

## **The Healing of ‘Pir Babas’**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Traditional healing refers to health practices, knowledge and approaches while using ceremonies, plants, animals or mineral based medicines, energetic therapies, or physical/hands on technique. This research centers on understanding the Indian spiritual healing method of ‘pir baba’ and to explore the implications of the healing process for health. Two healers and two healed persons, who believe in the traditional healing method of the ‘pirbabas’, of two different districts in Uttar Pradesh, India were interviewed in depth using the Khosla and Das (2019) Interview Questionnaire. The observation method was used for collecting data. This was followed by an interview which was translated in Hindi in order to understand their perspective as to what are the reasonable causes that make them believe in the method of traditional spiritual healing, the kind of method and effectiveness of these followed by the healer. The behavior, methods and the tools used by the healer at the place of healing were observed. A recording of the actions of those seeking cure of their problems at the place of healing was thoroughly observed. As observed in both the healing scenarios the most commonly used method by such healers is that of incantation, known as ‘jhaadh- phoonk’ in their common language. The healed feels relaxed after being treated by the healer and believes that it is gradual process which demands a lot of patience. The research intends to unveil the beliefs and attitudes towards spiritual healing process.

**Keywords:** Healing, Behavior, Spirituality

### **INTRODUCTION**

India is a vast repository of traditional knowledge associated with biological resources. This multitude of natural wealth has created a renewed interest in the traditional medicinal system, which includes the Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy systems (AYUSH). Since the beginning of time, people have been using a range of healing practices to resolve health and mental health concerns. Among these are the traditional healing practices which appear to be growing among immigrant communities in the West, for example, Yoga, Ayurveda, Astrology, Horoscopy, Voodoo, Santeria; and, the newer forms, viz., Maat, Morita therapy, Naikan therapy, and many others. These indigenous healing methods seem to address some of the many shortcomings of conventional health care and are practiced in conjunction with, and at times in the place of, modern Western forms. It seems that including two different

health care modalities is possible since competing and contradictory cures can be held alongside each other without creating conflict in the client. When people are faced with a serious or debilitating illness, they often consider supernatural healing or faith healing as the final option. Our expectations for divine healing are often placed in a variety of sources which present themselves as the only hope for a miraculous recovery. Some individuals will pursue the avenue of faith healers or those professing to have an “ability to heal.” Objects such as handkerchiefs, religious icons, or pilgrimages to holy sites are said to offer hope to those in desperate circumstances.

In modern day India, where there is a large and well-developed system of western medicine, doctors and physicians congenitally coexist with traditional healers such as the vaid of the ayurvedic and siddha systems, hakims of the Unani Islamic tradition, and herbalists. An account of healing traditions in India would not be complete without a mention of many faith healers: the

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babas, fakirs, pirs, and other wandering mendicants who are reputed to have magical healing abilities. There are also many shrines, mandirs, and dargahs, like the famous shrine at Loures, are considered to have miraculous healing properties. It should be noted that their belief in faith healing is no more or less in India than in any other country or culture, and that in fact the basis of healing may be no different than that which is accounted for in the more sophisticated terminology of modern medicine in discussions of the processes of psychoneuroimmunology or the placebo effects. Also, issues of faith, belief, or will toward well-being be stressed in all the systems discussed thus far, even though it may not have been explicitly mentioned in the specific sections. In India, there are many sacred scattered in little villages, towns, and cities or deep in the jungle that are reputed to have mysteries healing powers. Kakkar (1982) in his survey makes mention of a number of shamas and sacred places. The temple of Balaji, which is 250 miles south of Delhi, is one such place. This temple, which for many Indians holds the same place of reverence as did the Temple of Asclepius for the Greeks, holds the promise of relief for many afflictions, including epilepsy, tuberculosis, infertility, and mental illness. Samadhis or tombs of great Muslim Sufis or saints are also considered to have great power, by both Hindus and Muslims. To treat disorders that are perceived to be of extraordinary origins or to prevent possession by evil spirits, or to ward off the evil eye, many different practices prevail. It is common practice in India to put a black dot on the face or forehead of small children to protect the children against the evil eye. Tantric shamans employ a variety of rituals to summon the 'bhoot', 'pret', or 'chudails' possessing the body of the ailing person. The spirit is then asked what their demands are in order to leave the body of the person. Their demands are then fulfilled by providing some special form of food or worship, and sometimes animals are sacrificed to placate the spirit. Amulets are then tied to the arms of the person to protect them against future possession. Many fakirs, swamis, and babas are renowned for their powers of healing, and many of their devotees will undergo long and arduous journeys, just to be in their physical presence. Some of these people who are reputed to have mystical powers are famous both India and outside of fifth country, and can lay claim to thousands of devotees: maharishi Mahesh yogi, who has popularized Transcendental Meditation, Swami Rajneesh, Satya Sai Baba Radha Swami Satsang,

