

## How many more Ajith Kumars?

Tamil Nadu has a long, brutal history of custodial deaths. Ajith's case makes it harder to call it mere police excess.

Published : Jul 04, 2025 15:01 IST - 10 MINS READ

[Ilangovan Rajasekaran](#)



The [custodial death](#) of 27-year-old B. Ajith Kumar in Sivagangai district of Tamil Nadu bears chilling similarities to what police officer Derek Chauvin and his three colleagues from the Minneapolis (Minnesota) police department did to [George Floyd](#) in 2020. Floyd died of suffocation when the officer forcefully kneeled on his neck, exerting extreme pressure.

Ajith Kumar of Madappuram near Thiruppuvanam in the Sivagangai district was subjected to the same kind of cruelty by the personnel of the special crime squad attached to the Manamadurai police subdivision. The post-mortem report submitted to the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court and available with *Frontline* reveals the third-degree torture that Ajith Kumar was put through. He had died of multiple external and internal injuries, especially in the neck, chest, skull and abdomen, where multiple haemorrhages were noted.

His body bore 44 "external injuries", of which 18 were major ones. The internal examination showed sub-scalp contusion and subdural and subarachnoid haemorrhage on both sides of the parietal and left temporal region. Multiple petechial haemorrhages were noticed on the bi-parietal lobes of the brain. Haemorrhage was also noted over the posterior wall of the left ventricle and pulmonary trunk.

There were injuries to the neck, including its vocal cords, pharynx and larynx, causing fatal suffocation and catastrophic internal bleeding.

No wonder the court expressed its anguish thus: “Even an ordinary murderer would not have caused this much injury to a person.” Eyewitnesses, including Vineeth Kumar, brother of the deceased, who vividly recalled that fateful evening of June 28 when Ajith died of his injuries, told the court how he was tortured. One of the witnesses, Saktheeshwaran, a temple employee who took a video of the thrashing and Ajith’s wails of pain without the knowledge of the police, has sought protection since he fears for his life.

ity guard in a temple, had no criminal record. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The [custodial death](#) of 27-year-old B. Ajith Kumar in Sivagangai district of Tamil Nadu bears chilling similarities to what police officer Derek Chauvin and his three colleagues from the Minneapolis (Minnesota) police department did to [George Floyd](#) in 2020. Floyd died of suffocation when the officer forcefully kneeled on his neck, exerting extreme pressure.

Ajith Kumar of Madappuram near Thiruppuvanam in the Sivagangai district was subjected to the same kind of cruelty by the personnel of the special crime squad attached to the Manamadurai police subdivision. The post-mortem report submitted to the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court and available with *Frontline* reveals the third-degree torture that Ajith Kumar was put through. He had died of multiple external and internal injuries, especially in the neck, chest, skull and abdomen, where multiple haemorrhages were noted.

His body bore 44 “external injuries”, of which 18 were major ones. The internal examination showed sub-scalp contusion and subdural and subarachnoid haemorrhage on both sides of the parietal and left temporal region. Multiple petechial haemorrhages were noticed on the bi-parietal lobes of the brain. Haemorrhage was also noted over the posterior wall of the left ventricle and pulmonary trunk. There were injuries to the neck, including its vocal cords, pharynx and larynx, causing fatal suffocation and catastrophic internal bleeding.

No wonder the court expressed its anguish thus: “Even an ordinary murderer would not have caused this much injury to a person.” Eyewitnesses, including Vineeth Kumar, brother of the deceased, who vividly recalled that fateful evening of June 28 when Ajith died of his injuries, told the court how he was tortured. One of the witnesses, Saktheeshwaran, a temple employee who took a video of the thrashing and Ajith’s wails of pain without the knowledge of the police, has sought protection since he fears for his life.

**Also Read | [Custodial violence incident in Tirunelveli shocks Tamil Nadu](#)**

Ajith Kumar was not a criminal. A school dropout from a struggling, backward caste Nadar family, he had no police record whatsoever. As the eldest son, he bore the responsibility of caring for his widowed mother and younger brother, Vineeth Kumar, who was desperately searching for a job. Ajith’s modest wages, earned as a contractual watchman at the State-run Shri Badra Kalliamman temple in Madappuram, near Thiruppuvanam, were their only means of sustenance. Nonetheless, the family maintained a dignified existence until June 27, when a single accusation of theft shattered their lives.

