

Magico-Religious Folk Healing and Health: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: *The present study was undertaken to examine the role of magico-religious folk healing in health care. Folk healers are often regarded as people of great wisdom and esteemed standing within society, both in terms of materiality and moral character. These people possess the ability to accurately diagnose the underlying causes of diseases and disorders, and they also have expertise in utilising a wide range of pharmaceutical interventions, traditional practices, and extraordinary supernatural powers to effectively manage these conditions. This study concentrated on a local magico-religious healer residing in Rampura village of Amritsar district, Punjab. The observation and interview method were used to gather information with the ultimate objective of comprehending the factors contributing to the enduring prevalence of faith-based healing practices and their significance in addressing healthcare requirements. The study found people continue to place their belief in faith-based healing procedures due to the psychological gratification they bring and this is not a result of ignorance but rather a matter of faith. It emphasises the need for modern physicians to view health through a cultural lens and address it in culturally suggested ways, wherever necessary.*

Keywords: Folk healers, folk healing, health, magico-religious healers

1. Introduction

Folk healers are integral components of the healthcare delivery system. They have been providing service to humanity since ancient times. In an era prior to the development of modern medicine, physicians were scarce; therefore, these sages employed traditional wisdom to assist individuals in coping with or managing their health problems. Sever (2001) defined folk healers as "the wisest and most respectable person in society, in terms of materiality and morale. This person has the power of identifying and curing the diseases and disorders, consequently the origin of these diseases and disorders, and the skill of using various drugs for the treatment of the diseases and disorders or applying the practices with the help of information and practices acquired from the tradition".

There is a broad range of folk healers in both developed and developing nations. India is a nation of healers, according to Kakar (1982). Every part of Indian civilization is home to both natural and magico-religious healers. Natural folk healers primarily use herbal remedies, whereas magico-religious healers profess to have supernatural powers and are God's chosen ones. Consequently, they use their exceptional skills to heal others. These healers, according to Marriot (1955), belong to little traditions as opposed to large traditions, which are characterised by customs derived from classical and philosophical literature (Dalal, 2007). Because India is a traditional and multicultural country, people still trust in folk healing practices and turn to folk healers for help with mental health concerns, infertility, jaundice, smallpox, measles, stones, skin problems, and other minor ailments. The primary concern of healthcare providers is to safeguard the trust and confidence of patients, a crucial aspect that seems to be lacking in contemporary healthcare systems. Furthermore, temples, *dargahs*, shrines, and cults serve a fundamental role in facilitating healing processes (Lohakre and Davar, 2010). Flueckiger (2006) conducted an ethnographic study and arrived at the conclusion that the primary factor driving

individuals towards folk healing is just a question of faith, devoid of any other contributing factors.

2. Objectives and Methodology

The objective of this paper was to comprehend the factors contributing to the enduring prevalence of faith-based healing practices and their significance in addressing healthcare needs. In order to fulfil the objectives of the present study, it was conducted in the Rampura village of Amritsar district, Punjab. The study focused on a local magico-religious healer who is famous for treating health problems caused by supernatural causes. Both primary and secondary sources of data collection have been used. A sample of 50 respondents who were seeking the health services of local magico-religious healers have been selected for the interview. Case study method was used in order to obtain information from magico-religious healer. Observation method was also used for gathering information and secondary sources, such as publications in journals, articles, books, and, have been utilised for the purpose of carrying out the process of data collection.

3. Major Findings

3.1 Socio-Economic Profile of *Dhuni Wala Baba*

Swaran Das, also known as 'Dhuni Wala Baba', is a revered and devout person who is 52 years of age and lives in Rampura village. People refer to him as *Dhuni Wala Baba* because of his custom of burning smoke (known locally as "*dhuna balna*") and immersing himself in it for two hours during the month of "*Sawan*" (July–August). He belongs to a scheduled caste and illiterate. He adheres to the Sikh faith and primarily reveres Baba Shri Chand Ji, the son of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji. He has been in this practice from the last 20 years. For sustenance, he relies solely on the little provisions provided by his followers. Despite being married, he abandoned his family after entering this

profession and now resides in a shrine where his followers seek him out for therapeutic reasons. He entered this profession due to the influence of his brother, Tarsem Das, who is also a practitioner of magico-religious healing. He provided him with instructions, and he participated in the practice of “*chilla*” (engaging in an extended time of seated meditation inside a circular configuration for 40 consecutive days, notably within the confines of a cremation site). He claims that developing healing powers and a relationship with God are challenging due to extrinsic obstacles. Only those with exceptional mental fortitude may acquire healing capabilities using the “*chilla*” technique.

3.2 A Healing Event: *Mela*

Annually, in the month of August, a local healing festival known as “*mela*” is conducted in commemoration of Baba Shri Chand Ji in Rampura village. People, regardless of their health status, gather to express their respect and participate in the event. On this auspicious day, it is believed that *Baba Ji* grants blessings to people who come with sincere intentions, safeguarding them from all their adversities. The villagers begin *mela* preparations a month prior. Initially, they gather funds from the local residents, determining the contribution amount based on each individual's financial capacity. They whitewash, clean, and decorate the shrine with flowers. During fieldwork, the researcher also participated in this specific event. On this day, women were autonomously preparing food, locally known as *langar*, while men were distributing it to the people. Initially, *Dhuni Wala Baba* addressed the people, advising them to abstain from doing any immoral deeds and to adhere to the path of religion if they wanted to live a tranquil and robust life. He directed everyone to close their eyes and engage in meditation, while a few ladies started rotating their heads. It was astonishing to see them in this predicament; a few were trembling vigorously, while others lost consciousness. It was believed that they were being influenced by an external power locally called “*opri cheez*,” and in the sacred location, they were departing from their bodies. All the worshippers received *prasad* at the end.

