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Research Article

Blasphemy Accusations, Network-based Persecution, and Internal Relocation in Pakistan: When Social Capital Becomes Social Liability

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Abstract

Blasphemy accusations in Pakistan can affect an accused person long before any conviction and may remain consequential after the immediate incident. This article asks when existing relationships transmit accusation-related danger, and how that possibility should inform an individualized assessment of internal relocation. Drawing on social-capital theory, research on stigma, official reporting and fifteen purposively selected incidents or proceedings, it distinguishes relational dependence from the sanctions that may follow an accusation. Social liability is treated as exposure arising from ties that provide indispensable resources yet may also facilitate identification, withdrawal of support or coercion. Its activation requires evidence of changed conduct; a stronger claim that a supportive relationship was transformed requires information about that same tie before and after the allegation. In five of the fifteen incidents, the reported accusation arose within an existing family, workplace, commercial or community relationship, and institutional responses ranged from lethal failure to effective police extraction and judicial acquittal. Only one incident records movement to another locality, and none documents a threat following an accused person there. The analysis therefore separates geographical movement, destination safety and sustainable settlement, and proposes indicators for testing each rather than inferring nationwide risk from a serious local event. Existing networks may protect as well as endanger the accused. The contribution is a conditional account of how social relationships affect persecution and the feasibility of rebuilding life elsewhere, with explicit limits on what the present sources can establish.

Keywords

Pakistan, Blasphemy Accusations, Network-based Persecution, Internal Relocation, Social Capital, Social Liability, Non-state Actors, State Protection

1. Introduction

Blasphemy accusations in Pakistan present a problem that is at once legal, social, and geographical. An allegation may originate in a workplace or private dispute, but its consequences can depend on people who were not parties to that dispute: coworkers, neighbors, religious intermediaries, relatives and public authorities. Understanding the risk requires attention not only to the allegation itself but also to how it is circulated, acted upon and remembered.

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Pakistan's blasphemy provisions provide a formal legal context, but the social effects of an accusation are not reducible to prosecution. The threat of arrest and punishment coexists with informal denunciation, threats, boycotts, displacement and extrajudicial violence. Human Rights Watch (HRW) [1] documents the use of accusations for blackmail, commercial advantage and property acquisition. Its investigation also shows that the impact of an allegation can extend to households and communities. Yet these observations should not be converted into the proposition that every allegation generates the same risk or that every locality is equally dangerous.

The inquiry begins with the social career of an accusation: its emergence, the actors who repeat it, and the consequences for an identifiable person. It then asks whether relationships that previously supplied employment, shelter, recognition or protection become routes of exposure. Both questions lead, in turn, to internal relocation, where the relevant evidence concerns how far specific threats reach and the practical conditions of life at a proposed destination. None of these stages is assumed to occur in every case.

The analysis draws on attributed documentary accounts rather than original interviews or an independently examined set of court files. Its purpose is to identify mechanisms and the evidence needed to test them; estimating the probability of persecution or of relocation failure lies outside its scope.

The article makes three contributions. It defines social liability as a vulnerability distinct from the harm that may follow it, together with a temporal test for when a supportive tie has changed function. It codes fifteen documented incidents against that test and finds that in five the accusation arose within a pre-existing family, workplace, commercial or community relationship, while institutional responses ranged from lethal failure to effective protection and acquittal. Finally, it shows that none of the documented incidents establishes that a threat followed an accused person to a new location, and concludes that internal-relocation assessments require destination-specific evidence rather than inferences drawn from the severity of a local event.

2. Background and Existing Scholarship

2.1. Legal and Social Context

Pakistan's Penal Code contains several provisions concerning religious insult, including sections 295-A, 295-B and 295-C [2, 3]. The provisions differ in their prohibited conduct and penalties; they should not be treated as interchangeable. Sections 298-A to 298-C, which belong to the same chapter and include provisions specific to Ahmadis, can also be invoked in religion-related complaints [2]. Section 295-C concerns derogatory remarks in respect of the Prophet Muhammad and carries the death penalty under the prevailing legal framework. The fact that the state has not carried out an execution for blasphemy does not eliminate the consequences of prosecution, detention or extrajudicial threats [1, 4].

The legal framework creates incentives and risks beyond the courtroom. A person may face an informal allegation without a First Information Report (FIR), an FIR without conviction, or social punishment even after an acquittal. Each pathway has different evidentiary implications. The claim that someone is publicly known as a blasphemer must be investigated separately from the claim that police registered a case. Similarly, the absence of charges is not sufficient to establish the absence of danger, although it can be relevant to the breadth and persistence of publicity.

Blasphemy controversies also intersect with sectarian differences, majority-minority relations, local authority and the politics of religious legitimacy. Muslims as well as Christians, Ahmadis and members of other communities can be accused, but their structural vulnerabilities and the applicable legal restrictions are not identical. Any explanation that treats 'Pakistani society' as a single undifferentiated actor obscures substantial differences between regions, religious communities, urban neighborhoods and institutions.

