

## The Suno India Show

### Sulli Deals: No arrests a month on, as the women keep fighting for justice

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**Trigger Warning:** This podcast report contains stories of verbal sexual abuse and offensive language.

*On July 4th, Hana's friend sent her a tweet she was tagged in. "You're in it also," her friend said. The tweet contained a link to an app.*

**Hana:** I clicked on it and it said, find your Sulli of the day. And the button said Find me a sulli so I didn't get it. Sulli deals app. I didn't understand Initially, the what what it meant I was confused. I clicked on it. And I saw this random girl come up. I didn't get it. I kind of started getting a little suspicious ki there is something wrong here. And then the second time I clicked on it, my friend came up. That's when it started hitting me. Oh my god, this is something else then another friend. The fourth time it was me. And that's when it hit me what Sulli means.

*This is Hana Mohsin Khan. She is a commercial pilot and is active on social media, with almost 15 thousand followers on Twitter. She is also one of the 80+ women featured on the Sulli Deals app.*

**Hana:** Sulli is a derogatory word. It's a word which means Musalman woman Muslim woman. So sulli like you know sulla Musalla Musalman, Musalman ko they've just turned it into like a dirty slur and called us women sullis. And that is that it's a slur. So it was around, so I counted 83 women, their pictures were taken from their Twitter profiles, mostly. And they were put on there and they say, like you when you press that Sulli button, find me a Sulli, so the app generated a woman's picture, which then you could share it, there was a button that says share on Twitter. So you could pick a woman like, you know, it would find you that it would generate a woman for you. And then you could share it on your Twitter account and call it your Sulli of the day or your flavor of the day or your you know, I don't know what slave of the day. I mean, it's just disgusting. It's, that's what it meant.

*On July 4th, several Indian muslim women, especially those with some following online, received a barrage of texts from friends and acquaintances. Something terrible had happened. The Sulli Deals app invited users to find their deal of the day, a Muslim woman they could claim to own. The app included the Twitter image and handle of the woman, which could then be tweeted by the user as their very own Sulli Deal. The app, hosted on Github platform, was pulled down soon after and was gone by the morning of July 5th. However, one month and two FIRs later, we still do not know who the offenders are.*

*Hi, this is Suryatapa Mukherjee, reporting on this episode of The Suno India Show.*

*Today, we are looking at the Sulli Deals saga. Besides Hana, I spoke to a student and political activist Afreen Fatima, and student and poet Nabiya Khan. They have all been targeted by the app. They speak about the cost of being a visible and vocal Muslim woman in India today, as this is not an isolated incident.*

*The targets of Sulli Deals are well-known figures of social media. While many of them talk about politics, Hana stays off the subject. She however talks about her adventures in the skies. A few of her tweets have gone viral, especially one in November last year. Quote, "Did a Delhi-Gaya-Delhi flight today. An elderly lady wanted to look into the cockpit & when she saw me, she exclaimed in a haryanvi accent "Oi yahan to chorri baithi!" Could not stop laughing! Hashtag aviation stories."*

*While she says that the women who are political online are trolled more on a daily basis, any Muslim woman who defies the victim stereotype has been targetted.*

**Hana:** I was a Muslim woman who had the voice, I was a Muslim woman who, when I spoke, people listened. You know, and that's true for all the girls there almost, that when they spoke, people listened, and they did that does not fit into that typical Muslim, you know, victim narrative that they want to spin around, that a Muslim woman is oppressed, and she is, you know, tortured, or somehow, you know, not given equal rights, that that's the narrative they want to build, and we don't fit into it, we are not that, you know, we're not those people we are, you know, we are strong women with strong voices. Sabak sikhaenge inn ladkiyon ko, yeh bol kaise sakti hai? And, you know, you know, men just don't like women talking, they just don't like women's having an opinion, tum samajhti kya ho, like they don't consider women as equal human beings or anyone who is equal in society.

*Afreen Fatima is no stranger to online harassment. A postgraduate of linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, she is also the national secretary of the Fraternity Movement, an independent youth organisation. She was elected Councillor of Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union. Earlier she was studying at the Aligarh Muslim University where she had been elected President of the Women's College Students Union. It was in Aligarh during her Bachelor's at the women's college that she found her political voice.*

**Afreen:** In Aligarh Muslim University, when I contested my elections, it was for the identity. For me, I saw the kind of there was a sense of discrimination to the students of women's college, which has undergraduate students, and I was also an undergraduate student in women's college. And so you don't have an equal opportunity to participate in events of the university itself. And the reason why I wanted to contest the election is that is because I wanted to show the women of my college that we are enough to demand for our rights, we don't need a man, a man of a male leader from the main campus to come and ask or talk about our problems to our principal, or to our provost, we are enough and we can do it ourselves. And at the same time, my

campaign was because I was contesting in women's college, it was deeply oriented to the kind of infrastructural problems that the women's college had so I used this slogan of not a slogan, but a kind of a motto or something, that the women in women's college are treated in a step motherly way by the administration, ek sautela bartav kiya jata hai. And I also said that the same treatment is done to the Muslims in India, by the governments the intersectionality of the identity is also linked because I am being treated differently for being a woman, but I'm also being treated differently for being a Muslim. So both my identities are deeply linked with each other, and I cannot divorce, so earlier, I would only talk about my, my, maybe of my experiences of being a woman, but over the time period over time, I realised that it's not just my experiences of being a woman, it's also my experiences of being a Muslim woman.

