

[Sacred Psychiatry](#)

Category : [March 1997](#)

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MENTAL HEALTH

Sacred Psychiatry

In Kerala the mentally disturbed have a remarkable alternative to drugs and dungeons

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My wife developed mental problems when she was pregnant in 1965. All types of treatment, from modern medicine to naturopathy, failed," recounts Mr. Shreedharan Nair. "Then one of my friends suggested she be taken to the Chottanikkara Devi Temple. So as a last resort, I brought her while she was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. Initially, she would become violent, but gradually she calmed down. After one month, she was perfectly OK, and had given birth normally. It was the blessing of Chottanikkara Amma." Nair bought a house near the temple, and the couple now has four healthy and well-educated children.

Such cures are by no means unusual at the Goddess temple near Cochin in India's southwestern state of Kerala. Indeed, the entire routine of the temple is systematically geared toward obtaining divine relief for the afflicted. It is a haven of solace for the mentally disturbed, psychically possessed and people with various other ailments, such as epilepsy or

Alzheimer's disease. Not a single day passes here without at least five afflicted devotees checking into the lodges on the temple's periphery. Dr. Krishna Iyer, a practicing allopathic and ayurvedic physician, attests to the temple's power. "The remedial and curative effect of the worship of the Devi, shrouded as it is in the magnificent mystery of total devotion and faith, has been an enigma challenging scientific assessment."

"Buy these kirtan books of Chottanikkara Amma! By meditation and chanting please the Mother, and you will achieve solace from your agonies," shouts Meenakshi Kunjamma at visitors as they enter the temple gates. The 65-year-old book hawker was herself brought to the temple as a violent lunatic 35 years ago. "It is just because of the grace of the Goddess that I am now here earning my bread," she states with gratitude.

The temple maintains a strict daily schedule of worship and devotional activities for those those seeking relief. They are expected to begin the day 3:45 am with a bath in the temple pond--dug deep, long and wide out of the hard, red Laterite soil. Its water remains slightly warm early in the chilly morning, and contains some medicinal properties. It serves the same purpose as the warm water boiled with medicinal herbs prescribed by ayurveda. Next they go before the sanctum sanctorum to worship the Goddess during the early morning pujas known as nirmalyam, followed by the pantheeradi puja lasting about three hours. After this long ritual, they are given about five mg of panchagarya, a medicated ghee prepared in the temple and blessed with mantras. This ghee, consumed on an empty stomach, is a crucial part of the treatment. The next

worship rite is noon, after which sweet rice is served. At 3:30 pm, the sick again bathe in the pond, then return to the sanctum for puja and bhajana led by the temple's musicians until 8 pm. Guruthi puja is the last of the day, conducted at the Bhadrakali temple in the compound. Those who observe this strict routine with devotion are usually cured in a week to three months.

Bhaskaran Nair's wife lost her mental equilibrium when she was five months pregnant. She suffered from chest congestion, giddiness, weakness in her limbs and frequent loss of emotional control. "I spent large sums of money on her treatment, but to no avail," Nair told Hinduism Today. "Elders advised me to take her to the temple. At first she would become violent, and refused to stand before the Goddess. If forced to stand, she would yell and tremble. We continued like this for three months, strictly observing the rituals and temple routine. Finally, she was cured." Nair decided to settle down near the temple, as have many others who were cured. The family worships daily and Nair spends much of his time doing free service at the temple.

In certain cases it is suspected that evil spirits have made the person insane. After a specified period of time, these people will push a nail into a tree close to the Bhadrakali temple in the complex, either by hand or by knocking it with the forehead. According to witnesses, the person will fall back and soon after return to normalcy. The thick tree is now studded with long nails.

In the West, "crazy" people are often locked up in asylums, an

environment in which it is difficult to regain one's sanity. In the past some were physically restrained; now powerful drugs stupefy them into docility. The Hindu community of India has always accepted people of abnormal behavior as part of the community. Keralites have gone even a step further, and are blessed with this sacred, disciplined environment where real cures are happening.

Chottanikkara Devi Temple,
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Sidebar: But What About Freud?

Examining therapies

Cures by a Goddess! "All fine and good," some may think, "for superstitious village people, but not for modern, scientifically-minded folk like me." Think again. "Modern" methods of psychotherapy may be hard put to beat the Goddess in a head to head match. Consider, for example, classical psychotherapy founded by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century. He attributed many mental disorders to the unconscious part of the mind. Treatment by a trained therapist (a "headshrinker") goes on for years and calls for as many as five one-hour, US\$100 sessions each week--\$26,000 a year. The objective is to understand the person's current behavior by delving deep into their past, especially their childhood experiences. There are two shorter-term and therefore cheaper methods: cognitive-behavioral therapy, which seeks to change or rid one of unwanted thoughts or behavior (beat your fear of spiders by holding a spider), and interpersonal

therapy, focused on the patient's relationships to others (the "I'm OK, you're OK" group approach). Then there are drugs, these days Prozac, consumed in prodigious quantities in America for depression and other emotional disorders. For the truly masochistic, there is electroconvulsive therapies (made famous in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest") which delivers electric shocks to the head. And, yes, lobotomies are still performed.

But there is a big problem. The Scientific American reported in December, 1996, that in comparative tests of methods for treatment of the most common mental ailments--depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and panic attacks--"all therapies seemed to be equally effective--or ineffective." The number of people who stayed well as a result of any of these treatments, experts state, is a meagre one in four--perilously close to the likely rate of spontaneous remission. Based upon anecdotal reports and expert observations collected over many decades, Chottanikkara Amma is doing better than that.