**The Blasphemy Issue**

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On April 14, in Faisalabad, a Muslim woman named Sana Ullah allegedly claimed to be an Islamic prophet. The proclamation drew a stern reaction from people. The police intervened to arrest the woman and her two accomplices on charges of blasphemy under the country’s laws.

In Pakistan, blasphemy is an issue, which is condemned with strict punishment, ranging from life imprisonment to death sentence. In this case, video footage made the rounds on social media showing a woman wearing a hijab (headscarf) narrating her journey to prophethood. In the lexicon of psychology, it is called confabulation. The next question could be this: whether she is a culprit or a patient.

In a conservative country, such as Pakistan, where a mob is ever ready to get self-activated and lynch a person on one charge or the other, it is highly precarious to be labelled as a religious non-conformist – not to say religiously irreverent. Desecration of religious material and defilement of sanctified symbols are serious allegations. Claiming oneself to be a prophet is a far bigger issue. In its meaning, blasphemy itself is a death sentence.

It is known that any person charged with the allegation of blasphemy deserves punishment under the law, but it is not known if the said woman is of sound mind or not. To elaborate, in conservative societies such as Pakistan, it is a capital crime to pollute the sanctity of religion. Even a mere accusation of blasphemy invites grave consequences. Any person who gets challenged by circumstances or illnesses is permitted to take refuge in religion. Circumstances could be unbearable and ailments, mental or physical, could be untreatable. People avoid taboos and seek sanctuary in religion. Similarly, people who turn introverted are more prone to be religious deviants. That is the same person, who has sought retreat in religion turns against religion by proclaiming themselves the deity of the highest order.

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Blasphemy is not an issue peculiar to Islam. Instead, all societies and religions are faced with the same crisis. Both conservative and liberal societies adopt distinct approaches to deal with the challenge. Conservative societies, such as those inhabiting South Asia, use the method of deterrence before an act and punishment after the act. Liberal societies, such as those inhabiting Western Europe, use the method of indifference to let the challenge die down.

Similarly, in South Asia, blasphemy is treated with mob violence in the streets even before the law comes into action, whereas, in Western Europe, blasphemy is treated with triviality, without any prospects for capital punishment – an abandoned practice in the face of the sanctity of human life – to let society focus its attention on productive aspects of time consumption. The rationale is that a human being passes through different phases of circumstance and ignorance. The law has no right to decide on the phases of life unless the person is detrimental to the physical well-being of society. Jails are meant for rehabilitation. Detentions are places where a culprit can stay till the time of being transformed as per the laid down standards of the mainstream.

Western Europe also witnessed the practice of mob lynching, but that was the medieval ages when deviants, who were mostly budding scientists challenged the verdict of the Church on principles of life. The development of philosophy and science could not become possible without the proponents facing the charges of blasphemy – and consequent mob lynching. Nevertheless, Western Europe, as a whole, has come out of that part of the dark ages. South Asia has yet to respect the sanctity of human life. Generally speaking, no sound-minded person can claim publicly to be a prophet and avoid a reaction. It is easier to condemn one to punishment, but it is the duty of society at large to check the mental status of any such culprit. Chastisement can secure society against the person, as a culprit, but rehabilitation can serve a bigger purpose by retrieving the person back to normalcy, the mainstream.

The strength of conservatism remains that it keeps issues stifled or circumvented. The weakness of conservatism is that it founders on the force of suddenness. The dynamism of precipitance takes society by shock, as has happened in this case. Is she bold enough to do so? Is she veracious enough to pronounce so? In either case, the answer would be negative. The real answer is this: she is insane enough to do so.

A big question is this: how could a normal person reach the ultimate stage of blasphemy? The answer lies in studying the level of suppression existing in society. It is suppression that makes people submerged and compels them to take refuge in religion from temporal affairs. When the breaking point reaches, society gets surprised by the eruption of oddity called blasphemy, as has happened in this case.

Another big question is this: can people prefer to treat their mental health issues by medicine and not by taking refuge in religion? Unfortunately, the fields of psychology and psychiatry are not valued, especially in towns and rural areas. People lack awareness. Not many people are encouraged to consult a psychologist or a psychiatrist. Instead, solace is searched for in religion on the presumption that it would act as opium. The mental sickness may then turn against religion, and an act of blasphemy is performed, as must have happened in this case. Instead of letting a person reach a point of extreme, the person should be discovered and treated.

To her claim, a reactionary approach would be perilous, compared to a rational approach. Instead of focusing solely on punishing her, a preference should be given to treat her with medicine (by a psychiatrist) and by arranging her regular visits to a psychologist.

She is a victim of hallucinations, the persistence of which prejudiced her thoughts and views. She needs a treatment regimen and regular sessions for rehabilitation.

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