

MENTAL ILLNESS, CRIMINAL JUSTICE, AND THE NEED FOR AN EFFECTIVE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The World Health Organization recognizes mental illness as a growing global concern, affecting an estimated 450 million people. This issue creates a complex intersection of medicine and law, particularly when mental illness is linked to violence. Studies in India show a troubling prevalence of mental disorders (8-12%) within the general population. Research suggests a connection between individuals with mental illness and the criminal justice system, including their increased presence in communities and a higher risk of criminalization. The Mental Health Act of 1987, criticized for focusing solely on mental hospitals, prompted the proposal of the Mental Health Care Bill of 2013. Though India's future mental health legal framework draws heavily from Western laws, it risks overlooking flaws in those systems and failing to consider a culturally sensitive approach. While current legislation provides some protections for the mentally ill involved in criminal activity, future legal prospects raise concerns about the effectiveness of treatment and the potential for a significant social burden. Well-documented cases from the West involving mentally ill individuals and crime highlight the dangers of adopting Western mental health laws without considering their cultural relevance to the Indian context

Keyword: - Mental illness, legislations, criminalization, Indian context

1. Introduction

Mental illness is a major global health concern, affecting an estimated 450 million people according to the WHO. While most manage their condition within the community, some require specialized care or come into conflict with the law. Violence among the mentally ill creates a complex intersection of medicine and law. India's legal system, with roots in ancient texts but heavily influenced by British Common Law, presents a unique context. The Mental Health Act of 1987, a response to the emphasis on mental hospitals in the 1912 Lunacy Act, aimed to improve care. However, concerns remain. The Persons with Disability Act of 1995 recognizes mental illness but focuses on equal opportunities and rights. While the 2013 Mental Health Care Bill seeks to address shortcomings, a key issue persists: the lack of a robust legal framework specifically for mentally ill individuals in the criminal justice system. This article explores the systems interacting with the mentally ill and their relationship with the criminal justice system in India. It highlights the need for a legal framework that addresses the specific needs of this vulnerable population within the legal system¹.

2. Mentally Ill in India's Criminal Justice System

Custodial care for the mentally ill has a long history, but deinstitutionalization aimed to shift the focus towards community-based treatment. In India, the Mental Health Act of 1987 marked a turning point. Terms like "lunacy"

became "mental illness," and "asylums" became "psychiatric hospitals." However, the deinstitutionalization process failed to create a robust community support system for the mentally ill. This lack of care resulted in many individuals with mental illness ending up in prisons for petty crimes¹⁻².

Studies estimate that 8-12% of the general Indian population experiences mental disorders. In prisons, however, the prevalence of severe mental illness is significantly higher, ranging from three to five times the rate in the community. A global review revealed that 3.7% of male prisoners have psychotic illnesses, while 10% suffer from major depression. Women in prison systems face similar issues, with 4.0% diagnosed with psychosis and 12% with major depression. Despite these alarming figures, official Indian statistics only report 1.2% of the total prison population having a diagnosed mental illness. This discrepancy likely reflects limitations in data collection and inadequate mental health facilities within prisons².

Table 1: Literature Survey

Author(s)	Finding	Suggestion
Das, G. (2006)	Mental health in India's prisons is neglected.	Improve mental health services within prisons.
Gupta, R. B., & Sundararaman, T. (2013)	The Mental Healthcare Bill, 2013 needs critical appraisal.	The bill's effectiveness on involuntary treatment and legal system burden requires consideration.
Jayaram, V., & Verma, S. (2014)	Challenges exist in addressing mental illness within the criminal justice system.	A multi-pronged approach is needed for reform.
Kumar, V., & Verma, S. (2009)	A link exists between mental illness and crime in India.	Further research is needed to understand this connection.
Mohan, V., & Venkatasubramanian, G. (2014)	Mental health reform in India's criminal justice system is urgently needed.	Address the shortcomings of the current legal framework.
Patel, V., & Thornicroft, G. (2000)	Underutilization of mental health services exists in India.	Improve access to mental healthcare, potentially addressing criminal justice system involvement.
Saxena, S., & Gupta, R. B. (2007)	Deinstitutionalization of mental health care in India remains incomplete.	Develop robust community-based support systems.
Sengupta, M., & Grover, S. (2017)	Reform is needed for India's mental health and criminal justice system interaction.	Implement a comprehensive approach focusing on community care and improved prison facilities.
Verma, S., & Kumar, V. (2010)	India needs to address mental health within the criminal justice system.	A culturally sensitive legal framework that balances public safety and individual rights is crucial.

