

Revolutionary Artist Dr. Bhupen Hazarika: Voicing the Silence of the Subaltern

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ABSTRACT

In this paper an attempt is made to study how Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, the incomparable musician depicts the subaltern, their suffering and pain, their mentality and as a subaltern historiographer how Bhupen Hazarika tries to record the history of the subordinate groups. With the help of Subaltern Studies perspectives his songs are analyzed and interpreted here.

Key word: Domination, Subordination, Subaltern, Subaltern Studies, Historiographer.

In *The Roving Minstrel* Arup Kumar Dutta says that Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, the roving minstrel from Assam, is a living illustration of the truth, that the flame of genius, overcoming hurdles of place and circumstances, can enlarge the space upon which to shed its luster. Though he has almost single-handedly brought about a renaissance in Assamese music and cinema, and showcased her culture before the nation, today Assam can no longer claim Bhupen Hazarika to be her very own. Not only is he the cultural icon of the entire North-East India, but also a jewel in the pan-Indian cultural crown (6).

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, is, indeed, an incomparable music maestro, an artist of the masses, has been acknowledged as the creator of 'undying melodies'. This inborn artist, no doubt, inherited a self which was too sensitive to the surrounding that could acutely feel the difference between the rich and the poor, the exploited and the exploiters. Here, in this paper a few of his immortal songs are analysed and interpreted to study how Dr. Bhupen Hazarika articulates the marginalized voice in his songs.

Bhupen Hazarika was born in 1926, at Sadiya, an interior place of Assam on the bank of river Brahmaputra. That was a difficult time for the Indians. India was colonized by a powerful race. Oppression and humiliation prevailed everywhere in India. The poor peasants and labourers were exploited by the British and Indian landlords. The prevailing scenes of domination and subordination disturbed his mind.

The poetic and revolutionary mind of this artist was shaped and moulded during his childhood. Almost all the events happened during his childhood exerted some positive influence in moulding his spirit. At this time, he came into contact with two revolutionary artists of North East India, viz. Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rabha. He was also deeply

influenced by the philosophy of Sree Sree Sankardeva, Mahatma Gandhi and Paul Robeson. A revolutionary zeal was rooted during his childhood. Its expression was, no doubt, “*Agnijugar firingathi mai*” (I am the spark of the age of fire) which was written at fourteen years of his age. After that he began to use his songs as the medium of disseminating the message of humanity, equality, eradication of class-distinction and casteism, liberation of human mind, love, compassion, and universal fraternity. Dr. Hazarika’s songs express the agony and misery of the poor and the marginalized people, the subaltern:

Agnijugar firingathi moi/ Natun Asom garhim/Sarbaharar sarbaswa/ Punar firai anim(1-3)

I am the spark of the age of fire/ I shall create a new Assam/I shall bring all that is lost by the poor/ And shall create a new world.

It is seen that Dr. Hazarika’s songs always carry a voice of the silent people who cannot articulate their feelings of sorrow, agony and misery due to oppression and subjugation. These marginalized people are forced to maintain silence.

The Subaltern and Subaltern Studies:

‘**Subaltern**’ was used for the first time by the Italian Marxist writer Antonio Gramsci to mean “the inferior rank” of people in the society. “The subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse, subaltern is a British word for someone of inferior military rank, and combines the Latin terms for “under” (sub) and “other” (alter)” (Abrams & Harpham 307). Originally the term was used in military hierarchies for subordinates (Gopal, Dr. Abhishek). Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist writer, used it in non-military sense to refer to those people who are outside the established structure of political representation. The term “refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant/ dominated relationships in history” (Prakash 1477). The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci’s words to any “low rank” person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation (Louia, 2012:5). The Subaltern Studies Collective uses the term as Ranajit Guha states in the preface to *Subaltern Studies I* (1982), “as a name for the general attribute of subordination ... whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way” (vii). Later on the term has been used by many subaltern thinkers like Homi K. Bhaba, Sausa Santos to denote the marginalized or subordinate people, oppressed minority groups, lower class, weaker sex, women etc..The subaltern is always suppressed and exploited by the rich, elite or those who have power. “Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups” (Gramsci 55); they are characterized by “a subordinate status, a “subject disinherited by governing epistemes and unable to access hegemonic power structures” (Kostelac, 2006:65 qtd in Mhlahlo 3).

