

In sorrow flows the Hooghly

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The story of Calcutta's ravaged ghats



FLASHBACK: These photos of Mullick Ghat (above) and Chhotulal Ghat (below) from the early 1900s were found by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Edinburgh, in a shoe box.

Courtesy, RCAHMS

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Within a month of becoming chief minister of West Bengal in May 2011, Mamata Banerjee had announced her wish to beautify the Hooghly riverfront along the lines of the Thames in London, UK. But in the last 11 years, all redevelopment projects have primarily focused on building promenades and parks on the riverside, neglecting the once splendid and iconic ghats; most of them have been turned into garbage dumps or open toilets.

A ghat refers to the flight of steps or a negotiable slope descending into a river or any water body. Ghats were built for bathing, and prayer, cremations and other religious or spiritual rites, to ease the transport of people and cargo, and even for dumping garbage or night soil. In earlier centuries, the wealthy and the powerful built ghats to earn brownie points in society and also to show off their wealth. A ghat could be functional

or elaborately designed with add-on features and usually came with the family name of the patron inscribed.

This July, the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority or KMDA, the agency responsible for the city's planning, claimed it was working on a master plan that involved a major facelift of as many as 15 ghats on the Calcutta side of the Hooghly river. It has initiated a process to engage experts to study the ghats and thereafter plan their revamp or reconstruction.

Just a couple of weeks before the KMDA's announcement, the Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port Trust (formerly Calcutta Port Trust) also declared its wish to develop an "iconic riverfront complex" complete with a boutique hotel, banquet hall, shopping mall, sports complex, multi-level car parking zone and so on, on an adjoining plot of land at the prime business district and vantage point of the city on Strand Road surrounding the Armenian Ghat.

The Port Trust is the custodian and conservator of the river, including its banks, while the KMDA decides the development along the banks. A third agency, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), is in charge of managing approach roads, waste management and approving building plans of houses near the river, including the ghats.

But what is the ground reality of the ghats? Over a fortnight, I undertook several rides on ferries that crisscross the Hooghly every day, carrying thousands of commuters.



Mallick Ghat (above) now has the cast-iron structure, imported from Glasgow, hidden by corrugated iron sheets while the crowning glory of Chhotulal Ghat (below) was replaced by a new floor that serves as a dharmasala.

Courtesy, The Ganges Walk



Some three decades ago I would do this very often. I still remember the mostly green shoreline dotted with colonial-style pavilions and exquisite cast-iron structures. Alas, most of that has vanished. Instead, I saw shanties, piles of garbage and unsightly apartment blocks. Some ghats were covered with corrugated iron sheets painted white and blue.

To get a closer look, I decided to walk along the riverfront of the more architecturally significant ghats, most of them in the vicinity of the Howrah Bridge. It is quite difficult to negotiate them, as I discovered. A ramshackle bridge over the circular railway track that runs along the riverside lay in my path. I had to pick my way to the river through a mysterious-looking alley. Beyond it were parked trucks meant to carry goods to the adjoining business hub of Burrabazar, and shacks that were home to porters and other labourers.

I couldn't find my way to Pathuriaghat, famous for its cast-iron archways with dragon wing designs similar to the entrances of the metro stations in Paris. Instead, I landed up further south, at Jagannath Ghat.

The ghat looked grotesque. The ornate cast-iron structure was covered by an ugly corrugated tin shade, this too painted white and blue. It was apparently the doing of the flower traders who operate in the wholesale flower market adjoining the ghat.

BANK DETAILS

Prinsep Ghat

■ Built in 1843 in the memory of the Anglo-Indian scholar James Prinsep. The Palladian porch has six sets of Ionic pillars. It was restored in 2001

Mutty Lal Seal's Ghat

■ Constructed by businessman and philanthropist Mutty Lal Seal. Ugly flex sheets mar its Corinthian pillars

Babu Ghat

■ Built in 1830 by Babu Rajchandra Das of Janbazar, it has Doric pillars. A large section of the ghat is encroached by masseurs whose forefathers served aristocratic babus once upon a time. Today, it is crowded with idols, heaps of rotting

flowers and filth. The front is covered by an ugly white iron shade

Chhotulal Ghat

■ Located south of Howrah Bridge, this was commissioned by the merchant Chhotulal Durga Prasad's family and built in 1875 by Macintosh Burn & Co. and Port Commissioners. The original design had a gorgeous crown, which was destroyed in the 1980s

Mullick Ghat

■ Motilal Mullick had built it in memory of his father Nimaicharan Mullick. The once beautiful cast-iron structure imported from Glasgow is now covered with corrugated tin sheets

Zenana Ghat

■ Its interiors were decorated with relief tiles

and chequered marble flooring. Built in Rajasthani style by the Ram Chandra Goenka family, it was meant for women and to ensure their privacy while taking a dip in the river

Kumartuli Ghat

■ It has a spectacular pavilion supported by the north Indian *barah diwari* or 12 pillars. There are openings on three sides allowing the breeze to flow unhindered even during peak summer. This ghat is fairly well maintained

Ahiritola Ghat

■ *Ahir* in Hindi means milkman. This ghat in north Calcutta has a green tin roof resting on five ornamental arches. Unsightly flex sheets cover it.

