



Indian Female-led Music Bands and Riot Grrrl Movement: A Critical Study

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Abstract

The present paper explores the female-led music bands in India in the context of the Riot Grrrl movement. Riot Grrrl movement is a subcultural feminist movement that began in Olympia in the 1990s and gradually spread across the globe. It started with their own magazines called *Zines*, punk music, DIY shows, and live concerts as a protest against sexism and patriarchy. In light of this movement, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section examines the Riot Grrrl movement and its significance leading to the second section of the paper. The second section traces the history of female-led music bands in India, such as 'Mad Hatter,' 'Missing Links,' 'Sur Samalaya,' 'The Tetseo Sisters' and many more. The songs were composed and performed as resistance towards gender inequality and related biases and prejudices with an aim to create awareness, support and care for those in need. The third section discusses the aesthetics of Riot Grrrl movement with respect to Indian female-led music bands, followed by conclusion. The Riot Grrrl movement showed that it is up to people, including every gender, to create a path of equality, justice, and peace. Therefore, the paper explores how the Riot Grrrl movement paved a path for female-led music bands to voice their opinion against societal wrong-doings across the globe with a focus on examining its aesthetics in the context of Indian female music bands, in particular.

Keywords: Female-led bands, Indian music bands, Patriarchy, Protest, Riot Grrrl movement

“We are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad,
Girl = Weak.”

(*Riot Grrrl Manifesto*, p.2)

Music is an indispensable part of everyone's life. It has the capacity to uplift moods, cheer up souls and rejuvenate beings from everyday drudgery. There are different kinds of music, such as Rock, Jazz, Rap, and so on. These mainly developed in the west, whereas

the classical music like Hindustani and Carnatic originated in India. Everyone has a unique taste in music. One of the interesting kinds of music is Pop music – its origin is a matter of debate. It was developed in the 1950s and 1960s in west and became a huge hit among the masses. That's why the term "popular" is associated with it. On the one hand, music is a medium of exhibiting one's creativity, on the other hand, it is also a medium of showing resistance, protest, and angst. For example, the Riot Grrrl movement was started in the 1990s by a group of women against sexism, misogyny, and male domination in punk music. It was a time when hyper-masculinity became a norm in punk, and women's influence started fading away. Consequently, the movement was carved out as an alternative space by students, artists, and activists in Olympia, moving to Washington D.C., then across the nation, and after that to England.

Riot Grrrl movement was a subcultural movement that involved feminism, politics, and punk music. It paved the path for budding feminists and angry girls whose voices were unheard or ignored in society. It was set to normalize women's aggression and sexuality, which were socially acceptable for men but not for women. The members of women-led band called 'Bratmobile' came up with the phrase "girl riot" and repeating 'r' was added by an artist named Jen Smith, making it "grrrl." The three r's in "grrrl" signified the ferocity and anger against the unfair treatment given to women, creating a growling effect. In this movement, women started their own magazines called *fanzines* or *zines*, where they wrote about issues that were not considered by mainstream media. It was a movement that made clear that personal is political since the birth of a child. It was filled with energy, resistance, and optimism. They believed that women were free to speak, get aggressive and be loud and expressive. It was all about girl power and female empowerment. It provided space 'to be' without shame.

Women-led bands such as 'Bikini Kill' and 'Bratmobile' created unfiltered music to express their views on gender discrimination, marginality, rape, sexuality, violence, and unappreciated voiceless women. They wrote songs on eating disorders ("Feels Blind" by 'Bikini Kill'), societal expectations for female beauty ("Teenager" by 'Bratmobile'), and other issues such as heteronormativity and queer dynamics, to name a few. They believed that everyone had a story to

tell, but they were usually silenced by society. There was a lot of energy and anger which could work as a unifying force, they affirmed. Many male bands were in conflict with this movement, and some men created chaos in the live shows of women bands. In one of the iconic concerts, bands like 'Heavens to Betsy,' 'Bikini Kill' and 'Bratmobile' performed, and the artist named, Kathleen Hanna urged "girls to the front" so as to unlearn invisibility and hesitation. In addition, it was done to keep women safe from violent acts by male audiences. The Riot Grrrl movement made youngsters aware of feminist concerns and resistance through various mediums – zines, music concerts, organized meet-ups, DIY art, and live shows. Women could create their own rules and discuss sex, queerness, beauty standards, and women issues which were considered taboo in society.

