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8 yrs later, riot victims laid to rest in Gujarat villages

Express news service

Vadodara: The shadow of the 2002 riots hung large over Panderwada village and nearby Virpur on Thursday afternoon as the remains of six residents who had died in the killings eight years ago were finally laid to rest on Thursday afternoon.

Amid tight security, remains of six of the 21 killed in the Panderwada massacre, who had been identified through DNA samples, were handed over to their families for burial today.

Senior police officers stood on watch with only the close family members of the victims allowed into the Bakor Police Station to collect the remains. There is no word yet on the 15 other bodies dug up from the Panem river bed — on the Godhra-Lunawada highway — whose samples had also been sent for DNA testing.

While Hussain Habib Shaikh got his father Habib Ashraf Shaikh's remains, he has no idea when those of his brother Bismillah Habib Shaikh, who also died in the massacre, would be handed over.

"Police officials told us that they didn't want to release all the bodies at one go because it might create a communal problem," Shaikh said. "But they do not know how much a funeral costs. There is no other way but to wait. My relatives have come from Modasa, including my sister, and they were really disappointed when they found out that my brother's body is yet to be released. Can somebody tell us what was our mistake here?"

Shaikh buried his father's remains in the community graveyard at neighbouring Navagam, as the whole village gathered to mourn along with him. Incidentally, the remains of another member of the family who died in the killing, Shaikh's grandmother Dulhanbibbi Ashraf, are yet to be located.

Among those grieving were several Hindu families. "All the villagers knew these people," Hussain said.

Just a small distance away, Shabbir Shaikh was laying to rest his son Saleem. He would have been 40 had he been alive today, Shabbir recalled. Two other Panderwada villagers, Yasin Seba Sayyed and Yusuf Abdul Sayyed, were also buried in the same ground.

The remains of two others, Mushtaq Fakir Mohammad and Zakir Dasot Shaikh, were buried at Virpur, about 13 km from Panderwada.

Panderwada had witnessed lynching of 21 persons on March 1, 2002. Lunawada police officials allegedly conducted their burials on March 3, 2002, without informing the family members. On December 27, 2005, some activists dug up the site and the bodies were recovered.