and Tatbab, just to name a few. The centres or ashrams established by such spiritual leaders are often considered sacred sites, and many of these centres also impart religious training in mantra yoga or other spiritual practices.

While western medicine is still prevalent, traditional healing practices are still a vibrant force in India today.

### **Theories that explain the notion of faith healing**

In his paper- 'How Faith Heals', Levin (2009) states that the messages that promote faith, which is belief in God, trust that God's province extends to the physical well-being of the faithful and the obedience and loyalty to God, which is plentiful and reinforce an expectation of healing. Messages that are promoted in the sacred writings of respective religions may gather a faith among believers that can cause psychological responses conducive to healing. "Faith in God can be a resource by which one may "heal thyself", but not solely due to simplistic conceptions of cause and effect that dominate thinking in the religion and health field. Faith does not cause healing". Faith may condition the soil in which a 'factors causing health and well-being' tree can take root. The idea here is that healing may occur subsequent to expressions of faith that serve to establish the psychological environment necessary for a belief focusing on the causes of well-being response. Faith alone cannot process or cause healing rather there are various factors that facilitate it for example, human hosts and their environment along with therapeutic agents work mysteriously to foster positive result. The connection between faith and healing can be understood in context of mind-body interaction. Faith and healing and their relation to each other are unlike other pairs of exposure and outcome, here-in faith may be capable of engendering healing, by contributing to and supporting ongoing salutogenic tendencies within the human body and mind. Faith is not some discrete "thing" that we can "do," something to "plug in" to our "lifestyle," and thus attain some sort of amorphous state of "well- ness." Such a notion, such a misconstrued notion of faith, is, if anything, the therapeutic version of martyred Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous theological concept of "cheap grace."

### **Faith healing in Muslim and Hindu communities**

The faith healing practices in the Hindu and Muslim communities in India is not very different from each other.

Both of these religious communities are strong believers of faith healing and practice the notion that 'the creator' is the one who is supreme and praying is the means to reach him and that there are two types of spirit, a good spirit and a bad spirit. The belief is that there is an evil spirit that is causing the problem and by praying as well as requesting the supreme being, God, to get rid of the problem as well as the spirit. In other words, the basic idea of faith healing is exorcism. There is no particular distinction with regard to entry or seeking help at such places. The Hindus do visit the temples where 'faith healing' is practiced and the Hindus visit the Muslim worship places where faith healing is practiced (usually a 'majaar'). In India, possession is a relatively frequent occurrence, and as such, exorcisms are often a site of public gathering (Sax, 2011). The wearing of gemstones, the protection from evil spirits is also sought in other objects such as sacred healing ash (vibhuti/bhasman/bhabhut), and healing amulets (tabiz). The present psychological healing that Hindu rituals have on positive thinking and spirituality worldwide shows that spiritual healing should not be underestimated as a powerful tool in curing mental illness (Srivastava and Barmola, 2013).

This study is an attempt to understand and explain the traditional healing practice that was observed by the authors of this paper. The authors were inspired by the way the healing place was overcrowded by those who wanted to be healed. There was inquisitiveness to understand the belief system that makes them seek help from traditional healers and not the health professionals. The objectives are to understand the traditional healing method of 'pir baba' in two districts of Uttar Pradesh and to explore the implications of the healing process as per the healed.

