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Violence in the making: The politics of escalation from accusation to punishment

News such as that of the lynching of Mashal Khan in April 2017, the burning of Christian couple Shama and Shahzad in November 2014, the torching of the Christian neighbourhood of Joseph Colony in March 2013 and other incidents of ‘mob violence’ following blasphemy accusations make headlines, invoking shock and horror among humanitarian circles both nationally and internationally. However, we rarely get to hear how the accusations of blasphemy led to the violence. What happened between the accusation and the punishment? As discussed in the previous chapter, an accusation is usually made within microlevel interpersonal relationships. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how interpersonal conflicts—already intensified by blasphemy accusations—are transformed into collective violence. Not all blasphemy accusations lead to collective violence, but when they do, that violence can differ based on the identity of the accused. When the accused is a Muslim, as in the case of Mashal Khan, the collective violence is targeted at the individual. When the accused is a non-Muslim, there is a potential for collective violence to take the form of communal violence in which the whole community or neighbourhood of the accused is targeted. In both scenarios, there is an escalation of the conflict from the interpersonal to the collective, and from a single incident to a communal concern. I argue that blasphemy accusations do not inevitably lead to violence; rather, various factors and individuals come together in the process of escalation to *make* the violence possible.

The potential for conflict is embedded within interpersonal relationships in the form of ideals of purity and hierarchy, the transgression of which may lead to violence. Blasphemy accusations are often a response to a culmination of factors that are seen as impurities and challenges to the existing moral order of society. Veena Das (1990: 14) argued that, for the:

diffused hostilities to translate themselves into violent conflict, a contiguity has to be established between specific, concrete, and local issues on the one hand, and a master symbol on the other, in terms of which the conflict is viewed in the public consciousness.

In the case of blasphemy accusations, the ‘master symbol’ is created in the very moment a transgression is framed as blasphemy. Face-to-face relations are thus stripped of ‘the concreteness of relationships’ and replaced with ‘imagined identities’ within the instance of the accusation (Das and Kleinman 2000: 9). The escalation that follows further sharpens the symbolism and generalisation since the crowds are concerned not with the nature and details of the original offence but with the symbolic figure of the blasphemer. While the accusations are driven by individual concern for power and purity, they are quickly turned into a communal urge to remove the threat of impurity to achieve the idealised ‘pure’ society. Stanley J. Tambiah (1996: 192), in his work on collective violence, proposed the concepts of focalisation and transvaluation to understand the process of escalation. Focalisation is ‘the process of progressive denudation of local incidents and disputes of their particulars of context and their aggregation’ and transvaluation is ‘the parallel process of assimilating particulars to a larger, collective, more enduring, and therefore less context-bound, cause or interest’ (Tambiah 1996: 192). The processes of *focalisation* and *transvaluation* are crucial to the *making* of collective violence against those accused of blasphemy in Pakistan.

I call it the *making* of collective violence because a blasphemy accusation—despite all the symbolism attached to it—does not automatically lead to collective violence. In fact, the journey from accusation to punishment may take several courses, depending on the circumstances and the inclinations of those who become involved in the situation. The accusation may lead to invocation of state laws against the accused, nonstate violence or both. In rare cases, the charges may be dropped and a resolution reached without any serious punishment. I argue that the outcome of

the conflict—the form of punishment delivered—is determined by various *actors* who are involved at different stages of the conflict. Das and Kleinman (2001: 2) emphasised the significance of:

the entanglement of various social actors, ranging from global institutions to modern states on the one hand and small local communities inhabiting [an] increasingly uncertain world on the other, in the production and authorization of collective violence.

Having discussed the role of the state earlier, in this chapter, I focus on the local-level actors such as police officers, imams and religious leaders, politicians, local government representatives, NGOs, activists and journalists. Through an emphasis on the role of the actors who are involved in the *production* and *making* of the violence, I argue that the course of action chosen after an accusation of blasphemy is not entirely arbitrary. Nor is collective violence—when it happens—a *sudden* outburst or eruption of emotionally charged crowds. At every step of the process, the individuals involved have a range of choices available to them and it is through the successive culmination of those *choices* that violence becomes possible.

Some of these actors, such as local imams and other religious leaders, play the most vital role in the ‘authorisation of collective violence’. They are ‘propagandists’—key to the process of escalation—‘who appeal to larger, more emotive, more enduring (and therefore less context-bound) loyalties and cleavages’ such as those of religion and national identity (Tambiah 1996: 192). Paul Brass (2003b: 32–33), in his study of communal violence in India, also identified some key actors who play crucial roles in the orchestration of violence, such as informers, propagandists, recruiters of the mob, rumourmongers, fire-tenders and conversion specialists. Brass (2003b) found ‘fire-tenders’ and ‘conversion specialists’ to be of key significance in the making of collective violence. The fire-tenders are those who keep ‘the embers of communal animosities alive’ and the conversion specialists ‘decide when a trivial everyday incident will be exaggerated and placed into the communal system of talk, the communal discourse, and allowed to escalate into communal violence’ (Brass 2003b: 32–33). Local imams and religious leaders act as both fire-tenders, through dissemination of absolutist religious discourse, and conversion specialists, by turning a specific incident of transgression into a communal issue and instigating violent emotions among the wider community. Similarly, other actors—particularly the police, government representatives, politicians, NGOs

and journalists—play important roles in either constraining or enabling violent action. I will discuss the motivations of these actors and the impact of their choices on the outcome of conflict.

An exclusive focus on the role of actors in the production of violence has been criticised as an instrumentalist approach. One of the strongest critics of this approach, Sudhir Kakar (1996: 151), argued that it:

underplays or downright denies that there are ‘instigators’, too, whose participation is essential to transform animosity between religious groups into violence. The picture it holds up of evil politicians and innocent masses is certainly attractive since it permits us a disavowal of our own impulses toward violence and vicious ethnocentrism ... [allowing] a projection of the unacceptable parts of ourselves onto ‘bad’ politicians.

Blom and Jaoul (2008: 4), in their critique of Brass’s theory, also argued that he presented an instrumental approach that ignored the ‘popular agency and meanings that are actively involved in the production of communal violence’. They further contended that an exclusive emphasis on how the actors ‘manipulate, manage and organize’ the feelings and emotions of people understated the role of emotions (Blom and Jaoul 2008: 14). Instead, they argue, emotional and affective aspects are as significant to mobilisation for collective violence as are the cognitive ones (Blom and Jaoul 2008: 13). Not only are people’s emotions powerful in their own right, rather than being simply a resource to be ‘mobilised’ by their leaders, but also the ‘entrepreneurs’ of violence might themselves have an emotional stake in the issue (Blom and Jaoul 2008: 14). Reason and emotion are therefore mutually constitutive and work together in the production of collective violence.

While the role of actors in the *making* of violence is important, it is equally important to understand that violence is *meaningful* and draws on shared emotional and symbolic repositories. As Das (1990: 28) contended:

[T]here is no contradiction between the fact that, on the one hand, mob violence may be highly organized ... and on the other that crowds draw upon repositories of unconscious images.

