

Mental Health in India: Cultural Perception

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Abstract

Culture plays a vital role in impacting our personality and psychological development. It is also culture that affects our perception about everything that exists within and outside it. Mental health is one of such things that is highly influenced by culture and the way it is perceived is highly denotative of the culture one is a part of. Indians, for example are still very conservative with respect to mental health. Apart from the metropolitan cities which show some progress in understanding and treating mental illnesses, there is no or very less awareness about mental health, psychological disorders and their treatment in the country. Experiences of stigma and discrimination are not uncommon for the people suffering from psychological disorders. People going through these have to deal with negative reactions from their own family members, neighbors, friends and colleagues which makes them either be in denial about the illness or not being able to disclose what they are going through, to anyone. This, in turn, leads to feelings of alienation and negative self image. Mental illness has also been found out to be one of the leading causes of suicides in India.

Keywords- Psychological Disorders, Mental Illnesses, Existence of Stigma

Introduction

Another consequence of the lack of awareness and existence of stigma around mental illnesses in the country is the effects it has on the way they are treated. In India there are a lot of myths surrounding mental health. While there is a specific group of people which understands them as medical conditions, a large part of the society believes that they are a punishment from God or are a result of black magic. As a result of these beliefs, a lot of people in India seem to go for magical or religious treatments to people who have no idea about these illnesses, rather than undergoing a medical treatment. All these are a hindrance to a psychologically healthy lifestyle. This article aims to examine these cultural issues and understand how culture impacts mental health in India. It will explore the cultural context of mental health in India and study its impacts on the way its treatment/access to care is.

Data would be collected through primary research by the means of interviews with people belonging to different socio-economic backgrounds in an industrial town, Baddi to get a better understanding about the same.

Mental health in the National Health Policy, 2017

The main objective of the health policy, 2017 is to inform and strengthen the health systems in the country. This includes investing in healthcare, preventing diseases, strengthening health insurance etc. The National Mental Health Policy 2014 also aimed at strengthening mental health facilities by creating a network of people involved in mental health care and by making the access to psychiatrists easier through technology.

The Mental Health Care Act, 2017

The mental Health Care Act. 2017 has been created to improve the status of mental health in the country. This bill finally defines clinical psychologists, mental health, mental disorders, psychiatrists and mental health establishments. It gives the rights to the mentally ill people to prevent them from any kind of discrimination or classification unless it is important for their treatment. The bill also gives them the right to access healthcare irrespective of their caste, religion, economic status etc. and not be segregated from the society due to mental health issues. It also provides the people suffering from mental health issues who are below poverty line with free mental health services.

The bill gives the mentally ill people the right to decide what kind of treatment they want and what they do not. Similarly, it allows people to decide for themselves what kind of treatment would they want and what kind would they not if they have any kind of mental illness. The mental health workers are also obliged to provide treatment to the mentally ill, according to this bill. Confidentiality is also taken care of through this bill as it reserves the right to keep the information regarding the patient confidential.

Duties of government, both central and state have been given the responsibilities to increase mental health awareness, reduce stigma related to it, and reduce suicides. A central mental health authority and a state mental health authority would be created to maintain records of mental health establishments, educate mental health workers and law enforcers about the act and advice government on matters related to mental health.

This act also considers the prisoners suffering from mental health issues and aims at providing training to medical officers in the prison to deal with mental health emergencies. The act also lays rules for the kind of treatment to be prohibited. Electro-convulsive therapy without anesthesia, chaining, sterilizing, physical restriction (except for when it can cause harm to the patient himself or the people around him), would be banned.

The mental health bill has laid foundations for mental health services and if implemented properly, can bring a large change in the society related to mental health issues, its treatment and the stigma associated with it.

Summarizing Previously Done Researches to Understand the Situation of Mental Health in the Country

Studies have been conducted both in North and South India to understand how mental health is perceived in the country. The findings have shown a similar pattern across the country. The mental health issues are perceived not to be illnesses, instead, a cause of black magic, evil forces, God's punishment and Karma etc. These misconceptions about mental health lead the people to believe that they can be cured by traditional healers like Babas. A majority of people in majority of studies are found to be going to these traditional healers for treatment of mental health related problems. They do not go to doctors as they do not consider them as illnesses caused due to actual physical or environmental problems. This is due to the lack of awareness about mental health issues, psychologists, psychiatrists and mental health workers. Due to these beliefs about mental health in our country, it has become a stigma. Even if a person is aware of his condition, he would not want to go visit a psychologist or even accept that he has some problems just because he is going to be looked down at by the members of the community. There have been cases of the family members abandoning these patients so as to avoid the discriminating behavior from the people in the society. The people suffering from mental health issues have to suffer a lot due to these stigmas. They are mentally and physically abused, discriminated from the rest, are teased and disrespected. To avoid these types of behavioral treatments, the people suffering from any kind of psychological disorders generally prefer not to talk about them leading to no treatment for the same. Thus, the condition of mental health in this country is pathetic. Measures have to be taken at the earliest to make the people of the country aware about the existence of these problems and the solutions to those problems.

