CELEBRATING KOLKATA'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

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"Forgive them, for they knew not what they were doing; But some did, and did not care!" These impassioned words were inscribed on a poster that was mounted and was fixed on the wall over my desk. It inspired me for several years until the compulsions of my job took me away from that house. The poster was printed by the Ananda Bazar group and it depicted an old sepia tint photograph of demolition labourers tearing down the Senate Hall of Calcutta University, in 1960. The workers seemed to hammer away, quite mercilessly, at the intricately carved Grecian pillars but the imposing triangular pediment on top appeared regal and quite unconcerned even as death started at it. Concern for the past glory of this metropolis pervades the city's culture and yet, few shed a tear when a part of this glorious past is ripped apart. Little did Kolkata know then that it was not tearing down a building: it was actually ripping apart a very bone from its own ribs, that protected its pulsating heart. This grand edifice can hardly ever be replicated, but few protested. This sums up the tragedy of the "second city of the Empire" that once housed some of the finest edifices of the colonial period. Having failed to protect many, except the colossal public buildings, which we shall not discuss here, we take refuge in sentimental nostalgia.

It is needless to remind ourselves that Kolkata once famous for its large number of palatial buildings, which earned it the sobriquet: "the City of Palaces". At present, however, except the Marble Palace, Jorasanko Thakurbari and a handful of other such well-maintained ones, the rest are all gone or are in a pitiable state of disrepair. In a manner of speaking, this is poetic justice, as the wealth that flowed into the city from the early part of 19th century and continued unabated for the next one and a half centuries was from unabashed exploitation. Kolkata's colonial age architecture flourished as the indigenous ruling classes, and the British overlords acquired so much of economic surpluses that they could allocate quite a bit of it to building magnificent edifices — to demonstrate, of course, their own glory, pomp and splendour. We are not in the business of being overwhelmed by ostentation, but heritage and aesthetics mandate a certain regard for architectural uniqueness before they disappear and wipe off evidence of how man and nature conversed in different climates and circumstances. The purpose of this piece is to plead for retaining whatever we can because once they go, we shall

lose a valuable heritage of our city — with no hope of recreating extinct cultural species. Let us try to understand the value of Kolkata's built heritage from this analytical point of view, but since the area is unmanageably large, we will restrict the discussion to only two important classes of architecture that Kolkata boasts of. We shall try to locate the distinguishing features or unique characteristics that distinguish these forms of Kolkata's architecture from their cousins elsewhere. These two categories we shall explore are the grand Colonial-era residential mansions of the rich of north Kolkata and the quaint Art Deco buildings of south Kolkata — both of which bear the stamp of Kolkata and the spirit of Bengal.

What we need to focus on while studying Kolkata's architectural heritage are the various improvisations adopted, to combine foreign and local elements and construction norms. Stylistically speaking, the moneyed elite of colonial Kolkata copied several neo-classical and other European architectural features like neo-Renaissance, Romanesque and Palladian and then merged them all with indigenous requirements and features. Thus most such palatial buildings are really difficult to place into standard architectural categories. Not that all of them were, however, either very artistic or architecturally perfect, but then, they did bear the very own expressions of old Kolkata. We can decipher, for instance, a great demand for crowding as much showy stucco ornamentation and Baroque designs on the plaster work of buildings as was possible. Stately classical columns would often be capped with excessively carved capitals, replete with floral and leafy designs. The grand triangular pediments that crowned the rows of columns in front was kept high and imposing, so as to look down, rather imperiously, on people entering the hallowed portals. But one also comes across intervening architectural forms as well, like a decorated balcony in a later Italian style, that appears to jut out of the first floor of the building that rises just behind the tall pillars. Lavish use was also made of Italian marble and Belgian glass.

The very local need for privacy of family members enjoined that Kolkata's *bonedi baris* would have two very different wings, namely, the road-facing main building (*sadar mahal*) that had necessarily to be quite distinct from the female quarters (*andar mahal*), which were hidden from public view. It was, therefore, essential to have a quadrangular courtyard so that the two quarters could be separate, and yet be joined by narrower buildings on two sides of the quadrangle, with covered pathways on each floor that went alongside the living rooms. These running long and open balconies, popularly known as verandahs, connected the four blocks around the rectangular inner courtyard (*dalans*) and they served a very useful purpose. They ensured that light and ventilation were available in all the rooms, unlike the present-day dwellings where

some rooms hardly ever receive the sun's rays or any breeze. We must remember that the climate of Bengal was and is still most unsuited to grandiose European architecture and even to the later cooped-up blocks of west-inspired buildings. Cross ventilation and protection from the elements were two prime necessities, long before the electric fans changed it all from the early decades of the twentieth century. The third major requirement was, of course, sunlight, but in controlled quantities.

