



Sexual crimes, violence

The sexual assault cases in Karnataka must be investigated with sensitivity

The Karnataka police and the State administration must act with utmost sensitivity, professionalism, and swiftness to ensure the safety and the privacy of the women who have complained of multiple counts of rape and sexual harassment by Prajwal Revanna, the now suspended Janata Dal (Secular) party leader, the sitting Member of Parliament from Hassan, Karnataka, and grandson of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda. While the State government acted promptly by seeking cancellation of Mr. Revanna's diplomatic passport, the Special Investigation Team (SIT), formed to inquire into the rape and sexual harassment charges, must ensure the videos of these allegedly forced sexual acts that show Mr. Revanna with several women are immediately taken down and the identities of the women protected. In the past few years, allegations of sexual misconduct by those holding high office have made distressing headlines. These are a reminder of the highly unequal power dynamics and political influence that make it difficult to bring the perpetrators to account. The multiple complaints and charges against sitting Member of Parliament from the Bharatiya Janata Party in Kaiserganj, Uttar Pradesh, and former President of the Wrestling Federation of India, Brij Bhushan Saran Singh, serve as an example.

Survivors of sexual abuse rarely come forward to complain. And when they do, it is often when their trauma is unbearable, or when they have familial support, or if they feel confident that justice is likely to be served, while they seek privacy and safety. When a survivor files a complaint, it emboldens others to speak up, especially when it involves serial offenders. The police are finding it difficult in getting many of the women in the videos to register a complaint. Both Mr. Revanna and his father and sitting Member of the Legislative Assembly, H.D. Revanna from Holenarasipur in Karnataka, have been summoned by the SIT. Prajwal Revanna on rape charges, and his father for kidnapping an alleged victim-turned-complainant. Given such grave charges, it would be in the fitness of things for both leaders to resign from public office till the investigation is complete.

Policy mismatch

The U.S. must not arm Israel while asking it to halt Gaza strikes

When the Israel-Hamas war began on October 7, the immediate priority of United States President Joe Biden was to prevent the conflict from widening into a regional war involving Israel and its rivals. Mr. Biden adopted a two-fold strategy. He offered unconditional support for Israel's war on Gaza, launched after Hamas's attack on October 7, in which at least 1,200 people were killed, and unleashed a diplomatic effort to keep tensions low between Tel Aviv and its neighbours. But when the war raged on for months, with huge civilian casualties in Gaza, the Biden policy started falling apart. Today, as the war is set to enter its eighth month, Mr. Biden looks increasingly vulnerable to its regional and domestic consequences. Over 34,000 people, a vast majority of them women and children, have been killed by the Israeli Defense Forces in Gaza; Israel vows to invade Rafah, the southernmost town in Gaza where more than 1.4 million Palestinians have taken refuge, despite Mr. Biden's warning against such a move, with Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea and strikes and counterstrikes between Israel and Iran, the conflict has already spread beyond the borders of Palestinian territories and Israel, though a full-scale regional war has been avoided so far; the conflict has triggered massive protests by university students in the U.S., piling up pressure on Mr. Biden to reconsider his policy towards Israel.

To their credit, Biden officials have been working relentlessly to achieve a ceasefire and hostage deal between Israel and Hamas. Mr. Biden's timely response to shoot down the drones and missiles fired by Iran against Israel and his warning to the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, that the U.S. would not join Israel's retaliation against Iran, helped ease regional tensions. But his overall approach towards the crisis is flawed. The way Israel is carrying out its war on Gaza is against all the values America preaches about wars and human rights. The U.S. kept supplying weapons to Israel, even as it mounted allegations and evidence that Israel was indiscriminately bombing and destroying Gaza. Even when Mr. Biden seemed frustrated with Mr. Netanyahu's intransigence, he signed a Bill offering \$17 billion in defence aid to Israel. Mr. Biden's words and diplomatic efforts for truce are actually not matched by strong actions to pressure Israel. And, by continuing to arm and bankroll Israel's genocidal war on Palestinians, Mr. Biden is debilitating his own moral arguments about foreign policy. Not just morality, Mr. Biden's inability to rein in Israel is weakening America's standing in West Asia and sully his already fragile candidacy in the U.S. presidential elections in November. If the 81-year-old President is serious about peace in West Asia, he should first address the flaws in his policy towards Israel and Palestine. There were several examples of American Presidents using hard pressure on Israel for peace. Mr. Biden should at least show the courage to call for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and adopt policies, including suspending arms sales to Israel, to meet that goal.

