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Three hundred years of fortitude



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Between the crumbling outhouses and the green playing fields of St. George's School are scattered numerous buildings, each with their own spotless quadrangles, slatted windows and resident ghosts. Photo : R Ravindran



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Red brick buildings, hoary traditions and a never-say-die spirit... Deepa Alexander walks through the hallowed portals of St. George's, the oldest English medium school in Asia, as it gears up for its tercentenary

St. George's cloak glints scarlet in the morning sun. The picture of the saint on a white steed, raising his lance to kill the dragon, hangs high above the door to headmaster N. George's office at the recently-constructed Francis Fanthome block.

Dust devils spiral and rain trees creak noisily with the weight of history as over 1,000 students make their way across the sun-seared grounds of St. George's Anglo-Indian School and Orphanage. A quiet sanctuary from the noisy world just outside its gates, where Metro rail work is on, its worn flagstones are marked with the signatures of a century of boys. New buildings have come up, old ones have gone down. New names crowd the flagstones. The old portraits are gone, but the school's coat of arms with the cross of St. George and the motto, 'Trust In God and Do The Right', gleams high on the walls.

Isabel Manoharan, oldest staff member, pulls out records that tell the story of the oldest English medium school in Asia. Tracing its origin to St. Mary's Church Charity School, founded in 1715 by Rev. William Stevenson, the chaplain of St. Mary's Church, Fort St. George, the school had 18 boys and 12 girls belonging to the Anglo-Indian community housed in a building outside the fort. When numbers grew with the amalgamation of the Male and Female Civil Orphan Asylums, the school moved to where Egmore Railway Station now stands, in 1872. When the station expanded, the school moved to its present 21-acre campus on Poonamallee High Road in 1904. It was renamed St. George's School and Orphanage in 1954.

The most striking features of the school are its stunning vistas. Between the crumbling outhouses and the green playing fields are scattered numerous buildings, each with their own spotless quadrangles, slatted windows and resident ghosts. Vincent Cunningham, an old boy of the school and now one of its directors and campus manager, takes me on a guided tour. We pass the high-vaulted verandahs of what was once the school's hospital and now serves as the senior boys' dormitory, accessed by a flight of broad wooden stairs. Beyond the mud path stands the Tony Rodrigues Block that was once the office and before that the Junior Civil Orphan Asylum, its cornerstone laid by Masonic observances in 1940.

At the corner is the ID (infectious diseases) shed, now the kitchen where the school cooks a free noon meal for disadvantaged children. A couple of boarders play ball, others lounge under the trees leading to the pastel-coloured Conway House, the oldest building on the campus. "We have 30 boarders, all Anglo-Indian, some orphans, some from single-parent families. When I was a student here, boarders came from families that wanted a life of discipline for their children," says Cunningham as we bend low to enter the long dining room. A breakfast of pongal and sambar has been served and a chess game is in progress. The matrons step aside to let me read the foundation stone laid by Lady Campbell, wife of the then Governor, in 1823. Once the garden house of Brigadier-General T.H.S. Conway, the building has its own quaint clock tower with its hands frozen in time.

"Morning call used to be 5 a.m. when I was a boarder," says Cunningham, "but the rules are more relaxed now. Breakfast used to be a cut of brown bread from the Savoy bakery in Purasaiwalkam, banana and tea. After P.T., ragi porridge was served with bread and jam, followed by church service. Classes followed and lunch was vegetarian. Games and prep hour was rounded off with beef stew for dinner. Excitement meant going down to the box room to get your Lifebuoy soap and Gibbs toothpaste tin, supplied by the school. Life was very simple".

By now we've negotiated past Johnny, caretaker Roy Fernandez's billy goat, to get to the 130-year-old St. Mary's Chapel. It's easily one of the most beautiful structures on the campus with its gnarled weathervane, eaves dovetailed together over a roof that resembles the insides of a galleon, musty belfry, old wooden pews and exquisite stained-glass windows.

Girls and boys, their ties askew, step out of the classrooms at the century-old Central Hall and the rotund D.J.M. Wylde block for recess. It seems there is no game that the students don't play or cultural pursuit they do not follow. St. George's defies time by soaking in its 19th-Century aura, yet fitting neatly into the complicated world of the 21st Century. It's passion for hockey

bridges the years. The smell of cut grass and old willow has hung in the summer air since the school went on to win many laurels in the game.

“Part of the tercentenary celebrations will include matches between old boys and students, a carnival and a Christmas dance,” says G.K. Francis, school secretary and correspondent. “The Georgian reunion scheduled for April 23 (Feast of St. George), 2015, will inaugurate a 10-day programme that will not only bring old students back to the campus but also address issues such as Anglo-Indian education in the State and the future of the school. We are also working on building an auditorium.”

As I leave the school’s seemingly endless fields and enter the busy road, James Stewart, the watchman, clangs the gates shut. It is as if I have turned the page where independent India meets the Empire.