

Short Communication

Modified Kuppuswamy scale 2026: methodological comparison of approaches for updating income classification

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ABSTRACT

The modified Kuppuswamy scale is an extensively utilized tool for assessment of socioeconomic status (SES) in urban India. The scale requires updates periodically due to inflation. This article revises the income component of this scale for the year 2026 using the most recent CPI-IW value (148.6). Application of three methods of revisions have been depicted: direct CPI conversion method, multiplication factor method, and proportional scaling method. All these methods established an upward shift in the income thresholds in all socioeconomic classes. Among the three, direct CPI conversion method provided the highest estimates, while the proportional scaling method overstated values. The multiplication factor method provided practical, well-balanced and at the same time, reproducible results, making it most feasible and apt for regular updates. This review sustains the original scale structure and also ensures relevance that is contemporary for both qualitative and quantitative public health research.

Keywords: Modified Kuppuswamy scale, Socioeconomic status, CPI-IW

INTRODUCTION

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a fundamental and indispensable health determinant. It influences healthcare accessibility, literacy rate, nutritional status, and the overall quality of life (QOL).¹ Many socio-economic scales exist for the assessment of SES for both rural and urban settings. The Kuppuswamy socioeconomic status scale, developed originally in the year 1976, still remains one of the most commonly and extensively used tools for assessing SES in urban populations in India. It is based on a composite score that is derived from three parameters: education of head of family (HOF), occupation of HOF, and monthly family income. Gradually, because of the dynamic economic conditions and inflation, regular revisions of the income component of the scale have become imperative to maintain its applicability and validity.²

The update in the modified Kuppuswamy scale income categories is based on the changes in the consumer price index for industrial workers (CPI-IW), which functions as

a consistent and reliable indicator of inflation in India.³ The Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India (GOI), publishes CPI-IW data routinely to represent fluctuations in the cost of living. As per the most recent press release, the All-India CPI-IW for January 2026 is reported as 148.6 (considering base year 2016=100), with a year-on-year (YoY) inflation rate of 3.77%, denoting a continued rise in consumer prices and living costs.⁴

Taking into account that the income component of the Kuppuswamy classification is directly correlated with the purchasing power, a lapse in updating these thresholds may subsequently lead to misclassification of the socioeconomic strata. This can considerably and markedly affect epidemiological research, public health/healthcare system planning and policy making. As the inflation shows and upward trend, income limits that are defined previously become obsolete. This loss of relevance necessitates recalibration of the income component of the scale, so that present day economic status can be correctly reflected.⁵

As India is a rapidly developing country with profound and evident socioeconomic disparities, SES assessment requires contemporary and accurate tools. The modified Kuppuswamy scale is extensively utilized in community-based studies, clinical research, and health surveys. Therefore, periodic updating; preferably yearly, is very crucial in order to ensure the sensitivity of the scale to the dynamic changes in the economy.⁶

The current update for the year 2026 is derived from the latest CPI-IW values and is aimed at providing revised categories of income for reliable classification of the socioeconomic status. This update is specifically important for healthcare professionals and researchers who depend on SES classification to study various disease patterns, health inequalities and healthcare utilization.

METHODS

The CPI-IW was utilized to update the modified Kuppuswamy scale with respect to its income component. CPI-IW is published and compiled monthly by the Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, GOI.⁷ Since its inception in the year 1944, this index has been subjected to revisions periodically with the base years updated to 1960, 1982, 2001, and now most recently 2016 (2016=100); effective from September 2020.

The CPI-IW illustrates variations in retail prices of a fixed basket of goods and services that is consumed by industrial workers in urban parts of India. In the present 2016 base series, price data for 463 items are collected from 317 markets across 88 selected centres every month.⁹ It is broadly used for regulation of wages, calculation of dearness allowance and inflation monitoring. Therefore, it serves as a reliable indicator used for revising income-based socioeconomic classifications.

As mentioned earlier, for the current update, the CPI-IW value for January 2026 (148.6) was employed as per the official Labour Bureau press release.⁸

Approaches for updating Kuppuswamy income scale

Three previously used established methods described in literature were used to update the income part of the Kuppuswamy classification for 2026.

