



“ *Our first intake of community patients was in a December, 9 years ago and we are now stepping into the tenth year of community mental health work.* ”

Mental Health Action Trust is a not-for-profit Charitable Trust based in Kozhikode, Kerala. We provide long term management of chronic mental disorders for the poorest of the poor including the wandering homeless mentally ill, by employing a unique model that involves collaborating with local partners, training volunteers, screening patients and administering ongoing mental health care to patients in their own homes and communities.

In a world that denies mentally ill patients' dignity, we find meaning in the strife to rebuild their lives and that of their families by engaging with their community.

Central to the MHAT model is the concept of task sharing or task shifting whereby health workers without professional qualifications are trained and empowered to play professional roles. This group of MHAT mental health workers, led by the experienced duo of Ismail and Sofy, has grown in strength and confidence over the year gone.

Peer support work is another area where we made rapid strides last year. I believe that the roles of being a patient, a clinician or a carer are just roles that we all may end up playing at different times in our lives.

contd...

From The Director's Desk

Greetings! The new year is still very fresh and let me wish all of you a very good twelve months ahead.

Our first intake of community patients was in a December, 9 years ago and we are now stepping into the tenth year of community mental health work. Looking back, the year just ended has been a singularly good one for MHAT and for me personally. MHAT has taken several decisive steps, in directions hitherto unexplored and this has been made possible by the team being strengthened by several key individuals. The foremost proof of this is the production of this Newsletter into which a lot of effort has been put by the editorial team ably co-ordinated by two newcomers, Sajan and Meena.

Our clinical activities expanded to new districts of Kerala, so that we are now active in 53 centers spread over 7 districts. I am particularly excited by the work done by our Wayanad team headed by Sona for the stellar, innovative work amongst the tribal population living in hamlets, often deep inside the forests. Two new urban based projects – one for the elderly and the other for women – are taking shape under the leadership of Dr. Parvez and supported by the Rotary Club of Kozhikode. More senior social work and psychology professionals in MHAT have been joined by enthusiastic juniors and together the team has made sacrifices to spread care across disparate locations. The team takes in its stride the often long days - early morning starts and late night returns are all handled with good grace.

INSIDE

- From The Director's Desk
- About MHAT
- Our Founder & Director

- MHAT's Youngest Clinic
- You can Contribute to MHAT
- Tribal Colony, Wayanad

- I am not Insane - A Story of Hope
- Ashoka Fellowship
- Friends of MHAT (FoMHAT)

From The Director's Desk (Contd...)

The Centre for Psychotherapy has flourished with Rekha putting in long hours and with inputs from other clinicians too. December saw the birth of another exciting venture - an arts therapy centre being developed by another newcomer, Babitha.

Research has always been important at MHAT and last year marked the setting up of a dedicated research team headed by an eminent Psychologist, Professor Sam Manickam, ably assisted by Ambreen and her team of young enthusiastic researchers with guidance from Dr. Anish Cherian. Lastly and crucially, the administrative side of MHAT has been revamped and streamlined by Krishna Kumar and Ramesh Babu, with excellent support from the administration team.

In the last year, we have made significant progress in engaging with the urban community of Kozhikode where MHAT has put down its roots. It is extremely gratifying that a growing group of supporters of MHAT have come together. The 'Friends of MHAT' meet every month on first Wednesday at 5.00 pm at our Kuriyal Lane premises, coordinated by Shabana. 'The Third Saturday Movie Club' organised by Shukoor and his team has grown from strength to strength. Every third Saturday of the month, mental health themed movies are screened at various locations and the screenings are followed by discussions with the audience. Of course, we have been kept afloat by the generous donations from a large group of people without whom none of the above would have been remotely possible. To all of you, I bow my head in deep gratitude.

Warm regards.

Dr. T Manoj Kumar DPM, MD, FRCPsych
Clinical Director, MHAT



OUR FOUNDER & DIRECTOR

Dr. T Manoj Kumar has been in the field of psychiatry since 1985. He completed his DPM from Vellore and MD in Psychiatry from Ranchi. He is also a fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (FRCPsych) in the UK and has worked as a consultant in the Department of Liaison Psychiatry in the St James University Hospital, Leeds, UK. It was during the period of his assignments in the UK that he developed strong links with the then nascent speciality of Palliative Care in India. This, in turn, helped shape the concept of community-owned mental health in his heart. Shortly after that he returned from the UK to India and started MHAT.

