

HEADBANGING IN DHAKA: THE PRODUCTION OF ALTERNATIVES IN THE BANGLADESHI METAL SCENE

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine how and why the urban metal scene in Bangladesh came into existence. Based on interviews with key figures in the scene, ethnographic observation and textual analysis, the article proposes that urban youths' frustration with the poor state of conditions in the country is channeled into a passion to build an alternative space. Participants assert the distinction of their music from mainstream rock and pop. Translocal connections with other metal scenes existing elsewhere are emphasized in a local scene that remains tied to the activities of a largely middle-class, part-time, male population of artists who share particular social and economic resources.

Key words: alternative, metal, music scene, Bangladeshi metal, Dhaka

Introduction

It was a hot Friday afternoon in January 2012. The location was in the Agargaon area of Dhaka city, at the parking lot of a very drab venue known as The National Library Auditorium. It was crowded by a few dozen teenagers and twenty-something guys, the majority dressed in black, with Iron Maiden, Megadeth, Metallica, Slayer and Slipknot T-shirts, long hair, piercings, cigarettes and skull neck chains and rings scattered across their bodies. The parking lot soon fills to a throng of over a hundred, all of who eventually shift inside to hear the distinctive, growing riff of Metallica's 'Enter Sandman'. Most of the audience rush to the front of the stage and start head banging and shouting out loud while interacting with the performers on stage in a mix of immense intensity. As band after band takes to the dark stage, cheap lights, sound system and dry ice combine with the wall of sound to smother time and the everyday.

Such a mix of sweat, distortion, and visceral release has been much repeated in alternative metal and punk scenes around the world. However, such acts also come in multiple variations. In this article we examine what might be distinctive about one such variant – the Bangladeshi metal scene – in light of the now considerable cultural studies literature regarding alternative youth collectivities centered on popular music.

In this article, we draw selectively from debates regarding subcultures (Clarke *et al.* 1976, Hebdige 1979, Hall and Jefferson 1993, Colegrave and Sullivan 2001, Simonelli 2002, Clark 2003, Hodkinson and Deicke 2007, Williams 2007), scenes (Straw 1991, 2001, 2004), neo-tribes (Maffesoli 1996, Bennett 1999) and cultural geography (Massey 1998), in order to frame and develop an empirical study of a musical culture that appears to have characteristics associated with both subcultures and scenes. (For a better understanding of how the metal scene of Bangladesh is associated with Western Anglophone discourses of Subcultures and Scenes, see Quader and Redden, 2015).

Metal is truly an international genre. Even though it developed in the US and UK around the 1970s (Gaines 1991, Weinstein 1991, Walser 1993, Weinstein 2000, Wallach *et al.* 2011), it dispersed throughout the world reaching numerous countries of Europe, Australia, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Japan, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Madagascar (Kahn-Harris 2002, Liew and Fu 2006, Kahn-Harris 2007, Wallach 2011, Weinstein 2011, Liew and Chan 2013). Metal has been appropriated in several foreign languages and various foreign metal bands write songs in English. Weinstein (2011) argues that metal is transcultural, that is, it is not tied to a particular culture or geographical space. Rather, it forms 'imagined communities' of like-minded people who share their love of metal music and its associated fantasy worlds, and transcend traditional cultural and national boundaries (Weinstein 2011), making it an international genre of music.

The Bangladeshi metal scene is distinguished from the mainstream by its participants and involves expressions of resistance. It is also, however, a product of global cultural flows, one consequence of which is that the scene lacks clearly defined boundaries in relation to genre and style.

Research Objectives

Regarding research objectives, we seek to understand the emergence of a nominally subcultural music scene centered on international metal genres in the distinctive locale of a postcolonial developing country where the musicians responsible for production express sentiments towards local situations through the global cultural resources available to them. A central concern in our discussion is to assess both the usefulness and limitations of theoretical models largely developed in Western Anglophone countries in explaining the distinctive configurations of symbolic, social and economic elements mobilized in a particular postcolonial scene that our findings reveal to be shaped by both local and translocal interconnections of specific kinds.

