



Karnataka Stands With Bilkis



Who is Bilkis Bano and what happened to her 20 years ago?

On March 3, 2002, five months pregnant Bilkis had to witness her mother, sisters, aunts being gang-raped, and 14 members of her family including her three-year-old daughter being brutally killed by a mob of about 25 men. Bilkis, herself, was gang raped before she lost consciousness and survived only because the attackers left her for dead. Only seven of the 14 bodies of her murdered family members were found. The corpses were further mutilated, before being dumped in a mass grave. Bilkis knew the men. They were her neighbours in the village and also customers at her father's dairy.

Bilkis was one of the hundreds of women subjected to severe sexual assault during the targeted violence against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, post the fire on the Sabarmati express in which several Karsewaks were killed.

Did she get justice?

It took Bilkis several years to get justice for herself and for her family members from a system that is not kind to women particularly from marginalised communities. She remained resolute even as she faced threats to her life. However two decades later the men she named and accused were all found guilty by the trial court in Mumbai in 2008 and the Bombay High Court in May 2017. The latter remarked that there was "clinching evidence" to show that each of the accused had committed the crimes with which they were charged. The Supreme Court even asked the Gujarat government to pay compensation for the way the state police had initially suppressed evidence against the accused.

She said:

"I want justice, not revenge. I want my daughters to grow up in a safe India"

But this justice that she got was short lived.

Five years later on August 16, 2022, a day after India celebrated its 75th year of independence, the Gujarat government callously snatched away BilkisBano's freedom by releasing 11 remorseless men convicted for gangrape and murder of her family by using an outdated 1992 policy on remissions. This act by the government is illegal, unethical, inhuman and vengeful. In a statement she made after their release, Bilkis Bano said:

"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."

What makes the release of the convicted so unacceptable?

Right from the start, the convicted have been protected by the police that did everything to cover up the case. The Bombay High Court in 2017 held five policemen and two doctors guilty of "causing disappearance of the evidence with intent to screen the offenders." During their life imprisonment too, they did not suffer - they were allowed to come out on parole for 60 days every six months when they attended family functions and political rallies. According to media reports, soon after their release they were garlanded, fed sweets in public and felicitated by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. For what? For raping Muslim women? For being men of "Sanskrit" as they belong to the Brahmin community as stated by a BJP MLA who was one of the members of the committee that released the men?

Why should we all stand with Bilkis?

Each one of us should think. About how as a woman, a daughter, a mother, or simply as a citizen of this country, we feel about murderers, and rapists being freed before their time only because of their religious or caste identity. Is this the basis for dispensing justice in India today?

If we don't want the release of these men to become an example to all others who commit similar crimes, we MUST all come together to demand that the convicted criminals be sent back to jail to serve out their sentence till the time of their natural death.

We must stand in solidarity with Bilkis. Like her, we too do not want revenge. We want justice. And a more just and secure country for women..

Join us on August 27, 2022 (Saturday) at 10.30 am, Freedom park, Bangalore and let us show Bilkis that she is not alone.