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From Moheener Ghoraguli to the Present:

Bengali Rock Music—Identity,
Inequality, and Survival

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Executive Summary

This study examines the evolution, socio-economic dynamics, and policy environment of Bengali rock music in West Bengal, situating it within broader debates on culture, identity, and creative labour. Beginning with the emergence of Moheener Ghoraguli in the 1970s, the study traces how rock music developed as a counter-cultural response to dominant musical traditions and later evolved into a distinct urban subculture.

The analyses highlight that despite cultural visibility and a dedicated audience base, Bengali rock operates within fragmented income structures, limited institutional support, persistent gender imbalances, and unequal access to digital and global music markets.

Further, the study evaluates the existing cultural and music policy framework in West Bengal and India, identifying a significant gap between the institutional support extended to traditional art forms and the relative exclusion of contemporary genres such as rock. It argues that this imbalance, combined with market and infrastructural constraints, has limited the genre's growth and global reach.

In response, the study proposes the BRIDGE framework—focusing on financial backing, rights access, infrastructure development, digital integration, global outreach, and ecosystem development as a policy model to support the rock music industry. This framework aims to address systemic gaps and enable more equitable participation in the cultural economy.

By integrating historical analysis, socio-economic inquiry, and policy evaluation, the study concludes that Bengali rock represents a form of cultural resilience sustained under conditions of economic precarity, and that its future depends on more inclusive and adaptive cultural policy frameworks.



Introduction

An expression of struggle, an act of rebellion, a voice of defiance; in one word - revolution. That is what rock music stands for. Throughout history, rock music has often been the most romantic and violent, comforting and outrageous, beautiful and gruesome form of art. Over time, it has been symbolic of challenging the status quo, fighting for justice, and raising a voice against societal norms.

Rock music has the distinct characteristic of being both global and local. Drawing our focus to the Indian subcontinent, rock music had its inception in the 1970s in West Bengal. Bengal has had a long history of rigid cultural forms rooted in Rabindra Sangeet, Hindustani classical traditions, and diverse folk genres, which primarily talked about local lives and spiritual connections.^[1] These forms had been widely accepted as the markers of Bengali refinement and intellectual identity, enjoying institutional patronage and social prestige.^[2] The emergence of rock against this backdrop thus served as a cultural rupture.^[3] Moheener Ghoraguli, being the pioneer of Bengali rock, was the counter-current that challenged the aesthetic hierarchies and the moral economy of “respectable” music-making.^[4]

Moheener Ghoraguli stood out because it transformed global rock idioms into the local Bengali linguistic, poetic, and political context.^[5] Drawing inspiration from Western rock, they started writing lyrics in the local language, Bangla, articulating themes of urban alienation, political disillusionment, and existential crisis during a period marked by the Naxalite movement, economic stagnation, and youth unrest in Kolkata.^[6] They moved away from earlier music traditions by adopting a more introspective and critical approach.



Bengali rock emerged as the antithesis of dominant cultural narratives that privileged harmony, spiritual upliftment, and continuity with the past.

Socially, Bengali rock became an identity marker for sections of the urban youth seeking an alternative to hegemonic cultural norms, signalling resistance to both commercial homogenization and cultural conservatism. It is important to note that Bengali rock not only became a cultural revolt against bourgeois norms but also became a critique of imperialistic wars, refugee crisis, consumerism, and the alienation of the urban youth in a post-industrial capitalist society, highlighting the human cost often overlooked in capitalist expansion.

Despite its peripheral position, rock music gradually became a space for dissent and for the construction of an alternative identity among urban Bengali youth.^[7] However, as Chatterjee observes, even during its later revival phases, Bengali rock has oscillated between obscurity and nostalgia-driven recognition rather than achieving sustained mainstream integration.^[8] Unlike Rabindra Sangeet and mainstream film music, rock music has unfortunately failed to gain formal recognition from cultural institutions, state patronage systems, and educational frameworks. Thus, despite being artistically influential, it remained culturally peripheral. As broader discussions on Bengali music suggest, rock musicians often operate within informal economies, relying on live shows, digital promotions, and secondary occupations to sustain themselves, unlike practitioners of classical or state-supported folk traditions.^[9]

The contrast between Western rock and rock music in Bengal remains significant. Despite rock music representing political consciousness, a language of protest, and creative autonomy globally, Bengali rock continues to suffer from limited outreach due to linguistic barriers, lack of institutional recognition, and the structural dominance of film and devotional music.^[10]



Existing literature has acknowledged these challenges but often treats Bengali rock either as a historical curiosity or as a nostalgic subculture, without delving into the socio-economic realities and studying the present-day challenges that have hindered the potential rise of rock music as one of the dominant forms of Bengali music.^[1]

Methodology

By tracing the trajectory of Bengali rock, from Moheener Ghoraguli to contemporary bands, this research seeks to understand how rock music has shaped and continues to shape identity, labour, and cultural resistance in West Bengal. Drawing on industry reports, academic research papers, and various historical archives, the study aims to do a policy-oriented analysis of Bengali rock music. In doing so, it moves beyond the romanticized notion of rebellion to critically evaluate the conditions under which Bengali rock survives - and what lies in the future.



