

How Hindutva hijacked India's child protection body

Monday 7 March 2022, by [IYER Aishwarya](#), [JOHARI Aarefa](#) (Date first published: 2 February 2022).

In recent years, the NCPCR has devoted considerable attention to poorly substantiated complaints against minority communities.

A little after noon on December 6, Rahul Raghuvanshi was about halfway through writing his maths exam paper in St Joseph's School in the town of Ganj Basoda in Madhya Pradesh's Vidisha district.

Suddenly, loud cries of "Jai Shri Ram!" tore through the silence. There were sounds of smashing glass. Before he could react, the 17-year-old student saw a group of angry men outside his ground-floor classroom window, attacking the panes with iron rods.

Shrieking in fear, Raghuvanshi and his 13 classmates jumped from their seats and were bundled out of the room by their teacher and the external examiner who had come to conduct their mid-term Class 12 exams under the Central Board of Secondary Education. They sought shelter in an empty classroom on the first floor.

Their school seemed to be [under siege by a mob](#) of "400 or 500 people", according to estimates by the principal and several teachers. The enraged crowd - largely members of the Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad - had gathered to protest the "first holy communion" ceremony for eight local children more than a month earlier, at an entirely different location. The attackers claimed this had amounted to "religious conversion" from Hinduism to Christianity.

A section of the mob barged into the school courtyard and hurled stones at the glass façade of the sprawling, three-storey building for several minutes before police forces controlled them.

The damage could have been far worse if the inner gates of the building had not been locked, or if there had been more students in the school. But because of the ongoing board exams, the other students had left the school earlier that morning. The 14 students appearing for their maths paper were the only ones on the premises.

"It was very scary for us," said Raghuvanshi. "We were given five minutes extra to finish our paper later, but we could not concentrate."

It took days for the students to overcome the trauma of the attack and feel safe in school again. When I met them in their classroom in mid-December, they were no longer afraid, but were indignant. The eight children who had allegedly been converted, they said, were not even students of their school. So why had their safety been compromised?

Ironically, the sequence of events leading to the attack can be traced back to a letter from the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights, or NCPCR.

The NCPCR is an independent statutory body, which was established under the union Ministry of

Women and Child Development in 2007. Its primary mandate is to ensure that India's child protection laws are implemented effectively, and that all other laws, policies and programmes are in sync with national and global requirements for children's rights.

It is also specifically tasked with looking into the rights of children in need of special care, whether those affected by trafficking, violence, exploitation, natural disasters – or an unforeseen pandemic.

But under its current chairperson, Priyank Kanoongo, the NCPCR has appeared to have strikingly different preoccupations. Kanoongo is a product of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu supremacist organisation that is the ideological parent of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. A former member of the BJP's youth wing, he resigned from the party in 2015 to be appointed as a member of the NCPCR. In 2018, he was made its chairperson.

Under Kanoongo, the NCPCR has been transformed from an organisation that advocates for the rights of children in India to one that selectively uses them to pursue Hindutva causes and target religious minorities, as well as independent groups seen to oppose the supremacist ideology.

The Commission has done this through a well-oiled system involving Hindutva groups, propaganda websites and police and other government officials on the ground. Many of these cases spring from complaints made by organisations that are firmly entrenched in the Hindutva ecosystem. This recent shift in the Commission's activities raises the question of whether an organisation mandated to safeguard the rights of children has acquired a distinctly communal tinge, to the great harm of those it is meant to protect.

Located around 105 km from Bhopal, the town of Ganj Basoda is home to around 1.5 lakh people. Of these, barely 120 people – 30 families – are Christian. They attend services at St Joseph's Catholic church, the parish priest Jose Lee Cyrakkove said.

On October 31, said Cyrakkove, eight children from the parish between the ages of 10 and 15 received their first holy communion during their Sunday mass. Communion is an important sacrament in the Christian faith, and a child's first one is usually celebrated as a special occasion.

