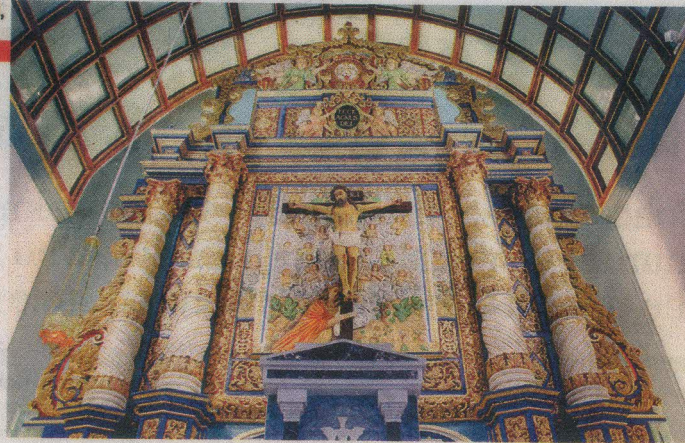


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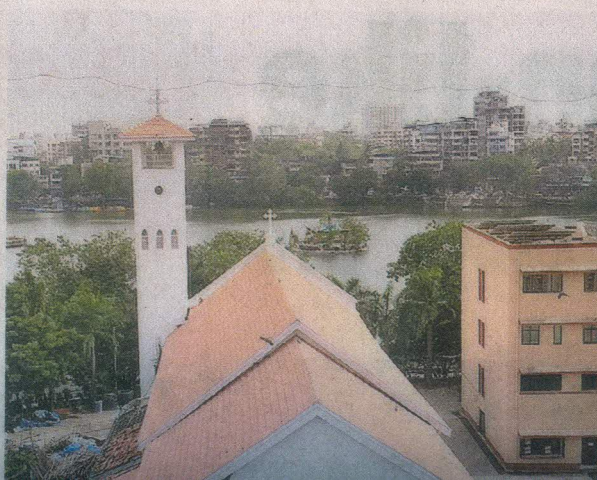


432-year-old church in Thane gets a makeover

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did you know?

The discovery of the original additional stone barrel vault with a decorative floral pattern at the centre of the coffered slab was an archaeological find. This was respected by revealing it to visitors. Two panels were kept open to show this floral relief in stone. It was agreed by consensus to polish the teak wood barrel vault and gilt its edges.



Wood work wonders

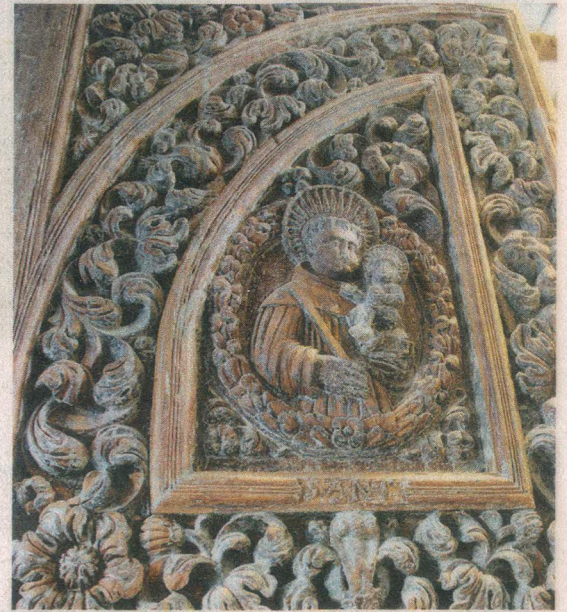




FOR THANE THIS BELL TOLLS: The original bell tower was where the West verandah stands. This was shifted to the South East side. Its architecture was responsive to the 1990s language, that of being modern. This was in contrast to the heritage church. Efforts were made to blend the tower with minimal intervention, by adding Mangalore-tiled roofs with decorative fascia.



An aerial view of the sloping Mangalore-tiled roof and bell tower that faces Talao Pali. The tapering of the structure towards the altar (foreground) depicts the Portuguese influence. Churches were built in a way to ensure that the congregation's focus was on the celebrants serving mass at the main altar.



(From top) The main altar made from old BTC (Burma Teak) is merely being restored in areas where wood has chipped off, the rest has been polished to its former glory; the main door of the church was carved from scratch by Vasai's Sequeira Brothers; a close-up of the intricate wood carving on one of the side doors to the church.