Chapter 1

The History & Evolution of Rock Culture in Bengal

The emergence of Bengali rock music cannot be separated from the gritty currents of 1970s West Bengal – marked by political instability, repression, unemployment, food shortages, and a fragile faith in the institutions. Calcutta, the once bright intellectual capital of colonial India, now existed as a city battered by stagnation and divided loyalties. The young minds of the city walked a tightrope between passionate revolutionary ideals and a growing sense of disillusionment with the system. However, culturally, the Bengalis held fast to their traditional musical practices with a stubborn consistency.^[12] Rabindra Sangeet had a moral sheen and intellectual continuity. Classical music retained its sense of authority. Folk songs represented authenticity and rootedness. Together, they formed what Antonio Gramsci would describe as a hegemonic cultural order - a setting in which certain discourses were naturalized as “legitimate Bengali culture,” and became the standards by which art and identity were judged.^[13]

2.1 The 1970s: Political Upheaval and Cultural Restlessness

The late 1960s and 1970s in India were a period of economic stagnation, increasing unemployment rates, and intense political instability. Under Indira Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, mounting opposition and governance crises led to the declaration of the Emergency (1975-77), in which civil liberties were suspended, opposition was suppressed, and media censorship became the norm.

The period further intensified the alienation of the urban youth. In West Bengal, instability had already escalated through the Naxalite movement.





Emerging from the 1967 peasant uprising in Naxalbari, the movement demanded radical land redistribution and the overthrow of entrenched class hierarchies. Under the ideological leadership of Charu Mazumdar and the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), it transformed from a rural agrarian movement to a militant urban student struggle. Disillusioned by graduate unemployment, economic stagnation, and a colonial education structure shaped by Thomas Babington Macaulay's legacy, thousands of students in Calcutta embraced revolutionary politics.^[14]

By 1969-71, the movement had transitioned from intellectual radicalism to armed struggle. Universities were closed, curfews were imposed, and parts of Calcutta were transformed into war zones, with Naxalite groups carrying out targeted assassinations and guerrilla tactics. In response, the government imposed severe measures to suppress the rebellion, including rampant arrests and custodial violence. By 1972, the movement had been effectively suppressed, but it had left behind a generation with a legacy of trauma, ideological passion, and alienation from state institutions.



It was in this charged political atmosphere, marked by violence, censorship, and disillusionment among the Indian middle class, that Moheener Ghoraguli was formed in 1975. Inspired by Bengali poet Jibananda Das' poem "Ghora", the band was named Moheener Ghoraguli and used a seahorse as their logo. In this context, it is important to note that Jibananda Das began his artistic career by questioning the burden of Rabindranath Tagore's legacy. He personifies, in a very interesting way, the desire for change that drove the young Naxalites in their pursuit of revolution in the early 1970s.^[15]

Led by Gautam Chattopadhyay, the band was not merely incorporating Western rock elements into the Bengali musical landscape; they were questioning the very moral and aesthetic authority of Bengali music. Moheener Ghoraguli departed from the conventional protest songs that adhered to familiar musical patterns. They challenged the established norms of Bengali listening. Electric guitars, bass, drums, and complex, experimental sounds entered a space long dominated by melody and vocal performance. It was not merely a question of technique; it was a statement.

They became the flagbearers of the counterculture movement of the time, as their music expressed the feelings of a generation that felt betrayed politically and constrained culturally.^[16] Bengali pop music had long engaged with politics, but Moheener Ghoraguli's significance lay in their tone – characterized by irony, fragmentation, and existential angst replacing straightforward moral positions.^[17] Thus, their emergence represents a counter-hegemonic cultural shift.

2.2 Aesthetic Disruption: Lyrics, Sound, and Structure

If the emergence of Moheener Ghoraguli marked a historical rupture, its true radicalism lay in its aesthetic transformation.



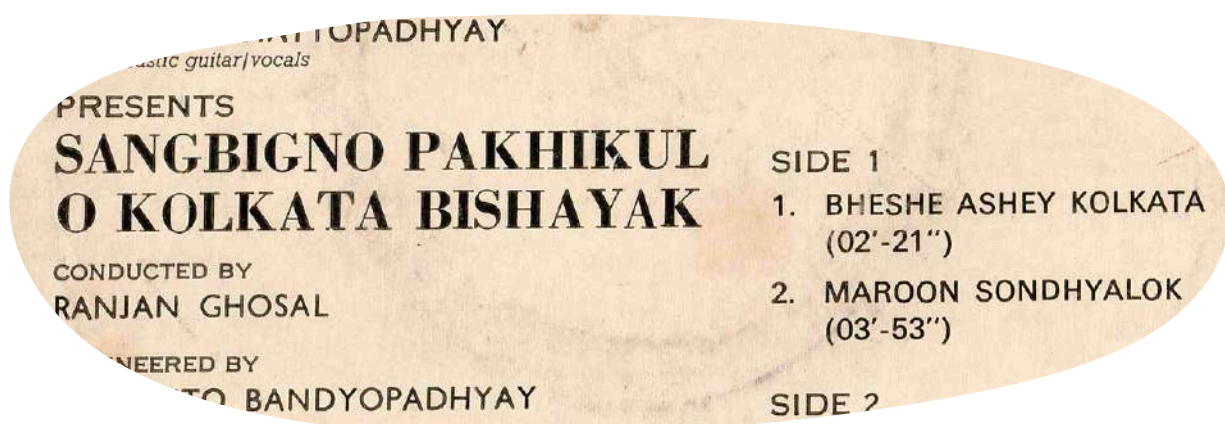
The band did not merely introduce new sounds; it disturbed the way Bengali music was conceived - how it was constructed, listened to, appreciated, and interpreted.

2.2.1 Lyrical Modernism and Urban Existentialism

Bengali music has always valued a smooth, emotionally resolved lyric and a sense of philosophical clarity. Rabindra Sangeet usually wove together romantic ideals, spiritual yearnings, and philosophical clarity. Folk songs carried devotional, pastoral, or communal narratives. Even the more politically oriented songs of the earlier times usually spoke in straightforward, persuasive slogans.

