Built Forms, Structural Alterations and Resultant Negotiation with Spatial Utility in Neo-Liberal Cities: The Case of Colonial Mansions of North Kolkata

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Abstract

Revolving around the case study of six colonial mansions of North Kolkata, the study brings in view the existential struggles and negotiations that each of these mansions has to undergo in contemporary neo-liberal cities, beside imparting the city its identity. Growing concern for heritage, while ensuring sustainability, enables these vernacular architectures to earn urban revenue through heritage commercialization. Within the larger backdrop of neo-liberal urbanism, the study therefore aims to understand a) the structural alterations that these buildings had to undergo at present; b) the negotiation in terms of changing utilization of space and socio-cultural norms that the residents had to adopt and c) analyzing the impact of 'heritage' tag and new layer of contestations that it brings along with. Adopting A.D Kings diachronic approach, the study resorts to qualitative enquiry.

Study reveals, while structural alterations considerably hampered architectural uniformity, increasing number of descendants and their changing needs made successive partitioning of these buildings inevitable. While informal partition allowed retention of original architecture, formal partitioning gave way to sub division of ownership rights allowing residents to sell out their respective portion, resulting in demolition of age-old residences. In terms of change in utilisation of space, it is the 'thakurdalan' of 'bahirmahal' that retained its utility unaltered, imparting these mansions its identity. Shifting of residents to other parts of the city while made some portions of the building losing its utility; shedding of gendered-biased conservative norms allowed parts of 'bahirmahal' to be converted into living space making it separate residential entity. Tagging these mansions as heritage though prevented the structures from demolition, but uniform regulation both for public and private buildings without considering their functional character, ownership rights or financial background of the owner created a new layer of contestation. While buildings are getting delisted, the entire process provided the Corporation officials a way to extract money from residents by enforcing legal bindings. Few successful cases of restorations stand as silver linings in this skirmish situation, encouraging Kolkata to initiate vigorous heritage management process of inner core, if the city really wants to save these structures from complete disappearance.

Keywords: *city, heritage, identity , neo-liberal urbanism, vernacular architecture.*

Introduction

Cities as a spatial construct, have always proved itself dynamic, adapting and restructuring itself according to the wishes of the city dwellers (Smith, 2012). It is the built forms and its built environments, that seems comparatively more static in responding such changing needs. This in turn raises the dilemma of 'modern' versus 'traditional', 'westernized' versus 'vernacular', when it comes to choosing of built forms that the city must accommodate.

Submitting to Neo-liberal market economy (Gill, 1995; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Sassen, 2004), 21st century's cities however witness juxtaposition of older city constructs beside formation of new satellite towns. While satellite town easily revamps itself according to the needs and expectations of aspiring 'global Indians,' making itself competent for global identity (Bose, 2007, 2014); the city core, flocked with traditional architectural edifices undergoes structural alterations and negotiation with spatial utility, to meet its needs. Growing concerns for heritage thereby provides the avenue where global identity can be acquired by glamorising city's vernacular edifices and its unique identity

(Ashworth, 2013). Marketizing these vernacular edifices in the process of city branding or that of heritage commercialisation in turn makes them capable of earning urban revenue (Steinberg, 2008). The growing awareness for urban heritage thereby opens new vistas for these traditional architectural edifices that no longer be considered as hindrance towards development but as potentials for earning urban revenue.

The story remains the same even in case Kolkata, bearing the remnants of traditional architectural edifices in inner city area, undergoing urban decay. In contrast lies rest parts of the city housing homogenised architecture marked by multi-storeyed apartments bearing the emblem of western construct myth of modernisation (Lang, 2002). Tagging these residential building 'as heritage[i]' has added a new layer of layer of legal contestations that the residents must deal within these crumbling walls. Reflecting upon the case studies of six colonial[ii] mansions of North Kolkata, popularly known as 'rajbaris[iii]', the paper investigates the existential struggles that each of these built forms faces in contemporary Neo-liberal societies. The objectives of the study therefore include a) understanding the structural alterations that these buildings had to undergo at present to serve the needs of its residents; b) exploring the negotiation that residents in turn have to adopt in terms of utilization of space within these age-old buildings and c) analyzing the impact of 'heritage' tag and the new layer of contestations that it has brought along with.

Cities, Built Forms and their Heritage Concerns
Considering cities as a temporal art, while Burges perceives 'city' as a product of 'human nature' (Park et.al, 1967), for Lefebvre it is an outcome of the quality of human actions and henceforth a 'social construction of space' and not merely a physical entity (Lefebvre, 1991). While cities hold back the traces of past events binding the remarkable continuity of human history, it is the built structures and its built environment that serves as tangible evidence of early human consciousness. Historical investigation behind the origin of these urban structures while tells us the socio-cultural and architectural inclinations of past urbanism, analyzing its structural and cultural modifications in turn reflects the changing architectural and societal norms that the city currently witnesses at large. Such an understanding of the built structures marks its linkage to A.D. King's diachronic or historical approach that considers the built environment 'as the product of social change in the society' that needs to be studied in relation to the economic structure of the cityscape at large (King, 1984). Theories on cultural evolution considered these built environments as a conscious expression of human behavior, a symbolic display of the social status and socio-cultural beliefs of its inhabitants (Lawrence & Low, 1990). Therefore, investigation of vernacular structures of colonial times that this study encompasses repeatedly reminds the glorious past that Kolkata once witnessed. While Morgan and Durkheim in their early evolutionary and functional theories postulated these built forms as mirror image of the culture that produced them; the British structural-functionalist tradition investigates the passive role that these structures play in illustrating the behavioral pattern of social life of its dwellers (ibid 1990). Thus, as a socio-cultural construct, each of the built forms served as a direct reflection of the opulence and grandeur that the lives of the 'babus[iv]' of early 19th century encompassed, leaving it open for interpretation.