3.3 Method of Treatment

It was found that the majority of people in the age range of 30-45 come to him for treatment of infertility and mental health problems, especially hysteria and sudden unconsciousness. It is worth mentioning that most of them who were seeking treatment were female. It is surprising to learn that not only illiterate people but also literate people from faraway places come to him for treatment. He does not charge anything for the treatment because he believes that God has chosen him out of millions, and if he does, he will lose his healing abilities. People, on their own volition, offer fruits, clothes, sweets, and grocery items as a matter of devotion. He provides treatment only on Sunday, locally known as “*chonki dena*.” He believes that some diseases have only supernatural causes, so no medical treatment can provide relief to patients. That's why most individuals seek his help when they have exhausted all other treatment options. People see him as a last hope and are willing to do anything to restore his sick role to normalcy. His method of treatment is very unique. First, he asks patients questions like, have you eaten something from an outside person? Have you stepped on

something magical? Have you stopped by the cremation site at night? Have you noticed something suspicious in your dreams? Are there any untimely deaths in your family? He then instructs the patient to close his eyes and engage in meditation. He sprinkles holy water on the patient, reads *shabad*, and tries to connect with supreme powers. In this manner, he attempts to summon the spirit believed to be within the patient's body, posing questions such as, who are you? What do you want? How will you leave the body? This way, the healer negotiates with the spirit and accepts his demands. It is believed that when the demands of the spirit are fulfilled, it leaves the body of the patient, and he or she comes back to a normal life. He gives holy water to sprinkle and *vibhuti* (sacred ash) to drink on the condition that no family member will not eat non-vegetarian food for forty consecutive days. He also provides *taweez* to tie on the wrist in black thread, as it will help in warding off the negative energies, and he strictly prohibits his devotees from eating anything taken from strangers and forbids them to take other treatment. For successful treatment, a person must arrive on at least five Sundays. He believes that he has special powers, and only he can help the people who are under the influence of malevolent spirits.

4. Analysis and Discussion

In the contemporary era, the presence of magico-religious healers in rural regions indicates a strong faith of people in their healing abilities. *Dhuni Wala Baba* is renowned for his culturally sensitive approach to providing treatment as he relates how diseases have not only physical but also social causes, thus winning the confidence of rural people. Inquiring about an illness's societal origins may give rationality to emotional thoughts of people which have no place in modern medical system. When individuals do not experience improvement from contemporary therapeutic techniques, they develop a conviction that external factors are responsible for their ailment and that only a supernatural path to healing will alleviate their suffering. Consequently, they seek out someone with high social standing. The preceding discourse unequivocally illustrates the impact of belief systems.

Fertility and mental health have significant social importance in Punjabi culture since they enhance social acceptability and elevate one's position in the social hierarchy. Infertility and mental health are also associated with social stigma, compelling people to pursue treatment through any available means and this stigma is more serious in case of women. People feel a sense of belongingness with magico-religious healers because they have a shared culture. They see him as a very private person, and they openly disclose their medical situation, which becomes challenging inside the contemporary healthcare system.

Items with mystical properties, such as *taweez* and *vibhuti*, serve as a safeguard against harmful supernatural entities, enabling individuals to see themselves as free from the influence of any external forces. This psychological satisfaction further facilitates their rapid recovery.

From a scientific standpoint, meditation enhances our mental, physical, and spiritual health, and *rishi-munis* have practiced it for numerous generations. The majority of magico-religious

healers use this technique as a therapeutic approach to soothe the patient's psyche. Conversely, when people rotate their heads in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction and move their bodies with freedom, it also induces relaxation in their bodies. This is because in that specific environment, people do not perceive this activity as unusual, allowing them to act without inhibition and it gives them a sense of freedom.

Community events like *mela* not only provide therapeutic benefits but also provide a respite from daily routines, allowing people to temporarily forget their sorrows and everyday concerns while enjoying the *shabads* and rhythmic sound of drums. The collective experiences provide them with optimism and a feeling of reassurance, as they see they are not alone in confronting despair and grappling with ailments and psychological distress. They get emotional, social, moral, and psychological support from one another, which aids in their emotional recuperation.

When comparing contemporary medical systems to faith-based treatment, emotions do not play a significant role. Many people believe that their voice has no significance in the contemporary medical system. Contemporary medical practitioners compel individuals to embrace their opinions, regardless of their personal agreement, leading to a sense of disconnection. No doubt, Western medicine has technical competence but falls short in addressing the emotional requirements of individuals. Individuals have not completely transitioned from the domain of emotions to the arena of pure science. In the studied area, modern health care facilities are readily accessible, but people do not favour them due to the absence of room for supernatural causative explanations of illnesses. Modern medical system strictly adheres to the notion of natural causality. Faith-based healing offers a reasonable framework for individuals by connecting health with social and religious factors and explaining how social coping mechanisms may help relieve ailments.

5. Conclusion

The study underscored the importance of comprehending the emotional dimension of healing, particularly in the context of mental health disorders and infertility. Psychiatrists also suggest traditional healing practices like meditation and physical movement in treatment, demonstrating that both medical systems are not rivals but rather siblings. The key difference is that the modern medical system has failed to validate cultural coping mechanisms, resulting in a lack of belongingness that faith healing aims to fill. It emphasises the need for modern physicians to view health issues through a cultural lens and address them in culturally suggested ways, wherever necessary. It also highlights the need for policymakers to consider the culture and belief system while framing health policies and programmes to ensure effective implementation.

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