

Review Article

# The Changing Connection between Women's Empowerment and Socioeconomic Status in Indian Cinema from 1985-1995 to 2015-2024

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Received: 19 October 2024

Revised: 22 November 2024

Accepted: 10 December 2024

Published: 30 December 2024

**Abstract** - Films play a significant role in shaping society's perception of women. Although many studies have focused on gender roles in films, little research exists on women's socioeconomic status and empowerment. This paper addresses this knowledge gap by analyzing the narrative of the relationship between women's socioeconomic status and decision-making power in Indian cinema. It compares films from 1985 to 1995 with films from 2015 to 2024. The aim is to investigate whether there has been a change in the way Indian films represent women's empowerment from different socio-economic backgrounds during these two different periods. To achieve this, the study was conducted in detail on six films (three from each period) focusing on the dialogue characters and the interaction of dialogue with society. The findings suggest a significant shift: earlier films often depicted women from lower socioeconomic classes as less empowered and those from higher classes as more empowered. In recent films, the situation has reversed; women from lower socio-economic backgrounds are seen as more powerful, while women from upper classes are sometimes seen as lacking independence. This research can be helpful for policymakers, filmmakers and professionals. It sheds light on the changing nature of the narrative of women's empowerment in Indian cinema and highlights the need for a better understanding of how the media shape society. This research can inform future filmmaking, policy development and academic research and lead to greater representation of women in the media.

**Keywords** - Decision making, Indian cinema, Socioeconomic status, Changing relationships, Women empowerment.

## 1. Introduction

A correlation has been seen between the empowerment of males and gender roles. (Urban.org, 2019) Furthermore, class standing also plays a significant role in empowerment. (McCluney, 2020) While societal norms undeniably shape the lives of women, their economic status is an important factor determining the level of empowerment. Hence, traditional gender roles and class standing influence the experiences of empowerment, making it a multifaceted issue.

In the recent past, women from disadvantaged groups had less access to resources, which affected their decision-making ability. (UNwomen.org, 2012) At the same time, many of these women face difficulties around their identity or self-expression that go beyond employment and finances. (Elliott, 1996) Conversely, women from a higher socioeconomic background tend to be more empowered as they have greater access to education and financial power, which leads to policy protections in law. (Taylor and Francis, 2023) This refers to women from higher socioeconomic classes being able to make their own decisions and having fewer restrictions on traditional gender roles.

In the contemporary era, society has begun to challenge traditional gender roles with the philosophy of gender equality. However, the intersection between socioeconomic status empowerment and self-identity is still ongoing. Media such as television, radio, newspapers, films, and social media shape people's opinions and beliefs about society. (Happer, 2013) Given how pervasive media consumption is in human lives with routine interactions, its immense influences on shaping thoughts and identity cannot be overstated. The media consumed, whether it is the news on TV or in newspapers that are read and social posts scrolled through, can have an impact. Techniques such as the use of well-known faces are used to grab the attention of the audience, readers and consumers of media (Karambelkar, 2020). The media can give us new knowledge and impact opinions and decisions.

Cinema is a strong and widely accepted art form, especially in the country with the largest film industry like Bollywood, Tollywood, and Kollywood, India. (Roy Stafford) (Nivesh Mitra, 2023) Movies play a major role in



empowering women economically and incentivizing decision-making (Verma, 2024). From *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* to *Raazi*, the portrayal of women in films has changed immensely. (Ayushi G, 2021) These shifts in movies portray the influence of gender roles and class on gender equality and autonomy. According to an article by Times of India (TNN, 2012), the movie ‘*Oh My God*’ raised questions about whether donations to temples and religious institutions were truly being used for the right purposes. As a result, many people started redirecting their contributions toward charities and NGOs that directly help those in need, like orphanages and old-age homes. Hence, this shows how movies can impact people’s perceptions and behaviour, affecting their real-life choices. This is because the experiences with fictional characters resonate with people as they tap into these experiences and connections formed with other people throughout their lives (Motion Pictures 2013).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Bollywood films often portrayed stereotypical gender roles, with women mostly playing supporting roles. As the years passed, the 2000s brought in more diverse narratives, reflecting modern society, with strong female leads and stories of empowerment becoming more common. The movies today

focus a lot on complex characters and real societal issues. (Ankuar Das, 2022)

Hence, films do hold the power to invoke change from within and, without challenging the status quo, inspired by a vision for women making decisions that align with who they are as opposed to their value being founded on prevailing narratives. Upon literature review, it was seen that multiple studies focus on gender roles and ideas such as feminism; there are not many studies focused on understanding the relation between the shift of narratives of women’s empowerment on the basis of socioeconomic class in Indian cinema. Existing research papers/review papers look into the roles of women in these films from the feminist lens; little research has been done on understanding the link between socioeconomic status and the level of empowerment. (GSDRC) This study will provide insights into understanding the level to which Indian cinema has responded to changes in society, one of which is the link between socioeconomic level and empowerment. (Yanyan Hong, 2021). The research will review whether the portrayal of a connection between women’s empowerment and their economic context in Indian cinema has seen changes ranging from 1985-1995 to 2015-2024.

