

## 150-year-old mental institute hosts meet in Taj lookalike

A 150-year-old mental health institute that had the lieutenant governor of Agra as one of its first patients is playing host to over 3,500 psychiatrists at a conference inside a model of the Taj Mahal.

'Instead of choosing a five-star hotel as the venue for the conference and spending millions, we wanted to use the resources for the conference to upgrade facilities in the institute premises itself and let the world see how we run one of the best mental hospitals in India,' mental health institute director and conference organising committee chairman Sudhir Kumar told IANS.

'The 110 feet x 150 feet model of the Taj Mahal was built in just 30 days by 70 workers,' said Satish Agarwal of Hari Om Tent House that built the structure.

The model is the venue for the four-day annual conference of the Indian Psychiatry Association, which started Wednesday and is being attended by 3,500 psychiatrists from all over India and abroad.

Kumar said the theme of the conference, 'Minding Mental Health', was most appropriate, 'because if mind is healthy and we are at peace with ourselves, our physical health will generally take care of itself'.

'The focus would be on lifestyles and modern values, some of which create a whole lot of mental disorders,' organising secretary J.R. Kalra said.

'The conference will bring to light the tremendous contribution our institute has made during the past 150 years and will set right a lot of negative ideas about the Agra Mental Hospital which has now a new name and new profile.

'We are shortly starting several new postgraduate courses with support from Agra University. The campus we have is the largest in India with excellent facilities,' Kalra claimed.

The Agra Mental Hospital was founded in 1859 to help treat British officers following the Indian war of independence in 1857. One of the first patients of the institute was the lieutenant governor of Agra.

To quote Sudhir Kumar from his article in the journal published by the Indian Psychiatry Association: 'Lunatic asylums were established by the British in India based on the fact that the care of the insane was the responsibility of the Crown.

'The first asylum was established in 1745 in Bombay (now Mumbai) followed by Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1784. There were few asylums until 1857. The growth of lunatic asylums was facilitated by the enactment of the Indian Lunatic Asylum Act, 1858. The act set up guidelines for the establishment of lunatic asylums as well as the procedures for the admission of lunatics.

'The Agra asylum came into existence in 1859. The circumstances of its establishment were created by the lunacy of Lt. Governor of Agra J.R. Colvin, who became a lunatic in 1857. In the year of its establishment, the first admitted patient was Aniga, a female beggar who was found loitering in the cantonment area. She was admitted on Sep 9, 1859.

'In that year, 39 patients were admitted, out of which 25 died, six were cured, seven improved and were declared fit for discharge, and one escaped. The administration of the asylum was being managed by the inspector general of prisons. Mostly custodial care was provided to inmates in mud houses. The wards and living conditions of inmates were very poor and unhygienic. Lice were seen even on the walls. Many patients died because of diarrhoea.'

However, the institute has come a long way since then, officials say.

'Till 1995 the hospital was under the state government. Now after the Supreme Court directive affecting Ranchi, Gwalior and Agra hospitals, it is run by an autonomous board. The state government has been providing enough funds for its development. Both in-patient care and facilities there have been a tremendous improvement and there are periodic monitoring and checks by the committee set up by the apex court,' Kalra said.

*Brij Khandelwal ( © IANS / India eNews)*