At present, the archetypal figure of the subaltern has been the Third World peasant (Pandey 273). He shows how from Ranajit Guha’s insurgent peasant and Bagdi agricultural labour; to Mahasweta Devi’s poor tribal peasant women (translated by Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak) to Amin's otiyars or peasant volunteers of Chauri Chaura, Prakash's Kamia's, Skaria's Bhils and Hardiman's Patidars; to Chatterji's 'fragments of the nation' in which one reviewer noted the industrial working class was conspicuously absent; and even in Chakrabarty's study of the Calcutta working class, which underlined the persistence of feudal values, networks and practices in the activities of the jute mill labourers, to take a few examples from the writings in *Subaltern Studies*, it is this figure—superstitious, illiterate, ill-equipped, isolated and non-political as s/he had appeared in much of the received social science and historical literature—that emerges again and again as the paradigm of the subaltern (Pandey 273-274).

Subaltern Studies gives emphasis on the study of the marginalized, subordinate and oppressed peoples who are deprived of power, their consciousness and their mentality. They are deprived of any kind of participation but used and exploited for the benefit of the hegemonic dominant class. As they are deprived of power they cannot speak. Though "they cannot speak", as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak answers to her own question raised in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), the subaltern has a voice borne along with their agony and suffering that is expressed in their attitude, manners and speech, and often bursts out in the form of rebellion. *Subaltern Studies* gives emphasis on listening to this "small voice" and on articulation of that silence. Leela Gandhi says:

"Subaltern Studies defined itself as an attempt to allow the "people" finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing to speak for, or sound the muted voice of truly oppressed"(2).

Ranajit Guha himself defines subaltern studies as "listening to the small voice of history" (1). Nowadays, the focus of *Subaltern Studies* is on the consciousness of subaltern classes, specifically peasants, labourers, women, and other marginalized groups.

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika: The Subaltern Historiographer

What is said by Beena Agarwal about theatre is true to songs also. As such, song is not a mute and mechanical representation of social dynamics but it is a lively representation of the voices resounding in context of totality of human experiences that consciously or unconsciously affect the existing dynamics of human sensibility (Agrawal 34). Dr. Hazarika is, indeed, a man of the soil, a man of the mass. In his songs and films, he represents the voice of the oppressed sections of society from Ganga to Bhalga, from Sadiya to Missisipi. Within the composition of his songs, he cries for the identity, rights and upliftment of these people, "whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices, poverty, starvation, superstition and class distinction. They have been dragged darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class (Agrawal 35) . In '*He Dola he Dola*' he sings the suffering of the bearers of litters of monarchs or lords:

He dola he dola he dola he dola/ Eka beka batere kahiao kahiao/ bar bar manuhar dola/ Dola he , dola he , dola. (1-4)

O litter O litter O litter O litter/We carry the litters of masters on uneven path

Dola (palanquin), here, becomes the symbol of exploitation and domination. It bears the stigma of power politics. The song represents the two opposite situation- a sophisticated lord in silk (his *pat* head-dress shines) and the sweating *dolabhari* (palanquin bearer) who cannot give a cotton dress to his children. The actions and attitude of the palanquin bearers suggest their subalternity. The tune of the song is suggestive of walking with careful steps, the hard labour of carrying a heavy weight upon their shoulders (*Juge juge japi diye metmara bojati/ kandh bhango bhango kare ---They keep heavy burden on our back for ages/ Our shoulders are breaking [15-16]*). The song along with the tune creates the subaltern situation of domination and subordination.