**Table 1. Movies, alongside a brief explanation of their plot.**

<b>Movies</b>	<b>Plot of the movie</b>
Trikal (1985)	This is a movie about complex family relationships, issues, and decisions to be taken as a family living in Goa comes together after the death of the character Ernesto.
Ijzat (1987)	In Ijzat, two characters, Sudha and Mahinder, who were married in the past, meet each other accidentally at a railway station. Here, they recollect their journey and love, ranging from how they fell in love and married due to family pressure to the way they divorced due to Sudha’s insecurity about Mahinder’s past lover, Maya. In the end, it is a movie about their love, separation and an unsaid apology.
Mirch Masala (1987)	Mirch Masala is the story of Sonbai as she tries to escape the lust and attacks of a brutal tax collector, Supedar. From slapping Supedar to hiding in a spice factory while the rest of the community decides how to help her, the story of brave Sonbai is presented as she finally escapes Supedar with the help of other women in the community,
Thappad (2020)	Thappad is a movie about Amrita, a housewife who casually gets slapped by her husband during a party. While this incident is relatively inconsequential to everyone else, it prompts Amrita to reconsider her marriage and the respect she ought to be given. The movie is about her transition and choice to start challenging the physical as well as emotional violence in her life, but it also touches on womanhood and societal expectations.
Chhapaak (2020)	Chhapaak is about the life of a young woman, Malti, who turns into an acid attack survivor. The audience gets to know about her recovery and psychological healing process, how she seeks justice for herself and ultimately helps others facing similar faces or those who faced similar acid attacks. The movie shows how she fights for justice and eventually succeeds at getting the acid sale banned.
Darlings (2022)	Darlings tells the story of Badrunissa, a woman caught in an abusive marriage with her alcoholic husband, Hamza. Even though she was dealing with domestic violence initially, a trigger incident made her fight back with the help of her mother and gain back her respect and empowerment. Set in a working-class neighbourhood in Mumbai, the story talks about gender-based violence and giving the power to stand up for oneself.

## 2. Methodology

To achieve the objective of this paper, the study was conducted in detail on six films (three from each period), focusing on the dialogue characters, body language and the interaction of dialogue with society. A qualitative analysis backed by interpretations from other studies has been presented. The films have been chosen based on the idea that they fit the time frame being studied and have crucial and substantial roles of female characters to understand. Above are the chosen movies, alongside a brief explanation of their plot.

## 3. Discussion

This section analyzes and interprets the scenes from the six chosen films in detail, examining factors like socioeconomic class and women's empowerment. By comparing these factors, this section will look at the patterns and differences between the two periods.

### 3.1. 90's Bollywood Era: 1985 - 1995

In the 1990s, the majority of the films in Indian cinema showed "glamorous realism," especially the ones made by renowned directors and producers. These films often had exaggerated scenes, long songs, and emotional stories about love and family. However, this decade also marked the beginning of more diverse topics being introduced to Indian cinema. The emergence of filmmakers like Mani Ratnam showed more grounded and realistic stories, while directors like Vishal Bhardwaj also brought politics and Shakespearean plays to the diversity (Dwyer, 2016). The portrayal of women in this timeframe, especially the connection between socioeconomic status and their empowerment, becomes crucial in these changing times of Indian cinema.

*Trikaal* is a movie about an Indian family residing in Goa. At the beginning of the film, one can see a man returning to Goa after Dona Maria's husband's death. (Benegal, 1985) In this film, women of high socioeconomic status families are seen voicing their opinions and decisions. For instance, Dona Maria is a powerful character who makes most of the decisions of the house.

Family members and people of the community seek her permission to make decisions and provide her with necessary information about the household, showing her position within the family with a high level of authority. As the film progresses, characters like Sita come out as ones with a high level of decision-making and free will, even in situations where male domination seems common. (Habib, 2017) For instance, in a scene near the end of the movie, Sita's husband decides to leave the house due to issues in the family, but without a moment of hesitation, Sita says loudly, "*Main nahin jaoongi.*" This shows her free will and high decision-making power. (Agarwal, 2014) Despite the patriarchal ideas she is surrounded by, Sita voicing her choices and denying to

move depicts free will that can be linked to the high socioeconomic status of the family. (Dalmia, 2024)

Another important character is Anna, who makes her own decisions about her love life. Initially, she is in a relationship with a local musician. Moreover, when she realizes that the relationship is not what she is looking for, she voices her opinion without any hesitation, depicting her autonomy in making her own choices.

