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Historical Perspectives on Mental Asylums: From Custodial Care to Modern Psychiatric Institutions

Atreena Rana Kaushik [1] * , Dr. Jahnabi Gogoi [2]

1. Research Scholar, Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India
nainakaushik1631@gmail.com ,
2. Professor, Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India

Abstract: The progression of mental asylums mirrors the transformation of society perceptions toward mental disease, ranging from old supernatural explanations to modern psychiatric facilities based on scientific principles and human rights. This study delineates the historical evolution of mental asylums, commencing with ancient and medieval confinement practices, progressing through the founding of custodial asylums, and culminating in the reform efforts of the 18th and 19th centuries. The 20th century signified the waning of large-scale institutions and the emergence of community psychiatry, but the 21st century has ushered in contemporary psychiatric hospitals, internet mental health platforms, and international policy frameworks that emphasize human dignity and social reintegration. A historical-analytical methodology, underpinned by archival and secondary sources, is employed to investigate the evolution of asylums from prison establishments to comprehensive mental institutes. Statistical analysis indicates a decrease in institutionalization and an increase in community-based and technology-driven care. The study continues by underscoring the necessity of amalgamating historical insights with contemporary issues to formulate an inclusive future for mental health systems.

Keywords: Mental Asylums, Psychiatry, Custodial Care, Deinstitutionalization, Community Psychiatry, Digital Mental Health, Global Mental Health Policy

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INTRODUCTION

The history of mental asylums represents a profound intersection of medicine, law, social control, and cultural values. The “asylum” originated as a custodial response to issues of social order and welfare rather than as a clinical initiative. By the mid-nineteenth century, industrializing nations in Europe and North America established county and state institutions to separate, “treat,” and manage those classified as mad, often under the supervision of newly formed bureaucracies and insanity commissioners. These undertakings encompassed legal, administrative, and medical dimensions, reflecting both humanitarian ideals and mechanisms of social regulation.

During the twentieth century, therapeutic approaches—beginning with moral therapy, followed by somatic treatments and later psychopharmacology—converged with revelations of maltreatment, civil liberties movements, and welfare state economics. This led to the policy shift of deinstitutionalization, which promised community-based treatment over long-term incarceration. Yet this transition was only partially realized; capacity was often redirected to emergency departments, prisons, or private facilities rather than adequately funded, rights-based community services.

The narrative of mental health care is thus inseparable from the evolution of human civilization itself. Across different eras, individuals with psychiatric disorders were variously feared, excluded, incarcerated, or treated with compassion. From supernatural explanations in antiquity to biopsychosocial approaches in the modern era, changing responses to mental illness mirror broader shifts in medical knowledge, societal values, and political priorities.

This paper offers a detailed account of the evolution from ancient custodial methods to contemporary mental advancements.

Concepts and Definitions

Clarifying key terminology is crucial while researching the history and development of psychiatric care because they have changed significantly and vary depending on the nation and setting.

- **Mental hospitals / asylums:** Standalone psychiatric institutions historically designed for long-term custodial care of individuals with severe mental illnesses. Traditionally built outside urban centers, they functioned more as facilities of segregation than treatment. Over time, many transformed into modern psychiatric centers providing both acute and long-term care.
- **Psychiatric beds:** Hospital beds specifically allocated for mental health care. These may exist in:

1. Dedicated mental hospitals (asylums or psychiatric hospitals).

2. Psychiatric units within general hospitals (short-term, acute admissions).

For international comparison, definitions by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are adopted. They classify psychiatric beds as all hospital beds maintained, staffed, and equipped for psychiatric care, regardless of location. Contemporary discourse further distinguishes between acute psychiatric beds (short-term crisis stabilization) and long-stay beds (rehabilitation or chronic care), reflecting the ongoing shift from custodial to therapeutic and community-based models .

Historical Trajectory of Mental Health Care

The development of mental health institutions reflects broader social, cultural, and scientific transformations across civilizations. The trajectory from ancient supernatural interpretations to modern biopsychosocial frameworks illustrates shifting understandings of madness, its causes, and its management.

