

SECRETARIAT BUILDINGS AS A SYMBOL:***Architecture and Political Intention — a timeline of state power in West Bengal****A chronological research paper on the Writers' Building, the New Secretariat Building, and Nabanna***Madhumita Roy**

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The secretariat building is the administrative headquarters of a government which houses offices of officials and departments coordinating the day-to-day work. In West Bengal, the Writers' building, New Secretariat Building and Nabanna were more than just administrative centres. Each of these structures represents the political will of the regime that occupied it. From 1698 to 2026, this paper deals with the buildings and how every regime showcased its power and vision through architecture. The timeline spans Fort William's origins as a trading-post, the Writers' Building's journey from a clerks' office to a Neo-Classical symbol of imperial power, the independence movement of the 1930s, the modernist New Secretariat Building of 1954, and the more recent shifts involving Nabanna and the reclaimed Writers' Building. Parsing through heritage reports, economic data, and historical records, the paper finds that architectural choices constantly reflected political priorities. Public investment in these buildings is more a question of political necessity than economic need. Each architectural shift reveals how the leadership of West Bengal has utilized built form in the service of communicating legitimacy in a changing social and political context.

Keywords:

Writers' Building, Mahakaran, New Secretariat Building, Habibur Rahman, Nabanna, secretariat architecture, political symbolism, timeline, Indo-Saracenic architecture, colonial Calcutta, heritage conservation, West Bengal administration, B.B.D. Bagh.

1. INTRODUCTION: READING BUILDINGS AS POLITICAL TEXTS

In Bengal, the architecture of a secretariat building has generally been more than that of just an efficient workplace of the executive and core government offices. The political intentions and aspirations have found reflection over three hundred years at each secretariat. The actual decision not to construct, enlarge, decorate, abandon or repatriate either structure was never incidental; it is an assertion of legitimacy. An architecturally Oxbridge-like clerks' dormitory, a Neo-Classical monument, a Bauhaus laded steel tower or a repurposed commercial high rise was chosen for a specific purpose; each intended to convey something about the government's vision and authority. This history is best seen as a timeline; what each government wanted to convey through its architecture. From the East India Company's trading post in the seventeenth century to the political transfer in 2026, three principal buildings: Writers' Building, the New Secretariat Building and Nabanna have been witnesses to shifting regimes. These have either adapted or inherited or abandoned architecture to stake claim to the political ethos. In that sense, architectural style becomes political vocabulary. Whether it be the choice of classical statues and columns as in the case of governments that want to give a sense of permanence and historical continuity or steel and concrete for the ones that want to be modern. At each turn of events, Bengal's architecture has visually expressed the state and legitimacy of Bengal's government.

2. TIMELINE OVERVIEW: POLITICAL INTENTION AND ARCHITECTURAL SYMBOL, 1698–2026

Before examining each era in detail, it is useful to set out the timeline as a whole. The table (Table-1) below summarises, period by period, the ruling authority in power, the political intention that authority is understood to have held, and the architectural symbol built or occupied to express it.

Table 1: Timeline of political intention and architectural symbol in West Bengal's secretariat buildings, 1698–2026.

Period	Ruling Authority	Political Intention	Architectural Symbol
1698–1756	East India Company	Secure trade; assert a fortified foothold in Bengal	Old Fort William (fortified trading post)
1757–1776	East India Company (post-Plassey)	Consolidate revenue and administrative control after Plassey and the Diwani grant	New Fort William; expansion of "White Town" around Tank Square
1777–1780	East India Company (Warren Hastings)	House clerical labour cheaply and centrally; no need yet to impress; minimal investment	Writers' Building: plain three-storey clerks' quarters
1877–1906	British Crown (Bengal Presidency)	Project grandeur, permanence, and civilisational authority of the Raj	Writers' Building rebuilt in Neo-Classical / Greco-Roman style with statuary
1930	Bengal Volunteers (revolutionaries)	Strike directly at the symbol of colonial administrative power	Writers' Building reinterpreted as a site of anti-colonial resistance
1949–1954	Government of independent West Bengal	Assert post-colonial modernity and indigenous technical competence	New Secretariat Building: Bauhaus-modernist steel-frame tower
1977–2011	Left Front	Project administrative continuity and durability of one-party rule	Writers' Building retained largely unaltered as metonym for government
2013	Trinamool Congress	Break symbolically from colonial and Left Front associations; claim modernity	Nabanna: converted commercial tower in Howrah
2014–2025	Trinamool Congress / heritage bodies	Preserve heritage value while modernising infrastructure	Writers' Building under partial, slow restoration
2026–	Bharatiya Janata Party	Reclaim historical and emotional legitimacy; distinguish from TMC era	Return of Chief Minister's office to the Writers' Building

