



Revivalist Style Churches of 19th Century in Ambala Cantonment: An Insight to Holy Redeemer Church Ambala Cantonment

Harveen Bhandari

Chitkara School of Planning and Architecture, Chitkara University-Punjab, India

Email: harveen.bhandari@chitkara.edu.in

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ABSTRACT

The British Raj in India led to different types of developments in various parts of the country owing to their physical, social and cultural needs. The Cantonments were one such significant development under British rule in 19th century. Out of the different typology of buildings made by the British settlers in cantonments, the most popular and most ornate structures are the Churches found across the country. In particular the churches built in the 19th century exhibit more or less similar architectural character and style as the whole world was experiencing the Revivalist Gothic style. The paper looks into the construction of such Revivalist Gothic churches in the newly formed Cantonment at Ambala during the same time period and analyses the architecture and construction of one of the oldest church of the cantonment. The paper brings to light the first Catholic Church in Ambala Cantonment, Ambala, India that is 100 years old and has survived the test of time and continues to be in use. It is an exemplary built heritage reminiscent of the British era that needs to be adaptively reused seeing it as an important typology of building exhibiting the Revivalist style in India. The present research was done as part of a project undertaken in Masters of Architecture under the able guidance of Prof Kiran Joshi.

1. The Origin of Churches in India

Religion and its practice play a dominant role in the life of all Indians besides caste, creed discriminations. The existence of religion continues to govern the routine activities of all Indians as there is no line of separation between secular and sacred life. Thomas (1974) in his book has stated that after Hinduism, Christianity occupies the third position in the list of largely followed religions in India. Christianity has influenced various elements of Indian society like social, political, and economic since its arrival in the first Century CE. The largest population of Christians was recorded in Kerala, which is considered as the birth place of this community. Different scholars have stated different theories about Christianity and its evangelisation in India. Early Indian churches did not maintain any proper records so nothing can be supported by documents or facts and probably is a reason of difference of opinion amongst various historians. Kerala's geographic location on the coast facilitated international trade and spread of Christianity in the country. The growth in number of Christian merchants coming to India further led to the spread of Christian communities in India. These Christian merchants were given a higher status in the Indian society, enjoyed special

privileges, were considered equal in stature to Hindu priests and could also purify objects touched by lower-caste people. India, during those times, had a rigid caste system and these benefits enjoyed by Christians persuaded lower caste Indians to convert to Christianity thereby increasing their numbers in the country. The rising Christian numbers in India, with more and more followers led to building of churches in India. Beginning with the Roman Catholic Churches built by the Portuguese, Indian churches witnessed diverse rules, regulations and styles. After Independence in 1947 the secular constitution of India gave Christian Churches much more freedom for its development. But the style and size of churches built under the British rule is noteworthy.

1.1 Influences on the Church Architecture of India

The Church architecture took birth in Kerala in pre-European periods as a result of trade connections with many countries. These connections allowed for movement of ideas, cross cultural interactions and spread of architecture styles and construction techniques. The trade route not only opened Indian land to traders like Portuguese, Dutch, and later the French, followed by Europeans but played a



Figure 1. St. Paul's Cathedral, Kolkata (Source: en.wikipedia.org)



Figure 2. St Stephens Church, Delhi (Source: en.wikipedia.org).



Figure 3. St. Thomas Cathedral Basilica, Chennai.
(Source: en.wikipedia.org)

significant role in influencing the development of church architecture in Kerala. In the beginning churches were confined to the Malabar coast and these churches had some significant elements in its front which were typical of churches in Malabar like a granite cross placed in the courtyard, a flag-staff in teak wood and a rock lampstand. The grand and highly ornamented churches were introduced to the country by the Portuguese in the 16th century. They introduced the Roman Portuguese style, which was executed by Kerala's local artists, who built some of the best churches in Kerala. Later with the arrival of Vasco Da Gama, the field of architecture got a major uplift as the Portuguese were great builders. St. Francis Church, Kochi also the burial place of Vasco Da Gama was the first church built in India in 1510 AD. Indian Church architecture took a leap under the British rule due to large number of churches being built in different parts of country. The commonly followed Basilican plan was changed to a cross shaped plan. The style that was most adopted was the British style, the Gothic reinterpretations, termed as revival of Gothic or Neo-Gothic architectural style. The Gothic Revival came in like a huge revolution that took birth in England in 19th century but spread to the entire world. The Gothic Revivalist buildings borrowed some broad architectural features from the original medieval Gothic style like its ornamental style, pointed

