

**ANALYSIS OF THE ACTIVITIES OF FAKE SPIRITUAL  
HEALERS IN PAKISTAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Spiritual healing has historical connotations but its recent upsurge in Pakistan has been discussed with focus on the primary factors that include illiteracy, poor economic conditions, sense of insecurity and irresponsible role of media. The activities of these fake healers, such as sexual harassment, rape, threats and attacks, and money extraction have been analyzed in the context of five different cases. This study is mainly primary nature based on interviews with media executives and academician. However, it is recommended that improving media's role, ameliorating economic conditions, reducing sense of insecurity, bringing down illiteracy and changing the attitudes of the people in general can diminish the role of these so called healers in society.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Conventionally, spiritual healers (*aamils* in Urdu) are those who help people heal from psychological and mental issues through a process of spiritual transformation, with the purpose being to rediscover the original nature of man. Spiritual healing is an old practice that is not specific to any particular culture or time period. Though religions and cultures differ, spiritual healers prevail all over the world. There are some healers who associate themselves with religion while others disconnect themselves directly from religion and instead focus on spirits and magic. There are others who declare themselves as prophets, messengers and mediators between metaphysical and physical worlds. South Asia and Pakistan has also been influenced by this tradition for ages. In Pakistan, spiritual healers are found in most parts of the country who attempt to cure people from their woes and miseries through a variety of techniques, some involving religion, while others involving spirits and magic. Unfortunately, spiritual healing has

become a grave social evil for the country as fake *aamils* have sprung up in huge numbers in Pakistan. Fake spiritual healing has, in fact, become a growing business, with the country already suffering from numerous evils and problems. Fake spiritual healers are not restricted with regard to location and they tend to have their existence throughout the country. The issue of fake spiritual healing finds its primary roots in the high levels of illiteracy and ignorance that prevails in the country. However, there are other major factors as well that contribute to this aggravating problem, which are discussed in this paper.

People belonging to slum areas, due to illiteracy and past traditions, seek the help of *aamils* in case of problems, diseases and dilemmas. They hold strong belief in the spiritual powers of these so called *aamils*. While *aamils*, in exchange of money, provide the visiting people with *taweez* (amulets) and explain it as a remedy for all their sufferings including infertility issues, marriage related problems, business predicaments, domestic clashes and vengeance (Waaijman 2002).

Traditionally, spiritual healers were looked at with respect and reverence as they used to cure people and assist them in getting rid of psychological problems, diseases, etc in their lives. Spiritual healing has existed in one form or the other in almost all the traditional religions (eastern and western) and cultures (American, African, Caribbean, Middle-east, East Asian and Euro Asian) of the world (HealthCare Chaplaincy 2009).

There is lack of availability of official statistics with reference to fake spiritual healers in Pakistan. Statistics and records do not exist at federal level as well at state or local level. However, in the year 2005, during the tenure of Rauf Siddiqui as Home Minister of Sindh, some statistics were published in relation to the existence of fake spiritual healers in the province of Sindh. There were 91 fake spiritual healers functioning in the province of Sindh, comprising 31 in the city of Hyderabad, 16 in Sukkur city while 44 in the metropolitan city of Karachi (Azhar 2012). Karachi has the highest number and the main areas of their operation in the city include Old Sabzi Mandi, Garden, Korangi, Mahmoodabad, Orangi, Malir, Empress Market Saddar, Surjani Town, Shah Faisal and Teen Hatti. These fake *aamils* have been found operating their businesses in these areas with impunity. However, despite the

unavailability of official statistics, it is not difficult to estimate that the total number of spiritual healers has increased in Sindh as well as in the country owing to the recent surge in faith for spiritual healing incited by the electronic media in general (Correspondent 2011).

### METHODOLOGY

This study is mainly primary nature and is based on interviews from faculty members of Mass Communication Departments from various universities of Pakistan and the media executives. The interviewees were selected randomly and their responses in conjunction with media reports retrieved from website have been analyzed qualitatively.

### ANALYSIS

Spiritual healers entail absolute frauds, people with unverified claims and those who combine their unproven claims with fraud. In Pakistan, spiritual healer can be a *pir* or an “elder” who provides his followers and disciples with spiritual guidance. However, on most of the occasions, these *aamils* have been involved in swindling the naive population with the objective of pulling out money from their pockets at the cost of their sufferings. Several *aamils* have been reported and even arrested for acts of torment on their followers or rather customers, especially females and minors. Many of the *aamils* have been accused of sexual advances and harassment in addition to rapes and murders (Shaffer 2012).

