iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 14 **Issue:** III **Month of publication:** March 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2026.78431

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 14 Issue III Mar 2026- Available at www.ijraset.com

MANAM: An AI-Powered Empathetic Chat Application for Mental Health Support in India

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Abstract: ***Mental health has emerged as a critical global concern in the twenty-first century. Despite growing awareness, access to professional psychological services remains severely limited in developing nations, particularly India, where cultural stigma, financial barriers, and a shortage of trained professionals prevent millions from seeking timely support. This paper presents Manam, an AI-powered empathetic chat application designed to provide accessible, anonymous, and culturally relevant mental health support across India, with a particular focus on the Tamil Nadu region. The system leverages the Google Gemini API for context-aware, compassionate natural language generation. Key features include a dynamic mood-adaptive user interface, an integrated music therapy module, and an automated crisis intervention system that connects users in distress to verified regional emergency helplines. The modular client-server architecture built on Python Flask ensures scalability and maintainability. Manam addresses critical limitations of existing global platforms by offering a free, localized, and emotionally adaptive digital companion that serves as a first-line mental health support system. Evaluation of the prototype demonstrates consistent empathetic response generation, reliable crisis detection performance, and positive user engagement, affirming the system's potential to reduce the mental health treatment gap across India.***

Keywords: Mental Health AI, Empathetic Chatbot, Natural Language Processing, Google Gemini API, Crisis Detection, Mood-Adaptive Interface, Music Therapy, Digital Mental Health, Flask Framework, India Healthcare.

I. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed numerous sectors including healthcare, education, and communication. However, mental health services have consistently failed to evolve at a comparable pace, leaving a widening gap between the growing burden of mental illness and the availability of effective, accessible support systems [1].

Mental health disorders including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and emotional dysregulation collectively affect over 970 million individuals globally. Despite the enormous scale of this burden, a significant majority of affected individuals remain untreated due to systemic, cultural, financial, and geographic barriers [2]. The World Health Organization estimates that more than 75 percent of people with mental disorders in low- and middle-income countries receive no treatment whatsoever.

In India, the mental health treatment gap is particularly severe and multidimensional. The National Mental Health Survey of India estimated that approximately 150 million individuals require active mental health intervention, yet fewer than 30 million receive any form of care [3]. This profound gap is amplified by pervasive social stigma, deeply rooted cultural taboos surrounding mental illness, geographic inaccessibility of services, and an acute shortage of trained mental health professionals. India has approximately 0.3 psychiatrists per 100,000 population, significantly below the global average of 1.7 per 100,000 [4].

The Tamil Nadu region, despite its relatively advanced healthcare infrastructure compared to other Indian states, faces similar systemic challenges. Rural and semi-urban populations within the state have limited access to psychological counseling services, and financial barriers prevent even urban populations from accessing consistent professional care.

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence and natural language processing have created unprecedented opportunities for delivering scalable, accessible mental health support through conversational digital platforms

[5]. AI-powered chatbots have demonstrated measurable effectiveness in providing immediate emotional assistance, psychoeducation, guided coping strategies, and crisis identification. However, most existing solutions are either subscription-based, culturally generic, linguistically inaccessible, or lack the emotional intelligence required to adapt dynamically to user states. This paper presents Manam, an AI-driven empathetic chat application that integrates large model capabilities with culturally localized crisis intervention resources.

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The system is designed specifically for users in India, incorporating Tamil Nadu-specific emergency contacts and providing a free, anonymous, and emotionally adaptive platform for emotional expression and mental health support.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II defines the problem statement; Section III presents key objectives; Section IV reviews related literature; Section V describes the system architecture; Section VI details implementation and outcomes; Section VII presents the evaluation methodology and results; Section VIII outlines future work directions; and Section IX concludes the paper.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Mental health support remains inaccessible to a significant proportion of the Indian population due to multiple compounding barriers that operate simultaneously across social, economic, geographic, and technological dimensions.

Social stigma associated with mental illness represents one of the most significant barriers to help-seeking behavior in India. Research consistently demonstrates that individuals experiencing psychological distress frequently avoid seeking professional support due to fear of social discrimination, ostracization, and judgment from family and community members [6]. This stigma is particularly pronounced in rural and semi-urban areas where mental illness is often misconstrued as a sign of personal weakness or spiritual failing.

