The Madhouse at the Lotus Lake (Dr. Erna M Hoch)

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In an era when immigration to the West was a norm with doctors trained in the subcontinent, there was a curious case of 'reverse migration'. A psychiatrist trained in the best institutions in Zurich chose to work at AIIMS, New Delhi. After that she came to work in Srinagar as a professor of psychiatry and transformed the relatively backward 'madhouse into a modern psychiatry hospital'. Before she came to Srinagar, she was the deputy head of psychiatry at the AIIMS, New Delhi. She wanted to take up a job that would offer more opportunities for development and pioneering work. On a chance visit to Srinagar, she saw an opportunity for herself to build a 'psychiatry hospital' and a department from 'nothing'. Not many would have dared to venture into those 'backward conditions'.

Erna M Hoch was born in 1919, grew up in Basel and trained in Medicine and Psychiatry. She lived in India from 1956 to 1988. She arrived in Srinagar in September 1969 as a visiting professor of psychiatry to organize psychiatry teaching for the medical students in Srinagar's newly constructed medical college and, at the same time to set up a psychiatry department for the college. Dr Hoch was handed over the charge of an 'old-fashioned' 'lunatic asylum' which only served the protective and nursing functions. Dr. Hoch sums up her experience as she built up a hospital where there was none for mental diseases in a land too far away- for a people socially, culturally and geographically too distinct and too different in her book titled, 'The madhouse at the Lotus Lake'. Eager to know how she did that, I read her priceless book 'The madhouse at the Lotus Lake' written by her in 2000, wherein she describes her struggle to convert a 'Pagal Khana" (as she calls it) into a 'hospital for psychiatric diseases'. Call it a review, a short extract or a leaf from our medical history; these lines of mine are a tribute to this great doctor who worked with utmost dedication to set up a facility for mental diseases in the heart of a beautiful land.

As Dr. Hoch says, the 'mental hospital' was an appendage to a prison. It was surrounded by barred cells to keep 'intolerable mental patients' prone to violence in safe custody. For her residence, Dr. Hoch chose the hospital's vicinity and gave up her job as a warden in the girl's hostel that was first assigned to her. Instead, she decided on a small 2-room house which was not even walled when she moved in. However, when Dr. Hoch took over, the cell complex was still part of the hospital, and many of the cells were still occupied with old, chronic patients who had never come out of them for years.

In her book, Dr. Hoch gives a detailed overview of the part of Srinagar where the mental hospital was located. She talks about its serene surroundings, the blossoming almond trees, the temples, the fort and the graveyard. The layout of the hospital and the rooms where patients were housed give goosebumps to the reader. She describes the 'hospital ', the inmates, and the hospital's building in detail. She talks about a room for patients with destructive tendencies and incapable of observing even the most primitive rules of cleanliness and hygiene. This room was furnished with a layer of straw. While other halls had an annexe with bathing cubicles and latrines, this straw hall had no sanitary facilities. Dr. Hoch counts it as one of the most outstanding deeds of her life that she managed to restrict a small compartment in one corner of this room behind which the

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patients could defecate in a recess on the floor. Through an opening in the wall, the excrement was flushed away by a cleaning crew into the sewers outside the building. Until then, the dirt had to be wiped up from the floor, removed from the straw, and, at times, scraped off the walls.

Some of the changes that were introduced were dramatic, whereas she treaded cautiously to bring out the other changes slowly and steadily. The staff had to be accustomed and re-educated, and the budget allocations steadily increased. Initially, there was resistance from staff, the neighborhood and the people to a change they were unfamiliar with. She realigned the budget for medicines which her predecessors used to run a small general medical polyclinic, and supplied expensive medication free of charge to employees and the neighborhood. She drastically reduced the expenditure on generic medicines and spent it on psychotropic drugs not only for hospital inmates but also for outpatients. This resulted in uproar in the neighborhood because their right to free medicine had been curtailed. This uprising and uproar were very skillfully handled, and the psychiatric disease hospital continued to provide first-aid medical services to the neighborhood but reserved drugs for patients only. The polyclinic also offered a 'triage point' for psychiatric patients so that physical diseases would be excluded.

With time the faith of people in the hospital increased. The population realized that help was available not only for desperate cases of mental derangement and confusion but also for disorders like anxiety, depression, hysterical manifestations, attacks of possession etc. Help was available for children with learning difficulties, behavioral disorders and people with seizure disorders and unspecified physical complaints. There was a tremendous increase in the patients visiting the hospital, especially ones with milder diseases.70% of the clientele to the hospital to the hospital was from the recommendations of other patients who were already cured. The first part of the battle, which included the 'goodwill of patients and population', had already been won.