Method 1: direct CPI conversion method (base year linking with 1976 adjustment)

This method involves the linking of CPI values across different base years stepwise and then adjusting it to the original Kuppuswamy classification year (1976).

Step 1: Basic CPI relationship

$$CPI_{\text{current/base}} = \frac{\text{Price in current year} \times 100}{\text{Price in base year}}$$

Substituting price with monthly family income (MFI),

$$CPI_{\text{current/base}} = \frac{MFI_{\text{current}} \times 100}{MFI_{\text{base}}}$$

Step 2: Linking across base years

$$CPI_{2026/2016}, CPI_{2016/2001}, CPI_{2001/1982}, CPI_{1982/1976}$$

CPI-IW values for different years were as follows: CPI-IW of 1960=100, CPI-IW of January 1976=298, CPI-IW of January 1982=459, CPI-IW of January 2001=445, CPI-IW of January 2016=269, CPI-IW of January 2025=143.2, and CPI-IW of January 2026=148.6.⁹

Step 3: Adjustment to original Kuppuswamy scale (1976)

Since the original Kuppuswamy classification (1976) is based on the 1960 base year, adjustment is required.¹⁰

$$\text{Income}_{1982} = (CPI_{(1982/1960)} / CPI_{(1976/1960)}) \times \text{Original income}_{1976}$$

Step 4: Final updated income calculation

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Income}_{2026} = \text{Original income}_{1976} \times & \frac{CPI_{2026/2016}}{100} \\ & \times \frac{CPI_{2016/2001}}{100} \times \frac{CPI_{2001/1982}}{100} \\ & \times \frac{CPI_{1982/1960}}{CPI_{1976/1960}} \end{aligned}$$

This method provides a precise estimate which is inflation-adjusted by incorporating all historical base year transitions and then correcting for the 1976 reference year.

Method 2: Multiplication factor method (CPI 2016 base scaling)

This method applies a direct multiplication factor based on CPI-IW values of the current year relative to the 2016 base year.

Multiplication factor (MF)

$$MF = \frac{CPI-IW_{2026}}{CPI-IW_{2016}} = \frac{148.6}{100} = 1.486$$

Income update formula

$$\text{Updated income}_{2026} = \text{Income}_{2016} \times MF$$

Thus, the revised income values are attained by multiplying the 2016 income categories by a factor of 1.486, reflecting the inflation between 2016 and 2026.

This method is practical, simple and widely used for periodic updates.

Method 3: Proportional scaling method (year-to-year adjustment)

This method amends income values based on proportional changes between consecutive CPI values. The first step is to calculate the inflation factor.

Inflation factor

$$= \frac{(\text{CPI of the current year} - \text{CPI of the previous year}) \times 100}{\text{CPI of the previous year}}$$

Updated income January 2026

$$= \text{Income for January 2016} \times \text{Inflation factor}$$

This approach hypothesizes stable economic transitions and is particularly useful for annual updates requiring incremental adjustments.

Final classification

The revised income thresholds attained from the above methods were categorized into five classes according to the modified Kuppuswamy scale namely upper, upper middle, lower middle, upper lower, and lower class, based on the corresponding income scores (Table 3).

RESULTS

The income criteria for the modified Kuppuswamy scale were updated for the year 2026 using three previously established methods.

Table 1 represents the updated income thresholds using the direct CPI conversion method. The table shows the incremental change of monthly family income categories across successive CPI base years – 1960, 1982, 2001, 2016, 2025, and 2026 while preserving the preliminary scoring system. A steady shift in the upward direction with respect to the income limits is noted across all socioeconomic classes, which reflects the cumulative effect of inflation over a period of time. For example, the upper socioeconomic class (score 12), originally defined as a monthly income of $\geq ₹2000$ in 1976, has escalated to $\geq ₹78,469$ in 2026.

In a similar manner, the lower class (score 1) threshold has risen from $\leq ₹100$ to $\leq ₹3,923$ over the same time period. The intermediate categories also indicate proportional scaling, that maintains relative class distribution while adjusting for purchasing power. These findings reinforce the pressing need of periodic revision of income criteria to ensure the reliability of socioeconomic classification in present day settings.

