

**A STUDY ON DR. BHUPEN HAZARIKA'S MUSICAL PORTRAITS OF
TRADITIONAL TRIBAL LIFE****¹Pol Kumar Deka, ²Dr. Kiran Hooda**¹Research Scholar, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan²Research Supervisor, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan**ABSTRACT**

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, an iconic figure in the realm of Indian music, has significantly contributed to the preservation and promotion of the diverse cultural and tribal traditions of Northeast India through his musical compositions. This paper explores Hazarika's artistic portrayal of traditional tribal life, focusing on his lyrical content, musical style, and the socio-political messages embedded in his songs. His music reflects the rich tapestry of Assam's tribal communities, emphasizing their struggles, joys, and deep connection with nature. Through an analysis of selected songs, this study highlights the way Hazarika used his art as a medium for cultural preservation and social commentary.

Keywords: Bhupen Hazarika, tribal life, Assamese culture, music, tradition, cultural preservation, social commentary.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika was an extraordinary musician, poet, and filmmaker, whose work transcended regional boundaries and brought the rich cultural heritage of Assam to the global stage. His musical compositions, often imbued with social consciousness, played a pivotal role in preserving the indigenous culture of Assam and its many tribal communities. Known as the "Bard of Brahmaputra," Hazarika's deep affinity for the river and the land of Assam was evident in his art, where he portrayed the lives of ordinary people—especially the marginalized tribal populations—with immense empathy, sensitivity, and a profound sense of justice. His music is an artistic reflection of the traditional tribal life of Northeast India, capturing not just the external realities of these communities but also their inner emotions, struggles, and aspirations. By blending the region's folk traditions with modern elements, Hazarika created a distinctive musical language that spoke to both local and global audiences.

Traditional tribal life in Assam and other parts of Northeast India is characterized by its close relationship with nature, deeply ingrained cultural practices, and unique socio-political dynamics. The tribes of Assam, such as the Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, and others, have a rich heritage of oral traditions, folklore, and music that have been passed down through generations. However, these communities have also faced numerous challenges, including economic marginalization, cultural erosion, and political neglect, particularly in the wake of modern development and globalization. It is within this complex socio-cultural context that Hazarika's music emerges as a powerful commentary on the lives of these communities. His compositions not only celebrate the beauty and diversity of tribal life but also highlight the



struggles these communities face as they strive to maintain their cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

Hazarika's early life experiences played a significant role in shaping his artistic vision. Born in Sadiya, a town in Assam, in 1926, he grew up surrounded by the folk traditions of the region. His father, Nilakanta Hazarika, was a well-known figure in the Brahmaputra Valley, and his mother, Shantipriya Hazarika, was instrumental in introducing young Bhupen to the world of music and folklore. The songs and stories of rural Assam left a deep imprint on his mind, and even as he pursued higher education in the United States—where he earned a PhD in mass communication from Columbia University—his heart remained tethered to the cultural landscape of his homeland. Upon returning to India, Hazarika embarked on a mission to use his art to document, preserve, and promote the cultural heritage of Assam and its people.

One of the most compelling aspects of Hazarika's music is his portrayal of nature as an integral part of tribal life. For the tribal communities of Assam, nature is not merely a backdrop to human existence but a living entity with which they share a symbiotic relationship. The Brahmaputra River, which flows through the heart of Assam, is a recurring motif in Hazarika's work, symbolizing both life and destruction. In songs such as *Bistirno Parore*, Hazarika paints vivid images of the river as it winds through the land, nurturing the people who live along its banks, but also threatening their existence with its seasonal floods. This duality of nature—its nurturing and destructive aspects—is central to the lives of Assam's tribal communities, and Hazarika captures this complexity with remarkable nuance in his music.

