



Voicing Cultural Heterogeneity: Bhupen Hazarika's Songs as a Medium of Communication in Assam

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Abstract

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, considered to be one of the legendary figures and cultural icons of Assam, has transformed music into powerful instrument of communication that transmits social, cultural, linguistic and geographical boundaries. His songs represent the cultural heterogeneity through lyrical narratives, music, languages and storytelling and use of folk elements. It showcases the unique diversities of different communities living in Assam protecting their identity with a sense of collective solidarity. This paper tries to examine the cultural heterogeneity of Assam through his selected songs and to explore the role of his songs as a medium of communication using the principles of mass communication theories.

Keywords: Assam, Bhupen Hazarika, Communication, Cultural Heterogeneity, Songs.

1. Introduction:

Culture is the way of life for people, their values, beliefs and practices. Culture passed on from one generation to the other by learning rather than through biological inheritance. Culture encompasses tradition, religion, language, moral principles and social norms. The concept of culture is central to a multicultural society, like- Assam.

Assam is renowned for its remarkable cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and geographical diversity. Having numerous indigenous communities, Assam is a reflection of a diversified society, where each indigenous community protects and possesses its own unique history, values, customs, traditions, languages, cuisines and lifestyle. This diversity is evident in its landscape, which ranges from lush green valleys and hills to dense forests and mighty rivers, the cultural festivals of different communities, the vibrant heritage of the region with showcasing of traditional music, dance, art and crafts, dress, food, ornaments etc. It is obvious to have internal disturbances sometimes in such a diversified society. Most of the indigenous



groups have been trying hard to bring their traditional lifestyle back with the protection of their culture and identity that they may have lost due to the process of assimilation. In such a heterogeneous society, lyrical literature can be one of the major tools of communication that may help these diverse communities of the region for peaceful coexistence.

Bhupen Hazarika, a well-known figure in Indian music, is celebrated for his profound lyrics that resonate with the multicultural essence of India. His songs often reflect the cultural landscape and social fabric of the Northeastern region of India and especially of Assam. In his music, one can find reflections of the natural beauty, diversity, and struggles of the people of this region. His songs serve as a powerful medium to convey the essence and spirit of the Assamese culture to the world. Therefore, studying Bhupen Hazarika's lyrics is indeed a great way to delve into the rich tapestry of unique emotions and experiences of people from Assam in relation to its diversified culture.

2. Objectives:

Based on the following objectives, this paper tries to explore the cultural heterogeneity of Assam and the role of Bhupen Hazarika as a communicator, who addressed this diversity through his songs:

- To examine how Bhupen Hazarika's songs represent cultural diversity of Assam.
- To explore the communicative functions of his music for mutual love, respect and cultural solidarity amidst cultural heterogeneity of the state.

3. Methodology:

The paper is based on qualitative study using analytical and exploratory method. Both primary and secondary data are used for the study. Eleven (11) original songs of Bhupen Hazarika are selected as primary source of data, whether secondary data is collected from articles, books, journals, newspapers etc.

This paper tries to explore the cultural heterogeneity of Assam through his lyrics he used in his 11 selected songs. Besides, his selected songs are analysed as a medium of mass communication in the light of certain theories of mass communication, like- Cultural Transmission Theory, Uses and Gratification Theory and Theory of Folk Communication.



4. Analysis & Findings:

4.1 Representation of Cultural Heterogeneity in Assam:

Assam, located in Northeastern part of India, possesses rich cultural diversity shaped by its history, geography and various ethnic groups. This diversity is a result of centuries of interaction and coexistence among these ethnic groups, making it a vibrant and culturally rich state in India. Assam is the concentration of some major ethnic communities, like- Bodo, Rabha, Hajong, Karbi, Dimas, Missing, Lalung, Koch, Ahom, Moran, Matak, Chutiya, Sonowal Kachari, Tea Tribe etc.