"All the eight children were from our Christian families," Cyrakkove said. "Their parents themselves had requested the ceremony."

The celebration was written about in the newsletter of Sagar diocese, the administrative centre for St Joseph's Church and other Catholic institutions in Vidisha district. This newsletter was also published online.

Unbeknownst to the church authorities, this online post caught the attention of the [Legal Rights Observatory](#), a Maharashtra-based organisation founded by Vinay Joshi, a former member of the RSS. Since 2017, the organisation has filed a string of complaints with various government bodies against Christian institutions, activists and media companies, for actions such as alleged religious conversions and opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act.

On November 15, the Legal Rights Observatory sent a complaint to the NCPCR about the "holy communion" of the eight children in Ganj Basoda, alleging that they had been converted to Christianity. The NCPCR had in the past [been quick](#) to take up complaints by the Observatory. By November 24, Kanoongo had written a letter to the district collector, demanding an investigation into these alleged conversions for their "prima facie contravention" of the constitutional right to freedom of religion.

When *Scroll.in* interviewed Kanoongo in January, he claimed that the case needed to be seen in the

context of the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act of 1968. The law, he said, requires district magistrates or collectors to maintain records of all religious conversions. He added that the Commission was concerned about conversions because children of Schedule Castes who converted to other religions would no longer be eligible for social welfare benefits designed for them.

"There are Central schemes for them, so we don't want these children to be denied their rights for any reason," he said. He added that such reasons could include if "someone does a religious conversion without their parents' consent or even if their parents are converting". This is why the NCPCR asked the collector to investigate the case and look up conversion records for the eight children, he said.

But what should have been a quiet inquiry by district-level authorities soon turned into public sensationalism.

On December 3, the local YouTube channel Aayudh released a [video](#) about the complaint to the NCPCR, presenting all the allegations as if they were facts. Eight "masoom" or innocent Hindu children, the video claimed, had been given a sacrament: "by sprinkling a few drops of water on them, their culture and identity had been changed in just two minutes...children who were saying the name of bhagwan until recently are now saying Jesus."

This was far from the truth, according to the father of one of the eight children. "Our family has been Christian from before the time of my great-grandfather," the man said on the condition of anonymity. "The first holy communion is very important for us. As parents we asked Father" – the priest – "to do it for our daughter because she was the right age."

Within a day, the Aayudh video had circulated all over Ganj Basoda, and several local Hindutva bodies – including the RSS-affiliated Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad – wrote letters to the collector, threatening protests if police complaints were not filed against the church.

By December 5, a protest had been planned: a "gherao" of St Joseph's School at noon the following day. This was despite the fact that the alleged incident had occurred at St Joseph's Church, not the school. "The school and the church are all part of the same institution," Nilesh Agarwal, a local Bajrang Dal leader, told *Scroll.in*, defending his group's decision to protest at the school. The institution he was referring to was Sagar diocese, the administrative unit for all Catholic parishes and institutes in five adjacent districts: Vidisha, Sagar, Raisen, Guna and Ashoknagar.

When the parish priest and the school principal got wind of the planned protest, they sought police protection.

"But when the protest started on December 6, barely two or three policemen were present, and they just stood there doing nothing," said Anthony Pynumkal, the principal of St Joseph's School. "Most of the police came later, after the damage had been done."

Agarwal claimed that the Bajrang Dal was not responsible for the violence, and that the stone-pelters were "a few anti-social elements from outside".

Nevertheless, he seemed to believe some sort of public trial of the families was necessary. "The church keeps saying that those eight children were their own Christians, but where is the proof? They have never made it clear," Agarwal said. "If the public has doubts and is demanding a clarification, why can't they just bring those children and their families before the media?"

While the collector of Vidisha, Umashankar Bhargav, said that the inquiry into the alleged conversions was still underway, the sub-divisional police officer Bharat Bhushan Sharma, who was

part of the investigation team, said that it had already been completed.

“But we did not find anything as such,” Sharma said.