Mental Health Services Partnership with The World of Art & Literature in Udinoor, Kasaragod



MHAT's youngest clinic is located in Kasaragod district and the model of community partnership is really interesting. While most of the partners hitherto have been palliative care groups, primary health centres and other health related NGOs, for the first time MHAT is associated with a locally owned socio-cultural group called "**Kinathil Samskarika Samithi Vayanasala and Granthalayam**". Started in 1955, it has been involved in the social, cultural, art and agricultural areas with various programmes such as reading evenings, agriculture, cultural festivals and library services. A volunteer and native of Udinoor, became interested in the community mental health programmes of MHAT and initiated this novel program. The clinic started in June, 2017 and functions in the library building. According to Mr. Sivadas, coordinator of the clinic, it is a new realisation for them that everyone in a society could play a part in a mental health programme leading to recovery from mental illness and rebuilding of lives.

You can contribute to MHAT!

If you can relate to what MHAT stands for and if you are keen to support the activities of MHAT, please feel free to contact us:

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Visit us at : <http://mhatkerala.org/>

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State Bank of India,
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From outside India please visit <http://mhatuk.org/contact.html>

MHAT Tribal Colony Home Based Service in Wayanad - by Sona K Narayanan



The MHAT Tribal Colony Initiative in Wayanad was started in 2015. This was in response to the realisation that the standard MHAT model which depended on clients coming to an identified community centre was not working in the case of the tribal population. Geographical, economic and cultural reasons were behind the failure of this model. Therefore, an entirely home based service with the help of the local health authorities was planned and is being implemented now. So far, more than 80 patients living in hamlets are provided a domiciliary service based on weekly visits of the team to the communities. A remarkable achievement is that the dropout rate is close to zero and this is because it has been possible to create a network of volunteers from within the tribal communities themselves. Despite holding very different beliefs about mental illnesses and despite major cultural barriers, these communities have been able to understand the benefits of psychiatric medications and actively collaborate with the treatments offered.

Dr. Manoj Kumar Elected Ashoka Fellow

It is with immense happiness that we share that news of Dr. Manoj Kumar, our founder and Clinical Director, being elected an Ashoka Fellow. He joins the world's largest and most influential network of social entrepreneurs for the decade of visionary work in establishing the MHAT model and expanding its impact.

Mrs. Rekha Bose, one of our Senior Clinical Psychologists said on the occasion: "Having been a part of the MHAT journey for the past 9 years, I see the Ashoka Fellowship as a befitting tribute to Dr. Manoj's unwavering commitment to his innovative vision of challenging status quo and shifting paradigms in the field of mental healthcare. The example he has set in serving the poor, as well as his optimism tinged with realism, have been significant forces that have guided and inspired the MHAT journey".

You can read more about this on the Ashoka website: <https://www.ashoka.org/en/fellow/manoj-kumar#intro>

I'm not Insane - A story of Hope by Muhsina Kaithakode

I was in the 8th grade when once dad and mum took me to a doctor. I'd been experiencing a bout of pains in various parts of my body – now a headache, next a pain in the arm, the pains continued almost cyclically. It had been a while and there was no respite in sight.

The memory of that dreaded morning still haunts me when prescription in hand, parents led me to place where the signboard read, "Psychiatrist". Confounded and confused, a sense of shock overtook young heart – "I'm not insane" it silently protested.

As I sat beneath that signboard that entire morning, the refrain continued in my heart - "I'm not insane, I'm not insane..."

What ensued were a series of entries into the psychiatrist's chamber – first parents and then me. I can't recall exactly what the doctor had said but I do remember being very angry and disappointed when he handed me a couple of comics as we left his place that day.



Upon reaching home the fast-paced events of the morning flashed through my head. "I'm surely not insane", a muffled scream of self-assurance escaped my lips. Nevertheless, the event planted a nagging doubt in my mind, "Was I suffering from some kind of mental illness?" I thought to myself that it was better to secretly suffer my doubts and pain rather than share them and be judged. And that's exactly what I did.

My solitary journey with my secret suffering and dreaded doubts continued for two long years. And then, suddenly like a volcano, they erupted outside my being, sometimes as bizarre swear words or screams and at other times as tiredness, exhaustion and laziness. Sleep was hard to come by.

During a dawn that followed one of those sleepless nights' dad asked me, "Why don't we visit a doctor?" Immersed in the uncertainty of what was happening to me plus the memory of a recent distasteful experience with a mantrik healer added to my own apprehensions concerning my studies led me to unwillingly nod "yes" in helpless obedience. Visits to the doctor started and continued week after week for five years. In the wee hours of dawn Mom and I would wake up, get ready and leave without letting anyone know, perhaps not even my siblings. Once at the doctor's I was asked to focus on my breath which I struggled to do relentlessly, while curiously the doctor and mum chatted about politics – they spoke a massive lot. This ritual continued uninterrupted for five years.

