

The Pain of Dyslexia, As Told by Bollywood

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NEW DELHI -- A recent Bollywood movie about a dreamy 8-year-old boy had all the ingredients of an Indian blockbuster -- six songs, tearful ups and downs and a happy ending. But the film has also planted the seeds of a movement to raise public awareness about dyslexia in [India](#).

THIS STORY

When Madhu Mangla, 45, watched the movie, "Taare Zameen Par," Hindi for "Stars on Earth," she broke down and wept in the theater. She recalled feeling as if it were her son's life reenacted on screen.

"My son changed five schools, but he could not read and write. He was labeled a failure by teachers. Children picked on him at school. I scolded him at home all the time," Mangla said of her son, now 18.

But after watching the movie, she went home and looked up dyslexia online. She read all night, and the next day she printed out the addresses of support groups in the city.

"The film gave me the strength to come out and admit he has dyslexia. It has taken me a very long time to do that," she said, as she played with the end of her floral chiffon sari and watched her son study at a learning center for dyslexic children. In the past three months, Mangla said, she has seen remarkable changes in her son, Rahul Mangla, who has been working with special-education teachers. He took the national 10th-grade test for the first time recently, and he has begun to type and send text messages from his cellphone.

"I learned in the movie that I have something called dyslexia," Rahul said. "But I also learned that I can overcome it with the right kind of teachers."

A runaway hit, the film is about a bucktoothed, wide-eyed boy who is scolded and punished by teachers and parents for poor test scores, and repeatedly called an "idiot" and "duffer." He retreats into a shell of silence and tears -- until a new, messiah-like arts teacher discovers the boy has dyslexia and encourages him to paint.

The film has lifted the veil on an issue that has remained shrouded in private pain for many families in [India](#). Parents, schools, activists and policymakers have held conferences and public meetings to talk openly about dyslexia since the film was released in December. Though a handful of groups have addressed the issue of dyslexia in India's big cities for more than a decade, public awareness and acceptance have been woefully low.

Dyslexia is the most common learning disability among children, and it affects a person's ability to process the written word, symbols and numbers. Most Indian

schools do not have programs to help children with learning disabilities, and teachers are generally not trained to deal with the issue, if not completely ignorant of it. The few private schools that offer special education charge extra fees.

Activists estimate that 5 to 10 percent of Indian children show signs of dyslexia, but there are no official figures on the matter.

"There has been a sudden awakening about dyslexia in the popular consciousness after the movie. So many people are hearing the word for the first time. People who lived in denial or hid it for years are now coming out to talk about it," said Anjali Bawa, a parent-activist who founded Action Dyslexia Delhi and fought for the right to an amanuensis, or a scribe, for dyslexic children taking national high school exams.

Since the movie was released, Bawa said, the number of parents who come to her office every month has increased tenfold. Some women who live with traditional extended Indian families call about their children without the knowledge of their husbands or mothers-in-law.

"Earlier, they would come when the child was thrown out of school or when they were up against the wall. Now, they come proactively and want to know if their child has dyslexia."

Educators and analysts say that as Indian schools have become more competitive, they have put too much emphasis on textbook studies and not enough on other skills. Schools dismiss children with learning disabilities as hopeless and badly behaved.

In the film, when the father is told that his son has dyslexia, he asks: "My son is not normal? Is he mentally retarded?"

The screenwriter, Amole Gupte, said his film has changed the way dyslexia is seen in India. Since the film's release, Gupte has been asked to write on the subject in the press and has answered countless reader questions.

"I get so many painful letters and phone calls from parents across the country," Gupte said in a telephone interview. "Fathers weep on the phone and say they saw the film and realized that they have been wrong in the way they treated their children. This is catharsis."

The Indian government passed a comprehensive disabilities law in 1995 that guarantees rehabilitation, job quotas and housing for people with visual, hearing, mental and physical disabilities. But it does not mention learning disabilities.

"Unfortunately, many in India still think learning disability comes under the mental illness category, and that adds to the shame and stigma," said T.D. Dhariyal, the government's deputy chief commissioner for persons with disabilities. Officials are now considering a list of amendments that would expand the definition of disability. "The government estimates that there are 21 million Indians with a disability, but the number would shoot up if learning disabilities are taken into account," Dhariyal said.

At a recent meeting with parents, Bawa Aditya Singh, a 27-year-old executive who has emerged as the public face of dyslexia for many in the capital, took to the stage and introduced himself, saying "I am dyslexic."

"There was pin-drop silence for some minutes. People kept staring at me," Singh recalled. "Then they asked what I did for a living. I said I have worked with [Disney](#) in the U.S. and am now the general manager at an upscale restaurant here. Their jaws dropped. After a few minutes, they began bringing their children in. And one after the other they stood up and said their child had dyslexia, too."