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Cultural Landscapes of Displacement: Lived Experiences of the Street Performers in Kathputli Colony, Delhi

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Abstract

As a major city, Delhi provides an abundance of employment prospects for outsiders. Dating back to the 1950s, the Kathputli Colony is famous for its street performers, most of whom are from Rajasthan. Home to a variety of musicians, dancers, acrobats, magicians, snake charmers, and other folk performers, it is particularly well-known for its Kathputli art (puppeteers). This article aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth overview of the field, which is why the current study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach. In this article, the focus is on the cultural landscape of these street performers, which has changed significantly over the course of their existence. The Delhi Development Authority initially demolished the illegal colony, and the majority of them were relocated to a temporary transit camp in Anand Parbat, where they are still residing in squalid and degraded conditions. Their performing arts, in addition to the cultural and social settings of their landscape, have been impacted by the displacement. Many artisans have already left Delhi due to the difficulties and issues that they faced, and others who have remained are resisting and struggling to make ends meet as they await the commitments that were made by the Delhi government. This article argues that people-centred planning is important for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage in rapidly transforming cities.

Keywords: Cultural Landscape; Puppetry; Street Performers; Migration; Displacement; Transit Camp; Resistance; Delhi; India

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Introduction

The Kathputli Colony in the Shadipur Depot area of Central Delhi is home to the largest colony of street performers in the world, which supported Rajasthani traditional folk art and culture and included more than 3,000 families. The colony was originally built by a small group of Rajasthani migrants who practised traditional puppetry. Initially inhabited by Rajasthani puppeteers, the colony later became home to a number of artists from other states; these artists performed in the streets as magicians, fire performers, snake charmers, traditional healers, acrobats, and musicians (Abraham, 2017; Banda et al., 2013). These artists shaped a distinctive cultural landscape characterised by shared traditions, informal performance, community interactions and a strong sense of belonging over several decades. However, everything changed with the demolition of the colony: from the disappearance of art forms to the very survival of these artists. The past ten years have been the worst for these performers. These puppeteers and other artists of the Kathputli Colony used to perform in Delhi's empty streets and public areas, but as time passed, they gradually vanished and are currently hardly noticeable. In pursuit of modern infrastructure and planned urban growth, the redevelopment projects have transformed informal settlements across rapidly urbanising cities. While such projects focus on improving the physical environment, they also shape the cultural landscapes, everyday practices[1] and social relationships that communities have developed over decades (Baviskar, 2003; Sauer, 1941). The displacement not only signifies more than the loss of shelter, but it also disrupts place attachment, community networks, cultural continuity and collective memory for the communities whose livelihoods are closely associated with particular places (Cresswell, 2015; Tuan, 1977).

In his famous novel *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie (1981) depicts a fictional "magician's ghetto" in Delhi, a literary representation that has been associated with the community of performers living in Kathputli Colony. Fanari (2017) draws attention to this connection while documenting the cultural practices, livelihoods and displacement- related concerns of Kathputli Colony's people. This association provides a useful literary point of reference for examining how urban redevelopment projects affect the cultural landscape and lived experiences of these street performers in Kathputli Colony, located in Shadipur, West Delhi.

The cultural landscape of Delhi's Kathputli Colony, an illegal slum that housed over 3,000 families, has been examined, and the study is important for documenting and preserving the rich cultural folk art forms of the artists of Kathputli Colony, which are at risk of being lost due to demolition and displacement. The focus of this article has been on comprehending the cultural landscape in relation to space and place by discussing how migration has shaped this cultural landscape and how cities have progressively contributed to it. According to Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), a space gradually becomes a place through lived experiences, emotional attachment and the meanings that individuals assign to it. The broader phenomenon of gentrification and urban displacement, which can lead to further marginalisation of the urban poor in major cities like Delhi, has been explained by focusing on the Kathputli Colony. The challenges the artists face after the displacement in the name of urban development, like the decline in performances, disruption of community networks, and loss of income that are crucial for their livelihood, have also been examined. The study also examines how social settings have influenced the cultural landscape in the cases of the transit camp and

[1] Everyday practices refer to the routine activities that people utilise, experience and give meaning to spaces in their daily lives (de Certeau, 1984). In the setting of Kathputli Colony, these practices include performing traditional art forms, engaging with the community, transmitting artistic skills across generations and making a living through public performances. Displacement alters access to performance venues, social networks and livelihood opportunities, disrupting these established patterns.

the previously demolished Kathputli Colony. In general, this study discusses Kathputli Colony's diverse and complex cultural landscape in relation to traditional Rajasthani puppetry and serves as a critical study for urban planners and policymakers, while highlighting the human cost of redevelopment projects.

Existing studies on Kathputli Colony have focused on issues of eviction, housing rights, community participation, redevelopment policies and urban governance (Chowdhury, 2024; Dubey, 2016; Zahan & Chowdhury, 2026). There was limited attention given to understanding how displacement transforms the lived experiences of street performers. Also, less attention has been given to the relationship between place attachment, cultural identity and the continuity of traditional artistic practices following displacement. This study addresses these gaps by analysing Kathputli Colony through the concepts of cultural landscape and place, offering a cultural-geographical perspective.

This study shifts the focus from housing and redevelopment policies to the cultural consequences of displacement that have been experienced by these traditional street performers. Also, the study has provided a geographical understanding of how urban redevelopment reshapes identities, cultural practices and community life by employing the concepts of cultural landscape (Sauer, 1941) and place (Tuan, 1977). Taking these as background contexts, the overarching aims of the study are as follows:

- Examine the cultural landscape and its transformation following the displacement of Kathputli Colony.
- Document the lived experience of displaced street performers and analyse the impacts of relocation on their traditional artistic practices, livelihoods and community life.

Methodology

Kathputli Colony was a slum cluster located in Shadipur, a neighbourhood in West Delhi (Figure 1). The nearest metro station to Kathputli Colony is Shadipur, and it has a major bus depot named Shadipur Depot. Shadipur is located between Kirti Nagar and Patel Nagar.

After the demolition, almost 2,800 families relocated to a transit camp in Anand Parbat, a few kilometres away from the colony, where many continue to reside while awaiting permanent rehabilitation (Dupont & Gowda, 2021). Since this study seeks to understand how displacement has transformed the cultural landscape and everyday lives of these artists, the transit camp in Anand Parbat serves as the primary field site. Apart from the transit camp, the artists were also interviewed in two different venues, including a school located in Gurugram and the National School of Drama in Mandi House, Delhi, where they performed with their team.