From architectural viewpoint existence of these structural remnants in 21st century instigates the binary of vernacular versus modern architectures (Lang, 2002; Rapoport, 1969; Lawrence & Low 1990; Susilo, 2007; Senan, 1993). To propagate the idea of 'modernization' the cityscape at present witness large scale demolition of these vernacular architectures and being replaced by multistoried apartments that constitute what we call modern architecture of the time. However, concentrating on Indian architectural history, Lang (2002) points out that for India, 'westernization' has always remained a synonym for 'modernization', may it be in the colonial times or it is the architecture of 21st century. Concentrating on the vernacular architectures of Bengal, scholars have also argued that most of these residential structures reflects a hybrid architectural style, built according to the needs and economic opulence of local 'babus', instruction of European architects and knowledge of the local 'mistris' (Sengupta 2013, Bose, 2020; Lang, 2002). Altogether it is due to this built environment that

earned then Calcutta the name 'City of Palaces' glamorizing its uniqueness and continues to connect the cityscape to its roots till today.

Heritage concerns in turn tries to hold back and preserve this uniqueness, an idea that gained momentum from late 20th century. Materialization of 'heritage' as a globalized discourse lays its origin in Euro-American cultural space in 1960s with UNESCO and ICOMOS establishing itself as standard setter, involving in normative production of global doctrines (Isar, 2011). While Global North became the articulator of heritage norms, Global South acted as a receptor of such ideas and norms. (Ibid, 2011). Countries thereby modifying their own heritage principles gradually broadened its scope and definition. Such a practice and theorization of heritage in turn invited criticisms and contradictions in recent years claiming lack of uniformity in its terminology, creating misunderstandings in its recognition across countries (Ahmad, 2006; Smith, 2006; Pendlebury 2013; Patiwael, et.al, 2019; Harvey, 2001). Till 1970s, both UNESCO and ICOMOS limited its understanding of heritage' to material forms particularly that of individual monuments and sites. (Ahmad, 2006). It was only in late 1990s, when the World cultural diplomacy were at stake due to increased recognition of globalization and thereby a gradual loosening of individual cultural identities, that cultural preservation was incorporated as a part of global heritage doctrine. Hence ICOMOS adopted Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas in Washington Charter 1987 (Ibid, 2006) while UNESCO recognized the principle of safeguarding 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' in UNESCO Convention 2003 (Isar, 2011). This shift in paradigm in understanding of Heritage from 'preservation' to 'conservation' finally gave way to consideration of heritage as a process allowing its integration with city development and planning process (Smith 2006, 2015; Lixinski 2015; Ashworth 2011; Patiwael, et.al, 2019). Globalization and Neo-liberal market policies that once caused loss of cultural identity thereby became the reason to win back global identity by proudly displaying one's own uniqueness. UNESCO's identification of World Heritage list, recognizing their Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) gives the heritage sites a worldwide recognition. Such prestigious tag in turn become the core asset of tourism led heritage industry and makes it liable for national and international fund while becoming an integral part of global economy (Ashworth 1994; Johnson 1999; Pretes 2003; Isar, Y.R., 2011). Such identification of urban heritage therefore propagated the idea of heritage commercialization and revitalization, promoting cultural heritage in the name of city branding while using its potentials for earning urban revenue. As such, the advertisement of Incredible India[v] while depicting Bengal glamourizes the culture and traditional grandeur of the 'Rajbaris', for Rajasthan it is usually the forts, revealing to its global spectators the uniqueness that each city possesses.

Since privatization and over valorization of corporate capital has remained the buzz word of on-going 'market civilization', (Gill, 1995; Brenner & Theodore, 2002, 2011) various financial organizations such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the World Bank as well as the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), have already come forward working in various parts of the world embracing culture and heritage to showcase uniqueness and memorability, making a place standout (Steinberg, 2008). In case of India, one such successful revitalization and restoration project that stands out involved restoration of Humayun Tomb, Sundari Nursery and revitalization of Nizamuddin Basti (report on Improving Heritage management in India, Niti Aayog, Govt. of India). This multi-facet private-public-partnership model materialized under the guidance and financial support of Aga Khan Trust for Culture, gave way to structural restoration of Humayun Tomb and Nizamuddin Dargah, revitalization of Sundari Nursery adding green space followed by revitalization of Nizamuddin Basti that adopted a participatory approach in its management process. The project took a time span from 2007 to 2013, setting an example for rest of the country.

However, challenges faced in implementation of such restoration process involving multi-level stakeholder often results in huge gap between policy formulation and its execution, making heritage management being viewed with much skepticism till today. In case of India, though Ahmedabad in the recent years won its place in UNESCO's list of 'World Heritage city' but withdrawal of Delhi in 2015 from the nomination considering it a hindrance towards development reveals where our heritage concerns till lies.

Methodology

Revolving around the case study of six colonial mansions of North Kolkata (refer table 1), the study adopting A.D Kings (1984) diachronic approach, resorts to qualitative enquiry. Semi structured interview of various stakeholders ranging from residents, government officials, conservationist architects and curators of heritage management projects have been taken into consideration through quota sampling. Five out of six buildings chosen has been tagged as 'heritage' helping to understand the new layer of contestations that tagging has done to these age-old edifices.

