

VIGNESH V, S GODSON WISELY DASS, & PEARSON LENEKAR SR @ Madurai, Thoothukudi, & Tiruchy

“THEY beat me up like I was an animal.” K. Angalan reminisced his two-decade-old encounter with cops, voice trembling, and fear still lurking in his eyes. “They tied me like Jesus on the cross and lashed me from legs to spine.” He can barely forget how he was treated, abused with filthy language and told to confess to the crime by cops, who openly threatened to hurt his sister. Angalan, a 39-year-old cycle mechanic and pig rearer from the Kuravan community, was first arrested before he turned 18. He was booked in 27 cases across 13 police stations in four districts, between 2007 and 2014, and framed in multiple theft cases. Though he ended up spending over a decade in jail, Angalan was fortunate enough to escape without sacrificing his entire life. However, not everyone was so lucky.

The recent custodial death of the 29-year-old B Ajithkumar, a security guard at Madapuram temple in Thirupuvanam in Sivaganga district on June 28, not only underlines the human rights violation against the suspects at the hands of police but also highlights the urgent need to evaluate the mentality of the police force comprising all the cadres of the department. Factors such as lack of accountability, inadequate supervision, insufficient mental health programmes, and a poor awareness of human rights among police personnel can be attributed to the brutal ‘police killing’, underscoring the urgent need to address custodial violence, say activists.

VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS TO ‘CRACK’ CASES

Human rights activists point out that members of special police teams under the direct supervision of SPs and DSPs are given boundless powers to operate inter stations and districts. They carry sickles, iron rods, wooden logs, and other lethal weapons, the activists alleged. The pressure sometimes originates from local politicians or recommendations from senior officials to crack cases, compelling officers to beat suspects for confessions.

When asked about the unleashed police brutality, particularly by special teams under SPs and DSPs, a policeman from a former special team told *TNIE* that senior police officers would not allow them to rest peacefully if no progress was shown in the investigation. “Beating suspects ‘black and blue’ is the approach we resort to because senior officials demand instant results in any case,” he said.

One way to address this issue is to ensure accountability through proper proceedings. “For instance, for 10 theft cases, a police inspector from a local station could be appointed to inquire into them with a team of policemen from different stations, with their involvement dissolving after the detection and conclusion of the cases. The department should avoid pressuring police to complete inquiries quickly, as this indirectly forces policemen to resort to violent methods. The state department should be prepared to accept a potential drop in crime detection as an immediate consequence,” opines another police officer.

R Murali, vice president of PUCI, believes that most policemen lack awareness or the will to handle the general public. They often end up treating them with the same methods reserved for habitual offenders. The public’s mindset also needs to change; common people seem to accept police brutality. He noted that the police department needs to transform its internal culture, as many a time, police personnel do not treat their colleagues with dignity, and this internal culture impacts how they treat others.

“If a child dies in a school, the headmaster is bound to face action or punishment. Similarly, if a policeman commits an offence, the senior officer must be held responsible. Only if such changes are implemented, the senior police personnel will turn cautious and apply more scientific and intelligent methods to detect or identify offenders. These days, or trying to handle, they integrate a lot of new technological innovations into their investigation to solve cases quickly,” he adds.

Henri Tiphagne, a human rights activist and executive director of Human Rights NGO People’s Watch, sheds light on how the new recruit training

PROCEDURE TO HANDLE SUSPECTS IN POLICE CUSTODY

- Suspects should neither be assaulted nor tortured
- Activities of special team policemen should be monitored
- Suspects should not be locked in lodges and rented houses for inquiries
- Suspects should be produced before the court within 24 hours
- Police are mandated not to harass accused while obtaining confession statements
- Investigation should follow only the techniques of scientific approach through interrogation, fingerprints, and call detail records (CDRs)
- CCTV should be fixed at police stations to check custodial torture complaints
- During recovery of stolen materials, police should not mount unnecessary force on the accused
- DSP and special branch constables should keenly monitor the accused in police custody and properly provide food and medicines
- Health condition of the suspect should be checked before arrest



FROM SATHANKULAM TO SIVAGANGA

WHEN INHUMAN TORTURE IS RED

Recurring custodial deaths underscore human rights violations against suspects & the urgent need to evaluate the mentality of police force

