



Bangla Rock: exploring the counterculture and dissidence in post-colonial Bengali popular music

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Abstract: ¹

This paper is an attempt to explore the politics and the poetics of vernacular music in modern Bengal. Drawn from extensive and in-depth research into the current “scene” (as popularly referred to in the musician and music lover circles), this paper delves into the living histories of musical and linguistic revolutions in a part of India where the vernacular literature has been historically rich, and vastly influenced by the post-colonial heritage. The popular music that grew from these

political and cultural foundations reflected its own pathos, and consecutively inspired its own form of oral tradition. The linguistic and musical inspirations for Bangla Rock and the eventual establishment of this genre in a rigidly curated culture is not only a remarkable anthropological case study, but also crucial in creating discourse on the impact of this music in the creation of oral histories. This paper will discuss both the musical and the lyrical journey of Bengali counterculture in music, thus in turn exploring the scope of Bangla – as in the colloquial for Bengali, and Rock – the Western musical expression which began during the 50’s and the 60’s (also populist and political in its roots). The inception of this particular political populist narrative driven through songs and music, is rooted in the Civil Rights movement, and comparisons can be drawn in the ‘soul’ of the movements, though removed both geographically and by time. Thus this paper engages with the poetics of Bangla Rock, to understand the marginal political voices surfacing through alternative means of expression.

1. Introduction

I want to begin this paper with a brief observational note: *Imagine a dark auditorium, dense with excitement, thousands of people packed together, all wearing the same t-shirt – the one they purchased to attend the concert – the entire space vibrating with adrenaline. The emcee for the evening introduces the members, one by one, the men that were to be the evening’s entertainment. But if one did not have context, you could think they were some sort of sacred entities, entering the arena to prophesize about the lives of all those present, and all those still outside the auditorium gates, begging-crying-fighting to be a part of the unfolding event. I know for a fact, that evening, over a thousand extra attendees finally made it inside over the 2500 capacity concert hall. When the band finally came on stage, they all wore the same tshirt as the crowd – they were united with their audience, and the crowd broke into an unified roar of what clearly seemed like pure ecstasy – a culmination of collective consciousness. They were some kind of gods, soon people were swaying with their every move, singing along every song; when the concert began, it went on for four hours – it was a special concert for the fans of the band, on the band’s*

¹ Author’s note: This paper has been presented in panel, and extensively discussed at the **National Conference on “Oral Cultures: People, Poetics, Performance”** (22nd – 23rd August 2017), organised by Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong Meghalaya, India. Prof. Desmond Khamawphlang, the head of the department, and conference organiser has provided his consent for the publication of this paper.



eighteenth year, but everybody who attended left as a fan if they weren't already. The ones who couldn't make it inside, stood outside and sang along with every song being played on stage. In spirit, mere gates & barricades could not keep them away from what they came to experience. Overall, it was a confluence of technology, emotion and performance, a grand spectacle of cultural manifestation of dissent – a safe space to create critique of the times, albeit through music. Above is what maybe considered actually a rudimentary description of a music concert by Bengal's most popular Bangla Rock band Fossils², held recently in Kolkata. But the experience does encompass a lot more than merely *musical* entertainment. Thus this introductory account sets the stage for the case study of this paper, as in the following sections concepts and contexts are explained, this report will contextualize the discourse on popular post colonial vernacular music and its relationship with the expression of cultural dissidence.

In my pre-doctoral thesis³, I explored the experiential space of counterculture through music in Bengal, where I looked at the chronology and history of folk music of the region integrating with colonial influences. With special reference to Bangla Rock as my case study, whereby I conducted an extensive fieldwork to determine the status of countercultural music amongst the youth of Bengal, who were the primary audience of this form of music. The results of this research yielded a clear statistical representation of popularity, market value, audience influence, and musical ingenuity – all locating Fossils as the band that harboured the greatest hold over its consumers⁴.

Therefore, to update on this inference, one has to return to Fossils as the case study. Now, firstly that reinstates the band as the subject of further research based on two primary aspects from the current observable field: (a) it is still a band which holds the highest standing among audiences, in numbers, and in membership on social media – as reported by current newspaper articles⁵; (b) it is also the highest paid group of artists in the regional market⁶. In 2006, when I conducted the first fieldwork, the mainstream entertainment industry (organisers and event management companies) was not interested in covering Bangla Band artists, so the bulk of their popularity grew through small performances for mostly college crowds or during music festivals. And still, the audience was ready, with preferences and favourites. One studying the field must acknowledge that the audience today is a smart modern individual with personal choices guided by independent thought, with access to a broad spectrum of options for every available product in the market. So the dedication one can observe in the fans of the band, reflects a curious aspect of cultural representation today that embodies the social realities of its time.

