

Prologue

*Masjid dha de, Mandir dha de, dha de jo kuch dhainda
Ik banday da dil na dhaawiin, rabb Dillan wich rehnda.*

[Tear down the mosque, demolish the temple; Break whatever
you like,

But do not break a person's heart; That is where the God resides.]

This couplet from a famous Punjabi Sufi poet, Bulleh Shah (1680–1757), speaks of the intrinsic value of every person regardless of their religion and conveys the message that God is found not in mosques or temples but in people's hearts. This is just one example of the much wider ethos of Sufi poetry, which I started reading and listening to in my undergraduate years. It provided me with solace and hope in the face of sectarian tensions that had defined my identity until that point.

I grew up in a lower-middle-class, mixed-sect family in Pakistan. My father's family are Shia Muslims and my mother's family are Sunni Muslims. The mix was even more muddled by the fact that my father's father had converted from Sunni Islam to Shi'ism in his midlife, effectively causing his wife and children to convert as well. Therefore, my father's cousins (and their children) are Sunni Muslims. I grew up in an environment where tensions related to right or wrong religious practices and beliefs were a part of everyday life. There were conflicts and ruptures, but there were also reconciliations and bridges. There were judgements and disapproval, but there was also tolerance and acceptance. Impassioned arguments about Shia versus Sunni religious practices were common, but so was joint participation by Sunni and Shia members of the family in each other's rituals. Regardless, I grew up tremendously confused about my religious identity.

I spent my teenage years trying to figure out the 'right path' for myself by reading religious books from both sects. As I navigated the journey, I swung different ways at different points in my life. At one point,

I became more religious than anyone else in my family, including in ways of which they did not approve. In my early undergraduate years, I started praying regularly, fully covering my head and body and adopted many other religious practices that were not common in my family. In my early twenties, I gave up most of the outwardly religious practices I had adopted so fiercely only a few years earlier.

There were several factors that influenced the changes I went through and the practices I adopted at different points along my journey. Sufism has been one of the strongest and longest-lasting influences on my life. In fact, my earliest introduction to the values of inclusivity, pluralism, tolerance, coexistence and humanism was not through Western philosophy or anthropology. It was through Sufi poetry that I first learnt the idea of transcending the boundaries of religion, sect or caste. Ironically, however, as I would learn later, the followers of Sufism are the ones who are at the forefront of anti-blasphemy campaigns in Pakistan, promoting violence and hatred instead of the message of peace that Sufism enshrines. Bulleh Shah, the highly revered Sufi poet quoted above, would have been persecuted for his blasphemous views and writings in present-day Pakistan. I have written this book from a place of deep sorrow and pain because I see the ideas I once admired and found comfort in being used to spread hatred and violence instead of love and peace.

This book is deeply personal for me. It is a product of the complex emotional and ethical journey in which I have searched myself as much as I have searched other people in the quest for answers to questions that have perplexed me for a long time. Questions of sameness and difference, boundaries and transgressions, the self and the other are central to my life as well as to this book. It is therefore not merely an academic inquiry into a topic I find interesting, but also an important dimension of my life as I have *lived* it.

Growing up in Pakistan, I felt I was constantly being measured against certain religious and cultural moral standards by people around me. The standards changed depending on the people, but there was always a sense of insufficiency and the need to prove one's 'goodness' as a woman, as a Pakistani and as a Muslim. As a young person, I constantly tried changing myself to fit the ever-elusive moral standards and to carve out my own ideals at the same time. In the process, I was not only being measured by others, but also participating in measuring others. I was not only being judged with respect to my faith but also judging others'

Muslim-ness. I was not only the recipient of everyday moral policing, I was also policing others' moral goodness. From my experience of growing up in Pakistani society, I have learnt that the constant struggle to achieve moral and religious correctness and to police other people's moral and religious behaviour is an ingrained aspect of life in Pakistan. This perspective shapes my arguments in this book and is rooted in my own subjective experiences and position in that society.

