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16 history-sheeters gunned down in 3 years. Inside Tamil Nadu Police's murky 'encounter' spree

The gunning down of 'Seizing' Raja—third encounter in two months—is not just a one-off episode. Police had faced flak after BSP state president was brutally hacked in July.

Prabhakar Tamilarasu | 28 September, 2024 09:31 am IST



Chennai: Vinithra wailed and pleaded desperately in a video—filmed in front of a temple on the night of 22 September—as she feared for the life of her husband N. Raja alias 'Seizing' Raja.

She had her reasons: she believed that Raja was arrested in connection with the murder of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader K. Armstrong. Moreover, the Tamil Nadu police, of late, have been ruthless in silencing notorious history-sheeters.

The next day on 23 September, gunshots pierced the early morning's silence at Akkarai, near Neelankarai. Raja, an A-plus category history-sheeter, lay dead at an isolated location off East Coast Road.

The gunning down of Raja—the third police encounter in two months—is not just a one-off episode. Over 100 crime suspects have been shot by the Tamil Nadu police since 1998. More precisely, 16 people have been killed allegedly in police custody across Tamil Nadu ever since the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came to power in 2021.

As for the police, these were shootouts in “self-defence”—a recurring theme wherein suspects, escorted to remote spots for supposed weapon retrieval, inevitably lead to exchange of gunfire, often ending with their death after being shot at least twice.

Of the 16 such encounters, ThePrint has learnt that the relatives of the accused in at least two cases feared a “staged encounter” soon after the arrests were made. Both the accused were shot dead by the police in an act of “self-defence” the next day after the arrest.

Further, only three deaths happened in Chennai and all of them were after 1998 batch Indian Police Service (IPS) officer A. Arun took charge as the Commissioner of Greater Chennai police on 8 July.

Arun's appointment came barely three days after Armstrong, the BSP's Tamil Nadu president, was hacked near Perambur in Chennai. Facing criticism for the law and order situation, the Tamil Nadu government had shunted out Chennai Police commissioner Sandeep Rai Rathore and brought in then Additional Director General of Police (Law & Order) Arun in his place.

Soon after taking charge, the city police chief said that he will “talk to the criminals in a language they understand”.

“Is extrajudicial killing the language he meant after taking charge as the commissioner of police?” asked I. Aseer, State Coordinator of the Joint Action against Custodial Torture.

The human rights activist also alleged that the police action to scare the criminals by way of encounters would not help them. “At a time when they are in the spate of encounters only, we witnessed a murder where a sex worker was chopped into pieces and sealed in a bag. This will not curtail the criminals from involvement in anti-social activities,” Aseer told ThePrint.

Back in the police circles, a section of officers hailed encounters as “a successful formula” to wipe out the criminals in the city, while some said that those killed in the recent police firings were no more key players in the underworld.

A senior officer in the rank of ADGP refuted the allegations of shooting down the accused under the pretext of maintaining law and order in the state. “Even, we want to bring them to justice, but it is the circumstances that lead to such fatal accidents,” the ADGP told ThePrint.

All the above-mentioned 16 men were A-plus history-sheeters facing at least five murder cases and a dozen of other cases including extortion, attempt to murder, and robbery, according to the police. Raja himself faced as many as 39 criminal cases and over 10 non-bailable warrants were pending against him. A Chengalpattu court had declared him as a proclaimed offender. Later, the police denied that Raja was arrested for the murder of the BSP leader.

A top official at home department that comes under the chief minister, maintain that everything is happening as per law.

The pattern behind custodial deaths

In the video that was widely shared, Vinithra feared that Raja would be brought down in a “fake encounter”.

“Morning at around 9 a.m., he went out to get tiffin for us. I waited for him till evening, but did not know where he went. Only later I came to know that a special team of police have arrested my husband. He was alleged to have been arrested in connection with Armstrong’s murder case, but he does not have any connection with the murder as we have settled in Andhra for the last two years,” Vinithra lamented in the video.

In the video, she also claimed that her husband was not involved in any criminal activity for the past two years.

