**A case of selective outrage**

On May 9, a 16-year-old girl in Kumbaragadige village in Somwarpet taluk in the hilly district of Kodagu in Karnataka got her Class 10 results. She was the only girl to pass the exam from her school and had got good marks too. The same day, she got engaged to a 33-year-old man called Prakash Omkarappa. The District Child Protection Unit intervened in the ceremony, following an anonymous call, and made her parents promise that she would not be married off until she turned 18. Many hours later, the angry groom turned up at her house, dragged her out, beheaded her, and fled with her head. The ghastly incident sent shock waves through the State. The police tracked him down and arrested him the next day.

This incident occurred a few weeks after Neha Hiremath, a first year Masters student of Computer Applications (MCA) and the daughter of a Congress municipal councillor, was killed by her former classmate Fayaz Khondunaik in in Hubballi in north Karnataka. She had gone to college to attend an exam on April 18. As she was getting ready to leave the college campus in the afternoon, she was repeatedly stabbed to death on campus by Fayaz. Neha was allegedly close to Fayaz earlier, but had distanced herself from him.

Just hours before Neha’s death, a double murder rocked the State’s capital Bengaluru. In a park in JP Nagar, a posh locality of the city, Suresh, 46, who is married with children, stabbed his 25-year-old colleague at an event management company to death. The two were reportedly in a relationship, but she had broken it off recently. The mother of the victim, in an attempt to rescue her daughter, bludgeoned him to death with a stone, the police said.

The common thread in all the three cases is that a man killed a girl or woman after she shunned his advances, broke up with him, or distanced herself from him. Clearly, this is toxic masculinity at play. Girls or women were killed by men who could not stomach the fact that they had been rejected. Studies have shown that those who endorse the masculine honour ideal are more likely to feel insulted if a woman rejects them and respond with aggression. This is the same logic that is behind several acid attacks on women too.

Not surprisingly, the case that drew the most outrage from political parties and larger society was Neha’s murder. As the incident happened just before Karnataka went to vote in the Lok Sabha elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gave it a communal colour. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to direct scaremongering over “appeasement politics of the Congress towards the Muslim community.” Minutes after the murder, local BJP leaders dubbed it a case of “love jihad” — a conspiracy theory propounded by Hindutva groups which claim that Muslim men are luring Hindu women into marriage on false pretences, in order to convert them to Islam. Union Minister and the Hubballi-Dharwad MP for four terms, Pralhad Joshi, who is seeking re-election, too called it “love jihad” and blamed the Congress government for the turn of events.

All this happened despite the Ministry of Home Affairs saying in 2020 in the Lok Sabha that “the term ‘love jihad’ is not defined under the extant laws. No case of ‘love jihad’ has been reported by any of the Central agencies.”

Such incidents have built immense pressure on the Muslim community to go an extra mile to distance themselves from the incident. For instance, in Hubballi-Dharwad, only Muslim traders and shopkeepers observed a voluntary bandh on April 22, condemning the murder.

However, there have been no statements condemning either the beheading of the 16-year-old girl in Kodagu or the 25-year-old in Bengaluru. There were no candle light vigils or protests. The only statements condemning the beheading of the Kodagu girl came from women’s activists. Besides the obvious fact of religion and how it served a political purpose, it is also instructive that while the two other murder victims came from poorer sections of society, Neha was the daughter of a municipal councillor and an MCA student.

While political parties make various attempts during election time to woo women, who hold sway now more than ever before, issues such as the lack of freedom to choose their partners or the lack of safety never become election points independently. They always seem to be subservient to other identities such as class, caste and religion, as the recent three cases illustrate.