













# An untimely death and its ugly aftermath

The death by suicide of a 17-year-old girl of a school in a village in Thanjavur district has led to political one-upmanship in Tamil Nadu, with the BJP claiming that it was due to an attempt at religious conversion. **S. Ganesan** and **C. Jaisankar** report on the case that the Madras High Court has asked the CBI to probe



Michaelpatti village, where the school is located, is named after the St. Archangel Michael's Church (above) in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. (Below): The police near the lane leading to the school. • SRINATH M.

**M**ichaelpatti, a laidback village that takes its name from the over 100-year-old St. Archangel Michael's Church in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, has been rudely thrust into the limelight over the past fortnight.

The ubiquitous police presence in the small village, situated on the banks of the Kudamuruttai river along the fertile Cauvery delta in central Tamil Nadu, is striking. Policemen and women keep a watchful eye on visitors at street corners, shops and around the church.

The tension is especially palpable near the Christian Missionary-run school at the centre of this controversy, situated on a narrow lane off the main road from Thiruthottupalli town. Police officers, including some in plainclothes, take down the details of visitors.

Past the security cordon, there is silence in the air in the premises. It is apparent that the school is here to come to terms with the death by suicide of a Class 12 student and its unexpected aftermath. The death has become a political rallying point for the Bharatiya Janata Party and right-wing organisations in the State.

**Death by suicide**  
Students have returned to classes since restrictions imposed in the wake of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 have been lifted. But teachers still appear overwrought. "We are tired. We need to and we are being told to focus on academics. But we are constantly distracted by all these visits and all the media attention," says a senior teacher.

The girl, whose untimely death has affected the school and the village, had been one of the school's 677 students, a majority of them Hindus. This year, she had scored 489 out of 500 marks in the SSLC exam and was preparing for the Class 12 exam. "She was intelligent. She would not talk much to us teachers. She was pretty normal with her friends," says the Sister.

The girl haled from Vadugapalayam in neighbouring Ariyalur district. She had been staying at the hostel right next to the school gate since Class 8 and was known to be studious. On January 9, she had apparently made a bid to end her life. When she started throwing up, the hostel cook took her to a nurse in the village who administered an injection and gave her some tablets. But as the vomiting did not abate, the hostel authorities called her father, who took her home and later to local hospitals for treatment for "stomach pain". When her condition worsened, she was admitted to the Thanjavur Government Medical College Hospital on January 15. Throughout this ordeal, the girl did not reveal the reason for her ill health until the doctor at the hospital determined the actual cause on medical examination and investigation.



The police recorded the girl's statement and later, a judicial magistrate took her dying declaration. In both the statements, the girl seemed to agree to terms with the death by suicide of a Class 12 student and its unexpected aftermath. The death has become a political rallying point for the Bharatiya Janata Party and right-wing organisations in the State.

Based on the girl's statement, a case was filed under Section 75 (punishment for cruelty to child), Section 82(1) (indulging in corporal punishment with the aim of disciplining a child), Section 305 (abettment of suicide of child or insane person) and Section 511 (punishment for attempting to commit offences punishable with imprisonment for life or other impositions) of the Juvenile Justice Act against the 67-year-old warden, and she was arrested. An alteration report was filed after the demise of the girl.

Though no suicide note was found, the police reportedly recovered an old student handbook in which the girl had allegedly written that she was awaiting her death.

**A video clip and a sudden turn**  
The issue took a sudden turn after a video clip of the girl alleging that the school correspondent, a couple of years ago, had spoken to her parents about converting her to Christianity went viral on social media after her death. "Could be" was the girl's response in the 47-second video clip, a question on whether she was being forced to convert because she had refused to convert.

As the word spread, the BJP cadre, led by its State vice president, Karuppu Muruganathan, staged a protest near the hospital demanding action against the school authorities for attempting to forcibly convert the girl to Christianity.

The grieving father Muruganathan and the girl's stepmother Saranya too claimed that she had been a victim of an attempt at forcible religious conversion and expressed dissatisfaction with the police investigation. Muruganathan

swiftly moved the High Court seeking a CB-CID inquiry initially but later modified it to a plea for a CBI probe.

It later emerged that the video was shot by P. Muthivel, the district secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, also from Ariyalur. He claims to have visited the girl at the hospital at the request of a friend, who was a relative of the girl's family, to ascertain her condition and ensure proper treatment. Muthivel also claimed that he had video recorded the girl's statement at the request of her stepmother. He later handed over the mobile phone used to shoot the video to the police for forensic investigation as per the High Court directive.

Soon, protests spread across Tamil Nadu with the BJP and right-wing organisations not only demanding action against the school authorities but also asking for an anti-conversion law in the State. They also took exception to the statement made by Superintendent of Police (SP) C. Ravi Prakash Gandhupaini at a press conference that neither the girl nor her parents had mentioned religious conversion as a probable cause during the initial investigation but affirmed that the police would probe this angle too. She also announced that a case had been booked against Muthivel as it was an offence to reveal the identity of the girl under the Juvenile Justice Act.

BJP leaders, including State president K. Annamalai, accused the SP of jumping to conclusions without taking into account the "video evidence". The BJP also sought to put the DMK in the dock, accusing it of double standards and drawing comparisons to the ruling party's stand on the death of Anita, who had died by suicide after failing to qualify in NEET to get a MBBS seat in 2017. Anita was also incidentally from Ariyalur district.

