

‘Why are the police asking irrelevant questions?’: Disquiet grows over missing Sterlite activist

RS Mugilan disappeared last month after publicly accusing top police officials of colluding with Sterlite to ‘orchestrate violence’ during the Thoothukudi stir.

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On March 7, in a modest house overlooking a narrow street in Chennimalai in Tamil Nadu’s Erode, CP Poongodi, 42, lay on a shawl spread out on the floor, trying to sleep. It was the 20th day since her husband disappeared and she was no closer to finding him. She was exhausted, Poongodi said, physically and mentally.

Shanmugam Thangasamy, 52, an environmental activist better known as [RS Mugilan](#), went missing not long after addressing a press conference in Chennai on February 15 where he accused senior police officials of [colluding with Sterlite](#) to “orchestrate violence” during protests against the company’s [polluting copper smelter in Thoothukudi](#) in May last year. He named then Inspector General of Police Shailesh Kumar Yadav and his deputy Kapil

Kumar Saratkar, who were both [transferred after the police firing](#) on the protesters killed at least 13 people.

Mugilan's associates suspect he was taken away by the police, but they have denied the allegation. His wife, though, accuses Sterlite of "being behind his disappearance".

"If the police claim Mugilan is not in their custody then those who run Sterlite are responsible for his disappearance," said Poongodi. "Why is the company silent? If they are not responsible, then they should say so openly."

Scroll.in emailed Sterlite for a response to Poongodi's allegations, but is yet to hear back. This story will be updated if the company responds. Chennai police chief AK Viswanathan is also still to reply to a message asking about the steps being taken to find Mugilan.

'Slowly breaking down'

Poongodi is a strong woman who has run the family almost singlehandedly since Mugilan plunged into activism after quitting his job with the state's Public Works Department in 1996. Now, though, she is shaken and "slowly breaking down".

After they were married in 1996, Poongodi said, Mugilan encouraged her to study desktop publishing. A year later she set up a small designing and printing shop in Chennimalai. The shop, two houses away, has been shut since Mugilan went missing.

"He always encouraged me to live independently, without being dependent on him," said Poongodi. "He spent most of his time working on environmental issues. And he would seldom stay home."

Indeed, despite all the hardship, she made sure to send their only son back to college in Coimbatore where he is studying for a master's in environmental science. She also sent her mother-in-law to stay with a relative in Chennai, Poongodi said, because the aged woman would weep whenever anybody came asking about Mugilan and it was taking a toll her health.

Although Poongodi is used to her husband's absence, she is growing increasingly worried. "Mugilan has never gone missing for such a long period," she explained. "This is the longest I have spent without knowing about his whereabouts."

'It's really worrying'

This, however, isn't the first time Mugilan has gone missing. In 2012, he disappeared while travelling on a train from Madurai to Kudankulam. It turned out he had been taken away by the police and held at the Kudankulam police station. After three days, he managed to call his wife from the cell phone of a person who was at the police station and told her he had been illegally detained. Immediately, a habeas corpus petition was filed, forcing the police to produce him before the Madras High Court.

At that time, the activist was at the forefront of the campaign against the setting up of the Koodankulam nuclear plant. "In 2011-12, the police registered at least 75 criminal cases, including of sedition, against almost every person who participated in the Koodankulam protests," said Gunaselan V, Thoothukudi coordinator of the Aam Aadmi Party and a friend of Mugilan for nearly 10 years. Mugilan is still facing several of those charges.

In September 2017, Mugilan and Gunaselan were on their way to Alwarthirunagari, Thoothukudi, when four men in a van intercepted their motorbike and abducted the activist. They were going to participate in a protest

against groundwater extraction by private companies, including Sterlite, for industrial use.

“I was there with him when he was abducted and I immediately sent a message through WhatsApp to his family, friends and the media,” said Gunaselan. “As the message spread and the media started reporting the abduction, pressure mounted on the police to reveal his whereabouts. The police said they had taken him into custody. They contacted his family and said Mugilan was held for failing to appear in court in relation to the Kudankulam cases. He was taken to a court and sent to Palayamkottai Central Jail in Tirunelveli.”

