

“They Built Well”

MARTHANDAM’S NEW HOUSE OF GOD

By Robert Sinclair, of Travancore

With ten years’ labour and great devotion the palmyra climbers of Marthandam have built a Church for themselves which invites to worship.

THE Christian people of Marthandam and district are drawn from those unprivileged communities which are denied the right of temple entry in India. But they are not of those who still stand suppliant for the removal of their disabilities. The new movement led by Mr. Gandhi to grant the simple human rights which have been so long denied has come too late for them. They have solved the problem in their own way, and have built for themselves a place of worship wherein they need feel no regret on account of exclusion from the temples of their land.

Ten years ago they started work on the foundations of their building, and they made it’s creation a great adventure of faith. The original design, estimated to cost £2,500, was early deemed inadequate, and the ultimate lines were left to be evolved in the course of construction. They sought for a place of worship of uplifting beauty and dignity, and determined that they would give their best for the highest. The spirit in which they undertook their task is best illustrated by the reply of one of the humblest of the coolies. On being exhorted with his fellows to do only the best kind of work, he replied, as he wiped the perspiration from his face, “Sir, this is to be God’s house, and we are going to build it so that when our children worship within, they will look around and say, ‘Our fathers built this place, and they built it well’”.

One of the earliest decisions was that no appeal should be made to the Society, or to the home churches for any contributions, and this resolve was faithfully kept. A few outside interested friends sent direct contributions from time to time, but these did not exceed four per cent of the total cost of nearly £7,000. Though still poor, despite substantial progress educationally and materially (the average income of the majority on the round twelve months will not exceed 15s a month), they have borne the burden themselves by their own contributions and gifts or by the product of their own skill and industry. Despite the depression of these last few years, it is to their credit that they have been able to open their church nearly free of debt.

For the most part they have been the actual builders of the church, though their traditional occupation has not been that of building, since they do not belong to the stonemason caste. They have been palmyra tree climbers, but so great is their natural aptitude that they have been able to finish most difficult kinds of work in a way which would reflect credit on the best type of craftsmanship at home. The polished granite pillars supporting the nave arches were a kind of work which they had never before seen. They had to prepare these perfectly cylindrically, and to polish them by hand according to instructions sent out from home.

The manager of the firm which sent these declared it was foolish to expect other than highly-trained workmen to do such work, and said he was sorry to take the money

for the materials he supplied as the venture was sure to end in loss and disappointment. But he was wrong. These humble Indian villagers has been able to finish their polished pillars in a way that would make it difficult to distinguish between them and pillars polished by machinery. Similarly the splayed and moulded arches of the doorways are beautiful examples of the stone-cutter's art.

The woodwork throughout is of the host Malabar teak and the roof is of the open hammer beam type with differential carving and moulding, which add greatly to the dignity of the interior.

One of the best tributes to the ideals which have animated all engaged in this work, and also to the appeal of the design of the building to an educated Eastern mind was paid by a high caste Indian gentleman just before the dedication. He is a man in high position, and asked for permission to see the interior. So profound was the impression made upon his own spirit that when he came out he said to the follow members of the Commission on which he was engaged, that he could fain wish to be a Christian in order to worship within that building. Another example was the case of a stonemason who offered to carry our a difficult part of the work, and explained that though he was not a Christian he wished some of his handiwork to be included in a beautiful building which was "for India".