

# Mental Health Issues in Indian Society and the Role of Bollywood in Creating Awareness: A Case Study of *Dear Zindagi*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *Karthik Calling Karthik*

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**Abstract:** Mental health is now an important social issue in India, but most people still do not talk about it openly. Many people think that mental health problems mean a person is weak, that it brings shame to the family, or that the person is behaving in a strange way. They do not understand that these are real emotional and psychological problems, just like physical health problems.

In this situation, films play a big role because they affect the way people think and feel. Bollywood is one of the most popular forms of entertainment in India, and it has the power to change how people think about sensitive topics like mental health.

This research paper looks at three Bollywood films — *Dear Zindagi* (2016), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), and *Karthik Calling Karthik* (2010) — to understand how Indian cinema shows mental health problems and what kind of solutions these films suggest to society. These three films were chosen because each one shows mental health in a different situation.

*Dear Zindagi* is about a young woman living in a city who deals with anxiety, emotional pain, and goes to therapy. *Taare Zameen Par* is about a child who has dyslexia, suffers emotionally, and faces a lot of pressure from the education system. *Karthik Calling Karthik* is about a man working in a city who feels very lonely, has low self-confidence, carries past trauma, and eventually goes through a mental breakdown.

The paper says that these films do not just show mental health as a problem. They also help people become more aware, feel empathy, and learn about mental health in a social way. These films help viewers understand that having a mental health problem does not mean a person is "mad" or weak. It simply means they are going through a human experience that needs support, understanding, and proper care.

At the same time, the paper also points out that films have some limits. Sometimes movies make complicated mental health conditions look too simple, or they solve big problems too quickly and dramatically. But even with these drawbacks, such films are still important because they start conversations and help reduce the shame or fear people feel around mental health.

This study looks closely at a few selected films using a qualitative and thematic approach, meaning it focuses on ideas, themes, and meaning rather than numbers or data. The study finally concludes that Bollywood has the power to change how people in India think about mental health. It can do this by

encouraging open conversations, making therapy feel normal, helping people understand their emotions better, and building a kinder and more caring society.

**Keywords:** Mental health, Indian society, Bollywood, stigma, therapy, dyslexia, anxiety, awareness, cinema, case study.

## INTRODUCTION

Mental health is very important, but in India, it is often ignored. For a long time, people in India have not talked openly about feelings like sadness, worry, fear, or stress. In many homes and communities, mental health problems are still seen as something shameful or embarrassing. Some people even think these problems are not real. When someone is struggling emotionally, others often tell them to "be strong," "stop thinking so much," or "just adjust." Because of this, many people suffer quietly and never get proper help.

This problem is bigger than it looks, because mental health affects every part of life — family, studies, work, relationships, and self-confidence. A child who has trouble learning may be called lazy or weak. A young person dealing with anxiety may be seen as immature. A working adult going through emotional stress may hide it because they fear being judged or losing respect. So mental health is not just a personal problem — it is also a problem for society.

In recent years, more people in India have started talking about mental health, but the stigma — the feeling of shame around it — is still very strong. Many people avoid going to therapists or psychiatrists. Some think that only "mad" people need such help. Others worry about what society, family, or future marriage partners will think. Because of this, there is a big gap between the number of people who need mental health support and the number who actually seek it.

In this situation, cinema can play an important role. Films are not just entertainment — they also influence how people think, feel, and talk about important issues. Bollywood, in particular, reaches a huge number of people across different ages, classes, genders, and regions. When Bollywood shows mental health in a careful and honest way, it can help people understand emotional problems better, feel less alone, reduce shame, and even inspire them to seek help.

This paper looks at three Bollywood films — *Dear Zindagi*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *Karthik Calling Karthik* — as examples. These three films were chosen because each one shows a different side of mental health in India. *Dear Zindagi* deals with emotional pain, anxiety, and therapy. *Taare Zameen Par* deals with a child's learning difficulty, emotional neglect, and

pressure at school. *Karthik Calling Karthik* deals with loneliness, low self-esteem, trauma, and mental breakdown in city life. Together, these films show us how cinema can not only reflect mental health issues, but also help bring understanding and change in society.

## **2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main goals of this research paper are:

1. To understand what mental health problems look like in Indian society and how common they are.
2. To study how some popular Bollywood movies show and deal with mental health issues.
3. To closely look at three specific films — *Dear Zindagi*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *Karthik Calling Karthik* — as examples.
4. To see how these films talk about the shame and judgment around mental illness, the pain people feel, how society often misunderstands them, and what kind of help or treatment is shown.
5. To find out how these films help in spreading awareness about mental health and whether they offer any solutions to society's problems.
6. To give suggestions on what steps the government, institutions, and society can take to help more people learn about and understand mental health in India.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper uses a qualitative and thematic method of analysis. This means it does not use surveys or number-based methods. Instead, it looks at the selected films as cultural texts — stories that show real social situations and how people think and feel.