### Causes for Increase in the Number of Fake *Aamils*

Numerous causes tend to contribute to the problem of fake spiritual healing in Pakistan. The primary causes have been discussed below:

***Illiteracy*** – A major factor responsible for the growth of fake *aamils* in Pakistan is the high rate of illiteracy that prevails in the country, which consequently leads to ignorance. Pakistan ranked 113 among 120 countries across the world with respect to literacy rate. As a result, there is lack of awareness and knowledge among people regarding the basics of religion, which leads to them being easily fooled by fake spiritual/faith healers (Imaduddin 2012).

A survey was carried out by *Daily Times*, with the purpose to disclose facts about fake spiritual healing to the people of Pakistan. Imam Bari, retired Associate Professor of Karachi University's Mass Communication Department blatantly said that illiteracy is the primary cause for the growth of fake spiritual healers. He stated that deficiency of education has been a major causal factor liable for masses of people being influenced by *aamils*. He was of the view that basic knowledge about the religion of Islam should be passed on to people in order to create awareness among them with regard to religion and spiritual matters as well.

It is true that people in Pakistan exhibit 'herd behaviour' in several instances and tend to follow others blindfolded instead of contemplating on the problems and attempting to solve them through the means of knowledge and rationality. Poor literacy rates and lack of education particularly among the people of rural areas and slums (where *aamils* thrive) play a major role in developing a mindset of ignorance. Thereby, in place of reasoning and questioning, illiterate and ignorant people establish unswerving trust on the *aamils* and follow their orders with utmost sincerity.

Bari also discussed the role of Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), stating that it is the responsibility of PEMRA to take immediate and strict action against the morning shows that tend to promote spurious *aamils* (Azhar 2012).

**Insecurity** – Sense of Insecurity, particularly among the lower and middle sections of Pakistani society is another reason that has led to people from these classes of the society seeking help from *aamils*. Hina Khan, a professor of History at the Karachi University stated that there is a growing feeling among the middle and lower classes of the society that they will not be able to achieve their aims, objectives, targets, goals and positions just through perseverance and efforts. This rising feeling of insecurity among the people of this country is due to corruption, injustice, failure of institutions and departments. Unfortunately, these people fall into a vicious circle which worsens their social and economic conditions as they continuously have to keep paying the *aamil*. Consequently, social mobility also declines massively.

Moreover, she said that the uneducated people, who otherwise find it difficult to achieve success, feeling helpless, tend

to resort to these fake *aamils* to find ways of achieving success through means of vice and supernaturalism (*Ibid.*).

**Economic Conditions** – Poor economic conditions prevailing in the country over the years has been a source of tremendous frustration and depression among the people as they are not able to meet their basic needs and are deprived of even the basic rights and amenities of life. When people from the lower and middle classes are unable to feed their children or fulfill the fundamental requirements of the family members; then a sense of rage, deprivation and despair engulfs them. With desperation, they approach the *aamils* to help them in improving the economic conditions, who in most cases, take advantage of these distressed people by befooling them and extracting money from them in the name of fees.

Zubair Mansoori, who is a senior journalist and columnist, said that frustration and dissatisfaction in the society are today at their highest levels with every individual wishing and demanding more than his essential needs, irrespective of the fact whether it comes through illegal or unjust means. He also went on to say that the framework and structure of the society has changed and become more fragile as people have lost trust in each other. Hence, they are reluctant to share and discuss their problems and quandaries with each other but with their *aamils* (*Ibid.*).

**Irresponsible Media** – A major and growing cause for increased in the number of fake *aamils* has been the irresponsible attitude of Pakistan's media. A segment of the media is encouraging these activities by organizing morning shows. On the role of media, Hina Khan explicitly said that morning shows were creating trouble in the society by goading people to get engaged in spiritual healing activities. And since the spiritual healers endorsed on these shows are mostly spiritual-cum-faith scholars, so these channels, in the attempt of gaining ratings, finish up portraying a negative image of Muslims as well as Islam. She said that Muslims do not require unreasonable solutions to their dilemmas. The competition among television channels with regard to ratings and gaining larger viewership has led them to cross boundaries in order to beat each other's performance. The trend of morning shows featuring *aamils* began with one channel coming up with the idea and then, it was replicated by all other channels.

