
From Coercive Control to the Claim of Dignity: Marital Violence in the Bollywood Films *Agni Sakshi*, *Daman*, and *Thappad*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the representation of abused married women in three Bollywood films released across nearly twenty-five years: Partho Ghosh's *Agni Sakshi* (1996), Kalpana Lajmi's *Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence* (2001), and Anubhav Sinha's *Thappad* (2020). It argues that these films mark a significant, though uneven, movement in popular Hindi cinema from the spectacular visibility of the battering husband to a more searching account of the social relations that authorize male control. *Agni Sakshi* places a terrorized woman inside the generic machinery of the romantic thriller: her suffering is palpable, but her rescue depends heavily on the competition between two men. *Daman* makes the violated wife the moral and affective centre of a regional social melodrama, names marital rape, connects abuse with property and motherhood, and carries survival toward retaliatory violence. *Thappad*, by contrast, builds its critique around a single public slap whose force lies in revealing the unpaid service, abandoned aspiration, class inequality, familial instruction, and legal bargaining that have made the marriage unequal long before the blow. Drawing on feminist film theory, scholarship on Indian popular cinema, coercive-control theory, intersectionality, and Indian domestic-violence law, the paper treats torture due to marital violence not as a loose synonym for pain but as a continuum of bodily assault, sexual coercion, surveillance, humiliation, deprivation of liberty, and erosion of personhood. Taken together, the films register an uneven historical shift of the woman from endangered body to speaking legal subject; nevertheless, they also show the persistent difficulty of imagining justice beyond rescue, exceptional retaliation, or private exit. Together, they form a valuable archive of changing cinematic arguments about marriage, consent, dignity, and female agency in India.

Keywords: Bollywood, marital violence, coercive control, patriarchy, female agency, *Agni Sakshi*, *Daman*, *Thappad*]

Introduction

Popular Bollywood cinema has repeatedly placed women's suffering at its emotional centre while allowing male desire, agency, and transformation to retain narrative authority. A woman may be loved, pursued, protected, assaulted, avenged, or restored to the family, yet her pain frequently serves either as evidence of masculine villainy or as the occasion for masculine heroism. A critical analysis must therefore address two interconnected questions: how fully and critically does a film represent marital violence against women, and to whom does it grant the authority to interpret, resist, and end that violence? This distinction is crucial. A film may condemn a brutal husband while preserving a narrative structure in which men compete for possession of a woman; it may sympathize with an abused wife while measuring her virtue through endurance; and it may celebrate her escape without examining the familial, social, and legal structures that enabled her captivity.

The Hindi films *Agni Sakshi* (Ghosh, 1996), *Daman* (Lajmi, 2001), and *Thappad* (Sinha, 2020) are especially productive for such an inquiry because all three place violence within marriage rather than treating danger as an intrusion from the public world. Their abusive men are not anonymous criminals. They are husbands who convert socially sanctioned intimacy into an apparatus of possession. The home consequently loses its ideological status as a naturally protective space. In these narratives, doors, bedrooms, rituals, money, motherhood, and family advice become instruments through which power is exercised.

This paper uses the term torture in domestic abuse or marital violence to describe sustained intimate practices that inflict physical or mental suffering and seek submission. This broadly is consistent with the United Nations definition of violence against women, which encompasses physical, sexual, and mental harm, threats, coercion, and arbitrary deprivation of liberty (World Health Organization [WHO], 2026). Evan Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control is particularly useful because it shifts attention from isolated assaults to a patterned deprivation of autonomy. Violence is not merely what the perpetrator does to the body; it is also the regulation of movement, speech, work, kinship, sexuality, and self-perception.

The three films span an important legal and cultural interval. *Agni Sakshi* appeared when cruelty by a husband or his relatives was criminalized under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, but India had no comprehensive civil statute addressing domestic violence. *Daman* was released four years before the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA). *Thappad* appeared after the Act had legally recognized physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse and provided residence, protection, monetary, custody, and compensation remedies (Government of India, 2005). Yet legal recognition does not automatically alter domestic common sense. Although Indian law recognizes domestic violence through civil remedies, the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*, 2023, continues to

exclude non-consensual intercourse by a man with his adult wife from the general definition of rape, except in legally specified circumstances such as separation. The persistence of intimate-partner violence, under-reporting, and attitudes that normalize male entitlement confirms the distance between formal rights and lived equality (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2021; WHO, 2025).

