

How a summer camp in Tamil Nadu is helping reclaim childhoods lost to police violence

An annual, week-long camp organised jointly by People's Watch and Manonmani Trust, a Chennai-based NGO, has been running quietly for nearly two decades, in an attempt to let the young ones cherish their childhood at least for a few days every year.



Children at the Theni summer camp pose for a cheerful group photo after a session, flashing hand signs and smiles. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

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This story is part of our series on Police Impunity in India. Reporters from The News Minute and Newslaundry are travelling across states to bring you stories of negligence and abuse of power by the police, and how minorities and marginalised sections suffer the most.

The day begins like any other at the children's camp in G Kallupatti of Tamil Nadu's Theni, nestled in the foothills of the Western Ghats. Children spill out of dormitories even before sunrise, filling the campus with contagious laughter, as they get ready for yoga. While some carry bamboo sticks for Silambam, Tamil Nadu's ancient martial art, others clutch handmade puppets, eager to return to the stories they began weaving the previous afternoon. On the surface, the Reaching the Unreached campus, as it is called, resembles any other summer camp for kids: games, crafts, songs, friendships. But if we look a little closer, we can see that these children carry a kind of grief we cannot fathom.

Murugan (18), from Javvadhu Malai, was ten when his father Chinnasamy was killed in cold blood. "It would have been better if my father had been condemned to jail forever. But now, it is as if there is no one for me at all," he told TNM. Chinnasamy was one of the 20 labourers shot dead by the police in Andhra Pradesh on April 7, 2015. The killings were called the Seshachalam encounters, considered a dark chapter in India's history of violations by the police. The labourers were accused of smuggling red sanders, and there was widespread criticism from several quarters alleging that the police staged the shootings.

The summer camp in Theni is for children like Murugan, who have lost their fathers or close relatives to police excess, encounter killings, custodial violence, and other forms of state repression. The annual, week-long camp, organised jointly by People's Watch and Manonmani Trust, a Chennai-based NGO, has been running quietly for nearly two decades.

For most of the children, the camp is their first time travelling and staying outside their native villages for a week, and being part of a group that doesn't see them as 'different'. It is, to them, a place for art, play, care, and crucially, for forging bonds with others who understand a unique, bewildering grief: the loss of a parent, not to illness or accident, but to a police bullet, lathi, or torture endured while confined to a cell.



Children explore the world through binoculars during a picnic to Kodaikanal Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

Jeyaraman, who has been working with People's Watch for over a decade and was part of the summer camp's inception in 2003, said that all they want is for the children to feel they can be children again. The camps were initially organised by the People's Watch, and later, the Manonmani Trust came in.



Jeyaraman shares a moment of warmth during the Theni summer camp for children impacted by state violence. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

A senior lawyer associated with the People's Watch said the idea for the camp emerged after years of observation and realisation that while support is sometimes offered to the adult survivors of police violence, children are often forgotten. "They watch the raids. They see the blood. They grow up with trauma they can't even name," he said.

Noting how the children's trauma is prolonged and multifaceted, Jayaraman recounted the story of a young boy who couldn't sleep at night. "We would be with him, talk to him. One day he said, 'They will come, break open the door.' He was scared that if he slept, the police would come and beat everyone up. It is challenging to bring these kids out of it," he said.

Priya, who has worked with the camp for thirteen years, elaborated on how children are the ones who witness the police beating up their parents almost daily. They are scared when they come across the police anywhere, and seldom think that men in uniform would protect them, she said. "Some of them also grow up thinking that exacting revenge or becoming a criminal is the only way out. But we try to show them that education, building a community, and caring are, in themselves, forms of resistance," she added.

Resistance through community building and care

The camps began as an experiment in 2003, at the People's Watch office in Madurai, with the first batch having just 15 children. Some of the camp's current volunteers were themselves children of police excess victims from earlier decades. Now adults, they come to the camp to offer what they never received. One such volunteer is Thangeswaran, whose father P Ramar was killed in a 1997 police shooting during a rally in Madurai, when he was almost eight years old.

"If the police wanted, they could have saved my dad," he recounted, as tears rolled down his face. "He was alive while inside the ambulance, but he died after being assaulted again by the police. We may be able to accept a person's natural demise with time, but to think they died of brute force is traumatising."

The image of his father's "bloodied and damaged" face haunts him, and he still faints at the sight of blood. "If there is a police shooting, how will his face be broken? I can remember his face even now. How his jaws were misshapen, and all we could see was blood," he recalled.

After Thangeswaran's father's death, People's Watch stepped in, and helped his mother secure a government job and better compensation. They ensured Thangeswaran's education by enrolling him at a hostel in Madurai. "They not only put me in school, college, and hostel, but they also helped with buying uniforms, clothes, and books," he said.

Thangeswaran participated in the very first camp in 2002, held at the People's Watch office in Madurai, and then a larger one in Yelagiri in 2003. For many, including him, the camp was an avenue to get good food thrice a day, and they waited for it every year, hoping to briefly forget their worries.