windows and towers and some construction principles. But otherwise the buildings had a completely modern 19th-century plan with use of contemporary materials and construction techniques. Under the Britishers rule, most of the cathedrals and churches built in India adhere to this style. Some noteworthy buildings like St. Paul's Cathedral, Kolkata (Fig.1) built in 1847, St Stephens Church (Fig.2) of 1862 in Delhi, Santhome Basilica (Fig. 3) rebuilt in Chennai in 1893, are some examples of the Gothic Revival style built in different parts of India by Britishers around the same time frame. Many more churches in Gothic revivalist style were built across the country.

2. The rise of British Cantonments

The beginning of 19th century saw the establishment of Cantonments by Britishers. The term Cantonment is taken from the French word 'canton' which means to cut or separate a part from whole. The cantonments were basically military establishments or temporary encampments located on outskirts of a town to house the military personnel's and its camp followers. The cantonments were built for housing British troops and officer but gradually its population increased as civilians were required for various odd jobs in form of servants, dependents and camp followers. The Cantonments were established along the major routes of the country on prominent locations due to their strategic purpose. The growth in number of Cantonments was the result of expansion of British power and supremacy which was strengthened further with establishing its military base in the prominent cities of India like Calcutta, Varanasi, Patna, Bangalore, etc. A cantonment included all facilities that would be required by European officer and troop for their physical and social needs like bungalows for officers quarters, churches, club houses, library, etc. The cantonments had different types of buildings but the churches were the most prominent buildings owing to their number, size and style. Different types of churches were built like Anglican church, Catholic churches, Syrian churches with private cemeteries to serve different Christian communions. So, the Cantonments became the largest repositories of Christian churches in India.

2.1 Churches in Ambala Cantonment--The British Cantonment

The city of Ambala is a part of the state of Haryana in India and is one of the 16 districts in the state. It is spread into two sub-parts, the Ambala city, and the Ambala Cantonment, which is popularly known as (Ambala Cantt), separated by a distance of 3 kilometres. There are many interesting stories associated with the evolution of this town. As mentioned



Figure 4. St Paul's Church, Ambala Cantonment. (Source: Author)

in Census report, 2011 the name 'Ambala' originated from Goddess Bhawani Amba whose shrine exists in the city while some believe that the city owes its existence to Rajput ruler Amba and was built during the 14th century AD. A common myth states that Ambala was originally called 'Ambwala', the city of mangoes owing to the presence of mango trees in its neighbourhood. The Ambala Cantonment was formed by the British in 1843 to house the British entourage. In 1841-42 the British troops had to abandon its Karnal cantonment owing to spread of malaria epidemic and then they moved to city of Ambala and established the Ambala Cantonment on the outskirts of the city in 1843. The cantonment housed the '2 Corps' which is one of the three Strike Corps of the Indian Army and so has immense strategic importance. The Ambala Cantonment has some of the finest churches built in Gothic Revivalist style by the Britishers during their stay in the cantonment. Churches were the largest buildings built for public use which often included schools and private cemeteries. The oldest church in the Ambala Cantonment is the St Paul's Church, built in 1855. The church was made as a Garrison Church, a church reserved for British military officers and their families, with a seating capacity of 1500 though civilians were allowed to participate in religious activities. This magnificent church suffered major damage in