Moheener Ghoraguli radically departed from this tradition. Their songs brought to the forefront urban alienation, disillusionment with revolutionary politics, fragmented modern identities, anxieties over middle-class stagnation, and the dissolution of utopian visions.^[18]

Rather than providing solace or transcendence, their songs exposed a sense of incompleteness. In songs like *Shono Shudhijan*, where they address city people as *Shudhijan*, or “gentle folks,” the lyrics attempt to connect with the crowd. Their music also reflects the struggle with urban spatial representation. They perceive the city as a space marked by melancholy, irony, and conflict. To represent the dullness of the urban landscape, they have sometimes shifted their attention away from the city to the rural settings.



This duality of urban and rural life fundamentally influenced their imagination, as we find in the four songs from the album *Shangbigno Pakhikul O Kolkata Bishayak*, namely *Bhese Ashe Kolkata*, *Haaye Bhalobashi*, *Maroon Shandhyalok*, and *Shangbigno Pakhikul*. The song *Haaye Bhalobashi*, which was written on the way back from a journey to Sundarban by the band members, finds Wordsworthian solace in the memory of the songwriter, who engages with the idyllic natural world, whether through a moonlit stroll or reading poetry on a bleak afternoon.^[19] However, this bliss is suddenly disrupted by the sight of the workers relentlessly toiling in the fields. The song *Ajana Uronto Bostu* is about four strange clerks who imagine their dreary lives in a gloomy hostel room. The clamour of the industrial metropolis has already infiltrated their private retreat. Yet, in the isolation of nighttime, their embodied experience in the urban commonplace unexpectedly transports them into a surreal existence.^[20] Before Moheener Ghoraguli, this dimension of society had been largely ignored and rendered marginal by the mainstream musical narratives. These songs emphasize the importance of ordinary and unsung individuals.

Calcutta, the former stronghold of intellectual arrogance, became a city of irony, decay, and agitation. Chatterjee describes this as a modernist shift in Bengali musical sensibility - a move from narrative storytelling to existential dislocation.^[21] This corresponds to Gramsci's notion of cultural struggle, wherein dominant sensibilities are challenged through alternative forms of expression rather than direct political confrontation.^[22] Moheener Ghoraguli did not challenge the dominant music with militant slogans; instead, they challenged it with tone. Irony replaced reverence, and ambiguity replaced certainty.

But importantly, their language remained purely Bengali. They did not submit to the hegemony of English. Instead, they wove together Bangla lyrical traditions and urban slang, shattering the tradition of using a polished dialect.



In Bourdieu's terms, this constituted a challenge to "*legitimate taste*."^[23] The "*bhadralok aesthetic*" valued refinement and melodic purity, whereas Moheener Ghoraguli introduced rawness and rupture.

2.2.2 Sonic Architecture: Rhythm, Instrumentation, and Structural Rebellion

Moheener Ghoraguli's sonic innovation was nothing less than revolutionary. Typically, Bengali music relied on the harmonium, tabla, strong acoustic melody, and vocals as the core elements. Moheen departed from this traditional norm by introducing electric guitars, bass guitars, drum kits, jazz-inspired elements, and sometimes combined these with folk instruments.

In the 1970s, Bengal, the electric guitar represented a form of cosmopolitan modernity, upending the acoustic world of Rabindra Sangeet and folk music.^[24] Amplification was itself political as it altered the spatial experience of music. However, their music was not an imitation of Western rock music - rather, they localized the electric sound. Retrospective interviews and essays highlight their experimentation with Baul influences, acoustic overlays, and electric instrumentation.^[25] This blurred the binary opposition between "authentic" Bengali and "Western modern."

Bengali classical and semi-classical music is based on melodic patterns led by raags and cyclical rhythms. Moheener Ghoraguli introduced syncopated rhythms, irregular beat patterns, jazz and progressive tempo shifts, and non-linear song structures. The transition to a rhythm-based musical style was a radical departure from traditional music forms, with the bass guitar adding a new layer of complexity and energy. This rhythmic destabilization mirrored social instability. The broken tempo echoed the fractured political life.



2.2.3 Performance, Space, and Subcultural Semiotics

Moheener Ghoraguli never performed on the large stages of the elite concert halls; their territory was limited to college campuses, informal gatherings, and small public spaces where youth congregated. This spatial positioning aligns with the subculture theory explained by Hall & Jefferson and Hebdige and shows us how subcultures construct symbolic resistance through style, sound, and space.^[26] Long hair, alternative fashion, and loud music - these were more than mere fashion and noise; they were semiotic shocks targeting a conservative cultural circuit. Local newspapers published articles dubbing their act as “*Bengali Elvis Presley’s nachon kodon*” (The obscene performances of Bengali Elvis Presley) - a wordplay on Elvis Presley’s name and indicative of how Moheener Ghoraguli’s stage presence was perceived as a cheap imitation of Western rock artists.^[27]



Hebdige argues that subcultures generate “noise” within mainstream culture and thus, Moheener Ghoraguli’s aesthetic noise challenged both expectation and authority.^[28] However, their subcultural capital did not translate into economic capital and thus resulted in a commercial failure. Yet, the absence of economic success did not diminish their value; instead, it produced a form of authenticity capital - the kind that future generations would inherit and reinterpret.



2.3 The 1990s Expansion: From Underground to Urban Subculture

If the 1970s represented a counter-hegemonic disruption through Moheener Ghoraguli, the 1990s represented a period of consolidation. What had once been an isolated aesthetic revolt had now developed into a sustained urban cultural practice. This did not result simply from musical creativity - it was also the product of structural changes in the political economy, media space, and urban geography of India.

