

Justice for Bilkis Bano

"My 3-year old daughter, Saleha, was in my arms. They snatched her and threw her into the air with all their might. My heart broke as her little head shattered on the rocks. Three men caught me by the arms and legs and many others entered me one by one. When satisfying their fust, they kicked me and beat my head with a rod. Assuming that I was dead, they threw me into the bushes."-Bilkis Bano

This is what happened during the Gujarat violence in March 2002: Five-months-pregnant Bilkis had to witness her mother, sister, aunts being gang-raped, and 14 members of her family - women, men, children, including her daughter, and a newborn child-being brutally killed by a mob of about 25 men. Bilkis was raped by several men before she lost consciousness. She survived only because the attackers thought she was dead. Bilkis knew the men. They were her neighbours in the village and also customers at her father's dairy. Only seven of the 14 bodies of her murdered family members were found. Neither was she called to identify them, nor was she able to give them a dignified funeral. The corpses were further mutilated, before being dumped in a mass grave

Bilkis Bano went on to fight against all odds for several years to get justice for herself and for her family members. The men she named and accused were all found guilty by the trial court in Mumbai in 2008 and the High Court in May 2017.

While delivering its judgement the Bombay High Court remarked that there was "clinching evidence" to show that each of the accused had committed the crimes with which they were charged under the Indian Penal Code - multiple gang rapes, including that of a pregnant woman, multiple counts of murder, and unlawful assembly. The Supreme Court asked the Gujarat government to pay Rs 50 lakhs to Bilkis Bano. and provide her with a job and a house, as compensation for the way the state police had initially suppressed evidence against the accused

This 15th August, we celebrated Aazadi ka Amrit Mahotsav. In his address to the nation, our Prime Minister spoke of the need to respect women. The very next day, those 11 men convicted for gangrape, and murder walked free, remorseless, thanks

to the Gujarat Government's remission of their sentence. The government so wanted them freed that they used an outdated 1992 policy to secure their early release. WHY????

From the start, these have been protected men who had been shielded by the police even in the immediate aftermath of their horrific crimes. It was because of the real danger of a biased trial that the case had to be handed over to the CBI and transferred out of Gujarat to Maharashtra. And sure enough, the Bombay High Court in 2017 held five policemen and two doctors guilty of acts "causing disappearance of the evidence with intent to screen the offenders and prevent them from punishment." The protection to the convicted rapists and killers continues. According to media reports, as soon as they were released, they were felicitated by the VHP. Felicitated for what?? For killing Muslims? For raping Muslim women? For increasing hate and violence in our country? Think about this. How, as a woman, as a daughter, perhaps a mother, or simply as a citizen of this country, do you feel about murderers, and rapists being freed before their time? Is this respect for women? Is this the Justice you want? Is this the India we want? In a statement she made after the release of her rapists and her family's murderers, Bilkis Bano said, "How can justice for any woman end like this? I trusted the highest courts in our land. I trusted the system, and I was learning slowly to live with my trauma. The release of these convicts has taken from me my peace and shaken my faith in justice. My sorrow and my wavering faith are not for myself alone but for every woman who is struggling for justice in courts."

Let us stand in solidarity with Bilkis in this struggle for justice. Let us not stay silent! Share with your friends, colleagues and families. Share this through social media. Talk about this.

SAFE (Step Ahead For Equality) joins with All India Democratic Women's Association; Forum Against Oppression of Women: Indian Christians for Democracy: Jan Swasthya Abhiyan: Justice for Coalition Religious West India: National Solidarity Forum: Police Reform Watch Vinayak Foundation: Shoshit Jan Andolan; Pani Haq Samiti: Contact us at faowindia@yahoo.co.in