

A MURDER IN BELAGAVI

A REPORT, AN APPEAL
FOR

JUSTICE SOLIDARITY HARMONY



FINDINGS OF THE CITIZENS' TEAM
THAT VISITED BELAGAVI
ON 7 OCTOBER 2021

Preface

As reports emerged of the brutal murder of 25-year-old Arbaz Aftab Mulla in Belagavi on 28 September 2021, a team of seven people from Bengaluru and Davangere visited Belagavi on Thursday, 07 October 2021, to express solidarity with the family of the deceased and to conduct a fact finding into the incident. The team consisted of Akash Bhattacharya (All India People's Forum), Avani Chokshi (All India Lawyers' Association for Justice), Nizamuddin (Fraternity Movement), Shaik Zakeer Hussain (Journalist, The Cognate), Siddharth Joshi (Independent Researcher), Syed Junaid (All India Students Association), and Tanveer Ahmed (Movement for Justice). The team interviewed the following people:

1. Anwar Ali Nadaf, Advocate
2. Dileep Kamath, Gramin Kooli Karmikara Sangha (Grakoos)
3. Laxman Nimbargi, IPS, Superintendent of Police, Belagavi District
4. M G Hiremath, IAS, Deputy Commissioner, Beglaum
5. Najeema Shaikh, Mother of Arbaz Mulla and other family members
6. Ramakant Khonduskar, Founder, Sri Ram Sene (Hindustan)
7. Ramzan, B News
8. Iqbal Jakati, Ittehad News
9. Sarala Satpute, Former Journalist with Vijay Karnataka and Prajawani
10. Sarjoo Katkar, Senior Journalist, New Indian Express
11. Yunus Saraf, Association for Protection of Civil Rights in India

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Introduction

We are living through times when communal violence and hatred against religious minorities is increasingly becoming the new normal in Karnataka. Cow vigilantism, attacks on Muslims and moral policing by religious extremist/fundamentalist organisations have escalated all over the state in recent times. While Islamophobia has been a running theme in most such incidents, Christians have also been consistently targeted – revealing the underlying political ideology of Hindu majoritarianism. This violence is the result of years of deliberate and neatly orchestrated communal politics. It has now become more insidious, psychological, and every day, and is dividing our societies and cultures more deeply than ever. Facilitated by the state machinery, which is largely dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), communal violence is now accompanied by either silence or victim blaming by the administration, media, and society, and the victims receive little solidarity.

The murder of Arbaz Aftab Mulla is part of this terrifying pattern described above. **The Citizen's Team which visited Belagavi has found compelling reasons to believe that the Sri Ram Sene (Hindustan) – henceforth referred to as SRS(H) – was involved in the murder of Arbaz.** The murder happened in the context of an interfaith love affair with his Hindu (Marathi) neighbour in Khanapur and appears to have been pre-planned with prior warning given to Arbaz and his family. In the current climate of intense communal polarization and administrative impunity for Hindu extremist violence, the murderers seemed to fear little about the consequences. No wonder it took substantial demands for accountability and justice from local activists and organisations in Belagavi and across the state, including this Citizen's Team, for the police to make the first set of arrests.

Despite the arrest of ten people on 08 October 2021, ten days after the murder, justice for Arbaz Mulla remains a long shot. Following the arrests, the Belagavi Superintendent of Police Laxman Nimbargi alleged that the girl's parents had hired contract killers belonging to the SRS(H). **Our findings suggest that while the girl's parents might have had a role to play in the murder, the SP's allegation could also be a ploy to shift the bulk of the blame**

from the SRS(H) to the family, thereby making the murder appear to be a contract / supari killing and not a communal “honour killing”.

