

Anti-Music and Alternative Sound Practices In India With Revant, Ruhail Qaisar and Kamakhya Records

By Disha Bijolia

“Hearing is a way of touching at a distance,” wrote Canadian composer and sound theorist R. Murray Schafer, likening the act of listening to an intimate connection that tends to reach across space and makes contact with something beyond ourselves. Sound collapses distance in this way. Its capacity to connect us to other sonic and temporal realities and create relations where none existed, drawing disparate bodies into a single, shared interiority, has long made sound indispensable to collective life. This is reflected in protest songs, binding listeners to the urgency of revolt. Religious and ritual chants do the same, carrying worshippers into altered states of faith and divinity. So do our favourite songs, bridging us to domains of heartbreak, loneliness, ecstasy and a million other moods in between. In all these aspects, sound operates as a threshold — a passage into conviction, transcendence, introspection or solidarity.

It is this quality of sound, to bypass the rational mind and anchor itself in the body, that links it so closely with storytelling. Folklore, myth, resistance movements, and rituals have relied on sound merely to do more than transmit meaning; to shape the very texture of experience. To hear then, is not simply to register but to inhabit, and to be moved elsewhere.

The following practices fall under a similar engagement with sound. Working within a form of ‘anti-music’ these artists treat noise, drones and static as primary material. Their method is editorial and procedural — record, isolate, splice, loop, misalign, and most importantly, spatialize. By arranging fragments and silences across time and space, their work is realised in the listener’s act of staying with discontinuity and disorientation, with their soundscapes emerging as sustained conditions of attention. The lineage of ‘anti-music’ runs from Futurism’s manifesto *The Art of Noises* (Luigi

Russolo, 1913), through musique concrète and mid-20th-century avant-garde experiments, to industrial, power-electronics, and the contemporary global noise/no-wave scenes. Practitioners foreground field recordings, glitches, distortion, and even silence as compositional materials; listening becomes an active, sometimes confrontational, encounter rather than passive consumption.

Anti-music changes our understanding of music by challenging the ingrained expectations of structure and pleasure, transforming the act of listening into a critical engagement with sound. In extension, it reshapes our perception of reality, insisting that auditory experiences can reflect social, political, and ecological conditions rather than merely aesthetic comfort.

The rise of anti-music can be traced to several intertwined factors. Political and archival urgency drives artists in subaltern regions to use noise and field-recording-based practices to work with ‘counter-memory’ — sonic traces, oral testimonies, and atmospheres that resist erasure and flattening narratives. Whereas, a digital DIY infrastructure, including platforms like Bandcamp and small net-labels, allows experimental artists to publish dense, non-commercial work directly to niche audiences, circumventing conventional industry gatekeeping.

Simultaneously, sound studies scholarship by thinkers such as Brandon LaBelle and Paul Hegarty frames sound as a social and territorial technology, giving practitioners the language and legitimacy to position noise as political practice. And finally, contemporary aesthetic and ecological crises — post-pandemic attention, climate anxiety, and the militarisation of land — have created a widespread appetite for unsettling, non-escapist listening. Anti-music, by resisting familiarity and demanding sustained engagement, becomes a powerful tool to confront place, history, and the realities we inhabit.

Personal Geographies of Sound

Revant is an experimental/electronic practitioner from West Bengal, now based in Mumbai, who uses glitches, static, field samples and fragmented beats to build textural, diaristic soundworks. His EP *MOSS* was born from a period of precarity: couch-surfing, unstable housing, a sense of not-belonging. Yet instead of translating this instability into text or image, he turned to sound. What he sought to recreate was a sensation he knew from childhood: standing in a field at the edge of the city, hearing its noise from afar. “It’s not really positive or negative,” he recalls, “but more like you’re there and all of it is washing over you. Larger and breathing. So for me, making is about being in that feeling.” The EP is his attempt to reproduce that sensation of immersion.

