



Exploring Humanism in the Political Praxis of Bhupen Hazarika

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the humanist dimensions of Bhupen Hazarika's political praxis, highlighting how his art, music, and social engagement embodied a profound commitment to humanity, equality, and justice. As a poet, singer, and cultural activist, Hazarika employed his creative expressions to give voice to the marginalized and to advocate for social transformation. Drawing inspiration from Marxist thought, folk traditions, and universal humanism, his political engagement transcended ideological boundaries, envisioning a more just and compassionate world. By exploring the intersection of humanism and political praxis in Hazarika's life and work, this study analyzes how his songs and cultural initiatives reflected an inclusive humanist vision rooted in empathy, equality, and social justice. The paper argues that Hazarika's political praxis functioned as a humanist intervention—one that sought to transform society through the unifying power of art, compassion, and collective consciousness.

Introduction:

Bhupen Hazarika (1926–2011) remains one of the most influential cultural figures of modern India. He was a multifaceted personality. He was a world famous singer, poet, lyricist, composer, and filmmaker whose works transcended linguistic and regional boundaries. Beyond his artistic brilliance, Hazarika was also a political thinker and social reformer. He (1926–2011) was born on 8 September 1926 in Sadiya, Assam, to Shantipriya Hazarika and Nilakanta Hazarika. Throughout his 85 years of life, he devoted himself to the cause of humanity, using his art as a vehicle for social awareness and transformation. His



remarkable contributions to the social, political, literary, and cultural spheres left a profound impact not only on Assam but on the entire Northeast region of India.

During his prolific creative career, Hazarika wrote and performed 342 songs as recorded in *Geetawali*. However, Mahendra Borah, in his introduction to *Geetawali*, notes that Hazarika composed nearly 400 songs. Renowned globally for his musical genius, Hazarika often identified himself as an activist through music. Reflecting this philosophy, he once said, “Since I was born till today, I have been living on music and being socially conscious. If I can do something for society through music, I will hold this of mine to be successful” (Hazarika, 2008, p. 490). His songs have continued to captivate and inspire millions over the decades. Although Hazarika’s musical journey began at the tender age of five, he embraced music as a lifelong mission for social change only after resigning from his position as a lecturer at Gauhati University (Dutta, 2013).

Bhupen Hazarika was one of the pioneering figures of cultural politics in Assam. His life and works vividly reflect a deep and inseparable connection between culture and politics. His songs were not merely artistic expressions but reflections of his political consciousness and his unwavering belief in human dignity. Influenced by his education at Columbia University and his interaction with Paul Robeson, the African-American artist and activist, Hazarika imbibed global ideas of cultural humanism and anti-colonial solidarity. Robeson’s influence is evident in Hazarika’s Assamese adaptation of Robeson’s song “We Are in the Same Boat, Brother”, which became “Bistirno Parore”—a symbolic call for unity across the world’s rivers of division. Hazarika’s political consciousness was significantly shaped by his association with the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in the late 1940s and 1950s. IPTA, the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, aimed to use art and theatre as tools of social change. Through IPTA, Hazarika engaged deeply with Marxist and socialist ideas. Yet, his approach remained distinct—he humanized political struggle by translating ideology into emotion. His songs did not merely propagate party lines; they gave emotional voice to collective suffering.

Hazarika was greatly influenced the Marxist philosophy in his early period of life. His close association with Bishnuprasad Rava is significant in this regard. While influenced by Marxism, Hazarika’s political praxis gradually evolved into a broader universal humanism. He moved beyond class-based analysis to embrace global solidarity. His travels and collaborations exposed him to diverse struggles—civil rights movements, anti-imperialist campaigns, and peace initiatives—which enriched his worldview. Hazarika’s universal humanism rejected dogmatism. He believed that empathy, not ideology, was the foundation of justice. His songs addressed not only Assamese or Indian audiences but humanity



as a whole. In this sense, his art reflects what Gramsci might call a form of organic intellectualism—a commitment to shaping moral and cultural consciousness from within society rather than from above.

Humanism and Political Praxis of Bhupen Hazarika

It is found that Bhupen Hazarika was a people's artist. He sang for the people. In most of the songs, he expressed the misery and suffering of the common people. So, his praxis of culture clearly reveals his humanist philosophy. His humanism is part of his cultural mission of social change. It is an endeavour to emancipate his people and free them from oppression and subjugation.

