

Delhi Detentions Expose a Shadow Zone Beyond Due Process

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Taken in broad daylight

Ten activists and students were allegedly “abducted” by Delhi Police’s Special Cell over three days in March, held without documentation or legal process, and subjected to what rights groups describe as custodial torture and sexual violence.

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Ten activists and students were picked up between March 12 and 14 from Delhi’s Dyal Singh College, with petitions alleging they were held without arrest memos, FIR access, or production before a magistrate. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

At around one in the afternoon on March 12, outside the rust-coloured gates of Delhi’s Dyal Singh College, the day moved at its usual pace. Students trickled out of classrooms. Some gathered at tea stalls. Others scrolled through their phones, killing time before the next lecture.

It was in this lull that, according to eyewitnesses, a young woman was forced into a white vehicle fitted with VIP lights. She resisted. She tried to shout. A few people glanced up. Inside the vehicle, another man sat waiting.

Minutes earlier, she had messaged a faculty member, asking how long it would take for their meeting to begin. When he returned the call around 1:30 pm, her phone was switched off.

For two days, no official account of her whereabouts emerged. The fragments of that afternoon were pieced together not by the police, but through petitions, statements, and the halting recollections of those who had been nearby.

A habeas corpus plea, filed before the Delhi High Court by Rajbir—father of labour rights activist Shiv Kumar—placed some of these fragments on the legal record. The petition alleged that Kumar and the student, Ilakkiya, a Master's student at Delhi University, were picked up around 1 pm outside Dyal Singh College by men in plain clothes, forced into a vehicle with VIP lights, and held incommunicado.

The plea described the episode as “illegal confinement”. Neither, it stated, had been produced before a magistrate. Their families had not been told. Their phones had gone silent.

According to the Campaign Against State Repression (CASR), Ilakkiya and Kumar had arrived at the college that morning to meet a faculty member about an upcoming “Anti-Imperialism Week”. The meeting ran late. At roughly 1 pm, Ilakkiya sent a message asking how much longer it would take. Soon after, she vanished.

The petition includes screenshots of those messages—small, unremarkable lines of text that, in hindsight, mark the last verifiable moments before her detention. Kumar, according to both the petition and CASR, had already been seized and was inside the same vehicle.

A widening pattern

By the evening of March 13, more people had gone missing. Manjeet Kumar, a worker with the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan and a close associate of Shiv Kumar, disappeared after attending a programme calling for the release of lawyer Surendra Gadling, an accused in the Bhima Koregaon case. According to the petition, he was picked up that evening in Jahangirpuri while heading home.

That same evening, residents in Vijay Nagar, near Delhi University's North Campus, reported police personnel taking several students from an office space.

Some were picked up in broad daylight. Others late at night. In at least one instance, two women were confined overnight and taken away only the following morning.

Across these accounts, certain details recur with troubling regularity: plainclothes personnel, unmarked vehicles, phones switched off soon after detention. No arrest memos. No FIRs. No acknowledgment.

The People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) did not mince words. In a statement on March 16, it alleged that the Delhi Police Special Cell had "abducted" ten activists between March 12 and 14 and held them without contact. PUDR described the detentions as a form of enforced disappearance carried out without due process.

"In short, the police 'disappeared' ten activists and kept them in their custody without contact with the outside world," the statement said.

PUDR added that at least seven detainees were "badly beaten in custody", that lawyers were denied access to official documentation despite references to an FIR, and that detainees were allegedly coerced into signing statements asserting they had joined the investigation voluntarily. These documents, PUDR argued, were designed to retroactively legitimise the detention and protect officers from charges of "abduction, illegal detention and torture".

'Joined the investigation'

The Delhi Police have maintained in court that no arrests took place. The individuals, it said, had "joined the investigation". Under established legal procedure, an arrest triggers a series of safeguards: documentation, intimation to relatives, and production before a magistrate within 24 hours. To "join an investigation," by contrast, implies a voluntary act.

Lawyers for the detainees say this distinction collapses the moment you look at the facts. No documents were shown at the time of pick-up. Some detainees were later made to sign statements asserting voluntary participation—effectively recasting custody as consent.

Additional Standing Counsel Sanjeev Bhandari, appearing for the Delhi Police, told the court that the individuals were detained after an FIR was registered, but opposed sharing a copy with the petitioners. "The FIR copy is confidential. We will present it before the court," he said, adding that the matter was "not so simple".

PUDR pointed to what it called a pattern. The same Special Cell had detained members of the Bhagat Singh Chhatra Ekta Manch and the Forum Against Corporatisation and Militarisation in July 2025, allegedly holding them without formal charges before releasing them. The recurrence, PUDR argued, raised concerns about “how the police can repeatedly detain, torture and harass activists... without official warrant or reason.”

In the [habeas corpus](#) petition, the detentions are described as “illegal confinement”. The petitioner argued that the absence of due process violated the detainees’ fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Phones and digital devices were seized, families say, cutting off those detained from any means of communicating their whereabouts.