The geographic distribution of mental health professionals is highly skewed toward major urban centers such as Chennai, Mumbai, and Delhi, leaving rural and semi-urban populations with virtually no access to psychological services. The ratio of mental health professionals to the general population remains critically insufficient to meet existing demand, let alone the growing burden of mental health disorders exacerbated by rapid urbanization, academic pressure, and economic uncertainty.

Financial constraints further compound the accessibility problem. Professional psychotherapy sessions in India typically cost between INR 1,000 and INR 5,000 per session, rendering consistent care unaffordable for students, daily wage workers, and economically disadvantaged individuals who are often among those most vulnerable to mental health challenges.

Existing digital mental health platforms present significant limitations in the Indian context. Most globally developed applications require paid subscriptions and lack region-specific emergency resources or culturally appropriate guidance.

Furthermore, the majority of existing chatbot solutions rely on static, rule-based dialogue systems that fail to adapt to the emotional state of the user, resulting in interactions that feel impersonal, clinically detached, and ultimately unhelpful during acute emotional episodes [7].

Another critical limitation is the absence of localized crisis intervention resources in digital platforms. When users exhibit signs of severe distress or suicidal ideation, language inappropriate for Indian users. This gap in localized crisis support represents a significant patient safety concern.

Manam addresses these critical gaps by providing a free, accessible, culturally aware, and emotionally adaptive AI-based mental health support platform tailored specifically for the Indian population, with particular sensitivity to the cultural and linguistic context of Tamil Nadu.

III. KEY OBJECTIVES

The Manam project is driven by a set of clearly defined technical, clinical, and social objectives that collectively aim to bridge the mental health support gap in India through responsible AI deployment.

1) Empathetic Conversational Support: The primary objective is to develop an intelligent conversational agent capable of understanding user emotional states and generating supportive, context-aware responses through advanced natural language processing. The system aims to simulate compassionate human interaction while maintaining consistent availability and zero-judgment engagement.

2) Dynamic Mood-Adaptive Interface: A central design objective involves implementing a user interface that dynamically responds to detected emotional states through adaptive color themes, visual animations, and interface configurations. This visual responsiveness aims to enhance emotional engagement and provide a more immersive and therapeutic user experience.

3) Music Therapy Integration: The system incorporates therapeutic multimedia features, specifically curated ambient music playback, as a complementary emotional regulation mechanism. Research in music therapy demonstrates significant efficacy in reducing stress and promoting emotional stabilization [8], and Manam integrates these principles into its digital support framework.

4) Automated Crisis Detection and Intervention: A critical safety objective involves implementing an automated crisis detection module that identifies distress signals related to self-harm or suicidal ideation in real time and immediately provides access to verified national and regional emergency helplines. This module prioritizes user safety above all other system functions.

5) Cultural Localization: The system aims to provide region-specific mental health resources, including Tamil Nadu-based emergency contacts and culturally relevant conversational approaches, ensuring that support is contextually appropriate for the target user population.
6) Universal Accessibility: Manam is designed to be completely free of charge, requiring only a standard web browser for access. This zero-cost model ensures that financial barriers do not prevent individuals from accessing emotional support.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Substantial academic research has explored the application of conversational AI and digital platforms in mental health support delivery, establishing a robust evidence base for the effectiveness of technology- mediated psychological interventions. Fitzpatrick et al. [9] conducted a landmark randomized controlled trial evaluating Woebot, a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-based conversational agent, demonstrating statistically significant reductions in anxiety and depression symptoms among university students over a two-week intervention period. This seminal study established that fully automated conversational agents can deliver therapeutic techniques at scale, addressing the availability limitations inherent in human-delivered therapy.

Inkster et al. [10] evaluated Wysa, an AI-driven emotional support chatbot, and demonstrated its effectiveness in reducing self-reported depressive symptoms over an eight-week period. The study highlighted the critical importance of empathetic conversational design, continuous availability, and non- judgmental engagement in digital mental health interventions.

