

‘Should we Dalits not fall in love?’

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"Should Dalits not fall in love?" asked Shahaji Sonawane in an impassioned plea for justice for his 16 year old son Swapnil, who was brutally done to death by caste Hindus from the OBC Agri community on July 19. Swapnil was killed for being in a relationship with his childhood friend. His family, unaware of the relationship until Monday, is yet to come to terms with what unravelled in less than 24 hours that left their teenage son dead. "He had not killed or ill- treated any one. He was just in love. Only if we had known about his feelings, we would have tried to help him through this. They suddenly (the accused) came, abused us all and killed my son. They did not even give us an opportunity to respond to the situation," said Gouri Sonawane, Swapnil's mother, who had to be hospitalised for two days soon after the incident. "I have not been able to mourn my child's death yet. Not until my son's murderers are punished."



According to Sonawanes, on July 18, the girl's family learnt about their relationship. It was Swapnil's first day at DY Patil College at CBD Belapur in Navi Mumbai, where he had secured admission in Commerce stream. They had studied together at Nerul's Nutan Marathi Vidyalaya until class 10th. But chose different colleges."On the 18th, the girl's family learnt about their relationship, which they bitterly opposed," recalls Shahaji. Swapnil was accused of storing her photographs in his mobile phone. On this issue, her

brother Sagar Naik assaulted and dragged Swapnil to the Nerul police station. Sagar and 10 others including the girl and two other minors have been booked and arrested under several sections of the Indian Penal Code and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 2015 for abduction, murder and casteist slurs.

Police apathy: "Police's inaction killed our son"

"The police gave Swapnil's phone to them to delete the photos. The girl's family even destroyed the SIM card and confiscated the phone," his mother Gouri told RTI at the Sonawane residence in State Bank of India colony at Nerul on Saturday. "The police wanted us to sign an undertaking that no one would be responsible if anything happened to Swapnil. I said how could we write such a thing? Finally, Swapnil pledged that he would not meet the girl or would be seen in her area."

The Sonawanes believe if the police had responded to the situation impartially and had understood the seriousness of the threat, their son would have been alive today. "The police made the biggest mistake. There was 101 per cent solution to this situation. This case would have been normal, had the police acted in the first place when we went to complain. It is not enough to suspend them. They should be made the accused in the case," said Swapnil's relatives. "They abused us right in front of the police at the police station. Instead of controlling the situation, the police acted at the behest of the killers," said Gouri.



The family has also complained of being threatened at the police station. As the two families were disputing at the police station, two police personnel present warned the Sonawane family of a "Sairat-like bloodshed." The police duo, comprising a woman sub-inspector Sonali Rajguru and assistant police inspector Yogesh Mane, have been suspended for dereliction of duty and the crime branch of Navi Mumbai police is presently investigating their role in the murder.

An abrupt end

Swapnil's written pledge did not quell the caste animosity. Fearing for their son's life, on July 19, Swapnil and his father went back to the police station. "We tried to have a complaint registered. If not an FIR, at least a non- cognizable offence registered, since we anticipated these men would strike back anytime. But the police refused to pay any attention to our pleas," Gouri said. While the trio tried to get the complaint registered, a group of 15- 20 men including the girl's brother had reached the Sonawane's residence.

Since Swapnil's younger sister was alone at home, the family immediately returned to the house. "The police knew what awaited us at home. One of them also said, 'You go home and see what happens in half an hour,'" Gauri said. She further alleged that the family had also asked the police for protection. Instead, it was provided to the girl's family. This allegation is a part of Gouri's statement and is being investigated.

The group that had gathered outside Sonawane's house heckled the family members asking them to come to the girl's house to discuss and put an end to the matter. Swapnil arrived on the scene. Surrounded by those boys, Swapnil, his father and mother left for Dharave area, two- kilometres away, where the girl lived. "They surrounded us from all sides ensuring we do not run away. SBI colony has several entries, but they ensured we took the route they had chosen and do not give them a slip," said Gouri.

When they reached the girl's residence, her family started hurling casteist slurs at them. "They said, 'You 'Mahars', do you have any aukaat (level)? Your son is dark and our daughter is fair. You are from the slums and she stays in a palace.' Then they started beating us," Swapnil's father Shahaji Sonawane told RTI.

The girl's family demanded an apology from Swapnil and asked him to touch her feet and address her as Tai (sister). As Swapnil bent down to do so, the girl's father Rajendra Naik kicked him on his stomach. A scared Swapnil began to run, but was chased down and thrashed by a group of people. He was rushed to the DY Patil hospital with injuries on his private parts, head, neck and leg, but was declared dead on arrival.

"If I had any inkling of what those people had in mind, I would never have gone to their place. Swapnil was my heart, my right hand man. I would have taken him anywhere, even to the US, but I did not have the time to do anything. Everything happened so 'phataphat' [quickly]," said father Shahaji, who works as a clerk in the SBI.

"Is it a crime to love?" asked mother Gouri. "We could have even advised our son, counselled him, but they did not give us a chance to do anything," she rued.

Swapnil, Sairat and Ambedkar

None in the Sonawanes' extended family had had an inter-caste marriage. "The society has not changed even today. Lovers unite in movies, but that is not what happens in real life. Even the Agris must have watched 'Sairat'. As for us, we would have happily accepted anyone from other castes," said Sunita Sonawane, Swapnil's cousin.

Swapnil's parents hail from the impoverished suburbs of Mankhurd and Govandi and made their way through a bank job to a clean and leafy bank quarters. Dr. Ambedkar's photos and figurines of the Buddha mark their Ambedkarite roots, to which Swapnil too held on dearly, sporting an Ambedkar badge on his shirt. "He forced me to make a gold locket with Babasaheb on it. He would wear it over his shirt collar with pride. Last week he was trying to cajole me to get him a gold locket with Ambedkar on it. I had told him I will soon make it," Gouri recalled, as her eyes welled up.

As a teen, he was full of life, who loved to travel, enjoyed delicacies such as 'momos' and 'shawarma' and was popular in his ample friend circle. Swapnil wanted to become a train motor engineer. "He loved trains. He would spend hours looking at videos of train on the YouTube," said Shahaji proudly. His friends have been visiting the family every day. "They are still in a state of shock. One of his closest friends was hospitalised along with me," Gouri said.



The case is a cruel reminder of the shocking presence of caste in urban cosmopolitan spaces. "Caste is so strong on the ground that people are ready to kill their own children over inter-caste marriages. We hear of these things in UP and Bihar, but it has now happened here," said Avinash Sonawane, Swapnil's cousin.

The family said they will fight till the end. They have been appealing to everyone who have met them since the tragic incident. "Help us in getting justice for Swapnil so that no other person meets the same fate as him," appealed Swapnil's grandmother to Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment Ramdas Athawale, who visited them at their residence on Saturday. Athawale has assured the bereaved family of his ministry's support. He will meet Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday demanding a CID inquiry into the incident, fast tracking of the trial and strict punishment for the suspended police personnel whose negligence aggravated the situation leading to Swapnil's death.

Another victim

Lovers just until last week, the girl is today named as one of the accused of murdering Swapnil. As a minor child, she was sent to the Children's home at Bhiwandi on her arrest. The Sonawanes, while they do not accuse her of any direct role in Swapnil's murder, feel she should not have ventured into this relationship when she very well knew her family. "If one has the courage to love, one should also show the same courage when in difficulty. The girl was right there when they beat Swapnil. But she did not intervene," rued Gouri. "May be she was too scared and could not speak up," wondered Shahaji. But for now, Sonawanes are not in the mood to forgive the girl.

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