

Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

Since 1994 this city, like Marquez's 'Chronicle of a Death Foretold', has been a view to a slow kill.

Sambhu Singh, a David who struggled for an aeon against the South City Goliath. A valiant working class hero did not have any working class party to back his gut. So at the end of his tether, Sambhu Singh had to die.

In 1994, the late Jyoti Basu had declared that the Jay Engineering /Usha Factory complex on Prince Anwar Shah road 'will be used to build a hospital and a pharmaceutical plant'. This complex is today better known as South City (mall and residential complex). In 1994 before the staff quarters within the complex could be demolished Sambhu Singh, a worker and an occupant of a quarter, had filed a stay petition with the High Court to defer the demolition till the receipt of full compensation from his employers. So, come what may, Sambhu Singh had to die.

2006. And Sambhu Singh was still living in his ramshackle dwelling, despite threats and coercion from cops and hoods, while the towers of South City loomed large all around him. His lawyers had deserted him in the interim and the High Court had ruled that the jurisdiction to hear the case was with the City Civil Court. Shunned by the institutions of constitutional democracy and terrorized by the agents of big capital, Sambhu Singh was left to die.

On the eve of Christmas in 2008, when many in the city were queuing for plum cakes, when Park Street was bedecked with colourful lights, Sambhu Singh's house was broken into by South City thugs. The roof and the staircase of the ramshackle dwelling were taken apart and the house was looted. Sambhu's sister-in law and 10-year-old nephew, for whom Sambhu provided despite his trying circumstances, were thrown on the street and the house made uninhabitable. Left to the mercy of a cold Christmas night, Sambhu Singh had to die.

Civil society groups took up his case in right earnest from the morning of Christmas in 2008. Teachers from Jadavpur University, students notably from PDSF, members of FAMA and a few others took up cudgels for Sambhu Singh. Detailed FIR was lodged at Jadavpur police station, local civil society conscience was activated and a 500-strong demonstration was held in front of the mall on 26 December. Also, a local Trinamul Congress (TMC) councilor made a brief appearance at the locale. In defiance of the kind society, in defiance of nature, Sambhu Singh chose to spend the winter nights in his dilapidated residence. CPI(M) spawned Nagarik Committee were now in the act, Sambhu Singh's friends were Naxalites they said.

Media was aware of the story but refused to take it up. Individuals within the print and electronic media were continuously leaking useful snippets of information to activists but they could hardly get across the news to their paying readers or viewers. The media barons may have barred their path and to the barons an evening of merriment on South City premises was too much of an allurements to forego. Advertisement revenue from the South City establishments is meat and bone that the media can only ignore at its peril. Big capital ensured the lubrication of cogs and wheels that run the establishment machinery and so Sambhu Singh had to die.

Sambhu Singh was yet to give up his fight; he was taking the South City behemoth through the courts while earning his bread as daily wage worker. Civil society's interest in

the case had waned although there were friends who were still with him. Dastardly acts come dime a dozen in this CPM-led Left Front ruled state and this correspondent had lost touch with the course of events.

2011. And Sambhu Singh did die.

On 14 January, there was no classic bullet in the head story. It was late evening and Sambhu Singh was out for dinner. A speeding vehicle knocked him down on National Highway 44. Commenting on a gory political murder perpetrated by cowards, the founder editor of this weekly had written 'Kolkata 71. It was an eerie August night when Saroj Datta went missing. The last gory moments of his life are known only to those heartless cops'. Sambhu Singh died on the spot and there were no witnesses. □□□