PR professional Karen Annunciation, guides me to the site. Workers are buried in last-minute preparations for D-Day. Parish priest Father Allwyn D'Silva is listening to Jitendra Chavan, Dilawari's main supervisor as he relays a quick update. "Looking around, how does it feel, Father?" I enquire. The genial priest, who's been helming affairs for six years, replies, "Challenges were many. Despite it being a 400-plus-year-old church, the exteriors did not reveal this age. It appeared as a contemporary building due to the interventions done during repairs in 1990s," he reveals.

The Franciscan church, built on the edge of the scenic Masunda Lake, popularly called Talao Pali, had withstood plenty of turmoil over centuries. The roof, the main wooden altar and side altars were the few elements to have survived, and with a new lease of life, it is ready to relive its history.

Around us, even as dust does somersaults, we get a sense of the history, and perseverance to protect it. Showing us elements of this mammoth restoration — from the splendid canopy that was rebuilt from historic references, to the cleaned-up basalt stone archways and the carved wooden altar, Father Allwyn downplays the effort. During past repairs, the existing exterior walls were plastered to a thickness of 3" to 4" by using gunitting (the process of concrete repair); this caught the restoration team by surprise. To add to this, the Baroque church extension was done in RCC. The bell tower never blended in with the heritage church. "These repairs didn't make the restoration easy since the original fabric and spaces had been altered," reminisces Fr Allwyn.

The future

We walk away from the wooden altar and reredo (altarpiece) towards the centre. Above us, we notice an unbelievably large ceiling fan. "Oh! That's called a Big Ass fan," chuckles Fr Allwyn, as everyone around bursts into peals of laughter. As we prod on this unique acquisition, we learn that the Big Ass Fan, despite being common globally, is a rarely seen in India. It's popular for its efficient electricity usage, but procuring it wasn't a breeze. "Till the end, the parish committee was divided. Bandra's St Peter Church parish committee connected us with the vendor who showed us a few functional fans, and the committee was finally convinced. It's a heritage structure but we have modern, eco-friendly amenities like LED lights, as well as ramps and railings for senior citizens," adds Fr Allwyn.

Watching our step, we note that the flooring is decadent yet historic in character. "Minton tiles?" we ask. "The central passage had original Minton tiles in two colours.

Since this was not available, we matched it using black marble and Jaisalmer stone in the same pattern; it now looks cohesive. The worn-out Kotah flooring was replaced with marble in the same pattern. The tall adanga marble dado was replaced with a small height Italian marble dado with a black marble moulding," Chavan explains, before, rushing towards the section where carpenters are applying finishing touches to the main carved wooden door (South porch) that took Vasai's Sequeira Brothers three months to complete.

By now, parishioners like Paul Aguiar and Julius Rodricks are updating Fr Allwyn on a few developments. Turning around, the priest tells us about their contribution, and insists on rattling off more names: "There's Rosemond D'Souza; of course, Vikas Dilawari and his main supervisor, Jitendra Chavan, Earth Craft Contractors, and Fleur D'Souza, on behalf of the Heritage Committee. There are countless others, managing the lights, TV and screens." He glances around to check if he has skipped names. Meanwhile, parishioner Dylan Hilton heads to the control room for a sound check. He's excited that his church will resonate to state-of-the-art acoustics, from UK-based Martin Audio — specialists in sound for places of worship. "This will be the first-of-its-kind," quips Fr Allwyn.

It's 6 pm. The tools have gone silent. A gentle breeze greets us as we step outside the Thane treasure. "We can't wait for September 20; all of this will be ready for the world to see," signs off Fr Allwyn. Amen.

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Around us, even as dust does somersaults, we get a sense of the history, and perseverance to protect it. Showing us elements of this mammoth restoration — from the splendid canopy that was rebuilt from historic references, to the cleaned-up basalt stone archways and the carved wooden altar, Father Allwyn downplays the effort. During past repairs, the existing exterior walls were plastered to a thickness of 3" to 4" by using gunitting (the process of concrete repair); this caught the restoration team by surprise. To add to this, the Baroque church extension was done in RCC. The bell tower never blended in with the heritage church. "These repairs didn't make the restoration easy since the original fabric and spaces had been altered," reminisces Fr Allwyn.



One of the arches of a door shows an etching that dates back to 1707 constructed using basalt stone

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A closer look at a detail of the stone arch, which was painted upon. This has been painstakingly cleaned and the paint removed. Now it shows exposed stone like it would have originally sat along with door lintels. This has brought a sense of history back to the interiors.

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(Left) A dated photograph of the altar prior to restoration; (right) Close-up of a detail from the canopy that is perched on the left interior wall of the church. It was recreated from scratch based on historic references.



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