

Article

Sorcery as Cure: Medicine in Mughal India (1526-1707)

Md Azharrul Haque Mallick^{1*}

1. Department of History and Culture, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India.

*Corresponding Author:
azharmallick2011@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Sorcery and its intertwining with medicine have deep roots in Indian cultural and spiritual traditions, persisting through the Mughal period (1526-1707). The Mughal rulers, who were patrons of the Unani and Ayurvedic medical systems, also indirectly acknowledged the role of sorcery in healthcare. While Unani and Ayurvedic practitioners enjoyed state support and prominence, sorcerers, operating without official endorsement, played a vital role in medieval Indian society, particularly among the rural and lower classes. Sorcerers, believed to wield supernatural powers, provided accessible and affordable healthcare, often addressing ailments thought to be caused by spiritual or supernatural forces—an area beyond the reach of conventional physicians and hakims. This study examines the dual role of sorcerers as both healers and practitioners of magic within the Mughal medical landscape. Sorcerers offered various treatments, including herbal remedies, magical spells, and rituals, sometimes involving animal or human sacrifices. Their methods, although lacking scientific validation, were perceived as effective by a populace deeply entrenched in spiritual and magical beliefs.

Keywords: Medicine, Sorcery, Magic, Mughal Empire, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Sorcery has been a part of Indian culture and traditions for thousands of years. In ancient India, sorcery was often associated with the practice of Tantra, which involved the use of various rituals, mantras, and meditations to harness supernatural forces and energies. Sorcery was seen as a means of achieving spiritual enlightenment and liberation as well as a way of attaining worldly benefits such as wealth, power, and success. Sorcery continued to be an important part of Indian culture and traditions during the Mughal period.

The Mughal rulers were patrons of medicine and encouraged the growth of the Unani and Ayurvedic medical systems in India. The influx of Iranian physicians also greatly contributed to this development. The physician's profession

also rose to prominence alongside other professions. While physicians and hakims were held in high regard and enjoyed the support of the Mughal state. In recognition of the valuable contributions they made, physicians were raised to the generous mansabs and high wages. Sorcerers made up yet another group that was active at the same time in combating disease, illness, and other problems associated with health. Even though they did not receive financial assistance or favours from the state, they played a vital role in medieval Indian medicine that was on par with that of physicians.

Sorcerers are basically a group of persons who practises magic, and they are believed to have the ability to cast spells and control supernatural forces. Sorcerers were inextricably linked to the common masses, particularly in rural and peripheral areas. It appears they were also present

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in capital cities like Delhi and Agra¹. Bernier says they used to travel throughout the country, and he also called these sorcerers “extraordinary persons.” Ali Sher Khani in his book *Tohfatul Kiram* mentions that several people of Sindh practice magic and incantations. Khafi Khan has also mentioned that sorcery and magic were very popular in the region of Assam. And it is through the sorcery there, that most of the diseases and illnesses were treated.³ Their presence in the region of Bengal was also noted by Jahangir⁴. People used to consult them not just in health-related issues. But their help and advice were also sought in personal, family, and other social matters. As many of them used to live the ascetic life, this way they were considered more reliable in the sight of people, and they were believed to be free from greed and other worldly desires. Further, their expertise in mystical and magical knowledge makes it seem to the general public that they possess divine knowledge, enabling them to handle or treat illnesses better than any other ordinary human being.

