

## JUSTICE FOR ALL - RASOOLBHAI'S WIFE

- By Navaz Kotwal

Pavagadh is a tiny little village of about 200 people in Panchmahals district of Gujarat. Muslims and Hindus here lived equally modest lives depending on pilgrims from across Gujarat, who come to visit a Kali temple and a Dargah that lie near the ruins of the old Champaner Palace. In the riots following Godhra, all the Muslims of the village, like those of the entire taluk, fled to the district headquarters in nearby Halol. Eleven months on, most have crept back to their villages or left the state, but the Pavagarh families are still in Halol struggling to find a way back home after the closure of refugee camps. They had tried to retrieve whatever was left and gathered courage to start afresh, but with little success.

All of them, in one way or the other, had lost some relative, their loved ones, their belongings and above all their means of livelihood - small handcarts—selling flowers, water and other trinkets for the tourists, jeeps—which ferried the tourist and did brisk business in festive seasons, little shops selling sweets and food and the like. The Muslims were threatened and categorically told that there was no longer any place for them there. Shocked and helpless most families chose to stay back in Halol hoping to make a beginning there. But 13 families who had lived in Pavagadh for over 50 years were determined that come what may, they would return 'home'.

Mostly elderly men and women and few young people, they didn't think that anyone would want to harass their little band. They were wrong. Water connections were severed; mobs would gather to stop their handcarts reaching the market; at night stones would be pelted at their houses. But the families persisted. This is home. There is nowhere else. These people have shared their lives with us—they can't always be like this. On each occasion the families complained to the local police. Facile efforts were made towards conciliation, but the harassment continued. The people who kept it going were well known to the administrators and the people of the town. Monthly meetings were held to keep the memory of Godhra alive. Rallies were held, resolutions passed, Muslims were reviled – the poison was systematically being spread. The administration knew all this very well, but say they are helpless to do anything without an official complaint being 'filed'. The families are very frightened and afraid of naming names and filing police complaints. Earlier efforts to file FIRs, just after the February-March carnage, have led to further threats and intimidation and not a single official action to restore their confidence in the machinery of justice.

On 27th December 2002, Prahlad Shastri, a young man with a penchant for creating trouble and a group of young people held a meeting to pay homage to the victims of Godhra. After the meeting while passing through a Muslim locality in Halol along the Pavagadh Road, they shouted abusive slogans. Residents retaliated with stone pelting. The already tense atmosphere became more poisoned. Incensed and wounded the group left for Pavagadh, dragged the men out of the houses and severely beat them up. Rasoolbhai and his son Munnabhai, along with about 5 other men were beaten black and blue. Rasoolbhai was tied up, doused with petrol and then was simply left to himself. Another close look at death. The Police did not prevent any of this but shifted the families off to relative safety in Halol. The DSP visited them and increased patrolling in Pavagadh and Halol.

All this proved too much for Rasoolbhai's 55-year-old wife. On the 1st of January - as the world wished each other peace and goodwill and Rasoolbhai lay in hospital with multiple injuries and broken bones - she died of a heart attack. Perhaps unable to take in any more. Perhaps a broken heart. Who knows and who cares! Rasoolbhai's wife who lived an unexceptional life in the seclusion of her family and perhaps knew little of the outside world has died from other peoples' politics and hatred, which would no doubt have bewildered her if she had comprehended it fully. For those who helped her die, it was a satisfactory end.