

Uncertainty in deaths of nuns in Kerala over 30 years - An overview

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ABSTRACT

Unnatural death of nuns in Kerala and finding their bodies in the convent has been a nightmare since past 30 years. From 1987, bodies of over 17 nuns were found in various convents in Kerala, including Sister Abhaya's in 1992. The digital and printed media were referred for this review and, in all cases, neither the convent authorities nor the diocese and Kerala Catholic Church has lodged a FIR or investigated to find out the reason for the deaths. Almost every case was initially closed by stating as "Normal Deaths". Reports of human rights violations within the nuns have been repeated in the death. Weeping eyes and swaggering hearts are no stranger to any inmate of the Virgin. Life stories of quite a few nuns is all about slavery, discrimination, oppression, fear, and bitterness. The main aims of the paper are to review the unnatural death of nuns in Kerala and to find of the current status of cases.

Keywords: Nuns, Kerala, Unnatural Death, Convent, Wells

Kerala, known as God's own country has been witnessing several unusual occurring which includes the suspicious death of Christian nuns. Over the last 30 years and above, 17 Christian nuns and a priest had been found dead in their convent areas. The bodies of most of the nuns were usually found in the wells of the convent or the nearby areas itself. Out of these 17 nuns, 8 dead bodies were found in the wells and water tanks of the convents. And thus convents, convent wells, and the deaths of nuns became a nightmare for the people of Kerala. Right from the year 1987 till the recent case in 2020, almost every other year witnessed the death of a nun in Kerala. Most of the cases were closed by the local police without much investigation by claiming them as suicides [3, 5]. The main questions that arises are: How many of those cases are proven? What percentage of offenders is punished? What percentage times have we seen the disappearance of the evidence, the witnesses' altercation, and the abuse of the poor woman who was killed?

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Table 1: List of nuns who were found dead

Sl.No	Year of death	Name of the nun	Place	Place where dead body was found in the nunnery
1	1987	Sr. Linda	Mukkoottuthara	Water Tank
2	1990	Sr. Magdela	Kollam	Room
3	1992	Sr. Abhaya	Kottayam	Well
4	1993	Sr. Mercy	Kottiyam	Room
5	1994	Sr. Annis	Pulpally	Well
6	1998	Sr. Bincy	Pala	Room
7	1998	Sr. Jyothis	Kozhikode	Well
8	2000	Sr. Polsi	Pala	Bathroom
9	2006	Sr. Ancy Varghese	Ranni	Room
10	2006	Sr. Linsa	Kottayam	Room
11	2008	Sr. Anupa Maria	Kollam	Room
12	2009	Sr. Josephine	Trivandrum	Room
13	2011	Sr. Mary Ancy	Poonkulam	Water Tank
14	2015	Sr. Amala	Palai	Room
15	2015	Sr. Stella Maria	Vagamon	Well
16	2018	Sr. Susan Mathew	Kollam	Well
17	2020	Student Sr. Divya	Thiruvalla	Well