Ethnographic work by Sana Ashraf [5] emphasizes the cultural and political meanings of honor, purity, transgression and religiously justified punishment in Punjab. Her research challenges accounts that explain violence merely as spontaneous irrationality. Mobilization depends on narratives that make participation meaningful and legitimate to the people being addressed. Building on this insight, the present article asks how the audience for an accusation is assembled, how its membership changes over time and whether an accusation remains actionable when the accused is absent.

2.2. The Explanatory Gap

Ashraf's account is particularly useful for explaining the social production of accusations and subsequent violence. The present analysis asks a narrower question: when and how do identifiable pre-existing ties change function after an accusation?

Human Rights Watch's 2025 investigation establishes another substantial body of evidence: accusations can serve economic objectives, including forced eviction, extortion and attacks on business rivals. The report describes alleged collusion between organized accusers and elements of law enforcement in online entrapment schemes, and documents cases in which people faced severe consequences after disputes unrelated to theology. The report thus establishes instrumental use as a research problem in its own right [1].

Kakar's 2026 study [6], based on interviews with 44 judges, lawyers and police officials, identifies social, legal and procedural barriers to preventing mob violence. This institutional emphasis matters because it treats state protection as something that varies from case to case and can be studied. Police sometimes fail to prevent attacks, but they also rescue threatened persons, open investigations or seek to disperse crowds. Partial or inconsistent responses still differ from one another in ways that matter for analysis.

The gap addressed here is therefore specific to blasphemy-related persecution in Pakistan: how a reported accusation alters the function of existing ties, and when the resulting exposure matters beyond the original locality. This connects the social origins of an allegation to the practical assessment of internal relocation.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical problem is not simply that social networks can cause harm. It is whether a person becomes vulnerable because essential resources are concentrated in relationships whose members can withdraw assistance, disclose information or respond to reputational pressure. Such vulnerability may exist before anyone imposes a sanction. An accusation can activate it, but activation and actual harm must be assessed separately. The stronger claim that a previously supportive tie changed its function requires evidence of that tie at two points in time.

3.1. Social Capital, Diffusion and Labeling

Social capital is commonly described as resources accessible through social relationships. Bourdieu [7] emphasizes how durable networks can reproduce advantage; Coleman [8] identifies obligations, information channels and norms that facilitate action. Both approaches are usually invoked to explain support, employment or protection. Yet the same networks may enforce sanctions and carry damaging information. Whether they do so depends on their structure, incentives and local meanings.

Granovetter's account of weak ties [9] is useful because information may travel beyond dense family or neighborhood circles through acquaintances connecting otherwise separate groups. The presence of such ties does not imply that information will spread indefinitely. Diffusion depends on salience, credibility, repetition, communication infrastructure and the willingness of intermediaries to relay a message. In blasphemy controversies, a mosque announcement, political intermediary, digital post or public demonstration may function as an amplification event, but the relative importance of each channel is an empirical question.

Labeling theory adds a second dimension. Becker [10] describes deviance as a consequence of social rule-making and attribution, while Goffman [11] analyzes the management of discredited identity. A public allegation can reclassify a person from a disputant to an alleged religious offender. Such a label may reshape interactions with employers, neighbors and relatives even when the underlying accusation is contested. The label's persistence, however, should not be presumed. Public correction, limited publicity, weak credibility or changes in local alliances may reduce its social force.

The process may begin in an ordinary dispute, acquire a religious meaning through public repetition, and lead people beyond the original parties to act. There is no fixed sequence. Some accusations remain local; others reach influential intermediaries, provoke official action, or fade without wider mobilization.

A further distinction concerns social visibility. A known trader, teacher or community figure may have a publicly legible identity, but prominence can confer both vulnerability and protective resources. A strong family network can facilitate tracing, yet it can also supply shelter, legal representation and negotiation. Which way the effect runs has to be shown from the record of each case.

Portes identifies the exclusionary and coercive effects of social capital [12, 13]. The narrower question here is whether a tie that previously supplied resources becomes a means of identification or sanction following an accusation. The claim is temporal: it concerns change in a relationship over time. The analysis must also allow for simultaneous protection and danger: a relative might provide shelter while inadvertently making the accused more identifiable.

3.2. Defining Social Liability

Social liability is defined here as prospective vulnerability arising when identifiable social ties, affiliations or reputational relationships can be used to withdraw essential resources, expose a person to hostile audiences or facilitate coercion. It is not synonymous with a harmful outcome. Actual sanctions, threats, exclusion and violence are observable manifestations, while dependence, identifiability and the absence of usable alternatives are possible antecedent conditions. A person may be vulnerable yet remain safe because allies intervene or an accusation loses credibility. Conversely, harm inflicted by strangers with no traceable relational channel need not be described as network conversion.

The distinction is empirical. A person excluded from an unfamiliar group may suffer stigma without losing a previously beneficial relationship. By contrast, a merchant whose established customers withdraw their trade or disclose his whereabouts after an allegation may experience a conversion of existing social capital into liability. Such an account needs evidence of the relationships themselves and of how their behavior changed.

