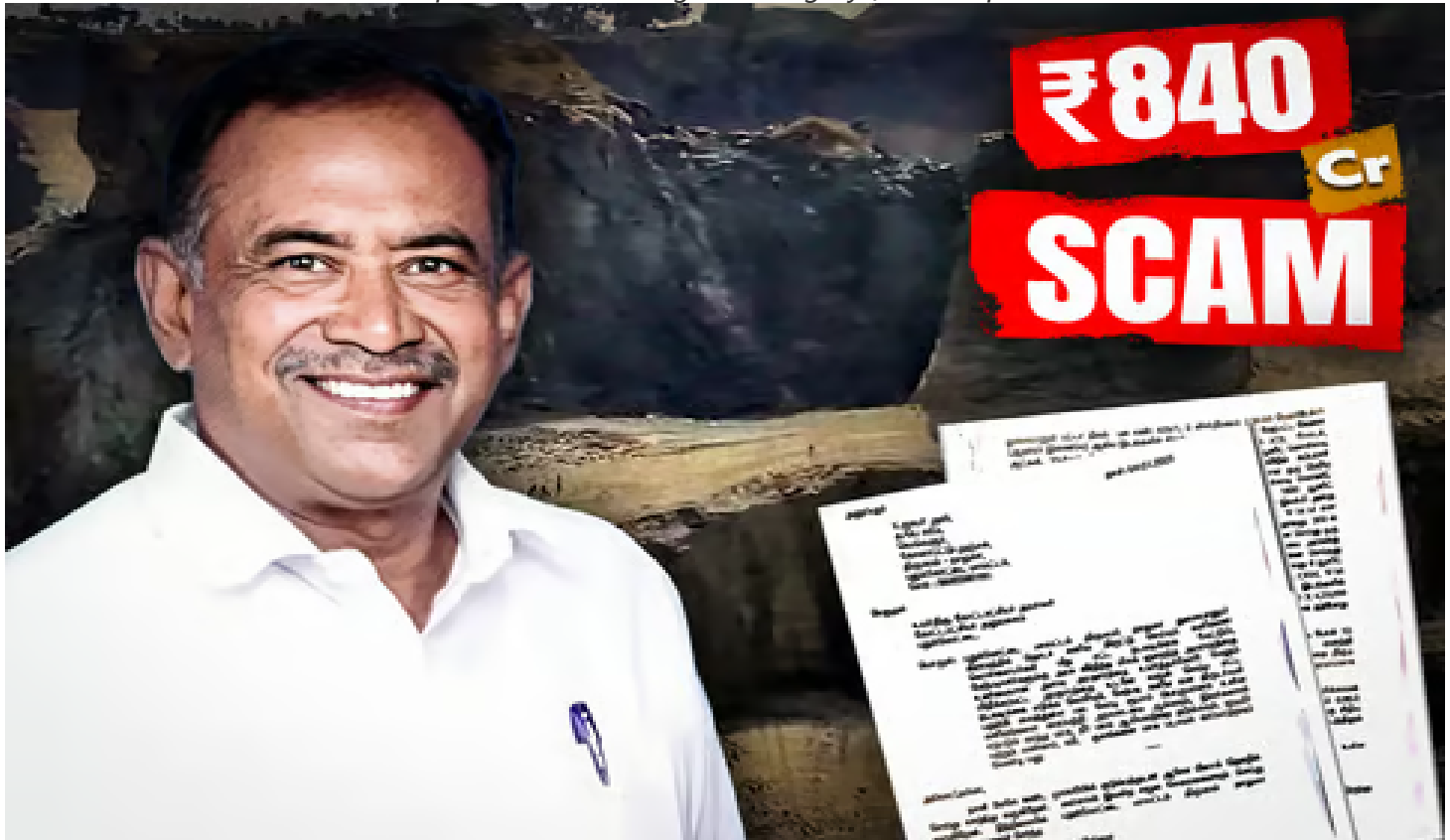


Activist who exposed Rs 840 cr mining scam silenced, family lives in fear

Jagaber Ali, who was an AIADMK functionary in Pudukkottai district in Tamil Nadu, had begun receiving death threats ever since he complained about illegal mining by five companies in the area.



Jagaber Ali was allegedly murdered after he protested against illegal quarrying in Pudukkottai district, Tamil Nadu.

