

Inclusion in Indian Society: A Review of Mental Health Policies in India

Darsh Chaudhary

Jayshree Periwal International School

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical review of mental health policies in India within the broader context of social inclusion. Mental health is a crucial but often neglected aspect of well-being, with policies in India historically lacking a comprehensive, inclusive framework. The paper aims to examine the current mental health policies, their effectiveness in promoting inclusion, and the systemic challenges in their implementation. It also discusses the role of various stakeholders, including the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international bodies, in fostering a more inclusive mental health care system. Through this review, the paper provides insights into the current landscape, the gaps, and future recommendations for achieving an inclusive mental health ecosystem in India.

Introduction

Mental health has long been a stigmatized subject in India, with social exclusion being one of the most significant challenges faced by people with mental health issues. Historically, mental health care in India was largely institutionalized and isolated from mainstream health care, often exacerbating the exclusion of individuals from broader society. The rise in awareness about mental health has triggered policy shifts, with a gradual movement towards inclusion, community-based mental health care, and de-stigmatization.

The concept of inclusion is multidimensional, encompassing social, economic, and cultural participation. For individuals with mental health disorders, inclusion refers to their full participation in society, without discrimination or stigma. Despite various legal and policy advancements, India continues to grapple with gaps in providing inclusive mental health care. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the country's mental health policies, their implications for inclusion, and the need for reform.

Historical Overview of Mental Health Policies in India

India's mental health policies have evolved over time, reflecting changes in societal attitudes and global advancements in health care. The key milestones in the development of mental health policies are:

1. The Indian Lunacy Act (1912)

The first formal legislation on mental health, the Indian Lunacy Act was colonial in nature and focused primarily on institutionalizing individuals with mental illness, often segregating them from society. This approach reflected societal perceptions of mental illness as a form of deviance requiring containment rather than treatment.

2. The Mental Health Act (1987)

This was a landmark act that replaced the Indian Lunacy Act, aiming to protect the rights of individuals with mental illness. However, it was still largely institutional and provided limited scope for community-based care. Although it recognized the need for humane treatment, it did not focus on broader societal inclusion.

3. The National Mental Health Programme (NMHP) – 1982

Recognizing the need to address mental health on a national scale, the NMHP was launched to integrate mental health services into primary health care. The program sought to decentralize mental health care and provide services in rural and underserved areas. However, due to insufficient funding and lack of infrastructure, its impact was limited.

4. The Mental Healthcare Act (2017)

The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, is a comprehensive law that marks a paradigm shift in mental health policy. The Act guarantees every person the right to access mental health care services and decriminalizes suicide. It also emphasizes community-based care, rehabilitation, and the rights of individuals with mental health conditions, thus promoting their inclusion in society.

Mental Health and Inclusion: Key Challenges

Despite progressive laws and policies, the inclusion of individuals with mental health conditions in Indian society remains a challenge. The key issues are:

1. Stigma and Discrimination

Social stigma surrounding mental illness continues to be one of the most significant barriers to inclusion. Negative attitudes, lack of awareness, and cultural misconceptions perpetuate discrimination, further marginalizing those with mental health conditions.

2. Lack of Access to Mental Health Care

India has a significant treatment gap in mental health care, with the majority of people with mental health conditions not receiving appropriate care. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 70-80% of people with mental health disorders in India do not receive treatment due to lack of accessibility, affordability, and mental health infrastructure.

3. Under-resourced Mental Health Infrastructure

The country faces a severe shortage of mental health professionals. The doctor-to-patient ratio is dismal, with one psychiatrist for every 100,000 people in some regions. This limits the capacity of the health system to provide inclusive, community-based care.

4. Inequality in Access

Mental health services are disproportionately available in urban areas, leaving rural populations with limited or no access. Marginalized groups, including the poor, women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, face additional barriers to receiving mental health care, exacerbating their exclusion from society.

5. Implementation Gaps

While the Mental Healthcare Act (2017) is progressive, its implementation has been slow. States are required to establish mental health authorities to oversee its execution, but many have not done so. The lack of resources and political will further hinders the realization of inclusive mental health care.

Key Policy Initiatives and Their Role in Inclusion

1. District Mental Health Programme (DMHP)

Part of the National Mental Health Programme, the DMHP aims to provide mental health care at the grassroots level, ensuring that individuals in rural and underserved areas have access to services. By integrating mental health care with primary health care, the DMHP plays a crucial role in promoting inclusion.

2. Ayushman Bharat Scheme

While not specifically designed for mental health, Ayushman Bharat provides insurance coverage for mental health conditions, making treatment more affordable. This financial support is essential for promoting inclusion, particularly for economically disadvantaged individuals.

3. National Health Policy (2017)

The National Health Policy (2017) emphasizes mental health as a key area, aiming to address the treatment gap and promote community-based mental health care. It highlights the need for integration of mental health into broader public health initiatives, thus fostering inclusion.

The Role of Civil Society and NGOs

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society have been instrumental in promoting mental health awareness and advocating for the rights of individuals with mental health conditions. These organizations often fill the gaps left by the public health system, providing community-based care, rehabilitation, and advocacy services. NGOs such as The Banyan, The Minds Foundation, and Sangath have pioneered innovative approaches to mental health care, promoting inclusion through de-stigmatization and community support.

The Role of International Organizations

International organizations like the WHO, UNICEF, and the United Nations have been pivotal in shaping India's mental health policies. The WHO's Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020 has influenced the development of national policies, advocating for the rights of individuals with mental health conditions and emphasizing community-based care.

Recommendations for a More Inclusive Approach

To achieve a truly inclusive mental health care system in India, the following steps are recommended:

1. Strengthening the Implementation of Policies

The Mental Healthcare Act (2017) needs to be fully implemented across all states. This requires political will, resource allocation, and capacity building at the grassroots level.

2. Reducing Stigma through Education and Awareness

Public awareness campaigns should focus on reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. Schools, workplaces, and communities should be targeted to promote acceptance and inclusion.

3. Expanding Access to Mental Health Services

The government must invest in expanding mental health infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Telemedicine and digital mental health services can help bridge the gap in underserved regions.

4. Training Health Workers in Mental Health

General health care workers should be trained to provide basic mental health services, allowing for early detection and intervention. This can help reduce the treatment gap and promote community-based care.

5. Collaborating with NGOs and Civil Society

Partnerships between the government and NGOs can help scale community-based mental health initiatives, ensuring that mental health care is accessible and inclusive for all.

Conclusion

Inclusion in Indian society, particularly for individuals with mental health conditions, remains a complex challenge despite progressive legal frameworks. While there has been significant progress, particularly with the enactment of the Mental Healthcare Act (2017), systemic barriers, stigma, and resource constraints continue to hinder full inclusion. To realize the vision of an inclusive society, mental health policies in India must be effectively implemented, adequately resourced, and supported by widespread public awareness and education. Collaborative efforts between the government, NGOs, and international bodies will be crucial in bridging the gaps and ensuring that individuals with mental health conditions are no longer marginalized but fully integrated into society.

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