The paradox of India's global rise, its regional decline

One of the deeply perplexing paradoxes of contemporary Indian foreign policy is that a globally rising India is also a regionally declining power. While India's global rise is a function of growth in absolute power, peer accommodation and a conducive 'chaotic' international situation, its waning regional influence is caused by diminishing relative power (vis-à-vis China), loss of primacy in South Asia, and fundamental changes in South Asian geopolitics.

India's aggregate power has grown over the past two decades – evident in robust economic growth, military capabilities, and a largely young and growing demography. Its inclusion in key global institutions such as the G-20, as an invitee at G-7 meetings, and active participation in multilateral groups such as the Quad, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation further highlight its geopolitical significance and its powerful presence globally, even if it is not a member of the United Nations Security Council. There is a lot more peer accommodation (except from China of course) of India's global rise is also aided by growing international attention on the Indo-Pacific, a theatre that is pivotal to global strategic stability, where India has a central position, geographically and otherwise.

Extraneous factors

Despite this global rise, paradoxically and worryingly, India's influence is declining in South Asia. When compared to India's influence in the region during the Cold War or in comparison to China's influence in the region today, India's power and influence in the region has sharply declined. This comparative decline, not an absolute one, caused by several extraneous factors, will have an impact on India's global position over time.

Paradoxically, again, some of the factors that have led to the decline of Indian influence in the region are also the reasons behind India's global prominence. Consider the following. The American withdrawal from the region and China filling that power vacuum have been disadvantageous to India. But that is, at the same time, a major reason why the United States and its allies are keen to accommodate India's global interests including in order to push back China in the region. In the case of the Indo-Pacific, while interest in the Indo-Pacific has increased, India's global prominence as an indispensable Indo-Pacific power, New Delhi's focus on the great power balance in the Indo-Pacific may have stretched New Delhi a bit too thin in the continental neighbourhood.

If India's global rise stems from the growth in



Happyman Jacob

teaches at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and is the founder of Council for Strategic and Defence Research

absolute power and the geopolitical choices made by the leading powers of the contemporary international system, India's regional decline is a product of the dynamics of comparative power, and geopolitical choices made by the region's smaller powers. To that extent, overlooking the balancing acts by the region's smaller powers to focus on the great power balancing might become counterproductive.

The rise of China and what India must do

But the rise of China explains India's regional decline more than anything else. Today, India is more powerful than it has ever been in nearly two centuries. And, yet, it is, comparatively speaking, the weakest it has ever been in history vis-à-vis China. Faced with a rising superpower next door for the first time, India is facing stiff geopolitical competition for influence in South Asia. China's rise will, therefore, mean that India may no longer be the most consequential power in the region.

The arrival of China in South Asia, the withdrawal of the U.S. from the region, and India's tilt to the Indo-Pacific have shifted the regional balance of power in Beijing's favour. Sensing this new power equation, South Asia's smaller powers, India's neighbours, are engaged in a range of strategies: balancing, bargaining, hedging and bandwagoning. India's smaller neighbours seem to find China as a useful hedge against India, for the moment at least. It is also important to keep in mind that a great deal of this regional and strategic results from shifts in the regional balance of power, not merely from insufficient Indian outreach to the neighbourhood.

While the presence of a rising superpower at its doorstep for the first time is at the heart of this paradox, the growing obsolescence of South Asia as a geopolitical construct adds to India's diminishing hold on the region. For India, meeting the challenge posed by this paradox is essential as China's rise in South Asia will mean that India may no longer be the most consequential power in the region.

