



Moments after news broke about the alleged encounter in Seshachalam forest in 2015, a relative of one of the victims screamed in anguish and ran through a dusty road in the Chithirai Hills of Dharmapuri district | EXPRESS

Ten years after 20 Tamil woodcutters were shot dead by AP police in an alleged encounter at Seshachalam forest, the victim families' fight for justice continues as the case is caught in legal wrangle & apathy of TN, AP govts

RAJALAKSHMI SAMPATH @ Tiruvannamalai

TUCKED away in the dry, dusty corners of Tiruvannamalai district lies Kannamangalam village – the abode of 12 Tamil families whose lives were thrown into disarray on April 7, 2015. No banners hang from its walls, no angry slogans tear through its air, just silence – thick and stubborn – clinging onto the women who have spent 10 years waiting, not for their slain husbands to walk back in, but for someone, anyone, to finally say out loud that what had happened to them was wrong!

This year, too, the seventh of April passed by unremarkably. Barring calls for justice by a few human rights organisations, the 10th anniversary of the mass “encounter” killing of 20 Tamil men in the Seshachalam forest area of Andhra Pradesh by a special task force of AP police for allegedly trying to smuggle red sanders lay buried in memories.

Though public outrage was persistent in the immediate aftermath, and independent fact-finding by various organisations highlighted glaring loopholes in the theory propagated by the AP police, not a single officer was made accountable, and the case continues to remain dormant. While the mainstream society availed the convenience of moving on, such a privilege is beyond access for the families of the victims, of whom 12 hailed from Tiruvannamalai, seven from Dharmapuri and one from Salem.

Tracing six of the families residing in Tiruvannamalai, *TNIE* embarked on a mission to find out how their lives changed in the absence of sole breadwinners and their fight for justice amid the dearth of resources. Their lives – shaped by poverty, interrupted education, and long-forgotten promises – remain frozen.

Lives left to endure

On April 6, 2015, Selvi's husband, Perumal K, left their home for masonry – a work that thousands of men from Tiruvannamalai's Jawadhu Hills take up to support their families. The next day, the news of his death reached home. “The punishment for a mistake they didn't commit was cruel. But the suffering they have made us endure is even worse,” says P Selvi, whose voice carries the weight of a decade spent mourning her husband.

The AP Special Task Force claimed the brand that Perumal was part of was engaged in red sandalwood smuggling and had attacked forest personnel with axes and stones, leaving them with no option but to open fire. This account, however, never sat right with the families.

A DECADE OF SORROW AND SILENCE



Police officials, media personnel, and activists gathered at the Seshachalam forest area in Chittoor following the alleged encounter by AP police and forest department officials on April 7, 2015 | EXPRESS

“After his death, I had no one,” says Selvi, who had to marry off her daughters early. “He would've made sure they studied. Now, I work to raise my grandchildren. Every morning I ask myself how I'll keep the family going,” she laments. Selvi's story resonates with the other five families living in the district as well. Their earnings, often limited to MGNREGA wages, cumbersome work in farmland and/or low-income government jobs like noon meal cooking, rarely exceed ₹6,000-₹7,000 a month. Sitting in the quiet of a small house at Murugapadi Anandhapuram in Tiruvannamalai, Pachaiammal recalls the last conversation she had with her husband, Moorthy G. “He said he would be back in two days. But what returned was his body, with injuries I still can't forget.”

Their daughter was only a toddler back then. “What answer can I give when she asks about her father? Had he been here, we wouldn't have ended up like this. Those responsible (for

our misery) should be held accountable,” she says. Thanji Ammal, who lost her husband Munusamy, cycles 20km from Murugapadi to Renugapuram to cook noon meal at a government school. “People think we were paid well. But none of the promises were kept. If someone could help with my children's education, it would change everything,” she says. The ordeals are worse for a bedridden Muthamma (43), widow of victim S Govindasamy from the ST Malayali community. “My father had gone for mason work that day. My mother always said our family wouldn't be like this if he was alive. That thought ate into her, and she slipped into depression. After three years, she couldn't move anymore,” says Chidambaram G, their son.

None of the couple's four children completed school. Today, they work as migrant labourers in Kerala and Karnataka. “The work is dangerous. We climb trees in coffee estates. It is low paying, and people often fall

down,” he adds.

The family has been trying to get Muthamma's job transferred to one of her children, as it could at least help them live together in one place again.

Among the most heart-wrenching stories is that of victim Vellimuthu V, a hearing and speech impaired man from the ST Malayali community. Orphaned young, he was raised by his siblings and relatives. “He used to give us everything he earned. He never let us go hungry,” recalls his brother Ramesh. “Now he's gone. His loss is irreplaceable.”

Torture, not combat: What evidence reveals

Days after the killing, a fact-finding team led by human rights organisation ‘People's Watch’ found evidence suggesting custodial torture, not a spontaneous retaliation. Bodies bore close-range bullet wounds, burn marks, and signs of restraint. Some victims were allegedly picked up from buses by men in plainclothes.

Henri Tiphagne, executive director of People's Watch, says, “These were custodial killings. They were tortured and executed. The courts, too, eventually acknowledged our findings. The opposition DMK had raised concerns about the incident in 2015. Now, when in power, it has failed to pursue the matter. The case remains where it began, with no progress.”

Unlike earlier instances in which the state police and forest department acted independently, this remains the sole case where the AP police, special task force, and the forest department joined forces during the alleged encounter, he adds.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) too had found troubling inconsistencies. It noted that the FIRs filed at Chandragiri Police



A People's Watch team, led by its chief Henri Tiphagne, met victims in Tiruvannamalai during a fact-finding visit to Tiruvannamalai in 2015 | EXPRESS

Station made no mention of the victims using firearms, only that they had “shown” them. Yet, a later report by the Chittoor collector claimed the men had fired country-made guns. The contradiction raised eyebrows.