Bhupen Hazarika depicted the pictures of many a communities of Assam through his lyrics. In the song titled- '*Agnijugor firingoti moi...*' Bhupen Hazarika wrote in 1939, he portrayed different communities which are one of the greatest examples of the existence of communities irrespective of religious, ethnic, racial, geographical diversities in Assam. He wrote:

*"Harijan, Pahari, Hindu-Muslimar
Boro, Koch, Chutiya, Kachari, Ahomar
Antar bhedi mou bowam
Bhedabhedor prachir bhang
Xamyar xarag rachim"*

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 42)

*(Of Harijans, hillmen, Hindus, Muslims'
Of Bodos, Koch, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Ahoms'
We break the internal barriers and become one
Breaking the chains of division
We create the heaven of equality)*

In the above song, Bhupen Hazarika wrote in his 13 years of age, reflects his acceptance for diversity with equal treatment to all to live with solidarity. Apart from this, in the song '*Rongpur tomar naam*' Hazarika depicted an all-inclusive picture of the region where he mentioned about the diversity of the region through their unique language, literature, history, architecture, music, dance form etc. that visualizes the presence of a multicultural society.



4.1.1 The Bodo-Kachari:

The Bodos are one of the oldest and largest plain tribes of Assam. The contribution of the Bodo community towards cultural diversity in this region can never be ignored. The representation of this ethnic community is visible in many of Hazarika's lyrics. For example, the origin of the word Bordoisila in the song titled '*Bordoisila ne haru doisila*' and the concept of *Bordoisila* is centered around Bodo folklore that refers to the contribution of Bodos to the heritage of the Assamese sub-nationalism. The Assamese term *Bordoisila*, pronounced as *Bardwi Sikhla* in Bodo, is a Bodo folk dance based on the folklore of a legendary fairy of the same name. It is believed among the Bodos that this fairy has the power to control wind and water to create rain, hailstorm and thunder which comes in the spring season to rejuvenate the surroundings.

"Bordoisila mane ki o' kakaaiti?

Boror bhaxare

'Bor' mane batah

'Dwi' mane pani

Aru 'sikhla' mane hol goxanijoni"

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 337)

(What is the meaning of Bordoisila, brother?)

In Bodo language

'Bor' means wind

'Dwi' means water

And 'Sikhla' means the fairy girl [goddess])

In his another song '*Tihu hol tumare naam*', he again mentioned the use of Bodo language behind naming of the river Tihu and the locality of Tihu-

"Boro bhaxar 'Dwihu' xobdo he Bishnu Rabhai koa

'Dwi' mane Pani Aru 'Hu' mane bowa he"

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 243)

(As Bishnu Rabha says, 'Dwihu' is a Bodo word

'Dwi' means water and 'Hu' means flow)



This song is an example of his distinct style of using languages and dialects of indigenous communities of Assam and bringing it to the mainstream Assamese society.

4.1.2 Mising Tribe:

Misings are one of the major tribes of Assam mainly concentrated on the valleys near the river banks of Upper Assam. They use to carry a rich cultural heritage. Showcasing their traditional cultural heritage, Bhupen Hazarika composed many a song among which 'O' Mising Dekati' is very popular. This song demonstrates the festival of 'Ali Aai Ligang' and how Mising people celebrates and enjoy their lives facing every happiness, sorrow and ups and downs. It can be best described through the following lines:

"Bolo.....

*O' Mising Dekati
Bojali Je pempati
Xurere Xojali Dekho
Disangmukhor Nixati"*

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 29)

*(O Mising brother
Blowing your pipe as you did
You've decorated the night of
Disangmukh with melodies)*

The use of words in this song is spectacular. Hazarika uses the ethnic Mising words to describe the socio-cultural life of the Misings through the expression of the traditional attire of males and females, their music, and instruments etc.

*"Mibugaluk cholati
Pererumbang saadarkhan kiyanu pindhili
Murat dekhon dumer di gamosa antili"*

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 29)

*(Why have you worn that Mibugaluk Shirt
and Pererumbang saadar?
Tied the Gamosa folding twice on the head)*



Mentioning about the attire of Mising Women, he wrote-

“Bolo.....

