

NEGATIVE POSITIVITY AND COUNTERCULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS: RUPAM ISLAM AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF BANGLA ROCK

-TANIMA DUTTA

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines Bangla Rock as a form of countercultural expression in postcolonial Bengal, with a focus on Rupam Islam's musical and literary contributions. Using an interpretive qualitative approach, it analyses select lyrics and *Rupam on the Rocks* (2009) as cultural texts reflecting urban alienation, identity, and resistance in a globalised context. The study highlights the concept of "negative positivity", through which Islam transforms pain, fragmentation, and personal struggle into creative and collective expression. His work challenges mainstream aesthetics through dissonance, raw vocal style, and introspective themes, shifting resistance from overt protest to a deeper, internal engagement with self and society. By reading songs such as "Acid" and "*Harano Padak*" and so on, the paper shows how personal experiences intersect with broader socio-political concerns. It concludes that Bangla Rock functions as a cultural archive of contemporary youth consciousness, offering a space where individual emotion becomes collective meaning.

KEYWORDS: Bangla Rock, Counterculture, Negative Positivity, Rupam Islam, *Fossils*, *Rupam on the Rocks*

Bangla Rock is a significant musical genre in modern Bengal that delves into the politics and poetics of vernacular music, reflecting the region's rich post-colonial heritage. This genre emerged as a countercultural movement, shaped by the tensions of postcolonial identity, globalisation, and urban alienation (Mukherjee).

Its development is considered a remarkable anthropological case study, particularly in its contribution to the creation of oral histories. The origins of Bangla Rock's political populist narrative through songs and music draw parallels with the Civil Rights movement in the West, sharing a similar "soul" despite geographic and temporal differences. Counterculture itself is characterised not as something separate from mainstream culture, but rather as a parallel stream of rebellious outbursts from within established normative cultural traits. It signifies a cultural tradition born in response to isolation, exclusion, and oppression. This musical experience often begins with an individual's personal encounter with the world, which then transforms into a popular expression where the audience internalises its own meaning, leading to a sense of collective consciousness. As Dick Hebdige argues, subcultures articulate resistance through style and symbolic disruption, transforming everyday cultural materials into signs of defiance (92). Bangla Rock, similarly, reshapes musical language into an idiom of dissent.

This study adopts an interpretive, qualitative approach, reading Bangla Rock, from the perspectives of West Bengal of India, as a cultural text through close engagement with select lyrics and Rupam Islam's reflective prose in *Rupam on the Rocks* (2009). Such an approach resonates with Simon Frith's assertion that popular music should be understood not merely as sound but as "a way of constructing identity" (Frith 109). The songs discussed here are therefore treated as sites where identity, memory, and resistance are negotiated.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries saw profound transformations in India's cultural landscape, particularly in West Bengal's music scene. These changes were largely driven by economic liberalization, privatisation, the expansion of media houses, and advancements in technology. Following the 1990 economic reforms, broadcasting media became liberalised and privatised, leading to the emergence of cable television channels like MTV and Star TV, as well as numerous private FM radio channels such as Radio Mirchi. This provided Bengalis with unprecedented

access to diverse global cultures, creating a more Westernised or globalised sense of identity and prompting a ‘reboot’ for Bengali songs to maintain their relevance. This era saw a notable increase in new music recording companies like Raga Music Communications, Asha Audio, and Cozmik Harmony, established to meet the demand for new musical products (Chakraborty).

The revitalisation of Bengali music involved borrowing, appropriating, improvising, and reshaping elements from foreign or Western music while frequently retaining the Bengali language and content. As Peter Manuel notes, global flows of music in the late twentieth century enabled “new hybrid forms rooted in local languages yet shaped by transnational influences” (Manual 14). Bangla Rock emerges precisely within this matrix of hybridity. However, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, hybridity is not imitation but a “third space” where new cultural meanings are produced (86). The borrowing of Western rock elements into Bengali music thus becomes an act of creative negotiation rather than cultural surrender. At the same time, this transformation must be understood within the specific historical trajectory of postcolonial India. Partha Chatterjee’s argument that cultural modernity in postcolonial societies unfolds through a negotiation between the “inner” and “outer” domains (Chatterjee 6) is particularly relevant here. Bangla Rock occupies this liminal space- adopting global musical forms while retaining a deeply local emotional and linguistic core.

