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A 'shoppers' stop' to Kolkata schooling?

By ADITI ROY GHATAK

In a state where realtors are among the few surviving profitable businessmen, there's little reason for education to take precedence over a real estate project. Even if the project be Shoppers' Stop, the mall credited with reported losses of Rs 23 crore in the last fiscal (a Rs 9-crore loss in 2000), and the school the illustrious Calcutta International School Society, popularly known as the International School.

If a section of the managing committee headed by Trinamul leader and recently elected Rajya Sabha member Dinesh Trivedi has its way, the students will be shunted from their present location in Lee Road to No. 5 Shakespeare Sarani, a building to be vacated by British Council. The school has been functioning from Lee Road for more than three decades. The sudden rush to move has been prompted by the commitment of the realtors, Heligers Development & Construction Company Ltd, to hand over the premises to the shopping mall by Diwali this year. Could there be a better reason?

The only spoke in the wheel is the parents' body that, by virtue of the unique constitution of the school, comprises either one or both parents of every student. It insists the rather expensive shift to the extremely congested Shakespeare Sarani be discussed threadbare, along with the financial implications, which the body has questioned, especially when the "physical infrastructure feasibility report has not been provided". No. 5 Shakespeare Sarani is owned by the family of CPI(M) member of Parliament Somnath Chatterjee. The cost of the displacement is a formidable Rs 3-crore "premium" to the Chatterjee family trust and a monthly rental of Rs 7 lakh for 33 years.

The parents aren't opposed to shifting but want the shift to be in the interests of the students, not of the landlord or the realtor; and if the lease was not going to be renewed, it was decided to find alternative accommodation and continue at the Lee Road premises on a rental basis. The parents also want the proposal to be "vetted by an independent architect to provide comfort to the parents that it is possible to run a school with 700 students... without any inconvenience to the children". Matters have been made worse by the verbal plans discussed by the management committee on ensuring financial viability by working a double shift, doubling school fees, enrolling more students and such moves which have raised parental hackles.

In the continuing fracas between parents and the committee, the chairman (Trivedi) and the vice-chairman (Seema Sandrolini, wife of the current US Consul General) announced their resignation. The principal had resigned even earlier. Armed with legal opinion, the parents' body says that since the secretary of the committee "did not accept the offer of Mr Trivedi to chair the meeting" after he resigned, the position of the chairman has fallen

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vacant and can be filled only at the next annual general meeting. In favour of the shift are, of course, the next door realtors, the Shroffs, who are constructing the building for Shoppers' Stop — if reports are to be believed, the sanctioned plans include part of the school premises — Mr Trivedi, Mrs Sandrolini and principal Nanda Chatterjee. Parents, who speak on condition on anonymity — their “children's future is at stake, after all” — say this section has succumbed to the realtor's pressures and is now pressuring the parents' body to agree to shift from 18 Lee Road so that the realtors can spread themselves over 16 and 18 Lee Road. The teachers are not publicly taking a position but there are reports of a promised “generous increase in salary for their all round efforts”.

The body of parents has requisitioned a general body meeting (slated for the first week of this month) to discuss, among other things, the “proposal to increase the fees” (50 per cent in 2002 and another 40 per cent in 2003, thereby making the fees almost double by the next year) and the collection of nine months' fees in advance (Rs 20,000 to Rs 24,000 per child, approximate average depending on the class) in July 2002. Besides, they allege in a detailed letter circulated to all the members that the cash flow for the British Council project has been overstated by Rs 70 lakh, as has the interest earning. They are also concerned about the plans to “stagger the school timings”. More importantly, they want to “appoint new committee members, including office bearers in place of those who have vacated office/resigned”.

Ever since the Shroffs started pressuring the school to move out — the rent for the school has been deposited with the office of the rent controller — there have been discussions to look for an alternative site. It was at the instance of the parents that the school pursued its search for land with the state government, which has suggested a two-acre plot for the school behind the Siemens building near the Gariahat Bypass Connector.

Curiously, the management committee does not want to consider starting construction there. Engineers and architects among the parent body and managing committee say a new school with playgrounds and auditorium can easily be constructed within 18 to 24 months.

No one wants a confrontation. Parents want the best option for their children. They also ask for a review of the legal measures taken by the school, which appointed a solicitor's firm to handle its case to stall the construction. The court was not told that the sanctioned plans had incorporated sections of the school as a part of the Shroff premises. The parents wonder how effective the representation on behalf of the school was.

The managing committee's position is very clear: the children's security has been threatened by the realtor next door — the construction has affected the nursery class walls.

Therefore, it must shift. The question then is: the school should close down immediately, why wait for disaster to strike? The parents' body points out that the matter has been dealt with by the High Court that has ordered the realtors to leave a safe distance between the building and the school, and the Calcutta Municipal Corporation has inspected the construction and instructed the landlord not to do anything to threaten the school premises. Moreover, a body of structural engineers and architects from among the parents has inspected the wall and says the damage caused “can be repaired” and that future safety will be fully ensured.

Kolkata realtors, are of course, smart operators: they believe one midnight blow to any structure is all they need to evict residents from their homes. Those who know, call it the “No 5 Russel Street” formula. Sometimes, however, the formula does not work.

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