As the BJP kicked up a political storm over the issue, the Left parties, the chairman of the Tamil Nadu State Mi-

norities Commission, Peter Alphonse, and several other organisations came out in support of the school and accused the BJP of attempting to sow seeds of religious hatred in the State. Without referring to the girl's death, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin too echoed similar views, while calling upon his partymen to expose the BJP's "destructive politics" in a statement ahead of elections to urban local bodies in the State.

The school management, the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation, has expressed distress over the issue being "diverted for political reasons" and dismissed the allegation of religious conversion as baseless. "Our institution has been rendering educational service for over 180 years. There has never been such an allegation in our schools in the past," says Rev. Sr. Fatima Paula, Superior General, Immaculate Heart of Mary Generalate, Pondicherry. "Even on holidays, she preferred to stay with us without going home. She grew up as our child and her death is a great loss to us," she says.

The School Education Department, based on an inquiry, asserted that there has been no complaint of any attempt at religious conversion at the school over the years and that it has a large number of Hindu students on its rolls every year.

**Family life**  
Days after the girl's death, a new video clip emerged on social media in which she made no mention of any attempt at religious conversion. In the clip, running for a couple of minutes, the girl claimed that the warden made her write accounts and do other chores. As she was unable to concentrate on her studies, she decided she would take the extreme step, she claimed.

But the girl's parents were not convinced. Muruganathan remains firm that his daughter had died by suicide as she had been unable to withstand the pressure to convert. "She was a victim of religious conversion. You couldn't find any fault with her, and we wanted to give her quality education. But we never imagined she would meet such a fate. No one should undergo our agony," Muruganathan, a small farmer, said at his home at Vadugapalayam.

He had re-married in 2014, a few months after the death of his first wife Kanimozi, the mother of three children, including the deceased girl. He and his second wife Saranya have a boy, The role of Muruganathan and Saranya also came in for close scrutiny.

The school management, in its implacable petition before the court, rejected the allegations of conversion and said that the warden had taken care of the girl as her own child and even paid her school fees. The girl, suffering from a dermatological condition, was pushed to die by her wife due to the cruel treatment of the stepmother and the domestic situation, it contended.

Police investigations also revealed that the victim's grandmother, Nithyantha Sarawathi, had made a call to Chidline in July 2020 alleging that the girl was being harassed by her stepmother. She had apparently made the call based on information provided by the villagers that the girl had been branded by the stepmother. However, when Chidline workers visited the girl, she had reportedly denied any such ill-treatment and the matter was treated as closed.

S. Subramani, the father of Kanimozi who was Muruganathan's first wife, also believes that the girl was ill-treated by her stepmother. "We do not have any contact with my son-in-law since the death of my daughter Kanimozi, though we live in the same village. My grandchildren don't visit my stepmother. We could not do much when we came to know that my granddaughter had been branded," he says. Incidentally, Kanimozi too ended her life in 2013 reportedly due to a domestic quarrel.

But Saranya denies the charges vehemently: "I treated all the children equally and never discriminated against any of them. She was the only girl in the family. No trip or festival was complete without her. Nothing can compensate for her loss," she says. "Since Class 10, she preferred to spend the holidays in the hostel as she wanted to prepare well for her public exams. She came home for Deepavali and remained here when the school was closed during the pandemic," she says.

Meanwhile, a team of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, led by its chairperson Priyank Kanangoor, flew down from New Delhi for a spot inquiry with district officials at Thanjavur, the school at Michaelpatti and the girl's parents in Ariyalur. A four-member fact-finding team of the CBI,

which included Sandhya Ray, MP, and Vijayashanti, former MP, too visited Thanjavur and Ariyalur.

Residents of Michaelpatti are not amused by all the "inquiries and politicisation" of the issue. The majority of about 900 families are Christians and a section of them even petitioned the Collector expressing resentment over the parallel inquiries in the village. The villagers maintain that allegations of forcing religious conversion were unheard of in the village.

"I have never heard of any such complaint in the school or the village. The families of all three religions have co-existed here peacefully for years," says J. Gurumurthy (80), who was among those who presented a petition to the collector on behalf of Hindu and Muslim residents. "My son and daughter studied at the school but they never faced any such issue," says L.K. Azeez, another resident.

With the Madras Bench of the Madras High Court transferring the case to CBI, the villagers hope that the truth will be established soon. "We all stand together and agree that the death of the child is a big loss. We expect the CBI probe will be fair and bring out the truth," says A. Jeyraj, an AIADMK member and former president of the village panchayat.

**High Court directive**  
With allegations and counter-allegations flying thick and fast in the case, the High Court, while ordering a CBI probe, said that it had a duty to render "posthumous justice" to the girl and felt that the circumstances, taken cumulatively, will create an impression that the investigation was not proceeding on the right lines.

Ministers and the Education Department have exonerated the school management of the charge of conversion, the order said. The Thanjavur SP asserted at a press conference that the conversion angle was not made out in the preliminary inquiry. Such a statement was unwarranted because by then the private video had already been in circulation, the order said. Justice G.R. Swami-nathan observed in his order that the parents had given a complaint alleging us without her. Nothing can compensate for her loss," she says. "Since Class 10, she preferred to spend the holidays in the hostel as she wanted to prepare well for her public exams. She came home for Deepavali and remained here when the school was closed during the pandemic," she says.

Whether there is truth in the allegations is a matter for investigation and for the court to decide. But two conflicting narratives have politicised the suicide of the girl and enmeshed facts in a complex web of lies and propaganda.

Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on the State's health helpline 104 and Sneha's suicide prevention helpline 044-24640050



