The Bangla band music *scene* in Kolkata is not a recent one, and my earlier thesis engaged with that strain of historical paradigm of cultural inroads of popular dissent through music that created an atmosphere for Bangla Rock to develop. It began simultaneously here, as it was reverberating in the West – 1960s, 70s – where the globalising nature of post modernity was taking hold all over the world. The musical tradition of Rock began in the West, but it also inspired its audience that was not limited to the West. Especially in the South Asian peninsula, where the brand new post-colonial countries – India, Pakistan & Bangladesh, were all grappling with the legacies of their own very fraught history. The cultural atmosphere was tense, with the reverberating nationalism of the region was clashing with the newfound democratic freedom. The cultural implosion

² *Fossils* stands unchallenged as the biggest band in Bengal, who perform their original music, and have been producing their signature sound – Bangla Rock – for eighteen years. They have performed as part of NH7 (the biggest Indian music festival that brings together musicians and bands and performers from all over the world to perform at concerts at different Indian cities) at Shillong in 2016. Recently they held a special concert celebrating 18 years of existence in a cultural space, which was not ready for their art, and is still skeptical. This concert was organized entirely by fans of the band, and they concluded this event as one of the biggest concerts by any singular artist at the most sought after venues in Kolkata. The introductory narrative description is of this specific concert that I attended as a personal guest of the band and had access to both the band and the audience during the event. I took advantage of this unique opportunity to speak to some of the organizers and sponsors, as well as record producers, who gave me insights into the current space which this genre of music commands and how the market operates with this form of countercultural expression. www.fossilsmusic.net

³ See Mukherjee 2016.

⁴ See Mukherjee 2016, Chapter 4.

⁵ See: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bengali/music/our-favourite-bangla-band-fossils-turns-18/articleshow/59859924.cms> and also https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170810/jsp/t2/story_166349.jsp

⁶ This conclusion was drawn after an interview with one of the biggest organizers of performance-based events in Eastern region of India. The statement was referenced and clarified through information received from other event organizers in Kolkata and its suburbs.



is amply evident⁷; available literature⁸ on the subject suggests that India, along with Pakistan and Bangladesh were all creating a niche space where musical experimentation was happening as a cultural reaction to the postcolonial experience. The rise of the *self* from the sea of homogenous nationalistic *citizen*, brought along with it the expression of *self* – which is, in other words, distancing of the *one* from the *many*. Music, is an intensely private expression, although it is frequently experienced in an group-based interaction: and therefore, the experience of this form of musical experience begins from the sense of an individual's experience of the world around, which is then transferred to a popular expression where the audience imbibes their own meaning from it, internalises it in its selfhood, and then returns it to the originator with the oneness felt by the many. This back and forth of experience is integral to the rock music sensitivity, and therefore by extension Bangla Rock embodies those ideologies innately.

In this paper, I will present an update of the earlier discourse with observations from the current field. I first began studying the field of popular vernacular music in Bengal in 2002, with the first interview with a rising underground Bangla Rock band; fifteen years later, the same band was celebrating their two decades in the popular music *business*⁹ – description of which I began this paper with. Having had the opportunity to closely observe the most popular band in Bengal over such a long time, I have had the unique position to observe the anthropological consequences of this countercultural revolution as it unfolded: as one may associate the consequence of Bangla Rock as a form of self-expression wherein aspects of cultural dissidence reflects back, to study the audience that identifies with this specific form of dissent, and why. As a researcher, I have been able to record and reflect on the socio-cultural aspects of oral traditions becoming a part of history through popular expressions within the Bangla Rock music space. As we delve into more details of the “Bangla Rock” concept, in the next section, I will discuss the context of counterculture and post-colonial Bengali popular music, and how *dissidence* becomes a central theme of popular expression.

2. Exploring popular music in the context of counterculture

Any debate into the paradigms of counterculture requires that one consider the manifold possibilities of its diasporic understanding. For, a counterculture is never really an event outside of the mainstream culture, it is the parallel stream of rebellious outbursts of cultural fissures from within the foreboding normative cultural traits. These traits are regularly and continuously socialized into human individuals who reside within their societies and are consecutively required to conform to its social norms. Let us take the case study of *Fossils* the band: the music offered by the band is an uniform collation of both lyrical dissidence as well as musical dissidence. In the former context, the literary quality of the songs played by the band offers an insight into a bleak existence – an existence where desires are bred by pedagogy, and yet the same experience also alienates

⁷ Although I did not find any academic reference or prior literature on the specific subject, one can conduct their own research from available social media, newspaper and magazine articles, and event details of live shows, etc. that will provide further clarification on this. As such, it is common knowledge that Pakistani and Bangladeshi musicians have been experimenting with Western musical influences with vernacular lyrical accompaniment. Bands like *Junoona* and *Fuzon* have released Rock based musical compilation with Hindi/Urdu songs, and they have a cult following in the entire continent. Same with bands from Bangladesh, such as *Black*, *Warfaze* or *LRB* are known to music lovers for years now. See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistani_rock, <https://www.desiblitz.com/content/7-best-rock-bands-of-pakistan>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladeshi_rock, <https://www.thetoptens.com/best-bangladeshi-rock-bands/>

⁸ See <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15207-pakistan-folk-and-pop-instrumentals-1966-1976/> and

⁹ I have italicized the word ‘business’ here for a specific reason, although I do not discuss this at large in the paper, this was another observation from this update on my research. The professional aspect of Bangla Rock in Bengal is a testament to the business it has been able to generate these last two decades. Though the amount of money being spent at these musical performances varies depending on venue, attendance and budget, *Fossils* as a band has been able to create a very steep financial quotation, which they maintain strictly. This, the band attributes to the production quality and technical requirements of such concerts, as they have become more and more advanced in their performances and require higher budgets. The market has also changed in these last two decades, wherein there is more demand for higher production levels from the audience, they love the lights, the visual graphics, the impeccable sound designs and technological advancements in the musicians themselves. The fans track everything the band does, instruments and technology used by the band members, and the techniques of using said instruments – this is in addition to the ideological expectations from the songwriter. All of these aspects provide the full spectrum of what is expected from the band and what product is then provided to the audience as a reaction to this demand. The profit generated from this relationship is the interesting link, which belies the otherwise philosophical bond that exists between the spectacle and the spectator.



