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Tram as collective memory- Tram as an object in the city that becomes a part of the everyday experience of the people in the city. Another part of it is, the way in which the city is experienced from inside of the tram in frames for a person to experience the city. Hence becoming a part of the subculture of the city .
Image sourced: <https://suvorc.weebly.com/>, Calcutta tramways, Jagdish Agarwal

Ekla Cholo Re

The Resilient Spirit of Kolkata’s Trams in a Modern World

Shweta Pedaparthi

Kolkata’s tram system is more than a mode of transport; it’s a living subculture deeply embedded in the city’s soul. Since their introduction in the 1800s, trams have become symbols of nostalgia, community, and continuity, shaping how Kolkatans view and interact with their city. Each tram ride brings a sense of connection, a link to memories, tales, and the familiar rhythm of bell chimes and conductor banter—elements that make Kolkata’s trams unique among urban transport.

Far from being relics, Kolkata’s trams are cultural icons connecting the city’s past and present. Trams journey through historic neighbourhoods, past landmark buildings, offering passengers fleeting glimpses into Kolkata’s architectural heritage and social evolution. Each line narrates stories of shifting demographics and urban growth, fostering a sense of community rarely seen in modern modes of transport. Here, people greet one another, conversations flow freely, and strangers often become friends—building a collective heritage that binds the tram community.

Beyond their functional role, trams have inspired art, literature, and cinema. Artists capture trams in paintings, writers pen poems on the unique journeys, and filmmakers use them to depict the city’s essence. Tram enthusiasts and preservationists fight to keep this culture alive amid challenges like route closures and modernization pressures. Initiatives like cultural festivals, themed rides, and onboard art exhibitions celebrate trams not just as remnants of the past but as evolving components of Kolkata’s identity. Yet, the trams face significant challenges today. Urban demands for faster, more

efficient transport have marginalized their once-central role. Technological advancements and the rise of private vehicles have led to shortened routes and dwindling services, slowly eroding the social bonds that trams once fostered. Today, the few trams that remain are seen by some merely as slow-moving vehicles rather than cherished cultural treasures. The tension between heritage conservation and urban progress is palpable, with critics arguing that the trams’ historical significance often outweighs their practicality in a fast-paced, modern city.

Despite this, many Kolkatans remain steadfast in their love for trams, championing their ecological benefits and potential to alleviate traffic congestion if integrated thoughtfully into modern transport networks. Innovative efforts—such as themed rides, tramway museums, and art performances—aim to rekindle public passion for trams. These initiatives don’t just preserve Kolkata’s tram legacy; they redefine its role for the future, positioning trams as heritage icons that offer both nostalgia and modern convenience.

Kolkata’s trams are at a crossroads, embodying a delicate balance between past and future. Revitalizing the tram system involves more than just updating infrastructure; it requires honoring the emotional, historical, and cultural significance trams hold for Kolkatans. Planners and policymakers face the challenge of modernizing while retaining the community spirit and heritage trams inspire. The vision is not just to preserve the past, but to craft a sustainable future where tradition and modernity coexist.

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Most importantly, this tram subculture evokes a nostalgia that resonates deeply in Kolkata, yet it must also adapt to the demands of a growing, diverse urban population. The tram's story is not only about historical value but about adapting its legacy to the city's evolving landscape. As Kolkata navigates this journey, the goal remains to rekindle a sense of closeness and unity through trams, not merely as vehicles, but as enduring symbols of Kolkata's resilient spirit.

Tram at the threshold of past and future being a common thread through time and events of a city.
Tram at the confluence - Past, Present
Image sourced: AFP, CTUA Archive, Debashish Bhaduri



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