## METHOD

### Sample:

The sample for the present study comprised of two healers and two healed individuals, who believe in the traditional healing method of the 'pirbabas', of two different districts in Uttar Pradesh. Convenience sampling technique was used. One of the healer and healed belonged to Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh. Another healer was 50 year (approximately) old Muslim man from Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh who heals at a 'mazaar' and also lives in the vicinity. The place of healing is away from the mainland and is situated between the

farms. The healed is also from the same village and lives not very far from the place of healing. The study surveyed people who had been seeking healing from these healers for different kinds of illnesses and how following the healer helped them in swift recovery from the illness.

### Measures

The observation method was used for collecting data. This was followed by an interview using Khosla and Das (2019) Interview Questionnaire which was translated in Hindi. The study utilized interview questionnaires to understand how these traditional healing practices led to healing or transformation of the self. The main aim was to explore and characterize the type and character of traditional healing associated with participation in a religious ritual being conducted by the traditional healer.

### Procedure

The authors made contact with traditional healers to immerse themselves in local healing practices of that particular community. In the course of their observations the authors participated in the community ceremonies and traditions of this cultural heritage. They have provided a narration of her experiences with these healing practices by direct observation as well as by interviewing those healed by these traditional healers. Healers were observed in dargah and their treatment procedures were understood. The healed individuals were interviewed after the informed consent was taken. Time taken for the interview was 30-35 minutes. The data were collected in the form of text and was audio taped as well. The language used was bilingual as the subjects were not very fluent in English.

### Observer

#### *Observer I: Case I*

"An old woman works as a maid in my colony in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh. She has 3 daughters and one of them was suffering from some problems. Once, the lady was talking to my mother about her daughter and I overheard the conversation. On asking her about the problems faced by her daughter she told me that her daughter "Mantasha" falls sick every 6 months. Her daughter stays all day on the terrace and stops interacting with the family all of a sudden for around a week. She stops eating, becomes unconscious all of a sudden, experiences tiredness, sleeplessness and is involved in

absolutely no social interaction. The lady takes her to the peer baba, who has a dargah located in Ayodhya. According to her, when she takes her to the baba, she stays there for 4-5 days and after few visits later she becomes healthy and happy. When I asked her, what was done with her, she told me that her daughter never shares the healing procedure with her but only tells that she meditates and the environment of the dargah is very peaceful and calm and she enjoys there”.

### ***Observer 1: Case II***

“I did an internship in a mental hospital in Faizabad with a counsellor. There was a ‘Brahm Baba ka Mandir’ across the road from the hospital. I saw many patients who came to the hospital had already visited the mandir. They used to be all covered in turmeric powder, Kumkum and sandalwood powder. Some patients were not benefited from the traditional healing procedures and hence visited the hospital while some were planning to visit the mandir as they found the medical treatment of no use and only wastage of money. I visited the mandir and found that there was a room for such practices. The patients waited in queues for their turn. There was a huge hawan-kund in the centre of the room and panditji was performing pooja there. Due to so much rush in the temple I was not able to enter the room. But I interacted with the patients who had already undergone the treatment and had visited the hospital. They told me that the panditji performed hawan and helped remove the negativity from the body which had resulted into the problems”.

### ***Observer 2: Case III***

“I went to my relative’s place which is a village in Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. There are 4 children in family (aged 25, 23, 20 and 16) and the father. The mother recently expired. They believe in the healing practices by a ‘baba’ of their village who basically seeks that every harm is caused by some evil spirit or because someone has got some evil spirits behind you that is causing all the harm. I went to the place ‘majaar’ (muslim worship place) where people from different regions and religions came with their problems to get themselves healed. I was taken there by my cousin. The place was situated deep inside the farms, which was far away from the mainland of the village. There was no means of transport for visiting the place. One has to travel there by one’s own vehicle or walk for a very long distance. I