one from their own identity. They sing songs of failure, of negativity, of loss, and of death. But these are poetic ideas, expressed through the songwriter's own life experience. In fact it is this convergence of self reflection and self critique that the audience finds easy to associate with – given the permanence of affliction in modern society, broadened with rising mental health issues in urban centres, the songs reflect a certain view of society that is not entirely the singer's own, but a collective emotion represented through self expression. And why is dissidence the common factor? Because every generation finds itself at opposition with its preceding generation, the clash of ideologies generates new knowledge and permeates cultural outlets. A lot of the lyrical expressions speak of loneliness and isolation, which is an interesting anthropological insight into urban psychology. The culture being created narrates individual histories, and in the context of a subaltern postcolonial expression, it records the struggles of the times. These records will remain, mainly in the form of musical albums, album art, and videos made and circulated during this time.

So then, what is *counterculture* in this context? “*The primary twentieth century countercultural narrative has the 1960s in its axis. The usual touchstones are a series of identities and events that focussed largely in the United States, with a few references to Europe,*” (Goffman 2004). Similarly the discourse centres around the same historical time and context. At the same time when Civil Rights movement was spreading across America, India was already fighting close to a hundred years to regain independence from her Western colonial master. The confluence of the same “Western” culture with the soon to become postcolonial state started to shape into specific categories. Our preoccupation here is the same influence in the popular music of Bengal. When I say popular, I specifically mean the *populist* music – music of the masses, as differentiated from the elite mainstream of traditional *gharanas* of musicians and litterateurs as songwriters. The freedom struggle in India created a space for dissent to take a cultural manifest form, through literature, music and theatre. These were creations that did not speak of higher form of expression, rather, they spoke of everyday life, and struggles of the commoner, and the suffering of the masses, and especially they spoke of a relationship with god (personal god). This last point is important because this expression of personal faith is limited otherwise within the stratified social structure of our country with primitive notions of sacred and profane. In this highly segregated society, a relationship with god is dictated by the position one holds in the caste & class pyramid. A lot of the vernacular popular music that rose out of the mass culture representation, reflects the Foucauldian concept of *governmentality*¹⁰. The pedagogical nature of our social and cultural traditions are a reflection of a postcolonial sentiment, wherein for a very long time the populist music was being relegated to the spectrum of *bawdy*, because it highlighted the more base emotions.

One example that may be contextual here is the lyrical quality, or the subject of the songs. Let us take the most popular band in Bengal now, Fossils, a band that has performed not only all over India, but also on four other continents, singing Bengali songs. All their songs are intensely personal, yet they have a huge favourability with an age range of fifteen to forty-five – which encompasses almost two decades of the band coming together, making albums and performing as a live act, and hence covers those who were in college in the early 2000s as well as those who are college-age now. This is a curious anthropological observation, whereby one may infer that the sentimental value of the basic product on offer – the songs – have an ability to connect with its audience in a way they feel it speaks for them. Songs like *aekla ghor* (solitary room) speaks of loneliness one feels after the collapse of romance, *nishkromon* (exodus) speaks of isolation from the larger social structure, *manob boma* (self sacrifice) speaks of the frailty of human connections, *aupodartha* (insignificant) speaks of the ineffectiveness of an average existence, *shasti* (retribution) speaks of slowly engulfing regret, *tritiyo bishwo* (third world) speaks of life as experienced through global inferiority, and many more such songs, that all draw from the sameness or commonalities of the human experience in a rapidly globalising society¹¹. What this reinforces is the fact that the mainstream culture allows no space for such artistic expressions, instead the mainstream fiercely regulates all culture propagated in the society within permissible boundaries. Counterculture, in essence, defies this very notion: it signifies a parallel strain of cultural tradition which is created as response to isolation, exclusion and oppression.

Studying counter-culture in its entirety thus requires a holistic approach that ultimately concludes to a more specific understanding. Despite being broadly under the umbrella of culture-studies, sociology

¹⁰ See: Foucault, M (1972).

¹¹ See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fossils_\(band\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fossils_(band))



provides a unique opportunity as well as perspective to study, research and understand the phenomena from all available venues of theoretical inquiry¹².

3. Bangla Rock: The voice of dissidence

Bangla Rock, intrinsically embodies a convergence of two distinctive traditions of artistic dissidence – on one hand we have the modern expression of *Rock* music from the counterculture of the 1960s, as a specific musical sound created to oppose the elitism of mainstream music. ‘Inceptually’, it was loud, it used technical inputs, it used layers, and it encouraged the accompanying vocals to reflect the pain of the lyrical subjects of the songs. On the other hand, this distinctive rebellious musical tradition met with a vernacular expression that also stood up against the traditional mores of literary elitism. A lot of the critics of this genre of emerging music in Bengal all claimed that Bengali as a language is too *high culture* for the mass representation Bangla Rock wanted to create: “Bengali is too sweet a language to express the angst of rock music” is the generic excuse given. This is the mainstream view of the genre, wherein the traditional culture of Bengali music is not embedded in expression of anger, instead it is of persistence and the romance of subtle expressions. Bangla Rock belied this belief and created a separate scope of expression within the vernacular culture, with a populist poetry in its basis, which is again rooted deeply in the history of the region.

