**Addressing an Indian nurse, are we still not rudimentary?**

**Abstract**

Nursing as a profession in India evolved under the influence of Christianity. Several aspects like uniforms, titles used for nurses and the very nature of the profession were shaped under the influence of religious principles and practices. Many of these aspects have undergone change and nursing has evolved as a scientific and secular specialty with unparalleled contribution to health care in India. However, the title ‘sister/brother’ used for addressing nurses still persists in most of the hospitals and health care settings in India. This can be viewed as a professional stereotyping. This article discusses the historical background of acquiring the title of ‘sister’ for professional nurses and the reasons it should be changed to break the stereotype.

**Introduction**

Modern Nursing made its advent into colonial India in the middle of 19th century (**1**). This was linked with the arrival of nurses from the west who were mostly females and had deep rooted cultural heritage of Christian religion (**1**). This period in history witnessed a social situation where gender roles of women in India were challenged and reified (**2**). Hence a stigma prevailed in the society about upper class women working as nurses and caring for sick strangers and men (**3**). There was an interplay of several factors like caste system, gender and religion which invariably shaped the negative perceptions about nursing in the patriarchal state that prevailed in India then [**1**].

In the early years of Nursing in India, mostly the religious nuns or Christian converts were only working as nurses [**1**]. The growth of professionalism in Nursing has strong influences from Christian doctrines for the religious. This happened not only in India, but all over the globe where early hospital establishments were linked to Christianity [**4**]. Nursing profession, during its infancy was profoundly Christianized in several ways. An example for this is the usage of nurses’ caps which were initially the veils or habits worn by religious nuns and deaconesses of the church (**5**,**6**). Another strong illustration for this is the title of ‘sister’ being used to address professional nurses (**1**). These influences got so deeply entrenched that the ‘white cap on the head’ and the title ‘sister’ almost got synonymous to a professional nurse.

Nursing in India has evolved a lot in the last century. From a vocation, it has grown into a profession with its own body of knowledge and unparalleled contribution to healthcare. However the subservient nature of the profession still remains with nursing in India. One of the reasons for this is that the profession is distinctively feminized (**7**) and hence has less power in the general perception (**8**). For a very long time, nurses in India were Christians (**1**).The years of religious dogma of vocationalism, self-sacrifice, asceticism and obedience has percolated into the very essence of nursing (**1**). This has hugely influenced the training of nurses (**1**) and public perception of the profession.

**Trends of change in uniforms of nurses**

The usage of caps by nurses has almost disappeared from uniforms for nurses in Indian hospitals. Yet, there are few hospitals which still hold on to the traditional practice of caps when it has no meaning or reason to wear other than for a symbolic culture. Rather it can be a potential carrier of pathogens (**9**). The traditional white frock uniforms of the nurses are also now been replaced by culturally appropriate dresses like sarees, salwars or unisex scrubs which are more comfortable and dignified.

**The title of ‘sister’ and ‘brother’**

The title ‘sister’ for a nurse continued to be used in Indian hospitals even after entry of people from all religions and from all walks of life into nursing. ‘Sister’ evokes the image of a selfless religious nun dressed in a spotless white frock. The title ‘sister’ has drained its meaning and intention. For the male nurse, the title ‘brother’ is used, again not having a useful meaning attached to it. It is an archaic form of language which is often having rhetoric effects in the context of a hospital.

According to John Pern ‘A stereotype results from an attributional metonymy’(**10**). Nurse has been substituted for the attributes seen in religious sisters and thus a stereotype has been created around it. Prolonged use of the term over all these decades has reinforced the stereotype to such an extent that it has nearly become impossible to address a nurse anything other than ‘sister’ or ‘brother’. This can also be argumented to have influenced the nurses to subconsciously change their attributes to fit into the title they are given. Thus stereotyping a profession eventually can be a potential reason for distorted self-image as well as public image of nursing. This should be viewed as an ethical issue.

In most of the countries around the world, in the early years, nurses were addressed as ‘nursing sister’ or ‘sister’. Many of these countries are no longer using the same title to address them. Except in India, few of the Middle Eastern countries use the term ‘sister/brother’ as a title for nurse.

Until recently, the nursing personnel in central government hospitals, including the males were designated as ‘Sister Grade II/ Sister Grade I’/‘Nursing sister’, which was nothing less than sexism and breech of gender identity. The job title of ‘nursing officer’ was initiated by Government of India vide an order (**11**) for the nurses working in Central government controlled hospitals and health care settings. However this has not changed the way nurses are addressed. In the wake of secular and gender neutral workplaces, it is sexist, disgraceful and professionally unethical to be addressed with a title that reflects remnants of the past with no specific meaning or reason. On the contrary it is perpetuating a stereotype.

**Professional ways of addressing a nurse**

Authentic respect should be echoed in the titles used for nurses. Referring to a nurse as a nursing officer in conversations or over telephone will dramatically improve professionalism attached to it. Even general appellations like ‘madam’ or ‘sir’, from patients is much more acknowledging than being called ‘sister’ or ‘brother’. The peers and other health care team members should rather address nurses using their names. When being addressed by name, it improves the specificity of the communication and the receiver has a higher tendency to act on the content of the message. This is based on the ‘cocktail party effect’ in which a person has high level perceptual processing of language when being called by his or her name even in noisy and distractive situations(**12,13**). In order to facilitate being addressed by name, nurses should wear their name badges.

**Conclusion**

Nursing is a career choice for a large number of Indian youngsters. The practice of nursing as a profession not only provides immense sense of job satisfaction, but also opens opportunities for personal and professional growth. The large numbers of Indian nurses who have migrated to various parts of the globe in search of greener pastures have irrevocably contributed to the growth of our country. The professional bodies of nurses in India like the Trained Nurses Association of India (TNAI) and the statutory bodies like Indian Nursing council (INC) have taken several steps for the professional development of Nursing. Nevertheless, the image of nursing in India needs to be remodeled and a change in the title will help the profession leave the shackles of past behind and break the stereotypes.

A change in the way of addressing a nurse has got a lot to do with the professional image of Nursing. Nursing profession is in need of advocates. Nurses themselves and the colleagues in the health care team have their best role in projecting nursing as a profession.

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