North Kolkata has been chosen as the study area because it is this part of the city that represents the oldest habitable portion, the old core of Kolkata, marking the native 'black' town of colonial times (Datta, 2012) (refer fig 1).
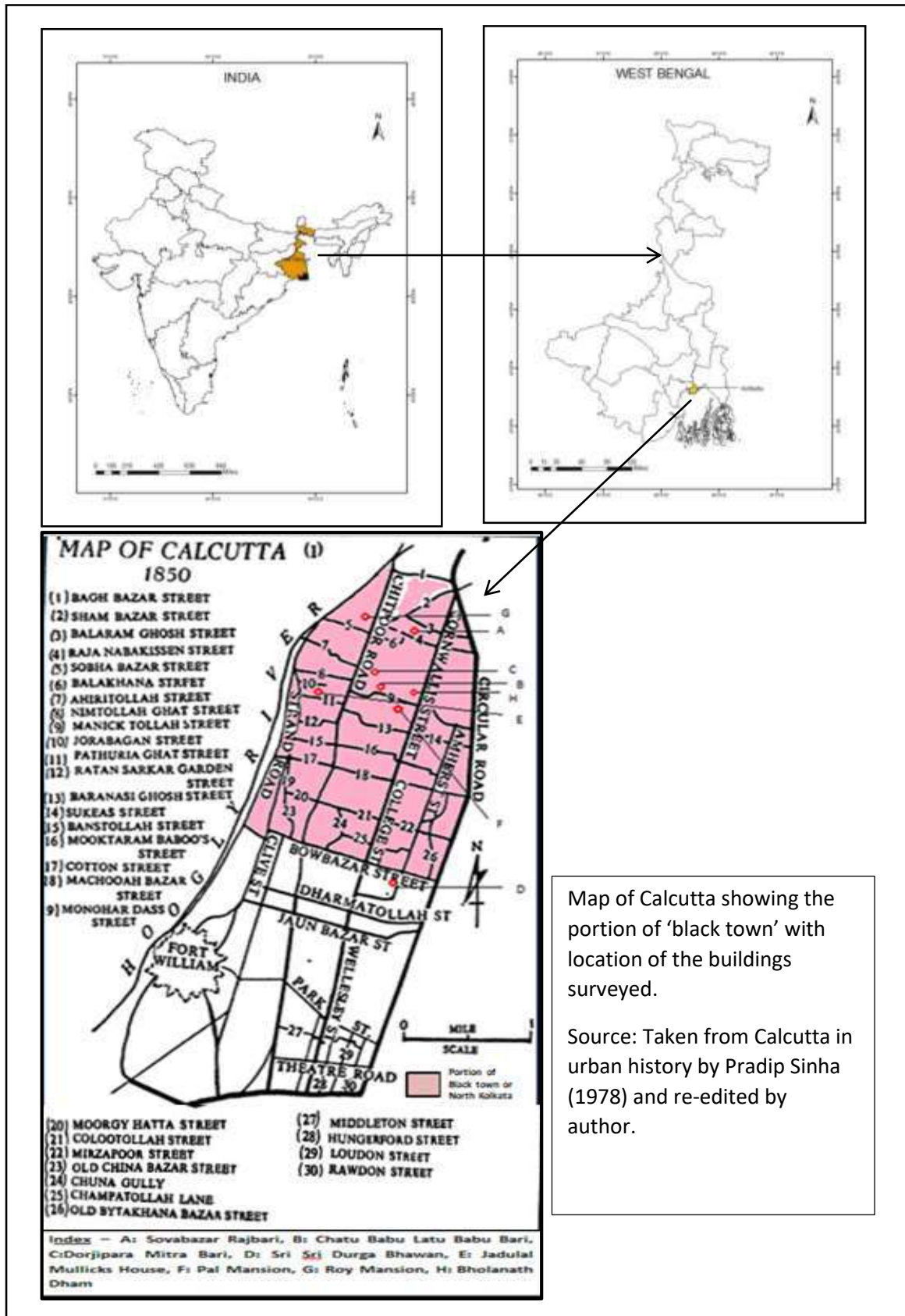
Table 1: List of heritage buildings chosen and their respective gradations.

Name of the building with year of establishment.	Criteria for selection	Gradation	Portions of the buildings that has been declared as 'heritage' (refer fig2)
Sovabazar Rajbari (1757 appprox)	Architectural style	Grade I	The entire portion of 'bahirmahal' comprising of Thakurdalan, the outer courtyard and the surrounding rooms.
Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari (late 18th century)	Building Associated with eminent personality	Grade I	The entire portion of 'bahirmahal' comprising of Thakurdalan, the outer courtyard and the surrounding rooms.
Roy Mansion(19th century)	Architectural style	Grade I	The entire residential building.
Dorjipara Mitra Bari (1807)	Architectural style	Grade II A	Only the thakurdalan and the 'jafri work' of outer veranda.
Jadulal Mullicks House(First half of 19th century)	Architectural style	Grade II A	Thakurdalan and the courtyard, and not the surrounding rooms.
Sri Sri Durga Bhavan	Not included in heritage list.	Not applicable	Not included in heritage list.

Historical Genesis of Kolkata 'RAJBARIS'

From late eighteenth century onwards, with permanent settlement of Company's rule (European administration governing in the name of East India Company), Bengal saw the emergence of a group of natives, working under the benevolence of White masters and making their fortune as banian (business manager) diwan (accountant) and vakil (business lawyer) (Bose, 2020). Accumulating huge amount of wealth within a very short span, these native elites became the flag bearers of 'Babu culture' in Bengal (Ibid, 2020). Their flamboyant display of materialistic wealth in turn got materialised in construction of the aristocratic mansions of Bengal, popularly known as Rajbaris or Raja's bari followed by their voluptuous lifestyle. Clustering within spatial configuration of Sutanuti that gained its recognition as 'black town' of the natives (refer fig 1: pink colour demarcates the portion of native town), these Rajbaris were spread across Bagbazar, Beniatola, Sovabazar, Dorjipara, Jorasanko, Mechuabazar, Barabazar and Bowbazar. As such, historical investigation of the origin of Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari, while brought in the story of Ramdulal Dey, who by 1805 emerged as an indigenous trader of Bengal and was responsible to establish first trading relationship with the Americans in Bengal; it was Nilmoni Mitra, the grandson of Durgacharan Mitra, (the latter being the owner of Dorjipara Mitra Bari) who worked as banian for the East India Company and upheld the financial position of the family at that time.

