

## Reel Women, Real Issues: Gendered Health Narratives and Development Discourses in Contemporary Hindi Cinema

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### Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of gender and development in three mainstream Hindi films namely *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017), *Padman* (2018), and *Janhit Mein Jaari* (2022) which highlight women's health, agency, and socio-cultural constraints. These films move beyond the traditionally apolitical narrative of popular Indian cinema by engaging with themes of shame, tradition, and disparity, revealing how entrenched taboos and patriarchal norms obstruct women's access to sexual and reproductive health and hinder their self-determination and affect development as a whole.

Using thematic analysis as methodology, the study identifies recurring patterns and symbolic motifs that shape cinematic representations of women's development. By studying the theme of women's health especially reproductive health, gender equity, and development this research points that development must be understood as an intersectional and multidimensional process, shaped by cultural forces that influence both policy and perception. Through an intensive and nuanced reading the films it highlights how cultural narratives reflect and challenge dominant discourses. By analyzing these films as cultural texts, the study highlights cinema's potential to serve as a site of socially conscious storytelling and advocates for the integration of gender discourse into broader developmental thinking.

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

### Introduction

The issue of women's development is intrinsically linked to the broader discourse on development. As one of the most underrepresented and underdeveloped segments of the global population, women constitute nearly half of the world's demographic. It is thus imperative to prioritize their inclusion in the formulation and implementation of development policies. Gender inequality not only perpetuates systemic disparities but also intersects with and exacerbates other developmental challenges, making it imperative to address such inequities in a comprehensive manner. It is necessary that a holistic view of issues and challenges that women face to successfully achieve development goals. This research thematically studies select Hindi films in the past decade that deal with the issue of women development, women's health including their sexual and reproductive health: *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017), *Padman* (2018), *Janhit Mein Jari* (2022) and tries to discover the themes of Shame, Tradition, and Disparity affecting women's health issues and issues of agency and self-determination that act as a hurdle to the achievement of development goals. The mainstream popular Indian cinema has largely ignored and overlooked the themes of development and sustainability and they have found expression

primarily within the realms of alternative or documentary filmmaking. These three films however represent notable exceptions as they effectively integrate these critical themes into the narrative framework of the conventional popular Hindi film. By doing so they challenge the traditional boundaries of mainstream cinema and offer a unique intersection of entertainment and socially conscious storytelling. This study aims to understand the meaning of development especially within the socio-cultural milieu of contemporary times and contemplates upon the idea of development through a gender equality perspective focussing on egalitarian forms of development.

It is imperative to consider that Development cannot be looked at as a solitary goal but as an all-encompassing one. A particular issue is often influenced by multiple interrelated variables, highlighting the significant intersectionality present within developmental concerns. The interplay of various issues contributes to and amplifies the complexity of any given challenge. Furthermore, the disparity between the conditions faced by men and women, coupled with gender inequality, serves as a critical factor in intensifying these challenges, thereby necessitating a comprehensive and intersectional approach to addressing developmental issues.

It is important to note that while gender equality in itself amounts to a single Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), its relevance contributes to nearly all the 17 Goals. The significance of issues concerning women highlights their interconnected nature within the broader developmental framework. Among the most formidable obstacles to achieving gender equality are the entrenched themes of shame, tradition and the constant fear of transgression. These cultural and societal challenges not only hinder progress towards gender equality but also impede the realization of other interrelated developmental objectives. This study rigorously employs thematic analysis to scrutinize four contemporary Hindi films, decisively uncovering the complex dynamics of taboo, tradition, and gender inequality. It asserts that these intertwined forces not only profoundly shape developmental outcomes but also critically influence the portrayal of women's issues. By elucidating how popular Hindi cinema articulates and challenges development aspirations, this research makes a case for the centrality of gender discourse in understanding broader developmental trajectories.