Perhaps at this point, the most essential answer would be to the question, what is *Rock Music*, and to answer that question we must look at the contextual history of that term. Foremost, rock music is a genre of popular music that developed during and after the 1960s, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. It has its roots in 1940s and 1950s rock and roll, which itself was heavily influenced by rhythm ‘n’ blues and country music (Berke 1969). Rock music also drew strongly on a number of other genres such as blues and folk, and incorporated influences from jazz, classical and other musical sources (Ibid.). Musically, rock has centred around the electric guitar, usually as part of a rock group with bass guitar and drums (Ennis 1992). Technically, rock is melody-based music with a 4/4 beat utilizing a verse-chorus form, but the genre has become extremely diverse and common musical characteristics are difficult to define (Frith 1982). Like pop music, lyrics often stress romantic love but also address a wide variety of other themes that are frequently social or political in emphasis (Ibid.). Unlike pop music, rock places an emphasis on musicianship, live performance, and an ideology of authenticity. Now, how does this authenticity derive its commonality with the vernacular poetry of Bengali? I would argue that the subaltern¹³ nature of countercultural expression desires an aggressive outlet, and this ideology of rock music aligned with the rising requirement of finding the right music to accompany the lyrical subjectivity of this genre.

This brings us to, where we must engage with the historical tradition of the concept being discussed. In Bengal, there exists a dynamic enthusiasm about varied forms of cultural amplification, amongst the people of Bengal. However much we critique the globalization process, we still embrace it in myriad sorts. If we look at the history of Bengali Music, in context to the city of Calcutta, we would notice that towards the early 18th century, in the pre-natal stages of Calcutta, a lot of people were coming into the city, bringing with them their own cultures and their own music (Banerjee 1989). Two socio-economic groups of Bengalis emerged in that stage, in the course of the growth and development of a metropolitan city under a colonial administration (Dasgupta 2007). Of the two, one is the Bengali elite and the other is that of the lower order migrants (Banerjee 1989). These were the people from various walks of life; they were the craftsmen, goldsmiths, farmers, fishermen, washer-men, and so on. “*They found certain categories of patrons in the city. However, it’s very interesting that the kind of class divide that dominates the cultural taste today is not relevant to the context of that time, because often the patrons and the lower order people came from the same category of continuum of culture, and therefore they shared the same kind of music*”¹⁴. At that time, there were two specific combinations of political forces, which were very strong, one was the nationalist force that was coming up, and the other

¹² See: Mukherjee, K (2016).

¹³ Here I am referring to Spivak’s discourse on subaltern voices.

¹⁴ See Rangan Bandopadhyay’s interview on alternative music and colonial Calcutta in ‘Le Pocha’. *Le Pocha*, (2002): A Documentary Film, by Bengali counterculture activist, enthusiast and researcher Qaushiq Mukherjee, it attempts to understand the phenomena of alternative music in Bengal’s largest urban centre, Calcutta; and also a socio-historical report on the evolution of counterculture through music in Bengal. <http://we.oddjoint.in/le-pocha.php>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qaushiq_Mukherjee



was the Victorian morality of the ruling British government. This combination proved fiery for the music of Calcutta in those days.

The music was essentially supported by a certain linguistic leverage, which was to be the tool of mass-culture appeal; an almost cultural weapon at the hands of the amassed marginal population. The folk amalgamation with the urbane yet elite traditional gave rise to new genres within the cultural dynamic. The colonialism played mediator in the 'we' feeling of the marginalized. These new genres were accommodating lyrical, linguistic, and musical liberties which were then banished from the mainstream music tradition. The use of language was primary to the expressiveness of the emotions of these musical genres. The songs in particular embraced permissiveness in its voice and composition, and therefore the audience immediately became engrossed in the reality of these songs and the musical genre. This was in opposition to the then mainstream culture of the *bhadralok* Bengalis and the Queen's people on shore, and was thus the inception of alternative music, within a more theoretical countercultural understanding (Mukherjee 2016).

The suppression on the dual fronts was similar in the realm of music to that of the literary field. And thus, the sentiments of the groups who felt directly affected by the socio-cultural changes that required to be brought about, were seething with the innate desire to fight for one's own basic necessities, and quite in the way of the Marxian paradigms – the levels of alienation occurred with the human intention to propagate culture through material manifestations, and the auxiliary fields of productive activity and personal lives. And the ideologies associated with protest require anti-establishment beliefs, a zest to swim upstream and create a space for cultural expression outside the set and regulated boundaries of the mainstream culture industry. At this point, nationalism provided the creative space for the songs of protest to echo through the halls of colonial imperialist agendas. Slowly, the protest became larger than the specific political ideas; it engulfed the socio-cultural spheres of those involved. The protest itself became a counterculture, and the products of this revolutionary movement were the poets and authors who felt the urge to put voice to their thoughts and not apologise for it in a finality of their expression. The war was won, the colony was salvaged, but the alienation remained on a very marginal level, as certain strata of the mass remained outside the exclusive membership of the mainstream culture, and the revolution carried on in the hearts of all those who felt that their voice was being undermined by the giants of the gentleman's game (Ibid.).