was instructed, before entering the ‘majaar’, not to laugh or speak anything to anyone there. Most of those present there thought it is the influence of evil spirits on them. There was a ‘baba’, who is the in charge of the place. Also, there were coordinators who were helping him in getting people rid of the evil spirits that is causing harm to their wellbeing. The people were supposed to sit in front of the place and plead the lord to help them fight with the spirit that has taken all over them. The believers were performing weird and intense actions, which is different for a normal human being to do. The tone in which they spoke was completely different from the actual one. They rolled around the ground in the soil and were shouting. The actions they performed were very intense and energetic which was a bit extraordinary in their part. They are of the belief that they get cured by all these actions and the evil in them leaves their body and the soul gets purified again. A few of them were crying and asking for help and on the other side a few of them, along with the coordinator, were performing very strange things like screaming and rolling round along the floor and doing some wavy sort of motion very intensely. The in-charge of the place charged minimally Rs15 for one visit and rest of it depended on the severity of the issue. He talked about in terms of the messages, he says, he used to get from the lord. He said, “I get instructions from God and I perform accordingly in every case”. He performs the actions at that particular place and also has his home in the vicinity.

He uses water, ash and a few other methods of incantations to treat the patients. The patients were allowed to sit at the place and used to cry and plead the lord, to get themselves rid of the pain and ‘the evil spirit, that is causing them harm. The patients performed peculiar activities like shouting, crying and speaking something that has no relevance with their life.”

### **Analysis**

A content analysis approach was used to gain insight into reports of spiritual healing and transformation in order to develop a better understanding and attitudes and beliefs towards the effectiveness of traditional healing methods. Interview questions were used as guidelines to elicit a narrative from the healed (a common technique in narrative enquiry methodology). The questions reflected the understanding of the nature of traditional healing practices and the issues involved, such as: beliefs about gender roles, attitudes towards traditional healing and

therapeutic healing. These questions were discussed in detail with the healed participant. The answers of the healed participants were reviewed and discussed with the co-author. After the interviews were done, the stories of the various participants were compared and data was prepared to be qualitatively analysed. The participants' responses were coded and follow-up-phone interviews were also done and transcribed for analysis.

## DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to understand the traditional healing method of 'pir baba' and to explore the implications of the healing process as per the healed. The healing method was observed by the researcher and an interview of the healed was taken using Khosla and Das (2019) Interview questionnaire. The detailed case analysis and the healing procedures employed are shared as follows:

### Case I

The main problems stated by the girl (healed) were severe headache, sleeplessness, unconsciousness, dizziness, lack of social interaction. She reported that she stays all day at the terrace and does not eat or sleep some days. She says "I don't remember what I do".

The procedure followed by traditional healer:

After a very careful observation I came across a very detailed picture of how the treatment takes place. There are two kinds of spirits that possess the person and they differ on the power and strength that they have. The individuals who are possessed by less powerful spirits are cured by ata'wiz which is an amulet or through prayers. These victims suffer problems like sleeplessness, sweating, poor appetite etc. On the other hand, those individuals who are possessed by very powerful spirits are treated separately and the treatment procedure is time consuming and requires a lot of patience. This healing process takes place from 9-12 am. The patients are required to take a bath in the holy water body that is present near the dargah which is called 'neersharif'. Baba explained how the patients deny, cry, shout and do everything possible to stop from bathing. After this, all the patients are collectively seated. The spirits on the victims speak the reasons, why they are present and what they expect from them. After baba comes to know about the reasons the patients leave with their parents. The next step is different for every patient depending on the

problems that they have. Some patients are required to visit the dargah and pray every Thursday or some must come every day, some are required to take bath every Thursday and Friday in the holy neersharif, while some may stay there and pray and meditate.

The girl who visits the dargah returns home in a normal state. She functions normally and performs all the chores very well. She says she finds peace and a very comfortable and accepting environment there.

### *Interpretation of Case I:*

This case represents healing procedure used by pir-baba in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh and interaction with the healed who was daughter of a lady who works as a maid. In the answers that she has given, it is evident that she has full faith and belief in the treatment procedures used in the dargah and is very religious and prays regularly. She repeatedly states that she opts this healing procedure over medical treatments because it is affordable and easily available as compared to the medical procedures which requires expensive tests and medicines. Her faith in traditional procedures have strengthened because of successful treatments she has seen and how at a very low-cost people can be healed. Also, lack of awareness of government facilities and programs for health can be attributed to her not using medicinal procedures.