Crowds are ‘disciplined’, ‘have clear objectives’ and ‘are often fighting for the restoration of a moral order’ (Das 1990: 27). At the same time, they draw on ‘powerful symbolic images’ and exhibit ‘states of heightened emotion’ (Das 1990: 25). Similar arguments have been made by other

scholars with regard to the simultaneously organised and passionate nature of crowds in the *making* of collective violence (see, for example, Sidel 2006: 13; Tambiah 1996: 270). Paul Brass—often criticised for his instrumentalist approach—himself acknowledged that instances of collective violence:

combine objective and intentional factors, spontaneity and planning, chaos and organization. They are best conceived as dramatic productions in which the directors are not in complete control, the cast of characters varies—some of them being paid, some of them acting voluntarily for loot or fun—and many of the parts have been rehearsed, but others have not. (Brass 2003b: 32)

Similarly, according to Horowitz (2001: 12), ethnic and communal violence are a ‘bizarre fusion of coherence and frenzy’ and ‘an amalgam of apparently rational-purposeful behaviour and irrational-brutal behaviour’ (p. 13). While I disagree with the characterisation of emotional and affective aspects of collective action as representing ‘chaos’, ‘frenzy’ or ‘irrational-brutal behaviour’, and see them instead as manifestations of symbolic structures, it is important to emphasise that collective action is both premeditated and passionate.

Therefore, in understanding the process of escalation that leads from blasphemy accusations to violent nonstate punishment, I employ an integrative approach in which I explain the *organisation* of violence as well as what it *means* to those involved. Violent action against those accused of blasphemy draws on certain repertoires of action, symbolic structures or a ‘web of signifiers’ (Das 1990: 9) and wider moral narratives. At the same time, various actors exercise their agency and derive their own meanings from the situation once it has turned into a societal and communal issue and, in so doing, they determine the outcome of the conflict. It is the contiguity established through the decisions and actions of various actors that enables violent action to take place. However, it should be kept in mind that individual actors, while exercising their agency, are also limited by the wider structures and religious and national narratives within which they operate (Das and Kleinman 2000: 16–17). Hence, collective violence against those accused of blasphemy is produced within the struggle for collective *as well as* individual identities, economic and political interests and moral concerns.

The process of escalation

In most cases of blasphemy accusations followed by some form of collective mobilisation and/or violence, a rough pattern can be drawn. The events that follow the accusation usually involve the stages identified in Figure 1.

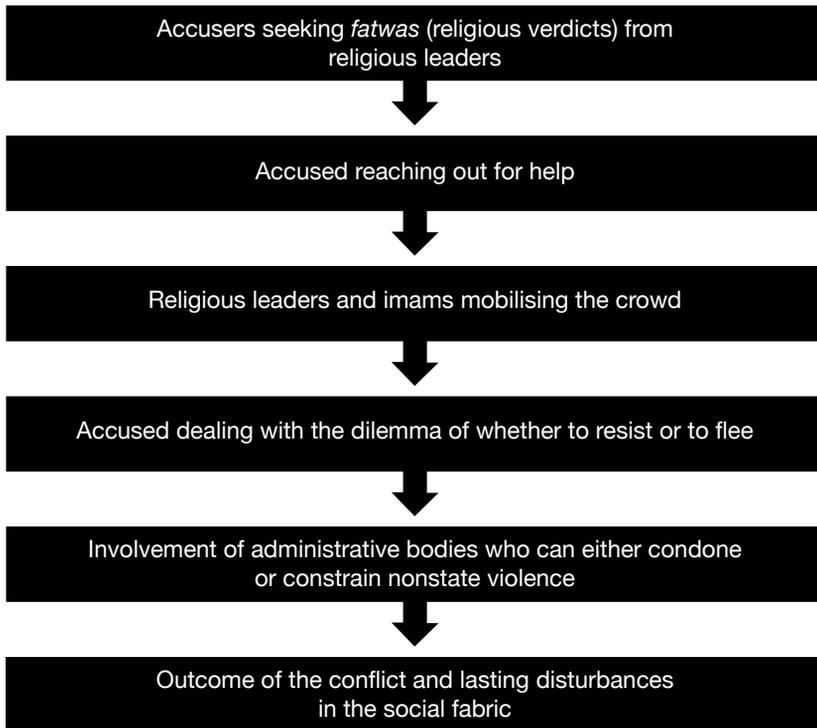


Figure 1. The process of escalation from accusation to punishment

Source: Author.

It is important to stress here that this process, as a complete unit, is not inevitable. As already mentioned in the Introduction, of more than 1,500 cases of accusations between 1987 and 2017, only 75 led to nonstate killings. Some of those nonstate killings were carried out by individuals such as police officers, security guards and other nonstate actors. Thus, the number of times an accusation leads to collective violence is more of an abnormality than a norm, making it even more vital to understand the specific factors that *enable* collective violence in those specific cases. Moreover, there are cases in which mobilisation for violent action occurs, following some of the phases identified in Figure 1, but does not lead

to a killing. There may be other forms of damage incurred in those cases, such as looting and burning of property, but violent killing of the accused does not take place. There are also instances in which the primary individual accused manages to escape violence but someone close to them is punished in their place. Even in cases in which the collective action follows through to the violent killing of the accused, there may be an overlap or reversal of order between the stages identified above. Therefore, the process identified in Figure 1 should be seen as fluid and fragmented at best, and the actual form in each case is contingent on the specific context of that case.

Nevertheless, these stages roughly form a repertoire of collective action—a concept first introduced by Charles Tilly (1986: 390). A repertoire of collective action is the usual form taken by an instance of collective violence in the given context. In the case of blasphemy accusations leading to subsequent violence in Pakistan, the above stages have become a common course of action, even though most cases do not go through every stage. Each stage further draws on certain repertoires of action and cultural symbols. Tambiah (1996: 296) presented a rather comprehensive list of sources that may be included in these repertoires:

The repertoire and capacities that constitute the cultural capital and arsenal from which the component units and phases of collective violence are drawn include the following: the calendar of festivals, the stock of performances, processions, orations, and public protests; stereotyped labelings and rumors, formally recognized insults, triggering actions, and shamings; and the array of communications media (newspapers, posters, television, VCRs, tapes, etc.) available and deployed. All these help shape the swirls, cumulative rhythms, and phased transitions, in the rise and fall of collective violence in public arenas.

Some of the sources—corresponding to the categories identified by Tambiah—commonly drawn on in episodes of violent action following blasphemy accusations include Friday prayers and sermons, mosques and their loudspeakers, mobile phones and social media. The case studies in this chapter will elaborate how these sources are employed. I divide the rest of this chapter into the six phases I have highlighted in Figure 1. Different actors take lead roles in different phases, even though the stages may be occurring simultaneously or in a different order, as already pointed out. While I focus on specific actors at different points in my discussion, it must be kept in mind that several actors may be concurrently active.