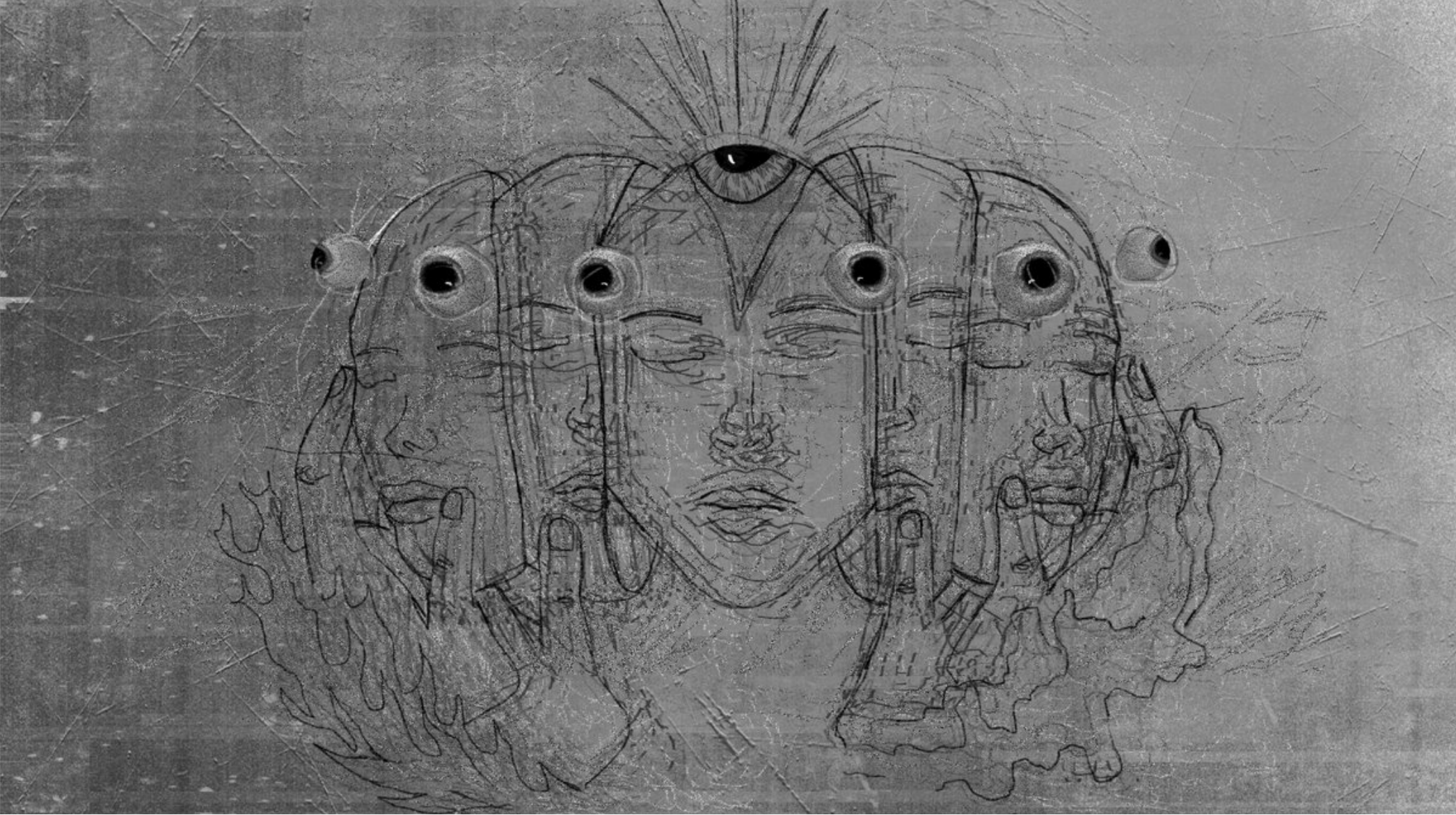
Glitches, static, fragmented beats become materials in his practice. They form the texture of his sonic diary, and the dissonance becomes a form of rebellion. “We are very Indian,” he says, “but our cultural sensibilities aren’t in touch with what is expected of us — maybe through Bollywood, or through how you speak, how you are, what you like. So for me it’s resistance in that way.” His refusal is not didactic but affective: by sounding otherwise, he opens space for other forms of being.



The tracks ‘Sorryfather’ and ‘N100’ exemplify this. ‘N100’ builds on an insistent beat, urgent and demanding, but leaves room within that intensity for drift — a space that mirrors the apathy and comfort of limbo. The result is a kind of endurance. “Music has always been something I could fall back on in times of distress,” he explains. “Being in that state and making things just takes my mind off things for a while. And helps me get busy doing something that isn’t self-destructive.” His work, then, is less an aesthetic pursuit than a survival strategy, a way of translating instability into form.

The essence of Bengal runs through his practice, though not in expected ways. He samples everyday soundscapes: the screech of Kolkata’s non-AC metro, buses vibrating along highways, the reverb of truck horns at night, the chatter of friends. “To me these are essentially Bengali sounds,” he reflects. “Because that’s what was around me in Bengal when I was there.” By folding these into his compositions, he produces an alternative archive — one that records the sonic residues of a life in flux.

