

A STUDY OF THE CHAPEL OF ST. JOSEPH'S CONVENT, BANDRA

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INTRODUCTION

Choosing to study this chapel was itself something I had considered for a long time. While much is today being written on East Indian and Goan Churches, not much can be found on chapels. And almost every Christian School or College has a chapel. Among our earliest memories in convent school include being marched off to the chapel. While these religious interludes were not always appreciated by us restless young ones, there is no doubt that the chapel became an integral part of our schooling. Even then, the solitude and quiet beauty of the chapel was evident to us. My paper largely concentrates on the chapel's architecture and iconography that creates the 'sacred space' that even a young child can appreciate.

St. Joseph's Convent

St. Joseph's Convent, Bandra, was established by the Daughters of the Cross, a Belgian order of Roman Catholic nuns.¹ On 8 September 1833, Jean Haze established the order in Liege. A few decades later, Monseigneur Steins, the Jesuit Vicar Apostolic of Bombay visited them in Belgium and invited them to Bombay, then under British rule. Thus in 1862, the nuns arrived in Karachi and by December 1863, they established a home in Byculla.² In 1864, a Jesuit priest rented a house for the nuns opposite St. Peter's Church on Hill Road in Bandra but as the nuns took in orphaned girls, destitute women and rescued slave girls, more houses were rented. A portion of one of these served as a chapel. In 1867, St. Theodorine swept into the convent like a whirlwind and determinedly collected funds and established the convent Chapel.

The Chapel of the Sacred Heart, St. Joseph's Convent, Bandra

The foundation stone of the chapel was laid in 1901 and the chapel was dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Unfortunately, no architectural plans or documents relating to its design, cost or construction can be found. One resident nun suggested that the chapel was designed by St. Theodorine but there is no proof of this either way. What is striking however is that the chapel bears remarkable resemblance to the slightly older Holy Cross Convent Chapel of the same order of nuns in Haslemere, England.³ It is quite possible that the Bandra chapel was built along similar lines, as believes Sr. Rohini the current Mother Superior of the Convent.

The Architecture

The Chapel's architecture is a sort of hybrid Neo Gothic/Brick Gothic Revival style which was very popular in 19th century Germany, Scandinavia and England.⁴ The structural pattern is rectangular in the north-south direction. The main entrance lies at the northern end while the altar is at the southern end. The chapel is of doubled storied height with a Mangalore tiled roof. The chapel has a double row of single pointed arched windows running along the 2 sides. The western side also has a 6-foot-wide covered arched corridor which provides entry to the back of the chapel and the sacristy.

A marble plaque at the base of these arches commemorates the foundation and consecration of the chapel to the Sacred Heart in 1900, (see fig. 1) The exterior of the chapel would have once shown off the brick used for its construction with lime mortar forming the joints and demarcating the brick pattern. Today a plaster layer painted a reddish colour clads the structure and the brick outline is emphasized with white lines. In a few places where this cladding has worn off, the faded orange-red of the original brick can be seen underneath, (see fig 2)

The Interior

The original main entrance of the chapel at its northern end was rebuilt in the early 1960's when a novitiate building was added to the convent. The modern entrance antechamber joins the chapel and the novitiate

¹ "Our Story". *Daughters of the Cross*, <https://www.daughtersofthecross.org.uk/> . 1 July 2024

² "School History". *St. Joseph's Convent High School, Bandra West*, <https://www.sjchsbandra.org/> . 1 July 2024

³ *ibid*

⁴ York, Trevor, "*Gothic Revival Architecture*". Bloomsbury, 2017.

though the original mosaic tile work is intact. Leading from this antechamber to the chapel is a set of four doors in solid teak wood with no carving. Sr. Rohini indicated that both the doors and the intricate brass latch appear to be antiques but there is no way to know if these were the originals. The main entrance has a choir loft that is supported by four concrete dressed pillars. The pillars are mortar with plaster of Paris molding. The loft protrudes about 1/5th the length of the chapel. Facing the altar, to the right is the entrance that opens out onto the western arched corridor. To the left is a teak wood staircase leading to the choir loft. (see fig 3)

The main nave of the church has 2 rows of teakwood pews with minimal carving. The flooring is composed of 3 types of decorative tile mosaic. The central aisle mosaic features a decorative Greek cross, the sides where the pews are located feature a star and square design and the border separating the two has a floral and geometric pattern.

