

Dakhni X Rap

A study of the advent of the emerging artform as a subculture
 Mayank Singh



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 Image credit: Instagram, Soundcloud accounts

This article explores the advent of rap and hip hop as an artform across the country and its intersection with Dakhni in the context of Bangalore. Hip hop and rap as genres, throughout their 20th century history have often been tools of representation and resistance. How does Dakhni find itself as its ally against the spatial and socio-cultural backdrop of an urban centre like Bangalore? We talk to 3 Bangalore rappers and an artist manager in this domain and find out.

Ojas Shetty

“What is Hip-Hop if not a cultural response to adversity?”

Ojas is an urban practitioner, multimedia producer, cultural propagandist, currently working at WRI India as a Senior Programme Associate. Ojas writes about cities, mobility, public spaces, data and hip-hop.

Mayank (M): How did your journey with Indian hip hop start?

Ojas (O): When I was 26-27, I was living a decent life, and to find more joy out of life, I started venturing out. In 2014, while I was with Hyderabad Urban Lab

(HUL), ‘Mere Gully’ had come out by producer Sez on the Beat featuring rappers Naezy and Divine. But more than just the artists on this track, this was also a collaboration of Kurla and Andheri with its class variations. And it was picked up everywhere - they got radio plays, interview invites, even on relatively newer platforms like Instagram and YouTube (thanks to the latter’s latest monetisation policy) - and spread like wildfire in the independent music space. In 2016, I moved to Mumbai and started to attend and even arrange ‘cyphers’*. Artists would get together in places like a park in Dharavi, a ground in Worli or Shivajinagar. I being, an avid hip-hop listener myself, started exploring the stories behind these artists.

A ‘cypher’ is a practice where rappers meet at a place, ideally in a circle and exchange verses for entertainment and competition.

M: What differences did you find in the

socio-cultural background of the rap you were listening to, which was mostly Western I presume, as compared to these artists you were hanging out with?

O: In the west, especially in the United States, Rap was largely a vocabulary of a disadvantaged community. It emerged out of spatially segregated neighbourhoods in New York and ghettos in Atlanta and Los Angeles. Hip-hop in India has had its own trajectory. For example, north India had desi hip-hop emerging out of NRI artists like Apache Indian. In cities like Mumbai, you would see instances of rappers like Sean Paul being played in apartments and arousing curiosity in the adjacent bastis. Ace, a pioneer from the Dharavi rap scene, would burn and distribute CDs from home, making rap music accessible to all classes. By 2013, in Mumbai, there emerged a clear distinction between basti rappers and apartment rappers. Similarly, in Delhi, East Delhi

and South Delhi were developing their own styles. With easy access to smartphones and iPads, music production also became easy. That being said Rap everywhere does accentuate the element of protest in an artform, although that’s not always exclusive to it. I mean what is hip-hop if not a cultural response to adversity.

That being, rap also presents itself as an identity politics artform - there is Valmiki Rap, Jat Rap, even Right Wing rap.

M: How did you get introduced to Dakhni rap?

O: My work with HUL in 2016 involved talking to a lot of bus unions and auto-rickshaw drivers, which is where I picked up a bit of Dakhni. I also got a chance to speak to filmmaker Gautam Pemmaraju and ended up learning more about the history of Dakhni. While living in Hyderabad, I realised the Urdu I have picked up has

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Mohammad Affan Pasha, also known as Pasha Bhai, has gained recognition for his contributions to the hip-hop scene in Bangalore, India. Image credit: Rolling Stone India, bangaloreinternationalcentre.org

100+ venues around the city.

The group 'Wanandaf' was an early initiative that turned informal spaces like Cubbon Park into accessible performance venues from people from all backgrounds, as bigger venues would have a cover charge for listeners. Dakhni rap happens at Neelasandra and Shivajinagar. There are discrete scenes in RR Nagar, Hennur, Koramangala. There are Rappers like Smokey and Brodha V who come from relatively advantaged backgrounds and have had access to housing and culture. There is a recent realisation amongst NRI rappers, like Hanumankind, that South Asia is a big emerging market for them.