Our team visited Belagavi to not only enquire about the incident but also to extend solidarity to Arbaz’s family and friends. This report too is more than a fact-finding report. The report describes the context of the incident as well as its aftermath in detail, in order to point to the implications of deep-seated religious polarisation and brewing saffron terror in northern Karnataka. Arbaz’s barbaric murder points also to the radicalisation of members of these Hindu extremist organisations who are willing to dismember and behead a human being driven solely by religious hatred. The BJP’s plans of exporting the Uttar Pradesh model of state sponsored consistent politico-religious violence are well on the way, we suggest. Incidents such as Arbaz’s murder was not the first one in the region and might not be the last. **Northern Karnataka’s addition to the saffron sphere of influence poses a grave threat to religious minorities all over the state and threatens to engulf Karnataka in a cauldron of Hindu nationalist violence.**

Thus, this report is also an appeal to fellow citizens of Karnataka to come together to not only ensure justice for Arbaz but also to respond comprehensively to the rising communal politics. **It is an appeal to launch a broad-based campaign to ensure justice for Muslim, Christian and other persecuted brothers, and sisters, to stand in solidarity with each other and especially with the victims of Hindu nationalist violence, and work towards rebuilding social harmony in our state. This is not possible unless the silent Hindu majority witnessing the saffron violence proactively stands in solidarity with the victims of such violence and stand shoulder to shoulder with our non-Hindu citizens against Hindu nationalism in all its forms.** We appeal to one and all to take up the task of rebuilding communal harmony as a peoples’ project.

Saffron in Belagavi¹

The saffron tide in Belagavi has risen from the ashes of linguistic politics in the region over the last two decades. Till 2000s, the linguistic fault lines between the Kannada-speakers and Marathi-speakers had defined the contours of the politics of the district. While the Kannada-speakers are in majority in the district as a whole, in the western portions of the district where the present incident unfolded, the Marathi-speakers are in majority. Thwarted aspirations of integration with Maharashtra have contributed to Hindu nationalism's vicious hold over the region. **This morphing of linguistic politics into religious politics in the region holds important lessons for secular, democratic forces. It shows how the weakness of alternative political frameworks and a lack of citizen alertness against Hindu nationalist groups can decisively alter the social and cultural fabric of a region.** A bit of history is therefore in order here.

This district of Belagavi (earlier Belgaum), borders Maharashtra in the north-west and Goa in the south-west. It comprises 10 talukas – Belagavi, Athani, Chikodi, Khanapur, Gokak, Ramdurg, Hukkeri, Raibag, Saundatti (Parasgad) and Bailhongal (Sampgaon).

¹ The contents of this part are predominantly derived from conversations with Mr. Dileep Kamath, Gramin Kooli Karmikara Sangha (Grakoos), Ms. Sarala Satpute, Former Journalist with Vijay Karnataka and Prajawani and Mr. Sarjoo Katkar, Senior Journalist, New Indian Express



Fig 1: Taluka Map of Belagavi District

In the years leading to independence, both Kannadigas and the Marathi-speakers laid claim to parts of the district. The Kannadiga-dominated Belagavi District Congress Committee ensured that the whole district joined the Mysore state in 1956 when the states were reorganised. Subsequently, the Maharashtra Ekikarana Samithi (MES) gained in strength and continued to demand the inclusion of Marathi-speaking areas within Maharashtra. The MES entered the electoral arena in the 1962 assembly elections and maintained a strong electoral presence in the assembly sections of the Marathi speaking

western region of the district including Khanapur, consistently winning three to five seats from 1962 to 1978, on the plank of merger of Marathi-dominant areas of the district with Maharashtra.

By the 1980s, the prospects of merger with Maharashtra had dimmed, factionalism had set in within the MES and the newer generation fancied the ascendant Hindu nationalist politics over the stumbling pro-Maharashtra politics. The pro-Maharashtra strand in Hindu nationalism increased its appeal to the Marathi youth. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had successfully communalized the pro-Maharashtra movement and the Shiv Sena had built a presence among the Marathi speakers of Belagavi. It was under these circumstances that, in late October 1984, Belagavi witnessed the first major communal clash. The desecration of a Ganesha temple by 'a lunatic' led to burning down of nine Muslim shops.

