

## Plight of POTA Victims

By a Correspondent

Almost six years after a deadly wave of genocidal attacks that targeted Muslims in Gujarat, the victims of the state's worst case of anti-Muslim violence still wage a tough battle for survival. In one of the worst-hit parts of the Gujarat, the Panchmahals district, scores of Muslim families have been reduced to penury after having lost their homes and possessions and with their male earning members still languishing in jails.

Immediately after a coach of the Sabarmati Express was set on fire near Godhra, a major town in Panchmahals, which then led to widespread attacks on Muslims in other parts of Gujarat, dozens of Muslims were picked up from the town and thrown into prison. Some 80 Muslim men from and around Godhra still remain in jail charged under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). Many of these men are said to have been wrongly charged with being allegedly involved in the burning of the coach. Exemplifying the total lack of justice in Gujarat, not a single Hindu has been charged under the same deadly law in Gujarat, despite the deaths of over 3000 Muslims at the hands of Hindu gangs in 2002.

Ayesha Bibi, aged 65, is the ailing wife of Husain Bhai Mohammad Bhai Dhobi, a POTA detainee. She lives in a Muslim slum in Godhra in a dark one-room hovel that is covered with a tin roof with gaping holes. She says that her husband was picked up by the police while he was washing clothes, which he used to do for a living. She, like most of the other relatives of Godhra's Muslim POTA detainees, cannot afford the exorbitant cost of hiring a lawyer to fight her husband's case. 'I have left it all to Allah', she says with a deep sigh, her eyes streaming with tears.

Ayesha's friend, Salma, relates the same traumatic story. Her husband, Asghar Ali Bohra, is the only Bohra among Godhra's POTA detainees, the rest being from the Sunni Muslim community, mostly from the 'low' caste Ghanchi or oil-presser caste. Asghar Ali used to eke out a living by selling trinkets on a push-cart. Salma says that he had nothing to do with the burning of the train, a point made by the wives and mothers of all the POTA detainees in Godhra whom this correspondent met. She, like most of them, is desperately poor, and cannot visit her husband, locked in Sabarmati jail in Ahmedabad, very often. The reason: she cannot afford the two hundred rupees that she would have to spend travelling to Ahmedabad and back. She now survives on a paltry five hundred rupees that she receives every month from the Bohra community. Her desperate poverty, exacerbated by the fact that the only bread-earner in her family has been in jail for almost six years, has meant that her sons had to be withdrawn from school and forced to take up low-paid manual jobs.

A young lad opens the tin door of a miniscule one-room tenement when this correspondent knocks, on it. 'Has my father come back?' he asks. He is a spastic. Anas, aged 15, has a mental age of probably a three year-old child. His mother, Ruqaiyya Begum, apologises for not having a chair to sit on.

She tells how her husband, Siddiq Badam, was picked up by the police when he was in the mosque and how she cannot afford to see him regularly, not only

because of her desperate poverty but also because she cannot leave her son alone, for fear that he might run away. She scrapes her livelihood by washing clothes for her neighbours. She talks of how she has to work extra hard to buy medicines for her husband, who, she says, has lost much weight and has developed pain in his heart while in jail.

'I have no one but God to help me', she goes on. She was just two when her mother died and she has no siblings. 'I had to sell off my cooking utensils to get money for keeping our home going', she says.

Anas, who knows 'we are talking about his father', hugs his mother and murmurs, 'Papa used to carry me on his shoulders to the railway station'. Ruqaiyya's eyes are now brimming with tears, Raziya, mother of four daughters and two sons, is Ruqaiyya's sister-in-law. She lives in a one-room structure, which she has taken on rent. Her husband Shaukat Badam, a daily-wage labourer, was placed behind bars under POTA more than a year after the Godhra train incident. This mother of six struggles to keep her family alive by working as a maid-servant. Her husband has now developed tuberculosis, and that she has to buy the medicines for him, because the medication that he receives in the hospital is not effective. This, she says, consumes much of her paltry earnings every month.

In her early 60s, Abida Abdul Haq Khoda is a mother of four sons. Her third son, Tayyeb, was arrested under POTA when he was just 19 years old. He was sleeping in a truck when policemen picked him up on the day of the burning of the train. The only son who lives with her now, aged 21, is out of work. He used to work in a cold storage company but he developed an illness that now prevents him from doing so.

Abida survives on a modest sum that her two other sons, one a worker and the other a maulvi in a madrasa, give her occasionally. Meanwhile Tayyeb has become very ill and pale, and she wonders if he will ever be released.

In the wake of the Gujarat massacre, scores of NGOs entered Gujarat, providing or claiming to provide relief to its victims. Today, however, the relatives of these POTA victims have almost no one to turn to. Most of them have no idea about the legal formalities involved and have no lawyer to handle their cases. Nor has any NGO taken upon itself the task of providing these hapless people any sustainable means of livelihood.

'Numerous NGOs came and gave some money to some of the victims', explains Hasanbhai, a local shopkeeper, 'but instead of giving people fish, and making them dependent, they should have taught them how to fish, by providing them some source of livelihood, which could have enabled them to stand on their feet instead'. He tells how some wives of POTA detainees in Godhra have, out of sheer desperation, been forced to take to sex-work to survive.

Ilyas Bhagat, a Godhra-based social activist, explains that the grinding poverty of most families of POTA victims in the town has caused the education to their children, numbering several hundred, to suffer. 'If only we could collect a modest sum of say eighty thousand rupees a year, we could cover the cost of their studies', he says. 'To make sure that donors feel that their money won't be misused', he adds, 'the money could be sent directly to the schools where these

children study'. Most of these schools are privately-run by local Muslim educationists.

This, as well as income-generating projects, Ilyas says, are urgently required to address the pathetic plight of the affected families of Godhra, almost all of whom are very poor. But most NGOs, he laments, have forgotten these families now, leaving them to fend for themselves in an increasingly hostile environment. □□□