What CASR alleges

On March 17, CASR released a detailed statement that shifted the focus from disappearance to what it alleged happened during those unrecorded hours. It levelled grave allegations against personnel of the Delhi Police Special Cell—custodial torture, sexual violence, and coercion.

These claims have not been independently verified and are likely to be examined in court.

According to the statement, Shiv Kumar was subjected to sustained physical assault after his detention. He was allegedly beaten with a belt, including on his genitals, suspended upside down, and struck with batons. He was threatened, kept handcuffed, and coerced into recording a statement claiming he had gone underground.

CASR alleges that Kumar and another detainee, Rudra, were stripped and subjected to sexual humiliation. Similar allegations were made about Manjeet Kumar, who was allegedly beaten on the soles of his feet, subjected to caste-based abuse, and forced into degrading acts. Other detainees—Gaurav, Rudra, Akshay and Avinash—were allegedly assaulted, humiliated and threatened, sometimes with the suggestion that their deaths could be staged.

According to the detainees’ accounts cited by CASR, the coercion extended beyond verbal statements to the fabrication of documentary records. Some alleged they were forced to sign blank sheets of paper whose contents were never disclosed. Shiv Kumar, the statement claims, was compelled to write a letter identifying himself as a Naxal activist and declaring he was going

underground to join the movement in Dandakaranya. Others were allegedly questioned about their participation in protests against government policies—and that questioning was framed, they said, as evidence of unlawful intent.

CASR also alleged interference with attempts to seek legal remedy. Aman, who had accompanied Manjeet Kumar's mother to initiate legal proceedings, was allegedly picked up while returning to Delhi and warned against pursuing the case.

In the courtroom

Habeas corpus petitions brought the matter before the judiciary. On March 15, the Delhi High Court agreed to hear the petitions on an urgent basis. By then, the police had stated that all detainees had been released.

This was contested. Most notably in the case of a student whose family told the court he remained untraceable. He was later reported to have been released.

The petitions sought preservation of CCTV footage from areas near Dyal Singh College and Jahangirpuri, along with access to phone location data. On March 16, a Division Bench directed that such footage be preserved, including from Special Cell premises. It declined, however, to constitute a medical board to examine alleged custodial injuries. The court directed the respondents to file an affidavit within a week explaining the circumstances of the detentions and the legal authority under which the individuals had been held.

"All we are saying is that there is a procedure and you must follow it," the Bench observed.

Even as the court ordered evidence preserved and sought explanations, PUDR noted that scrutiny of police conduct remained limited. Beyond procedural directions, it said, there had been no "strict examination" of the officers involved. The group called for "immediate action against guilty policemen".

For the organisations documenting these events, the March detentions do not stand alone. They point to a strikingly similar set of incidents in July 2025, when members of student and activist groups—including the Bhagat Singh Chhatra Ekta Manch and FACAM—were allegedly held without formal charges, then released.

What ties these episodes together, according to rights groups, is the method: detention without formal arrest, absence of documentation, release without acknowledgment.

At the centre of the present case stands Shiv Kumar, whose earlier encounter with law enforcement shadows everything that has followed. During the farmers' protests at the Singhu border in 2021, Haryana Police detained him. A court-ordered inquiry later found he had been held in illegal confinement and subjected to custodial torture.

Those picked up between March 12 and 14 belonged to overlapping networks of student politics, labour organising, and civil liberties advocacy. Their activities, rights groups say, fall squarely within the framework of lawful political engagement. The police maintain that no unlawful detention took place.

The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) has taken note of the alleged detentions and custodial torture, calling for greater police accountability and reparations for abuse of state power. V. Suresh, the organisation's General Secretary, said that while police torture is nothing new in India, the reported instances of sexual torture represent a disturbing escalation—particularly because they occurred “under the nose of the Supreme Court, Delhi High Court, and the National Human Rights Commission, even as Parliament was in session”.

At an online public meeting on March 23, where survivors from Delhi shared their testimonies, Suresh said that similar patterns of abuse are being reported across the country.

He pointed to the Sathankulam custodial deaths case as a recent precedent. On March 23, 2026, the First Additional District and Sessions Court in Madurai convicted nine police personnel for the murder of P. Jayaraj and J. Bennix, a father and son detained in June 2020 in Sathankulam, Tamil Nadu, for an alleged lockdown violation. They died after being subjected to fatal torture in custody. Nearly six years passed before the conviction came through. Human rights activist Henri Tiphagne and his organisation, People's Watch, played a prominent role in pushing for accountability despite initial attempts to cover it up.

The Delhi case, Suresh said, is “a solid case backed by documentation”. If the police refuse to register FIRs, the survivors must approach the courts. He noted that India has signed but not ratified the UN Convention Against Torture—and called for a renewed campaign to safeguard constitutional rights against the systemic abuse of power.