

BLASPHEMY AND PERSECUTION

Pakistan's Movement for Social Justice and Tolerance (JUST) has made a worldwide appeal for solidarity in the protest against the persecution of Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan, internationally known social activist, charged with blasphemy.

Dr. Akhtar is charged under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code on Blasphemy. According to this law, "whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) shall be punished by death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine" — a very serious charge, leading to capital punishment.

Human rights groups in Pakistan have repeatedly and correctly been agitating for the repeal of this blasphemy law. As the activist group Women Living Under Muslim Laws has pointed out, this law "is inherently unjust since it has failed to define the boundaries of law within which citizens are expected to live. Therefore, anything can be construed as derogatory and the accused can be punished."

The case against Dr. Akhtar Khan, who is eighty years old and bed-ridden, illustrates the dangerously bizarre extent to which the blasphemy law could be made use of to persecute otherwise innocent people.

The blasphemy case is centered around a nursery rhyme written by Dr. Akhtar Khan and included in a book published by the Oxford University Press. The rhyme, written in Urdu, is entitled 'The Lion and Ahmaq.' It is about a man who brings up a lion cub called 'Brave Lion' and spoils it. The lion later devours the master because it can not be bothered to go out into the jungle to hunt for food. A former colleague of Dr. Akhtar has brought charges against him, alleging that the rhyme refers to the Holy Prophet and the Fourth Caliph and is therefore blasphemous. Interestingly, the poem was written as far back as 1982.

"The tale is perfectly innocuous, unless one were to go about specially looking for an objectionable construction to it," says the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Eqbal Ahmad, renowned Pakistani scholar, states in an article published in *Dawn* that this poem "may be read as a parable on Bhutto and Zia." Only the sickest of minds, concludes Eqbal Ahmad, would read a reference to the Holy Prophet into it.

He continues "religious bigotry, especially when the law is distorted in the name of religion, does allow the 'sickest of minds' to take the law unto their own hands."

Dr. Akhtar Khan is a legendary social activist who, for nearly five decades worked tirelessly for the service of the poor. His life has been totally committed to social activism and reform. This commitment began in the early forties, when he was a young ICS officer, fresh from Cambridge, in the early forties. While serving in Barisal and Mymensingh, young Akhtar Khan saw the devastation brought on the poor during the Bengali Famine. He soon quit the colonial civil service and became an itinerant lock-smith in an effort to declass himself. In the fifties he laid the foundation for the Comilla program in East Pakistan, one of the most original rural development projects initiated in the Third World.

At Comilla, Akhtar Khan initiated a two-pronged program of rural work and credit-cum-training for the rural poor. When this remarkably effective program for rural development was launched by 'Khan Sahib,' the developmentalist jargon had not yet invented terms like 'empowerment of the poor' and 'poverty alleviation'. In recent years, he was involved in a program for nearly a million slum dwellers in Orangi, Karachi.

Persecution on religious grounds runs parallel to the recent resurgence of Right wing fundamentalism in Pakistan. Dr. Khan's is one of many similar cases of alleged insult to the Holy Prophet. Currently, there are three Christian men facing trial for blasphemy. According to human rights groups in Pakistan, local *maulavis* have been exerting pressure on the law enforcing agencies and the courts to impose the death penalty on the accused. Rights activists also note that 'ulterior, material motives' rather than 'genuine religious fervor' are the motivating factors for blasphemy law suits.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan is of the view that ulterior motives had played a vital role in the persecution of Dr. Akhtar Khan too. Dr. Khan's Orangi Pilot project had helped craftspeople with community loan facilities, popularised family planning, and brought the idea of self-help to slum people. This hurt certain vested interests and weakened the hold of traditional social and religious authority.

What is draconian about Pakistan's blasphemy law is that any individual can bring a law suit under Section 295, alleging 'deliberate intent to outrage religious feelings' and a whole series of other charges. Section 295 has a history of being amended frequently to suit right wing groups who have seized religion for political purposes. Martial Law governments and right wing politicians have repeatedly widened the scope of the blasphemy law to make it what it is today. Prior to Zia's martial law, the only crimes falling under section 295 related to insult to religions in general, and carried relatively lenient penalties. In 1982 during General Zia's martial law, defiling or damaging a copy of the Holy Quran was made an offence, carrying a mandatory life sentence. In 1986, the Jamaat-i-Islami party brought an amendment so as to include the charge of insulting the Holy Prophet, and adding the death sentence to the punishment.

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