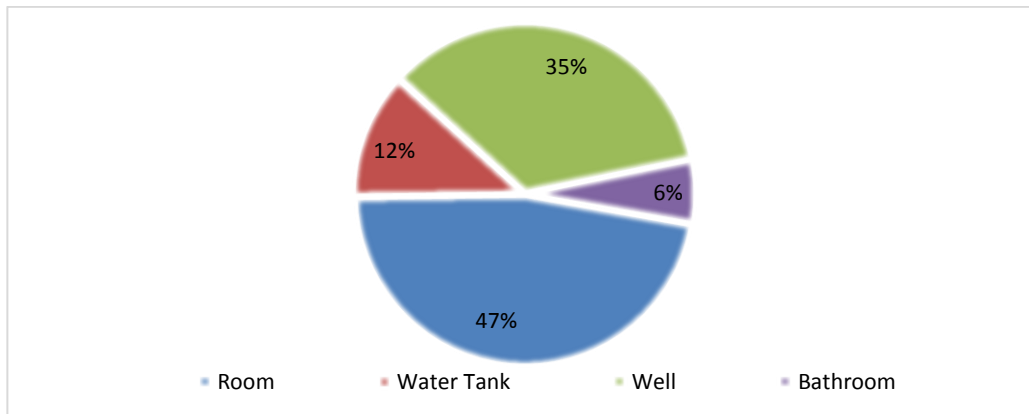


Figure 1: Pie Chart showing exact location of dead body in the nunnery

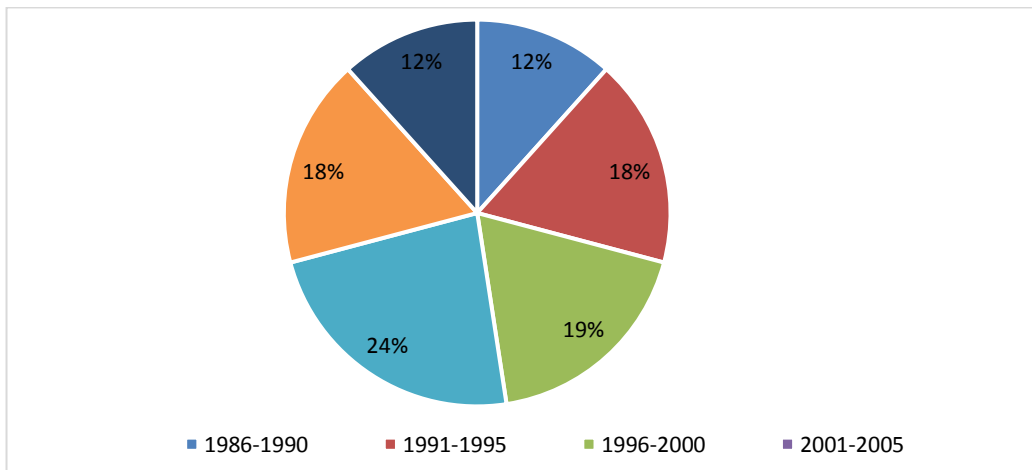


Figure 2: Pie Chart showing the prominent years of deaths recorded

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Church refers nuns as the 'Brides of Christ'. Recently, within the case of a nun's death, even her family is reluctant to file a case or invite action against the authorities because they're scared of dire consequences when it involves a subsequent wedding, baptism, engagement, burial, and even the studies of their children. There's also a belief created within the faithful that if they get up against the Church, their families are going to be ruined [1].

Hence in such cases, the family either remains silent or retracts any statement given earlier against the Church. Nuns are first and foremost Indian women. Nun-hood may be a lifestyle very similar to marriage. The state should ensure their safety. However, the changing governments in Kerala have not bring justice to nun victims usually because these governments are influenced by money power, muscle power, and vote bank politics [9]. Catholic groups during a southern Indian state have accused the Church of covering up the deaths of three nuns who they assert were murdered, but Church leaders say the Catholics are misguided.

The cases at a glance

Sister Abhaya Murder Case is the longest running murder investigation case in Kerala. Sister Abhaya, a Catholic sister, was found dead in the water well in St Pius X Convent in Kottayam on 27 March 1992. The local police investigated the case and closed it initially stating it as Suicide. The Crime Branch later tried to strengthen the suicide theory, with claims of psychological illness of the deceased [4]. On a writ petition, the supreme court of Kerala transferred the investigation to the Central Bureau of Investigation. the primary team of CBI did not find the rationale of death. Upon the instruction of the court a second team was acknowledged, which concluded that it had been indeed murder, but there is not enough evidence leading to the murderer. Court installed the 3rd team of CBI, and that they finally found two priests and a sister liable for the murder and arrested them on 19 November 2008. On 17 July 2009, charges of murder, and destruction of evidence were filed. The death of Sister Linda, who was found dead in Mukkoottuthara convent in 1987, and the deaths of several other nuns still needs a credible closure. Police presume that most of these deaths were recorded as suicidal deaths under duress from the church and government. The list of deaths shrouded in mystery include that of sister Abhaya in 1992, sister Mercy from Kottiyam was found dead, in 1994 Sister Annis' body was found in the well of Pulpally Marakavu convent; in 1998, sister Jyothis' body was found in the Kozhikode Kallurutti Convent well; in the same year sister Bincy was found dead in Pala Convent under mysterious circumstances; in 2000 Pala Snehagiri convent inmate Sister Polsi was found dead and recently Sister Susan was found dead in the well at Pathananpuram. The post-mortem report of the nun whose body was found inside a well at a convent near Kollam has stated the rationale for death as drowning. But, her abdomen showed the presence of naphthalene balls, and both her wrists were found to be slashed. "It is difficult to believe that these nuns who have had no history of previous health problems simply died one fine day,". In November 1998 when Sacred Heart Sister Jyothis, 28, was found dead inside a convent well in Thamarassery diocese. Local police said she committed suicide [3, 12, 13].