Source: Author

The rest of this paper lengthens each row of this timeline into a full discussion, organised chronologically rather than building-by-building, so that the reader can follow the way that political intention and architectural symbolism move together. The timeline resumes in Section 4, but we introduce a third aspect, namely GDP growth and public investment, below

3. ECONOMIC CONTEXT: GDP GROWTH AND INVESTMENT ALONGSIDE THE ARCHITECTURAL TIMELINE

Understanding the political symbolism of a building when set against the economic conditions of the time it was built, financed, or vacated makes it easier to read. During the time span of the paper, the important economic measure changes character. For the East India Company-era, the meaningful figures are revenue extraction and tribute since neither India or Bengal had a 'GDP' in the modern statistical sense. For the period post-Independence and contemporary period, India's national GDP growth rate, West Bengal's gross state domestic product (GSDP) and direct public investment in construction or renovation become directly comparable, recorded figures. The

figures in this section are assembled era by era so that those architectural timelines in Sections 4 to 12 can be read alongside the economic timeline that accompanied it.

3.1 The Company era: revenue, not GDP

After the Diwani settlement of 1765, the East India Company was granted the right to collect the land revenue of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by Shah Alam II. It was the Mughal emperor who in return for an annual payment of 26 lakh rupees paid for the upkeep of the emperor's court. This grant changed the firm from a trading concern into a territorial revenue-collecting power. It is this revenue base, not anything that would resemble a modern national income figure, that financed the earliest administrative structure of the firm in Calcutta, including the Writers' Building of 1777-1780. Today's economic historians note that the Company's revenue-raising efforts, along with the continued operations of the Company as a trading company, placed great stresses on the Bengal economy and significantly contributed to the catastrophic famine of 1770, even as the Company's own coffers and building budgets in Calcutta multiplied.

3.2 Independent India: The Planning Era (1950s)

The construction of the new secretariat building took place between 1949 and 1954 which began with the first five-year plan of India (1951–1956). The plan envisaged annual GDP growth of 2.1% but achieved an average of 3.6% due to robust agriculture. Public expenditure amounted to ₹2,069 crore (subsequently revised to ₹2,378 crore) of which most funds spent in irrigation, energy, transport and agriculture. Industry spent less. The construction of government offices like that of the new secretariat building is a state-led investment owing to growing economic activity of the public sector. A government architect, not a private developer, was put in charge of the design of India's first steel-frame high-rise.

3.3 The Long Plateau (1960s–1991)

For most of the period in which the Writers' Building served, largely unaltered, as the Left Front's seat of government, India's economy was growing at what economists later described as the 'Hindu rate of growth'. As a result, the average growth rate, from the 1950s through the early 1980s, was roughly 3.1 to 3.5 per cent annually. Above all, economic growth translated into a mere 1 per cent a year improvement in per-capita income. The modest growth rate is in line with the architectural pattern highlighted in Section 9. An administration with little fiscal space for new monumental building had every incentive to continue using existing inherited infrastructure rather than commission a new secretariat. Thus, through this analysis, we can draw the conclusion that continuity was both a political and economic choice.

3.4 2013: Liberalised growth and the cost of relocation

By 2013, India, which had undertaken the 1991 economic reforms, witnessed a change. In the year 2013–14, the growth of national GDP was 4.7%. However, the growth rate of gross state domestic product of West Bengal was higher at 8.62% at constant prices and 14.27% at current prices. The expense incurred by the state government in transforming the Hooghly River Bridge Commissioners' building into Nabanna (₹50 crore) and restoring the Writers' Building (initially ₹102 crore, subsequently referred to as part of a ₹2 billion programme) not only appears modest but also insignificant considering the West Bengal's multi-lakh crore GSDP. These costs were economic insignificant but essential for its administration; hence, the 2013 shifting was more motivated by politics and heritage than cost.