In Bangla Rock, the appearance of the mundane and the profane over and again reaffirms the claim that the parallel streams of expression arose circling around the notion of separation from the dogmatic regulation of traditional cultural theorems. The individuals and groups that propagated this expression of mundane in new forms were the leaders of the intellectual protest from within the system and yet removed from it. Like its Western counterpart, counterculture in Bengal developed through rapid rejection of the existing musical tradition and pushing through a tough arcade of criticism and ridicule from the apparently superior. Although Fossils did not begin the Bangla Rock genre of musical expression, they have survived almost two decades of being at the top of a very competitive scene, and they have retained their method of converging vernacular populist poetry with the aggressive rebellious sound of rock – which speaks of their popularity with a large base of audience, as well as their command of the market. The other Bangla Rock bands that came before them have had tremendous impact on the creation and propagation of the form, but Fossils has shown a certain dedication to their original ideology that still holds consequence that resonates with its audience.

4. Creating oral culture: the politics of vernacular poetry in Bangla Rock

While the first people to experiment with the sound of Bangla Rock were trying to create that space for dialogue with the audience, so that the social experience of the commoner is represented through an emerging stream of lyrical music that consciously separates itself from the mainstream musical tradition of the land. It is a fact that, the colonial history of Kolkata as a city is responsible for the innate class-structures that remain embedded in the socio-cultural history of the city to this day, and the people living on the margins imbibed these ideas and ideals as their own in the process of their urbanization which reflect on the culture they create. Kolkata as a city has grown with the growing necessity for urban space for our *nouveau riche* middle-class as well as the settler communities (Banerjee 1989). Thus historically, the reigning elite had already established their own traditions as the *higher culture*, that is one belonging to a more influential echelon of people in a growing urban space of colonial Calcutta, those who joined later were similarly disposed or were their ideological



compatriots. Therefore the culture originating from this environment was one that was closely censored, exclusive, progressively conformist, in other words – elite, or at least initially. However, the exclusion of the greater population from participating in the creation of culture resulted in localized cultures becoming formidable forms of expression. These new strains of populist cultural creation were a curious amalgam of the converging differences brought together by people with various backgrounds and histories. In the post colonial urban space of Kolkata, the variety of cultures that compacted together, formed smaller homogenized sub-cultures. And these subcultures not only survived the suppressive elitist marginalizing methods (Ibid.) but, they also survived the test of time and they changed their voices according to the times. The patriotic nationalist spirit of the decades preceding India's independence saw songs of *matrubhoomi* (motherland) and *shangram* (the struggle for motherland) rise out of all quarters, both elitist as well as marginal (Garg, Parikh 1976). But the seeds of dissidence were already sown in the space of mainstream music, and the alternative stream of protest music had foreseen the beginnings of Bangla Rock.

In the fieldwork I conducted during a period over a few years in the early 2000s, I attempted to locate the phenomenon in manifest terms. I became interested to study the social reality of vernacular countercultural music, simultaneously as I was exposed to both the music and its audience. The spectacular quality of the live performances, and the unusual relationship that the bands share with their audience, as well as the subjective nature of the music itself – drew me to examine the manifest factors more closely. I have spoken to over 300-500 audience members participating at alternative music concerts, festivals, etc. over the years, in which the first statistical results were drawn from 200-signed questionnaires. This particular aspect of my research was aimed at concluding on a concrete understanding around creating a category – about a class, caste, gender, age, ethnicity adherence, if any, within the audience. Accounting for the given socio-cultural constituency of Bengali population, specifically in Kolkata, I found that the average audience was: Bengali, male, Hindu, ranging between lower to upper middle classes, of no specific caste, and belonging to an age range of 15-26. Although this provides an accurate observation of the average audience for this kind of music, it by no means defines its entire composition. In case of Fossils, this phenomenon has been tremendously recorded. Fortunately in today's day and age, almost no event of value goes unrecorded, and one can find a mine of information on the band's popularity and its viewership on YouTube¹⁵ and Facebook¹⁶ – flooded with thousands of fan-videos¹⁷ and live updates. Sometimes the astonishing expressions of dedication to the band has also been recorded: in the concert mentioned at the very beginning of this paper, was indeed a special concert (the band played a four hour long show, that included them performing many original songs otherwise skipped during live concerts, and they also made directed speeches on a thematic subject – mental health – a rising problem in the urban youth of today). The band exercises a kind of hypnotic control over its audience, where the fans internalize the philosophy and music of the band to an extent where they consider it to be a part of their lifestyle. I observed an incident during the aforementioned performance: at one point the front-man of the band was standing quite close to the edge separating him from the audience; at this moment, a young fan lunged forward head-first onto the elevated stage, and grabbed his feet – he remained there for some time while his idol continued to sing, and then when the specific verse concluded, he kissed the feet, bowed devotedly one last time and disappeared into a pulsating crowd of euphoric bodies. Watching this boy's reaction, I was reminded of another incident: once, when visiting my maternal family in interior North Bengal as a child, I witnessed a traveling religious figure who had come to the village, a sort of *peer baba*¹⁸. He was conducting a public meet-and-greet ceremony and *kirtan* (religious musical event). Since this was a small village, everyone in the village was gathered to hear the *kirtan*, believers and non alike. Everybody present seemed to want to touch his feet and get his blessings in return, while he seemed oblivious to the crowd and

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/rupamislam74>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/FossilsIndia/>

¹⁷ This implies to video recordings made by fans from the audience during a live concert.

