



## TN police atrocity: Cop Balveer Singh tortured minors, too, says rights activist

Minor presented before media to narrate tale of torture by IPS officer Balveer Singh at Ambasamudram police station

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The Ambasamudram custodial torture case does not end with allegations of IPS officer Balveer Singh removing the teeth of accused persons with pliers, and other horrific crimes. Now, a human rights activist has alleged that he tortured minors as well.

At a press meet held on Wednesday (April 5), Henry Tipaghne of human rights advocacy NGO People's Watch produced the victims and their family members in front of the press in Madurai. The team presented the case of a 17-year-old who was also allegedly tortured.

"I was asked to hold on to the grills of a police station window and beaten on the thighs by a uniformed man, who I later came to know was ASP

Balveer Singh. It didn't end there. A big lathi was used to beat me on almost all parts of the body. He then took a stone and hit me on my mouth with it. I was bleeding profusely as the stone ripped off my lips," the minor told media persons.

The boy recounted watching Singh assault men sexually, wearing gloves. "I was frightened," he said. (*The Federal* is not revealing the victim's name in accordance with the Juvenile Justice Act.)

### "Several minors tortured"

Tipaghne, the founder-director of People's Watch, told *The Federal* before the press meet, "The IPS officer (Singh) tortured them despite their being minors. All forms of torture were inflicted on the minors on March 10."

He claimed that at least three minors were tortured by Singh on March 10. The accused were placed in observation homes under the Juvenile Justice Act, he added. The 17-year-old spoke about how he was first subjected to police lock-up, which in itself violated the Juvenile Justice Act. "Afterwards, I was moved to the home of a Kallidaikurichi Juvenile Justice Board member. Our shackles were removed just 10 metres away from the house. From there, we were moved to an observation home (run by Juvenile Justice Board) in Tirunelveli," the youngster said.

Tipaghne pointed out that uniformed policemen should not be present during the inquiry of an accused who is less than 18 years old. "Also, such an inquiry should not be conducted in the police station premises. A child welfare police officer should have conducted the inquiry under Section 107 of the Juvenile Justice Act," he argued.

### "Detailed probe needed"

Various human rights organisations have already raised concerns that the Ambasamudram custodial torture case might have involved youngsters. The government should run a thorough investigation on this, said V Suresh, National General Secretary of the People Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL).

“We are emphasising this issue (allegations that minors were tortured), as it can have worse consequences. The Constitution provides special provisions to investigate a child or youngster accused of a crime. They are called ‘children in conflict with law’. Any trauma caused while they are young can have a lifelong impact on their mental and physical health, impacting their emotional growth. Juveniles should be examined through the Juvenile Justice Board in a place where they feel safe,” Suresh told *The Federal*.

The police have filed a case against the police officers accused of torture under an archaic provision, PSO 151. They have not invoked Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) or SC/ST Atrocities Prevention Act. Following the provisions of PSO 151, a local Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) is conducting the probe, while rights organisations demand that the inquiry be moved out of the Tirunelveli zone for a fair trial, and stronger sections invoked.

Using a weak section itself seems to be an effort to buy time, alleged Tipaghne. “When they invoke PSO 151, they need not file a First Information Report (FIR). It gives them ample time to coerce witnesses or destroy evidence,” he said. He added that some of the people involved in the case belong to the Scheduled Castes. “By default, the police should have invoked the SC/ST Act too, which they haven’t done,” he said.

### **Questions on cop’s mental state**

The fact that there are multiple allegations that the IPS officer himself executed this kind of horrific torture has shocked many. “In most reported custodial tortures, IPS officers are found ordering others to execute the torture. But here, a civil services officer himself allegedly performing such ghastly acts is shocking,” said Suresh.

Such horrific torture (removing teeth with pliers) on people apparently involved in a group clash has also left many perplexed. Custodial tortures are more often reported in theft cases, as the police are under pressure to recover lost goods, said G Sugumaran, secretary of the Puducherry-based Federation for People’s Rights (FPR).

“But, in the Ambasamudram case, it was a clash between two groups. Most of these conflicts get settled with simple interventions. This puts the onus on the government to check the mental stability of the accused IPS officer with trained psychiatrists,” Sugumaran said.

### **Focus back on police reforms**

The long-due police reforms have also become a talking point. “Tamil Nadu has become a police state in the past three decades, irrespective of government change, which is leading to such incidents of torture,” said Suresh of PUCL. “There is a *quid pro quo* between the ruling political party and the police force. That helps them get away with things,” he said.

Human rights organisations accept the challenges faced by the police force. Especially in south Tamil Nadu, where violent clashes are usual, makes policing a challenge. But setting wrong priorities is where the problem lies, they pointed out.

The police department has turned into a deterrent agency rather than an investigative agency, thanks to a lack of police reforms, Sugumaran told *The Federal*. “Work load, stress, and a dearth of holidays are putting the police force under severe pressure. It is leading to a scene where police invent novel methods of torture. In a recent incident, Puducherry police allegedly smeared green chilli paste on the eyes of some accused before beating them up,” he said.

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