

5. Kerala orphanage directed to trace families of 54 TN kids

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CHENNAI: Following allegations that a home in Kerala had misappropriated funds and detained children, including 54 from Tamil Nadu, a [child welfare committee](#) in [Ernakulam](#) has directed the institution to trace their biological families.

One road to repatriate these children led to a bristling bakery on Mount Road in Chennai, where Shanti, 42, works as a cleaner. Five of her children stay in the Aluva-based home Janaseva Sisubhavan. "A sixth was married off. I got to know two years later," Shanti said impassively, while tiredly rubbing her hands on a greased cloth cap outside the shop where she works. Ten years ago, an agent had taken her along with her children to work in Kerala. "When we landed, he wasn't there. We had no money to return," said Shanti, whose youngest child was two years old then.

She was later taken into custody by the police and the children were put in the home. "My husband and I tried fighting for the children, but they accused us of being traffickers. The home promised a better life for our children," Shanti told TOI. She said she continued to visit them once in two years. "They barely recognize me and don't speak Tamil," said Shanti, who lost her husband three years ago. "It would have mattered to me if the children were returned when my husband was still alive. I can't afford to give them good education now," she said, before hurrying back into the kitchen, her eyes welled up.

Shanti is among the fortunate few who know the whereabouts of her children. Padmaja Nair, CWC chairperson in Ernakulam, said although the orphanage was registered, most of the children there didn't have documents to show how they arrived there. "They just had a register with a contact person against each name. Only two numbers were functional," said Nair. Of the 54 children from Tamil Nadu - 28 boys and 26 girls - 16 are from Chennai. She said the father of three children was tracked in Theni on Monday. He too, like Shanti, had gone to Kerala to work as a labourer. "His wife had committed suicide recently and he said he was in no position to take care of the children. But he wanted the children moved to a home in Theni," she said, adding a team of district

child protection officers was monitoring if other children were brought with their parents' consent. "We have given the orphanage a week's time to track the children's families and produce them before us," she said. Repeated attempts made by the CWC members to contact their counterparts in Chennai proved futile.

The allegations leveled by Chennai-based NGO Change India against Janaseva Sisubhavan include illegal procurement of children, money laundering in the guise of a charity, lack of compliance with the Juvenile Justice Act and tax evasion. The institution runs two homes — one each for boys and girls - with 165 children.

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Jose Maveli, chairperson of Janaseva Sisubhavan, said children in their homes were picked off the streets, abandoned by their families or handed over by police. "All of them were produced before the CWC here. The families, if there are any, are also free to visit them any time they want and take them home for vacation," he said, adding that repatriating them in Tamil Nadu would be tough on the children as most of them will take time getting used to a new environment.

Former Madras high court Judge K Chandru said families should be given priority over putting the children in institutions. "And if the families are poor, the state needs to find a way to work with them while ensuring the welfare of their children," he said.

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