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Introduction: Researching the rise of religious offence in South Asia

Paul Rollier, Kathinka Frøystad and Arild Engelsen Ruud

In 2011 a dinner party conversation in New Delhi ended with the following joke. An Indian dog and a Pakistani dog happened to meet at the Indo-Pak border. Fatigued but determined, the Indian dog trudged across to Pakistan. Surprised, the Pakistani dog asked: 'Why did you do that? Didn't they treat you well in India?' The Indian dog explained: 'All I ever got to eat was rice and lentils, lentils and rice, never any meat. I cannot take this any more, so now I am moving to Pakistan.' To its surprise, however, the Pakistani dog then crossed the border in the opposite direction. When asked why he had decided to move to a meatless diet, the Pakistani dog explained: 'Back home I am not even allowed to bark!'

With this joke, the host of the dinner get-together put a sardonic end to a conversation that had revolved around a growing sensitivity to expressions that offend religious sentiments across South Asia. In Pakistan the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, had recently been assassinated for criticising the draconic blasphemy legislation that made it possible to issue death sentences even for unwitting disrespect of the Prophet. In Bangladesh, over a hundred Jamaat-e-Islami activists had been arrested for defending their leader's comparison of his struggles with the suffering of the Prophet. Some years earlier, both countries had seen large-scale protests and violence in connection with the so-called Danish cartoon controversy. Meanwhile in India, hardly a week now went by without a news report about an artist, scholar or politician criticised, charged or assaulted for hurting religious sentiments, particularly Hindu ones. What was going on?

At the dinner party, possible parallels were suggested and discussed. The joke was the host's gentle way of shifting attention from parallels to

differences of kind. Whereas the growth of religious offence controversies in India was giving rise to a public critique of the legislation that enabled them, such a critique had become too dangerous to be voiced in Pakistan – as it would also do in Bangladesh a few years later. Needless to say, this was not a joke that elicited laughter.

Eight years on, the relevance of this joke and the conversation that prompted it has only intensified. Why did allegations of hurt religious sentiments become so pronounced across South Asia and religious traditions after the turn of the millennium? Our primary aim is to throw light on the circumstances that came together to pave the way for this development. Drawing on detailed case studies of recent religious offence controversies in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, we look for commonalities in the structural conditions that mark the entire region, and that cut across national and religious differences. One of these is the legacy of colonial law, which a number of scholars before us have examined. Clearly this legacy, and the legal amendments that have been made since the break up of British India, are crucial for understanding the particular shapes religious offence controversies take in the individual countries.

With their strikingly different political history and distinct postcolonial attention to issues of religious denomination, identity and sentiment, all four countries have come to experience heightened sensitivity to religious offence in the last few years. This is what makes Myanmar particularly interesting in this context and has prompted us to include it here. In spite of decades of a nationalist and autocratic military regime, once a semblance of democracy and open public sphere is re-established Myanmar proceeds to experience expressions of religious hurt in the same terms as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, with their relatively longer histories of open public space. Although outside the purview of the present volume, the same could be said of postwar Sri Lanka, where pro-Sinhalese Buddhist groups have become increasingly active in denouncing perceived insults to their religion.

The contributions collected in this volume are particularly attentive to four conditions that have nurtured religious offence controversies in South Asia. First, to the implications of the rapid introduction of social media and smartphones; second, to how the arrival, deepening or decline of democracy has influenced the articulation of political and religious rivalry; thirdly, to how an increasingly ‘split public’ (Rajagopal 2001, 2009; Sunstein 2017; Udupa and McDowell 2017) reinforces the mutual suspicion between religious and secular reasoning; and finally, to the growing demands for recognition – not only among marginalised

communities within South Asia, but also among adherents of hegemonic South Asian religious traditions. Though our list of changing structural conditions could undoubtedly have been expanded further, these four give a fair indication of the contextual canvas spanned out for the case studies detailed in the following chapters.

To document the beginning of the recent rise of religious offence controversies in South Asia in numerical terms is difficult. Quantitative exercises such as charting verdicts, lawsuits or First Information Reports (FIRs – reports that initiate legal proceedings) of alleged religious offence in comparable ways in the four countries would virtually be methodologically impossible. Furthermore, to our knowledge there is no reliable, provision-specific, publicly available data pertaining to the registration of blasphemy offences in any of the countries examined. The few quantitative overviews that we do have concern Pakistan, which has the strictest blasphemy legislation in the region. However, these are generally confined to cases that have been reported in the press and/or that came to the attention of human rights groups (Ahmed 2018; HRCP 2017, 96; Julius 2016, 100; see Siddique and Hayat 2008, 323–5). For what it is worth, this set of data indicates that there have been over a thousand cases of ‘religious offence’ in the country since the mid-1980s, with an increase from the 2000s onwards. This observation also seems credible for India, while the escalation appears to have begun somewhat later in Bangladesh and Myanmar. One of the main difficulties in quantifying this upsurge lies in the fact that recorded statistics of these cases, even if available, would not include the multitude of religious offence controversies handled outside the legal system – nor probably those cases not reported by the media, which necessitates a reflection on mediatisation.

Media play a dual role in offence controversies. Firstly, they constitute a medium through which allegedly offensive material can be manufactured and easily circulated to a growing proportion of the population. With the expansion of print media (books, newspapers, pamphlets, etc.) and the shift from state-controlled broadcasting to commercial TV channels in the early 1990s, the internet and mobile phones from the mid-1990s and social media and smartphones from the mid-2000s, the ongoing digital revolution represents a formidable source of unpredictability that generates a contradictory movement of enhanced visibility and growing containment (Udupa and McDowell 2017). Secondly, and importantly for the understanding of escalation, the media constitute a public sphere in which offence controversies are reported and heatedly debated. Even minor religious offence controversies in terms of legal repercussions can attract considerable public attention. This is

particularly so in instances involving art and celebrities, art demanding a particularly extensive freedom of expression and celebrities being well-known already – not to mention the combination of the two. Instances in which films, novels or paintings are met with lawsuits, threats or violence frequently receive wide coverage.

In combination, conventional and new media thus work as a giant megaphone. Offence controversies constitute highly marketable news and the complex media ecology is a significant reason for their prominent place in South Asia's public life. Our point of departure reflects this dual analytical gaze. Though partly relying on a positivist notion of a quantifiable (at least in principle) increase, we equally rely on the exponentially growing attention to these controversies across the South Asian mediascape.

Scholarship on the rise of religious offence in South Asia has so far been preoccupied with case studies, country-specific developments and reflections about their cause and impact. While these are necessary starting points, this volume hopes to encourage reflections that transcend individual cases and countries and so push the transition to a field of scholarship in which contributors engage with, debate and critique one another's arguments, methodologies and theoretical presuppositions. One element of this is to deepen the awareness of the relations between South Asian and European battles over religious offence beyond the topic of colonial law, and to problematise the concepts from which we depart, including 'religious offence' and its roots in the inscrutable notion of 'blasphemy'.

Conceptual reflections and global historicisation

Dependent as it is on the truths that a community cherishes (Lawton 1993, 4), the concept of blasphemy is notoriously imprecise. In Hebrew the term relates to the Abrahamic taboo of taking the name of God in vain (Lawton 1993, 14). In Greek this notion translates as *blasphemein*, to harm (*blaptein*) by the act of speech (*pheme*); it stands in profound contrast to *euphemein*, meaning to utter apt words or keep silent during the performance of rituals (Dacey 2012, 17; Lawton 1993, 14). In the Abrahamic context, therefore, blasphemy is generally understood as the opposite of a declaration of faith, and by extension as the betrayal of God's covenant (Bretherton 2016; Nash 2007, 2; Levy 1981). But this offence need not necessarily be oral in nature, as evidenced by a recently unearthed 2800-year-old latrine in Israel, purposely built on a site of pagan worship so as to desecrate 'false' gods (Ganor and Kreimerman 2017).

Together with physical desecration and iconoclastic profanity, blasphemy should be conceived as part of a continuum of religious offences instantiated in a variety of ways through words, gestures, images and so on. Thus, while recognising the distinction between ‘blasphemy’ and ‘sacrilege’ in English, for practical purposes we use these terms interchangeably.¹ We also recognise that these terms and their vernacular equivalents carry a judgement made on someone’s communication. We should not therefore assume that any transgressive act has occurred: our ethnography suggests that sometimes the offensive act, utterance or artefact exists only in the accuser’s imagination. Further, in certain contexts the incriminating evidence – a blasphemous remark, for instance – cannot be repeated directly for fear of committing yet another act of blasphemy.² Hence we find it useful to follow Favret-Saada’s invitation to treat allegations of blasphemy as a system of places, meaning that the locutor making the advent of a blasphemy case possible is not the ‘blasphemer’, a mere addressee, but rather the ‘denunciator’ (Favret-Saada 1992, 258).

In Europe, the meaning of blasphemy has evolved considerably, depending on the accepted boundaries between legitimate and forbidden forms of dissent (Nash 2007). Encompassed by the notion of heresy during much of the medieval period (Bretherton 2016), fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Christian Europe saw a proliferation of legislations to eradicate outrageous speech and iconoclastic gestures (Christin 1992; Delumeau 1978). However, efforts to suppress blasphemy were powered more by theological concerns over heresy and the state’s attempts to secure its own claim to power over ecclesiastical courts than by an increase in actual acts of blasphemy (Cabantous 2002, 58–9; Loetz 2009; Martignoni 2005). In this context historians have variously interpreted the suppression of blasphemy as signalling the emergence of the modern state, an excessive instrumentalisation of religion by monarchical power and, by the nineteenth century, class conflicts (Boudet 1996, 49; Delumeau 1978; Marsh 1998).

The dangerous efficacy of blasphemy was over time relegated to the realm of unreason. From a liberal secular perspective, the belief in blasphemy is often dismissed as a relic of the past or as an anachronistic aberration (Al-Azmeh 2013; McGarry 2014; Viswanathan 1998, 240) embraced by those, often Muslims, who fail to grasp the importance of freedom and the true nature of signs (Keane 2009; Mahmood 2009).³ Yet the global resurgence of blasphemy-related controversies over the last decades (Cumper 2017, 138), including in liberal democracies, calls into question its alleged demise.