To examine the transformation of Kathputli Colony through the lived experiences of displaced street performers, a qualitative ethnographic approach has been adopted for this study. Ethnography is well suited for an in-depth understanding of people's everyday lives, social interactions, cultural practices and meanings within their social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elliott et al., 2023). It also involves interpreting fieldwork experiences in relation to broader theoretical perspectives on social and cultural life (Matera & Biscaldi, 2021). Here, ethnography enabled an exploration of how these street performers of the colony experienced displacement and relocation affected their cultural identities, livelihoods, community relationships and attachment to place.

Field observations, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews provided insights into how displacement affected the artists' everyday lives and cultural practices. The collected data were analysed in relation to the study's conceptual framework to examine the connections between cultural landscape, displacement, place attachment, livelihoods and community relationships.

Fieldwork was conducted between December 2023 and April 2024 at the Anand Parbat transit camps and two other venues where they

performed. Primary data were collected in two stages.

The first stage involved exploratory non-participant observation, which enabled the researcher to familiarise themselves with the study area, to observe everyday activities and to identify potential participants for detailed interviews.

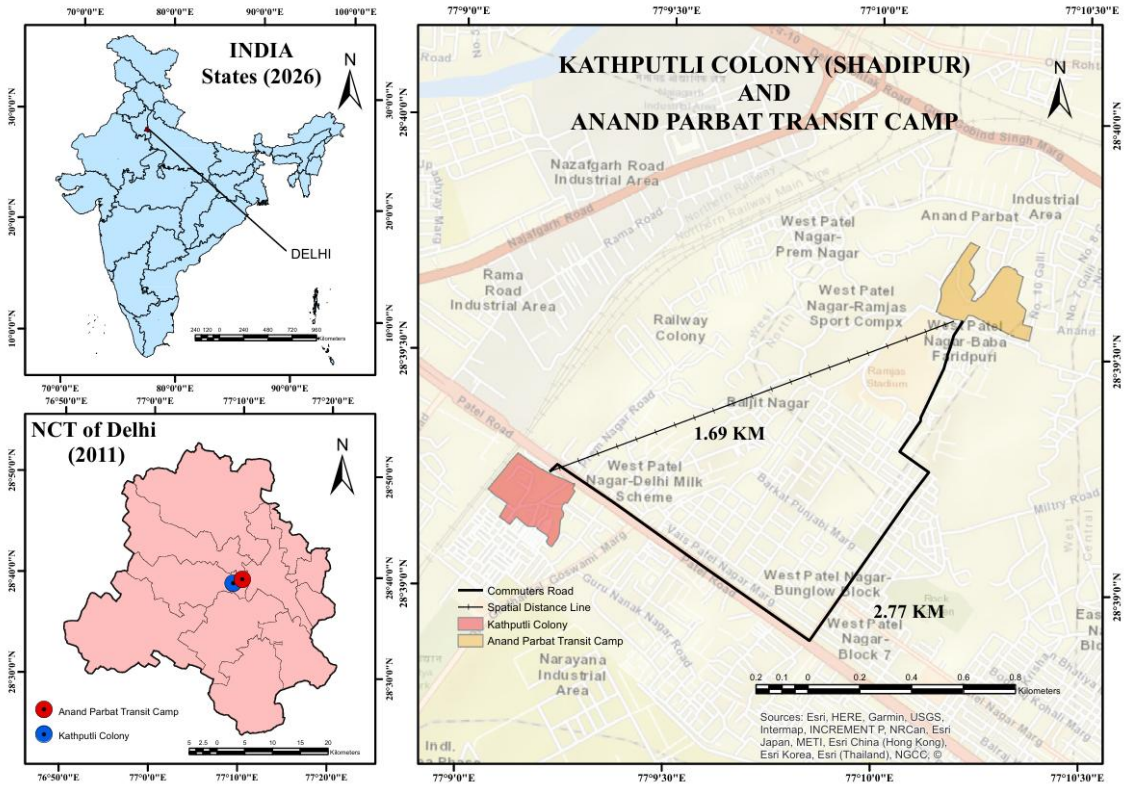


Figure 1: Location of the former Kathputli Colony and Anand Parbat transit camp, Delhi. Source: Author's compilation using map data and base map attribution from Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, Intermap, INCREMENT P, NRCan, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), Esri Korea, Esri (Thailand), NGCC, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

Participants were initially identified through secondary sources, including YouTube videos, documentaries and other publicly available materials featuring artists associated with Kathputli Colony. After field observation and going through secondary sources, the author approached prominent and renowned artists during field visits, like Puran Bhat, a National Award- winning puppeteer and Rajkumar Bhat. Following the initial interviews, the researcher encountered other artists while accompanying these two main artists during their performances. These encounters facilitated informal conversations and further interviews with artists performing alongside them in their respective venues. No formal gatekeeper was involved in participant recruitment. This approach combined the purposive identification of prominent artists with field- based engagement with other performers.

The second stage consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews, which enabled the researcher to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences. At this stage, informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting interviews.

All interviews were conducted in Hindi and audio-recorded on a mobile phone that the researcher carried with him to the field with participants' permission. The researcher's proficiency in both Hindi and English facilitated the interpretation and translation of participants' accounts. After returning from the field, the researcher listened to the recordings and translated the interview material into English for use in the analysis and writing

process. In addition, field notes were written in English in a diary which the researcher carried with him during performances and following informal conversations and observations. These notes documented performers' artistic practices, social interactions and everyday activities in their field settings. The documentation of the translation process is important for methodological transparency in qualitative interview research (Clark et al., 2017).

Primary data were collected through observations, informal conversations, in-depth interviews and detailed case studies. Secondary data were gathered from books, articles, government reports, journals, magazines, e-paper articles, and internet websites.

