

# Faith Healing and Skepticism in Pakistan: Challenges and Instability

With the rise of Islamic extremism in Pakistan, the country not only has to protect people from fraudulent healers but also has the challenge of protecting these fraudsters from violence.

RYAN SHAFFER

**P**akistani skeptics face unique problems with the rise of lawless religious extremism on one hand, and a government that protects Islam on the other. Faith healing is an old tradition that no time period or culture has a monopoly on. Despite differences in religions, faith healers who claim to heal the sick through religious belief exist throughout the world. Some claim to be gods, prophets, or intermediaries between the physical and metaphysical realms. South Asia is no different in that regard.

Whether people follow Islam or Hinduism, the believers who accept faith healing have a wide range of people who will take their money for promises of spiritual healing. While the “rat children” of Pakistan can be seen begging for money on the streets, in recent years faith healers in several parts of Pakistan have disappeared from public view. Since 2008, many have taken their “healing” underground, making their activities more difficult to track. For skeptics, this would at first seem like a cause to celebrate. However, this drop should not imply the change is from public critical thinking and a growth of scientific skepticism. It has to do more with an alarming trend in the other direction, which has to do with the rise of religious violence in Pakistan.

As readers of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER are well aware, faith healing attracts many types of people to its practice. These include outright frauds, people who believe their own unproven statements, and those who mix fraud and belief in their own claims. In North America and Europe, one might witness a pastor giving spiritual advice followed with an incantation where someone is “healed.” Likewise in Pakistan, it might be a “Pir,” an “elder” who gives his fol-

lows spiritual advice and a blessing. One Pir told *The News* that while there are some frauds “there are many who are serving the public through the verses of the holy Quran” (“Faith Healers” 2009). Official statistics about faith healing in Pakistan are difficult to obtain. Yet in 2005, some official numbers about the “prevalence of fake spiritual healers” were published under Home Minister Rauf Siddiqui. According to the *Daily Times*, the breakdown was: “91 fake faith healers and magicians operating in Sindh thus far, including 44 in Karachi, 31 in Hyderabad and 16 in Sukkur” (“Practices of Fake Faith Healers . . .” 2011).

In Gujrat, Pakistan, faith healing and child exploitation are combined with *chubas* (“rats” in Urdu), which are better known as the “rat children” of Pakistan. On any given day at the shrine of Shah Dola (also spelled “Daula”), “hundreds of worshippers come to celebrate the life of one of Pakistan’s most revered Sufi saints” (Galpin 1998). People bring their mentally retarded children to the shrine for a blessing, hoping it will make them better (Bragg 2001). Women also gather at the tomb praying for a cure for infertility. Yet if they then conceive, the myth

goes, “the couple can expect their first-born to be handicapped—a rat child with a tiny head. And it must be handed over to the shrine” (Galpin 1998). If the couples do not keep that commitment, God will punish them. Around the shrine are children who are mentally and physically deformed with microcephaly, or small skulls, supposedly with features like rats, and they cannot speak. These children beg for money from morning until night and usually have no problem getting it, since many believe the disabled are closer to God.

Many believe that people hand over healthy babies, which are then deformed to look like “rats” using crude devices and then sold to criminal organizations. According to Anusheh Hussain, head of Sahil—a nongovernment organization against child abuse—the children are sold for as low as 40,000 rupees (about \$10). Pirzada Imtiaz Syed, a trade union leader, said: “I have not seen this myself but I have heard from many people that they use iron rings which are placed on the baby’s head to stop it growing. I believe there are about 10,000 rat children in Pakistan controlled by a mafia of beggars who are all over the country. These children are also physically and sexually abused” (Galpin 1998). While people associated with the shrine deny that, and claim the deformity is genetic, Qasim Mehdi, Pakistan’s top genetic scientist who studied the “rat children,” said that it is “medically impossible” because a genetic disease must be carried in the family and passed through parents to children, but these children are not related. According to the Integrated Regional Information Networks, which

is an independent part of the United Nations, the theory that the children are forced “to wear metal caps which constrain the normal growth of the head” was developed and researched “by one of Pakistan’s top scientists, who was then banned from talking about the issue following media exposure several years ago.” (Integrated Regional Information Networks 2002).

