



# **THE MUSIC AND THEATRE OF C.R. PARK**

## **HOW BENGALIS IN DELHI SUSTAIN AND NEGOTIATE CULTURE**

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**The Music and Theatre of CR Park:  
How Bengalis in Delhi Sustain and Negotiate Culture.**

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## Introduction

The history of Chittaranjan Park is deeply rooted in the traumatic events of the 1947 Partition of India, which led to one of the largest mass migrations in history. Millions of people were displaced, and among them were thousands of Bengalis from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Many of these displaced individuals—particularly government officials, professionals, and middle-class families—settled in different parts of India, including Delhi. However, finding stable housing in the national capital was a challenge, as most resettlement efforts focused on refugees from West Pakistan.

To address this issue, a group of bureaucrats and influential Bengalis formed the East Pakistan Displaced Persons (EPDP) Association in 1954. Their primary aim was to secure land in Delhi for displaced Bengalis who had been uprooted by Partition. The association worked closely with the Indian government to petition for housing rights, arguing that East Bengali migrants were being neglected in comparison to their Punjabi and Sindhi counterparts.



After nearly a decade of negotiations, their efforts bore fruit in the early 1960s when the government allotted land in a then-remote area of South Delhi, close to what is now Greater Kailash. This settlement was originally called the EPDP Colony and was envisioned as a space where Bengali families could rebuild their lives while preserving their cultural heritage.

The land allocated for the colony was anything but hospitable. The area was rocky, uneven, and lacked basic infrastructure such as roads, drainage, and electricity. Initial settlers had to undertake the enormous task of converting this inhospitable terrain into a livable neighborhood. Plots were distributed to Bengali families under 99-year leases, which were later converted into freehold ownership. The colony was initially divided into eleven blocks (A to K), each designed to foster close-knit community living. Over time, as more families moved in, additional blocks like M, N, O, and P were added to accommodate the growing population.

By the 1970s, roads had been paved, markets had sprung up, and community centers were being developed, signaling the transition of the colony from a refugee settlement to a thriving neighborhood. From the very beginning, CR Park was more than just a residential settlement, it was a cultural and intellectual hub for Delhi's Bengali community. The early settlers were deeply committed to preserving their language, traditions, and religious practices, leading to the establishment of numerous cultural institutions and spaces.

Durga Puja, the biggest festival in Bengal, became an integral part of CR Park's identity. The first Durga Puja in the colony was organized in 1977, and over the years, it grew into one of the grandest celebrations in Delhi. Today, the CR Park Durga Puja celebrations attract thousands of visitors and are recognized as among the most authentic outside of Bengal.

Alongside religious and cultural activities, Bengali theatre, literature, and music flourished in CR Park. Bangiya Samaj, a cultural organization, played a key role in promoting artistic and intellectual exchanges. The establishment of Chittaranjan Bhawan provided a space for



cultural performances, book readings, and community meetings, reinforcing the colony's reputation as a hub of Bengali life in Delhi.



CR Park's markets became an essential part of its identity. The Bengali community ensured that their culinary heritage was preserved through specialized shops and food stalls selling traditional Bengali ingredients, fish, sweets, and street food. The CR Park markets soon gained a reputation beyond the Bengali community for their authentic Kolkata-style food, including *mughlai parathas*, *kathi rolls*, *jhalmuri*, *mishti doi*, *roshogollas*, and a variety of freshwater fish like *hilsa* and *rohu*. These markets became a cultural landmark, drawing food lovers from across Delhi.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the residents wanted to rename the colony to reflect its Bengali heritage. Several names were suggested, including *Purbachal*, which means "eastern settlement." However, the proposal that gained the most support was to name it after Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, a revered freedom fighter and political leader from Bengal. With support from prominent Bengali intellectuals and political figures, the demand was taken to the Indian government. The final approval came during Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister, and in the early 1980s, EPDP Colony was officially renamed Chittaranjan Park.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, CR Park witnessed rapid expansion and urbanization. The number of residents increased as more families sought to settle in the area, leading to the construction of additional apartment complexes and housing units. Infrastructure improved significantly, with better roads, parks, schools, and healthcare facilities.