Fig 1: Location of the study area.

Map of Calcutta showing the portion of 'black town' with location of the buildings surveyed.

Source: Taken from Calcutta in urban history by Pradip Sinha (1978) and re-edited by author.

Uprooted from their rural traditions and placed in direct contact of Western intelligentsia, the fake outward arrogance of these native 'babu's laid in contrast to their inner conservatism. Such dilemmas and insecurities in turn got materialised in bold architectural orientation of quasi-public 'Bahirmahal'[vi] versus gendered biased spatial domain of private interiors or 'Andarmahal'[vii] (based on Hindu 'shastras' and notion of caste based purity), marking the primary spatial boundaries of built plan of these 'rajbaris'(refer fig 2). Hybrid architectural orientation were represented in amalgamation of European, Muslim and Hindu architectural style (Taylor and Lang, 2016). The 'bahirmahal' and 'andarmahal' in turn underwent secondary divisions based on the nature of utility of space and were function specific (refer fig 2). The grand exterior which served the way of conspicuous display of social status comprised of three main components, viz. a grand façade- an elegant expression of Neo Classical architecture comprising of tall columns ornamented with quasi-Corinthian or ionic capitals, a style copied from European Bungalows (refer fig 3, 4,5), Porches and porticos- again a part of neo-classical architecture, poorly imitated in native dwellings, used for welcoming the guests, followed by Roaks- a raised plinth outside the main entrance, for the purpose of 'adda' or gossips among the locals (Bose, 2020). Male dominated quasi-public 'Bahirmahal' in turn comprise of a public courtyard, attached to 'Thakurdalan[viii]' and surrounding verandas, business space comprising of 'baithak-khana[ix]', kacheri[x], and that of library. Rooms in first floor were dedicated for ceremonial or recreational purposes and comprised of nautch-ghar[xi], billiard rooms, dining halls etc. Female dominated private quarters of 'andarmahal' in turn comprised of private courtyards that are smaller in size, less extravagant surrounded by verandas followed by rooms allocated for private rituals 'thakurghar[xii]', living spaces comprising of bedrooms, allocated on first floor while the ground floor rooms surrounding the courtyard comprised of kitchen, storage, bathrooms, 'aaturghor[xiii]' and rooms for servants.

In terms of utilization of spaces, life in 'bahirmahal' revolved around wasteful conspicuous consumption of material wealth, leading to luxurious and fancy lifestyle of 'Bengali babus'. Religious occasions held in the 'thakurdalan' of outer courtyard were celebrated elegantly, more than it was necessary demanding appreciation from European guests. Women were rarely allowed to come to 'bahirmahal' and if at all necessary, they were supposed to talk from the other side of 'purdah[xiv]', a norm rooted in Hindu's orthodoxy. Lies in contrast is the life in 'andarmahal' where life pursued in seclusion, regression, and dominance. Devoid of any architectural ornamentation, the rooms in 'andarmahal' were consciously function specific and usually remained dark, shabby, dampened with low ceilings. Separation of kitchen space for vegetarians and non-vegetarians, separate rooms for servants followed by separate back-doors, one for the female members of the family and other for sweepers and servants were all based on Hindu caste-based notions of pure and impure.

Fig 2: Building Plan showing the various component of these colonial mansion
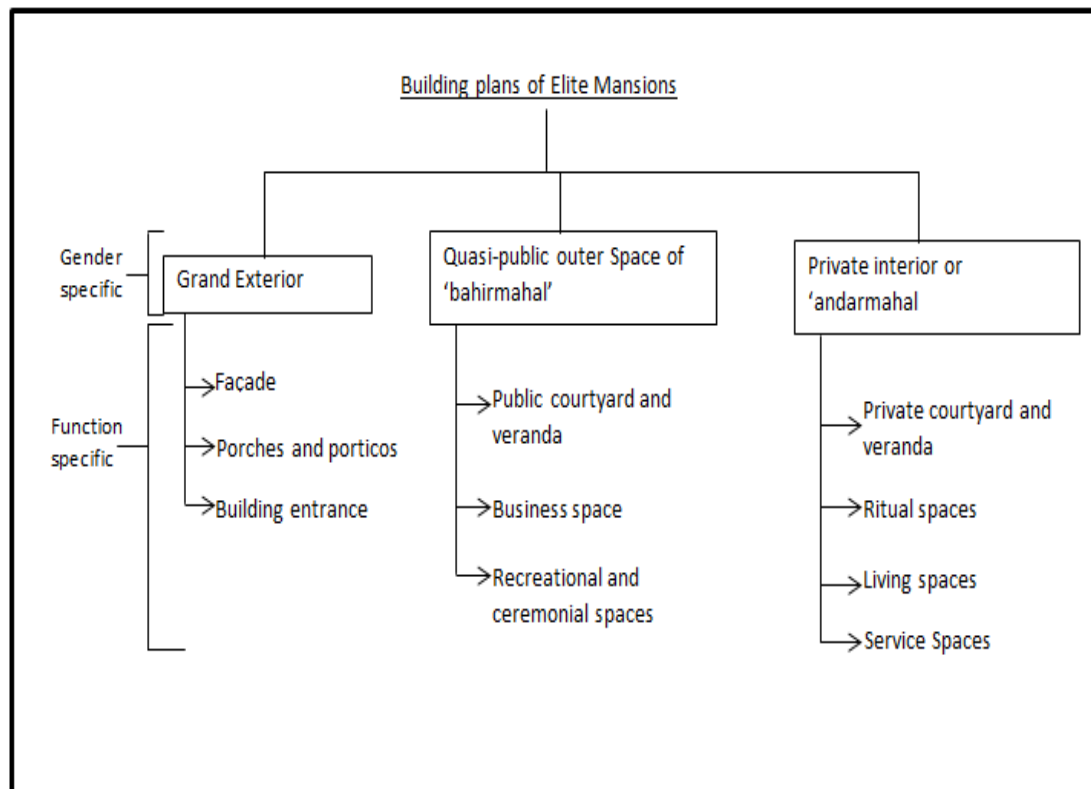
STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL NEGOTIATIONS ADOPTED IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES
Structural modifications