Updated categories of income for the modified Kuppuswamy scale for 2026 using the second method that is multiplication factor method is depicted in Table 2. This approach involves use of a direct scaling factor which is extracted from the CPI-IW values by multiplying it with the previously updated 2016 income thresholds. This revised income limits illustrated an evenly proportional increase across all the socioeconomic classes.

The category of upper class (score 12) showed an increase from $\geq ₹36,876$ in 2016 to $\geq ₹54,797$ in 2026, whereas the lower class (score 1) threshold demonstrated a rise from $\leq ₹1,844$ to $\leq ₹2,740$. A similar corresponding increase is reported across intermediate categories. This maintains the relative distribution of socioeconomic strata. When compared with the direct conversion method, the income thresholds for 2026 calculated above are relatively lower. This estimation depends on the adjustments that are made in the previous step and therefore this method is not based on cumulative historical methods. It can be acknowledged here that this method's simplicity renders it as the most convenient method for periodic revisions.

Table 2 also presents the updated income categories for the modified Kuppuswamy scale for the year 2026 using the proportional scaling method, based on the annual inflation rate derived from CPI-IW values. An inflation rate of 3.77% was adopted to adjust the income thresholds. The updated income limits demonstrate a uniform percentage increase across all the socioeconomic classes. The upper class (score 12) category increased from $\geq ₹36,876$ in 2016 to $\geq ₹1,39,056$, while the lower class (score 1) threshold increased from $\leq ₹1,844$ to $\leq ₹6,953$. All intermediate groups show comparable proportional increase.

However, when applying inflation directly over long periods of time, this method produces significantly higher income thresholds than the other two methods. This is probably because of compounding or scaling errors. Although the procedure is straightforward and helpful for short-term updates, if base-year modifications are not made, it may exaggerate income categories.

Table 3 depicts the Kuppuswamy socioeconomic classification based on a scoring system which is composite and incorporates education, occupation of HOF, and income of HOF. Each of the domain is assigned a specific score.

Then the cumulative score determines the final socioeconomic class. The total score ranges then classify individuals into upper (26–29), upper middle (16–25), middle (11–15), lower middle (5–10), and lower (<5) classes. This integrated approach enables an exhaustive assessment of socioeconomic status beyond income alone.

Table 1: Updated income categories for Kuppuswamy scale (direct CPI conversion method).

S. no.	Original Kuppuswamy classification (1976)		Monthly family income in INR				Current income classification
	Based on base year 1960		1982	2001	2016	2025	2026
	Scores	Income category					
1	12	≥2000	≥3081	≥13708	≥36876	≥52806	≥78469
2	10	1,000–1,999	1,540–3079	6854–13702	18438–36857	26403–52779	39235–78430 (up to 78468)
3	6	750–999	1155–1539	5141–6847	13828–18419	19802–26377	29426–39195 (up to 39234)
4	4	500–749	770–1154	3427–5134	9219–13810	13201–19776	19617–29387 (up to 29425)
5	3	300–499	462–769	3420–2056	5531–9200	7921–13175	11770–19578 (up to 19616)
6	2	101–299	156–461	692–2049	1862–5513	2667–7894	3963–11731 (up to 11769)
7	1	≤100	≤154	≤685	≤1844	≤2640	≤3923 (up to 3962)

Table 2: Updated income categories for Kuppuswamy scale (multiplication factor method and proportional scaling method).

Multiplication factor method			
Family income per month in INR (1976)	Updated monthly family income in INR (2016)	Updated monthly family income in INR (2026)	Scores assigned
≥2000	≥36876	≥54797	12
1,000–1,999	18438–36857	27399–54770 (up to 54796)	10
750–999	13828–18419	20549–27371 (up to 27398)	6
500–749	9219–13810	13699–20522 (up to 20548)	4
300–499	5531–9200	8220–13672 (up to 13698)	3
101–299	1862–5513	2767–8192 (up to 8219)	2
≤100	≤1844	≤2740 (up to 2766)	1
Proportional scaling method			
Family income per month in INR (January 2016)	Inflation rate (148.6*–143.2**)×100/143.2	Updated monthly family income in INR (2026)	Scores assigned
≥36876	3.77	≥139056	12
18438–36857	3.77	69528–138986 (up to 139055)	10
13828–18419	3.77	52146–69458 (up to 69527)	6
9219–13810	3.77	34764–52076 (up to 52145)	4
5531–9200	3.77	20858–34694 (up to 34763)	3
1862–5513	3.77	7022–20789 (up to 20857)	2
≤1844	3.77	≤6953 (up to 7021)	1

Table 3: Education and occupation of head of family and socioeconomic category for Kuppuswamy scale.

