

To The Chief Minister, Government of West Bengal  
Cc: The Mayor, Kolkata  
The Commissioner, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation  
The Chief Secretary, West Bengal  
The Secretary, Information and Cultural Affairs

Calcutta is one of the great cities of modernity, and Asia's first cosmopolitan metropolis. Like other great modern cities, its cultural inheritance is contained not only in its literature, cinema, art, and music, or in its political and intellectual history, but palpably in its lived spaces and its architectural ethos. This ethos is remarkably distinctive, and unique to Calcutta; it includes not only the *rajbari* mansions of north Calcutta and the grand colonial institutional buildings of central Calcutta, but the houses in which people have lived, and still live, in various neighbourhoods in the city – Bakulbagan, Hindustan Park, Kidderpore, Paddapukur Road, Bhowanipore, Sarat Bose Road, and Ganguly Bagan, to name just a few. These and others areas should really be declared heritage precincts. As Esther Duflo, Professor of Poverty Alleviation and Development Economics at the Massachusetts Institute Of Technology has said, Calcutta neighbourhoods should be showcased to the world in the same way that Prague and other great cities showcase their architecture. The first reason for this is the vivid way in which the history of a unique Bengali modernity is represented by Calcutta's buildings from the last century to the 1950s. The second reason is that, as Prof Duflo points, these buildings and precincts are the very things that will attract the international visitor to the city.

But these houses are being torn down today at such an incredibly rapid pace and so indiscriminately – principally for the land on which they stand - that there is an urgent need to introduce measures preventing such destruction. Such measures would not be unique to Calcutta; all major cities worldwide, whether in Europe (Berlin, London, Paris), Latin America, or North America, have laws that forbid the destruction of existing buildings. Nor would they necessarily oppose new developments; such developments can and will take place in areas that can accommodate them, as Calcutta expands. Moreover, a home owner has a fundamental right to sell their property; but neither buyer nor seller should, ideally, have the right to demolish existing buildings, since these add up to a city's collective inheritance and history. While there is a process in place to do with changing the name of a street, which acknowledges the right that people have to object to the name-change, there are no real guidelines to, and hardly any accountability regarding, demolition, and it appears that the character of the neighbourhood or *para* can be destroyed with impunity. Measures protecting not just heritage but both the cultural individuality and the multifariousness of the city as represented by its architecture are now long overdue in Calcutta; their introduction would show an unprecedented commitment to re-engage with this great city's identity and history. We believe that such an act of commitment is now unavoidable. There are some immediate measures that the government should adopt without delay.

- The West Bengal Heritage Commission and the KMC Heritage Committee unfortunately lack teeth. They should be empowered so that they can make urgent, tangible contributions, and also encouraged to work in consonance with each other.
- The list of heritage buildings should be urgently and substantially extended.
- Various neighbourhoods should be declared heritage zones or precincts, and criteria should be swiftly established for doing so. In this context, one of the most practical solutions towards protection would be the one suggested by the architect Partha Ranjan Das: to introduce Transfer of Development Rights, whereby owners of buildings are allowed to sell

the equivalent of land value to ‘developers’, who can then use those rights to extend new properties being built elsewhere. In this way, the great buildings and neighbourhoods will continue to survive. Moreover, Transfer of Development Rights costs the government nothing, and, in fact, will earn it considerable revenue. We urge the government to see this not as a marginal issue, but as one that’s central to the city’s history and to its future, and to act without delay.

Yours sincerely,

AmitChaudhuri, novelist and Professor of Contemporary Literature, University of East Anglia and, in alphabetical order,

PranabBardhan, Professor of Graduate School, Department of Economics, University of California at Berkeley

KaushikBasu, Chief Economist, World Bank, and Professor of Economics and C Marks Professor, Cornell University

Sugata Bose MP, Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs, Harvard University

JogenChowdhury, MP, artist

ParthaRanjan Das, architect

Esther Duflo, Professor of Poverty Alleviation and Development Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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ChittrovanuMajumdar, artist

AparnaSen, film director

SujataSen, member, West Bengal Heritage Commission

Dayanita Singh, photographer

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