In December, soon after I arrived in Vidisha district to investigate the attack on Christian institutions, I received a phone call from an unknown number. It turned out to be Kanoongo. He had been informed of my visit by local journalists.

Born and raised in the town of Vidisha, Kanoongo has strong connections with local political leaders, activists and media. His family is well-known throughout the district: his father was a lawyer, and his mother is a retired gynaecologist who founded Vidisha’s Jeevanti Hospital.

Kanoongo’s friends and acquaintances who I met in December said that he had been drawn to the field of children’s education soon after he finished his own studies in Bhopal and Delhi.

“He used to help children from the Bediya nomadic community get free education, to prevent them from getting into sex work,” said Vikram Pal, a businessman in Vidisha who has known Kanoongo for 15 years. Kanoongo also founded the Sanjay Gandhi BEd college in the town in 2004.

During that brief phone conversation with Kanoongo, he encouraged me to meet with his friends, family and former colleagues. He also listed several cases of alleged conversion and illegal activities in institutions run by the Sagar diocese, in which the NCPCR had intervened.

In November 2021, for instance, the NCPCR claimed it had uncovered a “[conversion racket](#)” in Raisen after Kanoongo and his team conducted a “surprise inspection” of the Bishop Clemence Memorial Boarding Hostel, a girls’ hostel run by the Sagar diocese. Kanoongo claimed that girls from Scheduled Tribes had been brought to the hostel “in the name of education”, but that there was no school building on the premises and no educational books – instead, his team found copies of the Bible and other Christian religious material among the girls’ possessions.

“Article 28 (3) of the Constitution says that in any educational institution, a child cannot be taught about any other religion without prior permission of the parents,” Kanoongo told *Scroll.in*.

Kanoongo also uploaded a [dramatic video](#) of this inspection on his personal Twitter and YouTube accounts, complete with suspenseful background music, claiming that the missionary institution was running a “conversion business”. Based on this inspection, the NCPCR directed the Raisen district administration to return the girls to their homes and take “strict action” against those running the hostel.

But priests at the Sagar diocese and a nun running the hostel refuted Kanoongo’s allegations. Sabu Puthenpurackal, the public relations officer of the diocese, pointed out that the hostel was not attached to a specific school. “It is a boarding house for girls who don’t have secondary schools in their villages,” said Puthenpurackal.

The girls live in the hostel for a fee of Rs 4,500 per month, and study in government schools nearby, Puthenpurackal said. At the hostel, nuns provide them with additional tuition, particularly in English. During the NCPCR inspection, he added, all the girls were at school.

Out of the 19 girls living in the hostel, five were Catholic students from Arunachal Pradesh. “We have had a few girls from Assam and Arunachal every year, because some of our nuns come from there,” said a nun in charge of the hostel who did not want to be identified. “The Bibles that the NCPCR found belonged to them.”

The remaining 14 girls were Adivasi Hindus from local villages. "There has never been any attempt to convert them," the nun said.

"After the NCPCR complaint, so many officers from the collectorate and the district child welfare committee came to inspect the hostel and question the girls," Puthenpurackal said. "But they stopped coming after four or five days. If they had found any evidence of conversion, they would have shut the hostel down by now."

Another alleged conversion case that Kanoongo mentioned involved the children of an estranged couple.

The children, a 15-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy, lived with their mother Babita (name changed) at Sevadham, an orphanage run by the Sagar diocese in Sagar town. Babita worked as a cook at the orphanage, a job she found in 2016 soon after she left her abusive husband.

"My husband had kicked me out and left me on the streets with my children," said 40-year-old Babita. "But the Sevadham people gave me work, and a place to stay, and they enrolled my children in school."

In early December, 2021, Babita's husband suddenly showed up at the orphanage. He had somehow found out that his wife and children lived there, and asked her for money. Babita says she refused. "He also wanted the children back, but why should I give them to him when he has not cared about them for five years?" she asked.

A week later, on December 11, the husband showed up again – this time at 2 am, with a group of police officers from Bina, the town where he lives.