The use of in-depth interviews alongside ethnographic observations provided complementary perspectives on participants' experiences and everyday practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elliott et al., 2023). This combination helped contextualise artists' accounts within their social and cultural settings and examine their experiences of displacement, livelihood changes and transformations in cultural practices.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was selected for this research as the study specifically focused on individuals directly affected by the displacement of Kathputli Colony (Patton, 2015), where the key informants were chosen for interview after several visits to the field, and the participants were thoughtfully recruited by the researcher on the basis of population to fulfil the aims and objectives of the research. In total, 19 respondents were interviewed, comprising traditional puppeteers, musicians, dancers, Dhol artists and other folk performers (16 artists: 11 men and 5 women), along with 3 key informants associated with rehabilitation and transit camp administration. In addition to these interviews, two detailed case studies (main artists) were undertaken to understand the long- term social, cultural and livelihood impacts of displacement across generations. Shorter narratives were also collected from other artists during fieldwork.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Field notes, interview transcripts, and observational records were read repeatedly to identify the recurring themes and patterns related to cultural landscape, place attachment, displacement, community relationships, livelihood and changing artistic practices. Similar responses from these artists were grouped into broader thematic categories, which were interpreted in relation to the objectives of this study and the conceptual framework of cultural landscape and place. Further, the representative quotations from the participants have been incorporated into the section of results and discussion to support the interpretation of the findings. Alongside other participant narratives, the major case studies were analysed and were given particular attention to provide a deeper understanding of the long-term cultural and livelihood impacts of displacement.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, ethical principles were followed. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research and informed consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, and they were not forced to answer any question and were free to decline any question they did not want to answer or withdraw from the interview at any stage. The interactions were conducted with sensitivity, particularly while discussing issues related to displacement, emotional experience and livelihood insecurity. The names of participants included in this article are used with their informed consent and permission. Puran Bhat and Rajkumar Bhat, the two principal artists featured in this study, verbally consented to being identified by their real names in the publication and expressed a preference for being named in recognition of their artistic work. Varun Bhat (grandson of Puran Bhat), Kuldeep Kaur, and Sanjay Gaur (government officials from Transit Camp) also consented to being identified by their real names in the publication. Pseudonyms have been used for other interview

participants to protect their identities and confidentiality.

Results

The Cultural Landscape of Kathputli Colony

Since the beginning of time, humans have dealt with nature in various ways, leaving an imprint on the environment, and these humans construct cultural landscapes, each of which addresses a different culture. Landscape shaping is the process by which humans change the natural environment over time to create a cultural landscape, and the primary factor behind the transformation is culture (Sauer, 1925). Humans transform the natural landscape according to their values and representations; that is why cultural landscapes differ from one another in terms of representation.

Bourassa (1991) asserts that a significant component of the system that alters a specific landscape is humans, who are social beings and cultural carriers with a unique combination of aspirations, skills and experiences.

A specific cultural landscape, as already stated above, such as that of Kathputli Colony, reveals the attitudes of street performers toward the modification.

Traditionally, rural communities were entertained by *putli tamashae* (puppet shows), especially Kathputli, a type of folk puppetry that originated in the Indian state of Rajasthan. The travelling puppeteer families performed short pieces from a predetermined repertoire as they went from town to hamlet (Awan, 2021). The vacant space in Delhi was first inhabited by the Kathputli artists, which is why it was given the name "Kathputli Colony". Ancestors of these puppeteers once performed for the kings and queens of Rajasthan, and they were mostly travelling puppeteers who performed occasionally to make ends meet. The government and several institutions invited these well-known puppeteers and other artists from Kathputli Colony to perform whenever they wanted to showcase different cultures of India. With their performances around the globe, these puppeteers brought pride to India. Consider Puran Bhat, a well-known artist from Kathputli Colony who has performed all over India and in over 25 countries and continues to do so with his sons and grandsons (Bhattacharjee, 2014). Puran Bhat is an accomplished singer in the Rajasthani folk style and a skilled string puppeteer in the Kathputli tradition, which he has elevated to a fine art (Bhattacharjee, 2014; Sarkar & Poovaiah, n.d.). He has collaborated on projects with Bal Bhavan, the National Centre for Education, the National School of Drama Repertory Company, and the Shri Ram Centre Puppet Repertory. In 2004, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the president of India, awarded Puran Bhat the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* Award (awardee for 2003) for his contribution to Rajasthani traditional puppetry (Foley & Smith, 2013), establishing him as a well-known Kathputli artist in the colony.

Suraj Bhat, a traditional folk singer who has performed in a number of government and private institutions, is another well-known artist from Kathputli Colony residing in a transit camp. Although he is no longer able to sing, he leads and manages a group of singers and dancers.

Similar to the artists mentioned above, there are a number of other well-known artists in the colony. Alongside these puppeteers, there are other talented performers who are skilled in dancing and singing folk songs. Additionally, there are magicians, acrobats, traditional healers, snake charmers, fire breathers, and players of various musical instruments who are from various parts of India and are part of the Kathputli Colony. These artists settled in the colony later. Over time, certain forms of art vanished, particularly after the demolition of the colony. Delhi Development Authority (DDA) initiated the redevelopment of Kathputli Colony in 2008-2009 as an in-situ slum rehabilitation project which was implemented through a public-private partnership (PPP) model. The project aimed to redevelop the site and provide housing for approximately 2800 eligible families in economically weaker section (EWS) flats (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2018; Shankar, 2017). In February 2014, relocation to the transit camp at Anand Parbat began, while the major demolition drive commenced in October 2017

(Chitlangia, 2017; Shankar, 2017). These artists used to play in streets, alleys, vacant lots, and other outdoor areas, but as time went on, urban residents lost interest in these kinds of art forms, and the spaces where they used to perform were no longer available. Acrobats, magicians, and traditional healers are becoming increasingly rare and will not be seen performing often, and performers who perform fire stunts and snake charmers have virtually vanished and now, the majority of the performers are *Dhol* players, vocalists, dancers, musicians, and puppeteers. The *Dhol* players were most prevalent in the transit camp in Anand Parbat. Several details regarding their work were disclosed during an interview with one of the *Dhol* players, who was going to perform in a private party with his group of five friends. The artist said that he has performed at a number of events and most of the *Dhol* players have social media accounts where they post videos showcasing their work and allow others to get in touch with them. In order to increase their appeal and get people to hire them for events and parties, they must dress in a unique and vibrant way. Another *Dhol* player in the transit camp, who is a father of two sons, was interviewed. He disclosed that instead of performing at parties and events, he stays with *Kinners*[2] and plays the *Dhol* for them. He added that their income was significantly impacted by the demolition of the colony and the COVID-19 pandemic. Several artists have encountered major challenges and are currently coping with them in the camp.

It has been determined from the fieldwork and interviews that the cultural landscape of Kathputli Colony is composed of multiple aspects, including migrants, cultural practices, informal settlements, resistance, and displacement, and these factors have altered the cultural landscape of the Kathputli Colony over time. Starting with the landscape of migrants, where these artists from Rajasthan inhabited a city's vacant area, while looking at how they practise their culture and other traditional art forms in that particular space, which sets it apart from others. In accordance with performing traditional cultural art forms, they also began constructing their homes informally within that landscape. The city gradually experienced the development of an entire landscape of informal settlements. The inhabitants of Kathputli Colony then resisted the government's abrupt decision to demolish the colony. During and after demolition, acts of resistance were subsequently carried out in that specific landscape by these artists and their families. All of the Kathputli Colony's artists and their families were told to relocate to a transit camp after the demolition, out of which a small number of artists left Delhi due to loss of livelihood, while few moved to other areas of Delhi because they were unable to survive in the transit camp. Once more, the narrative revolved around migration that began in this particular landscape of Kathputli Colony.

