

Bangladeshi mystic fights demons with psychiatry

September 15 2022

Evil spirits bedevil the families that seek blessings from an elderly Bangladeshi mystic—but he knows his prayers alone are not enough to soothe their troubled minds.

Syed Emdadul Hoque conducts exorcisms but at the same time is helping to bust taboos around [mental health treatment](#) in the South Asian nation, where disorders of the mind are often rationalised as cases of otherworldly possession.

Hundreds of people visit the respected cleric each week to conquer their demons, and after receiving Hoque's blessing a team of experts will gently assess if they need medical care.

Mohammad Rakib, 22, was brought to the shrine after complaining of "possession by a genie" that brought alarming changes to his behaviour.

"When I regain consciousness, I feel okay," he tells Hoque. But his uncle explains that the student has suffered alarming dissociative spells, attacking and scolding his relatives while speaking in an unrecognisable language.

"Don't worry, you will be fine," Hoque says reassuringly, reciting prayers that he says will rid Rakib of the spirit and to help him concentrate on his studies.

Rakib is then led into a room by the cleric's son Irfanul, where

volunteers note down his symptoms and medical history.

"We think he is suffering from mental problems," Irfanul tells AFP.

"Once we've taken his details, we will send him to a psychiatrist to prescribe medicines."

Sufi mystics

Hoque, 85, and his son are members of the Sufi tradition, a branch of Islam that emphasises mysticism and the spiritual dimensions of the faith.

They are descended from one of the country's most respected Sufi leaders, from whom Hoque has inherited the esteemed title of "Pir", denoting him as a spiritual mentor.

Their hometown of Maizbhandar is one of the country's most popular pilgrimage sites, with huge crowds each year visiting shrines dedicated to the Hoque family's late ancestors to seek their blessings.

Their faith occupies an ambiguous place in Bangladesh, where they are regularly denounced as heretics and deviants by hardliners from the Sunni Muslim majority.

But Sufi mystics have a deeply rooted role in rural society as healers, and Irfanul says his father gives his visitors the opportunity to unburden themselves.

"Those who open up their stresses and problems to us, it becomes easier for us to help," he says. "My father does his part by blessing him and then the medical healing starts."

Hoque is helped by Taslima Chowdhury, a psychiatrist who worked at the shrine for nearly two years, travelling from her own home an hour's drive away in the bustling port city of Chittagong.

"Had he not sent the patients to me, they might never visit a trained psychiatrist in their life," she tells AFP.

"Thanks to him, a lot of mental patients get early treatment and many get cured quickly."

Veil of silence

Despite Bangladesh's [rapid economic growth](#) over the past decade, [treatment options](#) for [panic attacks](#), anxiety and other symptoms of [mental disorder](#) remain limited.

A brutal 1971 independence war and the floods, cyclones and other disasters that regularly buffet the climate-vulnerable country have left widespread and lingering trauma, according to a British Journal of Psychology study published last year.

Bangladesh has fewer than 300 psychiatrists servicing a population of 170 million people, the same publication says, while a stigma around [mental illness](#) prevents those afflicted from seeking help.

A 2018 survey conducted by local health authorities found nearly one in five adults met the criteria for a mental disorder, more than 90 percent of whom did not receive professional treatment.

But experts say Hoque's referral programme could offer a revolutionary means of lifting the veil of silence around mental health and encourage more people to seek medical intervention.

"It is remarkable given that in Bangladesh, mental problems are considered taboo," says Kamal Uddin Chowdhury, a professor of Clinical Psychology at the elite Dhaka University.

The country's top mental hospital is now engaged in a project to train other [religious leaders](#) in rural towns to follow Hoque's approach, he tells AFP.

"They are the first responders," he adds.

"If they spread out the message that mental diseases are curable and that being 'possessed by a genie' is a kind of mental disease, it can make a big difference in treatment."

© 2022 AFP

Citation: Bangladeshi mystic fights demons with psychiatry (2022, September 15) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-09-bangladeshi-mystic-demons-psychiatry.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.