The police claimed the children needed to be shifted to another shelter immediately. Babita's resistance was futile. The children were taken away and moved to Sanjeevani Bal Ashram, another orphanage in Sagar.

A junior official at the Bina police station, which conducted the rescue, told *Scroll.in* that he did not know why the children were taken from their mother at 2 am. When asked if there was any complaint or evidence of the children being in danger, he said, "All I know is that we were told to rescue them immediately."

It wasn't until the next morning, when the children were brought before the district child welfare committee, or CWC, that Babita discovered what her husband had done: he had complained to the NCPCR that his children had been converted from Hinduism to Christianity at Sevadham.

"It was a completely false allegation, but the NCPCR directed the police to immediately rescue the children," said Rajkumar Ladiya, Babita's lawyer. "The next day itself both the children gave statements to the CWC saying they had not been converted, and that they wanted to go back to their mother. But the CWC said they would investigate."

Over the next several days, said Ladiya, both Babita and her children repeatedly provided the CWC with oral and written statements that the conversion allegations were false. "I have given this statement to the police too," said Babita. "Working and living in a Christian ashram does not make me change my religion. They have never attempted to convert any of us."

The junior police official confirmed this statement. "We were not able to find any evidence of conversion," he said.

Despite all these statements and assertions, Babita's children have not been returned to her. On December 27, Ladiya helped Babita file a case in the Sagar district court against her husband, the chairperson of the Sagar CWC, the sub-inspector of the Bina police station, which conducted the "rescue", as well as a man named Omkar Singh. "Singh is a former CWC member and works with the BJP," said Ladiya. "He has been accompanying the children's father to the CWC and making allegations about the children's conversion."

Even though Babita's petition asked for urgent hearings and immediate custody of her children, the court has held just two hearings in the past five weeks. "The judge said he wanted to wait for the written statements of the accused," said Ladiya.

Kanoongo told *Scroll.in* that the case was based on a complaint he had received from the father that the two children had been put in a children's home without his consent as a parent. This, Kanoongo said, was a violation of the Juvenile Justice Act, which allows children to be placed in children's homes only after the district's CWC conducts an inquiry and passes an order to that effect. "No one can just pick up any children and put them in a home," he said. "So we told the authorities to reunite these children with their family."

When I contacted Sagar district's child welfare committee, however, chairperson Chandra Prakash Shukla said that the complaint was actually about claims of religious conversion. "The father sent a complaint of religious conversion to Delhi," Shukla said, referring to the NCPCR office in Delhi. "From Delhi, a letter was sent to the collector, who asked the police to move the children."

Shukla emphasised that the children were not registered with the Sevadham ashram, but were living there in quarters that their mother had been given.

He admitted that when the children were produced before the child welfare committee, they both denied any religious conversion. "They said they want to live with their mother," Shukla said. "The mother also said she wants the children back and does not want them to live with their father."

Why, then, had the children not yet been returned to their mother? "Their father has repeatedly given us applications saying that the children have been converted and that he wants them," Shukla said. "We are still inquiring into the conversion. For now, we have kept the children in another shelter."

While Babita pines desperately for her son and daughter, the children have borne the brunt of their "rescue".

"They are being held in the other ashram like prisoners," said a tearful Babita, who has been allowed to meet them for just a few minutes every few days. "They have not been allowed to go to school, they have not been given warm clothes in this winter, and my daughter was crying the other day because they were forcing her to sweep the floors."

It isn't only in Vidisha that Kanoongo has stirred up controversy.

In August 2021, for example, the Commission levelled allegations of forced conversion against the Children's Home for Girls in Gujarat's Vadodara city, run by the well-known [Missionaries of Charity](#), founded by Mother Teresa. Kanoongo himself inspected the shelter home and claimed that non-Christian children were being made to study Christian texts. Following this, an FIR was filed against the organisation, accusing it of forcibly converting one child and one adult staffer.

