

St. Mary's Church - A Study on the living heritage monument in Chennai.

A.Karoliya Jansiraniⁱ

Abstract

St. Mary's Church is the first and the oldest Anglican Church in Asia, also called as the 'Westminster Abbey of the East'. It is one of the ancient monument buildings of Chennai. It is also considered as the oldest Anglican Church east of Suez and has been named as St. Mary because its origin was laid down on the Annunciation day of the Virgin Mary. The most special feature of the church is the high tower that is visible from a long distance. The church was originally built by William Dixon and designed by Edward Fowle. It is a bomb-proofed carved structure, which has the finishing touch of polished lime. The building of St. Mary's church had some later additions like the Sanctuary, Steeple, Tower and the Vestry. The tower was completed in 1701, a steeple added in 1710. The Archaeological Survey of India undertook the maintenance of the St. Mary's Church and declared it as a Historical Monument in 1949.

Key Words: Monument, Heritage, St.Mary's Church, Chennai

Introduction

The most important civilian building constructed in the white town in the 17th century was St. Mary's Church located at Fort St George, in Chennai which is the oldest British building in India. Streynsham Master, who was Governor of the Fort from 1677 to 1681, raised subscriptions for the purpose. The Foundation as laid on Lady's Day, 1678 and the building was completed in 1680. It was the First Anglican Church in India. (N.S.Ramaswami: 1980). It is popularly referred as the 'Westminster Abbey of the East'. The Chief Architect of the Church was Edward Fowle. Modelled on the Churches of England, this rectangular structure has a finely carved railing in its gallery on its wear. The uniqueness of the Church is its thick masonry walls which are nearly four feet in width and the roof which is nearly two feet thick. This was obviously done to save the Church from bombardments. For over a century it served as the Parish Church of the British settlement which grew up round Fort St.George. When more peaceful times came in the early years of the 19th century, the population of Madras began to spread far beyond the limits of the old city walls, and other Churches were built. In the later years St. Mary's became the Garrison Church, and so continued until the departure of British troops in 1947. (W.H.Warren.and Barlow: 1905) It is an Ancient Monument in which a Church has been given a new lease of life by an enthusiastic congregation of the Department of Archaeology and Archaeological Survey of India.

History

The English-speaking and Protestant residents of Fort St. George- traders, servants of the company and military personals did not have a Church for long. A company paid Chaplain arrived in 1647, but the prayers were conducted in a small room in the fort. The idea to build an Anglican Church was mooted by Streynsham Master, who has been described as its master mind. He was appointed as Governor of Fort St.George, from 1677-1681. The most memorable act of his administration was the building of St. Mary's Church. (W.H.Warren. and Barlow: 1905)The small Church or chapel provided by winter had become inadequate for the increasing protestant population and the Governor and his council entirely on their own initiative and without consulting the company or asking for its assistance set themselves the task of raising subscriptions in order to build a new Church. He raised a public subscription amount of 805 pagodas. Many leading citizens of the Fort like Elihu Yale, John Bridger, Master himself and thirty-eight donors (Henry Davidson Love: 1996) contributed for the fund.

The work of laying the foundation began on the Lady Day on 25th March 1678, and simultaneously an application was made to Bishop of London for solemnizing and sanctioning permission for the consecration

ⁱ Assistant Professor, Department of Applied History, Loyola College (Autonomous), Chennai.

and its completion. The Church was rendered the only bomb-proof building at the time, in the Fort. The Construction was completed in the course of two years and the Church was duly consecrated on 28th October 1680 (Fort St. George, St. Mary's Church: 2014) by the chaplain Rev. Richard Portman. The ceremony was marked by the firing of small arms and cannon by the Fort's Garrison. The Church was named St. Mary's, which is the oldest surviving building of the British in the whole of Madras.

On account of its peculiar roof-structure, the Church was used as a barrack and granary between December, 1758 and January, 1759 during the Second Carnatic War, when the French besieged Madras and again when Hyder Ali invaded the town in the late 18th century.

Architecture

The architect of the Church is not named and the work is attributed to Edward Fowle, Master-Gunner of Fort. Henry Davidson Love has however, pointed out that Fowle did not reach Madras till 1684, and the credit should therefore probably be given to his predecessor, William Dixon, Chief Gunner of the Fort (Henry Davidson Love: 1996), from 1678. It is not uncommon in those days for gunners to act as architects and engineers because the Company did not employ one (Col. D.M. Reid: 1945).

