

Tamil Nadu's police brutality: Sathankulam and the system that let it happen

Since 2022, 24 custodial deaths have occurred in Tamil Nadu as a direct result of police torture, including that of a 17-year-old in the Chengalpattu juvenile home who endured unimaginable abuse, leaving him with 96 injury marks.



Jayaraj and Bennix, who were tortured in police custody and later died.

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Half a decade since the Sathankulam custodial murders shocked the nation, Tamil Nadu remains far from achieving custodial justice. Police stations continue to haunt the voiceless as custodial torture in the state rises unabated. What is more saddening is that the judiciary, the police department, medical officials, and the state at large remain complicit in this blatant abuse of power. The 2020 Sathankulam case, where a father and son died after brutal police torture over a curfew violation, had laid bare this rot.

Since 2022, [24 custodial deaths](#) have occurred as a direct result of police torture, including that of a [17-year-old](#) in the Chengalpattu juvenile home who endured unimaginable abuse, leaving him with [96 injury marks](#).

In 2024, more than [300](#) accused persons entered Puzhal Prison, Chennai, with broken limbs, according to RTI data. The police offered the feeble excuse of “[slippery toilets](#)” for these injuries. The Madras High Court slammed the police, asking why no police officer had slipped in these toilets.

Resorting to extrajudicial methods has become so common that Tamil Nadu police have executed 21 [encounter](#) killings since 2021 alone. In one such case, the Madras High Court [condemned](#) the blatant disregard for constitutional rights, noting that “it tends to point out the lack of faith of the law enforcing agency in the Rule of Law.”

The inaction of MK Stalin’s government

MK Stalin and his Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government have ignored the police force’s horrendous conduct, allowing impunity to persist. As the Chief Minister and head of the police department, Stalin has failed to rein in police brutality.

Frequent transfers and token suspensions are treated as accountability but are merely knee-jerk reactions. Beyond custodial torture, reprisals and violence against human rights defenders are [on the rise](#). False allegations and arbitrary detentions, the worst of which have led to deaths due to police inaction, highlight the contrasting reality of this government.

Recently, the Madras High Court [criticised](#) the Tamil Nadu police for trying to suppress dissent by registering criminal cases against individuals peacefully protesting issues concerning public health and social welfare. It also [asked](#) the government: “When will you frame the witness protection scheme under BNSS?”

The fateful day in 2020

It was on June 19, 2020, that Jayaraj and Bennix, a father and son from Sathankulam, were arrested after allegedly keeping their mobile accessories shop open slightly past curfew. In Sathankulam sparked nationwide outrage. The two, with no criminal background and no serious offence, had got into a minor altercation with police. But this ‘misdemeanour’ bruised the police’s ego, leading to their brutal torture.

Officials [fabricated](#) FIRs and medical reports, conspired with the magistrate to approve remand, and left the duo stranded in prison without medical attention. They succumbed to their injuries within a few days — Bennix on June 22 and Jayaraj early on 23.

The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court took suo motu cognisance of the case. Yet, five years on, the trial is still pending, with families left waiting for justice.

Long story short: police impunity, medical officers’ negligence, the involvement of so-called “friends of the police,” and, most importantly, the subordinate judiciary’s failure to aid detainees dressed in blood-soaked clothes. This is just one of [1.8 million torture cases](#) reported annually in India.

Mechanical remands masking torture

According to the forensic [report](#) submitted by the CBI, the beatings lasted from 7.40 pm to 3 am on June 20. DNA samples collected from the walls of the Sathankulam lockup, toilet, and lathis matched those of Jayaraj and Bennix. The victims were reportedly forced to wipe up their own blood with their clothes before they collapsed.

The magistrate, P Saravanan, who remanded them, made little to no effort to ensure that due process was followed. He signed off on the remand from the first floor, despite the fact that the accused were visibly bleeding. Had he acknowledged their condition and acted accordingly, their lives might have been saved.

Institutional murder

While the police committed egregious abuses of power, the judicial magistrate failed at every stage to prevent the deaths. The offences the duo were booked for [were petty](#) and could have been resolved with a fine.

Nonetheless, the magistrate sided with the police and sent them to a crowded prison — during a pandemic. He did not question the decision to remand them in a sub-jail 94km away, when the district jail was just a few kilometres distant. He also failed to ensure that a [remand advocate](#) was present, and did not recognise that the officers involved had a [known history](#) of custodial violence.

Stuck in the political play

Following public outrage, the then All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) Chief Minister, Edappadi K Palaniswami, brazenly [claimed](#) the deaths were caused by “breathlessness,” while his aide denied it was a custodial death. Then opposition leader and current Chief Minister, MK Stalin, [criticised](#) the ruling party, stating that “Chief Minister Edappadi K Palaniswami, who heads the Home Department, should take responsibility for the deaths of the father-son duo.”

At the time, DMK’s Member of Parliament Kanimozhi [condemned](#) the incident, pointing out that “we need stringent laws in place to punish these kinds of crimes.” Ironically, within a year of making these statements, they came to power — yet nothing changed. If anything, the situation has worsened.

Policing is a state subject under the Constitution. Despite repeated appeals from rights groups, human rights defenders, and victims’ families to pass an anti-torture law, the government has failed to act. Tamil Nadu now ranks [highest](#) among southern states in custodial deaths.

Blood-stained hands and haunting cells

Despite a Supreme Court [mandate](#) in 2020 to install fully functional CCTV cameras in all police stations, the state government appears to have taken the order lightly. The Madras High Court [reiterated](#) this directive in 2022 and urged the DGP to expedite implementation. In 2024,

the DGP claimed that 99% of stations had CCTVs — a claim that doesn't hold up, with even the [Deputy Superintendent of Police \(DSP\) offices](#) still lacking adequate surveillance facilities.

The sharp rise in custodial torture and encounter killings exposes the grave failure of Tamil Nadu policing. And these numbers are just about deaths. We have not discussed disabilities and other kinds of problems caused by such police violence. The mental health toll of police harassment has driven many to suicide.

As retired Justice K Chandru [remarked](#) on custodial violence in Tamil Nadu, “police cannot take the law into their hands. Police stations cannot become courts, and officers cannot become judges.”

What can the government do?

The Tamil Nadu government, which often [boasts](#) that its police force is the “Scottish Yard” of India, should live up to its words.

Given the unwillingness of both the judiciary and the Union government, as well as their constitutional limitations, much depends on the state. The Supreme Court has acknowledged the need for a law against torture, but has [refrained](#) from pushing Parliament to enact one.

The fifth Tamil Nadu Police Commission [Report](#) recommended prompt investigations and strong action against custodial violence. It also made several suggestions regarding the mental well-being of the police force — all of which remain on paper.

Before things get worse, Chief Minister Stalin must push for genuine reform and ensure justice for all families affected by custodial violence, including in the Sathankulam case.

Sathankulam is not just a case, it is the epitome of Tamil Nadu's custodial violence crisis. If justice is denied here, it will be denied everywhere. And the result? Torture and death will continue inside Tamil Nadu's police stations.

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<https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/tamil-nadus-police-brutality-sathankulam-and-the-system-that-let-it-happen>