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The murder of a socially poor Dalit Catholic man who had married a woman belonging to an upper-caste Syrian Christian family has fueled protests across India's southern state of Kerala.

Kevin Joseph, 26, a member of Vijayapuram Diocese, was murdered in a so-called honor killing May 28, five days after he married 20-year-old Neenu Chacko of an affluent Christian family in Kollam district against the wishes of some members of her family, ucanews.com reported.

The man was dragged out of his house in Kottayam district with his cousin and taken away by a gang allegedly hired by the girl's family, police said. His body was later found in a stream in Thenmala in Kollam district. His cousin was released.

The victim's father and wife told local media they approached police soon after the kidnapping, but that officers refused to respond, saying they were busy arranging security for a visit by Pinaryi Vijayan, chief minister of Kerala.

Neenu named her brother Shanu Chacko and 11 people as being responsible for the crime. Most gang members belong to the Democratic Youth Federation of India, a youth wing associated with Kerala's ruling communist alliance.

"Had the police acted in time, a life could have been saved and criminals could have been arrested promptly," Lathika Subhash, leader of the women's wing of the opposition Congress party, told a protest gathering.

The crime comes amid allegations that Communist Party of India leaders use police to achieve their goals.

However, police arrested some youth federation members in connection with the murder.

Reports circulated that the government planned to suspend local police officers including the Kottayam district police chief.

Congress and the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party called for a dawn-to-dusk shutdown in Kottayam to protest police inaction after the crime was reported.

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The murder has opened debate in Kerala about discrimination against Christians of lower-caste origin by upper-caste Christians, who claim to be descendants of the priestly caste of Hindu Brahmins converted by St. Thomas the Apostle in A.D. 52.

Widespread protests have been held recently by Dalit Christians in Kerala against the discrimination they face from upper-caste Christians, commonly known as Syrian Christians because of their ancient link with the Syrian Church and its liturgy.

A Syrian Christian bishop recently rattled the community by saying that discrimination against Dalit Christians was due to the "myth" that their forefathers were upper-caste Brahmins.

Dalits formed just 2.6 percent of the 6.14 million Christians in Kerala in 2011, according to a study by the Center for Development Studies. Catholics dominated the Christian population with 3.7 million. Syrian Christians, now split into seven churches, are the majority and a politically influential group in the state.

Women's activist and lawyer T.B. Mini told ucanews.com that honor killings should be seen as the result of a resurgence of dormant caste feelings in Kerala society.

"Caste feelings have aggravated in Kerala after left-wing parties, which worked as a bulwark against untouchability and caste discrimination, started pursuing power politics," Mini said.

Recalling that communist parties were at the forefront of fighting caste discrimination and attracting lower castes to the party, she said that "if the current trend goes unchecked, peace will be threatened" in Kerala.