3.5 2025–2026: A faster-growing state and a reversal in a stronger economy

In 2026, during a period of robust economic growth, the decision to shift back the secretariat to the Writers' Building is made. The real GDP growth in India for FY2025–26 is expected to be 7.6-7.7%, one of the highest in G20 economy. The government of West Bengal has estimated the GSDP for 2025–26 to be ₹20.32 trillion, a nominal annual growth of 12%. Between 2012 and 2024, the actual GSDP development of the state was beneath the national average, and its share of national GDP diminished from 6.8% in 1990-91 to below 6% recently. So, the 2026 relocation takes place in a more favorable economic condition than before. But the national standing of the state shows a relative decline. So, the drive to undertake a major project like the restoration of Writers' Building also increases.

3.6 Summary table: Economic indicators alongside the architectural timeline**Table 2: National and state economic indicators alongside construction and investment figures for West Bengal's secretariat buildings**

Period	National Economic Indicator	West Bengal / State Indicator	Construction or Investment Figure
1765–1780	No GDP concept; annual Diwani tribute of 26 lakh rupees to the Mughal emperor	Company revenue collection across Bengal, Bihar, Orissa funds Calcutta construction	Writers' Building main block: ground coverage ~37,850 sq ft, completed 1780
1951–1956	First Five-Year Plan: target 2.1% GDP growth; achieved 3.6%	West Bengal PWD-led construction within national Plan framework	New Secretariat Building completed 1954; national Plan outlay ₹2,069 crore
1960s–1991	"Hindu rate of growth": ~3.1–3.5% average annual GDP growth	Writers' Building retained without major new construction	No major new secretariat construction; incremental block additions only
2013–14	National GDP growth 4.7% (constant prices)	West Bengal GSDP growth 8.62% (constant prices), 14.27% (current prices)	Nabanna conversion: ~₹50 crore; Writers' Building restoration: ~₹102 crore (initial)
2025–26	National GDP growth ~7.6–7.7% (fastest among major G20 economies)	West Bengal GSDP projected ~₹20.32 trillion (US\$236.56 billion); ~12% nominal annual growth	Writers' Building second-floor renovation underway ahead of 2026 reoccupation

*Source: Author's compilation based on available data***4. 1698–1756: FORT WILLIAM AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF ADMINISTRATIVE CALCUTTA****Political intention**

The first buildings of the East India Company in Bengal were characterised by a single function: to establish a fortified base in a central location, from which to trade and, increasingly, to administer and control the surrounding region. At this stage, the Company's buildings did not need to indicate any grandeur or legitimacy to an Indian public; security and function were the uppermost priorities.

Architectural symbol

This intention was expressed in the old Fort William, a fortified trading post whose construction commenced at *Sutanuti* in 1698 and was completed by 1706, named in honour of King William III of England. Although supposedly constructed for defence purposes, the fort served mainly to shield the Company's commercial interests. It was located at the site of the General Post Office of Kolkata. The vicinity that we now refer to as Lal Bagh, and was later referred to as Tank Square, became the focus of development, making it the core of what the British commonly referred to as "White Town," which came up around the freshwater reservoir, which was later known as Lal Dighi.

Economic context

Taking a historical period that does not entail any serious application of national-income accounting for either Bengal or India and orienting an economic variable on the volume of trade goods and revenue that the Company was looking to insulate rather than on GDP. The Company trading profits earmarked for the garrison and military expenses were utilized to construct the fort.

Outcome

In 1756, Siraj-ud-Daulah, Nawab of Bengal, invaded the Fort. The incident eventually caused the Black Hole of Calcutta where under unclear circumstances, a number of British prisoners died in a confined dungeon inside the Fort. The Company's troubles in the late 1750's were an early instance of an impressive building whose later afterlife as political symbol outlasted its function as administrator. Far from ending the Company's presence, this grievance would be cited in subsequent British military and political action in Bengal.

5. 1757–1776: CONSOLIDATION AFTER PLASSEY**Political intention**

Through the conquest of Calcutta by Robert Clive and the British victory in 1757 at the Battle of Plassey, and especially after the Company gained the right to collect revenue (the Diwani) in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa after the Battle of Buxar (1764), the political intent changed from a focus on securing a trading post to consolidating an up-and-coming territorial and fiscal administration. The Company now needed not just a fort but a civil government.

Architectural symbol

A new larger Fort William was built further south at *Gobindapur*. The area around the old fort and Lal Dighi, soon to be called Tank Square and later Dalhousie Square, was developed as the administrative and commercial heart of the city, accumulating banks, churches and government offices. The period of urban consolidation provided the architectural and geographical stage for all that followed; from this point, the precinct later to be christened B.B.D. Bagh became the administrative centre of gravity of Bengal.

