

The question on everyone's mind: Where is activist Mugilan?

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Published: 17th March 2019 03:21 AM

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CHENNAI: Where is Mugilan? This has been the question on the minds of activists, family, friends and scores of people over the past month. On Friday, Twitter was flooded with questions from people questioning the government and police on the mysterious disappearance of the activist who was last seen in Chennai on February 15.

Mugilan, a native of Erode, started his career as an employee of the State Public Works Department. He quit his job in 1996 to raise his voice against environmental issues and corruption.

Having been engaged in activism for over 23 years, Mugilan didn't let various threats, including death threats, one year in prison or illegal detention by police, hold him back from releasing a video on the police firing on anti-Sterlite protesters last May.

He released the video titled 'Sterlite Hidden Truth' on February 15 in Chennai. The video accused two police officers of colluding with officials from Sterlite to instigate violence during the protests on May 22, 2018 which led to the police firing. Thirteen people were killed in the firing. During a press meet that day, Mugilan blamed the police for torching vehicles and attacking the protesters.

After the press meet, he left to board the Mangalore Express at 10.30 pm to reach Madurai. That was the last time he was seen. His friend Sridhar

Nedunchezhiyan said he received a call from Mugilan 25 minutes after he'd left the press meet.

During the call he reportedly told Sridhar about threats he had received from police and Sterlite officials. Sridhar promised to receive him at the Madurai station the next morning (February 16) at 10.30 am. However, the train was delayed by four hours and Mugilan was never seen again.

Raising suspicions about his mysterious disappearance, a complaint was filed but no action was taken. Later, advocate Henri Tiphagne filed a habeas corpus petition before the Madras High Court, which issued notices to the Chennai police commissioner and superintendents of police of Kancheepuram and Villupuram.

On Wednesday, CB-CID put up posters promising rewards for any information about the activist's whereabouts. However, speaking to Express, Tiphagne, an activist and founder of People's Watch, said the state had to take up the responsibility in finding Mugilan.

"The police prefers to use technology for surveillance rather than for investigation. We have not seen a sophisticated use of technology. Mugilan's missing complaint was sent to police online on February 16. Exactly, 10 days later, I got a call from the Tindivanam police office inquiring about the complaint, although two court hearings had been heard in the case by then," he said.

Jayaram Venkatesan of Arappor Iyakkam said Mugilan had been strongly protesting against the Koodankulam nuclear plant. "In 2012, he went missing and around 75 criminal cases were filed against him. He also served one year in jail and getting bail in those cases was a big challenge. He even approached the Supreme Court which ordered the cases to be closed but nothing happened," he said.

‘Speed up investigation’

Venkatesan said Mugilan was released in 2018, and had been protesting against Sterlite since. “In this context, his disappearance seems very suspicious. Nobody has even a small clue on where he is, which is very worrying. We are not even sure if the police interrogated Sterlite officials about his disappearance. And the entire process of tracing the activist is moving at a snail’s pace. After one month, only on Wednesday were notices being put up in public places. Unless the investigation speeds up and the officials are interrogated, the truth will remain hidden,” he added.

He said activists have been facing threats from the government and other bureaucrats when raising their voices against corruption or non-people friendly schemes or projects. Mugilan’s disappearance is a new way of silencing issues which is a threat to democracy itself, he pointed out.

A senior police officer in the CB-CID said that posters had been put up in various places and two phone numbers (9962908908 or at 044-28513500) had been set up for public to call with tips or information.

“There are several teams working to trace Mugilan and we have got certain clues and are probing in all the angles to trace him,” said the officer.

The delay in tracing Mugilan evoked criticism from political parties and activists. Various protests and candlelight marches have been held demanding the police to speed up the probe.

It may be noted that Mugilan is not the first activist to face threats. Thirumurugan Gandhi, founder of the May 17 movement was detained under the Goondas Act for holding a rally at Marina Beach to commemorate the civilian victims in the final phase of the Eelam war. He had been holding such rallies for several years. However, in 2017 police detained Gandhi and three others under Goondas Act. He was also recently arrested on sedition charges.

<http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2019/mar/17/the-question-on-everyones-mind-where-is-activist-mugilan-1952089.html>