The design is very simple and the architectural decoration is very limited to deeply recessed doors and windows with beautiful stained glass fanlights. Originally, the plan consisted of the Prayer hall and the sanctuary alone (S. Muthiah: 1992). It is 24.3m long and 17m wide, with three aisles covered by semicircular roofs. The outside walls of the aisles are 4 feet thick; the inner walls separating the nave from the aisles are 3 feet thick; over the nave and aisles are built three semicircular masses of brickwork, 2 feet thick, bombproof roofs of solid masonry. The builders had to think of possible contingencies such as cyclones and sieges (St. Mary's Church 335th Anniversary: 2015). The edifice rests on a strong laterite foundation, testifies to this day the excellence of the mason's work in brick and polished chunam. Additions were made in the 18th century like the detached belfry tower was completed in 1701 and a steeple added in 1710 (S. Muthiah: 1992). In 1761 the gallery was enlarged to make room for the organ and the musicians and it was probably at this time that the two gracefully curve staircases were built to give access to the gallery from outside the Church (W.H. Warren and Barlow: 1905). The building consists of a nave and two aisles, with the nave protruding about 12 feet further than the aisles, thus forming the sanctuary. This extension was carried out in 1884, a vestry was built at the east end of each of the aisles, with flat masonry roofs supported by wooden beams; and the sanctuary was extended about 12 feet eastward for the formation of a choir (St. Mary's Church 335th Anniversary: 2015); otherwise the building remains as it originally was, and is a monument of good workmanship.

The Font

The black granite font is believed to have been in existence from the beginning of the Church. The font was donated by Job Charnock, the founder of Calcutta. The stone, from the Pallavaram quarry which was later termed as "Charnokite" after him. On the 19th August 1689, Job Charnock's three daughters Mary, Elizabeth and Catherine were baptized in this font by the Rev. John Evans. The cover of the wooden font was presented to the Church in 1885 (S. Muthiah: 1994).

The Altar Piece

The altar piece contains a famous painting of the Last Supper. It is much talk about and discussed about the History of the St. Mary's. The question is 'Who brought it and brought is it here?' has been run through over and over again in history. There are no records to give the history of the painting or the name of the donor. It is well executed copy of Raphael's, sketch of the Last Supper which was brought from Pondicherry (N.S. Ramaswami: 1980) after the British captured that place in 1761. It is measuring about ten feet by eight.

The Organ

The first Organ is memorable in the history of St. Mary's Church was bought in 1687 from Cap. Weltden for 70 Pagodas. The present Organ is the fifth which the Church has possessed from 1894 brought by Rev. A.C. Taylor (W.H. Warren and Barlow: 1905). There are two brass plates on the Organ. The sound of the organ resonates in and out of the Church is so sharp that anyone can be heard from anywhere. Mr. Paul was the organist for more than 46 years served and who entered eternity just a few years ago. The Present organist is Mr. John V. R. Collison.

The Gallery

In 1761, the Gallery was enlarged to make a room for the organ, and it was probably at this time that two gracefully curved staircases were built to give access to the gallery from outside the Church. The gallery was reduced to its present size at the beginning of the 19th century, when the two new vestries were built on each side; the right side of the vestries fixed the Organ, and the left side of the vestries has a place for the Priest's room. The carved teakwood balustrade in front the gallery dates from the building of the Church. Beautifully designed and executed figures of elephants and parrots appear on the balustrade and the of designing goes to Mr. Loycker (St.Mary's Church 335th Aniversary: 2015). The Gallery was relegated to the Governors and military persons who attended the prayer service.

Importnat Memorials, Ceremonies and Burials

The Church was once the repository of many valuable artifacts like Registers of Baptism, Marriages, and Burials from 1680 to 1947. Old Silver plate and Visitors Book from the British period are still available and is well maintained by the Church authorities. A few prominent entries in the Baptism book include the baptism of Job Charnock's three daughters Mary, Elizabeth and Catherine in this church on the 19th August 1689.

This ancient prayer house has solemnized the marriages of many individuals and famous personalities like Elihu Yale with Catherine Hymners on November 4th 1680, and Robert Clive with Mary Maskelyne on 18th February 1753, which could still be viewed (S.Muthiah:1994) in the marriage register. Yale was the Governor of Fort St. George, and a vestryman and treasurer of St. Mary's Church. On 6th October 1968, the day which marked the 250th anniversary of naming Yale College after Elihu Yale, the classmates of Chester, then the American ambassador to India, donated money for lasting improvements to the Church and erected a plaque to commemorate the occasion.

There are 11 tombs found in the Church including those of Lord Pigot, Lord Hobart, Sir Thomas Munro etc. Among those interred within the walls of the Church are four other Governors of Fort St. George – Sir Thomas Munro, Bt., George, Lord Pigot, the Rt. Hon. Vere Henry, Lord Hobart and Sir Henry George Ward. Also found are two statues, the Statue of the Late Col. Conway, and Colonel Pepper. The cemetery of St. Mary's was first found in the place where the law college now stands. These stones were brought and laid outside the Church.

The Old Silver plate comprises an alms-dish presented by Elihu Yale in 1687. Also preserved is a large basin of silver weighing 3 lbs. and 2 oz and is seventeen inches in diameter. The Church visitors' book dating from 18th February 1903 to 28th February 1947 contains the autographs of George, Prince Wales, and King George V and of Victoria Mary (W.H.Warren.and Barlow: 1905) his Queen.

Many personalities have visited the church, like, Prince Charles in the year 1980. On 4th May 2012, a special service was conducted for thanks giving on the 60th coronation Anniversary of Queen Elizabeth. In this occasion, Prince Andrew participated in the service. Duke Philip has also visited this Church.