Economic context

The Company gained direct access to the land revenue of Bengal through the Diwani grant of 1765. The Company also undertook to pay an annual tribute of 26 lakh rupees to the court of the Mughal emperor. Economic historians generally regard this single transaction as the moment that the Company moved from being a purely commercial player to one extracting revenue from territories. It is this enlarged base of revenue, which was predominantly from Bengal, rather than any measure of modern GDP, which underwrote the urban consolidation around the Tank Square during this period.

Outcome

By the 1770s the volume of letters, ledgers, and other papers created by the expanding revenue and trading apparatus had grown considerably beyond what the facilities could absorb, creating the immediate practical pressure that led to the next architectural development – the provision of a new building for the junior clerks of the Company.

6. 1777–1780: THE WRITERS' BUILDING AS PLAIN ADMINISTRATIVE NECESSITY**Political intention**

Governor Warren Hastings, who was appointed in 1772 as Governor of the Presidency of Fort William and went on to be the first Governor-General of British India, is widely credited with commissioning a centralised place for the Company's junior clerks or 'writers'. At this stage there was a straightforward administrative intention rather than symbolic one: no need to impress and only office.

Architectural symbol

The site of St Anne's Church which was demolished was granted to Thomas Lyon. Most accounts describe him as a carpenter by training. He established himself in Calcutta by then as a builder and self-styled architect. Lyon carried out the construction on behalf of Richard Barwell, a member of the Supreme Council of Bengal. Barwell was himself a former Company writer. The construction of Lyon commenced in 1777 with the main block, covering about 37,850 square feet, completed by 1780. The building was a deliberately plain three-storey block which was reportedly the first three-storey building of Calcutta. The building consisted of nineteen residential quarters for junior clerks with a plain straight unornamented façade (Figure 1). The contemporary English inhabitants did not consider it worthy of admiration; rather, they felt that it was an eyesore.

Economic context

During this period, the financial condition of the Company was under severe stress: increasing military pressure and administrative malfunctioning had brought the Company to the verge of bankruptcy in 1772, resulting in British parliamentary intervention through the Regulating Act of 1773. Given this situation, the deliberately unadorned, low-cost design of the Writers' Building is in keeping with an organisation that, even as it exercised enormous rights of revenue extraction in Bengal, was simultaneously dealing with a major liquidity crisis at home, and which was also further reason why architectural splendour was not, at this stage, a priority.

Outcome

The building achieved its limited administrative objective by bringing the Company's clerical staff close to the location of Company authority that already existed. So monotonous and banal is its design at this stage that it is hard to see how developments over the next century would bring about such a transformation in the architect's ambition.

7. 1877–1906: EMPIRE, GRANDEUR, AND THE NEO-CLASSICAL MAKEOVER**Political intention**

Through the second half of the nineteenth century, British rule in India had passed from East India Company administration, following the events of 1857, to direct Crown rule. Thus, the political intention behind public architecture across India had correspondingly changed. Colonial administrators aimed to display permanence and grandeur in their architectural designs, offering an unequivocal claim to civilising authority, rendering monumental, rational and everlasting the institutions of the Raj.

Architectural symbol

The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Ashley Eden, ordered the amalgamation of the principal government offices in 1877, which were earlier situated in Sudder Street and Chowringhee into the Writers' Building complex. Between 1877 and 1882 three new blocks were constructed perpendicular to the original main block. Another two blocks were added between 1889 to 1906, which resulted in a total added ground coverage of around 58,825 sq ft. During this reconstruction, the Victorian administration purposely attempted to give the institution what one account of the architecture describes as a "grand and powerful image" (Photograph 1).

**Figure 1: The Writers' Residence***Source: in the public domain***Photograph 1: The Writers' Building***Source: in the public domain*

Economic context

The campaign unfolded at a time that coincided with the apex of British imperial extraction from India, the main source of revenue being land revenue and customs, administered by the same Bengal Presidency apparatus of the rebuilt Writers' Building. According to economic historians, colonial fiscal policies such as heavy and regressive land taxation diverted resources to imperial administrative and infrastructure ventures. The lavish Victorian-era makeover of the Writers' Building, along with the installation of imported statuary and costly masonry work, was a visible, albeit a small, beneficiary compared to the much larger sums diverted for the railways, irrigation and military expenditure across British India in the same decades.