Mugilan was released in September 2018. “Now he has gone missing again and it is really worrying,” said Gunaselan.



Human rights activists hold a demonstration in Madurai demanding the authorities find RS Mugilan.

Photo credit: Facebook/Marx Pandian

On March 2, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Communist Party of India held a demonstration in Chennai, demanding that the activist be found urgently. These political parties as well as human rights groups plan to organise more protests if Mugilan is not found soon. “This is a problem that has affected a group of protesters who point out the mistakes of the government,” DMK leader TKS Elangovan told *The News Minute*, explaining the reason for their protests.

Previously, the human rights group Amnesty International had urged the authorities to investigate Mugilan’s disappearance.

“We need to find this uncompromising activist who is indispensable to Tamil Nadu,” said Gunaselan.

‘Fearing for his life’

The day before he disappeared, Mugilan released a video titled *Sterlite Hidden Truth* in which he accused the police officers Saratkar and Yadav of colluding with Sterlite officials to unleash violence during the May 22 protests. Separately, in a press statement, he accused the police of burning vehicles and blaming anti-Sterlite protestors.

He reiterated his allegations at the press conference in Chennai the following day. Afterwards, Mugilan met VP Ponnarasan and some other friends. At around 10.30 pm, Ponnarasan and Mugilan reached the Egmore railway station. While Ponnarasan took the Mangalore Express to Karur, Mugilan boarded a train to Madurai. He never reached.

According to his friends, Mugilan feared he had put his life in danger by addressing the press conference. Sridhar Nedunchezhyian, the last person

Mugilan apparently spoke to, at around 10.55 pm on February 15, said the activist shared his fears with him.

“So I asked him how he was travelling and what time he expected to reach Madurai,” said Nedunchezhiyan, who resides in the city. “He had received threats from Sterlite and police. The train was supposed to reach Madurai at around 10.30 am but it came only at 2.30 pm. Why was there such a long delay?”

When Nedunchezhiyan could not contact Mugilan on his phone, he went looking for him at the railway station. “We knew something had gone wrong when we could not trace him anywhere,” he said.

He informed some other friends and when they all failed to locate the activist, they approached the High Court on February 18, filing a habeas corpus petition through the advocate Henri Tiphagne. The petition was heard the same day. The court issued notices to the Chennai police commissioner as well as the police chiefs of Villupuram and Kanchipuram.



Viduthalai Chiruthai Katchi leader Thol Thirumavalavan addresses a protest meeting called to demand the government find RS Mugilan, in Chennai. Photo credit: Kaveri Protection Committee

When the plea came up for the next hearing on March 4, the police denied Mugilan was in their custody. The next day, *The Times of India* reported that the government's counsel had also informed the court that the inquiry into the activist's disappearance was being conducted by the Crime Branch, which had already questioned at least 148 people. The court directed the Crime Branch to file a status report and adjourned the matter till March 18.

Asking irrelevant questions

Among those questioned were some of Mugilan's friends. They alleged that the Crime Branch only posed "irrelevant questions". "I was asked who Henri Tiphagne was, how he had engaged Sudha Ramalingam as the lawyer and why she was ready to assist without taking fees," said I Aseervatham, Tamil Nadu coordinator of the human rights group People's Watch whom Mugilan had contacted a day before he went missing. "All this is irrelevant to the case. We have filed a petition asking them to trace Mugilan. Why are the police asking such questions instead of trying to find Mugilan's whereabouts?"

Gunaseelan added, "It is not the Crime Branch is incapable of doing it. With the latest technology, it is very easy to track a person through his phone or trace him using the CCTV footage."

Gunaseelan, who was also questioned, said the police asked him why the activist had contacted him and how he met his expenses. "I told them Mugilan had spoken to me about the threat he was facing for exposing Sterlite and also the sand mining mafia," he added. "They did not note this down. We are ready to cooperate with the inquiry, but why are they not asking relevant questions?"

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