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Coronavirus | Muslim men carry Hindu woman's bier in Indore

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The men carrying the bier of Draupadi Bai in Indore.

Relatives refused to help the family; neighbours arranged material for last rites

When the sons of Draupadi Bai Verma's sister refused to tend to her as she suffered from high fever, suspecting she had contracted COVID-19, there was no one left to take her to hospital.

The next morning she died. Even then, her relatives refused to touch the body. That's when 10 Muslim neighbours got together to buy things for her last rites, put together a bier, and carried her body to the cremation ground on their shoulders.

"This is the purpose of humanity, to serve each other," said Abdul Rehman Sheikh, one of the neighbours in South Toda of Indore, who carried the bier.

Ailing with paralysis for three months, Draupadi Bai lived with the family of her son, a daily wage labourer, who doesn't even own a bicycle. The other son lives in another locality 6 km away, and couldn't reach South Toda because of barricading. When she was suffering from high fever on Sunday night, the neighbours guided the children of the son to tend to her, apply wet towels on her forehead to bring down the temperature. "She had no one to help her. Even the son was helpless. We had tears in our eyes," said Mr. Sheikh, 30, a businessman. That's when they called her sister's sons, who live just 100 metres away. "The sister and her sons refused to step inside the house. If she was taken to a hospital the same day, she probably wouldn't have died," he said.

Funeral procession

The next day, the neighbours woke up to the news of Draupadi Bai's death. "We asked the son about the material we could buy for the last rites. And put together her bier," said Mr. Sheikh. Around 11 a.m. on Tuesday, the 10 men, along with the her two sons and their children, took out the procession to the cremation ground around a kilometre away.

The number of COVID-19 cases are spiralling in Indore, with health workers yet to locate a source, as most patients have had no contact or travel history. South Toda falls in the containment area of the outbreak, which has Jhanda Chowk, 350 metres away, as its epicentre. As most patients are testing positive for the virus after death, owing to the limited testing protocol, local residents are wary of approaching anyone ailing with cough, cold or fever, common symptoms of the infection. So far, 16 persons have succumbed to the disease in the city, which has recorded 213 cases.

The act of the neighbours earned praise from former Chief Minister Kamal Nath. "The example of humanity and brotherhood they have presented is commendable," he wrote on Twitter. "This is our Ganga-Jamuna *sanskriti*. Such visuals represent the harmony and our brotherhood," he said, while sharing a photograph of the men carrying the bier.