The following discussion will demonstrate how contingency between certain actors and their actions at certain points is established in a way that leads to collective violence.

Seeking *fatwas*: Authorisation of violence

In most cases of blasphemy accusations, the immediate step taken by the accuser(s) after they have framed a transgression as blasphemous is to reach out to local imams or religious scholars. Even in the most abrupt-looking instances of collective violence, such as the lynching of Mashal Khan, the accusers approached religious scholars to seek their *fatwa* ('religious verdict') on the matter. The verdicts from the imams or religious scholars affirm that 'the offence' was committed and that it was blasphemous. They also suggest the subsequent courses of action to be taken—whether the case should be reported to the police or the accused killed outside the state legal system. Local imams and religious scholars thus have the authority to legitimise violence against the accused. In almost every case I studied, the accusers had approached religious leaders to prove the legitimacy of the accusation. In a particularly extreme case, the accusers consulted several major religious centres of their sect to seek their verdicts on the matter. In other instances, the opinion of the cleric from the local mosque was considered sufficient to prove that blasphemy had been committed. Nevertheless, some form of religious authority is called on to legitimise violence against the accused. The following two examples will demonstrate how religious scholars were approached by the accusers and the impact their verdicts had on the escalation of the conflict.

Saleem is a poor Christian man who worked as a sweeper at a rural health centre in a small town about 4 kilometres from his home village in central Punjab. He was accused of blasphemy by his co-workers who had allegedly found a video derogatory of the Prophet Muhammad on his phone. He was beaten up by his co-workers from the health centre pharmacy following the accusations, but management dispersed the group. The next day, Saleem returned to his job as usual, hoping that his colleagues' anger had subsided and things would be back to normal. There was very little activity besides the regular work routine, but Shahzad, the prime accuser, who had been the most angry, was suspiciously absent from the scene. On the third day, Saleem went back to the health centre pharmacy and apologised again to the men who worked there. They told him that they

had forgiven him but that Shahzad, who was still absent, was very angry with him. They advised him to talk to Shahzad over the phone and ask him for forgiveness.

They dialled Shahzad's number and when Saleem spoke to him, Shahzad told Saleem that he had gone to a nearby town to fetch a *fatwa* from a mufti declaring that Saleem had committed blasphemy and must be killed. Shahzad told Saleem that he would not be spared for his crime. On hearing this, one of the men at the pharmacy advised Saleem to return to his village. He acknowledged that the situation was out of their control with the issuing of the *fatwa*. It should be noted here that while some of Saleem's colleagues were forgiving and willing to help him, it was the uncompromising wrath of one person (Shahzad) that led to further developments in the case. It is important because at most stages of the escalation, all it takes is one person in a certain position of power taking a particular decision to push the conflict in a violent direction. Saleem quit his job and went back to his village but the *fatwa* led to a violent mobilisation against him. Once the *fatwa* was issued stating that Saleem had committed blasphemy, by having an allegedly blasphemous video on his phone, the details and authenticity of the accusation were no longer important. The word that went around was the 'established' claim that Saleem had committed blasphemy and must be killed.

Similarly, in another case, the accuser obtained a *fatwa* from his religious leader and told the accused's apologetic relatives that 'it was too late' for them to seek peaceful resolution. Asad, a Sunni Muslim man, worked as a delivery driver at a glass shop in a busy market area in Lahore. The shop was owned by a Christian man and the accountant at the shop was also a Christian. One day the accountant was absent and his brother, Rahim, who was training to be a pastor, was filling in for him. Asad accused Rahim of writing insulting remarks about the Prophet Muhammad on one of the Islamic books Asad had left in the shop 'to read in his free time'.¹ After the accusation, Asad took the allegedly desecrated book to the Jamaat-ud-Dawa *markaz* ('religious centre') in Township, Lahore, where he was

1 There were a few copies of the Bible in the shop. One of the other books present, which belonged to Asad, was an Urdu publication titled *Mainay Bible se poocha Quran kyun jalay (I Asked the Bible Why Quran Was Burnt)* by Maulana Amir Hamza, a self-proclaimed religious scholar who is also one of the founders of the banned militant organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba. Asad, along with his Muslim friend Zain, came into the shop and saw Rahim studying Hamza's book alongside a copy of the Bible. Asad claimed that he ignored Rahim, thinking 'he might be interested in learning about Islam and may get inspired to convert'. Asad claimed that the next day he found some comments scribbled in the margins of the book cursing the author of the book, Muslims and the Prophet Muhammad.

a member and visited regularly. His religious leader, ‘Hafiz Sahab’, as he called him, affirmed that Rahim had committed blasphemy and must be punished. The owner of the shop and Rahim’s brother kept calling Asad to persuade him to sit down with them and ‘sort the issue out by talking’. They sought forgiveness for Rahim. However, in Asad’s words, ‘it was too late’, as he had already obtained a *fatwa* on the matter, which meant that no compromise was possible. In this instance, the offence was eventually reported to the police and a state trial was initiated. However, before that, the *fatwa* was used to mobilise a crowd that vandalised the shop where Rahim worked and pressured police to arrest Rahim and register a case against him.

In both cases, the *fatwa* legitimised the punishment of the accused regardless of the state court’s verdict. Blom and Jaoul (2008: 9), adopting French author Jeanne Favret-Saada’s concept, asserted that the ‘mechanism’ of an outrage involves three parties: ‘someone who denounces’, ‘a referent denounced as “outraging”’ and ‘a given authority called upon to intervene’. The fact that local imams and religious scholars are often approached *before* the police or any other governmental authority suggests that they have as much, if not more, authority as the state to legitimise violence. Religious scholars may refer the case to police or become complainants themselves, but the fact they are sought as an authority on the matter is important. It shows that, for the accusers and their supporters, the state of Pakistan, its laws and law enforcement bodies are not the only—or even primary—sources of authority. In cases of blasphemy accusations, religious scholars have the power to stamp legitimacy on the accusations and any subsequent violence. The religious scholars approached for *fatwas* have the power to direct the conflict towards either state or nonstate punishment, a violent or a peaceful solution.

Moreover, as Fox (2000: 15) suggested, the ‘clergy and other religious elites’ are ‘the most visible and authoritative arbiters of religious legitimacy’ as they can grant ‘the aura of religious legitimacy’ to even the most secular of conflicts. Through their *fatwas*, imams and religious scholars strip away the mundane details of the perceived transgressions, which may not always be religious in nature, and establish the accusations as definitively religious offences. This is a major step in escalation, as it sets the processes of focalisation and transvaluation into motion with great force. Once a *fatwa* has been issued, the word that circulates is void of the interpersonal contextual details of the accusation. It is a rumour in Das’s sense of the term insofar as its ‘form of language, its force, its lack

of signature' and 'its appeals to the uncanny' are concerned (1998: 125). It creates the figure of a blasphemer, the *Other*, who must be punished to purify the society.