With faded glory of cityscape so went down the glamour of North Kolkata's elite's mansion housing 5th or 6th generation, from the time they materialised. Basic reasons that necessitated structural alterations within these residential mansions includes a) necessities to accommodate increasing number of descendants resulting in successive partitions, b) the demand for privacy and need for modern living facilities that seems easier to install in newly constructed portion and c) unavailability of old building materials followed by lack of old 'mistris[xv]', making the renovation work even costlier. Moreover, as argued by Lang (2002), a particular style of architecture that turns out to be modern for today may be treated as something old or traditional by the next generation. Hence, the residents are left in a continuous tussle of what to accept and what to let go to meet their present needs.

Case specific study of structural alterations lays evidence that in cases where 'bahirmahal' stands as a separate block and not used as residential unit, structural alterations stand minimum. The extended family meets in 'thakurdalan' during religious ceremonies and the property is maintained at trust[xvi]'s fund. Such stands the cases of Sovabazar Rajbari holding the grand exterior, comprising of ionic pillars with yellow terracotta lions on top (refer fig 3,4) or Chatu Babu Latu Babu's Rajbari keeping intact the architectural ornamentation of outer façade (refer fig 5) and that of Jadulal Mullick's House. Maintenance of such architectural grandness not only makes them capable of earning a 'heritage tag' but serves as emblem for family's legacy beside establishing city's identity. In cases, where both 'bahirmahal' and 'andarmahal' are used as residential units as in case of Dorjipara Mitra bari, leaving alone the 'thakurdalan', structural alteration is evident in entire residential complex brought through successive partitioning. Partitioning of these old mansions in turn are of two types- a) formal partitioning, where the residents have settled after legal negotiation. b) Informal partitioning, where the residents negotiated informally among the co-owners, distributing the rooms among themselves.

Fig 3. The grand exterior of Sovabajar Rajbari (Raja Gopi Mohan Deb's portion)

Fig 4: The façade and the thakurdalan of Sovabajar Rajbari (Raja Raj Krishna Deb's portion)
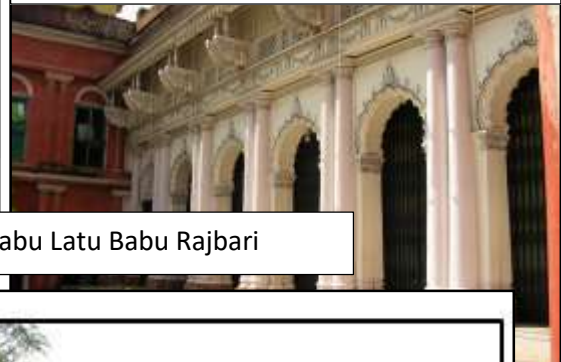
Source: Photographed during field

Fig 5: The façade of Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari

THE OUTER VERANDA COMPRISING OF PAIRED COLUMNS, CAST IRON PARAPERTS AND WOODEN SHADES

IRON GETES WITH RAILINGS

Source: photograph taken from the bog named 'Kolkata diary', article titled 'Palaces of Rich & Famous of Colonial Calcutta', written by Dibyendu Banerjee, June 27, 2017

In case of Sovabajar Rajbari, keeping the 'bahirmahal' unaltered, the residential complex that previously was represented by multi-courtyard 'andarmahal' now stands as separate residential blocks after formal partitioning, lining along Raja Naba Krishna Deb Street. As such, residential block holding postal address 6, Raja Naba Krishna Deb Street while changed its age-old structure to a multi-storeyed apartment, Alok Krishna Deb, another co-owner of Sovabajar Rajbari, preferred to stay in his age-old mansions (refer fig 6a). In case of Jadulal Mullicks House, while their descendants occupy separate residential units distributed formally across Pathuriaghata street, the 'Bahirmahal' standing separately, kept its age-old architecture unaltered. In case of Dorjipara Mitra Bari however, both 'andarmahal' and 'bahirmahal' are utilised as separate residential unit, having formal partition between the two. Formal partition in turn allowed the members living in 'andarmahal' to go for strutural alteration, resulting in construction of multi-storeyed apartment on the rear portion of the

building (refer fig 6b). Since only a portion of 'bahirmahal' has been tagged as heritage particularly that of 'thakurdalan'

Fig 6: Newly constructed multi-storey apartment within the residential portions of Rajbiri; a) forms part of Sovabajar Rajbari b) forms rear portion of Dorjipara Mitra Bari

Source: photographed during field work

Fig 7: newly constructed floor of Dorjipara Mitra Bari creating a mismatch in architecture.

and 'jafri work' of outer veranda (refer fig 9), the families living in 'bahirmahal' continued with informal partitioning and structural alterations in portions left untagged. As such, parts of 'bahirmahal' that have been rented out necessitated construction of newer walls followed by sub division of the rooms on tenant's side to increase the rental income. Within the owner's portion new floor has been constructed, adopting block structure creating a mismatch in architecture. (Refer fig 7).

