

THE TALE OF CHIMBEL'S NOSSA SENHORA DO CARMO... AND WHY WE SHOULD CARE

After much persuasion by locals and activists alike, the TCP department finally initiated the process of giving the ruins of the Convent and Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Nossa Senhora do Carmo) in Chimbel the heritage tag

ALIYA ABREU

PANAJI

Last week, the Town and Country Planning (TCP) Department initiated the process of giving the Ruins of the Convent and Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Nossa Senhora do Carmo) in Chimbel a "heritage" tag.

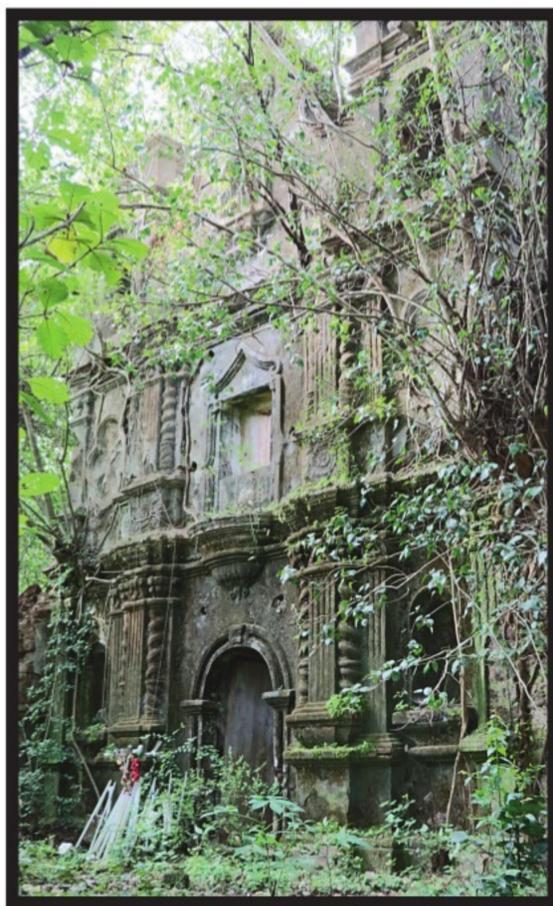
The decision was taken at a board meeting of the conservation committee, TCP Minister Vijai Sardesai said.

The decision led to rejoicing

across many sections of the community from the residents of Chimbel to historians, architects, and a certain section of the Church, including but not restricted to the Carmelite fathers!

But what's in it for the average Goan? And why should a Goan who has no connection with the place join in the rejoicing?

Says Fernando Velho from Panjim, one of the architects who initially started documenting the ruins in 2017, "In an era of tremendous development, our heritage could slowly be lost if we as Goans are not keen to preserve it."



Goa's first mental healthcare institute

Somewhere in the 1930s, the Portuguese government decided to set up a mental health institute at Nossa Senhora do Carmo.

"Prior to this, patients who suffered from mental health illnesses were either sent to jail, or for treatment to British India, which was very expensive," says Gracias.

It was the same social brotherhood, the Santa Casa da Misericordia that was given charge of managing the hospital, says the historian. The hospital was called the "Asilo dos alienados."

In 1947, when the institute of public assistance, or the "provedoria" was formed in Goa, the provedoria took over the premises and the running of the mental healthcare institute at Nossa Sen-

hora do Carmo. Till date, it is the provedoria who has ownership of the land on which stand the ruins, informs Velho.

Meanwhile, from 1947 to 1982, only one wing of the structure was being inhabited and used for the mental healthcare institute, while, by the 1950s, the other part started collapsing, says Velho, who, along with architect Dr Sidh Losa Mendiratta, prepared an academic report (funded by the Fundacao Oriente) on Nossa Senhora do Carmo in 2017.

In 1994, the Goa government demolished the two wings of the structure and kept only the chapel standing, says Velho. But little by little, the chapel too started crumbling, eventually becoming the ruins that stand in Chimbel today.

The Tertiary Carmelites

In conversation with "The Goan", Fernando Velho outlines the history of what are now the ruins of Nossa Senhora do Carmo.

The church was built over 250 years ago, and was home to the 'Tertiary Carmelites', a 100% Goan religious order.