(a) Ancient and Medieval Era: Spiritual Interpretations and Confinement

· **Ancient Civilizations:**

- Egyptian medicine attributed mental illness to spiritual disturbances, prescribing rituals, prayers, and herbal remedies.
- Greek physicians, notably Hippocrates (460–370 BCE), proposed the humoral theory, linking madness to imbalances in bodily fluids (blood, phlegm, black bile, yellow bile). Treatments included diet, exercise, and bloodletting.
- Roman physician Galen systematized humoral pathology, though spiritual beliefs persisted alongside

medical views.

· **Medieval Europe:**

- Strongly influenced by Christianity, mental illness was seen as a consequence of sin, witchcraft, or demonic possession.
- Responses included exorcisms, pilgrimages, and ritual purification. Texts such as the Malleus Maleficarum (1487) reinforced links between mental disturbance and witchcraft, fueling persecution.
- Individuals with mental illness were often confined to monasteries, almshouses, or prisons, with little therapeutic intention.

(b) Early Modern Custodial Care (17th–18th Century)

The institutionalization of the mentally ill became more defined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Asylums functioned primarily to segregate rather than rehabilitate, relying heavily on physical restraint and isolation. Notorious examples such as London's Bethlem Hospital ("Bedlam") symbolized both public fascination and neglect, as patients were sometimes displayed as spectacles.

The Enlightenment and the Rise of the Asylum

The Enlightenment introduced new approaches grounded in rationality, human dignity, and social reform. Reformers such as Philippe Pinel in France and William Tuke in England pioneered the philosophy of moral treatment, advocating kindness, structured routine, and purposeful activity. Pinel's removal of chains at the Bicêtre Hospital symbolized a humanitarian shift, though implementation often lagged behind ideals.

Asylums multiplied across Europe and North America, designed as therapeutic environments with gardens, light-filled wards, and orderly routines. Yet despite optimism, resource shortages and overcrowding undermined these aspirations, leaving many institutions to revert to custodial roles.

Nineteenth-Century Institutional Expansion

The nineteenth century was the golden age of asylum construction, shaped by:

- The Industrial Revolution and rapid urbanization, which heightened fears of social disorder.
- Legal frameworks such as the Lunacy Acts in Britain and state asylum systems in the United States, which made the mentally ill a public responsibility.
- The professionalization of psychiatry, with alienists (early psychiatrists) asserting medical authority over institutions.

Initially intended as sites of cure, many asylums soon faced chronic overcrowding and inadequate funding, becoming custodial warehouses rather than therapeutic centers. By the late nineteenth century, skepticism grew as recovery rates stagnated and conditions deteriorated.

Twentieth-Century Shifts: Psychiatry, Reform, and Deinstitutionalization

The twentieth century brought scientific advances but also stark critiques of institutional psychiatry.

- **Medical Advances:** Psychoanalysis, somatic treatments, and later psychopharmacology (notably the introduction of chlorpromazine in the 1950s) transformed therapeutic practice.
- **Exposés and Critiques:** Journalists and reformers revealed systemic abuse and neglect, while sociologists such as Erving Goffman (in Asylums, 1961) exposed the dehumanizing effects of "total institutions."
- **Deinstitutionalization:** Spurred by psychopharmacology, patient rights advocacy, and welfare reforms, large institutions were dismantled in favor of outpatient and community-based care. However, insufficient funding left many patients vulnerable, with prisons and streets becoming the new custodial sites.

Contemporary Psychiatric Institutions and Policy

In the twenty-first century, mental health care emphasizes:

- Multidisciplinary, recovery-oriented treatment, combining pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy, and community mental health systems.
- Rights-based frameworks, promoted by WHO, emphasizing dignity, autonomy, and inclusion.
- Technological integration, including telepsychiatry and digital mental health platforms, improving accessibility.

Yet challenges remain. In many low- and middle-income countries, asylum-like institutions persist under poor conditions. Moreover, the criminal justice system increasingly functions as a de facto asylum, given the overrepresentation of mental illness among incarcerated populations.