Outcome

The makeover was successful in turning an uninteresting clerks' dormitory into perhaps the most architecturally significant secretariat building of India. Furthermore, the building became from this point the unmistakable visual seat of British administrative power in Bengal. Also, this status would in time make it an equally unmistakable target for those who sought to resist that power.

8. 1930: THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT'S COUNTER-SYMBOL**Political intention**

By the year 1930, the political intention behind the action at the Writers' Building had changed camps. Bengal Volunteers cannot be seen as an outcast as this very success of the building as a symbol of colonial authority and power made it a valid target for a planned act which would strike directly at the apparatus of British rule.

Architectural symbol

On 8 December 1930, three young members of Bengal Volunteers, Benoy Basu, Badal Gupta, and Dinesh Gupta, entered the building dressed in European attire and shot dead Colonel N. S. Simpson, the Inspector General of Prisons, notorious for his treatment of political prisoners. A shootout occurred in the hallways of the building. In the face of police capture, Badal Gupta ingested poison and passed away immediately. Benoy Basu and Dinesh Gupta shot themselves. Benoy succumbed to his injuries five days later. Dinesh survived, but was hanged in July 1931.

Outcome

The colonial state's rebuilding of this same structure signified greatness and permanence; now it has become permanently associated with anti-colonial resistance. The area that surrounds the Writers' Building was renamed after Independence as B.B.D. Bagh, taking the initials of a trio of revolutionary men, and the Writers' Building itself came to be layered with two simultaneous and contradictory symbolic meanings as the site and architecture of colonial authority on the one hand, and the site of its most dramatic local defiance on the other. This double meaning would continue into this building's post- Independence life as the new state of West Bengal's secretariat.

9. 1949–1954: INDEPENDENCE AND THE MODERNIST COUNTER-STATEMENT**Political intention**

After India gained independence in 1947, the political motivations behind the architecture of states changed yet again. West Bengal's new government, similar to Delhi's new national government, had no inclination to sustain the neo-classical or neo-revivalist vocabulary of colonial rule. The new Government expanded with more departments and needed more spaces and decided to design another Secretariat building. Its intention was to assert modernity, technical self-confidence, and a clean architectural break from the imagery of empire, even while the colonial-era Writers' Building itself remained in continuous use as the seat of government.

Architectural symbol

Under the leadership of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy (1948–1962), the then government of West Bengal built a completely New Secretariat Building (Photograph 2) on a one-acre corner plot on what was then Hastings Street, about one-kilometre from the Writers' Building. The commission was for Habibur Rahman, who was a well-known architect at that time. He was the senior architect of the West Bengal Public Works Department at the time and had trained under the Gropius circle at MIT. Furthermore, this architect was schooled in Bauhaus design philosophy and completed the design of the building between 1949 and 1951 and the construction of the body was completed in 1954. Furthermore, the documentation of this project clearly states that the design was directly compared to the United Nations Headquarters in New York and the Ministry of Education building at Rio de Janeiro. The end result of Rahman was a fourteen-storey steel-frame tower in two L-shaped blocks. Furthermore, later on, three more blocks were added to it, namely the A, B and C blocks. Furthermore, the building of the tower took place on a structural grid of 6.6 by 6.6 metres. Also, the design was done to have narrow floor plates and concrete sun-louvres for high levels of natural ventilation in the building. This building was the first steel-frame high-rise in India and was the tallest modern building in Calcutta for about a decade.



Photograph 2: The New Secretariat Building

Source: Author

Economic context

Construction of the New Secretariat Building coincided almost precisely with India's First Five-Year Plan (1951–1956). The plan projected a 2.1 percent annual growth in GDP, and in fact saw a growth rate of 3.6 percent, thanks to favoured monsoons. Furthermore, per capita income increased by eight percent over the course of the plan. Out of total outlay of about ₹2,069 crore for the Plan, the largest shares went to irrigation and energy (27.2 per cent) and transport and communications (24 per cent). Industry received only 8.6 per cent. This state-led pattern of investment was reflective of the immediate post-war priorities of independent India. Accordingly, priority was given to agriculture for recovery and infrastructure for building. There was more emphasis on the latter rather than on industrial or show-piece construction. The new secretariat and similar government office buildings were financed within the overall framework of public investments. These were executed by a state Public Works Department rather than a private developer. This was at a time when public sector itself was the dominant force in the Indian economy in relative terms.

