

# For a Better Future

*[Naseem Shekh is an activist working with victims of the state-sponsored anti-Muslim carnage in Gujarat in 2002, in which more than 3000 people were killed. She is based in the Qasimabad Colony, near Kalol in the Panchmahals district of Gujarat. Eleven members of her own family, including her daughter and husband, were slaughtered in this most large-scale wave of anti-Muslim violence in India in recent times, the victims of which are yet to get justice. Here she narrates to Azim Sherwani the traumatic murder of her family, her struggle for survival and her present involvement in seeking to promote peace and communal harmony in communally-polarised Gujarat.]*

On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2002, I had a gynecological operation. I was in the nursing home. The next day my husband told me about the burning of the train coach in Godhra. I was frightened but he told me that police had been deployed and that nothing untoward would happen. He told the doctors to take care of me and not to worry about the money, promising to be back the next morning.

On 1st March a Hindu mob attacked the Muslim houses in my village Dahlol. I intuitively did not want my husband to go to the village but, owing to his repeated insistence that the children were alone, I could not stop him. A Hindu customer of ours sheltered my husband and the children in his house when the mob went on a rampage. He insisted on sending our children to the hospital, which he thought to be a safer place. My husband reluctantly agreed. My 13-year old daughter stayed with her father. The Hindu customer dropped my son Suhail at the nursing home. I was worried. I wanted to know where my family was. He told me not to worry. Very soon, he said, everybody would join me, and he assured me that they were safe in his house.

In the evening this Hindu man took my family with him, telling them that he was arranging for safe passage for them. He took them towards the river and on the way started shouting that there were Muslims around. This was a trap that he had laid. All at once, a Hindu mob, armed with sharp weapons, surrounded my family members. One of my nephews ran to save his life and hid behind huge bushes. But the mob killed everybody one by one. They begged for their life to be spared but in vain. My 13 year-old daughter was gang-raped and cut into pieces. After killing everybody they burnt their bodies. My nephew, who narrowly escaped, was watching everything, shaking with fear. He fled the place when the mob went back to the village. He came to the main road, which connects Kalol, a town with a substantial Muslim population. The police found him, and asked him to remove his trousers to see if he was a Muslim. They kicked him and abused him for being a Muslim. He was thrown out of the police jeep. Upon arriving Kalol he narrated the incident to our relatives and family friends.

I was still in the hospital and was not told anything by our relatives. The next day the mob came to the hospital in search of me. The doctor told them that I had been discharged and had left the hospital. After this incident the doctor was afraid that the mob might come again in search of me. He provided a set of clothes normally worn by Hindu women to hide my identity in case I was stopped on my way to a safer place. After 15 days I was sent to a relief camp in Qasimabad in an Army vehicle. When I reached the camp, my sister and other people started crying. I wanted to know about my husband, daughter and other family members. They told me that they were in a different relief camp. I insisted that I want to speak to them. One of my family friends phoned me, pretending that he was my husband, but I could easily make out that it was a different voice. I guessed that I lost everything. My life was completely destroyed. My brother-in-law started crying and revealed to me that only three members of our family of 11 had survived.

The atmosphere in the relief camp was depressing and frustrating. I had lost everything but I had to live for my son Suhail. We had to face so very many problems. We could not go back home. My brother-in-law wanted the compensation money to be deposited in his name. He thought I might take the money and get married to someone else and might not take care of my son. I convinced him that I would take care of my son for he was everything to me now. In case I got married again, I said, I would deposit the money in his account.

I had so much pain in my heart and was worried that I might go mad. I started volunteering in the camp. At that time some women's group and an NGO came to work for the rehabilitation and access to justice for the victims of the carnage. I joined them as a volunteer initially. There was a lot of opposition from some conservative maulvis. They tried to force me not to go out because I was a widow and I had to perform the religious duty of being isolated from men for four months. I told them categorically that I needed to work for women like me who had lost everything in the carnage. They needed my support. There was also some opposition from some of my distant relatives.

It was really difficult to engage Hindus, Dalits and Muslims in peace-building initiatives. There was complete mistrust of and hatred for each other. Muslims said that the Hindus had destroyed their life. What kind of reconciliation, they asked, is possible? But some people started appreciating our work. They would tell me, 'You lost everything in the carnage but you still don't hate Hindus. Rather, you try to engage them. So, we should follow your path of trying to promote peace and counter hatred'.

Today, I have no one in my life except Suhail. I am sad but now I am a confident woman. I can relate to and understand the problems of all other women, Hindus, Dalits and Muslims.

Constant preaching of hatred against Muslims for political purposes is the root cause of communal violence in Gujarat. The Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad are the main instigators of anti-Muslim hatred in India and use any opportunity to instigate violence against them. During the mass violence against Muslims there were some good Hindus who helped their Muslim neighbours in providing shelter or safe passage. Unfortunately, however, in Gujarat today the communal divide has increased.

In fact, all religions teach tolerance and peace but some people interpret religion with narrowness and to generate hate against fellow human beings. At times I ask myself that if the different religions were made to serve humanity then why are people all over the world killing each other in the name of religion?

I have devoted my life to the struggle against communalism and for empowering women. This and the hope for a better future of my son are my strength. I want to educate my son and would like him to join government service in Gujarat. There is so much pain in my heart but I want to channelise it to prevent a repeat of what happened in Gujarat in 2002. ✍