

# **Godhra to Gojra and onwards - "Year 2009 witnessed highest number of blasphemy cases since 1990" in Pakistan**

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**Year 2009 witnessed highest number of blasphemy cases (20 out of 69) since 1990. All cases were reported in the Punjab. Coincidentally, when we look at the number of Madressahs [religious schools] in the country we find 5,355 Madressahs in Punjab, 2,852 in Sindh, 1,242 in the NWFP, 297 in Balochistan and 120 in the federal capital. Is there a correlation of blasphemy cases with the number of Madressahs?**

In 2002, a small town of Gujarat of India called Godhra witnessed unknown extremists attacking a passenger train and burning alive 59 Hindu passengers that were coming back from the holy city of Ayodhya. It was immediately blamed to be the work of some extremist Muslims and what ensued was an outbreak of violent Hindu-Muslim riots that spread throughout the province of Gujarat killing 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus. 223 people were reported missing and 2548 sustained injuries. Nearly 523 places of worship were damaged that included 298 Dargahs, 205 Mosques, 17 Temples and 3 Churches. In a move to bring the riots under control, massive arrests were made that included 27,901 Hindus and 7,651 Muslims. 61,000 Muslims and 10,000 Hindus fled their homes because of the scare the on-going riots had created among them. Investigations carried out by different commissions came out with a variety of explanations like a pre-planned attack or an accidental fire in the train. Police were blamed for their failure to play an effective role in controlling the riots and in some cases they were accused for acting as mere spectators. Yet, two hundred policemen were reported to have lost their lives during the riots.

Nearly seven years after the Godhra incident in India, a small town in Pakistan called Gojra became a scene of Muslim-Christian riots on 1 August 2009 that resulted in burning alive of eight Christians as a repercussion of an incident of blasphemy that couldn't be proved true as yet. Thousands of Christians left the town in fear of any further backlash and didn't come back until complete normalcy was restored in the area. A fact-finding mission of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan submitted a report on 4 August 2009 claiming that the incident of Gojra was not a spontaneous reaction to the allegation of blasphemy but was planned in advance. The mission's report said that the announcements through mosques in Gojra on July 31 urged the Muslims to gather and "make mincemeat of Christians". Next day, about 1000 people gathered in the town and marched towards Christian Colony. Police contingent present in the neighbourhood didn't try to stop the mob. The mob had brought along petrol and other inflammable material and within half an hour they torched 40 houses of Christians.

Condemnation of the incident poured in from the President and the Prime Minister besides the chiefs of different political parties as well. The Lahore High Court Chief Justice Khawaja Muhammad Sharif took sua sponte action against the incident and directed District Judge Mehmood Maqbool Bajwa to hold a detailed inquiry into the matter and submit a report within one week. Amnesty International and other organizations called for the repeal of blasphemy law that was considered as

the root cause of all these extra judicial murders. Calling the incident as shameful, Jamat-e-Islami Chief Syed Munawwar Hasan demanded an impartial inquiry to penalize the culprit instead of undoing the blasphemy law. With the passage of time all feelings of contempt and remorse for the gruesome incident gradually subsided and the very same people who were once losing no time in condemning the incident changed their views and started talking differently. In the Hurmat Quran Conference that was held on 25 October 2009 and attended by the acting Ameer of JI, Dr. Khalil Ahmad, and Gojra Bar Council President, Saifullah Cheema, besides many other religious Ulema, a joint statement was issued by the participants that claimed to have found through their own initiated inquiry that the enraged mob were not responsible for burning the seven Christians but a group Christian drug addicts had in fact locked their house which later caught fire and resulted in burning them alive. They also condemned declaring absconders 70 Muslim as involved in the Gojra violence case. What justified them to make such remarks while a case was under trial at LHC and what led them go against their own earlier stand for an impartial inquiry of the incident and declare their own findings as authentic enough to declare Christian drug addicts responsible for the inferno that burnt seven persons alive and torched several houses in the area? All those findings of HRCF and other eyewitness accounts that identified a Maulvi Saheb of the area mosque and his followers as instigators for the incident became unimportant for them. They even ignored the reports about the masked men who were seen and reported by the residents to the media reporters as the persons involved in committing acts of violence on that day.