Reaching out for help: Opportunism and mistrust

As soon as the accused realise that they will not receive forgiveness for their perceived crime, they turn to their neighbours, family, religious community, NGOs and sometimes the police for help. These relationships are, however, rife with various tensions and mistrust. When Shahzad told Saleem that he had attained a *fatwa* according to which he must be killed, Saleem went back to his village and shared his story with Daniyal, his neighbour and friend. Daniyal, a security guard by profession and a socially active man in his Christian neighbourhood, was the head of the local church committee. I met him two months after the incident, when he was himself living in hiding because he had enraged the accuser and the Muslim community by helping Saleem. He recollected his response on hearing about the blasphemy accusation against Saleem:

Our Christian community is generally not organised, and we do not have any formal way to consult each other. Due to lack of proper organisation, I had taken the initiative and brought a few young men from our community together to form a small church committee. I was the president of that committee and we operated under the church of the nearest urban centre.² But the priests and fathers in the church are very weak. They are either cowards or work for their own interests. They do not stand for the Christian community. I called the father in our church, but he told me not to get involved with the matter [the blasphemy accusation] in any way. He suggested not to help Saleem or his family and to stay away from them; he said: 'Don't go to his house even if the Muslims kill him.'

While Daniyal was worried for his friend Saleem, he was extremely disappointed in the church and his religious leaders. He went on:

See, we are common people, but the fathers always wear the robes of piety and spirituality, regardless of which they are so self-serving. I told the father that I will help Saleem because he is a part of my community. I said to him that he can keep his

2 Name of the city intentionally removed from the account.

'fathership' to himself; I will do my duty. I also knew the father in another town where my brother-in-law lives. I decided to contact Father Anthony from my brother-in-law's city. I went to see Father Anthony along with three other men from our Christian community. I was aware that Father Anthony was also not to be trusted as we had had troubles with him in the past. We see the fathers as a shadow of Jesus, but they have absolutely none of the qualities of Jesus Christ. They are an embodiment of Satan instead. Even Muslim clerics are better than the Christian priests. They are selfish and greedy. Father Anthony agreed to give shelter to Saleem but later it turned out that he was also working in his own interests. He wanted to 'sell' the issue and make money off it. He thought he would present Saleem as a victim and receive money from church organisations outside Pakistan.

The expression of disappointment with the local Christian priests remained an important part of my subsequent conversations with Daniyal. He felt deceived and betrayed by his own people—the people of the same faith who, in his view, were supposed to look after each other. Daniyal's sentiments reflect the unravelling of the true nature of social relations, described as a key characteristic of social crises by Turner. Turner (1980: 151) suggested, 'in social dramas, false friendship is winnowed from true communality of interests; the limits of consensus are reached and realized; real power emerges from behind the facade of authority'. While the crisis unearths the true loyalties (or absence thereof) of specific individuals, the underlying tensions in social relations are already present in the form of widespread mistrust and conspiracy theories among the people. Every incident strengthens these widespread fears and perceptions, but the disappointment of individuals in each situation is unique to their subjective experiences.

Feelings of mistrust were expressed by my other Christian participants as well, who blamed the Christian clergy, whom they looked up to, of being self-interested and cowardly. However, it was not only the priests and other religious leaders whom they mistrusted; they had similarly critical opinions of Christian NGOs and human rights organisations whom they turned to for help. They complained about the insensitivity of these organisations and the way they exploited situations of crisis, such as blasphemy accusations, to make money and receive foreign donations. Daniyal explained that most Christian social workers, who are supposed to work for the welfare of the Christian community in Pakistan, are least concerned with the plight of the Christian minority. They visit the sites of

incidents of blasphemy accusations and violence against Christians, take pictures with the accused and their families, post those pictures on various media platforms, but never return to help those in vulnerable situations. In fact, by exposing their faces to the world through various media, they contribute to the vulnerability of the accused instead of helping them. A young girl accused of blasphemy in another case echoed this concern when she complained:

Some people from this NGO visited me right after the accusation. They have now put my pictures on the internet, asking people to pray for me. But everyone in our neighbourhood has seen my pictures and if I ever go out, they can recognise me and tell others that I am the one who committed blasphemy. That is why I cannot live in my neighbourhood anymore, even though the accusations were proven to be false and the case against me was dropped by police.

NGOs aim to receive donations from foreign funding organisations in the name of humanitarian aid. Similar concerns were highlighted by various other participants of my research including other minority group members accused of blasphemy, lawyers representing them in the courts and even social workers themselves, some of whom accused *other* social workers of being dishonest and corrupt. These social workers also complained about the accused *themselves* conspiring to be *victims* of blasphemy accusations, to ‘sell’ their stories to get attention from foreign media and be ‘rescued’ by seeking asylum in a Western country.

Interestingly, the affected persons from different religious backgrounds also accused one another of concocting their own tragic stories of blasphemy-related violence. For example, Christians complained that Ahmadis—proportionally the largest group among those accused of blasphemy—intentionally had themselves implicated in blasphemy cases so they could flee the country. They also lamented that such self-serving conduct by certain people compromised the chances of receiving help for the *real victims* (themselves). Even more striking were the complaints from accusers who supported killing the alleged blasphemers and argued that there were certain cases in which the accused intentionally and deliberately provoked Muslims (by insulting their religion) so they could pose as *victims* in front of the international community and escape the country. I believe the suspicions of corruption among social workers and the wider mistrust of other people by the accused reflect to some extent the general attitudes of Pakistanis, whose country is mired in corruption

and economic uncertainty. Due to widespread corruption, Pakistanis are generally mistrusting of other people, the government and NGOs when it comes to the distribution of limited resources.

While those complaining of dishonesty among the accused pointed out specific cases to me in which they thought the accused had ulterior motives, I did not find any evidence to support these suspicions. However, in my own interactions with the accused, a desire to seek asylum in a foreign country and/or receive financial help from foreign donors did come up several times. Given that these people knew I had some connection to Australia, even though they were unsure of my capability to help them, it was not surprising that they quite frequently brought up the idea of receiving any possible help through me. One of my respondents, a Christian man accused of blasphemy, asked me whether I could talk to church organisations in Australia on his behalf. In another extreme case, the accused, also a Christian man, told me of his plans to cross the border illegally to get to Europe. He hoped to be able to seek asylum there and 'raise the issue of the plight of the Christian minority in Pakistan with the European Union'. He also exclaimed that he was quite hopeful that, once Donald Trump came to power, he would save all the world's Christians, including the Christian community of Pakistan, from their fate at the hands of Muslims.

While most of these assumptions and speculation among various groups are based on widespread mistrust, there is certainly some opportunism operating around the issue of blasphemy in Pakistan. Das and Kleinman (2001: 25) suggested that:

the media and the human rights organizations play an important role not only in representing the violence but also in becoming actors in the anticipations of local communities on how their suffering is to be addressed.