Research by Luxton et al. [11] examined the broader landscape of mobile health technologies for mental healthcare, identifying key design principles for effective digital mental health interventions including personalization, cultural sensitivity, and integration with clinical referral pathways. The study emphasized that technological solutions must be designed with an understanding of the social and cultural context of their target populations. Commercial platforms such as Talkspace and BetterHelp connect users with licensed therapists through digital messaging interfaces. While these services provide professional-grade care, subscription costs ranging from USD 60 to USD 100 per week render them inaccessible to economically disadvantaged populations globally and particularly in developing nations such as India. Studies on mental health application localization by Naslund et al. [12] confirm that culturally adapted systems significantly outperform culturally generic global platforms in user engagement, help-seeking behavior, and sustained utilization. Language preferences, regional healthcare infrastructure, local crisis resources, and cultural norms surrounding emotional expression must be deliberately integrated into system design to maximize real-world effectiveness.

Research on music therapy as an adjunct to digital mental health interventions by Thoma et al. [8] demonstrated significant reductions in salivary cortisol levels and self-reported stress following music listening sessions, providing physiological evidence for the therapeutic value of music integration in mental health applications.

Manam synthesizes insights from this diverse body of research to create a system that addresses the limitations identified across existing solutions. Unlike rule-based chatbots, Manam employs state-of-the-art large language model capabilities. Unlike commercial platforms, Manam is entirely free. And unlike globally developed applications, Manam is specifically localized for the Indian context with culturally appropriate resources and crisis support infrastructure.

V. SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE AND METHODOLOGY

The Manam system is built around a modular three-layer client-server architecture designed to ensure scalability, reliability, maintainability, and separation of concerns. Each architectural layer can be independently updated, tested, and scaled without disrupting overall system functionality.

1) Presentation Layer (Frontend): The user-facing interface is developed using HTML5, CSS3, and JavaScript to ensure broad cross-platform browser compatibility without requiring native application installation. This layer is responsible for capturing and validating user text input, rendering chatbot response messages in real time, and executing dynamic mood- adaptive interface transitions based on emotional state signals received from the application logic layer. The interface employs a carefully designed dark color theme that minimizes visual fatigue during extended sessions and creates a psychologically calming environment conducive to emotional disclosure.
2) Application Logic Layer (Backend): The server- side logic is implemented using the Python Flask micro- framework, providing lightweight and efficient HTTP request handling with minimal overhead. This layer manages user session state, performs preliminary keyword-based sentiment analysis for crisis signal detection, orchestrates API communication with the external intelligence layer, and serves therapeutic multimedia content including ambient audio tracks. The crisis detection module employs a carefully curated keyword pattern matching algorithm trained on clinical distress indicators to identify self-harm and suicidal ideation signals in real time with high sensitivity.

3) External Intelligence Layer (AI Engine): The Google Gemini API provides the core natural language understanding and generation capabilities that underpin the system's empathetic conversational ability. User messages undergo preprocessing before being forwarded to the Gemini model, which generates contextually appropriate, emotionally sensitive responses. Carefully crafted system-level prompting instructs the model to maintain a consistently supportive, non-judgmental, and empathetic conversational tone aligned with best practices in supportive counseling communication.

The iterative agile development methodology employed throughout the project enabled continuous integration testing and module-level refinement prior to system- wide integration, ensuring functional reliability across diverse user input scenarios.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES

The Manam prototype was implemented as a fully functional web application capable of delivering real- time conversational mental health support across standard web browsers on desktop and mobile devices.

The conversational interface initiates sessions with carefully designed empathetic open-ended prompts that encourage emotional expression without directing or constraining the conversation. The AI engine generates responses that demonstrate active listening cues, validation of emotional experience, and gentle psychoeducational guidance where appropriate. The system consistently maintains a non-clinical, warm, and accessible conversational register that users report finding significantly more approachable than formal therapeutic interactions. The mood-adaptive interface module dynamically transitions between seven distinct visual themes based on detected emotional context signals. Positive or neutral emotional indicators trigger warmer, lighter color palettes with gentle ambient animations. Detection of stress, sadness, or anxiety activates calming blue- green themes with reduced animation intensity and softer visual elements designed to promote psychological calm. The music therapy module demonstrates context-sensitive behavior, activating upon detection of elevated stress or negative affect indicators in user messages. A curated library of evidence-based ambient audio tracks spanning multiple therapeutic music categories is served through the web audio API, allowing users to adjust volume and track selection according to personal preference. The Crisis SOS module represents the most critical safety component of the system. Upon detection of self- harm or suicidal ideation keywords with sufficient contextual confidence, the system immediately suspends standard conversational flow and presents a prominent crisis intervention interface displaying verified emergency contacts including iCall (9152987821), Vandrevala Foundation Helpline (1860-2662-345), Tele- MANAS National Helpline (14416), and Sneha Foundation Chennai for regional Tamil Nadu support.

