

A SENSE OF AN ENDING: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE RELEASE OF RAJIV GANDHI CASE CONVICTS

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The [release of the six remaining convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case](#) marks the end of a tragic episode that began with India's disastrous involvement in Sri Lanka's internal strife in the 1980s. The [assassination in May 1991, ordered by the LTTE leadership](#) and carried out by a suicide bomber, caused revulsion. However, over time, the prolonged incarceration of the seven persons ultimately found guilty evoked some public sympathy. Political parties in Tamil Nadu campaigned for the release of the four convicts on death row and three serving life terms. The [Supreme Court commuted the death sentences](#) to life in 2014. A [resolution adopted by the Tamil Nadu Cabinet in 2018 for releasing them](#) under Article 161 of the Constitution was not acted upon by the then Governor for a long time. Ultimately, he forwarded it to the Centre for its opinion. The Court, earlier this year, found no constitutional basis for the Governor's action and invoked its [extraordinary powers](#) to order [the release of A.G. Perarivalan](#). The same benefit has now been extended to others. While their release is no occasion to celebrate, contrary to what sections of the media and the political class seem to believe, it is not one for lamentation either. The plot's masterminds are dead and only mid-level operatives and some local collaborators were apprehended. A sense that 31 years of imprisonment is punishment enough does indeed prevail.

Their release is the culmination of due process in a vibrant legal system that is not without its flaws. A chilling trial court verdict that sentenced all 26 available accused to death in 1998 did not impress the Supreme Court. Based on a calmer appraisal of evidence, its 1999 judgment acquitted 19 of them of conspiracy charges, resulting in their release. Of the remaining seven, four were sentenced to death, and three to life. [Nalini](#), recruited into the plot as a local chaperone to the potential suicide bombers, got the benefit of commutation in 2000 itself. So too did [Ravichandran](#), who had hoped to lead an armed separatist movement in Tamil Nadu with the LTTE's help. The prison system, too, proved its benign side. Most of them acquired new educational qualifications, while one could even indulge in literary pursuits. Their freedom has come about through legal processes and legitimate advocacy. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the victims' families have suffered a lot, with few offering them succour or sympathy over the years. The tragic episode should occasion a fresh evaluation of the remission system and norms for premature release of life convicts. Going by the glaring omission in this particular case, some indication of remorse on the part of the convicts should be a prior requirement.

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