Umair bin Riaz, media professional and analyst, states that core target viewers of the morning shows are women and it is a widely held belief that women are more superstitious and gullible as compared to men, so TV channels broadcast these morning shows with *aamils* as guests to attract the female segment of the society. Regrettably, the sad part of the story is that this strategy adopted by the media houses has been working quite successfully for them. Since these shows have been receiving good ratings, television channels find them easy means to attract viewers instead of telecasting quality shows which could enhance the understanding and rationale of the audiences.

Not only these shows tend to promote superstition directly but they also indirectly advertise the fraud business of fake *aamils*. Though these measures have brought high ratings to the channels, but this has come to the detriment of emotions and beliefs of the innocent viewers. Riaz was quite blunt in saying that though media proclaims that it shows reality, but by conducting these shows; media houses, instead of building the rationale of people and educating them about how to deal with the challenges of life, they are teaching them to seek solutions to their problems with the help of magic and superstition, which would result in the elimination of all their problems, dilemmas and tensions through evil spirits.

He also went on to say that due to these enticing shows, TV channels alter viewers' beliefs and persuade them to believe things which otherwise they would not, thereby grossly violating the principles and ethics of media. The argument given by TV channels for airing these shows is that people demand these shows, hence they only respond to the demands of the people. However, while giving these arguments, they forget that media has become an important pillar of the society and, consequently, has the responsibility to lead the people by imparting knowledge and education to them in order to build their rationale. However, if media responds to people's demand without paying attention to its basic duties and principles of ethics, then, it is the nation which would suffer on the whole.

Riaz also went on to add that though such shows might bring ratings and benefits to the media houses in the short run but in the long run, they not only inflict a damaging effect on the society but also on the credibility and reputation of media houses themselves.

The emergence of social media has proved that reality cannot be hidden for too long. Though a large percentage of the viewers might fall prey to the trickery of the dubious *aamils* on the shows but there would be a small percentage that would be able to gauge the truth and consequently expose it. Media houses need to bear in mind that people cannot be kept on befooling for ages.

Asmat Ara, another professor of the Mass Communication Department stated that though the media is supposed to show the right way to the people of the country, but in Pakistan, the attitude of media has been rather dismal and irresponsible. It has been misleading the masses by freely and wrongly publicizing fake *aamils*. In her view, TV channels must realize sooner than later as to what they should broadcast and what they should not (*Ibid.*).

### **Activities of Fake *Aamils***

***Sexual Harassment and Rape*** – Fake *aamils* in Pakistan have been accused, arrested and proved in several instances on the account of sexually harassing women and raping them. Innocent and illiterate women of Pakistan who often get influenced by fake *aamils* and go on to believe in them as the ‘healers’. Fake *aamils* often take advantage of the trust that women place in them. They not only befool them but have been reported to conduct sexual intercourse with women and girls who approach them, proclaiming it to be an essential part of the healing process, which is certainly regrettable. And unfortunately, these poor women tend to believe these fake *aamils* and fall prey to their heinous intentions. Consequently, not only these women lose honour, but their problems, instead of being healed tend to aggravate as later these fake *aamils* pull out from their promise and commitment to cure the diseases and problems of these women. There have been several cases reported in this regard in Pakistan, some of which have been briefly discussed below.

**Case 1** - On 12<sup>th</sup> January, 2013, a case was published in *Pakistan Today* about a fake *aamil* who is being searched by the police as he has been reported of attempting to rape a women in the name of so called ‘healing process’. The woman, Sonia, reported to the police that she had sought the help of an *aamil* (spiritual healer) named Sajjad Baba for a *taweez* (amulet), whose location was in the suburbs of Islamabad. Upon sharing her



problem with the *aamil*, he asked her for Rs. 70,000 and a black goat in order to cure her problem. She fulfilled his orders. However, after no change in her condition, Sonia again went to the *aamil*, who then called her to a room where he was found naked. He jumped at her and told her that sexual intercourse was necessary in order to cure her. Sonia somehow managed to escape from the *aamil* and reported the incident to the local police station and report was lodged (Correspondent 2013).