To begin with, New Delhi must revisit some of its traditional conceptions of the region, 'modernise' its primacy in South Asia, and take proactive and imaginative policy steps to meet the China challenge in the region.

First of all, we must accept the reality that the region, the neighbours and the region's geopolitics have fundamentally changed over the decade-and-a-half at the least. Not willing to acknowledge there is a problem will only make matters worse.

Second, New Delhi must focus on its strengths rather than trying to match the might of the

People's Republic of China in every respect – the latter is a fool's errand. Fashioning a new engagement with the region that reflects India's traditional strengths and the region's changed realities is essential. Reclaiming the Buddhist heritage is one such example.

Third, India's continental strategy is replete with challenges whereas its maritime space has an abundance of opportunities for enhancing trade, joining multilaterals, and creating new issue-based coalitions, among others. New Delhi must, therefore, use its maritime (Indo-Pacific) advantages to cater to its many continental handicaps. Doing so could involve including India's smaller South Asian neighbours to the Indo-Pacific strategic conversations. Many of them are maritime states but not serious players within the Indo-Pacific project. India and its partners (the U.S., Japan, Australia, the European Union, and others) must find ways of engaging and partnering with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh as part of their larger Indo-Pacific strategy. In other words, New Delhi should try to weave them away from the China-led regional grand strategy by making them a key part of the Indo-Pacific grand strategy where India and its partners hold significant advantage over China.

Fourth, there is today an openness in New Delhi to view the region through a non-India centric lens. This also means that New Delhi is no longer uneasy about external powers in its neighbourhood as it used to be during the Cold War. As a consequence, there is a desire to join hands with external friends and partners both in the Indian Ocean and South Asia so as to deal with the region's common challenges. This openness in New Delhi, and the desire of the external actors to engage the region, must be utilised to address the difficulties arising out of New Delhi's regional decline.

Tap soft power

Finally, New Delhi should make creative uses of its soft power to retain its influence in the region. One way to do that is to actively encourage informal contacts between political and civil society actors in India and those in other South Asian countries. For instance, there is a need to encourage informal and unofficial conflict management processes in the region especially when and where the Indian state is hesitant about being involved directly in a conflict – Myanmar is a case in point.

The dichotomy between India's global rise and regional decline has profound implications for India's global aspirations. It is a legitimate question to ask whether a country that is unable to maintain primacy in its periphery will be able to be a pivotal power in international politics.

This dichotomy has profound implications for New Delhi's global aspirations

This is the year to get the SDG goals back on track

The United Nations summit on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), that was held in New York (September 18-19), assessed progress towards achieving the SDGs. The Agenda-2030, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015, identified 17 SDGs with 169 specific targets to be achieved by 2030. The programme is internationally non-binding, but all countries have committed to work towards these goals as transiting to sustainable development is a common global endeavour.

Slow progress

Progress, according to available reports, is off track. From 2015 to 2019, there were some improvements, although grossly insufficient to achieve the goals. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and other global crises have virtually halted progress. Apart from slow progress, and little or no attention towards the goals related to the environment and biodiversity (including responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, and life on land), it is a matter of great concern that the current practice of pursuing SDGs defies the integrated and indivisible nature of SDGs. We are far from the overarching target of balancing human well-being and a healthy environment. The present trend, if it continues, will lead to accelerated environmental degradation and the purpose of transiting towards sustainability defeated.

Given this emerging scenario, the UN SDG Report, 2023 identified five key areas for urgent action: Commitment of governments to seven years of accelerated, sustained and transformative actions to deliver on the promises of SDGs; concrete, integrated and targeted government policies and actions to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality and to end the war on nature with a focus on advancing the rights of women and girls and empowering the most



Sri Kumar Chattopadhyay

is a retired scientist and was Head, Resources Analysis Division, Centre for Earth Science Studies, Thiruvananthapuram. He is a former National Fellow of the Gulati Institute for Finance and Taxation, Thiruvananthapuram

2024 is an election year across the world and newly elected governments need to focus on the all-important sustainability issue

vulnerable; strengthening of national and subnational capacity, accountability, and public institutions to deliver accelerated progress; recommitment of the international community to deliver and mobilise resources to assist developing nations, and continued strengthening of the UN development system.

