

Grisly Discovery Reopens Old Wounds in Village in India

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PANDARWADA, [India](#) — One afternoon in March 2002, amid one of the worst outbreaks of sectarian violence in recent Indian history, 26 Muslim men and women were hacked to death by a mob of Hindu hard-liners as others hid in the wheat fields behind their homes in this dusty village. The victims' relatives saw the horror unfold.

The police removed the bodies, and the people of Pandarwada, in the western state of Gujarat, never again saw their dead. Nor, in the absence of burials, could they properly mourn.

Though DNA tests were ordered on several skulls and bones found in December in an isolated garbage dump near here, there seems little doubt that the bones are the remains of the villagers massacred four years ago.

Even the police, who say the people who dug up the remains conducted illegal exhumations intended to disturb the peace, acknowledge that the bones are probably the remains of the Pandarwada dead.

The discovery of the remains has reignited tensions over how officials in Gujarat, a state led by Hindu nationalists, handled a wave of riots in response to reports that a Muslim mob set fire to a train in February 2002, killing 59 Hindu pilgrims. The violence convulsed the state for days and persisted for months; at least 1,000 people, most of them Muslims, were killed.

The chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, was criticized for not doing enough to stop the carnage. He has since been accused of not doing enough to bring people who committed crimes to justice.

Cases were swiftly closed by the police, and reopened only after intervention by the Indian Supreme Court. Mr. Modi's own popularity in this heavily Hindu-majority state does not appear to have suffered. He was re-elected by a handsome margin in December 2002.

[The remains are not the only unresolved mystery surrounding the Gujarat violence. An official government inquiry, led by a retired Supreme Court judge, concluded in early March that the train fire that started the chain of death was not an arson, as initially reported, but an accident that began in the train.

[The chief author of the report spoke to reporters about his conclusion. But the report itself has not been released yet because of the angry political arguments it set off. Mr. Modi's Hindu nationalist party has denounced it, not least because the inquiry was initiated by one of the party's chief political opponents, Lalu Prasad Yadav, a lower-caste politician from Bihar who now is the federal railway minister. The report's critics say it is politically motivated.]

The police maintain that no one came forward to claim the bodies of the Pandarwada dead, and so they had them buried. The victims' relatives tell another story.

"I went to the police station 8 times to inquire about my brother's dead body and 21 times to collect the police report and post-mortem report," insisted Hussain Bhai Shaikh, a day laborer who had watched the mob butcher his brother, Bismillah Habib Shaikh.

Eventually, Mr. Shaikh said, the police gave him the autopsy report, and the state paid the family about \$3,125 in compensation. But he never saw his brother's remains, nor did he receive any clues as to where they were buried.

Teesta Setalvad, the secretary of Citizens for Justice and Peace, the lead advocacy group fighting for justice for the Gujarat riot victims, accused the police of "complete callousness."

J. K. Bhatt, who took over as police chief of Pandarwada's district late last year, said that he was not aware of the details of what happened immediately after the March 2002 massacre, only that the police had buried the victims as quickly as they could.

"None of the family members came forward to claim the bodies as per our records," he said. "Maybe all the formalities were not done at that time because police was very much busy in riot control at that time."

Ameena Bibi had hidden in the wheat fields with her entire family. The mob had already looted her house and burned it down. Then the hard-liners hacked to death her 24-year-old son, Ayub Habib Saiyed.

Several times, Ms. Ameena Bibi said, her family went to the police to ask about his body. Never, she said, did they get a straight answer.

Late last year, on Dec. 27, villagers, on a tip from an unidentified municipal worker, began digging around a garbage pit surrounded by wild shrubs. Three feet down, they found five skulls and the remains of what Ms. Ameena Bibi insists is her son's chocolate-brown shirt.

She is waiting for the government laboratory to complete the DNA tests. If the remains are those of her son, she said, she will finally do what she has been unable to for four years.

"I will collect every single bone of my son and give him a dignified burial in Muslim graveyard," she said.