On the morning of June 27, two women from Alampatti, Madurai—Nikita and her mother—arrived at the temple. Nikita sought Ajith’s help to get a wheelchair for her mother and to park her car. When the women returned after the *darshan*, they claimed 9.5 sovereigns of gold jewellery were missing from their vehicle.

### Miscarriage of justice

The bizarre events that followed reflect a shocking miscarriage of justice. Despite the alleged theft happening in the morning, the women waited until late evening to report it at the Thiruppuvanam police station. The inspector carried out a cursory inquiry with Ajith and another temple employee before escalating the matter to senior authorities, but he did not detain them. The case was then handed over to a special investigative team led by Manamadurai DSP Shanmugasundaram (now suspended).

Reliable sources told *Frontline* that the women contacted an IAS officer, who in turn sought a senior police officer’s assistance in the case. This officer reportedly asked the Superintendent of Police of Sivagangai district, Aashish Rawath (who has since been placed on the waiting list), to have Shanmugasundaram investigate the matter since it fell under his jurisdiction. The DSP allegedly instructed his six-member special crime squad, led by head constable Kannan of Palayanoor police station, to “recover the valuables at any cost”.

The team identified Ajith as the prime suspect and detained him for questioning, along with his brother Vineeth and two others. While this part of the sequence is not disputed, what follows is based on accounts from family members and other sources. To avoid CCTV surveillance, the police allegedly refrained from conducting the interrogation at the Thiruppuvanam police station.

Instead, the suspects were reportedly taken in a van to secluded locations, including a village tank bed and abandoned buildings. There, they were allegedly subjected to beatings and torture. The police also searched Ajith’s house. When they failed to find the “stolen” jewellery, they allegedly grew more violent, torturing Ajith with renewed brutality. On June 28, he was reportedly taken to a cow shed behind a temple, where he was beaten with plastic pipes and wooden rods. Ajith fainted and suffered seizures; family members said he also passed blood in his urine.

An unconscious Ajith was hurriedly taken in an auto rickshaw to a private hospital, which refused to admit him. He was taken to Thiruppuvanam Government Hospital, where he was declared “brought dead”. The body was sent to the Madurai Rajaji Hospital for a post-mortem examination. The Thiruppuvanam police registered an FIR late at night on the same day on the basis of the complaint filed by head constable Kannan, which claimed that Ajith died while trying to escape police custody.

If the murder was not shocking enough, the police’s blatant disregard for legally mandated protocols and procedures concerning arrests, detentions, and interrogations was even more appalling. The police officers who detained Ajith were in plain clothes and did not carry warrants. Ajith and the others were randomly picked up, detained, and interrogated. They neither registered an FIR nor recorded its details in the station case diary. No record of arrest or detention was made. Ajith was unlawfully detained for over 40 hours based solely on the suspicion that he might be the culprit.

In a State where hundreds of theft cases remain unresolved with many stolen properties, including jewellery, remaining unrecovered, the swift response of the Sivagangai police in this particular case

has raised suspicions. The death sparked widespread outrage in the State, and social media buzzed with opinions and videos condemning and castigating the police and the government. A clutch of petitions demanding a thorough investigation were filed before the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court.

“It is an extrajudicial killing. The tragic irony was that there was neither a formal complaint nor an FIR in this case. It has been a flagrant violation of all laws of the country from the day Ajith was illegally detained till his death,” said Henri Tiphagne of People’s Watch, a human rights organisation and one of the petitioners.

With the Assembly election coming up in 2026, the incident has caused serious embarrassment for the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government. The DMK’s campaign against the former All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) regime in the 2021 Assembly election had focussed on two key issues—the [custodial deaths of the traders P. Jeyaraj and his son J. Bennix in Sathankulam](#) in June 2020; and the Thoothukudi police firing on anti-Sterlite protesters on May 22, 2018, in which 13 people were shot dead.



During the 2021 election campaign, the DMK promised action against the perpetrators of these crimes. It is yet another story that none of the police officers held responsible by the Justice Aruna Jegadeesan Commission of Inquiry for the Thoothukudi police firing faced criminal charges. The [Sathankulam double murder case](#), investigated by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), is still in court.

