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REVIEW ARTICLE

Tele Manas in India: Advancing Mental Health Accessibility

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Abstract

India grapples with a substantial mental health burden, with an estimated one in seven individuals affected by diagnosable mental disorders. Mental health issues are significant contributors to the non-fatal disease burden, but detailed state-wise data on prevalence, impact, and risk factors are scarce. In response, the Government of India introduced the National Tele Mental Health Programme in the 2022 Union Budget to improve access to equitable, affordable, and high-quality mental health care. This initiative aims to offer round-the-clock mental health support, especially to vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations. Managed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), the program launched Tele Manas on October 10, 2022, featuring a nationwide, toll-free helpline number, 14416, providing support in multiple regional languages.

Keywords- Mental health, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), National Tele Mental Health Programme, Tele Manas, Tele Mental Health Counseling

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being where individuals recognize their abilities, manage daily stresses, work productively, and contribute to their communities. Mental health disorders are a significant global public health issue, affecting diverse populations regardless of age, socioeconomic status, or culture (1, 2).

In India, mental health issues are increasingly recognized, with the National Mental Health Survey 2015-2016 reporting a lifetime prevalence of 13.7% and a current prevalence of 10.6%. The treatment gap for mental disorders ranges from 70% to 92%, exacerbated by inadequate healthcare infrastructure, stigma, and high costs of private care. The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified mental health challenges, increasing loneliness, anxiety, and depression. The Government of India introduced the National Tele Mental Health Programme (NMTCP) in the 2022-23 Union Budget to address these issues. Tele Manas, launched on October 10, 2022, provides a 24/7 helpline (14416) offering mental health services in various regional languages (2, 3).

What is Tele Manas?

Tele Manas, or Mental Health Assistance and Networking across States, is an initiative by the Indian government to deliver tele-mental health services nationwide. The program provides support through telephone and online platforms to make mental health care more accessible, particularly in remote and underserved areas.

It connects individuals with mental health professionals for prompt and confidential help (2, 3).

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

With about 18% of the global population, India plays a significant role in the international mental health landscape. In 2019, mental health conditions were the second leading cause of years lived with disability(YLDs), and self-harm and violence were among the top ten causes of death. Suicide rates have increased by 40% from 1990 to 2016, making it a leading cause of death in several states. The National Mental Health Policy of 2014 and the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 emphasize the importance of mental health care access. The National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), introduced in 1982, and the District Mental Health Program (DMHP), added in 1996, aims to address these needs through community-based services. Telemedicine initiatives like eSanjeevani and Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres (AB-HWCs) have successfully bridged gaps in healthcare access. Building on these efforts, the National Tele Mental Health Programme, also known as Tele Manas, was introduced to further integrate mental health care with existing systems (3, 4).

Aim and Objectives

- *Universal Access:* Provide equitable, accessible, affordable, high-quality mental health care through 24/7 tele-mental health services nationwide.
- *Enhanced Availability:* Establish tele-mental health centers in every state and Union Territory to ensure timely access to mental health services.
- *Comprehensive Network:* Develop a mental health service network offering counseling, integrated medical and psychosocial interventions, video consultations, e-prescriptions, and

follow-up services.
- *Reach Vulnerable Populations:* Extend services to hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups (5).

HOW TELE MANAS WORKS

Accessing the Service: Individuals can call the toll-free number 14416 or a short code to connect with a trained counselor through an Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS) with automatic callback features.
Initial Assessment: Counselors assess the care needed and either provide immediate assistance or refer the caller to a specialist.
Specialized Care: Calls are transferred to mental health experts for specialized attention for audio or video consultations. Complex cases may be directed to nearby health facilities or connected with specialists via eSanjeevani.
Urgent Cases: Immediate or complex cases are directed to physical health service facilities, with arrangements for video consultations if needed (6).

TELE MANAS IMPLEMENTATION

Tele Manas offers free, 24/7 tele-mental health services through 38 centers across 27 states and Union Territories. With over 1,600 trained counselors, the service operates in more than 20 languages. The central hub at NIMHANS in Bengaluru coordinates the program. The two-tier system includes state-level Tele Manas centers for essential support and Tier 2 specialists for advanced care. The program integrates with services like the National Tele-consultation Service, eSanjeevani, and Ayushman Bharat health centers to provide comprehensive mental health care (7-9).