Figure 5. St. Thomas Orthodox Syrian Church Ambala Cantonment (Source: Author)

the bombing during India Pakistan war in 1965 and after that it was not reconstructed. It is now under the jurisdiction of Archaeological Survey of India. The remnants of this beautiful church (Fig.4) can be seen today. Another grand and beautiful church built in this British Cantonment is the Holy Redeemer Church, the first Catholic Church built in 1848, which was brought down in 1902 and then reconstructed in 1905. Some other Churches were also built by British in this area which include St. Thomas Orthodox Syrian Church (Fig. 5) and Marathoma Syrian Church (Fig. 6) in Ambala Cantt. Both these churches are smaller in size as compared to the previous two and are in a desolate condition. Both these Syrian churches are mainly used only on Sundays for morning prayers and sometimes on Wednesdays too. The St Thomas Church has some gothic look alike features like pointed arches with windows, buttresses but is not at all dominating as usual Gothic cathedrals. This church has low sloping roofs, no pinnacles but only a small bell tower in the centre. The Marathoma Syrian Church was built for a small seating of 75 and is not a grand structure but yet a beautiful brick façade building with inclined walls, semi-circular arches and a bell tower. The Marthoma churches faced a lot of rift due to the reformation

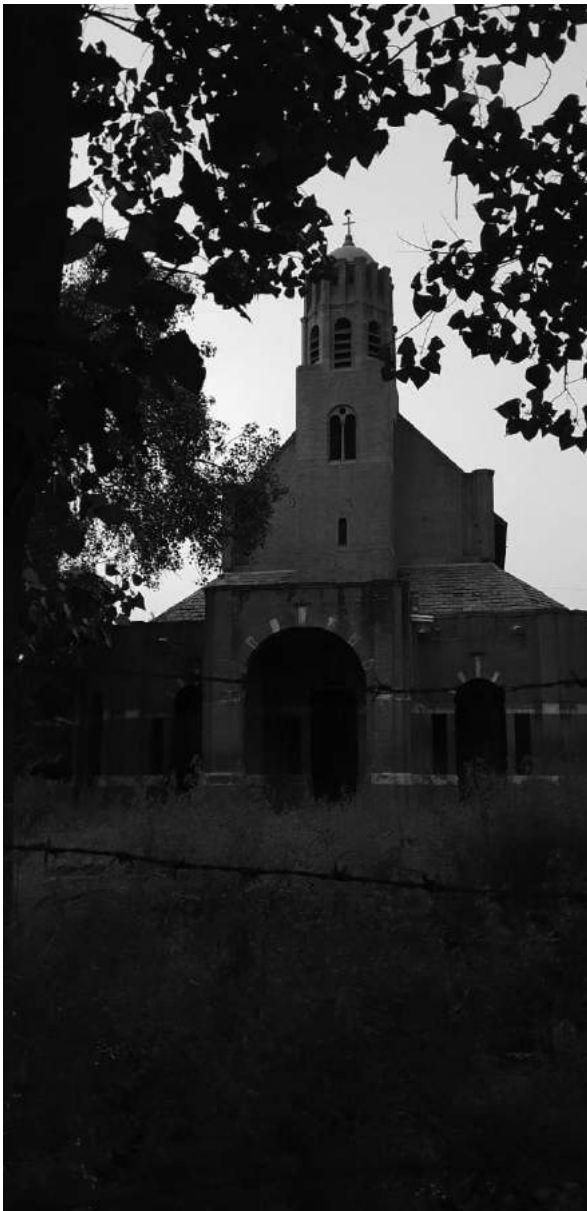


Figure 6. Marathoma Syrian Church Ambala Cantonment (Source: Author)

movement in 19th century which led to development of an independent community and a different church style. The diverse architecture of churches is a reminiscence of the British era and Holy Redeemer Church in Ambala, one of the oldest and largest church, is an example of the 19th century revivalist style churches built during British Raj.

3. History of Holy Redeemer Church, Ambala

An oldest revivalist style church that housed the largest masses of Catholics during the 19th century was built in



Figure 7. The exterior view of Holy Redeemer Church, Ambala Cantonment (Source: Author)

Ambala Cantonment on the outskirts of the city of Ambala. The building has been identified as one of the Heritage buildings by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). The construction of this first Catholic Church dates back to 1848 when the British army settled in Ambala cantonment. The Church fulfilled the religious and social requisites of the catholic community of British army. The Church is said to have been also visited by Lord Ripon, the only Catholic Viceroy of India during his travel from Calcutta to Shimla. The church has successfully completed its 100 years and still stands today as a beautiful architectural edifice. Holy Redeemer Church has been declared as 'Place of Pilgrimage' as per Diocesan Regulations (2017), the official regulations for Christians for the year 2017.

