

# MAPPING MUMBAI

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IN A 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

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## Gardens with something to tell



Lady Jerbai Masina's statue on the central lawn of the hospital

**W**hat could a Parsi knight and a Cross-crowned fountain on the grounds of the city's first Anglican Church possibly have in common?

To answer this riddle about Sir Cowasji Jehangir and St Thomas' Cathedral, turn the pages of an almost 100-year-old book. Dinshah Wacha's *Shells from the Sands of Bombay* reveals how Sir Cowasji donated the Gothic-style fountain as a personal contribution to the place of worship he associated with a happy childhood. It was placed to face the main door of the cathedral that graced an iconic corner of Fort. The Ready-money family scion had grown up in its protective shadow mere yards away at his Veer Nariman Street ancestral home. That gesture even earned him the sobriquet of Cowasji Cross!

The cathedral is dedicated to the apostle Thomas who landed on Kerala's shores. Its fountain is evocatively engraved: 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst.' The lovely line, quoted from the Gospel according to Saint John, is attributed to Christ in conversation with a samaritan woman.

St Thomas' Cathedral (famously naming Cathedral and John Connon School) welcomed an inaugural flock of faithfuls on December 25, 1718. Its construction had been urged by Governor Gerald Aungier who declared Bombay "the city which, by God's assistance, is intended to be built". For the opening ceremony, the cathedral was decked in palm branches. The long special Christmas service concluded with a celebratory 21-gun salute fired from the Fort, answered by every ship in the harbour.

Uniquely the sole buttressed structure in town, St Thomas' gave Churchgate its name too. The 'Fort' area dates to the mid-18th century Bombay Fort. Its walls and castle went up over a Portuguese manor site (partly yet glimpsed at INS Angre behind the Town Hall), to keep the island safe from marauders. The Fort had three landward gates: Apollo Gate near Regal Cinema, Bazaar Gate near Crawford Market and, because of its proximity to St Thomas', the Church Gate.

Further midtown, another of my favourite inscriptions sits safe at Masina, where a hush, not often falling on hospitals, descends. Look close at Lady Jerbai Masina's statue that stands in the central lawn — the writing across it will soothe the heaviest heart, the frailest health: 'There is no death, what seems so is transition, from breath to Life Elysian.'

On seven sprawling acres in a Byculla lane fronted by Gloria Church, this was the Renaissance architecture 19th-century residence of eminent trader and head of Bombay's Baghdadi Jews, David Sassoon. Classically called Sans Souci (French for "no worries"), it hosted the City of Gold's most elegant evenings. One epic event announced the transfer of governance of India to the British Crown in the presence of Lord Elphinstone and in December 1889, Sans Souci feted 6,000 Indian National Congress delegates.

The Sassoon family bequeathed their grand mansion to house a hospital in gratitude. When David Sassoon suffered an acute hernia attack, which was cured by Dr Hormasji Manekji Masina, he gave the good doctor his property for just Rs 25,000. The third Indian to obtain the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, Dr Masina always dreamt of setting up a hospital to treat the less privileged. In recognition of his work and that of his devoted wife Jerbai, funds from charities poured in. Masina became Bombay's first private hospital in 1902 (followed by Parsi General Hospital in 1908 and Harkisandas Hospital in 1925).

Jerbai started the Postgraduate Medical College and Lady Broacha College of Nursing in 1923. If her statue greets visitors at the entrance, she smiles benignly again from her portrait hanging along the ornate oak staircase of the OPD in the heritage wing. In the garden outside, patients take in the air on a lawn ringed by bougainvillea bushes. Serene alabaster faces dotting the green suit, the claim that here lies the city's densest cluster of busts of Parsi benefactors.

A shaft of sunlight slants to more sharply light up the words on Jerbai's memorial. A warm reminder of how well philosophy and philanthropy have woven together at this landmark institution.