This paper argues that the corpus charts a movement from the abused woman as a spectacularized object of terror, through the survivor as maternal rebel, to the wife as an ordinary rights-bearing subject who names disrespect before violence becomes habitual. The movement is not linear or complete. *Agni Sakshi* sometimes permits the male duel to eclipse the woman's self-recovery; *Daman* risks making lethal retaliation the only adequate answer to institutional failure; and *Thappad* privileges an articulate, middle-class protagonist whose exit is materially more imaginable than that of her domestic worker. Their limitations, however, are analytically valuable. They reveal not simply what Hindi cinema says about battered wives but what kinds of female freedom it can envision at different historical moments.

Objectives and Methodology

This study has three interrelated objectives: first, to examine how *Agni Sakshi* (1996), *Daman* (2001), and *Thappad* (2020) represent physical assault, sexual coercion, psychological intimidation, surveillance, economic dependence, and the denial of female autonomy within marriage; second, to trace the changing cinematic status of the abused woman—from an endangered body requiring masculine rescue, through a maternal survivor driven toward violent resistance, to a self-conscious legal subject asserting dignity and the right to leave; and third, to assess how genre, class, family ideology, motherhood, law, and historically changing attitudes toward domestic violence shape each film's conception of female agency and justice.

The paper adopts a qualitative, comparative textual-analysis method. It closely examines characterization, narrative structure, dialogue, performance, domestic space, melodramatic conventions, visual emphasis, and the resolutions provided to the three protagonists. The films are studied chronologically to identify both historical development and continuing patriarchal assumptions. Feminist film theory, intersectionality, trauma studies, coercive-control theory, and scholarship on Indian popular cinema provide the principal interpretive frameworks. The analysis also relates cinematic representation to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, NFHS-5 findings, and current international evidence concerning intimate-partner violence. Rather than treating the films as transparent sociological documents, the study reads them as culturally influential narratives that simultaneously reflect, negotiate, and challenge prevailing ideas about marriage, consent, suffering, respectability, and women's freedom.

Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to a small, purposively selected corpus of three Hindi films chosen for their distinct representations of marital violence and women's resistance. Since *Agni Sakshi*, *Daman*, and *Thappad* differ in genre, historical moment, and production context, they cannot represent Hindi cinema as a whole; their comparison is therefore interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. The study concentrates on close reading and textual analysis—narrative, dialogue, performance, visual framing, and domestic space—and does not investigate audience reception, box-office response, or viewers' lived interpretations. Finally, variations among theatrical, DVD, television, and streaming editions, particularly in subtitles, translations, editing, and timestamps, may be there thus affecting the precise wording and location of cited dialogue reported in abridged and summarised form in discussion in this paper.

Theoretical Framework: Looking, Marriage, and Coercive Control

Laura Mulvey's (1975) account of narrative cinema identifies the gendered organization of looking through which woman becomes image and man the bearer of the look. Although developed in relation to classical Hollywood, the insight remains pertinent to Hindi popular cinema, where spectacle, romance, family ideology, and star personae can convert the heroine into the object around which male rivalry is arranged. Later feminist film theory complicates any universal model of spectatorship by attending to genre, history, social difference, and the possibility of resistant or negotiated viewing (Gledhill, 1987). The question is therefore not only whether the camera objectifies a woman, but whether the narrative gives her consciousness causal power.

Indian popular cinema requires its own historical vocabulary. Its melodramatic mode does not merely exaggerate private emotion; it stages public moral conflicts through the family, making domestic relations allegories of social order (Prasad, 1998; Vasudevan, 2010). The cinematic family frequently bears the pressures of modernity, nation, property, sexuality, and gendered duty (Uberoi, 2006; Viridi, 2003). Women become privileged signs of tradition and respectability even when films sympathetically depict their suffering. As Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004) observe, Indian popular cinema has often positioned women within limited familial types, though the industry also contains counternarratives that disturb those conventions. A textual study must accordingly examine contradiction: a film may contest wife-beating while continuing to idealize self-sacrificing femininity.