The Indians were accustomed to consulting sorcerers not only in things pertaining to their health, but also in all matters that were beyond their ability or outside the realm of logical possibility. As Bernier states,

“The people imagine that these favoured beings are well acquainted with the art of making gold, and that they can prepare mercury in so admirable manner that a grain or two swallowed every morning must restore a diseased body to vigorous health, and so strengthen the stomach that it may feed with avidity, and digest with ease. They tell any person his thoughts, cause the branch of a tree to blossom and to bear fruit within an hour, hatch an egg in their bosom in less than fifteen minutes, producing whatever bird may be demanded, and make it fly about the room, and execute many other prodigies”⁵

Magicians played a significant role in the everyday lives of Indians during the mediaeval period. Robbers and thieves were apprehended with their help⁶, and sorcery was even employed to trap animals like crocodiles⁷ or to prevent crops from theft⁸. An intriguing incident involving the Gujarati baniyas is recorded by Muhnta Nainsi. Due to subsequent bumper harvests in Gujarat, there was no demand in the market for the substantial amount of hoarded grain. The merchants suffered a significant loss as a result. In the end, they turned to sorcerers, whose efforts prevented rain from falling in villages of Kelakot for the entire year. Because of this, the merchants were able to sell all of their stockpiles of hoarded goods⁹.

However, the role of sorcerers was not just limited to the performance of magic and sorcery. People also sought their services in the diagnosis and treatment of illness. In Medieval society, sorcerers were often employed to treat illnesses and wounds since they were sometimes viewed as the professional equivalents of physicians and hakims. Amir Khusrau greatly admired the medieval sorcerers' and their expertise in curing and treatment of disease. In his book *Nuh Sipihr*, he claims – “Indian sorcerers have the potential to revive a person who has passed away and restore them to full health”. Amir Khusrau further lauds their abilities that “even after six months, they can resurrect a man bitten by a snake and made dumb.”¹⁰

In Medieval Indian, both sorcerers and the practise of magic were very common. During the time of the Mughals, it was common practise to employ magical practises in the treatment of medical conditions. They gave access to much-needed medical care to those who might not have otherwise had it, and their understanding of spiritual healing practises and herbal remedies were revered and appreciated. Particularly in rural areas or among the poorer sections of society, where patients might not have had access to professional medical care, sorcerers frequently filled the role of physicians. People would seek out sorcerers for their expertise in herbal cures and spiritual healing methods, which were often thought to be more accessible and safer than the traditional medical treatments provided by doctors. The high prices that hakims and physicians used to charge their patients was one more factor that encouraged common people to seek help from sorcerers. According to what Manucci recounts, the Indian Hakim used to despise him due to the low prices or lack of prices that he charged for the treatments. On the other hand, These sorcerers used to charge nothing or very little money, especially when compared to medical professionals.

The ability of sorcerers to identify and treat diseases caused by supernatural powers, which were outside the scope of traditional medicine, was another reason for people to seek them out. In medieval Indian society, where magic, ghosts, and curses were widely believed in, sorcerers were particularly valuable. Since doctors and Hakims were unable to identify or treat illnesses thought to be brought on by supernatural powers, sorcerers were frequently sought out to treat such ailments. This preference gave sorcerers the chance to demonstrate their expertise in treating other medical conditions. Magic and other forms of spiritual beliefs were often considered complementary to traditional

- 1 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 215.
- 2 Bernier, F. (1916). *Travels in the Mogul Empire 1656-1668 AD* (V. Smith, Trans.). London: p. 321.
- 3 Khan, K. (2007). *Muntakhab ul Lubab* (M. A. Faruqi, Trans.), Mughlia Daur i Hukumat (Vol. IV). New Delhi: p. 159.
- 4 Jahangir. (1829). *Memoirs of the Emperor Jahangueir* (D. Price, Trans.). London: p. 96.
- 5 Bernier, F. (1916). *Travels in the Mogul Empire 1656-1668 AD* (V. Smith, Trans.). London: p. 321.
- 6 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 213.
- 7 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London (Vol. 3): p. 94.
- 8 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London (Vol. 3): p. 134.
- 9 Nainsi, M. (1962). Khyat (B. P. Sakaria, Ed.). Jodhpur (Vol. II, pp. 225-226), cited in S. A. N. Rezavi, *Urban Middle Classes in Mughal India*. Aligarh, 2006.
- 10 Elliot, H. M., & Dowson, J. (1871). *The History of India as told by its own historians* (Vol. III). London: p. 563.

medical practices. Patients received psychological support from them, which helped them cope with the stress and anxiety brought on by their illnesses. Additionally, it was believed that sorcerers had a beneficial effect on the patients' overall physical health.

