

Why Communal Tension in Tamil Nadu's Thiruparankundram is Another Warning Signal



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The Tamil Nadu government's silence on the matter only adds to the disconcerting scenario, highlighting the need for public attention and unity.



Sikkander Badusha dargah on Thiruparankundram hill in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Photo: Mamichaelraj, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

Thiruparankundram hill, located on the southwest of Madurai district in Tamil Nadu, houses Sikkander Badusha dargah, Subramaniya Swamy temple – the first of the six abodes of lord Murugan – and Kasi Viswanathan temple. Now, it has become a focal point of communal tension.

The Subramaniya Swamy temple was built in the eighth century during the reign of the Pandyas at the foothills of this monolithic hillrock whereas the dargah was built

in the 17th century at the top in the memory of Sikkander Shah, the last Madurai sultan. The Kasi Viswanathan temple is also located close to the top of the hill but on the other side of the dargah.

Locals from both communities have been worshiping together harmoniously for a long time here, but the hill has suddenly emerged as a communal flashpoint.

The core issue

On December 25, 2024, a group of Muslim men were on their way to the dargah, with chicken and goat. The police restricted their entry and stopped them from carrying out animal sacrifice – a practice which has been prevalent here for a long time now.

For centuries, Hindus and Muslims in the area have lived in harmony, respecting and participating in each other's religious traditions. However, recent allegations by right wing organisations that Muslims are trying to take over the site, calling it 'Sikkandar Hill', and introducing meat sacrifice as a new practice, have been unanimously dismissed by locals as baseless and divisive. To prevent these elements from disrupting their long-standing communal harmony, residents of Thiruparankundram, along with representatives of several political parties including Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) and Congress, submitted a petition to the district collector on January 27.

Following this incident, right wing outfit Hindu Munnani sought permission from the police to conduct a peaceful protest which was denied and a prohibitory order was instead issued by the district collector under Section 163 of Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023.

The outfit also approached the Madurai bench of the Madras high court and got the go-ahead to conduct the peaceful protest. Thousands of people were mobilised for the protest across the state, who chanted slogans like, "Retrieve the Kandar Malai."

Next, this issue took a turn when H. Raja, national secretary of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), appealed to relocate the dargah to a different site. Raja was booked for stoking religious sentiments for his alleged comment, "The first war, like Ayodhya, has already begun at Thiruparankundram which is Lord Murugan's first army camp."

On February 14, the high court dismissed a petition filed by Hindu Munnani to conduct a procession in Chennai carrying a vel (Lord Murugan's lance). The court categorically asked the outfit not to create any communal tension.

Is the land dispute new?

The Sikkander Badusha dargah was built around the end of the 17th century. The Subramaniya Swamy temple, although much older than the dargah, had no issues with the dargah or the worship practices conducted there, including animal sacrifice.

In 1915, for the first time the Madura Meenakshi Devasthanam – the body which manages the administrative affairs of the temple – vehemently opposed when the caretakers of the dargah, commonly known as Hukdars, attempted to construct a 'mandapam,' in an area close to the dargah site where there are cemeteries of the soldiers who died along with Sikkander Shah – for the pilgrims to take rest.

The Devasthanam claimed ownership over the entire land of the hill and argued that the site proposed to be used by the dargah administration was actually a place where Hindu pilgrims rest. As the government couldn't take a decision, the matter reached the Madurai subordinate court.

On August 25, 1923, the sub-court ruled that the entire hill except the dargah and the steps leading to it belongs to the temple. This was overruled by the Madras high court and in 1923, the privy council upheld the subordinate court's decision saying that the "dargah, its flagstaff and flight of steps" belongs to the "Mohammedan defendants" and the rest to the temple. After this ruling, there was no change in its legal position till today.

Animal sacrifice, now claimed to be a new practice, has actually been a long-standing tradition, as testified by local residents, both Hindus and Muslims. The region is also home to several deity temples where animal sacrifice is offered to the gods.

Historical evidence also suggests that Murugan was offered meat in ancient times. In 2003, when chief minister J. Jayalalithaa banned animal sacrifice in temples, strong public opposition led to the repeal of the ban in 2004, highlighting the deep-rooted nature of these traditions. Given that fundamentalists are now attempting to frame this as a land dispute, which is already a matter of court concern, it is essential to examine this issue through the lens of relevant parliamentary legislation.

The real threat

The Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute is one of the most sensitive political and religious disputes in India that left an everlasting impact on every sphere of the country's politics. In the early 1990s, the P.V. Narasimha Rao government enacted the Places of Worship Act, 1991 to prevent such disputes in the future. The law underlined that the Babri Masjid case was only an exception.

On December 12, 2024, the Supreme Court asked the Union government to file its counter affidavit within four weeks after a right wing advocate challenged the Places of Worship Act. This counter affidavit which is yet to be filed by the Union government might intensify the already emerging disputes including the tension in the temple city of Madurai.

The DMK, which has intervened in this case before the Supreme Court ironically chose to be silent on the Thiruparankundram hill issue. Here, the right wing is claiming the ownership of the entire hillock. A similar strategy is being used in other places like Ajmer Sharif dargah in Rajasthan, Shahi Jama Masjid in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal and Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi – to create conflict.

This is against the Ayodhya verdict in which it was clarified that this decision does not give the power to disturb other religious sites and that suits with similar claims over other mosques cannot be entertained. However, numerous lawsuits are being filed in lower courts across North India, claiming ownership over mosques, effectively bypassing the Places of Worship Act and the Ayodhya verdict.

A well-orchestrated strategy and the impending danger

Even in South India, right wing groups have been attempting to reclaim religious sites.

In 2017, the tombs at a dargah in Baba Budhangiri in Chikmagalur, Karnataka were vandalised. In May 2024, Hindutva groups obtained a high court order to survey the Jama masjid in Srirangapatna, Karnataka, claiming it was built over the Moodala Bagilu Anjaneya Swamy temple.

In Tamil Nadu, the Hindu Munnani has been actively opposing the construction of mosques. In August 2024, they halted the stone-laying ceremony of a mosque in Kallakurichi district, claiming the land was meant for Hindu cremation. Similarly, in

2022, they opposed the construction of a mosque in Vellore district, citing potential religious tensions due to nearby Hindu temples.

Unlike the previous incidents, the recent turmoil in Thiruparankundram has garnered significant attention, with thousands mobilising in Madurai on February 4. This escalation, coupled with recent violence in North India, such as in Sambhal, sends an alarming signal.

The situation is further complicated by the proposed Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, which seeks to limit Muslim autonomy over their religious properties. The Bill's implications, coupled with the challenge to the Places of Worship Act, 1991, now present a concerning picture. The Tamil Nadu government's silence on the matter only adds to the disconcerting scenario, highlighting the need for public attention and unity.

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