¹⁸ A type of religious leader, who caters to a certain geographical population, and often these figures do not adhere to any one specific religion, rather is considered sacred by all religions of the region. They mostly lead their lives as travelling speakers; they belong to a particular sect of preachers, but do not have a center or organization. Rather they have oral cultures that they speak at every stop they make during their travels. Their travels are charted around an infinite circular route, which incorporates all holy places they must visit. Sometimes they have understudies who later adopt their teacher's position once the teacher becomes unable to carry out the duties.



was chanting verses quietly and on his own. I observed with curiosity from a distance with my cousins, who all found this quite intriguing and exciting. Towards the end of this ceremony, the *baba* began to chant loudly dancing on a high platform at the middle of the stage, and the most faithful of the attendees began to hover closely around his feet, singing and dancing in a sort of frenzy. Suddenly, the central figure began to speak very loudly looking above him as if to god, and the atmosphere around him changed suddenly, people got agitated and began to fight each other to touch him while he was in this trance. This is the picture I was reminded of when I saw thousands of young fans reaching out to touch and feel the band, and to somehow become a part of the experience on an even deeper level. The entire audience erupted in a roar, and bowed a salute to the band in unison when they finished their performance for the night. The parallels that one can draw between these two incidents are varied, or perhaps it is more universal than imagined. There are more ways the audience is connected with their chosen medium of culture orientation, than just musical preferences or poetic fascinations – they are a stepping stone to self realization for those who hear themselves in the songs being sung on stage, like the *peer baba* was a medium to reach god for those who believed they could do so.

Although there are other bands¹⁹ that also personify with the message of Bangla Rock, the subject of our case study is the only one that has retained its originality of philosophy. Fossils, as a bearer of this immense responsibility of mass representation through self-expression, aided by the non-traditional musical legacy, they have always stood their ground on why and how they create their messaging through music. It is an integral part of their creative process, where the audience and fans are all included in the process, either through feedback through social media networks or through direct correspondence. Fossils maintains a great interest in their fans and followers, and takes interest in the changing dialogues in youth today. On the other hand, other Bangla bands, who have experimented over time with influences and musical genres, working with fusion and folk combined with more Western musical accompaniment, changed their musical ideology with the changing times, but none of these stood the test of time in the highly volatile market overridden with mainstream music (mostly film soundtrack and independent solo artists). I spoke to a former journalist who had covered Fossils' career in the early years, who was present for their special concert²⁰, about his outlook on the subject: he suggested that there was a certain element of modern branding technique being employed, using social media to its full advantage, and having a continuous dialogue with the fan-base. In other words, the band was changing itself with the times just enough to incorporate the rapidly evolving technological efforts, but being faithful to a more primordial poetry that allows aggression to be at its core, Bangla Rock as their mode of communicating with the audience has since created its own paradigm of oral culture.

This new strain of popular culture is a record of its times – the agency of which located in its specific political history – it speaks of the struggles a modern Indian individual feels: strained between the traditional expectations of their own society and the desires that stand in opposition to those expectations. The songs being created within the space of Bangla Rock are both personal and political, they are also a vernacular representation of an unrepresented and often ignored section of society – *youth*. Mainstream culture is traditionalist, and popular culture therefore is an ideological opposition to that stand – and as history is witness, youth of a society are who have always challenged the establishment. This case study is proof that this is no different to that rule, and we see how Bangla Rock is creating its own tradition of counterculture removed from the rigorous elitist mainstream, as a new subculture.

It is difficult to translate these extraordinarily expressive Bangla Rock songs, both lyrically and musically – they have an intrinsic quality which is expressed fully only in its original form. Even translating the song names belie their true impact. That vernacular poetry is a strong political form of expressing dissent, has been evident since the days of India's struggle for Independence. Bengal especially saw some of its brilliance

¹⁹ Bands such as *Abhilasha* and *Cactus* began a musical tradition that became Bangla Rock in later decades. Other bands such as *Krosswindz* already existed as a popular English band performing both covers and originals at Kolkata clubs and pubs who hosted live music events on weekends and special weeknights. *Krosswindz* also released a vernacular Rock album in the 1990s, which went on to acquire a cult following, and has been re-released many times due to popular demand. See also: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krosswindz>, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cactus_\(Indian_band\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cactus_(Indian_band)), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_music_of_West_Bengal, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangla_band_day.

²⁰ See: <http://www.epaper.eisamay.com/epapermain.aspx?queryed=9&eddate=8%2f11%2f2017> Moeinuk Sengupta, the author of the special feature in the link, is the source of this comment. He is someone who has also followed the subject I am studying, but from a journalistic point of view. His insights were greatly useful to update this research.



reflected through poets of protest, and also authors who rose to the challenge to invigorate its youth through words. This power of vernacular expression of Bangla Rock is a tribute to its altruistic past: although they are intensely personal (which is an affliction of post modernity), they are also militarily populist. And they represent a very cohesive cogent identity – that of the youth today, disengaged from the expectations of its previous generation. That they find solace in music, despite all the struggles and disenfranchisement, has been my most curious inference.

5. Fossils: association through dissociation

In this section, I will attempt, despite my best efforts, to translate one of the songs I personally feel draws out the internal isolation and personal politics of today's youth. Although the language used in these songs is intrinsically lyrical, and the poetic expression can only be translated in its core philosophical form – I have also tried to create a profile for the philosophical progression of the music and lyrics of Fossils through the years. I have primarily studied their first four albums²¹, and followed their popularity through the last two decades to compile a thorough understanding of how the band communicates with its audience outside of live performances.