In terms of representing violence, photos of the victims are shared 'as if their experiences were commodities that were being advertised' (Das and Kleinman 2000: 4). In doing this, NGOs aim to receive funding from foreign donor bodies, for which they compete against a host of other local NGOs. As Cottle (2008: 149) noted: 'Aid agencies now co-exist and compete for media attention and donor funds within an increasingly crowded field'. Within this competitive environment, representations of violence—and of the victims of violence—are geared towards 'exactly what the media require' (Cottle 2008: 151). In terms of shaping the expectations

of victims of 'how their suffering is to be addressed', NGOs establish the ideas of seeking asylum and receiving financial help as desirable outcomes for the victims. While there are some NGOs and social workers who are genuinely working to aid those accused of blasphemy, the majority of those accused end up feeling frustrated and left out because of this system of limited resources and high expectations.

Regardless of the actual help that the accused seek and that those with resources and power can provide, the wider perceptions, as well as actual experiences, of betrayal among individuals give rise to a widespread mistrust that complicates the possibility of seeking and receiving help for the victims. It leaves the accused in a vulnerable position without any reliable sources of legal, financial and social support. In times of crisis, the accused often experience a sense of powerlessness as friends, neighbours, religious leaders and social workers let them down, and *other* victims—or 'fake' victims—usurp the limited resources available. NGOs and social workers are key actors who can determine the course of action the conflict will take. A few of the accused thanked the NGOs and social workers who had stepped in at the right moment to help them and their families flee the conflict and save their lives. Nevertheless, most of the accused felt left out and frustrated because they did not receive appropriate help. The failure of religious leaders, NGOs and social workers to provide appropriate help may be due to limited resources or their own political and economic interests. Nevertheless, actions taken by these actors also contribute to determining the fate of the accused. While the accused struggle with finding reliable sources of support in the face of threat, accusers can usually mobilise multiple sources of patronage within a short time through established religious organisations, mosques and local leaders.

Mobilising the crowd: The role of mosques, local imams and religious organisations

While Daniyal managed to find temporary shelter for Saleem to protect him from Shahzad's wrath, soon it was not only Shahzad who was after Saleem's life. He was joined in his fury by hundreds more. A few days after the initial accusation, Shahzad shared the news of Saleem's blasphemy with Akbar, a Muslim resident of Saleem's village. Akbar shared it with two other Muslim members of the community. The three of them discussed the matter and took it to the mosque committee. The mosque committee

included a chairman and 11 other members. They were respected (due to their religiosity), economically well-off and socially influential. They were not formally involved in politics but had an active role in their community. The mosque committee discussed the matter among themselves and decided to escalate the matter further by encouraging the residents of their village to punish the ‘blasphemer’. The committee’s decision is another example of *deliberate* decisions taken to influence the outcome of the conflict. The members of the mosque committee shared the news that blasphemy had been committed by a resident of their village with local Muslims in the mosque, who started looking for Saleem and keeping an eye on who was visiting his house and meeting his family.

The use of the mosque as the sociopolitical public space where the masses are mobilised and roused for collective action is another feature common to most instances of blasphemy-related violence. Sidel (2006) found a similar pattern in his study of religious riots in Indonesia. He notes that, ‘in virtually every case, the “assembling process” involved mosques ... and other sites of Islamic worship and schooling as key locations for mobilization in defense of the faith’ (Sidel 2006: 103). Veena Das (1990: 9) highlighted the key role of ‘symbolic space’ in the mobilisation for collective action. Mosques are communal spaces that bring the residents of a village or neighbourhood together on a regular basis and also hold symbolic value as a sacred space in Islam. Mosques also allow the use of their loudspeakers to inform people—even those who do not attend the mosque regularly—of blasphemy accusations and incite them to violent action. The ‘call’ to violent action, when coming from a mosque, has a symbolic affinity with the ‘call to prayer’—a call to display one’s loyalty to Allah. The sound of the ‘noisy propaganda—such as through orations and speeches amplified through loudspeakers’ also has a capacity to generate visceral and affective responses (Tambiah 1996: 232). The use of the mosque and its loudspeakers, however, depends on the inclinations of the imam, who, as I have already mentioned, is the key actor in the mobilisation of violent crowds.

On a few exceptional occasions, imams have played a positive role by trying to appease the community and prevent violent action (Sirajuddin 2017). In some other cases, imams and clerics have referred the accused to the police and the courts, to be dealt with through accepted legal channels. In such circumstances, local clerics may be playing a dual role: of inciting the public to violence while also handing the case over to the police. The galvanised crowds are in fact used as a threat to pressure the

law-enforcement bodies. The imam of a small neighbourhood in Lahore told me that, while he ‘publicly condemned the offence committed by the accused and incited the attendees in his sermons’, he called the police himself when the crowd resorted to vigilantism. He said:

As I saw the crowd getting violent, I called the police and told them that if they do not arrest the accused soon, there will be acute violence because people are so ferocious; they are uncontrollable.

Thus, while he provoked the masses against the accused in the first place, he withdrew from responsibility for the potential violence by calling the police at the last moment. There are also a considerable number of cases in which imams have used their position to amplify the conflict by actively provoking local Muslims to punish the accused (and their communities) themselves, instead of resorting to the power of the state. Depending on the specific context and the inclinations of the imam, the course of action chosen may be in the personal interests of the imam, such as strengthening his religious authority and enhancing his legitimacy in the eyes of the public. The imam may also be driven by his own sense of moral anxiety and desire to achieve purity. Whatever the individual motivations, the role of ‘professional Muslims’, as Sidel (2006: 103) calls them, is crucial ‘in stoking the fires of religious tension and providing interpretive frames for the extrapolation of local disputes into larger, interreligious issues’. Thus, imams play the role of fire-tenders in galvanising crowds (Brass 2003b: 33).

In Saleem’s case, the imam played that role and used the mosque pulpit to deliver sermons riling up Muslims against Christians. Daniyal told me that the imam framed the issue as part of an eternal war between Christians and Muslims. He claimed: ‘The Christians are the same people who threw stones at the Prophet Muhammad, and it is time to finish them now’. There is an advanced level of transvaluation happening here in which the imam replaces the everyday relationships between Christians and Muslims living in the same village with imagined identities and broad moral narratives. Through this process of transvaluation, the people who were engaged in everyday interactions with each other ‘end up as particles of a large, homogenized, and organized avalanche’ (Tambiah 1996: 193). This effect is achieved through ‘mytho-historical clarion calls that recall their past, explain their present, promise a rosier future, and justify and exonerate punitive violence’ (Tambiah 1996: 193). By calling on the ‘mytho-historical’ story of Christians attacking the Prophet Muhammad

with stones—establishing a literal image of the offence of blasphemy—the imam presented Christians as the aggressors and Muslims as the victims. Once ‘the subjectivity of experience has been evacuated’ in the construction of imagined identities of self and the symbolic Other, the ‘aggressors can see themselves as if they were victims’ (Das 1998: 109). Seeing themselves as the victims of Christian attacks—through attacks on the personality of the Prophet, who is central to their Muslim identity—Muslims justified punitive violence against the whole Christian community.