While Western music consumption in Kolkata dates back to the late 1970s, the concept of “Band Music” truly gained momentum in the mid-1990s. *Mohiner Ghoraguli*, founded in 1975 and re-emerging in 1995, is recognised as the first Bengali rock band. Led by Gautam Chattopadhyay, they aimed to create a distinctly Bengali version of rock, sometimes referred to as “Baul jazz”, and their radical lyrics explored strong personal and social themes, akin to Bob Dylan’s urban folk movement. Other prominent bands like *Paraspathar*, *Chandrabindoo*, *Miles*, *Fossils*, and *Lakkhichhara* also emerged, ushering in a new era of Bangla music. The music industry

actively supported these new forms of music, even accepting financial risks.

While the early groundwork of Bengali band music can be traced to *Mohiner Ghoraguli*, it is with Rupam Islam and *Fossils* that Bangla Rock acquires a sharply defined philosophical and cultural identity. He is credited with introducing the concept of a “Rockstar” into the region and fundamentally transforming songwriting, vocal style, and stage presence. Despite being hailed as a “Rockstar” and an “undisputed youth icon”, Rupam and *Fossils* remain fundamentally committed to connecting with the public. This gives rise to a paradox: how can someone positioned as a distant “star” truly balance public connection, when stardom itself often creates barriers to such communication?¹ Yet, despite this tension, he continues to embody both roles. Under Rupam’s leadership, *Fossils* consistently engages with its audience, showing genuine interest in their fans and actively incorporating feedback, whether through social media interactions or direct communication channels. This close interaction allows a unique bond where fans internalise the band’s philosophy as part of their lifestyle, blurring the lines between idolisation and deep personal connection. Islam’s work transforms rock into a medium of dialogue- one that unsettles rather than reassures. His songs embody what Stuart Hall describes as identity not as a fixed essence but as a “production... always in process” (Hall 225). Through his lyrics, identity emerges as fragmented, contested, and continuously negotiated.

Born in a musical family, as both his parents were singer and composer, Rupam Islam had a musical upbringing since his childhood. Rupam did not like rock music in his childhood because he found it unpleasing, dark, and creating an unknown soundscape. Later, he understood the meaning of darkness through life’s struggles and hard knocks. Like a hard drink, rock music represents life. This music is not just for entertainment; it will disturb you. This disturbance exists in rock. It holds a mirror up to society, as Bob Dylan and John Lennon did. Music becomes an extension of dialogue, like in Gupi Gaine songs. The musical culture in the family

made him a musician, the family feud and disturbance made him a rock musician (Islam 12-14).

Rupam Islam co-founded *Fossils* in 1998, a band widely recognised for officially giving birth to the genre ‘Bengali Rock’. Under Rupam’s leadership, *Fossils* rapidly became the biggest band in Bengal, holding the highest standing among audiences and being the highest-paid group of artists in the regional market. Rupam’s vocal delivery is noted for its uniqueness, sometimes described as sounding a little “not Bengali”. *Fossils’* music is described as an “uniform collation of both lyrical dissidence as well as musical dissidence” (Mukherjee 37). *Fossils*, under Rupam’s guidance, meticulously cultivated a distinct visual identity. Band members often wear black clothes during performances, and black is extensively featured on album covers, establishing it as the “colour of the band” and cementing *Fossils* as a “brand” embodying a rock vibe (Chakraborty 248). Their live concerts are celebrated for their technical grandeur, incorporating sophisticated lighting, sound, and stage techniques, transforming each performance into a “fantastical theatrical show” (Mukherjee 43). This attention to detail set new standards for audience expectations from other bands in the city.

