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## Bhupen Hazarika as a Revolutionary Lyricist and Singer of Assam

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### Abstract

Bhupen Hazarika, a towering figure in Indian music and literature, remains one of Assam's most cherished cultural icons. As a lyricist, singer, and composer, Hazarika used his creative talent to voice the concerns of the oppressed and marginalized. His songs reflected themes of social justice, cultural identity, humanism, and resistance against inequality and exploitation. Drawing influence from folk traditions of Assam and international voices of struggle, his music emerged as a revolutionary force. This paper explores how Bhupen Hazarika's lyrical genius and musical expression significantly shaped the socio-cultural consciousness of Assam and the Indian subcontinent.

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**Keywords:** Bhupen Hazarika, Assamese music, revolutionary singer, lyricist, social justice, folk culture

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### Introduction

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika (1926–2011) was more than a musician—he was a cultural movement. Often referred to as the "Voice of the Brahmaputra," Hazarika became synonymous with Assamese identity and pride. His lyrics transcended time and space, addressing the daily struggles of ordinary people and weaving in themes of unity, justice, and human dignity (Goswami, 2012). A product of both indigenous roots and global exposure, he stood at the confluence of tradition and progress, voicing revolutionary thought through poetic compositions.

### Objectives of the Study

- To identify revolutionary themes in Hazarika's lyrics
- To understand the socio-political messages in his music
- To explore his influence on Assamese identity and protest movements

### Importance of the Study

Bhupen Hazarika's work connects art with activism. Studying his lyrics helps preserve Assamese cultural history, raise awareness of regional issues, and highlight music's role as a tool for social transformation.

### Methodology

- Textual analysis of selected lyrics
- Contextual analysis within Assam's historical background
- Review of secondary sources including articles and interviews

### Scope of Study

- Focused on lyrics from the 1950s–1990s
- Covers themes like humanism, protest, social equity, and regional pride
- Limited to Assamese and Hindi compositions with socio-political depth

### Review of Literature

- Goswami (2012): Humanism in lyrics
- Baruah (2014): Political symbolism
- Neog (2017): Folk influence and protest tone
- Bhattacharya (2011): Comparison with global protest music
- Saikia (2015): Women's voice and resilience in his songs

### Background and Influences

Born in Sadiya, Assam, Bhupen Hazarika's early musical exposure came from traditional Assamese music and his family's deep cultural involvement. As a child prodigy, he was composing songs and performing on All India Radio by age 12. Later, his education at Banaras Hindu University and Ph.D. from Columbia University exposed him to global socio-political ideas, including civil rights movements and folk music traditions of the world (Baruah, 2014).

At Columbia, he met Paul Robeson, whose rendition of "Ol' Man River" deeply influenced Hazarika. He adapted the tune into Assamese as "Bistirno Parore," localizing the global struggle against injustice for Assamese listeners (Neog, 2017).

### Revolutionary Themes in His Lyrics

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, often hailed as the "Bard of the Brahmaputra," was not just a musician or singer—he was a visionary whose lyrics became instruments of social change. His songs, penned and performed in Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and other languages, transcended artistic boundaries and became vehicles for revolution, humanism, and resistance against injustice. Through poetic storytelling and deeply emotive melodies, Hazarika addressed the socio-political issues of his time, embedding within his lyrics revolutionary themes that continue to resonate across generations.

#### (I) Humanism and Universal Brotherhood

One of the most striking themes in Bhupen Hazarika's work is his deep-rooted humanism. He believed in the unity of mankind beyond caste, religion, and borders. His iconic song "Manuhe Manuhor Babe" (Humans for Humanity) is a powerful example of this vision:

"Manuhe manuhor babe / Jodihe okonu nabhabe / bhabibo kunenu kua ..."  
(If humans don't think for fellow humans, who else will?)

This song is more than just an appeal for kindness; it is a call for social responsibility. It challenges society to reflect on indifference and encourages empathy as a revolutionary act. In a world increasingly divided by communal and class tensions, Hazarika's emphasis on human unity was a radical statement. This song illustrates his central message: compassion and empathy as a foundation for society (Saikia, 2015)

#### (II) Protest Against Oppression and Inequality

Hazarika's songs frequently highlighted the pain of the marginalized—the tea garden workers, the poor, the tribals, the flood-affected, and the voiceless. His compositions often served as poetic protests against systemic exploitation. For instance, in "Bistirno Parore" (On the Wide Banks), he adapts Paul Robeson's "Ol' Man River" and localizes it for the Assamese audience. The river Brahmaputra becomes a metaphor for the unchanging and passive observer of human suffering.

