Conclusion: Knowledge, Power and Agency

All these folk are saying, ‘It was plague. We’ve had the plague here’. You’d almost think they expected to be given medals for it. But what does that mean – ‘plague’? Just life, no more than that.¹

The period 1857 to 1880 began with considerable ambitions for those that the British considered to be lunatic in British India and ended in asylum closures and special investigations into the expense of providing such institutions. For example, in 1862 there was an exchange of correspondence between the North-Western Provinces and the Government of India about a survey that the Inspector-General of Prisons had organized. After canvassing the District Officers of the area he estimated the total number of lunatics in the NWP:

Dr Clark’s own conviction resulting from his own investigation is that there are 1250 cases to be provided for. Of this 328 can be sent to Bareilly and 328 to Benares so that there are still 600 candidates for admission to the proposed asylum.²

His plan was to house all those considered ‘lunatic’ in institutions to be provided for the purpose, even the ‘957 . . . said to be taken care of by their friends, a circumstance which I think very doubtful at least, the amount of care bestowed upon them must, I fear, be very small indeed.’³

By the end of the 1870s such ambitions would have been unthinkable. Typical of the period was the Bengal Medical Expenditure (O’Kinealy) Committee of 1878/9⁴ which devoted a separate section of its report to the lunatic asylums of the area. The differing costs of the patients in each asylum, the diverse dieting arrangements
and associated expenditure and the varying commitment of each superintendent to profitable manufacturing were all investigated as the cost of providing such facilities began to be felt as a burden. With the closure of the Moydapore asylum in 1877 and the Hazaribagh asylum in 1879 the last years of the 1870s signalled an end to the burst of energy which had more than doubled in two decades the number of asylums that the British had managed to get up and running by 1858.

An investigation of this burst of energy has implications for a number of current debates within the history of medicine and also within the controversies about the nature of colonial encounters and colonial experiences. Many historians of colonial contexts share with historians of medicine a concern about the nature of the knowledge generated within the systems that they investigate. It is worth emphasizing then that this study concurs with the conclusion that, 'patient records are surviving artefacts of the interaction between physicians and their patients in which individual personality, cultural assumptions, social status, bureaucratic expediency, and the reality of power relationships are expressed.' Documents such as the case notes at the Lucknow asylum are sites where ideas and identities were constructed, ideas and identities produced from within a range of discourses such as colonial difference, medical professionalism, modern masculinity and so on. Examining these sources reveals much about the way in which those writing the documents thought about themselves, about their work in India and about the Indians that they were dealing with. They reveal little however of the minds of which they claimed to be a record, in other words these psychiatric records can tell the historian nothing reliable about the mentalities of the patients who it was claimed were the subjects of the case notes.

These medical documents then were works of the imagination, of the imaginations of British male medical officers who worked in India in the high colonial period. That these imaginations survive in documentary form is a reflection of the power relations of the period, as the British had the power to watch and to write about the Indians admitted to the colonial institutions. But the study of the development within the Government of India of a concern about cannabis use among the Indian population demonstrates how the generation of knowledge within the government of the colonizers was more than simply an exercise in whimsy. The ideas and identities constructed in the asylum records did not remain isolated in the