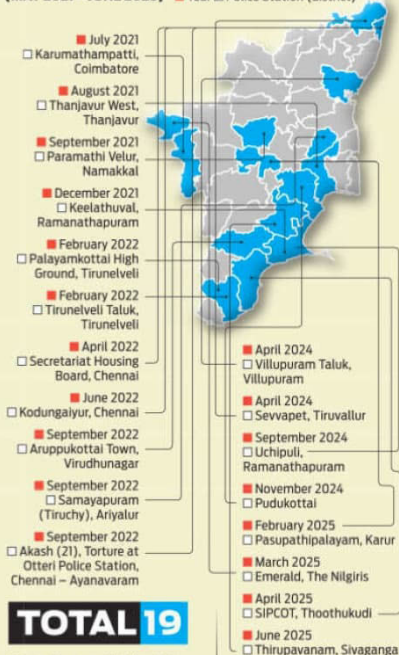
Beating suspects ‘black and blue’ is often the approach cops resort to when senior officials demand instant results in crime cases

Fostering self-discipline among officers and adopting scientific methods for interrogation essential to prevent such cases in future

TORMENT IN CELLS

A total of 19 custodial deaths occurred in Tamil Nadu between 2021 and 2025

(MAY 2021 – JUNE 2025) ■ Year □ Police Station (district)



TOTAL 19

(Note: No custodial death in police station in 2023 - only one death in judicial custody)

[Data source: People’s Watch in Madurai]

‘20K CUSTODIAL VIOLENCE CASES IN EIGHT YEARS’

According to National Human Rights Commission reports, around 20,000 custodial violence/deaths (police or judicial) have taken place in India from 2017 to 2024

teaches the police force how to circumvent or escape repercussions for torture, or how to “efficiently” inflict it. “The training needs to focus more on handling issues ethically. In the case of Ajithkumar, all those involved were aged between 30 and 40 years. They might have an average of 10 years’ experience in the field. Yet, they turned out to be brutal and were unresponsive

to Ajithkumar’s inability to cope with his cries,” he said, stressing that while they might not inherently be bad people, there was a clear lack of oversight. Besides, as Joint Action Against Custodial Torture (JAAC) Tamil Nadu state coordinator Tholar Thiyaagu points out, special teams are neither constituted with an official memorandum nor are liable under any law of investigation, as they are not bound to any police stations. While the second point in the 41 guidelines (SOP) issued by former DGP Syledra Babu in 2022 necessitates monitoring special teams, the present DGP dismantles all the special teams outrightly. It shows that the present police did not follow it word and spirit, he says.

Had the investigators followed the 41 rules of SOP, the encounters and custodial tortures would not have been continued, he adds.

CALL FOR PROPER ACTION

Stating that there have been 31 custodial (judicial or police) deaths in the state in the last four years, activist Henri Tiphagne calls for the proper installation of CCTV cameras in police stations. “Just suspending or transferring officers is not going to solve the issue. Install CCTV cameras in stations properly, ensuring the vicinity of the station is covered, because that’s where torture often happens,” Tiphagne said. He further stressed that the District Level Oversight Committees (DLOCs), meant to monitor CCTV installations and human rights concerns in police stations, have not reviewed anything effectively. Moreover, the witness protection scheme remains largely unknown among police or at the district judge level, Tiphagne said, citing an instance where a whistleblower in a Madurai stone quarry had to struggle extensively to seek protection under it due to lack of awareness.

“NHRC reports from 2017 to 2024 indicated 20,000 custodial violence/death (police or judicial) in India. Out of these, only 996 ended in compensation, and nothing has happened to the remaining 19,000 cases. Only 28 cases led to disciplinary action. We see many police officers appearing before the SHRC hearing every month for various cases. But they are getting promotions. Who will believe in such a system of SHRC and NHRC,” Tiphagne asked.

The nodal officer of the TN police well-being programme, Dr Jayakumar C, additional professor in the Department of Psychosocial Support in Dis-

aster Management at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) in Bengaluru, stated that through their programme, they engaged with officers from the rank of constable to ADGP Focussing on three aspects — individual, family and workplace — the programme helps with anger management, stress management, healthy coping strategies, and ways to solve problems in family relationships and with colleagues, among other aspects. Another extension of the programme is the ‘Maglichi’ initiative (not for all who took the well-being programme), which is for police personnel identified with problems during the initial well-being assessment, but this is currently functioning only in a few districts.