Tale of the Migrants from Rajasthan

A lot of information about how culture has evolved in a given cultural landscape may be gained by examining the migratory flows within that landscape. Ernst Georg Ravenstein's pioneering work on migration provides a crucial foundation to understand the migratory movements. Ravenstein formulated a series of generalisations about migration, including the significance of distance, the predominance of short-distance movements and the role of economic opportunities in influencing migration in his influencing papers published in 1885 and 1889 (Ravenstein, 1885, 1889). These generalisations which are based on nineteenth - century migration pattern, provide a useful starting point for examining mobility and its relationship with economic and social conditions. In the context of Kathputli Colony, the migration of these performers from Rajasthan to Delhi can be examined in relation to livelihood opportunities, while their subsequent displacement to the transit camp highlights how forced relocation differs from migration

[2] *Kinners* (also spelt *Kinnars*) are members of a socio-cultural gender community in India, often associated with the Hijra community, although terminology and identity may vary across regional contexts (Bevilacqua, 2022). In this study, during the interview, the participant used the term to refer to the community for whom the participant's husband performed as a *Dhol* player.

undertaken in search of opportunities. Gosal (1961) emphasised that migration cannot be considered a mere shift of people from one place of residence to another, as it is most fundamental to the understanding of continuously changing space content and space relationship of an area. An individual who relocates due to various reasons is referred to as a migrant. In their own way, migrants have played a significant part in shaping the cultural landscape.

There is a complicated relationship between place and space. Landscapes serve as both a physical place to live and a location with significance and contributions to the identity of society. Through human interaction over time, places are created. As Tuan (1977) explains that space becomes place as people become familiar with it and attach meaning and value to it through experience. Place is a location that is shaped by human stories and experiences, whereas space is defined as a place where humans have no social ties. Place is full of objects and meanings, and inside there is space. In Tuan's view, a space is a more visible expression of a specific time period. Places are carved out of space by cultures, where spaces are scientific and open; on the other hand, places are intimate and peopled. Over time, places are made by people with the help of culture, which is full of meanings and emotions. 'Place' refers here to something we people make. As Sack (2003) said, a place is made when we take an area of space and intentionally bound it and attempt to control what happens within it through the use of (implicit and/or explicit) rules about what may or may not take place. To study the cultural life and the landscape of these street performers of Kathputli Colony, it is crucial to know their place, which has evolved over time.

The story began with a few individuals of Rajasthan's 'Bhat' community who chose to seek out alternatives in order to improve their standard of living. In Rajasthan, these individuals were used to caring for cattle, primarily goats. In addition to having an agricultural history, this village had talented artists, and a couple of these artists travelled to Delhi in the 1950s in search of vacant public areas where they could perform and make some money. These performers were the first from their community to perform in Delhi's streets, grounds, parking lots, and other public areas. These artists were initially commuters on a daily basis. They would travel to Delhi for performances and return the same day. As more people witnessed these artists performing and making money, they began to follow. It was difficult for them to travel to Delhi every day to perform and then return home the same day. Thus, these artists made the decision to erect temporary tents near the Shadipur Depot in a vacant lot, and their family members also started joining them during visits. For a while, this temporary solution benefited these artists, and over time, they began to be joined by other artists and their families; in the following years, a number of additional artists joined the rest from various other states, like Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, West Bengal, and parts of South India.

Furthermore, on the basis of interviews, when the migratory movement in this specific landscape was evaluated, it became clear that the artists who initially migrated and performed were the ancestors of the present-day street performers and were part of a pattern of short-term migration. They used to come and go in accordance with their work schedule, which meant that they would arrive for a few days, perform, and then return. Over time, when they had constructed their homes in the city, they occasionally went back to their villages. Today, the migratory flow is less noticeable because many artists do not travel to their ancestral homes in villages, as they do not own any land in their villages, and a small number of them have sold their home, land and properties and moved to Delhi, whereas a few others claimed that they had never been there because they were born, married and had children in the colony. However, the migration ultimately led to the creation of the Kathputli Colony in Shadipur, which was eventually demolished, as discussed above in 2017 by the government.

Formation of Informal Settlements in an Urban Area

In search of greater prospects, migrants typically relocate to surrounding urban areas and begin searching for employment and other services. Every household in Kathputli Colony has a similar narrative. In addition to seeking chances in Delhi in the 1950s, these artists eventually found a place where they could begin to settle down. This area was vast and uninhabited and was in the middle of the city. They set up temporary tents in the vacant land, though illegally, and began to settle in the centre of an urban jungle. These tents eventually turned into shanties and colonies made of substandard construction materials. These artists had gradually filled the vacant land with unauthorised constructions. Subsequently, other artists followed and began to occupy land illegally to build their homes, and eventually the vacant area was populated with unauthorised and informal colonies. The slum eventually was given its own water and electrical systems. However, the Kathputli Colony's settlements gradually began to become crowded with migrants from neighbouring states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana, and others also began constructing houses in that illegal colony. Although the colony was primarily established by Rajasthani Kathputli artists, which is why it was given the name "Kathputli Colony", almost three thousand families were living there, displaying their creative and artistic abilities.

The city offered these artists a space to build their home as well as different spaces to perform. When a completely different landscape is imposed on an already existing landscape, the role of the city becomes distinct in and of itself. Examining articles and documentaries on the Kathputli Colony during its existence has revealed that Delhi's major cultural landscape included a distinctive cultural landscape and population shaped by diverse migrant communities and traditional performing arts (Dupont et al., 2014). Although the Kathputli Colony was never intended to be a part of Delhi, it is a tale in and of itself how an unplanned and informal colony built by these migrants came to be in a relatively brief period of time. The third and fourth generations of the primary artists, who originally came to Delhi from Rajasthan, have settled here. Delhi is now the birthplace of the present generation of Kathputli artists. One such instance is the household of Anita, a homemaker, and her husband, Suraj, who works as a *Dhol* player. Additionally, they have two sons who were born in Delhi. Furthermore, Anita mentioned in her story that she was born in Delhi and married there as well. Her mother and father, on the other hand, were from Rajasthan and moved to Delhi in search of employment. Similar to Anita, there are several cases that show how space becomes a meaningful place through lived experiences, social relationships and emotional attachments. Tuan (1977) explains how people develop meanings and values associated with places through experiences.