The imam and the mosque committee directed the crowd, inflamed by punitive passion, to torch all Christians’ houses and the local church, along with Saleem’s house. They agreed on a time to carry out this action: after Friday prayers—part of the ‘temporal structure of riots’ (Das 1990: 9). Friday prayers are a symbolic event as well as a ‘strategic checkpoint’ for religious rallies, protests and even social activism in Pakistan and other Muslim countries (Butt 2016; Sidel 2006). The period after Friday prayers is therefore not an arbitrary time chosen to perform violence; it has traditional religious and communal significance. The religious significance draws on the emphasis on Friday prayers in Quranic and prophetic traditions; the communal significance lies in the fact that it is the biggest regular social gathering for Muslims. Friday also has symbolic significance as the day of purification for Muslims—religious traditions and local customs recommend washing, cleansing the body, trimming one’s nails, and so on, on Fridays. It is no surprise, then, that Friday becomes the day of symbolic purification of society as well. In addition to the symbolic significance of Friday, the delay in carrying out the punishment is strategic, too, as it gives clerics and other religious leaders time to recruit the ‘mob’ and reach out to an audience wider than those who attend the local mosque regularly or live in the immediate vicinity. Daniyal, who saw the mob in his village very closely, asserted:

People who were part of the crowd were the lowest [socioeconomic] ranks of people. They were lower-caste professions like shoe-repairers, barbers, etc. Many of them were not residents of our village. They had joined from the neighbouring villages. The big influential people—the mosque committee and the imam of the mosque—incited the crowds and themselves watched the show. They also got the religious organisations involved, who riled up the crowds even more. Sunni Tehreek and other Sunni organisations [and political parties] gathered the mob and provided them with combustible material.

The religious organisations become involved through their connections with local religious leaders and imams. They facilitate further politicisation of the issue and mobilise resources from across various villages and cities. During my fieldwork, I also followed the social media pages and subscribed to SMS groups of some key religious organisations actively engaged in anti-blasphemy campaigning. News about incidents of blasphemy accusations is widely spread via social media and mobile phones. Thus, conflicts escalate from interpersonal incidents of perceived transgressions to meta-issues concerning the Muslim community as a whole. The escalation to this point and the mobilisation of the crowds are brought about by key actors or ‘recruiters’: the clerics and religious organisations who have vested political interests in the issue. Nevertheless, those who join the mob are driven by their own insecurities, fears, frustrations and passions. The ‘recruiters’ themselves have both emotional *and* political/strategic interests in mobilising crowds against the accused. The violence is planned and crowds are recruited following certain patterns. At the same time, the experience of *being in the crowd* allows individuals to transcend their individuality, submerge themselves in a collective identity and generate ‘unimaginable brutality’ (Kakar 1990: 143).

To resist or to flee? Agency in powerlessness

What does one do when one sees a crowd of angry men ready to attack? The natural response would be to run for one’s life. However, the decision to flee also presents an emotional dilemma. News of Muslims’ plans to torch the Christian neighbourhood reached Daniyal and other Christian residents of the village through loyal friends. On the Friday chosen for the torching, a wedding was also scheduled to take place in the Christian neighbourhood. The father of the bride-to-be, along with four other Christian men, went to see a local influential Muslim man on the Thursday to seek permission to hold the wedding ceremony. The Muslim man told them:

Don’t marry your daughter in this village because we are going to burn your houses tomorrow. If you want to conduct the wedding ceremony, go to a close-by village or do it with no more than 10 people here.

He also told them that, if they wanted to avoid the torching, four Christian men had to be handed over to the Muslims—the four who had helped Saleem run away and had assisted his family. Daniyal was one of the four men named.

The Christian men's delegation returned and warned the whole village, and refused to surrender the four men. However, to escape the consequences, most Christians fled the village that day. Daniyal decided to stay in the face of imminent danger—an experience he described as spiritual. For months after the incident, he reflected on his experience 'of looking death in the eyes' and drew his self-worth, amid all the chaos, from the fact he had resisted. He explained his decision:

The purpose of the Muslims warning us beforehand was in fact to scare us and make the Christians leave their properties behind and flee the village. On Friday, I told Saleem's family to go to some safe place and they left. Almost 90 per cent of people moved out of the village. My family also fled. They were worried for me and asked me to go to some safe place, but I refused and told them that I could not leave the village because God, my lord, had given me the power to face this. I also said that if I ran away, then what would happen to our people? I was ready to die for my people. I did not care about my life. Seeing my stubbornness, my parents stayed with me and the rest of the family left. That night, God gave me so much power that I cannot tell you. I could have easily fought off even a thousand men single-handedly. I praise God for this. This is a secret between me and God. God told me not to leave; he told me that if I left, everything would be ruined. I had two guns and seven cartridges with me at my house. I fed the cartridges into the guns and got ready for a fight. I resolved that, first, I would stop the crowd with words and ask them to solve the problem through talk. If they still attacked me, I would fight them.

This is an example of how the accused and those close to them exercise their agency, while making decisions in risky circumstances. Acting in faith was not merely a way of gaining psychological refuge for Daniyal; it was also his moment of self-actualisation, allowing him the possibility to believe that he had some 'power', despite his powerlessness in the circumstances. In a similar incident, a Christian woman, Sara, who was accused of blasphemy, refused to flee while a crowd of Muslim men was gathering outside her house. In a tone of defiance, she told me: 'If I had run away, that would have meant I actually committed blasphemy. I was

innocent. So, I wanted to stay and tell the truth (at the risk to my life)'. Both Daniyal and Sara had to eventually escape, despite their resolve to stand firm in the face of the threat. However, that brief period of 'resisting' allowed them the opportunity to feel that they had some agency in the circumstances. As Daniyal relied on his presumed spiritual prowess with the determination to 'fight' when he stayed back, it gave him a sense of purpose and meaning long after the episode was over. Mashal Khan also continued to defend his position and kept attending university after he had been accused and suspended with a warning to not be seen on campus—until the day he was lynched by his fellow students. While most of the accused never get a chance to fight back in the face of violence or even truly contest the accusation, they must live through the dilemma of whether to defend themselves or flee the threat of violence.