World leaders took cognisance of the situation, reaffirmed their commitments and agreed to step-up efforts to deliver SDGs, our global road map out of the crisis, by 2030. But how far these global pronouncements are operative at the ground level remains a big question.

Results that deserve deliberation

A team of 64 scholars analysed 3,000 studies, mostly peer-reviewed published articles across the world to examine the scientific evidence on the political impact of the sustainable development goals' within national and global governance to address pressing challenges of poverty eradication, social justice and environmental protection. The results, which were published in the journal, *Nature Sustainability*, September 2022 issue (under the leadership of Professor Frank Biermann of the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands), deserve wide deliberations, especially in the context of Agenda 2030 implementation.

The authors look at five dimensions: global governance, domestic political systems, the integration and coherence of institutions and policies, the inclusiveness of governance from local to global level, and the protection of ecological integrity. They concluded that 'the SDGs thus far have had mainly discursive effects but also have led to some isolated normative and institutional reforms'.

However, effects are often diffuse, and there is little evidence that goal setting at the global level leads directly to political impacts in national and

local politics. Overall, our assessment indicates that although there are some limited effects of the SDGs, they are not a transformative force in and of themselves'.

In this context, another UN report, 'Future is Now' (2019), perhaps provides some guidelines for action. It emphasised that "The true transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda can be realised through a systemic approach that helps identify, manage trade-offs while maximising co-benefits". By co-benefit the SDG on the activities that, while addressing one stress, will help address others at the same time. The report suggests adopting locally best suited entry points following regional and national priorities and applying four levers – governance, economy and finance, individual and collective action, and science and technology to propel our actions along the entry points.

Actors from these levers must develop partnership and establish novel collaboration to design and rapidly implement integrated pathways to sustainable development corresponding to the specific needs and priorities of the country. This will ultimately contribute to global transformation. In the prologue to this report, Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway and renowned for the famous Brundtland report, 'Our Common Future', expressed the hope that politicians and policymakers will take note of the suggestions advanced in this report and steer the world towards sustainable development.

An important year

The year 2024 is an election year across the world. At least 64 countries, both developed and developing, accounting for 49% of world population, will go to the polls. Perhaps, it is important for all the newly elected governments to ponder over the sustainability issue and align their national policies accordingly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Cleansing the system

Moral and ethical values in public life, especially where it concerns our legislators, have been plummeting to irretrievable depths. We the people are left with no choice but to elect "criminals". When we have such persons getting elected to Parliament to make laws that govern the nation, can their minions be far behind in emulating their leader? We cannot expect Parliament to enact laws to bar criminal

elements from entering the portals of Parliament. The Supreme Court of India is our hope. The top court should take the initiative to cleanse the system for the sake of the survival of democracy and to uphold constitutional values. **Kosaraju Chandramouli**, Hyderabad

Venky's Chicken Products I write this letter as the Company Secretary for Venky's (India) Limited. *The Hindu* (and another

media house) has published a report, "Venky's pushing antibiotics as poultry growth promoter". Inside pages, April 6, 2024, and online, with a link at think.in/Venky's, which alleges that Venky's chicken has a heavy dosing of antibiotics. The story was aired on Live TV and circulated on social media platforms. The statement made by the media houses is unfounded, inaccurate and in contrast with the facts. Venky's, a pioneer in

the Indian poultry industry, has been supplying high quality chicken to its consumers for over four decades. One of the products sold by Venky's is 'processed and ready to eat chicken' (Venky's Chicken Products) which is made in state-of-the-art processing units that have the highest standard of production practices and which are in strict compliance with Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) norms. Our chicken

processing units have internationally recognised certification such as HACCP and FSSC 22000. Venky's chicken products are made from internally sourced chicken meat – from birds raised in-house or grown under contract farming supervised by Venky's. We can proudly state that the birds used in Venky's Chicken Products are not fed with antibiotics on a preventive basis or as a growth promoter. The meat used to make Venky's

Chicken Products is periodically tested at FSSAI-approved National Reference Laboratories for antibiotics residue, as per FSSAI norms. Venky's Chicken Products are in compliance with FSSAI antibiotics residue norms.