After his return from America, it is found that his sensitive soul was shaken by the suffering of his countrymen. He saw the division of people on the basis of language, ethnicity, religion, and caste. Dr Hazarika composed several songs to address these divisions. The songs Yuwati Anamika Goswami (The Young Women Anamika Goswami), Dug Dug Dug Dambaru (Tom tom tom tom dambaru) Duyu Mukhamukhi (Looking at Your Face) can be cited as an example. Moreover, he had observed the people's misery who were exploited by the British colonial rulers and their puppet, the native landlords. Hazarika's rebellious spirit could not tolerate the inequality among his fellow citizens. Consequently, he identified himself with the exploited masses and became the voice of the underprivileged masses' dormant spirit. In this way, he could make a name for himself as a great humanist who championed the rights of the marginalised group. However, IPTA provided him with the platform to express his voice in this regard. It is discovered that most of his works during his close affiliation with IPTA focused on the life struggles of countless toilers and the common man.

The most beautiful example of Bhupen Hazarika's humanistic expression may be found in his renowned lyric *Manuhe Manuhar Babe* (If humans do not care for their fellow beings). a song, which has been translated into several languages, including Japanese. The Bengali version of this song was selected as the best song of the twentieth century by the BBC (Bengali section) in 2002. This song remains Hazarika's masterpiece on humanism. The song reads:

If humans do not care

About humans at all

With a bit of sympathy

Who else will care? Say o mate!



People meaning to sell people
People meaning to buy people
If the bygone history they repeat
Won't it be wrong? Say o mate!
If any weakling fords
The raging torrents of life
Clinging to your pluck
What will you lose? Say o mate!
If humans are not humans
Demons never turn human
If ever they turn human
Whoever will lose face?
Say o mate!

(Hazarika, 2010, p. 393) (Deka, 2011, p. 32)

Here, Bhupen Hazarika has raised the most pertinent question, 'If man does not think for fellowmen, who else will think for them with a little sympathy?' The song remains the best example of Bhupen Hazarika's attempt to propagate and establish coordination, co-operation, and tolerance among mankind.

In another song, *Prachandda Dhumuhai Mok Karile Prashna* (The Fiery Storm Raised a Query), Hazarika begs the raging Thunder to give her a "mighty and rich voice, "the blazing storm to grant her strength, and the entire Sky to "sing the songs of humanity." Thus, he sings:

The Sky gave me great vision
And the Storm immense power
The Thunder gave me its mighty voice



And reason for real valour.

With the voice of Thunder

With the power of the Storm

I'll sing and shake the horizon

In the realms of demons, too,

I'll sing the songs of humanity

Imbued with true tunes of the heart.

(Hazarika, 2010, pp. 322-323) & (Deka, 2011, p. 145)

In *Shitare Semeka Raati* (Chilly is the winter night), Hazarika expresses his ideology of humanism. The humanism in Hazarika's work—especially his care for the marginalised, including the poor peasants, wage labourers, and the minority is highlighted in this song.

Chilly is the winter night

Chilly is the winter night

The Chilly winter night

In the smouldering heap of paddy husk

In the worn-out cottage

Of a peasant hard up for clothes

Let me be its glowing warmth.

Chilly is the winter night

The hunger gnawing at the guts

Of a poor labourer hard up for bread

Bursts into leaping flames

Let me be its terrible rage.



Let me be the rage,

Let me be the rage.

Chilly is the winter night

Echoing around The hushed scream

Of a terror-stricken minority

Let me be their safe refuge

Let me be the refuge,

Let me be the refuge.

(Hazarika, 2010, pp. 468-469) (Deka, 2011, p. 99)

As a humanist, he could not tolerate the inhuman condition of the deprived masses elsewhere in the World who have been the victims of the exploitation of fellow men. That is why he sings——

Mai dekhiso anek gagon chumbi attalika xari

Tar chate dekhiso katana grihahin nara- nari

Mai dekhiso kisu gharar samukh bagisare ase bhari

Aru dekhiso maraha phoolar papari akalate para xari

(Hazarika, 2011, p. 366)

I have seen rows of colossal skyscrapers

I have seen lots of tramps under their shades

I have seen mansions adorned with gardens in the front

I have seen petals of dropping flowers falling off early

(Deka, 2011, p. 177)



He believed that untouchability and discrimination of people on the basis of caste, creed, and religion are two evils in the humanist path. Therefore, In *Agni Yugor Firingoti* (I am the spark of the age of fire), he sings:

No place for religion-mongers
There the caste pride gets dissolved
With my own hands, I'll destroy
Untouchability, the burly demon.

(Deka, 2011, p. 32)

In this song, Hazarika envisioned a new society, the new Bharat (India), to achieve the aim of humanism. During British rule, he saw the misery of the majority of the natives exploited by the colonial British rulers. So, as a humanist, he tried to portray the sufferings of subjected people through his praxis of culture. Bhupen Hazarika always liked to identify himself with the common masses. He thinks of himself as a nomad and wanders through the world without seeking his own home.