It is in this spirit that we need to view old Kolkata's architecture, to locate how local problems and issues were addressed and certain adaptions made. The louvred windows or *kharkharis*, had slanting 'blinds' that were fixed to an upright wooden rod on the window's sash (the little 'door' of a window) and these blinds could be manipulated with the upright rod — to control allow the light from outside to enter and the air or breeze to flow in. This is very Kolkatan, indeed, even though other tropical climes have also adapted it, the scale of its use in Bengal is quite overwhelming. Then, we come across large wooden screens covering the top half or more of the porch, bay or verandah in palatial buildings. These massive wooden boards, with fixed slanting Venetian blinds, were firmly joined to columns, shafts or cast iron pillars and they protected the inmates from the harsh glare or scorching heat of the sun. They also withstood gusty thunderstorms and lashing rains that are so characteristic of Bengal. Without them, the verandahs and the living rooms that were just beyond them would have been flooded with rain water or even filled with dust that come with unruly storms.

We may recall that the doors or windows (if any) of our traditional huts, cottages or even double-storied mud houses in our villages were indeed kept very small, so as to protect residents against the elements. The thick mud walls and high thatched roofs of these indigenous buildings helped control the heat or the cold that prevailed outside. In any case, most men, children and older ladies preferred to sleep in the open courtyard, at least where commoners were concerned. This harmony with nature and adaptability are very integral parts of our heritage, though they hardly exist within the city of Kolkata, where masonry structures dominate. The moot point is that our traditional walls made with porous materials interacted continuously with the weather — cooling the interiors during summer and insulating us from the cold during winter. European plaster and cement, on the other hand, were meant for harsher climes and basically to repel the elements, that included icy cold winds, sleet and snow. Most western houses were sealed in places so as to retain warmth inside them and cut down many heating costs. When these elements were grafted into our buildings without imagination, the rooms in houses could become unimaginably stuffy or hot.

‘Heritage preservation’ does not, therefore, mean just gawking at past splendour, but appreciating the finer architectural elements that mark several aristocratic houses of the 18th and 19th century Kolkata. Many of these features are improvisations of the city and some are quite unlike their variants in other cities. Let us look at the *khilan thakur dalan* or pillared porch that arose from the rectangular courtyard located in the *sadar* mahal part the house. It was (and still is) quite prominent in several houses, like that of, say, of the fabulously rich comprador, Raja Nabakrishna Deb. His *dalan* was meant to house the family deity and also to accommodate the image of Durga during her worship in autumn. As we know, Deb started the ritual of inviting British civil and military officials to impress them with his Durga Puja, but we can be sure that white men came to this ‘heathen celebration’ not only to humour their factotum, but also to witness the Indian dancing girls, who were the star attraction. Wine and meat dishes flowed in abundance, as worship became secondary in Deb’s show of pomp and power. Much of this was against Hindu rituals, but his wealth had secured Deb the position of being the undisputed leader of the upper caste Hindu tradition in Kolkata.

These raised *dalan* platforms, that housed the deities, had thick load-bearing pillars in front of the rooms and were usually just one-storey high. Quite often, rooms that rose above the *thakur dalan* went up to two or three storeys and could be put to good use. Beautiful multi-floriated arches adorned and joined the upper part of these thick columns— serving as open doorways to view the deities. The number of such openings were usually three (*teen khilan dalan*) or five (*panch khilan dalan*). The plasters on the walls of these thick, short pillars were often highly ornamented and the floriated arches that joined them were copied by Kolkata’s aristocracy from late medieval terracotta temples of Bengal. The latter, in turn, had incorporated them, strangely enough, from Islamic architecture. The main raised sacred porch of the *thakur dalan* could have a ‘stage’-like space in front, but we find that a gentle flight of stairs led down to the central courtyard. These wonderful *thakur dalans* are still well preserved in most old houses, as no one would like to upset the family deity. Besides the Sovabajar Rajbari of the Deb family and its many branches, we come across excellent *thakur dalans* that have been preserved quite well till now in the mansions of the Tagores of Jorashanko (without images or deities), the Mitras of Darjipara, Jagatram Dutta of Nimtala, Dwarpanarayan Tagore in Pathuriaghaa, the Roys of Jorashanko and the Jhamapukur Rajbati. These excellent, typically-Bengali *khilan* thakur dalans of the grand buildings of north Kolkata are actually an architectural gift of Kolkata to the heritage of India, but sadly, few understand its significance.