### **Research Objectives:**

- Examine the interrelation of women's development and broader development discourses
- Analyze cinematic representations of women's health and empowerment
- Identify and thematize core issues influencing women's development

### **Review of Literature:**

The realm of development and the status of women within the nation and as a part of the said 'development' has long been of academic interest to the scholarly community. The significance of women's health within has also found space in these academic deliberations, however, it has been noted that most of the research focusing on the same has been in the area of policy and

sociology and not cinema. Cinema is a powerful mass medium and has a significant cultural role in shaping how the issues of gender inequality are perceived and health discourses gain a mainstream space. Scholars have critically examined for a long time the gendered representations in Hindi cinema, highlighting the ways in which these portrayals not only reflect but also actively reinforce the patriarchal norms in preexisting in society. (Chatterjee, 1998; Gopal & Moorti, 2008; Butalia, 2002; Mazumdar, 2010). The representation of women has undergone significant changes over the decades in Hindi cinema. The mainstream cinema of early years till the 1980's mostly represented a traditional image of women often idealized as selfless mothers, obedient daughters, or devoted wives (Dwyer, 2000; Viridi, 2003). The only deviation to this was the independent women characters in the Indian New Wave films also known as the parallel cinema. This representation of women went through a substantial shift post liberalization and globalization in the 1990s, with female protagonists gaining more agency and autonomy (Roy, 2012; Chakravarty, 2011). Late 2000's and 2010's saw a rise of women-centric narratives in Hindi films such as *Kahaani* (2012), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2014) and *Pink* (2016), this shift highlights this transformation that reflects the fast-changing societal attitudes toward gender roles (Kumar, 2018; Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). This evolving representation of women in Hindi cinema is representative of a complex interplay between tradition and transformation. While mainstream popular cinema has historically perpetuated regressive gender stereotypes they have also at times served as catalysts for progressive discourse (Dethero, 2023). The emergence of feminist narratives in the late 1990s marked a significant shift, challenging entrenched gender inequalities and offering alternative portrayals of women's empowerment (Mishra & Bhargava, 2024).

Contemporary films such as *English Vinglish* (2012) and *Tumhari Sulu* (2017) engage with themes of female education, employment, and self-reliance, they represent the rising aspirations of Indian women in a society that is rapidly changing (Sangwan, 2024). However, despite the growing visibility of women-centric narratives, the representation of women's health in Hindi cinema remains limited. Issues such as menstruation, reproductive health, and mental well-being have only gained prominence in the last decade, with *Pad Man* (2018) marking 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, challenging societal stigmas and offering a nuanced portrayal of psychological well-being (Sharma, 2016). However, it is important to note that while some films attempt to normalize health-related discussions, they often do so within commercial constraints, this leads to diluted or sensationalized narratives (Sangwan, 2024).

Hindi cinema continues to shape public perceptions of women's issues, including health, by functioning as both a mirror and an agent of social change (Mishra & Bhargava, 2024). Public health campaigns have increasingly collaborated with the film industry to disseminate awareness on topics such as domestic violence and maternal health. Nevertheless, concerns persist

regarding the commodification of women's narratives and the persistence of exploitative tropes, underscoring the need for more nuanced and ethically grounded storytelling (Dethero, 2023).

The literature on Hindi cinema's role in the development of women and women's health underscores its dual nature as both an enforcer of traditional norms and a vehicle for progressive change. However, gaps remain in the holistic portrayal of women's health concerns, necessitating further scholarly interrogation. Future research should explore audience reception studies, policy implications, and the effectiveness of cinematic interventions in real-world health outcomes.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a thematic analysis to critically analyse a set of three contemporary Hindi films that contain the themes of women's health, reproductive health, gender equity, and development. These films were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that each work in the sample explicitly engages with the thematic issues under investigation.

### **Film Selection and Sampling**

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to deliberately 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 allowed that the selected films matched the themes of enquiry and provided a detailed analysis of the complex intersections between gender dynamics and development.

Braun and Clarke's Reflective Thematic Analysis (2006) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) model inspired approach was used in this research. Familiarization with the data was followed through by studying semantic and explicit meaning conveyed through the films by analysing narrative, dialogues, situations, music and visuals. The analysis observed how these themes are incorporated and presented in these films and represent the relationships among the key themes. Portraying not only individual issues of female health and gender inequality but also interconnect them within a broader developmental context.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

These films come at such a time, a few years after India has entered into a new century, adopted the SDGs (United Nations India, 2015), and is looking forward to modernity, technological advancement and the much sought-after dream of development. It is keeping in mind this situation that *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, *Padman* and *Janhit Mein Jaari* become interesting texts to study, its place in the wider narrative, the way it tries to look at the village, the taboos, traditions and injustice of the people who live there, their struggles, the challenges that women face, it all

becomes symbolic of the problems that India faces. The juxtaposition of the protagonists who want a change, their struggles on the ways of accepting something new, their efforts against the taboos and traditions, against those who have normalized the state of being, the status quo, who challenge and resist the change is symbolic of the push and pull of real-world issues, the tussle, the change and its resistance, it is this juxtaposition brought to life through the narrative of the films.