Significance of Historical Perspective

The historical evolution of mental asylums offers more than a chronology of institutions; it provides a mirror of societal values. It underscores enduring tensions between care and control, freedom and confinement, medical treatment and social exclusion. By situating modern psychiatry within its historical lineage, scholars and policymakers can better understand current debates about coercion, stigma, and the adequacy of community-based care. Ultimately, the history of asylums demonstrates that the treatment of the mentally ill is not merely a medical issue but a reflection of humanity's broader ethical, cultural, and political commitments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

George et al. (2023) Psychosis therapy has gone through four reform cycles that help explain US mental health systems. Early mental illness treatment was pushed in the first three reform cycles to reduce chronic disability. In the early 1800s to 1890, moral treatment included freestanding asylums, in the 1890s to World War II, the Mental Hygiene movement brought psychiatric hospitals and clinics, and in the late 1970s, community mental health centers were created. None of these approaches achieved early psychosis disability prevention aims. The Community Support Reform era (late 1970s to present) focused on community-based care for mental illness patients and natural support structures. The social welfare framework expanded to encompass housing, case management, and education. Because psychosis patients continued to have disabling living experiences despite reform, psychosis became more central throughout

Community Support Reform. Psychosis can be treated, and severely impaired people can join the community. Early intervention for young psychosis patients reduces negative effects and supports recovery-oriented care delivery. This history emphasizes social control, service user and family interaction, and psychosocial-biomedical balance. This article discusses reform cycles, political and policy circumstances, and triumphs and failures.

Meghrajani et al. (2023) This review article surveys the present situation of mental health in India, touching on the difficulties encountered, current programs, and potential future paths for betterment of mental healthcare provision. Mental health issues such as schizophrenia, bipolar illness, anxiety disorders, depression, and substance abuse are very common in India. Poor mental health has enormous societal, economic, and functional ramifications as well as a negative impact on people's quality of life. The difficulties of treating mental health issues are compounded by a number of social and cultural variables, including prejudice, discrimination, gender inequality, poverty, fast urbanization, and cultural views on mental disease. Limited availability of mental health specialists, particularly in remote regions, and large differences in treatment quality and accessibility to mental healthcare continue to be major concerns. Poor infrastructure, low public awareness, and incomplete integration into primary healthcare systems all work together to make it difficult for people to get the treatment they need. Examining the origins, functions, and historical progression of mental asylums in India, this article highlights the evolution of these institutions. Stigmatization, human rights issues, poor care quality, lack of human center approaches, and the necessity for new methods of mental healthcare are some of the criticisms and problems raised in relation to mental asylums.

Kakunje et al. (2021) The goal of psychiatric rehabilitation is to help persons with mental illness regain their independence and reach their maximum potential by providing them with the tools they need to learn and thrive in their environment. One aspect of this approach is adjusting the patient's surroundings to better suit his needs, while another is making adjustments to the environment itself. In India, the idea of mental rehabilitation has been around for quite some time. From the colonial era to the post-independence era, it has encountered numerous challenges. We have come a long way from where we were a generation ago, thanks to the efforts of a select few pioneers, various institutions, and legislative reforms. We will go over the history of mental rehabilitation, including topics such as the Vedic era, ancient India, the British Empire, post-independence India, and the present day. Additionally, it delves into the relevant legislation, accomplishments, individuals, and institutions associated with the topic. They say that the past teaches us lessons and the future is when we put those lessons into practice. This intriguing and lengthy journey through the history of mental rehabilitation in India has led us to the conclusion that there has been insufficient progress in this area. There is still a long way to go in this country's unique multidisciplinary area due to several financing, infrastructure, and workforce constraints.

Houstan A. (2019) The practice of segregating significant numbers of people who suffer from mental illness into institutions is a relatively recent phenomenon that has only been seen for approximately 150 years. In spite of this, asylums play a significant role in contemporary conceptions of the history of psychiatry. Consider a mental map that contrasts knowledge and ignorance, good and bad practice, and humanism and barbarism when comparing these concepts. The purpose of this review is to add a layer of complexity to the common wisdom regarding asylums by listening to the accounts of individuals who have

found themselves in these institutions at various points in time throughout history. To emphasize the ideological foundations of multiple reforms and institutional frameworks that, at first look, may appear to be solely pragmatic and clinical, instead of dismissing inpatient care as naively idealistic, the purpose of this discussion is to bring attention to the ideological roots of these reforms and frameworks. The objective of this Review is to emphasize the lessons that current mental health systems may learn from a data-driven examination of the prior successes and failures of asylums. Specifically, the review will focus on the challenges that asylums have faced in the past.