There are various established metal scenes in numerous countries of Asia such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Nepal, China and Japan, and there exists a number of associated research works based on them (*See*: Thompson 2002, Wallach 2002, Baulch 2003, Wallach 2005b, Wallach 2005a, Liew and Fu 2006, Greene 2011, Kawano and Hosokawa 2011, Wallach 2011, Wong 2011, Wallach and Clinton 2013). The Bangladeshi metal scene may be viewed as a part of this global and Asian metal milieu. However, no proper studies had been previously done on this field, and that is what makes these research objectives ground breaking and important.

Research Design

For this study a total of 14 participants involved with the scene were interviewed in 2012 (13 men and 1 woman) using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions about how the informants became involved in the scene, their views on it and the ways they participate in it. All of them are either musicians or music enthusiasts who took on roles as organizers of the gigs and recordings through which the scene is formed. Ten participants had jobs in various media industries, (including, marketing and business communications), while three participants were students at universities. Based on their parents' professional and business occupations and areas of residence, the majority of the participants come from middle-class or upper middle-class backgrounds in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. A summary of the details of these participants anonymized by pseudonyms can be found in Table 1. In order to supplement the interviews with the aforementioned participants, participant observation was also undertaken at several metal gigs, and public documents, that is, texts such as lyrics, music, album sleeves of the bands from this scene and their corresponding posters, flyers, newspaper and magazine articles were also collected and analyzed.

Table 1: Summary of details of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Occupation outside scene	Occupation in scene	Class of Family	Years in scene
Tariff	28	M	Marketing strategist at music company	Front man of Popular Underground Metal band	Middle	9
Ridwan	36	M	Business	Drummer; Owner of a mid-level Record Label and Sound System Company	Upper	25
Zakaria	20	M	Student	Guitarist of a new Underground Metal band	Middle	3
Mahbub	28	M	Musician, head of PR at music company	Front man of Popular Underground band	Middle	8
Ismail	28	M	Creative professional	Guitarist of mid-level underground rock band	Middle	10
Ranjib	29	M	Graphics designer	Owner of indie record label and manager of online promotions for bands	Middle	5
Alisha	25	F	Freelance journalist	music Freelance Drummer; Gig organizer	Middle	7
Nuruddin	38	M	Producer, TV channel	Organizer of mixed albums	Middle	13
Hasib	31	M	Business	Drummer of disbanded veteran underground metal band	Upper middle	16

Adil	34	M	Senior creative director	Front man of Popular Underground Metal band	Upper middle	20
Kamran	17	M	Student	Guitarist of new Underground Metal band	Middle	9
Amer	21	M	Student	Drummer of mid-level Underground Rock band; Producer in scene; Gig organizer.	Middle	10
Mostafiz	26	M	Musician, bank Officer	Drummer of mid-level underground Rock band; Gig organizer	Middle	6
Jahangir	25	M	Music promoter	Owner of underground gig organizing company	Middle	15

Research Findings and Discussion

Bangladesh is a post-colonial country occupying the Eastern part of the territory historically known as Bengal. Bangladesh became a country within the lifetimes of many of its living adults through the Liberation War in 1971. The major cities of Bangladesh, like Dhaka, enjoy comparatively better transport and utility infrastructures, such as roads and electricity. They are also hubs for primary, secondary and tertiary educational facilities. The population of Dhaka has a greater concentration of the educated middle-class and upper middle-class, whereas the population of the rural areas of Bangladesh is predominantly less educated agricultural workers (Wahid 2006, Hamid 2010).

Music has a rich tradition in Bangladesh, encompassing Bengali folk, Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul geeti, Bengali modern, pop and rock songs (Shehabuddin 2001, Henderson 2013). The Ethnomusicological literature in English is more often concerned with Bengali folk music more generally than with Bangladeshi music (for instance, in the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*). So given Bangladesh's recent history, it is perhaps not surprising that there is no academic work of note in English about popular music in the country. Given the paucity of academic literature about contemporary Bangladeshi metal music, in what follows, we depict the alternative (which includes the local metal scene) and mainstream music scenes mainly through our fieldwork findings.

