

Amazing Grace

The urban legend of St Thomas' Cathedral, Mumbai, has a lyrical Parsi strain to it too

BY MEHER MARFATIA



WHAT would a Parsi knight and a Cross-shaped fountain fronting the city's first Anglican Church have in common?

To answer this riddle about Sir Cowasji Jehangir and St Thomas' Cathedral, do turn the pages of an almost 100-year-old book, Dinshah Wacha's 1920 book- *Shells from the Sands of Bombay*, that explains the conundrum of this classic cathedral.

As a personal contribution to the landmark associated with happy childhood memories, Sir Cowasji donated St Thomas' the beautiful Gothic-style fountain. It happened to be placed prominently in the entrance way to the church rising serenely at a corner of Fort. The renowned philanthropist had grown up in its protective shadow - at his ancestral Ready-money home which still stands on Veer

Nariman Street, mere yards from St Thomas'. The gesture even earned him the sobriquet of Cowasji Cross.

Dedicated to the apostle Thomas, who landed on Indian shores at Kerala, the fountain is engraved with evocative words: "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst." The lovely line, from the Gospel according to Saint John, is attributed to Christ in conversation with a Samaritan woman.

Like the greatest ideas, this came from a simple start. St Thomas' Cathedral (which gave its name to the Cathedral and John Connon School, just celebrated 150 years) welcomed its inaugural flock of faithful on December 25, 1718. Its construction was urged by Governor Gerald Aungier, declaring Bombay- "the city, which by God's assistance, is intended to be built". Aungier hoped, with some help from the same agency, to erect a small church for public worship in the centre of the town".



St. Thomas' Cathedral, Mumbai

There are charming descriptions of the opening ceremony. The church was dressed in local foliage, decorated with palm branches and surrounded by plantain trees. "The pillars were adorned with wreaths of greens and the double crosses all over the room looked like so many stars," Olga Valladares wrote in *The Bombay Explorer's*, 1992 Xmas issue.

Invitees took formally appointed places including 'natives' like Rama Kamati. An honoured guest, he was wrongly charged with treason and imprisoned two years later. After a special Christmas service, conducted with an unusu-

ally long sermon, a celebratory 21-gun salute fired from the Fort was answered by every ship in the harbour.

Unique for being the only buttressed structure, St Thomas' importantly gave Churchgate its name. The "Fort" area actually goes back to mid-18th century Bombay, Fort. Its walls and castle went up over a Portuguese manor site (part of which yet lies at INS Angre behind the Town Hall), to keep the island safe from invaders. The Fort had three landward gates: Apollo Gate near Regal Cinema, Bazaar Gate near Crawford Market and because of its prox-

imity to St Thomas', the Church Gate.

The cathedral's spire, Porbunder stone apse and stained-glass windows continue inspiring awe among the youngest admirers, centuries after its design unfolded. Many Decembers ago, I rushed from work to bring my then toddler son here for an enjoyable evening of carols amid hushed whispers and muted candlelight. He gaped bug-eyed, all wonder and fascination. Then, cupped a chubby hand to my ear, softly posing a question I recall everytime I pass St Thomas'... "Mummy, is this heaven?"