The three films were chosen carefully because each one deals with a different kind of mental health issue:

- **Dear Zindagi** – anxiety, emotional trauma, therapy, and understanding oneself
- **Taare Zameen Par** – dyslexia, a child's pain, pressure from school, and being emotionally ignored

- **Karthik Calling Karthik** – loneliness, low self-confidence, trauma, and mental instability

The analysis looks at each film's story, characters, dialogues, social background, emotional struggles, and the message it gives. The paper also uses a case study approach, meaning each film is studied as a separate case that helps explain a bigger social reality in India. This method works well because films often show social truths in emotional and symbolic ways. Through this approach, the paper looks at both the problem shown in each film and the kind of solution the film suggests.

#### **4. MENTAL HEALTH AS A SOCIAL ISSUE IN INDIA**

Mental health in India is not just a medical problem — it is also a social problem. People do not suffer emotionally without a reason. Their pain is connected to things like family pressure, school stress, comparing themselves to others, gender expectations, work tension, loneliness in cities, and poor communication. So, mental health in India is deeply tied to how society works and what people believe.

One of the biggest problems is stigma — meaning, the way people judge others. When someone struggles with mental health, others often call them weak, unstable, or "not normal." This stops people from talking openly and asking for help. Many families choose to stay silent instead of seeking treatment because they are afraid of what others will say. But this silence only makes things worse.

Another problem is that people simply do not know enough. Many people cannot recognize signs of emotional pain, anxiety, trauma, or learning difficulties. Children who need help are scolded instead. Young people who feel confused emotionally are blamed. Adults who are quietly suffering continue to live normally on the outside, but feel broken on the inside. Because mental health problems are often not visible, people do not take them seriously.

A third problem is that professional help is hard to get. Even where mental health services are available, many people do not use them — because of the cost, fear, family pressure, or because they do not understand what therapy is. In many parts of India, therapy is still not seen as a normal or acceptable form of healthcare.

Mental health is also closely connected to the education system. Students are under constant pressure to perform well and get high marks. Different ways of learning are mostly ignored.

Children who are sensitive or have learning difficulties are often punished or made to feel ashamed, instead of being helped.

In the same way, in cities, working professionals often feel lonely, stressed, and emotionally cut off from others. They may look successful from the outside, but inside they may be dealing with fear, insecurity, or emotional breakdown. All of this shows that mental health is not a small or unimportant issue — it is deeply connected to the daily lives of people in India.

This is exactly why cinema is important. When films show these experiences with care and sensitivity, they help society understand that mental health is a real and serious issue that needs attention.

## **5. DEAR ZINDAGI: WORRY, EMOTIONAL PAIN, AND MAKING THERAPY NORMAL**

*Dear Zindagi* is one of the most important Bollywood films about mental health because it shows emotional pain in a very real and relatable way. The main character, Kaira, is a young woman who looks confident, talented, and modern. But inside, she carries pain from her past. She finds it hard to get close to people, feels unsure of herself, and often feels confused and anxious in her personal life.

The film's biggest strength is that it does not show mental health as something extreme or unusual. Kaira is not shown as "mad" or "broken." She lives a normal life — she works, meets people, and looks fine from the outside. But inside, she is struggling. This is very important because many real people also suffer quietly while looking perfectly okay to others.

The film gives a lot of importance to therapy. Kaira goes to a therapist named Dr. Jehangir Khan. Their sessions are peaceful, thoughtful, and meaningful. The therapist is not shown as scary or strict. He is kind, calm, and understanding. Through their relationship, the film tells us that going to therapy is not a sign of weakness. It is simply a healthy way to understand your feelings, your past, and your habits.

In Indian society, many people still think that seeing a therapist means something is seriously wrong or embarrassing. *Dear Zindagi* challenges this idea. It shows therapy as something normal, useful, and freeing. This is one of the film's greatest contributions to society.

The film also shows how emotional wounds from childhood can affect adult life. Kaira's pain from old family experiences affects how she behaves in relationships and how emotionally stable she feels. This tells us that mental health problems do not always start suddenly. They can grow slowly over time because of emotional neglect, insecurity, or painful memories.

Another important point is that the film speaks directly to young people living in cities — especially young women — who may be dealing with relationship stress, career pressure, and loneliness. It encourages them to understand themselves better, accept themselves, and work toward healing. The film does not promise a perfect life. It simply says that people can learn to face their pain honestly, with the right support.