The notion of Alternative music emerged in response to the co-option of rock music by the record industries in the United States of America and United Kingdom in the late 1960s through to the 1970s (Shuker 2005). Alternative music originally referred to musicians, promoters and record label owners who were unified in their beliefs regarding their music style and the independent Do-it-yourself (DIY) anti-mainstream and anti-commercialism ethos related with Punk, which was the platform in the 1970s, from which alternative music took off. Pertaining to music genres, alternative rock is associated with genres such as psychedelic rock, hard rock, punk, grunge, goth, heavy metal, industrial, jangle pop, pranksters, thrashcore, funk and roll and reggae amongst others (Shuker 2005). Rather than being tied down by genres, musicians and music journalists over the past two decades agree that the ethos associated with alternative rock is of key importance (Thompson 2000, Taylor 2004). This alternative ethos revolves around repudiation and confrontation of commercial music and mainstream styles, DIY philosophy, stylistic experimentation, localism and a certain defiant lifestyle or attitude (Thompson 2000).

All the informants of this study agreed that there are two main scenes in the Bangladesh music industry, namely the mainstream and the alternative scene. The mainstream artists cater to the mass public, so their songs, compositions, lyrics and genre are more suited towards this audience, as oppose to the alternative artists who cater to the niche crowd, whose orientations are much more international and niche crowd based.

Bangladeshi commentators have come to use the term 'alternative' to denote a scene dominated by heavy rock and metal, providing, in the words of a sympathetic anonymous journalist for the English-language newspaper, *The Daily Star*, an 'outlet through which to channel the frenetic nervous energy of teenagers.' Among the hallmarks of this alternative scene are an 'emphasis on originality' and the freedom of 'bands to shine in their preferred styles, without having to conform much to suit the mainstream'. For this journalist this scene is also marked by 'great camaraderie' and 'an openness and inclusiveness that is sadly lacking from many other spheres of life in this country' (STS 2010).

Although 'alternative' appears to be a term of convenience that is interchangeable with synonyms like 'underground', those active in this scene generally concur with these sentiments. Research participant Jahangir states:

From my perspective, the underground is something that has not been endorsed, that is something that nobody has looked into or cared for, and something that comes from different set of audience who find their own niche in music. They try to find this sort of music out, they try to build communities around it, and they are not into media coverage or gaining mainstream popularity.

When the participants of this research were asked what alternative music means to them, the most common responses highlighted the non-commercial focus of the bands, their creative independence from a mainstream audience and industry demands, and the fact that they produced music for themselves. The scene originated in the 1980s, but really gathered momentum in the early 2000s.

Long-timer Ridwan reflects on how in the late 1980s bands like Warfaze and Rockstrata started covering hard rock and metal songs – a sound that was completely new at that time in Bangladesh – resulting in a new community of kids running weekly gigs in small venues (i.e., local schools), using music gear purchased by their families. It was not until the late 1990s, however, that the music of local metal and rock bands became an identifiable presence in the local recording market. The compilation album *Chcharpotro* was released in 2000 by the record label, G-series (an upcoming major record label at that time). Many agree that this album, which was the first of several similar discs, announced the birth of the Bangladeshi metal scene in a form that is still recognizable today. Before this, in Nurruddin's words, 'The people of Bangladesh didn't even know that there were bands here who were playing metal, hard rock, alternative rock and also composing with Bengali lyrics'.

Most informants said that metal genres were the basis of the scene. However, nobody expressed any hard and fast rules about styles of metal or even the fact that metal or hard rock are compulsory. It seems then that independence from mainstream styles is the main criterion of alternative status, rather than a substantive definition of musical style based on permitted genres. With this in mind, in the next section focuses on the cultural ethos of the scene before considering the social, technological and economic processes that make its expressive forms possible.

The Alternative Ethos

While musical genre may be flexible in the local alternative music scene, one of the key themes running throughout the interviews was a sense of distinction the participants made between the alternative and mainstream cultural and political norms. As suggested above, however, the distinctiveness of this alternative music scene is due less to the fact that it has a thought-out platform and more to do with opening up alternative spaces of apparent freedom and creativity. Members of the scene define it in terms of a freedom from aesthetic and commercial constraints. This in turn allows members to do what they wish, rather than adhering to a fully thought-out alternative to which all must conform or belong.

