

Yoga Center Holds Women Hostage for Marrying Christian Men

Police in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala have launched an investigation into a complaint by a woman in her 20s who says she was detained and harassed for 22 days at a yoga center because she had married a Christian, according to *The Times of India*.

A case was registered against five people, including the director of the Siva Sakthi Yoga Center in Tripunithura, near Kochi, which is run by the Arsha Vidhya Samajam Charitable Trust, following an affidavit filed in the Kerala high court by a Hindu woman named Shweta.

She says her parents forced her to go to the yoga center for “counselling” ten months after she married her husband, Rinto Isaac, and says she had to attend classes where she was told about loopholes and contradictions in the Bible and the Quran. When she protested, she says her hands were often tied and that she was “forced to sleep on the floor of dormitories, and the doors of bathrooms did not have locks. There were many who had been confined for years ... Most of the inmates were ill but no treatment was given.”

Shweta, who escaped on Aug. 21, said there were at least another 65 women held illegally at the center because of their marriage to men from other religions, and that they were sexually harassed.

The Women India Movement, the women’s wing of the Social Democratic Party of India, said the actions of the yoga center had all the trademarks of a ‘*Ghar Wapsi*’ campaign—ceremonies in which Hindus who have changed religions are given a “homecoming” back to Hinduism.

Another young woman from north Kerala, 22-year-old Athira, held a press conference on Sept. 23 to explain why she had returned to Hinduism after leaving her home in July to convert to Islam. She said that she was visited by Arsha Vidya Samajam members, who took her for counselling at their Kochi Center, as reported by the *Indian Express*.

In the past four years, Arsha Vidya Samajam claims to have reconverted 2,000 Hindu girls who had converted to other religions.

A growing trend

In May, another Hindu woman, Akhila Ashokan, had her marriage with a young Muslim man annulled by the Kerala high court after her father claimed her husband would take her to fight for the Islamic State. Activists said she had been confined to her home and had undergone “serious rights violations.” The Supreme Court has ordered an investigation into the circumstances that led to their marriage, while the state’s women’s commission has required permission to meet with her.

Seven states in India outlaw proselytizing, and there have been efforts to impose these so-called “anti-conversion laws” at a national level, leading to an increase in attacks on religious minorities, such as Muslims and Christians, by militants who want India to become a Hindu state.

World Watch Monitor reported on Sept. 11 how two Christian women in Karnataka state, just north of Kerala, were accused of trying to convert other women.

Meanwhile on Sept. 23, women from different churches in Kerala launched an Indian Christian Women’s Movement, after one had previously been launched in Pune in 2014. *The Times of India* reports that the purpose of the independent organization is to “change unjust beliefs, practices and structures that perpetuate patriarchy and accentuate the exploitation of women in the churches and in society at various levels”.

Omana Matthew, Chairperson of Kerala Council of Churches women's commission, told the newspaper "that one aspect that triggered the formation of such a forum was the safety issues faced by women", as well as discrimination and denial of personal development.

Kerala has a high proportion of Christians—almost 20 percent of the population. Perhaps the state's most famous Christian will finally return home on Sunday (Oct. 2). Father Tom Uzhunnalil returned to India yesterday, meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other senior political and religious figures in Delhi, having spent 18 months in captivity in Yemen. {eoa}

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