By the 1990s, CR Park had established itself as one of the most desirable residential areas in South Delhi, not just for Bengalis but for people from diverse backgrounds. However, despite the increasing diversity, the neighborhood retained its distinct Bengali character, with its cultural events, festivals, and markets continuing to play a central role in community life.

### **Bengalis outside Bengal**

CR Park quickly became a nucleus for Bengali culture in Delhi. The establishment of the Kali Mandir in 1973 served as a cultural hub to congregate around. Initially a modest Shiva temple, it expanded in 1984 to include shrines dedicated to Kali and Radha-Krishna. The temple complex not only catered to religious needs but also became a focal point for cultural activities, especially during festivals like Durga Puja.



The annual Durga Puja celebrations in CR Park are among the most elaborate in Delhi. The neighborhood transforms with intricate pandals, traditional rituals, and cultural performances, drawing visitors from across the city. These festivities underscore the community's commitment to preserving and showcasing Bengali traditions. The focus of this project however, is not on the 'sacred' parts of Bengali culture, like Puja festivities, rather on the relatively mundane community activities- like that of theatre and music performances.



While CR Park began as a predominantly refugee enclave, its demographic landscape has evolved. The initial wave of settlers from East Bengal laid the foundation, but over the decades, the area has attracted a more diverse population, including many Bengalis from West Bengal. Thus, for many years CR Park unquestionably retained its Bengali essence, evident in its markets, eateries, and cultural institutions.

The locality's markets, particularly Market No. 1 and Market No. 2, are renowned for offering authentic Bengali cuisine, fresh fish, and traditional sweets. Stalls selling items like phuchka, jhal-muri, and various fish preparations provide residents and visitors with a taste of Bengal in the heart of Delhi. Numerous other markets have also popped up since, all with a



predominant Bengali focus to cater to residents. No place better to feast on classic Bengali cuisine, and culture.<sup>1</sup>



Socially, the community has maintained a strong network through various associations and clubs. The Chittaranjan Park Kali Mandir Society, for instance, plays a pivotal role in organizing events, managing cultural programs, and ensuring the welfare of residents. Such organizations have been instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural continuity. Other notable institutions include the Chittaranjan Das Memorial Society, and the Chittaranjan Park Bangiya Samaj.

Beyond the famed Durga Puja festivities, the neighborhood has also thrived as a hub for Bengali performing arts- Rabindra Sangeet, natok (theatre), dance, and community-led music gatherings. Cultural institutions, informal clubs, and even individual enthusiasts have kept these traditions alive, organizing performances that showcase both classical and contemporary Bengali art forms. Whether it's a children's natok during Durga Puja, a senior citizens' choir singing Tagore's melodies, or an impromptu *bauli* performance in the market square, CR Park's cultural vibrancy extends far beyond religious rituals. This piece will

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<sup>1</sup> Photo Credit: Urchin-t Matters

explore how these artistic cultures, of drama and music, persist, adapt, and even evolve in response to the changing demographic and social realities of the neighborhood. Before that however, a peek into the very cultures that now struggle to be relevant.

### Theatre and Music in C.R. Park

For much of its history, CR Park was more than just a residential enclave, it was a cultural sanctuary where Bengalis recreated the artistic world they had left behind. Theatre, dance, and music were not just forms of entertainment; they were integral to community identity. As a long-time resident who prefers to stay anonymous remarks, the weekends usually saw rehearsals for *natoks* (plays), winter evenings were filled with *adda* (intellectual discussions) on Tagore and Satyajit Ray, and festival seasons were incomplete without all-night *Jatra* performances, Bengal's folk theatre tradition, known for its grand narratives and dramatic dialogues.



Theatrical performances, deeply rooted in Bengal's tradition of *natok*, have long been a highlight of community life, especially during festival seasons. Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul Geeti, and classical dance performances were once the mainstay of cultural evenings, bringing together generations of Bengalis who found solace and identity in these shared artistic expressions.

Shipra, from Navapallay Natya Sanstha theatre group, one of the oldest and most prominent theatre societies in C.R. Park, teaches children Bangla Natoks every week. Children, aged 5-15, come to her twice a week, sometimes more, to learn a classic Bengali play for a

performance at a community gathering. Sometimes, she also conducts improv theatre in Bengali, so that her students are more engaged with the art of theatre itself, rather than simply learning the lines. She laments that many parents today are unable to keep in touch with their culture themselves, having to outsource this ‘education’ to people like her. Dance, music, and theatre classes are the only way to keep Bengali children still connected to the cultural roots of their parents.