Jain et al. (2017) The writers survey the evolution of mental health care in India. They trace its origins back to the time after the advent of Western medicine, including the ancient and medieval eras. During British administration, the East India Company and others expanded their network of lunatic asylums across India. There were a dearth of psychiatrists and hospital beds by the middle of the twentieth century, and medical education and services spread at a snail's pace. Publicly financed healthcare for all, modeled after the National Health Service (NHS) on the day of independence, did not advance far enough in the decades that followed. Disruptions to the economy and society, as well as a lack of funding for health care, prevented the services from being expanded. At least for serious mental disease, the advent of pharmaceutical therapies in the 1950s opened the door to the prospect of widespread hospital-based psychiatric services. It is important to note that there was a lag in developing efforts to comprehend the social determinants and causes of both mild and severe mental illnesses. Some felt uncomfortable with what they perceived as "Western" approaches to psychopathology and intervention, and some sought to include indigenous philosophical and conceptual frameworks. Nevertheless, these were infrequent and did not lead to a comprehensive Indian strategy for the study or treatment of mental disease. India has higher prevalence rates for mental disorders than other ordinary Asian countries, even though these rates are lower than in high-income countries overall. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of focused research on these variations and the regional psychosocial elements that contribute to mental illness. The National Mental Health Programme has major operational issues, and there aren't enough people to handle the current concerns. It is encouraging to see more private mental health facilities opening their doors, both for-profit and non-profit. Some of these organizations are taking mental health outreach in new directions, which is great. On the other hand, their lax regulation and sometimes human rights breaches make them a worry. In an effort to improve collaboration, care quantity, and quality, the new mental health policy aims to lay the groundwork. Now is a good moment to think deeply about what comes next and how local and sociocultural settings play a role in comprehending and treating mental diseases, especially with the renewed focus on global mental health and "universal" treatment recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical–qualitative methodology to explore the evolution of mental asylums, emphasizing documentary interpretation, archival research, and thematic analysis of secondary sources. The goal is not to quantify outcomes but to interpret how social, cultural, medical, and political forces shaped psychiatric institutions over time.

Primary Sources

Primary sources provide direct insight into institutional structures, policies, and experiences:

- **Archival Records**: Admission registers, government reports, colonial lunacy laws, and administrative documents relating to the regulation and functioning of asylums.
- **Medical Treatises**: Writings of early psychiatrists and reformers such as Philippe Pinel, William Tuke, Benjamin Rush, and Emil Kraepelin, which reflect shifting theories of mental illness and treatment.
- **Reform Materials**: Pamphlets, philanthropic society records, and advocacy documents that highlight humanitarian calls for moral treatment and patient rights.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources contextualize the above evidence through scholarly interpretation:

- **Historical Studies**: Seminal works such as Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, Andrew Scull's *The Most Solitary of Afflictions*, and Roy Porter's histories of psychiatry.
- **Regional Histories**: Studies focusing on colonial asylums in India, the rise of psychiatric hospitals in Europe, and deinstitutionalization in the United States.
- **Policy and Human Rights Reports**: Publications from WHO, OECD, and the United Nations, linking asylum history to contemporary debates on rights-based mental health care.

Analytical Framework

The analysis integrates qualitative approaches:

1. Contextual Reading – Interpreting archival and documentary sources within their social, political, and cultural settings.
2. Thematic Coding – Identifying recurring patterns such as custodial confinement, humanitarian reform, overcrowding, and deinstitutionalization.
3. Comparative Analysis – Tracing similarities and divergences between Europe, the United States, and Asia (particularly colonial and postcolonial India).
4. Critical Historiography – Engaging with earlier historical interpretations to balance narratives of medical progress, social control, and humanitarian reform.

Rationale

This methodology ensures that the study captures both institutional structures and the lived realities of individuals. By combining archival evidence with critical interpretation, the research highlights not only policy shifts but also the broader ethical, cultural, and political contexts shaping psychiatric care. The comparative dimension avoids Eurocentric bias by situating Western developments alongside Asian trajectories, especially in India.

DATA ANALYSIS

The historical development of psychiatric institutions is examined through qualitative interpretation of documentary evidence, rather than statistical testing. Tables are used as conceptual summaries to illustrate thematic patterns across time.

Evolution of Institutional Models

Over time, societies have developed different models for managing individuals with mental illness. These models reflected prevailing cultural values, medical theories, and political priorities of their respective eras. Table 1 summarizes this progression, showing how mental health care has shifted from spiritual and custodial practices to the modern biopsychosocial paradigm.

