

Protests Break Out in TN Following Pollachi Sexual Harassment Case

Leaked video and audio recordings, police bungling, and alleged political interference have led to thousands taking to the streets, demanding justice for the survivors.

A storm of protests and outrage has broken out in Tamil Nadu in the fortnight since the case of serial sexual assault and extortion in Pollachi in Coimbatore district came to public attention. Leaked video and audio recordings, police missteps, and alleged political interference have fuelled the protests. On March 13, according to Kaviya Sabapathy, Girls' Sub-committee Convenor for SFI Tamil Nadu, students from 150 colleges and universities in the State boycotted classes to carry out demonstrations.

The issue came to light in the third week of February when a woman approached the police, initially with a complaint of chain snatching. It was later revealed that four men had allegedly sexually harassed and blackmailed her. The arrest of the suspects revealed a huge racket of blackmailing women for sexual favours or money which has been going on since 2013, with officials stating that at least 50 women may have been sexually harassed. On March 12, the case was transferred from the Tamil Nadu Police to the CB-CID and the next day, the government announced that the CBI would conduct the investigation. Despite these steps, there is a general distrust of the fairness of the probe, especially due to the lapses in the investigation so far.

For instance, Coimbatore SP R. Pandiyarajan, who was initially responsible for the investigation, actually revealed the name of the survivor in a press conference. Both the Pollachi police and a Government Order reportedly also revealed her name too. Though the IPC clearly protects survivors from such disclosures, the repeated instances of such revelations are being viewed as a means of intimidation to prevent women from coming forward and complaining. "This is gross injustice. Just this one act will function in keeping other women from coming forward, threatening them effectively into silence. Severe action needs to be taken against him", says P.

Suganthi, State General Secretary for All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). In her view, the police have deliberately impeded the investigations.

In a press statement, Henri Tiphagne, Executive Director of People's Watch, Madurai, condemned the disclosure and called for serious action to be taken, "It is worrisome that none of the higher police officers including the Additional Director General of Police(L&O), Inspector General of Police, Coimbatore and Deputy Inspector General of Police of Coimbatore range have not taken any disciplinary action against Mr. Pandiyarajan known to the public for revealing the identity of the victim. Secondly, Mr. Pandiyarajan by stating that there was no "political influence" in this case has raised more doubts and concerns about the nature of the investigation." Tiphagne also alluded to an earlier incident of misdemeanour by Pandiyarajan, in 2017 when he was a Deputy Superintendent. A widely publicised video shows him slapping a woman protestor at a demonstration against TASMAL (Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation that has monopoly on liquor sales in the state.) People's Watch has registered a complaint against him with National Human Rights Commission, which has been transferred to the Tamil Nadu State Human Rights Commission. The SHRC has attached this complaint to their suo-motu complaint, according to Tiphagne.

Media Mishandling

The Editor of Tamil journal *Nakkheeran*, has come under fire from the state wing of the Network of Women in Media, India (NWWMI). In a statement shared by a member on Facebook, they strongly condemned "...the publication of audio-visual content pertaining to a horrific incident of rape through various platforms. The content, unambiguously, belongs to Nakkheeran, and Mr. Gopal has also urged people to "watch the video" ... Contrary to the claim that the video has served the purpose of initiating outrage, it has only taken perversion into homes via mobile and television screens, as perverted and voyeuristic content, and we do hope you will take all efforts to remove that content forthwith from all fora, including social media."

Political Rows

These events have led to massive outrage in the State. Opposition parties and civil society organisations have mobilised strongly on the issue. The protests intensified after an AIADMK worker, A. Nagaraj, was reported to have assaulted the brother of the survivor. Nagaraj was expelled, citing 'actions that run contrary to the beliefs and

aims of the party' in a [statement](#) co-signed by Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palanisami and Deputy Chief Minister, O. Paneerselvam. However, opposition parties accused the AIADMK of protecting the suspects. On March 12, a DMK-led protest at Pollachi resulted in the arrest of MP and Women's Wing Secretary K. Kanimozhi. SFI had also organised protests on the same day.

Most of these organisations have also expressed scepticism of SP Pandiyarajan's claim that there is no "political connection" to this issue.

Makkal Needhi Maiam, in a [press release](#), stated that the Women and Children Welfare Wing Co-ordinator, Sri Priya rallied together more than 300 "social activists" at Pollachi to submit a petition to the Sub-Collector's Office demanding, "to take severe action against the culprits, take necessary measures to prevent the identity of the victims being revealed and to punish those who spread the identities of the victims immediately." Party President and Founder, Kamal Haasan reportedly filed a complaint at the DGP's office in Chennai.

Concerns and Demands

Speaking to **Newslick**, Kaviya demanded strong punishment for not only the four accused but also all those involved in the racket. She also sought protection for the survivors. "We can convert the courage of that one woman, into the courage of all the survivors; we can convert it into the courage of all the women of this state. We will fight for this until they get justice," she said.

Suganthi said the investigation should be monitored by the High Court. She also wanted cases of accidental deaths in the region to be re-opened to examine if any of them were connected to this racket. Expressing AIDWA's solidarity and support for all the women who come forward to file complaints, she said the government should create a safe space for them

AIDWA will be organising protests on March 15, in Pollachi and all district headquarters in the State. They are trying to bring together student organisations, youth federations, and trade unions for joint mobilisations on the issue. The SFI Tamil Nadu's Girls' Sub-Committee is planning a hunger strike on March 17.

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