She recalls the apparent “golden period” of Theatre in C.R. Park to be the 90s, when a huge theatre audience began to accumulate in the colony. “Gole Market, Kashmere Gate, used to be the centre of Bengali theatre before”. After that, huge names in the Delhi theatre circuit moved to C.R. Park. Dhoomketu, from Moti Bagh, being one of them. Plays were staged not just in C.R. Park, but also in the Kamani auditorium,





Shri Ram centre, etc. Other notable theatre groups include Shapno Ekhon, led by Soumik Ray, and Green Theatre, led by Deepak Gupta.

Soumik Ray, alias Shomik Da is a founder of *Shapno Ekhon* (dream now), a major cultural organisation and theatre group that works in Delhi, to keep the spirit of theatre thriving. Shomik Da does not see theatre however as a means to “keep bengali culture alive”. He cautions against ideas of vanguarding culture. Instead he points towards the immense benefits that syncretism offers, as Bengali culture mixes and diffuses with non-Bengali cultures. He also thinks that “in the past 4-5 years, theatre groups have sprung up a lot in Delhi”.



Nilasis, a longtime cultural organizer in CR Park, recalls the sheer grandeur of Durga Puja performances in the past. “Twenty, even fifteen years ago, we had full-length Bengali *natoks*—Tagore’s *Tasher Desh*, Utpal Dutt’s *Tiner Talwar*, Badal Sircar’s *Ebong Indrajit*. These weren’t casual affairs; they had serious actors, rehearsals for months. The whole

community came to watch,” he reminisces. But over time, full-fledged Bengali plays started dwindling. “Now people want something shorter, livelier—so we have one-hour *yatra* style performances, sometimes just skits.” Plays in Bengali still happen, but they often share space with Hindi and English productions. *Tumhari Amrita*, the famous Shabana Azmi play, has been staged multiple times during the Pujo season, a stark contrast to the days when only Bengali dramas would be performed.

Mita Bhowmick, a long-time resident, recalls a time when CR Park’s cultural life revolved around Bengali theatre and music. “Earlier, every *natok* was in Bengali, and people would rehearse for weeks. Now, even the theatre groups mix in Hindi and English to bring in a wider audience,” she notes. Theatrical performances in the neighborhood, once dominated by adaptations of Tagore and contemporary Bengali playwrights, now frequently incorporate multilingual dialogues to cater to a more diverse crowd. Productions that once drew from the *Jatra* tradition, Bengal’s unique form of folk theatre, have become rare, replaced by modern plays and professional performances featuring well-known artists from outside Delhi.



Music, once the most sacred of Bengali art forms in CR Park, has seen perhaps the most dramatic shift. Rabindra Sangeet and Nazrul Geeti still find space in cultural events, but they are no longer the dominant sound of the neighborhood. “You used to hear Rabindra Sangeet everywhere during Pujo—at the pandals, at home, in the markets. Now it’s mostly Bollywood

remixes, Arijit Singh, and Punjabi beats,” Mita sighs. Nilasis agrees, noting that musical competitions have changed significantly. “It used to be serious, kids trained in Rabindra Sangeet, performed classical Bengali songs. Now, they mostly sing Hindi film songs, because that’s what gets applause,” he says.

Despite the changes, some traditions endure. During Durga Puja, the "Ananda Mela" cultural program still features a segment dedicated to Rabindra Sangeet and Nazrul Geeti. Well-known Rabindra Sangeet exponents continue to perform at community events, keeping the flame of classical Bengali music alive. However, the younger generation often prefers to participate in the "Antakshari" competitions, singing Bollywood hits and popular Bengali film songs.

