

## Bishops detained for anti-caste protest march

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**BANGALORE, India** -- Undeterred by the five-hour police detention of three senior Catholic bishops and hundreds of church activists, thousands of Christians took part in a rally March 5 to mark the end of month-long protest campaign by dalit Christians in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

While leading a procession of dalit Christians in Chennai demanding an end to discrimination, Archbishop Malyappan Chinnappa of Madras and Mylapore, president of the Tamil Nadu Catholic Bishops Council, Archbishop Peter Fernando of Madurai and Bishop Anthonisamy Neethinathan of Chingleput were detained by police along with other marchers.

The dalit protesters had undertaken a four-week march through the Tamil Nadu state. They covered nearly 500 miles on foot from Kanyakumari to reach Chennai, the state capital, to highlight the continued discrimination against Christian dalits.

Dalit means "broken open" in Sanskrit and denotes people formerly known as untouchables in India's multitiered caste system.

In 1950, the government made Hindu dalits eligible for free education and quotas in government jobs to improve their social status. The statutory benefits were extended to Sikh dalits in 1956 and to Buddhist dalits in 1990.

However, the benefits continue to be denied to Christian dalits, who account for two-thirds of the 27 million Christians in India. Repeated protests have not swayed the Indian government.

The detention of the marchers seemed to inspire the estimated 10,000 Christian dalits and at least six other bishops who joined a late evening rally that closed what organizers called the "long march."

The rally gathered near Chennai in Mylapore, where the apostle Thomas was martyred.

"The news of the detention of our bishops and marchers was no dampener," Fr. Z. Devasagayaraj, secretary of the Dalit Commission of the Tamil Nadu Catholic Bishops' Council, told Catholic News Service after the rally. "It only motivated our people more."

Archbishop Fernando explained to CNS that a Tamil Nadu official told him the group was detained to prevent "traffic chaos" in Chennai.

"So, they detained us at a marriage hall," the archbishop said. "They treated us well and promised to transport us to the rally ground in the evening and they did it."

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