The feminist concept of woman as a socially produced "Other" illuminates the marital assumption that a wife exists relationally—for husband, household, and child—rather than as an autonomous end. Sylvia Walby (1990) describes patriarchy as a set of interrelated structures rather than a matter of individual prejudice. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional method further shows that gendered harm is differently lived according to class, race, caste, ethnicity, and institutional location. These concepts prevent the abusive husband from becoming a convenient monster detached from social authorization.

Coercive-control theory makes the continuum particularly legible. Stark (2007) argues that many abused women experience a liberty crime: assault is combined with intimidation, isolation, surveillance, and micro-regulation. Liz Kelly's (1988) "continuum of sexual violence" likewise resists separating spectacular violation from normalized coercion. Judith Herman (1992) explains how prolonged domination narrows a victim's world and damages the capacity for trust, while recovery requires safety, remembrance, and reconnection. These frameworks allow the three films to be read not as stories containing more or less violence but as different cinematic maps of captivity and recovered agency.

Agni Sakshi: Spectacular Terror and the Limits of Rescue

In *Agni Sakshi*, Shubhangi, living as Madhu after fleeing her first husband Vishwanath, attempts to form a new life with Suraj. The plot resembles the Hollywood film *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Ruben, 1991), but its Hindi-film form intensifies the confrontation through songs, romance, star performance, and a climactic masculine contest. Vishwanath's abuse is immediately recognizable: obsessive jealousy, confinement, physical assault, threats, stalking, and the refusal to accept his wife as a separate person. He converts marriage into ownership and interprets departure not as her decision but as theft of his property.

Nana Patekar's forceful performance gives coercive control a frightening physical vocabulary. Sudden changes in vocal register, aggressive proximity, scrutiny, and explosive movement make the household unpredictable. The abused wife must continuously read his mood, a survival practice characteristic of captivity. The film's repeated returns to Vishwanath's threatening presence prevent escape from becoming a single geographic act. Shubhangi may cross the household boundary and assume another name, but the perpetrator carries his regime into the new world through pursuit and forced recognition. Her renaming is therefore double-edged: "Madhu" is an act of self-preservation, yet it also reveals how thoroughly abuse has denied her the security of an ordinary identity.

The film deserves credit for refusing the romantic myth that extreme jealousy signifies extreme love. Vishwanath speaks the language of absolute devotion, but the mise-en-scène translates it into danger. Possessiveness is shown as antithetical to care. His insistence that the marital bond cannot be revoked exposes the patriarchal logic by which consent given once—especially through marriage—is imagined as permanent submission. In this respect, the narrative makes visible what the PWDVA would later name as physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse within a domestic relationship (Government of India, 2005).

Nevertheless, *Agni Sakshi* packages domestic terror as a thriller. Suspense depends on whether Vishwanath will reclaim the heroine and whether Suraj can protect her. The female body becomes the territory on which good and bad masculinities are distinguished. Vishwanath represents violent possession; Suraj represents affectionate guardianship. This moral contrast is important, but it does not fully displace male sovereignty. The plot's

emotional and kinetic energy increasingly belongs to the confrontation between the husbands, while Shubhangi's own processes of planning, economic survival, legal recourse, and psychological recovery remain thinly developed.

Mulvey's (1975) distinction between active male agency and female to-be-looked-at-ness is therefore relevant, though the film does not reduce Shubhangi to erotic spectacle alone. Her fear organizes spectator sympathy; the audience knows Vishwanath's claim is illegitimate because it has seen what she endured. Yet suffering becomes her principal credential. The narrative repeatedly returns to the threatened woman so that danger can be renewed, and rescue can acquire emotional value. Her testimony must be believed by the benevolent man, and her safety ultimately depends on his capacity to defeat the violent one.

This structure corresponds to a familiar melodramatic solution: patriarchy is divided into demonic and protective versions rather than placed wholly under examination. As Prasad (1998) and Viridi (2003) demonstrate in different ways, the Hindi-film family often resolves social contradiction through personalized moral polarities. *Agni Sakshi* condemns abusive marriage but imagines justice principally as replacement—escape from the tyrant into the protection of the worthy husband. Shubhangi acts decisively when she flees, conceals herself, and chooses another relationship. Still, the film does not dwell on an autonomous social identity outside marriage. Its emancipatory horizon is companionate heterosexuality secured by heroic masculinity.

