



From *Annual Report on the Insane Asylums in Bengal for the Year 1870*, page 362, by J Campbell Brown Esq, MD, Inspector General of Hospitals, Indian Medical Department. Site plan of Bankipore Lunatic Asylum. Patna Lunatic Asylum Bankipore, established in 1821. Courtesy of The National Library of Scotland.

The British East India Company was established in 1600 as a trading company but also had its own exclusive asylums, both in India and London, for its employees. Records indicate that the Patna Asylum, located on the banks of the river Ganges, had been in existence since 1818 and was considered to be in the best condition among all the asylums when the 1858 Indian Lunacy Acts came into being. It was a public asylum funded entirely by the state and donations from charitable organisations, and it admitted mostly Indians patients.

The building was built in accordance with R.F. Hutchinson, a civil surgeon who played an important role in shaping the asylum. He was appointed in 1865 as a civil assistant surgeon, was superintendent of the Patna Asylum and served there for a long time. He was influenced by Thomas Kirkbride's asylum designs of a central building with wings in a linear arrangement as being therapeutic for patients. The Patna Asylum building was very attractive and one of the finest of its time. It received a large number of admissions, hence its capacity needed to be increased every few years, requiring an additional new wing or set of buildings. It had 104 beds by 1868.

In 1867 insanity was recorded in 60 patients because of consumption of gunja and bhang (cannabis), 3 because of opium, 11 because of epilepsy, some because of loss of relatives or property and in 56 patients no cause was found. The relatively small number of cases recorded related to opium is surprising, as opium production and trade had originally started in Behar. In an 1869 report sent to the Government of India, Dr Hutchinson reports a large number of admissions to hospital were a result of gunja or bhang consumption, and he observes how police seize such people and at once label them as dangerous lunatics, sometimes misusing their power by inappropriately sending them to the asylum for admission. He reports how stigmatising this could be in the religious and cultural context. He suggests that the Indian Lunacy Act XXXVI should be used to produce a medical certificate before admitting patients to an asylum, as a personal examination by a magistrate is more reliable. He goes on to describe such patients as in a state of 'Cannabism' and describes this as a merry state of excitement and does not see any unpleasant consequences after coming out of this state. Dr Hutchinson describes a woman who felt as if her spirit wished to rise upwards through her skull and her body longed to go upwards as well. He then contrasts this with bhang drinking by stating it produced pleasant reveries, like opium.

The asylum statistics record 126 patients being treated for ganjah alone, making it more widely smoked in Behar than elsewhere in Bengal. Interestingly, Dr Hutchinson explores whether lunacy is literally connected to the impact of the moon phases, and he concludes that lunations had little influence on aggressive behaviour among in-patients. He provides his analysis in a tabular format, in which he makes observations that the frequency of such aggressive episodes as when patients attacked each other was greatest during new moon and least during full moon. He recorded 49 cases of excitation during the waxing of the moon and 89 cases during the waning.

Dr Hutchinson was in the Indian medical services during the Indian Mutiny and the Afghan wars and was far ahead of his times in recognising stigma and working cross culturally. He later became surgeon general in the Indian Medical Service. He died on 11 January 1894 at his residence, 35 Clanricarde Gardens, London, and this was announced in the *Lancet* on 20 January 1894.

NOTE: Some of the spellings in Hindi were anglicised in British India and these are now spelt differently for example Bankipur for Bankipore; gunja, ganjah for ganja, i.e. cannabis; Bihar for Behar.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Royal College of Psychiatrists

The British Journal of Psychiatry (2024)
225, 590–591. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2024.139