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Former nun's autobiography alleges that sexual abuse and homosexuality is very high in the Catholic Church in Kerala, India. The book comes in the wake of a spate of sex scandals, nun suicides, and murders that shook Kerala's clergy.



The Catholic Church in Kerala, India, which has barely recovered from the Sister Abhaya murder case, allegedly murdered by two priests and a nun, finds itself in another controversy.

52-year-old Sister Jesme, a former nun from Kerala, has blown the whistle on the alleged sexual abuse that nuns have to face in convents. Sister Jesme has written a book – Amen – Oru Kanyasthreeyude Atmakatha (Amen – an autobiography of a nun,) that talks about the sexual harassment that she faced in the convent at the hands of both priests and nuns.

"At a retreat for novices, I noticed girls in my batch were unsettled about going to the confession chamber. I found that the priest there asked each girl if he could kiss them. I gathered courage and went in. He repeated the question. When I opposed, he quoted from the Bible which spoke of divine kisses."

In her book, Sister Jesme has asserted that she first came face-to-face with sexual abuse when she was a Novitiate. She says in her book, "At a retreat for novices, I noticed girls in my batch

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were unsettled about going to the confession chamber. I found that the priest there asked each girl if he could kiss them. I gathered courage and went in. He repeated the question. When I opposed, he quoted from the Bible which spoke of divine kisses."Sister Jesme has alleged that another time, a nun forced her to have sex with her. "I was sent to teach plus-two students in St Maria College. There, a new sister joined to teach Malayalam; she was a lesbian. When she tried to corner me, I had no way but to succumb to her wishes. She would come to my bed in the night and do lewd acts and I could not stop her," she has written in her book, Amen – an Autobiography of a Nun.

Back in his room, he tried to fondle me and when I resisted, got up and asked angrily if I had seen a man. When I said no, he stripped himself, ejaculated and forced me to strip."



Citing another incident of sexual trauma that she had to face, Sister Jesme says that it happened when she had gone to Bangalore for a refresher course. She writes, "I was told to stay at the office of a priest respected for his strong moral side. But when I reached the station, he was waiting there and hugged me tight on arrival. Later in the day, he took me to Lalbagh (a garden) and showed me cupid-struck couples and tried to convince me about the need for physical love. He also narrated stories of illicit relations between priests and nun to me. Back in his room, he tried to fondle me and when I resisted, got up and asked angrily if I had seen a man. When I said no, he stripped himself, ejaculated and forced me to strip."

Sister Jesme has also described the mental torture that novices are subjected to. She said that she was not allowed to go home when she heard of her father's death, and was able to see her

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father's body just before his funeral. She was told by the superior sisters that she was lucky to have been able to at least see her father's body, unlike many senior sisters.



Dr. Sister Jesme also refers to the corruption and the politicisation of religion prevalent in the Catholic Church. "Thirty-three years cannot be penned down in 180 pages but there are points the I want to make about the capitation fee, the quarrels that happen within the church, about the homo-sexuality, the hetero-sexuality," she says.

"The mental torture was unbearable. When I questioned the church's stand on self-financing colleges and certain other issues, they accused me of having mental problems. They have even sent me to a psychiatrist. There are many nuns undergoing ill-treatment from the order, but they are afraid of challenging it. The church is a formidable fortress," she adds.

The Catholic Church, of course, has reacted in its usual inimitable, unoriginal way. Sister Jesme has been denounced as mentally ill, and her *Amen: Autobiography of a Nun* has been termed as a "book of trivialities."

Sister Jesme has alleged that the Church alternately tried to bribe her not to write the book, and threaten her.

She writes, "One sister said that she is going to sit in the corner of the chapel and pray the

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rosary so that all my books will be burnt and no person will be able to read it. I said let us wait and see whose prayer will God hear."

In the book, Sister Jesme refers to the helplessness that nuns face when they are sexually abused in a convent. "When a woman is molested, sexually harassed, will she speak out? Only one out of a thousand will speak out. So think of nuns! They will never speak out. They fear that their nun-hood will be lost," said Sister Jesme.

Her allegations are in line with the scandals that have plaguing the Catholic Church in Kerala.

A suicide note that accused another nun of sexual harassment



On August 11, 2008, Sister Anupa Mary committed suicide in St. Mary's convent, in Kollam. She left a suicide note that accused a senior nun, in the convent, of sexual harassment.

In a fit of uncharacteristic originality, the Superior of St. Mary's convent denied the allegations by saying that sexual abuse is impossible because the nuns sleep in a cubicle which is only 6 feet high.

And two orphans try to kill themselves..

On August 26, 2008, two girls living in the Nithya Sahaya Matha Balika Mandiram, an orphanage for girls, tried to commit suicide. The orphanage is part of the Holy Cross order in which Sister Anupa was ordained. The two girls who had consumed poison and were admitted in a hospital run by the church gave a rather garbled explanation. They said that an apprentice priest Benedict spoke to them in a humiliating tone when he was counselling them and also told them that he had come to know that they were not good girls. Another girl who was also present at the counselling session told the Kerala State Women's Commission the priest had only blessed them by putting his hands over their heads and told them to be good girls.

And another suicide

Six months later, on February 11, 2009, Sister Josephine who lived in the The Daughters of Mary convent, in the Syro-Malankara archdiocese in Thiruvananthapuram, committed suicide. It was alleged that it was abuse at the hands of other nuns that forced Sister Josephine to take her own life. Unsurprisingly, a press release from the archdiocese said that Sister Josephine was being treated for depression.

Under-age sexual exploitation

Going back a few years, in 1995, a parish priest in the Changanacherry archdiocese, allegedly entered into a two-year sexual relationship with a 15-year old school girl who gave birth to his child in 1998. A case of rape and abduction was registered against the priest.

Another murder, and another nun who spoke out

In 1998, a nun from the Sacred Heart Convent in Kozhikode district was murdered. Kerala Police had said that they suspected a sexual motive behind the murder.

In October 2008, a 60-year-old nun belonging to the Congregation of Daughters of Mary Convent, Anchal, alleged that young nuns from the convents were being forced to have abortions and that priest and nuns were having "limitless" affairs. She further alleged that a nun Serenna Jacob has committed suicide because she could not handle the trauma. The nun is now in a mental hospital in Thodupuzha. Her nephew has alleged that she has been forcibly admitted to the hospital by the Convent authorities.

Sister Jesme has said that writing the book has been cathartic for her. "I wanted an outlet for my trauma. It'll help me start my second life afresh. The society has the right to know what's happening to the sisters," Sister Jesme, ex-principal of St. Mary's College in Thrissur, Kerala, has said. Sister Jesme quit the Congregation of Mother Carmelite (CMC), in August 2008.

She hopes the book will trigger a change in the life of the religious. She told the media, "I have just opened a window, only one window, and through that window if they see dust or dirt inside the convent, at least in a corner, and if one sister cleans the corner of the convent, then my book has been rewarded."

<http://www.dancewithshadows.com/politics/amen-autobiography-of-a-nun-sister-jesme/>