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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Sattankulam Verdict — A Rare but Insufficient Reckoning With Custodial Violence

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 The Hindu

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GS2

 The Hindu

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CONTEXT

The **Hindu editorial** evaluates the landmark verdict by a Madurai Sessions Court awarding the **death penalty to nine police personnel** in the **Jayaraj-Bennix custodial deaths case** (Sattankulam, Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, 2020). The editorial frames it as a rare but historically significant judicial reckoning with custodial violence — while arguing that it exposes, rather than solves, the systemic impunity that protects perpetrators in the overwhelming majority of such cases.

THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

1. The Exception Proves the Rule

The verdict is historically significant precisely because it is so **exceptional**. India records over 2,000 deaths in custody annually (NCRB data), yet convictions — let alone capital punishment — for police perpetrators are almost unheard of. The editorial argues that a system where justice requires sustained national outrage, CBI investigation, and extraordinary judicial attention cannot be considered functional.

2. The Jayaraj-Bennix Case — What Made It Different

- The victims were **shopkeepers** (not accused of serious crimes) — father Jayaraj and son Beniks were arrested for keeping their shop open past COVID-19 lockdown hours
- The case attracted **mass media coverage** and social media pressure
- The **CBI took over** the investigation — removing it from the state police machinery that would normally shield perpetrators
- **Medical evidence and witness testimonies** were preserved — critical for a successful prosecution



3. Structural Impunity — Why Most Cases Fail

The editorial notes that the conditions that produced this verdict are **replicable in very few cases**:

- Most custodial deaths involve victims from marginalised communities with no media access
- Investigating officers and accused often belong to the **same police hierarchy**
- **Witnesses are routinely intimidated** — especially where the accused remain in service during trial
- The mandatory **Section 176 CrPC (now BNSS) magistrate inquiry** is conducted superficially in most districts
- Medical examinations of detainees (mandatory pre-detention) are often not done or are falsified

4. The Systemic Reform Agenda the Verdict Demands

The editorial calls for:

- **Mandatory video surveillance** in all lock-ups and interrogation rooms (Supreme Court has issued directions; compliance is poor)
- **Independent investigation authority** for custodial deaths — not within the state police hierarchy
- **Functional custody reception registers** with medical examination documentation
- **Police Complaints Authorities** (as recommended by the Prakash Singh case, 2006) to be operationalised in all states

KEY PROVISIONS ON CUSTODIAL DEATHS

PROVISION	DETAILS
Section 176 CrPC / BNSS	Mandatory judicial magistrate inquiry for deaths in police custody
Article 21	Right to life and personal liberty — cannot be suspended even during arrest
DK Basu v. State of West Bengal (1997)	Landmark SC guidelines on arrest and detention procedures
National Human Rights Commission	Receives reports of custodial deaths; issues guidelines but lacks prosecutorial power
Police Act / state police manuals	Regulate lock-up procedures; largely unenforced



UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2 — Governance, Polity

- **Custodial violence as a fundamental rights issue** — Article 21 (Right to Life), Article 22 (protection against arbitrary arrest)
- **Police reforms** — Prakash Singh case (2006) directions, State Security Commissions, Police Complaints Authorities
- **CBI jurisdiction** — CBI can investigate crimes in states only at state's request or by court order

Mains Angle

“Despite constitutional guarantees and judicial guidelines, custodial deaths remain a serious human rights concern in India. Critically evaluate the structural reasons for the low conviction rate in such cases and suggest reforms.” (GS2 + GS4 Ethics)

FACTS CORNER

ITEM	FACT
Verdict	Death penalty to 9 police personnel (Sattankulam case)
Victims	P. Jayaraj (59) and J. Beniks / Bennix (31), father-son
Date of deaths	June 22-23, 2020
Arrest reason	Keeping shop open past COVID-19 lockdown hours
Location	Sathankulam PS, Thoothukudi district, Tamil Nadu
Investigating agency	CBI (state-level probe transferred)
NCRB 2022 custody deaths	2,544 (1,968 judicial, 175 police, rest other)
DK Basu guidelines year	1997 (landmark SC guidelines on arrest)
Section 176	Mandatory magistrate inquiry in custodial deaths (BNSS equivalent)



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