

# On First Anniversary of Police Firing, Thoothukudi Remains Resilient

Though hope of justice for the 13 people killed by police is fading, locals say they will not go down without putting up their best fight.



**Thoothukudi:** On May 22, 2018, J. Vanitha, young Snowlin's mother, was unaware of what was happening as a procession marched towards the district collectorate to demand the closure of Sterlite Copper industry. It never struck her that her young daughter could be among those huddled into an ambulance after a police firing. "There was confusion all around. The police were trying to stop us," she recalls.

Some of them waited while others, including Snowlin, continued to march forward. Hours later, Vanitha's son Godwin would know of his sister's death from news channels. He went looking for his mother. "The ambulance passed right by my side, but I never imagined Snowlin could be in it. I kept telling myself, "She will be safe',"

Vanitha said. Along with 17-year-old Snowlin, 12 other people were killed in police firing.

Over the past year, Vanitha and her family have entertained an endless stream of visitors to their modest house at Mini Sahayapuram – including those enquiring into the case with the promise of ‘speedy justice.’ Vanitha appeared before the one-member Aruna Jegadeesan commission to look into the killings. But she says, “Justice continues to remain elusive.”

“I have no hopes that I will live to see justice. That I will receive an answer on why Snowlin was killed,” Vanitha says.



A 77-page report titled ‘A year after Thootukudi burned’ released by the People’s Watch – a human rights organisation based in Tamil Nadu – explains in detail that justice remains ‘elusive’ and will perhaps continue to remain so.

The report says after the case was transferred to the CBI by the Madras high court, the families of the victims had a ‘ray of hope’, but were let down. The report says:

“The CBI team visited the violence affected areas. They have enquired only the officers who ordered firing on May 22, 2018, policemen on duty, families of the deceased and the injured persons. There is a general concern that the CBI team have not yet enquired enough number of people. Though there were explicit

directions from the court that the investigation should be completed within four months, it has been nine months until now and yet, the investigation is not complete yet. In the FIR registered by CBI, names of the policemen who were responsible were not mentioned and instead, there were two general FIRs registered.”

The one-member Justice Aruna Jegadeesan commission was mandated to complete its investigation within three months of appointment. The investigation has still not been completed, though almost a year has passed since its appointment. The report says the commission is yet to examine statements of 640 persons. “This brings more despair to the victims who had held hope that justice would be met from this Commission of Inquiry. We anticipate that at the present force, it will take the Commission more months to complete its task” it notes.

The report has also blamed the National Human Rights Commission for overlooking certain issues and prematurely closing the case “without bringing justice to victims”.

It says:

“The steps taken by the Government to bring in normalcy and law and order situation under control has only ended in more human rights violations and there is now a huge distrust among the citizens of Thoothukudi against the police, district administration and the government. The NHRC has overlooked these issues which still exist and have prematurely closed this case. There has been no action, prosecution or inquiry against the police officers and government officials on duty yet.”

The NHRC closed the case after claiming adequate compensation was paid to the victims. It also said the state government has taken adequate steps to bring law and order situation under control. It added that “the Judicial Commission is already looking into the angle of use of force/police excesses, if any, no further intervention in the matter is required”.

Henry Tiphagne, executive director of People’s Watch says the denial of justice to the victims is almost conspiratorial. “Clearly, the NHRC has led the conspiracy in which the CBI too has taken part. When the topmost human rights monitoring body fails, how can you

not sense a conspiracy? The NHRC as an institution has let its people down,” said Tiphagne.



### **Police clamp restrictions**

Meanwhile, attempts to observe the first anniversary of the deaths have been met with many restrictions imposed by the district administration. After the organisers approached the court to obtain permission, the police have warned against the participation of persons from outside Thoothukudi. Activist S.P. Udayakumar who spearheaded the protests against the Koodankulam nuclear plant, was detained by the police to thwart him from participating in the meeting.

District collector Sandeep Nanduri, however, claims there are no major restrictions in place. “The court gave permission for two meetings, both of which have been held. We have also allowed holding indoor meetings, memorial services and garlanding of portraits. The situation has been peaceful. Long rallies and processions were not allowed because counting of votes will happen on Thursday and police have been busy with that,” he said.

The residents of Thoothukudi continue to be remarkably resilient.

Posters echo the Biblical verse that reverberated across the Sahaya Matha Church on June 3, 2018, when Snowlin was being laid to rest: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”

“We might ultimately go down, but not without putting up our best fight” says P. Prabhu, a resident of Thoothukudi and an activist – a sentiment that perhaps many share.

<https://thewire.in/rights/thoothukudi-police-firing-first-anniversary>