There is yet another architectural splendour of Kolkata that was once the envy of Sydney in Australia, which was incidentally linked to Kolkata by regular shipping lines. We also had other forms of exchanges, including the swapping of many colonial rulers that explains why so many roads and parks of Sydney and other cities of Australia (and New Zealand) are replete with names like Wellington, Wellesley, Auckland, Eden and Victoria. The architectural expression that I refer to is the exquisite cast iron sculpture that adorned the facades of many such buildings. They appeared on balconies, as balustrades (commonly known as railings), and were also prominent as gates and perimeter fences. Careful observers are amazed to see the fineness of the work and the most delicate designs that man could ever weave with iron. Quite often, large parts of such cast iron dreams are found to have been taken away and sold by weight and replaced by unimaginative factory-produced wrought iron. My friends and I have photographed quite a few of these and presented these visuals at talks overseas — to many a gasp of wonder. As the artisans of the foundries of Howrah were genetically more skilled, our cast iron grills are superior to many other such specimens in different parts of the world. But while Sydney still prizes its cast iron balustrades on its balconies and one can undertake heritage walks for to admire their sheer beauty, we have managed to destroy most of them. I think it is time to read the proud publications of Sydney on this subject, like *Lacework in Iron* —just to get inspired. We may then focus not only on stucco, on plaster and on architectural styles but also on railings, balustrades, windows and of course wonderful doorways and marble flooring. And, by the way, a middle class adaption called red oxide flooring is another proud heritage of Kolkata's architecture that we hardly notice.

But history moves relentlessly and many of the stately palaces have been pulled down, one by one, from the 1950s. While some were demolished for public convenience like the widening of roads and the first such example that comes to our mind is the Choudhury's palace of *Saheb, Bibi, Ghulam* — that had to make way for Central Avenue. Others were handed over to promoters, often by squabbling siblings and cousins, for constructing multi-storied flats, But each time a building with neo-classical features or rococo or even ostentatious baroque was ripped apart, we lost an irreplaceable specimen of colonial Bengal's superb craftsmanship. What perhaps compensates a bit is profusion of western art deco architecture in central Kolkata in the 1930s — that gradually spread further south. World class architects, Ballardie, Thomson, and Mathews, introduced this new style that had taken America and Europe by storm. The sheer minimalist beauty that art deco and western modernist aesthetics exuded charmed sev-

eral generations in the twentieth century. People had, in fact, become quite weary of being dominated by heavily ornamented neo-classical buildings and by other grand forms of imposing architecture of the preceding two centuries. The distinguishing features of the art deco style are simple, clean shapes, often with a 'streamlined' look, that bore very geometric bands of plaster on the outer surface, running either horizontally or vertically, and a marked preference for curved verandahs.

Art deco architecture could flourish because new materials and technologies came into the market at the end of the 19th century and later. The arrival of reinforced concrete and light steel, for example, permitted the stylistic development and flexible appearance of art deco, as load-bearing pillars became less essential. Once constrictions like these were tackled, architects could experiment with more fluid forms and geometric designs — like sharp rectangles and squares that vied with equally pleasing curvatures. It was mainly after the First World War that art deco architecture, led by revolutionary masters like Le Corbusier led the movement in Paris, where its Theatre des Champs-Elysées appeared to herald the Art Deco movement, New York's art deco skyscrapers — like the Chrysler building, the Rockefeller Centre and the Empire State Building — dazzled the world.

Kolkata got its first taste of art deco in the 1940s and 1950s, through the fascinating architecture of English movie halls like Metro, New Empire, Globe, Lighthouse, Roxy — and was simply overwhelmed. But since we are not discussing public buildings here, let us move to Elgin Road, Ballygunge and Alipore where the newer wealthy class, especially those from outside of Bengal, built their early art deco mansions. Architects like Arjun Ray constructed landmark buildings like the *jahaj bari* (house shaped like a ship) and art deco became more democratic as the middle class started copying the stylish circular covered verandahs and broad staircases of the bigger mansions. This salaried class consisted of educated people, who were often more qualified and better-read than the old rich of north Kolkata. They were the very core around which the post-Rabindranath, post-Saratchandra generations of litterateurs, artists, musicians and professors would expand and flourish. Many set up dwellings in the new urban areas that were opened up by the Calcutta Improvement Trust or by private developers like the Hindustan Cooperative of Nalini Ranjan Sarkar. The latter, incidentally, sold plots to qualified middle class home-seekers on Hindustan Park and Hindustan Road in the Rashbehari-Gariahat area. And, this is the area that has the maximum concentration of smaller three-storied or four-storied art deco residential buildings, sprawled all over Purna Das Road, Keyatala, Southern Avenue, and the many eponymous roads in the localities around the Dhakuria Lakes.