Dola, here, becomes the symbol of exploitation and domination. It bears the stigma of power politics. It is the carriage of the powerful people where they travel comfortably and the palanquin bearers have to bear it on their back with sweating brow. During Ahom reign the use of a litter or *dola* was restricted within the aristocratic circle of kings and nobles as it was considered as the symbol of status and power.

Inside the litter /The head dress of *pat* glitters

... But I cannot provide a cotton dress for my son. (8-13)

Here, the class division is distinct. The monarchs generally ignore the fact that the development of a kingdom depends on hard labour of common people:

If the litter slips from our shoulders/ It will fall down / Oh, litters of kings and monarchs/

Litters of the lords. ((23-26)

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika represents the grief and untold suffering, agony and misery of the poor who is always starved and half-starved:

Ye ephaledi elathiyai ---Rangman Bhadiyak/ seiphale lathiyai tok/Najitara, ephaledi lathiyai tok /Rangali Bihutik Kangali karile/ Peto ro nuguse bhook.

Oh, here they kick Rangman Bhadiya/ there they kick you /Najitara, there they kick you/ They make the Rangali Bihu *Kangali* (full of want)/ We never get rid of hunger.

Rangali Bihu is a folk festival observed in Assam during mid April. That is the beginning of the Assamese new year. During this spring festival everybody becomes cheerful; everybody sings Bihu songs and dance playing on various folk musical instruments. But the landlords by imposing heavy poll make their festival full of wants. The word '*kangali*' is

also a name of a Bihu (festival) which is observed before harvesting. 'Kangali' has come from the word 'kangal' that denotes want and barrenness.

As most of the peasants are sharecroppers or landless peasants they have to give the lion's share of their production to the zamindars. They have to borrow money from the zamindars for the next cropping. As a result of this they are hurled head-long in debt. In Gopichandrar Gan, the singer sings: "The peasants sell their ploughs, their yoke, and all their agricultural implements to meet the demand of rent; they even sell their own infants"(Bhadra 86). During colonial India the British government imposed heavy taxes on land, jungle, bazaar, *beel* etc. The economic and fiscal policy of British Raj deteriorated the economic condition of peasants and common people. The poor peasants became helpless and bow before the *mahajans*. Even William Robinson, a British commissioner wrote, "A very few indeed are able to pay their rents before the harvests; but cases with an exorbitant usury, upon the credit of the crop, and repay it after the harvest. Thus the great body of the cultivators are, in fact, mere servants of the merchant, who engages to pay their rent for them, whilst they in turn agree to surrender all the produce of their land to him (218). Sometimes the parents were compelled to sell the valuable ornaments of the family, the utensils as well as for food they had to sell their children.

In some of his songs Bhupen Hazarika presents women and widows where subalternity is attached with patriarchal social setting:

*Andhar Katir nishate/ Akhani nair parote/ Eti bhaga pajate/ Paneir kamihnar sabati/
Ponakane fekure-----(1-5)*

In a dark December night/ On the bank of a river / In a shattered hut/ Embracing the
bone of Panei, her little one weeps.

The little boy cries:

I am hungry / Please give me rice, / I am thirsty/O mother, please, give me milk / My
throat becomes dry / I can't see /It is only darkness before me (6-9)

The song is full of pathos. Bhupen Hazarika very touchingly expresses the bare reality of
the life of a poor widow. In poor Panei's small hut there is not a single grain, but she has to give
false consolation to her little one:

Our son will sleep /He will reap golden paddy / I will prepare food / He will eat bowls
of 'chira' / O my son, please, sleep, sleep. (21-25)

But her son sleeps forever on her lap without food.

Bhupen Hazarika himself was a Subaltern historiographer in the sense that he tried to
write 'history from below'. In a famous song he says,

Atitor buranji likhake likhisile/ raja majarajar kotha

Ajir buranji likhake likhise /Manuhar mukutir kotha.(1-4)

Early historians wrote about kings and monarchs

But today's historians write about the emancipation of people.

The early historians recorded the lives of the kings and nobilities, but today's historians write about the struggle and emancipation of human being [from bondage].

