

Pakistan - Christian Couple burnt to death: Our visit to the area and observations

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A delegation of four planned to visit the area where two brick kiln Christian workers, Shama and her husband Shahzad, were burnt alive by a mob of Muslim religious fanatics on 4th November 2014.

An enraged mob beat the couple to death and burnt their bodies in the brick kiln for allegedly desecrating a copy of Holy Quran.

The incident took in Kot Radha Krishan, some 70 kilometers southwest of Lahore. This was the latest example of mob violence against religious minorities who were accused of blasphemy.

Our purpose was to investigate the incident and establish the facts but also to express our deepest condolences to the family. Initiated by AsmaJehanghir, the most known human rights activist in Pakistan and former president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, the others were Irfan Mufti of the South Asia Partnership and Mehmood Butt, general secretary of the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union Punjab, and myself.

I had been participating in the protest meetings and rallies in Lahore since this most heinous incident happened.

On 6th November, the Awami Workers Party held a rally and press conference where the Bhatta union announced a three-day strike on all the Bhattas.

At the 2pm press conference, in replying to a question, I criticized the Punjab government for not visiting the family. It was a live broadcast and within two hours the chief minister of Punjab visited Shama and her husband Shahzad's family at Kot Radha Kroshan announced 5 million rupees in compensation for the crime and gifted 10 acres of land for the children's upbringing. I believe this was the direct result of our press conference.

We left early on 7th November for Kot Radha Krishan. On our way we had to travel through Raiwind city, where an annual four-day Tableegi Ijtmaa (preach congregation) just begun. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims from all over the country had gathered, with thousands of vehicles parked on all sides of the road. Since we were stuck in the rush for some time it was clear to us how much fundamentalist religion has become a driving factor in the lives of millions of Muslim of the region.

On watching the gathering Asma Jehanghir remarked that "Despite all this we have to raise the voices for human rights and against religious fundamentalism." She added that "very few voices left in Pakistan who are still determined to protect and raise the issues of religious minorities."

It was a long way through the narrow and broken roads of the villages to arrive at the Bhatta where the incident occurred. The site was deserted. Irfan Mufti and I climbed on the Bhatta and visited the specific space where the bodies were burnt. There were some flowers left by someone earlier but

these were dried because some fire burning inside, although no one had been there for the last three days.

We went to see the room where the couple had been locked up before the mob had dragged them out. The door had been barred by the couple in an attempt to save themselves, and was locked from outside by the Bhatta owners to force the couple to pay *Peshgi*.

We observed a hole in the roof had been made in order to get to them. The room still had Shama's plastic shoe and some pottery.

We did not stay long over this sad and frustrating place because we wanted to speak to people and learn the facts from them.

We went to a nearby Bhatta. An elderly woman was washing her cloth and some children and young girls around them. "We were not allowed to go there by our Bhatta officials. We watched this happen, many hundreds came on motorbikes and tractor trolleys to that area" the elderly women said.

One of young girls recognized Asma Jehanghir whom she had seen on TV. While others went to interview more people the girl said they are also slaves. "Ask Asma to help us get rid of the *Pheshgi* (advance) system."

The *Munshi* (cleric) of this Bhatta and some others were reluctant to talk to us. They would not answer any question, at first only saying they had seen people going to the area but they did not know what happened.

We talked with some local workers from the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union who told us they are Christians and have never had a complaint about the Muslim community directing any hate towards them.

One elderly woman with a young girl arrived and told us that they were there at the time. "The mob dragged them to the top of the Bhatta and burnt them. They did burn any pages of Quran. It was the local mosque Imam who announced on loud speaker that Christians have burnt the Quran and enraged the people." This was information we already knew.

But what was the chain of events? Who was the link to the local Imam? Who instigated to violence? Why did the local people not save the couple?

We went to speak to a local trader whose tea shop was open. He was an invalid person with only one leg. This elderly man, an invalid with only one leg, told us he had been a friend of Shahzad's father, who had died just a few days before. He described Shahzad as a very gentle man who would never do what the local Mullah alleged.

The shopkeeper explained that all the men of the village ran away to escape arrest. Only the women are at home.

We went to see the Shahzad family in Klarkabad, a Christian suburb of Kot Radha Krishan. It is around 15 kilometers away from the Bhatta.

As we arrived the two of Shahzad's brothers, who had been present at the Bhatta, told us what happened.

"We four brothers have been working there for over 17 years with the same owner. Shahzad and

Shama were called by the Munshi in early in morning from their quarters inside the Bhatta and he locked them inside a room.

Some local people who were very agitated arrived and more were pouring in. We ran to save our lives. But the two were dragged from the room and burnt alive.”

One of the brothers explained that Shama’s sister, Yasmeen, had converted to Islam four years earlier. Her husband who was brother of ShahAd Masih had also converted to Islam four years earlier.

Yasmeen and her husband lived next door. Yasmeen worked at the same Bhatta and her children went to a nearby maddrasa.

One day before the incident, Yasmeen told Shama that she heard in the village that she had burnt pages of the Quran and said “If you convert to Islam, nothing would happen to you.” Shama did not reply.

After spending some time with the brothers we went to see the local police. We met the deputy superintendent of police and the local station house officer. They explained how difficult it was to arrest the local mosque Mullah and the owner of the Bhatta.

They said they had arrested some 50 people and were still looking for the *Munshi* and Bhatta owner’s two sons.

After collecting all the information, my conclusion is this:

“Shahzad’s died few days earlier. He was a religious person, a Pir who would give give written pages with sown religious message to get well as Taweez to the ailing persons who visited him.

After his death, Shama opened his trunk to find a holy Quran and a bible. She put the two on the top of a room in respect. The papers that were not holy pages of Quran were burnt.

The children of Shama’s sister told this story to the Mullah at the madrass thinking that they are pages of Quran. Then word of this rumor was spread to the Mullah of the village. After morning prayer, heannounced that they should be burnt the two the same way that have burnt the pages of holy Quran.

This Mullah was not a local inhabitant, but belonged to Muzafar Garh, a district in Southern Punjab, wheremany such illiterate but fanatic mullahs can be found. These mullahs are eager to exploit any such incident to show that they are the real DEFENDERS OF Islam.

In the meantime, the Munshi, who is also son-in-law of the owner of the Bhatta and has a religious mind, locked the two up as both have to give Peshgi of around 150,000 Rupees to the owners. They were called early in the morning by *Munshi* of the Bhatta and were locked.

After tearing apart the rooftop, the mob of over 1,000 fanatics from three villages tortured the couple before putting them to into the kiln’s furnace.

One can conclude that it was a combination of religious extremism, forced conversions and the *Peshgi* system (bonded labour) that were responsible for the incident that has shocked Pakistan and the world.

The spreading of religious extremism is very much linked to mob justice. There are laws that

prohibit mullahs using loudspeakers apart from prayer, but this is rarely enforced In this case, without any investigation to establish the facts, the Mullah instigated the mob to attack and burn them alive.

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