While the western world used art deco for gigantic public buildings, Kolkata adopted it eventually for smaller private residences. The west actually gave up this fashion after the Second World War, but Kolkata's residential buildings were built in right earnest only after the War, in the 1950s and 1960s. These scaled down versions and modest art deco buildings of south Kolkata were called 'Metro-style' houses, and they are in sharp contrast to the ostentation of the palatial buildings of north Kolkata. These smaller buildings stand out even today with their own quiet dignity — often combining so effortlessly contrasting geometries, like sharply defined rectangular corners on one side with semi circular balconies and gently curved architecture on the other side. The part that covers the central staircase usually has glass panes all the way up to the top, running along the middle of the building. This vertical area is often decorated with raised lines or bands in geometric patterns, from top to bottom. Some even have a small flag stand on top, but no one knows why it is there. This art deco style has not yet acquired celebrity heritage status, as few really observe its sheer beauty. Besides, most heritage lovers are so fixated on the neo classical and other grander architecture of Kolkata, that they cannot get out of the groove. It is time we recognised smaller art deco residences as Kolkata's unique contribution.

We may consider it right for heritage lovers and connoisseurs of architecture to make whatever comment they want on others' property, or for the preservation lobby to bemoan the destruction and rebuilding that come invariably with the passage of time. But we also need to understand that the owners need money to sustain uneconomically large buildings, and if the city's built heritage is to be preserved, then someone has to bear the burden. This economic logic is accepted and it explains why so many art deco buildings around the Rashbehari Avenue area have been reutilised Nd converted into upmarket boutiques, shops and quaint restaurants — without damaging their basic character. But when we consider the bigger problem of maintaining the huge mansions of north Kolkata, presuming of course that much of them are under the owner's occupation, we need to consider large amount of funds. Let us, therefore, see how is it that other self-respecting countries or cities have managed to cling on to what they will never able to replace. One of the methods to save and preserve heritage is to provide state or municipal funding, but I do not think we should even discuss this subject in India. After 41 years in administration, I hardly know any municipal body in India that has not taken an active part in the destruction of the history and heritage of the very cities that were entrusted to them.

One idea that I have been advocating for over two decades is the institution of a 'Lottery Fund'. Most people hardly know that large parts of early Kolkata were built

through public funds garnered by lotteries conducted by the East India Company's government. In fact, in 1817, the Company set up an official 'Lottery Committee' to raise money from citizens to plan and execute public projects. Some of the best examples of public roads in old Kolkata that were built with funds raised from public lotteries are Wellesley Street (Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road), Wellington Street (Nirmal Chunder Street), College Street and Cornwallis Street (Bidhan Sarani) as well as Strand Road. Another building that was financed completely from such funds was the grand Town Hall of Kolkata. A new Kolkata Heritage Lottery Fund on the model of the successful United Kingdom Heritage Lottery Fund is quite feasible — to help owners of heritage buildings in Kolkata repair and re-utilise them. And, after all, citizens can buy these lottery tickets for a public cause, with no sense of guilt and still some hope to win jackpots. The UK Fund earns millions of pounds and these ultimately go to subsidise the maintenance of heritage buildings and historical areas. The Bank of China and HSBC take an active part in providing heritage funds for their cities in China. There are many such ideas which our government just needs to examine and decide. An Oversight Committee consisting of urban planning experts and architects, with no conflict of interest, can surely take over from that point, along with heritage conscious citizens — to maintain their own town's heritage. At the same time public bodies need to observe the highest level of transparency, while they engage themselves in the task of saving every small part of the priceless and irreplaceable history of their communities, cities, state and the nation.

Kolkata must also remember that while Delhi has four World Heritage Sites declared by the UNESCO and Mumbai, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Hyderabad all have such prestigious buildings of international fame, the grand old capital of British India, Kolkata, is yet to earn this award for even a single site. Since Kolkata does not have any notable architecture of the pre-colonial era, we could propose the Victoria Memorial or the Howrah Bridge or even Fort William to the UNESCO, Paris, for World Heritage stature — but this requires a lot of professional documentation. UNESCO's rules mandate a large number of compliances and multiple dimensions — in order to maintain the purity of the original structure. These entail heritage consciousness and a fierce pride in the past that the citizens of most developed nations possess. We will require decades to instil this spirit among our citizens in this country and in this city, before we can even dream of taking up serious tasks of this nature. With every passing year, however, we lose some irreplaceable part of our architectural heritage.

But we can always make a start — so let us begin, now.