Gradually, this movement began to disintegrate by the late 1990s. It has been critiqued for not being an inclusive movement but a movement exclusively for white women. This space of feminist activism was limited, and no concerns about the intersectionality of race, class, colour were addressed. While it is agreeable that the Riot Grrrl movement did not show solidarity with all women across the world, still it definitely served as a catalyst in awakening feminist concerns throughout. "Girls to the front" became a rallying cry for years, and the aesthetics of Riot Grrrl movement never went away completely. The movement might have died, but its essence is present and carried forward in various parts of the world, such as Europe, Asia, Australia, South America etc. 'Pussy Riot' is a Russian band that came out of Riot Grrrl movement in 2011. They identified themselves as "riot grrrls" and performed on themes of feminism, politics, and queerness. However, the three artists got imprisoned for a protest song against Russian President, Vladimir Putin.

Similarly, various women bands were formed across the globe to give expression to their feelings, which was usually denied in third-world countries like India. In 1962, the first female-fronted band – 'Mad Hatter' was formed by the students of Miranda House, University of Delhi. It was for the first time that women performed on songs composed by their own selves, hence attracting more visibility. However, the band splintered soon. There were quite a few women's music bands that were active in the 1970s and 1980s, but

none of them survived for a long time. Nonetheless, this initiation of creating a women's band in itself was a revolution during that time when women were confined to homes. In the 1970s, 'The Ladybirds' was formed by Farida Vakil, who was also known to be the first woman lead guitarist and vocalist accompanied by other women artists. It was based in Mumbai, then Bombay. Well known singer, Usha Uthup was a part of this group as a jazz vocalist. The women band entered western music in Mumbai, giving competition to male music bands such as 'The Mystiks,' 'The Savages,' and many more. But in a few years, the band fell apart. Farida Vakil had exposure to western music and the Beat movement (which originated in America). The imitation of western music could be seen during this period in India.

'Losers and Weepers' was another women's rock band led by Kumari Koshy, Lata Chandy, and others. It was a band that faced societal hatred and was looked down upon. They would weep and label themselves as losers, hence the name of the group. They were asked to perform in a saree on stage by family members and were accompanied by parents wherever they performed. It could not sustain itself for long and remained active from 1969 to 1972. There was a band called 'Missing Links' in Kochi, a women-fronted rock band that was ahead of its time in the late 1960s. It was also famous as the 'Paul & Mathew Sisters' because of its four members – Sunila and Anila Mathew, Shalet and Rita Paul. The legendary pop singer Usha Uthup was also associated with this group. It experimented with a lot of themes and music but eventually, the band, like the other ones, disintegrated soon. Marriage and studies were the primary reasons for their discontinuation. These women's bands tried to break away from gender prejudices and stereotypes but fell apart too soon. Despite the constant struggle, the survival of such women-led rock bands was not easy amid male-dominated bands. Patriarchal mind set, societal restrictions, and rigid norms made it difficult for women's music bands to continue.

Many women-led rock bands have come up from the Northeastern part of India which aligned with the aesthetics of Riot Grrrl movement in their approach. 'Sur Samalaya' came up in the early 1980s with musical instruments like guitar, mandolin and a pair of bongos. A group of five women from Assam, locked the room,

drew curtains, and kept their music away from the patriarchal society as a protest. In 1994, the 'Tetseo Sisters' was formed as a band in Nagaland. The four sisters performed in traditional clothes and sang a regional song called 'Li' in Chokri dialect along with musical instruments including guitar, khabro, tati and banhum. They promoted their culture and fusion of western and folk music across the world, for example, in Scotland and USA. They were fierce and dominated the performance with their fusion of rock and other forms of music. The stage used to be full of energy with the songs created by these sisters. They were the driving force for many young girls who, too, aspired to be stage performers. Moving to 2000s, 'Affalatus' (meaning divine inspiration) was created by four experienced women musicians from Meghalaya. There was a charismatic approach to mixing music with the rock using guitar, bass and drums. The band made it clear that their love for music brought them together as one unit. They did not deny their influence from Bruno Mars and the music of the Beatles, but most importantly, they drew their influence from life itself. They received numerous awards, including one national award.

