

THE LEDE / COMMUNITIES

## On the Run

An interfaith marriage that stirred up trouble in Leh

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LEO PLUNKETT

During a late-summer road trip last September, Stanzin Saldon and Murtaza Agha unexpectedly showed up at their friend's house, overlooking Manasbal Lake near Srinagar. They could not contact him beforehand because they had abandoned their phones to conceal their exact whereabouts.

While Saldon and Agha breakfasted with his parents in the morning, the friend bolted out and ran around the neighbourhood, retrieving the daily paper from the

neighbours' doorsteps. He did not want people to see the front page, which featured his guests' faces. That month, Saldon and Agha were breaking news.

He kept the couple's secret for a week. Only on their way out the door did they finally reveal to his family that they were not just on a summer holiday. They were on the run from the Ladakh Buddhist Association, an organisation whose members were trying furiously to separate them. Two weeks later, they would be married for a second time.

Saldon, who is from a Buddhist family in Leh, and Agha, from a Balti Muslim family in Kargil, were briefly one of the most recognisable faces of “love jihad,” a rampant and xenophobic conspiracy theory surrounding the so-called forced conversion of non-Muslim women to Islam. The couple met on a trek in 2010 and started a nonprofit called rZamba—from the Ladakhi word for “bridge”—that organises youth leadership programmes. Their eventual marriage inadvertently stirred up communal anxieties in Ladakh, which is mainly split between Muslims, who comprise around 46 percent of the population, and Buddhists, who make up around 40 percent. But unlike several other interfaith romances that have made the news, their story has a happy ending.

After their week in Manasbal, Saldon and Agha took off, on no specific route, surprising more friends at their houses and even spending a sleepless night rowing across Dal Lake. They stopped travelling on 21 September, when they showed up as special guests at their own, second wedding at a hotel in Kargil, which friends had organised in their absence. Saldon wore a red goncha, a traditional Ladakhi dress for both Muslims and Buddhists, which she had bought preemptively in Kargil two years prior, and a silvery veil. The couple was garlanded with necklaces of rupee notes. There were officially around 40 guests, but over a hundred friends and well-wishers crashed the reception, held later at Agha's family home in Dras, a town in the Himalayan foothills. They had a Kashmiri feast of big round flatbreads and goat curry.





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“It was like our honeymoon,” Saldon said, recounting the road trip over lime sodas this March in Jammu. The couple has been living there since 2011, separately and then together. “Except it all happened before the wedding!” Then again, Saldon and Agha are not exactly of the kind to do things the usual way.

“You know, I proposed to him,” Saldon said. “We were on holiday in Himachal and there she got this realisation...” Agha began. “No, not there!” Saldon interrupted. Even when they talk to others, they seem to primarily address each other. “I was pinned down in a car crash in Delhi in 2015 and the only person I wanted to see was Murtaza,” she said. She had just received a marriage proposal from an eligible Buddhist man in Leh and was considering it, knowing there would be “huge drama” if she actually tried to marry Agha, who was her boyfriend at the time. She decided to fly back to Jammu from the hospital to propose to him. “I was shocked,” he told me.

The couple married secretly in July 2016, in Kargil. Agha’s family grudgingly came to terms with the marriage after he brought Saldon to his house in Jammu, but her family was furious. They forced her to return to her home in Leh that winter, where she stayed until she got a restraining order against her family before fleeing back to Jammu.

Members of the Ladakh Buddhist Association stormed the Leh bazaar last fall over Saldon and Agha’s marriage and Muslim and Buddhist men reportedly fought in the

streets. In September 2017, the LBA sent a petition to Mehbooba Mufti, Jammu and Kashmir's chief minister, demanding that she dissolve the couple's marriage. They claimed that Agha had "lured" Saldon into a trap.

The notion of love jihad was aggressively promoted by Hindu nationalists. "Now the love jihad concept is all over India, and even in Ladakh we have a BJP government," Agha said, referring to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. "We were the right people to blame for this issue in our region at the right time."

(/magazine/2019/03)

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Not willing to risk another separation, the couple went on the run. “We just drove,” Saldon told me. During the trip, Saldon alternated between ignoring the situation and feeling furious that so many people were speaking on her behalf. A week into their road trip, she wrote a fierce opinion piece in a Srinagar hotel room, which they sent it to a friend at the *Indian Express*.

“I will be 30 years old soon. I am an independent and educated woman and I have made all my choices regarding my life by my own free will—a right granted and guaranteed to every citizen of this country by the Constitution of India,” she wrote. “I have married Syed Murtaza Agha because I love him. There is absolutely no other reason.” The published piece was titled “I am Saldon I am Shifah,” referring to the Muslim name she chose for herself after she converted to Islam.

After Saldon’s cogently argued and public self-defence, the LBA’s attacks lost steam; its campaign went unheeded at the chief minister’s office. In fact, Saldon had privately converted to Islam in Karnataka before she and Agha even started dating.

“I just studied Islam on my own, starting six years ago,” she said. “People ask me why. I don’t have good reasons, you just know. It is a private matter.” She said she calls

herself a Sufi. She has long felt uneasy with the rigid norms of Ladakhi Buddhist society. “Ironically, in Ladakh, the caste system still exists for Buddhists even though Buddha was against castes.”

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The couple now leads a quieter life in Hindu-majority Jammu, away from both their families. Agha works as a government-employed electrical engineer and Saldon works for a private education nonprofit. They hang out with their friends in town, visit hiking trails and hill stations, and go out for non-vegetarian food. But they also get recognised in the street. “When we go to a mall, people will just stop and stare. Sometimes I try to relieve them myself by offering a selfie,” Saldon said.

Strangers write to them for advice. Agha gets a lot of Facebook messages. Young girls write to Saldon asking how she did it—how she made such an unapologetic break with her past. “I don’t know where it came from. You only know once you’ve done it,” she said, adding that another of her previous acts of rebellion, leaving medical school after three years to work in the development sector, was considered “insane” too.

Back in Leh, the LBA appears not to have reflected on the failures of its crusade against Saldon and Agha. “Interfaith marriages and friendships, we can’t stop it but it’s not good for our community,” Konchuk Ishey, the vice president of the LBA’s youth wing, told me. “These cases where Muslim men lure our women only started five to six years ago,” he claimed, although when pressed for specifics, he could not elaborate. “Indian women are very precious, it’s not like in the West.”

According to Rinchen, a development worker and Buddhist woman who lives in Leh, some members of the LBA have begun telling Buddhist girls not to wear tight jeans and short kurtas, try and break up interfaith relationships and organise official and unofficial boycotts of Muslim businesses.

After the lime sodas were drained, Agha drove us out to the Bajalta lookout point, in the hills above Jammu, to watch the sunset. He drove the same silver sedan they took on the road last September.



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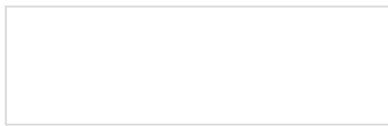
“I haven’t been here in more than a year,” Saldon said, as a train pulled into the station below and a shade of blue seeped into the pink sky. They used to come to Bajalta on dates in their early days as a couple. “I’m glad all this happened, looking back, because, growing up, I wanted to be sure about marriage. Now I’m so sure.”

They are polymaths, speaking half a dozen languages each, and Saldon is also an accomplished singer and dancer. These days, she teaches Agha how to dance by inventing choreography to Bollywood songs.

As we drove back into town, Murtaza urged her to sing a ghazal.

“Please? Just one?”

“*Hoshwalon ko khabar kya...*” she began. “What do sane people know—” about love?



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