

The Church of St. Teresa of Avila

Mumbai Legacy Project
D Ward



The Church of St. Teresa of Avila or St. Teresa's Church is located at the bustling intersection of J. S. S. Marg and Dr. Raja Ram Mohan Roy Marg in Girgaum. The church was initially known as Girgaum Portuguese Church. However, its name changed when the crossroad junction, where it is situated, was named 'Gadre Chowk' after Anant Hari Gadre, an eminent social reformer linked to the Brahma Samaj movement. During the Portuguese occupation of the city, three Catholic churches at Colaba, Girgaum, and Dadar were notable landmarks, strategically occupying vantage corner positions (Gandhi, 2010, 83). The origin of the church at Girgaum can be traced back to 215 years ago when it was in the form of a private chapel. A tablet, embedded in the wall near the West Side Altar and partially concealed by the First Station of the Cross, carries an inscription in Portuguese. It states, "This Chapel was erected in 1773 in honour of St. Teresa by the pious De Ga family. In 1836, Mr. Joseph George Maria De Ga, inspired by the zeal of his grandparents, reconstructed and adorned it in its present form for the greater glory of God and as an example for posterity" (D'Lima, 1989, 19).



Originally consecrated to St. Teresa and St. Joseph, the chapel operated as a subsidiary of Our Lady of Expectation Church. It served as a public place of worship, with administrators appointed by the majority of the congregation (Archdiocese of Bombay, 1982, 190). Constructed by the Portuguese Franciscans before 1570, the Church of Our Lady of Expectation originally stood in the approximate location of the present-day Victoria Terminus. In 1760, the church was relocated to the Esplanade, and in 1804, it was moved once more to Bhuleshwar. In 1887, following the establishment of the Archdiocese of Bombay in 1886, the church was elevated to the status of a cathedral (D'Lima, 1989, 19).

On 14th February 1867, Anthony C. De Ga, the sole surviving member of the De Ga family, transferred the administration of the chapel and two pieces of chapel land to Bishop Walter Steins, the Vicar-Apostolic of Bombay. In 1912, Msgr. J. dos Remedios, appointed chaplain in 1904, completely renovated the chapel. It was later elevated to the status of a parish church when the new parish of St. Teresa was established on 12th March 1941. Despite the area being insufficient for the needs of the parishioners, expansion was infeasible due to its location at the crossroads of two main roads and a cluster of buildings behind it (Archdiocese of Bombay, 1982, 191).



The current structure of the church was erected in 1912. According to Fr. Edgar D'Souza, a Parish Priest, the original church was notably smaller and not as wide as the present one. Two discernible remnants of the initial chapel left a niche for statues embedded in the wall. The niche was concealed by the main altar and a small flight of stairs leading from the side chapel to the Confessional near the East Side Altar. At that time, the residence of the Chaplain consisted of only one set of rooms, roughly occupying the space where the Parish Dining Room stands today (D'Lima, 1989, 19). The premises also include the chapel of St. Philomena, situated within the confines of this parish. The chapel was constructed in 1912 with the prime purpose of catering to the requirements of the parish school. The Archbishop of Bombay blessed the chapel and the school hall on 13th November 1912. Gradually, a new chapel replaced the original one and received blessings on 22nd October 1939 (Archdiocese of Bombay, 1982, 191). An additional inscription affirms that the church was rebuilt and extended through contributions from the congregation. The members were blessed by His Grace Dr. H. Jurgons SH, Archbishop of Bombay, on 13th November 1912. During this renovation, the Parish House and the Hall above the Church were introduced (D'Lima, 1989, 20).

The Church is also known for its monumental gong, a metal bell with a history spanning over 325 years. The gong, made in 1674, was initially gifted to the now-extinct St. Joseph Cathedral in Bassein (Vasai) by a devoted Catholic. Subsequently, following the fall of the Portuguese administration in Vasai in 1739 to the army of Bajirao Peshwa I under the command of Chimaji Appa, negotiations secured a safe passage for the gong to be relocated to another church in Borivali. Eventually, in 1883, it found its permanent home at the Girgaum Portuguese Church (Gandhi, 2010, 84).

The residential area of Khotachi Wadi grew around the church, which depicted an amalgamation of Indo-Portuguese culture. Winding through lanes and alleys, Khotachi Wadi paints a picture of pristine serenity. In stark contrast to the environmental degradation experienced by the areas surrounding it, Khotachi Wadi stands as a unique example of how a "microscopic identity" can withstand the pressures of rapid urban development. At the time of the Portuguese occupation and before, the entire Girgaum area was blanketed in lush greenery, featuring the abundant growth of palms and fruit trees that defined the landscape (Gandhi, 2010, 85), an atmosphere suited for the establishment of an institution of faith.





References:

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