Secular civil society groups actively tried to stem the rising saffron tide. A few months prior to the Babri Masjid demolition, the district experienced heavy communal riots with sixteen deaths and ninety-two cases of stabbing reported within a period of eleven days in April. Efforts by civil society groups to form Ekatmata Samitis (Integration Committees) however ensured that district escaped the worst of the communal violence that rocked cities like Hubli-Dharwad in the aftermath of the 6 December demolition. However, neither did the secular civil society receive enough support from the rest of society to arrest the growth of Hindu nationalism, nor was linguistic politics relevant enough to do so. Once large sections of the local Marathi society switched over to the BJP, the fate of secularism and communal harmony in Belagavi hung in the balance.

Till 1999, MES continued winning three to five assembly seats in the district but in 2008 and 2018, it failed to win a single seat. Until recently, the Belagavi City Corporation had a Marathi mayor, and its majority seats had been held by the MES for the last thirty years. Strikingly, in the latest elections held last month, BJP won thirty-five out of fifty-nine seats while MES could manage to win only three seats. Notably, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (AIMIM), a new entrant to the district politics, managed to win six seats in the Corporation.² This political transformation has coincided and been

² Data obtained through personal communication with the respondents in Belagavi and from <https://kgis.ksrsac.in/election/>

facilitated by the rise of extremism within local Hindu society. **The radicalization of society along religious lines has been a key factor in the rise of the BJP in the district. The handiwork of the RSS over the last two decades, outfits like the Bajrang Dal, Sanatan Sanstha, Sri Ram Sene and Sri Ram Sene (Hindustan) now compete with each other in showcasing their allegiance to the tenets of Hindutva.** The Sri Ram Sene, which came into public limelight through the violent attacks on pub-goers in Mangalore, is headed by Pramod Muthalik who hails from Hukeri in Belagavi.

The Sri Ram Sene (Hindustan) the organisation that appears to be the orchestrator of Arbaz's murder, is a breakaway faction of SRS. It was started in 2018 by Ramakant Khonduskar. Khonduskar comes from a family of MES supporters, and he admits to having sympathies for MES himself. He came under influence of Hindu nationalist politics during his student days and joined Bajrang Dal in 1996, later shifting to Sri Ram Sene. In the last few years, the influence of SRS(H) has grown quite rapidly. While Maratha youth form the backbone of SRS(H), it has also been very successful in attracting Dalit youths to its fold. Several of its office-bearers are from the Dalit community. The group has appropriated Babsaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as one of its icons and celebrates Ambedkar Jayanthi with aplomb. The organisation has been able to attract even those youths from Dalit communities who otherwise traditionally electorally support the Congress party. The fear of alienating the support of these youths seems to be a major reason behind the relative silence of the Congress leaders of the district regarding the murder of Arbaz.

Owing to the presence of these groups, Belagavi has become a centre of intensely competitive Hindu nationalist activities. In April 2021 for example, a pastor visiting his relatives in Halaga village near Belagavi city was dragged out of the house by a mob of 50-60 people. The mob claimed that the pastor was guilty of religious conversion. He was beaten, abused, paraded, and forced to shout, 'Jai Sri Ram'.³ These extremist groups have developed a strong base especially in Khanapur taluka. The Special Investigation Team set-up to investigate the murder of Gauri Lankesh had for example discovered that a team of twenty-two youths from Karnataka were trained in usage of firearms at a three-acre farm near

³ 'Christian Pastor Paraded, Injured, Forced into Hindu Ritual', *Morning Star News*, April 20, 2021.

Khanapur.⁴ Local journalists informed us that these groups fund their work through illegal activities including extortion and illicit liquor trade taking advantage of Belagavi location on the route to both Mumbai and Goa. Thus, through means fair and foul, and with complete administrative impunity, these groups have established themselves in a way that allows them to dictate terms in the social and cultural life of the district. When we met Ramakant Khonduskar and asked about his organisation's role in the incident, he denied playing a role but strongly asserted that they were opposed to interfaith love and marriage.

⁴ Johnson TA, 'Karnataka: 22 youths got arms training, finds Gauri Lankesh SIT', *Indian Express*, August 12, 2018.

