

Mental Illness, Dargahs and Healing: A Qualitative Exploration in a North Indian City

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Abstract : Mental health is recognised as an important global health concern. World Health Organisation in 2004 estimated that neuropsychiatric illnesses in India account for 10.8 percent of the global burden. The prevalence of serious mental illnesses is estimated as 6.5 percent by National Commission of Macroeconomics and Health in 2005. India spends only 0.06 percent of its health budget on mental health. One of the major problems that exist in Indian mental health care is the treatment gap due to scarcity of manpower, inadequate infrastructure and deficiencies in policy initiatives. As a result, traditional healing is a popular resource for mentally ill individuals and their families. The various traditional healing resources include faith healers, healers at temples and Dargahs. Chandigarh is a Union Territory located in North India. It has surplus manpower and infrastructure available for mental health care. In spite of availability of mental health care services, mentally ill individuals and their families seek help from traditional healers at various Dargahs within or outside Chandigarh. For the present study, the data was collected from four dargahs. A total of thirty patients medically diagnosed with various mental illnesses, their family members who accompanied them and healers were part of this study. The aim of the study was to: Understand the interactions between healer, patient and family members during the course of treatment, understand explanations of mental illnesses and analyse the healing practices in context of culture. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide for the three sets of informants: Healers, patients and family members. The interview guide for healer focussed on the healing process, healer's understanding of patient's explanatory models, healer's knowledge about mental illnesses and types of these illnesses cured by the healer. The interview guide for patients and family members focussed on their understanding of the symptoms, explanations for illness and help-seeking behaviour. The patients were observed over the weeks (every Thursday, the day of pir and healing) during their visits to the healer. Detailed discussions were made with the healer regarding the healing process and benefits of healing. The data was analysed thematically and the themes: The role of sacred, holistic healing, healer's understanding of patient's explanatory models of mental illness, the patient's, and family's understanding of mental illnesses, healer's knowledge about mental illnesses, types of mental illnesses cured by the healer, bad dreams and their interpretation emerged. From the analysis of data, it was found that the healers concentrate their interventions in the social arena, 'curing' distressed patients by bringing significant changes in their social environment. It is suggested that in order to make the mental health care services effective in India, the collaboration between healers and psychiatrist is essential. However, certain specifications need to be made to make this kind of collaboration successful and beneficial for the stakeholders.

Keywords : Dargah, mental illness, traditional healing, policy

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