This impulse extends into his curatorial work with Biswa Bangla Noise, a label dedicated to West Bengal’s sonic experiments. He describes it as a time capsule, something that a future listener might stumble upon and be startled by. “If some kid in a library or on a phone someday comes across it, they will see that people from their same city or state were doing all this cool shit. And it will blow their mind, or hopefully inspire them.” Here again, sound becomes both personal and collective: the record of one artist’s geography, and the foundation of a broader memory for others.



IGU Kamakhya Records - from Bandcamp

Sound As Counter-Memory & Alternative Histories

Based in Jorhat, Assam, Kamakhya Records is a Psychedelic music label that directs all its proceeds to The Lynti Khasi School of Umsawwar – a small remote village of farmers & shepherds located in Meghalaya, and The Society for Health & Educational Development (SHED), a not-for-profit residential and day boarding school in Assam.

Their ‘Untold Stories of India’ series foregrounds narratives often absent from official history: the displacement of Bengali Muslims during the Raj, the vanishing floodplains of Assam, or the cosmologies of Idu-Mishimi shamans in Arunachal Pradesh. “The aim was not just to make experimental music,” explains Kuntil Baruwa, the custodian of Kamakhya Records, “but to create a space where listening itself becomes a political act.”

Their method rests on the documentative and even evocative force of sound. Loops, distortions, and atmospheres turn into sonic triggers of truth. “What sound allows us to do, especially experimental sound, is to bypass the frameworks of language and permission,” shares Kuntil. “You can work with fragments, atmospheres, things that are felt but never written down. A loop that distorts over time can hold more emotional truth than any clean historical summary.”

“In the Northeast, music has always been about transmission. Knowledge passed down through oral stories, chants, rhythms that belong to no one and everyone. Experimental sound, for us, is a way to keep that spirit alive.”

— Kuntil Baruwa, Custodian - Kamakhya Records

Equally important is their redefinition of psychedelia. Unlike the global association with ‘trippy’ visual spectacle or euphoric dance floors, Kamakhya describes psychedelia as a method of unmaking: peeling back structure, producing states of disorientation that compel attention. “We are not trying to produce euphoric drops or functional grooves,” he says. “We are more interested in states of ritual disorientation, not for escapism, but for re-entry.” Here, sound does not provide escape from politics but a way back into it — an altered state that unsettles national narratives, border logics, and homogenizing identities.

‘Nau Khelar Gaan’, for example, comes from the lives of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh who are both over-policed and under-recognised in Assam’s political landscape. ‘RAAND, SAAND, SEEDI, SANYASI’ moves through the gendered and caste-coded rituals of North India and Varanasi. ‘IGU (Idu Mishimi Galuk Use)’, on the other hand, draws on the cosmologies of the Idu-Mishimi people of Arunachal Pradesh. In Idu-Mishimi death rituals, sound is passage; chants guide the departed through the afterlife, orienting them in an unseen landscape. By weaving field recordings with fractured sonic textures, ‘IGU’ recreates that navigation as an acoustic cosmology in action. ‘Sounds of the Isagarh Underground’ from their ‘Psychedelic Sounds from India’s back of beyond’ series is about a forgotten outpost in Madhya Pradesh, that emerges as a space marked by caste friction, generational dislocation, and the awkward negotiations of adulthood within fractured agrarian pasts.

“Assam is a space of plural histories: Ahom, Karbi, Bodo, Mising, Tea tribes, and so many others, and yet the dominant narratives flatten that complexity. Psychedelic sound, when done with intent, has the capacity to disrupt official geographies.”

— Kuntil Baruwa, Custodian - Kamakhya Records

For Kamakhya, psychedelia is political: it “becomes a space to break the loop, whether it is the loop of nationalist narrative, of extractive tourism, or even of algorithm-driven music consumption.” In this reframing, the altered state they seek is “not a chemical one, but an attentive one,” a sonic condition that pulls the listener out of autopilot and forces them “to navigate a terrain they do not fully understand.” American artist and sound theorist Brandon LaBelle, describes sound as creating disruptions in social space, producing “acoustic territories” that destabilize normative structures. Kamakhya’s practice can be largely read as this kind of territorial disruption, where a new, disorienting terrain for listening is carved out.

This ethos extends to their ethics of curation. As a not-for-profit, with proceeds going to schools in Assam and Meghalaya, they attempt to embed accountability into their structure. But more crucially, they insist on listening with communities rather than speaking for them. Releases are often rough,

uncomfortable, and ambiguous, because they’d rather “be slow and accountable than fast and extractive.” Their aim is not representation but resonance; to hold space for these sonic cultures without packaging them for easy consumption.

Over seventy releases later, Kamakhya has become less a label than an ecosystem of care, community and embeddedness. Unlike much of India’s experimental music scene, which can appear detached from land and consequence, Kamakhya insists that sound must remain tethered: to geography, history, and responsibility.

