

# 67. Death of 25 Chained Inmates in Asylum Fire in T.N., In re v Union of India

Civil Writ Petition No. 334 of 2001

**Decided on:** 05 February, 2002

**Court:** Supreme Court

**Coram:** M.B. Shah, B.N. Agrawal, Dr Arijit Pasayat, JJ.

## JUDGMENT

1. On the basis of submission note of the Registrar (Judicial) to a news item published in all leading national dailies about a gruesome tragedy in which more than 25 mentally challenged patients housed in a mental asylum at Ervadi in Ramanathapuram district were charred to death, the patients could not escape the blaze as they had been chained to poles or beds, this Court took suo motu action
2. After considering the factual report, Dr Abhishek Manu Singhvi, learned Senior Counsel was appointed as amicus curiae to assist the Court and notice was also issued to the Union of India.
3. Thereafter, by order dated 15-10-2001 [ Re Death of 25 Mental Asylum Patients, see below at p. 36] this Court called for the report from the State of Tamil Nadu on the subject and also sought information on the topics which are mentioned, from the State Governments and Union Government on an affidavit of competent authority.
4. Thereafter, when the matter was placed before this Court on 21-1-2002, most of the States sought extension of time for compliance with the order passed by this Court. The matter was adjourned for 29-1-2002. On that day also, some of the State Governments again sought extension of time for compliance with the directions issued by this Court. Further, learned amicus curiae submitted that the Mental Health Act, 1987 (for short "the 1987 Act") is not at all implemented by the authorities concerned and there is failure on the part of the Central/State Governments to implement the 1987 Act.
5. Mr Soli J. Sorabjee, learned Attorney-General appearing on behalf of the Union Government submitted that the 1987 Act is for the benefit of mentally ill persons and is required to be implemented in right earnest. He submitted that the Centre would take appropriate action for implementation of the 1987 Act as early as possible.

6. In our view, it appears that there is slackness on the part of the authorities concerned to implement the laws enacted by Parliament. This is one such instance.
7. One of the objects of the 1987 Act is to provide a law relating to the treatment and care of the mentally ill persons. Notification for implementing the Act was published in the Gazette of India on 11-1-1993.
8. For the time being we would refer to the definition clause 2(l) which provides “mentally ill person” to mean a person who is in need of treatment by reason of any mental disorder other than mental retardation. Further, clause 2(q) inter alia provides “psychiatric hospital” and “psychiatric nursing home” to mean a nursing home established by any other person for the treatment and care of mentally ill persons and includes a convalescent home established or maintained by any other person for such mentally ill persons. The said section reads thus:

[Quote Begins] “2. (q) ‘psychiatric hospital’ or ‘psychiatric nursing home’ means a hospital or, as the case may be, a nursing home established or maintained by the Government or any other person for the treatment and care of mentally ill persons and includes a convalescent home established or maintained by the Government or any other person for such mentally ill persons; but does not include any general hospital or general nursing home established or maintained by the Government and which provides also for psychiatric services;”

Further, Section 3 provides that:

[Inner List Begins] “3. (1) The Central Government shall establish an authority for mental health with such designation as it may deem fit.

(2) The Authority established under sub-section (1) shall be subject to the superintendence, direction and control of the Central Government.

(3) The Authority established under sub-section (1) shall—

(a) be in charge of regulation, development, direction and coordination with respect to Mental Health Services under the Central Government and all other matters which, under this Act, are the concern of the Central Government or any officer or authority subordinate to the Central Government;

(b) supervise the psychiatric hospitals and psychiatric nursing homes and other mental health service agencies (including places in which mentally ill persons may be kept or detained) under the control of the Central Government;