Rupam Islam’s creative output extends significantly into the literary realm, most notably captured in his 2009 book, *Rupam on the Rocks*. This book serves as a continuation of his popular FM show also titled “Rupam on the Rocks”. It is a diverse collection cum a partial memoir comprising unreleased songs, prose, essays, and rare photographs. In the “Preface” to the book the Rockstar confesses that beyond his songs, the essence of the real Rupam emerges in poetry (Islam 11). This poetry provides deeper insights into his thought processes, revealing his contemplations on life and his rejection of conventional norms, expressed through sentiments like, “Life no longer moves in a straight path” (*Jibon cholchhe na aar soja pothey*), thus wonderfully capturing his own view of rock song being an extension of dialogue.

In his interview to *Online Anadabazar Patrika* with Suchandra², talking about the name of his band as well as the philosophy of his

rock music he refers to “Negative Positivity”. The band’s identity embodies a concept of “Negative positivity”, where the raw, poetic expression of deeply personal, often negative experiences transforms into a collective, relatable emotion for the audience. Just as fossils are preserved remnants providing insight into past eras, the band, formed in 1998, is credited with “officially giving birth to the genre ‘Bengali Rock’” and has consistently retained its original philosophy for almost two decades, commanding the market and setting new standards. Their songs delve into universal yet personal themes of urban alienation, negativity, loss, and death, offering an “anthropological insight into urban psychology” and recording the “struggles of the times” for the youth, effectively preserving and reflecting contemporary societal afflictions like geological records (Mukherjee 38). This makes their music a lasting “record of its times” (Mukherjee 42) embodying resistance, not protest, like a deep-seated, unchanging truth unearthed from the past. In fact, the song “*Khoro Amar Fossil*” (Unearth my fossil), although initially performed in his solo shows and then included in *Fossils* 4 album in 2014, wonderfully captures this philosophy. When he sings, “*Khoro aamar fossil/ anubhuti michhil/ protikriyashil kono biplobe*” (Unearth my fossil/ A march of emotions/ Within a reactionary revolution), it perfectly bridges personal emotional history with collective revolution- “fossil” becomes a metaphor for memory, trauma, and emotion preserved within the individual, waiting to be excavated. Rupam’s lyrics often explore themes of pain, vulnerability, and existential doubt. But unlike nihilistic despair, his approach turns wounds into wisdom. This “negative positivity” does not deny suffering, it embraces it as necessary for growth, for feeling, for connection. The fossil is not inert but a preserved trace of lived experience, echoing Raymond Williams’ idea that culture records “structures of feeling” that are otherwise difficult to articulate (132). Rupam’s music thus becomes an archive of emotional history, where private suffering is reconstituted as collective resonance. He transforms emotional defeat into art. His voice and words reach youth who feel disconnected, ignored, or introspective. This transformation is inseparable from the sonic and performative dimensions of his work. The rawness of his vocal style

disrupts the polished aesthetics of mainstream Bengali music, aligning with Theodor Adorno's argument that art's critical potential lies in its capacity to resist harmony and expose dissonance (Adorno 23). Life is incomplete, uncertain, and sometimes cruel, but that does not negate its meaning. Rebellion is not only social, it is also personal, a fight against internal numbness. Music, for Rupam, is both confession and confrontation- a means to ask, to bleed, and to begin again. In this sense, Bangla Rock does not soothe; it unsettles.

A founding member of *Mohiner Ghoraguli* described Bangla Rock as an "angry cry" that emerged through Rupam, characterising this anger as "necessary"³. This underscores the genre's role as a powerful voice of dissidence that reflects the "pain of the lyrical subjects" (Mukherjee 39) and captures the struggles of the times. The song "Acid" from the album *Fossils 2*, bears the striking metaphor of "Acid" which both literally and metaphorically represents anger, self-loathing, and purgation. Crucially, Rupam does not advocate violence against others but calls for introspective destruction, to throw acid at one's own reflection, to confront and shatter one's ego, illusions, and complicity: "*Pothyo ektai acid chhnoro mukhe/ anyer mukhe noi, aainar mukhe*" (There's only one remedy- throw acid on the face/ Not on another's face, but on the face in the mirror). This inversion recalls Adorno's notion of negative dialectics, where contradiction becomes a mode of truth. The self becomes both the site and object of critique. When Rupam sings "*Aamar haate ek mayabi dando/ tatei lukiye rakhi gopon mantrō*" (In my hand, a magic wand/ Within it lie my hidden spells), the magical staff (*mayabi dando*) is revealed to be a musical instrument, a powerful image of art as a weapon and healing tool. Through the "primitive mantra" (*aadim se mantrō*), music becomes a medium for emotional rebirth and resistance. The shouting interjections (*aaui, uaa, iye*) and aggressive rhythmic flow mirror the energy of punk and industrial rock, where sound itself is protest.