The liberalization policies of 1991 reshaped the cultural industries of India. Market deregulation led to an increase in media outlets, private recording facilities, and niche marketing. For Bengali musicians, this meant the rise of cassette labels, increased access to recording facilities, and the possibility of alternative distribution channels beyond the film industry. Liberalization did not immediately empower rock musicians, but it certainly reduced centralized control over music distribution and created small but important pockets for innovation.

At the same time, the urban geography of Kolkata underwent a radical transformation. College festivals expanded in size and scope. Cafes and pubs began to feature live music. A gig circuit, though small, gradually emerged. These sites became crucibles of subcultural identity. Rock music ceased to be a periodic event and instead became a regular feature of urban youth culture.

2.3.1 Kabir Suman, Anjan Dutt, Susmit Bose, and Urban Intimacy

Before the full-fledged Bengali rock band culture became a reality, the early 1990s were characterized by the emergence of individual singer-songwriters who transformed the Bengali popular song's lyrical landscape.

Kabir Suman's 1992 album *Tomake Chai* was a radical departure from the hegemony of film songs and classical music.



His music was characterized by minimalist arrangements, colloquial Bangla, and urban-centric themes. Suman's songs revolved around intimacy, everyday life, loneliness, existential crisis, and political cynicism.^[29] He did not perform rock music in a guitar-driven style, yet his songs disrupted Bengali listening habits by validating the urban experience as worthy of artistic expression. His works helped establish an audience for non-film and non-classical music, which served as an important precursor to the rock explosion that followed.

Anjan Dutt furthered this transformation. In the mid-1990s, his albums, inspired by Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Western blues, blended guitar-driven arrangements with stories of urban romance and disillusionment. His songs traversed college crowds and cassette tapes, reinforcing the idea that Bengali music could be modern, personal, and urban without abandoning linguistic ties.

There is another name that often goes unnoticed when talking about the cultural revolution of the music scene in Bengal - Susmit Bose. Being active over several decades, starting from the 1970s, he served as a link between protest folk and contemporary alternative music.^[1] Although he remained a relatively low-profile figure compared to Anjan Dutt and Kabir Suman, by the mid-1990s, he had established himself within the city's niche urban-acoustic music circuit. Unlike Dutt and Suman, he performed mostly in English. Due to his emphasis on themes revolving around human rights, social justice, and Baul-folk-inspired songwriting, he is often referred to as the "*Indian Bob Dylan*." He ensured that modern song maintained a political genealogy even as it responded to the evolving urban sensibilities.

Suman, Dutt, and Bose together played a transitional role. They were not, strictly speaking, making "rock music," but they played an important role in transforming the musical culture in Bengal.



They helped Bengali popular taste shift from reverential consumption to dialogic listening, reorienting Bengali music from idealist transcendence to urban modernity.

2.3.2 Bands and the Urban Scene: Consolidation of a Subculture

Alongside Moheener Ghoraguli, Kolkata saw the rise of an English rock band in the mid-1970s - 'High'. With members including Lew Hilt, Nondon Bagchi, and Dilip Balakrishnan, the band became an important part of Kolkata's rock lineage. Although the cultural and social consciousness with which it emerged was in stark contrast to that of Moheener Ghoraguli, they contributed significantly to the rock culture that predated and informed the 1990s expansion.

However, their music did not gain much popularity among the urban youth. The primary reason for this was their inability to write songs that resonated with the urban youth life in the Bengali context. Their lyrics, being in English and heavily derived from themes common in Western rock music, echoed more of a post-colonial romanticism than an empathy towards the growing disillusionment and daily struggle of middle-class urban life in the given socio-political context of Bengal.

But the importance of High lies less in commercial success and more in their role in building the infrastructural and technical foundations of Bengal's rock music. They encouraged rehearsal cultures, stage professionalism, and musical technique derived from progressive and psychedelic rock.^[31] Their long-form live shows and original compositions created a repository of performance practices and technical knowledge within the Kolkata music scene. When Bangla rock bands emerged more strongly in the 1990s, they inherited not only Moheener Ghoraguli's ideological boldness but also High's technical expertise.



By the mid to late 1990s, a group of bands began to emerge that would eventually shape the Bengali rock scene. Cactus, formed in the early 1990s, combined blues-rock with Bengali lyrics. Their music was more aggressive than the earlier forms of music performed by individual singer-songwriters and represented a return to amplified intensity.^[32] They became central to rock music in college circuits and helped normalize Bangla lyrics in hard rock formats.

Lakkhichhara, formed in the mid-1990s, brought sharper alternative rock sensibilities. Their lyrics reflected themes of existential angst and dislocation, resonating with the middle-class youth struggling with the uncertainties of liberalization. Fossils band, formed in 1998, represented a more aggressive alternative metal and grunge sound. Their lead vocalist, Rupam Islam, articulated psychological turmoil, alienation, and rebellion in a way that turned Bengali rock into a cathartic experience. Fossils achieved mainstream success that was unprecedented for Bangla rock bands, performing at major college fests and concerts.



The Parash Pathar band combined satire and rock music, injecting humour and irony into the subcultural lexicon. Their presence showed that Bengali rock could be playful without sacrificing its edge and attitude. Prithibi, another Bengal-based rock band, introduced a more melodic and alternative rock sound, focusing on lyrical complexity and musical texture. Krosswindz band, formed earlier but resurgent in the 1990s, pioneered folk-rock fusion with global influences. Their incorporation of Celtic, Irish, and Indian folk elements into rock formats expanded the sonic vocabulary of Bengali alternative music.