Prior to this order, high positions in the church were occupied first by the Portuguese, and then by Goan "Brahmin" priests, with those of "non-Brahmin" lineage being sidelined.

"Nossa Senhora do Carmo" became the first exception to the rule, where Goan Catholic priests of other lineages could find acceptance, and have a sense of community.

Historian Prajal Sakhardande reiterates the importance of the once-standing church saying, "It was the first church built by Goans, which housed the first Goan order of priests..." ...with the blessings, of course, of the Portuguese rulers of the time.

The tertiary Carmelites inhabited the church for a good 88 years, before being moved out of there in 1835, when the Portuguese rulers sent them to Pilar and other places, and confiscated their land.

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A refuge for children and 'fallen women'

Moving to the next chapter of history... In 1835, a social brotherhood of lay Catholic people called the Santa Casa da Misericordia was given charge of the premises.

Nossa Senhora do Carmo now had two separate retreats, so to speak. The left wing, called the "Recolhimento de Nossa Senhora da Serra" housed "white girls of old Christian stock" says historian Fatima Gracias.

The right wing, called the "Recolhimento de Maria Madalena" also known as "Casa das Penitentes, Arrependidas e Convertidas" was an "institution for women of doubtful character who had repented," says Gracias.

At this time, Nossa Senhora do Carmo was also visited by British explorer Richard Burton who documents the two separate wings and the groups of women they housed in his book "Goa and the Blue Mountains", although his

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version differs slightly.

In 1924, those who inhabited the left wing were shifted from Chimbel to Palacio de Ataide, Altinho, while the "Recolhimento de Maria Madalena" from the right wing was moved in the third decade of the 20th century to Altinho in a building next to Recolhimento de Serra, she says.

The Serra building is today a home for aged women.

THE LONG JOURNEY TOWARDS ACHIEVING HERITAGE STATUS

The movement which eventually led to Nossa Senhora do Carmo being discussed by the TCP Department last week, didn't actually start as a movement.

When architects Fernando Velho and Dr Sidh Losa Mendiratta decided to document the history of Nossa Senhora do Carmo, they did so because the ruins were on the verge of completely disappearing.

"So we decided to at least document the structure and its history in text," says Velho.

Meanwhile, Velho, who is a lecturer at the Goa College of Architecture, also started making presentations about Nossa Senhora do Carmo at different places to different audiences. But he received no response from important stakeholders like the government or the Church.

Further, the "List of Buildings and Sites of Historic and Aesthetic Importance in the state of Goa" had last been updated only in the year 1984, so the architects saw no way as to how to persuade the government to add Nossa Senhora do Carmo to the list.

Velho also gave several lectures at the Charles Correa Foundation

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in Fontainhas, where architect Tahir Noronha, researcher at the Foundation was keen to help the ruins get the "heritage" tag.

Then, three things happened that gave a different turn to the tale.

At one of the presentations made by Velho, Fr Eusico Pereira, who also gave the St Estevam community farming project its push, heard the presentation. Fr Pereira was really taken up with the presentation, being from Chimbel himself.

This gave birth to the Mount Carmel Restoration Forum which then started writing letters to the TCP Department asking that the ruins be protected.

The residents also managed to bring on board the Discalced Carmelites (the Carmelite Monas-

try Aquem fathers), with Fr (Dr) Archibald Gonsalves also writing to the TCP Department.

One of the other things that happened, is that Velho met another young architect Lester Silveira who was interested in conservation, and stumbled upon the ruins in August 2018.

Silveira suggested that they put a pin of the site on Google Maps, as well as upload pictures to Google.

On Google Maps, Silveira hoped that more awareness would be created on the ruins and the history of Nossa Senhora do Carmo.

"The idea was to get as many reviews as possible so that everyone who viewed it in the future would know the site was important," said Silveira.

However, when none of this seemed to move the TCP department, Edgar Ribeiro, a former chief town planner at Delhi, put in a good word with Vijai Sardesai himself.

"The fight for the residents has just started," says Velho, adding that it is now up to them on how to take the plan forward.

Velho also hopes that now with the ruins set to join the "List of Buildings and Sites of Historic and Aesthetic Importance in the state of Goa", the perception of the village will change.



Residents and activists of Chimbel



Orphans at the Serra Chimbel, 1914



Church and convent of N. S. Do Carmo, 1900.