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them that to drink. We did it because there was nothing else we could do.”

The women, she says, didn't cry. They had no tears left. "The heartbreak set inside of them. Watching helplessly while their loved ones were torched. The half-burned children crying, 'Mummy, save us, save us!' How could Mummy save them?"

Residents who lived through the ordeal say the area resembled a war zone. There were bodies piled up into trucks and taken to mass funerals. Some were completely unrecognisable. "Until today, we don't know where those bodies went," says Jaswant Singh, 35, who lost his father and 10 other family members in the riots.

But many people were good to them, he insists. At the camps, people from all religions and castes brought food, water, and medical supplies. There just weren't enough resources. "There were four or five people fighting over one chapati," he says.

"when a mighty tree falls... the earth around it does shake"

On November 19, newly appointed Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi made a statement that continues to sting: "... when a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it does shake a little," he said.

To Harbans Kaur, that was a slap in the face. "Our people were killed in broad daylight, dragged outside and burned alive with blazing tyres put around their necks," she says. "And



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after that, what did the government declare? A compensation of Rs 10,000. Is that the value of a human life?"

The compensation has since been raised to Rs. 3.5 lakhs, but Gurdeep Kaur says getting it is like a child receiving pocket money. "They killed our families, they burned down our homes, and 25 years later, we still haven't received the full amount of the compensation. Are our demands unjust?"

After Rajiv Gandhi's statement, Harbans Kaur says she realised that she neither belonged to this country, nor did she want to. "We are not Indians," she says. "We are Sikhs."

"If this were our country, if we were true citizens of India, would anyone have allowed this to happen? It wasn't just the people who killed us. We really believe that it was our government who did it."

"our hindu neighbours helped us"

Tomorrow is August 15, so the children are home from school early today, after a pre-Independence Day celebration. "Mera Bharat mahaan," says the eleven-year-old, who wants to become a teacher. "Good salary and respect," is the reason for her choice.

What is the meaning of independence when the leaders of this country can still get away with bloody murder, asks

Whether it's a kingmaker like Sonia Gandhi, a braveheart like Meera Sanyal, the thousands of foot soldiers who monitor the process, or the women who queue up to cast their vote—the political identity of the Indian woman is growing

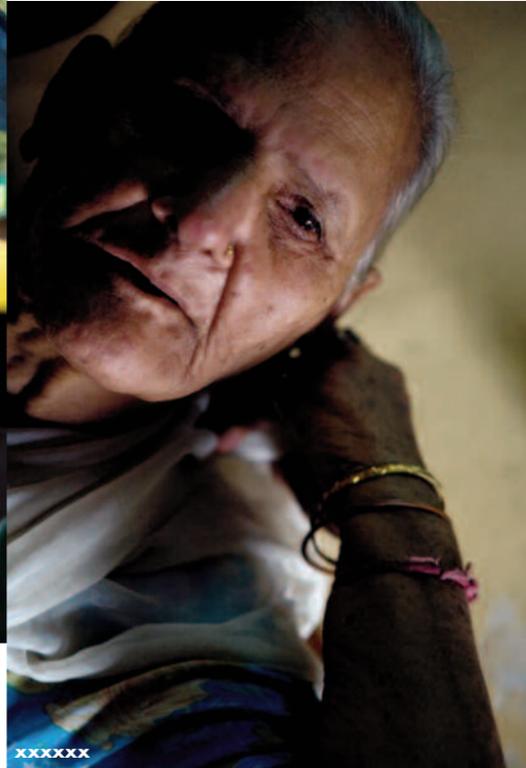
a neighbour. But Harjinder Kaur, who lost her father, her brother, her husband, and her son, disagrees. She will not breed hatred in her children for the country in which they live.

When the Sikhs were being burned, it was the Hindus who were killing them. It was also other Hindus who were saving them.

"It was never a religious issue," says Harjinder Kaur. It was a political one, she says, and the real tragedy is that the people of India allowed their leaders to get away with this crime against humanity.

Gurdeep Kaur's family was the only Sikh family in their neighbourhood. When the neighbours saw that their home had been marked with a big red cross, they knew her husband and her children were in danger. For three days, her Hindu neighbours hid the family; eventually, when the mobs found them anyway, it was one of the neighbour's sons who helped them escape to the police station.

"The mobs took many lives," she says. "But countless others were saved by the neighbours who risked their own well-being to do so."



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“there should be retribution.”

Harjinder Kaur, now 57, was also at home in Sagarpur when tragedy struck. It was the third day, and the violence was showing no signs of abating. “They brought sticks and clubs, and started beating everyone. They tore our clothes, took our jewellery, our gold.”

They made her watch. One by one, they killed male members of her family - her father, her husband, her brother, finally, her son. “One was burned, another stabbed...”

She isn’t able to continue.

Her sister, 65-year-old Surinder Kaur lost a husband too. They pulled him outside, doused him with petrol from his own motorcycle and set him on fire, while she stood by helplessly and watched.

“One finger, if it gets burned, see how much it hurts,” she says. “It’s as if a cyclone blew threw our lives and left everything in shambles. When it was over, there weren’t even any pieces left to pick up.”

The sisters eventually did gather together what was left of their scattered lives. They were given homes here in Tilak Vihar, where they live almost next door to each other. Initially, they wanted to take action. They wanted to raise their voices and fight the injustice. All they wanted was their home, their old lives back, even if it meant living in the same homes where their husbands and children lost their lives. They wanted to remain connected to their families in that way.

But that didn’t happen. “We were threatened,” says Surinder Kaur. “They told us that if we ever set foot there again, they would kill the remaining members of our families as well.”

It must be worth Rs. 1.5 crore now, says Harjinder Kaur. “We could have been living comfortably, instead, here we are in this hovel.”

But what she most wants is not the house, not the

comforts. “It’s not about money, it’s about getting justice,” she says. “Punish the perpetrators. There should be retribution for what they have done to our lives.”

“they call it the widow colony.”

“Everyone here has suffered,” says Gurdeep Kaur, referring to this colony of widows. “Somebody’s brother, somebody’s child, almost everyone’s husband. Some were killed, some were left to die.”

In the name of these widows, say residents, NGOs and gurdwara associations are bringing in money and donations not only from within India, but also abroad. Not one paisa of it, they say, ever reaches them.

“What happened is done, but now the government is not even taking control of the situation,” says Harbans Kaur. “The children are roaming the streets because they haven’t received good education and can’t find jobs. They’re becoming thieves and drug addicts in large numbers. One poor mother, how much can she do?”

Like the thousands of others, sisters Surinder and Harjinder Kaur gave up meat, expensive jewellery, and celebrations of festivals. Their hearts aren’t in it anymore. How can they now enjoy the good things in life, when every day, they have visions of the worst? Neither of them has considered remarrying.

Harbans Kaur didn’t remarry either. She’s spent the last 25 years living in the Widow Colony, bringing up her daughter.

“The government can’t bring my daughter’s father back,” she says. “But they can give us justice.” □