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On January 17, social activist Jagaber Ali was on his way to his factory, which manufactures hollow blocks, after attending the Friday afternoon prayers at the Kattubhava mosque in Tamil Nadu's Pudukkottai district. Tragically, he lost his life after being struck by a tipper lorry. Although the police insisted it was an accident, it soon became evident that Jagaber had been murdered. Known for routinely challenging the stone quarrying mafia in Thirumayam taluk and nearby areas, Jagaber had been deliberately eliminated.

Jagaber, who was an All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) functionary in Pudukkottai district, had begun receiving death threats ever since he complained about illegal mining in the area. In his complaint, he had assessed the loss to the state to be around a whopping Rs 840 crore.

When TNM visited Vengalur village, there was a palpable sense of fear and helplessness. "We want justice for Jagaber Ali, but we cannot risk revealing our identity," a close relative of the murdered activist said.

There is a legitimate reason for the fear. The mining mafia wields immense control in and around the villages of Pudukkottai district. His wife, Mariyam, pointed out that this was evident from the police's reluctance to even register an FIR on his death. And finally, when they did register an FIR, they did not follow proper procedures, whether it was for an inquest or the post-mortem.

Delay in registration of FIR

The Thirumayam police refused to accept her complaint alleging foul play, she said. The police, according to her, kept insisting that it was an accident. "It was only after the intervention of Jagaber Ali's friends and the local jamat that the police agreed to register an FIR—and even then, not as a murder but as a suspicious death."

Two hours after the accident that killed Jagaber Ali, a lorry driver named Kasinathan surrendered at the Thirumayam police station, claiming responsibility for the incident. Jagaber Ali's family was informed by the police that it was an accident and a driver had surrendered.

After the intervention of the locals and jamat, the initial FIR was registered only on January 18, at 11 am, a good 22 hours after the death. It was filed under Section 194(1) of Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) for suspicious death. Section 194(1) of BNSS requires a magistrate to investigate the death scene, along with witnesses, and document any injuries or possible causes of death.

According to police sources, a team led by an Additional Superintendent of Police was asked to carry out an investigation. The team arrested Rasu, owner of RR Sand Crushers, Dinesh Kumar, and Muruganandam. Based on the statement made by the suspects claiming it to be a murder, the case was modified into a murder case. Seven days after the murder, the key conspirator in this case, Ramaiya, the owner of RR Group, surrendered at Namanasamuthiram police station on January 23.

'Crime scene staged'

Describing the scene of the crime, a family member told TNM that Jagaber Ali's murder was staged to make it look like an accident. "When we got a call at around 2.30 pm, we rushed to the spot and saw Jagaber lying on the ground. He had lacerations above his thigh on the left leg and a cut on his right leg. He had injuries on his face and hand. The lorry that was supposed to have lost control – which the police claim ran him down – was parked on a slope. The entire scene looked like it was staged," they added.

Another relative pointed out that his glasses, phone, and wallet were kept on the side of his body, and call recordings from his phone had been deleted. "Jagaber has auto call recordings on his phone; when we checked his phone, we found that call recordings on the day of the murder were deleted. Recordings of the calls that were made before are available on his phone," added the relative.

In her complaint, Jagaber's wife, Mariyam, alleged that her husband was fighting against illegal stone quarrying in Thirumayam and had been lodging complaints against the mining mafia. Jagaber had also approached the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court against the district administration's inaction and had been responsible for imposing hefty fines against the violators. "The owner of RR Group has been involved in illegal stone quarrying and they had been issuing death threats to my husband, who opposed them. My husband had informed me about the threats he had received for fighting against the illegal mining mafia," read her complaint.

No inquest and video recording

Jagaber Ali's body was handed over to the relatives after the post-mortem. The autopsy was not recorded on video. A relative told TNM the family wanted a video recording, but the hospital authorities denied their request. "The Thirumayam hospital authorities told us they don't have the provision here," a relative said.

Thirumayam police station inspector Gunasekaran told TNM that the case was being handled by the office of the Superintendent of the Police and he was unaware of the situation.

Chief of Thirumayam Government Hospital, Dr Krishnamurthy, said the family did not want a video recording of the postmortem. "There is no procedure to conduct an inquest and it will be done only if the victim's side requests for it. The victim's family did not want it," he added.

Executive Director of People's Watch NGO Henri Tiphagne told TNM that the delay in registering the FIR for more than 20 hours clearly showed that no action had been taken by the police while the body was lying at the mortuary. "The law clearly demands that an inquest should have been conducted by the Executive Magistrate; clearly, the authorities have prevented it. Everyone in the police force should be held responsible for the lapses."

