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Dalits enter TN temple first time in 100 yrs

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NAGAPATTINAM: For the first time in a hundred years, dalits of Chettipulam village stepped inside the local Shiva temple on Tuesday, in a historic moment brought about by government and political intervention.

Escorted by revenue and police officers, nearly 70 dalits of the village situated near Vedaranyam in Nagapattinam district entered the century-old Kamatchi Amman Sametha Ekambareswarar Temple at around 11 am and offered prayers for 25 minutes. Dressed in their best, women had brought flowers and other offerings. A group of non-dalits, including panchayat president V Manimaran, also accompanied the dalits. District collector C Munianathan himself distributed prasadam to the dalits after the prayers.

"It is a historic day for us. For decades, we were barred from entering the temple. All we could do for generations was to stand 10 feet away from the temple entrance and offer prayers," said Nandan alias N Natarajan, a dalit labourer. He and other dalits were greeted by non-dalits inside the temple.

The dalits here had earlier made three attempts to enter the temple. On September 30, they found it locked. The next day they were arrested when they tried to break the lock. On October 14, when Nagapattinam revenue divisional officer Rajendran led the dalits towards the temple, violence broke out as non-dalits started pelting stones. Police fired warning shots in the air and resorted to a lathicharge. The CPI(M), spearheading the agitation, had warned of another attempt on November 2 if the government failed to ensure entry of the dalits into the temple by October 30.

A tripartite meeting involving non-dalits, dalits and government officials was held on Monday. It was decided there that the dalits would be taken into the temple on Tuesday.

A large posse of police personnel was deployed in the village. On Tuesday morning, a police vehicle picked up dalits from their doorsteps and took them to the temple. Once everybody gathered in front of the temple, the collector ushered them in. Thanjavur range DIG Abhay Kumar Singh and SPs of Nagapattinam and Tiruvarur were also present.

"The dalits need not worry about their safety in the village. They can enter the temple and offer prayers without fear. The district administration will ensure that they are not stopped from entering the temple," said Munianathan. Police would be stationed in the village for a few more days, he said.

Meanwhile in Chennai, the CPI(M) took out a rally to highlight the rights of dalits and tribals. Later, they met chief minister M Karunanidhi and handed over a 14-point charter of demands pertaining to the welfare of Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

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