

## Yet Another Custodial Death in Tamil Nadu; Ex-Cops, Activists Demand Stern Action

A 33-year-old Dalit man died in police custody in Chennai on June 12 adding to over 10 such deaths reported from the state over the last one year.

A month after chief minister M.K. Stalin told the State Assembly that there will be **no more custodial deaths** in Tamil Nadu and “custodial deaths cannot be justified whichever party is in power,” 33-year-old S. Rajasekar from Tiruvallur – a Dalit youth – died in police custody in Chennai on Sunday, June 12.

The Kodungaiyur Police in Chennai had arrested Rajasekar, categorised as a ‘B’ Category history-sheeter on June 11, a day after the Madras high court came down heavily on the state police for the rising number of custodial deaths. The court observed that it reflected the **“madness of the police”** and recommended the appointment of a retired high court judge as the head of the State Police Complaints Authority.

Immediately after the news of Rajasekar’s death, Chennai Police commissioner Shankar Jiwaj placed five policemen under suspension and transferred the probe to CB-CID.

“This kind of action is unprecedented; it has been very swift. I think it is because of the pressure that the death of Vignesh had created,” says I. Aseervatham, human rights activist working on custodial torture issues. The custodial death of **Vignesh** on April 19 at the Chennai Secretariat Police Station led to a widespread furore following which six policemen were arrested. Vignesh and his friend Suresh were picked up on April 18 after a vehicular check.

In this case, Aseervatham says, the police have taken custody of Rajasekar a day before his death and had apparently detained him in a lodge. **The family refuted the police version** and said they were threatened and the police had held negotiations along with village elders to convince them to take the body without protest.

“Only 20 days ago, the DGP had issued a statement directing the cops to not keep those taken into custody for interrogation in the police station. But keeping him in a lodge for inquiry is the same, and violative of DGP’s order.”

Another ‘tactic’ adopted by the cops to cover up custodial deaths is to offer money to the families, ‘unofficially.’ “One of the first things the cops did in Vignesh’s case was to give the family Rs 1 lakh through the employer. The family wanted to return it. The family of [Thangamani](#) who died at Tiruvannamalai on April 27 was also offered money by the cops, but had refused it.”

About a dozen custodial deaths took place in Tamil Nadu in the past year since April 2021 including Rajasekar’s. For over six years, Tamil Nadu has [recorded](#) the highest number of custodial deaths among the southern states.

“Irrespective of whichever government in power, most of those who die in police custody are Dalits,” says Aseervatham.

Among the deaths in the last one year, 21-year-old Surya, who died at MGR Nagar police station in January 2021; 35-year-old Satyavaanan, who died at Thanjavur police station in August 2021; and Thadiveeran, who died in Tirunelveli in February 2022, were Dalits. Thangamani belonged to the Kuravar community – again extremely [prone](#) to police brutality.

“This is reflective of not just the police mindset, but the society’s mindset as a whole. The police think who will speak up for someone like Vignesh or Rajasekar and the society’s silence only reaffirms their thought.”

Concurs Vanni Arasu, deputy general secretary of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi:

“Someone like Vignesh who appeared very vulnerable is obviously an easy target for the police. It is easy for them to target the marginalised. I am shocked that the police could still do this even after the chief minister announced in the State Assembly that there will be no more custodial deaths. The CM should pay serious attention and ensure that justice is delivered to the victims and that it does not repeat. If need be, the cops should be put through a course in human rights.”

While agreeing that the police need to undergo human rights training, retired IPS officer G.Thilakavathi who is credited to have held gender sensitisation training for the cops during her tenure, says more needs to be done.

“The police are under huge pressure. A cop needs to work for 72 hours at a stretch and this has had a telling effect. There are an increasing number of suicides even among the cops. But custodial violence and deaths are inexcusable. You cannot justify it in any way, you only need to take proactive steps to stop them.”

Pointing out that there was almost no conviction in custodial deaths in Tamil Nadu, Thilakavathi says unless a conviction happens, the cops will continue to inflict custodial torture. “Unless convicted, they have nothing much to lose. They might have to face some initial issues but if they knew they will not have to pay a huge price, what would stop them? When I entered the service, every police station had the [D.K. Basu guidelines on custodial violence](#) displayed prominently. It needs to be done again.”

Of the 118 cases of custodial deaths between 2019 and 2021, perhaps only the infamous [Jayaraj-Bennix](#) in Sathankulam hit headlines and led to a huge outcry.

Thilakavathi also says that the inputs given during the training are “insufficient in terms of making them understand the repercussions of custodial torture, according to law.” “The training method needs to be overhauled, with some stress on infrastructure.”

Meanwhile, People’s Watch, a Tamil Nadu movement working on custodial torture and deaths, has demanded that the Madras high court take suo-moto cognisance of Rajasekar’s death and monitor the probe, even while welcoming the unprecedentedly quick action taken in the case.

<https://thewire.in/rights/yet-another-custodial-death-in-tamil-nadu-ex-cops-activists-demand-stern-action>