The self titled first album from Fossils²² was released in 2002, after some difficulty with rejection from major record labels and was finally taken up by a regional label that was already making some headway in the market by taking up independent artists and emerging genres. This album became an underground best-seller – released under the genre 'Bangla Rock, the first of its kind; wherein the pirated copies also flooded the market, and although record sales were not much of a statistical evidence, pirated sharing and word of mouth turned the band into somewhat of a cult movement in the 2000s. This album was a slow hit, and the songs grew with the audience – mostly constituting rock ballads, the songs relayed a romantic desperation and longing that has a very innate quality – and brought everybody's attention to what the band was setting out to do. Almost all of the songs in this album are love songs, but with dark undertones – marked by anxiety, separation, rejection and defeat. The audience was ready for this dark, almost depressive melancholia that resonated with all the songs in this album. The lyrical quality reflected the musical expression with strong poetic self reflection and self loathing, which in turn was a call to arms to the entire generation – to express more of the pain, without hiding it within elitist cultural mores.

The first album's success gave Fossils²² the courage to bring to fruition their second studio album, simply titled "F2"²³. Moving away from the desperation in tone of the first, the second album is a technical masterpiece. Whereas the first was a humble offering with basic studio qualities and tracks completed with demo patches, the second was recorded in a professional studio, using updated instruments and advanced technological addition, and mixed at Sterling Sound, New York by famed American sound engineer Steve Fallone. The result was a fantastic studio album where the band showcased its abilities with flair and pomp. This album also provides the growing audience base of Fossils with a spectrum of what they are able to offer as a distinctly different musical ensemble. The popularity of this album soon after its release, both in record sales and in demand for live performances, began to form a specific market in the popular music audience. Along with the addictive songs, the band began to put up exceptionally good quality of live concerts. These live performances could be readily recognisable to a fan of the counterculture music years – bands like Led Zeppelin, The Doors, Rolling Stones and the British Punk Rock scene – but unheard of in Kolkata live show circuits. When Fossils began their live performances, they already stood out with their songs and use of instruments, but to that they added technical grandeur as time progressed – by using lights, sound and stage techniques and individual acts to make each performance a fantastical theatrical show for the duration of the performance, which kept the audience glued to this unfolding spectacle the entire time. They even started to wear only black attire in their live shows (a style choice they follow to this day), perhaps as a nod to the Goth movements by embracing the darkness of their messaging

²¹ This list is comprised of only Fossils studio albums, and does not account for "Mission F" (see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3cXAUWYKB8&t=1357s>) released in 2006 as a collaborative project and not a traditional Fossils album, and "Apu-dartho" a special two-track video album released in 2007, which cannot be seen as a musical album on its own, and therefore does not constitute to a complete comparison in this analysis.

²² See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4HiMSOjvUE&t=2234s>

²³ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNigjrr9YZQ>



quite literally as well as the music they offered. The demand for this kind of attention to detail quickly adjusted the audience's taste and they began to demand similar standards from other bands operating in the city. The second album established Fossils firmly in the market as well as earmarked an audience, with specific tastes and demands, and brought forward Bangla Rock as a definitive genre in the region.

The third studio album from Fossils was released in 2008, titled F3 not breaking with tradition, is the most intriguing album from the band till date, as it takes the most important critical leap into addressing the political questions, rather than mere inward reflection. This is a distinctly political album – developed as a concept album, from start to finish – it plays like one whole song, with discrete parts of musical digression and reminiscence, it juggles with the questions of oppression, moral alienation, dissociation from the social centres, and it raises the dichotomy of free will and agency within the *governmentality* of a 'citizen'. Therefore, I chose a song from this album to translate, as an example to show how language bridges gaps in popular expression. The translation I have attempted is semi-literal, wherein I have tried to thematically translate the expression. A word by word translation would sound not only un-poetic, it would also fail to do justice to the lyrical quality of the use of the language Bengali. The song is named *Hashpataley*²⁴ (which literally translates to 'at the hospital'), and follows the story of a soul trapped in an endless maze of isolation, longing to reunite with their lover, haunted by dreams of a forgotten past.

*My body still desires your touch
Once more, by my side
Desires that wait still beyond the horizon
Still looking out of the Southern window
Dreaming of a Southern Sea and its Southern gale
That saltens my desires and my dreams
They slowly float, away from me, in the Sothern sea
And my dreams mock me from afar
Floating still farther away
As I fall asleep in the fickle softness of your memory.*

*You came to the hospital again
You came to see me
You asked me how I was
I am well, I said, before it turned to
An infinite endless blackness.*

*Outside my door, the sunbeams slowly turn to gray
No one knows, I lie here, still awake
I wonder, if life for me were a mistake
The phosphoresence of my desires still keeps me alive
Pumps my heart with fiction and lies
Maybe if I drown in my dreams
I can be at one, with you and the Southern sea.*

*You came to the hospital again
You came to see me
You asked me how I was
I am well, I said, before I turned to
An infinite endless blackness.*

The context of the song also clarifies the message: this song was written after the band had interactions with a group of HIV positive individuals, which they were doing as a part of their non-profit works in the

²⁴ See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eTOTef9h_k&t=2547s. Skip to 35:55 for *Hashpataley*, the song translated in this paper.