On December 12, the Vadodara police booked the nuns at the children's home under Sections 3 and

4 of the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, which prohibit forceful conversion. They also invoked Section 295A and 298 of the Indian Penal Code, which pertain to offending religious sentiments.

Soon after, the main accused in the case, a nun, moved an anticipatory bail application in the Vadodara sessions court.

“At least seven hearings have been completed but the case keeps getting pushed,” advocate Jahangir Shaikh, who is representing the Missionaries of Charity in the case, told *Scroll.in*.

According to Shaikh, the adult staffer whom the FIR claimed was forcibly converted had submitted an affidavit in Vadodara court “saying she had converted out of her own free will and that all these allegations were hurting her”. The next hearing in the case was scheduled for February 1, but has been postponed to February 7 because police officials involved in the case contracted Covid-19.

There were other instances too, in which the NCPCR involved itself in cases pertaining to religion.

In June, pro-government publication *OpIndia* [said](#) that the Commission had taken cognisance of a report it had published about the alleged conversion of Hindu children to Islam at a school in Uttar Pradesh’s Fatehpur town. The Commission asked district authorities to investigate whether the school was forcing Hindu children to follow another religion.

Earlier, in December 2020, the Commission had ordered an inquiry into six childcare homes in Assam and Manipur set up by Assam parliamentarian [Badruddin Ajmal](#). Here, too, the NCPCR had acted on a complaint from the Legal Rights Observatory. The Commission alleged that over 200 children were missing from the homes, and that the homes had accepted funds from foreign organisations with links to Islamist terrorist organisation al-Qaeda.

Apart from FIRs filed by police, the Ministry of Home Affairs also initiated an investigation into the case. No further reports have emerged about the status of the investigations. When *Scroll.in* spoke to Kanoongo, he said he did not recall what had come of the June and December matters.

The NCPCR had also fervently objected to the participation of children in the widespread protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 and the proposed National Register of Citizens. In December 2019, the Commission directed the Directors General of Police of all states of India to take action against protesters, a large proportion of whom were Muslims, for “[misusing children](#)” in allegedly violent protests.

Weeks later, police in Uttar Pradesh’s Muzaffarnagar town added Section 83 (2) of the Juvenile Justice Act to an FIR related to allegedly violent protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act that had 107 named accused and 3,000 unnamed accused. The section is meant for “any adult or an adult group that uses children for illegal activities either individually or as a gang”. The punishment for the offence is rigorous imprisonment of up to seven years and a fine of Rs 5 lakh.

Muzaffarnagar-based advocate Mohammad Islam, who is handling the cases of at least ten people accused under this FIR, said that the trial in the case was yet to begin. “The police have named over 100 people in this FIR and there are thousands in the unnamed section, so the threat of anyone being picked up in the FIR is very real,” he said. “The police are constantly on the prowl, threatening to pick people up even now. It is important to note that the allegation of the misuse of children for ‘illegal activities’ was never made in the original FIR by the police officials.”

The commission also cited the alleged presence of children at Citizenship Amendment Act protest sites, when it raided two [shelter homes](#) for children in Delhi in October 2020. Further, the NCPCR

claimed that it had received complaints of sexual abuse being covered up, forced religious conversion and violations of the Juvenile Justice Act in the homes, named Umeed Aman Ghar and Khushi Rainbow Home.

Both the shelter homes were established by the Centre for Equity Studies, a civil society organisation headed by activist Harsh Mander. The organisation denied the NCPCR's allegations and said they were aimed at maligning Mander, a vocal critic of several policies of the BJP government.

After the Delhi Police filed an FIR against the homes, the NCPCR's allegations were demolished by an affidavit filed by the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights in the Delhi High Court. The affidavit noted that the homes had been inspected by three bodies of the Delhi government after the NCPCR's allegations - namely, the Child Welfare Committee (South), the District Inspection Committee and the State Inspection Committee.

The DCPCR affidavit stated that the "NCPCR's observations, except on some specific shortcomings, lacked substance and merit" and were "not borne out by the evidence".

