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Thappad: A Tale of Women's Resistance against an Abusive Social System

Reviewed by Avishek Deb¹

Film Title: *Thappad*

Director: Anubhav Sinha

Year: 2020

Length: 141 minutes

Original language: Hindi (subtitles available)

Genre: Drama

As India strives to become a five trillion-dollar economy, noticeable advancements in Indian tech industries have increasingly begun to lure foreign investors, leading to class promotion and a notable rise in the number of Indian billionaires. According to the 2001 Union Budget Census ("Literacy as Seen in 2001"), the literacy levels in India have risen from 65.38% in 2001 to 77.7% in 2023 ("Literacy Rate in India," 2023). India's increasing literacy levels highlight a greater consciousness of the need for education to achieve promotion in economic status. There has also been a sharp incline in the percentage of working women, which would initially indicate that gender equality is possible thanks to the current governmental stance on female foeticide, femicide, and the "*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*" scheme ("Save girl child, educate girls") which aims to prevent "gender biased sex selective elimination," ensure "survival and protection of the girl child," and ensure "education and participation of the girl child" (Ministry of Women, n.d.). During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the lower-middle class of India has greatly benefited from job opportunities in multinational corporations (MNCs), making the most out of their education. This virtue of outcome-oriented education boosted the social and economic mobility of the lower-middle class but left a cultural void or stasis, allowing the patriarchy to remain in control. Even in this postmodern era, the Indian educated upper class (who have enjoyed aristocratic privileges for generations) surrenders to the dominant patriarchal discourse. The movie *Thappad* (2020) raises awareness about such hypocritical beliefs. The film effectively points out that a rise in social and economic status does not necessarily guarantee a change in cultural mindset regarding gender. A woman's gender construction requires her to play the role of service-giver (both physically and emotionally). In return, men offer a rise in socio-economic status, or social mobility, through a marital relationship. If these women (having gained upward social mobility) act contrary to their gender construction, then men often retaliate with sexual and emotional violence and abuse. These socially mobile housewives are elated with elevated class status; however, they falsely assume their new ranking will change the patriarchal order of their lives. Many Indian men have acquired social mobility, be it the new middle or even the aristocratic class, earlier than their female counterparts. But gender inequity and the *thappad* (slap) of domestic violence remain despite socio-economic mobility.

Thappad is not the first movie to be based on domestic violence and abuse nor will it be the last. In fact, a bunch of web series like *Criminal Justice: Season 2* (2020) and *Illegal* (2020) have addressed the same issue but the good/evil contrast is perhaps too stark. Earlier movies like

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Khoon Bhari Maang (1988), *Bandit Queen* (1994), *Agni Sakshi* (1996), and *Matrubhoomi* (2003) have painted the males as absolute villains and rightfully so, thereby deserving punishment and unworthy of women's companionship. But marital relationships in India are complicated by a Foucauldian power tussle over economic independence where wives are expected to feel obliged to husbands for their redemption. The housewife in *Matrubhoomi*, for example, is bereft of any chance of self-realization or social mobility due to the dehumanization placed upon her caste by the men of her household (who also lack social mobility). *Thappad* (meaning slap) is a collage of several conjugal lives where a housewife Amrita Sabharwal (also known as Ammu) lives an almost perfectly happy life for the first thirty minutes of the movie until she is slapped by her husband. From then onwards every character in the movie gets divided between different responses, from "It happens, forget and move on" on one side to "Why slap her at all?" on the other side. For years, women in films, just like Indian society, have been portrayed as objects to be possessed by men.

Laura Mulvey, the feminist film theorist, has pointed out how cinema treats women in a fetishistic mode with the "male gaze" staring at them—from Marilyn Monroe to Kate Winslet and down to Margot Robbie today. These Hollywood actresses still enact their roles in the way that patriarchy desires. However, this is not just a Hollywood phenomenon. Bollywood, even in the most women-centric movies, has portrayed Indian women in stereotypical ways. Any so-called rash or assertive behavior by a woman character would tag a film as an art film rather than a commercial one. This snobbery in film viewing is merely vanity; viewers enjoy such consciously feminist movies rather than celebrating the women in their own households. This apathetic attitude towards rethinking patriarchy has led women of the new generation to acquiesce and compromise in the cultural dehumanization process. As soon as women are enculturated and dominant values enter their superego, they have lost half of what they could have been. In *Thappad*, Amrita's husband Vikram mocks her with the phrase "*Khaana to banana sikh lo/ Learn to cook first*," a stereotype that initiates the first stage of domestic abuse. A call from the office informs Vikram that his dream of settling in England would come along with unethical conditions, and this context moves him to slap Amrita. Amrita, who gets slapped by Vikram in front of the guests, receives an explanation on the next day from the "frustrated" Vikram who now wants to quit his job: "*Mujhe waha rehna hi nahi hai jahaan value nahi hai/ I cannot stay in a job where I am not valued*." This is when he unconsciously makes Amrita aware of her own valueless life—a mirage that she had been chasing for so long by living only through her husband's dreams.

Amrita's consequent decision to separate herself from this mirage once and for all due to "just one slap" is deemed incomprehensible and foolish by her husband, her mother-in-law, her mother, and her brother. That one slap should be interpreted as a disregard and a complete denial of a woman who does not conform to the codes of gender construction set by the patriarchy. Economic affluence cannot wipe away these codes. Even Amrita's lawyer, Netra Jaisingh, a woman who has joined the aristocracy through marriage, does not validate Amrita's feelings of disrespect due to just a slap, which Netra argues can happen in a marriage. Amrita's belief that a slap can justify divorce appears irrational to Netra's understanding of Indian culture.

Netra wants to make a name for herself in the legal profession but is slapped by her husband both literally and figuratively, both by physical torture and verbal ridicule. Amrita's maid Sunita is perhaps more unfortunately located as a marooned, amnesiac, compromising woman. She seems to have accepted her husband's alcoholic habits and a few slaps per day. Amrita's mother is an ever-compromising woman who has been slapped by her own parents and husband, but she fails to understand her daughter's desire for divorce. This lack of cultural change is distinctly observed in all of these newly affluent females and even the newly aristocratic Netra.

Thappad is not just a movie about Amrita's decision to divorce for an unpardonable slap or loss of self-respect or even her being the torchbearer for the other women characters marooned in the darkness of patriarchal dominance. Through Amrita's rebellion against established gender constructions, the movie reminds us about the failure of parents to impart ethical values regarding marriage. Amrita doesn't spare herself and her mother regarding what has happened in her marriage. Her consciousness is not just about reclaiming liberty but also about hoping to understand one's rights related to marriage as well. *Thappad* promotes not only the requirement of cultural education, progressive cultural change, and social mobility but also acknowledges the importance of women's subversion, be it inside the kitchen or the office. *Thappad* does this cultural work against the backdrop of a nation fast evolving while in many cases staying the same. Without this cultural change, gender equity promotional agendas will fall on deaf ears, and more homes like the Sabharwal's (as depicted in the movie *Thappad*) will be built with a nameplate at the door belonging to the men of the house only.

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