An incident that occurred during the reign of Aurangzeb in 1672 further reveals the people's belief in sorcery. The Satnamis of Narnaul rebelled against the Mughal officers in 1672 and initially defeated several Mughal troops sent to suppress the rebellion. The medieval Indian society attached great significance to sorcery, and during the Satnami Rebellion, it became popularly believed that the leader of the rebellion was a sorceress. Many other magical fantasies also circulated. As a result of these stories, the imperial army started losing morale against the Satnamis. Eventually, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb was forced to lead the army himself against the Satnamis. He also resorted to using a sorcerer's method, namely the writing of magical spells. He wrote some prayers and devices with his own hands, which he ordered to be sewn onto banners carried against the rebels. It is evident that Aurangzeb wrote these prayers to rebuild the confidence and morale of his army, who were supposedly fighting against an army of magicians. He presented these prayers as a defense against the magical offenses of the Satnamis. Interestingly, for this act, Manucci referred to Aurangzeb as a master of witchcraft. Additionally, he claimed that Aurangzeb's spells were more successful than those of the elderly woman, and that they ultimately triumphed^{11,12}.

Jahangir has mentioned that a group of seven sorcerers approached him in his court and entertained him along with the courtiers with a couple of magic tricks¹³. He also writes that he had often seen the performances of such magicians in the court of his father Akbar¹⁴. It appears, based on a painting in the Hamza Nama, produced in the court of Akbar, that reads as "Muzmahil was being treated by sorcerers in the guise of physicians,"¹⁵ that some of these sorcerers also used to infiltrate the Mughal court while posing as physicians. Because there was no apparent distinction between the two, and their tools were also nearly identical to one another, it was quite easy for the sorcerers to impose themselves as physicians in the Mughal court.

Both the sorcerers and doctors practised medicine and played a role, but their approaches to the treatment of patient's were often at odds with one another. Physicians, to treat serious illnesses and injuries relied on established medical knowledge and treatments and their knowledge of

anatomy, physiology, and traditional medical treatments was highly valued. While sorcerers relied on their knowledge of magic and spiritual beliefs to diagnose and treat illnesses. They were sought out for their expertise in diagnosing and treating illnesses caused by supernatural forces, and their knowledge of herbal remedies and spiritual healing techniques.

According to Manucci, there were some medical professionals who also possessed some sorcery knowledge and abilities. They combine their abilities in order to provide effective treatment for the ailments¹⁶. He says that many Indian physicians have no understanding of human anatomy, hence to compensate their lack of knowledge they rely on sorcery. However, the sorcery and sorcerers were equally utilised by the European physicians for the treatment of disease or illness.¹⁷

The belief that peoples had in spirits and other supernatural beings was another factor that drove them to seek treatment from sorcerers. The medieval Indians attributed to these spirits a variety of ailments that were beyond their knowledge. As sorcerers, they were thought to either physically possess some of these spirits or to have the ability to counteract the influence of those spirits.

The woman of the house appeared to be in excruciating pain. They consulted with physicians, but those professionals were unable to identify the nature of her illness, and the treatments that were prescribed to her did not help. The lady continued to suffer in the same manner for a number of days. After that they consulted a sorcerer.^{18,19} A Mughal court physician's daughter became pregnant, but she was unable to give birth at the appropriate time and was in imminent danger of passing away. She was unable to find relief from either her father or the other doctors. They enlisted the most intelligent and seasoned professionals in their field. Failing to find any cure, they employed sorcerers in the end.