Death by Warning

It was their opposition to interfaith love and marriage that seems to have led the SRS(H) to organize a meeting with Arbaz and his mother two days prior to the murder to ‘resolve’ the issues surrounding his relationship with his neighbour Ragini (name changed to protect the identity of the woman). Arbaz lived with his mother Najeema Shaikh at a rented house in Khanapur and had a successful car resale business. Najeema teaches at a local Urdu medium school. Having lost her husband to cancer a few years ago, she held her son very dear and looked out for him. Ragini, who belonged to the Kumbhara caste, lived next door and the two families knew each other before she and Arbaz entered into a relationship over a year ago. Given the context described above, Najeema Shaikh had sensed danger as soon as she learnt about it. She told us that she wasn't opposed to the relationship as such but doubted its future and definitely wanted no harm for her son.

According to Najeema, Arbaz initially hid the relationship from his mother. She heard rumours and, needless to say, not on a positive note. **As soon as she got wind of the relationship, the first thought that struck her was that hers was a Muslim family living in a Hindu locality, in a place where Hindu extremist organisations are strong.** Fear was her dominant emotion. She told us that she had reservations about Ragini even otherwise and tried to dissuade her son, to no avail. While parental objections to a romantic relationship is not unusual, what struck us was the language in which it was articulated. Such is the fear of Hindutva violence and the desperation to safeguard lives that Arbaz's aunt told us, *‘If he committed a crime, he could have been beaten or put in jail. Why did he have to be killed?’* Indeed, the fear was real since soon after Ragini's parents learnt about the affair, her mother came to Najeema's house and warned that under no circumstances would she agree to a marriage proposal for her daughter. According to Najeema, she threatened that she was ready to kill or even die in order to prevent Ragini's marriage with Arbaz.

Following the arrest of ten people on 08 October, the police have stated that Ragini's family hired goons to kill Arbaz. That is indeed an easy narrative to float, given that Najeema has repeatedly talked about the threats announced by Ragini's mother. Local activists of Belagavi claim that SRS(H) has members within Ragini's family but that has not been confirmed. Our team was not in a position to ascertain the precise role played by Ragini's

family in the murder. **However, we are concerned that the police may, by shifting the bulk of the blame to the family, make the incident appear to be an instance of contract / supari killing rather than the communal “honour killing” that it is.** The role of SRS(H) in the murder came forth very strongly in every conversation that we held. The SRS(H) has a wide base among the Hindus of Khanapur and, with its Hindutva ideology and activities, is capable of instilling fear in the general public. Once the news of the affair spread, Najeema’s family faced routinely harassment from SRS(H). The Muslim owner of her house was worried that he would face consequences as well and evicted her family from the house. After that, Najeema and Arbaz were forced to shift out of Khanapur and into Belagavi city. Regardless, Ragini and Arbaz remained in touch and routinely spoke over the phone. Concomitantly, Arbaz and Najeema too routinely received threats and soon Pundalik Mutgekar of SRS(H) summoned them back to Khanapur to ‘resolve’ the issue.

At this stage, strong social and community support is what Arbaz and Najeema needed. They are ought to have received protection and support from the State and its instrumentalities including the district administration and police, given the explicit mandate to them to do so in various judgments of the Supreme Court. But under the climate of fear and polarization that pervaded the area, there was little support that they could draw upon. They ended up going to Khanapur for the proposed meeting. While they feared trouble, they understandably did not anticipate the brutal turn that the situation eventually took. In the ensuing meeting, Pundalik Mutgekar and Prashant Birje of SRS(H) proposed a financial settlement and angrily broke Arbaz’s SIM and phone that contained photographs and videos of himself with Ragini. It is not clear whether they were serious about a ‘settlement’ since at the same time they threatened that a hundred of their cadres were waiting to kill Arbaz. Najeema Shaikh and her son nominally agreed to pay a certain amount hoping that the situation did not escalate. Mutgekar and Birje initially demanded Rs. 17,000/- (Rupees Seventeen thousand) and after some negotiation a demand of Rs. 7,000/- (Rupees Seven thousand) was made. The proposed settlement seems to have been a hoax since it was proposed merely two days before the murder.

