



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS' ALERT - INDIA

NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

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April 17, 2018

To

Mr. Srinivasa Kammath

National Focal Point - Human Rights Defenders & Deputy Registrar

National Human Rights Commission

Manav Adhikar Bhawan,

Block-C, GPO Complex, INA,

New Delhi – 110 023

Email: hrd-nhrc@nic.in

Dear Sir,

Sub: HRD Alert – India – Urgent Appeal for Action – Telangana: Journalist Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi abused and threatened for her cartoon on the recent rape incidents – Regarding

Greetings from Human Rights Defenders Alert - India!

HRD Alert - India is a Forum of Human Rights Defenders for Human Rights Defenders. It endeavours to initiate actions on behalf of Human Rights Defenders under threat or with security concerns.

We are now writing to express our grave concerns regarding the abuse, intimidation, death threats to Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi for circulating her cartoon in the context of recent spate of rapes.

Source of Information on the Incident:

- Communication with Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi
- Media Reports
- Regional Coordinator of HRDA for the South of India.

Status of the Human Rights Defenders:

Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi is a journalist based in Hyderabad and associated with national daily "The Hindu". Apart from working for print journalism, she is a creative artist and, as a form of expression, has been drawing cartoons on social issues.

The Perpetrators:

- Unknown persons through Facebook and Twitter
- Advocate Karuna Sagar Kashimshetty, President of Hindu Sanghatan

Date of Incident:

- Since April 10, 2018

Incident detail:

The recent rape incidents in Kathua and Unnao, have led to a series of protests and public outcry across several Indian cities and towns. The protests have assumed various forms,

formats and shapes, a prominent one being a variety of artistic expressions including drawing and publishing of caricatures and cartoons.

On April 10, 2018, Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi published a cartoon on her social media pages, i.e. Twitter and Facebook. The cartoon made a reference to the mythical Hindu Gods, Ram and Sita, in the context of current spate of abduction and rape against women and widespread protests in India. In her cartoon, Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi has shown Sita, upon learning about the sexual crimes, telling her husband (Ram), *"I was so glad I was kidnapped by Ravan and not your bhakts!"*. This depiction, having no intention to hurt religious sentiments of any community, was a subtle attempt to contribute in a democratic manner to the debate about the criticism of those trying to shield rape accused, particularly in reference to the protests held by Hindu Ekta Manch, a right-wing outfit that was demanding the release of Deepak Khajuria, one of the prime accused in the Kathua rape case.

After sharing this cartoon on her social media pages, Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi has been at the receiving numerous online abuses, including on WhatsApp. Most of the abuses are extremely intimidating, including threats to kill her. One of the abusers commented that she would meet the same fate as journalist Gauri Lankesh, who was shot dead outside her residence in Bengaluru in September, 2017. Another one threatened her with a Charlie Hebdo style attack of January 2015. In a series of abuses, she is linked with terrorist outfits alleging that she has been paid for this 'anti-Hindu' post.

Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi has been drawing cartoons for a long time now, including some on some of the sensitive issues, but never witnessed this kind of backlash. She admits that these abuses, the death threats especially, have indeed intimidated and frightened her.

On April 14, 2018, the Hindu Sanghatan, an off-shoot group of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, through its President Advocate Karuna Sagar Kashimshetty, filed a police complaint against Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi at the Saidabad police station in Hyderabad under Section 295 (a) of the Indian Penal Code (deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs).

The Hindu Sanghatan has also filed a complaint against another journalist, Mr. Shabbir Ahmed, the Deputy Editor of the news channel "Times Now", who merely shared her cartoon on his Twitter profile.

Appeal:

In the wake of these repeated incidents where human rights defenders, including journalists, are intimidated, threatened and harassed, curbing fundamental rights to freely express, we urge you to immediately -

- Order an immediate, independent, thorough, transparent, effective and impartial investigation into the above-mentioned incident of abuse and intimidation faced by journalist and human rights defender Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi;
- Take immediate legal action against the perpetrators and those abusing and threatening Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi and Mr. Shabbir Ahmed by identifying them through their Facebook and Twitter accounts;
- Order that the police immediately drop all charges against Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi, Mr. Shabbir Ahmed and anyone else against whom cases are filed in this context;
- Guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi and her family members as they continue to be under risk of further attacks by the perpetrators and give this assurance to the NHRC in writing immediately and urgently. NHRC should also record Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi's statement and order for her security, and;
- Ensure provision of reparation, compensation, apology to Ms. Swathi Vadlamudi and her family for the psychological sufferings they are undergoing because of the constant threats.

HRDA appeals that this petition is not transferred to the Andhra Pradesh and Telengana State Human Rights Commission (SHRC). As available from NHRC's website, this SHRC has no chairperson and members and hence is not in a position to decide any case.

Looking forward to your immediate action in this regard,
Yours sincerely,

S/d-

Henri Tiphagne
National Working Secretary

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