Table 1: Evolution of Institutional Models

Era	Dominant Model	Features	Outcome
Ancient–Medieval	Spiritual/Demonic	Exorcism, confinement in monasteries	Marginalization
17th–18th C.	Custodial Asylums	Segregation, restraints, prisons	Inhumane conditions
18th–19th C.	Moral Treatment	Humane care, beginnings of psychiatry	Reform & expansion
19th–20th C.	Institutional Psychiatry	Large asylums, biological treatments	Overcrowding, neglect
Mid-20th C.	Deinstitutionalization	Community care, psychopharmacology	Closure of many asylums
21st C.	Modern Psychiatry	Biopsychosocial model, digital care, rights-based	Inclusive, patient-centered

Table 1 demonstrates how exorcism and incarceration in religious institutions came about throughout the Ancient–Medieval era because mental illness was primarily understood in terms of spirituality or demonicity. As custodial asylums proliferated by the 17th and 18th centuries, they prioritized seclusion and restriction, frequently in cruel and barbaric settings. Though its influence was constrained by the quick growth of asylums, the 18th and 19th centuries brought moral treatment—a humanitarian philosophy that placed an emphasis on kindness and organized care. Large hospitals, which used biological treatments but suffered from overcrowding, dominated the institutional psychiatry era of the 19th and 20th centuries. A paradigm changes away from long-term hospitalization and toward community care and psychopharmacology was signaled by the deinstitutionalization movement in the middle of the 20th century. A biopsychosocial, rights-based approach that incorporates digital tools, community support, and hospital care is being adopted by psychiatry in the twenty-first century.

Deinstitutionalization Trends (1950–2020)

The mid-twentieth century represented one of the most significant qualitative shifts in psychiatry—the move away from large custodial institutions toward community and rights-based care.

- **1950s–1970s:** The introduction of psychopharmacology and early welfare reforms enabled many long-stay patients to leave asylums. However, the community care system remained underdeveloped.
- **1980s–2000s:** Human rights campaigns and WHO initiatives accelerated deinstitutionalization, but gaps in services led to the re-routing of patients into prisons, emergency departments, or poorly regulated private clinics.
- **2000s–Present:** Telepsychiatry, digital platforms, and global rights-based policies have expanded access, yet asylum-like conditions persist in some regions, especially in underfunded mental hospitals in low- and middle-income countries.

DISCUSSION

It is a reflection of the progress that has been made in society, science, and ethics that the transition from correctional asylums to modern psychiatric facilities has occurred historically. Historically, stigmatization gave place to medical curiosity, which was then followed by compassion that was driven by reform. The expansion and contraction of big asylums, on the other hand, exemplifies the ongoing conflict that exists between care and control, as well as treatment and neglect.

In the contemporary age, there have been significant advancements made in the fields of medicine, psychology, human rights legislation, and technological advancements. Nevertheless, difficulties continue to exist, including inadequately funded systems, cultural shame, inaccessibility in rural areas, and increasing psychological burdens as a result of modern stressors such as economic instability, high levels of digital overload, and pandemics such as COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

The history of mental asylums illustrates a significant evolution in societal perceptions and management of mental disease, from ancient spiritual interpretations to the advent of 21st-century digital psychiatry. Initially based on superstition, imprisonment, and social exclusion, practices progressively transformed into organized correctional asylums, humanitarian reforms, institutional psychiatry, and ultimately deinstitutionalization alongside the emergence of community care. This extensive history highlights significant lessons: the perils of neglect and overcrowding in custodial environments, the threat of dehumanizing patients into mere subjects of control rather than recognizing them as individuals with rights, and the essential importance of compassion and evidence-based therapy. In the modern period, psychiatry is progressively influenced by a biopsychosocial paradigm that amalgamates medical care with human rights concepts, technical advancements like telepsychiatry and artificial intelligence, and community-focused frameworks that prioritize accessibility and dignity. However, the historical record underscores that progress is not linear; the same tensions between care and control, as well as inclusion and marginalization, continue to manifest in new forms. Consequently, the future of psychiatry relies on the development of systems that integrate technological and scientific advancements while simultaneously prioritizing humanistic values, social responsibility, and equity in mental health care.

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