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

As per the latest WHO records, more than 1.5 billion people worldwide lack access to basic sanitation facilities, including private toilets or latrines. Among them, 419 million individuals still practice open defecation, often in street gutters, behind bushes, or in open water sources. (WHO, 2024) The case of open defecation is a strange one in India. India's open defecation rates are a matter of surprise: despite rapid economic growth, improving literacy rates, and widespread access to improved water sources, the Census of 2011 found that close to 70% of rural households in India still do not have a toilet or latrine Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). In comparison to other developing and under developed parts of the world it is still a matter of concern where in rural sub-Saharan Africa around 35% of people defecate in the open without a toilet or latrine, in rural Bangladesh, only 5% of people practice open defecation and in rural China the figure is merely 2%. (UNICEF and WHO 2012). The government has been continuously working to deal with the menace for many years. The Nirmal Bharat Abhyan also called the Total Sanitation Campaign launched in the year 1999 to 2012 worked for the elimination of open defecation, promote toilet use among the masses and general sanitation. Swachh Bharat Abhyan, a flagship program of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi government has also been working towards this agenda, while there has been some success the battle is far from won. World Bank Data suggests that Open defecation in India has fallen from 65.97% in the year 2000 to 39.84 % in the year 2015 (wssinfo.org, n.d.). In 2015 some 41 per cent of India's rural population defecated in the open in 2022 the numbers had reduced to 17% (Mahapatra, 2023). Not only is open defecation linked to various diseases (like cholera, bacterial vaginosis, hookworm etc) but also linked to various crimes against women in the past. It becomes even more difficult for woman to survive without a toilet, where they have to do additional labour to defecate in public in order to find a secluded place to find some privacy. One of the many challenges that this issue faces is that of ritual and tradition, these apply to woman even more. While government had organizations have paid considerable attention to this issue, it is also centrally associated with the question of women. *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* explores these issues in detail, especially those associated with that of women. The film opens with a long scene with a group of women going someplace before the crack of dawn, there is a sense of camaraderie among them and nothing out of the ordinary, it is everyday business. They are going to take care of their bodily needs, to defecate, before the sleepy town wakes up, they must do what is natural to all humans and animals alike in darkness. The opening scene sets the tone for the film; it also in no time brings to screen what is an everyday reality to millions of women in

the country. They are bound by the absence of basic amenities that the more developed take for granted, what is more interesting to note is that it is not a matter of deprivation, or an economic underdevelopment but of a rigid refusal to part with what is often throughout the film and in real life called the traditional way of life. The answer to the open defecation problem is not simple as people having no money to build a toilet but more to do with the refusal to do that despite various programmes run by the government to help and persuade them to do so.

The focus on tradition is emphasised in the beginning itself where the protagonist of the film Keshav is married to a buffalo in a lavish ceremony for good fortune and to ward away evil luck, the light hearted scene communicates the dark reality of contemporary rural-small town India and its relationship with tradition and rituals, it also lays the foundation for what would remain a major road block to constructing of a toilet at home in the film as well as in real life of many people, this scene also hints the focus on tradition and ritual that is central to various issues related to women.

The female protagonist of the film raises a demand for a toilet and refuses open defecation as prevalent in the town. She is strongly challenged and opposed for this, not only by the village elders but also by the women who have made peace with the arrangement, accepting it as a status quo. The idea of tradition as a roadblock to achievement of goals related to development as well as them being something that pull empowerment back is reiterated. A strong assertive woman who challenges traditions and established order is supposed to be corrupted by modernization and education, this prejudice is raised time and again throughout the film where various characters point out Jaya's education being the reason for her challenging of social order that must be frowned up, they deduce education as being a spoiling influence. On her first interaction with the women of the 'Lota Party' and her distain for the practice of open defecation get a response from a fellow woman "you're very beautiful and you done a love marriage. This is what girls do after getting educated", her education is again brought forward as a corrupting influence when she has an argument with her husband Keshav regarding her insistence of having a toilet at home, and Keshav 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-law's family, your education has spoiled you"*

There is an urgent need for substantive reforms to improve the status of women in India. Enduring traditions, cultural norms, and systemic institutional biases constitute significant barriers to achieving gender equality. Women's decisions regarding their careers and education are frequently subjected to undue criticism, being portrayed as corrupting influences rather than as empowering endeavours. This dynamic, a combination of devaluing education, an excessive emphasis on tradition, and insufficient female empowerment, is central to the film's examination of stunted developmental progress.