Outcome

The New Secretariat Building succeeded as a technical and an architectural statement, establishing Habibur Rahman, with Achyut Kanvinde in Delhi and Ahmedabad, as a creator of large-scale public modernism in India several years before Le Corbusier's Chandigarh project. Many department heads did not want to shift, as attraction for Writers Building continued. However, the symbolic success of the building was muted in comparison to its technical achievement. Since its inception, the Building has served as a working extension of the secretariat and accommodates departments and Principal Secretaries without ever displacing the Writers' building as the seat of Bengal's Government. This sets up one of the timeline's clearest lessons, that architectural ambition and political symbolism do not always travel together.

10. 1977–2011: THE LEFT FRONT AND THE POLITICS OF UNALTERED CONTINUITY

Political intention

In thirty-four uninterrupted years of Left Front governance, the political design for the Writers' Building focused on continuity. The administration made little external alteration to the existing colonial-era complex instead of assigning a new architectural symbol. This decision further established the building as the seat of Bengal's

government and came to be identified with the ruling party in the public mind. Since relocating to the New Secretariat Building was not a favorable option, demand for more space increased. During this period, the courtyards were blocked with taller constructions, the roofs were occupied by temporary constructions, and the front corridors were enclosed with partitions. Over a gradual timeframe, these adjustments made the complex fortification with an inward face. The administration clearly tried to minimize construction expenditure and showed unawareness of the obligations when occupying a heritage structure.

Architectural symbol

Between the year 1906 and up until the major reconstruction of World War II, there was little rebuilding. The building remained in appearance mostly as it established by the Victorian campaign of 1877–1906. The lack of architectural modifications was a political statement in itself, a historically grounded physical presence attesting to political permanence. During this period, the name of this building became a popular metonym for the government of West Bengal, a bit like ‘Whitehall’ is for the government it houses in Britain.

Economic context

This period of architectural stagnation corresponded with what economists have termed, India’s “Hindu rate of growth”. National GDP grew at an average of only about 3.1 to 3.5 per cent a year from the 1950s through the early 1980s. Moreover, per-capita income rose at barely 1 per cent a year once population growth is factored in. Finally, this slowdown was constrained by a restrictive licensing regime and domestic savings of only 10 to 15 per cent of GDP. New secretariat building was not created during these decades both because the public investment space at the national or state level was limited but also because of a deliberate political choice. Both these factors complemented each other. After all, a government that has little fiscal headroom to spare for new monumental development has every reason to turn a political virtue out of occupying the building it already has.

Outcome

Yet by the twenty-first century, continuity that served political purposes had exacted a heavy physical toll. Incremental twentieth-century additions, 13 interconnected blocks crammed into and around the original courtyards, compromised ventilation, light, structural integrity. Meanwhile, deferred maintenance allowed asbestos hazards and other general decay to accumulate. By the time the Left Front lost power in 2011, the structure which had symbolised resilience was in a state of near-crisis.

11. 2013: TRINAMOOL CONGRESS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF RUPTURE

Political intention

The Trinamool Congress government under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, which took office in 2011, confronted the structural crisis at the Writers’ Building with a practical and symbolic intention. To vacate a building that required major renovation in the real sense. Also, to disconnect the new government, both physically and visually, from a building which is inextricably connected both to colonial rule and to the thirty-four years of Left Front government.

Architectural symbol

In August 2013, the state secretariat departed from the 250-year-old Writers’ Building, an old heritage structure, to a recently commissioned modern high-rise Nabanna (Photograph 3). While retrofitting facilitated a quick business-to-office transformation, commercial high-rises proved deficient in layouts, circulation security, and infrastructure due to planned design. Nabanna does not present the institutional authority and civic symbolism commonly expected in secretariat buildings, which are designed to convey government status and values. The change raises issues of public pride as the impressive buildings of secretariat buildings have long been the source of collective identity and common aspiration. Consequently,



Photograph 3: The Nabanna Building

Source: Author

while functional, repurposed commercial facilities such as Nabanna may not be able to perform the symbolic and representational functions of a real government secretariat.