The film's historical importance should not be understated. In a mainstream mid-1990s thriller, it insists that a wife has the right to flee, that marital possession is criminal rather than romantic, and that public respectability can hide private terror. Yet its title, meaning "witness by fire," evokes both ordeal and proof: the abused woman seems compelled to demonstrate suffering before her new life becomes morally legitimate. This evidentiary burden anticipates a recurring cultural question—how much violence is enough to justify a woman's departure? *Agni Sakshi* answers with an abundance of visible brutality. *Thappad* will later reject the premise of that question.

Daman: Marital Rape, Feudal Power, and Maternal Revolt

Kalpana Lajmi's *Daman* moves from glossy metropolitan thriller to Assam and from male rescue to a woman's prolonged struggle within a socially entrenched household. Durga, married to Sanjay Saikia, is subjected to beating, humiliation, sexual violence, suspicion, and control. The film explicitly identifies itself as a narrative of marital violence and was produced with support from India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Its public-pedagogic purpose is therefore unusually visible. Raveena Tandon's National Award-winning performance asks the audience to remain with the violated woman's fear, injury, silence, endurance, and eventual refusal.

The regional setting is not merely scenic. Sanjay's domination is connected to class and landed power. Marriage transfers Durga into a household where male status protects

cruelty, and her limited resources restrict exit. Economic and social asymmetry make violence repeatable. Whereas Shubhangi can inhabit a mobile urban world and find a protective second partner, Durga's everyday environment closes around her. The abusive husband exercises what Walby (1990) would describe as the combined force of patriarchal household relations, male violence, and institutional accommodation.

The rape sequence is central to the film's politics because it breaks the culturally persistent fiction that marriage supplies perpetual sexual consent. Sanjay treats access to Durga's body as a husband's entitlement; the film represents the act as violation rather than conjugal intimacy. Kelly's (1988) continuum clarifies how sexual assault belongs to the same regime as beating, verbal degradation, jealousy, and restricted movement. The violence is not a collection of unconnected outbursts. It is a method of establishing sovereignty over a wife.

The legal contradiction remains acute. The PWDVA later included sexual abuse within its civil definition of domestic violence, but the general marital-rape exception in Indian penal law has continued to deny full criminal recognition to non-consensual sex within most adult marriages. *Daman* thus articulates a claim that exceeds the law available at its release and remains politically unfinished: a wife's bodily autonomy survives marriage. Feminist legal scholars have long shown that the private/public divide shields family violence by treating the household as a domain beyond ordinary standards of justice (Agnes, 1999; Menon, 2012). Lajmi's camera makes that "private" suffering a public accusation.

Durga's motherhood complicates the representation. Her daughter Deepa is born from violence, yet becomes a source of attachment and futurity rather than a reminder that destroys maternal love. When Sanjay attempts to arrange Deepa's marriage to a much older man and pursues property placed in her name, Durga's struggle becomes intergenerational. She is no longer trying only to survive; she seeks to interrupt the reproduction of patriarchal exchange. Property, sexuality, and marriage converge. Deepa is valuable to Sanjay as an asset to control, while Durga sees in her daughter the possibility of a life not governed by the same terror.

This maternal motivation gives Durga narrative agency, but it also reflects a recurrent limitation of women-centred melodrama: a woman's rebellion becomes most culturally acceptable when performed as motherhood. Her right to safety needs no supplementary justification, yet the plot amplifies it through the daughter's danger. The "good mother" becomes the form through which the "disobedient wife" can be celebrated. Uberoi's (2006) work on family and kinship helps explain why such narratives can challenge male authority while preserving the moral centrality of sacrificial maternity.

The death of Sunil, Durga's sympathetic brother-in-law, removes the possibility of benevolent male mediation. His respect contrasts with Sanjay's sadism, but he cannot rescue Durga. She escapes with Deepa, constructs another life, and ultimately kills Sanjay when he returns to dominate them. This climax reverses the gendered action structure of *Agni Sakshi*: the tortured woman becomes the agent who ends the torturer's power. Her violence may be read as self-defence extended across years of failed protection, yet the film's solution is troublingly exceptional. It risks suggesting that when family, community, and law fail, liberation requires the survivor to become executioner.