region. Their exchange with this unique group of people opened their experiential spectrum to an otherwise unexplored aspect of social interaction of isolated people. HIV(+) and people with AIDS are still held distantly in our society. Although the fear and trauma regarding the disease is slowly being chipped away, the stigma is still verifiably long term. With this context, the song becomes clearer, in its philosophical layout, and brings attention to how subtle political messaging in popular cultural expressions do spread awareness and promotes empathy. By internalising the suffering of the isolated soul, the song associates with the deeper, more common experience of alienation within a larger social whole. This allows the listener to also internalise the same suffering and feel at one with someone they would never have felt nothing in common with. To me, however, this song embodies the idea of the *panopticon*: the song incites the visual aide to imagine a social pariah, isolated but under the surveillan constantly so as to always keep them away from the centre of life; it also seems like this perpetual confinement slowly takes away the agency of the individual, makes them accept the alienation as a punishment for being different. Musically, the song plays like a howl, or a cry, of an incarcerated soul. The hospital in the song is the symbolic institution, depicting a system of control and containment: where the lover can visit, but only in dreams and in fantasy. This Foucauldian paradigm of reading external factors as internally located, brings this song to focus. A seemingly different person has some of the very same sadness as everyone else, the pain of rejection and loneliness, the hurt of losing a loved one, are all extremely human experiences and thread the entire humanity into one common experience – humanity.

The album also took up the issues of the time, by showcasing a highly sensationalized media chaos over an inter-faith romantic tragedy in Bengal²⁵. The songs of this album did not follow the established norm of presenting an album, neither did it follow the musical tradition they had established themselves. Instead, Fossils took a leap of faith and offered their very best, as a critique of the times, almost like they did not care for the image they had built with so much struggle. The album cover depicted a bullet ridden *white* shirt, as opposed to their black attires. The album's plunge into previously unknown darkness is a vivid journey through sounds that incite sights, and words that inspire a hunger to break with the system. It is rebellious both in its lyrical quality and its musical rendition, by creating an atmosphere of discomfort, the album nudges the listener's inner demons. The songs of the album, as they are named – *Swabhabik khoon* (an ordinary murder), *Maa* (mother), *Danober utthaan* (rise of the beast), *Guru* (Sir), *Phirey chaulo* (let's go back), *Bidroher pandulipi* (manuscript of revolution), *Mummy* (refers to the Egyptian concept), *Bhoot aar tilottoma 1* (ghost and the city 1), *Dhongsho romonthon* (destruction rumination), *Hashpataley* (at the hospital), *Mrityu: Mrityur pore* (death: afterlife), *Rainline a mrityu* (death at the railline), *Schizophrenic Bra*, *Bhoot aar tilottoma 2* (ghost and the city 2). Not surprisingly, this is also Fossils' most unpopular album. The release of F3 in 2007 was received with lukewarm response, and did not generate too many favourites in the crowd. After this album, the band went through some soul searching, and some members left, while others returned. With time, the band created its own space and began to work more in tune with audience response.

The fourth album, titled F4²⁶ and released in 2013, provided a nostalgic revisit to the first album – comprising of ballads, crowd pleasers and signature Fossils grunge tones. This album appears more mature, mellow and domesticated. The anxiety of youth is past, and with ageing members, the band projected a more politically correct stand – a sort of synthesis arising from the chaos and dilemma of the inconsistencies of youth. This album bears a stamp of surrender, to the system, having fought hard and lost – whereas, in the spirit of its inception, Fossils has won the revolution and become a mainstream performance act. The defeat, however, lies in the fact that the broader medium format, of television and film, is yet to embrace the enigma of Bangla Rock. As if in response, the fourth album is an intensely visual album, with varied soundscapes as well as signature tones, providing the listener with a vivid tool to immerse within. Although it is calmer in its expression, this album still invokes many innately political questions, it seems to have come of age and the rage has been replaced by responsibilities towards life itself. The analogy of governmentality comes full circle

²⁵ This case was highly publicised in the media, and the trial was followed closely as an interfaith issue. The album subtly took up the issue and centred their theme around the alleged murder of a Muslim man, for secretly marrying the daughter of a wealthy Hindu businessman from Kolkata. The case brought up a tense communal antagonism during the trial, and the political parties as well as the police were held involved in the conspiracy by the general public. Therefore the romantic perspective here takes centre stage in the concept album. See: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/rizwanur-rahman-case-hc-rejects-ashok-todis-plea-for-dismissal-of-charges-4700775/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rizwanur_Rahman.

²⁶ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ukbo7cq-B4o&t=1496s>



at this album, as the struggles dissipates through dissociation, the audience begins its association with the changing perspective of the lyric. As Fossils grows in age, so does its audience, and with it does the universe of this fantastical journey of relationship between the performer and the spectator.

Their fifth album is currently in production, titled F5, it is a break from their traditional format, and is being released in two instalments (first of which was released in August 2017, and the latter slated for tentatively mid-2018 release) with four songs in each release. This marks another change in how music being produced, marketed, shared and received, in today's changing environment. Since incomplete, I did not consider it as a part of our discussion in this paper.

6. Conclusions

As we come to the conclusion of this paper, I want to intentionally leave you with the feeling of wanting- to read on and to explore more. With adequate interest in this unexplored cultural spectrum, I look forward to following many of the forming hypotheses, so as to study this unique phenomena further and with more scrutiny. The aspects that still need to be studied are, revisit audience perspectives with a fresh fieldwork, and in-depth discussions with the band about their range and responsibilities as the creators of cultural discourse, to delve further into the intended cultural effect. This cultural movement towards embracing agency, will provide evidence of the changing times to those who study societies after us.

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