O’ Mising gabhoru

Ege mekhelate toi endhar xanili

O’ rihakhanit tamuli takar rangaa tora basili

Dekatir xonar banhir xote gunggang bojali

Sariyaha ful jen ribigacheng khoni toi bukute bandhili”

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 29)

(O’ Mising girl

You smeared darkness to the Ege Mekhela

O’ weaved red stars of Tamuli taka into the Riha

Played gunggang with the golden flute of that young man

The Ribigasang like Mustard flower you

Dressed at to the chest)

In this specific song, he writes-

“Aru tore purux dehate futi futi uthise

Xeuj rangor jiya jiya Oinitom”

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 29)

(And it has become distinct on your male body

the green coloured lively Oinitom)

The ‘Oinitom’ vocal is associated with ‘Ali Aai Ligang’ festival of the Mising tribe. Along with expression of unique Mising culture, it expresses the love life of mising young girls and boys.

4.1.3 The Karbi Tribe:

The songs of Bhupen Hazarika mentioned about the Hill tribe Karbi, who lives in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. In the Karbi language, the meaning of ‘Karbi’ is Hill and the meaning of ‘Arngleng’ is people. Meaning of ‘Ka’ is light and meaning of ‘Bi’ is work. That means the moral of Karbi tribe is ‘work is religion.’ This description he expressed through his lyrics in the song ‘Diphu hol tomar naam’. In this song, Hazarika mentioned about



the history of the formation of Karbi Anglong District along with the festivals and rituals of the Karbi community.

The ritual of giving 'Xorai' to worship their god is known as 'Thekar Kibi'. With the passage of time the words 'The' and 'Ki' gets annihilated and remained the word 'Karbi'. Karbis celebrate their festival 'Chomangkan' very passionately. Actually 'Chomangkan' is an annual funeral ceremony observed in Karbi villages to pay tribute to people died in that same year. Bhupen Hazarika has written a song beautifully describing the significance of this unique festival. 'Chomangkan' is a festival of music, dance and enjoyment. In this 'Chomangkan' festival young male and female dances 'Chomangkan' dance with Nimcho Kerung and dhal-taruwal. A glimpse of this festival is found in this Bhupen Hazarika's song-

"Chomangkan utsawat naach, Chomangkan hoy

Deka gabhorue naachi dharitri kopai"

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 246)

(Chomangkan dance is performed during Chomangkan festival

Boys and Girls shake the earth dancing together)

He mentioned about Karbi's folk-tale Haimu in this song acknowledging the contributions of Semsing Ingti, the karbi's son and Rongbong Terang, the famous literary person.

4.1.4 Tea Tribe:

The Tea tribe were brought to Assam by the Britishers from various places of India to work at the tea garden of Assam and then got established. The people like- Chaotal, Bhumij, Orao, Munda, etc. are known as Tea tribe people of Assam. These people also become an integral part of Assamese language and culture. The culture and lifestyle of the Tea tribe is well depicted in the songs of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. In the song 'Asom deshor bagichare suwali', Hazarika gave the picture of a girl wearing nose pin and having fun by dancing jhumur with the beats of Maadol (a kind of drum used in Jhumur). Their rituals of 'Karam Puja' is described as such-

"Bhador masat dham dhama dham

Karam pujat dham dhama dham



Baaajaao aami dham dhama dham

Maadal chaotali”

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 55)

(In the month of Bhado, Karam Puja is celebrated playing Chaotali maadal with the sound like- dham dhama dham)

The Durga Puja in the Ahin Month is celebrated also by the tea tribe. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika’s song told-

“Aashin mashe durgapuja

Dhaker keman gurguri

Tari majhe jhilmil kare

More praner sundari”

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 88)

(Durgapuja in Aashin Month

Dhakeer Kemen gurguri

The love of my life)

The unique attire of the Tea tribe is noted in his songs. Males wear short ‘dhoti’ and sleeveless shirts and women wear red bordered yellow sarees. Woman attire was mentioned as

“Lal saree pindhi nache

Madal jhumur bajna

Nake noluk banye taabij

Runjhun baje gahana”

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 88)

(Dancing wearing red saree

Maadal jhumur is playing

Nosering in nose wearing bracelet in arms

Ornaments playing runjhun)

This is how the picture of the rich cultural heritage of Tea tribe in Assam can be found out in the lyrics of Bhupen Hazarika.