Herman's (1992) model of trauma and recovery stresses restored safety and social reconnection. *Daman* offers fragments of both, but its climactic fatality overwhelms the slower work of rebuilding. The narrative rightly produces anger rather than sanctifying endurance. At the same time, it individualizes justice in Durga's final act instead of imagining a reliable network of police, courts, shelters, health services, and economic support. Its noble social purpose is accompanied by schematic writing and uneven execution.

Those aesthetic weaknesses matter because didactic simplification can turn structural violence into the pathology of an exceptionally monstrous man. Even so, *Daman* advances beyond rescue melodrama in three decisive ways. It names sexual violence within marriage; locates abuse in property and household hierarchy; and makes the survivor's decision, not a male protector's victory, the narrative terminus. Durga's transformation does not erase vulnerability. Rather, it refuses the idea that vulnerability and agency are opposites. Her fear, maternal care, rage, flight, and retaliation belong to a continuous struggle to regain personhood.

***Thappad*: The Single Blow and the Infrastructure of Entitlement**

Thappad begins not with an obviously dangerous husband but with routine. Amrita manages the household, monitors her mother-in-law's health, prepares Vikram for work, teaches dance to a neighbour's child, and organizes a celebration of his expected promotion. The careful repetition makes domestic labour visible precisely because it has become invisible to those who benefit from it. Amrita describes herself through contentment, but the film gradually distinguishes chosen care from a gendered service identity that has absorbed her abandoned ambition as a dancer.

At the party, a professional disappointment enrages Vikram. When Amrita intervenes, he slaps her before family, friends, and colleagues. The assault is brief, but the public setting exposes a private hierarchy. He redirects humiliation received from more powerful men onto the woman whose service he assumes and whose resistance he does not anticipate. The slap is not presented as equivalent in duration or severity to the prolonged violence suffered by Shubhangi and Durga. Its significance lies elsewhere: it crystallizes an entitlement already embedded in the marriage.

The social response confirms that the film is about more than an impulsive act. The recurring minimization—only one slap—places the burden of preserving the marriage on Amrita rather than the burden of repair on Vikram. Her memorable insistence that he had no right to hit her changes the ethical question from measurement to legitimacy. How many assaults justify departure? The film answers that arithmetic is itself patriarchal. Dignity is not a threshold benefit awarded only after repeated injury.

Stark's (2007) framework makes this argument legible. *Thappad* depicts few conventional signs of coercive captivity before the party, yet it reveals an unequal distribution of time, aspiration, and authority. Vikram's career is a household project; Amrita's dance is a relinquished possibility. He expects emotional regulation from her but does not recognize the labour involved. After the slap, his concern repeatedly returns to consequences for himself—his reputation, promotion, marriage, and legal position. The assault exposes the deeper assumption that her life is an annex to his.

The film's formal restraint is crucial. Unlike the thriller intensity of *Agni Sakshi* or the brutal social melodrama of *Daman*, *Thappad* relies on silence, stunned duration, ordinary rooms, and procedural conversations. Amrita's face after the slap is not simply an image of pain; it becomes a site of thought. The narrative grants her time to interpret what has happened. This shift from spectacle to reflection marks a major development in cinematic agency. She does not need to persuade a rescuer that Vikram is a monster. Indeed, he is not rendered as one. She decides that a relationship structured by his entitlement is unacceptable.

The supporting women produce an intersectional map of accommodation. Sunita, the domestic worker, is routinely assaulted by her husband and has fewer economic and social protections. Netra, Amrita's lawyer, possesses professional authority but experiences marital and workplace inequalities. Amrita's mother and mother-in-law have translated curtailed aspirations into advice about compromise. Shivani's relative independence offers another possibility. As Shubhra Gupta (2020) and Nandini Ramnath (2020) observed, the film connects the central marriage to a range of women whose lives demonstrate how patriarchy crosses generations and classes.

Yet class is both strength and limitation. By placing a financially comfortable, conventionally "good" wife at the centre, *Thappad* denies the defensive claim that violence results from poverty, lack of education, or a supposedly provocative woman. It shows abuse as compatible with cosmopolitan respectability. At the same time, Amrita's parental home, articulate father, legal access, and social capital make withdrawal more practicable than it is for Sunita. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality warns against treating one woman's route as universally available. The film acknowledges this inequality but does not fully redistribute narrative seriousness: Sunita's beatings are partly handled through comic energy, whereas Amrita's slap receives sustained contemplative attention.