Rohan Bhagwat, Pune

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GROUND ZERO



The ABVP protests in Hubballi seeking the death penalty for the accused in the Neha Hiremath murder case. Neha, a first-year MCA student, was stabbed to death in Hubballi. PTI

Murder and mischief in Hubballi

Neha Hiremath, a 23-year-old student, was stabbed to death on a university campus by her former classmate, Fayaz Khandunayak. The BJP leadership has been alleging that this is a case of 'love jihad', while the Congress has argued that the incident was the unfortunate result of a personal tiff. **Girish Pattanashetti** reports on the State-wide protests and the different accounts of Neha and Fayaz's relationship

It is the 13th day since Neha Hiremath, 23, was killed in Karnataka's Hubballi. People trickle in and out of the Hiremaths' compact two-storey home in Bidnal, a middle-class locality populated with people of various faiths. Some carry food in steel boxes; it is a tradition in north Karnataka to visit bereaved families with food and eat meals with them after offering condolences.

The visitors — friends, relatives, and acquaintances — all express horror that a young woman, the daughter of Congress municipal councillor Niranjan Hiremath, 50, suffered such a gruesome end. Neha was stabbed to death on a college campus by her former classmate, 23-year-old Fayaz Khandunayak, on April 18.

It has been an exhausting day for the Hiremaths. The death of their daughter has occurred in the midst of the Lok Sabha elections and has turned into an important election narrative. Earlier, the Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly, R. Ashoka, who belongs to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), accompanied by former Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai and MLA Mahesh Tingankai, visited their home to offer condolences. As they streamed out, journalists gathered around them, close to two air coolers, under a shamiana, with a huge banner paying tribute to Neha in the backdrop.

Addressing the media, the BJP leaders spoke of lapses in police action. They promised to pressure the State government to act without delay and ensure stringent punishment to the accused. They emphasised the need for an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) — "bring out the truth about this case of 'love jihad'" — a conspiracy theory propounded by Hinduwa groups which claim that Muslim men are luring Hindu women into marriage on false pretences, in order to convert them to Islam. Niranjan, 50, who had already said he was satisfied with the progress of the investigation by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), listened in silence.

After they left, Niranjan's staff informed him that a minister would be visiting soon. An aide consulted him about the drafting of a letter seeking permission for a gun licence. The distraught father did not have a moment to grieve.

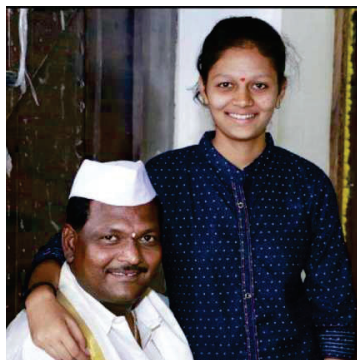
As Niranjan goes downstairs in the evening to see more visitors off, a gunman, provided by the Hubballi-Dharwad police, stands guard at the front door. Inside the hall, Niranjan's wife Geeta, 43, sits on the sofa staring at her daughter's garlanded portrait. Neha's younger brother, Nihal, stays back to take care of his mother. "Although she was older, she was my friend," says Nihal.

Murder in broad daylight

On the blistering afternoon of April 18, Neha, a first-year Masters-degree student of Computer Applications at KLE Technological University, was getting ready to leave the college campus. Her mother was sitting in a car outside, waiting to pick her up. "Her class was to end at 4.30 p.m. I

She first met him during some project work and treated him like a friend. But she distanced herself from him after coming to know of his intentions.

NIRANJAN HIREMATH
Neha's father



Neha Hiremath with her father and municipal council member Niranjan Hiremath. Photo: Special Arrangement THE HINDU

had gone five minutes earlier. After coming out of the classroom, she called me to say she was coming out," recalls Geeta.