*Afreen has been covered by many mainstream news outlets, especially for her participation in NRC CAA protests. But not all of the coverage is positive. Here is an India TV report from January 2020 on her speech at a protest that had gone viral.*

*'Sharjeel Imaam ke bad JNU ki ek aur bhadkai chahtra ka video samne aya hai lag bhag 10 minute ke is video me Afreen nam ki ye chahtra lagatar zeher ugalti nazar aai'*

**Afreen in the clip:** *'Hum musalmano ki bat kis liye kar rahe hain kyuki ye sarkar ye sarkar se mera sirf bhajpa sarkar se matlab nahi hai Indian state ki jo sarkar rahi hai vo humesha ki anti-Muslim rahi hai'*

*'Afreen Fatima nam ki is ladki ne bhadkai bhashan Prayagraj me diya Roshanbag ke Mansoor Ali Khan park me CAA ke khilaf pradarshan ho raha tha. 23 January ko Afreen Fatima yaha pahuchi aur bhashand diya'*

**English Translation:** 'After Sarjeel Imaam another JNU student has been found giving an inflammatory speech. In this 10 minute video a student named Afreen is seen making poisonous comments.'

**Afreen in the clip:** 'We Muslims are rising up about this issue because this government and not just BJP government but the government of the Indian state has always been anti-Muslim.'

*'Afreen Fatima gave this inflammatory speech in Prayagraj in Roshanbag's Mansoor Ali Khan park on 23rd January.'*

*CAA or Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 seeks to naturalise illegal migrants from all religions, except Islam. This is based on a National Registry of Citizens or NRC proposal which seeks to make a registry of quote-unquote legitimate citizens based on a specific set of documents. The process is complete in Assam excluding more than 1.9 million people living in the state.*

**Afreen:** To a certain extent, I think, at least I had accepted that I would be trolled online that I would receive unwanted messages in my DMs that I would receive. And my my, my defence

mechanism was to ignore and ignore and ignore, because I do not have that kind of energy to call every single one of the handles that are sending me filled the DMS I do not have that energy because if I start doing that all my day will like Go, go away, go wasted on that only. And I would not be able to talk about the things that I really want to talk about. So I just learned to ignore it. And then you see yourself being presented as some deal. As to satisfy the fetishes of Hindu men to satisfy lustful gazes of Hindu men. And it was extremely disturbing and I just did not know what to say or how to respond to it. And I just logged out of Twitter and I did not see anything at that particular time. And that throughout the night, there was just one thought inside my head. What if one of these men who had me or any other Muslim woman as their Deal of the Day just comes and claims their Deal of the Day? Who is going to stop them? Is there anyone? Is there any state institution? Is there any law enforcement agency that will stop them? Because there is not.

*'Sahil ki khamoshi ko cheerta hua aeega leke ek sehlab aeega inqulab.  
Aeega inqulab pehen ki chudiyen, bindi, burqa hijab,  
Kabhi Gauri ki awaz banke  
Kabhi Savitri ke sapno ka ahvad ban ke  
Kabhi Fatima ki dhal ban ke  
Kabhi Ammi ka laal ban ke  
Leke apne seene me jasbaat ke bebaak  
Aeega inqulab pehen ke chudiyen, bindi, burqa, hijab aeega inqulab.'*

*This is Nabiya Khan, a poet and a history major. Her twitter bio says, quote, "My poetry is my protest against tyranny of our times." She has over 46 thousand followers. This poem of hers, in particular, gained in popularity during the NRC CAA protests early last year and she performed it at protest sites across the country.*

*'Kabhi Shaheen Bagh ki sham ban ke  
Kabhi Jamia ki dastaan ban ke  
Kabhi AMU ki awaam ban ke  
Toh kabhi Faiz ki nazmo ka unwaam ban ke  
Lene tumhare zulamon sitam ka ek hisab  
Aeega inqulab pehen ki chudiyen, bindi, burqa, hijab'*

*She said she regularly experiences sexual harassment online. The message is always that she should keep quiet. After she spoke out about being on Sulli Deals, she was harassed even more.*

**Nabiya:** I cannot even start to explain how people abused me day in and day out. Abuses were as vile as you can imagine. But I'm being targeted even till now. I get notifications online, they text me and they threaten with like, not to speak up.