A strong test of the proposed concept requires evidence of temporal reversal. It is insufficient to show that an accused person possesses social ties and later experiences threats. The analyst must identify a prior protective or productive function, a subsequent accusation or stigma, and a plausible mechanism through which a tie becomes a source of danger. Where networks were already hostile before the allegation, the appropriate explanation may instead be entrenched antagonism. Where an employer dismisses an accused worker solely to avoid reputational damage, this may demonstrate resource withdrawal without establishing active transmission of risk. Drawing the lines this way narrows the concept and makes it falsifiable in individual cases.

3.3. How Relationships Change Function

Consider a relationship that provides work or accommodation before an accusation. If the contact subsequently discloses an address or withdraws assistance under outside pressure, the record may show activation of a latent vulnerability. If the contact was hostile throughout, the case demonstrates antagonism rather than transformation. If no evidence identifies the contact or any changed behavior, the network explanation remains a hypothesis. Protective ties can interrupt the same sequence.

3.4. Competing Explanations and Observable Differences

Persistence should be more likely when an allegation remains attached to identifying details, trusted intermediaries repeatedly circulate it, and motivated actors can reach contacts outside the original locality. This is not established merely by the existence of social media or dense family networks. A competing prediction is that local disputes lose force after a move, particularly when the destination offers protection and independent support. Distinguishing the predictions requires dated evidence of transmission, recognition, threats and actual outcomes after relocation.

Some incidents are better explained in other ways. A property dispute can motivate an instrumental accusation without any subsequent reversal of supportive relationships. Police incapacity can permit crowd violence even when perpetrators are strangers to the accused. Public media exposure can create recognition without relying on pre-existing occupational or kinship ties. The social-liability account adds something only where specific relationships explain who could identify the accused, who withdrew or sustained assistance, or how threats reached a new setting.

The anticipated effects consequently vary with the circumstances. Occupational visibility may increase exposure in one setting while enabling colleagues to intervene in another. The framework is most useful when it identifies these competing pathways and allows stronger networks to cut either way.

3.5. Network-based Persecution and the Relocation Question

The same social ties that make a person recognizable in the place of accusation may be relevant after a move. Recognition in one locality, however, says little by itself about identification elsewhere. The analysis therefore distinguishes evidence of a local threat, evidence of its transmission across locations, and evidence concerning protection and everyday survival at a proposed destination.

Table 1 summarizes these mechanisms, the indicators through which each can be observed and the evidence required to establish it. The same mechanisms are used to code the comparative incidents in Table 3 (Section 5.5).

Table 1. *Mechanisms and observable indicators.*

Mechanism	Observable indicators	Evidence needed
Instrumental initiation	Prior commercial, property or personal conflict	Chronology; complaints; corroboration
Amplification	Public announcements, repeated posts, third-party mobilization	Media archives; witness accounts
Reputational stabilization	Identifying allegations persist after initial event	Dated independent records
Translocal activation	Threats or recognition in a new locality	Destination-specific evidence
Protection	Police action, prosecution, continuing safety	Police and court records
Relocation	Movement, exposure, employment and safety	Verified post-move outcomes

4. Materials and Methods

This article uses qualitative documentary synthesis to examine blasphemy accusations, network-based persecution and internal relocation in Pakistan. Sources include scholarship on social capital and blasphemy allegations, official country reports, human rights investigations and policy guidance available by October 2026. Fifteen reported incidents or proceedings were selected purposively for variation in alleged triggers, social mobilization, accused persons, official responses and outcomes. The sample is neither exhaustive nor statistically representative. Particular attention is given to whether a source documents an accusation, an act of collective persecution, actual transmission of a threat beyond its original locality, or only a theoretical possibility of such transmission. The analysis does not independently determine disputed motives or facts contained in court records that were not obtained.

Evidence is classified at three levels: judicial records; incidents attributed to reputable institutions; and the article's theoretical interpretations. No original judicial records were examined for this study, so all case material falls within the second level. Institutional accounts are treated as evidence of what those organizations reported. In particular, no inference of persistent nationwide threats is made without evidence of cross-locality transmission or pursuit.

The fifteen entries concern distinct reported incidents or proceedings. Eleven come from two annual State Department reports, so the number of entries should not be mistaken for fifteen independent investigations. Table 2 identifies the source of each entry and separates reported outcomes from the author's analytical reading. Where accounts conflict or subsequent outcomes are unknown, no broader conclusion is drawn.

The entries distinguish the allegation itself from what an institution reports about its consequences. Bail, acquittal and rescue document specific interventions; they do not establish the accused person's longer-term circumstances.

Two further episodes, the Sargodha attack documented by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [14] and a Gujranwala case reported by Human Rights Watch [1], are discussed in the Results as supplementary illustrations but were not part of the comparative set.

