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Faith healing: an unregulated health domain

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Master of Science in Journalism



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This Capstone Project is submitted to the Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment of Master of Science in Journalism (MSJ) degree

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Fall Dec 2019

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Abstract

Despite Pakistan having adopted modern forms of treatment as part of its official healthcare regime, many non-traditional treatment types are still prevalent in the country - faith healing being one of them. It has a wide acceptance among the masses, be it country's cities or rural areas.

There are many factors that have forced people to seek alternative forms of treatment: inadequate healthcare facilities, weak healthcare legislation, and religious misconceptions surrounding health-related concerns.

This capstone project is focused on highlighting the flaws in Pakistan's healthcare regulations that have failed to devise a robust mechanism to curtail the practice. It includes interviews of people who visit faith healers, religious scholars, social scientists and healthcare practitioners.

Faith Healing: An Unregulated Health Domain

In midst of Karachi's largest graveyard, Meewa Shah Qabristan, sits a person who needs many introductions – largely due to the work he does. Popularly known as 'Gharo Waaja', a combination of two Balochi words, meaning our caved brother, he is revered by many people for his ability to treat diseases conventional doctors fail to comprehend or resolve.

He was born Murad Ali, a name unknown to many of his patients and is a faith-healer who has been practicing for at least 20 years. "We moved to Karachi from Khuzdar in 1997 after our area was struck with famine," Ali said.

He claims to have inherited special spiritual knowledge and affinity to God from his father who was also a spiritual healer. "My father gave me this ILM [religious knowledge]," he said.

Ali charges Rs500 for a single visit - an amount much higher than what a doctor would charge in many localities of Karachi. He sees around 50-100 clients a day; they queue up outside his small cave-like structure in the hope of finding relief, a cure. Because of the sheer volume of people who come to visit Ali, patients are required to book an appointment with his assistant beforehand.

Saima Bibi, a mother accompanying her six-month pregnant daughter Samina, complained to Ali of her daughter's absurd behavior, especially during the onset of the moon. She was diagnosed by Waaja with having been taken over by an evil 'non-Muslim' soul, which had to be removed. Ali started murmuring in a lowered voice in an apparent attempt to end the possession, while occasionally waving his right hand over the possessed girl.

This continued for 15 minutes and ended with Ali whiffing over Samina's face in order to ward off the evil spirit, a common move made by faith healers, also known as 'holy blowing'. The mother, apparently satisfied, left with her daughter while handing a Rs500 currency note to Waaja's assistant.

Ali is not an exception. There are hundreds of faith healers working in different parts of Karachi.

According to Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC), at least 600,000 quacks were operating across Pakistan and one-third of them – as many as 200,000 - were practicing in

the province of Sindh alone. And of those fake practitioners, around 40% had been practicing in the cosmopolitan cities like Karachi.

As a result, quacks were much more accessible. One such practitioner was available to 350 persons, compared to one qualified doctor available for 1,290 persons.

The report, however, noted that even that was not evenly distributed. There were still pockets of population (i.e patients) whose healthcare needs remain unmet due to access issues - unavailability of qualified professionals, transport, education and financial support to meet the required expenses for the treatment.

Therefore, health of the inhabitants of the province, especially in the low quantile of the wealth -- defined as vulnerable including poor, critically ill, women and children -- was at severe risk.

Dr. Nighat Shah, a gynecologist who practices at The Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH), said pregnant women - specifically first-time mothers - may sometimes experience visual hallucinations and fits while suffering from pre-eclampsia.

"It is one of the common obstetric dangers that many women experience. It results from hypertension [high blood pressure]," she explained, adding how it usually occurs during the second half of pregnancy.

If left unchecked, Nighat said, pre-eclampsia can also lead to severe headaches, less urine, extreme convulsions, and swelling of hands and feet.

She said even though the causes of pre-eclampsia were still not known, increased blood pressure and proteinuria [presence of protein in the urine] were well-established indicators.

"These can be taken care of during antenatal visits and are very much manageable. We monitor patient's blood pressure, give muscle relaxants, and other medications to mitigate the effects of this disease," Shah noted.

Shah thinks lack of awareness regarding pre-eclampsia and other psychological issues, lead people to look for miraculous treatments that simply may not exist.

