

WORSHIP IN INDIA :

A SHORT DESCRIPTION

W. J. Pethybridge

This is a brief description of things as we find them among the Indian assemblies which are associated with Brother Bakht Singh and his fellow-workers. This is a rather clumsy title for a work which seeks to be fully non-denominational and unsectarian, but it is the simplest that will make things clear.

These assemblies are an attempt to be a true Indian expression of New Testament practices, and at first one is surprised to see how the differences seem to be so great, yet without violating New Testament standards.

For instance everyone removes their shoes before entering the place where the meeting is to be held. This is of course a regular Eastern way of showing respect, like our removing our hat. It is done in entering a home as well as a temple, by all. Sitting on the floor on straw mats is a very usual Indian method of rest, and is certainly cheaper than providing benches, which would make the legs of many ache.

Music is sometimes in the form of translated English hymns with their normal tunes, but usually they sing hymns composed in the local Indian language to Indian tunes, which take a little getting used to. There is the little harmonium of Indian design together with drums, tambourines, and occasionally other Indian instruments.

The meeting is usually in a 'pandal', a simple thatch roof on rustic poles, which keeps off the sun or occasional rain, and provides all the shelter needed in a hot country. This pandal is often in the garden of a well-built house which affords accomodation for the full-time workers and their families and visiting friends. Though simple beds are often used, Indians can always crowd up together on the floor to sleep, and make light of what would to us be intolerable discomfort.

The Sunday morning meeting is usually presided over by the leading elder, often a full-time worker. Everyone is allowed to come, but before the breaking of bread a clear warning is issued about the 'damnation' of those who partake unworthily. This means that many do not take part, and sometimes even those who usually join in will abstain, feeling unworthy for one reason or another.

There is not a definite set pattern, but a typical meeting might go like this:

1. Opening prayer by leading brother.
2. Period of singing several hymns.
3. Message from the Word to stimulate worship to the Father and Son.
4. Period of open worship in which all may take part, usually in giving of thanks and praise, but occasionally a chorus will be sung.
5. A short message on the meaning and solemnity of breaking bread.
6. Thanksgiving and distribution of elements. Congregation remains kneeling, and if they desire to partake they raise their hand until the elements are brought to them.
7. Long prayer of intercession for workers in different parts of India, for the sick, and for those in special need.
8. (Either here or at the close) The collection: those not born again are asked not to contribute. While a hymn is being sung, they all file to the front and place their offering in the box on the table, all sisters first, then brothers. Last week I saw a poor sister bring an egg and leave it on the table by the box.
9. A long message of exhortation to godly living and fruitful service and witness.