South Asia provides unique problems for skeptics in the region compared with North America and Europe. With centuries of tradition and severe economic inequality throughout the region, superstition is rampant in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. In the case of India, since the 1970s, Indian rationalist groups have grown in number and influence but have also built ties with the international rationalist community. Basava Premanand (1930–2009) from Kerala, India, was an early post-independence rationalist speaker and writer, detailing how some Hindu gurus trick believers. In the 1970s,

Premanand began criticizing Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011), an Indian “God man,” eventually founding the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, which coordinates the activities of dozens of rationalist associations throughout India. Another prominent figure is Prabir Ghosh who is a more recent Indian skeptic and writer who offers a cash prize similar to that of the James Randi Educational Foundation for demonstration of paranormal abilities in India. Their mission has not been easy. Indian skeptics have faced attacks in a variety of ways, including Premanand surviving four assassination attempts (Datta 2004).

Pakistanis have dealt with the problem differently, and due to political instability as well as blasphemy laws it also faces unique challenges. Mohammed Younus Shaikh is a medical doctor, rationalist, and human rights activist who started The Enlightenment, a rationalist society, in Pakistan in 1992. His organization came to a halt in Oc-

tober 2000, when he was charged with blasphemy for a lecture he supposedly gave at Capital Medical College. Not only did Shaikh deny committing blasphemy, he denied even giving a lecture there. Nonetheless, he was fined 100,000 rupees and sentenced to death (Price 2001). The law to prevent “derogatory remarks about Prophet Mohammed” was added to the Pakistani Penal Code in 1986, and remains on record despite attempts by President Musharraf to change the law just a year before Shaikh was arrested. For three years, the IHEU, the Sea of Faith, and Amnesty International campaigned for his release. He was finally acquitted of blasphemy in November 2003 and immediately fled to Europe. After his acquittal, he described the event as “Islamic terrorism through the abuse of law and of the state apparatus.” When Shaikh left the country, Pakistan lost a critical voice against superstition and encouraged would-be skeptics to re-

This picture, taken on July 17, 2008, shows a Pakistani devotee touching the feet of Nadia, a twenty-five-year-old microcephalic “rat woman” at the shrine of Shah Dola. According to local legend, infertile women who pray at Shah Dola’s shrine will be granted children, but the first child will be born microcephalic and must be given to the shrine or else any further children will have the same deformity. AFP PHOTO/Farooq NAEEM

main silent about religion. Despite the absence of skeptics questioning belief, there has recently been a change in faith healing activity throughout Pakistan.

With the rise of lawlessness in some areas of Pakistan that border Afghanistan, comes a trend that seems to be only increasing in areas without effective government. Since late 2007, places such as Peshawar, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, have seen an increase of instability caused by the Pakistani Taliban. From the lack of effective law enforcement, radical Muslims have been emboldened to attack and murder those they disagree with or who do not follow their interpretation of the Quran, which includes faith healers. They have attacked and threatened faith healers with claims that the “healers” are fraudsters misusing the Quran and misleading Islamic believers, or that the healers are false prophets.

In 2008 and 2009, many Pirs who practiced faith healing were picked up from around Peshawar and were released only when they promised no longer to engage in those activities. Others have not been so lucky. In January 2009, one faith healer was blown up by explosives in Peshawar after he was told to stop his “illegal and un-Islamic” practice, but did not submit to the intimidation. Several others were attacked as well, including one who was beheaded, and a faith healing business was also destroyed. In fact, Phool Badshah, a faith healer, was murdered within the limits of the Yakatoot Police Station jurisdiction. The police, it appears, have been powerless to stop these attacks.