M: Was there an apprehension about putting out an album in Dakhni?

O: There was. Urdu and Dakhni have their own class connotations where Urdu is considered more respectable and has a wider audience; Dakhni is considered humorous. One is often chided by elders for speaking in Dakhni - labelling it as 'broken Urdu'. But we felt writing in English and Hindi/Urdu would have been an inauthentic

a more Dakhni touch to it. In 2018-19 as I had to frequent Bangalore for my work with WRI, I made it a point to catch cyphers or attend studio recording sessions. Pasha Bhai, who would later drop his single 'Eid Ka Chand' in 2020, was still writing and recording in English and Hindi. On top of this, avenues like MTV Hustle would only accept entries in these two languages. In 2021, I helped write a proposal for these Bangalore-based artists for IFA and then once we bagged the grant, we not only realised that there is value in Dakhni as a language for hip hop, we also discovered that there is a whole realm of grant-writing as a medium to release music rather than primarily relying on self-funded production of this kind of work.

M: Is there a spatial or cultural similarity between the origins of hip-hop culture of Mumbai and Bangalore?

O: There isn't. In the west, hip-hop as an artform has its origins in the Bronx in New York City. In Mumbai, hip-hop had its origins in Nalasopara and Mira Road - where dance groups helped keep children off drugs. You must have seen some of these dance groups on the TV show Boogie Woogie on Sony back in the day.

Bangalore has had its own history of western music - Metal, Jazz and Electronica. It took a little longer for rap to be taken seriously in Bangalore because of proximity of better venues and conservative neighbourhoods. You must have heard the news of RWAs shutting down some

representation of their everyday life.

M: How have the venues received this as an artform?

O: There are clear divisions: programmers come from a different class background, and the elite determine taste more than anyone else. You have to wait for a chance and are expected to feel grateful for opportunities that you may get at a popular venue like Fandom or Social. We then would reposition ourselves to consider venues like BIC/ MAP/Goethe Institut. Rap audiences are different in the sense that they are largely male and high energy. Although once we did end up doing a show for an NGO-run school.

M: How has this artform helped revive Dakhni as a language?

O: We have to realise that Dakhni stopped being a literary language due to the rise of the Urdu dominion and its recognition from the Government. A lot of artistic work would exist in Dakhni - although as a spoken word tradition it still continued since the last 200-250 years. Dakhni in Bangalore would have more Kannada and even Marathi (due to Shivaji coming to Bangalore in the 16th century), than



Dakhni in Hyderabad which would have more Telugu in it. These guys are reviving the dead literary tradition in a way, even though it's not the same Dakhni, especially with the usage of everyday slang.

During floods, our sewers end up overflowing, electricity gets cut off first, houses get flooded with this water, we are not able to sleep, cook, eat or drink.

Pasha Bhai is a well-known rapper from Bengaluru, popular for his unique style of blending "Dakhni", a South Indian Urdu dialect, into his rap music. His tracks often reflect the struggles of the urban poor, daily life in Bengaluru's Muslim neighbourhoods and social issues.

M: Can you describe your journey and background?

Pasha Bhai (P): I belong to Neelsandra, which is a small ghetto with small lanes, filthy streets. It's a highly dense locality. I feel we are treated differently by the administration but it's people like us who run the city at the core of it - we may not be signing documents but we go and get our hands dirty and put our head in the infrastructure of the city - be it economically or physically, tangible contributions to the city come from these communities. Growing up here I'd question

why do we only have to end up taking these certain jobs and end up studying at these particular institutes? Why can't this cycle change?

During floods, our sewers end up overflowing, electricity gets cut off first, houses get flooded with this water, we are not able to sleep, cook, eat or drink. We somehow spend the night and start cleaning up the next morning. Some people would get together and arrange for food and would go around distributing milk, bread, medicines. So this solidarity literally has helped us survive. You don't leave your people behind, no matter what the situation is.

M: How did you start rapping?