About the allegations of sexual abuse at the homes being covered up, the State Inspection Committee noted, "there appeared to emerge no evidence that there is practice of non-reporting of cases of sexual violence" at the homes. The Child Welfare Committee, meanwhile, observed that Umeed Aman Ghar had filed an FIR on the directions of the CWC, and that after the Delhi High Court heard the matter, it had ordered that the children in question be placed back in the care of the home.

Two of these committees, the Child Welfare Committee and the State Inspection Committee strongly recommended that the children continue to stay at the home. The report of the State Inspection Committee noted, "The children are found to be happy in the CCI and maintain good health and education. The children have shared that they live as a family and want to stay together."

But despite these findings, authorities continued to act against homes run by the Centre for Equity Studies. Between February and November 2021, 45 children from Umeed Aman Ghar and 11 children from Khushi Rainbow Home were returned to their parents after directions were issued to this effect by the Department of Women and Child Development of the Delhi government.

Among them was 14-year-old Kabir (name changed), who was removed from Umeed Aman Ghar, and has spent the last year sleeping on streets, parks and the home of an aunt in Delhi's Nizamuddin Basti. He has survived by doing menial work at the Nizamuddin dargah, and has supported his alcoholic father from his meagre earnings.

"Please didi, tell them I want to go back," Kabir said, when he took *Scroll.in* to the public bathroom in Nizamuddin where he pays Rs 10 for a bath. "Please help me get out of here."

The NCPCR did not act as swiftly when in December 2020, media reports of children being allegedly tortured in police custody began to emerge from Bijnor's Nagina town, 80 km from Muzaffarnagar. Several of the 21 children, who had been detained for participating in protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, [recounted](#) how they were beaten on their knuckles, legs, arms and waists, abused and humiliated and told their eyes would be gouged out, while they spent between two and three nights with the police.

In Muzaffarnagar, [reports emerged](#) of 14 students being detained after protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. According to the reports, the founder and principal of a madrasa from which the students were held, said that they had been refused water to end their weekly Friday

fasts. “The police abused them and made derogatory remarks about Islamic religious figures – [such as] the Prophet,” he was quoted as saying. “They were forced to say Jai Shri Ram.”

In an [interview with *The Hindu*](#) in February 2020, Kanoongo claimed that he had sought a response from the superintendents of police in Muzaffarnagar and Bijnor about the allegations of mistreatment of children. He noted that the police had claimed that the allegations were false, and that he had accepted these responses. He reiterated to *Scroll.in* that the commission had acted in these cases. “We filed notice, we got an action-taken report,” he said, adding that the report had been submitted to the Supreme Court.

The families of the children, however, remain traumatised. The mother of a 15-year-old boy who was detained in Bijnor said, “Whenever we speak of the police or if something happens, we and he get very scared.” The mother of another boy from the same locality said her son still had pain in his limbs. “He was hit so badly on his legs and knees that till today he is not able to work. Every winter especially, the pain returns to his joints. He also remembers what happened from time to time. How can a child forget something like that?”

The Commission has also been silent about several alleged instances of Hindu children being indoctrinated into espousing violence. In a recent, widely-reported case from December 2021, Sudarshan News aired videos of students in at least three different Uttar Pradesh districts [being made to pledge](#) to “fight”, “die” and “kill” in order to turn India into a “Hindu rashtra”. The NCPCR did not respond to these incidents at the time.

When *Scroll.in* asked Kanoongo about this, he said the Commission had not received any complaints about these videos so far, he said, “Please send me the links, no one has complained to me till now. If you complain, I will send a notice.” He added, “If it was something we were aware of, action must have been taken. If not, we will take.”

Amidst all the controversial cases that the NCPCR has been in the news for, one issue did not make the headlines at all: the unusual length of Kanoongo’s tenure.

Under the [Commissions for the Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005](#), which governs the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights, the Commission must have six members and one chairperson – all eminent people in the field of child rights – appointed by the Central government. Until recently, the Act allowed each member or chairperson to serve no more than two three-year terms on the Commission.

