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The Bishop & the Builder

Corporations have their own meandering ways, realtors abide by their own rules and, of course, politicians-turned-mayors play their own games. But it doesn't matter who owns the property at No. 5 Russell Street, it is the city's heritage and must stay that way, says ADITI ROY GHATAK

'IT has at present a very melancholy aspect, and in some degree reminded me of Moreton Corbet having like that the remains of Grecian pillars and ornaments with high carved pediment...' Bishop Reginald Heber (1783-1826), English clergyman, writer of hymns and exceptional commentator on the socio-cultural history of India and the aesthetics of Indian architecture, as it was then evolving with Western influences, was nostalgic about Ghiretty House on the Hooghly, near Chandannagar. The man who lived in "eternity" and looked forth "into time and its space", may well have been talking of his own home, as it stands today at No 5, Russell Street (now 5A, Anandalal Poddar Street). Once the celebrated Episcopal Palace, it was vandalised by realtors in the silence of the night on 25 August 2001.

Its gracefully arched gateway lay in a pile of rubble even as Zach Pattanaik, a hapless resident, watched some 50 thugs break down the heritage gate under the direct supervision of the realtor and his bespectacled assistant. The fluted pillars were flattened and the semi-circular arch with its flat top was demolished. The keystone bearing the central plaque that read: "This building was the Episcopal Palace from 1826-1849 and was occupied by Bishops Heber, James, Turner and Wilson" disappeared. As did the other two plaques on the springers on both sides. One bore testimony to its importance as "The National Council of YMCA of India, Burma and Ceylon, general office", and the other to those who had paid for it: "This building is donated by YMCA of Australia". Says Peer Mohammad, a tailor who has been living in the building for at least five decades: "They came in a big gang, with huge hammers at around 11.30 in the night. They drew electricity from the pump house and lit up several large halogen lamps. They had huge hammers and some of them attacked the four pillars outside and flattened them. Others climbed on top of the arch and within three hours had left no trace of it. They finished everything by five in the morning and cleared out."

Today's YMCA cannot really be concerned about heritage as it has struck a sale agreement with Om Rajgharia (on which the tenants have obtained a stay order) of the property for a paltry Rs 1.10 crore. The tenants have offered to better the offer and maintain the building without changing anything. The realtor will not relent and has been a nuisance for the past six years, forcing the residents to successfully seek legal intervention.

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The police know the individual who supervised the demolition. In fact, the man has returned the plaques after the media hullabaloo. Several eyewitnesses, including the darwan of the building, have told the police who he is. His nefarious intent has been known to the residents of the YMCA-owned premises at No 5 Russell Street for at least six years. They formed a tenants' association and moved Calcutta High Court as early as in 1995, seeking its protection. Delivering his order on 18 October 1995, Mr Justice Barin Ghosh said: "... It is also the case of the petitioners that anti-social elements have been permitted to loiter around the premises with the object of harassing the tenants... it has been contended that the aforesaid illegal activities have been started in the month of October 1995. Various complaints with the local police station were made but the same were of no avail." Mr Justice Ghosh appointed two special officers, Rup Chand Chakraborty and Chittaranjan Das, and ordered that they "forthwith visit premises No. 5 Russell Street, Calcutta, to inspect the same and in particular having regard to the essential amenities available at the premises in question for the purpose of peaceful enjoyment of the same by the tenants".

Armed with this court order, the tenants possibly became complacent. Matters seemed to be going their way as the Calcutta Municipal Corporation listed both the building and the gateway as premises to be included in the heritage list under section 425B of the CMC Act 1980, in 1997. The building was listed as No. 298 and the gate as No. 307 with the description: "Bishop's former residence gateway". For some curious reason, no such description accompanied serial No. 298, though it was the house where the early bishops lived, including Heber, in the year of his death. That the Corporation did not find time/ resources to write to the individual owners of the premises stating that their premises were to be listed as heritage buildings comes as no surprise.

Corporations have their own meandering ways and the Kolkatan's sense of outrage has long been bludgeoned into accepting these. Realtors abide by their own rules and, of course, politicians-turned-mayors play their own games. Thus it was that mayor Subrata Mukherjee, who heard of the vandals' handiwork the morning after, told the press, "I will take the matter up with the chief minister, Mr Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, so that the culprits are arrested", and then as quickly disassociated himself from statements he'd made in the "heat of the moment" the day after.

Amidst this hullabaloo, only one man was smiling — Om Rajgharia, who had thought several moves ahead, quickly managing to persuade the mayor that he knew nothing of the building's heritage status. All he had in mind was the welfare of the residents and since he felt the gate was crumbling he believed it was fair that he, as the building's "caretaker", should demolish it lest some resident get hurt some day. Why did this abundance of love and affection for the residents have to be demonstrated in the dead of night no one knows. And how was a construction demolished without the Corporation's permission? Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies. After all, the politician and the promoter have spoken! There are two aspects to the drama at Bishop Heber's house: one is the trauma that the residents have experienced. The main security for their home, the front gate, broken in a rude violation of their privacy; and the other involving the continuing pillage of Kolkata's heritage. Darbhanga House was allowed to decay and then brought down to now serve only as the venue for wealthy weddings. Sir Biren's magnificent home is already under demolition and pressure brought to bear on the Corporation to have it declared a heritage building has yielded no result though the proposed plans to start constructing a hotel there seem to have been put on hold. St John's Church is yielding room to the realtor's commercial plans, never mind that the area also houses Job Charnock's tomb. Kolkata is developing.

With the mayor insisting that the promoter fairly drips with the milk of human kindness, the shocked tenants have written to the chief minister for protection. The mayor, they say, believes the "owners appear to be fully entitled to demolish listed heritage structures in the middle of the night

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without the need for any permission from the Calcutta Municipal Corporation”.

According to their written complaint to the chief minister, the owner, YMCA, has entered into a sale agreement with “one Om Rajgharia, who is now calling all the shots. This very same promoter was present on the scene on the night and early morning of the 25th and 26th August, 2001, when he unleashed a group of his hired vandals to demolish the entrance arch and supporting pillars in one swift action”. The residents, who met the chief minister’s secretary, believe the “idea was to obliterate the structure and by association the historical relevance of the building”. They are doubly harried by the fact that while the police commissioner was very sympathetic he was “unable to assure us of a thorough investigation in view of the shifting and now lukewarm attitude of the Corporation to the original FIR”.

As things now stand, the Corporation has filed a FIR. The residents have filed a complaint. The chief minister and the minister for municipal affairs have been given all the facts of the case. The residents have written to chief architect and town planner Saroj Ghosh seeking “restoration of the structure”. And Om Rajgharia is all sugar and honey with the residents. While residents must pursue their own agenda — some may even sell out to the wealthy promoter and support his nefarious plans — the Kolkatan has only one: it doesn’t matter who owns the property at No. 5 Russell Street, it is the city’s heritage and must stay that way. For once the Om Rajgharias of the world must be shown their place. The administration must establish who is in charge. Thanks to the ruckus, the police promptly located the three plaques. The “believer” says it is the spirit of the Bishop that has intervened. If that be so, it would be interesting to witness the spirit of the late bishops taking on the present-day builder.

(The author is a freelance writer.)

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