As an academic inquiry, this book is based on more than seven years of research of blasphemy accusations and subsequent violence in Pakistan, conducted as part of my Masters and PhD degrees (2012–19). I first went to Pakistan explicitly as a 'researcher' in 2014 to conduct three months of fieldwork for my Masters thesis. It was after those three months that I first realised I had hardly scratched the surface of an extremely complex issue and started building a PhD proposal while writing my dissertation. The three months of fieldwork for my Masters thesis were also helpful in facilitating my re-entry into the field to conduct my doctoral research from March 2016 to February 2017.

I was based in Lahore for the duration of my research. Lahore, the capital of Punjab, is a metropolitan city with a population of 11.1 million, according to the 2017 census (PBS 2017). While Lahore is the second-most populous city in Pakistan, after Karachi, it has seen the most cases of blasphemy accusations in the country since 1987 (Jacob 2018). Lahore is a hub for religious organisations and political parties that have been actively engaged in campaigning against alleged blasphemers. During my fieldwork, there were tens of protests, religious gatherings and conferences that took place in Lahore with the explicit aim of protecting the honour of the Prophet and punishing alleged blasphemers. Lahore has multiple shrines central to the religious beliefs and practices of the Barelwis, who are most active in anti-blasphemy activities and campaigns. Most of the Muslim population in Lahore belongs to the Barelwi sect of Sunni Islam, according to unofficial estimates; the state does not identify sectarian affiliations in the official census (Ramzan 2015). Moreover, Lahore has a host of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society organisations that have been at the forefront of advocacy and relief activities for those affected by blasphemy accusations. Lahore's session and high courts hear multiple cases of blasphemy every day. For all these reasons, I chose Lahore as the primary site for my research. It was also convenient for me because I had lived in Lahore for four years during my

undergraduate studies and my parents also now live in the city. Thus, it was a familiar place, with friends and family, who were crucial to making my fieldwork emotionally and practically viable.

Despite Lahore being the primary site of my research, I describe my research as multi-sited for two reasons. First, within Lahore, I was constantly moving between different spaces, including NGO offices, the houses and neighbourhoods of those affected by blasphemy accusations, courts, shrines and religious centres. Given these spaces are all quite different to one another and often contradictory in what they represent, I find it more useful to see them as multiple sites than as parts of the same big site—the city of Lahore. Second, while based in Lahore, I also visited other towns and cities within Punjab and Islamabad Capital Territory to follow certain cases, meet certain people and see certain places (for example, the shrine of Mumtaz Qadri in Bara Kahu, Islamabad). The towns and cities I visited to understand and follow specific cases included Gujrat, Bhera, Jehlum, Mandi Bahauddin and Rawalpindi.

Ethnography is understood as the classic methodology of anthropology, traditionally defined as a prolonged period of research in which the researcher lives with and observes a community closely to understand their point of view (Spradley 1980: 3). Since the 1980s, however, anthropologists have questioned the traditional understandings of a defined field and bounded community as the objects of ethnographic research (Appadurai 1990; Clifford 1997; Marcus 1996). Such critiques have pointed out that the field no longer operates in fixed localities due to the changing nature of a globalised world. It has also been argued that the traditional notion of ethnography creates false dichotomies, such as home versus the field and insider versus outsider (see, for example, Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Olwig and Hastrup 1997). The ethnographic field is thus seen no longer as a fixed site but as a set of ‘shifting locations’ defined by the topic of interest (Clifford 1997).

Given the shifting locations of my research, I used the methodology of multi-sited ethnographic research developed in response to critiques of traditional ethnography. The earliest concepts of multi-sited ethnography emerged in 1986 with *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and were later developed into a more elaborate theory by Marcus (1995). According to this theory, the researcher follows ideas, people, narratives, connections and objects in time and place. Multi-sited ethnography is:

designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact define the argument of the ethnography. (Marcus 1995: 105)

Adopting multi-sited research methods, I followed cases, stories and people as I moved between different sites and groups of people.

My research participants, as varied as they were, often belonged to opposing schools of thought—for example, those who supported violent punishment of blasphemy and those who did not. I conducted my research, on the one hand, with people who were accused of blasphemy (regardless of whether or not the case was taken to the state legal system), their lawyers, their families, friends and neighbours, activists, social workers, NGO professionals, journalists and some government and police officers. On the other hand, my research participants also included the accusers, their friends, supporters and witnesses, their lawyers, religious clerics, scholars and members of religious parties who either mobilised for violent punishment of the accused in specific cases of blasphemy or wrote, preached or campaigned against blasphemers in general.

