

# ***Taare Zameen Par* — A Case Study** **Pedagogical Use of Cinema and** **National Education Policy 2020**

RADHIKA KHANNA\*

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## **Abstract**

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*This paper looks at cinema's pedagogical dimension and potential through the case study of Taare Zameen Par, a Hindi film released in the year 2007. The author has studied the film's impact on various stakeholders of the Indian education system and reflected on the practices for transformative education. We know that cinema wields tremendous power to engage and influence viewers, an eclectic mix of students, teachers, parents, educational administrators, policymakers, and others. This paper analyses the selected film's contribution to shaping and changing perspectives on education. It further proposes the integration of cinema as a pedagogical tool in the new classroom being ushered in by the National Education Policy, 2020, which advocates doing away with learning by rote and mere reproduction of information.*

*A discussion of the film Taare Zameen Par is relevant as the cinematic presentation of a student with learning difficulties raised many concerns about the quality of a learner's educational experiences that are today at the heart of the National Education Policy's implementation. The author thus found it worthwhile to expand her area of inquiry to include the impact of changes in the education system through implementing NEP 2020 that "lays particular emphasis on the development of creative potential" of an individual. Cognitive learning is a part of a wider canvas of creating a knowledge society that takes cognisance of the students' diverse dispositions and aspirations. It draws on "the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities — both the 'foundational capacities' of literacy and numeracy and the 'higher-*

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\*Assistant Professor, Department of Electronic Media and Mass Communication, Pondicherry University

*order' cognitive capacities such as critical thinking and problem solving but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions."*

*NEP 2020 recognises that the fundamental principles guiding the education system and its institutions should work towards student-centred, multidisciplinary and holistic learning.*

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It must allow sufficient flexibility for the students to choose and pursue a discipline while at the same time, create a space for nurturing their creativity and critical thinking.

The aim clearly must be to build conceptual understanding rather than learning by rote. Students must develop their innate potential in their journey through the education system. These goals are achievable by creating dialogic learning spaces where the teacher interacts with students to understand their learning needs and contributes as a humble knowledge worker.

"A good education institution is one in which every student feels welcomed and cared for, where a safe and stimulating learning environment exists, where a wide range of learning experiences are offered, and where good physical infrastructure and appropriate resources conducive to learning are available to all students. Attaining these qualities must be the goal of every educational institution." (NEP 2020)

A student would feel welcomed and cared for when the teacher would emphasise the power of difference and be open to new perspectives emerging from interaction with the student. The author asserts that there is a need to have intellectual

humility to realise the several aims and objectives of NEP 2020.

"It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom," said Mahatma Gandhi.

"The more we know, the more we can see that we do not know." (The Mother, 1954)

The above quotes most aptly bring out the paradox of endless learning in the history of the search for knowledge. However, this search for knowledge has recently been transformed into the pursuit of information and scholarship in the world of academia. Learning and knowledge dissemination has been reduced to a commodity and much in tune with capitalist production models have been modified with an eye on profit related to the market. Giroux (2008) categorises this as 'the biopolitics of market sovereignty'. This change has affected most crucially the process of dissemination or pedagogy. Teaching, learning, the creation and sharing of knowledge through thinking facilitated through questioning or critical thought are part of the complex process of pedagogy. Pedagogy then plays a linking or relational role whereby learning is imbibed as enculturation, and all knowledge gained is part of the culture, making the process organic.

Shulman (1986) describes several types of teacher knowledge, including knowing how to teach and what to teach. It is the science of teaching that is commonly defined by pedagogy. The most essential in the common understanding of pedagogy is educational theory and instructional methods. Instructional methods are specific strategies and techniques such as cooperative learning, inquiry, lecture, learning centres, and advanced organisers which teachers use during teaching. There are various educational theories, but teachers need to understand their own personal theories of learning because that helps teachers make more thoughtful decisions in the classroom (Galton, 2007).