Informal partitioning, were witnessed in Rajbaris that are more compact, revolving around one or two courtyards as in cases of Roy Mansion and Sri Sri Durga Bhavan. Forming separate household, three

to five families co-occupy such residences. The number of residents here, have reduced greatly with families settling elsewhere while retaining their property rights. Most of these rooms thereby remains locked, unmaintained, and dilapidated. Lack of co-ordination among the co-owners followed by financial burden of maintenance upon those residents who stayed back compels them to think for an alternative housing. Families settled elsewhere are more eager to sell out the property altogether. Beside partitioning, increased cost of maintenance due to increased cost of timber plinth for ceiling followed by unavailability of traditional 'mistri' necessitated members to pay little attention in maintaining architectural uniformity when undergoing structural alterations. Changing priorities from material grandness to that of comfort while making new constructions cost effective compels the residents to choose modern compact ubiquitous box-structured apartments. Crave for additional facilities such as attached bathroom, attached kitchen with chimneys, attachment of air-conditioners on old walls further necessitated to bring considerable change within the living space of previously denoted 'andarmahals'.

Negotiation with spatial utility and socio-cultural norms

Changing family structure, increasing economic constraints and limited availability of rooms to accommodate the descendants compelled the residents living in these 'Rajbaris' to make necessary changes with its spatial utility and socio-cultural norms. With changing pattern of lifestyle, while some space lost its utility as in case of 'bhiyanghor' or joint family kitchen of Sri Sri Durga Bhavan; shedding of strict gendered based traditional norms allowed the residents to convert office spaces or 'baithak-khana' of 'bahirmahal' into that of bedroom as in Dorjipara Mitra Bari. With formal partitioning, residents were also compelled to chalk out new kitchen or bathrooms or convert the old store room to bathroom to serve the necessities.

Case specific understanding revealed that it is only the 'thakurdalan' of 'bahirmahal' that retained its utility unaltered, imparting these mansions its identity. Economic constraints though compelled the residents to bring down the grandeur of celebrations, but nevertheless it provides the extended family a reason to gather in the courtyard, revoking their pride in age old culture and heritage. Particularly during Durga Puja, each of these 'thakurdalan' and its adjacent courtyard turns out to be melting pot of traditions and culture, serving as a must visit point for 'puja-porikromas[xvii]'. Commercializing this cultural identity and architectural grandness, the residents of Sovabajar Rajbari (Raja Gopinath Deb's portion), Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari, Dorjipara Mitra Bari, Jadulal Mullick's House and Sri Sri Durga Bhavan have started giving out this portion of 'bahirmahal' on rent for commercial shooting, holding marriage ceremonies etc. Parts of previously used business and ceremonial spaces comprising of 'bhiyanghor' and the store rooms in turn find its utility only during the time of pujas (refer fig 8).

Fig 8: present condition of 'bhiyanghar' of 'bahirmahal' of Sovabajar Rajbari.

A: The 'bhiyanghor' of bahirmahal that finds its utility only during the time of religious occasions. B: Since the ceilings of ground floors were too high, so the store room has been partitioned into two parts and this wooden stair connects the upper portion.

Source: photographed during survey work.