In his *Rupam on the Rocks*, while referring to his preference of Intellect to Heart, he talks about his disturbing childhood in his family that triggers the rockstar in becoming, he also says that it is

really necessary not only to protest but resist. He suggests it represents a fundamental, necessary reaction to societal pressures and alienation, a “rebellious outburst”, that challenges the establishment from within (Islam 12-14). This inward turn also distinguishes Islam’s emphasis on resistance from conventional protest. Resistance, in his framework, is not a spectacle but a sustained ethical stance. Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony is instructive here: domination persists not merely through force but through consent, and resistance must therefore operate at the level of consciousness (Gramsci 12). This he wonderfully composes in the lines of “*satotar bilashita*” (“The Luxury of Honesty”) (From *Mission Fossils*) which is not merely a protest anthem- it is a manifesto of resistance grounded in moral clarity, existential grit, and individual defiance. When one’s back is against the wall, one has to turn around and fight. It demands not revolution in the streets- but revolution of the self. To feel, to remember, to bear responsibility, and to stand, even when no one is watching- that is Rupam’s vision of resistance.

Equally compelling is Rupam’s exploration of identity as a process shaped by rupture. Rupam has characterised himself as sky-oriented, believes in liberation; hence blue is his favourite. This personal philosophy of seeking liberation likely infuses his music, which itself seeks to free audiences from conventional norms and provide an outlet for self-expression. Islam expresses being “quite well with himself” within a world of diverse ideas and people (Islam 26). A pivotal moment in his self-discovery was an event where he “lost himself to himself” after he was attacked by a third party in October 2000 which inspired his song “*Uuntirishe October*” (29th October”) (Islam 26-27). This song was a moment of liberation from his inner lover spirit and focuses more on the discovery of self-identity that is wonderfully reflected through the repeated words “*Aami, aami, aami.....aami je*”, a fragmented attempt to reclaim subjectivity. The autobiographical resonance of “29th October” reveals how trauma becomes a site of self-reconstruction.

The incorporation of punk aesthetics into Bangla Rock further intensifies its countercultural energy. Punk music is a fast-paced, aggressive genre of rock that emerged in the 1970s as a reaction against mainstream music and social norms. It features short songs, loud distorted guitars, simple chord progressions, rebellious lyrics, and a DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos. In his book Islam discusses that his song “*Harano Padak*” (“Lost Medal” that appeared in *Fossils 2*), can be considered as the first Bengali punk song; it encapsulates the spirit of punk through both form and content, despite its poetic, metaphor-laden Bengali language (Islam 119). The lyrics centre on a love affair with a ghostly, forbidden, possibly hallucinatory presence—a metaphor for transgression and taboo love. He breaks away from mainstream Bengali lyrical traditions that typically emphasise romanticised love or spiritual ideals. Punk, in Rupam’s adaptation, is not just a genre— it is a language of resistance, alienation, and emotional violence. In this song, love is not salvation, but a form of madness. The self is haunted, broken, and resistant to societal norms. The song voices a personal apocalypse, not for spectacle but for self-truth. In “*Harano Padak*”, the rejection of institutional recognition reflects what Hebdige identifies as the subcultural refusal of dominant value systems (Hebdige 117). The “lost medal” becomes a critique of socially sanctioned success, exposing its arbitrariness. At the same time, this resonates with Frith’s observation that popular music often challenges “the criteria by which value is judged” (Frith 67). Thus, it is not just a protest song, it is an act of cultural subversion, delivered with the rage, rupture, and irony that defines true punk ethos.