Apart from the clearly identified ‘research participants’, my analysis and insights are also drawn from my experiences and interactions while growing up in Pakistan for the better part of my life. These insights are based on my interactions with my own family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and many other people from whom I have learnt. Sometimes even brief conversations with taxi drivers, shopkeepers and so on provided a window on to the sensibilities of certain sections of Pakistani society. Whether or not these interactions form a part of my ‘research’ is a tricky question. As Ceja-Zamarripa (2007: 11) asked: ‘[W]hat does it mean to anthropology that the anthropologist’s whole life could be characterized as one continuous participant-observation?’ There has been a tendency in traditional anthropology to draw absolute distinctions between experiences of *living in a society* and *doing fieldwork* such that the former is not an accepted basis of knowledge. However, these distinctions have been challenged, as Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 32) write:

A discipline in which ‘experience’ is so central has been surprisingly unfriendly to the notion that ‘experience’ is constantly reconfigured by memory. If an anthropologist can ‘write up’ an ethnography based on data collected during doctoral fieldwork twenty or thirty

years ago, why should it not be possible for ‘natives’ to ‘write up’ an ethnography based on their lives? In what sense might we think of one’s ‘background’—growing up, as it were, in ‘the field’—as a kind of extended participant observation?

In my research, I find it impossible to separate the insights I have gained through explicitly *doing fieldwork* from those I gained by *living* in Pakistani society for an extended period. I draw on these insights to make sense of the knowledge I gained during my fieldwork. I do not quote or use specific information provided by those with whom I casually interacted and learnt from over the years. However, at a broader level, I recognise that the pool of my research participants is much larger than those who appear in this book.

There were two major concerns that guided me as I moved between different sites and groups of people while doing my research: the logic of my topic and the safety of my participants and myself. In terms of the logic of my topic, I wanted to understand the perspectives of various parties to the conflict and how they were opposed but connected to each other. The lack of significant ethnographic work on the issue of blasphemy in Pakistan meant there was a lot of potential in almost every dimension of the topic. Each of my ‘sites’ could have been a focus for the whole dissertation in itself: the courtrooms, the NGOs, the neighbourhoods, the shrines and so on. However, I was guided by my curiosity to gain a broader understanding of the issue by studying its multiple aspects. On the flip side, it required sacrificing the depth of each aspect to some extent. At such an early stage in research, it made more sense to get a wide understanding of the issue; future research can delve deeper into each of the dimensions.

The second guiding concern was safety. Spending too much time with the accused and their families—specifically those who were living in hiding—could have compromised their and possibly my own safety. On the other hand, there were groups and individuals whose perspective was important to me, but I would have had to risk my safety to access them. For example, towards the end of my fieldwork, I was offered an opportunity by a group of lawyers—who were supporting and representing the killers of alleged blasphemers in court—to go on a countrywide tour with them to meet those who had killed for the love of the Prophet Muhammad, and their families. It was an extremely tempting offer because it would have provided me with a wealth of information about the lives of those who engage in anti-blasphemy violence. However, I was warned by concerned people

not to take the risk and I decided to let go of that opportunity. Thus, my decisions regarding my field sites and participants were guided—and limited—by safety concerns.

There are two aspects of my research methodology that I would like to discuss in more detail: the methods that I used to identify and approach my research participants and my methods of data collection. In terms of approaching the research participants, for my initial entry into the field during my Masters research, I began with some publicly available contacts with NGOs—because it appeared the safest option at the time. Some of those who responded positively to my research aims and intentions helped me get in touch with others, within the NGO sector and among those affected by blasphemy accusations. When I later returned for my doctoral research, some of my previous contacts were extremely helpful in letting me back into their circles and introducing me to even more people.

