

Indian Mars mission leader criticised over temple visit

November 7 2013

The head of India's space agency, basking in plaudits after the launch of the country's first voyage to Mars, was brought down to earth Thursday by criticism of his decision to seek divine blessing for the mission.

K. Radhakrishnan, chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), visited the famous Lord Venkateswara temple in southern India on Tuesday where he reportedly placed a replica of the Mars spacecraft at the feet of an idol.

Later in the day Radhakrishnan oversaw the successful launch of the Mars Orbiter Mission, known as "Mangalyaan" in India, which is on an 11-month journey to study the Martian atmosphere.

India's rationalist organisations, which campaign against religion and superstition in the diverse but officially secular country, slammed the widely publicised temple visit.

"There would have been nothing wrong had he gone there in his personal capacity. But to go there as chairman of ISRO and ask for heavenly favour is nonsense," Narendra Nayak, president of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, told AFP.

"It sends a wrong message to the common man who will think God can sort out all his troubles," said Nayak.

Sanal Edamaruku, president of the Indian Rationalist Association, also

played the ISRO chief who was congratulated by the prime minister and president on Tuesday.

"What sort of message are we sending out to the world? It's a shame for our country that prides itself on its secular credentials," he told AFP.

India is attempting its first inter-planetary journey with a spacecraft built in just 15 months on a budget of \$73 million, a fraction of previous attempts.

More than half of all missions to Mars have ended in failure, including China's in 2011 and Japan's in 2003. Only the United States, Russia and the European [space agency](#) have succeeded.

A spokesman for ISRO could not immediately be reached for comment.

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