

Harsh Remedies at Afghan Shrine

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Beatings and spartan diet form traditional “cure” for people with psychiatric disorders.

At a holy shrine in southeast Afghanistan, people with mental disturbances are still being chained up as part of a “cure” that doctors and Islamic scholars condemn as primitive magic.

The Mia Ali Sahib shrine at Samarkhel in Nangarhar province has offered its own form of treatment for psychiatric disorders for the last 300 years, and people still bring relatives there despite the availability of modern care in the town of Jalalabad.

Among the eight current inmates, IWPR’s reporter saw one man with long, unkempt hair and dirty, his legs scarred by the chains that held him imprisoned in a small room.

The man, aged about 35, clearly had no idea where he was, but his behaviour suggested he might have served in the military in the past.

“Did you bring the wages for my soldiers?” he asked, laughing and gesturing at the scraps of paper covered with writing which were scattered around him. “It’s written down here who you should pay and who you shouldn’t pay.”

Treatment costs 100 US dollars a month at the shrine, which also makes money by selling amulets. Relatives often offer gifts for an apparently successful cure.

Mia Shafiq, a descendant of Mia Ali Saheb in whose name the shrine was established, said the standard treatment involved tying up the patient for 40 days, he and feeding them nothing but dry bread, black pepper, salt and water.

“They aren’t allowed to eat anything else,” he said. “Also, they can’t bathe or cut their nails and hair for 40 days.”

Mia Shafiq said he himself was living proof that the therapy worked.

“I was tied up here for 35 days and now I’m fine,” he said.

Critics say that in addition to denying patients proper food and hygiene, staff at the shrine often abuse them. Mia Shafiq admitted this happened, saying, “We beat some mentally ill people if they won’t stay quiet and annoy us, so as to calm them down.”

An old man chained up by a tree called out, “Please bring me some food, for God’s sake. I am dying of starvation. I was told I’d get fried chicken and boiled potatoes here, but they don’t even give me dried bread.”

Weeping, he said, “I am hungry. They didn’t give me food yesterday morning or evening.”

When Mia Shafiq heard the old man complaining, he took his stick and went over to him, saying, “Tell me now, what do you want?”

The old man threatened to kill him; and then begged him not to hit him.

Medical experts say the shrine can only aggravate patients’ conditions.

“If you try treating a patient with shrines and amulets, the disease will grow stronger day by day,” Dr Fazel Rahim Naseri, a psychiatric medicine specialist who lectures at Nangarhar university, said. “So by the time patients are admitted to hospital, they’re beyond treatment, and some may even die.”

In addition, he said, the restricted diet prescribed at the Mia Ali shrine was liable to cause further health issues for patients.

Dr Naseri said that if some people appeared to recover after spending time at the shrine, it was either because their condition was episodic in nature, or because they were only pretending to be ill so as to escape problems in their daily lives.

Dr Ahmad Zaher Allahyar, head of mental health at the provincial health department, said that while resources were limited, there was provision for proper psychiatric care in Nangarhar.

The regional hospital's psychiatric unit could accommodate 14 men and six women as in-patients, and had a library, TV and other forms of recreation.

"In addition, we also have advisory centres for patients' families where experts in spiritual and psychological matters provide advice," he said.

Mia Shafiq insisted the shrine had healing powers, saying, "It's the doctors who are deceiving people.... Many patients who are brought to the shrine have not been cured by medicines, but recover here with the blessing of God."

Islamic scholars say that despite the popular belief in supernatural charms and cures are part of the Muslim tradition, such things are in fact proscribed by the faith.

"Seeking help from shrines, amulets and other things of that kind are deemed to be paganism, which God regards as a great sin," Mawlawi Abdul Azizi Khairkwah, the head of the religious affairs department in Nangarhar, said. "We have ordered imams at the mosques to educate the people about this, and about the true spirit of Islam."

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