*Nabiya says that although she hasn't changed anything about her online presence despite this*

*abuse, she may in the future.*

**Nabiya:** I never thought about changing anything about myself after this incident. But if I decide to do so tomorrow, if I try to filter my expressions or if I decide not to post my pictures tomorrow, I think that will be just as well. It will not be because I'm scared, but it will be because we know how vile these men from the Hindu ecosystem are. And they have our pictures, they can use them, they can morph these pictures. I mean, these men, they were sending me pornographic images of hijabi women in my DM. So I don't know when they can morph my images into these pictures.

*Hana Mohsin Khan was the first to file an FIR in the case. The Uttar Pradesh Police had registered an FIR on 6th July under IPC Section 509 — insulting the modesty of a woman and Sections 66 and 67 of the Information Technology Act — transferring obscene material.*

*Then the Delhi Commission for Women took cognizance of the case and an FIR was registered by the Delhi police under IPC Section 354A for sexual harassment. Afreen and Nabiya have both filed complaints with the police, as have many of the other women but these have not been converted into FIRs. Hana explains.*

**Hana:** There was one in Bombay, there was one in there were five in Delhi, there was one at Calcutta. One I believe in Kerala. And another friend of mine, she's doing it from Dubai. And I think someone else from USA. So there are those happening.

*There have been some political stirrings as well. In late July, Congress MP Dr Md Jawaid submitted a letter to home minister Amit Shah requesting the arrest of the criminals. It was signed by fifty six members of parliament across party lines. Shiv Sena MP Priyanka Chaturvedi wrote to IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw asking him to take action against such crimes online. However, there still has been no progress on the case. The National Commission for Minorities has sought a detailed action-taken report from the Delhi Police commissioner and a superintendent of police in Ghaziabad. The Delhi Commission for Women has summoned the DCP of the Delhi Police Cyber Cell for failing to provide satisfactory information on the case. The Delhi Commission for Women received over two hundred and fifty complaints regarding Sulli Deals.*

*This is not the first time that Muslim women have been quote unquote auctioned online. Earlier in May, around the time of Eid, youtube channel Liberal Doge held a virtual auction of sorts while livestreaming photos and videos of Muslim women from Pakistan. Then later on Twitter, the Hindu men involved were tagging Indian Muslim women to auction. One of the women was National Coordinator for Indian National Congress' social media, Hasiba Amin. After she filed a complaint with the police, several of these accounts were deleted or the usernames were changed. However, there has been no update on the investigation.*

*Hana says she is familiar with discrimination as a Muslim woman. It is now taking new forms*

online.

**Hana:** I feel that it was always like this. Definitely. When I was in school, my principal told me that... I took up science because I had 99 in my science 10th board exams and 98 something in Maths boards. So my Teacher, my school teachers and my principal of an Indian School, they discouraged me from taking up science they said that are tum logo ko toh, you know, you just have to get married. And you know, you did just need the graduation degree for a marriage. So why are you, why are you bothering with science? Why don't you take up arts or commerce? I was I was struggling a little bit as everyone does in science in 11th, and 12th. And that's what they had to say to me. So yes, they were saying these things to me a long, long time ago. I've had to leave, you know, houses because I was a Muslim. So, you know, I was thrown out of the house once because, not thrown out, but I was asked to leave. So this has always happened but now it's just more pronounced and uglier. Because, you know, we don't know who's saying what, there are so many people who are just hiding behind fake IDs. So that's why it's increased.

*Even earlier, as article 370 was abrogated, Hindu men were saying online that they could now buy Kashmiri land and marry Kashmiri women. Article 370 barred non Kashmiris from possessing land in the region, and the children of Kashmiri women with non Kashmiri husbands would not inherit land in the region. Kashmir has a Muslim majority and the men shared photos of light-skinned women in hijab, with captions saying this is their future bride.*

*BJP MLA in Uttar Pradesh Vikram Saini had joined this chorus, saying that unmarried BJP party workers can now have Kashmiri brides and Muslim party workers should celebrate too.*

*'Karyakarta bahut utsukh hain aur jo kuware hain unki shadi wahi krwa dein koi dikkat nahi. Kya dikkat hai dekho kitna mahilaon ko kitna atyachar tha waha ki ladki agar kisi Uttar Pradesh ke chore se shadi krle toh usko kya dikkat hogi? Bhartiya nagrikta alag Kashmir ki alag yani ek desh do vidhan kaise hona chahiye? Aur jo Muslim karyakarta hain jo yaha baithe hain unhe khushi manani chahiye shadi waha kro na Kashmir ki gori ladki se khushi manani chahiye unko bhi poore Hindu Musalmaan koi ho ye poore desh ke liye ek utsaah ka vishay hai.'*

**English Translation:** 'This is an exciting news for all workers because now they can marry fair women from Kashmir. Earlier women were tortured. There were 2 citizenships one for Kashmir and one for India how does that make any sense? The Muslim party members should be happy infact everyone should be happy.'