In 2011, some segments of the Pakistani government began listening to critics of faith healing in other parts of the country. In Karachi, which has felt the lower levels of militancy, hundreds of faith healers openly do business. According to the *Daily Times*, “They are indulged in fleecing innocent masses with a sole purpose to extract money from them on the cost of their plights” (“Practices of Fake Faith Healers . . .” 2011). Umair Alam, who was taken advantage of, explained his situation: “I don’t believe

them any more as I have personally experienced their deceitful skills. I paid 25,000 [rupees] to a faith healer, who ran his business in Surjani Town, when I was trapped in a serious domestic problem. He initially assured me of getting all my problems solved within 45 days. But, subsequently, nothing happened and he refused to return my money, saying it will take more cash for solving the problem” (“Practices of Fake Faith Healers . . .” 2011). With stories of fraud and abuse as well as intimidation and murder in other parts of the country, the government has shown some interest in addressing fraud.

In June 2011, Nadia Gabol, Sindh Minister for Human Rights, described spiritual healing as “no more than a matter of money making.” Gabol said that the practice should be banned. In fact, she announced, “It is a matter worth concern. After deliberations with our parliamentary leader, we will take this issue to the provincial assembly” (“Practices of Fake Faith Healers . . .” 2011). Likewise, Fayyaz Ahmed Laghari, the Inspector General Police in Sindh, said that action will be taken against the fraudsters when the police receive formal complaints. Time will tell whether the Pakistani government can protect its citizens from attacks and whether the authorities can stem the fraudulent activities of faith healers. Yet, it seems that at least government officials speaking about the problem is a move in the right direction.

There is no doubt that faith healers, who make promises to mentally and physically heal sick people, need to be scrutinized and should be held accountable for their claims. But this should be done through laws and courts, not through intimidation. With the rise of Islamic extremism in Pakistan, the country not only has to protect people from fraudulent healers but also has the challenge of protecting fraudsters from violence. Skeptics encourage critical thinking. The silencing of opponents through threats is not critical thinking but rather the opposite. Both skeptics and faith healers can agree: the violent intimidation and threats to Pirs is not acceptable. It remains to be seen

what, if anything, the Pakistani government can do because the government needs to not only protect its citizens’ safety and stop fraud, but it also needs stability. ■

## References

- Bragg, Rick. 2001. Seeking miracles in a place of cruelty and beauty. *New York Times* (October 28). Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/28/world/seeking-miracles-in-a-place-of-cruelty-and-beauty.html>.
- Datta, Tanya. 2004. Sai Baba: God-man or con man? BBC (17 June). Online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this\\_world/3813469.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this_world/3813469.stm).
- Faith healers: Another casualty of lawlessness in Frontier. 2009. *The News* (February 23). Online at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=164058&Cat=7&dt=2/22/2009>.
- Galpin, Richard. 1998. The rat children of Pakistan. BBC (29 June). Online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/122670.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/122670.stm).
- Integrated Regional Information Networks. 2002. Pakistan: Focus on rat-children. United Nations (14 October). Online at <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=18638>.
- Practices of fake faith healers unnoticed. 2011. *Daily Times* (June 6). Online at [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011/06/06/story\\_6-62011\\_pg7\\_4](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011/06/06/story_6-62011_pg7_4).
- Price, Susannah. 2001. Pakistani sentenced to death for blasphemy. BBC (18 August). Online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1498121.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1498121.stm).

## For Further Reading

- Dugger, Celia. 2001. Pakistani sentenced to death for blasphemy. *New York Times* (August 20). Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/20/international/asia/20DOCT.html>.
- Faith healer killed near Peshawar. 2009. *Daily Times* (February 18). Online at [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009%5C02%5C18%5Cstory\\_18-2-2009\\_pg7\\_37](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009%5C02%5C18%5Cstory_18-2-2009_pg7_37).
- Kemp, Danny. 2008. ‘Rat people’ forced to beg on Pakistan’s streets. *Sydney Morning Herald* (August 2). Online at <http://news.smh.com.au/world/rat-people-forced-to-beg-on-pakistans-streets-20080802-3oqf.html>.
- International Humanist and Ethical Union. 2004. Campaigning for the release of Dr Shaikh. (1 February). Online at <http://www.iheu.org/node/1008>.
- Rationalist International. 2001. Dr. Shaikh sentenced to death. Online at <http://www.rationalistinternational.net/ShaiKh/2001.08.26.htm>.

---

Ryan Shaffer is a historian and writer. He is currently a PhD candidate in history at the State University of New York, Stony Brook.