A group of children pose with a camp coordinator Thangeswaran during an outing at the Theni summer camp, surrounded by greenery and laughter. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

Each day of the camp has a carefully designed structure. The mornings begin with yoga, followed by silambam practice and a healthy and tasty breakfast. Following the meal, the children head to the session for the day, career counselling or awareness classes on child rights and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. The camp, apart from physical activities and games, most importantly, offers a sense of community and the space for them to recover.



A child practices Silambam with fierce focus; reclaiming space, strength, and joy. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

"First, we bring the children and give them counselling. But not in the Western sense. We talk to them, we let them talk, and sometimes we don't talk, if that is what the children want. We want to have the space for the child to lead, to do what he or she wants," Jayaraman explained.

The organisers also constantly stay in touch with the children after the camps end, monitor their progress in school, and intervene if they drop out. There are dedicated volunteers for each village, with former students becoming volunteers and mentors for the next generation.



A batch of children in the Theni summer camp, after a drama practice. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

While in the initial editions of the camp, all the participants were children of police excess victims, either encounter killings or custodial deaths, now, it has evolved to include children from Denotified Tribes, Jayaraman said.

Denotified Tribes (DNTs) are communities that were once branded as "criminal tribes" under the British colonial-era law, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. This Act presumed certain communities to be "inherently criminal" and subjected them to constant surveillance and control. In Tamil Nadu, DNT communities include Kudumbar, Kattu Naicker, Ambalakarar, Piramalai Kallars, and others. The Act was repealed in 1952, and these groups were "denotified", hence the name Denotified Tribes. Despite this, many DNTs continue to face deep-rooted social stigma and police harassment, as no comprehensive national law has replaced the Act to safeguard their rights.

In 2025, the camp was held from April 27 to May 4, with 115 children participating, several of whom belonged to the DNT communities, particularly the Kalottar and Kattu Naicker.

"These children are from communities still heavily profiled by the police. Their lives are defined by a cruel paradox: they are traumatised by state violence, but also simultaneously treated with suspicion, simply for surviving it," explained advocate Edgar Kaiser, one of the organisers of the camp.



Figure 1A child beams with joy, wearing a handmade newspaper hat during a creative session at the Theni summer camp. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

Young minds steeped in fear and trauma

The journey from their villages to the camp is, for many of the children, a journey out of worlds steeped in fear and stigma. The 115 participants of the 2025 camp came from eleven districts across Tamil Nadu. Some of them witnessed their parents being brutally beaten and dragged away in the dead of night, and many of them grapple with the confusing narratives spun around their parents' deaths.

"My mother said that my father was sleeping on the road when a lorry ran over him, but my grandmother said that the police killed him," said a 10-year-old boy at the camp, whose father was also killed in the 2015 Seshachalam encounters in Andhra Pradesh.

The Andhra Pradesh police had, at the time of the encounters, claimed that a group of 20 men, accused of smuggling red sanders, mostly from Tamil Nadu, opened fire on the police and forest officials when confronted, leading to a shootout in which all 20 were killed.



Figure 2 Scene from the Seshachalam forest after the 2015 police encounter that killed 20 alleged red sanders smugglers — a case that continues to raise questions about extrajudicial killings. File Photo

However, subsequent investigations and eyewitness testimonies [painted](#) a far different picture. Human rights organisations and local activists alleged that the victims were first arrested from various locations in Tamil Nadu, taken to the forest in Andhra Pradesh, and executed in a staged encounter. Many bodies [were found](#) with gunshot wounds to the face or back of the head, with signs of torture including burn marks, suggesting they were shot at close range, possibly after being incapacitated.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) [termed](#) the killings a "massacre" and called for a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe. Families of the deceased said they had no involvement in smuggling and were merely labourers hired by smugglers, who became scapegoats in the police operation. Many of them belonged to the Denotified Tribes.

Over the years, legal battles continued, with the Andhra Pradesh High Court demanding status updates on investigations and monitoring the NHRC's role.

Ramu, a child rights activist, who has worked extensively with the communities in Sitheri Malai, Javvadu Malai, and Kalvarayan Malai, and was part of the Seshachalam encounters fact-finding team, explained that most of the deceased men were from arid regions, driven by poverty to seek work through brokers who promised higher pay for felling trees.

Ramu pointed out that the practice of hiring cheap labour from these villages still continues. For children, like the nine-year-old who lost his father in the encounters, already burdened by societal prejudice, the label of criminality associated with their fathers is an added layer of suffering.

"Though they have no connection to what their father or mother or family is accused of, children are also seen as criminals. Once the label is put on, it never goes away. The camp offers them a counter-narrative— they meet other kids with similarities, understand what to do in life, and they find a sense of community. Some children think they want to become a lawyer to fight for justice for their father or for their community," Ramu said.

He also explained that many of the children of the 20 Seshachalam victims were very young in 2015, and that they were unaware of the reason behind the deaths. Twelve-year-old Sivasankar from Thiruvannamalai recalled the moment he realised his father wasn't coming back. "At first, no one told me. They said my father has gone to work. But later, I figured it out," he said.

Murugan from Javvadu Malai, whose father was killed when he was 10, added that if his father had just been in jail, the family would at least have someone. "Now it's like I have lost an arm. We struggled a lot, I couldn't go to school. But Ramu sir insisted, and I completed 12th grade. Now, I don't think I can study because my mother is struggling alone, and I want to help her. There is no one to come for us, even if someone beats us up," he said.