Role of Archaeological survey of India in preservation of St. Mary's Church

In India, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is the premier institution concerned with the conservation of monuments. This institution was established in 1861 after the initiative taken by the antiquarians of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta. The Archaeological Survey of India undertook the maintenance of the St. Mary's Church and declared it as a Historical Monument in 1949 (Vetriselvi). With the help of the Congregation of the Church, they protect and preserve the original structure of the Building.

In 1977-78, the first conservation work started the decayed wooden joists, of the ceiling of the aisles were replaced by new ones, and the leaky terrace of the nave was water tightened by using brick jelly concrete in lime over which two layers of flat tiles were laid and the top plastered and finished with combination mortar. Pipes meant for the flow of rain water from the roof were chocked up and these were removed and replaced after clearing the passage. (B.K.Thapar: 1980)

On the eve of tercentenary (1980) of the monument, the interior walls were distempered after carrying out repairs to the damaged pillars and plaster-work. The Vaulted ceiling was painted with black colour as per the original. The decorative wood-work was painted with water proof paints (Debala Mitra: 1983). The layers of flat tiles were laid in the vaulted roof of the central aisle and the top was plastered. The other two aisles were also plastered in combination mortar and the surface was painted with bitumen tar to prevent leakage.

The Church was restored in 1985 by the ASI and by the Congregation of this Church. The damaged

plaster over the inner wall surface was removed completely and plastered and polished to match with the original, the ceiling of the vaulted roof was painted (JagatPati Joshi: 1990). In order to arrest percolation of rain water into the wall; the leaky vaulted roof was covered by laying bitumen tar felt over a coat of bitumen in 1989. Primer and finally applied with a coat of bitumen tar (S.K.Maha Patra :1994).

In the year 2001, the tower and walls of the Church were applied with weather shield exterior paint. Synthetic enamel paint was applied to the wooden and iron members. Patch plastering work was completed. The vaulted roof was applied with two coats of emulsion paint. The wooden embers were also applied with two coats of touch wood paint (Indian Archaeology 2000-01- A Review). At present, from February 2016 onwards the conservation work is going on. The damaged plaster over the inner wall surface was removed completely and plastered and polished to match with the original (Dr.Krubha Lili Elizabeth).

Conclusion

Buildings that survive from the past are fossils of civilization. It is our duty to safeguard our heritage buildings and hand down those remains to our young generation. St. Mary's Church is one of the oldest British Living Monument, still in use by the public for offering prayers and also as a tourist place. Every effort has to be made to preserve this historical and architectural monument. There are so many buildings that have been constructed after this Church, yet are in a state of damage and not in use by the people like National Art Gallery, Victoria Public Hall, Royapuram Railway Station, Senate building (It is restored and used by the public at present) etc these monuments are all in dire need of restoration and preservation and should be made available for the public in future. Thus, it is noteworthy to mention that the techniques used by the British in construction of this Monument deserves a great credit as it has survived across centuries, facing several conditions and other external threats, which has elevated its status as 'One of the Strongest' in India.

References

Primary Sources

- Interview with, Ms. Vetriselvi, Assistant Archaeologist, ASI, Chennai Circle, 04.10.2016.
 Interview with Rev. Dr. krubha Lily Elizabeth, chairperson, St. Mary's Church, Chennai ,07.10.2016.
 Fort St.George, St. Mary's Church, (2014) Archaeological Survey of India.
 St. Mary's Church 335th year Anniversary, (2015) The family of CSI St.Mary's Church, Madras:
 Fort St. George.
 B.K.Thapar., (1980) Indian Archaeology 1977-78- A Review, New Delhi :Government of India.
 Debala Mitra,(1983) Indian Archaeology 1979-80- A Review, New Delhi :Government of India.
 Indian Archaeology 2000-01- A Review, Government of India, New Delhi, 2006.
 Jagat Pati Joshi., (1990) Indian Archaeology 1985-86- A Review, New Delhi New Delhi:
 Government of India.
 S.K. Mahapatra., (1994) Indian Archaeology 1989-90- A Review, New Delhi :Government of India.

Secondary Sources:

- Col.D.M.Reid, (1945), The story of Fort St. George Asian Educational Services, Madras Diocesan Press.
 Love, Henry Davidson (1996), Vestiges of Old Madras 1640-1800, Madras: Asian Educational Services.
 Muthiah S., (1992) Madras Its Past and Its Present, Madras: East- West Press private Limited.
 Muthiah S., (1992) Madras, Chennai: A 400 year Record of the first city of Modern India, Madras:
 East- West Press private Limited.
 Muthiah S., (1994) Madras The Gracious city Present Madras: East- West Press private Limited.
 RamaswamiN.S., (1980), Fort St.George, Chennai: TamilNadu State Department of Archaeology.
 WarrenW.H, andBarlow, N. (1905), St. Mary's Church, Fort St.George Madras, Garrison
 Chaplain publication.