Earlier, we discussed how place is a meaningful construct that is constructed out of space. One of the clearest examples is how street performers, primarily Rajasthani traditional puppeteers, occupy a Kathputli Colony, a vacant area in the middle of Delhi. Even though these artists were using the empty area illegally, the municipal authorities did nothing about it because their political bosses considered them as potential voters. They occupied this area as their home, spending decades there with their families and imbuing it with their feelings and meanings. Here, there are many stories of exceptional artists, including their hardships, triumphs, unity, and much more. Outsiders and city residents viewed this informal settlement as a slum, but for these artists, it was their home. The colony had a sense of belonging and a feeling of "we". Apart from the space it offered for the construction of their homes, the city also played a significant role in giving these artists opportunities and a platform on which to play in order to support themselves. Because of the opportunities the city gave these street performers, they decided to build their homes in the city itself, eliminating the need for them to travel back and forth and return to their place of origin. The way that these migrants from Rajasthan established an informal settlement in

the centre of the city to survive by performing, promoting, and conserving their traditional folk art forms is an intriguing aspect of their relationship with the city.

Prolonged Intervention by the Government and Private Builders

Amidst the metropolis, an unplanned and informal colony emerged, populated by migrants from the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, and Bengal and elsewhere. In essence, the Kathputli-renowned colony began to host a variety of performers, including acrobats, snake charmers, *Dhol* players, folk dancers, folk singers, magicians, and many others. In Delhi's vacant locations, these artists used to showcase their artistic abilities, and a few of them received recognition and began to perform in a variety of public and private institutions. Over time, a few renowned artists brought the colony to the attention of the world, and over the span of 40–50 years, the artists and their families lived in a crowded, disorderly slum that had sprung up in the centre of the city.

In the name of urban development and the *in-situ* rehabilitation project, the government threatened the slum that had existed for fifty years, and despite being regarded as chaotic and dirty by others, the slum served as a creative area for all of these artists who were content and happy here. In order to finance the urban project that intends to make the city slum-free and to relocate impoverished neighbourhoods, the current threat of eviction is one of the first well-planned *in-situ* redevelopment initiatives aimed at rehabilitating the public space.[3]As one of the initial projects, Kathputli Colony will lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive city gentrification strategy.

Ajay Maken, the state minister of home affairs at the time, launched a colony rebuilding project in 2009, and it was started by the Delhi government in 2010 as a public-private collaboration with Raheja Developers.

The plan calls for Raheja Developers to construct free homes for displaced households on 60% of the property, and in turn, they would then be permitted to utilise the remaining 40% for a commercial complex and Delhi's tallest structure, the 54-storey luxury apartment complex called Navin Minar (Abraham, 2017).

The first *in situ* rehabilitation project in Delhi is the renovation of Kathputli Colony, and the prospect of a nicer housing complex with all the extra amenities, such as elementary and secondary schools, primary health centres, and markets and shops for necessities, is what the colony inmates look forward to. Relocating a slum population outside the municipal limits was the foundation of Delhi's slum development in earlier times, and this new development plan would provide housing and other amenities to the slum inhabitants at the same location rather than moving them to another area (Banda et al., 2013).

Resistance, Relocation to Transit Camp and Related Issues

Resistance to both government policies and private builders has long existed in the Kathputli Colony. They have opposed displacement, demolitions, and forced evictions. They are constantly striving to preserve their culture, housing, and means of livelihood. As part of the Delhi Master Plan for 2021 (Delhi Development Authority [DDA], 2010), the redevelopment of Kathputli Colony was conceived in 2009 (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2018). It was one of these unofficial and informal settlements

[3] Public space refers to spaces which are accessible to the public, and they are used for social interactions, cultural practices and everyday activities. Public spaces include, basically, the streets and common areas used by these artists for making puppets, holding workshops, rehearsals and performances, social interaction and their daily activities in the context of Kathputli Colony. Lefebvre (1991) provides a theoretical framework for understanding space as socially produced by humans through daily activities, social relations and power structures. So, redevelopment and displacement not only alter the physical environment but also the social and cultural uses of space. Although Lefebvre's work does not provide the only way to understand public space, his concept of the social production of space is useful for examining how the everyday practices of performers of Kathputli Colony are connected to their surroundings and how redevelopment may transform these relationships.

located in the Shadipur Depot Area of Delhi. However, the locals opposed the rehabilitation and began a struggle to stay there. About 1,350 households had been relocated to a transit camp at Anand Parbat by June 2017 (Press Trust of India, 2017). The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) planned to build multi-storey apartments as part of its *in-situ* development. Although the relocation began in February 2014, it proceeded slowly since not all locals could be persuaded by this assurance.

Residents presented their own alternative local development proposal, which combined cultural contributions with tourism to boost the local economy. The administration rejected this suggestion since it was not regarded as a genuine alternative. According to Fanari (2017), the exclusive, paternalistic, and short-sighted "clean up the slums" plan could have been replaced with a workable alternative agenda for improving the living conditions of slum people if this suggestion had been approved.

The Delhi government started a colony development project in 2010. In this instance, they collaborated with Raheja Developers, following the idea of a public-private partnership. Residential units, community areas for the heritage museum, an amphitheatre, shops, a police station, a place of worship, a weekly market, a children's park, and a venue for wedding ceremonies were all promised to the residents of Kathputli Colony, and after three years, the people were to be moved back to the original location (*in-situ* rehabilitation) after initially being relocated to the transit camp.

However, a twist was in store. The building of the EWS (Economically Weaker Section) apartments was deprioritised, and the private builder began concentrating on luxury apartments and shopping centres on a significant portion of their property (Sadiqe, 2022).

Resistance became ingrained in the landscape as the residents of Kathputli Colony began to enquire about their existence and means of livelihood. In the guise of urban growth, the government planned to destroy the landscape that served as a creative outlet for them. These artists questioned the government's intentions because, before being displaced, they were all used as vote banks, but abruptly they were being told to leave their homes and move to a transit camp.