To bring in transformative education, teachers need to expand their knowledge and explore different ways of seeing, thinking and feeling. As educators, it is vital to look at critical pedagogy that primarily focuses on a more human relationship between the student and the teacher. Ira Shor asserts that “critical pedagogy is liberatory pedagogy through critical education and action.” The revolutionary “thinking of the comrade” is the attitude that a teacher should have towards students. It’s a thinking that acknowledges the student’s position as to where the teacher once was, and the student may one day be where the teacher is today. Thus by relating to the student on a human level and reducing the teacher-student gap,

critical pedagogy draws attention to the potential of both the teacher and the student to grow together and reshape the structures they inhabit (Monchinski, 2008).

As opposed to critical pedagogy, over-directed learning or what Freire termed the ‘banking deposit method’, emphasises students’ fatalistic views of themselves as against ‘problem posing’ education that affirms students to be in the process of becoming (Freire, 1970). This system of education also puts the teacher and the student against each other. An antagonistic relationship builds between the teacher and the student because a teacher is knowledgeable while a student is not.

The challenge, also the very purpose of ‘educative and pedagogic methodology’, is to move beyond strategies for specific learning to accommodate living as learning. Numerous researches have been carried out in this direction, showing the difference between the two strategies and their importance. Scholars have raised a whole realm of issues to reiterate the significance of ‘from learning to living approach’, and critical pedagogy has contributed much to this discourse. Some of the critical issues and suggestions for this transformation are discussed below.

Richard Peters and John Holt, although their educational theories drastically differ, assert the teacher to be only a guide. While the former insists on getting inside the forms of knowledge, the latter upholds the

need to free the student to follow his/her interests (Galton, 2007).

Alexander (2017) suggests another angle to the role of the teacher, and this is that a teacher should be a facilitator. Through this role of the teacher, s/he creates room for dialogic teaching, which can “minimise the use of rote, recitation and instructional talk in favour of dialogue.”

Many educational researchers remind us of a damaging history of education where educators have used violence and fear as a stimulus to establish authority and dominance largely leading to resentment from students, especially the male students. They suggest replacing this with the value of humour. They believe that a teacher who uses humour is less likely to be challenged and signals trust and a shared sense of purpose.

Scholars from the school of critical pedagogy have raised many pertinent points on the process of exclusion that takes place through planned behaviourism. Vygotsky (1962) advocated not to decontextualise the nature of behaviourism as “behaviour of individual social actors cannot be disconnected from the socio-historical-cultural context in which it is situated in practice.” Kincheloe and many other forerunners of the school reject the hierarchy of the intelligence paradigm in the conception of the mind that suggests “high levels of cognitive ability are rare qualities found only among an elite few.” In opposition, these scholars argue that “good sense

and reason are human qualities” equally distributed throughout the species. Other important scholars of critical pedagogy include Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Piaget, Gilles Deleuze and Foucault. Critical pedagogy has always stood against the “dominant, domesticating form of education informed by paternalistic, Euro-centric, and mechanistic approach to teaching and learning” (Malott, 2011).

Bringing in critical pedagogy is imperative to realise and manifest NEP 2020. Here, cinema has a supportive role in contributing to creating the new classroom.

### **CINEMA: A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL**

Educators have a task of integrating cinema — including documentary films and short films, both live-action and animation, into their inventory of tools, to inculcate in their students a superior understanding and application of the various concepts and concerns which are at the heart of schooling and the state of composure and mental health of students. This paper has attempted to discuss the pedagogical use of cinema in education with the hope that more teachers and teacher educators will draw upon films as a tool in their classrooms. Cinema has, from its very inception, been popular among the masses, treated as a magic box that takes one into the world of fantasy. But this is not the only perception and impact of cinema. Besides, cinema has also been acknowledged

for its portrayal of reality and critical representation of social inequality.