He emphasised that induction of such programmes at the training level is a must, and they should continue even during their service. “They are not taught how to handle public criticism or uncooperative individuals. Force is not the only method. Even if we consider the personal lives of these five police officers, they are not rested in the case, their actions would definitely have impacted their personal lives, friendships, and many other aspects. We cannot just move on from one incident. It should be ingrained in the policy of policing and at all levels of police force,” Jayakumar added.

Pinning hope in the state’s ‘Police Well-being and Maglichi’ programme, first of its kind in the entire country, Dr C Ramasubramanian, TN’s state nodal officer of the Mental Health Programme, stated that “identification, training, treatment, rehabilitation, and back to work” is a comprehensive approach undertaken by the state. “Any amount of punishment is not going to help bring out a permanent change or solution. However, by providing training, we can change the attitude of the police and bring a new mindset. The police officer then becomes an asset for the department. The training should be continuous, consistent, and meaningful. Without finding the etiology,

treating the symptoms is not going to lead to a permanent cure,” he said.

However, sources from the police department said the well-being programme, though successful since its inception in 2017, was halted during Covid-19 and has not been revived. Many such initiatives often get hindered midway, disrupting the final results. For instance, while serving as the DIG of Tiruchy range and IGP of central zone in 2020 and 2021 respectively, V Balakrishnan introduced cognitive behavioural therapy to several cops in his range. He identified 80 police personnel with violent behaviour from five districts in Tiruchy range in 2020, soon after the custodial death of P Jayaraj and his son J Beniks in Sathankulam in Thoothukudi. The cops including constables, sub-inspectors, and inspectors were taken off duty, involving direct contacts with the general public, and they were chosen for the specialised programme called ‘Cognitive Behaviour Therapy’ by the psychologists. Since he was transferred, the programme was put on hold. Later, he tried to revive it when he took charge as the IGP of central zone in Tiruchy. But it too was short-lived as he was transferred again.

Constant work stress, many say, also adversely affects the morale of the policemen, which eventually adds to the outbursts of cop brutality. In the wake of this, the state government introduced weekly offs for police personnel up to the rank of sub-inspectors in 2021, along with holidays on their birthdays and wedding anniversaries, with the aim of safeguarding their health and allowing them to spend time with their families. In several cases, the Madras High Court has criticised the ineffective implementation of this weekly off system. However, commenting on these issues, a police officer stated that while weekly offs are provided for policemen, they are not consistent due to the nature of their work and the necessity of their presence in important and emergency situations.

ATROCITIES AGAINST KURAVANS

In Angalan’s case, though human rights groups intervened later, trauma of the dark days still haunts him. “Even today, police come to my house, take my photo, and leave. I live in constant fear.” Just three months ago, he says, officers attempted to re-arrest him, citing a new CCTV footage. Only his lawyer’s immediate intervention prevented another round of incarceration.

In 2016, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes constituted a special committee to investigate rising complaints of police atrocities against the Kuravan community in TN. The committee documented 21 case studies involving men, women, and even children, each revealing systemic abuse. M Sundararajan, retired assistant superintendent of police, Dharmapuri, and a member of the Kuravan community, points an accusing finger to the systemic bias in the force. “When there is a high-profile theft or crime, the heat comes down hard from superiors to inspectors, sub-inspectors, and finally, constables. The mindset gradually shifts to securing a confession (which is more important than finding the truth even by inflicting enormous pain on the accused even if it’s woman or a juvenile,” he says.

Sundararajan points to a lingering colonial hangover in the TN police force, particularly in how Kuravans are treated. “From training days, officers are fed with casteist biases. Kuravans are seen as default suspects,” he says. “Confessions are forced through torture. They’re branded as ‘heavily-shedders’ as a repeatedly targeted.”

Amid this juncture, PUCI, vice president R Murali stressed the need for a tribunal or forum where victims or their families can seek justice. “If a theft occurs, people can approach the crime police station, but where can victims of custodial torture go seek justice? There must be a radical change in the department,” he said.

NEED FOR SYSTEMIC REFORMS

Highlighting the need for systemic reforms within the police department, Virudhunagar MP Manickam Tagore stated that measures such as fostering self-discipline among officers and adopting science-based methods for interrogation are critical to prevent such incidents in the future. “This has to be the last inhumane act,” he said.

“We can see the changes over a decade if we start making changes with extensive awareness and sensitisation programmes for cops,” an IPS officer on the condition of anonymity said.

Just suspending or transferring officers is not going to solve the issue. Install CCTV cameras in stations properly, because that’s where torture often happens

Henri Tiphagne, Human Rights Activist