A critical scene in the film illustrates these intersecting tensions: Keshav is summoned before the Panchayat for his insistence on constructing a toilet at his home. This moment encapsulates the complex relationships between gender, tradition, modernity, and practices such as open defecation, thereby foregrounding the cultural challenges that hinder both women's empowerment and broader societal development.

*“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 uncleanliness, 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 women’s refusal to change despite being doubly at a loss due to this practice is also discussed and explored in the film. Not only are women affected by the various diseases that open defecation makes people vulnerable to, but there is an excess physical exertion to often walk a long distance to find a secluded space to relieve themselves, the psychological burden of hiding, and the possibility of sexual assault. Their resistance for change thus makes little sense if not looked at from the perspective of the absence of freedom of movement and open defecation being the only time they get to go out, this lack of physical agency plays a significant role in women’s refusal to end open defecation despite its various harms. Women in many societies, particularly in Latin America, have relied on "networks of reciprocal exchange" (Lomnitz, 1977) that provide information and assistance from family, friends, and neighbours to obtain basic services such as health and child care however, such relations are also responsible for control and societal pressure. It is often the same structures that help in upholding traditions and patriarchal controls over women’s mobility, rights and define the ‘proper’ way of behaviour. The ‘Lota Party’ is a good example of the same, it is a group of women who go together for defecation, they have internalised and normalised this activity and fail to understand Jaya’s refusal to this, they resist the change even though they are affected by the cons of it even more than men. The Lota Party is introduced at the opening scene of the film, there is an easy sense of camaraderie between the women, when they are shown giggling and talking on the way, it is a relief for them from everyday chores at home, a life that is limited by the four walls, a time to explore the outside world no matter in how limited a way. It is also emphasised as an easy fun gathering of women when the young girl Sama invites Jaya to go with them with ease at her first day in Keshav’s house saying *“come on siter, everybody is waiting to welcome you to the Lota party. Hurry or it will be dawn”* same is emphasised by Keshav at the beginning where he replies to the

question by Jaya what should she do since he has no toilet at his home that “*same place where everyone else is going, meet everyone, socialize, make your identity in the lota party*” The film makes the point against the women’s refusal to toilets in Jaya’s angry rant at women criticizing her “*you tolerate all this, and are satisfied that you get a chance to gossip about your in-laws during this time*’ and in a scene where Jaya is going an interview she says ‘*freedom is not going out in the open to defecate but to go out when you wish so.*” The film acknowledges that open defecation is not just an issue related to health and sanitation but also women, where the traditions that hold women back and limit their agency in the outside world are also responsible for women refusing to change for a small relief of exploring the world around them reinforcing the same tradition and rituals enforced by patriarchy.

The film interrogates the complex interplay between women and development, illustrating that developmental challenges are not isolated or stand-alone issues but rather part of an intricate web of interrelated variables. These challenges must be understood as multiple interconnected factors that require a holistic, integrated approach. Moreover, the film reconceptualizes open defecation as a departure from entrenched “tradition,” revealing its contentious nature among the rural populace. It posits that open defecation is condemned on two principal grounds: first, because it disrupts established “natural” patriarchal norms, and second, because it is perceived as an imposition of alien, Western practices

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

The stigma attached with menstruation questions the basic menstrual needs of the women and young girls even in this day and age. The lack of attention and silence to this issue is striking. Menstrual hygiene is significant for the holistic development of the female from healthy lives to equitable education, to ensuring gender equality and empowerment. Even in present time it is difficult to maintain proper levels of hygiene and sanitation among female population during the menstruation period because the simple bodily function remains under a thick curtain of taboo and it is often avoided to be talked about due to shame. (Tiwary, 2018) *Padman* is a film that explores the theme of menstruation and the taboo surrounding it through the real-life story of Padma Shri winner Arunachalam Muruganantham. Menstrual hygiene is related to achievement of various other development goals, the fact that 26% of the total female population in the country is of a age group that menstruate regularly it is imperative that discussions about menstrual health and hygiene are normalized so as to raise awareness and safeguard against various diseases. (House, Mahon, & Cavill, 2012)

