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INDIA REAL TIME

Religion Journal: India Mosque Hit by Holy Hair Row

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By Joanna Sugden



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES Muslim devotees worshiped a holy relic, widely beleieved to be a hair from Prophet Muhammad's beard, in Srinagar, June 22.

Plans to build India's largest mosque have divided Sunni Muslims in a dispute over a lock of hair.

The 25,000-30,000 capacity place of worship was proposed in early 2011 by Kanthapuram A. P. Aboobacker Musliyar, who heads a faction of Sunnis in western Kerala and claims to have a lock of Prophet Muhammad's hair.



Opponents from other Sunni groups allege the lock of hair is fake and that Mr. Aboobacker Musliyar is cheating people, taking donations for the mosque in the coastal city of Kozhikode for his own gain.

Building has yet to start on the mosque, and opponents say the delay is because of the "Holy Hair Controversy."

After several attempts, The Wall Street Journal's India Real Time contacted Mr. Aboobacker Musliyar on Sept. 25 and asked him about the allegations. He refused to comment and referred the matter to Abdul Rahman, the chief executive of the "Knowledge City" project where the mosque is planned. Knowledge City aims also to house engineering and medical colleges. Mr. Rahman didn't respond to telephone and email requests for comment.

In a previous interview earlier in September, Mr. Rahman had told India Real Time that building of the mosque had been delayed because of the vast scale of the Knowledge City project, funded by Mr. Aboobacker Musliyar's organization Markaz, which describes itself as a "non-governmental institution of charity."

"These things [donations to the mosque] are run by a registered society [Markaz] so all activities are accountable to the government... We are submitting accounts every year," Mr. Rahman said.

Hussain Saquafi, the secretary of Markaz, added that the organization receives donations from people in Kerala and all details are provided to the government through chartered accountants.

"They are in the millions of people and they are coming to our conference at Markaz and whenever A.P. Aboobacker (Mr. Aboobacker Musliyar) asks them to extend their hand they are ready to do so for school building and mosque building," Mr. Saquafi told India Real Time.

"All these allegations are baseless," he added.

Bahauddeen Muhammed Nadwi, general secretary of E.K. Sunni, a Muslim group from which Mr. Aboobacker Musliyar broke away to form A.P. Sunni, is one of those who allege that the hair relic is fake.

"This is a cheating program [of] money collection only, from the well wishers of Islam and Muslim believers," Mr. Nadwi said in an interview at Darul Huda Islamic University in Malappuram, Kerala, where he is vice-chancellor.

He added that Muslims believe only very few of the Prophet Muhammad's hairs survive today. Those that do, including one in Delhi's Jama Masjid, one of India's largest mosques, have a written lineage or chain to show how they have come down from the Prophet to be with the current holder, he said.

K. Noorudheen Musliyar, a lawyer, says he has brought a case in the Kerala High Court against Mr. Aboobacker Musliyar regarding the donations to the mosque.

In his interview with IRT in Kozhikode in September, Mr. Rahman said the group had not received any notification from the Kerala High Court.

The Masjid Sha'ar-e-Mubarak - the mosque of the Holy Hair - was designed to house the lock and to accommodate 5,000 more worshippers than Delhi's Jama Masjid. The estimated cost to build the mosque was initially put at 400 million rupees ($7. 5 million).

The mosque's name has since been changed to Heritage Mosque and its design altered in recent months, according to Unais Mohamed, assistant general manager at Markaz.

Mr. Nadwi of E.K. Sunni believes the controversy is bad for Islam's reputation in Kerala. "The other religions are laughing at us that we are trifling over a fake piece of hair," he said.



Joanna Sugden is freelance journalist living in Delhi. Before coming to India in 2011 she spent four-and-a-half years as a reporter at The Times of London, covering religion and education. You can follow her on Twitter @jhsugden.

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