Mentoring Institutes

Various institutions support the program, including AIIMS centers, PGIMER Chandigarh, and NIMHANS Bengaluru. These institutes assist with technical, collaborative, and operational aspects of Tele Manas (7-9).

Services Offered

- *Tele Counseling:* Provided by qualified counselors.
- *Tele Consultation:* With mental health experts when necessary.
- *Referral Services:* To additional mental health facilities and specialized institutes (9, 10).

Target Audience

- Individuals experiencing mental health concerns.
- Family members are seeking support.
- Grassroots healthcare providers and community health workers (10, 11).

TELE-MANAS CALLING MECHANISMS
System Structure

- *Two-Tier Framework*
  i. *Tier 1: State-Level Tele-MANAS Cells:* These cells are staffed with trained counselors and mental health specialists who provide immediate support and basic counseling.
  ii. *Tier 2: Expert Consultations:* This tier includes professionals from the District Mental Health Programme (DMHP) and Medical Colleges who offer in-person consultations and can also conduct audio-visual consultations through the e-Sanjeevani platform.
- *Current Setup*
  i. *Regional Coordination Centers:* 5 established centers oversee and coordinate the activities of the Tele-MANAS cells.
  ii. *State/UT Tele-MANAS Cells:* Currently, 51 operational cells across various states and Union Territories (UTs) are designed to cater to the mental health needs of local populations.

- *Initial Phase Implementation*
  i. *Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS):* A centralized IVRS will be implemented, providing an accessible platform for individuals seeking mental health support. This system is customized for each state and UT to cater to regional needs.
  ii. *Continuity of Care:* The IVRS will ensure that individuals receive immediate assistance and are connected to appropriate resources for ongoing support.
- *Integration of Specialized Services*

The Tele-MANAS initiative aims to connect with various services to enhance the mental healthcare ecosystem, including:
  i. *National Tele-consultation Service:* Facilitates remote consultations with mental health experts.
  ii. *e-Sanjeevani:* A digital health service providing telemedicine consultations.
  iii. *Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission:* Integrates digital health services to improve healthcare delivery.
  iv. *Mental Health Professionals and Wellness Centers:* Links patients to local healthcare facilities and specialists.
  v. *Emergency Psychiatric Services:* Ensures rapid response and intervention for critical mental health crises.

Comprehensive Coverage

The program aims to address a full spectrum of mental health needs, ranging from mild wellness issues to severe disorders, ensuring an integrated approach to mental healthcare.

Training of Counselors
NIMHANS Training Program

The National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) has trained approximately 900 counselors across various states and UTs, equipping them with the skills to provide adequate support.

Mentoring Institutions

- A network of respected institutions supports the Tele-MANAS initiative, including AIIMS Centers such as Patna, Raipur, Bhopal, CIP Ranchi, and PGIMER Chandigarh.
- Various mental health hospitals and institutes throughout India provide mentorship and resources.

States and UTs Participating

- The Tele-Mental Health Program has been launched in regions including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Chhattisgarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Ladakh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal (11-13).

CONCLUSION

This initiative represents a significant leap forward in addressing India's mental health challenges. By leveraging technology to provide accessible and affordable mental health support, it is within reach for every citizen. Integrating this service with existing healthcare infrastructure also highlights the potential for scalable, sustainable solutions in public health. While the initial rollout has shown promise, continuous efforts to expand, enhance, and adapt the service based on user feedback and evolving needs will be crucial. Ensuring adequate professional training, addressing privacy concerns, and maintaining quality of care are also vital for the organization's long-term success. As Tele Manas continuously evolves, it stands as a model for other nations grappling with similar public health challenges, demonstrating how technology can be harnessed to create equitable healthcare solutions in the 21st century. Tele Manas represents a significant advancement in addressing India's mental health challenges. By utilizing technology to provide accessible and affordable mental health support, the initiative offers a model for scalable and sustainable public health solutions. Future success will depend on ongoing expansion, user feedback adaptation, and high-quality care standards.

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