

Heritage on Wheels

By RANJITA BISWAS

In Satyajit Ray's film *Mahanagar* (The Big City), as the woman protagonist steps out to go to work for the first time, a tram passes in the background, instantly establishing the locale as Kolkata. It is the only city in India which retains this vintage transport system.

When introduced by the British in 1873, trams were drawn by horses. They were not meant for commuters, but were used to transport goods from the railway station at Sealdah in central Kolkata to the godowns at the Armenian Ghat on the Ganga. The company was sold within nine months as losses piled up. It was revived as the Calcutta Tramways Company in 1880 and registered in London. Electrified trams were introduced in 1900.

The coaches run on fixed tracks and are hooked to overhead wires. Electricity is drawn by trolley poles, a tapered cylindrical pole used to transfer electricity from an overhead wire to the control and propulsion equipment. San

For more information:

<http://www.calcuttatramways.com/home.htm>



A tram near the Kolkata Maidan.

Francisco's cable cars, by contrast, are pulled along the city's hilly tracks by underground cables. These are gripped with a vise-like mechanism that is operated via the grip lever in the front of the car.

Maintaining Kolkata's tram system has been an uphill task. Tardy upkeep, long power cuts, and customers' impatience with the slow-moving vehicles resulted in the elimination of many routes. So much so that many predicted the tram's imminent demise.

However, the Calcutta Tramways Company has spruced up its fleet. It has 272 trams, but only 110 trundle out of the depots every day. The oldest car is a veteran at 70. Twelve trams lying idle in the depot have been renovated and more are due for a makeover. The new avatar is already attracting more patrons and the revenue is rising. Clearly, Kolkata's love affair with the tram is not over yet.



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