The roof exterior is of red Mangalore tiles. Within, a framework of teak wood beams supports the wooden rafters and the space between the cross beams and roof now feature a false ceiling made up of square panels of wood. The corner supports are carved with quatrefoil design.

Windows

Both sides of the church have 2 rows of single pointed arched windows. The shutters have coloured stained glass panes. The window grills were added in 1963 according to the former Mother Superior (late) Sr. Rohini Fernandes. The bottom section of the windows also have wrought iron grills.

1963-64 were very special years in the history of this convent as it played host to several delegates of the World Eucharistic Congress in Mumbai. Sr. Mary Celeste was charged with preparing the chapel and convent for this special honour. Among other things, she designed metal cut screens which were fixed on the exterior of the coloured glass panes. This is what today gives the windows the appearance of etched glass.

Barring the altar windows, the upper windows of the chapel are similar. Each has two painted wooden shutters divided into 4 panels with wooden tracery. The single arch has interlacing tracery and the metal foil has an 'S' design and a crescent. The bottom row of windows have wrought iron grills.

Originally the altar windows were single arched, similar to the rest of the chapel. But in 1963, Sr. Marie Celeste designed different thematic metal foils for each.

South East Upper window: has 5 panels. (i) The top most arched panel features a descending dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit, (ii) Top left – Shepherd's rood, (iii) Top right – intertwining rings, perhaps symbolizing marriage or Christ and the church as his bride, (iv) bottom left – bread or the Eucharist, (v) Bottom right – the Lamb.(see fig 4)

South East Lower window: the scales of justice.

South West Upper Window: (i) Top pointed arched pane – baptism, (ii) Top left – grapes or wine, blood of Christ, (iii) Bottom left – Diya with a cross, it's interesting to see this indigenous symbol and (iv) Bottom Right – an Anchor that could symbolize faith or perhaps Bandra's origin as a fishing enclave (see fig.5)

South West Lower window – non-descript design

Sanctuary

The Sanctuary of the Chapel lies at its southern end and is separated by a broad step, framed by a pointed undressed arch. The flooring is white marble and the grooves into which the communion rails once fitted are clearly visible. An undated photograph of a group of nuns at prayer clearly show the carved wooden communion rails. No one seems to know what happened to them or when they were removed.

On either side of the sanctuary there are statues. Facing the altar to the left is a statue of Mother Mary and to the right is St. Joseph. These are plaster statues.

2 steps up, lies the altar and pulpit. The chapel once boasted an elaborate wooden altar popular in Portuguese styled churches (see fig. 6). With its 5 niches for important statues and carved spires, this wooden altar was replaced by a simpler wooden one. Sr. Rohini suspects that the older one was perhaps removed and dismantled in 1963. She also suggested that it might have been broken up and the wood used for something else. The second wooden altar with three niches, (see fig. 7), was itself replaced by a single black metal cross with a white ring at its axis; the same design as the cross worn by the nuns.

Sometime later the cross was moved to the corridor outside the west entrance and a simple statue of Christ was placed with the tabernacle at the altar.

Sacristy

On the western side of the sanctuary, is the sacristy. Its tile mosaic floor matches that of the chapel. The Sacristy also has three antique wood cupboards (with no decorative carving), that house vestments, sacred vessels and articles. It also features a teak staircase leading to the first floor gallery, an exact match to staircase leading to the choir loft.

Gallery

The gallery runs along the western length of the chapel. It is a closed gallery bordered on one side by the arched chapel windows looking into the chapel. On the outer wall, gentle pointed arches overlook the convent

garden, grotto and entrance to the convent parlour. At the northern end of the gallery is an entrance to the choir loft and a covered corridor connecting the convent. Early photographs indicate that this arch was built along with the chapel and convent.

Choir Loft

The Choir Loft is about 10 feet long and spans the breadth of the chapel. It overlooks the main nave of the chapel. It has a mosaic tile floor and wrought iron and wooden railing, topped by a wooden banister.

Important Statuary

1. Our Lady (Painted Wood): This is in the choir loft. About 3 feet tall it is finely carved and painted. Old photographs indicate that this statue was formerly kept in an antique wood case in the chapel's sanctuary.
2. Le Pieta (Painted wood): A replica of Michelangelo's Le Pieta, this statue is life-sized carved of wood and painted. Now placed between the main entrance and side entrance at the back of the chapel, Sr. Rohini believes it is as old as the chapel.
3. Our Lady, St. Joseph: to the left and right of the altar on the first sanctuary step, there are two fiber glass statues of Our Lady and St. Joseph.
4. Byzantine Cross: (fig. 8) The most beautiful of all the articles in the chapel according to me is this small 12 inch painted wood Byzantine cross. Unfortunately, there is no record of how it came into the chapel.