(c) advise the Central Government on all matters relating to mental health; and

(d) discharge such other functions with respect to matters relating to mental health as the Central Government may require.” [End of Inner List] [End of Quote]
9. Similar provision is made under Section 4 for the establishment of such authority by the State Government. Thereafter, Section 5 provides that the Central Government

may, in any part of India, or the State Government may, within the limits of its jurisdiction, establish or maintain psychiatric hospitals or psychiatric nursing homes for the admission, treatment and care of mentally ill persons at such places as it thinks fit. Other important section is Section 6 which provides that on and after the commencement of this Act, no person shall establish or maintain a psychiatric hospital or psychiatric nursing home unless he holds a valid licence granted to him under this Act. Section 8 further provides — when licence to continue or establish psychiatric hospital or psychiatric nursing home should be refused. Prayer is for implementation of these provisions. It appears that the aforesaid provisions are not implemented. Therefore, learned amicus curiae sought for issuance of the following directions:

*[Quote Begins] [Inner List Begins] “(i) Every State and Union Territory must undertake a districtwise survey of all registered/unregistered bodies, by whatever name called, purporting to offer psychiatric/mental health care. All such bodies should be granted or refused licence depending upon whether minimum prescribed standards are fulfilled or not. In case licence is rejected, it shall be the responsibility of the SHO of the police station concerned to ensure that the body stops functioning and patients are shifted to government mental hospitals. The process of survey and licensing must be completed within 2 months and the Chief Secretary of each State must file a comprehensive compliance report within 3 months from the date of this order. The compliance report must further state that no mentally challenged person is chained in any part of the State.*

*(ii) The Chief Secretary or Additional Chief Secretary designated by him shall be the nodal agency to coordinate all activities involved in implementation of the Mental Health Act, 1987, the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 and the National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999. He shall ensure that there are no jurisdictional problems or impediments to the effective implementation of the three Acts between different Ministries or Departments. At the Central level, the Cabinet Secretary, Government of India or any Secretary designated by him shall be the nodal agency for the same purpose.*

*(iii) The Cabinet Secretary, Union of India shall file an affidavit in this Court within one month from the date of this order indicating:*

*(a) The contribution that has been made and that is proposed to be made under Section 21 of the 1999 Act which would constitute corpus of the National Trust.*

*(b) Policy of the Central Government towards setting up at least one Central Government-run mental hospital in each State and Union Territory and definite time schedule for achieving the said objective.*

*(c) National policy, if any, framed under Section 8(2)(b) of the 1995 Act.*

*(iv) In respect of the States/Union Territories that do not have even one full-fledged State Government-run mental hospital, the Chief Secretary of the State/Union Territory must file an affidavit within one month from date of this order indicating steps being taken to establish such full-fledged State Government-run mental hospital in the State/Union Territory and a definite time schedule for establishment of the same.*

*(v) Both the Central and State Governments shall undertake a comprehensive awareness campaign with a special rural focus to educate people as to provisions of law relating to mental health, rights of mentally challenged persons, the fact that chaining of mentally challenged persons is illegal and that mental patients should be sent to doctors and not to religious places such as temples or dargahs.*

*(vi) Every State shall file an affidavit stating clearly:*

*(a) Whether the State Mental Health Authority under Section 3 of the 1987 Act exists in the State and if so, when it was set up.*

*(b) If it does not so exist, the reasons therefor and when such an Authority is expected to be established and operationalised.*

*(c) The dates of meetings of those Authorities, which already exist, from the date of inception till date and a short summary of the decisions taken.*

*(d) A statement that the State shall ensure that meetings of the Authorities take place in future at least once in every four months or at more frequent intervals depending on exigency and that all the statutory functions and duties of such Authorities are duly discharged.*

*(e) The number of prosecutions, penalties or other punitive/coercive measures taken, if any, by each State under the 1987 Act.” [End of Inner List] [End of Quote]*

10. At this stage, we have again heard learned counsel for the parties and learned Attorney General submitted that as a first step the aforesaid directions as suggested by the amicus curiae be issued and information as sought be called for.

11. We direct accordingly. The State Governments as well as the Central Government shall file affidavits complying with the directions mentioned in the aforesaid paragraphs (i) to (vi). It is further directed that the necessary affidavits as per order dated 15-10-2001 be also submitted, if not already tendered.

12. Stand over for 9-4-2002.