CCTV cameras show what happened next. A masked man intercepted Neha and repeatedly stabbed her. Students stood frozen in horror as he fled the scene, leaving her bleeding profusely. A security officer on campus was the first to lift her up with the help of a few students. "We immediately rushed her to a hospital nearby in a university car. But the doctors declared her dead on arrival," the security officer says.

The man was later identified as Fayaz, her classmate from an undergraduate course. A resident of Munavalli in Saundatti taluk of Belagavi district, Fayaz was nabbed the same evening by the Karnataka Police, reportedly with the help of people who chased him after seeing him running away from campus.

The Police Commissioner, Renuka Sukumar, says Fayaz, in his initial statement, claimed that he and Neha were friends from pre-university and were in love, but that she started avoiding him later. "He said he was unable to bear this 'insult' and killed her," Sukumar says, adding that the statement needed corroboration.

Initially, Neha's parents categorically denied Fayaz's statement that the two of them were in love. Later, they said that the two were friends. "She first met him during some project work, and treated him like a friend. But she distanced herself from him after coming to know of his intentions," says Niranjan.

Neha, from several accounts, was reserved and preferred to be with family. "Unlike other

girls her age, Neha never invited her friends home. She didn't go out with them either. In fact, she had very few friends. I was like her older sister and constant companion," says Geeta, her face wet with tears. "Even if she wanted to go out to eat a snack, she would force me to accompany her. She would never go alone."

Niranjan says Neha was deeply religious. He calls his daughter their "lucky charm". He says, "She would not drink a drop of water without doing puja. We prospered after her birth."

Widespread protests

News that a Hindu woman was killed by a Muslim man spread like wildfire in the district. As leaders and religious heads rushed to console the victim's family, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) began protesting the same night. The protests quickly spread across Karnataka. Home Minister G. Parameshwar termed the brutal murder "akasmika", which roughly translates into accidental and unexpected.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said the murder was committed for personal reasons. The BJP immediately called these statements attempts to hush up a case of 'love jihad'. Niranjan also condemned the remarks of the Home Minister and Chief Minister, providing further ammunition to the BJP's attack. The Home Minister then apologised for his remarks, saying he regretted issuing his statement if it had hurt the parents.

While protests by right-wing organisations continued, the powerful Veerashaiva-Lingayat community, of which the Hiremaths are a part, also began protests seeking the death penalty for the accused. This was followed by a call for a State-wide college bandh by the ABVP.

The next day, Muslim organisations including the Anjuman-e-Islam also began protests against the accused. In Hubballi-Dharwad and Munavalli, Muslims came out in large numbers to condemn the act. "We stand with Neha's family and we as a community strongly condemn this brutal murder. We want the government to ensure that he gets the death penalty. As a tribute to Neha, we will name one of the blocks of the Anjuman-e-Islam complex in Dharwad after her," said the president of the Anjuman-e-Islam, Dharwad Ismail Tamatgar. These protests forced Siddaramaiah to hand over the case to the CID. Subsequently, the government also issued an order to set up a special court.

The BJP sent a host of leaders to visit Neha's family at regular intervals, organised candlelight vigils, and a public meeting. During his visit to the region, BJP national president J.P. Nadda visited Neha's family. Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who was in Hubballi to attend an election rally, also met the family backstage after his campaign. Both Nadda and Shah alleged that the Siddaramaiah-led government was trying to dilute the case. "On April 18, Neha Hiremath was murdered. Whose responsibility is it to provide security? But they (Congress) say it is a personal mat-



He had told me that Neha was in love with him, and they were ready to get married, but I had told him to first focus on building a career. My son was intelligent and so was Neha. I wanted him to study for the IAS. But he has made us hang our heads in shame.

MAMTAZ
Fayaz's mother

ter. If you can't protect women, leave it to us. We will make Karnataka safe for women," Shah said, while addressing a rally in Hubballi.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi too has been mentioning the murder in his speeches across Karnataka. He brought up Neha during election rallies in Belagavi, Sirsi, Davanagere, and Hosapete and appealed to the people to reject the Congress for its "vote bank politics".