**Case 2** - Another case was published in *Roznama* newspaper on December 15, 2011 about a fake *aamil* named Ajab Khan who was arrested by the police. Ajab Khan admitted that he had played with seven women's honour. According to the culprit, he was a resident of Dera Ismail Khan and had come to Karachi in the year 2000 and established his foothold in different parts of the city. He used to offer services of spiritual healing alongside amulets. With the passage of time, women began to visit him for his services. However, he began to take advantage of them by giving them a *taweez* along with intoxicating drink which the visiting woman was asked to drink it instantly. On consuming the drink, the visitor would go unconscious and then he used to undress them and take images of their nude bodies. Later on, using those images, he began to blackmail those women in order to have sexual intercourse with him and to provide him money. The innocent women fell into his trap and sold their honour to him in order to save themselves from disgrace in the society. Recently, Ajab Khan, had detained a woman named Rehana at his place and used to dishonour her constantly until she managed to escape from his trap and reported to the police (<http://www.pakistaniscandals.com>).

**Case 3** - On August 14, 2012, Islamabad Police was successful in arresting a fake *aamil* who was guilty of blackmailing and raping women that used to visit him for cure of their psychological and spiritual problems. The accused was arrested on the basis of a complaint launched by the husband of a victim woman. The husband said that his wife had the problem of hallucinations and the fake *aamil* (name not disclosed in the original article) raped her on numerous occasions and extracted money from the husband by using the photographs and videos that he had made of his wife during the relationship. It was not the story of just this woman; the accused had been involved in raping



women behind the veil of treatment and cure. And on every occasion, he used to make videos and photographs of women visiting him by getting them undressed. When the police cracked down on his clinic, photographs and videos of several victims were found. The complainant reported that when his wife used to refuse from entering into an intercourse with him, the accused used to get it done at gunpoint. The accused had also been paid up to Rs 15000 by the complainant upon blackmail (Azeem 2012).

**Money Extraction** – As discussed above, instead of healing and providing cure to their visitors and followers, numerous *aamils* in the country have been found to be fraudulent and befool the people visiting them in order to extract more and more money from them (Kamal 2011). A case in this regard is discussed below:

**Case 4-** It is a case of Umair Alam, who was deceived by a fake *aamil*. Having been fooled by them, Umair is disgruntled and adamantly states that he does not place trust in them any more as he himself has been a victim of their devious skills and trickery. He says that he had paid Rs. 25,000 to an *aamil*, who had a clinic in Surjani Town of Karachi. He did so in order to find a cure to a grim household problem in which he was trapped. The fake spiritual healer had made a promise to Umair that he would be able to solve all his problems within a month and a half. However, as the time passed by, Umair's problems did not change. When Umair demanded back his money, the fake *aamil* blatantly refused to return the money and said that his problem could only be solved in exchange of more cash (Correspondent 2011).

**Threats and Attacks** – Some fake *aamils* have been known to possess armed men and groups in order to ensure smooth operation of their trickery business. These *aamils* have also been reportedly involved in attacks on people and media teams that have made an attempt to uncover their dirty business.

**Case 5** - A similar case was reported in Orangi town of Karachi where agents of fake *aamil*, after being exposed, had attacked and beaten Samaa Television channel's media team while the police did nothing to protect them. It was a secret operation carried out by Samaa TV to uncover the fake *aamil*'s deceitful business through which he had fooled many a people of the area and had been able to gain money and valuables from them in return of false promises. The police team which was supposed to protect

the media crew only watched the incident as an audience, which reflects that police is also involved and supports the business of the fake *aamil* (Samaa TV 2013).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Without an iota of doubt, the issue of fake *aamils* is one of the growing social evils that Pakistan is currently encountering. As discussed earlier, fake *aamils* have affected our nation, particularly the middle and lower classes of the society. Not only illiterate but literate people have also been influenced by these fake *aamils* and have thereby suffered (Correspondent 2012, May 29). On the whole, Pakistan's image has been hurt globally with increasing number of cases about fake *aamils* being reported in the local media. However, this increasing menace needs to be tackled at the earliest. Some of the measures that can be adopted to combat the peril of fake *aamils* are given below:

**Improving Media's Role** – Over the years, media has established itself as an important pillar of the nation and consequently huge responsibility also rests on its shoulders to guide the society towards the right path. Referring back to the causes of rise in the number of fake *aamils* in Pakistan, irresponsible attitude of media houses has been one important factor. Media channels are continuously conducting morning shows with fake *aamils* as their guests and thereby they have been promoting fake *aamils* indirectly and also their business of trickery. Hence PEMRA which is the regulatory authority of media needs to realize its role in this regard and take strict notice and action against the television channels, which just for the sake of ratings conduct *aamil* oriented shows on their channels. Censorship needs to be enhanced to greater levels and severe penalties should be imposed on channels that violate the policies set by PEMRA in this regard.

