Sathankulam Case: Tamil Nadu Government Bars Activities of 'Friends of Police'

Though the voluntary community policing initiative has denied any involvement in the custodial torture of Jayaraj and Bennix, activists have sought its ban.

**Chennai:** On July 8, the Tamil Nadu government banned all activities of the Friends of Police (FOP) – a voluntary organisation in community policing that has come under the scanner for its alleged role in the Sathankulam custodial death case. It rescinded a government order that extended the FOP to the entire state in 1994 in view of an ‘adverse report’ from the director general of police (DGP), Chennai.

Earlier, on July 5, the initiative was suspended by the state government pending further orders. Even before the suspension orders came, several senior police officials passed instructions at district levels, asking their subordinates to stop using FOP in police-related works in the districts.

These instructions came after FOP was embroiled in the custodial deaths of father and son duo Jayaraj and Bennix in Sathankulam of Thoothukudi district. The deaths received nationwide attention and it was said that six FOP members had a role in the custodial torture. FOP denied any involvement, saying it does not have any members attached to the Sathankulam police station.

This led to civil society organisations and common citizens questioning the police’s functioning and the involvement of FOP members in dealing with those brought to police stations for interrogation or taken into custody. It is said that
when the lockdown was imposed, FOP volunteers were allegedly asked to help the cops perform their COVID-19 related duties.

The FOP initiative was started in 1993 by Pratheep V. Philip – presently the DGP of CB-CID which will investigate the case of the custodial deaths – when he was the SP of Ramanathapuram. The stated objective of the movement was to encourage community policing and bring the police and public closer.

While some police forces have used FOP for productive issues, it is also alleged that many are misusing it.

**Alleged RSS link**

Some activists have also alleged that there are links between FOP and the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS). S.P. Udayakumar, an anti-nuclear activist from the state, claimed that the name of Seva Bharathi – a front organisation of the RSS – was found on the identity cards of some FOP members, and that the issue needs investigation. He said, “The CB-CID says members of the FOP are not involved in the Thoothukudi case, but they are being taken for investigation,” he said.

When *The Wire* contacted a phone number of an ID card in circulation on social media (which had the name Nitheesh Murugan), he said the ‘card was photoshopped’. He said he was filing a complaint against those who circulated it in the media. “The Tirunelveli police did issue an ID card for us to do COVID-related work, but they took back the ID cards after the work was over,” Murugan said, adding that he is a practising lawyer and a member of the Seva Bharathi.
Henry Tiphagne, executive director of People’s Watch – a human rights organisation – says FOP was not started in accordance with the law. “The police department needs reforms. It continues to use colonial measures,” he says.

The state’s Human Rights Commission had on Tuesday asked the home secretary and the DGP if there was any legal sanction for engaging the services of FOP.

Philip, who started FOP, was unavailable for comment.

“FOP was created only for community policing, to keep in touch with common people, especially in rural areas,” says retired police official Karunanidhi. “It was a good concept, in that it was using local persons for the purpose. It was also useful for youngsters who wanted to join the police department. But in the last few years, the misuse of FOP by the police has begun.”

Even as the CB-CID continues to maintain that FOPs were engaged only for COVID-19 related work, activists feel the department needs urgent reforms.