The legal plot also exposes the gap between injury and institutional intelligibility. Because a single slap may appear strategically weak in divorce negotiations, Amrita is encouraged to assemble stronger allegations. She refuses to fabricate a conventional dossier of cruelty. Her position is ethically exact: she does not need Vikram to be declared an absolute villain in order to conclude that the marriage has violated her equality. The law, however, often requires recognizable grounds, evidence, categories, and bargaining positions. Feminist legal criticism cautions that law can translate women's heterogeneous experiences into its own authoritative language. *Thappad* dramatizes that translation without rejecting law altogether.

Pregnancy adds another pressure toward reconciliation. Hindi cinema has often treated motherhood as the force that restores the fractured heterosexual family. *Thappad* refuses that closure. Amrita's decision indicates that responsible motherhood does not require preserving a disrespectful marriage; it may instead require refusing to normalize inequality for the next generation. This reworks the maternal agency found in *Daman*. Durga protects an adolescent daughter through flight and lethal resistance; Amrita protects a future child's moral environment through separation.

The film's ending permits apology and self-recognition without making them sufficient grounds for reunion. Vikram begins to understand the enormity of what he had regarded as a momentary lapse, while Amrita does not surrender her decision in order to reward his development. This is a subtle but important narrative redistribution. Male repentance is valuable, but it does not cancel female judgment. The film concerns the normalization of male entitlement more than the corporeal effect of one blow. Its radical proposition is correspondingly modest and profound: a wife need not present herself as maximally tortured before claiming the right to leave.

Comparative Discussion: From Visible Injury to Gendered Common Sense

Read together, the films change the scale at which domestic violence becomes recognizable. *Agni Sakshi* requires repeated spectacular danger; *Daman* presents a sustained regime of physical, sexual, economic, and familial domination; *Thappad* uses a single blow to reveal a prior structure of inequality. This progression should not be mistaken for a hierarchy of suffering. The later film does not trivialize severe battering, and the earlier films do not lack psychological insight. Rather, the corpus expands the ethical field: justice must respond to grievous injury, but equality also requires intervention before violence becomes habitual or lethal.

The protagonists' routes to agency differ sharply. Shubhangi flees and is defended; Durga flees, protects, and kills; Amrita interprets, litigates, and exits. These verbs disclose changing ideas of cinematic subjecthood. Flight is common to the first two because the abusive home is figured as captivity. In *Thappad*, Amrita's physical mobility is less restricted, yet her life-project has been domestically enclosed. Her exit is therefore epistemic

as well as spatial: she learns to see habitual service and male ambition as political arrangements rather than natural marital roles.

Naming also evolves. *Agni Sakshi* identifies the husband as violently possessive but contains the problem within villainy. *Daman* explicitly names marital violence and visually identifies marital rape. *Thappad* names patriarchy through everyday speech—adjustment, family honour, one mistake, career pressure, and the presumption that wives absorb damage. The films move from an abnormal man to normalized masculinity. Connell's (2005) account of hegemonic masculinity is useful here: domination persists not only through the most violent men but through cultural standards that make authority, career, control, and female accommodation appear properly masculine.

Their visual economies also differ. In *Agni Sakshi*, pursuit and confrontation repeatedly turn the woman into the object of competing gazes and actions. *Daman* keeps the spectator closer to the survivor's endurance, though scenes of brutality risk making pain an affective spectacle. *Thappad* relies on domestic repetition and reaction, making interpretation itself dramatic. Across the three, the woman's face changes function—from evidence of terror, to record of accumulated suffering and rage, to a reflective surface from which judgment returns toward the family and audience.

All three films use melodrama, but to different ends. Melodrama can simplify social conflict into virtue and villainy, yet it can also make injuries excluded from official discourse emotionally undeniable (Gledhill, 1987; Vasudevan, 2010). *Agni Sakshi* uses melodrama to authorize rescue; *Daman* to demand recognition of marital atrocity; *Thappad* to magnify the moral meaning of an act society calls small. The last film's relative realism does not eliminate melodrama; it internalizes moral polarization within competing definitions of marriage.