There was a time in the early 2000s when a number of female-led bands came forward from the Northeastern part of India. 'Blue Corn' is one of the most popular bands based in Mizoram. The group of three women is famous in their native state and other parts of neighbouring states of Manipur, Meghalaya, and Nagaland. Another rock band from Mizoram is 'Apples,' led by three girls. In 2007, they began their journey of rock music with high energy. They performed retro Mizo versions of hit songs which created their fan following. Mizoram has some really exquisite women's music bands, and 'The Chosen' is yet another one on the list. The six girls have great talent for jamming and mixing rock. The girls got attention for their songs in the native Mizo dialect called "Broken wings" and "We praise you" and were awarded in 2011. The three sisters from Manipur started a revolution with their band called 'Minute of Decay.' The Delhi-based rock band played a fusion of contemporary vocals and medleys. Their affair with music ensured that they would survive, irrespective of their disciplined parents and societal barriers. In 2011, another rock band emerged called 'Hurricane Girls'. This Assam-based group is formed by Mamani Kalita and Arju Begum. They

performed in various states like Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Delhi, and Kolkata. They are like a storm on the stage, as the name of their band suggests, full of energy with fusion music along with instruments such as nagara, drums, guitar, and *dhol*.

Sikkim is also famous for a band of women called 'Genesis of Pink,' formed in 2013. The band aimed to bring a change in society and voice their opinions on delicate issues like rape, violence, and other social concerns. The group of four women addressed various social issues in their compositions. They used rock music and many beats and believe in spreading the message through the medium of their music. Another group was formed in 2013 called 'Vivance – Naga Girls' with an aim to introduce masses with girl power in their songs. This resonated with the aesthetics of Riot Grrrl movement with similar motives. The band of four women created a blend of rock, pop, and Indie music and experimented with its fusion. It came out with "Dream Out Loud" in 2014, which created its fan base. They are involved in foot tapping music as well. Apart from northeast, there were a number of women-led rock bands flourishing in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Chennai. For instance, 'The Vinyl Records' was formed in 2010 by four girls who were into punk, rock, and pop music. This Delhi-based band experimented with Indian rock music and got featured on one of the music channels on Indian television in 2011. Since then, it has gained popularity among the masses and has a great fan following. 'The Void' is a Bengaluru-based women's band that plays on genres like punk, pop, classic, reggae, and rock music. Created in 2014, the band experiments with their compositions and is passionate about music. Mumbai is considered as a city of dreams where many youngsters try their luck. 'Pais and Petticoats' is a women's music band which was formed in Mumbai around 2013. Their experiments with beats and association with pop, punk, folk and rock music make their band unique.

With globalization in the 1990s, India saw a major transformation in pop music. One of the Indian music channels followed the concept of the British reality show and formed India's first mainstream women's music band called 'Viva' in 2002. The band gave a fresh breath of air as it was the first time in the Indian music industry to create an 'all girls' band. A group of five young girls, vivacious in their approach, got amplified by their

performances on stage. They sang against sexism and patriarchy. Their song, “Jaago Zara” became an anthem for girls to reclaim their identity and fight all odds. The song raises relevant questions against oppression and biased societal norms. Another song called “Kali Mai Diya Salaai” is about smashing prejudices and norms against women, dowry, and gives a message of girl empowerment. The band performed songs for the marginalized, oppressed, and downtrodden sections of society and urged the masses to wake up from their slumber and show love, support, and care for those in need. Through the song “Jahan Ho Pyaar Ka Mausam”, they imagined a utopic world full of love and compassion. Clearly, their songs were ahead of their time. Though short-lived, the band made its mark in society. The time when music bands like ‘Euphoria,’ ‘A Band of Boys’ and others were dominating the market, ‘Viva’ made way to audiences’ hearts because of their uniqueness, individuality, and women bonding, which were not common during that time.