In September 2021, the Act was [amended](#) to make one very specific change. As per the amendment, a person who has served “two terms as Member, or one term as a Member and one term as Chairperson, shall be eligible for one more term as Chairperson”.

A month after this amendment came into effect, Kanoongo was appointed to his third term at the NCPCR. He had first been appointed as a member in 2015, then was made the chairperson in 2018, and has now been [retained](#) for another term as chairperson.

“By statute, commissions like the NHRC and NCPCR are supposed to be independent, setting their own mandates, but governments often think of them as an extended arm of the state,” said Karuna Bishnoi, a former special monitor at the National Human Rights Commission, who collaborated with the NCPCR between 2007 and 2014 in her capacity as a child rights specialist at Unicef.

To counter interference, Bishnoi believes any commission needs a strong chairperson who can assert independence. “Without that, there will always be agents telling the commission what to do. And this manifests itself more in certain points of time, with

certain agendas.”

Such concerns about the NCPCR are heightened by the fact that many of its interventions are based on complaints by the Legal Rights Observatory and another organisation called the Kalinga Rights Forum. While the Legal Rights Observatory is founded by a former member of the RSS, not much is known about the origins or the current leadership of the Kalinga Rights Forum.

In response to emailed queries from *Scroll.in*, the organisation responded stating that it was founded in November 2019, but that the “exact date cannot be disclosed”. It claimed to have 150 activists across India, but said that “names of core members of the Team cannot be divulged for Security reasons”.

The forum denied having any links to the Legal Rights Observatory or the NCPCR. Asked if it was a registered organisation, it responded, “It is not mandated under any Law Or Act to Provide this information in Public.”

Even those on whose behalf the forum has filed complaints knew little about it. In one instance, pertaining to an incident from northeast Delhi’s Seelampur, it had [complained](#) to the NCPCR that a two-month-old Hindu child and his parents had been attacked by “Islamists” celebrating a Pakistan victory in a cricket match. When *Scroll.in* contacted the child’s father, he said that no one from the Kalinga Rights Forum had contacted him and that he had never heard of it.

What is clear is that the Legal Rights Observatory and the Kalinga Rights Forum are fraternal, though the former also told *Scroll.in* that it knew the latter only through social media. When Twitter suspended the handle of Legal Rights Observatory in February 2021, Kalinga Rights Forum [wrote](#) to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, asking it to intervene. A few weeks later, the RSS official publication [Organiser](#) reported that the handle had been unblocked.

Kalinga Rights Forum continued attacking Twitter. In July, the pro-government publication *OpIndia* reported that the forum had filed a complaint with NCPCR, alleging that the social media company was promoting terrorism and allowing terrorist groups to use children in Jammu and Kashmir. When Kalinga Rights Forum tweeted about this complaint, Kanoongo promptly [responded](#): “Noted!!” The same day, [OpIndia](#) reported that NCPCR had written to Jammu and Kashmir police asking for an investigation into the allegation.

Kalinga Rights Forum, *OpIndia* and Kanoongo often seem to work in sync with each other. In 2020, Kalinga Rights Forum filed a complaint with NCPCR, citing an *OpIndia* report that alleged a minor Hindu boy had been sacrificed in a mosque in Bihar. Kanoongo promptly wrote a letter to Bihar police. The Bihar police investigated the matter and found no truth in the allegations – the DGP of the state, which was ruled by a Janata Dal (United)-BJP alliance government, was forced to go [live on Facebook](#) to quash the rumours. As fact-checking site *AltNews* reported, [the boy had drowned in a river](#). The police went on to file a case against the *OpIndia* editors. On Twitter, Kalinga Rights Forum [came](#) to their [defence](#), condemning the FIR.

In his interview with *Scroll.in*, Kanoongo denied that NCPCR had links to these groups and publications. “I am not familiar with any organisations,” he said, when asked about Kalinga Rights Forum and Legal Rights Observatory. “I get 40,000 complaints. If you complain, we will take action.”