To understand the situation of mental health in a town in Himachal Pradesh, Baddi, a primary research was conducted in the town.

Baddi

A Municipal Corporation and an industrial town, Baddi is situated in the south of Himachal Pradesh. It is a part of the district Solan and lies on the border of Himachal and Haryana. It is Asia's biggest pharmaceutical hub and some of the largest pharmaceutical companies like Cipla, Ranbaxy etc. are located here. Apart from pharmaceutical companies, this town also provides home to around 2,120 industries. One- third of all the people employed in Himachal Pradesh's medium and large scaled industries are employed in Baddi and the town generates half of the total revenue generated by the industries in the state.

Social Demographics

The Municipal Corporation Baddi is a residence for about 8,325 families making to the population of 29,911 with a total of 19,332 men and 10,579 women, as per the Census 2011. While the adult sex ratio of the town is 547, the same for the children is 831. This might be because of migration of men for labor from different parts of the country to the town. The literacy rate of the place is 86.3% with more number of male (83.7%) literates than the females (65.5%). 11.6% of the population of Baddi belongs to the Schedule Castes and 3% to the Schedule Tribes. The population of Baddi mostly comprises of Hindus (95.14%) followed by 3.32% of Muslims and the 0.84% of Sikhs. The data also suggests that 15,983 people in the town are engaged in work activities, 97% of which are employed for more than 6 months. Out of these 15,983 working people, only 1,789 are women and the rest are men.

Health Facilities

The town has a government hospital as well as a few private hospitals which provide healthcare to the people staying in the town. However, for better healthcare facilities and better treatment, people prefer going to hospitals in Chandigarh, which is located at a distance of 40 kms from the town. Generally, the lower class goes to PGI for treatment of serious illnesses whereas the people belonging to the upper middle class go to the private hospitals in Chandigarh.

Mental Healthcare in Baddi

However, the status of mental health care in the town is pitiable. There are no clinics set up for this purpose. The town does not have any counselors, therapists or psychiatrists even in the hospitals. There is a little or no awareness about mental health and mental health issues among people in the town. To understand the status of mental health in Baddi, 200 people were interviewed.

The Respondents

200 people living in the town Baddi were interviewed for the purpose of this study. 82 of the total people interviewed stayed in a housing society whereas 118 of them lived either in the slums or the villages. The respondents belonged to different castes, Pandits, STs, OBCs, Rajputs etc., however, the majority belonged to OBCs (30%) followed by 21% belonging to Scheduled Tribes. The respondents were a mix of people belonging to different income groups ranging from the people with monthly salary of 2 lakhs per month to 5000 per month. The literacy level of the respondents varied too. However, most of the respondents interviewed were educated till grade 12th.

