

# Rape accusation divides India

KOCHI, INDIA

## Nun says Catholic bishop assaulted her, then church officials urged silence

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When Bishop Franco Mulakkal agreed to personally celebrate the First Communion for Darly's son, a rare honor in their Catholic church in India, the family was overcome with pride.

During the ceremony, Darly looked at her sister, a nun who worked with the bishop, to see her eyes spilling over with tears — tears of joy, she figured. Only later would she learn of her sister's allegation that the night before, the bishop had summoned the nun to his quarters and raped her. The family says that was the first assault in a two-year ordeal in which the prelate raped her 13 times.

The bishop, who has maintained his innocence, will be charged and face trial by a special prosecutor on accusations of rape and intimidation, the police investigating the case said. The church acknowledged the nun's accusations only after five of her fellow nuns publicly rallied to her side to draw attention to her

yearlong quest for justice, despite what they described as heavy pressure to remain silent.

"We used to see the fathers of the church as equivalent to God, but not anymore," said Darly, her voice shaking with emotion. "How can I tell my son about this, that the person teaching us the difference between right and wrong gave him his First Communion after committing such a terrible sin?"

The case in India, in the southern state of Kerala, is part of a larger problem in the church that Pope Francis addressed for the first time last week after decades of silence from the Vatican. He acknowledged that sexual abuse of nuns by clerics is a continuing problem.

At a time when church attendance in the West is low, and empty parishes and monasteries are being shuttered across Europe and America, the Vatican increasingly relies on places like India to keep the faith growing.

The scandal in Kerala is dividing India's Catholics, who number about 20 million, a small minority in a population of about 1.3 billion.

And there may be more to come: Other nuns have stepped forward to report sexual abuse at the hands of priests, the police in Kerala say. In Kerala's Pathanamthitta district, four priests have been accused of blackmailing women during confession, using the



SIVARAM V/REUTERS

**Bishop Franco Mulakkal, center, leaving after questioning by the police near Kochi, India, in September. The bishop has denied accusations that he raped a nun 13 times.**

information to coerce them into sex, according to Sudhakaran Pillai, a police official.

"If this case goes ahead, it will be a new beginning, and priests and bishops will be forced to be held accountable," said the Rev. Augustine Vattoly, a priest in Kerala who was an early supporter of the nun's accusations. He said he was or-

dered by his superiors to back away or face repercussions.

"The church is losing its moral authority," Father Vattoly said. "We are losing the faith of the people. The church will become a place without people if this continues. Just like in Europe, the young will no longer come here."

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# Rape case against bishop shocks India's Catholics

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Details of the nun's accusations came from interviews with law enforcement officials, from her family and from the five other nuns who saw the saga unfold inside the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church.

Copies of the official complaints the nun addressed to the church authorities by email and post were provided to The New York Times. (The nun is not being named and her sister is being identified only by her first name because under Indian law, the media, including international news organizations, cannot identify rape victims.)

The nun's family accuses Bishop Mulakkal, 54, of raping her repeatedly over a two-year period, beginning May 5, 2014.

The bishop could not be reached for comment, but church officials and the Kerala police said he maintains that he is innocent.

The nun, who belongs to the Missionaries of Jesus religious order, first informed the church authorities of the alleged assaults in January 2017, approaching nearly a dozen church officials, including bishops, a cardinal and representatives of the Vatican. Some cautioned her to wait, assuring her that the church would take action. Other officials forbade her to go to the police, her family said.

The only action came in September, after the church's silence led five other nuns to stage a dayslong protest at Kerala's High Court.

They sat in front of a large poster of the Pietà, the sculpture housed in St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City depicting Mary holding the limp body of Jesus in her lap after his crucifixion. Instead of Jesus, the poster featured a nun's life-



SAMYUKTA LAKSHMI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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less body. A placard read "Justice for nuns."

About two weeks after the protests started, the Vatican stripped Bishop Mulakkal of his administrative duties. The next day, Sept. 21, the Kerala police arrested him.

"Retrospectively, the church should have taken action quicker if we had known a crime had really happened. If she thought the church was not acting properly, she should have gone to the police sooner," said the Rev. Paul Karendan, a spokesman for the archdiocese that oversees the headquarters of the Syro-Malabar Church.