“The successive improvements made in official accounts indicate an attempt to suppress the truth,” the NHRC said, in its May 2015 order. It further recommended that the case

SESHACHALAM ENCOUNTER CASE (2015-2025)

6 APRIL 2015

Labourers from Tiruvannamalai, Salem, and Dharmapuri districts travel to Andhra Pradesh for work. En route to Tirupati, many are allegedly abducted near Nagari by men in plain clothes, believed to be AP police and Special Task Force personnel

7 APRIL 2015

Andhra Pradesh Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force (RSASTF) claims an encounter near Srivaramettu in Chandragiri Mandal, Tirupati district

20 Tamil woodcutters shot dead by police in alleged self-defence. Injured forest staff only bore minor injuries. The bodies of victims arrive at SV Medical College over 14 hours later

NHRC takes suo motu cognisance and issues notice to AP officials. People's Watch launches its fact-finding mission

8 APRIL 2015

A PIL is filed before the High Court of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana alleging a staged encounter. Postmortems are hurried, violating NHRC norms

10-15 APRIL 2015

An independent fact-finding team (comprising judges, IPS officers, forensic experts) visits Tirupati, the site of killings, and the victims' homes

20 APRIL 2015

AP government constitutes a Special Investigation Team (SIT)

23 APRIL 2015

NHRC holds a public hearing on the case in Hyderabad

NHRC PROBE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

10-11 MAY 2015

NHRC team visits Tirupati. AP government refuses cooperation and denies access to sites

28 MAY 2015

NHRC finds prima facie evidence of extra-judicial killings and recommends ₹5 lakh interim compensation per victim

LEGAL OBSTRUCTION

5 JUNE 2015

AP government files a writ petition in HC to block NHRC's recommendations

One week later, AP High Court stays NHRC's order

COMPENSATION AND SUPPORT

6 AUGUST 2015

TN government announces ₹3 lakh ex gratia to each victim's family, offers government jobs (anganwadi cooking assistants) to all 20 families

Then CM J Jayalithaa personally hands over five appointment orders and writes to her AP counterpart seeking justice.

Political attention in Tamil Nadu gradually fades thereafter

2015 - 2025

Case remains stuck due to judicial delays, non-compliance by AP government, and administrative backlog due to HC bifurcation

RENEWED ADVOCACY

Since 2016, annual remembrance meetings held by the victims' families every April

2019

The case was transferred from Hyderabad to Amaravati court due to the high court bifurcation

7 APRIL 2025

(10th anniversary) Joint Action Against Custodial Torture (JAACT) petitions NHRC to vacate the 2015 stay order by the Andhra Pradesh High Court

CURRENT STATUS

AS OF APRIL 2025

No CBI investigation initiated. Compensation recommended by NHRC remains unpaid by AP government; FIRs pending, and no convictions secured so far

Witnesses still under threat; protection has been inconsistent. Case is pending in HC as the 2015 interim stay has not been vacated



be handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and interim compensation of ₹5 lakh each be awarded to the affected families. It also called for witness protection, and additional compensation under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

Justice delayed and denied

One week later, the AP High Court stayed the NHRC's order, after the state government challenged the commission's jurisdiction through a writ petition. Ten years on, the stay remains in place, and the government has not complied with any of the commission's recommendations. The NHRC, in turn, filed multiple counter-affidavits, but there is no final ruling yet.

This April 7, like every year, members of the Joint Action Against Custodial Torture (JAACT) lit candles, held photographs, and read out names that the nation had long forgotten. They submitted a fresh memorandum to NHRC chairperson Justice V Ramasubramanian, urging intervention to vacate the court's stay. “These families are destitute. The NHRC has a statutory duty to intervene,” the memorandum said.



On the 10th anniversary of the encounter, families of the 20 victims gathered for prayer at Nambiyampattu in Tiruvannamalai | EXPRESS

10 yrs, 20 graves, zero accountability

Lack of legal closure in the case, even after a decade of the alleged anti-smuggling operation in the Seshachalam forest area, exposes institutional apathy and impediments in the fight for justice in such heinous crimes. So far, no police officer has faced prosecution. The CBI has not launched an inquiry, despite calls from the NHRC and civil society. Interim compensation of ₹5 lakh per family, as recommended by the NHRC, has also not been paid.

In Tamil Nadu, politicians' promises to the kin of the victims, including permanent houses, nearby employment for widows, and educational support for the victims' children, remain unfulfilled.

The then Chief Minister, J Jayalithaa, had immediately written a letter to her AP counterpart N Chandrababu Naidu demanding a thorough probe. However, the political pressure from TN waned over time and has now nearly faded with no substantial intervention in the case, which continues to languish in the AP high court.

As the Tamil families mark 10 years without justice, their questions remain simple: *How long must they wait? Who will be held accountable? When will the rule of law mean something to the poor?*

When Appa died, Amma couldn't cope and slipped into depression. We had no money and my siblings had dropped out of school. Now, we climb trees in estates. It's dangerous, low-paid work and people often fall from the trees
Chidambaram G, son of victim S Govindasamy

If my husband had been here, we would not have ended up like this. Those responsible for our misery should be held accountable
Pachaiammal, widow of Moorthy G

If someone could help with my children's education, it would change everything. Most people think that we were paid well. In reality, however, none of the promises were kept
Thanji Ammal, wife of victim Munusamy

He was orphaned young and raised by his siblings. He gave us everything he earned. He never let us go hungry. His loss is irreplaceable
Ramesh, brother of victim Vellimuthu V