

BOOK REVIEW

*Review By Neeta M Khandpekar**

LUNATIC ASYLUM IN COLONIAL BOMBAY- SHACKLED BODIES, UNCHAINED MINDS

AUTHOR: Sarah Ann Pinto

**PUBLISHER: Palgrave MacMillan Publications, 2018,
ISBN 978-3-319-94244-5, pp. 251.**

Price: \$ 84.99 Hardcover

The author, an artist herself has chosen for her research a very untouched area and also designed the cover page of the book. The book deals with very relevant issue of mentally ill people. The book uses thematic approach. The chapters are divided into seven parts including Introduction and Conclusion. The other five chapters address different aspects. The book opens with the Introductory chapter beginning with an accident in State of Tamilnadu in India, killing 25 mentally ill people. This accident was widely covered by Indian media and consequently the first mental health policy of India was launched in the year 2014. The author has chosen a macro period with a micro area of the colonial period focused on the Bombay Presidency Lunatic Asylums. As to how the Asylum system remained a failed colonial enterprise is brought out well. The Introductory chapter has very rich literature review covering various aspects about Asylum across the world. It links the genesis to Edward Said's Theory of Orientalism. Wide use of libraries and archives is clearly visible in this chapter. In Chapter Two, Indian Insanity and local colonial context for its treatment traces treatment of mental illness in India from the Ancient times to the Colonial Period. The use of word "Veritable Cinderella" is very appropriately used. Chapter Three discusses the notion of the Asylum as "Middle Ground" and the cause of the failure of Asylum System between 1793-1921 has been assigned to fragmented colonial official hierarchy. The tussle situation between the Hemp Commission and Superintendents of Asylums is well researched giving relevant footnotes. The diet chart for Bombay's Lunatic Asylum and its information is unique. Working in asylums contributed to the upward mobility for *Mahars* and *Madarasi* Communities as covered at p. 85. Chapter Four looks at 'Common Sense' treatment of Indian Insanity. Hybridized methods of treatment by Superintendents of Asylums have been discussed. Caste prejudices in asylum, the attire of

*Dr. Neeta M Khandpekar, D.Litt is Professor at the Department of History, University of Mumbai, India.
Email:neeta_khandpekar@yahoo.com

male and female patients has also been covered. The interesting case of Brahmin ‘Devram’ (Civil Surgeon versus Magistrate Opinion) has been brought out. Devram was actually fasting and the Magistrate took it for suicidal tendencies which led to the controversy. Beer and wine was given to European, Eurasian and Parsi patients. The Fifth Chapter is creatively titled “Unsound Soundscapes”, highlighting the lack of space in most asylums that led to common space sharing with violent or noisy patients with quite patients. Use of chains, bells and clocks with relevant examples and some photographs have been shown.

Chapter Six on public perceptions of the ‘*Pagal Khana*’ evaluates the perception of the asylum. Donations by Cowasji Jehangir, Madhavdas family, R Premji etc have also been covered. On p.163, a paragraph mentioning local newspaper of 1852 is mentioned but the name of the newspaper is missing. News items from relevant nineteenth century newspapers like *Ahmedabad Samachar*, *Indu Prakash*, *Akbari Saudagar*, *Bombay Chabuk*, *Nyaya Sindhi* and *Rast Gofar* have been used.

In the conclusion, the author has covered recent changes introduced after spread in the use of drug in mental hospitals, list of activities for patients, and mental hospitals, currently in Maharashtra. The work covers the lived experiences of patients and local communities as they encountered a foreign medical institution.

While referring the *Arunodaya* Weekly Newspaper (published every Sunday from Thane in Marathi language) in Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai, an interesting Notice is seen from Superintendent of Colaba Lunatic Asylum Mumbai.

It says “Through this notice it is conveyed to all people that Ramshastri Baba Narayan Thoke, Deshastha Brahmin by caste died on 2nd August 1883, at the time of his death Ramshastri had 849 Rupees, 8 Anna, this amount presently is with the Superintendent. Those who claim to be recipient of this amount (any hier), should come with relevant paper proof to the Superintendent before six months from today's date failing which the amount will be deposited in the name of Government through Bombay Accountant General” (p.4, November 3, 1901).

After reading Dr Sara’s work, I felt a relevant addition has been made towards medical history which is an upcoming research area in humanities.