Such remains the case where 'bahirmahal' stands separated from 'andarmahal' as in Sovabajar Rajbari, Chatu Babu Latu Babu's Rajbati or that of Jadulal Mullick's House. Rooms on first floor, previously used as 'baithak-khana', Kacheri etc. are presently used as rooms for the servants who stays there, looking after maintenance of 'bahirmahal' and 'thakurdalan'. Thus over time, while the servant rooms in 'andarmahal' got converted into separate residential zones, the rooms in 'bahirmahal' made place for servant's quarter. In case where portions of bahirmahal are also being used for residential purpose, as in case of Dorjipara Mitra bari, a single 'nautch-ghar' in ground floor has been partitioned into three individual rooms, given out on rent to the tenants. This gives an idea about the size of nautch-ghar as it previously was.   The courtyard centric 'andarmahal' can hardly be recognized owing to formal partitioning or its conversion to multi-storeyed apartments. Informal partitioning of 'andarmahal' as witnessed in Sri Sri Durga Bhawan, Roy mansion or residential portion of Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari made evident the large sized living rooms, its old architectural inclinations and that of jointly owned 'thakurghar'. Gendered biased nature of space utilization hardly exist. In contrast stand, small 2bhk boxed structured apartment located on rear portion of Dorjipara Mitra Bari or in portion of Sovabajar Rajjbari (refer fig 6). While new attached bathrooms have been chalked out within Sri Sri Durga Bhavan's old built forms, presence of old bathrooms away from living rooms or at the end of verandah as in Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari or that of Roy Mansion rest its root on Hindu traditional notions of purity. Stocked in living rooms and bed rooms are some antique possessions such as age-old furniture, marble tables, age old piano, tanpura, hat stand, most of which has lost its utility in present times. The residents have preserved these antiques, reminding of rich culture and aesthetic value that these age-old buildings possessed in its heyday.
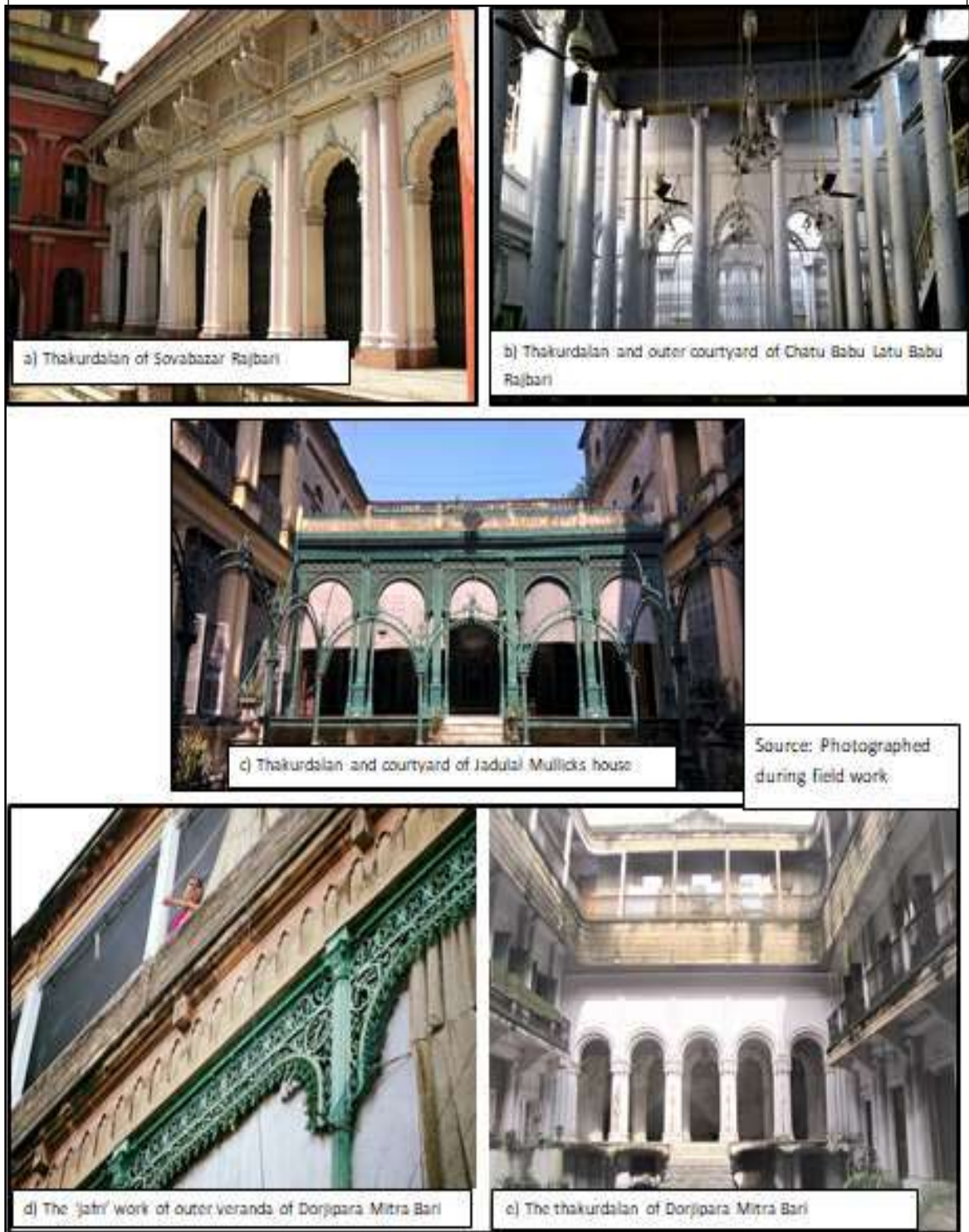
Buildings and their heritage concerns (refer table 1):

Amidst existential struggles and negotiations, growing concerns for heritage serves as a way out aiming to ensure sustainability for these age-old edifices. While heritage commercialization allows these structures to earn an urban revenue, funding its own maintenance; revitalization of urban core prepares the city to be a strong contender of UNESCO'S World Heritage List, earning global fund. Acknowledging such potentials that Kolkata do possess, Kolkata Municipal Corporation, under the guidance of Heritage Conservation Committee prepared the graded list of heritage buildings (gradation done maintaining the ASI norms in case of Grade I and INTACH norms for Grade II and III) that was published in 2009.[xviii] The list was supplemented by regulatory guidelines imposed upon the owners of these residential mansions which has been brought under 'heritage tag[xix].'

While residents do accept that most important outcome of this 'Heritage tag' is that it prevented the structures from demolition, rescuing them from constant threat of developers; it equally glamorized their historical significance, making their built forms important landmarks of cityscape (refer fig 9). This in turn promoted 'heritage tourism' and 'heritage commercialization' such that during Durga puja, it becomes a must visit places in 'Puja Porikrama' organized by West Bengal tourism. Moreover, in areas where residential portion stands separated from that of Bahirmahal or Thakurdalan, tagging the later portion as 'Heritage' did not pose much problem as in case of Sovabazar Rajbari, Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari and Jadulal Mullick's house.

On adverse side however, as claimed by the residents, tagging has done more harm than providing a relief. Uniform regulations both for public buildings and private residences irrespective of considering their functional character, ownership rights or financial background of the owner invited a new layer of problem. While heritage management process in Kolkata did not progress further than enlisting buildings as heritage, lacks of participatory approach followed by arbitrary imposition of regulations added legal tensions upon these dilapidated structures. While none of the buildings enjoy any tax exemption as promised in the regulations; with time, the property tax has doubled owing to the large expanse of land that these buildings cover.