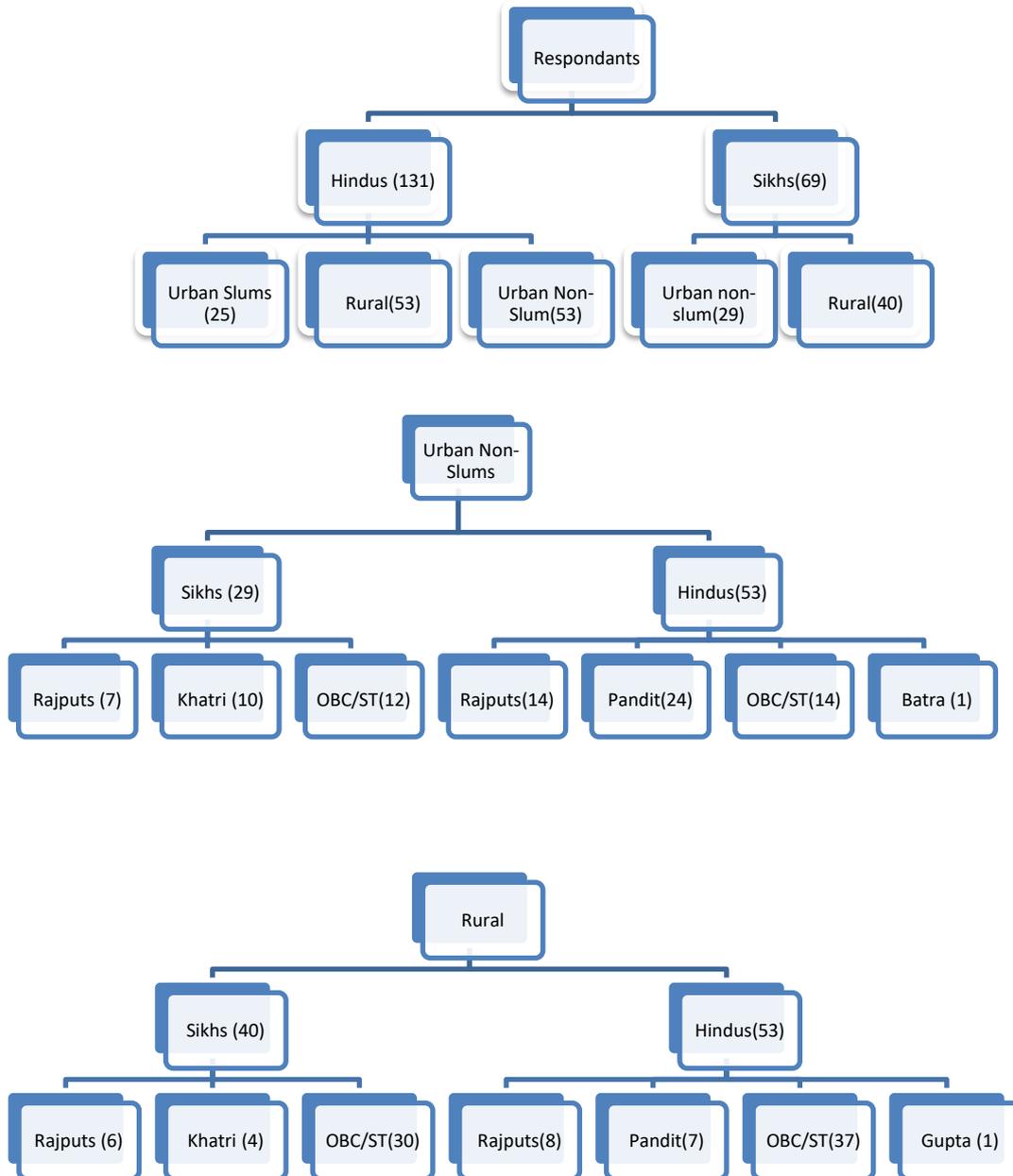
Questions asked

The respondents interviewed were told about the study and were asked for their consent after which they were asked about their general details like their monthly income, caste and religion. They were then enquired about who they will go to if they had any kind of psychological issues. Then, they

were asked about whether or not they know about psychologists and mental health workers and if they thought they were useful. Lastly, they were asked if they would consider going to traditional healers like babas for mental health related problems.

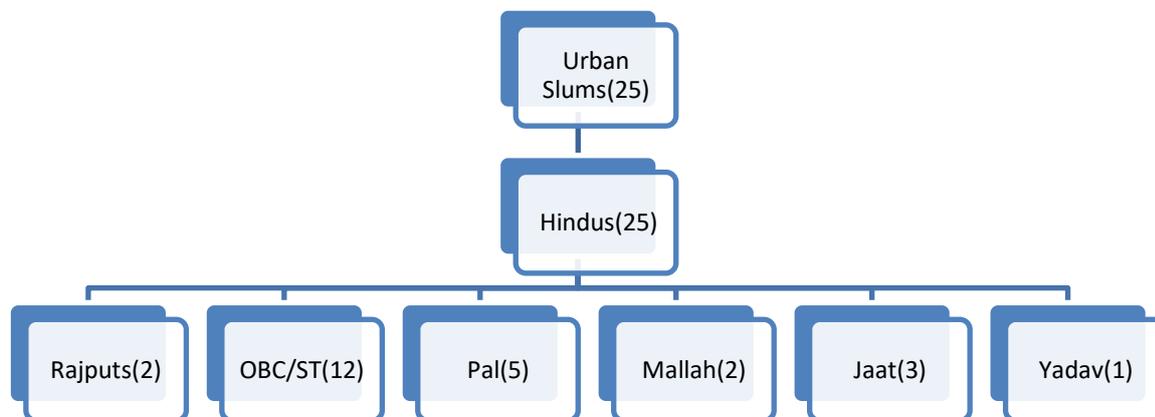
Data Collected

The data collected by interviewing 200 people is described in the following chart.



