presenting it as a subject discussed only in hushed tones and with considerable discomfort. The film's traditional village setting amplifies these challenges, depicting women as lacking fundamental knowledge about menstruation while entrenched customs impede progress. The narrative illustrates the seclusion of women during menstruation, often requiring them to sleep apart from the main household with minimal amenities. (Cultural taboos and menstrual health: analysing practices in Gadchiroli's Kurma Ghar (period huts) in Maharashtra, 2025) This is shown when the protagonist's wife is excluded from festivities and made to sleep outside, and when a young girl, after a ceremony marking her entry into adolescence, is made to sleep on an open terrace. These portrayals reinforce the perception of menstruation as unclean and contaminating. (K., 2024) Such alienation not only undermines women's dignity but also poses physical risks, as demonstrated by documented cases of infection and fatalities in period huts, including the recent deaths of a woman and her two children in Nepal (BBC, 2019). The absence of accurate information about menstrual hygiene leads women to adopt unsafe practices shaped by tradition, taboo, or personal coping strategies (Sumpter & Belen, 2013). These uninformed behaviors increase vulnerability to urinary tract

and reproductive tract infections. (Anand et al., 2015, pp. 249-254) The film further depicts resistance to change, exemplified when Lakshmi's wife asserts, "my God is with me, nothing will happen," and refuses to use sanitary napkins, stating, "for years I have been using this only, if you heart is clean nothing will happen to you." This refusal underscores the health risks associated with inadequate understanding of menstrual hygiene. The persistent stigma is highlighted through various scenes: Lakshmi's inquiries about menstruation are silenced, his wife recounts her reluctance to use sanitary napkins due to a previous incident, and his efforts to provide sanitary products to his sister and nieces are met with shock and embarrassment. Even educated women in the film display discomfort discussing menstruation, as seen in a scene where two city women, seeking sanitary napkins for a friend at night, express hesitation and shame. (Pinkishe Foundation | NGO Empowering Women & Advancing Menstrual Health, n.d.) "Do you have a wife, sister, or any other woman in your house? Actually, our friend is in the car. We were looking for a pharmacy. Suddenly, actually, ladies' problem." The taboo surrounding menstruation therefore emerges as a significant barrier, making the achievement of women's health challenging. (Systematic review of menstrual health and hygiene in Nepal employing a social ecological model, 2020)

The film also addresses the unusually high cost of menstrual hygiene products, such as sanitary napkins, which many contemporary women's liberation activists and policymakers refer to as the "period tax." (Calderón-Villarreal, 2023) Elevated prices render these products inaccessible to a significant portion of the low-income population, effectively categorizing them as luxury items rather than basic necessities. (Period Poverty – why millions of girls and women cannot afford their periods, 2025) The narrative centers on Lakshmi's efforts to develop an affordable sanitary napkin for low-income groups, aiming to increase accessibility for women who continue to use cloth and alternative

products due to both tradition and prohibitive costs. (Meher & Sahoo, 2023) During a lecture, Lakshmi asserts, “Why for men 12 month and for woman only 10. Woman wearing pad gives them 2 months extra to live.” (R et al., 2024, pp. 1-15) This statement underscores the argument that menstrual taboos and the limited affordability of sanitary products diminish women's quality of life.

Navigating Caution and Censure: Condom Stigma in Janhit Mein Jaari

In India, discussions about sex are often suppressed due to prevailing moral judgments and societal scrutiny, resulting in a pervasive sense of shame. (Sex education in India, 2024) Within this context, male contraceptives, particularly condoms, are closely associated with stigma. (SS et al., 2016) The concept of male contraception is intertwined with constructs of male virility, a particularly sensitive issue in India's patriarchal society. (Klinton & Olaoye, 2024) As a result, condom use is frequently perceived as diminishing masculine strength, reinforcing societal discomfort. (Chakrapani et al., 2013, pp. 938-951) Women are often excluded from decision-making regarding sexual relations and contraceptive use, and expressing opinions on these matters is considered taboo and is actively discouraged. (Saha & Chatterjee, 2018, pp. 1-10) Despite limited involvement in contraceptive decisions, women disproportionately bear the responsibility for contraception, often through hormonal or invasive methods. (Agrawal et al., 2023) According to NFHS-5, male-oriented contraceptive methods, such as condoms and male sterilization, constitute approximately 17% of the modern contraceptive prevalence rate (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021). Infrequent contraceptive use leads to various adverse health outcomes, including sexually transmitted infections. (Steiner et al., 2021, pp. 750-760) Even within monogamous relationships, the absence of contraception can result in unintended pregnancies, rapid successive births, or abortions, all of which have lasting

effects on maternal health. (Biswas, 2025) The film *Janhit Mein Jaari* addresses contraceptive awareness by challenging societal stigmas related to the purchase and use of condoms among both men and women. Through its narrative, the film also fosters discourse on consensual sex and emphasizes the importance of informed decision-making in contraceptive practices, with particular attention to women's health. The film centers on Manu, a female protagonist employed at a condom factory and responsible for marketing its products. The narrative depicts her efforts to confront entrenched taboos and societal shame associated with discussions of condom use. Manu's journey underscores initiatives to raise awareness among women regarding contraceptive options, challenge cultural silences, and promote informed discourse on sexual health.