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Complaint on illegal mining

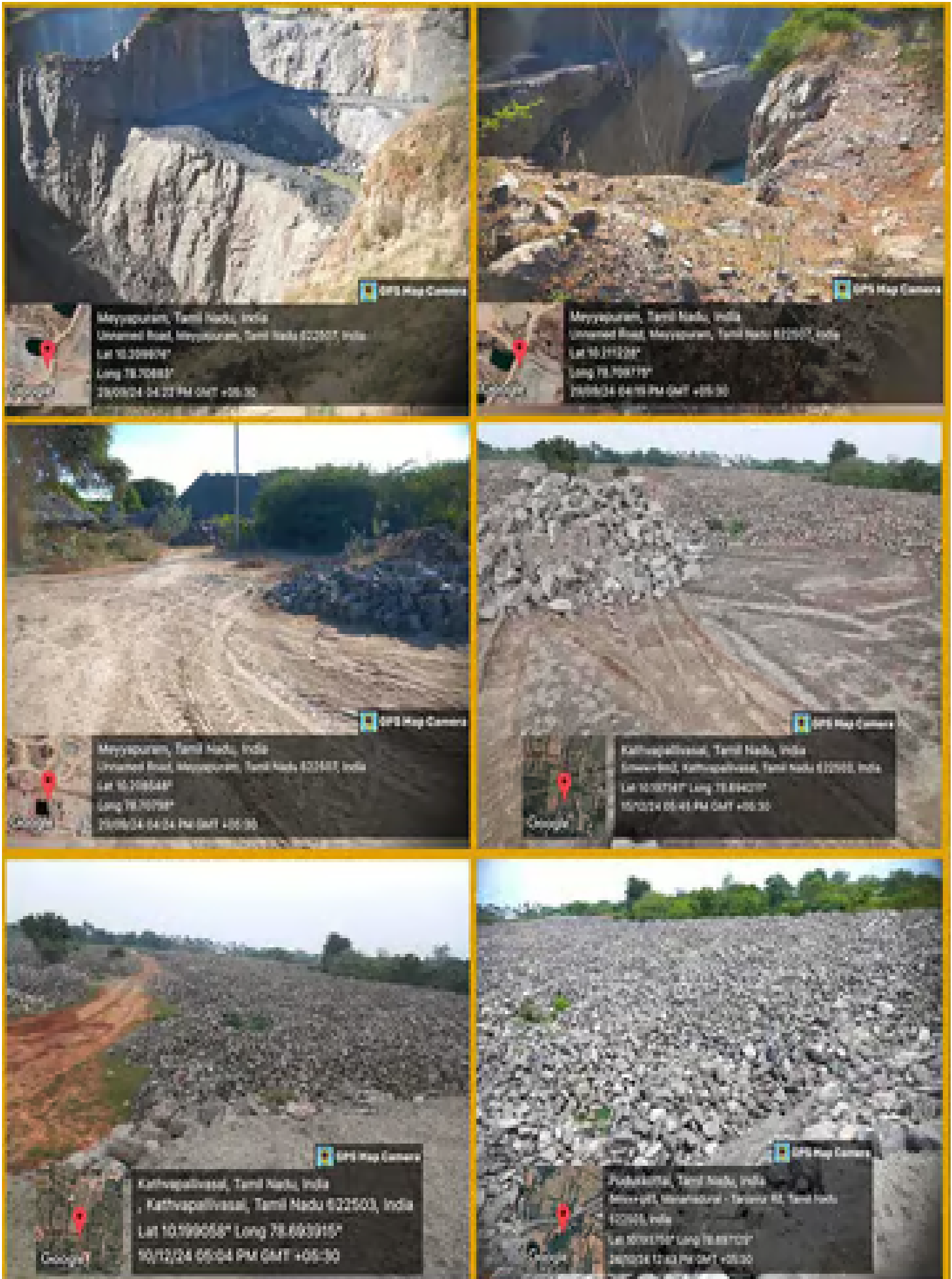
TNM spoke to quarry workers who said that around four years ago, Jagaber worked as a manager at a fuel station belonging to RR Group for six months. At the time, he had assisted the company in communicating with their Hindi-speaking workers. It is believed that he managed to gather details about the illegal mining operations during this time.

A local official on condition of anonymity told TNM that Jagaber Ali's latest complaint lodged on December 26, 2024, against the illegal mining activity in Thirumayam taluk was detailed with well-documented proof running into several pages.