Source: The Ganges Walk and the book Kolkata Darpan by Radharaman Mitra

The approach to the ghat — meant for bathers as well as priests and people conducting rituals — lay encroached by traders and their piles of flowers. The flower market stretches for nearly a kilometre, and skirts two other ghats — Mullick Ghat and Zenana Ghat — that lie beneath the eastern approach of the Howrah Bridge. It blocks the entrances to these two ghats as well.

Jagannath Ghat is named after a temple near the ghat; it is dedicated to Lord Jagannath. It was built by Sovaram Bysack, a businessman and philanthropist, in the early 18th century for pilgrims. Years ago, the ghat used to be known as Sovaram Basaker Ghat among the local people. Bysack is the Anglicised spelling of the Bengali surname Basak.

Atreyee Basak is a descendant of Sovaram; she is also a heritage enthusiast and quite taken with Calcutta's colonial history and grandeur. She, along with her childhood friend Poulomee Auddy, co-founded a heritage walking tour called The Ganges Walk along the architecturally significant ghats. Recently, they made a documentary titled *The Dying Ghats of Calcutta*. Says Atreyee, "We are saddened by the present condition of these edifices that are the flag-bearers of our history and heritage. We feel it is our responsibility to preserve it in our own way."

Poulomee adds, "With the passage of time, these splendid structures started losing their glory due to the lack of conservation and restoration. The once beautiful riverbank has now become a dump, stinking and filthy."

While researching for the documentary — it took five years — Atreyee and Poulomee found most of the ghats in varying stages of decay. When they compared the current condition of Chhotulal Ghat — to the south of Howrah Bridge — with a 1912 photograph of it, which they found in the collection of the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), they were appalled. Says Atreyee, "The original design had a gorgeous crown, but that ornamental rooftop was destroyed to make room for a new floor in 1987." The floor is now a dharmasala and the whole structure has been painted a deep red.

Mullick Ghat, built in memory of the famous banker and mint man Nimaicharan Mullick,

is now the epicentre of the flower market.



NEW LENS: Much of the olden beauty of Jagannath Ghat (above) and Ahiritola Ghat (below) has been lost through renovation efforts that include the typical blue-and-white coating

Photographs by Prasun Chaudhuri and courtesy The Ganges Walk



The cast-iron colonnade with arch infill panels imported from Glasgow is now covered with corrugated tin sheets to protect roses, marigolds and gerberas from the scorching sun," says Atreyee. Just beside this ghat is the Zenana Ghat. It was built for women bathers by philanthropist-businessman Ram Chandra Goenka in the early 1890s. Its

elegant dome surrounded by four minarets is now in the grip of undergrowth. The ghat has been abandoned by bathers as there is no clear approach to it. Earlier this year, heritage activists had a hard time preventing a part of it from being leased out to local businessmen as a godown.

“There is a need to restore the ghats that stand witness to our history. It is a pity that sometimes, in the name of restoration, a fresh coat of paint is given or some minor facelift is carried out, and little is done to revive the olden carvings and other artistry,” says Atreyee.

There are two exceptions.

In 1993, the non-profit organisation, Intach, restored Prinsep Ghat in association with some corporate partners and the state public works department. The construction of the second Hooghly bridge and dumping of building materials around the ghat had turned it into a dilapidated structure. Although the river has shifted from the original ghat in the past few decades, the well-maintained Prinsep Ghat is more of an iconic monument than a way to the river.

The elegant colonial structure of Durga Charan Mukherjee Ghat (also known as Maayer Ghat) in north Calcutta’s Bagbazar has also been restored to its old glory by the Hooghly River Bridge Commissioners. In addition to this, the Port Trust had painted Annapurna Ghat, Judges Ghat and Mutty Lal Seal Ghat with the help of some students of the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta.

Jawhar Sircar, who is the former culture secretary, Government of India, and Rajya Sabha MP, said in the documentary, “It’s not impossible to bring back the glory of some of these ghats and their architectural masterpieces of cast iron. There are a lot of conservation architects in Calcutta who do good work. We can make a pool of such architects who will decide what is to be done, how it is to be done.”

Talking about the challenges of restoration, Sircar tells me that the process has to begin with synergy between the agencies — the Port Trust, KMDA and KMC — involved in the management of the river and the riverfront. The Port Trust is a central government body, while the other two agencies come under the state government.

“The users of the ghat, especially the flower merchants, must also co-operate during a restoration effort,” Sircar adds.



Atreyee Basak and Poulomee Auddy at Pathuriaghat

The documentary features Gautam Chakrabarti, who is honorary heritage advisor of the Port Trust. He tells me about strong hindrances in any kind of restoration effort of the ghats from various local political lobbies. He recalls the time of the refurbishing and painting of Mutty Lal Seal Ghat. He adds, "Some local goons desecrated the painted walls with excreta to prevent our work. We had to call the police." He laments the lack of social consciousness among the general populace in matters of heritage.

Adds Sircar, "It's a pity that our culture considers the river's water holy, yet people don't hesitate to defecate or throw animal carcasses, rotten flowers and filth into the river or defile the riverfront." According to him, focus on the aesthetics of the riverfront is more of a European concept and Calcutta had imbibed this as a colonial legacy. He adds, "It's time to reclaim the heritage of these derelict ghats and pay some real homage to the sacred river."
