

# News

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## Dharmasthala burial case: The News Minute challenges Karnataka High Court over gag orders



The applications have been filed contesting two ex-parte gag orders granted by the trial courts in Bangalore restricting The News Minute's reportage on the Dharmasthala burial accusations and the Sowjanya murder case.

News Minute and Karnataka High Court

Spunklane Media Private Limited, which owns web portal The News Minute (TNM), has approached the Karnataka High Court challenging two separate gag orders that have allegedly been used to curb its reporting on the murder of 17-year-old Sowjanya and the recent allegations involving the Dharmasthala temple and burials [Spunklane Media Pvt Ltd v Harshendra Kumar D & ors and connected case].

In one case, TNM has challenged an ex-parte gag order dated March 22 passed by VI Additional City Civil and Sessions Judge, Bangalore.

The order was passed in a suit filed by employees of the Sri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project.

Although TNM was not named a party to the complaint, it received warnings from the plaintiffs seeking the removal of specific articles and a tweet, citing the court's ruling and invoking the 'John Doe' classification.

'John Doe' categorization allows courts to issue orders against unknown persons whose names are not known at the relevant time.

Even though TNM was not a party to the complaint and the content in question was not libelous, it pulled down the content temporarily 'without prejudice' only to avoid further legal complications.

However, the March 22 directive was then invoked again in emails ordering TNM to erase another video.

TNM refused to comply, pointing out that the video was not named in the schedule to the ex-parte decision and that the film merely covered verifiable facts including the registration of a FIR and public statements made by officials, including Karnataka's Home Minister.

TNM further asserted that despite being fully aware of its identity and having previously litigated against it, the respondents were still seeking to harass TNM by demanding it to remove content, under the 'John Doe' categorization, without providing it an opportunity to be heard.

In a separate appeal, the news portal has challenged an ex-parte gag order dated July 18 imposed by an X Additional City Civil and Sessions Judge, Bangalore, in a litigation where TNM was identified as defendant No 47 along with 338 other defendants.

The order prevented TNM from publishing any content connected to the Dharmasthala dispute.

According to TNM, the order was granted without providing it prior notice, as required under Order 39 Rule 3 of the Civil Procedure Code (CPC), and without documenting any justification for why the court chose to continue without hearing TNM first.

As per the plea, the order fails to discriminate between genuine defamatory content and fair, factual reporting on subjects of important public importance, and the sweeping breadth of the injunction amounted to a restriction on press freedom..

"The Impugned Order has a serious effect of stifling free speech and consequently has a chilling effect on the Petitioner's fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression as guaranteed under Article 19 of the Constitution of India," the plea argues.

TNM has highlighted in both petitions that its reporting did not identify wrongdoing to any single individual from the temple administration. However, the respondents were falsely accusing them of defamation, while seeking wide takedowns and future limits on publishing.

Notably, TNM also relied on the recent Karnataka High Court verdict in a similar lawsuit brought by the YouTube channel Kudla Rampage, where the High Court invalidated the ex-parte gag order dated July 18, 2025.

Drawing from this precedent, TNM has sought similar relief, seeking the High Court to dismiss both ex-parte gag orders granted against it.

The background to these petitions lays in a flood of media coverage that followed severe charges made by a former sanitation worker employed at the Dharmasthala Manjunathaswamy Temple.

The worker stated in a police complaint that he had been compelled by his employers to bury numerous dead, including those of women, for nearly two decades.

While the complaint did not name any specific individuals as suspected in a crime, the discoveries generated major public debate and media attention, including coverage by The News Minute.

Following this, Harshendra Kumar, Secretary of the Dharmasthala temple institutions, filed a civil defamation suit before a sessions court in Bengaluru, naming 8,842 allegedly defamatory links.

These included 4,140 YouTube videos, 932 Facebook posts, 3,584 Instagram posts, 108 news articles, 37 Reddit posts, and 41 tweets.

The sessions court then ordered a sweeping gag order on reporting the incident.