Sound As Assault On The Senses

Ruhail Qaisar is a noise/experimental artist from Leh, Ladakh¹, whose current practice revolves around examining threads of local memory, mythos, and poetics through sound art. The artist’s tryst with sound has been a series of “special accidents” that have accumulated across his life. His trajectory winds through childhood obsessions with rock and roll and cinema, particularly the world-building of bands from the 1960s to the early 1990s. “The visual aesthetics, the poetics in the lyrics, the choice of embellishments on the soundscape and arrangement — I found myself obsessed with all these dynamics and their flexibility, modulated to myriad variations from genre to no-genre,” he recalls.

That early fascination was compounded by his return to Ladakh during university, where encounters with culture, ritual, and history were filtered through the exchange of ideas with a close circle of friends. The collisions between global sound cultures and Ladakhi memory seeded the foundation of his practice.

Noise, distortion, and sonic abrasion have always given Ruhail a dopamine rush. From “the screech of a chalk on board to PA systems feedbacking,” he describes the visceral thrill these disturbances carried for him. Even in his death metal band Vajravarah, he and his collaborators wanted their music to be “evil, dirty, precise, eerie and powerfully chaotic” in contrast to the polished, hi-fi sound of their peers. He recalls spending “8–9 hours on a guitar in one sitting to compose, configure, mangle, invert arrangements and try and break new ground even within a limited genre like that where tropes have been exhausted decades ago.” This insistence on pushing at the edges of form later opened out further with noise and electro-acoustic practices.

His 2020 album Fatima described as ‘an anti-lingual conjuring of metaphysical totems in music¹’ and ‘a requiem for a dead future’ was the artist’s elegiac tribute to his homeland slipping away into erasure by militarization, and extractive tourism. “Fatima opened up the world of touring and performances where I could play with the format, the dramaturgy, the excess and the silence,” he shares.

Field recording once played a central role in his work, though lately he gravitates more toward “found material and their interior sound of objects and their permutation and the spatialization these timbres interact with.” His 2023 commission for Austria’s Musikprotokoll, ‘The Spine of the Sky’, exemplifies this shift. Composed during a three-month residency, the 25-minute work premiered in a Dolomite mountain cave, using an Ambisonic system of 96 speakers and 18 sub-basses embedded under the floor. Here, Ruhail learned to maneuver his sounds across the sphere of the venue, enveloping the audience in a sonic field that was at once sculptural and overwhelming.



Ruhail Qaisar - by Adnan Zaid

Yet his intent isn’t to pander: “I don’t have the listener in mind at all when it comes to composing. It’s just the desire to propel sonics into power, or to solve the eternal problem of being confronted with a problem that I need to solve somehow: how to make music without making music? How to avoid music while I am playing an instrument?” He insists that his practice is narrow, not expansive — “a singular direction of suffering that I can sniff and hound the trail till the dead-end horizon.” If what emerges from that pursuit turns out to be musical, “we have a composition,” he notes.

For the artist, sound is less an expressive vehicle than a phenomenological demand: a way of sculpting time, intensity, and pressure. “Ultimately what I require is Artaudian in nature, assault on the senses with cruelty and spectacle,” he continues, “and all I am trying to trace it all back is to an imaginary primitive rhythm power, lingering voices of ancestors from the mountaintops, the trills of the Tibetan highland yowl, the hum of the tectonic shift, a thousand people pounding their chests in mass unison, screaming in my native tongue in glossolalia trance cadence, speech before words.”

What emerges from these practices is an understanding that sound, once uncoupled from the grammar of music, operates differently; as a material presence that presses on perception. Jordan Lacey, the Australian sound theorist, composer, and researcher describes noise as a vibrational affect that works directly on the body before meaning takes shape. Composing with such volatility within these practices tap into the same mode of communication where it becomes less about arranging notes than about staging conditions where listening itself is unsettled, and sound confronts us as a force.

The provocation, then, is that ‘non-music’ is not a retreat from form but a wager on sound’s autonomy. By sidestepping harmony and repetition, these works open onto a different logic: one where listening detaches itself from recognition and we’re placed inside sound’s event, where instability and intensity become the very ground of experience. Together these practices enact a deliberate descent into a more primal mode of perception — a pre-linguistic economy where narratives are assembled through sonic imagination rather than familiar syntaxes. In a way, it’s storytelling in its purest form where themes of displacement, cultural memory, and identity are transmitted as aural disclosures.

¹Qaisar, Ruhail. Fatima. Bandcamp. Accessed September 18, 2025. <https://ruhailqaisar.bandcamp.com/album/fatima>.