### Case 2

The boy (healed) did not have much of the physical problems but was suffering from loss in business as well as had some serious family issues, which includes his mother's death. He believed that it is because of some evil spirits that is causing harm to the family and is preventing the progress in business.

Procedure followed by the traditional healer:

After observing the healing place as well as interviewing the healed, a vivid picture could be drawn. The healer and the healed believe that the cause of all the problems is evil spirit and the lord can help them get rid of the spirit which will help them to make things fall into place.

The individuals suffering from serious issues had to plead the lord, and according to the healer 'a message is sent to him by the lord and he does as the lord instructs him'. For minor issues he used a few mantras. The healing process takes place on Thursdays only between 9 a.m. to 1 p.m and 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. The patients have to sit at the place and plead the lord to get rid of the evil

spirit. After the evil spirit enters the body of the person, it is dealt by the coordinators and in serious cases by the 'baba' himself wherein the evil spirit is given a way out of the body of the patient. The people present there are given holy water as 'prasad'. Also, there were different other things given as per the problems. For example, some of the people were given mustard seeds and were asked to sprinkle it in their home to prevent the evil spirits entering their house. The healing takes place in phases as the healer says that the power of the good spirit takes time to get into effect.

### ***Interpretation of Case II:***

The case depicts the healing of a 'pir-baba' in a village in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh and the views of the healed in the healing method. While giving the answers during the interview the healed has reiterated several times that the people visit these places of healing for the satisfaction of their mind and soul ("mannauraatamakishaantikeliye"). According to him, the traditional healing is different from medicinal healing and people should not be completely dependent on this method for physical as well as mental problem but because people feel benefited is the reason that they revisit the place. The person also says that if a person is ill, he will definitely need medicine along with prayers and these methods for healing ("Dawaaaurduaa"). The person is a strong believer of Hinduism but doesn't follow all the rules. His answer of gender equality was a bit confusing as he confused gender equality with gender roles. The person doesn't seem to have very strong bond with the family as he is not aware of his roles in the family. Satisfaction according to him is when things are according to the way he wants it and deviations are perceived as stressful. He says there are a few things that the medicinal treatment can only deal but some other things can be dealt only with the spiritual healing. His views on the causes of mental health are that it varies from person to person and symptoms are inefficient decision making and sadness. Moreover, he says that only motivating the person to stay positive can help the person deal with the mental disorders.

The interview of the healed makes it clear that he is not a firm believer of the spiritual healing when physical and mental illness is considered, as he is an educated person, but when it comes to business and family problems, he believes that the healer motivates him or does something in a way that makes the things fall into place. The mother of the healed used to visit the healer

for various issues and it is from there that he started to visit the 'baba' and believed in his treatment procedures. Also, everyone in his neighbourhood believes in the healer and his practices. He believes that most of the problems (except physical) can be solved by mere motivation and positive outlook towards the problem and life.

The observations and analysis are supported by an article titled "From Survival to Respect: The Narrative Performances and Ritual Authority of a Female Hindu Healer" by Amy L. Allocco. The article explains the fieldwork that Allocco (2013) did in Tamil Nadu. It explains the strategies used by a female Hindu healer named Villiyammal to create and maintain her ritual authority in both her domestic shrine and in public temple spaces, where she occupies a religious leadership role that is unusual for a single woman.

### **Conclusion**

Faith healing is closely dependent on the belief of the person seeking the treatment. The practices used will not be effective if the person doesn't believe that it will make him regain his health. The faith healing is well accepted even in the modern world including India. People often turn their way towards faith or spiritual healing when they do not find the other methods of treatment to be effective. Also, the modern and western methods of treatment are far more expensive than the faith healing therefore people with low socioeconomic status prefer to completely rely on faith healing. Education also plays a role in believing in this method of healing for example, in less educated societies, epilepsy is still believed to be caused due to possession of evil spirits. The objects used for faith healing are not very expensive and are usually leaving or adopting some habits (like not eating non-vegetarian food during the treatment) or the natural resources such as water (made holy by some mantras).

### **Implication of the study**

The implications of the study are mainly to have an in-depth understanding of traditional healing practices used 'by pir-babas' and to further understand the beliefs and attitudes towards the acceptance of these practices as being effective.

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