The different genres of cinema continue to capture the imagination of the diverse audience. More recently, especially since the 1990s', many newly developed mass media technologies have come to the fore that have complemented each other and have widened the reach of cinema, both by way of the number of audiences and the time they invest into it. Films can now be seen more repeatedly, economically and they cannot be erased from people's memory. Films are also a powerful archive of social change. Films have taken different stands, sometimes being neutral to representing the social context, sometimes promoting a particular social practice and sometimes being critical. In either perspective, films have had a significant impact as a pedagogical medium.

The strength of cinema as a pedagogical tool also owes to its ability to resonate with a wide cross-section of the audience, from disparate socioeconomic strata of society, quite unlike any other pedagogical tool. As Giroux (2001) observed, "Film not only challenged print culture as the only viable source of knowledge; it was an attractive cultural text for students because it was not entirely contaminated by the logic of formal schooling. ... Film became a ... useful ... resource to offset dominant textbook ideologies and is invaluable as a pedagogical tool to challenge officially sanctioned knowledge and

modes of learning." Films are made for popular consumption and usually for entertainment. Still, one cannot undervalue the educational impact of certain films created to bring awareness and societal change.

This paper takes a close look at the pedagogical value of Bollywood director Aamir Khan and creative director Amole Gupte's *Taare Zameen Par*, which aimed at providing an insight into a child's mind, with school education and learning disability as its focus. The author conducted in-depth interviews with filmmakers and educators to explore the role of films in transformative and critical education. P.K. Nair, National Film Archives of India's (NFAI) founder-director and the doyen of film preservation in India, described pedagogy as the process of education through formal, classroom situations with the teacher/elder acting as a guide. He further opined that education also has a natural continuous process that is not time-bound. It starts from birth and evolves through direct contact with life, nature and fellow human beings.

Films, according to him, are commonly accepted as an effective medium of communication and artistic expression. They create realistic situations that offer audiences virtual experience (most often) from the protagonist's point of view. Hence, pedagogy through cinema offers education through experience-based learning.

The author also interviewed the film's scriptwriter, Deepa Bhatia and creative director, Amole Gupte to understand their intent and choices in shaping the film's narrative. They shared the process of research in depth towards creating the film's script that had them involved with the project for eight long years. To give shape to their concerns about the prevalent education system, they spent considerable time researching and working with Maharashtra Dyslexia Association, Tulip School and many school children through several theatre workshops in Mumbai.

They also revealed the need to approach Aamir Khan, as they knew that having a superstar on board, would help them reach out to a larger audience with the message of the film. The film garnered a wide viewership and was highly successful at the box office. The film's director, Aamir Khan, spoke on various public forums on the need to bring changes into the Indian education system. In one of these programme's broadcast on a popular television channel, in 2009, Aamir Khan and the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton discussed the importance of education at the national and international levels. He said, "... one of the key things about education to me is not whether you know the answer of  $(a+b)^2$ , but are you encouraging children to question? Are you encouraging children to have their own minds that are wanting to learn and are thirsty and hungry? And not merely people who have a

good memory. Kids are told that you have to learn this by heart and kids learn it by heart. You are not creating individuals who will have minds which will take our humanity forward, in a way that we can't imagine today. That will only happen if you have minds which are encouraged to question, to disagree, to challenge, to search and discover and I don't think that we are following that kind of education in India today. It's mostly focusing on how well you can memorize things." (statevideo, 2009).

Gupte also elaborates on the need to let go of rote learning and the unhealthy pressure on students in schools. He says, "What is this? It should be an open book exam. Why is this a shut book exam? Is a test intended to find their capability at mugging up a subject? This is the most ridiculous way of dealing with knowledge. Cramming knowledge is like forcing more air into a balloon than it can retain. It vanishes as soon as it finds its way out. Children should only be asked to go by their own memory, what they retain. And eventually, what they retain is the beauty of the experiences and not the torture of cramming and mugging up."