"Families see convulsions and fits as transcendental events that require some divine intervention. That's why they turn to spiritual healers who use religious texts to treat the patients," she added.

The practice of spiritual healing has been identified as one of the leading factors that result in delayed diagnosis, late presentation of patients, and even death.

According to a study conducted by Liaquat National University in 2018, 32% of their psychiatric patients had visited faith healers at least once in their lifetime. It also noted that, in majority of the cases, relatives introduced patients to their chosen faith healers.

The study also identifies inadequate healthcare facilities, illiteracy and religious beliefs as reasons people visit spiritual healers.

Professor Dr. Tipu Sultan, who recently retired as chairman Sindh Healthcare Commission (SHCC) highlighted two other pertinent reasons apart from those identified in Liaquat University's research.

"Poverty and ignorance compel people to try out these mysterious modes of treatment. Both these factors make for a lethal combination," he said, adding that people are usually unaware about healthcare and tend to unquestionably believe anyone who claims to have a solution.

This tendency, Sultan said, makes them vulnerable to financial and medical exploitation at the hands of faith healers.

"Faith healers are well aware of peoples' ignorance and fool them in the name of religion," he added.

It doesn't seem difficult to find a faith healer in Karachi offering to cure people of ailments.

Baba Saifuddin, another faith healer in Lyari, sat down with 60-year-old, Khuda Buksh, when we visited his clinic. He listened to his patient carefully and in detail.

Buksh came with the complaint that his eyes and skin had been slowly turning yellow. To treat that, Saifuddin handed Buksh an amulet that had some Quranic verses wrapped inside and told him to wear an onion around his neck.

"If that onion turns yellow within the next three days, it means you have Hepatitis C," Saifuddin said, further instructing Buksh to always keep wearing the Taweez he had given to him.

He claims to have treated hundreds of such patients during his 10-year-long career. "I have treated people suffering from all kinds of diseases, including cancer and HIV," he said.

His clinic teemed with people, two of whom had come from Thatta to get treatment for their mother. "She is suffering from cancer," said Imran Tunio, one of the two brothers, hoping that Baba Saifuddin would be able to treat his mother.

“We do not have enough facilities in our area. One of our relatives in Karachi suggested we visit here,” he added.

A recent World Bank document, "For Better Quality and More Integrated PHC Services through Harnessing the Private Sector in Sindh Province," described the availability of public health centers (PHC) in urban areas of Sindh as insufficient. It said that the private sector in Karachi was majorly contributing to the health sector, and there was only one PHC facility to population ratio of 1 to 82,000 in the city.

It further classified the private sector health facility operations in Karachi as: (i) for-profit hospitals and self-employed practitioners; and (ii) not-for-profit and non-governmental providers, including faith-based organizations, and civil society. The private sector at the PHC level includes general practitioners ranging from doctors, hakeems (3%), homeopathy practitioners (1%) and ayurvedic clinics, to maternity homes and traditional birth attendants.

A separate study by Aleemi et al in urban Sindh found that 32% of participants relied on a Dai (traditional birth attendant) for obstetric care; a spiritual healer (32.6%), and a Hakeem (practitioners of traditional medicines most often distributing potions; 11.4%), mostly for general treatments.

Tufail Ahmed, journalist and health reporter with the Express Tribune has extensively reported on healthcare issues.

He termed absence of legislation on faith healing as another reason that makes this method of treatment particularly attractive to fake practitioners. "The state seems to have turned a blind eye to this mode of treatment as if it does not exist," he said.

“We have National Homeopathy Council that overlooks registration of its practitioners, issuance of certificates to those practitioners, and many other things. Similarly, there is Tibb Council and PMDC regulating their respective healthcare providers and establishments. However, there was no body that could regulate them [faith healers],” he added.

While people going to these healers have no scruple about the practice, the state has not taken its position on whether it accepts faith healing as one of the methods of treatment or not.

Even Sindh's Healthcare Commission Act, promulgated back in 2013, is silent on where these practitioners fall, or whether these non-traditional practitioners come under its jurisdiction at all.

Under its classification of healthcare service providers, and quacks, the Sindh Healthcare Commission Act states: "Healthcare service provider means an owner, manager or in-charge of a healthcare establishment and includes a person registered by the Pakistan Medical Dental Council, National Council for Tibb and Homeopathy or Nursing Council, pharmacy service provider."