This is not the first time when the family members of the victims have expressed their apprehension about a police encounter at the time of arrest.

A year ago, on 16 September, after history-sheeter A. Viswanathan was allegedly shot dead near Sunguvarchatram in Kancheepuram district, his letters to the home department revealed that he was being constantly threatened by the police of a possible encounter.

Confirming the apprehension, his lawyer Pugazhenthii said that Viswanathan was looking for redemption to embrace a peaceful life.

“Just a week before his encounter, he met me at my office and told me that he just got married and wanted to live a peaceful life, without involving in any anti-social activities. I had assured him that nothing untoward would happen and asked him to attend the cases against him properly,” Pugazhenthii told ThePrint.

Viswanathan’s wife Maha also alleged that he was shot just hours after being arrested by the police. “When we were in Tiruttani, police forcefully arrested him in front of me. They did not give us any reason then. When I tried to video record it, they snatched my mobile and broke it. Even before I could get a mobile phone to convey the same to our lawyer, I started hearing that he was shot,” Maha told ThePrint.

When the allegations arose, then ADGP Arun told the media that there was no violation in the encounter of Viswanathan. “He was an A-plus category rowdy and only after he assaulted the police, he was shot dead. So, there is no violation,” the IPS officer told the media.

Arun was promoted as ADGP in 2022. While most part of his 26-year career has been in Chennai, he has also served as Superintendent of Police of Karur, Kanyakumari and Tirupur districts and Commissioner of Police of Tiruchi and Avadi.

Apart from the alleged encounter killings, Aseer claimed the police have also been involved in a spate of shooting wherein the legs of accused are targeted, thereby injuring them badly.

“Earlier, there used to be bathroom slippage stories by the Tamil Nadu police for breaking the hands and legs of the suspects arrested in criminal cases. Now, they have started cooking up stories to shoot the accused on their legs,” he said and questioned why none of the encounter victims have been shot on their legs.

Tamil Nadu has witnessed a number of cases where the accused suffered a leg or hand fracture. Police claim such injuries are a result of the falls in the slippery bathroom at the police station. A retired Inspector General of Police (IGP) told ThePrint that it was the “only solution” since conviction of an accused took several years in a single case.

“Before an accused gets convicted, he commits a series of crimes and later, goes underground. So, such fractures help us for a short time, if not a permanent solution,” the retired IG said, adding that the fractures would curtail criminal activity as well as instil a fear among his fellow rowdies.

125 killed in 26 years

Though the use of firearms against the rowdies and gangsters started in 1998, the gun culture started much earlier in the 1980s when Tamil Nadu witnessed a surge in the Naxal activities. Retired IPS officer Walter Devaram, who retired as the Tamil Nadu Police chief in 1997, is said to have advocated the use of firepower against elements involved in heinous crime.

According to data compiled by the Madurai-based human rights group People’s Watch, 125 people have been killed in 101 encounters since 1998. While 69 of these were during the rule of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), 56 are from the DMK years.

The first encounter after the DMK came to power three years ago took place at Sriperumbudur. On the night of 9 October 2021, a duo allegedly attacked a 55-year-old woman on the streets in a bid to rob her chain. On hearing her scream, people chased the two who melted away in a forest area.

After hours of search, the police managed to trace one of them, who allegedly fired at police, leading to a retaliatory attack, in which the suspect died on the spot. The man was identified as Murthaza from Jharkhand.

While there have not been any encounters in Chennai until July, police encounters were happening across Tamil Nadu that brought down 13 men wanted in various criminal cases. Before Raja was shot down, another history-sheeter Kakkathoppu Balaji was gunned down just some days ago.

Another ADGP told ThePrint that the alleged encounters have always fetched results in controlling the brutal serious crimes.

“It was in the early 2000s that the trend started. We could see good results and all the top names during the time were allegedly encountered. As a result, there was not much rowdyism happening in Chennai for the next few years” the ADGP said.

The second ADGP said that the higher-ups gave a green signal before police took such actions. “We never want to get into trouble. If the government decides to try us before the court, then it would turn out to be a headache for us. So, it’s purely a state operation,” he asserted.

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