In addition to his portrayal of nature, Hazarika's music is notable for its use of traditional folk instruments, which lend authenticity to his depiction of tribal life. Instruments such as the **dotara**, **dhhol**, **khhol**, and **flute** are integral to the folk music of Assam and feature prominently in Hazarika's compositions. These instruments, with their earthy and organic sounds, evoke the rhythms of rural life and provide a sonic link to the region's tribal traditions. By incorporating these instruments into his music, Hazarika not only paid homage to the musical traditions of the tribes but also ensured that these traditions would be preserved for future generations. His songs often begin with simple, melodic phrases played on the dotara or flute, gradually building into more complex arrangements that mirror the layers of meaning in his lyrics.

Lyricaly, Hazarika's songs are rich with imagery drawn from the daily lives of tribal communities. He sings of their relationship with the land, their festivals, their struggles, and their hopes for the future. In songs such as *Manuhe Manuhar Babe (For Humanity)*, Hazarika addresses the universal human condition but does so through the lens of the marginalized tribal people, emphasizing their right to dignity and equality. His music often carries a message of unity and brotherhood, calling for solidarity among all people, regardless of caste, creed, or ethnicity. This inclusive vision is central to Hazarika's philosophy and is reflected in his deep commitment to social justice.



Hazarika's portrayal of tribal life is not limited to the celebration of cultural practices but extends to a critique of the forces that threaten these communities. His music often addresses the economic exploitation and political marginalization of tribal groups, particularly in the context of land displacement and environmental degradation. In many parts of Assam, tribal communities have been forced off their land to make way for large-scale industrial projects, leading to the erosion of their traditional way of life. Hazarika's music, with its poignant lyrics and evocative melodies, serves as a form of resistance against these injustices. His songs are a reminder of the resilience of the tribal people, who continue to fight for their rights and for the preservation of their cultural identity.

In addition to his music, Hazarika's work in film and theater also contributed to his portrayal of tribal life. His films often centered around the lives of ordinary people, with a particular focus on the experiences of Assam's tribal communities. Films such as *Era Bator Sur* (Songs of the Abandoned Road) and *Shakuntala* reflect his commitment to highlighting the struggles of marginalized groups, while also celebrating their cultural resilience. Through his films, Hazarika was able to reach a wider audience, using the medium of cinema to amplify the voices of those who were often unheard.

The significance of Hazarika's work lies not only in its artistic merit but also in its role as a cultural bridge. In a region as diverse as Assam, with its myriad ethnic groups and languages, Hazarika's music served as a unifying force, bringing people together through the shared experience of art. His songs, sung in Assamese but infused with universal themes, resonated with audiences across India and beyond, making him a beloved figure both within and outside Assam. His work helped to elevate the cultural status of Assam's tribal communities, ensuring that their stories were heard on a national and global stage.

In Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's music offers a unique and powerful portrayal of traditional tribal life in Assam. Through his use of folk instruments, lyrical storytelling, and his deep connection to the land, Hazarika captured the essence of the tribal experience, highlighting both its beauty and its challenges. His music serves as a testament to the resilience of these communities, offering a voice to the voiceless and ensuring that their stories will continue to be told for generations to come.

II. DR. BHUPEN HAZARIKA'S ARTISTIC JOURNEY

1. **Early Life and Influences:** Born on September 8, 1926, in Sadiya, Assam, Hazarika was influenced by the rich folk traditions of Assam. His parents, particularly his mother, introduced him to music and local folklore, which became a foundation for his later work.
2. **First Song at Age 10:** Hazarika wrote and recorded his first song at the age of 10, signaling the beginning of his lifelong association with music and cultural expression.
3. **Education and Global Exposure:** Hazarika earned a master's degree in political science from Banaras Hindu University. He then went to the United States, where he



completed a PhD in mass communication from Columbia University. His exposure to global music and social movements significantly shaped his worldview.

