

Tensions Rise in Thiruparankundram

Recent controversies over the ownership and religious practices on the hill have led to growing friction between communities.

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The historically peaceful town of Thiruparankundram, located in Tamil Nadu's Madurai district, is now at the centre of rising communal tensions. For over two centuries, Hindus, Muslims, and Jains have coexisted in this sacred space. However, recent controversies over the ownership and religious practices on the hill have led to growing friction between communities.

Dispute Over Religious Claims

The conflict stems from claims made by right-wing Hindu groups that the entire Thiruparankundram hill which is home to both a Murugan temple and a mosque, belongs solely to Lord Murugan and is part of the Shaivite sect of Hinduism. These groups have also expressed opposition to the animal sacrifices performed near the mosque by the Muslim community. They allege a deliberate attempt to rename the hill as 'Sikkandar Hill' in government records, which they see as an effort to alter its religious identity. The foothills of Thiruparankundram feature an ancient temple dedicated to Lord Murugan, while the upper sections of the hill house a Sufi

shrine with the grave of Sufi saint Sultan Sikandar Badushah Shaheed, along with a mosque and some ancient Jain caves. As certain Muslim groups have launched counter-campaigns, the issue has escalated into a full-fledged controversy, with tensions mounting between temple and dargah supporters.

Authorities Take Precautionary Measures

Authorities have enforced prohibitory orders, preventing public gatherings and rallies by religious and political groups. The police have also imposed round-the-clock surveillance in the town to prevent violence. Despite the restrictions, tensions flared further when the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court allowed a protest by the Hindu nationalist outfit Hindu Munnani at a location five kilometers from the city, on the condition that no provocative statements be made. However, reports indicate that inflammatory speeches were delivered during the gathering.

Historical Context

The dispute over the hill's ownership is not new. Legal battles surrounding the religious rights of both communities date back over a century. Advocate S. Vanchinathan of the Madurai Social Harmony Group explains:

“For centuries, people in southern Tamil Nadu have witnessed Hindus worshipping Lord Murugan alongside both Hindus and Muslims offering prayers at the dargah, all while living together peacefully without conflict. However, a sudden turn of events has seen organisations such as the BJP, RSS, Hindu Munnani, and Sangh Parivar attempting to disrupt this harmony by inciting conflicts around the Sikandar Badhusha mosque.”

He further claims that external elements are being brought into the town to provoke unrest and calls for legal action under the UAPA and other laws to prevent communal violence.

Historical records reveal that as early as 1915, attempts by the dargah authorities to add facilities to the site were blocked, marking the start of legal disputes over the land. A 1923 ruling established that the mosque and its surrounding area legally belong to the Muslim community, while the temple retains rights over the other sections of the hill. This decision was upheld by the Privy Council in 1931 and reaffirmed by the Madurai Court in 1978. Despite these rulings, right-wing groups continue to challenge the historical ownership of the site.

The situation further deteriorated after Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) Lok Sabha member L. Navas Kani, who also serves as the chairman of the Tamil Nadu Waqf Board, visited the dargah on January 22 and held discussions with local authorities. Following his visit, a compromise was reached—animal sacrifice was banned, but cooked meat-based food was allowed to be brought to the hill.

However, BJP state president K. Annamalai alleged on social media that Kani had deliberately eaten biryani on the temple premises, accusing him of attempting to provoke Hindus.

“Hindus are a peace-loving community. An MP went up the hill and ate non-vegetarian food, which is unfortunate. Appeasement politics have taken hold, and this MP should be dismissed as he created a law and order problem. This situation is deeply unfortunate.”

In response, Kani refuted the allegations, stating:

“He (Annamalai) made false accusations, claiming that I visited the Thiruparankundram temple and ate biryani. I never consumed non-vegetarian food over the hill.”

Despite Kani’s clarification, the controversy fueled further protests by Hindutva groups, who accused him of attempting to desecrate the temple.

Local Community Calls For Peace

Local activists and residents insist that external political groups are behind the unrest. Activist S. Dileepan highlights that the district collector organized a peace meeting with all political parties, but the BJP and AIADMK refused to sign an agreement upholding the long-standing religious traditions of the hill.

“Muslims and Hindus have worshipped together at this site for many years without any issues or conflicts. We are committed to preserving the harmony we have maintained over the years. The IUML and the secular alliance in Tamil Nadu are dedicated to upholding unity,” Kani reiterated.

Madras High Court denied permission for Hindutva organizations to hold further rallies across the state in connection with the dispute, offering temporary relief to the residents of Thiruparankundram.

State and National Leaders

BJP leader and Union Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting L. Murugan has vowed to advocate for Hindu interests in the area, arguing that past court orders establish Lord Murugan's ownership of the hill.

"Some unfortunate incidents have occurred in the area, and the state government must take serious action against the perpetrators. A court order in 1933 clearly states that the entire hill, except for 33 cents of land, belongs to Lord Murugan. However, the revenue records in 1983 incorrectly refer to it as Sikkandar Hill."

Human rights activist Henri Tiphagne argues that the conflict is being artificially created by Hindutva forces attempting to disrupt communal harmony.

"Southern Tamil Nadu has a long history of harmony, and attempts to divide people along communal and caste lines may be futile here. Hindutva forces are trying to establish a foothold by attempting to create divisions in the name of religion, caste, and language."

As the situation remains tense, authorities continue to monitor the town closely to prevent further escalation.

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