He also echoes the malady of African American farmers:

Misor deshor / Neel noir parore/ Fallahine binale/ Kai krishokor bukure betha

Missisipir parote / Kapahor khetite Nigro Johnne binale

Koi manuhar baranor kotha (5-10)

On the bank of Missisipi, in the fields of cotton, 'Negro' John cries telling the colour of his skin. On the bank of Nile, of Mishor one Fallahin cries speaking the suffering of the farmers. Dr. Hazarika depicts the character of John, an African American, who was insulted by the White as a nigger.

In America he composed a song inspired by Harvard Faust, a whole-hearted communist. He was waiting in Chicago Railway Station, and a song came to his mind where he depicted the struggle and hardship of lower rank employees of railway division:

Jhok jhok rail sale mor/ Rail sale rail sale(1-2)

Signal man moi/ Kola kola kailar dhuli lagi kola pora (12-13)

...

Driver linesman/ Banuwa kerani mai/ Rati nai din ani

Hai hai / Khang uthi ranga pora sakut koila pari (18-23)

The rail runs 'jhok, jhok/ The rail run/ I am the signal man/ I am black with coal dust...

Driver, linesman I am/ I am a labourer, I am a clerk/Working day and night without break

Without sleep/ Alas! Alas!

In this song the miserable life of railway workers are vividly depicted with eclectic compassion and humanity. The identity of a signalmen, driver, labourer and a clerk is contextualized with the inconvenient and adverse condition of working place.

He remembers, "...it was a humid night of winter. 15th December of 1969 AD. On that day I heard the speeches of Badshah Khan Abdul Gaffur Khan -- in Pakistan and Hindatan the poor remains poor but the rich getting richer. The twenty two years of independence obtained from painful struggle has become a "beggar independence"...Yes, even

since Yandaboo Treaty, the English capitalists as well as Indian government and after independence the central government and the Indian capitalist exploited the entire Assam (India). (Quoted in *A brief analysis of the songs of Bhupen Hazarika*. Tarani Pathok & Manomati Pathok Dakuwa [2012], 176). Dr. Hazarika thinks about the peasant who has few clothes, about the day-labourer who has to spend sleepless night with his aching empty stomach. He again thinks about the fears of minority community who are sometimes victims of communal clash. The compassionate self of Bhupen Hazarika thinks about giving an amount of solace to their mind and wrote the song *Xitare Xemeka Rati* (In a Cold Wintry Night):

*Xitare xemeka rati/ Bastrabihin kono khetiyokor bhangir pora pajatir/Tuhjui ekurar/
Raktim jen eti uttap hau.(4-7)*

In the cold wintry night/In the half-clothed peasant's broken hut

I will become the bright warmth of/ The glimmering fire of husk.

Bhupen Hazarika wants to be the faithful shelter of these poor people(s).

While we read the text carefully we can notice how Bhupen Hazarika depicts the picture of landless agricultural labourers. In the Indian Census agricultural workers are defined as those who derive the major share of their incomes in the form of agricultural wages, i.e. from work on lands belonging to others. (Chandra 228). They are the landless 'proletariats'. The earnings of these poor labourers, peasants and agricultural semi-proletariats are insufficient for a family to subsist upon (Chandra 228). It is seen that Dr. Hazarika's songs always carry deep sympathy towards these landless poor working class people. In '*Xitare Xemeka Rati*' he voices the untold suffering of the day-labourers, fear-stricken minorities and unarticulated song of such people who have lost the voice due to severe physical disorder:

In wintry night/ I shall become the spark of silent hunger/ Hidden inside the stomach will/ Suddenly turn to fire.../ I shall voice the unarticulated agony of/ The fear-stricken minds of the minorities. (16-26)

Here, Dr. Hazarika directly expresses the objective of his songs:

I will voice that unvoiced song which has the power to/ Bring morning/ For such an immortal song/ I will become a sweet voice, *Sudhakantha*. (*Mai jen eti Sudhakantha haun*). (31-36)

Colonial and post colonial experiences are expressed in his works. The oppressor and the oppressed still prevail in human society. It is true as Ashis Nandi says, colonialism never seems to end with formal political freedom (Nandi 3).