P: Growing up, being exceptional in studies, I was told I was a special kid. Eventually I started questioning this notion as I started getting practical in life, especially after I lost my father. I was directionless, out on the streets making money by printing documents for people, doing all kinds of work. And this money which we'd have to hide from family would somehow allow us to bunk classes and hang around with friends. After 12th, I was introduced to rap by a friend and became a proper hip-hop head, listening on repeat albums like J. Cole's '4 Your Eyez Only' and Kendrick Lamar's 'Damn'. Being a rapper was something that only existed

Mohammad Affan Pasha aka Pasha Bhai

at the back of my head, since these artists were doing their work in English and my friends who introduced me to this work were writing in Hindi. I started learning and picking up other people's styles and started writing everyday in Hindi/English.

M: When did you start writing in Dakhni?
P: When I came across Indian artists like Naezy, Divine, Emiway and esrtwhile Seedhe Maut, I noticed that they are authentic to their language. That's when I realised that my mother tongue Dakhni has had its own literary legacy from the past several centuries. And that's what led me to the release of my debut single 'Eid ka Chand' and a lot of people appreciated me for representing Dakhni. I had started writing in Hindi, because a lot of my inspirations amongst mainstream artists were writing in Hindi. I later started rapping in English after being exposed to global hip hop and watching rap battles. To be honest, I never thought I'd end up rapping in Dakhni, but later rapping in my mother tongue felt like home to me.

M: When you look at the rap culture of another city, let's say Hyderabad, do you see any similarity?
P: I can relate a lot with Divine, Emiway and Naezy. Listening to Naezy hits you differently if you are a Muslim kid. There's a lot of resilience and pride in Emiway's writing. So when I'm looking for depth, I relate to Bombay rap a lot, although for easy listening I listen to Delhi rap. A lot of cultural aspects reflect in the rap of that geography.

M: What about the nature of rap coming from smaller cities?
P: I have seen a lot of rappers come to Bangalore from Kolar, Hassan, Mysore, Chintamani and then go back because of lack of opportunities here. To be honest, there's no proper formalised industry here. Whatever it is, it's just us and we do have a range of rappers based on reach, popularity and accessibility. And the rappers from small towns come and learn how to make do and manoeuvre through the available opportunities here.

M: My last question would be - in terms of informal spaces in Bangalore for rap battles and cyphers, and even regular performance venues like Fandom, how accepting have they been?
P: Talking about informal spaces, Wanandaf

did bring about a certain organisation in the rap community in the city in terms of cyphers. Even before that, MC Suhas would organise cyphers and jams around Jayanagar. And we would see rappers like Ali from Kashmir amongst others. In comparison to other cities, Delhi and Mumbai may have been better in terms of rap's presence but I still find the scene here a little less confusing than, say, Chennai.

The formal venues have not been very accepting to be honest, all they want is to make money and become another Delhi or Mumbai. They would rather fly down MC Altaf from Mumbai or Seedhe Maut from Delhi rather supporting artists here. They have no vision. If I had my own venue I would call rappers every week for a showcase and get my regular audience. That would cut half the cost of flying these artists from other cities.

Dope Duo (Saad and Umar)

"The Bangalore we see is different from the Bangalore that other people see."

M: Hi, could you both give me a little educational background of yours?
Saad (S): I'm in second year, studying BBA in St. Joseph's (evening) college.
Umar (U): I graduated from St. Joseph's (evening) college. Currently I am working as a brand alliances manager for a firm for 6 months.

M: How old are both of you, if I may ask?
U: I'm 21 and he (Saad) is 19.

M: Where did you grow up and where do you currently live?

U: We spent the first 10-15 years of our lives in Shivajinagar and then had to move to Neelasandra due to some family issues, which is where we currently live.

M: And how has it been living in Neelasandra?
S: We might have been born in Shivajinagar but this place (Neelasandra) is us living hip-

hop. This Muslim ghetto is (the embodiment of) hip-hop for me. At every street corner here, you'll find a so-called thug with a blade in his mouth. I mean he has a life to live, a wife and kids to protect. I hope you understand. And we were not born with a silver spoon in our mouth. The Bangalore we see is different from the Bangalore that other people see.