While these controversies remain often formulated in religious terms, we may also discern the re-emergence of blasphemy in a secular garb – a crime increasingly understood and debated as a form of disrespect for humans and their religious sensibilities, rather than as an offence to the sacred (Favret-Saada 2017). What was once punished as blasphemy now tends to be viewed as religious hatred and discrimination, as a violation of rights against a particular group or individual on the basis of its religion or belief (see Dacey 2012; Bretherton 2016). Conversely, accusations of blasphemy (in the religious sense) are increasingly framed as an assault on liberal societies' attachment to freedom of expression (e.g. Eriksen and Stjernfelt 2012; Gubo 2015; cf. Cumper 2017, 164). The main case for such freedom holds that even harmful speech should be protected, because doing so has a desirable impact on democratic development (Danbury 2017). While censorship only heightens curiosity and invites transgression, the argument goes, freedom of speech ensures a 'marketplace of ideas' where truth can emerge and thus ultimately protect individuals against the abuse of state power (cf. Baker 1989).⁴

Yet the challenges posed by new technologies of media and communication to the regulatory capacity of states complicate this assessment. In a so-called 'post-truth' era of algorithmic governance and 'social media echo chambers', the liberty to voice one's opinion online, for instance, cannot be dissociated from concerns over the internet serving as a potential incubator of violence and as an instrument in the pursuit of power (Price and Stremlau 2017, 318). Similarly, in secular yet religiously/ethnically diverse Western societies, such as those of Europe, defendants of an unbridled right to free expression must contend with those for whom this right conflicts with their freedom of religion, and who may therefore seek redress for perceived religious slights.

The legal articulation between these two rights has become highly contested. In Europe there is no consensus on whether the beliefs of religious communities should be given legal protection.⁵ While some argue that protecting religions against defamation could act as a safeguard against the discrimination of minorities, others contend that doing so would compromise the right to free expression and foster religious intolerance.⁶ In recent years the compromise position consists in replacing blasphemy laws with incitement-to-religious-hatred legislations, thereby protecting *members* of religious communities from vilification, rather than their beliefs.⁷ The liberal understanding of free speech holds that persons only can be protected from defamation, not what they think or worship (Dierkens and Schreiber 2012, 171; de Saint Victor 2016).

But distinguishing between inciting hatred towards beliefs and towards believers can prove difficult in practice (Cumper 2017, 156). In addition, this distinction rests on a historically specific understanding of what a person's proper relationship to belief and rituals should be, rather than a universal one (Mahmood 2009; Mahmood and Danchin 2014). Religion is here conceived as a set of beliefs to which the individual gives ascent, so that religious symbols appear as external and inconsequential to the supposedly true locus of religiosity, one's interiority. Blasphemy is therefore not perceived as a real offence. As such, it is often met with allegations of majoritarian prejudice on behalf of religious minorities.

As Saba Mahmood has remarked, 'minorities often contest the discriminatory practices of secular law through the same legal instruments that enshrine majoritarian privilege' (2015, 176).⁸ It should therefore not be surprising that international structures of governance, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the European Court of Human Rights, have become key sites for the re-articulation of blasphemy in recent decades. Pakistan, in particular, has played an important role in this process. Since the late 1990s it has sought to recast 'blasphemy' into the discourse of human rights, so as to counter negative stereotypes towards Muslims (Rehman and Berry 2012; Bettiza and Dionigi 2015, 634–7; Zuber 2015).⁹ Acting on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) at the UNHRC, the Pakistani delegation successfully tabled resolutions aimed at criminalising the 'defamation of religions'.¹⁰ While Western democracies saw these attempts as eroding the universal right of freedom of expression and as potentially reinforcing discrimination towards minorities and doctrinal dissidents, the OIC pointed to the existence of a number of religious insult provisions in EU countries.¹¹ In 2011, after years of tussle, the OIC finally accepted the general shift away from the notion of 'defamation of religion' towards that of 'discrimination', anti-'hate speech' and 'incitement' to religious hatred and violence (OHCHR 2011). This shift is grounded in the distinction between verbal attacks on religious individuals or groups and attacks on religious symbols and religions as such (Temperman and Koltay 2017, 7; Parmar 2015, 382).

Of particular interest is the fact that Pakistan and the OIC, while still striving to impose a global ban on the 'defamation of religions', also emphasised the need to promote cross-cultural 'tolerance' and 'interfaith harmony' (cf. Parmar 2015, 380). This strategic recourse to a discourse of tolerance may seem surprising in light of the discriminatory effects of blasphemy laws. But as Wendy Brown suggests, the idiom of tolerance is generally an expression of domination (Brown 2006, 204). Talk

of tolerance often functions through the essentialisation of cultural and religious differences, so as simultaneously to incorporate and sustain the otherness of the tolerated element (Brown 2006, 28). In its long-standing attempt to translate domestic blasphemy laws into an international legal norm, the OIC's strategic embrace of such liberal language allows it to universalise its call to shield religious sensitivities from insult.

Moreover, Pakistan's stance on defamation at the UNHRC and its recourse to notions of 'interfaith harmony' and 'tolerance' is in keeping with South Asia's legal traditions on free speech and its limits. As discussed below, colonial regulations on speech and expression were devised in the name of public order, and purportedly aimed at fostering 'communal harmony' among easily excitable subjects. Central to these were the proscription of incitement to religious hatred and offences to religious sentiments. In the postcolonial period, 'reasonable restrictions' of the constitutional right of free speech have also included state security, public order, friendly relations with foreign states, public decency and morality and caste discrimination (cf. Pohjonen and Udupa 2017, 17).¹²

The history of religious offence and its regulation in South Asia is deeply intertwined with Western developments and debates on blasphemy; in several respects it prefigures these developments. Thus the recasting of blasphemy into an idiom of hurt religious sensibilities, which emerges in the late twentieth century in Europe (Favret-Saada 2017), is already discernible in India in the 1920s and 1930s (of which more below). This is no coincidence. Asad Ahmed's work shows that the concerns that presided over the drafting of anti-blasphemy provisions during the colonial era were directly inspired by nineteenth-century liberal and utilitarian projects of legal reform (Ahmed 2009, 2016). Rather than simply being triggered by irreducible cultural differences heightened by new technologies of communication and migration flows, the recent globalisation of blasphemy controversies is predicated upon the rise of the modern state and its grammar of governance. This effected a reorganisation of religious life and a reconceptualisation of 'religious offence', notably through the enactment of colonial laws, to which we now turn.

Law and turning points

Scholars of blasphemy working in the Euro-American world commonly point to the Rushdie affair of the late 1980s as a turning point.¹³ The sheer novelty of a transnational blasphemy controversy helped to portray this affair as an upheaval generating an indisputable 'before' and an 'after'

(Grenda, Beneke and Nash 2014, 7). The affair also serves as a reference point for studies of later confrontations between free speech and artistic freedom (e.g. Klausen 2009; Grillo 2007a, 2007b; Ball 2017), as if it were the mother of religious offence controversies. In this way, organised expressions of outrage towards artistic representations deemed injurious to religion appear as the preserve of Muslims – a view which overlooks the fact that the moralist stance of anti-Rushdie protesters directly draws on a rhetoric forged by Christian fundamentalists in Europe since the 1960s (cf. Favret-Saada 2017).

Seen from a South Asian perspective, however, the Rushdie affair is of lesser magnitude as a turning point. To be sure, it was the first large-scale transnational offence controversy involving South Asians at home and abroad. The affair was moreover seminal in that it united South Asian Muslims with Muslims in other parts of the world in a common debate (though not necessarily a common stand) long before the galvanising effect of the so-called ‘war on terror’. And in India, where the book was banned from importation, it triggered criticism of the Congress government for ‘appeasing’ the Muslim minority. As such, the Rushdie affair is a major reference point in South Asian discourses on censorship as well. Yet in this region the Rushdie affair was neither the first of its kind, nor necessarily the most consequential. For South Asianists, the Rushdie affair is rather part of a series of events that originated in British India and forked out in the independent states after decolonisation. Henceforth events in each South Asian country began to acquire greater density, especially from the 1980s or 1990s onwards, though not simultaneously, to the same degree or in full sync. To give a better understanding of these uneven parallels, we need to go back to the mid-nineteenth century.

In the scholarship on religious offence controversies in South Asia, a significant turning point was the establishment of a common Indian Penal Code (IPC) for the entire population of British India in the 1860s; this now forms the basis of the criminal codes in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, as well in other former British colonies (see Yeo and Wright 2016 [2011], 3). Whereas the Mughals (1526–1857) primarily settled disputes by arbitration, their British successors held it important to develop a uniform legislation. Initially they had relied on whatever legal traditions were in place, spanning from bodies of customary law, Islamic jurisprudence traditions, the Anglo-Hindu laws, various parliamentary charters and acts, East India Company regulations and English common law (Skuy 1998; Patra 1961). The next step was to draft a legislation that would be applicable and acceptable to all sections of society and thus help to maintain ‘social order’.

Although drafted by Macaulay in the 1830s, this legislation was not enacted until 1862, having acquired more urgency after the great Indian uprising of 1857. For Macaulay and his colonial successors, the challenge was to allow for extensive religious freedom and critique while preventing religious intimidations. The relevant four sections made it an offence to destruct and defile places of worship and sacred objects (section 295), to disturb rituals (section 296), to trespass burial grounds or places of worship (section 297) and to utter words or to make sounds and gestures with a view to ‘wound’ someone’s ‘religious feelings’ (section 298).¹⁴ In addition, in another chapter, section 153 aimed to prevent deliberate provocations of the kind that might instigate interreligious rioting.¹⁵

With this new law, all human punitive rights were transferred to the courts. By the same stroke all the religious traditions found in this heterogeneous subcontinent were given equal protection. In this respect the IPC was ahead of English blasphemy legislation, which only protected the Church of England until it was abolished in 2008. In the decades that followed, section 153 was nevertheless found wanting; it was supplemented in 1898 with 153-A, which criminalised attempts to promote ‘feelings of enmity’ between religious communities.¹⁶ Decades later, however, the intense communal polarisation that followed in the wake of the Independence movement, aided by an increasingly affordable printing technology, gave rise to a mode of transgression that turned out to be unpunishable by existing law. This mode of transgression – satirical writing about the Prophet or Hindu deities – was epitomised by the *Rangila Rasul* pamphlet. This affair, and two other similar controversies,¹⁷ became a second turning point in the modern history of offence controversies in the region, and decisively shaped the way in which ‘blasphemy’ and ‘religious sentiments’ came to be conceived, adjudicated and experienced over the next hundred years.

Published in Lahore in 1924, the Urdu pamphlet *Rangila Rasul* (‘The colourful Prophet’) claimed to describe intimate events of the life of the Prophet. Written and published by members of the Arya Samaj (Thursby 1975, 40), this caricature contained satirical poems about the Prophet and his multiple marriages. Its overall message was that his teaching, which constitutes the essence of Islam, ‘was derived from his sexual “experiences”’ (Raj 2015, 150). Highly popular and soon translated into several languages, within months the publication spurred the mobilisation of Muslims for whom the pamphlet amounted to a defamation of their Prophet and religion. Mahatma Gandhi, by criticising it, contributed to making *Rangila Rasul* better known (Nair 2013). The uproar soon

became so tumultuous that the government of Punjab attempted to stop it (Thursby 1975, 41).