Precisely, in 1987 Sister Linda found dead in a water tank of Convent, in 1990 Sister Magdela killed at Tillery, Kollam, in 1992 Sister Abhaya found dead in well at Pius Tenth Convent, in 1993 Sister Mercy found dead at Kottayam, in 1994 Sister Annis found dead in the well at Pulpalli Marrakavu Convent, in 1998 Sister Bincy died at Pala Convent, in 1998 Sister Jyothis found dead in the well at Kozhikode Kallooriti Convent, in 2000 Sister Polsi killed at Pala Snehagiri Convent, in 2006 Sister Ancy Varghese, killed at Rathnie's Convent, in 2006 Sister Lisa was murdered in Kottayam Wakatanam, in 2008 Sister Anupa Maria

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found dead in Kollam 2009 Sr. Josephine who lived in the Daughters of Mary Convent in Thiruvananthapuram, committed suicide, in 2011 Sister Mary Annie, found dead in a tank in the convent at Poonkulam, in 2015 Sister Amala is found dead at the Lisyu Convent in Palai, in 2015 Sister Stella Maria, found dead in the well at Vagamon Ulupuni Convent, in 2018 Sister Susan Mathew found dead in the well at Mount Tabur Convent, Kollam, in 2020 Monk student Divya found dead in the well in Basilian Sisters Convent, Thiruvalla [2, 4, 6]. Recently a similar case occurred in Kerala where Rev Fr George Ettuparayil, 55, the vicar of the St Thomas Church was found dead in the Parish well in June 2020. Police initially considered it as a case of suicide but later on filed a case of Unnatural Death [14].

The saga of most of the cases lies like, either closing it initially stating them as suicides and not even going for further investigations or tagging them as the cases of Unnatural Death. The main focus of this topic for a study was as the victims belonged to the same community and there lies a strong similarity in all the cases from the location of the dead bodies to the investigatory status of those cases.

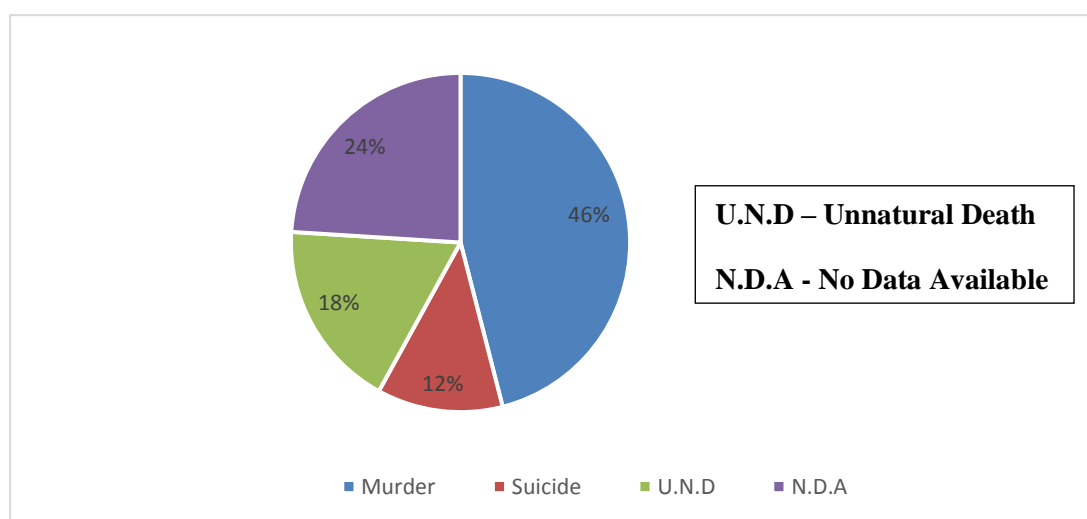


Figure 3: Pie Chart showing the current status of the cases

CONCLUSION

There are not any available figures on the amount of suicides of nuns till now, and there are a variety of suicides of nuns in Kerala that never got reported in the press. Only those cases during which the victims had some relative to question the unnatural death ever got into the newspapers. Otherwise there were just obituaries. Most of the cases are closed as suicide cases very initially or the evidences are cleared out or else cases are closed intentionally. The devious polity of recent India put a blanket on the rightful debate on alien and criminal religious practices, and their ethical and moral effect on the indigenous people and society. The Church should ensure the safety and security of nuns and nun trainees. The parents who send their young daughters to the Church should be ensured of the safety of their daughters. The Church always stood for justice and should bring justice to the victims and proper investigation should be done in such mishappenings. Introspection to this effect is the need of the hour on part of the Church. The cases filed and closed stating as 'Unnatural Death' shall be interrogated properly.

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Acknowledgments

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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