

Book Review

Ashraf, Sana. *Finding the Enemy Within: Blasphemy Accusations and Subsequent Violence in Pakistan*. 270pp. Australian National University Press 2021.

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In the past two decades, every so often, a spectacular case of mob justice against an alleged blasphemer erupts in Pakistan, resulting in predictable handwringing by the chattering class, proclamation by the law enforcement agencies that it will punish the culprits, and coverage in the international press that fortifies the image of Pakistan as a bigoted society where blasphemy has become a highly sensitive and emotive issue. The lynching of a Sri Lankan factory manager in Sialkot on 3 December 2021 was one such incident. An English newspaper, the *Express Tribune*, proclaimed that “The nation was shell-shocked and disgusted on Friday when a Sri Lankan national was brutally lynched and his body was set on fire by a mob in Sialkot”¹

Was the nation ‘shell-shocked and disgusted’ at this heinous crime against Priyantha Kumara? It depends on who speaks for the nation. There were tweets from the Prime Minister, Chief Minister of Punjab, Chief of Army Staff, prominent politicians, and religious leaders—an unusual display of unity against this crime. Sana Ashraf’s *Finding the Enemy Within* points, however, to an alternative nation-in-the-making consisting of millions who describe themselves as lovers of the Prophet (*aashiqan-e-rasool*), ready to kill and be killed to protect his honour. Writing as an anthropologist, Sana Ashraf, deploys a ‘multi-sited’ ethnographic technique to follow those who were accused of blasphemy as well as the accusers, the lawyers’ guild that sees itself as lovers of the Prophet defending the integrity of the blasphemy statutes, and NGO’s working to help those who are accused of blasphemy. The key argument of the book is that blasphemy accusations are often triggered by interpersonal interactions but rather than writing these accusations off as personal vendettas it is more fruitful to view these incidents as “motivated simultaneously by religious-cultural ideals, emotion and personal rivalries.” (p.31) Once these accusations are made, they take on a life of their own escalating “into a shared religious concern, inciting passionate responses from a much wider audience of believers living with anxieties about their faith, their religious and national identities and the purity of their society. To the mobilised crowds, the accused becomes a symbolic figure,

‘the impure other’, who threatens national, communal and individual purity.”(p.31) There were 1,500 reported cases of blasphemy and 75 incidents of nonstate killings between 1987-2017 but the violence is not confined to the 75 killed by the mob: all those accused of blasphemy suffer grievous harm in the shape of long prison sentences, economic ruin, psychological torture and rifts in families and communities. The author adopts a range of theoretical frameworks to make sense of the damning power of blasphemy accusation regardless of the specific circumstances.

Situating herself as an insider who grew up in Pakistan persistently asking what it is to be a good Muslim, Sana Ashraf tells the reader that she wrote this book from “a place of deep sorrow and pain because I see the ideas I once admired and found comfort in being used to spread hatred and violence instead of love and peace.” (p.16) The ideas she is referring to are best summed up by the couplet of Bulleh Shah she uses as an epigraph for the introduction. The English translation does not capture the pathos of the couplet but here it is: “Tear down the mosque, demolish the temple; Break whatever you like, But do not break a person’s heart; That is where God resides.” (p.15)

The introduction outlines various Urdu terms that are used to describe what in English is the catch-all term of blasphemy. This is a highly productive exercise in delineating crucial shades of this religious offence and then explicating the difficulties of judicially determining what would constitute *gustaakhi*, *bey-hurmati* or *tauheen-e-risaalat*. These Urdu terms, though, capture the resonance for the believers who are ever anxious to guard *namoos-e-risalat*, the honour of the Prophet. Given the more nuanced shades of the Urdu terms one wished that the author had used these terms more consistently in her discussion of various cases later in the book.

Chapter one looks at the historical roots of anti-blasphemy violence in Pakistan. It covers the well-trodden path of scholarly discussion around the evolution of the Muslim

community in the subcontinent into a minority and eventually a nation. The key conclusion of the chapter is that the contemporary anti-blasphemy violence stems from nationalistic anxieties around the deviant and the different, legitimating those who bring charges of blasphemy and enabling violence against the accused. At the start of chapter two, Sana Ashraf provides a brief but highly suggestive discussion of affect that “turns ideas into passions and meaning into embodied devotion.” (p.93) The interspersing of *naat* (melodious hymns in honour of the Prophet) with vows to behead anyone who attacks *namoos-e-risalat* in the YouTube video she cites is instructive for comprehending what makes the Tehreek-e Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) a powerful player in contemporary Pakistani politics. Like the author, I found myself viscerally responding to the tonality and emotions of the *naat*. The powerful emotional resonance of the *naat* makes it a potent resource to mobilise believers’ passions against those accused of insulting the Prophet.

In the second section of chapter two she turns her attention to the historical and political circumstances that enabled a homogeneous discourse around the punishment of blasphemy. This homogeneity stems not from a consensus on what constitutes blasphemy—that is often not contested opening the path for an ever-expanding offense such “as insulting men’s beards, criticising the Pakistan Army and supporting religious minorities” as acts of *tauheen-e-risalat*.” (p.103) The consensus, based on the citation of several *hadith* and Quranic verses, is around the necessity to show no mercy to the blasphemer. The ever-expanding definition of blasphemy along with total certainty that the crime must be punished and the heterogeneity of political actors and organisations eager to defend *namoos-e-risalat* results in highly volatile politics. Tehreek-e-Labbaiq Pakistan (TLP) formed in 2015 and its founder Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi (d.2021) have emerged, for now, as the primary custodians of *namoos-e-risalat* chiefly due to obsessive reverence for the physical being of Prophet Muhammad, Rizvi’s ability to elicit the right ‘affect’ from his audience by gliding from recitation of Arabic verses to colloquial Punjabi and TLP’s success in taking over custody of the legacy of Mumtaz Qadri (assassin of governor Salman Taseer).

