

Short Story Section

The Accursed House

-Bhaskar Roy Barman

Mr Rebati Das heaved a deep sigh, as he stared across the thickets of bushes and trees that mushroomed around it to the house that stood forlorn and accursed. People avoided passing by it, scared of its malignant influence. The malignity clinging about it compelled its proprietor to depreciate its value, its funeral reputation spreading far and wide out of the village. The proprietor Ashoke Mitra and his family left the house to live permanently over in Kolkata, enjoining upon Rebati Das, once the janitor of the house, impossible task of looking for a possible buyer of the house, with promise that he would continue remitting him the money he used to get when working as janitor of the house.

By him was standing a youth, twenty-five years old, staring bemused at the top of the house that jutted above the thickets, other parts of the house hidden around the thickets. He had told Rebati Das, when introducing himself to him, that he was working on one of the famous newspapers, sent over here by the editor to write a story around this accursed house and that the readers of the newspaper liked reading such stories.

He was jerked out of the trance by the loud sigh he had heard Rebati Das heave and nudged Rebati Das out of his musings.

‘What are you thinking of, Rebati Babu?’ he asked.

‘I’m thinking, Samir Babu, of the past glory of the house over there, which has been lost for ever,’ Rebati Das replied.

‘To hear about the past glory of the house I have come a long way down here from Kolkata,’ Samir said. ‘Let’s walk over to the clear place beneath that tree and I shall listen to you tell me the story, sitting on the clear place.’

‘If you do not mind it, I want to ask you a simple question, before listening to your story,’ Samir said, as they had sat on the place beneath the tree.

‘Why should I mind it? Rebati Das said. ‘Ask it away!’

‘I saw you alone in your house, when I came over to see you,’ Samir said. ‘Are you living alone?’

Rebati Das did not reply forthwith and kept silent. Samir heard him heave another deep sigh.

‘Are you living alone?’ Samir repeated, to rouse him from his abstraction.

‘I have no family, no relative to be reckoned with,’ Rebati Das said.

‘Why?’ Samir asked.

‘Your curiosity is intense!’ Rebati Das said in a normal voice.

Samir could not understand whether Rabati Das had got angry at this question. He conjured up a smile in his face and said, ‘The question I’ve asked is the question reporters always ask!’ Samir said. ‘In writing a report or a story around this house, I shall have to write something about you. Otherwise, the report or the story will read shallow.’

Rebati Das smiled a sad smile. ‘I don’t bother about whether or not you write anything about me in your report or short story.’ he said. ‘Since you’ve wanted to know something about me, then listen! I have been looking after the house as the janitor since the time of Jagannath Mitra, father of the present proprietor Ashoke Mitra. Jagannath Mitra who had had this house built gifted to me the house I am living in, perceiving my sincerity in the work and my honesty. I was so absorbed in looking after the house I had forgotten about my marriage. There was, besides, no kith or kin about me who would think about my marriage. In fact, Jagannath Mitra had brought me to the house from the street and made me janitor of the house, putting me in the charge of looking after the house.’ He paused to take in a breath and continued, ‘It’s my personal matter; I don’t relish discussing it. Tell me what you want to know about the house.’

‘I have got to know what I wanted to know about you.’ Samir said. ‘I’ve heard this house is ghostly or haunted.’

‘You’ve heard wrong!’ Rebati Das said firmly. ‘It’s not ghostly or haunted. It has got accursed by the generosity of the present proprietor Ashoke Mitra.’

Samir got extremely surprised. ‘You are meaning to say the house has got accursed because of the generosity of Ashoke Mitra!’ he twanged.

‘Yes, I am meaning to say so,’ Rebati Das said, his voice firm.

‘It is difficult to believe!’ Samir said.

‘Many things happen beyond our knowledge,’ Rebati Das said. ‘Please listen to what I am telling.’

‘Please go on,’ Samir urged.

‘After the death of Jagannath Mitra,’ Rebati Das went on, ‘Ashoke Mitra inherited this five-storey huge, almost palatial house and vast property along with it. More than fifty lac rupees remain deposited with different banks. He also inherited a flourishing cloth business in the heart of Kolkata.

‘When reading through the documents relating to his inheritance, Ashoke Mitra came to learn that the house had been built in 1950 at the cost of five lac rupees and it was now fetching, clear of all taxes, more than thirty thousand rupees monthly by way of rents. He was also earning, clear of taxes, no less than fifty thousand rupees from the cloth business.

‘He was then an enterprising youth with a generous bent of mind. He was ashamed at the miserliness of his father and spent money lavishly to the chagrin of his father. He is the only child of Jagannath Mitra. Ashoke Mitra’s mother had died when he was a child. Jagannath

Mitra had brought him up with the motherly and fatherly cares combined. He could not bring himself to deny Ashoke Babu whatever he wanted and even could not stop him spending money lavishly. He often grumbled to me at his spending money lavishly. Ashoke Mitra had associated himself with a charitable club that professed itself devoted to uplifting the downtrodden. Since Ashoke Mitra was the scion of the richest family of the locality, the club hinged upon him in monetary matter.

‘The charitable activity that Ashoke Mitra had taken on as his pastime brought him into close contact with politically-minded and influential people. Gradually he had insinuated himself into the favour of some influential leaders who were supposed to have assured him that they would see to him being given a party-ticket in next election.

‘As soon as he had succeeded to the large property, he summoned me to him. As I presented myself to him, he said, “Rebati Babu, I’ve decided to lower the rents by one-third with effect from the next month. I think my father fixed a preposterous rent on each room. I can’t help feeling ashamed at his inordinate craving after money. So I’ve decided to lower the rents.”

