

MENTAL ILLNESS IN TAMIL NADU

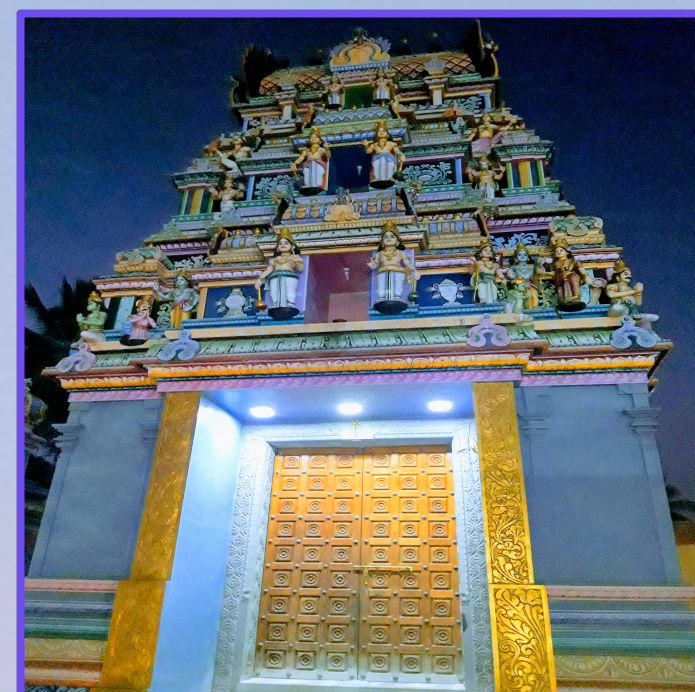
ETHNOPSYCHIATRIC INVESTIGATIONS

MA RESEARCH PROJECT SOPHIE BURKE

BIOMEDICINE

is the name given to a western form of professional medicine that asserts that illness is largely caused by deviations from universal biological norms. Biomedicine assumes that illness and medical theory, science and practice, are acultural and have universal validity.

Anthropology recognizes the cultural bases of biomedicine and considers biomedicine as a professional *ethnomedicine*, not an objective standard against which all other systems are measured. (Birx, J.: Encyclopedia of Anthropology)



Village temple

ETHNOPSYCHIATRY

is the branch of medical anthropology concerned with mental health and illness. A key focus of ethnopsychiatry is on local cultural understandings of mental disorders and signs thereof. Ethnopsychiatry recognizes that a cultural, rather than a universal, psychology underlies specific folk or professional psychiatries.

(Birx, J.: Encyclopedia of Anthropology)



Ex-Patient guarding The Banyan

MEDICAL SYSTEMS IN TAMIL NADU

- Biomedicine (including biopsychiatry)
- Siddha: ancient traditional Tamil medical system; similar to Ayurveda
- Ayurveda: ancient traditional North Indian medical system
- Religious/spiritual healing

→ Because 'mental disease' is a biomedical concept, it cannot be fully equated to the concepts the other medical systems in Tamil Nadu have for such diseases.

RESEARCH SETTING

I spent 6 months, from Oct '18 till April '19, in different places in Tamil Nadu, South India:

- In and around Auroville/ Pondicherry area
- Gingee (Viluppuram district)
- Tiruchirappalli (Trichy)
- Chennai

During this time, I lived with a Tamil family in a small village near Auroville in the Pondicherry area. I visited various temples and ceremonies together with and without them throughout Tamil Nadu's Viluppuram district, and later volunteered at The Banyan, an NGO in Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai, which offers psychiatric care to mentally ill homeless women.



Ayurvedic section of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry



A part of a Siddha herbarium

RESEARCH QUESTION & METHODOLOGY

What do rural Tamil people think about 'mental diseases'?

What or who do they think causes such diseases, and how do they try to heal them?

To find this out, I engaged in participant observation of Tamil family life, different temple healing rituals, and the day-to-day psychiatric care routine at The Banyan NGO. I also conducted structured and semi-structured interviews with a considerable variety of people: from Ayurveda and Siddha practitioners to Brahmins, traditional healers, village working women, and mental health patients and their families themselves.



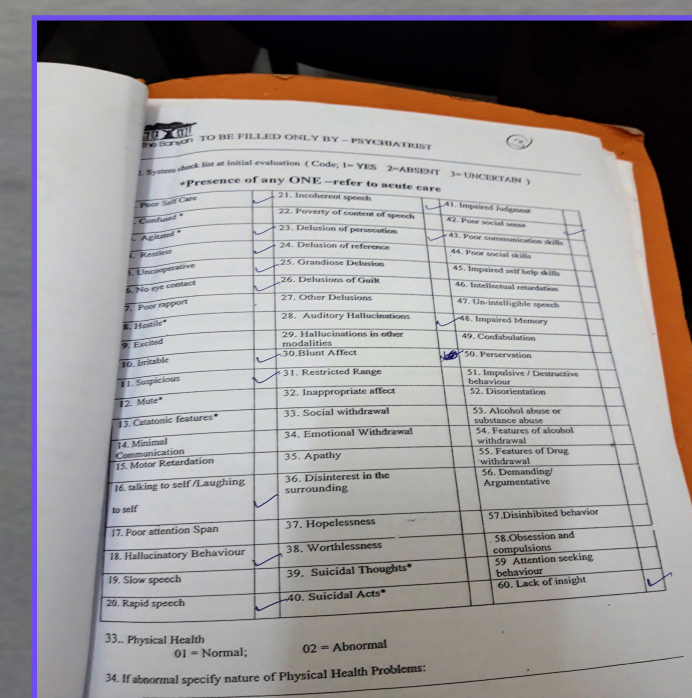
Occupational therapy at The Banyan

FIRST RESULTS

"I believe there are spirits everywhere. The science fiction and horror movies—it's all true. We're just projecting what we really know." Varsha, 34

"I think it's loneliness. That disconnection from the society. I feel that it is up to the individual's karma. Otherwise, how do we explain that one person is coping with a disease and another is not?" Sujatha, 51

Almost all my interview partners, both inside the biopsychiatric facility The Banyan and outside of it, explained the existence of mental diseases through spiritual and/or religious beliefs and vocabulary. Dual healing approaches combining biopsychiatry and religious healing like at the Gunaseelam Temple could therefore prove very helpful in Tamil Nadu's medically plural setting.



Patient's file at The Banyan