The theme of taboo, stigma and shame is strong in the film *Padman* where menstruation is an issue that has to be talked about in hushed whispers, great discomfort and shame. Not only this the traditional set up of the village also provides a place where the women are not only ignorant of the basic issues associated with it but the traditions surrounding it make it difficult to bring about a change. The women are secluded and made to sleep away from the main part of the

house often with basic amenities, this is shown twice once in the beginning of the film when the protagonist's wife is barred from being a part of the festivities and made to sleep outside and another time with a young girl after the function celebrating her entry into adolescence is made to sleep in open on a terrace. This brings to light how menstruation is seen as something unclean, unholy, and contaminating. This alienating treatment of women is not only taking away of their basic dignity but also physically dangerous as seen in various instances of infection and deaths of women in period huts, one only has to remember the recent case of deaths of a woman and her two children in Nepal(BBC, 2019). The absence of proper and correct knowledge about right hygiene practices to be observed during menstruation proves to be dangerous to women who resort to wrong practices influenced by tradition, taboo or personal strategies to cope up with menstruation. (Sumpter & Belen, 2013)These uninformed practices make women especially vulnerable to Urinary Tract Infections and Reproductive Tract Infections. The refusal to change is seen when Lakshmi's wife at various points says, "*my God is with me, nothing will happen*" and at his insistence to use a sanitary napkin and stop using the cloth "*for years I have been using this only, if you heart is clean nothing will happen to you*" refusing to understand the dangers to various health conditions related to improper understanding of menstrual hygiene. The taboo associated with menstruation is also highlighted continuously throughout the film. Lakshmi's on not knowing about menstruation and asking why his wife is alienated from the function is hushed, same way his wife talks about her refusal to try his innovation of sanitary napkin saying that the last time she used it on his insistence and bled all over her saree which she had to wash, she says that she was fortunate that it happened during the night or what would people have thought. When Lakshmi tries to give sanitary napkins to his sister, she along with her in-laws is shocked and offended. On trying to give it to his nieces they run away from the room in shame. Infacteducated women also find it uncomfortable to talk about it such is the stigma attached with the issue. In a scene two educated women from the city are looking for a pharmacy at night to buy sanitary napkins for their friend, even they are uncomfortable, shy, ashamed to ask for sanitary napkin, they say:

*"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 is thus one of the biggest issues with the subject making women's health a difficult target to achieve.

Another area that the film explores is the unusually high cost of menstrual hygiene products like sanitary napkins which many modern-day women liberation activists and policy makers have called popularly as the period tax.The high cost of products makes it difficult for a large population with low income to afford and make them a luxury item than a basic amenity. The film is Lakshmi's struggle to invent a sanitary napkin that is affordable for low-income groups so as to make it popular among women who stick to cloth and other products not only because of tradition but also because of high cost of such products. At one point during a lecture Lakshmi states "*Why for men 12 month and for woman only 10. Woman wearing pad gives them 2 months*

*extra to live.*” Making a strong and valid point that menstruation taboo and low affordability of sanitary products lower the quality of life of women.

**Between Caution and censure:** Condom stigma in *Janhit Mein Jaari*

There has always been shame attached to the idea of sex in India, where sex and the discussions around sex are always shrouded in silence and whispers due to strong moral judgement and societal scrutiny. Within this context, male contraceptive especially, the condom, is inherently linked to the concept of shame. The idea of male contraception deeply attached constructs of male virility, a sensitive subject in a strongly patriarchal society like India. Consequently, the use of condom is seen as diminishing or limiting masculine strength reinforcing societal discomfort with it. Women are frequently excluded from decision-making processes concerning sexual relations and contraceptive use, the act of voicing their opinion regarding such issues is seen as a taboo and is strongly discouraged and censured. It is important to note that despite having marginal participation in the decision-making regarding contraception the responsibility for contraception falls on women, with hormonal contraception or invasive methods. According to NFHS-5, male-oriented contraceptive methods, namely condoms and male sterilization, account for approximately 17% of the modern contraceptive prevalence rate (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021). Infrequent contraceptive use contributes to a range of adverse health outcomes, with sexually transmitted infections representing just one among many concerns. Even in monogamous relationships the avoidance of any contraception leads to unwanted pregnancy that might in itself lead to birth of children in rapid succession or abortions both having a long-lasting effect on maternal health. The film *Janhit Mein Jaari* engages with the issue of contraceptive awareness by challenging societal stigmas surrounding the purchase and use of condoms among both men and women. Through its narrative, the film also initiates discourse on consensual sex and the importance of informed decision-making in contraceptive practices especially focussing on women’s health.