Cont...

I'm not Insane - A story of Hope by Muhsina Kaithakode (Cont..)

Then one day at school I felt dizzy, fainted and fell. Upon coming to my senses, I cried and cried to exhaustion. This was followed by an absolute loss of bodily control characterized by a sense of being paralyzed with stiffening of the arms and legs. The body eventually bounced back to normalcy by which time I had been rushed to a hospital. Tests for BP etc were taken. But nothing came of it. The season for fainting and falling went on for a while - it happened about 5 times in that period. Doctors cast doubts pertaining heart disease and further related tests were done. The only certainty that emerged from these tests was a recognition that a lot of money had been spent to no avail.

Meanwhile, the early morning visits for psychotherapy continued, despite this the term "panic attack" hadn't even entered our awareness. I shared what I was going through with friends, relatives and acquaintances. Some donned the roles of self-appointed advisors while others rebuked me, some said they didn't have the time to engage in my pointless play and others advised me to control my thinking. Some listened patiently and would assure me "Don't you worry, everything will be alright". Some suggested to envision and brace for a "Brave New World". One of the recurrent themes that seemed to underlie all of the advice I received was, "it is all your imagination, there is nothing wrong with you". This led me to consider this suggestion and "stop my inappropriate imaginations" by trying to confine to an almost unreasonable standard of order in my daily life. What resulted was an obsessive and compulsive propensity in such things as cleaning the washroom after shower etc. So basically, rather than help, some of these advise I received made life more difficult for me.

In hind sight, it cannot be denied that all of the people who were passionately advising me were probably all doing it with the intention of finding a solution for me, but the issue really was that they were doing it in the context of very limited awareness and knowledge about mental illness.

The opportunity to pursue studies away from home gave a significant relief – from the doctor though not from the illness. However, academic work was an insurmountable mountain. And as I tackled this mountain of study, tears were my constant companion. And on occasions when there was laughter it appeared against the backdrop of sadness. Sleepless nights too

were numerous. Some nights I lay in bed, motionless – almost surrendered to my plight. During the day, my obsession with cleanliness continued - sometimes six showers a day would still leave me feeling "not clean enough". Often I was silent and then there would be the season of unstoppable storytelling – the stories were always of my journeys.

Then arrived the season of walks. I walked and walked. I walked oblivious to and incapable of comprehending my likes and preferences. I walked detached to and yet bearing the burden of my confusion like a cloud. I walked undeterred by the diminishing number of friends and acquaintances. I walked alone, at the edge of the sidewalk talking to myself.

It was after once such walk that a thought emerged in my head. Upon return from the walk, I sent out a message to my friends almost like one of those matchmaking advertisements we come by: "I'm looking for a lady psychiatrist – open-minded, not with easy solutions". It was MHAT's contact number I received.

Soon I was at MHAT and when I responded to my name being called, it was a warm smile that awaited and greeted me. Although I had planned to narrate the above story with all its twists and turns to my doctor, yet the first words that leapt out of my lips upon meeting my doctor was "Doctor, am I a mental patient?".

In the days that followed, there was patient listening, there were answers that convinced my heart, there was a name for my illness, medication was prescribed and finally, I started to feel relief. The dense fogs of confusion appear to be finally thinning. Some I can even wipe clear with my bare hands.



Friends of MHAT (FoMHAT)

Friends of MHAT is an informal group of people from and around Kozhikode, who are interested in and supports MHAT's work. There are friends from all walks of life including journalists, businessmen, artists, people who work in other areas of social development and health and people who have experienced mental health problems. The group meets on the evening of every 1st Wednesday of the month. The broad aim is to support MHAT's core clinical activity as well promoting an awareness about MHAT and addressing barriers to good mental health care in the community through various community engagement activities such as the monthly movie screening and public lectures and publication of quality materials. Some of the areas so far that FoMHAT volunteers has taken initiative include; Starting two new clinical service in Kozhikode Corporation area, extensive coverage of MHAT's activities in local and national media, design and IT support for MHAT's newsletter, financial support for MHAT's infrastructure needs, ongoing development of an urban engagement centre for mental health issues and joint working with other NGOs. MHAT is grateful to all friends who find time to meet regularly and joins us in promoting mental health care.