

Saluting Thane's 432-year-old treasure



St John the Baptist Church in Thane is ready to reopen after a mammoth restoration that has infused life into one of Mumbai's oldest and largest parishes. Fiona Fernandez takes a tour of the site few days before it opens its doors, to relive its rich history and legacy

On September 20 2015, as the congregation celebrates mass inside the restored, 432-year-old St John the Baptist Church in Thane, it will mark a red letter day in local heritage conservation. More importantly, it will be a labour of love fructified for the church's 10,000-odd parishioners, who for the past year-and-a-half have waited for this day.

The past

As a nine-year-old, I recall craning my neck while attempting to fully soak in the stunning, towering wooden altar inside the Portuguese-styled church. Being a parishioner from the neighbouring St Pius X Church in Mulund, visits were regular, and that sight remained etched in my mind. However, by the early 2000s, neglect and decay had taken a toll. It was around the time, in 2002, when conservation architect Vikas Dilawari was invited to inspect the church, and submitted a concept note. Years later, in 2008, based on the 2002 paper, the then parish priest had requested him to look into repairs of the sanctuary, altar and two side altars.

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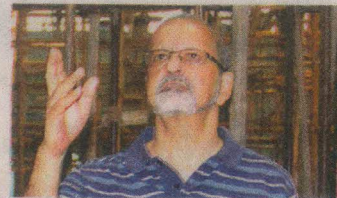
CROWNING GLORY: The main altar made of wood had been gilded, cleaned and polished. Very little restoration was needed for this centrepiece of the 432-year-old church. Marble was added later, in the 1960s. The wooden coffered ceiling was all painted, poorly repaired and one could not gauge the materials that were used. The joints had opened in some places, and had rotted. A painstaking process of removing the paint and repairing the joinery followed. The lower three rows on both sides of the sanctuary are in wood panels. The higher rows are in MS plates, which would have replaced the original wooden panels during previous repairs. PICS/SHARAD VEGDA

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The present

Cut to September 2015. It's a scorcher of an afternoon. Sunlight crisscrosses the scaffolding inside the church as parishioner and



It was crucial to see this project through – from start to end. With the community involved so closely, we had to ensure that we took everyone along.

— Father Allwyn D'Silva

