FIFTY YEARS OF PSYCHIATRIC RESEARCH IN INDIA

While going through the articles for compilation of this volume, I could not help but remember the journal in my early years as a post-graduate student. Projecting my thoughts further back in time it struck me what could possibly be a better way to tee-off in the Golden Jubilee year of Indian Psychiatric Society than to have a look at the psychiatric research published in this journal in the last half century.

The journal has grown in stature steadily over the years - both in quality and quantity of the articles. During its progress, which truly reflects the progress of psychiatry in the country, it has kept pace with the current cultural environment of India, besides reflecting the changing facets of psychiatry and psychiatrists. This is clearly evident in the review by Agarwal & Aga (1994).

A glance at the issues of 1950's evinces the interest of workers in psychology including psychoanalysis: phenomenological studies were infrequent, and few therapeutic traits, esp. on ECT, and insulin coma therapy are also to be found. The number of therapeutic trials increased with the passage of years, and the seventies and eighties saw a surfeit of them. The more recent of these have employed standardized diagnostic criteria, blinded designs and better experimental controls, and have larger sample sizes. However, majority of these studies, excluding a few which are on indigenous drugs, are an estreat of trials conducted abroad. Work on electro-convulsive therapy, a widely used therapeutic modality in clinical practice, has never become an 'in' thing in research, although studies are there-both on theoretical and practical issues.

Epidemiological and phenomenological studies attracted researchers in the 60's, and the interest in them continued well into the eighties. The epidemiological studies have been conducted on multitude of topics like mental morbidity in general population, prevalence of suicide, correlations between social class and mental illness, student failure, industrialisation and migration, drug abuse-both in specified population like students, and in general population.

Clinical studies form a substantial bulk of research in last 25 years; most of the work being centered on depression and schizophrenia, with a smattering of reports on rare syndromes and culture-bound syndromes like keemam dependence, dhat syndrome, jhin-jhini, koro etc. Studies on Unipolar-Bipolar distinction of depression, and Positive - Negative Schizophrenia. Good vs Bad Prognosis Schizophrenia, the IPSS study and FACOS study are some of the outstanding works of Indian research: these studies showed the interest of Indian workers in keeping up with the current trends in research abroad. Hysteria, hysterical psychosis, acute psychosis and possession disorder have also been studied.

Psychology is another well researched domain: however, the studies mainly pertain to adaptation of scales in Hindi language, establishing norms of performance for the Indian population, and designing of some new psychometric tools. The later decades also witnessed reports on psychological methods of treatment. By-and-large, research on psychological issues never formed the brunt of the studies published.

Child psychiatry is another area to have received random attention. The studies, while being quite limited in the earlier decades, did increase, at least in numbers, in the later decades. The earlier work comprises mainly of few prevalence surveys of school children, case-reports and few studies on specific problems like nocturnal enuresis and speech problems. The researchers in last two decades have matured, and studies on diverse subjects like parental deprivation, juvenile delinquency, autism, symbiotic psychosis, attitude of parents towards their mentally retarded children, have been published.

Biological psychiatry has been a woefully neglected area in Indian research. Albeit recent years have seen some original work being published, but it is nowhere near the contemporary work from West. Thus, until seventies, the thrust centered on study of
sundry markers like blood group and some metabolites in various disorders, mainly schizophrenia and affective psychoses. In the eighties, the former disorder received attention on immunology, CT changes, biochemical studies, and genetics: dexamethasone suppression test in depression was a much researched area. Brain mapping, evoked potentials, estimation of monoamine metabolites in suicide and aggression have also been investigated in recent times.

The basic framework of quality research is employment of a sound methodology, which is surely missing in most of our research. The current trend of utilizing the help of a qualified biostatistician from the inception of the project is sadly lacking in most studies. Secondly, the analysis of the acquired data is still being carried out by the old statistical tests. ergo, the interpretation of findings does not carry much impact.

Another fact of deficiency is impecunity of multi-centre studies. The better designs of some recent community studies indicates that it is more an attitude of lack of initiative rather than co-operation on part of Indian psychiatrists which is responsible for this deficiency. The absence of good, or even adequate, record-keeping is another impediment to the clinical studies: the retrospective viewing of charts of patients yields scant information. This can be largely eliminated by the use of computers, which are not an esoteric commodity in our country any more. The development of CATEGO - like software in the local language would greatly overcome this problem.

Psychiatry has moved a long way towards biological orientation from Freudian domination of early half of this century, and our contemporary workers in developed countries are propounders and facilitators of this phase. It is apodictic that biological research does require sophisticated laboratory facilities, which are not so freely available in our country owing to economic and "other" constraints. However, these meagre resources can be utilized in more judicious, and methodologically refined ways. However, no such constraints are on basic research in genetics, e.g. family and twin studies. On the contrary, the Indian family structure with propensity of cohesion between relatives can provide much information on genetic transmission of illnesses.

In the final analysis, it appears that we are suffering more with 'Problems of mind', an aptly coined phrase by Wig and Akhtar (1974) which connotes the lack of knowledge of research methodology. The same authors put emphasis on proper training of postgraduate students in this accord as a solution to this problem which holds true even after passage of three decades. And, I for one, wholly agree with them, as these are individuals who are going to take us in 21st century and present the face of Indian research to the World.

J. K. Trivedi

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