The Hindu publisher was arrested and prosecuted for attempting to promote enmity between different classes of colonial subjects (section 153-A of the IPC). The judicial process concluded in 1927 with an acquittal. The Lahore High Court ruled that sections 298 and 153-A did not criminalise the *verbal* defamation of religions and did not apply to *deceased* religious leaders (Ahmed 2009, 182; Thursby 1975, 45).¹⁸ The court added that if such expressions were to be criminalised, a further section would have to be added.

This decision caused further protests. The ability to display wounded feelings during these protests and mosque gatherings was part of a 'politics of self-expression' grounded in notions of cultural authenticity and virtuous emotions (Daechsel 2006; Pernaau 2015); it was voiced in a language that drew heavily on Urdu poetry and its images of burning hearts and unrequited love (Gilmartin 1991, 1998). Two years after the acquittal Ilmuddin, a young Muslim carpenter from Lahore, murdered the Hindu publisher. His subsequent trial and execution for murder attracted the intervention of eminent leaders and intellectuals, such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Allama Iqbal. With time Ilmuddin acquired the status of an Islamic hero and saint, and close to a century later served as an exemplar for Salman Taseer's murderer (Schaflechner, chapter 8).

With *Rangila Rasul* a new form of urban politics was born. It centred on the mobilisation of communities through the performance of affective attachment to both material and abstract religious symbols: mosques, cows, printed scriptures and religious figures among others (Gilmartin 1991, 1998; Freitag 1989; Scott 2015). The well-publicised legal processes around publications such as *Rangila Rasul* often brought increased sales to the pamphlet, tract or newspaper in question (Thursby 1975, 48; Scott 2015, 294).

Disappointed over the lack of a legal weapon that could stop hurtful publications in the future, Muslim leaders appealed to the Governor of Punjab. For the government, the judgements handed in cases of provocative writings failed to clarify whether a deliberate insult to a religion or to a deceased religious figure amounted to the intentional promotion of enmity between communities (Thursby 1975, 6). Eager to pacify protesting Muslims and prevent further cases, in 1927 the government proposed a 'Religious Insults Bill' which aimed to criminalise not only spoken offence but also any representation intended to 'outrage' religious feelings (Barrier 1974, 101; Thursby 1975, 61; Stephens 2014). In its original form, section 295-A reads as follows:

Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of His Majesty's subjects, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations, insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.¹⁹

Once this section was passed into law, the Indian subcontinent was equipped with one of the strictest regulations of religious offence that the world had ever seen. After 1947, these regulations (sections 295, 295-A, 296, 297 and 298) were incorporated in the respective penal codes of the now independent states of India, Pakistan, Myanmar and, from 1971, Bangladesh.²⁰

Commenting in the aftermath of the *Rangila Rasul* affair on Muslim susceptibilities and the risk of social upheaval, the Punjab Governor wrote that an attack on the Prophet 'stung them to the quick' and that they 'could not bear' to see this repeated (quoted in Thursby 1975, 41). Scholars have suggested that such statements, and the wording of section 295-A, are premised on the colonial assumption that Indian society was essentially religious and that its confessional pluralism demanded a neutral and rational arbiter. Colonial subjects were thought to be susceptible to volatile religious passions and vulnerable to religious insults, which in turn would lead to social disorder (Ahmed 2009, 179; Ramdev et al. 2016). Born out of an active engagement with the local conditions, this piece of legislation, and subsequent legal restrictions on expressions that cause real or perceived harm, could become a means to instil restraint and to discipline 'native' religious sensitivities (Adcock 2016, 343). Ironically local religious publics using these laws nowadays often fail to recognise the colonial origin of these notions of blasphemous and seditious libel.

Summing up our argument thus far, the Rushdie affair is less significant in the history of blasphemy controversies if seen from South Asia. For South Asianists, more significant turning points are the colonial implementation of blasphemy legislation in the 1860s and its subsequent strengthening, particularly the addition of section 295-A in 1927. The next turning points occurred after Independence and were thus country-specific. Before we can return to this volume's ambition of identifying some of the conditions that nurtured the rise of blasphemy controversies across the South Asian region, a summary of country-specific developments is in order. As is well known, the four countries considered in this volume – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar – pursued different

political paths after decolonisation, which had a direct impact on the kind of public expressions that were permitted.

India

Under the aegis of Jawaharlal Nehru, India became a socialist republic dedicated to industrialisation, modernity and secularism. Though its Muslim population shrank greatly following the establishment of Pakistan, India remained a composite society and its proportion of Muslims was still around 10 per cent (Joshi, Srinivas and Bajaj 2003). A main priority for independent India was to reconstruct a polity that could prevent new fragmentation along religious lines and also inculcate respect for religious others.

At the same time other developments suggested that these steps were inadequate. In the south, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's reinterpretations of the *Ramayana* emphasised the negative traits of Lord Rama. In 1956 he burned images of Rama in public (Richman 1991) to mobilise Dravidians against Brahmanism. In the same year Aubrey Menen published a novelistic *Ramayana* interpretation– *Rama Retold: A Secular Retelling of the Ramayana* (1956) – which was every bit as provocative as that of Periyar (cf. Chandran 2017, 60–5). And in the 1960s interreligious riots were suddenly on the rise again – spearheaded by mobs that, according to Hasan, were 'headed not very infrequently by RSS volunteers' (1988, 827). One of the outcomes of this was a further tightening of the religious offence regulations. In 1961 section 295-A was expanded with an 'or otherwise' phrase, and in 1969 section 153-A was considerably extended. The result was that there hardly remained a thinkable religious transgression left to criminalise.

The 1970s were marked by far more dramatic events than religious offence controversies, including the brief but dramatic war with Pakistan that culminated with independence for Bangladesh, an emergent Sikh insurgency in Punjab and the increasingly authoritarian rule of Indira Gandhi. During the 21-month Emergency period, the state maintained strict control over all publications and public utterances, as it would continue to do for another 15 years with radio and TV broadcasting. This may explain why Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* shocked the few Indians who read it before restrictions were imposed. One of these was the well-known author and journalist Khushwant Singh; he advised Penguin India not to publish the work in India since it was so hurtful and tasteless that it could inspire massive riots (Waldrop 1999; Frøystad 2013, 199).

In the decades that followed, the number of blasphemy controversies picked up, first slowly and then with increasing speed and media-tised intensity. By now there is a vast scholarship detailing specific cases (e.g. Date 2007; Laine 2014; Pennington 2016; Sarma 2014; Sethi and Sengupta 2014; Taylor 2011; Ramaswamy 2011; Laine 2011; Copeman 2012; Dharwadker 2012), so we will instead emphasise interrelated trends. Firstly, the weight has shifted from pre-publication to post-publication regulation, and thus from clearances to complaints. This development began with the termination of the state monopoly on television and radio broadcasting in the early 1990s; it continued with an expanding television universe followed by internet connectivity on large and small screens. Feature films and documentaries still need clearance by a censor board prior to public screening, but the liberalisation of the rest of the mediascape is more than sufficient to make the scope for potential transgressions virtually infinite.

Secondly, legal redress is increasingly sought for alleged offences against Hinduism. As Hindu nationalism has metamorphosed into one of India's most persuasive political ideologies, blasphemy controversies increasingly reflect alleged offences against Hindu sentiments (Bailey 2014; Taylor 2014; Thapar 2014; Tripathi 2009). True, such cases are hardly new (as illustrated by the *Ramayana* reinterpretations of Periyar and Menen) and offences against minority religions are still suppressed (as illustrated by the ban on the book *Islam, a Concept of Political World Invasion by Muslims* from 2003). Yet the re-emergence of a self-assertive Hinduism has clearly multiplied the number of incidents in which Hindus claim their deities and religious feelings have been disrespected.

Thirdly, religio-political organisations and pressure groups play a growing role in initiating political campaigns and legal proceedings against alleged transgressors. As Chandran poignantly remarks, censorship has become 'democratised' (Chandran 2017, 2010). The prosecutor's role is no longer monopolised by the state but dispersed across the political and societal spectrum – with the effect that alleged transgressions, which could formerly be handled with discretion, frequently turn into massive spectacles of demonstrations, protests, campaigns and vigilante attacks.

Fourthly, religious offence controversies have spread from the domains of politics and art to academia, beginning with the violent and legal campaigns against D. N. Jha's documentation of the deep roots of beef consumption in India and continuing with attempts to block the works of James Laine, Wendy Doniger and Jeffrey J. Kripal. Though the higher courts support academic freedom, a long-drawn-out legal battle is

nevertheless a ‘punishment’ in its own right (cf. Dhavan 2008). An inter-related development is the protests against allegedly offensive university course readings. Though institutions generally seek to uphold the principle of academic freedom, such attacks nevertheless create considerable cross-pressure at a time when the government shares the protesters’ ideological position.

Lastly, a fifth trend is worth noting. Due to the above developments, many Indian intellectuals have expressed growing worries about retaining a regulation of religious offence so extensive that even the most careful politician, activist, artist or academic working on questions of religion risks hurting someone’s religious sentiments. So a new critical debate has begun: one that discusses whether regulating religious offence produces more blasphemy controversies than it prevents, and if it would be better to do away with this kind of regulation. Yet since India’s legal regulation still appears to have considerable popular support (cf. Singh 2018a, 2018b), and certain politicians advocate harsher punishment rather than deregulation, the debate is likely to be long drawn out. As indicated in our opening joke, however, it is noteworthy that India is not among the South Asian countries where questioning the wisdom of regulating religious offence has become a dangerous thing to do.

Pakistan

Like the other countries considered in this volume, Pakistan inherited the religious offences provisions contained in the IPC. But in contrast to them, in Pakistan these laws were substantially enhanced to include offences directed towards specific holy names, objects and feelings. Aside from colonial legal provisions, Pakistan also inherited the memory of past controversies and an emotional repertoire of protest against blasphemy (Blom 2008). The *Rangila Rasul* affair, which took place in Lahore, shaped a local imaginary of heroic sacrifice that would suffuse controversies for the century to come. This imaginary revolves around the celebration of iconic slayers of blasphemers (Ilmuddin d. 1929, Cheema d. 2006, Qadri d. 2016; cf. Schaflechner, chapter 8) and is primarily conveyed through shrines, movies, television series, street banners and popular literature. Yet the first decades following Pakistan’s independence only saw eight formal cases of blasphemy accusations (Julius 2016, 101).

With the rise of religious parties in the late 1970s, and calls for the establishment of the *Nizam-e-Mustafa* (Rule of the Prophet), Muslimness increasingly came to be defined by the state. While the Prime Minister

Zufliqar Ali Bhutto (1971–7) had already made concessions to Islamic parties, it was under Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977–88) that blasphemy was cast as a capital offence (Talbot 1998, 241–4). Under his state-led process of Islamisation, five additional clauses were added to the Pakistan Penal Code, all of them pertaining to offences against Islam. These include the physical desecration of the Quran (section 295-B, life imprisonment), insulting the relatives or companions of the Prophet (section 298-A, three years) and insulting in any way the Prophet himself (section 295-C, mandatory death sentence since 1991).²¹

These legal additions led to an increase in the number of individuals charged with blasphemy, from a handful of cases before the mid-1980s to over a thousand charged under religious offence sections since (HRCP 2017, 96; Julius 2016, 100; Siddique and Hayat 2008, 323ff). Although no one accused has so far been executed, over 53 suspected blasphemers have been killed since 1986 at the hands of zealots or vigilante mobs (ICJ 2015, 11).