The State government has been trying hard to prevent the BJP from building a Hindu-Muslim narrative and has blamed the saffron party of politicising the issue for electoral gains. Congress leader Santosh Lad countered the BJP saying the party was playing "politics over death" and said the BJP would not have bothered if the killer was a Hindu man.

Allegations and counter allegations

The incident once again led to discussions and debates on 'interfaith love' with social media flooded with hate speeches. As Karnataka became a tinderbox, the police provided protection to Fayaz's parents in Munavalli in the neighbouring district of Belagavi. They strongly condemned the incident and apologised for their son's act before going incommunicado.

In her lone interaction with the media, Fayaz's mother, Mamta, a teacher, empathised with Neha's family. But she categorically denied that this was one-sided love. "This was great injustice to Neha and her family. What he has done is completely wrong. He left home five days ago (April 13) saying he was fed up of sitting at home and was going to find a job. I came to know about the ghastly incident after an acquaintance called me asking me to switch on the television," she said.

According to Mamta, Fayaz and Neha were in love. "He had told me that Neha was in love with him, and they were ready to get married, but I had told him to first focus on building a career. My son was intelligent and so was Neha. I wanted him to study for the Indian Administrative Service. But he has made us hang our heads in shame," said Mamta, who remembers speaking to Neha once over the phone. Fayaz's father, Babasaheb, who is also a teacher, apologised too. He believes that Munavalli, his hometown, has got a bad name because of his son. "Strict punishment should be given to my son for what he has done so that it will be a lesson even for those who think of committing such acts," he said. Babasaheb and Mamta live separately; Fayaz lived with his mother.

Babasaheb recalls Neha's father calling him once. "He asked me to keep Fayaz away from his daughter," he said. "But Fayaz fought with him saying they were in love and wanted to get married." Neha's parents refute this story. They claim that Fayaz kept pursuing their daughter. What happened on April 18 was a planned act, they say. They also believe that it involved a few others.

A change in routine

The incident has left the university administration in shock. The institution has imposed restrictions on the entry of outsiders. At KLE Technological University, people say they didn't know Neha well as classes began only three months ago and she rarely attended class.

During the investigation, the university authorities informed the CID that they had poor attendance. The parents, they said, told them that a health issue had prevented her from attending class. She later appeared for tests in college.

On April 18, Neha had to go to university to write an internal assessment test. After the CID began its investigation and took him to the university campus for 'mahazar' (inspection of the crime spot), Fayaz told them that he had spent a few hours on campus waiting for Neha to come to college, sources say.

In BCA college, adjacent to KLE Technological University, where Fayaz and Neha studied together, neither their classmates nor the teachers witnessed anything unusual. Fayaz was well known on campus during his second year as he was chosen to represent the university in bodybuilding and earned the title 'University Blue'.

"In his final year, however, he lost interest in sport and also academics. He failed in one of the subjects during the fifth semester," recalls a lecturer who did not want to be named. Another lecturer says, "Fayaz nearly vanished from college after the fifth semester and did not write his final semester examination." He also stopped bodybuilding, the lecturer adds.

Meanwhile, the CID's six-day custody of the accused has ended and Fayaz is back in judicial custody.

Neha's parents are demanding a new law to ensure speedy delivery of justice and stringent punishment in such cases. "We want a special law to be enacted just like in the case of Nirbhaya. We don't want the accused to get away with some minor punishment because of inordinate delays in the courts. While we welcome the setting up of a special court, we want the government to take steps to formulating a separate law which will ensure the most stringent punishment that will act as deterrent," says Niranjan.

Although the family is disturbed by the fact that they are suddenly in the limelight and at the centre of a political slugfest, they see a message in their daughter's departure. "She has left us in grief, but she has made us stronger. We don't want other parents to suffer like this. We will pursue the matter as far as we can. We hope the government will listen to us," Niranjan says.