

Seshachalam Tragedy: A Decade of Silence and Desperate Call for Justice

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On April 7, 2015, the Seshachalam forest in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh, became the backdrop for one of the darkest chapters in India's fight for human rights.



Seshachalam forest, where red sandalwood is found. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

On the 10th anniversary of the [Seshachalam tragedy](#), this year, families of the victims, their neighbours, and civil society actors [gathered](#) to commemorate the demise of those who succumbed to state violence in 2015. This year, the solemn gathering took place at one of the victims' homes in Polur, Thiruvannamalai district in Tamil Nadu, where victim families from Thiruvannamalai, Dharmapuri and Salem districts came together to mourn. They paid homage to their husbands, sons and brothers, sharing their pain and anguish while vehemently placing forward their demand for justice.

The loss remains fresh, and the victims' families continue to feel hopeless as they seek recognition for their suffering and demand action from both the state governments and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). These men, who were the sole breadwinners, ventured out in search of a livelihood, oblivious of the life-changing tragedy that was waiting for them.

The 2015 tragedy in Seshachalam forest

On April 7, 2015, the Seshachalam forest in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh, became the backdrop for one of the [darkest](#) chapters in India's fight for human rights. Twenty individuals from Tamil Nadu were [taken](#) by the Andhra Pradesh Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force (STF) from several districts close to Andhra Pradesh border and were shot to death, backed by the usual narrative of a police encounter.

Nine alleged red sandalwood smugglers were [killed](#) in one place and 11 in a second clash a kilometre away in Chittoor. These men had left their homes with the hope of earning a livelihood, only to be caught in a [politically](#) charged conflict over the [precious](#) red sandalwood. The victims were captured, [tortured](#) and murdered, and their bodies discarded in the dense forest, as the authorities sought to bury the truth along with them.

Aftermath of the encounter killing: a tarnished justice process

The NHRC [took](#) *suo motu* cognisance of the incident the same day and issued notices to the Andhra Pradesh chief secretary and the director-general of police of Andhra Pradesh to submit a detailed report. In May 2015, the NHRC directed the Andhra Pradesh government to [pay](#) Rs 5 lakh as interim relief and ordered the government to provide financial assistance under the SC/ST (POA) Rules to the families of each of the 20 persons killed by the STF personnel within eight weeks.

In June 2015, the Andhra Pradesh chief secretary filed a petition before the Andhra Pradesh high court challenging the direction of the NHRC. The high court [ordered](#) an interim stay of the NHRC's order.

Ten years after the incident, the interim stay had not been vacated, and the proceedings before the high court were still pending. Later, NHRC never materialised its efforts to effectively intervene in the court proceedings to lift the interim stay, as a result of which, the case now remains unresolved.

In an effort to provide relief, the Tamil Nadu state government [provided](#) compensation of Rs 3 lakh and jobs to each of the 20 woodcutters' families. However, the low-paying jobs offered by the government, with wages ranging from Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 per month, make it extremely challenging for them to meet their basic needs. Many families, now headed by single mothers, struggle daily to make ends meet. Children are deprived of education, and poverty continues to bind them in an unbreakable cycle. Despite the government's small gesture, the families remain trapped in financial hardship and emotional pain.

The tragedy remains a haunting reminder of a system that utterly failed to protect the lives of the innocent and even to provide justice after the incident.

Ten years on, the families of these victims continue to seek justice, but both the state governments have remained largely silent.

The surging encounters in different parts of India including [Sambhal](#), [Tamil Nadu](#) and [Bastar](#) further highlights the need for reform in law enforcement. These incidents underscore the importance of proper training, transparency, and oversight in police operations as [recommended](#) by the Administrative Reforms Commission in 2007 and the National Police Commission in [1980](#).

Police funds should be allocated to strengthen law enforcement agencies, ensuring that they can handle sensitive situations without resorting to excessive force. Additionally, independent bodies must be established to investigate unlawful police actions, such as the Seshachalam encounter, and hold accountable those behind it.

Hope amidst despair

As years passed, the Seshachalam tragedy faded from the public and state consciousness, as the families of the victims were abandoned to mourn in silence. No charges were brought against the perpetrators, and the wounds of the families remain open. Recently, the Joint Action Against Custodial Torture (JAACT) from Tamil Nadu has [appealed](#) to the National Human Rights Commission to vacate the 10 year long stay before the high court and provide justice to the innocent victim families. Though the struggle for justice may seem endless, the call for justice and act of remembrance brings us closer to healing.

What is very important here is that every year when the victims come together on April 7, they hope that something better will happen in their lives to bring justice to the martyrs.

The Seshachalam tragedy has turned into a reminder of relentless hope for justice, collective awakening, for the determination of the voiceless and a stark reminder that even the smallest light can pierce the darkest night. The NHRC, which was very swift in taking *suo moto* cognisance, ordered compensation and also [listed](#) this case in their [important interventions](#), must ensure that “Justice must not only be done, but must also be seen to be done”.

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