These bands brought about stylistic plurality in rock music. Bengali rock was no longer a monolith - it spanned folk-rock fusion, hard rock, satire-driven pop-rock, and grunge-inspired angst. In terms of subculture theory, this marked the phase of consolidation. Rock music became a badge of urban youth subculture.

2.3.3 From Scene to Memory: Canonization, Nostalgia, and Symbolic Capital

From the early 2000s onwards, a notable transformation took place - the 1990s Bengali rock period began to be narrated as the “golden era.”^[33] Interviews, tribute concerts, documentary discussions, and print retrospectives reframed bands of the 1990s as pioneers rather than peripheral figures.^[34] This process of memorialization must be understood not merely as nostalgia, but as symbolic consolidation.

However, canonization did not necessarily alter structural economics.^[35] Symbolic elevation did not guarantee financial security for artists. Instead, nostalgia functioned as a ticket-selling mechanism for reunion concerts, a branding tool for festivals, and a legitimizing discourse in cultural journalism.^[36] Memory itself became a resource.



This exposes a crucial dynamic in the political economy of culture. Symbolic value can circulate independently of material support. The genre's significance was acknowledged, but structural support was minimal.

Thus, the history of Bengali rock reflects more than the evolution of a musical genre; it represents the emergence of an alternative cultural consciousness within Bengal's urban society. From the counter-cultural interventions of Moheener Ghoraguli to the consolidation of a distinct rock subculture in the 1990s, Bengali rock evolved through continuous negotiations between resistance, identity, and cultural legitimacy. Yet, despite its symbolic influence and lasting cultural presence, the genre remained structurally marginal within the broader cultural economy. This tension between cultural significance and institutional precarity forms the foundation for understanding the contemporary realities of Bengali rock musicians and the challenges they continue to face today.



Chapter 2

Lives Behind the Sound: Identity, Inequality, and Labour in Bengali Rock

Building on the historical evolution outlined in Chapter 1, this chapter examines the lived realities of Bengali rock musicians. It focuses on their social backgrounds, economic conditions, and the challenges of sustaining a career within an informal and unequal music economy, highlighting the tensions between cultural expression and survival.

3.1 Socio-Economic Background of Bengali Rock Musicians

The socio-economic background of Bengali rock musicians is quite different from that of many other genres of music in Bengal. It has been observed that, historically, most of the Bengali rock musicians belong to an educated middle-class background, especially from the city of Kolkata or the surrounding urban districts. This demographic pattern reflects the socio-cultural conditions under which rock music first originated in Bengal during the 1970s. Musicians in bands like Moheener Ghoraguli were mostly university-educated individuals who were exposed to Western music through records, radio broadcasts, and cosmopolitan intellectual networks.^[37]



Unlike other prominent genres of Bengali music, like traditional folk music, which are rooted in rural communities and transmitted across generations through hereditary or community-based systems, rock music has not been associated with rural Bengal - it developed within an urban intellectual milieu. The musicians were mostly students, artists, writers, or professionals. They were not associated with music as their profession, but rather used it as a form of expression. This is reflected in the fact that during the expansion of the genre in the 1990s, bands like Cactus, Fossils, and Chandrabindoo emerged largely from college circuits and youth cultures.

The middle-class backgrounds of many Bengali rock musicians have also influenced the thematic content of the music. Lyrics often echo themes of urban alienation, generational anxiety, and middle-class disillusionment. Scholars have argued that Bengali rock music represents the cultural experience of the middle-class "bhadralok," and has failed to emerge as a cross-class musical movement.^[38]

However, this socio-economic background also points towards the structural barriers within the music industry. Learning rock instruments such as the electric guitar, bass, and drums requires the purchase of relatively expensive equipment. This makes the entry of new artists into the rock scene relatively easier for those who have access to urban facilities and financial resources. This contrasts with other folk music genres such as Baul and Bhatiyali music, where instruments are relatively inexpensive and musical education occurs through community networks.

Thus, while Bengali rock often presents itself as counter-cultural, its practitioners typically come from relatively privileged social backgrounds compared to performers in traditional musical genres.



3.2 Gender and Class Dynamics in Bengali Rock

Despite having the image of being counter-cultural and rebellious, the world of Bengali rock music is marked by significant inequalities in terms of gender and class representation. Bengali rock is characterized by an overwhelming predominance of male musicians, with very few female musicians contributing to the genre in terms of instrumental roles such as playing the guitar, drums, or participating in music production. These female musicians commonly feature as vocalists or collaborators in bands.

In terms of sociological studies of popular music cultures, it has been found that the world of rock music is characterized by an overall reproduction of gender hierarchies in spite of its self-perception as being rebellious.



Lucy Green's study on the relationship between music education and gender shows that instruments like electric guitar and drums have been socially associated with masculine identity, thus discouraging female musicians from participating in rock music.^[39] Similarly, Sheila Whiteley's research on the relationship between women and popular music reveals that the world of rock music is characterized by an overall reproduction of masculine rebellion while marginalizing women's creative agency.^[40]



These patterns are evident in the Bengali rock scene. Prominent bands, such as Fossils, Cactus, Chandrabindoo, Lakkhichhara, and Krosswindz, have mostly been composed of male members. Interviews with musicians often acknowledge the fact that women's involvement in instrumental roles and band leadership positions has historically been extremely limited.^[41]

At the same time, it has been observed that in the past few years, women have started entering the independent music scene, particularly as vocalists, composers, and producers. The rise of digital platforms and home recording technologies has been able to address the problem of unequal representation to some extent. However, the historical underrepresentation of women has significantly shaped the demographic composition of Bengali rock.