Ahmed said absence of such a regulatory body means there are no enforcement mechanisms against quackery, monitoring and evaluation, and licensing of faith healers.

However, the former SHCC chairman said it was not about having laws and regulatory bodies in place, but their effective implementation and enforcement.

"The absence of a regulatory body could be one of the factors but having that would not have made any difference," he said, noting that even the existing regulatory bodies like PMDC, Homeopathic Council, and Tibb Council had failed in regulating their respective domains.

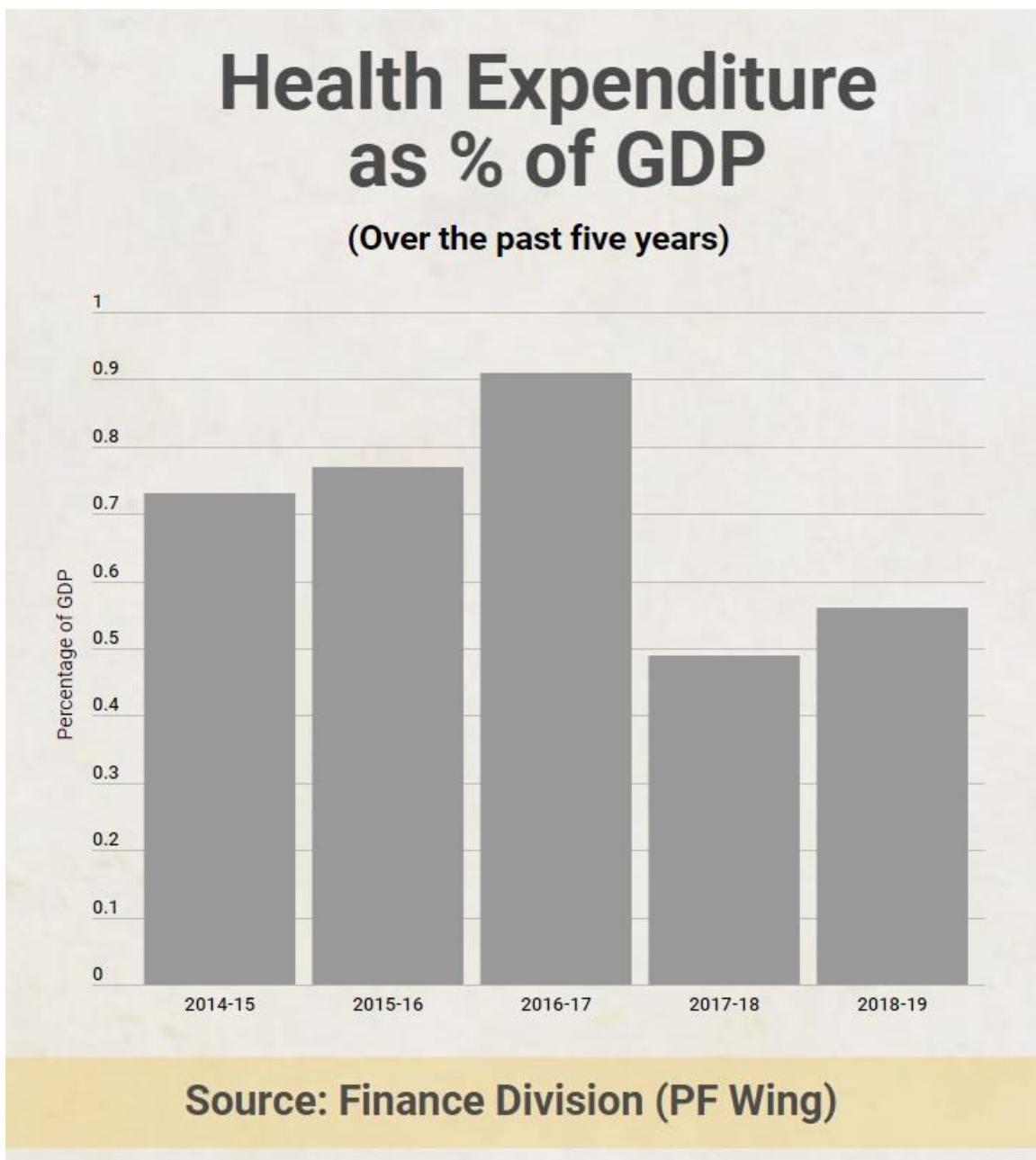
"I know for a fact, having served as chairman of one such body, that these regulatory bodies are just there to carry out paperwork and nothing else. They have no substantive impact. The widespread presence of quacks is an open testimony to that," Ahmed further added.