During my PhD fieldwork, I began expanding the scope of my research and used publicly available phone numbers to contact some religious scholars and leaders. Some of them agreed to meet me in person; for others, I had to use family contacts (for example, an uncle of mine who is a member of Jamaat-e-Islami put me in touch with some people in that organisation). Once I had established some key contacts, they were happy to refer me to more people within their circles. Some of my academic friends and mentors at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (where I studied for my undergraduate degree) were also of great help in connecting me with relevant people such as lawyers and journalists. One defence lawyer gave me the contact details of prosecution lawyers, which is how I ended up studying a specific group of prosecution lawyers representing the accusers in court. The prosecution lawyers put me in touch with their clients (the accusers), who then let me talk to their witnesses, their spiritual and religious leaders, and so on. Hence, for most of my research, I used the snowball sampling or chain-referral methods to identify and approach my research participants. Of course, there were many referred persons who never responded; there were also some who promised collaboration that did not materialise. Nevertheless, I found a wealth of connections and information through my initial contacts and their referrals.

As for the data collection, I used a range of different methods, including participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews and content analysis. For most of my participants, I started with formal

interviews and continued to see them regularly such that the relationships grew into more informal interactions over time, allowing me to engage in casual conversations and participant observation. Since I was not based at one fixed site, among one group or community, I kept moving between different groups and individuals depending on their availability and my schedule. However, I actively tried to dedicate weeks (and sometimes even months) to specific groups to develop deeper connections and understanding. For example, with the Khatm-e-Nabuwat Lawyers' Forum (the group of prosecution lawyers I studied), I spent several days a week over four months to understand their perspective. Similarly, I maintained connections with the accused and their families, trying to see them as many times as they were willing to see me. Some of them kept calling and inviting me to their homes to talk about their experiences. However, I was cautious not to put pressure on any of them to maintain contact because of their safety concerns. I also collected a lot of published data, mostly from the religious organisations and scholars whom I met. They gave me or referred me to dozens of religious publications (mostly in Urdu). I acquired as many of those books and other publications as I could and used them for content analysis. I also followed the social media accounts of religious organisations that were active in anti-blasphemy campaigning during my fieldwork. Some of the major organisations used Twitter to organise their regular protests and gatherings. While I was not able to participate in those protests and gatherings because they were male-only, familiarising myself with the language of mobilisation helped me gain a deeper understanding of the issue. I also kept an eye on their social media content to understand the religious and political narratives being generated and promoted.

My interactions with my research participants—particularly while using ethnographic research methods—were shaped by my own identity and social position in the society. Kirin Narayan's 1993 essay first dispelled the myth of insider versus outsider anthropologists and argued that a multiplex of identities shapes any anthropological research (pp. 673–76). It has since been widely recognised in anthropology that the positions we occupy in society, including class, gender and education, define how we interact with and are perceived by our research participants. More importantly, these social loci also define our own subjectivities and determine how we look at, understand and write about people. I believe various markers of my identity—including my being an educated Pakistani woman from a lower-middle-class, mixed-sect (Sunni–Shia) Muslim family—are crucial to my research.

I was the first woman from my entire family (both mother's and father's sides) to go to university and live alone in a different city.¹ I went to a private university—considered the most expensive and most prestigious in Pakistan—which my parents were certainly not able to afford. I was selected for university through a national outreach program that gave scholarships to deserving students with insufficient financial means to pay their fees. At university, I attended a class on the ethnography of Pakistan in my first year because of the university's requirements to take out-group courses (that is, courses from different streams and disciplines). That is where I was first drawn to anthropology and eventually changed my major to anthropology from economics. My parents were not happy with that choice because they wanted me to study something that would get me a well-paying job. They did not know much about anthropology; in fact, they had never even heard of the subject before. What they knew was that 'social science subjects' were not an economically viable option for people with modest economic backgrounds such as ours.

The pursuit of social sciences (and anthropology) has in fact been a luxury for most scholars of Pakistani origin—at least those who have been writing for an international academic audience. There have been brilliant anthropologists—including women—from Pakistan who are highly regarded in the international academic community, but most come from privileged backgrounds. For those from lower-middle-class backgrounds like mine, education is usually a means to attain social prestige and upward economic mobility. Therefore, studying anthropology is an act of going against the grain.² My place in the social and economic setup of society is important because it defines my experiences of living in Pakistani society, which may be different from most other scholars, who come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than mine. These experiences shape who I am as a researcher, how I approach and am perceived by my research participants and how I understand the experiences of those about whom I am writing.