The church was built and served by Father Venance O.F.M. Cap. of Delhi and this housed the first church priest's residence too. In 1885 the number of Catholics raised to 340 Europeans and 20 Indians as stated by Das (2004) in HT Times. On the Northern side of the church building, two additional rooms were built which were reserved for Solider Club, which later collapsed and were rebuilt. Presently these two rooms are in use and serve as a dispensary and a reading

room. In 1890, the residence of the priest got burnt and later a new one was built in the center of the compound. The first resident priest of this Catholic Church was Fr Agnelus and later in 1895 Fr Fidelis was appointed as a Military Chaplain in Ambala who started an elementary Urdu school in the complex. Holy Redeemer Church was reconstructed by Father D'Souza in 1902 as the old church was structurally unsafe and was brought down. The new church could house 800 people and was blessed by Archbishop Gentili in 1905. Since then, till date this is one of the biggest, the most beautiful and most maintained church in this cantonment.

The Church was made under the section 280 of the Cantonment Act 1924, under which Delhi Cantonment agreed to demise the Church premises. These premises were leased to the archbishop of Delhi and Shimla on June 19, 1951 in perpetuity from June 07, 1948 and since then it is designated as a Roman Catholic Church. On 1st April 1956, this Church was handed over to Redemptorist Group, who are maintaining the Church (Fig. 7). It is significant to all Roman Catholics residing in Ambala as they gather here for routine prayers, celebrations and Saturday/Sunday masses and sing prayers and hymns. They participate in annual celebrations and gather here for weddings or deaths etc. The church stands intact for more than 100 years and people have emotional values attached to it as their ancestors used to visit this church. They donate some amount of money from their income for its maintenance.

3.1 The Site and its Surroundings

The Church complex lies in the sectors along the, Staff Road or the Sardar Patel Marg, Ambala Cantt. The church building is placed on a site of 2.32 acres, set amidst large landscaped areas with dense clusters of trees. The plot is termed as Survey no: 270, which is bounded by Lawrence road on the east, Survey no: 273 on the West and a main road on the North and Survey No: 271 on the South as marked in the registry papers of Roman Catholic Church. The site has three entrance gates of which, two lead to the main church building while the third one leads to the charitable school. The site is bounded by Lawrence road, Bank Road and the Mansfield Road on three sides. There are two privately owned bungalows at the rear end of the complex. The Church complex faces the Lawrence road. To its opposite across the road is the Indian Post office complex, which houses the General Post Office staff residences and other office buildings. On the Eastern corner of the site, lies the Convent of Jesus and Mary and across the Mansfield road lies the Gandhi Memorial National College.

The Holy Redeemer Church complex houses three buildings, namely the Church, the Priest's residence and a charitable school. There is a small playground too for the

school kids. A thick line of trees acts as a buffer between the school building and main road. The site conveys a sense of peace and serenity owing to the dense trees and vegetation and also provides a shady and cool environment with sitting spaces. The Church complex houses some significant elements like the statue of Jesus Christ that stands high on the boundary wall facing the Lawrence road. There is a small shed named the "Church Stall" next to the main wider entry gate. On the left of the church building, is a 'peda' that has a small stone structure and a stand beside it where people light up candles and make wishes. To the right of the main church building is a capsule that marks the place where the altar of the original church existed long back. It bears the date of construction of the church.

