

# HOUSE OF HORRORS: ON AUTHORITIES ATTENTION TO HOMES RUN BY NGOS

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February 21, 2023 12:10 am | Updated 09:03 am IST

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It is inconceivable that flagrant violations of law and human rights happen in plain sight, and when intervention finally happens, it is already too late for some. The case in point is the Anbu Jothi Ashram case in Tamil Nadu's Villupuram district where — entirely by accident — the lid was blown off dark secrets and happenings inside the home. The issue came to light when police followed the thread of man missing complaints. Then one sordid fact after the other came to light, including sexual and physical abuse, bizarre scare tactics and even trafficking. The unlicensed home — the name translates to 'flame of love' — was providing shelter to persons on the fringes of society, physically and socially in need of support. It had been accommodating destitute women, abandoned senior citizens, beggars, alcohol addicts and persons with mental retardation or illness. Residents who were rescued later told tales of how they were held down with a mixture of fear, terror, and perversion; the owners also used monkeys to terrorise them. The home had been running for years until police first entered its premises last week to arrest four employees for running the centre without a valid permit. A total of 142 residents were rescued and relocated. Subsequently, as women residents of the home made sexual assault and torture charges against the owner Jubin Baby and his wife Maria, police arrested the couple. Another unit run by them near Puducherry was closed down and over 20 residents rescued. Following up, the National Commission for Women recorded testimonies of the rescued women, and the investigation has been handed over to the CB-CID.

The Anbu Jothi Ashram case should never have happened, given the safety mechanisms provided by the law, and rules crafted and enforced by the State. All care homes should be registered and periodic assessments carried out to allow them to continue to operate. How did this institution slip through the cracks? Laws in the social sector that serve persons in disadvantageous circumstances, must leave no loophole, no cracks that can be exploited. This case certainly speaks to chronic neglect in the sector, despite periodic exhortations and even raids on care homes to check their credentials. Exploitation in the social sector is particularly intolerable; it is tantamount to allowing the fence to eat the crop. Monitoring and supervision in the sector need to be fool-proof and corruption-free. Not only should authorities document every last flagrant violation at the ashram but also make an example of it — to serve as a crushing deterrent to any one who might toy with the idea of abusing those who seek sanctuary.

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