

In India, a legal group defends Muslims accused of terrorism

by [Bhavya Dore](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue

Eleven years ago, Shahid Nadeem witnessed the blasts that left 37 people dead and more than 100 injured in the small town of Malegaon, 167 miles from Mumbai.

Police rounded up nine Muslim men and charged them with the crime. The men were poor and had no lawyers.

“I saw innocent men taken by the police,” Nadeem said. “There was nobody to appear for them.”

The experience inspired Nadeem, then an undergraduate, to become a lawyer. He now works for the nonprofit Jamiat Ulama-e-Maharashtra’s legal arm, which defends wrongfully accused terrorism suspects.

The Malegaon blast was one of two major bombings in India in 2006 in which Muslim men were arrested or detained, with some charged and later tried.

“People started coming to us,” said Gulzar Azmi, the general secretary of the organization’s legal group, both Muslims and others. “If there is a poor Hindu, we don’t differentiate.”

To date, the group has helped get acquittals for more than 100 men, and it currently has about 600 cases. It also challenged the Organized Crime Act, which conferred wide-ranging powers on investigating agencies.

The Jamiat takes cases for free and taps some of the country’s best-known criminal lawyers to argue them. The group’s funding is drawn entirely from *zakat*, charitable donations Muslims give as a religious obligation.

Muslims in India constitute about 14 percent of the nation’s 1.2 billion people. But those Muslims are worse off socioeconomically and overrepresented in the criminal justice system. For a while it seemed as if arrests had slowed, but with the rise of the self-described Islamic State group, the trend reversed.

Sharif Shaikh, a Mumbai lawyer who regularly takes on some of the Jamiat's clients, has seen case after case in which innocent Muslim men allege that they have been harassed or tortured by police.

"We have managed to get many acquittals when we were able to apprise the court of the real facts," he said, "but people's entire lives have been destroyed, and society doesn't accept them back."

Mufti Abdul Qayyum knows what it feels like to return to society after more than a decade in prison on false charges.

"I had no money," he said. "Without the Jamiat's help I wouldn't have been able to fight." —Religion News Service

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