4.1.5 The Gorkhas:

Nepalese, known as the Gorkhas in Assam, live their livelihoods by dairy farming. The cows are very dear to them. Expressing their emotions with a lactating cow in his song 'Fut Gadhulite Kapili Khuntite' Hazarika writes-

"Fut Gadhulite Kapili Khuntit

Kun Gorkhali Gabhorure Gaaijani Herai"

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 331)

(During dusk in the tributary of Kapili river

The cow of whose Gorkha girl has got lost)

Again he writes,

"Gaon taar Khetri, Si Nalbahadur Chetri

Gaai bisorar chale, monor morom jaache

(Sei) maram dekhi Kanchijoni ranga pari jaai"

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 331)

(His village is Khetri, he is Nalbahadur Chetri

Pretending to search for the cow, expresses love from the heart

Seeing that love the Kaanchi turns red)

Khetri is still a habitat of a number of Gorkha people in Assam. 'Chetri' is a surname and also a sub-group among the Gorkha community, whereas, 'Kaanchi' identifies the young girls. This lyric expresses the love angle of a young Gorkha couple depicting the traditional lifestyle of the Gorkha community with their lifestyle in the region.

4.1.6 The Koch:

The Koch is another community in Assam who ruled over the lower parts of Assam for decades. The song 'Mangaldoi tomar naam' reflects the history of Koch dynasty which was written using Brajawali words. Brajawali is a language used by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev and his predecessors who established Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam for the unification of greater and diverse Assamese society through certain religious and cultural reforms. Hazarika says-



*“Koch rajar jiyori Mangala jaar nam
Xehi name namakaran mangaldoi dhaam”*

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p.378)

(The daughter of Koch King whose name is Mangala
Mangaldoi is named after her)

And-

*“Chilarayar putra Parikshit Narayan
Koch Behar eri Darange patila Xason”*

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p.378)

(The son of Chilaraya is parikshit Narayan
Established his Kingdom in Darrang leaving Koch Behar)

Koch-Rajbanshis enjoy a very important position in the society and politics of Assam. The existence of this community is very much visible in lower part of Assam. They enjoy autonomy with the existence of their unique culture, language, festivals, rituals, customs and traditions that contribute towards their assertion of their identity as a separate entity.

4.2 Bhupen Hazarika's Songs as a Medium of Communication:

Communication through songs refers to the process of transmitting messages, ideas, emotions and cultural meanings from the artist to the audience through musical and lyrical forms. Songs are considered to be one of the most powerful and universal forms of communication that combines languages, rhythms, melodies and emotions. Bhupen Hazarika's songs too can be seen as a powerful tool in the greater Assamese society that conveys ideas, beliefs and shared experiences across cultures and generations. It contributes in communicating and unifying the heterogeneous groups in Assam with mutual love, respect and solidarity carrying socio-political messages, public awareness and mobilizing them for greater social causes.

The *Cultural Transmission Theory of Mass Communication*, emphasized by scholars, like- Melvin L. DeFleur and Denis McQuail, explains how media serves as a channel of transmitting cultural values, norms, beliefs and heritage from one generation to another. According to this theory, media is not only a tool of information or entertain; but also passage on and preserves the culture of a society. Bhupen Hazarika's songs, as a powerful media tool



plays impactful role in the socio-cultural life of the people of Assam which is visible from the above discussion of his songs representing different communities. His songs keep the heterogeneous traditions, customs and beliefs alive. With the use of native languages of indigenous groups in Assam and depiction of cultural diversities in his lyrics, his songs work like an integrating force, strengthening collective identity and unity through shared symbols and stories. Representation of cultural heterogeneity of Assam in the lyrics and music, Hazarika's songs have become successful to touch the mind and soul of every people transmitting it from one generation to another.