Economic context

The transfer happened in one year when India's national GDP growth was negative and with 4.7 percent at constant prices in 2013-14 was well below the decade's standards. On the other hand, West Bengal's own economy was, by contrast, growing distinctly faster than the national average. According to the Central Statistics Office, during the same year, West Bengal's GSDP expanded by 8.62 percent at constant prices 14.27 percent at current prices. Thus, in 2013-14 West Bengal was ahead of India's GDP growth standards. In relation to this state net economic base, the Nabanna conversion cost of ₹50 crore and the cost of initial restoration for the Writers, estimated at about ₹102 crore, were small amounts. So, the decision to shift was based on structural and political aspects. The state was not lacking in financial capacity to maintain the existing building.

Outcome

Bengal government was more than two hundred years old but was operating from a building which does not have any inherited architectural or historical links with colonial or pre-Independence legacy. Although the official reason was the temporary closure of the Writers' Building, commentators and opposition parties at the time saw this moving out symbolic. They interpreted it as a rupture, replacing a heritage building with modernism which is more efficient and administrative. However, the original ambition of the Writers' Building architecture is minimal. But, this is not the case with the New Secretariat Building which is modernist in its architecture and was constructed over six decades ago a mere kilometre away.

12. 2014–2025: RESTORATION AS AN INSTITUTIONAL INTENTION

Political intention

With the core functions of the secretariat moved, the political and institutional intent shifted to heritage. A wish, expressed by the state government and by national conservation bodies, to preserve the Writers' Building's historical and symbolic value while remedying its structural failings that had necessitated its vacation. While its intention was not overtly partisan, it was technical and commercial. However, the slowdown of intentions was emerging as a pointed issue.

Architectural symbol

Work on restoration started in December 2013 at an approximate cost of ₹102 crore. A detailed, phased Conservation Management Plan was prepared by a multidisciplinary team from Jadavpur University, Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology (IIST), Shibpur and Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH, among others. A team of international heritage consultants including AusHeritage advised the removal of the later coats of paint and cement render to expose the brick. The project envisaged not only structural repair of the original building but its transformation into "a modern state secretariat" which will also retain "heritage status". Water harvesting, solar panels and other passive sustainability features were also designed to be incorporated.

Economic context

Even as India's economy has grown in scale over this decade, restoration funding for the Writers' Building remained well off the project's own technical ambitions: later on, annual maintenance allocations were reportedly only around ₹1 crore, a small fraction of multiyear sums required to execute a multi-part Conservation Management Plan for a 550,000 sq ft heritage complex. The difference in the national and state economic growth on the one hand and the line in the budget for heritage restoration on the other indicates that the growth in GDP does not ensure continuous allocation of resources to any specific capital project, particularly heritage conservation which during these years has to contend for allocation against infrastructure and welfare allocations of more political immediacy.

Outcome

Despite progress being made in the restoration work by the 2020s, by mid-way through the decade only around a quarter to a third of the total restoration scope is estimated to have been completed. This is due to annual maintenance funding of just ₹1 crore reportedly, and the project's oversight committee meeting only infrequently. During this time, the building overwent never completely abandoned, several departments including sections of the PWD itself continued to function from parts of the complex. The episode demonstrates a gap, already well known from Indian heritage conservation practice more generally, between a worthwhile, professionally validated plan and the sustained financial and administrative commitment necessary to execute it.

13. 2026: THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY AND THE RECLAMATION OF HISTORICAL LEGITIMACY

Political intention

After the 2026 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election, the Bharatiya Janata Party won majority of seats in the 294-member Assembly, forming its first-ever government in the state and ending fifteen years of Trinamool Congress rule; new Chief Minister took oath on 9 May 2026. The stated political intent of the new government with respect to the secretariat was explicit: to reconnect governance with what party leaders claimed was Bengal's "administrative heritage and historical identity", and to differentiate the new government from the Trinamool Congress regime which Nabanna had come to represent.

Architectural symbol

BJP's state leadership (the party has been signalling this since at least 2021) was to shift the seat of government from Nabanna back to the Writers' Building (Photograph 4), reported in May 2026. The second floor offers the largest space that is currently vacant and the Chief Minister's office is likely to go here as renovation is ahead of opening. As the larger complex is still remaining undeveloped, only Blocks 1 and 2 can be expected to be operational in the near future, with the departments occupying these blocks, including engineering offices being moved out, officials indicated.