Figure 3 Child rights activist Ramu smiles during an outdoor activity at the Theni summer camp, where he led sessions on healing through art. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

Children are often not told about the violent nature of such deaths by their families, to shield them from mental agony. Ezhilarasi, an eighth-grader, said that her mother says her father died when he went for woodwork, but her grandmother says that the police shot him.

"Elders can be consoled relatively easily, but not children. Their pain and worries come out only when they have friends, when they are in a space where they feel safe to share," Jayaraman explained, citing how hard it often becomes to get through to these children, whose trauma remains invisible to the state.

Filling the vacuum created by the state

"Children who witness their parents being beaten or killed are completely invisible to the law. The Indian criminal justice system does not have a victim-centric approach or a language for these children, leaving their trauma unacknowledged," Edgar Kaiser said.

He likens the betrayal by the system to the severing of the bond between a mother and a child. "A child and their mother have a natural bond of trust. The state is supposed to be like that for its citizens. But what happens when the ones meant to protect you are the ones hurting you?"



Figure 4A cheerful selfie of Edgar Kaiser with the children. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

Jayaraman pointed out how not just adults, but also juveniles, are criminalised by the system, despite legal protections against it. “What happened to Gokul Sri? His siblings and mother are here at the camp. We can offer them support, but we can’t undo what happened to him,” he said.

Gokul Sri, a 17-year-old from Kannadapalayam near Chennai’s Tambaram, tragically died in December 2022 under suspicious circumstances at the Chengalpattu Juvenile Home. Initially, authorities claimed he died of food poisoning. However, his mother Priya Palani alleged custodial torture after noticing multiple injuries on his body during a delayed morgue visit. A post-mortem examination revealed 96 distinct injuries, including abrasions and fractures, indicating severe abuse.

Following public outcry and intervention from human rights organisations, six juvenile home staff members were arrested, including the superintendent and medical assistant. The case was transferred to the Crime Branch-Criminal Investigation Department (CB-CID) for further investigation.

In response, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin announced a Rs 10 lakh solatium for Gokul's mother and allocated a house under the 'Anaivarukkum Veedu' scheme. Additionally, the Tamil Nadu government constituted a one-man committee led by retired High Court judge K Chandru to assess and reform the state's juvenile justice system.

In November 2023, Justice Chandru [submitted](#) a comprehensive 490-page report outlining 44 recommendations aimed at overhauling the administration and conditions of juvenile homes under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.

Gokul’s mother, Priya, who was also at the camp, briefly told TNM what happened to her eldest son. “Even if it is a terrorist, they would be asked for their last wish. But my son was killed. Something like this shouldn’t happen again,” she said.

Edgar said the purpose of the camp, a civil society initiative, is to fill the vacuum left by the state, a kind of emotional first aid in the aftermath of police impunity.



Figure 5 Group photo from the summer camp, which brought together over 120 children and facilitators for a week. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Edit by Azeefa Fathima

Ensuring a dignified childhood

Speaking to TNM, a teenager from Tiruvannamalai said, “I used to think I should take revenge for how the police treat my family. But after coming here, listening to the others... I feel a little calmer. Like maybe there’s another way to deal with what my family goes through.” The boy’s family belongs to a DNT community, routinely subjected to police violence.

That “other way” is a recurring theme at the camp. Organisers are careful to let children grieve, be angry, laugh, and feel everything so they can feel validated as individuals.

Edgar and Jayaraman believe that such camps for children impacted by the actions of the state should be state-funded. “If the government really believes in social justice, they must start with the police department, end the impunity, fix the systems.”



Figure 6 Children at the Theni summer camp wearing handmade newspaper hats during an art activity. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

Ramu cited that the government should conduct such camps in each district. “It is because of the state that the children are traumatised and impacted in the first place,” he asserted.

Jayaraman also added that apart from healing and recovering from something that happened, the children should also be given a rights-based education, where they learn about their legal rights in the wake of police arrests, and as juveniles. “We insist that the government should give this education in schools,” he said.

Edgar called for improved accessibility, addressing staff shortages, better pay for lower-level cops, and functioning CCTVs in stations. The perpetrators, in this case the police, he suggested, are in need of help themselves.

“No sane human being will inflict such horror and pain on another human being. They, too, should be given help.”

The camp, though a small-scale intervention run with limited resources, punches far above its weight. Children leave not just with memories of art and play, but a strengthened sense of self, a network of friends who understand their unique burdens, and perhaps, a nascent belief that their lives can have meaning beyond the tragedy that marked their childhoods.

An eight-year-old, trying to do yoga and hold a silambam stick in her tiny figure, said, “I feel strong when I learn this. Not scared, but strong.”



Figure 7A child strikes a playful pose on the steps during a break at the Theni summer camp, wearing a newspaper hat made during craft time. Image by Edgar Kaiser | Design by Dharini Prabha

<https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/how-a-summer-camp-in-tamil-nadu-is-helping-reclaim-childhoods-lost-to-police-violence>