The occurrence of blasphemy accusations is predominantly localised in Punjab, where the majority of Pakistan's Christians and Ahmadis live, and in lower middle-class areas, where false accusations have become a lethal instrument in socioeconomic conflicts. Human rights groups and scholars have repeatedly denounced the discriminatory nature of these laws, pointing out that individuals with mental health problems are probably disproportionately targeted (Husain 2014), and that the majority of those killed following an allegation are non-Muslims.²²

Most sentences for religious offence are overturned at the High Court level, and the accused acquitted on the ground that the charges were concocted and spurred on by family feuds, business quarrels, land disputes or religious rivalry (ICJ 2015, 7). Legal scholars suggest that the deliberate wording of these provisions fails clearly to define the types of behaviours that could amount to defilement (Siddique and Hayat 2008; Forte 1994). Consider the broad reach of section 295-C:

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 Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine.

The lack of a reference to the offender's psychological state or intention to offend in this section partly accounts for the fact that the legal proceedings for 295-C are often constrained by the near-impossibility of

repeating or displaying the inculcating words or representation, lest that would amount to a reiteration of blasphemy (see Rollier, chapter 2).

Large swathes of the population, including the country's *ulema* and religious organisations, regard this section as a divine decree and the cornerstone towards the instauration of a more Islamic society. The religious right, with the support of Islamist militants, forcefully oppose any attempt to hold a debate on these laws. The very act of criticising these sections of the Penal Code is often held to constitute in itself an act of blasphemy. In 2011 the Governor of Punjab was killed by his bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, for criticising the misuse of Pakistan's anti-blasphemy provisions (see Schaflechner, chapter 8). This assassination marks a new turn in Pakistan's tryst with blasphemy. The murder trial of the bodyguard and his execution in 2016 were accompanied by massive street protests in support of him – a man lionised by protestors for his readiness to break state laws to uphold that of God. In this context of religious fervour and outrage, holding blasphemy trials becomes increasingly perilous. Judges, the accused and their counsels are subjected to intimidation and occasionally to attacks by members of extremist Islamist groups (ICJ 2015, 7; UNHRC 2013, 13–14).²³ The resultant atmosphere, and the judiciary's concern for public sentiments in these cases, serve to impede the proper delivery of justice.

This surge in blasphemy accusations over the last two to three decades should be understood within the global economy of religious offence, in which sections of Pakistan's state and society expect their country to spearhead a worldwide Muslim campaign against blasphemers, as it did at the UNHRC for over a decade. Hence each international blasphemy crisis – around the Danish cartoons in 2005, the 'Innocence of Muslims' video in 2012 and the Charlie Hebdo cartoons in 2015 – translates locally into lively expressions of outrage and protests in which emerging religious publics stage their attachment to the defence of Islam.

Blasphemy accusations as they have occurred over the last few years should be seen in connection with two new trends. First, Pakistan has witnessed the spectacular emergence of a powerful political movement, the Tehreek-i Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). Established with the likely assent of the military (Sethi 2017) in the aftermath of Qadri's execution, the TLP is dedicated to the rigorous punishment of blasphemers. While the movement had already proven its capacity for disruptions through massive street protests in 2017, the 2018 general elections provided it with the opportunity to demonstrate the appeal of its anti-blasphemy narrative among voters of traditional religio-political parties (Khalid 2018).

No longer merely an instrument in interpersonal rivalry, allegations of religious transgression are increasingly woven into political discourse and wielded in conjunction with concerns over ‘national security’. This brings the regulation of blasphemy closer to the traditional pattern of censorship that has affected media circles and dissident voices in the country, especially (though not only) during periods of military rule (Boquérat 2016). In short, accusations of blasphemy form part of a series of established devices to restrict the freedom of expression. This evolution is taking place in the context of a second trend whereby the military, to pursue its counter-terrorism strategy, has seen its punitive capacity enhanced, notably through the creation of military courts to try civilian suspects and the practice of enforced disappearances (OHCHR 2017, 4; ICJ 2018).

Bangladesh

When Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan after the 1971 war, the new constitution listed secularism as one of its four founding principles. This was a reflection of the ideological orientation that had underpinned at least a significant part of the liberation war and that came to influence subsequent events in this situation of double post-coloniality. Those who held Islam to be the defining ideological foundation of a Muslim majority country were forced into retreat. The main Islamic party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, was banned, while organisations and individuals thought to have been on the wrong side of the war lost positions and influence.

Though the independent government made some concessions to pan-Islamic sentiments, partly in response to the severity with which the oil crisis hit this devastated nation, nowadays these early years are often seen as a time when the constitution’s liberal and secular ideals were held high. Nonetheless, as early as 1973 the poet Daud Haidar was accused of having insulted the Prophet in a poem. He was imprisoned, his ancestral home burnt and one of his relatives killed; later Haidar was forced into exile.

The outrage against Daud Haidar had ignited protests and it saw the first Islamist demonstration after Bangladesh’s war of independence. Though a singular incident, it is nonetheless suggestive of a religiosity that ran counter to the more public secularism (Riaz 2004). After the bloody coups of 1975, religion as central to the nation’s identity was re-emphasised and upheld by the military governments that ruled the

country for the next 15 years. In a series of amendments, the epithet 'Islamic Republic' was attached to the country's name, the Bismillah added as a preamble to the Constitution and other religious references were introduced. In spite of religiously conservative leanings of the ruling clique, however, Bangladesh did not see the same turn to conservative Islam as did Pakistan, remaining instead largely open and liberal.

Accusations of religious offence resurfaced, however, with the reintroduction of democracy in 1990. The election winner, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, established an alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami. Soon after a case was filed against professor and known atheist Ahmed Sharif. He belonged to the educated elite establishment and was a former freedom fighter, both of which made it unthinkable for a recently established government to take him on. A year later, however, Taslima Nasreen was accused of insulting Muslims in her novel *Shame*. By this time the government was more comfortably in power (Riaz 2008), and Nasreen was also junior compared to Sharif. A bounty was offered for her head, tens of thousands protested in street demonstrations and she was summoned by the court. Eventually Nasreen fled the country. After this more incidents took place, including the banning in 1995 of what is considered the first scholarly feminist work in Bangladesh (*Naree* by Humayun Ahmed).

In the same period Ahmadis were increasingly targeted: cases of physical assault took place and their publications were banned by the government. This period also witnessed increased Islamist assertion in the countryside, including a series of fatwas against working women and an expanding number of mosques and madrasas.

Overall these relatively smaller incidents did not seem to challenge the secularism of the state. Laws protecting Islam had not been introduced; the Ahmadis, although often subject to random cases of violence and oppression, were not legally defined as non-Muslim; and food was still available behind screens during Ramadan, the month of fasting. But after 2009 the dynamics seemed to change and two opposing identities of national ideology asserted themselves.

Acting on election pledges and responding to a long-standing demand, the government instituted the so-called International War Crimes Tribunal to try war criminals from the war of independence. Four years on, the sentencing of a well-known Islamist leader to life imprisonment for his war crimes set off massive protests within days. In February 2013 hundreds of thousands of protesters assembled at the Shahbag crossing in central Dhaka, demanding that he be hanged instead (De 2015); they feared that the prison sentence would

simply be overturned with a change of government. The scale of the demonstrations spurred the government to ensure a retrial in which he received the death penalty. The government, on the verge of being accused of relaxing on its pledge to try the war criminals, had clearly shifted gear following the Shahbag demonstrations. He was later executed. In all, 30 individuals have received the death penalty and six have been executed.

The scale and success of the Shahbag protests set in motion a counterreaction (Roy 2018; Zaman 2018). From January 2013 onwards a dozen individuals were accused of blasphemy, atheism or apostasy; seven of them were killed. In addition, a number of other people were killed for deviating religious beliefs. The perpetrators belonged to fringe Islamist organisations, but, as with the Shahbag protests, these incidents spurred a dynamic of action and reaction between an Islamic interpretation and a secular progressive interpretation of the nation's identity. Surveys picked up a broad antipathy against atheists and bloggers that the government had also noticed (Fair, Hamza and Heller 2017); four bloggers were duly arrested for hurting religious sentiments and making derogatory remarks against religion. Soon an Islamist organisation called Hefazat Islam came to the fore with its demand for legislation against blasphemy. Rather than refuting the demand, the Prime Minister retorted that legislation protecting religion already existed in the Bangladesh Penal Code (Sáez 2018). Not satisfied, Hefazat organised a giant demonstration in Dhaka in May 2013, to which possibly 100,000 participants were bussed in from all over the country to support its demands, including prosecution of the 'atheist bloggers'. The potential fall-out was nipped in the bud when the demonstrators were chased out of town in a surprise move at night by the police.

However, in its second consecutive term in power, Awami League has made concessions to Islamists, and in particular to Hefazat. These include a revision of school textbooks, the removal of an allegedly idolatrous statue of the lady of justice outside the Supreme Court and the decision to declare a graduation degree from the Hefazat's madrasas as equivalent to government school degrees.

Although Bangladesh does not possess a blasphemy law such as that existing in Pakistan and envisioned by the Hefazat, Islamist organisations have been increasingly successful in setting the terms of what constitutes intolerable religious offence in the public sphere. In recent years this has led to a series of incidents following accusations of blasphemy, including the 2014 case involving the cabinet minister Latif Siddique (discussed by Ruud in chapter 4).

Myanmar

Myanmar (known as Burma before 1989) is often not included under the epithet South Asia, but it is still the inheritor of the same legal system, known originally as the Indian Penal Code. British Burma was separated from British India in 1937 and followed a different trajectory thereafter. It had a new constitution, a different independence movement and a very different experience during the Second World War; it also, after a brief period of electoral democracy, suffered a lengthier period as a brutal military dictatorship. In spite of this the Myanmar Penal Code remained intact, and sections 295-A and 298 have come to be used in courts to regulate issues of religious sensibility. As discussed earlier, section 295-A was originally a 1927 amendment intended to protect religious minorities. However, in Myanmar (as well as in Sri Lanka), it has come to be used as a device by which to protect majority Buddhist sentiments against minorities.

