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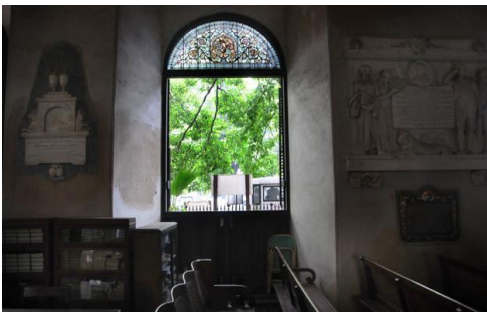
## The bells of St. Mary's



Special arrangement



Special arrangement



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## **As the oldest Anglican church east of the Suez turns 334, here is why it still an enduring part of the city's history**

The car tailgates a line of military trucks squeezing past the thick stone walls of Fort St. George. I hurry down the hedgerow that separates the busy corridors of the Tamil Nadu Assembly from the quiet Ionic columns of what is considered the oldest British building in India. The closing strains of the pipe organ signal the end of the morning service, a tradition at CSI St. Mary's Church for over three centuries now.

From its towering masonry to the secluded beauty of its gardens, CSI St. Mary's, built in 1680, was the historic scene of baptisms and weddings and also the final resting place of those who unfurled the Union Jack across Asia.

"St. Mary's, now part of the Church of South India's Madras diocese, is a living monument. It continues to serve people as it has for 300 years," says Reverend Krubha Lily Elizabeth, the 112th presbyter in a long line of men and women who have guided their flock at this church.

While the Anniversary Day service just went by, the bells of St. Mary's will now ring to celebrate Armistice Day, to honour the veterans of the two World Wars and other wars fought by India. Held every year on the second Sunday of November (November 9 this year), it still draws an enthusiastic but rapidly diminishing group of men and women from abroad who served in Madras, families of those with a city connect and police and military personnel stationed here.

Robed in a white cassock, Rev. Krubha leads me to the beautiful wrought-iron gates surmounted by a lamp, flanked by a lancet-shaped fence. It marks the boundary where time has stood still since the church was consecrated on October 28, 1680, by Rev. Richard Portman.

In the early years of the East India Company, religious services were conducted at the dining hall of the Factory House. Then Streynsham Master, Agent of Madras, initiated the construction of the church. The foundation stone was laid on March 25, 1678, the feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, giving the church its name. Master Gunner Edward Foule and Chief Gunner

William Dixon are said to have designed it. The consecration was marked by the firing of the cannon by the fort's garrison.

Massive studded wooden doors, hinged to smooth walls plastered with lime mortar and egg white, open to a central nave fringed by two aisles. At one end of the nave stands the altar cordoned off by communion rails originally gifted by the Princess of Tanjore in 1877. The choir stalls, the Bishop's chair and a lectern given by Lady Hobart are finely carved. Above them hangs a painting of the Last Supper, inspired by Raphael's Vatican masterpiece. Commissioned by the Nawab of Arcot it was brought from Pondicherry by the British as part of war booty in 1761 and installed in 1902 by Rev. C.H. Malden.

At the other end is a gallery encircled by richly carved Burma teak pillars. Originally built to house the pipe organ, it later seated the Governor and his Council. Above it rise the vaulted bomb-proof roof, bell tower and the spire. The sound of the organ (1894), the church's fifth, still fills the air as organist John Collison plays.

Beneath the rounded stained glass windows, an extraordinary array of treasures and memorials jockeys for space. The granite baptismal font is where Job Charnock's (founder of Calcutta) three daughters were baptised. It also has the marriage records of Governor Elihu Yale, later benefactor of Yale University (the first marriage registered here) and Major-General Robert Clive. The visitors' book, dating back to 1903, bears the signatures of George V, Queen Elizabeth II and Princes Charles and Andrew.

But it is the numerous worn-out flagstones, marble and brass plaques that line the walls that are reminders of triumphs and disasters in places as far off as Mallegaon and Pegu, Cape of Good Hope and Cawnpore — the price of Empire. And so, pastors and Governors, sailors and soldiers, administrators and artists now rest in the same place.

Prof. Jhansi Singh, who is researching on these memorial tablets, says, "They are unusual in that they have Indian elements. While the words tell the story, the carved faces and symbols fix the context."

Verger Immanuel leads me to the mango tree where lie 104 tombstones some as old as Elizabeth Baker's (1652). Governors Sir Thomas Munro and Lord Hobart lie interred in the church. During the Anglo-French and Mysore Wars, the church was used as an armoury and the tombstones as mounting platforms for the guns and it was only after 1807 that the dead did rest in peace here.

CSI St. Mary's was also instrumental in the founding of several institutions that were to define Madras — St. George's School in 1715 (its boarders still form the church's choir) and the General Hospital, among them. While it continues to draw members from even Perambur and Tambaram, it also brings in groups such as the Tamil Nadu Secretariat Christian Fellowship and the curious visitor in search of ancestral records.

The church has daily and Sunday communion services, and also teaches underprivileged women tailoring, craft making and weaving through its branch Christ Church at Annai Sathya Nagar.

When it's time to leave I head for the sun-dappled garden laid out by Rev. Peter Miller in 1986. A lone hawk soars past the spire that lances a brilliant blue sky. The hands of the tower clock are motionless.

At CSI St. Mary's, time has always stood still.