According to an instance that was documented by Manucci, even the highest-ranking nobles at the Mughal court sought the assistance of sorcerers for the treatment of disease. In this particular instance, Amanat Khan, the governor of Lahore, favoured the employing sorcerers above the services of physicians. In addition, Khafi Khan relates the story of a Mughal lord who, in an effort to discover a process that might transform stone into gold, sought the assistance of a sorcerer.²⁰

Manucci, moreover relates a story to us about an incident

11 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 168.

12 Jahangir. (1829). *Memoirs of the Emperor Jahangueir* (D. Price, Trans.). London: p. 96.

13 Jahangir. (1829). *Memoirs of the Emperor Jahangueir* (D. Price, Trans.). London: p. 104.

14 Rezavi, S. A. N. (2006). *Urban Middle Classes in Mughal India*. Aligarh: p. 454.

15 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London.

16 Jahangir. (n.d.). *Jahangirnama*. p. 108.

17 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London (Vol. 3): p. 408.

18 Khan, K. (2007). *Muntakhab ul Lubab* (M. A. Faruqi, Trans.), Mughlia Daur i Hukumat. New Delhi: p. 469.

19 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 208.

20 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 219.

in which a sorcerer was asked to heal a patient of nobile family who was suffering from mental illness. He said that the man was possessed by a demon but not mad. After a few days had passed, the sorcerers finally convinced the guy's guardians that the man was now sane and no longer harboured a demon within him. As a result, the guardians gave the man permission to take a stroll around a garden. However, his condition deteriorated again, and he attacked those around him, resulting in the death of one person. At last, he was referred to a European physician.²¹

2. METHODS OF TREATMENT

Many sorcerers were also known for their healing powers and were sought out by people from all walks of life for the treatment of physical and mental illnesses. They used a combination of magic, spiritual healing, and herbal remedies to cure their patients. Like traditional Unani and Ayurvedic physicians, the sorcerers also relied on herbs, plants, and natural remedies to treat the illness. However, the sorcerers' treatment often involved making sacrifices of animals or humans. They engaged in, or recommended to their patients, a variety of different types of sacrifices in the hope of ridding their patients of the negative symptoms of the disease or restoring their health.

Among them are human sacrifices, in which the sorcerers convince their patients to give up the life of another person in order to save their own lives. The housemaids, slaves, and children of the poor made for the most convenient targets for them; these individuals were either abducted specifically for this objective or enticed into a trap by deceit. Manucci narrates the story of a woman,

*Luiza Barboza, she contacted a sorcerer for a remedy for her excessive weight because she was fat. He instructed her to select a slave girl in her household, bound her hands and feet, and position her such that she was unable to move. The next step was for her to take a bath while seated on the slave woman and not get up until the woman had passed away. When Luiza Barboza accomplished this. The sorcerer then commanded that the corpse must be thrown away in the river within eight days.*²²

Additionally, Khafi Khan has also related a story in which a sorcerer demanded a boy be offered as a sacrifice.²³

Another form of sacrifice involves the sacrifice of wealth. where a patient is expected to pay for the sorcerers' expenses and efforts to cure their disease. A woman who wanted to know how long her daughter would live, so she consulted with a sorcerer to find out the answer. He responded by saying that she would not have much longer to live if she did not receive treatment as soon as possible. The sorcerer

*then conditioned the treatment, that she has to fund the required amount in order to meet the expenses that are associated with the rituals that have to be carried out. She sent a gold ornament to be melted down in order to satisfy these requirements. In addition, she handed him a band made of silver, her gold rings, a silver bow and arrow, a gold chain, as well as a variety of silk and white cotton cloth, and she also included fifty rupees as a contribution towards the costs incurred. All of this was presented to the sorcerer as a gift, and he brought it back to his residence with him. After the completion of the ritual, the sorcerer was sent off with additional gifts and an abundance of appreciation.*²⁴

Sometimes, they recommended strange rituals and sacrifices for treatment, such as in the case of a woman who wanted to have a child. Initially, she tried medicines and drugs. However, when her attempts failed, she finally sought the help of a magician for treatment. The sorcerer advised her to go and stand below a large banyan (badd) tree in the forest at midnight. He further advised her to perform certain sacrifices there. According to the report by Manucci, as a result of this treatment, she became pregnant, and the tree where she performed these sacrifices became sterile and never yielded any fruit.²⁵