As a social tool, *Dear Zindagi* works in two ways. First, it helps the audience accept that emotional struggle is real and valid. Second, it shows therapy as a possible and healthy solution. For these reasons, this film is very important in any discussion about mental health in India.

## **6. TAARE ZAMEEN PAR: CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH, DYSLEXIA, AND SCHOOL PRESSURE**

*Taare Zameen Par* is a very moving film that shows the inner feelings of children. The film is about a young boy named Ishaan who finds school very difficult. His parents and teachers think he is lazy, naughty, and careless. But later, everyone finds out that he has dyslexia — a condition that makes reading and writing very hard.

The film is important because it shows how children can suffer quietly when everyone around them only cares about marks and good behavior. Ishaan is not a bad or stupid child. He is full of imagination, creativity, and feelings. But because he cannot do what the school expects, no one understands him, and he gets hurt.

This is a very common problem in India. Many children who learn in a different way are treated like failures. Instead of trying to understand why the child is having trouble, adults usually blame the child. This makes the child feel ashamed, scared, and sad. The film shows this very clearly. Slowly, Ishaan becomes quiet, broken inside, and stops connecting with people because nobody truly understands him.

The situation changes when a new teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh, notices Ishaan's problem. He does not punish the boy. Instead, he tries to understand him, learns about his difficulty, and

teaches him in a kind and helpful way. Through this teacher, the film shows a better way of teaching — one that is based on love, patience, and including every child.

This makes the film important not just for mental health, but also for improving our education system. It criticizes schools that only care about marks and not about children as human beings. It also questions parents who push their children too hard without thinking about how the child actually feels. The film says that children need encouragement, emotional care, and teaching that suits their individual needs.

When we think about mental health, *Taare Zameen Par* is not only about dyslexia. It is also about low self-confidence, fear, sadness, feeling rejected, and feeling alone. The film helps us understand that when children are always scolded, compared with others, and misunderstood, it causes serious damage to their mental health.

As a solution, the film teaches us to: be emotionally sensitive as parents, make education more inclusive and welcoming, create awareness about learning difficulties, make teachers more responsible, and give children the support they need.

The film made a big difference in how people think. Many parents, teachers, and viewers started to look differently at children who struggle in school. That is why *Taare Zameen Par* is still one of the most important Bollywood films about children's mental health.

## **7. KARTHIK CALLING KARTHIK: LONELINESS, PAIN, AND MENTAL BREAKDOWN IN CITY LIFE**

The film *Karthik Calling Karthik* shows a different kind of mental health story. It is not about a child like *Taare Zameen Par*, and it is not about healing through therapy like *Dear Zindagi*. This film is about a grown man living in a city who feels very alone, scared, and mentally broken inside.

The main character, Karthik, is a quiet and shy person. He has no confidence. People at his workplace treat him badly, he cannot speak up for himself, and he carries a lot of old pain from his past. He feels like no one sees him or cares about him. As the story moves forward, we can clearly see that his mental condition is getting worse. The film has some thriller and dramatic scenes, but it still shows us real emotional pain and a confused, broken sense of self.

One big topic in this film is **men and mental health**. In India, society usually expects men to be strong, quiet, and successful. Men are not supposed to show fear or sadness. Because of this, many men hide their pain and never ask for help. This film shows what can happen when a man suffers alone for too long — it can become very dangerous.

The film also shows how **office stress and city loneliness** can hurt a person. Karthik's job is full of pressure and humiliation. He has no good support system and feels very bad about himself. Many people living in big cities go through the same thing — they suffer quietly while continuing their daily routine and pretending everything is fine.

Even though the film tells its story in a dramatic way, it still asks important questions about mental health. It shows that when a person stays alone, misunderstood, and without help, their suffering can grow very serious. It also shows that **old trauma or pain from the past does not go away on its own** — it keeps affecting your present life if you never deal with it.

The film gives a clear message to society — **emotional pain should never be ignored**. People need good relationships, self-respect, and professional help when things get too hard. The film may not show mental illness in a perfectly clinical or medical way, but it is still important because it brings attention to the hidden pain that many people — especially men in cities — carry silently.

So, *Karthik Calling Karthik* is a warning about what happens when people stay silent, stay alone, and never get help. It takes the topic of mental health beyond schools and families, and connects it to city life, work pressure, and the deep pain a person can feel inside.

## 8. COMPARING ALL THREE FILMS

When we look at all three films together, we can see that mental health problems in India are not the same for everyone. Each film shows a different kind of struggle.

- **Dear Zindagi** shows a young woman dealing with sadness, anxiety, and finding peace through therapy.
- **Taare Zameen Par** shows a child struggling with school pressure and a learning difficulty called dyslexia.
- **Karthik Calling Karthik** shows an adult man dealing with loneliness, low confidence, past trauma, and a serious mental breakdown.