According to our research participants, the history of the scene's development is linked to a whole range of bands identified as local pioneers and/or influences that come from abroad. The scene is more a matter of 'family resemblances' and contingent social links among a 'community of the different', as opposed to a fixed canon or code. It was the mere fact of having a new focal point, a togetherness borne of doing something different that seemed most important.

When asked what people get from the scene, there is often the suggestion that the compulsion to seek out alternatives is influenced by the social environment in which young people grow up. For instance, according to Nurruddin, those youth who became part of the metal/alternative scenes were looking for an outlet and a space to express their thoughts and emotions. He says:

The political situation in our country has been quite poor for the past 15–20 years. So there may have been a frustration amongst the youth. They didn't have much scope to do anything so maybe they took up these foreign genres of music and wanted to express their creativity in a new space.

While 1980s bands paved the way by playing metal, by the late 1990s, with access to cable TV (music channels) and the internet, youth discovered new and different genres, which would come to be focal points for their rebellion against the mainstream and the problems of Bengali society as a whole. For Jahangir, this new music included a combination of playing distorted guitars and 'talking about political issues, the youth and their frustrations'. Such themes could not be aired through love songs, and so aesthetic and social rebellion combined together in a cocktail of distortion, energy and politics. The creative space of alternative gigs and jam pads allowed young people, principally men, to express their anger about the numerous problems of society (including widespread corruption, lack of jobs and economic opportunities, social injustice, poor safety and security conditions, lack of infrastructural development, crippling inflation, as well as frequent natural disasters) since there was little censorship involved here. While many of the bands write lyrics 'about political problems, aggression, frustration and rebelling against the downfalls of our society' (Ranjib and Alisha), the fantasy lyrical worlds of metal also allow indirect and figurative ways of expressing the frustration. So while research participant Amer explains 'With my band, we write about social problems, problems faced by our youth etc.', it is also true that 'My band's songs and music always have metaphorical meanings'. Likewise for research participant Mostafiz social commentary merges with the more affective and indirect possibilities of darkness: 'We write about political problems, love and even hate. Especially amongst the metal bands, the themes of hate, darkness, satan worship, anti-god etc. are quite popular.'

Affording the Alternative

The local alternative music scene is a small-scale but intense environment in which audience members and performers invest a great deal of energy and time. There is basically no expectation that playing in the scene is a matter of making money. The majority of mainstream artists are also full-time musicians, making an earning from their music careers. The artists in this alternative scene, however, are generally not full-time musicians. They have separate careers and they don't usually make money off their music. Indeed, informants describe what might be understood as a break-even economy which includes personal investment in equipment, recording studios, practice pads and gig slots in the hope that sufficient financial return will help to

sustain further involvement in the scene. As Ranjib explains ‘What happens here is that a few friends usually get together, make a band, do a few shows. Then if they become a bit popular, they look for promotion, interviews and try to land slots at bigger shows’ – where they are more likely to earn a decent fee rather than have to ‘push sell’ – that is pay for gig and record slots in order to gain exposure. However, the most common element that enables bands to sustain activity amid the vagaries of uncertain returns is the effective subsidy from their own careers outside the scene.

Although money is seen as a constant challenge and not as the intended reward, the flipside of this is that artist/participants are limited to those who can afford to subsidize involvement in a pro/am model (Ivey and Tepper 2006) by bringing pre-existing social and economic resources to it. The economic conditions of possibility of the scene are thus twofold. On the one hand, to become part of the scene one has to have a way to cover the costs, including those associated with renting and using shared practice and performance spaces. On the other hand, more than money, key social networks that link to influential cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984, p. 16) in the scene is also important for access to shared spaces. Who you know and who approves of your music is important to be a successful member of the scene. The most influential people are often called *Murubbis* (a Bengali term which translates roughly to mean veterans) or *Boro Bhais* (another Bengali term translates to mean, big brothers).

Selling Out?

