Stone Cross Unearthed in India Ignites Christian-Hindu Dispute
Category : October 1983
Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 1983

Stone Cross Unearthed in India Ignites Christian-Hindu Dispute

Thousands of Kerala Hindus Cry Historical Chicanery and March to Protest Encroachment on Sacred Pilgrimage Site

Igniting a furious Hindu/Christian controversy in the state of Kerala, South India, on March 24th, Rev. Mathew Anthiyakulam proclaimed that two members of his parish had unearthed a stone cross established by Jesus' apostle Saint Thomas in 57 A.D., 150 km. from Trivandram near the Mahadeva temple at Nilakkal, in what is one of the most sacred of all Hindu pilgrimage areas - the 18-hilled garden of Lord Ayyappan. While the priest brazenly staked his claim, proposing to build a Christian church on the site, Hindus, shocked at his audacity, mounted a powerful protest that lasted for six months and finally resulted in the relocation of the proposed church. The intervening months of conflict left dozens injured physically, and scarred feelings on both sides.

The same day of the announcement, a makeshift thatched bamboo church was quickly constructed. Biblical hymns and worship celebrated the event. There were many doubting Thomases who did not believe the Thomas-established-this-cross allegation, but looked upon the whole thing as a sham calculated to bring Christianity into more prominence in the Hindu area. No wonder they doubted. In recent years dozens of Hindu temples and shrines have suffered similar fates. In Sri Lanka, Catholics are trying to build a cathedral within a stone's throw of the large and ancient Tiruketeswaram Sivan temple on the Mannar coast, and Buddhists "discover" viharas with suspicious regularity - all in Hindu areas.

On May 19, less than a month after the temporary church went up, the Kerala government approved a grant for one hectare of land at the site, which is 70 miles from the nearest town and part of a government forest reserve. Working through that evening and into the night, workers replaced the bamboo shed with a more permanent structure made of steel and asbestos, complete with a 5-foot granite cross. Rev. Dr. Antony Nirappel led the consecration rites the next morning, and daily prayers were started (India Today, June 15).

Shocked by the government decision, and angered at the Christian encroachment on sacred Hindu land, Hindu leaders denounced the cross-finding as a ruse. Far from being 2,000 years old, the cross was, they asserted, from all appearances brand new. They added that there is no Christian population within 10 km. of Nilakkal and hence no need for a church, especially 325 meters from the Ranni Saleehwara Mahadeva Temple enroute to Sabaramalai. Some even questioned the existence of the cross, The San Francisco Examiner reported, for though church leaders said the cross "was found, erected and photographed at the site," four days later, the church caretaker told the police it had been stolen.

Nearly 2,000 Hindus gathered in protest under the banner "Nilikkal Action Council," led by orange-robed sannyasins, held a sit-in near the site on June 4. An intense one-hour battle ensued with police trying to break it up. Devotees hurled rocks at police, and police lobbed tear canisters and charged with their clubs to finally drive the demonstrators into the forest, leaving 50 injured and arresting 30, including 9 sannyasins.

On July 16, hundreds of Ayyappa devotees who had set out from 18 centers to symbolize the 18 hills in Lord Ayyappa's sacred flower garden, began a long trek to Nilakkal Temple on the way to the Sabaramalai forest hill shrine, also revered by Saivites who regard Ayyappa as a manifestation of Lord Muruga. With tensions running high, police vehicles escorted the long procession and closely monitored the gathering at the Mahadeva Temple. There the crowd was addressed by Swami Vidyananda Saraswathi of Kasi Mutt and Swami Satyananda Saraswati of Chenkottu Ramadasa Mission. Devotees participated in night-long prayer and other ceremonies.

The Examiner reported that on this day "Hindu temples throughout Kerala flew black pennants to protest the little church. Thousands of Hindus, wearing black cloths over their mouths and hands, marched in the streets of all major cities and towns in Kerala, condemning the police action and the arrest of the monks. By the end of the day, police said, two Catholic churches had been hit by handmade bombs, the tires of 15 state transport busses had been slashed and 28 protesters had been arrested. The state's home minister, Vayalar Ravi, described the protesters as 'demons' trying to tear apart the state from within..." Others looked upon them as angels of the Hindu cause. Nor was that the end of the story.

Representing the Nilikkal Action Council, Swamis Satyananda Visveshwara

Theertha, head of the Pejawar Math in Udupi, and Vidyananda Saraswati (who later denounced, in The Hindu, certain Hindu trouble-makers as his followers) said on July 18 the Council would give up its opposition "if it was proved beyond doubt that the now non-existent church was set up by Saint Thomas when he was believed to have visited Kerala in the middle of the 1st century." But, they declared, as there was no historic proof that Saint Thomas ever visited Kerala, the right to build a church near Mahadeva Temple and within the sacred 18 hills of the Deity of Sabarimala could not be entertained. Swami Vidyananda asserted that the area, by historic tradition and usage, belongs to the Hindus and made a fervent appeal to the Christian community not to take an "obstinate stand" on the issue, but help solve the problem in a peaceful manner.

On July 21 Christian bishops of various denominations held a conference at Vadavathoor and concluded that until communal harmony was firmly cemented, the construction work should not resume. The Catholic Archbishop of Changanacherry, Dr. Antony Padyara, Rev. Dr. Mathew and other churchmen did not confirm whether or not they would shift the site of the church, but a 15-member sub-committee was formed to deal with this and other problems facing the Christian community.

The Hindu reported July 23rd that Swami Vidyananda Saraswathi had welcomed the construction halt by the Bishop Conference. On August 19, the Bishop subcommittee announced it would shift the church to a location 4 km. from the Mahadevan temple. The following day, the Nilikkal Action Council suspended its agitation programs and cancelled an upcoming march on the basis that the church would be shifted by October 2. Meanwhile, a special committee of distinguished religious leaders from the Action Council stands vigilant pending further developments.

In the midst of the controversy, even Christians doubted the wisdom of building the church at Nilikkal, considering the cost in strife and the risk of setting off communal passions on a wide scale in Kerala, India's most densely populated and most literate state. Dr. C.P. Mathew wrote in a letter to The Hindu (June 4): "A piece of granite in the shape of a cross said to have been recovered from the site is going to strike at the very root of communal harmony in the state. If at all it has any significance, it is for the Department of Archeology. Some narrow-minded, selfish Christian fanatics (both priests and laymen) are behind this. The Christian community in general is not interested in this episode. Which is more important for a Christian, a piece of granite or the teachings of Christ?" Another observer wrote, "Saint Thomas and his master Jesus would never have desired to build a Church in

the teeth of opposition...We are dishonoring Saint Thomas if we do not respect the sentiments of the Hindu population."

Perhaps, many wondered silently, the Christians themselves would soon rediscover one of Jesus' admonitions: "Do onto others as you would have them do unto you."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.