3.2 Architectural Style and components

The Holy Redeemer Church in Ambala is an architectural splendour showcasing the revivalist gothic style of architecture in India which started gaining popularity in the 19th century. The architectural movement termed as Gothic Revival or Neo Gothic began from England in 1740s and soon started spreading to Europe. It grew widely in the early 19th century, when medieval and classical forms of architecture were revived contrary to the prevalent neoclassical styles. The early 19th century saw rise of Neo-Gothic buildings in Europe and Britain. As a British colony, India was also affected by it and soon this new wave was seen in many buildings in India. This style aimed at reviving the Gothic architectural style and applying it to public buildings and churches. Gothic Revivalist buildings usually show use of ashlar masonry, polychrome brickwork, or wood walls with Gothic motifs such as battlements, decorative brackets, pinnacles, pointed arches, towers, and turrets etc. Holy Redeemer Church, Ambala has many similar functional and architectural components which show a close resemblance to other Neo Gothic structures built in India around the same time period. Some of the common functional components of Holy Redeemer Church include: (Fig. 8).

Plan- The Church has a typical Latin cross plan, an elongated nave, and two aisles with a transverse arm called the transept.

Nave- The central area of the church is bordered by Aisles, intended for seating of parishioners. Aisles- These passageways in the church are separated from the Nave by rows of pillars.

Apse- A domed or vaulted recess or projection in a building, which is generally at the eastern end of a church and contains the altar.

Transept- The north and south projecting arm of church, which intersects at right angles to the nave.



Figure 8. The interior view of Church showing its various functional components and their proportions (Source: Author)

This church has stylistic elements that express its function from its exterior form. It is vertically, articulated by an externally accessible staircase, large open hall, functional areas, or methods of managing the roof load, all are visible from the exterior façade of the building. This legibility of function is a hallmark of the Gothic style. The style is expressive, with lively colored surfaces, lancet windows and use of stained glass some noteworthy features of this building. Pointed arches are widely used on the facades of the building. The use of decorative windows lends symmetry and elegance to facades (Fig. 9). The pointed arches allow for elaborate intersecting shapes in form of dense tracery in the windows that lends structural support to these large windows. The windows have elaborate use of stained glass. Use of structural components like vaults to span large spaces, use of flying buttresses to transfer loads effectively to ground made the walls free and lighter, which could be pierced by huge stained glass windows or rose windows. Rose Window, the unique Gothic circular window, is filled with stained glass and has intricate tracery with all members radiating from the center. This window generally adorned the western fronts of many churches. One of the most distinctive characteristics of church architecture is the large windows covering the entire wall space. Large windows were an outcome of use of ribbed vault which could easily

transfer the weight of superstructure to ground efficiently. The walls acted as non load bearing elements and the simple window openings developed to decorative sculptural Gothic elements. The windows made use of stained glass and added life to the building interiors with colour and light. The Gothic cathedrals and secular buildings expressed their perception of dominance by their extraordinary height. The height in Neo Gothic churches is absolutely proportionate to its width. The proportion of nave height to its width was generally 2:1 or greater and the nave was always taller than the side aisles. The Holy Redeemer Church also follows 2:1 proportion for its nave height to its width. While interiors follow fine proportions, the exteriors are modulated by high rising towers and pointed spires, a typical characteristic of Gothic churches. The vertical emphasis which makes these buildings stand apart from others is strongly enhanced by both the functional as well as the architectural elements of the building. On the exterior, the vertical emphasis is created by various elements like the soaring towers, flying buttresses, columns, the doors and windows and the mouldings around them which accentuate this aspect of verticality (Fig. 10). The roofline, buttresses and other gable ends are crowned by pinnacles. The building interiors also flow unbroken from floor to ceiling and restate this aspect of dominance and verticality.

3.3 Structural Components and Materials Used

A wall is an even and united fence, and can be made of wood, earth, stone, or metal. It is meant to sustain the vertical or lateral pressure, when used externally. Its strength is enhanced by increasing its thickness. In neo-gothic buildings the piers used at fixed intervals resist vertical pressure, and are supported by buttresses to resist lateral pressure. The walls generally are made of three distinct members, namely the foundation, body and cornice. The foundation is a heavy foot, wider than the wall, on which the wall stands, and which protects it from settling into the ground. This foundation is called the Base of the wall. The body of the wall is the principal mass formed of any material like mud, bricks or stones, etc and is called a wall veil. The wall should be preferably of uniform thickness throughout its length. The thickness can vary from half a foot to six feet. In some cases the thickness goes as high as fifty feet, but then it is not uniform. The additional thickness can be seen in some particular parts, in the form of a buttress or a pier, or any other element. However, the walls are generally kept of moderate thickness, and strengthened by piers or buttresses. The part of the wall between the piers is intended to maintain privacy and give protection and resist the climatic forces so practically the walls act as non load bearing members. The weight of the structure is transferred downwards by the arches to the tall stone pillars that run along the nave and



