

TN police's 'slippery' toilets: Data shows over 300 suspects fractured limbs in custody

New RTI data from Puzhal prison suggests custodial torture is a grim pattern, with over 300 inmates entering jail with broken limbs.



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This story is part of our series on Police Impunity in India. Reporters from The News Minute and Newslaundry are travelling across states to bring you stories of negligence and abuse of power by the police, and how minorities and marginalised sections suffer the most.

In Tamil Nadu, perfectly healthy suspects arrested by the police in criminal cases often end up in jail with broken limbs. The standard explanation from the police is that the suspect “slipped and fell in the bathroom” of the police station.

Without any solid data that can prove a pattern, the police have till now walked away with no consequences. Now, for the first time, data obtained through a Right to Information (RTI) petition has revealed a grim pattern.

Between January 1 and October 7, 2024, at least 304 accused persons remanded to Chennai's Central Prisons in Puzhal had fracture injuries.

The data, provided by P Dharmaraj, Additional Superintendent of Puzhal Central Prison-II, was obtained by advocate Pugalenth, director of Prisoners' Rights Forum. The data suggests that what was once dismissed as isolated cases of torture has now become an institutionalised practice. The act of breaking limbs has become the norm.

“One of the earliest cases that pointed to this disturbing trend was in 2015, when a notorious robber, ‘Neeravi’ Murugan, ended up with a broken leg,” recalled a senior crime reporter who has been tracking custodial abuse in the state. “Police at the time claimed he was injured while trying to escape custody.”

Earlier, such incidents were rare and often seen in sensitive cases, typically when public anger was directed at the police or the ruling government over their failure to prevent a crime. But over time, even individuals accused of offences like chain-snatching were seen wearing casts when produced in court, with images of their injuries circulated in the media.

According to advocate Pugalenth, despite regular condemnation from human rights defenders across Tamil Nadu, the practice has spread beyond major urban centres. “I’ve received information from lawyers in various lower courts about police producing the accused in court wearing casts and bandages,” he said. “This is no longer limited to high-profile or exceptional cases. It’s happening everywhere.”

The RTI data reveals the nature and extent of injuries; they range from right-hand forearm fractures and leg fractures to wrist fractures.

Importantly, the data pertains only to police stations falling under the jurisdictions of Chennai, Thiruvallur, Kancheepuram, and Chengalpattu districts, suggesting that the actual number of such cases across the state could be significantly higher.

According to the Prisons Department, the highest number of cases where the accused were admitted in prison with fractures were reported in March 2024, with 51 cases, and in August 2024, with 79 cases.

In medical terms, fracture in any part of the body is categorised as a grievous injury. Speaking to TNM, Dr Selvakumar, a former police surgeon and expert in forensic medicine, said that even the smallest hairline fracture is considered as a grievous injury by doctors. “These kinds of injuries can have long term consequences.”

Examining cases

TNM verified a few cases based on First Information Reports (FIR) and allegations levelled against those arrested and remanded to judicial custody with fractures.

In January 2024, Khemaram was arrested by Flower Bazaar police for allegedly cheating someone of Rs 8 lakhs. He was booked under Sections 420 (cheating), 294(b) (use of abusive language), 506(2) (criminal intimidation) and arrested by the Muthialpet police. When he was remanded in judicial custody, he had a fracture in his left hand.

Similarly, Roshan Kumar was arrested by the Kodungaiyur police in connection with the theft of two motorbikes worth Rs 10,000 each. He was remanded to judicial custody with a fracture on his right forearm on March 12, 2024.

Another FIR was registered by the Tenyampet police in Chennai in July 2024 under Sections 331(4) (house break-in), 305 (theft) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) after a complaint that unknown persons had entered a shop and stolen Rs 4,000. The police arrested Arun Kumar in connection with this case. He was remanded to judicial custody in October with a fracture in his left leg.

The list also has details of 37 accused who have multiple cases against them, including theft, criminal intimidation, causing hurt, robbery, murder charges detained under the Goondas Act. In almost all cases, a hand or leg was fractured when they were lodged in the prison. In some cases, the accused had fractures in both an arm and a leg at the same time.

Another journalist covering the crime beat told TNM the explanation that the accused "slipped in the bathroom" has become the standard operating procedure (SOP) in police stations. "Breaking limbs has become a mandatory exercise like registering an FIR, recording the statement of the accused, and taking the accused for a medical check-up before sending them to jail. In sensitive cases, it gets reported, while in others, there are no records of it," he said.

HC and SHRC intervene

On May 15 this year, the Madras High Court vacation bench of Justices GR Swaminathan and V Lakshminarayanan questioned why toilets in police stations are designed in such a way that only prisoners slip and fall.

What prompted the court to raise this question was a plea moved by the father of a remand prisoner who had suffered fractures in his left leg and right hand. The court questioned whether these toilets are inspected by authorities and why no one besides prisoners have been injured there.

"Such practices should be stopped," the court warned, adding that if they continue, the police officers concerned will lose their jobs for negligence of duty.

Advocate Pugalenthil said the courts have not taken any concrete steps to prevent this blatant human rights violation. He added that in most cases, magistrates at the lower courts inquire about the injuries to the suspects, who provide other reasons.

"Police personnel are present in court during remand proceedings, and the suspects fear for their lives. They won't reveal the truth," he told TNM.

Henri Tiphagne, executive director of People's Watch, told TNM that it's time that the courts intervene as it is the duty of the court to take suo-moto cognisance of the issue. "The best remedy would be for the courts to direct the state legal services authority, district judges, and competent lawyers to visit all the prisons to authenticate it," he said.

Henri further said that the power to remand rests with the judicial magistrates and the recurrent case of fractured limbs is a loss of dignity for the judiciary. "If you have a proper investigation team that is non-police in nature and has senior judicial officers, all the information including digital evidence can be traced back. That is how they can restore the lost dignity."

In May 2020, the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) initiated suo motu proceedings against these 'freak accidents' that take place inside police stations and called for a detailed report from the Chennai Commissioner of Police.

The Commission demanded to know how many incidents of 'bathroom slipping' had been reported since 2017, whether any police officials had themselves fallen in the bathroom, and what action had been taken by the Police Commissioner to prevent such incidents.

There is no clarity on the status of the SHRC's suo motu proceedings.

In the past, when RTI activists tried to access information regarding 'slippery' bathrooms, the petitions were turned down by the Public Information Officer at the Director General of Police's office, who asked the petitioner to file separate RTI petitions with all district police offices and commissionerates.

Speaking to TNM, advocate Bhramma, who had filed a similar RTI petition in 2019 but to no avail, said he has appealed against this directive, and his appeal is still pending with the Commission.

When TNM reached out to Maheshwar Dayal, Additional Director General of Police, Prisons Department said that they are accepting inmates the way they are being sent by the courts.

"We don't know what is happening outside the prison, it is none of my business. The court is sending them with a warrant and we are taking them in. He may be with a broken limb, heart attack, or diabetic, we are giving them all the attention that is required. This question does not pertain to the prisons department and I am surprised," he said.

Commenting on the pattern of custodial violence reported in police stations in the district, Kancheepuram district SP K Shanmugam said, "We don't know what is there in the data. We will study the data and react to it. We work only as per the law." He also said that the information was new to him and that he will check it up.

TNM reached out to Chennai Police Commissioner Arun, but he declined to comment.

We also reached out to the Tamil Nadu Home Secretary Dheeraj Kumar and DGP Shankar Jiwaj for their comment. We will update this story once they respond.

<https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/tn-polices-slippery-toilets-data-shows-over-300-suspects-fractured-limbs-in-custody>