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Urban (Non-slum)							
	Total no. of people		No. of people that have knowledge about Psychologists/ Mental health workers		No. of people who will consider going to traditional healers		
	No. Of Sikhs	No. Of Hindus	No. Of Sikhs	No. Of Hindus	No. of Sikhs	No. of Hindus	
	29	53	24	39	2	6	

Urban (Slum)							
	Total no. of people		No. of people that have knowledge about Psychologists/ Mental health workers		No. of people who will consider going to traditional healers		
	No. Of Sikhs	No. Of Hindus	No. Of Sikhs	No. Of Hindus	No. of Sikhs	No. of Hindus	
	0	25	0	1		12	

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Rural	Total no. of people		No. of people that have knowledge about Psychologists/ Mental health workers		No. of people who will consider going to traditional healers		
	No. Of Sikhs	No. Of Hindus	No. Of Sikhs	No. Of Hindus	No. of Sikhs	No. of Hindus	
	40	53	0	1	12	22	

Accessing medical care: Doctors

It was observed that almost all the participants that were interviewed said that they would go to a doctor if anyone in their family or they themselves get any kind of a psychological problem. This can be explained in two ways. This could either be possible that these people actually approach a doctor for any kind of illness, be it mental illness or physical illness. Another explanation for this answer could be that people are not willing to go accept publicly that they would not go to doctors and will instead go to some traditional healers to get a treatment for the same. This could possibly be the case because in our society, no one wants to admit that they do something which is not typical to the larger population, i.e. no one wants others to know that they do not do what the majority does. Hence, saying that they would not go to a doctor can make them feel judged by other people and therefore they will be hesitant to accept the same.

Awareness about Psychological Illnesses

Another observation that was made was that a lot of people did not know what a psychological disease was. The researcher had to explain to them what they meant by any kind of mental health issue. Even after being explained about the same, they were not clear about the same. This could have been the case because of these people not being exposed to any kind of news or awareness about mental health issues.

Awareness about Psychologists/ Psychiatrists/ Mental Health Workers

The difference in opinions was seen when the respondents were asked whether they know about psychologists or mental health workers or not. While significant number of participants (65) knew that there are people specially employed for mental health issues, the larger percentage had no idea that there are psychologists or psychiatrists that help in resolving issues related to mental health.

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63 people who were aware about psychologists/ psychiatrists belonged to the urban non-slum areas while the rest of them lived in either the villages or the slums. This could be attributed to the fact that since it is a small town, not much awareness do people have about mental health. Not having a psychological clinic or an NGO that works with people with mental health issues in the town also adds up to the same.

Understanding of the functioning of psychologists and Perception about them

Among these 65 people too, it was observed that though a lot of them had heard about the psychiatrists or “mental health doctors”, as they call it, some of them did not have any understanding of what they actually do. They just knew that there are people who can be approached if anyone is suffering from a mental health illness but were not sure about what they do and how they do what they do. However, it was seen that whether or not they knew about the job of psychologists or psychiatrists, they said that they feel that these psychologists or psychiatrists are reliable. This could be an assumption made by these participants who merely had any idea about their working. This could have been made considering they all think that these psychologist and psychiatrists are doctors and since doctors can be trusted, so can be them. Another explanation for this assumption could be that they might have thought that since psychologists and psychiatrists have studied about this particular subject, they would know what the patient would be talking about and would know the exact treatment for the same, similar to how doctors do.

Traditional Healers

When asked about whether or not they would go to traditional healers for getting treated for psychological issues, 54 (27%) of the total participants reported that they would. This shows that even today people do believe in these traditional healers who generally do not have any prior knowledge about the subject but nevertheless do the treatment for the people who come to visit them for any kind of physical or psychological problems.

This might also be possible that a much larger population than just 27% would actually go to these healers but did not report it because they did not want anyone else know about it due to the very reason that these healers and the people who believe in them are not looked up on to in modern’s world.

The explanation given by most of the people who told that they would go to traditional healers for these problems was that they would not mind going to anyone who is in anyway capable of offering these services and would be in any way helpful in giving treatment. This again shows how blind people are towards these traditional healers. They really would not care to find out how reliable they are and would be ready to do whatever they ask them to just in a hope that they will help the patient recover.

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Out of the total of 54 people who said that they would go to traditional healers, 11 belonged to families earning more than 50,000 a month, 12 people were Sikhs and 6 people stayed in housing societies. It can thus be inferred that most of the people who think going to the traditional healers is a good option belong to lower income families, stay in villages or in slums and are Hindus.

Discussion

It was seen that some results were in line with previous findings while others were not. Not many people in the town were aware about mental health and mental health workers in this town which is similar to what studies previously have found. Similarly, approaching a traditional healer for treatment of such illnesses was also something that was expected to be the case considering the past studies and it was, in fact, the scenario in this town as well. However, a difference was seen in the fact that almost all of the participants said they will go to a doctor in case of any such a problem which is something that is interesting to find considering the stigma associated with mental health. Nevertheless, more studies would have to be conducted to find out how people belonging to different places, socio-economic backgrounds, religions etc perceive mental health as. And more than just research, measures have to be taken at the earliest to make the condition of mental health better in the country.

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