Fig 9: Portions of the Rajbaris that has been declared as 'heritage'

a) Thakurdalan of Sovabazar Rajbari

b) Thakurdalan and outer courtyard of Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari

c) Thakurdalan and courtyard of Jadulal Mullicks house

Source: Photographed during field work

d) The 'jatri' work of outer veranda of Dorjipara Mitra Bari

e) The thakurdalan of Dorjipara Mitra Bari

Legal restrictions on structural alterations or its reuse, restrictions on the use of building materials particularly those falls under grade I, not only made the maintenance process costlier but necessitated the residents to bribe the local leaders or Municipal officials to get the necessary permission. Such situations have left the residents at the mercy of KMC, wherein the norms are getting sold at local level in terms of money leaving the purpose un-served. In fact claims like 'heritage tag' preventing these buildings from demolition is also questionable since only a portion of the buildings that has been tagged as heritage kept intact while residents are selling out the other portion. Such is the case of

Sovabajar Rajbari or that of Dorjipara Mitra Bari (refer fig 6 and 7). While none of the residents were consulted before tagging their private properties, such continuous financial tussle has forced the residents to move to the court for delisting their building from heritage list. Such is the case of Roy Mansion, the grade 1 building that got delisted in 2017 after seven years of long court case.

Few successful initiatives in this skirmish situation stand as silver lining, restoring the old neighbourhood architectures while commercializing city's image and identity. Such include the initiatives like Calcutta Bungalow, where the building of the Majumdars, established in 1926 in heart of the city has been successfully restored and presently being used as a classic heritage guest house. Another such initiative includes Bawali Rajbari[xx], involved restoration of 250 years old aristocratic mansion of Bengal Zamindar located in city's outskirts. Such heritage themed guest house not only stands as exemplary tool within its neighbourhood, showcasing potential that these heritage buildings possess if restored properly but also stand economically lucrative. However, such initiatives though turned profitable after initial private investment; nevertheless, failed to initiate community level change, where most of the buildings struggle to cope up with basic maintenance cost. The restored buildings in turn stands alone reminding the need to incorporate a 'landscape approach', in Kolkata's heritage management and planning process.

Conclusion

Revolving around the case study of six colonial mansions of North Kolkata, the study therefore reveals the existential struggles and negotiation that each of these mansions undergo at present, but continuing to impart the city its identity. Growing number of descendants and their need for privacy made structural and spatial alterations inevitable, undergoing successive partition within these dilapidated structures. While informal partitioning allowed retention of original architectural orientations, formal partitioning involved structural alterations in most cases. Legal partitioning gave way to sub division of ownership rights allowing residents to sell out their respective portion, as in case of Dorjipara Mitra Bari and Sovabazar Rajbari. In contrast, informal partition though initiated limited structural alterations but has aggravated the incidence of internal family clashes. Lack of initiative to share the burden of maintenance among co-owners, leaving it entirely upon those who stayed back, left the buildings totally devastated. Such remains the case of Roy Mansion. Moreover, shifting of younger generation to other parts of the city gradually lessened the sense of belonging with their ancestral house. Growing land values followed by monetary benefits offered by developers often seem lucrative against the regular cost of maintenance, making the owners choose the easy path of demolition. In terms of change in utility of space, it is the façade and the 'thakurdalan' that retained its utility delivering family identity in the neighbourhood and cityscape at large. In most cases, with moving out of the descendants, while some rooms like 'bhiyanghar' or 'baithak-khana' lost its utility over time, shifting of living space from 'andarmahal' to 'bahirmahal' can be seen in buildings where residents chose to stay back.

However, in spite of such structural and spatial alterations, it is these age-old structures that continues to remind the city its lost glory and once acquired identity of 'city of palaces'. Growing concern for urban heritage thereby enabled restoration of these mansions that holds historic significance even in 21st century, ensuring their sustainability. But lack of participatory approach in heritage management process, huge gap between policy formulation and its execution followed by imposition of strict regulatory norms upon the residents without paying heed to their financial constraints, is already earning the heritage management process a bad name. Though few successful restorations of age-old buildings are trying to set an example but that obviously is not enough to bring a city level change. The need of hour is therefore to initiate a vigorous heritage management and revitalization process of inner core, if Kolkata really wants to save these structures from complete disappearance, which would otherwise leave the city detached from its history and identity.

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[i] Heritage tag here refers to the graded list of heritage building published by Kolkata Municipal Corporation. (2009) Graded List of Heritage Buildings, Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Volume XI.

ii The present study refers the built forms as 'Colonial buildings' owing to the time period when these building first emerged. These are actually the hybrid architectures born from the amalgamation of Western architectural style combined with local knowledge and climatic constrains.

iii Rajbaris or Rajas Bari mainly refers to the Zamindari mansions, most of which were built during colonial times.

iv babu- hindu gentlemen, belonging to the upper section of the society

v The advertisement glamorises vividly the uniqueness of major Indian cities, that in turn imparts India it's cultural identity holding her faith in 'Unity in Diversity'. Incredible India
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXmYydzUeL8

vi bahirmahal- usually referred to as male's quarter, the outer chamber of the house.

vii andarmahal- usually refer to as women's quarter, the inner chamber of the houses.

viii thakurdalan-space where the deity is established during festivals

ix baithak-khana- drawing room

x Kacheri- room where the local 'raja' would deal with the legal problems, similar to that of panchayats in rural areas

xi nauthchghar- room for watching dance and music

xii thakurghar- the room for daily worship of the family deity

xiii atur ghar- the maternity room used in early days

xiv purdah- curtain or veil

xv mistri-master craftsman or mason

xvi trust fund- joint fund, either comprise of rental incomes or paid collectively by extended family members, usually kept for maintenance of public spaces within the concerned building.

xvii A small guided tour held by West Bengal Tourism that mainly involves pandal hopping, often involving a visit to the 'zamindar's houses where the family puja is organised in the courtyard

xviii (2009) Graded List of Heritage Buildings, Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Volume XI

xix Guidelines published for the owners of Heritage Building' from official website of Kolkata Municipal Corporations

xx http://www.therajbari.com/restoration/
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXsL96vu1z0

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