Figure 9. Pointed Gothic windows spread symmetrically on the facades (Source: Author)



Figure 10. Vertical emphasis- A characteristic feature of Gothic buildings (Source: Author)

aisles. The roof is made of wooden trusses that rest on stone brackets. The flying buttresses in the side aisles also carry the load and point it downwards through the piers.

The walls of the church are built in English Bond with bricks of size 9 inches by 4.5 inches by 3 inches. First class bricks have been used throughout. The external walls have exposed brickwork with lime mortar pointing while the inside walls are plastered with lime mortar. The roofs have wooden trusses (Fig. 11) covered with wooden planks in interior and topped with G.I. sheets on exteriors which are held in place with brick parapets at the edges (Fig. 12). The aisles have a false ceiling decorated with Sheesham wood rafters. The windows have 6" wide stone mullions with wooden frames fitted to them. The stone mullions are constructed from carefully shaped and jointed pieces of stone. The windows have wooden frames with textured glass. The mild steel grills are directly inserted to these stone mullions. The windows rest on tapered stone sills. The tapered sills do not let the dirt accumulate over them. The stone mullions and the sills are painted white to differentiate them from the monotonous brick walls. The rose window used in the church is divided into segments by stone mullions and filled with stained glass. The rose windows are provided in the Nave and Transept areas. The doors to the church also are built in Sheesham wood. The



Figure 11. The oofs with wooden trusses and wooden planks (Source: Author)

main entrance door of the church is set amidst intricately carved stone pillars and cornices. The grand 13'-3" high wooden door is made up of wooden planks joined together and fixed to the wooden framework. The door has a unique locking system. The other doors to the church are also made up of Sheesham wood.

The wooden balcony at the mezzanine level in the Nave lends a distinct character to the church interior (Fig. 13). The wooden rafters of the balcony are supported on the wooden beams which further transfer the load to the sleek wooden pillars. The balcony has beautifully carved intricate Sheesham wooden parapets. The building has mostly cement flooring. Marble flooring has been provided only in the Nave area. The raised podium/altar has marble and Jaisalmer stone flooring with stained glass in the apse (Fig. 14). The Narthex/foyer have a combination of marble and mosaic flooring. The church has classic English furniture which includes wooden benches, confession stand, pulpit, Mother Mary's stand and wind organ. They were made up of Sheesham wood and were designed as per the specific requirements at that time. For example, the benches have slots for keeping soldiers' rifles. Though the slots are no more in use, still they are reminiscent of the British era.



Figure 12. The walls with varying widths and GI sheets used to cover the roof trusses (Source: Author)



Figure 13. The wooden balcony at mezzanine level and the unused wind organ (Source: Author)



Figure 14. The Altar with beautiful stained glass and wooden paneling at the bottom (Source: Author)



Figure 15. Christ Church, Kasauli (Source: en.wikipedia.org)



Figure 16. St Andrew's Church, Bangalore (Source: picssr.com/photos)

4. Stylistic Comparisons with Buildings of same Era

Christ Church, Kasauli (Fig.15) is a typical Anglican church built by Britishers in the same era in 1853 in the Kasauli cantonment. The well proportioned gothic arches, stained glass windows set in brick facades double the simplicity of the rustic grey facades and green slanting roofs of this oldest church in Himachal Pradesh, India.

St Andrew's Church, Bangalore, is a Scottish church built in the 1860s and has similarities with the Holy Redeemer Church, Ambala. This Church has beautiful brick facades (Fig. 16), clock tower, pointed Gothic arches resting on piers, stained glass windows and rose window.