"It will be acutely underestimating the content of this film if we narrow it down merely as an exercise in recognising and managing dyslexia. In fact, it looks like a wide angle landscape of the present age where everyone is in a restless hurry. This film raises serious questions on

mental health perspectives. We seem to be heading to a state of mass scale mindlessness even as children are being pushed to ‘perform’...family systems hell bent on goading young children to peaks of achievement, and schooling systems governed by steel frames of critical disciplinary forces. Are we heading to a major landslide in the coming years leading to major breakdowns in the mental health and functioning of school going children?” (Sathyanarayana Rao and Krishna, 2008).

The film struck a chord with audiences from all walks of life. Teachers and parents reflected on their roles and discussed the issues raised by the film in their groups. Many questioned the state of school education, which ignored mental health at the altar of adult expectations.

### **Educational interventions in schools across India**

The film not only helped a large number of individuals to reflect on important concerns about schooling but also inspired real-life interventions by several schools across India. The project, “Identification of Dyslexic Students in English and Mathematics and giving them Adequate Remedial Measures with the Help of Training and Scientific Technology” of a Puducherry School was one such project selected by the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) to implement their program, ‘All India Competition on Innovative Practices

and Experiments in Education for Schools and Teacher Education Institutions 2010–11’.

NCERT awarded it the best project. Similarly, many educational institutions across the country reflected on their practices and brought in changes to the benefit of the students, especially the laggards by the school’s “standards”.

One could also gauge the impact of the film from the fact that the Delhi High Court laid down that dyslexia was not a disease. Medha Lotlikar, founder of Saraswati Mandir Trust who ran three schools for children in Mumbai with severe learning disabilities recounts that it ordered a man to watch the film when he described dyslexia as a mental disorder. These words of the Delhi High Court are not only heart-warming but provide a lot of hope to the thousands of children who are being labelled as dyslexic, autistic, slow learners, attention deficit and so on. These children are then excluded, thrown out of regular schools and put in special schools, most of which are not registered and are illegal and irregular.

### **Supplementary educational video with the film**

The film director, Aamir Khan recorded a panel discussion featuring educationists who discussed the educational issues and concerns at the heart of *Taare Zameen Par*. The experts discussed the condition of dyslexia for the benefit of all the viewers

who watched the film. The panel included Dr. Vrajesh Udani, child neurologist; Masarrat Khan, CEO, Maharashtra Dyslexia Association; Medha Lotlikar, Educator, Tulip School; and Dr. Harish Shetty, psychiatrist and counsellor. In the panel discussion, the filmmaker made efforts to discuss various perspectives related to child psychology, pressures of the educational system, coping with learning disabilities, and has thrown light on the need for inclusive education. A DVD with the panel discussion was released as a complete educational resource material that accompanied the film's DVD in the year 2007 so that all those who purchased the film's DVD became aware of crucial concerns in the field of education.

### **Impact on viewers-citizens through the power of cinema**

As discussed earlier, the power of cinema to make an emotional connection with millions of people is seen through this Hindi film. The author observed the film's influence on the feeling and thinking process of an ordinary film viewer, beyond the academic and intellectual sections of the society, through a spectrum of online responses members of the audience posted from across the world. Amole Gupte shared some of the reactions from parents and teachers in an interview with the author.

He narrated how people came up to him in various symposiums

and conferences. He further spoke about his decision to choose the popular feature film format over the documentary one to reach the national consciousness to a wide range of audiences.

"When I visited Hyderabad, Delhi and other cities for some symposiums that were organised after *Taare Zameen Par's* release, people identified themselves emotionally with the characters in the movie. "You have depicted my life story." "Sir, you don't know what difference this has made to our lives; we cried when we saw the movie." People's perceptions also changed. They confessed how unknowingly they had been troubling their child. This makes me sad but the good thing happening everywhere is the social change. That little drop in the ocean is the biggest thing, you know."

Gupte tells about the people in his circle who expressed, "*We never looked at our children this way*"; "*I think I will not push her for the tuition or I will not do this.*" Gupte continues, "I have heard people, and they have understood on their own the point which academically has been discussed — about how to bring in change. But that which does not often go out of intellectual and academic circles has now touched the chord of a layperson."