One of the key findings of the research is that participants do not talk about ‘making it’ as such, beyond the idea of becoming established in the scene. They tend to use a highly affective vocabulary about passion and freedom to describe the intrinsic rewards of being involved. This appears consistent with findings of other studies of alternative music scenes where a key aspect of the ethos is that one should not compromise aesthetic autonomy and integrity by seeking mainstream or commercial success. Accordingly in Western rock and punk movements, the issue of becoming popular after having enjoyed alternative status can be fraught and met by charges of selling out (Frith 1996, Frith 2004b, Frith 2004a). What is distinctive in this scene, however, is not that participants repeat familiar alternative positions about maintaining artistic integrity while eschewing a discourse of intentionally ‘making it’. Rather, the vast majority of bands in the Bangladeshi metal scene actually have little ethical problem with the idea of becoming commercially successful.

Research participants Tariff, Mahbub, Zakaria and Ranjib note, for instance, that the alternative scene in Dhaka can be used by some artists as the first step towards mainstream popularity. In other words, this scene may be perceived as a kind of incubator for the new. Increased popularity is thus taken as a byproduct of the development of innovative sounds that inevitably shape the popularity of particularly bands.

Overall, ‘making it’, in the sense of becoming popular with audiences who don’t frequent the scene, is not opposed. For most of the participants interviewed for this study, there does seem to be room enough for a transition from alternative to mainstream recognition, particularly if audiences sense that key aesthetic principles are not compromised.

The Trans local turn

At the same time it is quite clear that for most participants this historical development towards the potential mainstreaming of artists is not killing off the alternative. Almost all regard the future for the scene as bright. Nowadays, a lot of Bangladeshi metal bands write their own material in English because they want to distribute their music via foreign channels. It depends on the bands, their genres and their beliefs about which artistic trajectory they want to take.

The bright future identified by most is often linked to the new possibilities of the internet which promises a virtual hub for the local scene and a new kind of translocal dimension that is not confined to artists consuming foreign music and recreating its styles, but involves them sharing music in regional and global scenes. As Mahbub puts it ‘Internet is all we have. That is our lifeline. Without this, there would be no metal scene.’ Ismail and Mostafiz believe that with English lyrics, great compositions and good production quality, artists can successfully relate to the international metal scenes. Bangladeshi bands such as Severe Dementia and Orator have released albums with foreign metal labels, and have performed in small concerts in other Asian countries.

This kind of synchronicity is possible currently in Bangladesh due to the urban middle class youth’s access to the Internet and social network sites (especially Youtube), not to mention the accessibility of cable television and the availability of pirated foreign music in local stores. The internet forms the basis of informants’ optimism about the future as it allows real-time connection and a sense of being contemporaries with peers in other places. There is recognition that the Internet makes piracy easier, especially in a country without significant services for downloading paid-for musical content. However, most do not depend on income from music careers in this local metal scene.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Studies

The previously mentioned research objectives are about understanding the nature, history and agency of the Bangladeshi metal music scene. The findings from this research show that this metal community is about the general dissatisfaction of educated, world-weary young men – but also their enthusiasm and passion – which is channeled into a compensating experimental space that is distinctly different from local traditions, representing a fantasy release from social realities of an extremely difficult postcolonial nationhood while sometimes tackling issues ‘head on’ in lyrics.

With recalcitrant economic and environmental realities underlying the situation and both major political parties who would promise a better future at each other’s throats, it is no wonder that youth symbolic resistance is sublated into a broader alternative aesthetic of freedom and integrity rather than channeled into a clear activism that offers specific answers. The internet allows an extension of the scene via connection with like-minded peers working in similar experimental ways elsewhere. The translocalism evident in this metal scene of Bangladesh, which now extends to playing for non-Bangladeshi audiences, suggests that creating indigenized versions of western genres is not the point of the scene.

Regarding limitations of this study, a bigger sample size than 14 people would have been desirable, as well as a bigger scope to perform more in-depth field work, which was limited to Dhaka city. But this study should pave the way for similar future studies, where the scope may include all the major cities of Bangladesh and larger time frame for field work.

Besides metal, there are a number of other music related communities existing in this country, such as the emerging local rap and R’n’B, baul fusion, and blues & jazz scenes, all of which warrant similar exploratory studies. Different aspects of these Bangladeshi music scenes can be the research themes for numerous studies in the future.

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