

Victims of Indian school fire: “The government is responsible for this tragedy”

Our correspondents
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The Sri Krishna private school, which burnt down in the town of Kumbakonam in southern India last Friday killing 90 children, was typical of thousands of similar institutions in rural areas of the country. It was grossly overcrowded and lacking in elementary safety measures and basic facilities. But for those who sent their sons and daughters there, it was still better than most government schools.

Unlike many private schools, the Sri Krishna school was well established, had official approval and offered teaching in either Tamil or English. A local resident, Lakshmi, a former student of the school, explained, however, that its conditions had deteriorated over many years. “This school came into existence in 1960. Till the 1980s, it was a very small establishment. In 1985 the institution got government recognition to run a high school.”

Its expansion in the 1990s meant the building was completely inadequate. Lakshmi complained that the building was far too small for so many students. “Firstly, it’s cramped. Secondly, it doesn’t have the required infrastructure. Thirdly, it’s in the heart of this noisy town.”

She pointed out that the school’s owner, Pulavar Palanisamy, has political clout, which helped in getting official recognition. Currently he is one of the local orators for the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam organisation (AIADMK), which holds power in the state of Tamil Nadu. When the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was in power, he was a DMK member. It was only after angry locals ransacked his house that the police arrested him and other family members over the fire.

Most of those who sent their children to the school were poor. The WSWs visited the area and spoke to some of the parents and surviving students from the

village of Naththam, 8 kilometres from the school. Fourteen of the 65 students who attended the school from this village died in the fire.

Naththam was set up and residents relocated from Kumbakonam when the DMK was in power in 1997. But the government did not provide decent roads, sanitary or health facilities. All the villagers were given land. They had to build their small houses and huts themselves. Most of them are very poor, including painters, carpenters, day labourers at the local market, drivers and rickshaw pullers.

Sreethar Bandarinathan, aged 9, died of his injuries in the government hospital. His mother Amudha said: “We don’t have any primary school here. We don’t have good roads. Only the Sri Krishna school provides van facilities to transport our children. So we decided to send him to this school. We thought the school transport fees were cheaper (30 rupees per month). We could not afford more money so we admitted our child in the Tamil medium [which is cheaper than the English medium].

“When we went to the school after hearing the news, they would not allow us inside. Police authorities asked us to go to the marriage hall to check whether my son was there. We didn’t find him. Then we went to the hospitals. That is where we found him in a bed.” She explained that her son was alive but died of his injuries despite the attempts to save him.

“My husband is working as a tobacco packer at the Midheen tobacco company in Kumbakonam, earning 1,500 rupees [\$US34] per month. We have three children: the elder one is studying grade eight, the younger one is studying sixth and the last one, who lost his life in this fire, was studying grade four.

“We are managing our life using the ration system. Sometimes we buy the rice outside at the market price

of 13 rupees per kilogram. The ration shop is two kilometres away from the village. The road's condition is very bad. Even in an emergency we haven't any health centre or any doctor, unless we go to Kumbakonam, which is 6 kilometres from here."

Eight-year-old Vijay Balasivaraman, a student who was injured in the fire, is now undergoing treatment at the Apollo Hospital in Madras. His uncle Poongavanam Murugesan, a labourer at the vegetable market in Kumbakonam, blamed the Tamil Nadu administration for the fire. "The government is responsible for this tragedy, because they permitted them to run a school like this. The ruling party politicians asked us why we complained to the media. But what else can we do?"

He also spoke out about the conditions his family faces. "I only work in the night and get just 1,500 rupees per month. I eat only two meals a day. That is common among most of these villagers."

He pointed out that there are no facilities in the village. "Even the burial ground is two-and-a-half kilometres from here. The way to the graveyard is so narrow that four people cannot carry the dead body of the child. In our village only one house has a phone connection. When any post comes, the postman hands the letters over where the village road connects to the main road [2 kilometres away]."



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