These artists of the Kathputli Colony organised multiple protests and demonstrations, opposing the government policies. Their struggles were brought to light with the assistance of numerous NGOs, local organisations, media outlets and activists. A number of legal lawsuits were also filed by the community to challenge forced evictions. These artists have used their cultural expression, which is their strongest advantage, to express their resistance. These artists used their music, art, and cultural performances to help them express who they were. A few of the acts of resistance with their news sources are listed below:

- The proposed redevelopment of Kathputli Colony was strongly opposed among the traditional street performers, who feared that relocation and the demolition of their homes would threaten their livelihoods and traditional artistic practices. The puppeteer Puran Bhat expressed concern about the lack of suitable space for large puppets, musical instruments and other performance-related activities in the proposed housing arrangements (Burke, 2014).
- On Wednesday, 29 June 2016, residents of Delhi's Kathputli Colony gathered outside the home of Lt. Governor Najeeb Jung to express their disapproval of the Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) ineptitude (Mirror Now, 2016).
- According to Counterview, Delhi Solidarity Group (DSG), an ally of Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan (BAA), raised concerns about the way in which the DDA was obtaining residents' consent for relocation. The group alleged that DDA officials were approaching individual families in the presence of heavy police deployment and that public properties were being demolished without public consent (A Representative, 2017).

- On Sunday, 26 February 2017, hundreds of people from Kathputli Colony gathered at Jantar Mantar to express their displeasure with the postponement of their relocation (Times News Network, 2017).
- According to a BBC report, Puran Bhat and a few other Kathputli artists starred in the 2013 award-winning documentary "Tomorrow We Disappear", produced by two young American filmmakers, Jimmy Goldblum and Adam Weber, which focused on the conflict (Ward, 2022).

In the past, individuals were merely relocated to resettlements on the outskirts of the city or displaced when informal communities were destroyed. However, *in-situ* rehabilitations are now planned for people who qualify for new homes. In this instance, *in-situ* rehabilitation refers to providing accommodation for the residents of the informal settlements once the new structures are constructed. That said, nearly all of the residents of the Kathputli Colony left in 2017 following a number of protests and moved to transit camps, which were meant to be a short-term fix. They were assured of residences in the same locations where they had spent so many years.

When it comes to transit camps, they were constructed in 2012. In February 2012, the first group of Kathputli Colony slum inhabitants moved. About 527 families were relocated by December 2016, and all of them moved in September 2017 following the demolition of the Kathputli Colony. The transit camp in Anand Parbat is constructed on 17 acres of land, totalling 2,800 rooms with all the necessities. Additionally, there are few general stores in the transit camp that are exclusively run by these individuals of Kathputli Colony, as well as outside vendors selling food, vegetables, and other goods on carts. There were also small shops that sold *Dhol*-related items, which were offered to enhance the appeal and uniqueness of these performers' *Dhol*. Nine years later, in 2024, the colony's residents are still residing in a 10-by-12-foot room in the Anand Parbat transit camp, where they are compelled to store everything, including their creative instruments. These artists protested in different ways against the government's failure to fulfil its commitments both during and after demolition.

The field investigation revealed that the impacts of displacement extended beyond the relocation of the residents. Interviews and field observations indicated that the participants experienced multiple challenges in the transit camp, including disruptions to their livelihoods, social interactions, living conditions and everyday cultural practices. During the survey, several artists were interviewed and asked about their experiences living in the transit camp. The lanes are crowded and disorganised, and the transit camps was described as filthy. There are several people staying in the cramped accommodations. The most noticeable and significant issues with the transit camp where these artists reside are inadequate water supply, overcrowding, hygiene and sanitation issues, inadequate waste, lack of community spaces, maintenance and infrastructure issues, disruption of cultural practices, safety issues and disruption of livelihood (Dupont & Gowda, 2021; Shankar, 2017). One participant, a traditional dancer, described her life in the colony as follows:

> *Hum log sab milke rehte the. Kaam ke liye yahan-wahan bhatakna nahi padta tha. Colony mein shaadi se lekar tyohar tak hum sab manate the* (We all lived together. We did not have to wander from place to place in search of work. We used to celebrate marraiges and festivals together in the colony.)

The interviews consistently revealed that displacement affected not only the physical environment of these artists but also their livelihoods, education, mental well-being and sense of belonging.

In one of the studies, Dupont & Gowda (2021) argue that every camp inhabitant surveyed in 2019 expressed dissatisfaction with the water's uncleanness, with some citing skin conditions in Kathputli Colony, which is classified as a slum. This is paradoxically superior in terms of

quantity, regularity, and quality. When only the first group of families moved there, the camp was well-maintained, as it was constructed for a two-year transit time. The prefabricated buildings and the physical infrastructure, particularly the evacuation pipes, hidden sewers, cemented passageways, and platforms, began to deteriorate after six years of occupancy and pressure from more people.

The combination of overcrowding, poor basic amenities, poorly maintained public restrooms, and deteriorating infrastructure tends to perpetuate slum-like conditions. The short-term fix has not pleased the residents of Kathputli Colony. They are eager to get settled in the houses that have been promised to them. The problems discussed above are evident and physical, but there are more challenges which are invisible to others like anxiety, stress, and emotional trauma, and their mental health is greatly impacted by their restricted employment, poor housing conditions, and uncertainty about the future. The physical, emotional, and cognitive development of the children is particularly at jeopardy. A similar concern was expressed by Anita, the wife of a *Dhol* artist, Suraj Bhat, who explained:

> *Kathputli Colony main hi sab kuch tha humara. Yahan aane ke bad kam milna mushkil ho chuka hain.* (Everything we had was in Kathputli Colony. After coming here in a transit camp, finding work has become very difficult.)

In an interview with a 22-years-old-artist named Varun Bhat, grandson of Puran Bhat, he discussed how his studies have suffered as a result of displacement. Up to Class 10, he attended regular school; nevertheless, he attended an open school for the next two years, until Class 12. Although he was unable to complete his education after that, he is now considering getting his diploma at the age of 22. Varun is a simple and well-spoken young man who has performed abroad with his father and grandfather. He travelled to France with his grandfather when he was fifteen years old, and he recently performed with his team in Qatar in January 2023. Even though he overcame the emotional trauma owing to the displacement, he said that several other children have given up their education and are doing nothing. Reflecting on the emotional impact of displacement, Varun remarked:

> *Camp Kathputli Colony jaisa ni lagta. Yahan ghar wali feeling ni ati*. (The camp does not feel like Kathputli Colony. It lacks the feeling of home.)

In another interview with Kuldeep Kaur, the counsellor at the transit camp, she discussed her counselling sessions with the Kathputli Colony members and the various issues she faces with those residents who are unable to listen or comprehend. She added that many individuals in their twenties are unsure of their future, which is a challenge for them as well as the parents. Another female respondent from camp said:

> *Bachon ki padhai chutt gayi. ab yahan ake koi school jata hain, koi ni jata. Mere bachein vi padhai pe bilkul dhyan ni dete, dusro ke sangat pe rehte hain. Apne bachon ki padhai ko leke main khud tention main rehti hun*. (The children's education was interrupted. Now that we are here, some go to school while others don't. My own children pay absolutely no attention to their studies; they are influenced by the company of others they keep. I constantly worry about my children's education).