Christ Church, Shimla, located on the Shimla's prominent Ridge, is the second oldest Anglican church in North India built in 1857 in neo-Gothic style by Britishers. Highly symmetrical planning with pointed turrets at the corners and soaring clock tower makes the church a landmark on the ridge (Fig. 17).

Holy Trinity Cathedral, Karachi whose bell tower (Fig. 18) functioned as a lighthouse at the Karachi harbour. This first major church in Karachi was built in 1855 and shows typical neo-gothic features, but this church was built in locally available coloured stone.

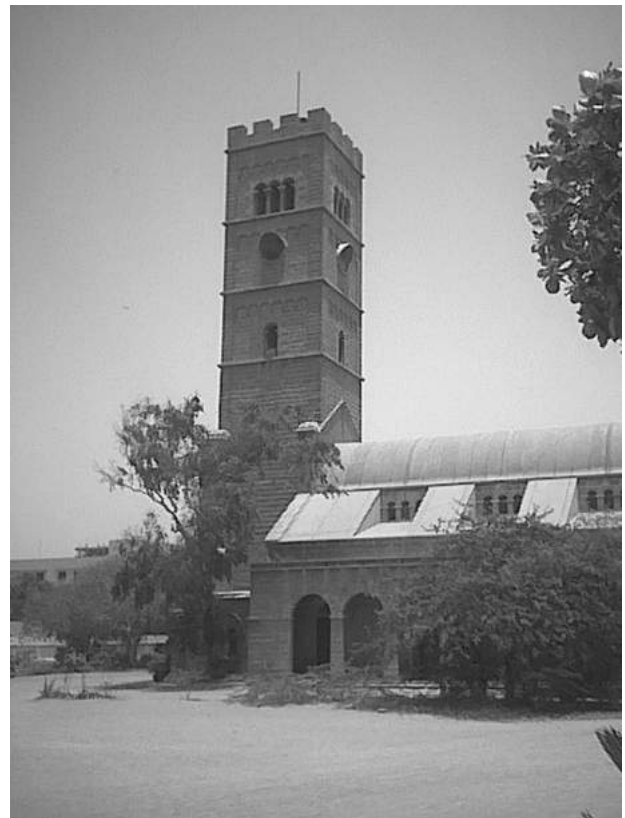


Figure 18. Holy Trinity Cathedral, Karachi
(Source: en.wikipedia.org)



Figure 17. Christ Church, Shimla (Source: en.wikipedia.org)

5 Conclusion

Holy Redeemer Church and other such Churches are examples of neo-gothic style buildings that could establish links to contemporaneous developments in rest of India during the 19th century-the phase of Revivalism that spread to the entire world. This church is one of its kinds Roman Catholic Church in Ambala cantonment and that has managed to survive the vagaries of time. It continues to be in use for various ceremonies, thus is well maintained from time to time. No major irreplaceable changes have been made to the structure of Church, but there are certain changes which have been made to the finishing work. Some cracks can be seen on the top of arched windows due to thermal effects. Algae growth is visible on the walls of the rear side. Termite growth is present on freshly painted walls and there is growth of vegetation on some of the buttresses and effluence is developing on the rear side walls. Cement plaster has been done over the stone pillars which were initially lime plastered. Exterior walls originally had lime mortar pointing but now at some places cement pointing has been done. Electrical conduits which were

added few years ago are all exposed in the main hall. Some cornices around doors and windows have broken and need repair. The stone pillars also have been cement plastered rather than the original lime plaster. This church is overall in a good state and maintained but the other two churches like St. Thomas Orthodox Syrian Church and Marthoma Syrian Church are in a bad state. They are hardly used and that too for a very few hours in a week. These buildings need to be suitably used and taken care of as they are exemplary of a regional hybrid architectural style, including construction and ornamentation systems, of the 18th-19th century that are now forgotten. Churches also signify an important typology of public buildings built by Britishers in India. Also, the loss of St Pauls Cathedral makes it even more necessary to save the other built heritage from deterioration or becoming extinct in near future.

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