Jayati Ghosh, one of the long-time members of *Rabigeetika*, a renowned Rabindra Sangeet organisation in Delhi, seems unfazed by such changes. She regards most musical styles as fluid, adapting to their times while carrying remnants of their past. “(earlier) it was a way to remain connected to our roots, to keep Bengali musical traditions alive in a city that was not our own,” she reflects. “It was about nostalgia and wanting to keep old traditions going”

Over time, however, *Rabigeetika* has become more than just a bridge to the past. It has cultivated a space where serious, dedicated musicians engage with Rabindra Sangeet not just as tradition, but as a discipline, something to be studied, perfected, and passed on with pride. “The audience may be smaller, but those who remain are deeply committed,” Jayati says. “Earlier, it was mostly community elders who upheld these traditions, but now we have younger artists, professionals and dedicated persons who see Rabindra Sangeet as an art form in its own right, not just a relic of the past.”

She acknowledges that the larger cultural landscape of Chittaranjan Park has changed, that Bollywood and Punjabi music have taken center stage at public events. But she also insists that Rabindra Sangeet has not been erased, it has simply retreated into spaces where it is more consciously nurtured. “It may not be the dominant sound of the streets anymore, but

the music is still here. And as long as there are people singing it, teaching it, and performing it with sincerity, it will always matter.”





## Changes and Evolution

However, over the last two decades, and especially in recent years, the cultural landscape of CR Park has undergone a transformation. The Bengali ethos that once dominated the stage is now making way for a more cosmopolitan, hybrid identity.

Anoushka Sinha, a student who has grown up in CR Park, observes that while cultural events are still central to the neighborhood, they do not hold the same significance for younger residents. “Pujo is fun, but it’s more like a festival now—big crowds, Bollywood songs, flashy lights,” she says. Traditional Bengali performances, once the heart of these celebrations, now share space with mainstream entertainment. Hindi and English fusion music often dominate stage performances, with Rabindra Sangeet and folk songs struggling to hold their ground. While earlier generations grew up with Bengali-medium schooling and cultural immersion at home, today’s youth are more fluent in Hindi and English, and their artistic preferences reflect this shift, as Fusion and Bengali Rock bands like Cactus occupy the stage at Puja concerts.



Despite these changes, cultural engagement has not entirely waned. Ishani Das, a long time participant in local theatre, highlights the resurgence of theatre and music in post-pandemic CR Park. “After COVID, people became more emotional. There’s *more*



theatre, *more* poetry, *more* music now,” she says. The demand for performance spaces has led to the increased use of formal venues like CR Bhavan and the A-Block auditorium. Bengali associations, such as the Bengal Association and Bangiya Samaj, continue to organize literary and musical gatherings, ensuring that cultural traditions, though evolving, remain alive.

This is a view endorsed by Shomik Da as well, emphasizing how change can lead to innovation. “Art, music, theatre and all should not be limited to these boundaries, you know? Just because people don’t know a language as well as they did, does not mean they still can’t feel, or understand poetry, music, drama and all”. It is both ironic, and appropriate that those most involved in the music and dramatist scene of C.R. Park seem to embrace the demographic changes more than those who merely look upon the same.

However, funding and participation dynamics have shifted significantly. While Bengali families once sustained these cultural initiatives through *chanda* (community donations), sponsorships from businesses now play a greater role. Anoushka notes that non-Bengalis contribute 60-70% of the funding for Durga Puja and other events. “They come, bring their kids, take part, it doesn’t feel different anymore,” she adds. This increased involvement of non-Bengalis has influenced programming choices, making events more inclusive but also less centered on Bengali heritage.<sup>2</sup>



Food, another integral aspect of CR Park’s cultural fabric, mirrors these changes. Mita observes that while *mughlai paratha* and *kosha mangsho* remain festival staples, food stalls now prominently feature momos, pizzas, and fusion cuisine. “Pujo used to be about eating Bengali food. Now it’s like a carnival, you get everything,” she says. Similarly, the literary

<sup>2</sup> Picture Credit: D-Block Pujo Samity

culture that once flourished during Pujo, with magazines and poetry readings, has waned. “People post Pujo pictures online, it becomes a whole sort of thing of itself like halloween pictures, or diwali pictures” Anoushka points out.



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### What of “identity”?

These transformations reflect broader shifts in CR Park’s identity. As older generations retire and move to Gurgaon, Noida or back to Bengal, younger families, including many non-Bengalis, settle into the neighborhood. While Durga Puja remains grand, its character is increasingly cosmopolitan. The once insular enclave is now an open cultural hub, where Bengali traditions persist but must compete with the forces of modern urban life. Whether this signals a dilution or an expansion of CR Park’s cultural identity remains a question of perspective. For some, it is a necessary evolution, a way to ensure continuity in a changing world; for others, it marks the gradual fading of an era where Bengali theatre, music, and dance were unquestioned cornerstones of community life.

