

Through the generous support of the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, I conducted seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Lahore and Sharaqpur from December 2021 to July 2022 to examine the contemporary Barelvi resurgence around anti-blasphemy mobilization in Pakistan. During this time, I traced social contestations and ethical debates between four central Barelvi groups about the meaning of dignity and respect for sacred and ordinary beings. These included: 1) the *Tehrik Labaik Pakistan* (TLP), or the movement (of the slogan) ‘we are present, Oh God’s Prophet,’ an anti-blasphemy movement led by small-time clerics and constituted by working-class young men. 2) the *Dawat Islami* (DI), or the ‘Islamic invitation,’ a mass piety movement led by traditionally trader communities but mostly operated by full-time, employed members from working-class backgrounds. 3) the *Minhaj-ul-Quran International* (MQI), or ‘the International Quranic Path,’ is a religious movement appealing to Pakistan’s aspiring middle-classes. 4) traditional Shrine devotional orders.

### 1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

My dissertation shows that blasphemy accusations and related disputes in Pakistan serve as a means of expressing, addressing, and redirecting underlying social tensions about religion, class, and gender. It focuses on how diverse Barelvi actors across the socio-economic spectrum use the idiom of anti-blasphemy, rooted in Sufi concepts of hierarchy and transgression, to articulate and challenge views about the distribution of respect and dignity in society. The Barelvi movement to protect “the Prophet’s honor” rests on a non-liberal worldview in which human dignity derives from the sanctity of a cosmic-social hierarchy requiring deference for God, prophets, and saints, but also social superiors, parents, husbands, and brothers. TLP activists directly connect the loss of dignity of ordinary people with blasphemy against sacred beings. They proclaim that ordinary Muslims will earn respect by proving loyalty to the Prophet by identifying and confronting “blasphemous forces.” Their movement also paradoxically exploits the heightened climate of accusation to not only attack vulnerable groups but also to challenge and insult social and religious superiors.

The other Barelvi groups I studied offered alternative but overlapping views about what it means for Muslims to earn respect and dignity in supposedly blasphemous times. For the DI, blasphemy against parents prefigures blasphemy against prophets and saints. For the MQI, Muslims and their sacred entities will be respected when they gain a global standing and reputation for their educational achievements and civil manners. And for traditional Sufi shrine cults, Muslims will be respected if they devote themselves to Sufi leaders embodying the cosmic polity. Nevertheless, Barelvis have long used blasphemy accusations, presented as the ultimate transgression but practically mediated by elders, to police and sanction social inferiors. By radicalizing blasphemy accusations, the TLP has created a new terrain of moral vigilance allowing ordinary men to demand respect from and show disrespect to higher-ups.

#### ***Islam, Blasphemy, and Popular Politics in Pakistan***

In recent decades, anti-blasphemy violence by state and non-state actors has become an ever more pervasive and normalized feature of life in Pakistan. Accordingly, scholars have highlighted the political and legal problems generated by country’s blasphemy laws from the colonial era to their Islamization in the 1980s. Given how anti-blasphemy violence is more often carried out through extra-legal means, several scholars have pointed out procedural problems with the current-day law that make it particularly suitable for ‘abuse.’ Other scholars focusing on colonial genealogies of the law have shown how the laws generate the passions that they claim to regulate by institutionalizing, legitimizing, and inadvertently weaponizing ‘the hurt sentiments’ of religious communities. Despite the productivity of this body of research, most scholarship on blasphemy politics foregrounds the blasphemy *laws* over the popular politics and everyday contestations giving rise to the new anti-blasphemy *movement* in Pakistan.

My research shows that the TLP anti-blasphemy movement is deeply embedded in a working-class resentment against both rural landed elites and the urban middle classes. I maintain that the TLP does not promote respectability through middle-class notions of scriptural piety, ‘authentic Islam,’ or a respectable (*sharif*) cultural habitus. Instead, the TLP demands respect for the validity and fundamental dignity of ordinary Muslims through proven loyalty for Prophet Muhammad. In doing so, the TLP also questions and challenges the authority of traditional landed elites and shrine-custodians who demand loyalty from ordinary people. Exploiting the perceived blasphemy crisis, the TLP maintains that all social distinctions have fallen into suspense since the honor of the Prophet is under attack. The TLP thus emerges from a double disappointment with the Islamic worldview of the old feudal order and Islamic projects of the new middle-classes.

### ***Anthropology of Muslim Societies***

In the wake of post-9/11 Islamophobic narratives, many anthropologists have addressed how Muslim ethical and theological discourses challenge Western assumptions about the innate superiority and universalism of liberal secularism. Yet, the narrow focus on how Islamic lifeways exist vis-à-vis the West has meant that the new anthropology of Islam has paid surprisingly little attention to how Muslims use Islamic idioms to deal with everyday problems and social contestations. The desire to sidestep western frames of knowledge to understand Muslims on ‘their own terms’ has also led to an over-emphasis on Islamic texts, official discourses, and middle-class narratives over popular and transgressive Islamic beliefs and practices. Foregrounding normative and transgressive traditions, my dissertation shows that Islamic ethics and theology cannot be abstracted from the day-to-day anxieties and hopes of Muslims about living with others.

### ***Dignity and Respect***

New populist leaders, from Donald Trump to TLP leader Khadim Rizvi, are known for their public displays of disrespect toward certain groups and their promise to restore respect for others. The global rise of authoritarian populism has re-kindled anthropological interest in hierarchy and civility. These debates are still shaped by the classical divide between “honor cultures” with deference hierarchies and “civil societies” with egalitarian dignity. This dissertation shows that hierarchy and egalitarianism are not opposites, but continually shaped and reshaped through everyday social contestations. It thus explores how dominant and marginalized groups alike use idioms demanding and denying respect to both reproduce and challenge entrenched hierarchies and privileges.

## **2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables**

1. I collected hundreds of popular Barelvi books, magazines, and paraphernalia. I realized that this popular archive exists in tandem with and against the more elite textual sources that scholars use as primary sources.
2. I have carried out 94 formal interviews with 62 informants over the course of my fieldwork. I also regularly interviewed and observed seven primary and thirteen secondary informants through more informal, ethnographic interactions.
3. I have recently completed one dissertation chapter, “The Equality of Questionable Dignity.” I also recently gave a zoom talk for the Center of South Asia at Stanford presenting key findings from my chapter.
4. Since returning from fieldwork, I have completed, 1) A detailed encrypted inventory of all fieldwork data, including audio/video files, interviews, collected books and magazines, Evernote entries, informant profiles and meetings. 2) Digitalization of all collected media, literature, and paraphernalia. 3) Coding and analysis of all field notes, transcripts, and archival materials. 4) Completed significant parts chapter 3 and a long fieldnote-essay for chapter 1 (half of the chapter). 5) Several detailed fieldnote essays to be incorporated in later chapters.