Discussion with the respondents raised several issues, like the relocation process not being transparent.

In an interview, Sanjay Gaur, a representative of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and the person in charge of the transit camp, talked extensively about the issues they are facing with these artists. He said that the locals produce a lot of garbage and cause chaos by rupturing the water pipelines every other day. Further, he discussed the lanes' cleanliness and how the locals still refuse to learn about cleanliness, garbage management, and other topics despite several rounds of counselling sessions and lectures. In addition to discussing the drawbacks of these artists of the Kathputli Colony, he

expressed concern about how they would manage to live in apartments. Also, during an interview with senior artist Puran Bhat, while expressing his views on cleanliness, he said*:*

> *Yahan pe log bahut gandagi karke rakhte hain, ap kisi vi gali main chalein jayein, apko bahut gandagi milegi. Suru k eek do gali chor ke sare gali gande hain* (People here leave a lot of filth lying around; if you go into any street, you will find a great deal of mess. Except for the first couple of streets, all of them are dirty).

Apart from the different perspectives of people interviewed, a few aspects were observed during the survey about certain things being filthy and completely unhealthy. Like, waste was everywhere, children were openly defecating in the sewers, and a few lanes were so filthy that an outsider would not dare to go inside. Meanwhile, the lanes at the starting point of the camp were considerably cleaner than the lanes towards the end. When asked about this, the people in the clean lanes responded that they had shared the responsibility of keeping the lanes clean on different days of the week and also added that each person's conscience tells them how they want to live. Even though the transit camps were only a temporary solution for them and none of the artists liked them, a small number of artists chose to keep their lanes clean, as they wanted to feel at home.

Discussion

Social Settings of the Former and Displaced Cultural Landscape

The findings of the study demonstrate that the transformation of Kathputli Colony is more than just the physical demolition of an informal settlement. Displacement has reshaped the cultural landscape by altering social relationships, livelihood opportunities, and people's emotional attachment of artists to their place of residence. This discussion interprets these findings through the theoretical perspectives of cultural landscape and place while comparing them with the existing literature on Kathputli Colony and urban redevelopment.

Sauer (1941) emphasised the importance of interpreting landscapes in relation to the human activities and cultural processes that shape them. It is the task of the geographer to interpret this landscape in terms of the social and cultural processes that have shaped it. Understanding the social settings makes it easier to figure out the complex relationships that exist between people, places, and cultures in a certain cultural landscape. Social settings also have an effect on how individuals interact with each other, how they interpret things, and how they change their surroundings, which shapes the cultural landscapes.

Seeing how these artists from different cultures arrived in an unknown space with a different culture and established themselves within the current cultural landscape is incredibly intriguing. Although all of the artists were relocated to a transit camp after the demolition of their previous colony, one could still recognise all of these artists from Rajasthan because of their distinctive culture, language, attire, and appearance. Over 2500 families from 12 distinct communities, all of which were formerly a part of Kathputli Colony before demolition, are currently residing in the transit camp. This particular landscape was shaped by multiple cultures of different communities with their own unique characteristics.

Decades earlier Carl Sauer (1941) highlighted how social circumstances influence cultural landscapes. The cultural landscape of Kathputli Colony was used to illustrate the following thoughts, which provided valuable information about the social contexts that transform the specific landscape. The components of cultural landscapes are a reflection of the social, cultural, and economic circumstances of the human communities that form them. In the case of the Kathputli Colony, as already discussed several times above, a group of migrants from Rajasthan arrived in Delhi and shaped a new culture inside the pre-existing one. The situation of the demolished Kathputli Colony revealed a lot about the individuals who continued to live in that area. The cultural practices, ideas, and beliefs that are passed down from one

generation to the next are also influenced by tradition[4] and history, which Sauer acknowledged to have an effect on the social environment. Making *Kathputlis* and other traditional artistic pursuits were passed down through the generations, influencing their social surroundings. Additionally, Sauer recognised that social circumstances are dynamic and will always change throughout time, impacting how cultural landscapes are formed. The findings of the present study support Carl Sauer's understanding of cultural landscapes as a product of continuous interactions between people and their environment. The transformation of Kathputli Colony illustrates that the process of displacement not only changed the physical landscape but also the social relationships, artistic practices and cultural identity that had evolved over several decades. Thus, the findings suggest that changes in the built environment reshape the cultural landscape and the everyday experiences of its people. In social contexts, the displaced Kathputli Colony and its former cultural landscape are quite different. It is fascinating to observe how the social environments have changed as a result of the relocation.

However, some residents reported during interviews and casual conversations that outsiders generally perceived Kathputli Colony as a slum, a view that contrasted with their own understanding of the settlement. For these artists, nonetheless, the colony was more than that. One of the participants interviewed in the transit camp mentioned that the camp is a nightmare for them. In the Kathputli Colony, we were content and comfortable. There, the feeling of community was stronger among everyone; here, it is not as strong. People residing in transit camp are more worried about their survival and livelihood since many artists with their families have already left, a number of artists have passed away, and the ones who are still there are hopeful and are waiting for the government's promises. Baviskar (2003) says that the social setting of the Kathputli Colony is significantly impacted by the interactions between the community, the government, and the market, all of which have helped shape the cultural landscape. Puran Bhat, a well-known puppetry artist, said in an interview that he was sure that 2,800 families would receive the homes the government has promised, but the process is taking too long, and if the government wants to provide housing, it should do it for everyone, not just the 800 families who will shortly receive the first lot of homes. Further, he added that they were content in Kathputli Colony, felt safe there, and were well-known for what they accomplished. Additionally, he stated that a number of members from colony families have become beggars after being relocated, giving a clear explanation of why the government should focus on these people's development rather than the walls and structure of their homes, which would not benefit these artists, and to live in any of these apartments designed for them, a person must be presentable and culturally appropriate.