Father Karendan said that the church was slow to act at first, as they thought

the nun was resisting transfer orders given by Bishop Mulakkal.

In Kerala, it is not uncommon for families to have one or two daughters take vows as nuns. Statues of Mary and Jesus line the streets, and even weekday Mass is well attended.

India's Christians, who make up only about 2 percent of the country's population, tend to stand together during a crisis.

India's governing bloc, the Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P., led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is rooted in Hindu nationalism. In that environment, the scandal in Kerala has pitted Christians who believe the case is a stark call for reform within the church

against those who want to maintain unity out of fear.

Mary Maveli, a 36-year-old Catholic in Delhi, said she was willing to give the nuns the benefit of the doubt as opposed to her mother, who immediately stood by the bishop.

"For my mother, she thinks that in the current political climate if we put the church in a bad light it is an opportunity for B.J.P. to blow things out of proportion. For me, I want it treated as a criminal offense, and we should let the court decide," Ms. Maveli said.

When Bishop Mulakkal was released on bail in October, he was cheered and showered with flower petals when he returned to his diocese. His church posted a large banner featuring his photo and proclaiming a "heartly welcome."

A senior policeman investigating the case said he believed that the authorities had sufficient evidence to charge Bishop Mulakkal with both raping the nun, and then intimidating her family and the families of the nuns who initiated the protest in an effort to silence them. The policeman spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the case.

"We are broken. The church we have given our lives to won't even give an ear to us," said Anupama Kelamangalathuveli, a nun who served at the convent at the same time as the nun who said she had been raped.

"This fight isn't just for us," she added. "The church needs to listen to women and not just the priests and bishops."

In November 2017, Cardinal George Alencherry discouraged the nun from taking her case to the media or the police, according to the nun's family and the other nuns. Representatives of Cardinal Alencherry did not respond to requests for comment.

Desperate, the nun decided to take her case directly to the Vatican by writing to the pope's representative in India, Archbishop Giambattista Diquattro.

"No sooner I reached the room than he pulled me toward him. I was numbed and terrified by his act. I took all efforts to get out, but in vain. He raped me brutally," reads a letter the nun wrote to Archbishop Diquattro on January 28 of last year.

The letter went on to accuse Bishop Mulakkal of intimidating her and others into silence, and to explain how she had complained to various church authorities who failed to act.

Multiple emails and phone calls to Archbishop Diquattro requesting comment went unanswered.

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Through more than a year of efforts to receive help within the church, she confided in five other nuns who had at one point lived with her at the convent, the St. Francis Mission Home, tucked away in thick jungle in rural Kerala.

In April last year, the five nuns, some who had been moved to other convents, defied church rules to slip away from their residences across India, taking buses and trains to travel hundreds of miles to join their sister and support her.

The nuns said they decided to go public only after Bishop Mulakkal filed several police cases against them and their families in June, accusing them of plotting his murder. The police said his accusations had been dismissed.

The nun wrote a second letter to Archbishop Diquattro on June 25, days after

Bishop Mulakkal filed his accusations with the police.

"I was waiting for the Catholic Church to give me justice," she wrote. The letter, written in halting English, said that as her situation grew worse, she was "forced to approach for the legal procedures."

Three days later, she went to the police and filed a complaint accusing Bishop Mulakkal of rape.

As the weeks went by, the church ordered the nuns to leave St. Francis and to return to their convents.

Worried that they would be evicted, and with the police slow to respond, the nuns decided in early September to take the nearly two-hour drive to Kochi, a major city in Kerala, and protest outside the High Court. When they returned the next day with their placards, they were surprised to see dozens of churchgoers, activists and even priests, holding their own signs demanding that Bishop Mulakkal be held accountable.

The nuns are now filing multiple civil cases against church officials in India, claiming that they tried to intimidate them to drop the case or ignored the rape accusations. The nuns are still at St. Francis, after having ignored repeated orders from the church authorities to disband. On Saturday, with the nuns planning another public protest, the church revoked those orders, giving the nuns a small victory.

"We took a vow to be in a congregation, to make the congregation our family," said Sister Josephine Villoonickal, one of the nuns ordered to return to her convent. "They are now trying to destroy this family."

*Shalini Venugopal and Hari Kumar contributed reporting from New Delhi.*