The Uses and Gratification Theory proposed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in 1974 explains how audiences actively use media to satisfy needs such as information seeking, entertainment, identity formation, emotional release or social integration. Bhupen Hazarika's audiences find in his songs a source of cultural identity and collective belonging, affirming local traditions while engaging with universal themes.

From the above mentioned songs and discussion, it is seen that Hazarika's songs provide significant information about society, politics, language, and ethnic issues, promoting humanism and social unity. His lyrical works celebrate the diverse cultural heritage of Assam and Northeast India—its folklore, traditions, and music—helping audiences connect with their cultural identity and community values. The songs allow the listeners to experience aesthetic pleasure, spiritual peace, and emotional resonance, enriching their individual identity, social responsibility and artistic appreciation. His songs foster social relationships and solidarity, building a sense of collective consciousness and unity among people.

Folk Communication, developed by Brazilian journalist, professor, researcher Luiz Beltrao de Andrade Lima in 1960s, as a theory of communication refers to the use of traditional, community-based forms of expression like storytelling, music, puppetry and dance to exchange information, ideas and cultural values. These are deeply embedded in a community's identity and are seen as powerful communication tools that strongly connect the communicator and audience easily. Hazarika, in his songs, used folk idioms, rhythms, storytelling, musical instruments, folk musical tunes and languages as communicative devices. It contributes to reach out his audiences not only at personal level, but to create the feelings of collective consciousness and belongingness among the heterogeneous groups of people in Assam.



Representation of different communities, like- Bodo, Missing, Koch, Karbi, Tea tribe etc. and their indigenous culture through his songs may able to connect in showcasing the individual identity of the communities. Besides, his songs give a clear picture of culturally diversified society of Assam who reconcile with utmost solidarity with mutual love and respect and integration.

Thus, Bhupen Hazarika's songs are not merely artistic expressions but serve as instruments of social communication, fulfilling informational, emotional, and cultural needs.

5. Conclusion:

Bhupen Hazarika's song has a special effect on the common people. His lyrics can easily attract anyone. Assam is a hub of different ethnic communities. Bhupen Hazarika tried to introduce this diversity to the world community. The picture of cultural life of the entire tribes and communities of Assam is found in the songs of Bhupen Hazarika. The dress, musical instruments, festivals, dance and songs, food, religion, language and lifestyle of different groups are reflected in his songs.

The narrative and symbolism he used in his songs carry socio-political messages. Use of oral tradition and popular perception along with folk elements in Hazarika's songs could communicate all the sections of people in Assam irrespective of their cultural heterogeneity, class, caste, religion, ethnic groups and geographical diversity. He celebrates this diversity of Assam in his songs. In the song 'Asom Amar Rupohi', he writes-

*"Pahar bhoiyam ekei kora ramdhanurei dare
Tomar bhaxar marambore milan setu gorhe
Lohityare bahal parak pranipaat karo
Janma lalo iyatei, iyatei jen maro
O' janma lalo iyatei, iyatei jen maro
Pam kot ene madhur rupa xamabesh
Bharatare purba dixorsurya utha des"*

(Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagra, p. 53)

(Like the rainbow that unites mountains and plains,
The love of your language builds bridges of unity.
I bow to the wide shore of Lohitya



I was born here, I want to die here
Oh I was born here, I want to die here.
Where can I find such a sweet gathering
A place of India's east where the sun rises)

This song depicts the geographical diversity of Assam where people of hills and plains live together with their linguistic differences. He compares the colour of Assam with the rainbow where multiple colours symbolize the unique beauty with its identity intake. The word 'Louhitya' is another name of the Brahmaputra River that flows as the life of Assam carrying the whole Assamese culture, traditions and diversity on its both banks. He glorifies Assam and Assamese identity and wishes to born in Assam again and again where people live with peace and harmony without deviating from their traditional cultural values.

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