Economic context

The reclamation is happening against a much more robust economic backdrop, both national and state, than was the case in 2013. India's real GDP growth for FY2025-26 has been estimated at about 7.6-7.7%, the highest for any one of the G20 major economies while West Bengal's GSDP for 2025-26 has been pegged at about 20.32 lakh crore (US\$236.56 billion) with average annual GSDP growth pegged at about 12% in nominal terms. Simultaneously, the state's average real GSDP growth over 2012-2024, at about 4.3-4.6 per cent, has continued to lag behind the national average of about 5.6 per cent and the state's share in the national GDP has declined from 6.8 per cent in 1990-91 to under 6 per cent in recent years.

With a state government pulling in a bigger absolute revenue base than it did in 2013, even as it does not have the same national standing, it would seem to have the fiscal space, as well as the added political incentive, to complete a high visibility restoration and reoccupation of the Writers' Building where the previous regime's attempt was halted.

Outcome

As of this writing, the transition is in the early stages, as the Chief Minister is allegedly working temporarily from the West Bengal Legislative Assembly annex building pending the completion of renovation work on the second floor of the Writers' Building, and the building's Wikipedia entry already states has been "used for the role again since 2026". The decision effectively closes a thirteen-year loop where a colonial-era building was vacated by one party and claimed by a different party for reasons that are almost a mirror image: not to break with the past, but a deliberate, photographable assertion of continuity with it.

14. Synthesis: What the Timeline Shows



Photograph 4: The Writers' Building

Source: Author

Read end to end, the timeline assembled in this paper demonstrates a consistent pattern: each major change of political intention in Bengal's governance has been accompanied by a corresponding architectural decision, even when that decision was simply to leave an existing building unaltered. The pattern can be summarised as four recurring strategies, each illustrated more than once across the timeline:

- Plain functionality, used when there is no political need to impress (the Writers' Building, 1777–1780; the old Fort William, 1698–1756).
- Ornamented grandeur, used to assert permanence, civilisational authority, or historical legitimacy (the Writers' Building after 1877; its reclamation in 2026).
- Modernist rupture, used to assert technical capability and a break from inherited tradition (the New Secretariat Building, 1949–1954; Nabanna, 2013, in a far more modest register).
- Deliberate continuity, used to make an existing building stand for the durability of the regime occupying it (the Writers' Building under the Left Front, 1977–2011).

Three key observations emerge. Architectural ambition and political symbolism do not always play out together. The New Secretariat Building, with greater architectural merit than the Nabanna, never became more than Writers'. In contrast, the Nabanna, of greater pedestrian scale, has become a potent symbol of a new administrative regime. Furthermore, the symbolism of a building changes over time, even contradicting its original design purpose. The Writers' Building was originally reconstructed as a symbol of colonial permanence. Afterwards, it became a monument to anti-colonial resistance and after that a metonym for ruling parties quite distant from the original text. Moreover, heritage architecture becomes a reusable political resource for one regime after another, irrespective of ideology. The appeal of the 2026 BJP government to the historical identity of Writers' Building shows how its material legacy continues to serve contradictory political narratives through generations.

15. CONCLUSION

The secretariat buildings of West Bengal as evolving symbols were examined in this paper. The Writers' Building went from being a clerks' dormitory (1777) to a Neo-Classical symbol of imperial permanence (1906); the site of anti-colonial resistance (1930); the seat of independent Bengal's government for sixty-six years; a symbol of rupture when vacated (2013) and, by 2026, became a marker of historical legitimacy for a government with no direct links to its predecessors. Unlike the New Secretariat Building, India's first steel-frame skyscraper designed by a Bauhaus-trained architect that showed architectural innovation while its symbolic resonance was lesser known and it served its role silently for decades while political narratives shifted to other sites. The time does not suggest that political intention solely determines architecture. Each government renegotiates the relationship between built form and symbolic meaning, often reusing built forms that carry different historical implications. An economic analysis of the construction of secretariat buildings indicates that this type of investment is rarely reflective of overall growth in GDP. For instance, the New Secretariat Building was constructed in 1954 during a time of lesser growth of the nation. Further, in the case of Nabanna and the Writers' Building, not many funds were allocated for their construction and the GSDP of the state had seen a significant rise after 2013. Restoration delays continued in the 2010's despite national growth. The most important pattern is political: governments throw money at the secretariat that presents the desired message. Gaps in funding for restoration are often one of preference, not ability. In future, similar study of other Indian secretariat buildings may be undertaken to gauge their transformations to colonial constructions, modernist addition, recent relocation or restoration.

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