*Hana says that this form of abuse against Muslim women is an old way of targetting the community.*

**Hana:** There's this patriarchal layer, which which were, you know, during ancient times, until date, if you if you hurt the softest target in, in a community, that is when you win in a war, you know, when you win a war us, you hit the women, you, you rape the women, you do all sorts of things, and you're hurting the community. So that is what their intention is to hurt the community.

Because, you know, that's what you're doing. You're enraging that community that we are going to do this to your women.

*Afreen says that the media portrayal of such incidents needs to change.*

**Afreen:** I want to say that the whole Sulli Deals issue that happened should be seen in the light of the rampant islamophobia and the perpetrators... It's not just the identity of the victim, but also the identity of the perpetrators, which is Hindu men should also be talked about equally because it is as important. I was attacked because I was a Muslim woman, but who attacked me and why did they attack me is also an important question that we need to address. Because every single time lynching happens when people say that a Muslim man was lynched, no one tells who lynched him. A Hindu mob lynched him. Every single time a Dalit woman is raped people say, the fight is to ensure that people will say that it's a dalit woman, but at the same time, the fight should also be that it was a Brahmin man or a thakur man, or some upper caste man who raped her.

*A month on from Sulli Deals, the Twitter accounts of these women reflect newer issues. On 8th August people gathered at a rally organised by former BJP spokesperson Ashwini Upadhyay in Delhi, chanting slogans about killing Muslim people. Nabiya and Afreen have been condemning it. Afreen was briefly picked up by the Delhi police on 10th August from a protest against the incident.*

*On the other hand, Hana has tweeted about shifting to another city for work and being unable to rent a flat because of her religion.*

*What is the cost of such daily personal and political battles for young Muslim women? Afreen says it is all too common to have bad mental health.*

**Afreen:** I do not know of a single Muslim activist who is not seeking therapy and we should not have. When dealing with this, it should not have been this for us, we should have had that privilege of just studying or working. But we don't have that privilege. And we have to speak up. Because if we don't, no one else will. And I think that's what makes me more anxious. That's what makes me more insecure. The fact that I am not safe anywhere. The fact that every single time I come online, or every single time I step outside of my house, I'm taking a huge risk is unsettling for all of us. And the community is dealing with it somehow, because we refuse to just exist. We want dignified existence, we want our self respect. And we're not going to settle for anything less than that.

*Hana says she is always angry now. The Sulli Deals incident has made her a different person.*

**Hana:** I'm disgusted. I'm angry. I was not an angry person. I am not an angry person. And I am just constantly angry. You know, in a day I do speak about it to many people, I do talk about it.

And I don't want to talk about these things. I don't want to have to have this anger in my head. I hate it. I just hate it. I'm such a. I've always been a positive human being. I've always been a go-getter. And here I am thinking about something as disgusting as this. And that's, that's irritating. You know, thankfully, I'm not depressed or I'm not upset. I'm just angry. I'm very angry, which I've never been before. I don't like it.

*Nabiya says that since the incident, the targets of Sulli Deals have become like a support group for each other.*

**Nabiya:** The solidarity that we have with each other is the only thing that helps us and keeps us going on. We have faced so much hatred, so much trolling online after this incident that so many women I know are having such bad mental health right now. But then our support, our solidarity for each other keeps us I feel like we don't have any other option, we never had the privilege to stay quiet. This fight was forced upon us. We have to continue this fight. We don't have an option to take a break and feel sad or to like distance ourselves from all these vile things.

*Tum uthao zamane pe talkiyan  
Tum dhao zamane pe talkiyan, Savarkar ka paigam ban ke  
Vo fool bichata chalega Ambedkar ka samvidhan ban ke  
Apni zillat ka hisab lega ek Shaheen insaan ban ke  
Ho jaoge tum khaak Hitler ka anjaam ban ke  
Uthaega tumhari jhoothi khudi ka nikab dhaega tum pe adal aur sitam ka hisab  
Aaega inqulab pehen ke chudiyan, burqa, hijab  
Pathardil shehr me ruksaar e yaar ban ke  
Zard patte khil jaenge atishen chinar ban ke  
Karega bagawat apne haq ka haqdar ban ke  
Badlega zamana waqt ki raftar ban ke  
Kabhi dafli ka banega rag kabhi ishq toh kabhi gulaab  
Aaega inqulab pehen ke chudiyan, burqa, hijab  
Aaega inqulab.'*

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