However, throughout *the movie*, there are some grey incidents where the audience sees patriarchal dominance and even minor instances of domestic violence (Thrukal & Jaipuria, 2020). However, these moments are few compared to incidents where women hold power and authority in the family.

The second movie *Ijazat* is a story of Sudha and Mahinder, a divorced couple who accidentally meet at a train station. (Gulzar, 1987) Through flashbacks, the audience learns about their marriage and how they got divorced because of Mahinder's previous relationship with a girl called Maya. Mahinder and Sudha got married due to family pressure, but their relationship was compromised since Sudha felt insecure about Maya. After several such incidents of insecurity and jealousy from Sudha comes the breaking point. (Sood, 2020) When Maya attempts suicide, Mahinder rushes to her, causing Sudha to feel that it is the end of the relationship and eventually leave him by writing a letter. In the present, sitting at the train station, they talk about their past.

Sudha gets to know that after she left, Maya and Mahinder were together for a while until Maya died in an accident. In this movie, Sudha, despite wanting to save the relationship and loving Mahinder, takes charge of her life. After discovering Maya's photo in his wallet, she feels that Maya is affecting their marriage. (Bengani, 2022) Further, deciding to leave Mahinder and walk away without asking for anyone's support. This shows that she is a woman who can make her own decisions without anyone's need and has the free will to handle her relationship the way she prefers. These qualities can be linked to her high socioeconomic status. Even after their divorce, Sudha comes out as someone self-sufficient and content, showing no signs of sadness or dependency, making her an empowered person. (Chaudhari, 2022)

Maya, as well, even though emotionally complex, emerges as someone who lives with a strong sense of free will. She expresses her emotions through poetry and lives life on her own terms, choosing when to re-enter Mahinder's life. In both characters, it can be seen that their high socioeconomic status affords them personal autonomy and the strength to make independent decisions in their relationships. (Pande, 2021)

The third film, *Mirch Masala* (Mehta, 1987), starts with a group of women collecting water when Subedar, a local tax collector, arrives. All the women run in fear except Sonbai. Subedar sets his sights on Sonbai and makes advances. She slaps him and runs away, hiding in the chilli factory. This shows that, despite her initial resistance, Sonbai is not empowered enough to stand her ground. She flees for safety and relies on Abu Mian, the factory guard, to protect her. (Bhattacharya, 2019)

Throughout the film, the low sense of free will for women is evident. Women are not allowed to stand up for themselves, as shown by the societal pressures against Mukhi's daughter getting an education. Even some women in the factory suggest Sonbai surrender to Subedar, indicating they do not believe they have any autonomy. (Mazumdar, 1991) There is a powerful dialogue: "*Izzat sirf amiron ki baat hai*" (Respect is only for the rich) reflecting the idea that personal dignity and empowerment are categorized on the basis of socioeconomic status. In the end, while the women unite and throw chilli at Subedar to blind him, showcasing collective empowerment, the film still emphasizes the low individual empowerment women have throughout the story.

### 3.2. 2000's: 2015-2024

2000's demonstrate a noticeable shift in depicting the relationship between women's empowerment and socioeconomic status. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are portrayed as more empowered, while those from higher classes are shown as having less empowerment.

In the movie *Darlings* (Reen, 2022), the lead female character named Badru comes from a background and relies on her husband, Hamza, for financial stability. Facing violence at home leads to her loss of empowerment, where she justifies her husband's abuse by the financial support he provides. In a scene from the movie's beginning, Badru normalizes and accepts violence by saying to her mother that, "*It is nothing; he just hit me.*" (Agide, 2022)

However, as Hamza's aggressive behaviour worsens and leads to Badru losing her, she begins to understand her value and strength clearly. With the help of her mother, Shamsunisa and neighbour Zulfi, Badru starts taking charge of her own life. The pivotal moment in her journey and movie toward empowerment occurs when she decides to confine Hamza within their house. (Tarshi, 2022) In one scene, when Hamza tries to compliment her so as to regain her love and set him free, she gestures to Hamza, "*Chup*" (Be quiet). This transformation of Badru gives her free will to fight back despite the socioeconomic background portrayed in the movie, highlighting Badru's character. Badru's strength comes out more powerfully despite the financial struggles. In the end, despite Badru and her mother revoking the decision to kill Hamza by letting a train hit him,

fate comes into the picture, and Hamza gets killed. Ultimately, the movie is a reflection of the increasing empowerment of women from lesser socioeconomic status. (Biswal, 2023)

Another movie, *Chhapaak* (Gulzar, 2020), is about Malti and focuses on her journey as an acid attack survivor coming from a lower-middle-class background. The movie depicts a woman who overcomes adversity and societal obstacles to find empowerment by shaping her path in life. She shows the differences between her struggles and her resilience after facing an acid attack and facing moments where she sees her new face and screams and cries, knowing "*naak nahi hai, kaan nahi hai, jhumkha kahan latkaungi*" (Nose is missing, ears are not there, where will I put the earrings).

