

**# August 15, the 75th year of Indian Independence is a black day for Indian women.
We demand that the illegal Special Remission / Premature Release of all the 11 convicts -the rapists and murderers- in Bilkis Banu's case be immediately revoked and they continue to serve out their Rigorous Imprisonment until their death/till they are alive.**

Along with women across the country, we the women of Karnataka stand in pain and rage with Bilkis Banu and condemn in no uncertain terms the shameful and illegal release of her 11 rapists by an act of special remission by the Government of Gujarat. It is an act that smacks of brazen impunity and total disregard not only for the law but for the absolute humiliation and violence already suffered by Bilkis Banu more along with the security and dignity of all the women of this country. The early release of these murderers/rapists only strengthens the impunity of all men who commit rape and other acts of violence against women.

Please let us remind the people of this country and the Government of Gujarat of the brutal violence inflicted on her and her family more than 20 years ago that she recounts in her own words.

"All the 4 men of my family were killed brutally. The women were stripped naked and raped by many men. They caught me too. My 3-year old daughter, Saleha, was in my arms. They snatched her and threw her into the air with all their might. My heart broke as her little head shattered on the rocks. Four men caught me by the arms and legs and many others entered me one by one. When satisfying their lust, they kicked me and beat my head with a rod. Assuming that I was dead they threw me into the bushes. Four or five hours later I regained consciousness. I searched for some rags to cover my body, but couldn't find any. I spent a day and a half on a hilltop without food or water. I longed for death. Finally I managed to find a tribal colony. Declaring myself as a Hindu I sought shelter there. Those men were using such foul language, I can't repeat it ever. In front of me they killed my mother, sister and 12 other relatives. While raping and killing us, they were shouting sexual abuses. I could not even tell them that I was five months pregnant because their feet were on my mouth and neck. The conviction and imprisonment of my rapists does not mean the end of hatred. But it does mean that somewhere justice can succeed. I have known the men who raped me for many years. We sold them milk. They were our customers. If they had any shame, they would not have done this to me. How can I forgive them?"

We want to remind the people of this country and the state of Gujarat that all the 11 men the latter has magnanimously released are **convicted criminals**. While passing judgement the Bombay High Court remarked that there was "clinching evidence" to show that each of them had committed the crimes they had been accused of i.e. conspiring to rape a pregnant woman, murder and unlawful assembly under the Indian Penal Code. The Supreme Court even asked the Gujarat government to pay Rs 50 lakh a job, and a house to Bilkis Bano as compensation for the way the state police had initially suppressed evidence against the accused.

In this context we have the following questions to ask the concerned authorities.

On 15th of this August that was being celebrated as Amrit Mahotsav Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi in his independent day address stated

"I have one request for every Indian. Can we change the mentality towards our women in everyday life. Pride of Nari Shakti will play a vital role in fulfilling the dreams of India. Respect for women is an important pillar for India's growth....A distortion has crept in our conduct and we at times insult women. Can we take a pledge to get rid of this in our behavior? "It is important that in speech and conduct, we do nothing that lowers the dignity of women"

Do these words get reduced to shameful rhetoric by the Government of Gujarat that wilfully disregarding the PM's statement proceeded to release the convicted criminals on the very same day?

Or are we to understand that the Government of Gujarat which the PM was heading as the then Chief Minister at the time of Bilkis Banu's rape is exempt from his exhortations?

Are we the women of India supposed to remember and celebrate this memorable day as "a day of freedom for rapists and murderers"? Especially when we have seen news reports that all the 11 convicted were felicitated with garlands, sweets and touching of feet outside the jail by their friends and relatives? And then were taken to be felicitated in the auditorium of the Deen Dayal Upadhyay Trust. Is this the glorious Indian and Hindu culture we are all supposed to pride ourselves on that can felicitate rapists, goons and murderers?

Why did the prosecution department of the Gujarat state not raise any objections when this revocation order was issued?

How could Supreme Court allow such an application from one of the accused for release especially after the recent remarks of the CJI that certain PILs as unnecessary and fit to be dismissed and fined?

Is the Government of Gujarat not aware of the cabinet order dated:18/07/2018 approved under the Chairmanship of PM Mr. Narendra Modi on grant of Special Remission in which it is stated "Special remission will not be given to prisoners who have been convicted for an offence for which the sentence is sentence is of death or where death sentence has been commuted to life imprisonment; Cases of convicts involved in serious and heinous crimes like Dowry death, Rape, Human Trafficking etc"

Is the Government of Gujarat not aware of the resolution of the Home Department Resolution No.JLK/822012/1859/1, dated:23rd January, 2014 which in its Annexure-1 states that; "The following class of prisoners SHALL NOT be granted for State Remission as well as for Premature Release.

(IV). (d) Prisoners convicted for murder with rape or gang rape"

All our sense of collective injustice mean nothing before the statement of Bilkis Banu that she issued through her lawyer when she heard about this revocation.

"When I heard that the 11 convicted men who devastated my family and my life, and took from me my 3-year-old daughter, had walked free. I was bereft of words. I am still numb. Today, I can say this how can justice for any woman end like this? 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."

Bilkis Banu, this country should stand in shame that while you are speaking for every woman who is struggling for justice, the Government of Gujarat is behaving with you in as brutal and dehumanised a manner as the rapists and murderers themselves.

We the women of India declare that August 15, 2022 is a black day for women. And demand that if any semblance of justice needs to be brought back to this country then the concerned authorities i.e the Supreme Court, the Governor of Gujarat and Central Ministry of Home Affairs should take immediate suo moto action to consider this as a rarest of rare case and revoke the Special Remission/Premature Release of all the convicted criminals in Bilkis Banu's

case. We also demand to revise their sentence and put them under rigorous imprisonment until their death.
Otherwise Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav would have turned into poison for the women of this country.

Naveddu Nilladiddare (If We do not Rise, Karnataka) and Karnataka Raajya Mahila Dourjanya Virodhi Okkuuta

Representing women's organisations and feminists across the state of Karnataka