

1,500 Islamic party workers held for flouting orders

Over 1,500 workers of a Tamil Nadu Muslim party were arrested Friday for violating orders and attempting to pray at a disused 200-year-old mosque inside a fort here. The party promised to continue its struggle to offer prayers at the mosque as its 'birth right'.

Workers of the Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnatra Kazhagam (TMMK) tried to offer prayers at the Nawab Masjid in the 13th century Vellore Fort, against Archaeological Survey of India orders.

Vellore District Collector D.P. Yadav told IANS: 'Over 2,000 police personnel were pressed into service to maintain order. Though only 500 looked like courting arrest, nearly thrice that number were eventually held as the protestors' numbers swelled to approximately 3,000. As the event was peaceful, the protesters were let off in the evening.'

Eyewitnesses told IANS that the TMMK volunteers indicated that Friday's event was only a dress rehearsal for a bigger protest later. TMMK general secretary Hyder Ali told IANS by phone from [Chennai](#) that over 10,000, including TMMK leader M.N. Jawahirullah, were arrested.

'Today's event was only a symbolic protest against the Archaeological Survey of India that refused us permission for our prayers at the mosque in the fort which is our birth right. If proper responses from the central and state governments are not forthcoming, our struggle will have to be long and bitter,' Ali said.

'The ASI has allowed Hindus to worship at the temple within the fort. So, why are we alone being unjustly denied the privilege? Further, why is the government downplaying our protest?' an angry Ali asked.

Meanwhile, according to sources a bigger gathering is being planned in Vallam, a small town in Thanjavur, for two days from Saturday afternoon. It is being organised by the Tawheed Jamaat, another Islamic group.

'Some 200,000 devout Muslims will congregate there and demand the rights denied to us for so long. In fact, today's event in Vellore was an attempt to jump the gun,' Jamaat sources added.

Though it is said to have been built in the 13th century, Vellore fort finds first recorded mention in 1566 when it was removed during the Vijayanagaram regime by its Nayakkar chieftains, according to accounts published by a temple here.

The fort was captured and held by the Bijapur Muslim dynasty (1656-1678), the Marathas (1678-1707) and the Mughals (1707-1760). It finally went under the British control in 1760 till India's independence in 1947, according to a Tamil Nadu government communique issued July 2006.

Situated 130 km west of capital Chennai, this town is famous for its Christian Mission College and Hospital. The fort houses a Shiva temple (Jalakanteshwarar shrine), a church and a mosque.

The ASI and a trust were granted control of the fort in 1921, according to government records.

After a protracted battle since 1961, a few Hindus gained permission to offer worship in the shrine

inside the fort in 1981 under ASI control and supervision. Till Friday, prayers had not been offered inside the mosque and the church for almost 200 years, locals said.

Hindu groups alleged that the protest namaaz was the handiwork of Islamic fundamentalists who want to compete with the 27-year-old offering of Hindu prayers inside the fort.

'While the Jalakanteshwarar temple has been in existence since the 13th century and is a sign of patriotism, the mosque is a symbol of alien rule. The demand to offer worship inside the fort is without any justification whatsoever', Rama Gopalan, leader of the Hindu Front, said.

'Any unauthorised entry into the fort or activity within is prohibited,' an ASI signboard proclaims at the entrance of the fort.

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