He says that the whole world is his home and sings——

Moi eti Jajabaor
Dharar dihinge dipange lawaro
Nibisari nija ghar
(I am a wanderer
Far-off places on earth I roam
Not seeking for me a home)

(Hazarika, 2010, p. 366) (Deka, 2011, p. 177)

He wrote songs on the great figure who fought for the humanist cause. His songs — '*Mahatmai hansi bole Ram Rahim*', '*Zindabad Mandella, Mandella Zindabad*' and others, where he praised these celebrated personalities, not God, for working for the cause of humanity. To honour Nelson Mandela's



contributions to the struggle against racial discrimination and the liberation of South Africa's Black population, he sings:

Good cheer Mandela

Mandela good cheer

.....

The effects wall of apartheid

You shattered with a lightning-charged hammer

And raised a firm list for an open sky

Good cheer Mandela.

(Deka, 2011, p. 345)

His famous song *Bistirna Parare* (In the wide expanse), asking the mighty Brahmaputra why it has been flowing silently and shamelessly, listening to the sufferings of the dwellers on its sprawling banks, is another song composed on the theme of humanity. The song is an echo of Paul Robeson's 'The Old Man River'. He sings:

In the wide expanse

Hearing the clamour of countless masses

In the wide expanse of the vale

You old Luit, why do you keep flowing?

Morality is though going down

Humanity is through losing ground

Lazy and brazen, why do you keep flowing?

(Deka, 2011.p. 165)



In this song, Hazarika questions the mighty Brahmaputra, which is also referred to as Luit, has been silently flowing after witnessing the loss of humanity in the present society. He actually used the metaphor Luit-the mighty Brahmaputra-in to indicate the Assamese nationality.

Thus, it appears that Hazarika's conception of humanism was rooted in a deep concern for humanity, transcending caste, class, and regional boundaries. His celebrated song *Manuhe Manuhor Babe* (Humans for Humanity) encapsulates his moral and philosophical stance: His humanism, however, was not abstract or romantic—it was social and political. It emerged from a deep awareness of inequality, poverty, and exploitation prevalent in society. Hazarika's political praxis was expressed through his artistic activism rather than formal political power. Although he contested elections and briefly engaged in party politics, his most powerful political acts were his songs and performances that addressed issues like labor exploitation, caste discrimination, migration, and regional identity. For instance, in *Moi Eti Jajabor* (I Am a Wanderer), he speaks of global interconnectedness, transcending boundaries and nationalities. His music consistently carried messages of unity, fraternity, and social justice. Hazarika's cinema, too, was politically charged—films like *Shakuntala* (1960), *Pratidhwani* (1964), and *Chikmik Bijuli* (1969) explore themes of inequality, alienation, and moral decay in modern society.

Conclusion

Thus, it reveals that through his praxis of culture, Bhupen Hazarika has been able to establish himself as a great humanist. He always advocated humanism throughout his life as a way to lessen the suffering of the underprivileged and exploited masses. He dreamt of an ideal society that would be founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. To him, any form of human exploitation was intolerable. As a result, he wrote and sang songs that depicted the exploitation and suffering of the downtrodden masses. However, his humanitarian concern encompassed not only his own people but also embraced the people of the whole world.

Through these works, Hazarika transformed art into a vehicle of political expression. His praxis was dialogical: it sought to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually in the pursuit of a humane social order. His life and work exemplify the fusion of humanism and political praxis. His art was inseparable from his moral and political commitments. By blending Marxist ideas with folk traditions and universal compassion, he created a unique form of cultural politics rooted in empathy and equality. Hazarika's political praxis thus stands as a model of ethical engagement through art. In a world increasingly fragmented by divisions, his message of human solidarity remains profoundly relevant. His songs continue to remind us that politics, at its core, must serve humanity.



It is true that Hazarika wrote songs on a variety of topics. Yet because of his humanist concern, he tried to alleviate the pain of the millions of downtrodden people. Bhupen Hazarika's humanist ideology has become increasingly relevant in the present-day context. Although his cultural praxis may not immediately bring about change in society, it undoubtedly inspires and awakens strong humanist sentiments in the populace. He had firm belief in people and thought that they were strong and worthy. And this is the cornerstone of his humanist and progressive outlook.

It is alleged that his songs gradually lost their appeal to the working class and the underprivileged after his dissociation from the common platform of IPTA. Critics are of the view that the poor common people of his songs like Panei, Rongmon, Driver, Linesman, Fireman, were replaced with statesmen like Nehru, Bhuttojan, Ayub Khan, Shastri, and even Bidi Company etc. It is true, there was a shift in his ideology in different periods of life, but he remained same at one point i.e. his intense sense of universal humanity. To conclude, it can be said that Bhupen Hazarika has transcended the narrow and localized nationalistic sentiment to the height of global humanism and fraternity.

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