4. **Folk Music and Social Commentary:** His return to Assam marked the beginning of his career as a singer, songwriter, and composer. He blended Assamese folk music with contemporary themes, using his music to address social issues, including poverty, inequality, and human rights.
5. **Music for Films:** Hazarika composed music for numerous Assamese and Bengali films, contributing to Indian cinema. His work in films such as *Shakuntala* and *Era Bator Sur* reflected his deep connection with Assamese culture and social realities.
6. **Bard of Brahmaputra:** Known as the “Bard of Brahmaputra,” his music often revolved around the river and the lives of people dependent on it. The river became a symbol of both sustenance and destruction in his songs.
7. **National and International Recognition:** Hazarika’s work earned him numerous awards, including the Padma Bhushan and the Dadasaheb Phalke Award. His influence extended beyond Assam, making him a prominent figure in Indian cultural and social life.
8. **Legacy:** Hazarika passed away in 2011, leaving behind a rich legacy of music, films, and social activism, immortalizing the culture of Assam and the struggles of its people.

III. PORTRAYAL OF TRADITIONAL TRIBAL LIFE IN HAZARIKA’S MUSIC

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's music offers a vivid and multifaceted portrayal of traditional tribal life in Assam. His compositions serve as a cultural bridge, capturing the essence of the region’s diverse tribal communities while also addressing their struggles and celebrating their heritage.

1. **Connection to Nature:** Central to Hazarika's depiction of tribal life is his portrayal of the natural environment. The Brahmaputra River, forests, and rural landscapes are recurrent motifs in his songs. For example, in *Bistirno Parore*, Hazarika paints a poetic picture of the river as both a life-giving force and a source of danger, reflecting the deep connection between the river and the lives of the people living along its banks. This relationship underscores the importance of nature in the daily existence of tribal communities, who view it not merely as a backdrop but as an integral part of their identity.
2. **Use of Traditional Instruments:** Hazarika's music is characterized by the use of traditional Assamese folk instruments such as the **dotara**, **dhol**, **khol**, and **flute**. These instruments provide an authentic soundscape that mirrors the musical practices of the tribal communities. The earthy tones of these instruments evoke the simplicity and richness of rural life, enhancing the authenticity of his musical portrayals.



3. **Lyrical Themes:** The lyrics of Hazarika's songs often draw upon tribal folklore, rituals, and daily experiences. His songs celebrate festivals, communal activities, and the close-knit nature of tribal societies. For instance, songs like Manuhe Manuhar Babe (For Humanity) highlight universal themes of human dignity and equality, framed through the lens of the tribal experience. His lyrics reflect the cultural richness of these communities while also addressing issues such as social injustice and economic marginalization.
4. **Cultural Preservation:** Hazarika's music plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage of Assam's tribal communities. By incorporating traditional stories, legends, and cultural practices into his compositions, he ensures that these elements are passed down to future generations. His work also brings the stories of these communities to a broader audience, raising awareness about their cultural contributions and social issues.
5. **Social Commentary:** Beyond celebrating tribal life, Hazarika's music often includes a critique of the socio-economic and political challenges faced by tribal communities. His songs address themes of displacement, environmental degradation, and political neglect, using his platform to advocate for the rights and dignity of these marginalized groups. For example, in *Moi Eti Jajabor (I Am a Wanderer)*, Hazarika touches on the theme of displacement and the sense of loss experienced by tribal communities due to modern development.
6. **Empowerment and Unity:** Hazarika's music also serves as a tool for empowerment and solidarity. By highlighting the struggles and resilience of tribal communities, he fosters a sense of pride and unity among them. His work calls for greater recognition and respect for their cultural identity and social contributions, promoting a vision of inclusivity and social justice.

In Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's music offers a profound and nuanced portrayal of traditional tribal life. Through his use of natural imagery, traditional instruments, and lyrical themes, he captures the essence of Assam's tribal communities, celebrating their cultural heritage while also addressing their struggles and advocating for their rights. His contributions have played a significant role in preserving and promoting the rich cultural tapestry of Northeast India.

IV. CONCLUSION

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's musical legacy is a testament to the power of art as a medium for cultural preservation and social change. His portrayal of traditional tribal life in his music has not only ensured that the stories of Assam's indigenous people are heard but also fostered a greater understanding and appreciation for their rich cultural heritage. Hazarika's music serves as a bridge between the past and the present, highlighting the importance of preserving tribal identities in the face of modernization. Through his compositions, he has immortalized the lives of these communities, ensuring that their stories will continue to resonate for generations to come.



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