The khadi ashram on the outskirts of Calcutta was once considered Mahatma Gandhi's second home. This is also where he spent close to a week in the run-up to India's Independence. Prasun Chaudhuri visits what is now a shambles. Photographs by Amit Datta

I shall try to treat Sodepur on the same footing as Sabarmati

On August 9, 1947, when the rest of the country awaited the freedom hour with bated breath, Mahatma Gandhi arrived at the Khadi Pratishthan in Sodepur. Sodepur lies on the outskirts of Calcutta, 14 kilometres to the north. The site had been Gandhi's Satyagraha camp during the Independence movement. And post 1948, after he stopped visiting Sabarmati in Gujarat because it had got mired in caste politics, the Sodepur ashram became a regular haunt of his. In 2014, when it featured in the tentative list of the Unesco World Heritage places in the category titled “Sites of Satyagraha, India’s non-violent freedom movement”, it was described thus — “second home and base in eastern India for Gandhi to promulgate the virtues of Satyagraha”.

That historic year, Gandhi stayed at the Sodepur ashram between August 9 and 13. Saddened by the communal riots that raged all around and the impending Partition, he spent his time here in prayer and solitude, as borne out by his letters. Seventy years on, standing on the same hallowed ground, it is difficult to imagine anything quite so momentous. Wild grass and weeds engulf the ashram, the terracotta paving lies shattered along. There was a time when the rooms were vibrant with action — khadi spinning, production of mandal paper, fountain pen ink, ghee, cheese and honey. Now, all nine rooms remain locked all the time. The looms and yarns lie heaped in a corner. The last time a yard of khadi was spun out of here was in 2000. Water has seeped through the broken tiles and summoned an ugly patchwork of mildew. After dark, locals avoid the place for fear of snakes and anti-socials, whose den it supposedly becomes.

Veteran Gandhian Astit Ranjan Das has been the secretary of the Khadi Pratishthan Trust Board, which has been running the ashram, since 1974. He blames the state government for the neglect. The 82-year-old tells The Telegraph about a grant the centre gave back in 2000 but laments the state government’s apathy towards what has now become a ramshackle institution.

The 68-year-old Chetan Ravi Vyas is caretaker of the place. He has already spent a half-century here. He tries to open the rooms at Das’s bidding. But some of the locks are so old, the keys won’t turn, even breaks.

Krishnan Bhattacharya, a schoolteacher and author of a few books on the history of Sodepur, talks about insurgencies in the Ashram Trust and SMTP funds. Das rubbishes these. He says: “We transferred the land allocated by the central government to the district magistrate so that he could renovate and protect the memorial.”

There are others who want just to get ahead with the restoration of the property. Sekhar Seth is one such person. He owned the Satish Chandra Dasgupta, or his grandson, K Chandra Dasgupta, who sold his home to the central government. They have not restored anything.

Krishnan Bhattacharya, a schoolteacher and author of a few books on the history of Sodepur, talks about insurgencies in the Ashram Trust and SMTP funds. Seth dismisses these. He says: “We transferred the land allocated by the central government to the district magistrate so that he could renovate and protect the memorial.”

There are others who want just to get ahead with the restoration of the property. Sekhar Seth is one such person. He owns the Satish Chandra Dasgupta, or his grandson, K Chandra Dasgupta, who sold his home to the central government. They have not restored anything.

Krishnan Bhattacharya, a schoolteacher and author of a few books on the history of Sodepur, talks about insurgencies in the Ashram Trust and SMTP funds. Seth dismisses these. He says: “We transferred the land allocated by the central government to the district magistrate so that he could renovate and protect the memorial.”

There are others who want just to get ahead with the restoration of the property. Sekhar Seth is one such person. He owns the Satish Chandra Dasgupta, or his grandson, K Chandra Dasgupta, who sold his home to the central government. They have not restored anything.