

Thanjavur Suicide: NCPCR Suggests Tampering of Evidence but Remains Silent on 'Conversion' Angle

Activists said because the child rights panel was acting upon a complaint of alleged forced conversion, it should have discussed its findings regarding these claims.



NCPCR chief Priyank Kanoongo. Photo: Twitter

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Chennai: In its inquiry report on the death by suicide of a minor girl in Ariyalur district in Tamil Nadu, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) said it found many “glaring issues” which should be investigated by the authorities – including tampering of evidence – but remained largely silent on the allegations that the girl decided to end her life because she was forced to convert to Christianity.

On January 19, the 17-year-old girl – a plus two student at Sacred Hearts school in the Michaelpatti village – died by suicide, ten days after consuming herbicide. The death snowballed into a major controversy in the state with the BJP claiming that the girl had died by suicide because she was “forced to convert to Christianity” by the school. The BJP also released a video of the girl, in which she says that the school authorities had told her to convert a couple of years ago and that she was harassed in different ways.

But the state police’s investigation discounted the possibility of the conversion angle. There were also reports that suggested that the girl was harassed by her stepmother, driving her to suicide. Subsequently, the case was transferred to the CBI by the Madurai bench of the Madras high court.

A three-member team of the NCPCR, consisting of its chairperson Priyank Kanoongo, Madhulika Sharma (advisor, education) and Katyayani Anand (consultant, legal) visited Thanjavur on January 30 and 31 to conduct a “thorough enquiry” into the incident. They were acting on a complaint received on January 20 about “forceful illegal conversion of children, corporal punishment and mental agony driving the student to suicide”. The report, released on Thursday, said that the committee was in “receipt of 3545 complaints pertaining to the issue and demanding an enquiry”.

The report said there were many discrepancies and lapses in the immediate steps taken by the school authorities for the care of the minor girl after she fell sick and in the investigation into her death by the authorities.

It stated that the school did not have separate rooms and accommodation for the stay of children. It said that in the absence of proper compliance of due procedure of law and since the alleged crime scene was not sealed and cordoned off for the purpose of the investigation by the local police, there might exist a possibility of tampering with evidence.

The committee also said there were anomalies in statements made by the investigation officer and the superintendent of police. “The steps taken by the investigating authorities were observed to be not in line with the rules of procedure that should have been adopted in case of investigation into the death of a minor girl. This creates suspicion whether the investigating agency is doing a fair investigation or not,” it said.



Representative image of Tamil Nadu police. Photo: PTI

The report also slammed the school for not making sincere efforts to provide appropriate medical care to the girl. “A local nurse was engaged by the school for the medical treatment of the minor child and when the child fell more sick, the CCI contacted the parents of the minor child,” it said. This lapse, the report says, “indicates malicious intention of the CCI to conceal the real reasons behind the minor girl’s death”.

The school also collected fees from the mother before allowing the girl to be taken for the treatment to the hospital, the report noted. “The Commission observed that no inquiry had taken place against this action of the school authorities for taking fee from the mother of the deceased child,” it said.

The NCPCR report also said that the authorities “were trying to turn the incident into a story of the minor having an evil stepmother, and how that stepmother forced the deceased child to do household work”. But in the course of the interaction with the school and police, the NCPCR found out that the minor girl “was made to do official work of the CCI by the warden like book keeping, accounting, store management etc and other work like cleaning the premises, washing toilets, opening the door etc”.

The report said that the investigative authorities ignored the requests of the family to probe the conversion angle but did not elaborate on the possibility of the angle.

NCPCR has recommended that the chief secretary take action against district authorities who failed to act as per the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 and to provide necessary counselling, compensation and assistance to the parents and the brother of the deceased girl. It has also recommended an enquiry into institutes that are functioning under the Tamil Nadu Hostel and Homes for Women and Children (Regulation) Act 2014 and the Juvenile Justice Act and provide the list to the NCPCR.

It has also recommended shifting all the children residing in the hostel. The NCPCR has also recommended to the DGP to take disciplinary action against the district police officials for not following the due process of investigation and conducting a fair investigation.

‘Incomplete’, say activists

But activists denounce the report as ‘incomplete’. Pointing out that the NCPCR committee was visiting on a complaint about conversion, **Henry Tiphagne, executive director of the People’s Watch movement, said that the report was conspicuously silent on this angle.**

“It is a sad state of affairs. The complaint is about forced illegal conversion of children. The report does not discuss the findings of their enquiry vis-à-vis that. The report does not fully say who they met, who deposed before them. When the report says they were acting on a specific complaint, shouldn’t it also reveal the findings of the committee on that complaint?” he asks.

Jeeva Kumar, a lawyer from Rayamundanpatti, a neighbouring village of Michaelpatti, who deposed before the NCPCR committee, told The Wire that he informed the panel that there was “no chance of forceful conversion” in this region. “I said it was not fair to meddle with the education of children with such non-existent problems. I also told the committee that we expect it to act without any bias,” he said.

Several residents of the villages who had their children studying in the Sacred Hearts school made the same deposition, Kumar claimed, adding that he is not surprised that the committee hardly mentions the conversion angle.

State BJP chief K. Annamalai, in a tweet, highlighted the report's finding that the police ignored the pleas of the family to probe the conversion angle. He rejected news reports which said the committee found no evidence of forced conversion.

If you know someone – friend or family member – at risk of suicide, please reach out to them. The Suicide Prevention India Foundation maintains a list of telephone numbers (www.spif.in/seek-help/) they can call to speak in confidence. You could also refer them to the nearest hospital.

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<https://thewire.in/rights/thanjavur-suicide-ncpcr-tampering-evidence-silent-conversion-angle>