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WORKING WITH NGOs FOR MENTAL HEALTH – INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Psychiatrists in India are very busy. With only 6,000 in number for 1.3 billion populations (one psychiatrist for 2.2 lakhs) they are indeed scarce. India will urgently need another 7,000 psychiatrists to provide the bare minimum mental health services (for a ratio of one psychiatrist for 100,000 people). With under 500 post graduates in psychiatry coming out of our medical institutions every year, this is a distant dream and may take at least 50 years to materialize.

In such a scenario, how does a psychiatrist find time to work with NGOs? When our professional fraternity is too few in number, we will have to first rely on primary care doctors. In my view, NGOs should also be accorded the second or third priority, because they deal with large number of people and the message of mental health can be spread far and wide. Psychiatrists and NGOs working together become powerful advocates for mental health.

My first experience with people in the periphery working in mental health was during 1978-80 when I was doing DPM at Madurai Medical College. As part of community psychiatry, we were posted in Balarengapuram, an outskirt of Madurai. Later during my MD Psychiatry training in PGIMER Chandigarh during 1982-84, we were posted in the village Raipur Rani in Haryana where we came across lots of ordinary people and few mental health workers.

My big break came in 1988, while working as a lecturer in psychiatry at Medical College, Kottayam in my native Kerala. Kottayam was the first General Hospital Psychiatry Unit in Kerala started in 1967, before which mental health facilities were available only at the three mental hospitals in Trivandrum, Trichur and Calicut. At Kottayam we had only 30 beds and a huge clientele. Many times patients could not be admitted, as all the beds were already occupied. At other times, we resorted to early discharges, to accommodate other patients. Around this time, something remarkable happened. Mr. PU Thomas one of our nursing attendant in the ward, thought of a rehabilitation centre for the mentally ill! He told me, he and his friends would take care of 10-12 patients, outside the hospital in a rented building, provided we would give the necessary psychiatric care.

There was a discussion with my colleagues and we all

agreed to help Thomas in this small endeavour. At first, patients from distant places especially from the hilly Idukki district of Kerala, who could not come for early follow-up were looked after by this group of lay carers. This turned out to be a big success. More and more people were seeking their support. Moreover, there were many orphan mentally ill, who had no where else to go. With our encouragement and with the support of the public of Gandhi Nagar (in Arpookara village of Kottayam) where the Medical College is located, Thomas and his friends decided to form an NGO. Thus the 'Navajeevan Trust' was born in the early nineties. With public donations, they purchased a plot of land, about a kilometer away from the Medical College and soon a full fledged Rehabilitation Centre was born.

Thomas was the quintessential 'good Samaritan' and he and his colleagues ate and slept with the inmates, now numbering nearly 300. Police, the district administration, politicians, local MLAs, panchayat members and lay people in unison supported their work. They gave food, clothing and shelter to the needy mental ill, entirely through public donations. No more was the sight of wandering mentally ill anywhere in Kottayam district! If anyone saw any mentally ill in distress, the police were informed and they would bring them to the Navajeevan. The Department of Psychiatry at Government Medical College, Kottayam took up the entire responsibility of the psychiatric treatment. This was the prime model of Govt.-NGO Collaboration. When the Dept. celebrated its Ruby Jubilee in 2008, only one public man was honoured and it was PU Thomas of Navajeevan.

The candle which Navajeevan lit soon spread across entire Kerala. Now nearly 15,000 people with mental illness are being cared for in more than 100 such NGO run rehabilitation centres. Near my home at Palai, we have another centre 'Mariasadan' with whom too, I am intimately associated with. At almost every rehabilitation centre run by NGOs, the psychiatry unit nearby or the psychiatrist resident in the vicinity provides service, mostly free. This is a new revolution in Kerala, India and you do not see wandering mentally ill on the streets here anymore! This is a model worth emulating in other parts of India and across the world as well. □

—The author is Secretary General, World Psychiatric Association