Class dynamics in Bengali rock are less articulated but remain significant. In the case of rock music, artists usually belong to the urban middle-class stratum of society^[42] as the ability to engage in the production of certain types of culture requires substantial cultural capital, including exposure to global musical traditions, access to instruments, and participation in educational institutions.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides us with the framework needed to understand this pattern.^[43] According to his study, the production of art depends not only on economic capital but also on the possession of cultural knowledge, acquired through education, family background, and social connections. In the case of Bengali rock music, the possession of musical instruments such as electric guitars, amplifiers, and drum kits, and the exposure to Western artists, have historically been concentrated among educated urban middle-class groups.



This concentration of cultural capital indirectly shapes caste representation within this genre. The urban middle-class environment has traditionally been dominated by socially privileged groups who have greater access to cultural networks.^[44] As a result, the rock music genre indirectly reinforces these social constructs even without explicit exclusionary practices.

Understanding the representation of gender, class, and caste within the Bengali rock music genre requires a holistic understanding of both its emancipatory aspirations and its social limitations. The genre may represent an arena for cultural dissent, but the internal composition continues to reflect the unequal distribution of cultural, economic, and social capital in contemporary India.

3.3 Economics of Being a Rock Musician

The economic reality of Bengali rock musicians reflects the broader situation of India's independent music industry. Although the genre has gained significant cultural acceptance and a dedicated youth fanbase, it operates within a structurally precarious creative economy characterized by irregular income streams, lack of institutional support, and dependence on live performances.

Unlike classical musicians, who benefit from institutional patronage through cultural academies, government-sponsored festivals, and teaching networks, rock musicians operate within the informal sector of the creative industry. Their economic survival, therefore, depends on diversified income strategies rather than a single source of income.

Recent industry reports on India's independent music sector illustrate the scale of this precarity.



Surveys conducted by The Dialogue and EY India-Indian Performing Rights Society highlight that independent musicians across India face significant structural barriers in monetizing their work despite technological expansion and increased digital distribution.

3.3.1 Income Structure of Independent Musicians

According to the Dialogue Report (2025), based on a survey of over 1,200 independent musicians in India, income sources for independent artists remain highly fragmented.^[1]

The data reveals that live performances account for the income of the majority of musicians. However, this is highly seasonal and depends on festivals, college events, and corporate events. The dependence on live performances is more critical in the case of Bengali rock musicians because they do not have the commercial base as enjoyed by film music or mainstream pop.

3.3.2 Streaming Economics and the Digital Shift

Although the rise of streaming platforms like Spotify, YouTube, and Apple Music has made all kinds of music more accessible to a wider audience, the economic benefits for the artists remain highly uneven.

According to the EY-IPRS Music Creator Economy report, over 20,000 songs are released annually in India, reflecting the rapid expansion of independent music production.^[1] Yet streaming revenues are heavily concentrated among a small number of artists with very large audiences.

For regional genres like Bengali rock, the economic model of streaming is particularly challenging as it is built on scale-based revenue systems, in which artists with millions of streams earn significantly more than others.



Bengali rock bands, whose audience is generally limited to their linguistic community, are usually not able to achieve such high streaming numbers.

3.3.3 Comparison with Classical and Folk Musicians

While classical musicians often supplement their income through music schools and teaching institutions, rock musicians lack equivalent institutional pathways. Similarly, folk musicians get frequent opportunities to perform through government-sponsored cultural programs, which provide a measure of income stability. Rock musicians, by contrast, operate largely within private event markets.

The economic conditions in which Bengali rock musicians perform demonstrate the paradox of independent music in the contemporary world. Although Bengali rock music has achieved considerable cultural popularity and has secured its own fan base, musicians often lack the financial stability needed to sustain themselves. Thus, Bengali rock operates within a form of creative labour that is marked by passion, precarity, and persistence.



3.3.4 Structural Challenges and Cultural Limits

Despite its rich history and strong cultural presence in West Bengal, Bengali rock has failed to attain significant global recognition. It has carved out a unique identity through the use of Western rock instruments and Bengali lyrics; however, certain structural, economic, and cultural barriers have hindered its expansion to a wider global platform.

One of the major barriers is the small linguistic market. Bengali rock, being predominantly performed in the Bengali language, is limited in its appeal to non-Bengali-speaking audiences. Although language has not been a barrier for the global popularity of other music genres, like Korean pop and Latin music, these genres have attained such status with the support of a well-developed international marketing system and coordinated industry backing. In contrast, Bengali rock remains largely limited to West Bengal and the Bengali diaspora abroad.^[1]



Another factor is the lack of a well-developed industry infrastructure for promoting independent music. In contrast to the mainstream film music, which is supported by large production houses, promotional networks, and media partnerships, Bengali rock bands are mostly part of an informal system, with artists managing their own recording, marketing, and distribution activities.



While this system provides artistic autonomy, it also hinders the scope for promoting their music on a wider scale.

A further constraint is the live performance ecosystem. Bengali rock music has traditionally relied on college festivals, cultural events, and regional concert circuits for its primary audience engagement. While this is important for sustaining the genre, it rarely provides the international exposure necessary for global recognition. Without regular participation in international festivals, Bengali rock remains largely confined to regional live performance circuits.