There was a time when her mother questioned her decision to fight for the ban on acid and mentioned the family's struggles and her brother's health issues as reasons for Malti to give up on the case due to the family's financial struggles; however, Malti moved ahead seeking justice for herself and other acid attack survivors. In a moment, she expressed, "*The acid attack stripped me of my identity*". However, she was ready to fight and get back her identity. (Pal & Karmakar, 2024)

Malti fights to stop the selling of acid. She is dedicated to supporting survivors of acid attacks through her work with an organization despite facing financial challenges and personal losses like the death of another acid attack survivor, "Pinky". She eventually succeeds in getting a ban on the sale of acid—an accomplishment that showcases her resilience and decision-making. Her position in a bracket does not hinder her determination or capacity to make a difference. The movie reflects how her sense of empowerment expands despite the obstacles presented by her situation—perhaps even flourishing because of them.

In contrast to the opening two movies of this era, *Thappad* introduces us to Amrita, a woman from an upper-class household. Despite her stability and high social standing, Amrita's journey towards empowerment is hindered by the expectations of her family and what society expects her to behave like.

When she is slapped at a gathering by her husband, supposedly due to aggression, Amrita makes the difficult choice to separate from him. Yet she encounters discouragement from her family members, who insist that she should remain within the marriage. Her mother's casual remark of "*Ghar ek thappad se thodi na toot jate hain*" (A home does not break with just one slap) shows how societal norms often overshadow a woman's independence within households. Even though Amrita is financially self-sufficient, she is still pressured to prioritize the marriage and compromise her dignity to uphold the family's reputation. (Deb, 2023)

Amrita is facing challenges in court as the judge and lawyers seem to minimize the seriousness of the situation she is going through. “*Ek thappad ke liye, yeh sab karna zaroori hai?*” (Is it necessary to go through all of this for just one slap?) questions her own lawyers, portraying how even the reinforcers of law influence her to not move forward with this decision and to stick with her marriage instead of a divorce. The emotional struggle Amrita faces shows that women from upper socio-economic backgrounds also encounter social barriers despite their financial independence. (Mehta, 2020)

Amrita decides to end her marriage with her husband as a way to assert her independence and strength within herself. The process leading up to this choice shows how women in circles, may face limitations in their freedom because of societal expectations even if they are financially stable.

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between women’s empowerment and socioeconomic status in Indian cinema, comparing films from 1985-1995 to those released from 2015 onwards. The observation from this research and analysis is that there is no clear disparity depicted in the movies. While there are some patterns, filmmakers often choose to empower female characters toward the end of the movie for creative liberty so as to spread positive social messages. This does not always reflect real societal trends that show complexity.

One of the common threads between 1985-1995 and 2015-present is that in most films, women start with low empowerment—whether they belong to high or low socioeconomic classes. However, by the end, they often

emerge as strong and empowered. The speed of this transition and how it is depicted depends heavily on the plot. In *Trikal* and *Ijazat*, women from higher socioeconomic classes had more autonomy and decision-making power. However, in *Mirch Masala*, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were initially powerless. On the other hand, in the more recent films, *Darlings* and *Chhapaak*, lower-class women showed greater empowerment, while in *Thappad*, the upper-class protagonist faced significant social and emotional constraints.

A clear paradoxical contrast emerges between the two periods. Earlier films showed high socioeconomic-class women with greater empowerment while lower-class women had less. In today’s films, one can see the reverse—women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds now often exhibit more strength and agency, while upper-class women face limitations.

There are certain limitations to this study. Firstly, only six films were analyzed. A larger sample size, say 20-30 films, would give a broader, more nuanced picture and help identify better and more detailed trends. Another limitation is a potential bias in how each scene from a movie has been interpreted. More diversity in directors—particularly comparing male and female filmmakers—could also influence these findings.

In the end, this study reveals much about society’s changing views on women’s empowerment. It can help filmmakers and policymakers to understand how women and their empowerment levels have been portrayed in Indian cinema and reflect upon the potential message it spreads in society.

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