There has been a relevant debate over the place of ‘blasphemy’ in Buddhist thought. One line of argument suggests that there is no place for blasphemy within Buddhism. Scriptures, and in particular the *Brahmajala-sutta*, hold that material culture or objects have no real sacred value; as objects of attachment they can only create obstacles for the individual’s quest for merit and distort the mind. In effect, the argument goes, it is not possible to offend a true Buddhist. Against this, in many ways, urban interpretation (Fuller 2016) is the more popular religiosity that attributes protective power to the Buddha, the *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings) and the *sangha* (the community of monks). Paul Fuller points out that Buddhist objects are part of what has been termed ‘apotropaic Buddhism’, which constitutes ‘a constant feature’ in Buddhist history and in which objects, texts and teachings are regarded as having protective or magical qualities. ‘An image of the Buddha [which in a way is not simply an image, but *is* the Buddha, a surrogate Buddha, as it were], has the power to protect and avert danger’ (Fuller 2014; italics original).

Although Buddhism played a central role in both pre-colonial and colonial Burmese identity, a fact evidenced by Myanmar’s early twentieth-century revivalist movement (Winfield 2010; Cox 2010), there were nonetheless few legal cases of religious offence in either Lower or Upper Burma, at least in the colonial era documents. These few cases were often related to interpretational issues among Buddhist monks rather than to offence caused by members of other religions.

A significant development, however, was the so-called shoe controversy, which helped to tie the fledgling independence movement to

the country's more traditional Buddhist symbols and identity (Charney 2009). The controversy involved the exemption for European visitors to pagoda precincts to remove their shoes. This exemption was seen by many Burmese Buddhists, nationalists and traditionalists alike, as a sign of disrespect. Having simmered for many years, the shoe controversy finally became a nationwide issue in 1916. Protests, publications and public pressure eventually forced the colonial authorities to allow trustees of pagodas to bar visitors who did not remove their shoes. The controversy was one element, albeit of great significance, which inspired many Burmese to connect colonialism to a sense of moral decline among Buddhists. Its significance lay particularly in that it politicised and mobilised both lay people and Buddhist monks in protests that lasted into the 1920s and 1930s.

However, Buddhism-based political unrest was soon eclipsed by the emergence of a new class of secular-oriented intellectuals. Educated in British-inspired institutions, this intelligentsia soon took the lead of the independence movement (both against the British and later against the Japanese), and later formed the core of independent Myanmar's political elite. After Independence, Buddhism played a minor role in politics, even if ideas of making Buddhism a national religion were contemplated (Charney 2009, 101ff); this was even more the case during the first decades of the military regime, with its muscular and notionally socialist nationalism. From the late 1980s, in particular after the botched 1990 election, the regime sought increasingly to appropriate Buddhism and Buddhist symbols as a means of legitimising its rule. Pagodas and temples underwent reconstruction as the regime sought to reinforce a connection between the nation-state and Buddhism. In the same period there was also a significant mobilisation of monks against the regime (Gravers 2012), and what amounted to a struggle over moral power took place.

This struggle over moral power did not spill into political mobilisation on issues of religious offence, however. A recent study (Ashin and Crosby 2017) shows that between 1980 and 2017 there were only 17 rulings concerning heresy (*adhamma*) and malpractice (*avinaya*) in state-regulated Buddhist courts. Most of the accused were monks. There is no mention in the constitution of state preference for Buddhism, and the State Sangha Act (1990) enables state control over the *sangha*, in particular 'unruly' anti-regime monks.

After the 2007 'Saffron Revolution', which saw the first major mobilisation of monks alongside lay protesters, and in particular after

the dissolution of the military regime and the junta in 2010–11, religion has come to occupy a more prominent role in political mobilisation. It is also in this period that accusations of religious offence have been raised – notably in the two cases involving bar owners who used inappropriate depictions of the Buddha and that of the writer and opposition politician who claimed that the Buddha was not Burmese. Both cases are investigated by Frydenlund (chapter 3).

Analytical perspectives: Beyond methodological nationalism

The countries considered in this volume have followed radically different political paths following the dissolution of the British Empire. Moreover, the religious traditions that dominate in the four countries are radically different from one another. Nevertheless the respective nationalist ideologies in all four countries have all become increasingly flavoured by religion during the past decades, and all four countries have experienced a perceptible rise in religious offence controversies.

What are we to make of these similarities? Are they coincidental? The question is yet to be addressed within the scholarship of blasphemy and religious offence, which has tended to focus on individual countries – a perspective that unwittingly promotes methodological nationalism by naturalising national borders (cf. Glick Schiller 2006, 613). We believe that much can be gained for scholars of blasphemy accusations in India to look across the border to Pakistan and Myanmar, or for scholars of religious offence in Pakistan to look to India and Bangladesh, and so on. In this way we can attempt to track the commonality of these countries with respect to religious offence controversies beyond the IPC and their colonial pasts.

This volume is an attempt – possibly the first one – to think beyond methodological nationalism and to consider the denominators and similarities that cut across national, political and religious differences. However, the development of a politics of blasphemy in fairly similar directions across these lines requires a more explicitly formulated analytical point of departure to come properly into view. To indicate the analytical directions we consider fruitful for reflecting on growth beyond national, political and religious contexts, we begin with those that have deepest academic trajectories before moving on to explore those we believe deserve more attention in future research.

Persisting importance of law

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to a range of important legal effects. Ramdev, Nambiar and Bhattacharya have argued that section 295-A has facilitated an ‘outrage prone economy of “feeling”’ which right-wing nationalists in India now regard as part of their national character (Ramdev, Nambiar and Bhattacharya 2016, xxi). Through it, they contend, religion was made legally immune from criticism and outrage was turned into a constitutive affect through which to lay political claims. Importantly, the process of ‘immunising’ religion from criticism in the name of vulnerable religious sentiments may be (retroactively) constitutive of these very feelings. Similarly, Mazzarella and Kaur argue that, far from merely containing religious sentiments, censorship and laws limiting certain forms of expression can be ‘a generative technology of truth’ (Mazzarella and Kaur 2009, 5) that produces normative modes of attachment to the divine. According to Pinney, law here functions in an ‘iatrogenic’ manner – that is, as generating the very problem it attempts to prevent (Pinney 2009; see also Abbas 2013; Adcock 2016; Siddique and Hayat 2008). Rather than simply preventing the targeted offence, these scholars claim, laws incite the display of wounded sentiments and warrant its strategic mobilisation in response to perceived offences. These laws, Ahmed writes, ‘demanded both the demonstration of emotionality and its containment and regulation through judicial process’ (Ahmed 2009, 173).

Elaborated further by Scott, this led to the development in colonial India of a thriving ‘extralegal legal culture’ – evidenced, for instance, by the legal language deployed by offended groups to narrate their emotional experience and make it politically legible (Scott 2015, 301). Extended to contemporary India, this perspective illuminates how Hindu nationalists who petition the courts to limit what can legally be written or taught about Hinduism describe their emotional reaction to the ‘offence’ in a language that directly reflects the wording of the law (Adcock 2016, 330; Pennington 2016). The analytical perspective deployed in this volume draws on this perspective to accentuate how seemingly visceral and spontaneous displays of outrage are often fundamentally shaped by colonial law and the administrative apparatus of South Asia’s postcolonial states.

While this perspective captures well the paradoxical outcome of regulating public expressions, it is too mechanistic to shed light on the banal fact that there are also numerous transgressions that have *not* been construed as offensive. An alternative, which many of our contributors endorse, is to think of law as having a ‘crystallising’ effect. Like a

catalyst, it enables people to make their discontent, ambitions, rivalry or even greed manifest by offering a 'site' for articulating 'widely different interests and grievances, often only remotely connected with the event itself', to borrow Grillo's formulation (Grillo 2007b, 21). Within this perspective, law is primarily *transformative* rather than *formative*. It enables action, but never from a clean slate.

Whichever perspective one sides with, scholars of offence controversies in South Asia agree that the law and its wordings are of tremendous importance. This is why so many scholars refer to the addition of 295-A as a seminal turning point – much as the Rushdie affair or the Chevalier de la Barre affair (Cabantous 2002, 127–32) are treated in the scholarship of religious offence in the Euro-American world. That said, a quick recapitulation of the *Rangila Rasul* case and the anti-Rushdie agitations in Britain also brings up an approach to the role of law that has received less attention. Here law is seen as a desired state of protection that a minority group can envision and is willing to fight for. Whereas Indian Muslims in the 1920s agitated for a law that protected the Prophet and won, British Muslims in the 1980s agitated for universalisation of the English blasphemy legislation, but lost.

Blasphemy accusations as politics

Alongside legal history and the implications of law, the analytical perspective that has deepest pedigree in the study of South Asian censorship controversies is undoubtedly political instrumentalism. Anchored in rationalist perspectives emphasising human agency (whether individual or institutional) and goal-driven behaviour, the underlying question is approximately as follows: who would have something to gain from instigating a censorship controversy – and what would that 'something' be? This line of inquiry has a clear continuity with studies of interreligious riots in India, where instrumentalist perspectives came to enjoy a prominent position in the 1990s.

In his poignant investigations of riots in north India, Brass (1997; 2003) departs vehemently from former studies which suggested that collective violence somehow erupts spontaneously. Instead he insists that riots are 'a grisly form of dramatic production' (Brass 2003, 15) involving preparation, rehearsals and particular individuals whose skill lies in their ability to orchestrate riots. Drawing on these insights, Elcheroth and Reicher argue that mass street mobilisations and communal violence in India have become a standard practice in the Indian political repertoire (Elcheroth and Reicher 2017, 157). Applied to the study of blasphemy

controversies, this approach can be used to illuminate at least four questions: who are the actors that gain from these controversies; what is the role of the state therein; how is offence dramatised as political theatre; and, lastly, whether these controversies can facilitate the emergence of new kinds of publics?

Answering the first of these questions is not as straightforward as it may seem. Certainly many scholars draw attention to how majority communities appear more eager to initiate blasphemy cases than others. But the language of religious sentiment and the laws regulating blasphemy and 'hate speech' have also been harnessed by marginalised groups to secure justice, not least in India (Ramdev et al. 2016, xxxvi; see also Frøystad 2016). Although the 'winners' of blasphemy controversies cannot therefore be deduced *a priori*, evidence suggests that the legal provisions tend to be availed of by those who can simultaneously display a credible threat of disruption to substantiate the veracity of the outrage. As such these individuals and groups – usually numerical majorities or economic and social elites – are far more likely to see their petition for censorship and castigation answered by the state (Adcock 2016; Viswanath 2016, 355). With the participation of skilled organisers and provocateurs – for example, Dinanath Batra in India or the TLP and the Sunni Tehreek in Pakistan – 'any disrespect can be portrayed as blasphemy and lay itself to popular mobilizations – which may translate into votes' (Jaffrelot 2008, 2). The regulation of religious offence therefore appears as a preferential system in which only the powerful may draw direct dividends from staging their affective sensitivity.

In Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, religious minorities very rarely seek legal redress for offensive acts against their religion. By contrast, religious minorities in India have been able to deploy hurt religious feelings to gain concessions from the state, but atheist and agnostic groups have not (Padmanabhan 2016, 355). Thus, depending on whose sentiments were outraged, blasphemy regulations do not operate uniformly. Further, while these laws can theoretically be availed of by any citizen of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar, Pakistan possesses provisions to protect one religion in particular, Islam, and to discriminate specifically against another, the Ahmadi sect. To sum up, the regulation of religious offence tends to privilege the dominant classes in a given society and also to reinforce the state's coercive powers to curb dissent – or at least to give it moral or religious legitimacy.

Another perspective on blasphemy controversies as politics concerns the ambiguous role of the state. Calls for redress are almost always directed at the state and its legal institutions. Called upon to arbitrate,

the state may respond by recognising the sacred nature of that which was allegedly offended and by ‘protecting’ the injured party. The role of the state has often been conceived as a benevolent arbiter that does its best to maintain peaceful coexistence between religious communities (cf. Frøystad 2013). However, as Adcock (2016) points out, the arbiter’s ‘tolerance’ can also entail cultural and political regulation. Its legal apparatus produces normative judgements on what counts as religiously offensive, and what should remain unspeakable (Butler 1997, 96ff).

Moreover the state can draw on local concerns over blasphemy and ‘hate speech’ to widen its regulatory reach – as when the Pakistani state banned YouTube (from 2012 to 2015) and blocked individual online content purportedly to protect local Muslim sentiments.²⁴ Similarly, Mazzarella and Kaur also draw attention to the historically constituted conflation in India between moral and political regulation of blasphemy, sedition and obscenity (Mazzarella and Kaur 2009). Of course, similar perspectives are also applicable beyond South Asia, as Saeed demonstrates in her analysis of how the Egyptian and Turkish states used the Charlie Hebdo controversy as an opportunity to tighten control over media and bestow legitimacy to its disciplinary actions (Saeed 2015, 39).

A third perspective on blasphemy controversies as politics elucidates how protests are staged as political theatre. Inspired by dramaturgical and performative perspectives developed by Goffman (1969), Schechner (1988), Tilly (2006) and others, this optic is useful for bringing out how participants in anti-blasphemy protests often draw on local repertoires forged during the colonial period and in the course of successive protests (e.g. Blom 2008). It also brings out how protesters must stage and embody their hurt to make it visible in order to obtain legal redress – without which, as noted by Cefaï, there can be no collective action (Cefaï 2007, 163, quoted in Blom and Jaoul 2008, 2; Ramdev et al. 2016, xxvii).

For Pakistan, it also helps to tease out the long tradition for heroising assassins of blasphemers. Recalling the protests in the UK following the publication of his book *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie describes how protesters’ ‘faces were performing anger for the cameras ... rejoicing in their anger, believing their identity was born of their rage’ (Rushdie 2012, 128). Whether the protesting community is a minority (e.g. British Muslims in the UK or Hindu nationalists in the US) or a powerful segment of society (e.g. Hindu nationalist organisations in India), it must foreground its vulnerability, its sense of hurt and need for state protection as a strategy for political assertion.

A fourth perspective on blasphemy controversies as politics pertains to how they nurture the emergence of new kinds of publics and political

communities, and new modes of envisioning political sovereignty. The prominence of blasphemy can fruitfully be interpreted as symptomatic of a 'politics of identity', whereby marginalised communities deploy a language of hurt to demand safeguards or the acknowledgement of a historical injustice or cultural singularity. While some scholars analyse such processes in terms of assertiveness of formerly disenfranchised communities (as does Sen, chapter 6), others warn against the resulting fragmentation of citizenship and established political communities into privatised 'constituencies of blood' (Al-Azmeh 2013).

Scaled up, some also point out how blasphemy accusations bring about a new assertiveness and unify global communities across territorial divides. This process could be seen during the Rushdie affair, but the emergence of new media has now made such processes even easier. As Saeed has argued (2015), alleged transgressions such as the Danish cartoons (2005–6) and the Charlie Hebdo caricatures (2015) bring dispersed Muslim communities into a global conversation that helps to reinforce a transnational and trans-sectarian Muslim identity, if not 'new forms of ethical and political practice for a global arena' (Devji 2006). The same is true of diasporic Hindu formations; as Zavos (2008) and Anderson (2015) have argued, their 'performative expressions of outrage' against M. F. Husain's paintings, or against an offensive stamp, helped to make Hinduism visible in the UK and gave coherence to an idiosyncratic inflection of Hindu nationalism in Europe.

Analysing blasphemy controversies as politics can yield a plethora of insights – but they can also easily fall short in isolation. The cultivation of an emotionality of hurt and the emergence of new technologies of communication play vital roles in this regard. Let us now move on to perspectives that analyse these developments in their own right.

Affect and blasphemy

Elucidating how emotions are influenced by law and dramatised to increase the likelihood of a ban does not exhaust the role of sentiments in religious offence controversies. To understand what moves people to tear down transgressive posters, march through the streets in scorching heat, thrash 'blasphemers' or merely appeal to their community leaders to take action, it is equally necessary to lend an ear to the protesters. When engaging with them, theories of affect appear particularly useful. The strand that has gained most currency for such purposes is the Spinozian brand taken up by Deleuze and Guattari, given further

momentum by Massumi (1995) and thereafter refined by a number of scholars (see Seigworth and Gregg 2010).

One of the advantages of the notion of affect is that it captures the indirect and non-reflective thinking (cf. Thrift 2004, 60) that moves people to act. In contrast to 'emotions', a term generally used in reference to inner sentiments (but see Blom and Tawa Lama-Rewal, in press 2019), affect explicitly refers to sentiments that prompt immediate action. Yet due to their non-reflective status, the resultant actions are not always predictable and thus not easily pinned down by instrumentalist perspectives. However, such unpredictability does not result in affect-related behaviour being entirely random. It is almost always cultural, sometimes in ways that can be thoroughly naturalised, as in the case discussed by Schaflechner (chapter 8). It is also worth noting that affect can be 'tamed' and choreographed to suit a standard protest repertoire, as suggested in Ruud's analysis (chapter 4) of how collective outrage can be staged for television cameras.

Applied to the study of religious offence controversies, the theory of affect can help us to understand why reactions to a given transgression can become so intense – even if a rumoured transgression is all it takes, as in the cases described by Blom (2008), Kublitz (2015) and Ruud (chapter 4). Blom's work is particularly enlightening since it illuminates how some of the young men in Lahore who protested against the 2006 *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons were taken by surprise by the strength of their own reactions. Schaflechner's chapter extends this analysis by discussing how such reactions, including the killing of 'blasphemers', are moulded by a history of past emotions connected to blasphemy, and by a specific literary genre that magnifies such affective response.

Theories of affect can also illuminate the *rise* of religious offence controversies. As Mazzarella has argued (Mazzarella 2012), modernity's attempts to promote rational deliberation and suppress affect are perhaps now giving way. Affect is returning to the political domain with full force, partly because of the ways in which mediatisation transforms the economy of attention. Consequently, politics is increasingly becoming a matter of affect engineering (Thrift 2004, 64). A meme combining wickedness with humour can create larger ripples than even the most eloquent political oratory. A key question is thus how and why people come to develop such devoted and uncompromising attitudes (cf. Atran 2016), often within remarkably short spans of time. As Frøystad suggests (chapter 5), part of the answer is the growing reliance on visual communication enabled by increased smartphone connectivity. To make sense of such processes, we underline the importance of mediatisation, which the next section approaches through the optic of materiality.

Materiality and mediatisation

Though several scholars have noted the significance of materiality and mediatisation for bringing about religious offence controversies in South Asia, few have moved beyond mentioning it in passing. In our view, the medium and replicability of the alleged transgression deserve far closer attention. Consider, for instance, that M. F. Husain's paintings of Hindu goddesses from the 1970s did not spark any controversy until they were reproduced in a critical article in a magazine in 1996. This fact exemplifies not only how religio-political organisations may actively look for transgressions to rally around, but also how mediatisation multiplies a message in ways that dramatically increase the likelihood of a successful 'transgression hunt'.

Similarly, scholars have remarked how in the last decades of the colonial era, controversies around publications such as *Rangila Rasul* and *Satyarth Prakash* were made possible by the formidable growth of affordable print technology at the time (e.g. Scott 2015; Nair 2013). The same applies to Periyar's controversial *Ramayana* interpretations, which he disseminated on inexpensive paper through his own journals, magazines and printing press, allowing for the extensive coverage of his grievances and campaigns (Richman 1991, 180). The transition from finite modalities of replication and circulation, such as the print medium, to the unbound possibilities afforded by digital networks, invites us to look beyond the question of replicability and to take materiality equally seriously as symbolic content, legal affordances and political processes.

Materiality approaches – as developed in social anthropology – examine how humans and their material surroundings are mutually constitutive (Miller 2005). By attuning our senses to how human sociality is conditioned by its material surroundings, artefacts and images, they seek to elevate materiality from its subordinate role. In this way we can 'think through things' (cf. Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007) and follow their effects, which necessitates that we pay close attention to their meanings – whether common sense or surprising.²⁵ By introducing this orientation more explicitly into the scholarship of religious offence controversies, we can better appreciate how these controversies may be shaped by the properties of the medium through, or on which, the alleged offence is committed, documented and reproduced. For instance, what difference does it make whether an alleged offence is spoken, written, drawn or gestured – and thereafter possibly multiplied by being telecast, printed or digitalised?

Addressing such questions goes far beyond rehearsing the contrast between disallowing visual representations of the divine (as in Islam and

Judaism) or encouraging them, as in most Hindu traditions. In chapter 7, for example, Asad Ali Ahmed examines how legal courts in Pakistan can transform alleged religious offences from verbal remarks into typed witness statements and judgements that repeat, preserve and multiply them, with profound implications for the defendant. Shifting to the smartphone revolution in India, Frøystad examines in chapter 5 how the emergence of digital devotion in the shape of sharing and commenting on religious images may create a marked ‘split affect’ in the case of innovative or daring images – particularly if their circulation crosses religious boundaries.

In short, the magnitude of a blasphemy accusation partly rests on the material form, reproducibility and potential circulation of the alleged transgression. Though an insulting utterance, a burnt Quran, a sacrilegious theatre play or an eaten cow cannot be readily reproduced, a video, an image or a novel in digital format can easily be disseminated globally through digital channels, thus altering the economy of outrage in South Asia and beyond.

A quick glance at recent scholarship on media and mediatisation helps us appreciate just how much the public sphere has burgeoned and democratised from the days of print newspapers. Consider India, where until 1991 the state monopolised broadcast media with a view to ‘educate, inform and ... help maintain national unity’, leaving only the privately owned printed press to exercise critical journalism (Thussu 1999, 126). Since the end of the state monopoly, private broadcast has grown exponentially and now totals over 800 television channels (Government of India 2018). In Pakistan, where television broadcasting was liberalised in 2000, there are over 130 channels, whereas Bangladesh has at least 26 (Udupa and McDowell 2017, 2). In Myanmar most television channels remain state-owned and, though the government has created an opening for private channels and satellite television, these are still under tighter regulation than in the other countries considered here.