The law's changing presence is equally significant. In the 1996 film, effective justice is largely extra-legal and masculine. In *Daman*, public institutions are more explicitly implicated, yet lethal self-help supplies closure. In *Thappad*, lawyers, petitions, property negotiations, and evidentiary strategies occupy substantial narrative space. This reflects the post-PWDVA environment, in which domestic violence is formally recognizable as more than assault. Section 3 of the Act includes harms to health, safety, life, limb, and well-being, whether mental or physical, as well as sexual, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse (Government of India, 2005). The Act's broad definition resembles the continuum these films collectively represent.

Formal recognition, however, does not abolish marital ideology. National survey evidence indicates that spousal violence remains widespread and that social attitudes may continue to justify wife-beating under specified circumstances (IIPS & ICF, 2021). WHO (2025) likewise describes intimate-partner violence as a pervasive human-rights and public-

health crisis whose prevalence is obscured by stigma and under-reporting. Cinema matters in this context because it supplies narratives through which viewers decide what counts as violence, who qualifies as a credible victim, and when departure becomes legitimate.

The corpus also reveals a shift in the imagined audience. *Agni Sakshi* persuades through fear: viewers must recognize the dangerous husband. *Daman* persuades through indignation: viewers must condemn marital rape and institutional neglect. *Thappad* persuades through discomfort: viewers must detect their own participation in minimizing inequality. Its critique extends to affectionate parents, women who counsel endurance, professionally successful people, and the husband who considers himself decent. Patriarchy is no longer elsewhere.

Still, none of the films fully imagines collective transformation. Women help one another, and *Thappad* especially places multiple female lives in dialogue, but remedies remain individualized. One woman finds a good partner, another kills the violent husband, and another obtains divorce. Missing or underdeveloped are shelters, survivor collectives, sustained counselling, community accountability, and the material redistribution necessary for safe exit. hooks (2000) insists that feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression, not merely an account of individual advancement. On that measure, the films open political questions more effectively than they design collective answers.

Conclusion

Agni Sakshi, *Daman*, and *Thappad* constitute a revealing cinematic sequence in the representation of abused wives. The first makes coercive possession spectacularly visible but largely resolves it through protective masculinity. The second places marital rape, landed privilege, motherhood, and property within a survivor-centred social melodrama, allowing the woman to end the perpetrator's control while exposing the terrible absence of dependable institutions. The third turns from extreme captivity to normalized entitlement and demonstrates that one slap can disclose an entire marital order. Its achievement lies in relocating the question from the quantity of injury to the quality of the relationship.

Across the films, the tortured woman increasingly acquires interpretive authority. Shubhangi knows she must escape; Durga knows she must save herself and her daughter; Amrita knows that dignity cannot coexist with a marriage that requires her to absorb violence and call it insignificant. Their agency is neither identical nor equally enabled. It is shaped by genre, class, region, family support, property, law, and the narrative uses of motherhood. An intersectional reading consequently resists turning Amrita's composed legal exit into a universal prescription or Durga's retaliation into an uncomplicated fantasy of empowerment. The most consequential development is the changing burden of proof. *Agni Sakshi* surrounds the wife with enough terror to validate rescue. *Daman* accumulates atrocities until retaliation appears inevitable. *Thappad* refuses the demand for accumulation. By asserting that even a single act can reveal an unacceptable structure, it recognizes women before they become

exemplary victims. Together, the films teach that intimate violence is not confined to bruises: it includes sexual entitlement, economic dependence, surveillance, coerced adjustment, appropriated labour, abandoned ambition, and the social command to preserve marriage at the expense of selfhood.

These films do not simply mirror changing attitudes; they participate in the cultural contest over what marriage permits. Their enduring value lies in making the domestic sphere answerable to democratic principles. Love without consent becomes possession, care without reciprocity becomes service, and family honour without female dignity becomes discipline. The movement from captivity to dignity is therefore not merely the story of three heroines. It is Hindi cinema's incomplete but increasingly articulate recognition that a wife is not property, that endurance is not consent, and that freedom begins when the woman's own judgment becomes sufficient evidence.

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