

Man goes missing on train, kin accuses Railway Police of inaction

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By Jayanthi Pawar

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When 35-year-old Baskar (name changed), realised his father-in-law was missing from the train they were travelling in, and the train had just then crossed Mambalam railway station, he immediately rushed to the railway police, seeking help to trace the man. But, it took him three days to get the FIR copy from the local police.

Speaking to Express, Baskar says, "We were returning from our relative's house to Chennai and the train slowed down at Mambalam. That's where my father-in-law got off. We realised this only when the train reached Egmore at around 4 am. Immediately I rushed to the railway police and sought help."

When the family requested the officials to scan through CCTV footage to trace the man, they claimed the technical person was not available and the family was asked to wait.

“After around sixteen hours, the person in charge arrived and the CCTV footage was scanned and I found my father-in-law had got off the train in Mambalam and was walking towards Ranganathan Street. Had they scanned the footage earlier, I could have found him by now,” says Baskar.

He further adds, "However, I went back to Mambalam railway station and found that the case will not be handled by the railway police as he left the station. They directed me to the local law and order police station by 9.30 pm, where we were asked to return the next day. The next morning, I reached the station by 9 am and it was only in the evening that a police personnel accompanied me to the shops in Ranganathan street and scanned the CCTV footage and again hitting a dead end, we were asked to leave,” he recalls.

“Finally, it was only the third day evening that the police agreed to file an FIR only because we had an advocate talk to the officers at a higher level. Had the police helped us scan the CCTV footage, we could at least have found out that my father-in-law had boarded an autorickshaw or any other vehicle and traced him with the registration number. Now it has been more than a week and we are yet to get any information,” points out Baskar.

This seems to be the plight for any family who approaches the police station to file a missing complaint.

In another missing complaint, two-year-old Harini, had been found missing on September 15, 2018, when she was travelling with her parents, Venkatesan (25) and Kaliammal, from the Narikuravar community, around Kancheepuram, with relatives, selling beads and other handmade products.

When the family approached the station to file a missing complaint, the police did not pay heed to it.

“Later, after bringing the issue to the notice of the media, higher officials instructed the station to file an FIR. Though, the case was filed, the process the police adopted to trace the girl was still slow. “For one month, the police did not contact us to trace the child. Meanwhile, we gave the police a tip-off saying the child could be in Mumbai and Kolkata and visited the places. The girl’s mother was eight months pregnant and could not accompany us much and the family depended on the father’s income. With the help of social networking sites and the police’s help, the toddler was traced after 114 days at Thiruporur in Kancheepuram,” said Sayed, an NGO staff who helped the family.

Disagreeing with this, a senior police officer in the City claimed, “Once we receive a complaint about a person missing, the photo of the victim is shared in Whatsapp groups in the police district and among the neighbouring districts. The same day, we ensure it is uploaded on the State police website and all the other stations across the State are intimated.

However, the delay to file FIR in some cases leads to the person being found even dead. For instance, in January last year, an FIR was filed only seven days after a 26-year-old man with mental disabilities, was reported to be missing. However, the day the man went missing, it was learnt that he had died in a road accident and since the complaint was not filed on the same day, the victim’s family was kept in the dark.

Vaishnavi Jayakumar, member of DRA (Disability Rights Alliance), says M Praveen Kumar, a resident of Kotturpuram, who had been working as a housekeeping staff at a star hotel on Dr Radhakrishnan Salai road, for five years, had gone missing on January 13 and had died in a road accident the next day. “But since the missing complaint was not uploaded, the body remained unidentified,” she added.

Vaishnavi points out if CCTV surveillance is being pushed so aggressively, it should be easier for police to trace missing complaints faster.

In the recent Tiruvallur case, where a 15-year-old girl had allegedly gone missing, it took six months for the family to find out that the girl was raped by five men for five days, killed and buried near her house. It was only after six months, the locals recovered bones of the girl. In this case, the missing complaint was filed on the same day but the police told the parents the girl must have eloped and sent the parents back to check at her friends' houses.

All the mentioned cases are those which were widely talked about in the media. "Any missing complaint is normally underplayed in police stations. The first reaction to a missing complaint is to search in the neighbouring locality and at friends' houses and it takes minimum 30 to 60 hours to file an FIR. Once the case is registered, the investigation process starts," says the activist.

Henri Tiphagne, an activist and founder of People's Watch, says despite having the added value of technology, it is not utilized. "They prefer to use technology for surveillance rather than investigation. We have not seen higher level use of the technology. For example, anti-nuclear social activist Mugilan's missing complaint was sent online on 16 February to the police. Exactly ten days later, I got a call from Tindivanam station inquiring about the complaint, whereas, two court hearings were already held in connection with the incident. This is the case, even for a high profile person's missing case. The police have to ensure they have the mechanism to put up the missing complaints in public domain," he adds. When questioned about the difficulties faced by the police for the delay in filing of missing complaints, an inspector said, most of such complaints turn out to be fake.

“There have been cases, where the children go to meet their friends and their parents who are not aware, file a missing complaint. To avoid such hassle, we ensure that they check the victim’s frequently visited places and then receive the missing complaint,” said the inspector. Also, a senior police officer said, when any missing complaint is filed, it is automatically uploaded on the State police website, which is accessible to all the stations across the State.

“Hence, if the missing person is traced or either dead, the family is intimated,” said the officer.

Meanwhile, N Lalitha, an advocate with the Madras High Court, says once a missing complaint is filed, the police without checking for merits and demerits, should file an FIR. “Currently, the police officers begin the investigation first and then file the FIR,” she adds.

<http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2019/mar/10/missing-in-action-1949066.html>