Education of family head		Occupation of family head		Overall socioeconomic status (income + education + occupation)	
Scores	Category	Scores	Category	Total score	Socioeconomic category
7	Post-graduate or professional degree	10	Professional	26–29	Upper class
6	Graduate degree	6	Semi professional	16–25	Upper middle class
5	Intermediate	5	Shopkeeper/ clerk/ arithmetic skill jobs	11–15	Middle class
4	High school	4	Skilled worker	5–10	Lower middle class
3	Middle school	3	Semi-skilled worker		
2	Literate less than middle school certificate	2	Unskilled worker	<5	Lower class

Continued.

Education of family head		Occupation of family head		Overall socioeconomic status (income + education + occupation)
1	Illiterate	1	Unemployed	

DISCUSSION

Previously existing literature has always emphasized that the Kuppuswamy scale requires updates periodically in order to maintain its accuracy and validity. Nevertheless, various controversial aspects have come up many times with respect to invalid revisions in various published updates. A recent review by Varshney et al highlights this point and states that many recent versions that are labelled as “modified” scales introduce substantial and notable changes which may not be true, such as changes in the income categories or increasing categories of the occupational category classifications.¹¹ This is many times done without any validation. Such amendments may compromise uniformity with the original scale and mislead researchers. On the other hand, the present update conforms to a more accurate “revision” approach, and updates the scale with respect to the income component only while still preserving the original structure and scoring for other scale parameters.

The utilization of CPI-IW as a fundamental variable for revision is strongly supported in literature. This is because of the fact that CPI-IW changes with respect to the cost of living. A previous update by Jabeen et al noted that inflation in its cumulative form should always be considered for updating the income thresholds, rather than only relying on YoY inflation, which may further undervalue long-term economic changes.¹² This corroborates with the utilization of the Multiplication Factor Method, which encompasses cumulative inflation from the 2016 base year.

The direct CPI conversion method in the current analysis, generated the highest income estimates. This is due to the incorporation of multiple base-year linkages. The proportional scaling method generated disproportionately elevated values, that suggests possible over-estimation when applied beyond short-term updates. The multiplication factor method provided estimates that are practical, aligning with previous studies that recommend it as a reproducible and operationally feasible approach. Ahmad et al in 2024 utilised the direct CPI conversion method for calculating the new income strata.¹³ The proportional scaling method was reportedly used by Saleem et al in 2021 and Shankar et al in 2025.^{14,15}

Even with timely and regular upgrades, SES scales still have some limitations. As noted by Jabeen et al in their review, where they used multiplication factor method, income-based classification is prone to reporting bias.¹² It does not account for changes in size of family, resources that are non-monetary or the regional cost of living. This is more relevant for the informal sectors. Furthermore, when economic metrics is focussed on more it ignores more comprehensive factors that influence socioeconomic

status, like living conditions, healthcare access, and education.

Hence, it can reasonably be recommended that any future amendments in the scale should consider multidimensional indicators of socioeconomic status. Revising the income component using CPI-IW remains crucial and imperative as it maintains relevance. Nevertheless, the present article has offered a more standardized and practically useful version of the modified Kuppuswamy scale for 2026.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides an updated revision of the modified Kuppuswamy scale with respect to its income component. It has been updated for the year 2026 using three CPI-IW-based methods. It was observed that income thresholds showed an increasing trend across all the socioeconomic classes. This further indicated the impact of inflation which is unrelenting and warrants the need for updates which should be done regularly. When the three utilized approaches were compared, marked variability in the anticipated 2026 income cut-offs were observed. The multiplication factor method, emerged as the most pragmatic and feasible option. It can be stated that it is necessary that validity of socioeconomic classification should be updated regularly using the latest CPI-IW values to support robust research, informed policy making, and effective public health interventions within India's evolving socioeconomic landscape.

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