Table 2. *Comparative incidents and evidentiary qualifications.*

Incident	Setting / alleged trigger	Reported outcome	Analytical caution	Source
Ashfaq Masih	Lahore, 2017-22; Christian bicycle mechanic; alleged landlord and rival-business motives	Death sentence reported in 2022	Economic motive is defendant allegation, not independently established; no relocation information in source	US State Dept 2022 IRF [15]
Ramzan Bibi	Punjab village, 2020-22; Ahmadi donor; returned mosque donation led to clerics' complaint	10 months detained; bail granted 2021; trial pending in 2022	Reported interpersonal-to-criminal escalation; no relocation information in source	US State Dept 2022 IRF [15]
Asim Aslam	Lahore, 2011-22; Complaint brought by brother; mental-health evidence	Acquitted January 2022 after retrial	Counterexample to presumed judicial deference: reversal on retrial; long-term safety not established	US State Dept 2022 IRF [15]
Javed Akhter and Muhammad Shahid Khan	Karachi, 2018-22; Alleged burning of textbooks at school; complaint by passerby	Both acquitted February 2022 for evidentiary contradictions	Counterexample to presumed judicial deference: acquittal at trial; no relocation information in source	US State Dept 2022 IRF [15]
Qamar Aqash	Supreme Court, 2022 (origin not stated in source); Alleged blasphemous social media language	Supreme Court granted bail after over four years' detention	Counterexample to presumed judicial deference: appellate intervention, not proof of safety	US State Dept 2022 IRF [15]
Nadeem Samson	Supreme Court, 2022 (origin not stated in source); Blasphemy prosecution; trial delay	Supreme Court granted bail January 2022	Counterexample to presumed judicial deference: bail on procedural grounds; no relocation information in source	US State Dept 2022 IRF [15]
Salamat Mansha Masih	Supreme Court, 2022 (origin not stated in source); Blasphemy prosecution; weak state evidence	Supreme Court granted bail August 2022	Counterexample to presumed judicial deference: evidentiary scrutiny; no relocation information in source	US State Dept 2022 IRF [15]
Priyantha Kumara	Sialkot, December 2021; Factory manager accused by workers	Mob killing reported in December 2021; prosecution department reported convictions in April 2022	Department announcement, not the signed judgment; six death sentences reported*. No relocation evidence.	Punjab Public Prosecution Department, 19 April 2022 [16]
Faisalabad woman	Faisalabad, April 2023; Woman said her sister received revelations; accuser not named	Police prevented mob attack	Counterexample to presumed police inaction: immediate protection; longer-term unknown; no relocation information in source	US State Dept 2023 IRF [17]
Chinese supervisor Tian	Upper Kohistan, April 2023; Criticized work pace during	Police rescue, transfer, bail in Abbottabad	Reported police transfer and bail demonstrate short-term protective	US State Dept 2023 IRF [17]

Incident	Setting / alleged trigger	Reported outcome	Analytical caution	Source
	Ramadan; accused by project interpreter		intervention; neither permanent relocation nor durable safety is established.	
Musarrat Bibi and Muhammad Sarmad	Pakpattan, April-December 2023; Christian and Muslim co-accused; school storeroom paper-burning allegation	Acquitted; police arrested complainant who assembled mob	Counterexample to presumed impunity: acquittal and arrest of the instigator; no relocation information in source	US State Dept 2023 IRF [17]
Jaranwala Christian community	Faisalabad district, August 2023; Blasphemy allegations against two residents	Churches and homes attacked; close to 200 arrests reported	Documents collective attacks following accusations, not cross-regional pursuit or failure of relocation.	US State Dept 2023 IRF [17]
Swat accused man	Swat, June 2024; Accused of blasphemy	Mob lynched accused; police failed to intervene	Failure of police protection; motive and relocation not established	Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025 [18]
Umerkot accused man	Sindh, September 2024; Blasphemy accusation	Police fatally shot accused, per HRW	State agent implicated; not a relocation case	Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025 [18]
Shagufta Kiran	Pakistan, September 2024; Christian woman accused over WhatsApp-group content	Death sentence reported	Digital circulation and formal prosecution; no proven cross-regional tracking; no relocation information in source	Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025 [18]

*Two official Punjab Public Prosecution Department pages give differing totals for some non-capital sentences in the Sialkot case; only the six death sentences, which both report, are relied on here.
IRF: US Department of State Report on International Religious Freedom; HRW: Human Rights Watch.

5. Results

5.1. Instrumental Initiation and the Identity of the Accused

Some documented accusations have arisen amid disputes over property, commercial advantage, or personal relationships. In these cases, religious framing can increase the costs of resistance by attracting audiences beyond the original disputants. The initiating motive nevertheless requires independent corroboration: an accused person's account of a rival's incentive is not, by itself, proof of deliberate fabrication. The cases below are therefore used to distinguish reported allegations from independently established motives.

Human Rights Watch reports episodes in which property and financial disputes intersected with blasphemy allegations. Its account of a Gujranwala trader identified as Abbas describes a supplier dispute followed by a complaint concerning WhatsApp material previously shared between the parties [1]. This sequence makes an instrumental motive plausible, but the report alone cannot establish the complainant's subjective intent or determine what a court would find on a complete evidentiary record.

Economic interests should not be treated as a universal explanation. Allegations may also arise from sincerely held religious beliefs, sectarian conflict or rumors whose origins remain uncertain. In some cases the available reporting cannot distinguish among these possibilities.

The comparison is not confined to Christian or Ahmadi defendants. The prosecution of a Muslim co-defendant, Muhammad Sarmad [17], and the killing of a Sri Lankan factory manager accused by coworkers [16] demonstrate that the mechanism can operate across religious identities and occupational positions. Yet identity and institutional backing remain consequential: the same label does not imply identical exposure or capacity to secure assistance.

