



The Basilica of Bom Jesus in Old Goa is important not only because it houses the relics of St Francis Xavier, but also because it is a critical part of Goa's architectural history. Apart from being a religious building, constructed between 1587-97, the Basilica represents the flowering of Renaissance style architecture in Goa.

A generation of Goans has grown accustomed to seeing the Basilica's exposed laterite walls, but this is not the way the building was designed, nor indeed the way it looked until about 60 years ago. In his research paper, "On the Trail of Baltazar Castro, a Portuguese Restorer in India" (Proceedings of the EAHN 2015: Entangled Histories, Multiple Geographies, Belgrade), architect-scholar Joaquim R. Santos reveals that it was discredited restorer Castro who, in the 1950s, brought about the dramatic transformation of the external appearance of the Basilica, by having the plaster removed and leaving the underlying laterite stone exposed. Santos claims that such de-plastering was a part of President Antonio Salazar's nationalistic ideology, where monuments were falsely 'restored' to look ancient, or rather medievalised, to proclaim the antiquity of the Portuguese empire. Santos also adds that many such ideologically motivated restorations were initially undertaken in Salazar-ruled Portugal during the 1940s. Apart from the de-plastering of the Basilica, Castro also affected the removal of its pyramidal sloping roof which was over the bell tower. Today, these changes still haunt the Basilica. Replying to the recent discussion in the media on plastering the church, the rector of the Basilica, Fr. Savio Baretto admits that "[t]he bell tower is a real problem during the monsoon. Maximum leakage takes place there" (*The Goan Everyday*, 10 Feb. 2016).

But despite the deterioration, Fr. Baretto and many others seem to be against the idea of re-plastering the Church. The Rector echoes a romantic appeal that "[m]ost of the Goans have been born to the sight of a red bricked [laterite] Church. Having it plastered will hurt the sentiments of the people of Goa more than anything. I agree with the fact [that] the church is deteriorating, but there must be more modern ways of preserving and improving the structure". The fact is that there is no better way to preserve the church other than plastering it. History also suggests that such sentiments are misplaced, because the Basilica was always meant to be plastered since the time it was built in the late sixteenth century. If the public affection in Goa for the Basilica did not dim, despite the removal of its plaster, why would it

happen now when the result would be the protection of the Basilica?



To Plaster or Not

In his book *Whitewash, Redstone: A History of Church Architecture in Goa* (2011), architectural historian Paulo Varela Gomes claims that the Bom Jesus is a “unique façade in the history of Christian architecture” (p.68). A closer observation of the façade will reveal that it consists of two kinds of stonework – the hard and intricately decorated Bassein basalt, brought all the way from the Bombay region, and the porous local laterite stone. Of these, it is the hard stone which is meant to be exposed and un-plastered. The story of the exposed stone in the Basilica’s design is more interesting than it appears. The design of the church, the construction of which began in 1587, was a modest affair, writes Gomes, and that around 1596 the complex (*Casa Professa*) was practically finished, with only its façade yet to be built. Gomes argues that there was a decisive shift from modesty to monumentality when the Jesuits decided, at the last moment, to have the Basilica’s façade built of *pedra do norte* (northern stone), that is Bassein basalt. This stonework is indeed exquisite and truly marks the uniqueness of the Basilica. Discussing the lasting contribution of the Bom Jesus façade, Gomes declares that “it could have been the building that allowed Indian artisans to domesticate European architectural and ornamental vocabulary, to make it their own” (p.70). It is clear that it was the Bassein stone with its ornamentation which was to be seen in relief against the plastered and the whitewashed walls of the rest of the Basilica.

The Basilica was already renowned for its aesthetics of exposed hard stone and whitewashed walls before Castro’s intervention. He seems to have followed the politically motivated aesthetics used in Portugal to justify de-plastering. But, monuments which were de-plastered in Portugal were made of hard granite, which can withstand the vagaries of nature; the same is not true of Goan laterite. A porous stone, laterite absorbs water by capillary action which leads to the soaking of the entire wall. The damage is therefore not restricted to the exterior surfaces alone.

The fact that the exposed laterite walls of the Basilica have miraculously withstood the onslaught of the Goan monsoons since the 1950s should not make us complacent. The same fate, Santos claims, was not accorded to the Arch of the Viceroys in old Goa. It was also de-plastered by Castro, and soon afterwards crumbled during a heavy monsoon storm. The arch which is visible today is the reconstructed version. The clerical authorities in the Archdiocese have to decide, therefore, if the current aesthetics of the Basilica are more

important than the monument itself.



To Plaster or Not

(First published in *The Goan Everyday*, dt: February 29, 2016)



Share this...



Facebook



Whatsapp



Print



Email



Twitter



Reddit