Recently, ‘Meri Zindagi’ has attracted attention among the masses because of its rebellious outlook and stand for change. It is the first women ‘mission rock band’ of five, based in Lucknow, whose words are as sharp as a sword. Clad in pink sarees, these bold women write songs on violence, abortion, menstrual hygiene, rape, and other major women’s issues. They draw inspiration from their day-to-day lives and compose songs with hard-hitting lyrics and catchy tunes. They started their journey by composing songs with kitchen utensils (tongs, spoons, plates, etc.) due to a lack of financial support; with their mission to create awareness about gender discrimination and inequality so that people become sensitive to gender issues. They perform to entertain along with a social responsibility to make girls realize their dreams and follow them. The lead singer observed how girls are not adopted in favour of boys from orphanages. This troubled her. Being a doctorate in music, she created ‘Meri Zindagi’ along with other women with similar thinking to bring awareness and change in society. They have released two albums and performed more than 150 shows all over the country. Moreover, they have conducted awareness programmes on girl education, anti-smoking campaign, and the latest campaign on racism (‘Hum kaaley hein’ – ‘we are black’). They are also in the process of opening a radio station online so as to provide a platform for women

to share their experiences and struggles all across the country. They manage to create an environment where women can talk and express themselves freely without shame. 'Meri Zindagi' provides space to feel protected and a voice for the voiceless, marginalized, and oppressed sections of society.

It is observed that the struggle for women's emancipation and freedom of expression has been brewing since the formation of the first-ever women-led rock band, that is 'Mad Hatters' in various parts of the country – Delhi, Mumbai, Assam, Sikkim, Manipur, Nagaland, Chennai. When one notices the chronology of the women-led music bands in India from the early 1960s to the late 2000s, it is quite clear how there is a shift from mere imitation of western music to experimenting with different forms of music. However, women bands were short-lived in the 1960s and 1970s owing to societal pressures and gender stereotypes. But gradually, women are coming forward in their true selves on stage – rebellious, showing protest and resistance through music. From imitation of western forms of music to Indianization of western forms through fusion and other musical experiment, to creating an individual space as women's music bands in India, women have come a long way. India has begun to see the change in the representation of women from ordinary to extraordinary women through resistance, protest, and rebel wherein music is one of the greatest mediums to bring the change. It is simply that our country needs more such 'mission music bands' by women to break the shackles of patriarchy and gender stereotypes.

There is no denying the fact that the world has shown signs of improvement over two decades, but issues like trans women, homophobia, and sexism are still prevalent in society. While there have been phases to revive the Riot Grrrl movement, it is better to learn from the highs and lows of it and make something better out of it. This movement showed a direction, and it is up to people, including every gender, to create a path of equality, justice, and peace.

Despite growing visibility, there is still misogyny, sexism, objectification, and commodification of women. There are still a lot of questions that hang in air as far as solidarity and representation of women are concerned. There is a need for women to realize their

potential and reclaim their space in whichever field they are in. It is high time the society realizes its responsibility and provides equal opportunities to both men and women. It is high time that people unlearn the deeply rooted gender stereotypes and prejudices and become aware of gender sensitization and gender-neutral language. There is a need to talk about the acceptance of women in the public sphere and dismantlement of societal norms which are mostly biased against one gender. There is a need to talk about issues of transgender, queerness, homophobia, and other issues which are silenced in the socio-cultural setup. Lack of solidarity, sexual cyberbullying, and cyber-crimes are harsh realities of the time. Through writings, music, and discussions, these issues have come to the forefront. There is a need for more such movements like the Riot Grrrl movement to show resistance and protest against wrongdoings in society. Music reflects attitudes, mindsets, and ideologies of the time, and there is a need for women bands to come up with their own compositions to create awareness in society.

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