Amole Gupte and Deepa Bhatia resolved that they would not commence the film production until they had a star actor. Gupte says, "Having a star on board would

increase the film's impact, which is what both of us wanted. It's a film not only about dyslexia because then an unlettered person wouldn't like the film, as he would have no connection with reading and writing. But it is also a film about the inflexible educational system and about childhood and parenting."

The need of the hour is "flexibility, so that learners have the ability to choose their learning trajectories and programmes, and thereby choose their own paths in life according to their talents and interests" (NEP 2020).

*Taare Zameen Par* is a film that communicates the need to sensitise parents and teachers to factors that affect learning. Krishnamurti (1974) stresses in his thoughts on education, "Fear is what prevents the flowering of the mind, the flowering of goodness. Most of us learn through fear. When the brain is conforming to a pattern of obedience, it is no longer capable of freshness, no longer capable of thinking simply and directly." However, as we see in the film, Ishaan is constantly fearful and unable to withstand his teachers' and father's authority. This changes through the interaction with his new art teacher, Nikumbh who educates Ishaan's parents, the school principal and his fellow teachers about Ishaan's learning difficulties.

The film emphasises the absence of fear and authority to enable learning and to support children through appropriate responses and interventions to allow joyful learning.

As educationists, our concern is the academic progress of the learners and their overall sense of wellness and well-being. Education is to prepare the student for life, and therefore the development of all aspects of the human personality must be the prerogative for teachers.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, the author has looked at *Taare Zameen Par* as a case study of the pedagogical use of cinema. The findings of her doctoral research have been related to the National Education Policy 2020, which aims to bring in a landmark transformation in India's education system. The issues raised through the film are those of concern for students, teachers, parents, educational administrators and policy-makers. These include holistic education and caring for mental health and well-being. This paper discusses the imperative of listening to and observing the needs, interests, strengths, and challenges and creating opportunities for joyful learning.

"Let us allow the blossoming of laughter and nurture the brimming, bubbling enthusiasm of childhood in the classrooms and corridors of schools...One needs to seriously probe the fact that positive mental health promotion is not a cross-sectional element, rather in reality, it is a longitudinal journey starting from early childhood...it is the need of the hour to skillfully and sensitively gear up the children to the required

levels of performance by carefully mapping their strengths, weakness and resources.” (Sathyanarayana Rao and Krishna, 2008)

Educationists and policy-makers have realised the burden that undue emphasis on cognitive learning places on young minds. Therefore, in the NEP 2020, there is a call for revamp of the current design of the education system that is centred around the learning-for-exams format. Herein, the focus would be on conceptual understanding by bringing the fun in learning to make learning chiefly experiential, throwing up opportunities to engage the students in their learning journey inside the four walls of an institution and the outside environment. The provisioning of vocational internships would enable this to facilitate, for instance, an interaction of the students with local artisans and others. This should give the students vital exposure to the skill sets employed by the workers to ply different kinds of trades for their livelihood. This is intended to steer the thrust of schooling from mere cognitive learning to learning that addresses an innate potential of a human being. It should also aid in creating an ecosystem for positive mental health through inherently engaging, joyful education.

*Taare Zameen Par* demonstrates the effective use of a film as a pedagogical device. This film was widely used for stimulating discussion and reflection amongst school teachers and policy-makers. Many

educational institutions across India organised in-house film screenings on their campuses. Giroux (2011) in his article argues that “films not only provide a pedagogical space that opens up the ‘possibility of interpretation as intervention’, they also make clear the need for forms of literacy that address the profoundly political and pedagogical ways in which knowledge, practice, discourse, images and values are constructed and enter our lives.”

Though *Taare Zameen Par* has been used to ‘cultivate’ teachers and students alike, a teacher could choose for screening scenes from the film to organise classroom discussions around them. It is interesting to mention that there were takeaways and some imposing lessons for both the communities to apply in their real-life situations. At least they would hold back and think before carrying forward with the conditioned responses. The film can facilitate, bring about a behavioural change to a more humane and sensitive ecosystem and thus fulfil education’s grand purpose.

