

Emulating Ghazi Ilam Din: 37 blasphemy-accused killed extra-judicially

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Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer's assassination by his official guard constable Mumtaz Qadri—reportedly for speaking against the misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan and his support of Asia Bibi, a poor Christian woman convicted under the blasphemy law – is yet another example of those killed as a direct or indirect consequence of this legislation. His murder once again has proved that the blasphemy laws in their present form are a source of victimization against minorities as well as secular forces of the country. Since the mandatory death sentence was introduced as a result of the Amendment Act No. III of 1986 to Section 295-C, by General Zia many innocent people have lost their lives, in some cases, even before the accused persons were brought to trial.

According to data compiled by National Commission on Justice and Peace (NCJP), an NGO working on the repeal of Blasphemy laws in Pakistan, 37 people accused of blasphemy (16 are Christians, 14 Muslims, five Ahmadis and two Hindus) have been killed since 1986. Ironically, 9 among them were either killed by policemen or their fellow inmates in jail or 'committed' suicide in police custody. One will be surprised to know that 26 out of these 37 people are killed in eight districts of central Punjab (Lahore, Faisalabad, TT Singh, Gujranwala, Sheikhupura, Gujrat, Sialkot and Kasur) and rest in other parts of Punjab and Sindh. There is not a single reported case of extra-judicial killing of accused blasphemers from Balochistan. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, an accused was lynched when MMA was in power.

Tahir Iqbal, an air force mechanic, was the first accused Blasphemer who died in police custody in 1992 in Lahore. He was charged with blasphemy in December 1990 after converting from Islam to Christianity. He was found dead in his cell in July 1992. His lawyer Naeem Shakir blamed that he was poisoned to death.

Yousuf Ali, a Sufi Muslim who had been convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death in August 2000, was shot and killed in the Lahore Central Jail by another inmate on June 11, 2002. The prisoner who killed Ali, Tariq Butt, was a member of the banned Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan. Some prison officials were arrested in connection with the incident, including an Assistant Superintendent, who reportedly took responsibility for the incident and stepped down. It is said that owner of a media group played important role, first in the drama of posing first Yousuf as a blasphemer through his newspapers, and, later in his murder as well. According to details, a reporter working for this media house provided Tariq Butt the loaded pistol to him a day before he murdered Yousuf. Many believe that the media tycoon staged the entire episode to grab the property of Yousuf.

In 2002, Mohammad Asghar, accused blasphemer was gunned down by a police constable while being arrested in Noshehra Wirka in Gujranwala. Samuel Masih, 27, accused of blasphemy died at a

hospital in Lahore on May 28, 2004, five days after he was hit with a brick cutter by a policeman guarding him in the hospital. He was hospitalized with tuberculosis. The policeman later told investigators that it was his 'duty' as a Muslim to kill an 'infidel.'

In 2009, a police constable in Gujrat opened fire on three people accused and detained under the blasphemy law – Mian Qasim Ansari, Irfan Naeem and Ghafoor Aslam. Ansari was killed and Naeem was injured. In September 2009, 19-year-old Fanish Masih was tortured to death within 24 hours after he was brought to jail on a blasphemy charge in Sialkot. In July 2010, two young Christian pastors, Rashid Emmanuel and Majid Masih, were being led out of the trial court in Faisalabad in chains. Unidentified gunmen fired on them, killing the two and injuring the police officer.

"Nobody knows what happened to all these extra judicial killings of the accused by policemen or in the jails. Police officials have never shared the inquiry reports of these incidents with media or NGOs. These extra judicial killings in the name of religion are unanswered as fear does not allow the families of the victims to pursue the case," says Joseph Francis, the head of CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assessment and Settlement), a Non Government Organization working for the rights of blasphemy accused. "This becomes state's responsibility to follow such killings but unfortunately such killings are put under the carpet by the state and the court as it invites' majority's wrath," he says.

The incidents of killing of accused blasphemers by charged mobs or individuals have become very common over the years. The first such incident was occurred in Faisalabad in 1991 when a Muslim student killed his Christian teacher Naimat Masih In Faisalabad. The boy was reportedly instigated by a Muslim teacher, Allah Ditta, of the same school to kill Naimat Masih. Masih was the most senior teacher in the government school and the most suitable candidate for the headmastership, and Allah Ditta was eyeing that seat, thus, he instigated the boy that Naimat Masih had insulted Prophet Mohammed and should be killed. The boy performed the "Islamic" act of killing the Christian teacher. Later, he was arrested and treated like a hero by police. They kissed and hugged him after arresting him.

On of the worst accident of killing a person on the accusation of blasphemy occurred in Gujranwala in April 1994 when one Hafiz Farooq Sajjad was burnt alive by an angry mob. The people mistook the word atai (quack) over the loudspeaker for isai (Christian) made by his neighbor just to settle score against him. In 2002 a mob dragged Zahid Shah, a mentally ill man from his home, beat him unconscious with iron rods and sticks, then stoned him to death, allegedly on the instructions of a local Muslim cleric. The victim had been convicted of blasphemy in 1994 for claiming to be a prophet. An appeals court ordered his release three years later after concluding that he was mentally ill. On April 9, 2008, in the Karachi Korangi Industrial Area, factory employees beat to death a Hindu coworker, Jagdesh Kumar, after he allegedly made blasphemous comments against Islam.

The judges also face immense pressure while deciding these cases. Take the case of Lahore High Court Judge, Arif Iqbal Bhatti, who was assassinated in his chambers at Lahore High Court in 1997. The killer said he targeted the judge because he was on the bench that acquitted two Christian men, Salamat and Rehmat Masih, accused in a blasphemy case.

The phenomenon took a horrible turn in the recent years. One of the most brutal attacks against the Christians minority triggered by blasphemy accusations took place in 2010 in Gojra, Punjab, resulting in at least seven Christians burnt alive and over 50 houses torched. A fact-finding report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said the Gojra riot was pre-planned and the police had information that an attack was brewing but did nothing to prevent it. It found that announcements had been made from mosques the previous night calling upon people to make "mincemeat" of local

Christians for their 'blasphemous' acts of desecration of the Quran.

"This is unfortunate that the trials of the persons involved in the aforementioned extra judicial killing in blasphemy cases are hardly properly followed by the state or decided by the courts," said Mahboob Ahmad Khan advocate, a fact finder of human rights violation working with Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. "There are only two cases in the history in which the killers of blasphemy accused have been awarded sentence," Khan added while recalling his office record. "One of them had killed a blasphemy accused in Kasur and the other in Faisalabad."

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