1 One of my female cousins had started university a year before me, but she went to an all-female university, studied medicine and lived with her relatives during her studies. I, on the other hand, went to a coed university, did not study medicine (the expected and most prestigious profession for women in our social circle at the time) and lived by myself in a hostel.

2 This is changing now, as increasing numbers of students from backgrounds similar to mine are studying these subjects due to rising awareness about scholarships and career opportunities. However, it remains to be seen how many of those without the privilege and social capital that comes with it are able to make it as successful academics and scholars.

My gender is also an important part of my identity that affects every aspect of my life, from education to personal relationships. What is most important to highlight here are the ways in which my gender impacts my research. Most of my research participants were male and many of them came from backgrounds where it was not common for women to be educated, independent and able to freely mix with men, let alone do research among men. Having said that, even though many of my research participants would not allow women from their families to do what I was doing, they were moving in public spaces where women *were* present as lawyers, religious scholars, NGO workers, farmers, labourers, and so on. Thus, I was not an entirely unusual sight for them. Most of them were extremely respectful in their dealings with me, and perhaps even more respectful because of my gender. I realise that male researchers may not be able to get as favourable a response from some groups of participants as I did. This is partly due to the culture of special treatment of women (pampering, protecting, looking after them) and partly because, as a woman, I was less threatening to them than male researchers.

There were some unfortunate incidents of sexual harassment as well, which cut across the varied groups of my research participants. I am not the first woman to have experienced sexual harassment in the field; it is recognised as a widespread problem for which anthropology students are insufficiently prepared (see, for example, Johansson 2015; Berry et al. 2017; Kloß 2017). Thus, while my gender enabled my entry into certain circles, it became a barrier to participating in others. There were situations in which I had to turn down valuable opportunities to learn simply because I felt vulnerable as a woman and had to look after my safety first. There were potential spaces for research that I could not access because of my gender. For example, most of the religious and political gatherings concerning disrespect of the Prophet are male-only and I could not attend them to enrich my research.

It is not only the researcher's identity that is complex; every research participant also brings a multiplex of identities to interactions. It is precisely because of this complexity of interaction between people occupying different positions in society that anthropological research is considered subjective. Our different social positions determine what type of connections we establish with our research participants. As researchers, 'there will inevitably be certain facets of self that join us up with the people we study, other facets that emphasize our difference' (Narayan 1993: 680).

There are certain aspects of my identity that the participants themselves chose to emphasise because they could relate to them. Most of my research participants from religious minorities related to my minority status as a Shia Muslim. They often took me to be ‘one of their own’—the persecuted minorities of Pakistan. There were a few exceptions—for example, a Christian woman I interviewed expressed her deep anger for Muslims by addressing me as ‘You, Muslim people!’ I was a face of both (rare) Muslim compassion and Muslim brutality for her. To my Muslim participants who were accused (or their friends/families), I was a sympathiser, a comrade, who understood their experiences when their own relatives had abandoned them. To the accusers and their supporters (witnesses, lawyers, religious scholars and so on), I was someone suspicious whose ideas and aims were unclear. Sometimes they took me to be a journalist; at other times, I was regarded as someone who did not know much about religion and needed guidance. I was cautious about revealing my Shia identity to my Sunni participants in the beginning, but soon realised that Sunni Barelwis also relate to Shias on many levels—in their reverence for holy personalities (many of whom are common to both sects), devotional practices and shrine culture. Both Barelwis and Shias have been criticised by the Deobandis and other sects in Pakistan for their Sufism-inspired devotional practices and reverence of shrines and saints. Thus, after I had disclosed my Shia identity to the Barelwi participants, they discussed their devotional Sufi ideas and practices with me much more openly.

I also chose to intentionally highlight or suppress certain facets of myself depending on with whom I was interacting. For example, to the accusers and supporters of anti-blasphemy violence, I did not divulge my religious views or my opinions on the issue of punishment for blasphemers. They were of course suspicious of me and kept asking me for my opinion on specific cases or the issue in general. I presented myself as someone without much religious knowledge, seeking to learn from them to build my own opinions. When they asked me how I felt someone should be punished after they had allegedly committed blasphemy, I told them I was not an expert on religious or legal matters, so I was not able to issue a verdict. I did in fact want to learn from them and understand their point of view. Some of my research participants expressed on multiple occasions their hope that I would use my pen to write for Islam, for the Prophet Muhammad and his honour. They expected me to write what they thought I should write, but I never made any promises to them.