Sensing that the issue was providing ammunition to his political opponents, [Chief Minister M.K. Stalin](#), who holds the Home portfolio, handed over the case to the CBI. He contacted Ajith’s family over the phone to express his regret and promised Ajith’s mother stringent action against the perpetrators.

An interim compensation of Rs 5 lakh was given to the family and a three-cent plot was allotted. Vineeth was given a job at the Aavin office in Karaikkudi. The Chief Minister also placed the SP,

Sivagangai, on a waiting list and suspended the DSP, Manamadurai. Five of six policemen, including Kannan of the special team, who were placed under suspension initially, were arrested on murder charges under Section 103 (1) of BNS and remanded in judicial custody. DGP Shankar Jiwal ordered an immediate disbanding of all special units functioning under sub-divisional DSPs across the State. A detailed “dos and don’ts” on arrests and investigations has been issued to all police stations.

As in the case of the Sathankulam custodial deaths, the intervention of the judiciary restored the sanctity of the law in Ajith’s case. But for the higher judiciary and activists, the case would have been suppressed.

According to Henri Tiphagne, 31 custodial deaths have occurred in Tamil Nadu in the past four years, with not a single officer being punished. “Every custodial death violates the Supreme Court’s guidelines in the D.K. Basu case. The law enforcers breaking the law with impunity betray the very rights of citizens enshrined in the Constitution,” he told *Frontline*. He called for an investigation into the roles of senior IAS and IPS officials involved in the case, as well as the *bona fides* of the complainant Nikita, who was allegedly involved in a case of financial misappropriation in 2011.

The two-member bench of the Madras High Court, Justice S.M. Subramaniam and Justice A.D. Maria Clete, acting on a batch of public interest litigation (PIL) petitions, came down heavily on the police and the state. Justice Subramaniam wondered how a state could kill its subjects. “Can it be tolerated?” he asked during the hearings. Passing a common order on July 1, the bench insisted that an “impartial probe is just and necessary” in the case.

The judges pointed out that despite Ajith’s mother filing a complaint on June 29 on her missing son, the Thiruppuvanam police did not register an FIR until July 1. Since there was an apprehension that evidence would be tampered with, the judges said material evidence such as CCTV footage from the temple should be safeguarded. They asked Madurai Additional District Judge S. John Sundarlal Suresh to conduct an inquiry and submit his report by July 8.

**Also Read | [Custodial death of Rampurhat massacre accused a loss of face for CBI](#)**

Before the dust of the Sivagangai case could settle, an earlier incident of custodial violence was reported: it occurred on January 14, 2025, at the Devathanapatti police station in Theni district. After a video showing a man being beaten up in custody went viral, five policemen were transferred to the Armed Reserve Force immediately.

“We have been fighting for a long time to bring officers who violate the rights of ordinary people to justice. Recently, we have managed to force the government to charge those police officers who commit culpable homicide in violation of the law,” said Vincent Kadir of Madurai-based Evidence, a rights organisation.

Notwithstanding its progressive image, [Tamil Nadu](#) has an odious history of custodial killings. Of the 31 victims of judicial and police custodial violence in the past four years, nearly 38 per cent belong to marginalised and minority Muslim communities. This is because of the higher number of detentions among them. Tamil Nadu had the second-highest number of deaths in custody between 2019 and 2020: it recorded 490 deaths, the highest in southern India. As of December 31, 2022, Tamil Nadu had the dubious distinction of 2,129 detentions—almost half of India’s total—with 38.5 per cent being

Dalits. The absence of specific laws against custodial violence and a lack of scientific and advanced forensic techniques in crime detection are the major deterrents to prosecution of erring officers.

All four Minneapolis police officers involved in [George Floyd's](#) death were convicted of both federal and State murder charges in the US, with sentences ranging from 22 to three years. Does the Indian criminal justice system ever enforce such strong deterrent convictions against rogue officers who brutalise citizens with impunity? Ajith's case and the Sathankulam double murder case raise troubling questions about the systemic malice that seems to mark law enforcement.

<https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/social-justice/custodial-death-ajith-kumar-tamil-nadu-police-brutality/article69767793.ece>