TNM accessed the copy of the complaint sent to the Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) dated January 10. Jagaber had alleged that five companies, RR Crusher, Saint Arockya Mary Crusher, Eashwar Enterprises, RR M Sand Unit-1, and RR M Sand Unit-2 operating in Thulaiyanur revenue village as a consortium, have been indulging in illegal stone quarrying for the past year without a valid licence.

The complaint alleged that the five companies had indulged in rampant illegal mining in both government-recognised quarries and private land by deploying more than 150 workers and heavy machinery. "The operations go on for 24 hours and in the past year alone, natural resources worth several crores have been plundered. These entities could have earned more than Rs 840 crores by selling them," the complaint read.

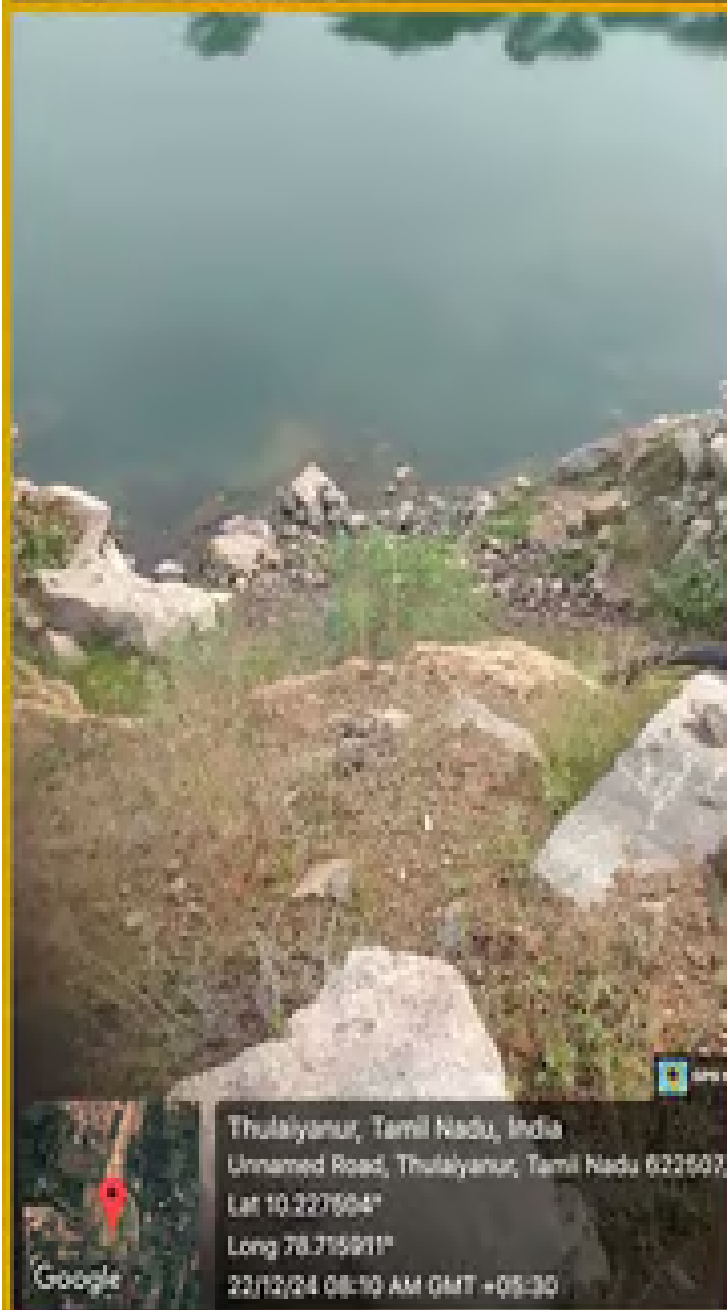
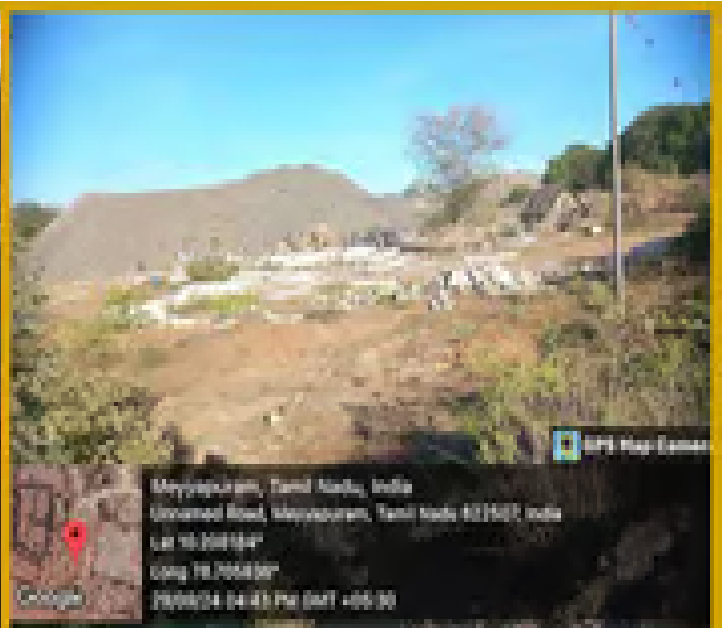
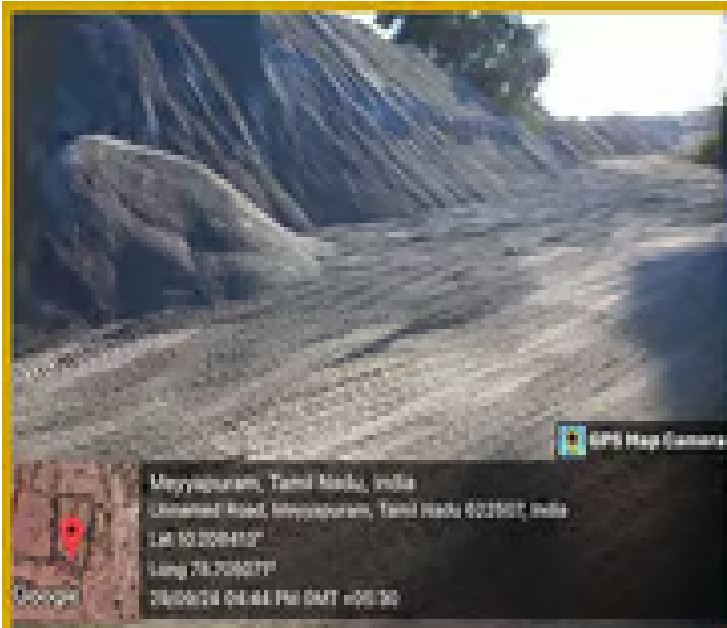
Attached to the complaint were several annexures with meticulously documented proof of land records, details of expired licences, and documents related to stockyards where illegally quarried materials were stored. The complaint had details of at least seven 'stock points' with their survey numbers spanning 30 hectares and photos of the illegal 'stock points' with their GPS coordinates.