He said that these bodies operate in a perfunctory manner, only occasionally prosecuting practitioners when someone dies owing to negligence. "These institutions otherwise remain allusive to whatever is happening. This, in turn, gives rise to disappointment among people regarding the existing health system."

Quoting Britain's example where such regulatory bodies effectively function, he said the practice of faith healing had almost disappeared.

Pakistan state, on the other hand, has always been apathetic towards the health sector - not interested in allocating financial resources or devising proper oversight mechanisms, he said. A 2018 State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) report, "State of Health Sector in Pakistan," noted that public sector health expenditures as a percentage of GDP in Pakistan had not only remained extremely low but had also been falling since 1990's. In terms of health-related public spending, Pakistan was behind many developing countries including Sri Lanka and Sudan. The country's average health expenditure since 1949, was around 0.6 of the GDP.

It further noted that limited budgetary resources were one of the principal factors behind Pakistan's 'unimpressive' health statistics.



While Gharo Wajo was busy diagnosing other patients, Jan Muhammad stood outside with his 10-year-old daughter, holding a pile of medical reports.

Enquiring upon what brought him here, he shared how his daughter was suffering extreme abdominal pain for almost a year.

“I have taken her [his daughter] to a couple of hospitals. Even after that, my daughter had not improved. They all are there to make money. My brother suggested me to visit here for my daughter’s treatment,” he said.

Jan Muhammad, after getting her daughter checked, came out with a bottle of water in his hand which seemed like a prescription.

“Baba has asked us to visit him again after a week and give a glass of this water to her [Muhammad’s daughter]regularly,” he shared.

Listening to our conversation, Imran, an intrigued patient standing right behind Muhammad, also jumped in to narrate a similar story of how he was fleeced by private hospitals - and was ultimately cured by Gharo Wajo.

Dr. Sabir Michael, who holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Karachi, believes the practice was also reflective of the increasing distrust among people regarding the healthcare system. "Most of them are genuinely disappointed by the system," he said.

This dissatisfaction, he says, largely stems from widespread presence of fake practitioners in many areas and exorbitant prices charged by private hospitals. "When patients do not get their desired treatment after spending so much, they start going to faith-healers, who are often readily available and offer cheaper treatment," he added.

He stressed for enforcement of existing anti-quackery laws if the state wants to restore people's faith in the healthcare system. "Unless that happens, we will continue to push more people out of our healthcare system. They tend to go to anyone who offers a solution, and that’s pretty obvious,” he said.

Michael also said it was not just dissatisfaction with the system; faith healing was much more deeply entrenched. “It is anthropologically and religiously rooted in society and pervasive among all sections, rich or poor. Some turn to them for curing all diseases, others to avert any bad luck that might come their way.”

Pakistanis of all rank and files - business tycoons, high-ranking bureaucrats, mainstream political leaders - seek faith healing services, he added.

Michael, however, termed religion as the main motivator behind people seeking faith healing services. “Unlike other treatments, faith healing draws its legitimacy from holy

scriptures,” he said. “This intrinsically leads people to have more trust in this form of treatment. Faith healing simply appeals to their existing beliefs that cure can only come from Allah.”

When asked what motivated him to adopt faith healing as a profession, Baba Saifuddin said he wanted to treat people suffering from spiritual illnesses.

“Diseases are just manifestations of some evil force overtaking your body,” he said, explaining that when someone wades off the ‘True Path’ they become vulnerable to such forces.

He said both Quran and Hadith have made references to existence of *Jinn* and the Evil Eye. “Our beloved Prophet Muhammad had also come under sorcery at one time,” he said.

Saifuddin uses the Quran as reference to treat all kinds of diseases, including psychological illnesses. “Quran and Hadith have cure for everything. It not only treats your physical ailments but also spiritual issues,” he said.