Digital platforms offer new possibilities in this regard, but they also bring new challenges. Streaming platforms like YouTube and Spotify allow musicians to distribute their music, helping them to reach a wider international audience, without being a part of any record label. However, this access remains limited within a platform-driven ecosystem. The algorithm-driven approach of such digital platforms majorly benefits only those musicians who can attain extremely high streaming numbers. Regional genres with smaller listener bases, therefore, face structural disadvantages in gaining visibility within global digital ecosystems.^[48]

A major factor driving growth in the music industry is the increasing significance of music publishing and intellectual property rights. The rise of publishing revenues, through licensing, synchronization, and royalty collection, has opened new economic opportunities for artists and rights holders. However, accessing these revenue sources demands knowledge of copyright systems, legal frameworks, and connections within formal industry networks.^[49] Independent musicians, especially those in regional genres like Bengali rock, often lack the institutional backing and industry expertise needed to monetize these rights effectively.



Cultural positioning also plays an important role in determining the global presence of the genre. Bengali rock is situated in a hybrid space between Western musical structures and regional cultural expression. While this hybridity provides Bengali rock with its unique identity, it also makes it difficult to categorize within global music markets that often rely on well-defined genre identities. As a result, Bengali rock has not yet achieved a recognizable global brand like Korean pop or Latin pop.

Another critical aspect of the changing music economy is the rise of content-driven media services. Here, music is increasingly woven into larger digital ecosystems, including film, advertising, gaming, and short-form video platforms. While this convergence has broadened monetization opportunities, it has also heightened the need for professional management, branding, and integration across platforms. Independent musicians who lack access to these resources find it hard to take full advantage of these chances.

Despite these difficulties, Bengali musicians continue to aspire to greater international recognition. Interviews with contemporary bands reveal ambitions to collaborate with global artists, perform at international music festivals, and reach wider audiences through digital platforms.^[50] Such aspirations represent the growing interconnectedness of global music cultures, where regional genres are increasingly engaging with international audiences.

Bengali rock, therefore, remains a powerful regional musical movement - deeply embedded in Bengal's cultural landscape - even as it continues to negotiate the challenges of global recognition.



Chapter 3

Policy Gaps, Structural Loopholes & the Road Ahead

Building on the socio-economic realities discussed in Chapter 2, this chapter examines the policy and institutional frameworks shaping the music ecosystem in West Bengal and India. It identifies key gaps in support for independent genres such as Bengali rock and proposes practical measures to create a more inclusive and sustainable cultural economy.

4.1 Cultural Policy Framework in West Bengal: Inclusion and Exclusion

Cultural policy in West Bengal has often focused on preserving and promoting traditional art forms, including classical music, folk traditions, and heritage performance practices. State institutions and cultural bodies, such as the Directorate of Culture and national organizations like the Sangeet Natak Akademi, support these art forms through grants, fellowships, and performance opportunities.

For example, the Government of West Bengal provides retainer fees for folk artists. This offers a modest but reliable monthly income to practitioners of traditional art forms. National schemes, announced through the Press Information Bureau, also give financial assistance and scholarships to young artists, especially in classical and traditional fields.^[5] These efforts reflect a policy approach that views culture mainly as a means of preserving heritage.

However, this approach also highlights a major exclusion. Contemporary and independent genres, like Bengali rock, are largely ignored by formal policy support.



Unlike classical or folk musicians, rock artists lack access to regular grants, state-sponsored fellowships, or official recognition programs. This approach suggests that cultural policy still operates with a divide between traditional and modern forms, institutionalizing “heritage” while treating contemporary urban genres as market-driven rather than culturally important.^[52]

The Sangeet Natak Akademi’s grant-in-aid schemes also focus on supporting established performing arts organizations. However, there is limited support for independent or alternative music communities. As a result, Bengali rock musicians, who mainly work outside formal institutions, find it difficult to access these resources.

4.2 Policy Gaps and Structural Loopholes

The study of cultural and music policies in West Bengal and India highlights several related gaps that contribute to the marginalization of Bengali rock in the cultural economy. A major problem is the lack of formal recognition for contemporary genres like rock and independent music in state cultural policy. Current frameworks prioritize classical and folk traditions, viewing them as heritage worth preserving, while leaving modern musical expressions largely to market forces. This creates a divide in which certain art forms receive institutional support, while others are overlooked by the policy framework.

Another significant issue is the lack of institutional support for independent music. There are few publicly funded spaces for rehearsal, recording, or training, and a limited institutional focus on developing contemporary music practices. As a result, musicians often depend on informal networks and private resources, which raises entry barriers and reinforces inequalities in access to cultural production. This problem is further exacerbated by the limited integration of independent musicians into the digital economy.



Despite the music industry's significant change through streaming platforms and digital distribution, policy frameworks have not effectively addressed fair compensation, awareness of intellectual property, or access to publishing and licensing for independent artists. As a result, many musicians struggle to fully benefit from the economic opportunities offered by digital platforms.

Finally, there is a clear lack of an export-oriented strategy for regional music. India does not have a systematic plan to promote regional genres like Bengali rock internationally. This limits the genre's global visibility and restricts its growth potential beyond regional borders. Together, these gaps indicate a broader issue within cultural policy: the inability to adapt to new forms of cultural production in the contemporary era. To tackle these challenges, there is a need to move towards a more inclusive and flexible policy framework that acknowledges contemporary music as a vital part of the cultural economy rather than as an informal or secondary activity.

4.3 The Road Ahead: Policy and Institutional Recommendations

Addressing the structural challenges faced by Bengali rock musicians requires more than incremental adjustments. It needs a fresh look at how cultural policy interacts with contemporary creative economies. Instead of viewing independent music as an informal activity focused on the market, policy should treat it as a valuable cultural sector with economic, social, and export potential.



This shift must be operationalized through targeted interventions in finance, rights access, infrastructure, digital integration, global outreach, and ecosystem development—conceptualized as the BRIDGE framework.