Following the negotiation, both Arbaz and his mother returned to Khanapur and the following day Najeema boarded a bus to Goa on work. Arbaz was in touch with Najeema

throughout this period. According to Najeema, when Arbaz called on the afternoon of 28 September, he seemed scared and asked her to return soon. He also asked her if she had received any threatening calls. That is the last time she heard from her son. When Najeema returned, she found that Arbaz had left his phone with his grandmother and left the house. Arbaz's body was thereafter discovered on the railway track close to Khanapur station. According to the police, he seems to have been taken there in an ambulance frequently used by SRS(H). His hands were found tied and the post-mortem report reveals injuries from beating, severed neck, leg and torso, and a knife stab injury at the neck. In the end, he was decapitated, and his body was left on the track.

When asked about the incident during our visit, the SP refused to provide any information till the completion of the investigation. Even when asked about compliance with Supreme Court directions for creation of a 24-hour helpline to assist inter-caste/inter-religious couples, he again stated that he would respond to the same only after completion of investigation. The Deputy Commissioner denied any knowledge of the incident. Najeema Shaikh shared with us that Pundalik Mutgekar had openly threatened her with acid attack and had warned that he could easily murder her son, for there were already forty police cases against him and he had nothing to fear. Pertinently, Pundalik has now been arrested by the jurisdictional police. **Arbaz's aunt shared with us that a murder case had been registered solely because his hands were tied, or else the police would have successfully passed it off as suicide.**

A New Normal?

As discussed above, a host of factors have contributed to the increasingly communal atmosphere in Belagavi. These have culminated in creating a new normalcy in which murders like that of Arbaz are neither unexpected nor impossible. In fact, they become probable. The impunity of groups like SRS(H), the bias of the media, the silence of politicians and civil society, the lack of any voice of protest or dissent from the local communities, and the isolation of Muslims and Christians also becomes normalised. Perhaps understanding the institutionalisation of caste and its social acceptance points to the social processes underway and structures of dominance being created, gives an insight into the future of minorities in the state – reducing them to second-class citizens and dehumanised beings on whom any violence can be heaped. An issue that repeatedly cropped up during this Solidarity Visit was that **though the incident was definitely the most gruesome and brutal communal incident in the recent past, it is part of the relatively ‘low-key’ incidents happening on a regular and normal basis in Belagavi.** Sarala Satpute spoke of attacks on Christians under the pretext of forced conversions. Iqbal Jakatti told us about the deliberate installation of Shri Ram Sene boards outside a masjid. What struck us as exceptionally unfortunate was the lack of solidarity with the communities under target from those outside these communities. Their silence is telling, and could very well be an outcome of fear of reprisals from the Hindutva organisations. But it could also point to an acceptance by so-called silent sections of the project of social segregation and Hindu majoritarianism. **After the murder of Arbaz Mulla, not a single non-Muslim organisation in Belagavi came forward to extend support to his family.** The increasing polarisation between the communities is accompanied by isolation and marginalisation – both social and economic. Of course, these trends cannot be seen as something confined to Belagavi – but are reflected across the state and country.

While the Members of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Belagavi at the moment are both members of BJP, the MLA from Khanapur is from Congress. She visited Najeema Shaikh only three days after the incident, and apart from vaguely promising to try and seek justice for her, took no concrete steps in that direction. Regardless of having a representative from a non-BJP party Khanapur has continued to remain fertile for Hindu nationalist groups and in fact the impunity for their activities has only increased. The reason lies not only in the

national domination of the RSS and the BJP but also in the nature of expansion that the RSS has carefully nurtured. Right from its inception, the RSS has given top priority to creating social and cultural polarisation and using it to drive political expansion. The RSS proudly claims that Hindu nationalism can continue to prosper even if the BJP were to lose power at the centre or in the states.