To this we must add the internet revolution followed by the advent of social media. Today active social media users account for one-third to one-fifth of South Asia’s population.²⁶ Across the region, internet connectivity has developed through mobile phones rather than computer screens (Udupa and McDowell 2017, 2–3). A steadily growing proportion of South Asia’s diverse population thus participates in this burgeoning media swirl at the same time as new connections are forged across countries and with their diasporas. These developments, as eloquently pointed out by Udupa and McDowell, have reconfigured political participation in profound ways, not least by forging a new kind of pluralism that ‘places antagonism, passions and collective forms of identification at the center of democratic politics’ (Udupa and McDowell 2017, 4).

This has a number of implications for how religious offence controversies begin and unfold. Firstly, social media enables the proliferation of potential transgressions and allows a degree of anonymity to its users, which reduces the threshold for sharing transgressive content. Secondly, the expansion of the mediascape has led to the emergence of ‘cultures of counterfeit’ and piracy, where copies circulate without necessary reference to an original (Comaroff 2007, 137; Sundaram 2010). This means that it is increasingly difficult for the state to stop the circulation of a pirate and online copy of a banned text, film or expression. Conversely, it renders it impossible for a given community to impose its taboos on a global scale. Thirdly, the growing possibilities for sharing visual images and videos enhance affectivity. And lastly, the expansion of new media technologies makes religious offence controversies simultaneously local and global. Though usually anchored in a specific local context, they can more easily be delocalised and transposed, particularly if the accuser is part of a wider transnational network or community (e.g. Taylor 2011).

In this regard, it should be noted that these new media facilitate the spatial circulation of *both* ‘offensive’ material *and* outrage, as we saw as early as in the affair of *The Satanic Verses*.²⁷ Herein we also find a counter-intuitive point: outraged publics not only communicate their indignation, but may also circulate the incriminated material to persuade co-religionists to protest. Just as an official ban often turns out to be the best way to publicise a book or a film (Scott 2015, 298; Kaur and Mazzarella 2009, 9), the outraged party often gives visibility and fame to that against which they protest. These observations notwithstanding, Favret-Saada’s observation that there is a marked discrepancy between the potential controversies that escalate and those that fall into oblivion (Favret-Saada 1992, 257) is equally apt today. Accusations that find popular traction are typically the culmination of complex sets of actions over time that often go undetected (cf. Ghosh 2016; Favret-Saada 2004), which resonates with our earlier point about law as a ‘crystalliser’ of discontent.

We leave it to our contributors to continue these reflections. For now, let us conclude that there are numerous reasons why scholars of religious offence controversies need to be more attentive to mediatisation and other aspects of materiality, and should examine texture, replicability and circulation as closely as contested meanings and political contexts. One of them is the ongoing ‘media revolution’, which strikes us as crucial for the escalation of blasphemy controversies. That being said, it is now time to introduce the chapters that follow.

Chapter outline

Although the four countries covered in this volume – Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar – are very different in terms of religious traditions and political culture, they are also united by certain elements of colonial history. For the sake of simplicity, we use the epithet ‘South Asia’ to indicate our regional focus, even though we are acutely aware of the ambiguous regional status of Myanmar.²⁸ Yet our aim is not to monitor the history of blasphemy controversies in a given political region, but rather to bring up case studies that help us reflect on their rise across stark differences of political regimes and religious orientations. Each contributor focuses on an individual case or type of accusation of a religious offence, on the ground that the complexity of the rise needs to be understood by means of in-depth investigation. Each contributor has also been asked to emphasise dimensions of their case that help to illuminate the rise of religious offence controversies beyond it – and, if possible, beyond the national context in which it is enveloped. It is this labour of identifying the ‘drivers’ of contemporary offence controversies that led us to single out the analytical frameworks spelled out in the previous sections.

The first of these, the framing role of the law, is investigated in particular in Paul Rollier’s paper on the growing anti-blasphemy agitation in Pakistan. He addresses the relationship between the law and people’s concrete engagement with the risk of desecration. He draws attention to the way in which people’s relationship with desecration rests on a distinct mode of apprehending holy words and objects. Encoded in law, this relationship ultimately demands vigilance towards the potential blasphemer in each and every person. In a Pakistani court, this leads to a situation in which the adjudication of blasphemy allegations is caught in a circular logic that paradoxically magnifies the offence.

More generally, Rollier notes how the rhetoric of, and sensitivity towards, religious offence translates into everyday practices and attitudes – and now extends to all religious communities, which confers on it a quasi-ecumenical quality. This in turn helps us to understand how the idiom of outrage has become so widespread in South Asia. The framing role of the colonial-era law plays a significant role, and we shall see the law making its appearance in several of the chapters. Moreover, the very personal sense of grievance when symbols and objects are said to be ‘attacked’ helps to explain why irreverence, mocking or deliberate insult cannot be let pass by many. A further observation in Rollier’s chapter is that the misuse of anti-blasphemy laws and the performance of outrage

have become a weapon in interpersonal disputes, and are increasingly wielded by competing religious entrepreneurs and politicians to gain visibility and relevance.

This aspect of religious outrage is further explored in detail from the other end of South Asia, Buddhist-majority Myanmar. In chapter 3, Iselin Frydenlund details two cases of blasphemy accusations and judicial proceedings there. Her analysis focuses on how, in this fledgling electoral democracy, accusations of blasphemy are being negotiated and pushed through media, the judiciary and in political mobilisations by representatives of majoritarian religious organisations. Frydenlund points to a wider political context, in which a certain form of cultural change is seen as a postcolonial invasion, resistance to which becomes defence of traditional values. There is also a historical context formed by the so-called 'shoe controversies' in the colonial era which, as mentioned earlier, helped to set Buddhism and respect for its symbols at the centre of the nation's independence struggle. These combine to fuel blasphemy controversies in a situation where the newfound democracy faces political power tussles as well as the commercialisation of religious symbols.

Similarly chapter 4, in which Arild Englesen Ruud investigates accusations launched against a government minister in Bangladesh, sees the suddenness of the charges and their success in light of electoral democracy and the ideological conflict at the heart of the postcolonial republic. Here the ruling party has sought at times to portray itself as the custodian of a secular polity, willing to accommodate the needs of minorities and non-believers, and at other times as the representative of a generally religious populace. The story of the conflict over the nature of the state is old, but increasingly characteristic of much of South Asia's late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century history. Modi's rise to power in India is perhaps the globally most appreciated expression of this change, but its antecedents derive from the cow protection movement of the nineteenth century and the various reform movements within all major religious denominations in the region. For Bangladesh, the conflict lies at the core of its modern identity. Ruud locates the sudden success of the protests in the highly visible mobilisation by the secularists in the years before the minister made his statements. This prehistory, in which the government's position had been ambiguous and indecisive, enabled Islamist groupings to seize their opportunity. Helped by activist social media, the message of outrage was spread within days.

Social media is another core theme in this collection. The role played by social media in spreading accusations of blasphemy or potentially offensive content is suggested in several of the contributions, but it

is most thoroughly investigated by Kathinka Frøystad in chapter 5. Her case study focuses on visual images disseminated via mobile phones and on the viscosity of digital images. Here, as in several of the other chapters, the outrage is caused by visual rather than textual or oral content: it is about depictions rather than statements. In Ruud's Bangladeshi case, Latif Siddique's controversial statement in New York was filmed and circulated on YouTube and on television. Rather than the statement itself, what was found offensive was the circulation of its video recording and the fact that it entered people's homes and daily lives. In Frydenlund's Burmese case, it was the depiction of the Buddha with earphones that instilled a sense of outrage. Frøystad's case is about memes or photo-shopped images circulated via mobile phones.

Frøystad takes the two parallel revolutions – the rapid expansion of smartphones and the rise of blasphemy controversies – as her starting point. She merges these fields of enquiry by examining how smartphones contribute to the rise of blasphemy accusations, and illustrates how circulating religious images on smartphones, such as memes in which deities are portrayed in novel or daring ways, may be deemed offensive if they 'spill out' to the wrong audience. Frøystad pays particular attention to the capacity of social media for large-scale circulation and inexpensive image transmission in societies characterised by 'split publics', thus producing radically contradictory 'affects' in societies marked by political tension and anxiety. The case in question follows the historical trajectory of a narrative about the Kaaba in Mecca as a former (or in some versions, present) Shiva temple. Despite the narrative's existence in textual and verbal forms at least since the 1940s, it did not result in blasphemy controversies before being transmuted to digital visual images.

In most of our chapters it is representatives of the majority community who most vocally express their outrage and grievances against blasphemers. In Pakistan and Bangladesh these are usually Muslims claiming to represent the *ummah*; in Myanmar these are members of the Buddhist majority and their community of monks, the *sangha*, who object most fiercely to the perceived offence. As for India, the denouncers are often Hindus, especially proponents of Hindutva, though they can also be representatives of minority religions, as in Frøystad's chapter.

Several chapters also bring out how secularists and non-believers can be disproportionately targeted: a writer who denounces the *sangha's* nationalist understanding of Buddhism (chapter 3), a boastful minister (chapter 4), and Governor Taseer in Pakistan, killed by his bodyguard for denouncing the country's harsh blasphemy laws (chapter 8). Their relaxed interpretation of religion was understood as secular and

representative of Western-inspired values and lifestyle. All were seen as part of a wider ideological or cultural divide, and as representing a non-national or even anti-national ethos.

This topic is most thoroughly investigated in chapter 6. Here Moumita Sen explores the nascent worship of Mahishasur, hitherto considered by most to be the demon slain by the goddess Durga and who is now celebrated with gusto in a religious festival particularly popular in Kolkata. Increasingly, however, and quite rapidly, the cult of Mahishasur has gained popularity among Adivasis throughout West Bengal, as well as among leftist groups in places such as Jawaharlal Nehru University and elsewhere. The cult itself, and the support it has gained, have roused the anger of groups professing more traditional interpretations. These include some among the Hindu nationalists, most notably Smriti Irani, a BJP minister, who has claimed that worshippers of Mahishasur are anti-national. As in other chapters, the offended parties often use set stylistic devices to stress their sense of outrage.

In chapter 6, the minister's insistence on raising the issue in parliament is set against the canvas of the politics of ethnicisation in India. Sen's study underlines the importance of emergent Adivasi assertion and newfound identity in confronting an increasingly hard-line Hinduisation propagated by the Hindutva forces; acknowledging the role of both is crucial to understanding this rise of the politics of offence.