5.2. From Local Allegation to Collective Mobilization

An accusation becomes a collective issue when influential actors present it as requiring public action. Ashraf's work [5] shows how honor and religious devotion can supply the moral vocabulary for such mobilization. Public framing may recast hesitation as indifference to religion and participation as a duty. The process does not require all participants to share the original accuser's motives. Some may be driven by conviction,

others by conformity, opportunism or fear.

In its June 2024 fact-finding report on the Sargodha attack, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan described allegations against a Christian man, crowd mobilization, attacks on his household and police efforts to evacuate relatives. The man subsequently died from his injuries [14]. This institutional account documents sharply different outcomes for members of the same household. It does not establish that their exposure would have continued after relocation.

Public repetition may enlarge the audience for an allegation, but informational reach and mobilization are not the same. People can hear an accusation without endorsing it, while a respected intermediary can persuade others to act. The observable question is who communicated the allegation, which audience responded, and whether anything followed from it.

Family association may create secondary exposure when relatives are named, threatened or treated as responsible for the accused person's conduct. Shared addresses and occupations can make such associations visible, but kinship by itself is not evidence of targeting. The analyst must identify the relevant threat or sanction and the relationship through which it arose.

Counterexamples are necessary to evaluate diffusion. An influential religious figure sometimes rejects a complaint, neighbors refuse to mobilize, or police break up a gathering. Violence by strangers who learned of an accusation from a public broadcast also differs from threats passed through established contacts. Without evidence identifying the channel, the appropriate conclusion is that the mechanism is unconfirmed.

For relocation, evidence of communications linking locations, attempts to obtain an address or threats passed through known contacts carries greater weight than the mere possibility that online material could circulate nationally.

The cases show divergent institutional responses. The 2023 State Department religious freedom report describes police protection of an accused woman in Faisalabad and an acquittal involving Musarrat Bibi and Muhammad Sarmad [17]. Human Rights Watch's later reporting describes lethal violence against accused persons in Swat and Umerkot [18]. The killing of factory manager Priyantha Kumara in Sialkot, followed by convictions reported by the Punjab Public Prosecution Department, illustrates that grave violence and subsequent prosecution can coexist [16]. Taken together, the episodes show neither uniform impunity nor uniform protection.

Judicial outcomes also vary. Reported bail decisions for Qamar Aqash, Nadeem Samson and Salamat Mansha Masih, and acquittals involving Asim Aslam and two Karachi defendants, indicate that appellate and trial courts can scrutinize allegations and procedural defects. Bail and acquittal are not evidence that social stigma has disappeared. Equally, continued stigma cannot be inferred from legal proceedings alone. The post-decision experiences of these defendants remain unobserved in the sources used here [15].

5.3. State Protection: Between Formal Law and Informal Power

The existence of police, courts and criminal prohibitions against assault does not settle whether a threatened person can obtain effective protection. A meaningful analysis asks whether authorities are accessible, willing and able to respond, whether they can prevent foreseeable harm and whether their actions are sustained. Such questions matter most when a complainant risks being arrested after seeking help or when police face crowd pressure.

Human Rights Watch describes intimidation and failures of accountability in specific investigations [1]. Kakar examines institutional and procedural obstacles to preventing mob violence [6]. Neither source implies that every police force, court or locality responds identically. The relevant distinction is between immediate rescue, investigation, prosecution and sustained protection after the initial crisis.

A further analytical distinction concerns police protection from a known private adversary versus protection from diffuse potential perpetrators. In the first setting, intervention can target known individuals and specific threats. In the second, authorities may face uncertain or dispersed actors, changing allegations and public mobilization. The latter scenario can complicate protection, although complexity and incapacity are different things. Researchers should seek records of complaints, responses, arrests, prosecutions, witness protection and subsequent incidents.

Claims of official complicity need careful handling. Corruption, patronage and selective enforcement are plausible and documented in some cases; they should not be presumed from an adverse outcome. A study that distinguishes indifference, resource constraints, fear of mobs and intentional collaboration will offer a stronger explanation than one that treats all institutional failures as a single phenomenon.

Documentary sources also have asymmetries. Human rights reports often give detailed accounts of police inaction in prominent episodes, while routine interventions that prevent violence receive less attention. Conversely, official statements may emphasize arrests or inquiries without establishing whether endangered people obtained durable security. Future studies should code actions separately from outcomes, record contradictions among sources, and avoid inferring effectiveness solely from the announcement of an investigation. Where judicial decisions are available, they should be read for their actual holdings rather than cited as general statements about nationwide practice.

According to the 2023 State Department religious freedom report, police rescued a Chinese supervisor whom a project interpreter had accused after a workplace dispute; he was airlifted to Abbottabad, where he obtained bail [17]. The episode illustrates the possibility of effective immediate extraction when institutional resources are available. It does not establish his subsequent long-term safety or the availability of equivalent protection to others.