Images of illegal stone quarrying sites with GPS coordinates submitted by Jagaber Ali with his complaint.

On December 26, 2024, Jagaber lodged this complaint with the Tahsildar of Thirumayam taluk, S Puviarasan. In his last interaction with the media, Jagaber alleged that it was the Tahsildar who leaked the complaint copy to the mining mafia.

Speaking to TNM, Puviarasan said that he received a complaint against illegal stone quarrying on December 26 and initiated an inquiry by asking the Revenue Inspector and the Village Administrative Officer (VAO) to inspect the quarry and submit a report. "The Revenue Inspector and VAO visited the quarries on January 9. There was a delay in submitting the report as our offices were closed due to Pongal festival. There was a similar complaint earlier about mining companies operating without a licence, and we have imposed a fine of Rs 15 crore. We have also investigated the complaint and submitted a report," he said.



When questioned whether he had leaked Jagaber's complaint to the mining companies, Puviarasan said once they began an investigation, the companies would immediately realise that someone would have lodged a complaint.

Jagaber had also escalated the matter by lodging the same complaint with the Department of Mines, Revenue Divisional Officer, and District Revenue Office. On January 13, he met the Pudukkottai Collector and submitted the complaint copy along with the documents and accused the Thirumayam Tahsildar of leaking the details of the complaint to the mining mafia.

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In his last interaction with the media at the Pudukkottai collector's office on January 13, Jagaber Ali told reporters that the authorities had been reluctant to take action against illegal stone quarrying and had sought more time. "We are left with no other option but to organise people and stage a protest on Friday (January 17)," he had said.

Jagaber Ali's family alleges that he was silenced on the day he was supposed to hold a mass protest against illegal stone quarrying.