M: How and when did you both get into rap?
S: Rap was not a conscious decision to get into. It came automatically into our lives. I guess it was God's plan, it was all written. I started listening to rap around 2018-2019 before big names like Divine got famous, even before Pashabhai started rapping in Dakhni. People here were writing in Urdu and English and going through an identity crisis. When I'd listen to international artists like Kendrick (Lamar) and Eminem, you'd realise that their stories are similar to the lives we are living here.

U: We have been writing for a couple of years now. Very rarely you will come across a duo of actual siblings in hip-hop working together. We have been witness to each other's personal and professional struggles. Thankfully till now people who have heard our music have shown us love. And we are still learning from each other and from hip-hop as an artform. And we have been lucky enough to be able to collaborate with Pashabhai who is a known figure of the Dakhni hip-hop scene. And so now, that serves to us as a milestone and there's no turning back now, we have nothing to lose. And we are doing this on top of my day job and Saad's education. We want to set the right example for kids.

M: So I'm assuming the language you speak at home is Dakhni; how did you end up writing in Dakhni?

S: We started writing in Urdu and English - the latter primarily because we'd memorise Eminem's verses and write our own on the same beats. Eventually we realised if we have to represent our culture, we do need to start writing in Dakhni. There is a line in my upcoming song: 'Eminem bhi yaha paida hota toh rap karta Dakhni mein' (Had Eminem been born here, even he'd have rapped in Dakhni). We have seen how Dakhni is looked down upon as a language. We are not asking for a special treatment to Dakhni, we just want to be accepted just like any other rapper.

M: Any particular spatial anchor that helps you to create art?
U: It used to be the water tank on the terrace of my house in Neelasandra, where I would sit in the night and see the moon shine brighter than the stars around it. The moon would inspire me to shine brighter than those around me especially since I was going through some personal turmoil.

M: Are there rappers coming from small towns or are they only present in cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad?
U: I think people consume hip-hop from all across the country, from all cities big and small. And what matters is whether someone sitting in a small town far away can relate to what another artist is trying to say. There are a thousand ways to express and tell a story. And there are so many perspectives. You never know who might find your story relatable and inspiring. We might not have the same life but we may be able to bring our own perspective to someone else's work. Currently there is a rapper in every street.
S: There is no point comparing towns I feel - our Bangalore ghettos are extremely small in front of the western (neighbour-)hoods, which might look lavish in front of ours in terms of lifestyle. So if you look at it, we are small town boys for them. So if we are able to connect with them, definitely artists coming from smaller towns (than Bangalore) would surely connect with us. That being said, Bangalore definitely has more visibility and a community for artists to learn and grow than say Belagavi.

M: How often does communal background find its way into rap lyrics?
S: Hip-hop historically originated from the Black African-American Community, so yes in the west, communal differences in writing may be seen between the works of Kendrick (Lamar, a Black artist) vs say Eminem (a White artist). In India, it's a mix of this socio-economic background plus what you have grown up listening to. There is a whole subgenre called flex-rap, where yes you do write about money and cars and women, and we frankly don't relate to it. But they won't be writing about the struggles we have faced. But for us there is an added challenge - the struggle is not just against the world, it's also to find acceptance (of pursuing this artform) within our own community.

Listen to 'Bengalore ki Daastan' by Pasha Bhai and Demixx Beats on YouTube by scanning the link below:



Dope Duo are an emerging rap Duo from Bangalore, consisting of brothers Umar and Saad. Listen to 'Emergency Case' by Dope Duo featuring Pasha Bhai

Mayank is an architect with a Master's Specialisation in Structural Engineering with over 9 years of professional experience. As an educator, his main subjects are building construction, with an emphasis on computational design and its applications in large-span and high-rise structures along with building acoustics. As a part-time musician, composer and producer, he releases and performs music under the moniker 'Bluedoor'. Mayank is drawn to finding parallels with music and architecture for students to develop a cohesive understanding and commonalities of both the disciplines.