The film follows the life of a female protagonist, Manu, who gets employed at a condom factory and is tasked with marketing the condoms. The narrative traces her struggles in confronting deep rooted taboos and societal shame surrounding discussions of condom use. Her journey highlights the effort to foster awareness among women about contraceptive choices, challenging cultural silences and advocating for informed sexual health discourse.

The film raises the issue of a planned pregnancy throughout its narrative and continually discusses the need for ‘planning’ a family. Family planning allows individuals and couples to realize their preferred number of children and to manage the timing and spacing of pregnancies. This is facilitated through the use of contraceptive methods and interventions addressing infertility (WHO, 2025). At one time the protagonist states that “*with planning having even two children are fine, and without planning even one child is wrong*”. After her wedding in a conversation with her sister-in-law regarding when to have children the sister-in-law remarks

regarding not planning their first child by saying that “*by having a child in the first year of marriage I ruined both my life and my figure*”. The film foregrounds the challenges women face in exercising agency over family planning, particularly their limited participation in decisions regarding contraceptive use. Availability of family planning services allows individuals and couples to achieve desired birth spacing and family size, and contributes to improved health outcomes for women, children, and families (Sonfield et al, 2014). By portraying the sister-in-law’s remorse over having an unplanned child, it further exposes the emotional and social consequences women endure when denied autonomy in reproductive choices.

In a poignant sequence Manu’s assistant dies by suicide, not able to bear the stigma and ridicule of the society due to an unwanted unwed pregnancy. Manu sadly remarks that the pregnancy is not the mistake but the fact that they were not told the benefits of using a condom by anyone is the true mistake. The film also deals with the concept of abortion as a medical procedure due to unwanted pregnancies. The film reiterates the significance of raising awareness among women more than men and making them party to the contraceptive decision, the protagonist states that “*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 the protagonist moves ahead with her quest to raise awareness about condom use despite the censure of the family various instances of the mishaps due to not using a condom are revealed in the form of complications due to abortion in a sister-in-law. Inspired by Manu’s awareness campaign the sister-in-law requests her husband to use a condom stating that she has already had two abortions and so cannot risk an abortion again. In one of her campaign session Manu sates to the women present the significance to use a campaign by stating that “*children make mistakes, they should not be a mistake*”. The film effectively tries to bring the conversation about condom use to the forefront of public discourse and remove the sense of shame and embarrassment associated with buying a condom. Within the narrative of the popular film the film raises an important issue to female reproductive and sexual health and the issue of rising population density. By raising these poignant issues, the film underscores the developmental concept of effective family planning that necessitates the collaborative engagement of both men and women. Crucially, men must actively dismantle entrenched social and cultural barriers to assume equitable roles in reproductive decision-making by adopting contraceptive practices and endorsing women's autonomy in selecting reproductive health strategies.

### **Conclusion:**

Taboo and tradition are the twin bane in a woman’s life and act as significant impediments to women's development, simultaneously reinforcing gender disparities and undermining sustainable development initiatives. This study has demonstrated that women’s issues are not confined to isolated areas of concern but instead intersect with multiple dimensions of development. Although gender equality is explicitly addressed in only one of the United Nations’ seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, its realization is foundational to the achievement of broader developmental objectives.

The films *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, *Padman* and *Janhit Mein Jari* serve as compelling case studies that interrogate how longstanding cultural taboos and entrenched traditions perpetuate both gender inequality and resistance to social change. Through their narrative, character dialogues, and visuals, these films reveal that development must be understood as a holistic process, encompassing cognitive, psychological, political, and economic dimensions. Importantly, they emphasize that women's issues are not peripheral but central to any effective transformative agenda.

Additionally, the films illustrate the inherent challenges in transitioning from tradition to modernity. They suggest that meaningful progress can only be achieved through gradual innovation and a persistent reconfiguration of traditional norms, wherein women transition from being mere subjects of tradition to active partners in change. Resistance from established patriarchal structures and traditionalist viewpoints underscores the complexity of this transformation, suggesting that sustainable development is a non-linear process marked by interdependencies across various social axes.

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

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