The 2023 Jaranwala attacks provide a different illustration. The State Department reported attacks on churches and Christian homes after allegations against two residents [17]. This is evidence of community-wide harm within the locality; whether an accused person would be traced to another city is a separate question.

5.4. Internal Relocation: Movement, Safety, and Sustainable Settlement

Moving to another city is only the first part of an internal-relocation assessment. The second is whether the identified threat can reach the proposed destination and whether effective protection is available there. The third is whether the person can obtain housing, income and ordinary social participation without exposure to a known danger or conditions that make settlement unreasonable. The three questions are related, but evidence on one cannot stand in for evidence on the others.

Together, they correspond to the 'relevance' and 'reasonableness' analysis in the Guidelines on International Protection No. 4 issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which ask whether the proposed area is practically, safely and legally accessible, whether the persecutor is likely to pursue the claimant there, and whether the claimant could lead a relatively normal life there without undue hardship [19, 20]. The contribution here is to specify how social ties bear on each limb of that assessment.

The UK Home Office's September 2026 guidance states that, in general, a person fearing non-state actors is likely to be able to relocate internally, while each case must be considered on its individual facts [21]. Guidance from the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) likewise directs attention to the proposed area, personal circumstances and support [4]. Neither source supports a categorical finding that blasphemy accusations create nationwide risk or that moving elsewhere is always sufficient.

The first question is the threat's demonstrated geographical reach. An accusation known in a neighborhood may not be known in another province. Relevant evidence would include specific threats made after departure, communications to contacts in another location, continuing efforts by named adversaries to locate the accused, or dissemination that connects the accused person to a proposed destination. Local violence alone does not establish such reach.

The second question concerns safety at the destination. Police responsiveness, whether known hostile actors are present, and the possibility of receiving effective protection matter independently of the severity of the original incident. Publicity can facilitate recognition, yet whether someone will be pursued or harmed in a given locality depends on who is there and what they know.

The third question is whether settlement is practically sustainable. Housing, employment, identification through occupational or family contacts, and access to trustworthy assistance may affect a person's ability to remain in a destination. Relationships can cut both ways: a relative can offer shelter or give away a location, and professional contacts can provide work or repeat an accusation. Which of these happens has to be established from evidence about the family or community network in question.

The three questions therefore tell a relocation assessment what to look for. A safe journey and long-term protection are separate findings, as are immediate protection and access to a livelihood. Conversely, hardship or the need to disclose personal history does not by itself establish persecution. The analysis must connect the alleged risk to identifiable actors, plausible pathways of identification and conditions at the proposed destination.

As Section 4 notes, the fifteen incidents are not a cohort followed after relocation, and they cannot establish how often accused persons are recognized in new localities or relocate safely. A destination offering effective protection, independent means of support, and reliable relationships may substantially reduce risk.

5.5. Coding the Incidents Against the Proposed Mechanisms

Table 3 codes each incident against the mechanisms in Table 1. In five incidents the reported accusation arose within an identifiable pre-existing relationship: kinship (Asim Aslam, whose brother filed the complaint), employment (Priyantha Kumara; Tian, accused by a project interpreter), commerce (Ashfaq Masih, on the defendant's account) and local religious life (Ramzan Bibi) [15-17]. They are the incidents to which the framework's temporal test could in principle be applied, although none of the sources documents the earlier function of the tie. Only one incident (Tian) records movement to another locality, and it shows short-term protective extraction rather than settlement. No incident documents a threat reaching a new location. The coding therefore locates the evidentiary gap precisely: the sources capture where accusations originate and how institutions respond, but not what happens after relocation. Jaranwala points in a different direction: the attackers were reportedly mobilized from outside the town through mosque announcements, so amplification reached beyond the locality without any prior tie to the accused [17].

Table 3. Mechanism coding of the comparative incidents.

Incident	Tie involved	Instrumental initiation	Amplification	Protection / response	Movement or translocal reach
Ashfaq Masih	Commercial (landlord, business rival)	Alleged by defendant	Not reported	None; death sentence	Not reported
Ramzan Bibi	Community (returned mosque donation; clerics' complaint)	Reported dispute	Not reported	Bail (2021)	Not reported
Asim Aslam	Kinship (brother as complainant)	Not reported	Not reported	Acquittal on retrial	Not reported
Javed Akhter and Muhammad Shahid Khan	None (complaint by passerby)	Not reported	Not reported	Acquittal	Not reported
Qamar Aqash	Digital (social media)	Not reported	Not reported	Supreme Court bail	Not reported
Nadeem Samson	Not identified	Not reported	Not reported	Supreme Court bail	Not reported
Salamat Mansha Masih	Not identified	Not reported	Not reported	Supreme Court bail	Not reported
Priyantha Kumara	Workplace (accused by own workers)	Not reported	Documented (mob)	Prosecution after killing	Not applicable
Faisalabad woman	Not identified (statement about her sister)	Not reported	Mob gathered	Police prevented attack	Not reported
Chinese supervisor Tian	Workplace (accused by project interpreter)	Not reported	Not reported	Police rescue; bail	Moved to Abbottabad (short-term)
Musarrat Bibi and Muhammad Sarmad	Not identified	Not reported	Mob assembled by complainant	Acquittal; complainant arrested	Not reported
Jaranwala Christian community	None identified; mob reportedly from outside the town	Not reported	Documented (mosque announcements; collective attack)	Close to 200 arrests reported	Not applicable
Swat accused man	None identified	Not reported	Documented (mob)	Police failed to intervene	Not applicable
Umerkot accused man	None identified	Not reported	Not reported	State agent implicated	Not applicable
Shagufta Kiran	Not identified (WhatsApp-group content)	Not reported	Digital circulation	None; death sentence	Not reported