He quoted a verse from the Holy Quran to substantiate his proposition: “And we reveal of the Quran that which is a healing and a mercy for believers though it increases the evildoers in naught save ruin.” [Al-Israa' 17:82]

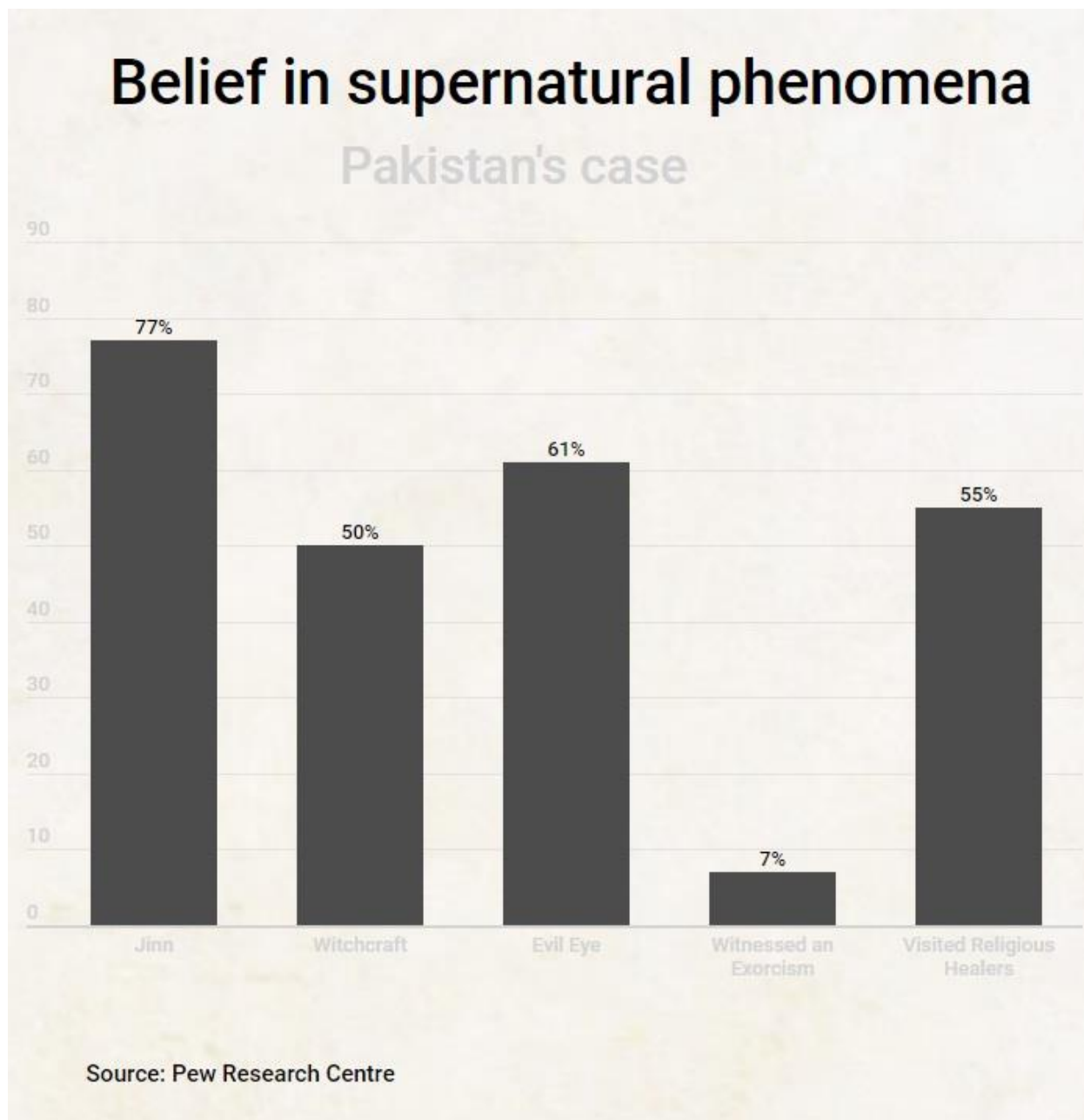
"Being a Muslim, how can someone not believe in these words," he added.