Even though the stories are different, all three films share some important common ideas.

**1. Mental health problems are often hidden** In all three films, other people do not realise that the main character is suffering. Kaira looks successful. Ishaan looks careless. Karthik looks strange or weak. This is very common in real life in India, where people often ignore emotional pain until things get very serious.

**2. People judge quickly** Families, schools, and workplaces in these films all judge the person instead of trying to understand them. The first reaction is usually blame, shame, punishment, or rejection — not kindness.

**3. Support from others makes a big difference** In all three films, things start to get better only when someone truly listens and helps. In *Dear Zindagi*, it is the therapist. In *Taare Zameen Par*, it is the art teacher. In *Karthik Calling Karthik*, the film shows that the person needed someone to understand him and also needed professional help.

**4. We must stop the stigma** All three films challenge the idea that mental illness means someone is weak or "mad." They show that anyone can go through mental health struggles, and these people deserve care and respect, not shame.

**5. Change must happen in society too** These films show that mental health is not just a personal problem. It is also connected to how families behave, how schools treat children, how workplaces treat employees, and how society thinks. So the solution must also come from society, not just from the individual.

Taken together, all three films help us understand mental health in India in a deeper and wider way. They encourage us to stop judging, start listening, break the silence, and replace shame with awareness and empathy.

## 9. HOW THESE FILMS HELP SOCIETY

These films are important not just because they show problems — they also show us *how* to deal with those problems. They work like tools that can slowly change society.

**1. They spread awareness** Many people may not know what anxiety, therapy, dyslexia, or trauma even means. These films help people understand such things in a simple, relatable way.

**2. They reduce shame** When a popular film handles mental health with care and kindness, it breaks old wrong ideas. People start to understand that feeling pain or having mental struggles is not something to be ashamed of.

**3. They build empathy** When we watch a character suffer, we feel their pain. This helps us become more kind and understanding toward real people going through the same things in life.

**4. They make it okay to ask for help** In *Dear Zindagi*, going to therapy is shown as a normal and good thing. This gives people the courage to seek help instead of suffering quietly.

**5. They start conversations** Once such films become popular, people start talking about mental health — at home, in schools, in the media. This is a big and important step toward change in society.

**But — films have their limits.**

Films alone cannot fix mental health problems. They can create awareness and understanding, but they cannot replace doctors, therapists, good schools, or proper mental health services.

## **10. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the study of these films, here are some useful suggestions for society:

- 1. Spread awareness about mental health** — Schools, colleges, media, and community places should regularly hold programmes to help people understand mental health in an easy and clear way.
- 2. Make therapy and counseling normal** — Going to a therapist or counselor should be seen as a normal part of taking care of your health — just like visiting a doctor. It should never be considered shameful.
- 3. Make schools more friendly and understanding** — Schools should be able to identify if a child is facing learning problems, emotional stress, or behavioral issues — and handle it with care and kindness, not punishment.
- 4. Educate parents and teachers** — Parents and teachers should learn how to notice when a child or teenager is feeling emotionally troubled. They should talk to children in a supportive and gentle way — both at home and in school.

5. **Support mental health at the workplace** — Companies and organizations should create a safe and respectful work environment. Issues like stress, humiliation, and loneliness at work should be taken seriously and addressed.
6. **Show mental health responsibly in media** — Films and TV shows should not make fun of or exaggerate mental illness. Honest and sensitive portrayals can help people understand and empathize better.
7. **Improve mental health services in India** — Along with awareness, India also needs good quality mental health services that are easy to reach and affordable, so that anyone who needs help can get it without fear or hesitation.

## 11. CONCLUSION

Mental health is a big and growing problem in India. It affects people of all ages — children, young people, adults, students, and working professionals. But most people stay silent about it because of shame and misunderstanding.

This is where Bollywood films can help.

The three films — *Dear Zindagi*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *Karthik Calling Karthik* — show that movies can do more than just entertain us. They can help people understand pain that is not always visible. They give words to feelings that are hard to express. They reduce judgment and build empathy. They also show that getting better is possible — through support, understanding, and professional help.

*Dear Zindagi* shows that going to therapy is normal and okay. *Taare Zameen Par* shows respect for children who learn differently, and criticizes a harsh education system. *Karthik Calling Karthik* shows how loneliness and emotional pain can affect people living in big cities.

Together, these films send one clear message — mental health is not a personal weakness. It is connected to family, school, work, identity, and society as a whole. These films also show us a way forward — through open conversations, kindness, inclusion, therapy, and emotional awareness.

So these three films are important not just as movies, but as mirrors of society. They make people think, feel, and talk about mental health in a better way. That is why they are valuable examples of how Bollywood can bring about social change.

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