The film consistently addresses the topic of planned pregnancy and emphasizes the importance of family planning. Family planning enables individuals and couples to determine their preferred number of children and to manage the timing and spacing of pregnancies. This is achieved through contraceptive methods and interventions for infertility (WHO, 2025). At one point, the protagonist asserts, “with planning having even two children are fine, and without planning even one child is wrong.” Following her wedding, in a discussion about childbearing, the protagonist's sister-in-law reflects on not planning her first child, stating, “by having a child in the first year of marriage I ruined both my life and my figure.” The film highlights the challenges women encounter in exercising agency over family planning, particularly their limited involvement in decisions about contraceptive use. (James-Hawkins et al., 2018, pp. 843-858) Access to family planning services enables individuals and couples to achieve desired birth spacing and family size, contributing to improved health outcomes for women, children, and families (Sonfield et al, 2014). By depicting the sister-in-law's regret over an unplanned child, the film further reveals the emotional and social consequences women experience when denied

autonomy in reproductive decisions. (Harris et al., 2014).

In a poignant sequence, Manu's assistant dies by suicide, unable to bear the societal stigma and ridicule resulting from an unwanted, unwed pregnancy. (Suicidal deaths in pregnancy at an apex institute in India: A retrospective analysis of autopsy cases, 2022) Manu observes that the true mistake lies not in the pregnancy itself, but in the lack of education regarding the benefits of condom use. The film addresses abortion as a medical procedure necessitated by unwanted pregnancies and emphasizes the importance of raising awareness among women, making them active participants in contraceptive decisions. (Biswas, 2025) The protagonist asserts, "we have to raise awareness among women because the truth is that it doesn't affect men whether men use a condom or not but it is not the same case with women." As Manu continues her campaign to promote condom use despite familial disapproval, the narrative reveals various consequences of neglecting contraception, such as complications from abortion experienced by her sister-in-law. (Singh et al., n.d.) Motivated by Manu's advocacy, the sister-in-law requests her husband to use a condom, explaining that she has already undergone two abortions and cannot risk another. During a campaign session, Manu underscores the importance of contraception by stating, "children make mistakes, they should not be a mistake." The film seeks to bring the conversation about condom use into public discourse and to eliminate the shame and embarrassment associated with purchasing condoms. (Acharya & Jejeebhoy, 2012, pp. 107-116) Through its narrative, the film highlights critical issues related to female reproductive and sexual health, as well as the challenge of rising population density. (Kalidhasan & Arumugam, 2020) By addressing these concerns, the film underscores the developmental importance of effective family planning, which requires the collaborative involvement of both men and women. (WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND FAMILY PLANNING: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE, 2016, pp. 1-9) It further

emphasizes that men must actively challenge entrenched social and cultural barriers to participate equitably in reproductive decision-making, adopt contraceptive practices, and support women's autonomy in selecting reproductive health strategies. (Shrivastava et al., 2025, pp. 113-116).

Conclusion

The films *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, *Padman*, and *Janhit Mein Jari* serve as case studies that examine how longstanding cultural taboos and entrenched traditions perpetuate gender inequality and resistance to social change. Through narrative, character dialogue, and visual representation, these films demonstrate that development should be understood as a holistic process encompassing cognitive, psychological, political, and economic dimensions. They further emphasize that women's issues are central to any effective transformative agenda. (Lahiri-Dutt, 2025) Additionally, the films illustrate the challenges inherent in transitioning from tradition to modernity. They suggest that meaningful progress is achieved through gradual innovation and persistent reconfiguration of traditional norms, enabling women to become active partners in change rather than passive subjects. (Singh & Kumari, 2024) Resistance from established patriarchal structures and traditionalist viewpoints underscores the complexity of this transformation, indicating that sustainable development is a non-linear process marked by interdependencies across various social axes. (Koonan, 2019, pp. 40-58)

This research affirms that addressing women's issues is pivotal to achieving. This research affirms that addressing women's issues is pivotal to achieving both egalitarian and sustainable development. The cinematic representations examined highlight the necessity for a nuanced, integrated approach that recognizes the multifaceted roles of taboo and tradition in shaping gender dynamics and, consequently, the overall trajectory of developmental progress.

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