Victims and survivors are not usually seen as significant *actors* in the production of collective violence. However, the decisions of the accused in the face of threat can also determine the eventual outcome of the conflict. If Mashal Khan had fled, he could also have been a survivor—even though not all of those who flee survive. There have been cases in which, despite an attempt to flee, the accused was followed, captured and brought to violent punishment. In fact, attempts to flee further fan the flames and may lead to even more intense forms of punishment. Nevertheless, *it is possible* to escape violent punishment if the accused manages to find appropriate ways to escape and safe places to go. This is dependent on their resourcefulness. Saleem avoided death at the hands of the violent crowd because he managed to escape in time. I argue that, while the accused are the weaker actors with the least amount of agency to determine the outcome of the conflict, their decisions may save their lives in some cases. Moreover, regardless of the effective impact of their choices, *the subjective experience of agency* shapes their self-image and self-worth and helps them cope with the adverse consequences of the conflict. As Das (1990: 31) suggested, survivors are not passive beings 'completely controlled and moulded' by circumstances beyond their control; rather, the 'assault and the threat of annihilation' bestow 'a heroic dimension to the task of surviving'. I would like to extend Das's concept of 'heroic dimension' to the victims as well, to those who choose to resist but who do not survive.

Constrain or condone? The role of police and administrative bodies

When Friday prayer time approached, Daniyal's friend Kashif—a man who had converted from Christianity to Islam—went to the mosque. The imam was rousing the passions of the crowd with his sermon and preparing them to attack. Daniyal recalled:

As the mob started gathering after Friday prayers, Kashif told me to contact the police and whomever else I could. I called 15 [police] and the person on duty arrived within a few minutes and controlled the whole situation by dispelling the crowd. The police asked me why I hadn't called them earlier. I told them that I thought I could handle the situation myself, but I realised at the last moment that I could not.

The police dispersed the crowd by convincing the Muslim leaders to discuss the matter in the presence of the police. In this rare, fortunate event, they managed to contain the violence by forming a peace committee with three representatives from each side (Muslims and Christians). In the presence of the police (deployed in numbers in the village for weeks after the incident), the Muslims calmed and retreated from their intention to torch the Christian neighbourhood. It must be noted, however, that, by the time the mob gathered and Daniyal called the police, an NGO worker whom he had contacted earlier had spread the news among influential activists who got local and international media coverage for the incident and managed to pressure higher-level police officials to attend the site and control the situation.³ Some human rights activists began spreading the contact details of senior government members and police officers from the relevant district on social media, encouraging people to push them to ensure peace in Daniyal's village. These activists were affiliated with

³ While we see a positive impact of the media in this case, in other cases it may be counterproductive. For example, due to their extensive coverage of blasphemy cases, news reports reach greater numbers of people prepared to be violent than would have been possible without such exposure. Asia Bibi's case was highlighted by the media to an extent that it led to mass demonstrations at the national level; Muslims from across the country demanded the death penalty for her. Similarly, media coverage had an immense role in making a hero out of Mumtaz Qadri for hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis. Moreover, the media coverage of blasphemy cases has also contributed to a rise in the number of such cases across the country. This is because common people who were never aware of the existence of the blasphemy laws now have a convenient tool at their hands if they want to take revenge on their rivals or redress a personal grievance.

powerful politicians and managed to gain the authorities' attention just in time. However, this is not always the case. In many other incidents, police and administrative bodies failed to contain the violence.

It is widely known that police were informed and were present at the time of the Joseph Colony incident, Mashal Khan's lynching and several other cases, but could not (or were unwilling to) prevent violent action. The role of local government representatives, who have a certain influence over the public in their areas, has also been noted as being mostly unhelpful. Let us consider a specific example of police and government failure to contain violence. In December 2016, in a village in Chakwal District, local Muslims orchestrated an attack on an Ahmadi mosque resulting in a few casualties and vandalism of property. A couple of weeks before the attack, the Muslims had posted a letter with 580 signatories to the district coordination officer and copied it to several other government representatives, including ministers and the prime minister himself. In the letter, they declared their grievances against the Ahmadis for occupying a mosque in their village and warned that, if the government did not take action against the Ahmadis, they would be compelled to take extreme measures themselves. The Ahmadi community also wrote to the local administrators, seeking government protection due to threats from the Muslim community. The government representatives failed to respond and deliberately stayed out of the matter. There have been various other incidents in which the police and government officials failed to restrain violence despite prior knowledge and warnings. Ian Copland (2010: 147) argued that, to successfully curb collective violence, 'the state must want to act, and have the will to do so, even at the cost of offending some of its supporters'. He further contended that 'modern states clearly have the capacity to contain outbreaks of communal violence. They must also, of course, want to do so' (Copland 2010: 150). There are several reasons police and local government representatives *do not want to act*.

The interests of local government representatives lie in maintaining their voter support, hence they try to avoid getting involved in situations in which the majority is engaged in violence, even though they are not actively condoning violence. Similarly, the police's 'reluctance to use force may be an expression of solidarity with those against whom the police or the army is being asked to use force' (Das 1990: 23). After all, 'policemen are part of society' and may themselves subscribe to the ideas under contestation (Das 1990: 24). Das (1990: 23) pointed out that the state—and its subsidiaries, such as the police—has its own repertoire

of action for managing situations of violent conflict. Police action may be deliberately delayed so the crowd can 'inflict considerable damage before they are brought under control' (Das 1990: 24). This is not only because of police sympathy with the majority, but also because the state's legitimacy is at stake when using force against the perpetrators of violence.

Thus, while the police and administrative bodies have the capacity to contain violence, they may instead condone it to gain moral legitimacy or because of their own personal beliefs. They can also choose to deliberately stay out of the conflict to pursue their political interests. Hence, the conflict is not politically neutral, as the actors involved have their political interests at the fore. Turner succinctly pointed out how social dramas are essentially political processes:

Social dramas are in large measure political processes, that is, they involve competition for scarce ends—power, dignity, prestige, honor, purity—by particular means and by the utilization of resources that are also scarce—goods, territory, money, men and women. Ends, means, and resources are caught up in an interdependent feedback process. (Turner 1980: 152)

The decision of the police and government representatives to act to control violence or to stay out of the matter is also political. The course of action to be taken is sometimes decided according to the political goals of those on the frontlines; at other times, it is according to the political goals of the higher-ups, such as ministers, who are not physically present at the site of the conflict. Despite the various possible sources of motivation—emotional, political, strategic—the decisions of police and administrative bodies can determine whether or not violent action takes place.

Lasting hostilities and wider disturbances in the social fabric

Despite having reached a peace agreement with the local Muslims, Daniyal did not see the situation in his village as peaceful. He continued to interact with various news media. He was interviewed by journalists from Britain, France and Germany. His proactive role in communicating with NGOs and media outlets agitated the local Muslims even more. Due to their growing hostility towards Daniyal, he had to eventually flee the village. He explained:

The Muslims still had grievances against us because there were police in the village. NGOs were visiting every day. The Muslims thought they were being attacked by the Christians. They felt like a bald man whose head is being picked by birds. They started blaming me for the whole situation. They said that I was responsible for the police and the NGOs taking up the issue and coming to our village. Peace has apparently been restored in my village, but the eyes of the Muslims are still waiting for me. They believe that the Christians succeeded due to my efforts and that I gave the whole story to the news agencies. They think that I am the mastermind behind the success of Christians over them. So, the Muslims continue to look for me and Saleem. They were saying they would not spare the two of us. Therefore, even now, I, Saleem and his family are not safe. We are all living in hiding [separately].