‘Hearing this, I stood for a while perplexed and confused. I thought I had heard him wrong. “Lower the rents!” I stammered. ‘Perhaps – er – I’m sure you’ve meant to raise the rents.”

“You’ve heard me right, Rebati Babu,” he sort of shrilled out, “I repeat, I’ve decided to lower the rents by one-third. Go right away to notify all the tenants of my decision!”

‘I stood on flabbergasted, staring into Ashoke Mitra’s face. I felt myself thrown off balance. He seemed to be ruining himself. I had been the janitor of this house since his father’s time. I thought I ought to save him from the possible ruination. I summoned up courage and said, “if you permit me to, I venture to say you’ve not reflected upon the consequences of your hasty decision. If I should tell the tenants of your decision, what would they think of you? What would your neighbours think of you, Sir?” Besides...”

‘He stopped me short. “ I’ve not summoned you – have I? - to offer me this unwarranted piece of advice. I’ve summoned you to execute my orders. I hope I have made myself clearly understood.”

‘I nodded and Ashoke Babu gestured me out.

‘Next morning, as they had learned about lowering of the rents by one-third, all the tenants abandoned themselves to a delirium of conjecturing. When asked, I could not explain about the decision of Ashoke Mitra. The tenants who had previously not so much as exchanged formal greetings when they bumped into one another found themselves drawn together in an attempt to solve the conundrum that had presented itself to them.

‘Bidding adieu to their self-conceit, they congregated at a tea-shop known as Chhanu’s tea stall which they had previously avoided. Chhanu’s tea-shop leaped up into a flourishing business. The tenants were chatting on to find a solution to the conundrum, but they could not arrive at it. One of them opined that the present proprietor had lost his head; another

attributed the decision to some criminal activity which Ashoke Mitra wanted to hide by keeping the tenants pleased. But no opinion met with approval. Finding no solution to the conundrum, the tenants authorized Mr Shome and Mr Bose to go see Ashoke Mitra and ask him why he had lowered the rents and report the outcome of the meeting next morning at this shop.'

Rebati Das paused from the long narration and said to Samir, 'This was the conundrum to me, too. I was present at the chatting to listen to their conversation. They did not object to my presence. I decided to join in their conversation next morning about this time to know how they would solve the conundrum.

'Next morning we gathered at Chhanu's tea-stall, anxiously awaiting the arrival of Mr Shome who had not yet come to tell what the proprietor had said. Presently, Mr Shome came and said that what I had said was absolutely right. Mr Kar asked Mr Shome his idea of why the proprietor had lowered the rents. Mr Shome said he could not guess at it and volunteered to say that he could not understand why Ashoke Mitra, a man of commonsense, would delight with the pleasure of depriving himself of a good fat revenues. Another tenant hazarded the hypothesis that Ashoke Mitra might have committed some crime and his desire to atone for it must have driven him on to this act of munificence. His hypothesis was laughed down. The proprietor-and-tenants relation had not reached such stage that the proprietor would have tested his bouts of munificence upon the tenants. They said. Another suggestion that the proprietor had lodged some spies without families on the top floor and at their advice he had lowered the rents to keep the tenants' mouths shut met with disapproval. In fact no one could give any plausible solution that could be accepted. The morning gathering dispersed; it was time for them to prepare to go to their offices.

'The next day the whole house was agog with commotion. The previous night when the wife of Mr Bose lodging on the third floor was rushing to the lavatory at the corner of the terrace she met up with the late Jagannath Mitra, in hand a receipt book. Frightened out of wits, she rushed back into her room and swooned off. Mr Bose decided to leave the house for another house and he did. When the decision of Mr Bose to leave the house was reported to the morning gathering of the tenants, though they took it lightly, their conversation was wobbling on irrelevances. The same thing happened to Mr Dhar who lodged on the second floor. The next morning the house was beleaguered by terror at this news. Since Mr Dhar was a god-fearing and truthful man, no one disbelieved him. All the tenants left the house out of fear of meeting up with the apparition of the late Jagannath Mitra, a receipt book in hand..

' I had tried my best to persuade Ashoke Mitra to rescind his decision. But Ashoke Mitra did not heed my request. He said there would be no dearth of people willing to rent the rooms at the lowered rents. Yes, there was no dearth of people willing to rent the rooms. But when they had heard the house was haunted by the apparition of the dead father of Ashoke Mitra, a receipt book in hand, they got frightened out of their desire to rent the rooms.'

Rebati Das paused and watched for Samir's reaction.

'Your story is really interesting,' Samir said. 'Please tell me what happened next.'

'Even the terror gripped us,' Rebati Das resumed. 'We heard every night howling and sinister murmuring. The nightly howling and sinister murmuring scared the people from near the house. But I stayed on. Ashoke Mitra left me duty-bound to look after the house yonder. Besides, I have no other place to go to.'

He paused for another while to take in a deep breath, then continued. 'That house has got accursed out of the generosity of Mr Ashoke Mitra, hasn't it, Samir Babu?'

'No, Rebati Babu, no,' Samir said. 'It's not his generosity that has made the house accursed. It is only his craving that has made it accursed'

'His craving?' Rebati Das asked, completely bewildered.

Yes,' Samir said, 'it's his craving for something he had no capacity to achieve.'

Rebati Das was staring bewildered into the eyes of the young man from Kolkata.

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