Chapter three delves into specific cases of blasphemy to demonstrate the dual potential of such an accusation to legitimate violence against one’s rival and “the power to grant social legitimacy, moral authority and a licence of spiritual purity to the accusers.” (p.103) Three out of the four cases discussed in depth highlight perceived sexual transgressions by the accused or a relative of the accused before the incident. For the Christian families the double jeopardy of being a religious minority and perceived as lower caste (*zaat*) makes sexual or romantic interaction with a Muslim potentially a highly provocative act leaving them vulnerable to the wrath of a community anxious about eroding moral order. Sana Ashraf notes that the accusers in most cases of blasphemy not only know the accused beforehand but also highlight the suspect

marker of the accused: Shia, Christian, Ahmadi, liberal, secular, feminist, Deobandi, etc.,

Chapter four discusses the processes after an accusation of blasphemy that may end in collective violence against the individual or in the case of Christian or Ahmadi accused, their larger community as well. Once an accusation is made the twin processes of focalisation, whereby a local incident is progressively denuded of its particulars, and transvaluation, in which the particulars of local incidents are assimilated into a larger collective cause or interest, may determine the next steps. (S. J. Tambiah, 1996) Depending upon the details of the accusation, pure chance, and the availability of outside forces eager to forward their agendas, the accusation can result in lodging of an FIR (First Information Report) with the police, nonstate violence, and in a few cases dropped charges and a resolution without serious punishment. (p. 108) The first step after an accusation is to get a *fatwa* from the local Imam, a figure who looms large in most blasphemy accusations. The Imam issues a *fatwa* in most cases and often takes charge of what happens next. The Imam may encourage non-state violence against the accused, or he may lead an effort to lodge an FIR with the police. *Fatwas* were obtained in the two cases of Christian men discussed in the chapter and what happened next in one case illustrates the interaction between means and ends of various actors. One young man emerges as a defender of one of the accused and complains about the complacency of the church fathers; he refuses to leave his home in the village that is threatened by the mob and gets the attention of NGOs and the international press, which brings government officials to the scene to look for a peaceful resolution. Another accused young woman complains about an NGO plastering her face on social media, making the target on her back even larger, and many others claim that there is a deliberate attempt by some to become victims of blasphemy accusations to get visas to go abroad or to raise funds for their organisations.

Chapters five and six focus on the clash between legal and popular justice. The failure to provide timely adjudication of blasphemy accusations by the legal system lays bare the limits of sovereignty and monopoly of violence of the Pakistani state. The multiple sovereignties at play illustrate why blasphemy accusations have become the problem from hell for the Pakistani state. Islamist groups highlight the state’s failure to implement the blasphemy statutes and their own fealty to true Islamic practices of showing no mercy to those who dare insult the Prophet. Staging violence against the accused bolsters the stock of various actors as defenders of *namoos-e-risalat*. In the last chapter Sana Ashraf brings much-needed attention to an organisation entitled Khatm-e-Nabuwat Lawyers’ Forum (KNLF), an 800-member organisation of lawyers with a dual mission to prosecute all cases of blasphemy across Pakistan and to defend those who impose extralegal punishment on alleged blasphemers. (p.173) This organisation best exemplifies the complex entanglement of notions of legality and illegality, reason and passion, justice in this world and salvation in the afterlife. The KNLF insists that blasphemy laws are necessary to maintain social order but is

eager to help those who take the law in their own hands to punish alleged blasphemers. As *ashaqin-e-rasool* the KNLFF lawyers present themselves as the chosen ones who can protect the sanctity of blasphemy laws but are also privy to the secrets of God's kingdom (*maarifat*).

Sana Ashraf has provided us with a rich account of the multiple forces involved in the volatile economy of blasphemy accusations and is the first ethnographic study of the range of different actors involved. Such a vantage point is rare indeed, though at times this reader wished that we heard more from her 'informants' and less from various academic theorists. Her book contributes to recent scholarship² that refuses to be confined by binaries of religious versus secular, reason versus passion, instrumental use of religion versus purity of motives by paying attention to the multiple ways in which individuals, groups and the state mobilise symbolic and material resources to compete for autonomy and power.

Reference

Tambiah, S. 1996. *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asian*. University of California Press

Footnotes:

[1] 'Nation outraged at Sri Lankan's lynching by mob' Muhammad Shehzad & Zaki Abbas, *The Express Tribune*, December 3, 2021.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2332263/nation-outraged-at-sri-lankans-lynching-by-mob>

[2] See for instance Michelutti M. *et al.* 2019. *Mafia Raj: The Rule of Bosses in South Asia*. Stanford University Press and Khoja-Moolji, S. 2021. *Sovereign Attachments: Masculinity, Muslimness and Affective Politics in Pakistan*. University of California Press.