6. Discussion

The most discriminating evidence would identify an existing tie, document its earlier supportive function, establish what changed after an accusation, and trace any ensuing disclosure, threat or withdrawal of support. A separate record is needed to show that a threat reached a proposed destination. Research should also include cases in which accusations faded, protective contacts intervened or relocation succeeded, since a sample of severe attacks alone would overstate the risk.

6.1. Explanatory Scope and Competing Pathways

An initiating complainant and a later hostile audience may act for different reasons. Economic advantage can explain an initial allegation, while religious solidarity, fear of reputational contamination or pressure from intermediaries can explain later participation. The framework's incremental value lies in tracing these actors and their relationships. Where the record shows only a crowd and an accusation, the relational

account cannot claim more than plausibility.

The same ties may operate in opposite directions. Relatives can provide shelter, while association with them can reveal a person's location; colleagues may repeat an allegation, or defend the accused against it. Attention to these differences is preferable to treating a social network as uniformly protective or threatening.

When a specific destination is assessed, the strongest evidence is a demonstrated link between the alleged persecutor or mobilized audience and that location. A publicly accessible allegation raises a question about discoverability; it does not establish that anyone has identified, sought or threatened the individual there.

The concept of social liability directs attention to losses that are not captured by physical displacement alone. A person may remain in place but lose trade, employment or access to familiar institutions because others alter their behavior. The resulting vulnerability may be substantial even where no subsequent attack is documented.

The account has clear boundaries. It does not explain every episode of blasphemy-related violence, nor does it establish that social ties are predominantly harmful. Some attacks arise through mass publicity among strangers, some allegations lose credibility, and some families or employers remain protective. The model should be rejected for a case when relational history adds nothing to the explanation of the observed outcome.

6.2. Evidentiary Hierarchy and Limits of Inference

The evidence hierarchy matters. Official reporting may substantiate that police rescued a person or that a court granted bail, but it does not establish long-term safety unless later outcomes were examined. The prosecution department's announcement about Sialkot, for example, is an official summary of convictions; the signed judgment itself was not examined. Neither source type should be treated as a longitudinal record of relocation.

Tables 2 and 3 show variation in reported triggers, collective targeting, police conduct and judicial outcomes. Their principal limitation is the near absence of documented post-move follow-up. Accordingly, they cannot test the prevalence of transformed relationships or translocal pursuit. Both remain proposed mechanisms for future investigation.

A stronger future design would compare otherwise similar accusations that led to continued threats, successful protective intervention and uneventful relocation. Researchers would record the person's pre-accusation sources of housing, income and protection; the contacts through which allegations traveled; any attempts to obtain a new address; and the durability of support after a move. Threats and outcomes must be measured separately from the hypothesized vulnerability, avoiding the circular claim that a network was dangerous simply because harm occurred.

6.3. Practical Implications for the Internal Relocation Alternative

The framework has direct practical value for the internal relocation alternative (IRA), also referred to as the internal flight or internal protection alternative, in international refugee law. UNHCR's Guidelines on International Protection No. 4 structure the inquiry in two parts: a relevance analysis, which asks whether the proposed area is practically, safely and legally accessible and whether the claimant would be exposed there to the original risk or to a new risk of persecution or serious harm; and a reasonableness analysis, which asks whether the claimant could lead a relatively normal life in that area without facing undue hardship [19, 20]. In blasphemy-related claims, decision-makers frequently have detailed evidence about the incident in the home area but little evidence about the proposed destination. The social-liability framework converts that gap into a set of questions that can be answered with evidence.

For the relevance limb, the framework asks which identifiable relationships connect the claimant to the proposed area, and whether any of them also connect the claimant to the accuser, the mobilized audience or the intermediaries who circulated the allegation. A relative, employer, congregation or business contact in the destination may be the means by which the claimant is housed and employed, and also the means by which he or she is identified. Instead of asking in the abstract whether blasphemy accusers can reach every part of Pakistan, the decision-maker can ask whether a demonstrated channel of transmission exists to the particular destination, whether named adversaries have sought the claimant's whereabouts since departure, and whether identifying material, such as a name, photograph, video or FIR, has circulated in a form that could be recognized there (Table 1). Each of these is a factual question that country-of-origin information, the claimant's testimony and corroborating documents can address.

For the reasonableness limb, the framework exposes a dilemma that general country guidance tends to obscure. The resources that make a relatively normal life possible, including housing, employment, access to a religious community and assistance with documentation, are usually obtained through social ties. Where the only ties available at the destination are those through which exposure could travel, the claimant may be able to remain safe only by abandoning them or by concealing a past accusation or the religious identity associated with it. Whether a person can reasonably be expected to live in that way should be addressed explicitly rather than assumed. Conversely, where the claimant has independent means of support, or protective ties that are unconnected to the accusation and its audience, the framework supports a finding that relocation may be both relevant and reasonable.

