

# Terrorism - Charlie Hebdo Cartoons and Blasphemy Laws in Contemporary Times

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The murder of French school teacher Samuel Paty by an 18 year old Muslim boy of Russian origin has opened the Pandora's Box all over. Few days' later three people were killed in Nice, in France again. There were protests against France in few Muslim majority countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and there was boycott of French goods in many of them.

On one side, the French President identified with the slain teacher and pledged to fight political Islam, on the other Turkey' President Erdogan made derogatory comment on French President who withdrew its Ambassador from Turkey.

This all is sequel to the highly condemnable murder of Paty, who in his class was teaching about freedom of expression and was using the Charlie Hebdo cartoons as an example. Just to recall the cases related to murder of cartoonists in Charlie Hebdo (2015) are beginning in the Courts. In this context the cartoons derogatory to Prophet Mohammad were republished by the paper. The cartoons connect terrorism with Islam and the Prophet. This in a way was in the backdrop of 9/11 after which the term 'Islamic Terrorism' was coined and popularised by US media. As Charlie Hebdo published those cartoons their office was attacked in which nearly 12 cartoonists were killed. The responsibility of this attack was taken by Al Qaeda. One recalls that Al Qaeda itself was promoted in the beginning in few Madrassas based in Pakistan, where Salafi version of Islam was used to indoctrinate Muslim youth and the syllabus of indoctrination was allegedly prepared in Washington. The US had allegedly pumped 8000 million dollars to indoctrinate the future Al Qaeda recruits. The US also supplied 7000 tons of armaments to this outfit.

During last few decades as the global scene has been dominated by rise of terrorism particularly in West Asia. It is the outcome of the politics to control oil resources in this region. The extremist's trends within Muslims have seen a new peaking. With this many countries have introduced Blasphemy laws, and some Muslim countries have made blasphemy punishable by death. These include Pakistan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Nigeria.

In our neighbouring Pakistan the death penalty for blasphemy was introduced after Zia regime intensified the Islamisation of Pakistan. At the same time the popular opinion in many of these countries has been shifting to the extremist versions of Islam. We saw as to how in case of Asia Bibi, she was framed for blasphemy and Punjab (Pakistan) Governor Salman Taseer was done to death as he demonstrated his protest against this law by meeting Asia Bibi. The murderer was treated like a hero by a large section of Muslims!

The historians of Islam tell us that there was no such law of blasphemy in Islam till two centuries after Prophet Mohammad. It came up during Abbasid rule, in the beginning of 9<sup>th</sup> Century. It was to strengthen the ruling dynasty's hold on power. Similarly in comparatively recent times Zia UL Haq, a military ruler also introduced this law to strengthen his own authoritarian rule. The purpose of this was only to legitimize his regime under the garb of an 'Islamic state'. This was an attempt by the military dictatorship to increase its hold over the society. The concept of apostate (Kafir) runs parallel to it and all non Muslims, and Muslims differing from the ruling sections interpretations are also so labelled and are liable to be killed. In Pakistan the major victims of this law are Muslims like Ahmadiyas and Shias. Of course Christians and Hindus are also on the firing line of this concept and the laws of blasphemy.

In one of the engrossing webinars on the topic on October 25, organised by Muslims For Secular Democracy, Islamic scholar Zeenat Shaukat Ali quoted Koran extensively to say that the holy book does not prescribe violence against those who do not subscribe to the holy book, (To you your religion to me mine). In a refreshing way the webinar's moderator Javed Anand pointed out, "We are here to condemn in unequivocal terms, no ifs and buts, not only the man responsible for this barbaric act but all those who had any role in the instigation of the crime as also all those who seek to justify it. We are here not just to condemn the slaying of Mr Paty, but also to demand the abolishing of apostasy and banishing blasphemy anywhere and everywhere across the world".

This in tune with many interpretation of Islam by the likes of Asghar Ali Engineer; one of the outstanding scholars of Islam who points out that Prophet Mohammad was so spiritual that he would never ask for revenge for insults against his own self. Engineer narrates an incident from Prophet's life, "One old woman used to throw garbage on him whenever he was passing that way. One day at that spot, she was not there to throw the garbage. The Prophet straightaway went to see her and inquired about her well being, she felt ashamed of herself and embraced Islam."

There is a need to understand as to why the intolerant tendencies in Islam are more dominating in current times. While history is also replete with Muslim rulers who used these concepts to increase their power, in current times there is an added dimension to the phenomenon. In 1953 Mossadegh regime, an elected regime was overthrown in Iran, as he was out to nationalise the oil companies dominated by the US-UK nexus. His regime was overthrown; leading to the coming to power of fundamentalist Ayatullah Khoemini in due course. Later with Russian occupation of Afghanistan, America deliberately started promoting the Islamic groups pursuing intolerant versions of Islam. Training of Mujahidin, Taliban, Al Qaeda was part of the same process.

Finally with the continuous intervention of US in West Asia, attacks on Afghanistan, Iraq etc. brought to fore led to intolerant groups to becoming more dominating leading to acts like the one of murder of Paty. The discussion and debate over rejection of concepts like blasphemy and 'kill the kafir', is the need of the hour for a saner World.

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• Sabrang. 02 Nov 2020:

<https://sabrangindia.in/article/charlie-hebdo-cartoons-and-blasphemy-laws-contemporary-times>

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