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ROLE OF POLICE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM -FOCUS ON THE SATHANKULAM CUSTODIAL DEATH CASE

~ *Paiyyavula Ramya*

INTRODUCTION:

This blog discusses the role of police in investigations and custodies. It focuses on the custodial death of two civilians in Sathankulam, a small town in Tamil Nadu state. Let us go back to the days when we were ordered to stay at home and quarantine to save lives. Around June 2020, the state ordered a lockdown by restricting citizens movement after a certain time. It was in this month this horrible incident took place, where two men from a family were tortured to death by police. This case¹ proved that the power being used ultra vires is institutionalized. By using the shield of a khaki uniform, police can go to any extent to satisfy their ego even at the cost of a civilian death. This case was not about one man being angry at victims but the whole authority of a station that had to protect citizens turning brutal. Ultimately, this incident was a direct violation of Article 21² of the Indian Constitution which guarantees that no person shall be deprived of their life or personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law. These deaths show how the very fundamental right meant to protect human dignity was crushed by those in power.

FACTS OF THE INCIDENT:

Coming into the main incident that led to the custody of the victims named Jayaraj (59) and Bennix (31), both of them owned a mobile shop in the Sathankulam area. The curfew was in

¹ State rep. by CBI v. S. Sridhar & Ors., SC No. 470/2020 (1st Addl. Dist. & Sessions Court, Madurai, Apr. 6, 2026).

² India Const. art. 21.

effect and the police executives were given power to enforce the lockdown. On June 18th, after the curfew time, some workers were standing in a queue to collect their respective wages. The police threatened them, but Jayaraj argued that they should be allowed to collect their wages as it was their hard work. A head constable who was at the scene informed the police station about this. On the following day, Jayaraj's shop was not closed immediately after the curfew began. It was only fifteen minutes late, around 7:15 PM. A few constables along with Inspector S. Sridhar took him to the station after some altercation. Bennix, Jayaraj's son, went to the station in search of his father. According to the CBI chargesheet, both of them were brutally assaulted continuously for seven hours until 3 AM the next morning. Their physical condition totally deteriorated. Their clothes were filled with blood, and even the walls and floor of the area where they were beaten with lathis were covered in blood. Although their lawyers and friends questioned the police about this, the police did not bother to reveal the truth. On the day after the assault, when they were produced for a medical checkup, Doctor Vennila declared they were physically fit. Even the magistrate who saw them from a balcony granted police custody without a proper inspection. During this span, it was said they changed their lungis six times to hide blood stains. On the same day, an FIR was filed under five IPC sections: 188,³ 269,⁴ 294(B)⁵, 353⁶, and 506(2)⁷ for disobedience to public order, negligence likely to spread infection, obscene acts, assaulting a public servant, and criminal intimidation. The torture continued until they died in the hospital from severe complications which were a direct consequence of brutal custodial torture. Bennix died on June 22nd and Jayaraj on June 23rd. After their deaths, the district court took Suo-motu cognizance of the incident. From that day until April 6, 2026, the investigation continued to deliver justice for which the mother and sisters of the victims fought.

There were many twists around this case. Politically, the CM stated that there was no police wrongdoing. The family fought for justice for a cause that was not even an offense committed by the victims. The police authority tried to turn the incident into a normal death. However, the case was transferred from the CBCID to the CBI. Along with circumstantial evidence, the statement of Constable R. Revathi, who was in the station on June 19 for her night shift, revealed what had actually happened. She only spoke after getting an assurance from the High

³ Indian Penal Code, § 188, No. 45 of 1860.

⁴ Indian Penal Code, § 269, No. 45 of 1860.

⁵ Indian Penal Code, § 294(B), No. 45 of 1860.

⁶ Indian Penal Code, § 353, No. 45 of 1860.

⁷ Indian Penal Code, § 506(2), No. 45 of 1860.

Court of Tamil Nadu that her family and job would be safe. This evidence finally resulted in the conviction of all nine police officers with the death penalty. One more police-accused had died before the trial began in 2020. The judge cited this as a rarest of rare case because the offense was committed by the people who were actually supposed to prevent such activities.

ANALYSIS:

It is completely true from this incident that police can go to any extent when they lose their humanity and want to satisfy their vengeance. This tragedy occurred not because of broken laws, but because of a system that failed consistently to identify the victims in a horrible situation. If the medical doctor had performed the checkup neutrally without any bias, the report would have revealed that they were unfit for police custody. Even when the magistrate witnessed them, if he had done his job carefully despite it being during the lockdown, it would not have led to their deaths. Finally, the judiciary pronounced the verdict six years after the incident. This period saw four different judges handling the case as no special judge was assigned. Since each accused had a separate lawyer, the judge had to listen to nine different lawyers' arguments and fifty-one witness trials. All of this accumulated to push the verdict date to six years, which finally resulted in the death penalty.

CONCLUSION:

This is not an isolated incident because there were almost 2000 deaths in police custody from 1998 to 2023 in the whole country. This incident stood out because it was in its extreme form. While Bennix's family suffered for justice, there are many mothers and sisters still fighting for justice. This case verdict is historic because, for the first time, all the police officers involved have been sentenced to death. Before concluding, it is worth hailing R. Revathi, the woman constable who witnessed the torture in the station that was faced by the victims and became a witness during the CBI investigation. We need many more officers like her in India to stop such brutal practices by those in power. Without her, the circumstantial evidence could not have proved much about the horrible story, and there might not have been the same verdict.