

## 6 years, 3 elections: Families of Thoothukudi police firing victims still await justice

Three years have passed since Stalin assumed office as CM after promising to deliver justice for the victims of the 2018 police firing.

By: Haritha John 11 Apr, 2024



Campaigning in Thoothukudi before the 2021 assembly elections, MK Stalin, then the opposition leader and now Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, recalled the tragic events of the police firing in 2018. He declared passionately, “A horrible firing happened. What is its backdrop? BJP and AIADMK joined and committed brutal murders. Seventeen-year-old

Snowlin was shot and killed... what all atrocities happened. For this, have they been punished? Not yet.” He promised to hold the accused police officers accountable if voted to power.

It has been three years since his speech and since his party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, came to power. *The News Minute* revisited Thoothukudi ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections to understand if the promises made by the DMK have been fulfilled.

Speaking to Muthupandy, whose 20-year-old son Karthik was among the 13 killed in May 2018, it is clear that the families of victims are yet to receive justice. Muthupandy said the family moved to another place due to the haunting memories of their son. “That was the house Karthik was born and brought up in. We couldn’t stay there, so we moved out. Justice to us is not compensation; it is when the culprits are punished,” he told *The News Minute*.

Karthik, then a second-year BA History student at Kamarajar College, was one of the 13 people fatally shot by the Tamil Nadu police during protests against the Sterlite copper plant operated by Vedanta Limited in Thoothukudi, which had caused significant environmental pollution.

He was among thousands of demonstrators who marched towards the district collector’s office to mark the 100th day of peaceful protests against the plant, then India’s second largest copper smelting facility.

Calling out the state government for not doing enough, Krishnamoorthy, an anti-Sterlite activist, said, “This happened in front of everyone, in front of the media and people. How can you forget or hide it? When the CM was the opposition leader, during election campaigning he promised the officers responsible would be punished. They [DMK] were with the people on the Sterlite issue. It is painful that they are protecting those officers now.”

### **'I am tired of fighting'**

Two elections have come and gone after the police firing – the 2019 Lok Sabha polls and the 2021 Tamil Nadu Assembly elections.

In 2019, DMK's Kanimozhi was elected as the Member of Parliament from Thoothukudi, promising to amplify the voices of the aggrieved families. Two years later, with the DMK forming the government in the state, people's hopes were revived.

Yet, as Karthik's mother Murugeswari painfully reflects on the unchanging fate of those responsible for the tragedy, their hope for justice remains a dream. The scars from the event continue to haunt the families who lost their loved ones.

Murugeswari described how Karthik joined the protests against the Sterlite unit in Thoothukudi. "I told him to eat something before leaving. He quickly ate and rushed out. That was the last time I saw him. If he had been alive, he would have turned 26 on May 11," she said, her eyes filled with tears.

Snowlin, just 17-years-old, became the face of the victims. She was among the six shot from behind while trying to escape. Her mother, Vanitha, told *The News Minute* that Snowlin was deeply-affected by the pollution's impact on the local fishermen community, which motivated her to join the protests against Sterlite.

Initially hesitant to speak, Vanitha admitted to *The News Minute* that she was weary of the ongoing struggle to get justice for her daughter. In January this year, she approached the Madras High Court seeking to register a murder case against all police and revenue officials involved. "In the petition, I have asked that the inquiry be completed within six months," she said.

Vanitha added, "I am tired of fighting and speaking out. Everyone takes advantage of our plight for their own benefit, but we have been denied justice. They even promoted the officers who committed the crime."

She said that she would not participate in any events that commemorate the Thoothukudi incident or Snowlin's death. "I am not going to plead with anyone for justice. I console myself with the belief that my daughter sacrificed her life for a noble cause."

When asked about the upcoming elections, Fathima Babu, a retired college professor and activist said, "We are trapped between the deep sea and the devil, we are confused about whom to vote for. The current government had enough time to undo whatever was done by the previous government, but they have not done that. We are still hopeful that MP Kanimozhi will act on this at the earliest."

Kanimozhi is re-contesting in Thoothukudi from the DMK while the AIADMK has fielded R Sivasamy Velumani.

### **'We demand criminal charges'**

The Justice Aruna Jagadeesan Commission set up by the Tamil Nadu government to investigate the Thoothukudi incident identified 17 police officers responsible for the firing.

It recommended departmental action and criminal proceedings against the officers. However, there has been little visible progress in holding them accountable.

A day after the commission's report was released, CM Stalin described the incident as a "black spot" in the state's history. He announced that departmental action had

commenced against the officers and gave an assurance that they would face punishment.

“They keep transferring the officers, and we are not kept informed about the departmental actions,” said Murugeswari, echoing the sentiments of many affected families.

Shailesh Kumar Yadav, one of the indicted officers, was promoted to Director General of Police in December 2023, raising questions about the government’s commitment to accountability.

In January 2024, the High Court questioned this promotion following a petition by human rights activist and lawyer Henri Tiphagne. In the same month, the state government said in a statement that disciplinary actions had been taken against some officers, including Shailesh Kumar Yadav, DIG C Kapil Kumar, and P Mahendran, the then Thoothukudi SP. It added that criminal charges were filed against a sub-inspector and a head constable. But no further details were provided on the nature of the “disciplinary actions”.

Despite the government’s claims, the victims’ families remain unconvinced.

“Criminal charges must be brought against all 17 officers. They transfer these officers and call it departmental action. We do not want departmental action. We demand criminal charges,” said Muthupandy.

The AIADMK government initially provided government jobs and Rs 20 lakh compensation to the families of each of the 13 victims. Subsequently, the DMK government offered an additional Rs 5 lakh to each family and upgraded their government job posts. However, the Justice Aruna Jagadeesan Commission report recommended Rs 50 lakh compensation to each affected family.

“In our petition, we have also requested adequate compensation. We don’t even have title deeds for the houses we live in. The leaders at the top are not concerned about our living conditions. Their promises exist only on paper,” said Vanitha.

When *The News Minute* asked Thoothukudi MP Kanimozhi about the issues raised by the locals, she said most of the demands have been met. “I keep in touch with most of the families. People have been rehabilitated. We have given them jobs according to their educational qualifications. Families have been compensated. Their major demand was to close down the Sterlite unit. The Tamil Nadu government stood firm in court and ensured that we got a positive verdict. I am sure the CM will ensure justice is done.”

On February 29, the Supreme Court dismissed Vedanta’s plea to reopen its Thoothukudi unit, which was closed in mid-2018 due to public outcry over environmental concerns. Despite this significant ruling, the families of the victims continue to await justice and resolution to their grievances.

<https://www.newslaundry.com/2024/04/11/6-years-3-elections-families-of-thoothukudi-police-firing-victims-await-justice>