

First North Eastern State's mental health policy from Meghalaya

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With about 150 million people in India estimated to live with a diagnosable mental health condition, and nearly 83% of individuals without any access to mental healthcare services (Murthy, 2017).¹ The magnitude of the mental health crisis in India is undoubtedly immense and the situation in North Eastern Terrain in India, is all the more complex due to socio-cultural factors, and geographical factors. Research by Alee et al. (2018)² suggested that various historical factors including—years of insurgency, ethnic clashes, human rights violations, and substance abuse have contributed to mental health challenges in the seven north-eastern states. Though the literacy rate is high in the North Eastern states, awareness about mental illness is very limited.

It is recommended in the NMHS that all states in India should receive support to create and execute a specialized "Biennial Mental Health Action Plan" focused on severe mental disorders, common mental disorders, and substance use problems.³ Taking into consideration the travel and communication difficulties, special provisions were mentioned for the north eastern and hilly states in the MHCA 2017.⁴ The state of Meghalaya, on 29th November, 2022⁵ launched a comprehensive policy on mental health and social care, with special attention to the issues faced by children, adolescence, and youth. A team from the Banyan, an NGO in Chennai, India along with other prominent drafting committee members conducted a situational analysis based on interviews of the key informant and focus group discussions (FGDs) with contributors from the health and social care departments, NGOs, service users, tribal leaders and healers and members from the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes.

This policy aims to identify the key mental health concerns in the state and gaps in existing services, and highlights the strategic priorities for action and eventually decrease the extent of disability, morbidity, mortality, and social suffering. Moreover Meghalaya has major and minor matrilineal tribes and tribes that play a pivotal role in composition of population in the hilly state of Meghalaya with a history of traditional healers depending on curative use of natural products

of the mountains. The current policy will successfully involve the local village headmen, tribal leaders, religious teachers and traditional healers in creating awareness and destigmatisation of mental illness thus enabling them as the first point of care.

The key highlights of the policy are:

1. Strengthening the different stakeholders networks and investing in the mental health care infrastructure to deliver quality of care even at the primary level and also focus on the development of the human resource.
2. The primary step towards achieving holistic well-being is to establish collaboration and partnerships with each tribal community to bridge the gap between biomedical and traditional forms of care.
3. To prevent individuals from falling into a state of poverty and destitution, government departments such as social welfare and justice, disability, women, child, and tribal welfare can provide employment opportunities, basic income-type interventions, and other social security schemes.
4. Focusing on the mental health preventive and promotion through pathways for early detection, accessible mental health information platforms, and educating people and increasing the knowledge of the community through peer led programs.
5. Self-help and support groups, safety spaces, half way homes and helpline numbers, evidence based life skill models, and security schemes will be implemented to tackle the problem of social determinants of health for the vulnerable populations.
6. The policy clearly mentions Megha Health insurance Scheme,⁶ which is a state health insurance scheme that will provide coverage for inpatient care and reduce the financial burden of the families.
7. The policy particularly attempts to support the vulnerable communities like the elderly, LGBTQIA+, addicts, migrants.

In India, the responsibility of health systems is mostly under the jurisdiction of individual states. Consequently, due to cultural, regional, and political factors, the effectiveness of the program differs across the various states. To establish a systems approach based on a broader public health framework, it is vital to have a thorough understanding of the current state of the mental health system in different states of India. As part of the policy, they have launched a toll free state mental health Assistance helpline on 13th January, 2023.⁷



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Contributors

MG conceptualised and wrote the manuscript.

Declaration of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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