Another method of treatment by sorcerers was the use of dolls, commonly known as voodoo dolls nowadays. Manucci tells the story of a sorceress named Lunna in Cochin who earned her living by selling devil dolls in the form of rats, rings, jewels, buttons, flowers, and so on. These dolls were used as replicas of real human beings.²⁶ The sorcerers would experiment with these dolls in order to treat their patients, rather than directly involving the patients themselves. One sorcerer gave a similar doll to Suzana Borges for her treatment and recommended that she interact with it as if it were a living person. Later, he convinced her to bury the doll in a similar manner to burying an actual human being.²⁷

Magical spells were another form of treatment exercised by the sorcerers. They guide the patient to chant or recite certain spells to relive the effect of illness. These spells were believed to have the power to heal, and they were often used in conjunction with other treatments such as herbal remedies. Magical spells are still considered as part of medicine. It was also practiced by the physicians and hakims.²⁸ Apart from it, the sorcerer utilized the amulets and talismans to protect patients from harm and to promote healing. These were often made from materials such as herbs, stones, or woods, and they were believed to have special powers.

21 Khan, K. (2007). *Muntakhab ul Lubab* (M. A. Faruqi, Trans.), Mughlia Daur i Hukumat. New Delhi: p. 470.

22 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 215.

23 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 200.

24 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 223.

25 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 215.

26 Khan, S. M. (1947). *Maasir i Alamgiri* (J. Sarkar, Trans.). Calcutta: p. 303.

27 Rezavi, S. A. N. (2006). *Urban Middle Classes in Mughal India*. Aligarh: p. 182.

28 Manucci, N. (1907). *Storia Do Mogor, or Mogul India, 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans.). London: p. 201.

3. CONCLUSION

The role of sorcerers in Mughal society was complex and multifaceted. Sorcerers' use of sorcery as a form of medical treatment was not without its drawbacks and restrictions. As the practice of sorcerers did not adhere to any scientific methodology and instead relied heavily on empirical experience and knowledge, there is a good chance that, if not executed properly, the sorcerers' techniques could also cause harm. In addition, the use of herbs and other types of remedies by sorcerers may be injurious or have an adverse interaction with other types of treatment. This was especially true if the practitioner lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to properly diagnose and treat diseases.

In the absence of an institution or legal authorization, the area of sorcery was open to anyone, resulting in the proliferation of fraudulent and dishonest sorcerers. These sorcerers were exactly the same as what is termed by Nadeem Rizavi as the Bazaar physicians. Manucci narrates the ordeal of a woman in Bassein, who had no child to inherit her wealth. She reached out to a sorcerer who, by trickery, made it appear that she was pregnant. However,

after a time when the time of birth came, the foul play of the sorcerer was revealed unto her.

These sorcerers frequently engaged in unregulated practices, making it impossible to ensure that their patients received the highest level of medical attention that was available. In addition, oversight and accountability were lacking, and patients were frequently left to rely on the abilities and knowledge of individual practitioners. Hence, there was a general distrust of sorcerers and their methodology.

Despite the importance of sorcerers in providing medical care in the Mughal period, their practices were often viewed as unscientific and superstitious by the medical establishment, including physicians. Sorcerers and sorcery were not always accepted by Mughal society as a whole. Some even accused them of heresy, and their acts were considered superstitious and fraudulent. However, there were a high number of people who used to consult them for the treatment of family and health-related issues. Manucci makes mention of Europeans and even the Mughal nobles taking the help of these sorcerers.

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Author Bio:

1. Mr. Mallick currently pursuing the Ph.D. from the Department of History and Culture at Jamia Millia Islamia. He is working on the history of Aruangeb in urdu literature.