

# Tamil Nadu's Dalit blind spot: 'Education killed my son, so my grandsons don't want one'

"We did the right thing with one son, and we lost him. I hate education, I hate that word."

**Ramanathan S.** | Wednesday, February 3, 2016



*This is the first part of a three-part series on stories of deaths of two Dalit youngsters from Tamil Nadu, and how the political establishment chose to look away.*

On a bright and sunny morning in August 2007, Palanichamy's son, Senthil Kumar, got a call from the University of Hyderabad informing him that he had been selected for a doctorate at the School of Physics. "You should have seen him jump with joy," says his father, with a glint in his eye.

"It was like he had won this world." Palanichamy was a pig-breeder in Jalakandapuram near Salem, and had never been to school. His son's PhD scholarship was an unimaginable achievement.

There was a tight deadline though — he was asked to report to Hyderabad at 3 pm the very next day, or he could lose the opportunity. “We did not have any money then. I begged people I knew around town and somehow gathered Rs. 5000, and sent him to get the admission done. He walked like a king,” says his mother Deivanai, with a sense of pride.

“He was to return two days later, early in the morning. I went and sat at the teashop at 4 am, waiting for him to come. He got down the bus and looked for me, knowing I would be waiting. As he spotted me, he raised his hand for a thumbs-up,” reminisces Palanichamy, and then his expression of pride breaks down to loud sobs. “Every time I remember that, I cannot stop crying. My dear son left me forever,” he says.



***Senthil's father Palanichamy***



### ***File image of Senthil Kumar***

Senthil Kumar had a dream — he wanted to be like former President Abdul Kalam. But when he entered the University of Hyderabad, his dream was torn apart piece by piece. He was not allotted an academic guide, because of which he failed the exam and lost his scholarship. On February 24, 2008, following months of discrimination at the hands of his professors, Senthil Kumar is believed to have killed himself in his hostel room at the University campus by consuming poison.

A University inquiry held later stated that there was a culture of discrimination against Dalit students at the science department. The poor family, 'paniyandis' from the lowest of castes making a living through breeding pigs, had to spend close to Rs. 50,000 just to get his body back from Hyderabad.

Eight years later, they still haven't got any of Senthil's possessions back. "He used to write a diary, we tried to get it back for two years. Then we just stopped," says Saravanan, Senthil's brother who now works at a meat shop. The University gave them a compensation of Rs 5 lakh, but there wasn't even one condolence message from the officials, he says. "And we are still paying the debt of Senthil's education," Saravanan adds.



From left: Senthil's brother Saravanan, mother Deivanai. Far Right: Senthil's father Palanichamy.

“Can’t we study? So what if we were from the lower caste, can we not dare to move ahead in life?” asks Deivanai, with tears welling up in her eyes. “Everyone tells us that education is the way out of our poverty, but look where education has led us. I lost my dear son, and we cannot pay back the loans, which we took for him. We have nothing left.”

Now, no one in Palanichamy’s family wants an education. His daughter and Senthil’s younger sister Kamakshi’s sons – Gunakesar and Surya aged 14 and 16 – have quit school. They work the power looms in textile factories. “What if they kill my grandkids too?” asks Deivanai. “But that is wrong, you have to educate them,” I say, and she shoots back with anger, “We did the right thing with one son, and we lost him. I hate education, I hate that word.” Saravanan says, “At least I can see them every day, keep them safe. They killed my brother, they cannot kill our kids too.”

The family had struggled hard to pay for Senthil’s education. Both Saravanan and Kamakshi had dropped out, but the school headmaster had insisted that Senthil should continue. So the family did everything they

could. “I used to pick up pig shit from different places and sell. I could not let others see, so I would wear the saree over my head and scrap the shit and sell it as the time for his fee-payment approached,” says Deivanai.



### ***Senthil's mother Deivanai with his books***

When Senthil died, only two people helped them, says the family: Dalit leader D Ravikumar and anti-caste activist Kathir of NGO Evidence. Kathir helped them with money for the travel expenses, and Ravikumar helped them fight for an inquiry and with compensation.

“All those who are raising their voice against Rohith Vemula’s death now, were in power back then. Rahul Gandhi’s Congress was at the Centre and Karunanidhi was the CM,” says Saravanan. “We even met a DMK Minister, and he asked what he could do when Senthil died in Hyderabad,” he adds.

The lack of any support from the DMK particularly, hurt Deivanai because at the time of Senthil’s death, she was propped up by the local DMK unit, as the Councillor for the local body ward. Her ward was a reserved seat, so she had stood and won, although she didn’t have any power. “None of them even came to see me, who cares for Dalits?”