“Undoubtedly, everything is curable through the Quran,” said Maulana Osama Bawani, a religious scholar and teacher, but it did not mean that we close our eyes to other treatments.

He said even our beloved Prophet [S.A.W] employed natural remedies to treat many diseases. “There is a book that draws parallels between Tibb-e-Nabwi and modern science,” he said.

He said Islam was amenable to all forms of treatment and does not refrain its followers from adopting any of the available treatments.

“Be it allopathic, homeopathic, hikmat, faith healing, or any other form of treatment. We should only rely on Allah, for he is the one who ultimately cures everything. As long we keep faith on Him, all modes of treatment are good to adopt,” he said.



Bawani, however, cautioned that adopting any of them was acceptable until they fell under the ambit of *Islamic Shari'h* laws.

Dr. Sultan said people, in general, have always looked for supernatural solutions to problems that are very much human-induced, and can be resolved by human intervention "That's why the practice of spiritual healing dates back centuries. Even communities who had no access to healthcare practiced witchcraft," he added.

Talking on its religious aspect, he said it was prevalent among the followers of all faiths and not exclusive to Islam.

He, however, said that the practice was most prevalent among South Asian Muslims. A 2012 report of the Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, conducted a survey across 39 Muslim countries to learn about their beliefs related to supernatural beings. It was found that deep conviction existed among Muslims of the South Asian origin regarding the existence of such forces.

In the South Asian countries surveyed, at least seven-in-ten Muslims affirm that *Jinn* exist, including 84% in Bangladesh. In Southeast Asia, a similar proportion of Pakistani Muslims (77%) believe in *Jinn*, while fewer in Indonesia (53%) and Thailand (47%) share this belief. Across the Middle Eastern and North African nations surveyed, belief in *Jinn* ranges from 86% in Morocco to 55% in Iraq.

Overall, Muslims in Central Asia and across Southern and Eastern Europe (Russia and the Balkans) are least likely to say that *Jinn* are real. In Central Asia, Turkey is the only country where a majority (63%) of Muslims believes in *Jinn*. Elsewhere in Central Asia, about a fifth or fewer Muslims accept the existence of *Jinn*. In Southern and Eastern Europe, fewer than four-in-ten in any country surveyed believe in these supernatural beings.

In general, Muslims who pray several times a day are more likely to believe in *Jinn*. For example, in Russia, 62% of those who pray more than once a day say that *Jinn* exist, compared with 24% of those who pray less often. A similar gap also appears in Lebanon (+25 percentage points), Malaysia (+24) and Afghanistan (+21).

Bawani said there were many Quranic references that proved the existence of *Jinn*. “These creatures are able to possess your body. They can even kill you.” “One of our Sahaba, Sa'd ibn Ubadah, the chief of the Khazraj tribe, was assassinated by the *Jinn*. His assassination was claimed by the head of *Jinnat*, who informed Muslim leaders about it,” the religious scholar said while quoting references from various Islamic traditions.

He said while there was no denying that *Jinnat* existed, but people who frequently claimed to have been possessed by them, suffered from psychotic diseases. “Such people should not consult faith healers, but psychologists instead,” he advised.

Bawani was critical of many of the faith healers currently practicing across Pakistan and thought healing through spirituality required extensive knowledge of the Quran. “Most of them do not even have basic knowledge of the Quran, yet they continue to fool people in the name of religion,” he lamented.

Bawani also questioned the commercial aspect of the treatment. Since when treating someone spiritually started to cost money? “Those who genuinely practice it would not charge a penny for the treatment,” observed Bawani.

Despite many concerns that surround the practice, Jan Muhammad seemed adamant on seeking faith healing services as far as it benefited him and his family.

During Jan Muhammad’s second visit to Waaja, he held a box of sweets in one hand while his 10-year-old daughter held the other, hopping around carelessly.

“I had been wandering here and there for more than a year. Some doctors prescribed long lists of tests; others said she had some stomach disorder. But ALLAH had written my daughter’s cure in this water,” he said referring to the water he had been given by Gharo Waaja.

My daughter is now feeling better,” Muhammad said while distributing sweets among patients waiting outside for their turn.

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