We have seen how a film produced primarily for entertainment has also inspired educational interventions in schools across India. Along with its impact on individuals in the audiences, educators across the country also reflected on their practices and initiated dialogue and projects to address the lacunas in their institutions.

This was also sought to be achieved by recording a panel discussion with educationists informed of the issues and concerns surrounding the ideas raised by the film. Along with learning from the experts, the viewers-citizens also learn through the film's creative deployment of storytelling. The elements of a well-researched script, camerawork, sound design and songs written especially to bring forth Ishaan's condition and Nikumbh's empathetic response to it, strike an intended emotional connection with the audiences.

Experiential and reflective learning is being encouraged by the NEP 2020 along with the inclusion of multi-modal learning. The choice of a popular Bollywood film as a case study in the pedagogy of cinema demonstrates the power of the moving image in the introduction and the implementation of the National Education Policy.

Kincheloe (2008) shares evocatively, "I simply listened to people who had been deemed failures by the larger society or by the schools they attended. Such individuals, I have learned over the years, often possess some of the most compelling insights into what is actually happening, into how people are seriously harmed by institutions ostensibly constructed to help them improve their lives." As NEP 2020 begins to transform the face of Indian education, Ishaan Awasthi will continue to remind us of the harm that schools can do if we don't wake up to the need of

changing our pedagogical practices, emphasising critical pedagogy and dialogic teaching.

In the film, we see the art teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh, played by Aamir Khan himself, reach out to the 8-year-old Ishaan Awasthi, played by Darsheel Safary. He is a student branded by his teachers and parents as being lazy, careless and inept at his studies. Nikumbh demonstrates a teaching approach that emphasises the concept of "Dialogue" (Buber, 1937). Morgan and Guilherme (2012), in their paper, discuss the relevance of Buber's thought to our times, "For Buber, an educational approach based on dialogue is an approach that places appropriate weight on both the teacher and student's roles. The role of the teacher is to set the curriculum, the framework, to set the value platform for the student, but this does not mean that the student's interests, creativity and needs are overlooked as the student develops these within the framework set by the teacher."

Is there any difference between a mainstream teacher and an art practitioner in their pedagogical talk? The virtues of empathy and regarding the other as important as oneself are portrayed through the way Nikumbh cares for Ishaan and makes all attempts to forge communication with him. Throughout his interaction with Ishaan, we see exemplified the dialogic teaching approach. Also, as an art teacher, he reflects sensitivity and reciprocity to Ishaan. "Compared

to teachers, creative practitioners ... gave pupils more time to think when planning and designing activities ... extended questioning sequences so that classroom discourse was dialogic rather than ... the more usual 'cued elicitation' ... offered more precise feedback ... tended to extend rather than change pupils' initial ideas" (Galton, 2008).

Nikumbh's intervention as an art teacher uses song, music, dance and outdoor activity where the students explore their creative and artistic abilities and encourages them to learn with fun. He deploys humour with a creative amalgamation of various elements of a dramatic performance that marks his entry into the class and the film. As Alexander (2018) states, why shouldn't learning be enjoyable? The motivational power of Nikumbh's dialogic teaching wins over the traumatised and recluse Ishaan. The film affirms the possibility of making

education inclusive and drawing in students with varying capacities. Critical pedagogy, as we have seen earlier in the paper, is emancipatory and addresses contexts of social disadvantage.

"Central to this evolving criticality is humility. Here we realise that we do not know, and in our fallibility we work with people from diverse socio-economic classes, genders, sexualities, races, and ethnicities both at home and around the world to overcome our ignorance" (Kincheloe, 2008).

A teacher needs to create engagement for learning to occur. When this engagement is informed by empathy and deep listening, then the teacher can successfully create a conducive learning environment for diverse learners in and outside the classroom.

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