Rupam Islam’s provocative song “*Bicycle Chor*” (“Bicycle Thief” from *Fossils 2*) is a sharp, satirical, and complex commentary on the intersections of eroticism, power, class, and systemic decay, particularly in a post-liberalised, consumer-driven urban Bengali society. In this song sexuality is reframed within structures of class, morality, and economic survival. This aligns with Michel Foucault’s argument that sexuality is not merely private but deeply embedded in “relations of power” (Foucault 94). Sexuality is not just as personal pleasure or moral taboo, but also a socio-political transaction

embedded in corruption, deprivation, and capitalist absurdity. The narrator- a self-confessed “bicycle thief”- emerges as a symbol of marginalised, transgressive youth living in a society that is morally hollow, economically dysfunctional, and sexually repressed. Here, eroticism becomes both a commodity and weapon. It critiques: patriarchal hypocrisy (“*Maa, bon hoyechhe beshyaa*” - “Mother and sister are branded as prostitutes”), moral policing and class divisions, and how sexuality becomes entangled with survival, resistance, and negotiation of identity. The song thus exposes how desire is regulated, commodified, and politicised, challenging the moral binaries of respectability and deviance.

In *Rupam on the Rocks*, Rupam states that his parents “instilled isolation” in him in his childhood, and he preferred to be alone as a child; he had very few mentionable friends since his young age (Islam 12)). He likens loneliness to water, adapting to any vessel, and suggests it nurtures growth, fearlessness, independence, and self-criticism. He considers both love and separation as ‘productive’ (Islam 20). He considers that the ultimate reason separation is not a cause for sorrow is that “love is not lost”. He also views separation as a tonic or antidote that can lead to segregation, and challenge societal rules through new communication. Running through all these themes is a persistent engagement with solitude. Rupam’s reflections on loneliness reconfigure it as a generative state rather than a deficit. This resonates with Williams’ broader argument that culture emerges from lived experience rather than abstract systems (Williams 128). In “*Ei ekla ghor aamar desh*” (“This lonely room is my country”) from *Fossils* 2002 album), solitude becomes a site of belonging, where memory and identity are negotiated internally rather than socially. It resonates with listeners who experience loneliness not just as physical isolation, but as a deeply psychological condition shaped by past love, unfulfilled desires, and the illusion of detachment

What emerges from this exploration is a vision of Bangla Rock as a form of vernacular modernity that is both locally rooted and globally informed. It reflects what Manuel describes as the

“indigenisation of global music forms” (Manual 19), while simultaneously embodying the postcolonial negotiation of identity outlined by Chatterjee and Hall. The enduring appeal of Bangla Rock among youth audiences further underscores its relevance. As Frith notes, popular music gains meaning through its listeners, who use it to “map out their own emotional worlds” (Frith 121). Bangla Rock’s consistent resonance with successive generations suggests that it articulates not just a historical moment but an ongoing condition of modern urban existence. Ultimately, the concept of “negative positivity” encapsulates the philosophical core of this movement. It affirms that pain is not the negation of meaning but its condition of possibility. By transforming suffering into expression, and isolation into shared understanding, Bangla Rock creates a space where the personal becomes political and the individual becomes collective. In this transformation, from wound to voice, lies the enduring significance of Rupam Islam’s work. The audience for Bangla Rock, particularly the youth and students, is remarkably consistent. These audiences - the youth - mostly the students - do not change; even if the faces change, the student-community does not change. This stability in their core demographic, ranging from 15 to 45 years’ public, highlights the enduring appeal of *Fossils*’ music across generations of young people who consistently challenge the establishment. Rupam emphasises the collaborative spirit required in a band is humility. This highlights a pragmatic and humble approach to collective artistic creation which possibly makes his creation and performance most popular in creating the countercultural milieu of Bangla rock music.

NOTES:

1. Rupam Islam’s interview with Suchandra in *Anandabazaar* Online: Youtube link:
<https://youtu.be/Ia9udcL7rV8?si=g7-Dnv9nAvOw11kW>
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3. Do
4. Do
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