The complicity of the ruling dispensation at union and state level cannot be understated. In fact, just some weeks before the brutal incident with Arbaz, there was a communal incident in Bengaluru. A Hindu man travelling with a Muslim woman on a bike was slapped by two Muslim men, a video of which went viral. Immediately, within 12 hours, the accused were arrested, and Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai tweeted, *'In connection with the case of assault on a bike rider travelling along with a woman of different faith, @BlrCityPolice has acted swiftly, identified & secured 2 accused persons. A case is registered & legal action is initiated. My Govt. deals with such incidents with an iron hand.'* Is it a coincidence that the victim in this case happens to be a Muslim and the aggressor a Hindu extremist group? However, in a case of brutal decapitation, no government functionary has deemed it appropriate to extend solidarity or ensure justice to the family of the deceased victim. In fact, while speaking to reporters on October 13, Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai said, *"We all have to bear responsibility in society. People have some strong emotions and when there are certain actions, there will be reactions. The government's job is not just to protect law and order but also to ensure there is harmony in society. For this, everybody has to cooperate. Even our youth have to make sure that the emotions of people in the society are not offended. This is a social issue and we need morality. When there is no morality in the society, there will be reactions accordingly."* In effect the Chief Minister has approved and justified the crimes by extremist organisations in the name of religion while endorsing their actions of taking the law into their hands.

The repeated refrain of Najeema Shaikh, 'When will my voice reach the Prime Minister', seems to fall on deaf ears. The harsh reality of the situation is that her plea, no matter how strong it is, will never reach the Prime Minister because he has chosen not to hear and not respond. In the lead up to his election victory in 2014, he had casually dismissed the planned massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 as a 'small mistake along the way'. The

political establishment's silence in this case must not be seen as a lapse but a deliberate refusal to engage thereby effectively condone the crime. Till the arrests on the morning following our departure from Belagavi, the police had consistently overlooked the evident role of the SRS(H) at every stage. Even in the press release issued by the police following the arrests on 08 October mention the accused by name only, and their political affiliation to SRS(H) has been kept under wraps. The communal element is being ignored by the police as they try to pass off the crime as a contract killing and put the blame on the family for hiring goons to murder Arbaz.

Those we spoke to in Belagavi, unanimously pointed out the systemic impunity of members of organisations like SRS(H) from facing the consequences of the crimes committed by them. Iqbal Jakatti spoke of the 'VIP treatment' provided to members of such organisations even in prison. During our discussions with Ramakant Khonduskar, the founder of SRS(H), he admitted that Pundalik Maharaj and Prashant Birje, both of whom have been named in the FIR, were members of SRS(H) but he denied their involvement in the murder. He repeatedly stated, 'If they wanted to commit some crime, would they leave evidence?'. In an effort to shift the blame away from his organisation, he questioned Arbaz's character, pointing to possibilities of his involvement in illegal activities and the likelihood of a consequent mishap. He said, 'We have to check the background of Arbaz, his behaviour, his business, habits, friends – he was involved with ganja.' However, he vehemently denied any personal knowledge of the crime, and said that his understanding was based on news articles alone. Of course, with Arbaz found with hands tied, there is no way in which his death could be passed off as a mishap or a suicide. The post-mortem report also confirms murder. Unfounded allegations of illegality levelled against Arbaz still serve a useful purpose for the likes of Ramakant Khonduskar. It serves to demean and demonize Muslims in the eyes of others and helps maintain the fertility of the terrain for further communal attacks.

Our inquiries brought into question the local media's role. **There seems to have been an overall media blackout in the local newspapers and channels.** While some papers nominally covered the incident, neither the communal nature of the incident, nor the name of SRS(H) emerged anywhere. The team spoke to Iqbal Jakatti of Ittehad News, one of the few media organisations that comprehensively covered the incident. He told us that there is a lot

of fear among journalists as well as a fair bit of sympathy for SRS(H). He explained the blackout as the result of both, suggesting once again the strong local base of Hindu nationalism as well as their stranglehold over local structures of power. In respect of the failure of local media to comprehensively cover this gruesome incident, the conversation with Sarala Satpute brought up another dimension of this problem. She said that since a large portion of the revenue of the local media comes from the elected representatives (currently BJP), journalists are not willing to cover issues that might cost them financially. Advertisements from the party and from the government, coverage of political events and politicians, as well as news tips form a huge chunk of the journalists' bread and butter. They are dependent on the politicians for the same.