While the Gojra incident was still waiting for the judicial inquiry to complete and the perpetrators to be punished, another incident of violence against Christian minority took place in Faisalabad where two Christian brothers were gunned down by a group of masked men on 19 July 2010 right on the premises of the court of justice. It led to violent protests by the Christians in the native village of the slain brothers. Incidentally, Gojra is 50 km away from the place where this crime was committed. A one-column report appeared in the press followed by condemnations from the President and an adjournment motion by the president's media adviser and MNA Farahnaz Ispahani in the National Assembly that sought a debate "on the subject of rising persecution of minority communities of Pakistan." A criticism by the Federal Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti on the misuse of blasphemy law triggered a strong condemnation and death threats from the Majlis-e-Tahafuz-e-Khatim-e-Nubuwwat. Like the last year, the Lahore High Court Chief Justice Khawaja Muhammad Sharif was quick again to order judicial inquiry into the murder of two Christian brothers and at the end of sua sponte case hearing he deplored that due to police negligence people were taking the law into their own hands and not waiting for the results of cases pending in courts. Neither he made any comment nor did anybody question the benefits of the sua sponte action if perpetrators remain unaccounted for and continue taking law into their hands.

These three events of violence at, Godhra, Gojra, and Faisalabad, carry several similarities. The masked men killing innocent people for blames that couldn't be proved in any court of law, the negligence of police force to enforce the law, the perpetrators remain untraceable, and the repeated sua sponte actions fail to stop the recurrences of these crimes. There are dissimilarities as well. The Godhra violence in India started when the innocent people belonging to majority population of the country (80% Hindus) were burnt alive by unknown extremists. The incident resulted in widespread violence in the whole Gujarat province. On the other hand, the Gojra violence in Pakistan began when two persons belonging to a minority population of Pakistan (1.6% Christian) were blamed for committing blasphemy. The majority population (97% Muslims) got enraged and some of the extremists took the law in their hands and went against the Christian minority. The situation became highly volatile in the area but didn't result in spreading it out to the other parts of the province. After two days of violence, things returned to normal and soon the event became a part of the forgotten history until the latest incident in Faisalabad reminded the previous events of similar nature.

The Last quarter century of Pakistan's history is full of events where a number of men and women belonging to Muslims, Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus were implicated in blasphemy cases though none of the allegations could be found convincing enough for the higher judiciary to uphold the sentences given to the suspects by trial courts. On 6 August 2009, the *Dawn* newspaper published a report carrying title "Is there an end?". It contained a long list of those events of blasphemy that were highlighted in the press from 1990 to August 2009. An analysis of this port reveals some astonishing facts about the places and religious communities that were affected by the nature of crimes related to blasphemy act during this period. Out of total 68 blasphemy cases in the country, Punjab had 58, Islamabad 8, Sindh 4, and KP (NWFP) had only 1 case during this period. Balochistan is the only province in the country where no newsworthy blasphemy case was ever reported as per the available information. Coincidentally, when we look at the number of Madressahs in the country we find 5,355 Madressahs in Punjab, 2,852 in Sindh, 1,242 in the NWFP, 297 in Balochistan and 120 in the federal capital. Is there a correlation of blasphemy cases with the number of Madressahs? Why is Balochistan safe from these cases? Either the people in Balochistan are very tolerant or the Madressahs in Balochistan follow a different syllabus.

The highly affected of the blasphemy events is the Christians community. During the last 19 years, 36 Christians, 17 Muslims, 14 Ahmadis, and 1 Hindu were either killed or arrested for blasphemy cases. It's normally believed that poverty, lack of education, and backwardness are breeding grounds for all kinds of extremism. In our case, the situation appears to be almost opposite. Most of the big cities of the country that enjoy comparatively better living condition, literacy rate, and other facilities are found to have more cases of religious extremism than the places that have higher poverty rate and low literacy rate. Lahore, Islamabad, Toba Tek Singh, Faisalabad, Karachi, Gujranwala, Kasur, Sheikhpura, and Peshawar are the cities where these cases were reported during this period.

Another point to note is that the year 2009 had the highest number of blasphemy (20 out of 69) cases since 1990 and all cases were reported in Punjab with the exception of one in Sindh that too was later declared false. In 2009 a new phenomenon also entered into blasphemy related events when Gojra incident triggered the people to resort to torching of public property and innocent people and reminded people of Muslim-Hindu riots in Godhra back in 2002. In India, no Hindu-Muslim riots took place after Godhra while Pakistan faced Muslim-Christian riots-like situation twice within less than a year. A country that was solely created to save the minority from the persecution of majority is now being recognized as the one where human rights of minorities and women are constantly violated on one or the other pretext. Will there be a consensus among all citizens of the country that they will resist all those instigations that call for human blood, no matter how sacred the cause may be?

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<http://www.viewpointonline.net/fullstory.php?t=Godhra%20to%20Gojra%20and%20onwards&f=full-11-july-30.php&y=2010&m=july>

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