Gradually the staff had to be expanded, nurses to be employed, and supervisors and Assistants to be recruited. Nothing came about without effort. The unskilled had to be trained, and those without zeal had to be stimulated. The kitchen staff, the electricians, the compounders, the laboratory assistants, the tailors, the gardeners, and the launderers-Dr Hoch gives details of each one and how she used their services to make a 'hospital' out of a prison cell. She was bothered by the leisurely attitude of the employees who misused the 'casual leave' option to the maximum; however, she controlled nearly 80 employees very well. When she joined the hospital, a very rough tone prevailed among the employees for the patients. Still, gradually, her presence changed their behavior towards these 'social outcasts'. There were chronic patients in the hospital, vegetating anonymously, and she endeavored to help them regain the human dignity to which they were entitled. No medical records had been kept on these inmates. Many patients had been hospitalized for more than 12-yrs and more than a year. There were only 100 beds for inpatients, which served a population of 2.5 million and thus were usually occupied. The hospital was overcrowded, as active efforts were not made to discharge patients after they were admitted.

In her desire to know about these chronic inmates, Dr. Hoch writes, 'I tried to find something about the origins of these chronic patients and reasons for their hospitalization'. These figures who were staring at the dirt, mostly naked and wrapped only in ragged woolen blankets- I wanted to assess whether there was any hope of rehabilitation. Unaccustomed to such human attention, some hid as we approached them, others ran away in fright; still, others burst into tears when they heard friendly voices and concerned questions about their welfare. Many remained closed, not trusting such astonishing interest or perhaps too hopeless to dismantle once again the walls of protection and defense they had erected inside and maybe then be disappointed again. Yet, even today, I remember quite a number of them, especially those who continued to remain under our care in the following years and some of whom we brought back to life.

Dr. Hoch developed an interest in the traditions of Kashmiris, their fears, concerns, idiosyncrasies, positive points, and negative aspects, and they struggled to make a decent space for patients with psychiatric diseases on the banks of a lake. She struggled as a 'pagalmeem', an outsider, an imposter, but was focused on her goal to care for a community forgotten in the backyards of a backward place.

Dr. Hoch heeded the advice of a patient in Delhi and implemented his advice in Srinagar. The patient once told

her,' There are times when everything, especially all human contact, seems poisoned. Only the Earth, the sky, the wind, trees, flowers, and mountains still have a healthy, beneficial effect. And precisely from these, we are cut off when put in a psychiatry hospital'. So in the hospital at Srinagar, she exposed patients to these elements as whole-day patients moved in and out of the wards breathing fresh air and looking at the open sky and the beautiful garden in the middle. So they could enjoy the sun, the rain, the breeze and the wind, which kept them happy. She took extra care of the nearby garden and ensured it was well-maintained.

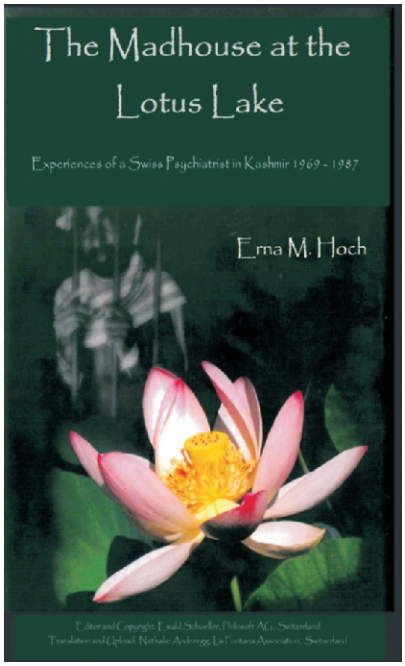
Dr. Hoch had an eye for detail. She studied the customs of Kashmiris and applied them in the hospital to benefit patients. The winter chill bothered her, and it was impossible to have the 'central heating system' in SMHS hospital installed. However, she was impressed by the 'Hamam' concept and applied it to her hospital. The Hamam eased the suffering of shivering patients for whom winter signified an added calamity.

Dr. Hoch has contributed s lot to psychiatric care in the Kashmiri population. Her dedication, commitment, and zeal to work have no parallel. She was a doctor, a nurse, a psychologist, a physician, and a landscapist; all rolled into one. She did not fight to get through her point but reasoned beautifully for the rights of people without rights. She lived for a cause, and she realized it.

The book is a tribute to her work and is a must-read for all the psychiatrists practicing psychiatry in Kashmir. She has carefully chosen many index cases that tell a lot about the apathy towards the problems confronting patients with mental ailments. I close this with a description that she gives of herself:

'One occasion, it was mainly my arrogance that caused me to fall: I had just received a letter asking me to provide short curriculum vitae and photograph for the publication of a - Who is Who Encyclopedia of the 7000-or maybe it was 700-most famous women in Asia. On the way home from Medical college to the hospital, I was smugly gloating over the honor of belonging to this select circle of prominent ladies, forgetting to pay attention to my path in the rain-soaked old town alley. Suddenly, one of the 7000 most famous women in Asia was sitting in the mud, exposed to the ridicule of the street urchins and only concerned about whether the rain jacket would cover the patch of excrement on the back her skirt. After this disillusionment and literal humiliation-the English' humiliation' more clearly that it means 'coming back to Earth' or becoming Earth itself-I naturally made no effort to reply to this letter.' Women of her caliber do not strive for medals and honors but work for a cause in the most unfamiliar of surroundings delivering what they can amidst all the odds they face.





Dr. Erna M Hoch