Applied in this way, the framework avoids two errors. It does not presume that a blasphemy accusation creates a nationwide risk simply because the original incident was severe,

and it does not accept relocation merely because the claimant could physically travel to another city. Instead, it directs the assessment toward individualized, destination-specific evidence about relationships, transmission and protection, which is consistent with the case-by-case approach required by current UK Home Office and EUAA guidance [4, 21]. For practitioners preparing or assessing a claim, the indicators in Table 1 can serve as a checklist for the evidence that should be sought before either conclusion is reached.

6.4. Directions for Future Research

The limitations identified in Section 6.2 define a concrete research agenda. Five directions follow from the framework and from the gaps in the present evidence.

First, longitudinal follow-up of accused persons is the most pressing need. Every bail decision, acquittal and police rescue in Tables 2 and 3 ends the documentary record at the point where the relocation question begins. Studies conducted with legal-aid organizations, defense lawyers and community bodies that remain in contact with accused persons could record, at fixed intervals, where those persons live, whether they have been recognized or threatened, and how they support themselves. Such a design would allow successful relocations and failed ones to be compared, rather than inferring relocation outcomes from the severity of the original incident.

Second, the temporal test proposed in Section 3.2 requires relational data collected before and after an accusation. Ego-network interviews with accused persons and their relatives, supported where possible by contemporaneous documents such as employment records, tenancy agreements and correspondence, could establish what function a tie served before the allegation and how it changed afterward. This would allow the analyst to distinguish activation of a latent vulnerability from pre-existing antagonism and from mere withdrawal of support, and therefore to test whether social liability adds explanatory value beyond stigma and crowd violence.

Third, the digital diffusion of accusations should be studied directly rather than assumed. Tracing how identifying content, including names, images, videos and copies of FIRs, moves across messaging groups and social media platforms, and in which regions and languages it is recirculated, would distinguish informational reach from actual recognition and mobilization. Such work would also clarify whether online circulation decays over time or is periodically revived, a question with direct bearing on whether a threat can follow a person to another city months or years after an incident.

Fourth, research should compare destinations, not only incidents. Police responsiveness, the presence of co-religionist or sectarian communities, the density of migrant and informal labor markets, and the availability of legal assistance vary considerably across Pakistan's large cities and provinces. Comparative study of these conditions would give decision-makers evidence about the reasonableness of relocation to particular places. A complementary line of inquiry would analyze published asylum and appeal decisions in the United Kingdom and European Union in which internal relocation was considered for persons accused of blasphemy, in order to identify how decision-makers currently reason about network reach and where evidentiary gaps most often arise.

Fifth, the framework should be tested beyond Pakistan. Accusations of blasphemy, apostasy or religious insult generate community sanctions and displacement in other national settings, and comparison would show whether the relational mechanisms identified here are specific to Pakistan's legal and social context or reflect a more general pattern. Across all five directions, research involving accused persons carries serious ethical risks, because data collection could itself disclose a person's location or revive an allegation. Strict anonymization, secure data handling and consultation with organizations that protect accused persons should therefore be regarded as preconditions for this research rather than as procedural formalities.

7. Conclusions

The cases reviewed here do not tell a single story of inevitable escalation. They include killings, collective attacks, arrests, acquittals and protective interventions. Social liability is most useful when the record identifies a relationship that created exposure or allowed a sanction to be enforced; it is not an alternative name for every instance of stigma or violence. The relevant question is what specific relationships made possible, and whether other relationships or institutions constrained them.

For internal relocation, the practical implication is an evidence-based inquiry into a specific destination. Decision-makers should distinguish a serious threat in the place of origin from proof of continuing pursuit, and distinguish the capacity to travel from the capacity to live safely and sustainably after arrival. Documentary reporting on Pakistan makes these questions important, but does not answer them for every accused person.

These conclusions must be read in light of the study's data limitations. The fifteen incidents are drawn from secondary institutional reporting rather than from court files, interviews or case tracking: eleven come from two annual US Department of State religious freedom reports, three from Human Rights Watch's World Report 2025 and one from an official prosecution announcement. Such reporting tends to record prominent and severe incidents, and none of these sources follows accused persons across regions or over time after an accusation, bail, acquittal or rescue. The absence of documented translocal pursuit in this set therefore cannot be taken as evidence that such pursuit does not occur, just as the severity of local violence does not establish that it does. The findings identify mechanisms and the evidence needed to test them; they do not estimate how often threats follow accused persons to new localities or how often relocation succeeds, and they cannot substitute for individualized evidence about a particular claimant and destination. Further comparative research,

along the lines set out in Section 6.4, is needed to establish when social capital becomes a liability and when it remains a source of safety.

Abbreviations

EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
FIR	First Information Report
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IRF	International Religious Freedom (US Department of State report)
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Shaul Michael Gabbay: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this research have been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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