<sup>3</sup> Picture Credit: The Telegraph

However, Ishani Das believes the pandemic has rekindled an emotional connection to performance arts. In fact, there has been a resurgence of smaller, intimate cultural gatherings—Baul performances in the market square, poetry recitations in community halls, and even jazz-fusion concerts where Tagore’s songs are reimagined with modern instrumentation. New spaces have emerged, such as auditoriums in A Block and CR Bhavan, providing a more formal setting for cultural expressions beyond just the Pujo season.

The decline of literary activity has been another marker of change. Nilasis laments that *pujo patrikas* (magazines) and literary sessions were once an essential part of celebrations. “Every Durga Pujo, we had magazines filled with poems, short stories, essays. People actually read them. Now, everything is on Instagram.” Anoushka agrees, noting that cultural expression has moved online. “People don’t write for *pujo patrikas* anymore, they make Pujo vlogs, post stories, do live streams of events. That’s how culture is archived now,” she says.

Unlike earlier, when performances were exclusively Bengali-led, today non-Bengalis make up a significant portion of both the audience and the participants. This financial and social integration has influenced the programming itself. With a more mixed crowd, the preference for Hindi, English, and fusion performances has grown, pushing Bengali-centric content to the margins.

At the same time, CR Park’s evolving identity is shaped by broader changes in Delhi’s urban fabric. The rise of high-rise apartments, the influx of corporate professionals, and shifting economic aspirations have all contributed to a more cosmopolitan neighborhood ethos. For younger residents, the Bengali identity of CR Park is no longer an exclusive marker of belonging; instead, cultural hybridity has become the norm. Pujo pandals now host Bollywood-style dance performances alongside traditional *dhunuchi naach*, and Rabindra Sangeet often shares space with contemporary indie music. This blending of cultures has



not erased Bengali traditions but has recontextualized them within a larger, more pluralistic urban identity.

## Conclusion

Despite these shifts, many older residents remain wary of what they perceive as commercialization. Sponsorships from major brands, corporate-backed cultural events, and the increasing spectacle of Pujo celebrations have, in their view, transformed what was once a deeply personal, community-driven festival into a public spectacle shaped by market forces. “It used to be a cultural thing, *natok*, Rabindra Sangeet, literary debates. Now it’s about food stalls, influencers making content, and the biggest DJ nights,” Mita says. The transformation of CR Park’s food culture mirrors this shift. The traditional Bengali fare, *mughlai paratha*, *kosha mangsho*, *ilish bhapa*, still exists but is now accompanied by pizza, sushi, and bubble tea stalls.

While the grandeur of CR Park’s Durga Puja has undoubtedly put it on the city’s cultural map, some question whether the intimate neighborhood gatherings and literary discussions of the past can ever be reclaimed. The answer, perhaps, lies in how the younger generation chooses to navigate this balance. Whether they see themselves as stewards of a rich cultural legacy or as pioneers of a more fluid, adaptive identity that reflects the ever-changing nature of urban life.

Despite these transformations, what remains unchanged is the spirit of CR Park itself. The neighborhood continues to be a hub of artistic expression, even if the forms and mediums have evolved. While the Bengali cultural monopoly has faded, it has given way to a broader, more inclusive artistic identity. For some, this represents the inevitable march of progress, an adaptation to modern sensibilities. For others, it is a slow dilution of the very essence that made CR Park unique. As the older generation moves away, and the younger one reshapes cultural traditions to fit a digital, fast-paced world, the question remains, will CR Park always be a Bengali cultural bastion, or is it transforming into something entirely new?

### **About the Author**

Pratyush Rudra is a final-year undergraduate student of Sociology at Hindu College, Delhi, with a keen interest in Social Movements and Collective Behaviour, particularly through an ethnographic lens. He has previously worked with the Society for Participatory Research in Asia and G20 India, engaging with issues of grassroots democracy and knowledge production. Beyond academia, he is an avid filmmaker, trained fine artist, and amateur musician, exploring the intersections of art and activism.