The last but not the least aspect of the new normal is **the complete invisibilisation of the voice of the woman who Arbaz was in a relationship with.** We were unable to meet Ragini since we were told that she was in custody [though this was denied by the Superintendent of Police]. While we have been unable to establish contact with her so far, we are horrified at how her voice has been completely taken over by 'adults' of both Hindu and Muslim communities. **Her voice is absent in all conversations concerning her: her relationship with Arbaz, her views on the nature and extent of her family's involvement in the murder, and her physical and emotional safety in the aftermath of the murder.** While several Muslim citizens blamed her for 'trapping' Arbaz, Hindutva voices place as her an innocent girl lured into this relationship by Muslim youth (what these groups call Love Jihad), Hindu voices have reduced her to a Hindu girl who is part of a Hindu family whose agency is completely subservient to her parents. Her individual identity has been nullified at every stage by these communities as well as the state which sees her as a mere tool in their investigation. Journalists covering the incident too have paid scant regard to her voice. One cannot overestimate the significance of this invisibilisation. Hindu nationalism works by subsuming women's agency within that of the family, especially its male figureheads. However, one expects sensitive Hindus, who are critical of the murder, to be conscious of Ragini's agency and not speak on her behalf. One also expects Muslims who are critical of the love jihad trope to not invert the trope and blame the 'Hindu girls' since that only strengthens Hindu nationalism's discursive frameworks.

Citizens' Responsibilities

As a Citizens' Team we are not simply stating that a new normal seems to have emerged. We are questioning it, and question ourselves too in the process: are we going to let this new normal take hold? Since our visit, there have been various communal incidents in Belagavi. On October 8, a Muslim man's shop was vandalised on temple opening day.⁵ On October 17, two interfaith friends were attacked in a park.⁶ On October 18, two interfaith friends were attacked and robbed. The 'miscreants' asked the burqa clad woman to find a man from within her own community.⁷ Reports of such incidents are arriving from all parts of Karnataka on a daily basis.

To start with, the citizens' team appeals to all people of Karnataka to extend solidarity to Arbaz Mulla's family, **to demand a speedy and fair investigation and trial in the case to ensure justice. We demand of the police that they must not downplay the reality of communal "honour killing" and pass it off as purely a case of contract killing.** The girl's family's involvement must be seen in tandem with that of the SRS(H). The police and the district administration together must ensure the safety of Arbaz's family.

We demand of the district administration and the state government that they acknowledge Belagavi to be a communally sensitive area and take requisite steps to prevent such incidents in the future. In fact, not only in Belagavi, but all over the state the government should take steps to ensure communal harmony including comprehensive compliance of the Supreme Court judgment in the Shakti Vahini v Union of India case, which mandates that all inter-faith and inter-caste couples will be protected.

Finally, we appeal to all citizens to stand up to the rising tide of Hindu nationalist violence in the state. In the last few weeks, we have seen increasing instances of religious goondaism ('moral policing') which seek to divide the youth, which deny women any choice and are an attack on the dignity of Muslims and Christians. These instances have happened across Karnataka from Mandya to Mangaluru. Arbaaz was beheaded, Muslim boys in Ilkal

⁵ Kiran Parashar, 'Karnataka: Muslim man's chicken shop vandalised on temple opening day in Belagavi', The Indian Express, 18 October 2021

⁶ 'Inter faith friends attacked in Karnataka's Belagavi', The Hindu, October 17, 2021

⁷ Shreyas HS, 'Belagavi: Interfaith friends attacked, robbed by gang.' *The Times of India*, 18 October 2021.

town were beaten up for wearing skull cap and then these victims of violence have been arrested! Churches and pastors are being attacked every Sunday. The Police are barging into Christian homes violating their most basic rights. We are also seeking an increased assault on inter-caste relationships and an affront to the rights of Dalits.

On 13 October, the Chief Minister gave a statement supporting this violence, and Karnataka is set to become more dangerous. **We cannot stay silent as the violence increases.** We appeal to all fellow citizens who believe in India's constitution to organize themselves to hold the government and law enforcement agencies accountable, to ensure justice for the victims of such violence, to stand in solidarity with all those who are under attack, and to take up the task of rebuilding communal harmony as a peoples' project.

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