



The history of Sophia College in Cumballa Hill dates back to the early 1800s. The land over which the institution was built is accented with stories of several acquisitions and ownerships, including those by a Parsi gentry family, two Maharajas, and a barrister. The Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus acquired the land in 1940 and established an educational institution for women, making it a space that championed ambition and empowerment.

The campus and its surrounding area were originally a significant part of the land owned by the former British East India Company. This expanse was designated later as 'inam' land, and a segment of the property was awarded to the Parsi family of Ashburner in the early nineteenth century. The residence on this land was named Somerset House, a homage to Sir Henry Somerset, one of the Commanders-in-chief of the forces of the Bombay Presidency, who resided here during the tenure of the Ashburners.



The structure then was only what is today the Chapel, 'den' and Lodge with a few rooms on the first floor. Badruddin Tyabji, the third President of the Indian National Congress, was the next owner of this majestic bungalow in 1882, where he built the 'Somerset Annexe' which is now the considerable part of the Science building (Down the Corridors of Wisdom 1990, 1).

In 1917, Hormusji Noshervanjee Vakeel purchased and developed the property further by extending it, building the East-West wing and other additions. In 1923, the Maharaja of Indore briefly inhabited this land before the ownership passed on to the Maharaja of Bhavnagar in 1937 (Gupta 2016). It was from him, in 1940, that the nuns of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus purchased the property to start a women's college in the city. Mother Andersson was the first principal of the institution.

The college initiated a course, Home and Social Culture, in 1940. The faculty of Arts was established in 1941. A temporary affiliation was granted to the college by the University of Bombay for the first year. In 1942, the affiliation for Bachelor of Arts teaching and learning was granted, followed by permanent affiliation in 1950. The college presently offers various other taught programmes and is affiliated to the University of Mumbai.

A balustrade encircled the central lawn, where once stood four Greek statues. The spiral marble staircase leads to the office of the Principal on the first floor and provides access to the main building. It also has authentic Burma teak bannisters that have stood the test of time, dating back to when the college was established (Down the Corridors of Wisdom 2017, 16).



With its blend of neo-classical architectural styles, elements and geometric patterns, the building is a testament of various trends that influenced architecture over time, thus serving as an example of change and development. “It is one of the most beautiful college buildings in Bombay and needs to be appreciated for that, apart from the fact that it is a building with such a long history from Henry Somerset’s time”, says Dr. Rashna Poncha, Vice Principal (Arts) of Sophia College. “That is the reason we are very proud of this place; we are very proud of how we look after it, and the sisters of the Sacred Heart who have put so much into this space”, Dr. Poncha adds.

The college has developed over the years, with advancements in infrastructure to meet the present needs. However, the institution is still rooted to its original purpose. “We have become more digital, moved on with the times, but our ideology is still the same, our vision and mission has not changed, and the spirit of Sophia has still remained to give the best possible chances and opportunities to young women”, Dr. Poncha says, reminiscing her days as a student and her journey as a faculty member.

Ms. Swarupa Kamat, alumna, current Head of the History Department and Associate Professor, says, “I see Sophia College as a place which provides women a time to mature between adolescence and adulthood, to grow, to learn, and also to become confident people ,who have a sense of purpose and a sense of worth”. The college has been instrumental in giving women a second lease of life and a way to express themselves. “Being an only girls’ space”, says Dr. Poncha, “a lot of students who have not been allowed to study otherwise, who would not have been enrolled in co-ed institutions, can come here and study”. The college, according to Ms. Kamat, “brings together people of India into a single classroom and it initiates a friendship that very often lasts a lifetime; it really brings about unity in diversity”.

Ms. Kamat strongly urges students to understand the college’s heritage, the love inherent in its establishment and appreciate their time on campus. “There is room for preservation and conservation, and there is a possibility of re-looking at spaces, but we need to protect our heritage.”

Today, standing by the motto ‘Urdhva Mula’ which translates to ‘Roots Upwards’ in English (Down the Corridors of Wisdom 2017, 45), Sophia College continues to fulfil its purpose and aspires for its students to gain valuable insights, not only from their academic pursuits, but also from the diverse range of experiences they have during their time in Sophia College.

References:

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