B- Backing Finance

A key first step is to establish a “Contemporary Music Support Scheme” (CMSS) at the state level, similar to existing programs for folk and classical artists, but designed with a project-based and performance-linked funding model. Under this scheme, artists or bands could seek support for specific initiatives such as album production, tours, or digital releases, with funding tied to measurable milestones like completing recordings, performing live, or reaching defined audience thresholds. To address financial insecurity more directly, the CMSS could incorporate a mixed income support system that combines short-term grants with matching funds - for instance, the state could match a percentage of revenue generated through ticket sales, crowdfunding, or sponsorships - thereby encouraging market participation while avoiding long-term dependency. Complementing this, low-interest loans through public banks or cultural funds could further enable musicians to invest in equipment, recording, and touring without facing prohibitive upfront costs.

R- Rights Access and Regulation

Policy must also get involved in the digital and publishing economy, where most value is now created. A major issue is the lack of understanding and access to music publishing and royalty systems among independent musicians. The state could collaborate with organizations like the Indian Performing Rights Society to establish Music Rights Facilitation Cells. These would help artists register their work, manage royalties, and navigate licensing agreements.



I-Infrastructure Development

On an institutional level, there is a strong case for setting up Urban Music Hubs in cities like Kolkata. These locations would receive public support but operate independently, offering affordable rehearsal studios, recording spaces, and performance venues. Their primary focus should be on physical and institutional infrastructure, reducing entry barriers for independent musicians, and creating accessible spaces for production and performance.

D- Digital Integration

Digital platforms offer significant opportunities but require targeted policy support. The state could explore partnerships with platforms such as YouTube and Spotify to create regional artist promotion programs. State-facilitated digital initiatives could improve the visibility of Bengali rock through curated playlists, algorithmic promotion, and creator support programs tailored to regional music. This would help address the structural disadvantages faced by smaller linguistic genres in platform-driven ecosystems.



G- Global Outreach

To improve global visibility, a focused cultural export strategy for regional music is necessary. A Diaspora Circuit Touring Program could be introduced where the state government can partner with Indian consulates and cultural organizations in cities with large Bengali populations and create a subsidized international touring circuit.



This would provide Bengali rock musicians with structured access to global audiences and performance opportunities.

E- Ecosystem Development

Another important area is building a structured live music economy. Instead of relying mainly on college festivals, policy can promote a city-wide live music circuit by offering incentives to venues that frequently host independent artists. Incentives could include tax breaks, licensing support, or shared funding for programs in cafés, auditoriums, and cultural centres that commit to a minimum number of live performances each year. This strategy would stabilize income streams and reduce dependence on seasonal events.

Importantly, these interventions should be guided by data-driven policy design. Regular surveys of independent musicians - covering income levels, employment patterns, and market access - should be institutionalized to inform policy decisions. This would ensure that interventions remain responsive to the evolving dynamics of the music industry.

Finally, policy should embrace a broader shift in perspective. Culture should not be viewed solely as heritage; it should be recognized as creative work within an economic system. Supporting Bengali rock isn't just about preserving a genre; it's about enabling a new generation of artists to engage fully in the cultural economy. By operationalizing the BRIDGE framework- combining financial support, rights access, infrastructure, digital integration, global outreach, and ecosystem development- it is possible to lift Bengali rock from marginal survival to sustainable growth and global relevance.



Conclusion

This research examines Bengali rock music not just as a genre, but as a cultural product of history, identity, and political economy. The analysis shows that rock music in Bengal emerged as an insurgent form, challenging established musical traditions and expressing the anxieties of an urban, politically conscious youth, eventually evolving into a distinct urban subculture.

However, this cultural presence has not resulted in structural coherence. Bengali rock musicians tend to come from urban middle-class families and operate in an informal economy of cultural production with fragmented income sources, low levels of institutional support, and high barriers to entry. It remains imbalanced in terms of gender and reflects social inequalities in cultural capital. Despite the rise of digital media and India's music industry, the economic landscape of Bengali rock remains uncertain. Musicians continue to operate in an environment marked by unstable live performance circuits, limited monetisation from streaming services, and a lack of viable career options.

These conditions stem from institutional shortcomings in cultural policy and industry frameworks. Current policy frameworks in West Bengal continue to marginalise modern music genres, like rock, from institutional recognition and funding. Similarly, the expansion of the Indian media and entertainment industry has not led to level playing fields for independent and regional artists. The advantages of digital growth, publishing, and distribution are unevenly distributed among well-resourced and mainstreamed artists.



Against this backdrop, the global marginality of Bengali rock becomes more intelligible. Bengali rock is not marginal because of its artistic merit, but because of structural factors such as the lack of export infrastructure and inequitable access to global music markets.

Yet, despite these limitations, the persistence of Bengali rock suggests a deeper form of cultural resilience. It is not sustained by institutional or economic factors, but by the dedication of musicians and their fans. It continues to be a site of alternative expression, identity construction, and experimentation in the changing socio-cultural milieu of Bengal.

This research suggests that the survival of Bengali rock is not just dependent on the ingenuity of musicians but also on the transformation of the system in which it operates. An inclusive cultural policy approach, as outlined through the BRIDGE framework, focusing on financial backing, rights access, infrastructure, digital integration, global outreach, and ecosystem development, can help Bengali rock to transition from marginalised to mainstream.

Bengali rock is more than a musical genre. It is a lens through which we can explore the cultural, economic, and identity dynamics of contemporary Bengal. Its trajectory reflects both the possibilities and the limitations of creative expression in an unequal cultural economy.



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