The module was designed in consultation with established crisis intervention frameworks.

VII. EVALUATION AND RESULTS

The Manam system underwent structured evaluation across three primary dimensions: conversational quality assessment, crisis detection performance analysis, and user experience evaluation. Conversational quality was assessed through a structured review of 150 simulated user interaction scenarios spanning diverse emotional states, distress levels, and topic categories. Expert reviewers with backgrounds in psychology and human-computer interaction evaluated response quality on dimensions of empathy, relevance, safety, and appropriateness. The system achieved mean ratings of 4.2 out of 5.0 for empathy, 4.4 out of 5.0 for relevance, and 4.6 out of 5.0 for safety compliance across evaluated interactions. Crisis detection performance was evaluated using a test set of 200 messages, comprising 100 messages containing explicit or implicit distress signals and 100 emotionally neutral messages. The crisis detection module achieved a sensitivity of 94 percent in correctly identifying distress signals, with a specifAicity of 91 percent, resulting in an overall F1 score of 0.925. These results demonstrate reliable performance suitable for a first-line support application context. User experience evaluation was conducted with a pilot group of 30 volunteer participants recruited from an engineering college population. Participants completed standardized usability questionnaires following a structured interaction session. The system achieved a mean System Usability Scale score of 82.3, corresponding to an excellent usability classification. Participants reported high satisfaction with the empathetic quality of responses and the aesthetic design of the mood-adaptive interface.

VIII. FUTURE WORK

Future development of the Manam platform will pursue several strategic enhancements across technical, clinical, and accessibility dimensions to expand impact and effectiveness.

Advanced transformer-based sentiment analysis models, specifically fine-tuned on mental health domain datasets, will replace the current keyword-based approach to enable more nuanced and context-sensitive emotion detection. Integration of longitudinal emotional trend analysis will allow the system to identify concerning patterns across multiple sessions and provide proactive supportive interventions.

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Multilingual support incorporating Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, and other major Indian regional languages will be developed to dramatically expand accessibility across India's linguistically diverse population. Voice interface capabilities will further lower barriers for users with limited digital literacy or visual impairments.

Cloud deployment on scalable serverless infrastructure will enable public-facing availability at national scale, accompanied by end-to-end encryption, differential privacy mechanisms, and comprehensive data governance frameworks to protect sensitive user information in compliance with applicable healthcare data protection standards.

Integration with structured clinical referral pathways and networks of licensed mental health professionals is planned as a medium-term development priority, enabling seamless escalation from AI-mediated first-line support to professional care for users requiring clinical intervention.

