

100 years ago, a Jesuit priest disregarded sceptics and bought 50 acres of "unattractive" land in Madras for ₹60,000. And thus was born one of the most prestigious colleges in south India

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THE LOYOLA STORY

Pics: B A Raju

In the early months of 1924, the expanse between the water tank and railway line in Nungambakkam was dotted with patches of cultivation and brick kiln chambers. This is where Father Bertram and a few others from the Society of Jesus bought 50 acres to set up a Catholic College in the capital of Madras Presidency at slightly under ₹60,000.

Thus was born Loyola College with Father Bertram at its helm as founder-principal. A century later, it has grown to be among the most prestigious in south India.

On March 10, 1924, Governor of Madras Lord Willingdon and Lady Willingdon laid the foundation for the main building. A year later, Loyola began functioning with 75 students in three BA courses (history, economics, and mathematics).

The annual report of 1924-25 says some people advised Father Bertram against buying land beyond Nungambakkam tank as it was outside the corporation boundary (which roughly followed the tank bund) and they feared it would be difficult to get electricity and water connection. The team tried to buy land south of Sterling Road, but fearing competition and a price increase, returned to the first choice. At the time, the now-crowded Sterling Road was virtually deserted, with just five bungalows dotting it.

The Loyola site, though desolate and unattractive, was not without beauty: "At sunset, on a November evening, with the tank filled to the top of the embankment and submerging the adjoining fields, it glittered in the fading light while heavy, dark clouds, fringed with crimson and gold hanging over the western horizon were mirrored in the still waters; and to the south arose the confused mass in which eye could scarcely distinguish the sombre foliage of palm and casuarina trees from their image in the lake, the lengthening shadows of approaching night blurring colours and forms," says the 1924-25 annual report of the college.

describing the land around the college.

Father Bertram's dream of establishing a Jesuit college in Madras with the primary objective of providing university education in a Christian atmosphere for deserving students irrespective of creed was not without challenges.

When he went abroad after the end of World War I to collect funds for the proposed institution, the response was poor due to the economic depression. Pope Benedict XV contributed 100,000 lire (₹27,000 at the



KNIGHT SAINT

Loyola was the family name of St Ignatius, a Spanish knight and founder of the Society of Jesus

CORNERSTONE COINS

Inside the foundation stone is a sealed packet containing one eight-anna coin and one two-anna coin of 1924 obtained from the Bombay Mint

STEP BY STEP, BRICK BY BRICK

Loyola College was founded by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Father Bertram, founder-principal of Loyola and former principal of St Joseph's College in Trichy, took a few staff with him to launch the college in Madras

The team located the 50-acre land and bought it for ₹60,000

March 10, 1924

Governor of Madras Lord Willingdon laid the foundation for the main building



time). He then borrowed ₹2 lakh from St Joseph's College, where he had worked as principal, to get things started.

By Dec 1924, the first floor of the college building was built. The columns of the upper verandah could be seen standing out against the sky and every day a stream of visitors would come by to see the building. It was ready at the beginning of the 1926-27 academic year.

The building is in the shape of the capital letter 'T' in which the central part is made up of large rooms with two wings comprising smaller rooms. The three-storey structure had 17 rooms on the ground floor including for the principal and college office. The second floor had nine rooms with a Quinn Hall for examinations and meetings.

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS

The steel beams of the main building had 'Fleet England' inscribed on them, which shows they were made in the UK and shipped to India," says professor K S Antonysamy of Loyola College. "The classrooms are spacious with good ventilation and acoustics. The iconic main building was recently renovated."

Loyola now offers 22 UG courses and 21 PG courses. BCom and BSc Visual Communication are two most sought-after. The institution which



PAST AND PRESENT: (Clockwise from top) Loyola College campus today; Lord and Lady Willingdon laid the foundation; the building in 1925; Father Bertram at the opening; the original founding plaque displayed

started as a men's college, now admits women in its postgraduate courses.

Loyola rose to prominence in the next few decades with the enrolment rising steadily. The NIRF ranked it the second-best college in the country in 2017.

The college also boasts of illustrious alumni including in sports (chess grandmaster Viswanathan Anand), cinema (actors Vijay and Suriya) and politics (DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran).

Loyola College is planning a grand 100th year celebration with a centenary building and raising a ₹100crore scholarship fund. "The centenary building at ₹40crore will resemble the iconic main building and will house the school of liberal arts," says Father A Louis Arockiar-

aj SJ, principal. There will also be a hall of fame.

The college will hold an international alumni day event in Dubai in Aug. This year, the annual Bertram tournament will be conducted at the national level for tennis, hockey, kabaddi, volleyball, and cricket.

"We are planning to raise about ₹100 crore as a corpus fund to support 1,500 students annually. We hope to achieve at least 50% of the target during the centenary year. The interest will be used to provide scholarships," says George B Cherian, joint secretary and convener of the centenary celebration committee of Loyola Alumni Association.

"The centenary year celebrations will begin on July 31 with a religious function. Students and others will be invited to a second celebration on Aug 1. Celebrations will be on through the year."

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1925 | The College began with 75 students with three BA programmes in economics, mathematics and history

1926 | The physics and chemistry departments established

1927 | Enrolment of students went up to 503; BA history closed; revived in 1957

1930 | Construction of college church begins

1942 | Student strength increased to 1,387

1945 | BCom course started

1978 | Loyola College, though affiliated to University of Madras, became autonomous

1979 | Loyola Institute of Business Administration established

1989 | BSc Visual communication launched

2017 | NIRF awarded All India second rank to Loyola

2021 | MSc counselling psychology and MA international relations courses launched