Sometimes both parties to the controversy are part of the same religious community, as in the case investigated by Asad Ali Ahmed. In this complex and puzzling case, Ahmed explores the layers of interpretation and mutually conflicting ontologies at stake in the controversy. Specifically, he deals with the trial of a Sufi teacher ridiculed in the English language press, dismissed in a meandering judicial system and maligned by religious scholars, who accuse him of blasphemy. But the story is also about translation across a real and imagined cultural divide. The study locates a driver in the different registers, or even ontologies, involved in blasphemy accusations: the English language world of the Pakistani elite, the Urdu-speaking world with its own religious interpretations upheld in the state instruments of law and court, and the religious and spiritual world of the Sufi and of the Sufi's antagonists. The one is anathema to the sensibilities of the other – a situation which is not unlike that found in other countries (think of the India v. Bharat debate) and which underlines the vast distances in cultural anchorage found in South Asian societies.

While in Ahmed's chapter the offended party is Deobandi, Jürgen Schaflechner points out in chapter 8 that blasphemy accusations in

Pakistan are often pushed by Barelwis, who have a mass following and are often misrepresented as open-minded Sufis. To Barelwis, Schaflechner writes, disrespect of the Prophet is intolerable and their veneration of Muhammad unsurpassed. He points out that within the devotional Barelwi tradition and cosmology, the Prophet is elevated to a position of unconditional devotion. For Barelwis, the Prophet is considered to be 'the perfect man' (*al-insan al-kamil*). As Schaflechner investigates the most well-known cases of blasphemy allegations in the country, those involving Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, and Governor Salman Taseer, he is intrigued by the post mortem veneration of the Governor's murderer, his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri. The author reminds us of the existence of a vast corpus of hagiographic literature eulogising lay Muslims who daringly lost their lives in an attempt to punish blasphemers. Schaflechner also brings out the contagious nature of blasphemy accusations: once Asia Bibi has been accused of blasphemy, any form of support extended to her becomes problematic. Governor Salman Taseer was not murdered because he had committed blasphemy, but because he was critical of a law that protected the Prophet.

Finally, Ute Hüsken's thoughtful Afterword to this volume points out some alternative and potentially fruitful disciplinary and conceptual avenues to investigate the rise of religious offence politics. One of these, she writes, consists in approaching blasphemy controversies through the lens of ritual studies, so as to appreciate better *how* they work on us as humans and as society through their performative efficacy. She also points out, rather optimistically, that the 'accelerated connectivity' characteristic of our era indeed facilitates the expansion of blasphemy controversies, but may also be harnessed to further mutual understanding.

As the cases studies in this volume make clear, the politics of religious offence has become a significant phenomenon in contemporary Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. To explain its prevalence and its emergence, we have indicated a series of important, and to an extent unrelated, developments that in combination have caused this 'perfect storm': the rapid introduction of social media and smartphones, the deepening of democracy and its effect on political and religious rivalry, the mutual suspicion between religious and secular reasoning and, finally, the growing demands for recognition among both marginalised and hegemonic communities. These are developments that have a profound impact on society. Whatever the next turn will be in the history of religious offence controversies in South Asia, it will be deeply anchored in these developments.

Notes

1. This is further motivated by the terms commonly used by our interlocutors in South Asia to denote religious offence, such as *tauheen*, *behurmati*, *ninda* and *pakhandi*, which are broadly synonymous with ‘insult’ and ‘disgrace’, be it performed through oral, visual or physical means.
2. Think of the stoning scene in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*: a crowd is about to stone Matthias to death because he has uttered the name of God, ‘Jehovah’. But the accused turns to the priest and starts to question his sentence: ‘Look, I don’t think it ought to be blasphemy, just saying “Jehovah”’. ‘He said it again!’ shouts the angry crowd. As Matthias repeatedly utters the name of God, the priest exhorts him: ‘I’m warning you. If you say “Jehovah” once more...’. He claps his hand over his mouth, but it is too late: a stone hits him. Despite his attempt to control the unruly offended crowd, the priest is eventually stoned to death.
3. On the notion of blasphemy in Islam and its overlap with apostasy, see Stewart (n.d.), Forte (1994) and Izutsu (2002, 99–101).
4. On the different argumentative traditions in support of ‘free speech’, see Danbury (2017).
5. Article 9 of the European Court of Human Rights for instance, which guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, may conflict with others’ right to freedom of expression (Article 10). On the different European approaches to the limitation of freedom of expression, see Leigh (2011) and Trispiotis (2013).
6. The former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, expressed these concerns very clearly (Limon, Ghana and Power 2017, 652–3).
7. Consider, for instance, the 2008 abolition of the British law against blasphemy and the simultaneous enactment of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act (Barendt 2011; Sandberg and Doe 2008). On the shift from blasphemy laws to anti-hate speech legislations, see Temperman and Koltay (2017).
8. This line of thinking proposes to take the recent return of blasphemy controversies as a vantage point to question the ‘patterns of liberal restriction’ that underlie the ‘situation of hegemonic secularism’ prevalent in the West (Asad, Brown and Mahmood 2009, 30, 105). Less a means to restrict free speech, ‘blasphemy’ is seen as reflective of the shape that free speech arguments take in a given context (35).
9. On the notion of religious offence at the European Court of Human Rights, see Lewis (2017).
10. See, for instance, UNHRC (2008).
11. As of 2016, seven out of 45 European countries still possessed anti-blasphemy provisions of some sort (Theodorou 2016). In 2012, 32 states in the world possessed such laws (PEW 2012).
12. The right to freedom of expression is enshrined in article 19 of the Indian, Pakistani and Burmese constitutions and in article 39 of Bangladesh’s, as well as in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
13. Salman Rushdie, a celebrated British author of Indian descent, had come under fire for his unfavourable parody of Prophet Muhammad in his 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*. Immediately after its publication, it was banned from importation in India. The controversy acquired global resonance following the effort of diaspora circles in England to communicate their outrage to the rest of the Muslim world, including Iran, whose ayatollah issued a fatwa against Rushdie in the shape of a death threat. Not only was Rushdie now in danger wherever he went, but so were those associated with his work: his Japanese translator was killed and his Norwegian publisher injured.
14. ‘295. Whoever destroys, damages, or defiles any place of worship, or any object held sacred by any class of persons with the intention of thereby insulting the religion of any class of persons, or with the knowledge that any class of persons is likely to consider such destruction, damage, or defilement as an insult to their religion, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description, for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.’
 ‘296. Whoever voluntarily causes disturbance to any assembly lawfully engaged in the performance of religious worship or religious ceremonies, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description, for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both.’
 ‘297. Whoever, with the intention of wounding feelings of any person, or of insulting the religion of any person, or with the knowledge that the feelings of any person are likely to be wounded, or that the religion of any person is likely to be insulted thereby, commits any trespass in any place of worship or on any place of sepulture or any place set apart for the performance

of funeral rites or as a depository for the remains of the dead, or offers any indignity to any human corpse, or causes disturbance to any persons assembled for the performance of funeral ceremonies, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description, for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both.'

'293 [a typo for 298]. Whoever, with the deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of any person, utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person, or makes any gesture in the sight of that person, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description, for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both.' (Morgan and Macpherson 1863, 217–21).

15. '153. Whoever malignantly and wantonly, by doing any thing [sic] which is illegal, gives provocation to any person, intending or knowing it to be likely that such provocation will cause the offence of rioting to be committed in consequence of such provocation, be punished with imprisonment of either description, for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both; and if the offence of rioting be not committed, with imprisonment of either description, for a term which may extend to six months, or with fine, or with both.' (Morgan and Macpherson 1863, 127–8).
16. '153-A. Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representations, or otherwise, promotes or attempts to promote feelings of enmity or hatred between different classes of Her Majesty's subjects shall be punished with imprisonment which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.' (LawyerServices. In, n.d.).
17. One around Pandit Kalicharan Sharma's *Vichitra Jivan* (published in Agra in 1923) and the other around Devi Sharan Sharma's *Sair-i-Dozakh* (published in Amritsar in 1927). See Thursby (1975).
18. Additionally there was the problem of *intention*: the publisher stated that his aim had never been to hurt anyone, but merely to make Muslims aware of the dubious morality of the person they venerated.
19. In its present form, the penalty is of two years' imprisonment in Myanmar and Bangladesh, three years in India and ten years in Pakistan.
20. The wording of these sections is the same across penal codes (including Sri Lanka) with one notable exception: the offence of insulting religion or religious beliefs carries a maximum two year sentence in Bangladesh and Myanmar, three years in India and ten years in Pakistan. Another small difference consists in the additional words 'or otherwise' in the Indian section 295-A.
21. Two of these five sections, namely 298-B and 298-C, are designed to criminalise the ritual markers of the Ahmadi community, whose members had been officially declared 'non-Muslims' in 1974. The legal reforms undertaken in the 1980s, which also included the creation of sharia courts and the *hudood* ordinance, was part a broader policy of Islamisation (or Deobandization) of society. See Nasr (2001, 130–57). For a detailed overview of the parliamentary debates that led to these reforms, see Ahmed (2018); on the possibility of further reforming these laws, see Hoffman (2014) and Rumi (2018).
22. To be more precise, blasphemy accusations rarely target Sunni Muslims. Over the last three decades Shias and Ahmadis, who represent about 20 per cent and 0.3 per cent of the population, were the accused in 70 per cent of all cases under sections 295-B, 295-C and 298, while Christians and Sunnis were the accused in 15 per cent of these cases respectively (figures derived from HRCP 2017, 96 and Julius 2016, 98). On blasphemy controversies in relation to religious minorities in Pakistan, see also Abbas (2013), Gregory (2012), Shakir (2015) and Siddique and Hayat (2008).
23. Judges are sometimes coerced to sentence the accused without evidence and lawyers attacked or pressured deliberately to misrepresent their clients (see UNHRC 2013, 13–14).
24. In the case of media restrictions, the blasphemous is treated on a par with content that the state deems un-Islamic or anti-national. In 2017 it issued over 1,000 requests to Facebook to restrict access to specific content, resulting in the shutdown of 177 pages for violating local anti-blasphemy laws or condemning Pakistan's independence (Facebook 2017b). India issued over 10,000 complaints, and had over 1,000 pages shut down for violating local laws relating to defamation of religion and hate speech (Facebook 2017a).
25. Though made popular by the work of Gell (1998) and Latour (e.g. 1999, 2005), scholars disagree on the depth of this perspective's intellectual roots. For Miller (2005), they seemingly only extend back to Bourdieu's celebrated analysis (1977) of how the architecture of the Ka-byle reproduced their thinking. For Høstaker (2015), they date back to the paleontology of Leroi-Gourhan (1911–86), which discussed how early humans externalised tasks to things, which in turn influenced their lives in profound ways.

26. In 2018 India had 250 million active social media users, Pakistan 35 million, Bangladesh 30 million and Myanmar 18 million (Kemp 2018a, 2018b).
27. Favret-Saada writes that shortly after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in the UK, local Muslim organisations disseminated relevant sections of the book among ambassadors of Muslim countries in London (1992, 251). Henceforth the campaign expanded to the Middle East, Africa and back to South Asia.
28. We are also aware of the omission of Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. In addition, both the Maldives and Afghanistan are at times listed as part of South Asia.

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