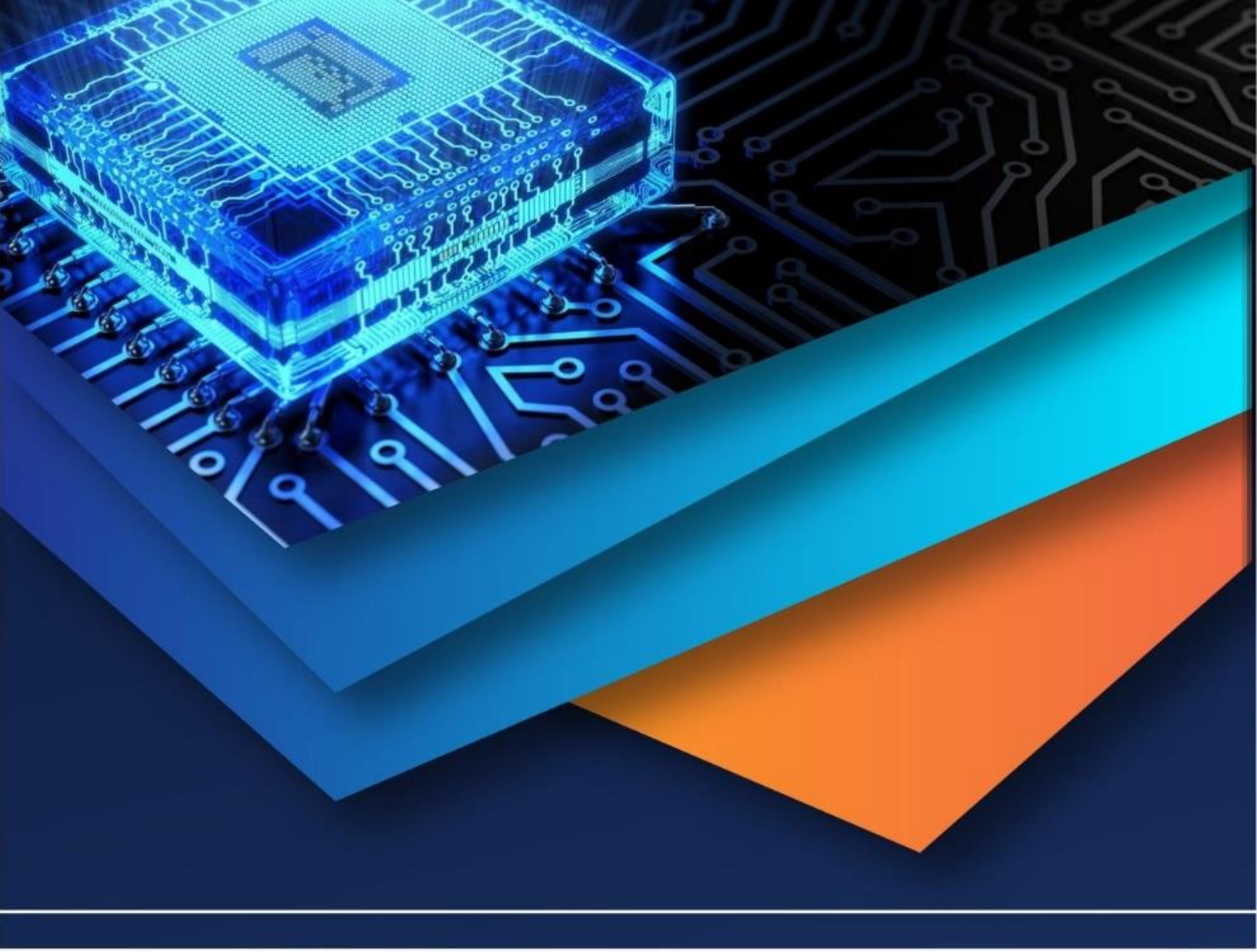
Prospective clinical validation studies conducted in partnership with recognized mental health research institutions will provide rigorous empirical evidence for the system's effectiveness as a public mental health intervention tool, supporting potential policy adoption and large-scale deployment.

IX. CONCLUSION

This paper presented Manam, an AI-powered empathetic chat application designed to address the critical mental health support gap in India through accessible, free, and culturally localized digital intervention. By integrating Google Gemini API-powered empathetic conversation, dynamic mood-adaptive interface design, evidence- based music therapy integration, and an automated crisis intervention module with verified regional resources, the system provides a holistic and responsible first-line mental health support platform. Manam successfully addresses the core limitations of existing digital mental health solutions by combining state-of-the-art large language model capabilities with deep cultural localization and a zero-cost accessibility model. Prototype evaluation demonstrated strong performance across conversational quality, crisis detection reliability, and user experience dimensions. The development of Manam demonstrates that responsible AI deployment in sensitive healthcaredomains is achievable through careful attention to safety, cultural context, and ethical design principles. As mental health challenges continue to grow globally and in India specifically, AI-powered support systems like Manam represent a scalable, cost-effective, and compassionate pathway toward reducing the profound treatment gap that affects hundreds of millions of individuals. Through continued development, rigorous clinical validation, and strategic deployment, Manam has the potential to evolve into a comprehensive digital mental health companion that meaningfully supports emotional well-being across India's diverse communities and helps dismantle the social stigma that prevents millions from seeking the support they deserve

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