Kanoongo also denied any suggestion that the NCPCR has been targeting minorities or minority institutions. “It is false. I work on whatever institutions I get complaints about,” he said. He compared himself to a traffic policeman on highway duty: “If the highway has more trucks running on it, then he will issue more challans for trucks only, no?” he said. He added, “The communities

that have opened more institutions and are not getting registrations, whoever they may be, I get complaints about them.”

However, activists and others who work in the field are deeply concerned by the NCPCR’s apparent communal preoccupations.

Dr Vandana Prasad, a former member of the NCPCR, believes it is a “complete abdication of their role” if powerful organisations like the NCPCR – created to monitor and correct the government of the day – allow themselves to be used for political gain. “But that often happens, to the detriment of ordinary citizens and principles of fairness, justice and equality,” she said.

Shantha Sinha, a veteran child rights’ activist who served as the chairperson of the NCPCR for two consecutive terms, from 2007 to 2012, overseeing the drafting of the landmark Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, was careful in articulating her concern about the current agenda of the commission.

“The Commission is meant to be a conscience keeper for children – it is the only institution available for children to improve their lives and protect their rights,” said Sinha.

The NCPCR, she said, has a mandate to bring important issues of child rights to the centre of national attention and demand urgent action. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic should have been a major focus for the commission, she added.

A cursory look at Kanoongo’s Twitter timeline through November and December shows that in this time, he reserved his greatest enthusiasm for cases that targeted religious minorities. In November, for instance, he specifically [invited](#) the public to send in complaints about cases of religious conversion of children. He also specifically tweeted about the [arrests](#) of Muslim men in cases of child trafficking and alleged religious conversion, and actively replied, via quote-tweets, to people making allegations about cases of “[love jihad](#)”.

Meanwhile, the NCPCR’s work on Covid-19 has focused largely on promoting the health ministry guidelines for the protection, diagnosis and medical care of children infected with the coronavirus. In April 2020, it created a website known as the Bal Swaraj Portal on which states and Union territories were asked to upload data about children who were orphaned, abandoned or lost one parent due to Covid-19.

In a status report submitted to the Supreme Court on January 13 this year, the Commission claimed that there were a total of [1.47 lakh such children](#) across the country. The majority of them were living with relatives or guardians, while 1,843 were living in shelter homes, orphanages, hostels or adoption agencies, it said.

“This is the first time, before or after independence, that the state is not only maintaining centralised records of its orphaned, single-parent and abandoned children, but also doing the work of ensuring their welfare,” Kanoongo told *Scroll.in*. The Commission, he said, has made it mandatory for these children to be assessed by their district Child Welfare Commissions, which have been preparing social investigation reports and individual care plans for them.

Kanoongo cited at least three specific cases in which his team had intervened to ensure that orphaned children could stay with relatives or guardians. He also claimed that the NCPCR has initiated efforts to ensure financial assistance for the education of children who have lost one or both parents, either through government schemes or support from schools and private companies. On the ground, however, [Scroll.in had found](#) that until a few months ago, many orphaned children were still

awaiting the assistance.

The greatest concern isn't the NCPCR's inability to help children but its vast potential to cause them harm because of a misguided agenda. The anxieties of the Christian community in Madhya Pradesh reflect this concern.

"They target the Christians because they know we are a peaceful community, and there's nobody to retaliate," said Puthenpurackal at the Sagar diocese.

"I have lived and worked here freely for the past 40 years, but now for the first time I am feeling a bit anxious and worried."

The father of one of the adolescent children involved in the first communion ceremony at Ganj Basoda's St Joseph's Church said his family is still reeling from the shock of the conversion allegations and the attack on the school. "This is the first time someone has ever accused the people of our church of conversion. It is mental harassment," he said. "Now I feel scared for my family because we don't know how these anti-social elements will behave."

Aarefa Johari
Aishwarya Iyer

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