"Bistirno parore/Asonkhya jonare hahakar... nisobde nirobe bua kiyo ....."  
(O wide riverbanks... why do you silently flow, unmoved by the suffering of people?)

By personifying the river, Hazarika questions the apathy of both nature and society in the face of suffering. He critiques the social structure that accepts inequality as normal, urging change through awareness and unity.

#### (III) Anti-Colonial and Nationalist Sentiment

Though most of Hazarika's songs are not overtly political in a party-political sense, they are deeply patriotic and reflective of a post-colonial consciousness. His songs often express the desire for a just and equitable India. He celebrated India's diversity and independence while criticizing the betrayal of the ideals of the freedom movement.

In several songs, Hazarika condemns neo-colonial exploitation—by landlords, corrupt politicians, and industries that displaced the poor. His song "Dola, He Dola" captures the emotional trauma of a rural bride who is displaced due to dam construction. It subtly critiques the developmental policies that ignore the human cost.

#### (IV) Empowerment of the Marginalized

Hazarika's lyrical world often centered around Assam's tribal and rural populations. Unlike many urban-centric cultural productions, his work gave dignity and voice to the indigenous communities. He wrote songs in their dialects, incorporated their musical instruments, and spoke about their struggles.

His representation of the poor and powerless was not of pity but of strength and resilience. Songs like "Ganga Mur Ma" (Ganga Is My Mother) express the connection between people and the land, portraying rural life with pride and emotional depth.

#### (V) Feminist Undertones

Although Hazarika lived in a predominantly patriarchal society, some of his songs portrayed women not just as romantic figures but as strong emotional and political beings. He emphasized their pain, sacrifice, and strength. In songs like "Moi Eti Jajabor", he depicts a deep emotional understanding of feminine loneliness and longing, which, in turn, becomes a metaphor for broader human alienation.

#### (VI) Hope and Regeneration

Unlike many protest songs that dwell on despair, Hazarika's lyrics often end with a note of hope. He believed that change is possible through collective effort. This optimism is in itself revolutionary, especially in times of political repression or social hopelessness. His music was frequently used in public movements—from student protests to anti-dam movements—because it energized people not just emotionally, but ideologically.

Bhupen Hazarika's legacy as a revolutionary lyricist lies in his ability to blend art with activism. His songs were not mere entertainment but instruments of education and emancipation. His lyrical themes of humanism, protest, identity, justice, and hope reflect a revolutionary spirit that was deeply rooted in the soil of Assam but reached far beyond regional borders.

#### **Musical Style and Popular Reach**

Hazarika was a master of blending. He mixed Assamese folk genres like Tokari geet, Kamrupiya Lokgeet, and Goalparia songs with elements of Indian classical and Western orchestration. This fusion made his songs both authentic and accessible to a diverse audience (Bhattacharya, 2011). His use of simple, colloquial Assamese made even complex ideas digestible. Whether addressing poverty, love, or revolution, his melodic storytelling drew the masses—urban and rural alike—into active reflection.

#### **Political and Cultural Legacy**

While primarily an artist, Bhupen Hazarika's works were inherently political. He served as an MLA in Assam (1967–1972) and was involved in various cultural and nationalist movements. He believed in India's composite culture and promoted unity across languages and communities through his multilingual songs in Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and English (Baruah, 2019). His influence persists in contemporary times. During protests and cultural movements, Hazarika's songs continue to be sung as symbols of protest and resilience. His posthumous recognition with the Bharat Ratna in 2019 cemented his place as a national icon (Government of India, 2019).

#### **Conclusion**

Bhupen Hazarika's contribution as a revolutionary lyricist and singer is unmatched in Indian cultural history. His work was not just artistic but transformational. Through melody and metaphor, he awakened a generation's political consciousness and instilled pride in regional identity. His songs continue to resonate, reminding us that music can be both beautiful and brave—an enduring tool of resistance and reform.

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