The colony was their home, even though the living circumstances were inferior. Since many artists had lived there their entire lives, the demolition had a negative influence on their mental health in addition to their means of subsistence. They had a place to practise their talents in the colony, but they were unable to do so in the transit camp because there was no such space. The emotional attachment expressed by the artists of Kathputli Colony reflects Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977) concept of place. Although the transit camp in Anand Parbat has provided them shelter, it has not acquired the meanings, memories and sense of belonging associated with the former Kathputli Colony. The former colony for these artists was not merely a residential space, but a place shaped by lived experiences, shared cultural practices and long-standing social relationships. Their stories and

[4] In this study, tradition refers to the artistic practices, skills, knowledge and beliefs that are transmitted across generations within a particular community. In Kathputli Colony, it includes the transmission of knowledge of puppetry and other traditional performance practices to future performers in the community, through which artists sustain their cultural heritage. Traditions may also evolve in response to changing social, cultural and economic circumstances (Shils, 1981).

narratives demonstrate that displacement involved the loss of a meaningful place rather than simply a change in location.

During the field survey, two women sitting and chatting were observed and interviewed in the transit camp. One was sitting outside the room and was talking with her while the other was cooking inside her room. They said they are close friends and that their homes were adjacent to one another in the Kathputli Colony before demolition. However, they were unhappy that their rooms were separated by a great distance in this camp. Additionally, they revealed how they were deceived by the government into going to a transit camp in order to receive better apartments when they were ready. But they had been waiting for more than five years and are concerned about the education and growth of their children because they believe the transit camps are unsafe and their children could end up in the wrong hands. In response to other enquiries regarding safety issues, they said that the transit camp is home to different communities, some of whom sell illicit substances, and that children are becoming victims. They also said that in the recent past, a child from the nearby lane passed away due to a drug overdose, and they are still not acting appropriately despite repeatedly approaching the DDA. For safety considerations, some are afraid to voice their complaints. These findings are broadly consistent with earlier available studies on Kathputli Colony, which have highlighted the prolonged uncertainty surrounding withering living conditions, rehabilitation, and the disruption of community life (Chowdhury, 2024; Dupont & Gowda, 2021; Zahan & Chowdhury, 2026). However, the present study extends these discussions by interpreting displacement through the concepts of cultural landscape and place while highlighting the lived experiences of these street performers.

The social setting and all of these situations set the former Kathputli Colony's cultural landscape apart from the transit camp. The way people engage with one another, their relationships, and their challenges have all shaped and changed the cultural landscape.

Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on urban redevelopment and rehabilitation policies, the present study examines displacement from the perspective of cultural geography by documenting the lived experiences of these street performers. By combining field observations, interviews and case studies, the study demonstrates that displacement transforms not only the physical landscape but also social relationships, cultural identity and people's attachment to place.

Conclusion

The study of Kathputli Colony and its artists provides a compelling case study of how displacement transforms cultural landscapes in the name of urban development. Originally, the Kathputli Colony was a vibrant, self-organised community of Rajasthani artists and later became home to migrants from other states. The city provided them space, which was then carved out into a place. Even though the city has its own culture, the culture of these migrants became part of the city's cultural fabric, creating a distinctive and fascinating cultural landscape with its varied values, language, way of life, beliefs, and cultural practices. The colony was more than just an "illegal squatter settlement" for the people who lived there; it was a "place" full of meanings, stories, and a strong sense of collective identity. The demolition of the colony and the relocation of its residents to a transit camp have had a significant impact on the deeply rooted social fabric that had existed there for a long time.

The relocation to Anand Parbat transit camp, meant to be a temporary solution, has had profound and lasting consequences on these artists. Due to overcrowding, poor sanitation and inadequate infrastructure, which have created a hostile environment that is very different from prior colonies where they worked together as a community, the new environment has not only affected the quality of life but also had a severe impact on their livelihood and mental health. The lack of communal spaces and venues where these artists used to practise and

perform made their lives difficult, which contributed to the decline of their art forms, forcing them to seek alternative sources of income, thereby threatening the continuity of their traditional cultural identity.

The findings demonstrate that displacement affected not only the physical environment but also their sense of belonging, social relationships and everyday cultural practices. As a result, the transformation of Kathputli Colony should be understood as both a spatial and cultural process rather than just a housing intervention.

A major finding of this study is that the impacts of displacement are not the same among the performers of Kathputli Colony. While some artists have adapted to changing livelihood opportunities by undertaking event-based performances and using social media platforms to promote their art, several have struggled to sustain their artistic practices or have abandoned the city. At the same time, the loss of shared spaces and the disruption of community relationships have made it more difficult to practise, collaborate, and transmit artistic knowledge across generations. The experiences of younger artists, including disruptions to their education, further illustrate how displacement can affect the continuity of traditional art forms in future. These different experiences suggest that cultural change following displacement involves both adaptation and erosion. Rehabilitation and redevelopment should therefore be evaluated not only in terms of housing provision but also in relation to artists' ability to sustain their livelihoods, maintain community relationships, and continue their artistic practices.

The story of Kathputli Colony is a strong reminder that a city's development should not imply losing its cultural identity and also explains the importance of developing cities with people in mind, taking into consideration community heritage and the emotional connections that made a mere space into a valued place. The future of these artists from Kathputli Colony and their cultural legacy remains uncertain since they are waiting for the concerned authorities to fulfil the promises made during displacement. The experience of Kathputli Colony demonstrates that urban redevelopment projects must recognise cultural heritage, community relationships and lived experiences alongside infrastructure if they are to achieve socially just and sustainable development.

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Originality and Plagiarism

The authors have written an original work entirely, although works of several authors have been used to enrich the paper and have been appropriately cited or quoted in it.

Data Access and Retention

Authors are happy to provide raw data in connection with a paper for editorial review and are fully prepared to make such data available for public access.

References and Citation Accuracy

We confirm that every reference cited in this manuscript exists, has been consulted by us, and accurately supports the statement for which it is cited, and that all data reported are genuine and appropriately cited. We accept that responsibility for the accuracy of references and data rests solely with us, and that if any reference or data is found to be fabricated, falsified or misrepresented, the manuscript may be rejected or, if published, retracted.

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Author Contribution Statement

Somnath Nayak: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Software, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Visualisation, and Writing - Original draft.

Anjan Sen: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Validation, Writing - Review and Editing, and Supervision.

Both the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Fundamental Errors in Published Works

Authors comply with the obligation to promptly notify the journal editor or publisher regarding any inaccuracy in their own published work and cooperate with the editor to retract or correct the paper at any point in time.

Reporting Standards

Authors of reports of original research present an accurate account of work performed and objective discussed is quite significant.

Hazards and Human or Animal Subjects

No hazardous materials are used throughout the study. The study includes human participation, complies with ethical concerns; no animal subject is harmed, and an adequate code of ethics is used.

Use of Patient Images or Case Details

All the images used in the paper were taken and collected during the field investigation.

Use of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) did not use any AI Tool or Service.

Acknowledgement of Sources

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