Further, media houses themselves need to understand their role in the development and progress of nation. The country is already suffering from various other plagues and evils and cannot afford to be further affected by the menace of fake spiritual healing. Media channels should rather play a constructive role and should aim to educate the nation to face their challenges and

problems in a realistic manner instead of resorting to means of trickery and supernaturalism (Azhar 2012).

**Improving Literacy** – Low literacy rates have been a cause of numerous problems in Pakistan. In the case of fake *aamils* also, low literacy is one of the root causes. As far as the government is concerned, it needs to increase spending on the education sector which has so far been grossly neglected. According to Zakir Hussain, Vice Chancellor of Government College University Faisalabad, government should increase the spending on education upto 4% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). He also went on to say that it is primarily the responsibility of parents to educate their children and ensure that they receive at least primary education.

In this manner, improving literacy in Pakistan is very critical in order to raise the awareness levels of the population so that they could differentiate between real and fake, truth and false, right and wrong. Education is also necessary so that people understand Islam in true colours and not get fooled by the so called faith/spiritual healers who in the name of Islam befool and deceive people (Correspondent 2012, September 26).

**Reducing Insecurity** – Reducing the sense of insecurity among the people of the country, especially those belonging to the middle and lower strata of the society is equally important. Government, being the biggest stakeholder in terms of power and resources, needs to adopt a more proactive role in this regard. Government, at federal and provincial level, should rigorously aim to reduce corruption, bribery and failure of institutions so that the common man can place trust in the system and does not have to rely on means of spirits, magic and fake *aamils* for success in life (Azhar 2012).

**Improving Economic Conditions** – People have been going to the fake *aamils* to improve their economic conditions and to escape the realms of poverty. This is primarily because ever since Pakistan was established, successive governments have not been able to provide economic stability to the country and the conditions of the poor have only worsened over the years. The menace of fake *aamils* can be overcome substantially provided the government is able to improve the economic conditions of the people so that the majority of the population is able to fulfill its needs and requirements and that of its dependants too. She further said that

the government should employ favourable policies and strategies towards the people so that they can successfully achieve their objectives with perseverance and personal endeavours rather than means of trickery and deceit (*Ibid.*).

**Change of Attitude** – Despite the fact there is illiteracy and economic instability; people of Pakistan also need to change their mindset and attitude. They need to accept the challenges and realities of life in an upright manner and seek to resolve them through hardwork, determination and their own efforts instead of seeking solutions of magic, spirits and supernaturalism as professed by the fake *aamils*. The ‘herd behaviour’ mentality needs to be changed and a more rational approach needs to be adopted in all the spheres of life (Shaffer 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Spiritual healing has been practiced over the centuries across different cultures and religions of the world. It is an age old tradition in the region of South Asia and Pakistan as well. In recent times, there has been a large increase in the number of fake spiritual healers (*aamils*) in Pakistan and this menace has hurt the nation tremendously. Though official statistics about fake *aamils* are non-existent but it has been reported in various sources that the network of *aamils* is quite extensive throughout the country particularly in Karachi. It has had a very negative impact on the lives of the individuals who had sought assistance from the fake spiritual healers. Several women have not only lost their money but also lost their honour at the hands of the fake *aamils* who influenced them in the veil of healing and then conducted rape with them. Moreover, these fake *aamils* have been successful in extracting large sums of money from the innocent and uneducated people of the country by befooling them. Later on, these *aamils* go on to blackmail, threat and attack these people. There have been numerous factors which have together contributed to the promulgation of this evil. These factors include low levels of literacy and awareness, deteriorating economic conditions, increasing sense of insecurity and irresponsible behavior of media. It is the need of the hour that this menace is overcome and this can only be done if people change their attitudes, media understands its true role and sense of responsibility towards the nation, literacy

and economic conditions improve, and sense of insecurity is eliminated.

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