

JUSTICE FOR ALL- FACELESS MOBS ABSCONDING!

- By Navaz Kotwal

Till now Yunusbhai has only received despair and dejection from those in authority in his search for justice. Now he is waiting for his day in court. He wants the machinery of justice to be so effective that every victim will benefit from its impartiality and fairness. He does not want compassion. He wants justice. He feels that the state could not possibly turn its face away from its primary duty of providing Justice. It is essential because people have suffered and continue to suffer.

Yunusbhai was a resident of Dehlol village in Kalol taluk of Panchmahals district. There were just 70 Muslim families in the village. Few owned land and others had small businesses. Yunusbhai was doing well for himself. He worked hard and managed to provide his family a comfortable life. But Godhra and its aftermath changed it all.

Terror broke loose in Dehlol on February 28 when armed mobs descended upon the village. They were all clad in saffron. Yunusbhai locked his family and himself in the house. He called the police for help. The police said they were short of staff. The terror was immense outside. House after house was being looted and burnt. The masjid had fallen. Yunusbhai called the police again. They said they had sent a jeep. The jeep never came. The mob was on his house by now. It was wisest to leave. They escaped from the back door. A few others joined. There were about 40-50 of them- Yunus, Medina, Sultana, Feroz, Rizwan, Zubeda, Faim, Imran and more. They ran to take shelter in the fields. The standing crops, which had not been harvested, provided them a place to hide for a couple of hours. They kept running, all along hoping that the police would come to their rescue. It was 12 hours since the attack on them had begun and they had not yet reached safe ground.

The night passed. Life or death both were uncertain. They decided to move ahead. The group got separated. The escape seemed never-ending from one field to another. But luck was not with them. They were spotted by a large armed mob carrying swords, sticks, knives, axes and cans of petrol and kerosene. People started running in all directions. Faim and Imran were caught. It was an unequal game. Ten armed men against two young boys. The boys were slashed with swords. In seconds they were drenched in blood. They fell. They were dead. This did not satisfy the murderers. They picked up huge stones and smashed the boys' faces. The brutality with which both were maimed numbed Yunusbhai. Holding onto him was his son Rizwan and wife Zubeda. Feroz, Sattar, Salim, Mohammad...hid and saw it all. But the brutality did not stop here. The men then doused the two boys with petrol and set the bodies ablaze. They left after that. Suddenly all was quiet. The silence was haunting.

About 30 of them had managed to escape. The only emotion they could recognise was fear. As they moved on they spotted Feroz's tempo parked in the field. This was the best option. They all got into the tempo and drove towards Kalol. The tempo was spotted. The road had been blocked by a mob with barrels, stones and heaps of sand and a car was parked in the middle to prevent entry. The tempo swerved in order to avoid the mob but skidded and overturned. As the passengers tried to get out of the vehicle they were caught by the mob. Yakubhai was caught and slashed at with a sword and then burnt alive. Ten others were done to death in a similar manner.

What followed next changed Yunusbhai's life forever. 5-6 attackers caught hold of Rizwan - his 12-year-old son. They struck him with swords and sticks until he was soaked in blood. He begged and pleaded but they would not let him go. Hearing his screams Yunusbhai's wife Zubeda ran back to save her son and fell on top of him, covering him with her body. But the beastly mob did not spare her either. Mother and son were both hacked to pieces and then set ablaze. Yunusbhai saw all this happen from a distance where he was hiding. The murderers had familiar faces. Faces one saw in the village everyday- the auto rickshaw driver, the fruit-vegetable vendor, the bank manager and so many more. He recognised them all. They all used to be his friends. He just could not move.

Suddenly Yunusbhai's eyes fell on Sultana. He saw she was running. She was soon overpowered. They dragged her, stripped her and raped her one after the other. Yunusbhai fled. He had broken his arm. He didn't know whether his arm hurt more or his heart did. He only kept running. He reached the Kalol camp a day later. Here he met some of his other neighbours -- the few like him who had managed to escape. They had more to tell him. His parents were also killed and burnt. They had begged and screamed and pleaded but the tormentors had laughed. They were burnt alive.

I met Yunusbhai in the Kalol camp. I heard his story. A tear rolled down his eye. The pattern was the same. I had heard hundreds of stories by now. A common thread bound them together - sorrow and hopelessness. I had started comparing the stories. I questioned myself. Here was a man who had lost so much- his family, his house, his livelihood and his right to a life with dignity.

But once again stories and pain do not end here. Living in the Kalol camp he had to make visits to the police station everyday trying to get an FIR lodged. He was told his complaint would be lodged only if he removed the names of the accused. He had to prove that his family was killed in front of his eyes. He had to make countless visits to the police station before the cops accompanied him to the site of the crime. There was some 'luck' here. He proved his wife's death. Identified her by the anklet that was found in a leg lying in the area where she was burnt. But his son was reduced to ashes. He remembered the shirt his son was wearing on that day. A piece of the collar of that shirt was found. Yunusbhai was now eligible for compensation for the deaths. But this was not an easy task. He got this only after countless visits to the authority concerned. Each time he went the official was on leave or too busy to attend to "petty matters". It took him seven long months before he got compensation for death.

After all the effort Yunusbhai's eyewitness account became part of an omnibus FIR lodged by the police. The FIR carried no names of accused. Just nameless, faceless mobs. Three more incidents of rioting and murder were clubbed in the same FIR. The case was investigated. The chargesheet is out. Muslims are accused for rioting. All the murderers that Yunusbhai named were said to be absconding. So what if they all still live in the village! They roam free. They threaten Yunusbhai regularly. They will not let him back in the village. They offer him money to withdraw the case. Yunusbhai regularly complains to the police but who is listening.

Yunusbhai has seen his wife and son being slaughtered in front of his eyes. His parents were killed elsewhere in fields far from home. They did not get a decent burial. Yunusbhai never

got the bodies. He never got to perform the last rites. He is learning to live with this cruel reality of life. But nothing rankles more in his heart than a brooding sense of injustice. He is beginning to realize that he is on the wrong side of the line. The law suddenly seems as something mysterious and forbidding- always taking something away from him. Maybe he is right!