Class differences (perceived and real) also played a significant role in determining my relationships with my participants. A majority of my research participants had lower socioeconomic backgrounds (workers, manual labourers and so on). Many of them saw me as a member of the elite class because of my education and physical attributes such as my clothing and the vehicle I used. I always felt a little uneasy because of my privileges compared with these people. The uneasiness was compounded by the fact that many of them went out of their way to entertain me. They would cook meals with multiple dishes including meat for me despite my insistence on not visiting them during mealtimes. I knew that many of those families could not afford meat as a part of their everyday diet. They cooked those meals to match what they thought of as *my* status. I was often left in situations where I could not say no to them because they had already gone out of their way to arrange something for me, but taking those favours made me extremely embarrassed. I tried to dress as plainly as possible when visiting these people and to underplay any other physical or perceived attributes of my socioeconomic status.

On other occasions, I decided to highlight certain aspects of myself that would join me with the people with whom I was interacting. There were times when people expressed what they thought of as differences in our socioeconomic backgrounds. I took some of those occasions as opportunities to put them (and myself) at ease by talking about things that joined us. For example, when visiting one family, I was left to sit with their three teenage daughters for quite some time. They were brilliant girls, all going to a nearby public school, and talked to me about their education and studies. They talked to me about how they dreamt of being 'as educated as me' but had no hope due to their limited means. I told them that I had been in a similar position because my parents were unable to pay for higher education in a good university, and that I had received all my education without paying a single rupee because of the scholarships I won. They were inspired and motivated and felt a lot more connected to me.

There was also an element of people's expectations of me when they went out of their way to treat me nicely. In some cases, they dropped subtle hints that they were expecting financial and/or material help from me. In other cases, they explicitly asked me for help (material, political, strategic and so on). Once again, I felt I was betraying them by turning their pains and woes into the objects of my study and not returning any

favours to them. Due to various constraints, I could not provide direct financial or material help to anyone, but I did put them in touch with relevant NGOs and other sources that could help.

Despite being a Pakistani Muslim woman, or a so-called insider/native anthropologist, the challenges of connecting with people and developing respectful relationships with them defined my research. In some ways, being an ‘insider’ comes with a much higher degree of moral responsibility as people put certain expectations (such as to abide by local norms) on the researcher. It was due to my insider/native status (as a Pakistani Muslim) that some of my research participants hoped I would write to defend Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. It was also because of my insider status that I was rebuked by others for my lack of ‘proper knowledge of Islam’. My native status thus made me more vulnerable to moral policing within familiar settings. As an insider, I posed a different kind of threat, as ‘the enemy within’, for some of my research participants, who criticised me for tarnishing the image of Pakistan or presenting a dark side of Pakistan to the world. For them, I was a misguided, Westernised person at best and a traitor of the nation at worst. To them, I represented the much dreaded ‘Western agenda’ of undermining the national image of Pakistan.

These perceptions joined me with those who have been, or are likely to be, accused of blasphemy—as they are also often seen as the enemy within, the dreaded face of Western, anti-Islam or anti-Pakistan forces, the uncanny face of the other. Concerns about the enemy within, group boundaries, individual and collective identities and the self and the other form central themes of this book. However, as I will show, these concerns are not unique to Pakistani Muslims, and blasphemy accusations are not the only form in which they are expressed. On the contrary, my focus on these concerns shows that the issue of blasphemy in Pakistan—while embedded in a specific historical and political context—is a part of the struggle that many societies across the globe have experienced in the past and continue to deal with in the contemporary world. I draw on anthropological studies to show how blasphemy accusations and subsequent violence in Pakistan are similar to other forms of violence targeted at those deemed transgressive or misfits within communities; parallels can be drawn with witchcraft accusations in Indonesia, anti-Muslim violence in India, lynching of African-Americans, among a plenitude of other examples. This book, therefore, deals with ever-pertinent questions surrounding violent conflict in societies through a detailed study of blasphemy-related violence in Pakistan.

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