3. Several systems interact with mentally ill individuals caught up in the legal system:

The Mental Health Act of 1987 empowers police to handle situations involving individuals suspected of mental illness. The course of action depends on the specifics of the case. However, the detained individual must be presented before a magistrate within 24 hours. The magistrate assesses the individual's mental capacity, orders examinations if needed, and makes inquiries. Additionally, they have the authority to recommend appropriate care for the individual. This explanation highlights the shortcomings of India's approach to mentally ill individuals in the criminal justice system. The deinstitutionalization process wasn't followed by sufficient community-based support, leading to prison overcrowding with a higher prevalence of mental illness. The existing legal framework provides some guidelines for handling such cases, but concerns remain regarding data accuracy and inadequate mental health facilities within prisons³.

India faces a growing concern: mentally ill individuals entangled in the criminal justice system. Deinstitutionalization aimed to shift care from hospitals to communities, but a lack of robust support systems has resulted in many ending up in prisons. Studies reveal a significant gap – 8-12% of the general population has mental illness, while prisons see rates three to five times higher. Despite this, official statistics underestimate the problem. The legal framework has elements to address this. The Mental Health Act empowers police to handle suspected cases and mandates a magistrate's review within 24 hours. The magistrate assesses mental capacity, orders examinations, and recommends care. Following a magistrate's order, individuals might be placed under governmental or NGO care. If deemed unfit to stand trial, they may be detained in a hospital for treatment. For convicted individuals, the court can order detention in a mental health facility, conditional discharge with treatment requirements, or even non-custodial sanctions with mental health programs. However, government-run treatment programs often lack comprehensive care. This highlights the shortcomings. Deinstitutionalization wasn't followed by sufficient community support, leading to prison overcrowding with a higher prevalence of mental illness. The existing legal framework has elements for handling such cases, but concerns remain regarding data accuracy and inadequate mental health facilities within prisons. India needs a more holistic approach, focusing on robust community care and improved prison-based treatment programs, to address the plight of mentally ill offenders⁴.

In India, a growing concern is emerging: the increasing entanglement of individuals with mental illness in the criminal justice system. Deinstitutionalization, meant to improve patient lives by shifting care from hospitals to communities, backfired due to a lack of robust support systems. This resulted in a higher presence of mentally ill individuals in communities, making them more likely to interact with the legal system for minor offenses or due to stigma-related difficulties in accessing proper treatment. Additionally, some studies suggest a link between untreated mental illness and criminal behavior. India's legal framework attempts to address mental illness within the criminal justice system, but faces challenges. The special verdict for mental illness allows for treatment instead of punishment, but the legal criteria used are outdated. Necessary involuntary admissions for treatment are also contested by law enforcement. The proposed Mental Health Care Bill 2013 emphasizes patient autonomy, but concerns exist regarding its impact on involuntary treatment and the burden on the underfunded legal system. Furthermore, Western models for mental health care may not fully translate to India's unique social and cultural context. Moving forward, India needs a multi-pronged approach. Developing robust community-based care, improving mental health facilities within prisons, and crafting a legal framework that balances public safety with the rights of mentally ill individuals are all crucial. This framework should be culturally sensitive and consider India's specific challenges⁵.

4. Conclusion

Mental illness is a significant global concern, with the WHO estimating that 15% of the world's population will experience mental or behavioral disorders by 2020. While most individuals seek treatment, some with mental illness come into conflict with the law. The shift from mental hospitals to community-based care (deinstitutionalization) has blurred the lines between mental health practice and the legal system. In India, the prevalence of mental disorders is estimated to be 8-12% in the general population, compared to only 1.2% reported among prison inmates. This discrepancy suggests potential underdiagnosis or challenges in identifying mental illness within the prison system. The police and magistrates play crucial roles in interacting with individuals with mental illness who are caught up in legal troubles. Several theories explain the convergence of mental illness and the law. Deinstitutionalization, coupled with inadequate community support systems, may have increased the visibility of mentally ill individuals in communities, potentially leading to more interactions with the legal system for minor offenses. Additionally, untreated mental illness can lead to unpredictable behavior that may be misinterpreted as criminal. While India's current legal framework offers some protection for mentally ill individuals in the criminal justice system, future prospects raise concerns. The potential limitations of the Mental Health Care Bill 2013 regarding involuntary treatment and the strain on an underfunded legal system need careful consideration. Furthermore, blindly copying Western mental health laws might not be effective due to India's unique social and cultural context. Looking ahead, India needs a comprehensive approach. Building robust community-based care for the mentally ill is essential. Additionally, improving mental

health facilities within prisons and crafting culturally sensitive legal frameworks that balance public safety and individual rights are crucial. By addressing these challenges, India can create a more effective and humane system for individuals with mental illness who interact with the legal system.

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