Confessionals

The Chapel has two teakwood carved confessional chairs which include a screen and kneeler. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, one was placed in the entrance antechamber and the other beneath the choir loft staircase. Today both lie unused with other bits of discarded furniture in a corner of the entrance antechamber, covered with an old cloth.

Way of the Cross

Old photographs indicated that the chapel had an old teak way of the cross set that featured relief carving. These have been replaced with plastic ones. No one at the convent knows where the original set has gone to.

CONCLUSION

The St. Joseph's Chapel with its beautiful brick façade and gentle arches, lying in a picture book garden lovingly tended by the convent sisters, is a jewel of serenity and beauty on bustling Hill Road. (see fig 9). The beautiful mosaic flooring, the gentle sunlight filtering through the stained glass windows and the freshly polished pews all add to the charm of the chapel. It is a tragedy though that its antique altars and the way of the cross set have been lost to obscurity. I was also surprised that several convent sisters were unaware of the age or heritage of the chapel. Upon discovering that I was also working on the St. Xavier's Chapel, many commented that certainly that was older and more deserving of research. This lacuna, the non-recognition of our school chapels as part of an important Christian heritage only strengthened my resolve to march on despite the absence of good documentation. There are many such chapels, some over a century old, whose custodians and public fail to recognize their value and hence priceless sacred articles and furniture give way to plastic imitations or poor restoration. No doubt finance for maintenance is difficult to raise and Sr. Rohini also touched upon the difficulties of maintaining the structure, particularly the Mangalore tile roof and water proofing. Unfortunately, there is no state sponsored nor Church support or incentive for heritage management. We also discussed the importance of educating the sisters of the convent about the physical patrimony of the chapel and perhaps in future spreading this knowledge to the community so that these little gems may continue to shine and proclaim God's word.

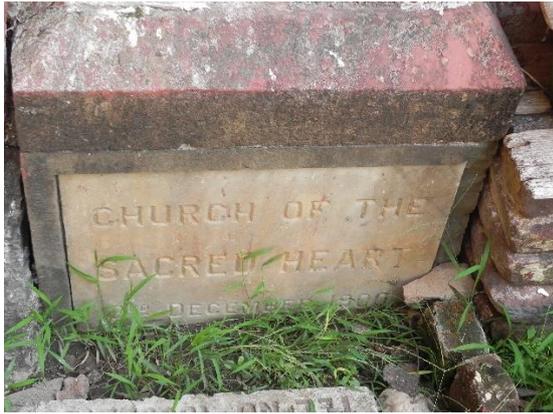


Fig.1: Chapel Foundation Plaque, 1900 CE



Fig 2: Original brick work



Fig.3: Chapel viewed from Altar



Fig 4: South East Upper Altar Window



Fig 5: Southwest Upper Altar Window



Fig 6: Undated photograph of the Nuns at Prayer indicating the old 5-piece teak altar and communion rails, undated photograph from the Convent's collection, shared by Sr. Rohini Fernandes



Fig 7: 3 Piece Teak Altar, undated photograph from the Convent's collection, shared by Sr. Rohini Fernandes



Fig 8: Painted Byzantine Cross



Fig 9: Western Façade of the chapel

REFERENCES

- [1] York, Trevor, “*Gothic Revival Architecture*”. Bloomsbury, 2017
- [2] “Our Story”. *Daughters of the Cross*, <https://www.daughtersofthecross.org.uk/> . 1 July 2024
- [3] “School History”. *St. Joseph’s Convent High School, Bandra West*, <https://www.sjchsbandra.org/> . 1 July 2024
- [4] Fernandes, Sr. Rohini. Interview. By Janine Coelho, Nov 2016.
- [5] Henrietta, Sr. Anne. Interview. By Janine Coelho, Dec 2016.
- [6] Image 6: Unknown, Nuns at Prayer, Personal collection, St. Joseph’s Convent Bandra, N.d.
- [7] Image 7: Unknown, 3 Piece Altar, Personal collection, St. Joseph’s Convent Bandra, N.d.
- [8] Images 1-5, 8 & 9: Coelho, Janine. Nov-Dec 2016. Author’s Personal Collection.