While the conflict had been resolved formally, the grievances remained and found alternative outlets of expression. The local Muslims—particularly the landowning caste (Jatt Biradri)—decided to boycott the Christians socially and economically. The village consists of about 3,000 Muslim homes and 30 homes belonging to Christians. Muslim residents of the village are economically stronger than the Christians as they own land and have family members working in the Gulf and Middle East sending money home. Wheat growing is the mainstay of sustenance and economic activity in the village. Working on the crops of the landowners is the major source of livelihood for most Christians who belong to the working class of the village. They earn about Rs200 (~\$2) per day for working in the landowners' fields. Some Christians are bonded labourers living under conditions of slavery. They serve their Muslim overlords 24 hours a day and get a meagre amount in return for their services. They are 'bonded' to certain families/landowners as labourers in return for money they or their ancestors may have borrowed from the landlords but could not return. Daniyal lamented the economic dependency of the Christians on Muslims and the misery that ensued following the boycott:

To be honest, most of us live all our lives indebted to Muslims. We can never pay off the money they may have lent to our previous generations at some point in time. But after this incident, the Muslims stopped hiring us [Christians] for labour on their lands. It was the wheat-harvesting season. They stopped giving us grain (as many of us get our payments in grain). Christian women who worked in Muslim houses (as household help) could not work anymore. So, we had no grain and no money. The Muslims

threatened us that if we did not pay their debts back, they would capture our houses as well. We own the houses because they were allocated to us by the government a long time ago. However, the Muslims said they would grab our houses if we failed to pay their charges back. It was impossible because they were not giving work to Christians anymore. There was a primary school in our community but even that has been closed because of this issue.

In the months following the incident, relations between the Christian and Muslim communities slowly returned to 'normal'. The school was reopened and Muslims started hiring Christians again. However, full rehabilitation of the society after serious episodes of violence when 'perpetrators, victims, and witnesses come from the same social space' and engage with each other in their everyday life is almost impossible (Das and Kleinman 2000: 2).

No glib appeal to 'our common humanity' can restore confidence to inhabit one another's lives again. Instead, it is by first reformulating their notions of 'normality', much as the experience of disease changes our expectations of health, that communities can respond to the destruction of trust in their everyday lives (Das and Kleinman 2001: 23).

Healing and rehabilitation, therefore, mean transformation of society to a different state in which the relationships among people are permanently altered (Das and Kleinman 2001). The aggressors reinhabit the same world with an enhanced sense of their moral purity and power. Tambiah (1996: 230) noted that the perpetrators of collective violence are not 'burdened with concerns and reactions that impede their return to everyday life'. In fact, engaging in violence against those deemed to be transgressors of religion further consolidates the perpetrators' sense of self and morality by helping them achieve 'purification', even if they are tried and/or punished by the state later on. In cases of communal violence, having demonstrated their power and superiority against an already weaker and inferior community, the aggressors are further emboldened in their exploitation of the marginalised.

For the survivors, on the other hand, the violence lays bare 'the artificial order of normal times' and alters the way they see themselves in relation to others (Das 1990: 32). For Daniyal and Saleem, the transformation was extreme because they had to permanently relocate and reconstruct their lives in the shadow of constant threat. Once accused of blasphemy, it is practically impossible to get rid of the label and resume life as

before, which was the case for Saleem. The case of Daniyal, however, is unusual because he was not the primary accused. Nevertheless, through his defiant actions, he antagonised the Muslims in such a way that no peace with them was possible. Some form of peace could be established with those who conformed to the existing social hierarchies even within the conflict—such as those who went to the Muslims to seek permission for the wedding. Daniyal, however, not only defied the hierarchies but also tried to turn them around by bringing the village to the attention of NGOs and the international media. Therefore, no peace was possible with him.

Permanently altered are the relationships not only between the two communities, but also among the members of the same community. Relationships with friends and relatives who refuse to support the accused and their families in times of crisis are also permanently deformed, if not severed. Sara, the young woman accused of blasphemy, told me that her fiancé broke off their engagement after the accusation and her relatives stopped visiting. Most of the accused (survivors) to whom I talked during my research had similar complaints about their relatives abandoning them in the face of violence. They often expressed how the crisis had ‘laid bare the truth of their social relationships’. Thus, the moments of violence reveal not only the true extent of (potential) hatred between communities that already share uneasy relationships with each other—such as Christians and Muslims—but also the illusions inherent in relationships of loyalty and solidarity. Through the moments of violence, the victims and survivors also realise the full extent of the indifference to and/or prejudice against them of the state and its administrative bodies. Thus, as Veena Das (1990: 32–33) put it, the survivor learns to see ‘how the microcosm of violent space and time that s/he inhabits is a reflection of the macrocosm of the violent modern state’. The outcome of the conflict, therefore, ‘is no clear-cut victory, no definitive crossing over to safety and renewal’ and also ‘no complete defeat, no ultimate breakdown and dissolution’ (Das and Kleinman 2001: 24). The social fabric of the society is permanently affected, ‘and yet in the midst of the worst horrors, people continue to live, to survive, and to cope’ (Das and Kleinman 2001: 1). The conflict may come to an end, but violence lives on within the intimacies of everyday interactions and may surface at some other point, in some other form.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated in this chapter how things escalate from interpersonal accusations of blasphemy to communal outrage and which mechanisms determine the form the punishment will take. I have argued that, in cases where violent action takes place, the process of escalation draws on certain repertoires of action such that legitimisation is sought from religious authority rather than state authority, crowds are mobilised by local imams and mosques, and the administrative bodies take sides based on their own strategic interests in the conflict. On the other hand, the accused seek help from their communities, their own religious organisations, NGOs and other civil society actors—all of whom have their own interests in and fears about the situation. Thus, subjective decisions from a number of actors determine the course of action to be taken and the eventual outcome of the conflict.

Following Veena Das's conception, I argue that, for violence to occur, a certain 'contiguity' has to be established not only between the specific issues and the collective symbols, but also between the decisions taken by various actors at different stages of the conflict. Thus, the occurrence of collective violence following blasphemy accusations is not inevitable; it is within the power of the key actors, such as religious leaders and imams, the police and administrative bodies and the invisible hand of the higher-ups in the state, to quell or contain the potential for violence. However, it is not the same balance of factors—a set formula—that leads to collective violence in each case. On the contrary, the key drivers, the tipping point and the most significant players may be different in each case. Therefore, whether an accusation will lead to collective violence is contingent on the decisions of key actors as well as the specific context of the case. I have further contended that collective violence—when it happens—is both organised and meaningful. It is both premeditated (as Paul Brass argued) and emotionally significant (as Blom and Jaoul proposed). Collective violence is organised and planned by the key actors and also draws on emotional and symbolic repositories that render the violence meaningful to the perpetrators.

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