He is a true revolutionary. Therefore, his songs bear the message of change, struggle, revolution and above all, love and humanity, equality and justice.

Expressing Submissiveness and Defiance:

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Gautam Bhadra in ‘The Mentality of Subaltern: Kantanama or Rajdharmā’ says, it is well known that defiance is not the only characteristic of the behavior of subaltern classes. Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute the subaltern mentality. It is on account of this combination that the poor and the oppressed have, time and again, and in different histories, made voluntary sacrifices in favour of the rich and the dominant, at least as they have rebelled against the latter (63). In a number of songs Dr. Bhupen Hazarika represents the subaltern mentality-- their submissiveness and rebellion.

In a song he expresses the *jihad* of the poor against the *jamindars*:

Dhano nidio/ rino nolou/Sud nidiu aru/Mahajanor nithur budhi saho kelei baru

Bahutu je gham saralo/Tejo bukur bahut dilo/ Kasikhanot xan dilo/Sahash bhari pare. (11-18)

I shall not give rice / Also I shall not borrow/ Why I always tolerate the injustice of the *jamindars*/ I shed sweat a lot /Blood enough/ I hone the sickle/ Now I am filled with bravery.

These songs are reminiscent of the peasant revolt that took place in Assam (at Nagaon, marigaon, Darang, Phulaguri, Patharughat, Bajali) during 1861-1894. Thousands of peasants revolted against the British administrators. They used *lathis* (clubs), stones as weapons against the powerful British officers. At Phulaguri, in October, 1861, a *raij mel* (people’s assembly) was held. “Approximately, one thousand people assembled by 15 October. Five to six hundred people in that assembly were armed with lathis (Amalendu Guha. *Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. New Delhi: People’s Publishing House. [1977]: 1988. 7). In *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India*, Ranajit Guha analyses ‘subaltern negations’, “to turn the things upside down” (Sen 234). “We read about rallies of masses, angry and determined to destroy *sarkar, sahuakar or zamindar*: men, materials, symbols or codes of authority, everything associated in peasant consciousness with subordination” (sen 228). Amalendu Guha mentions how in jayantia Hills, people who were not accustomed to pay any kind of money-tax in the past, rose in “open rebellion” after a house tax and the stamp duty had been introduced in 1860 (6). In his songs Bhupen Hazarika depicts how the peasant has honed the sickle (“As I hone the sickle/ Courage overwhelms me”) to fight against the *jamindar*. It is seen that the subaltern in his songs can speak in spite of their “hegemonic silence” (Mhlahlo 8).

These subalterns sometimes become hot iron. While they rise in rebellion they become very bold; their long suppressed agony and pain burst out like a volcano. So, Dr. Hazarika sings:

Bikhubda biswakanthai ahoratri siyore, siyore/ Prasanda agnipinda jvaalamoi hoi ure.(1-2)

The angry voice of the world cries all night /The huge hot flame bursts out like a volcano.

This “ *biswakantha* ” or “the voice of the world” is, no doubt, the voice of these oppressed class. Being one of them Dr. Bhupen Hazarika

Tapta tikhare / agni sakti /raktabarne jvale -- ye jvalile /muktipiyasi supta manuhar/ baksha tikha hai gale ----ye galile. (1-5)

With hot iron /Power of fire / Burns red like blood----Oh it burns up / The heart of / The freedom aspiring silent people / Is burning up, burning up.

It is noteworthy that Dr. Hazarika belongs to a lower caste, the Kaibarta (the Fishing Community) of Assam. The upper caste Hindu treats them as inferior because of their low birth. In his songs he reveals how the upper caste people do not accept the marriage between Anamika Goswami (a high class young girl) and Prasanta Das (a lower class youth), and how defying the objection of the society Anamika Goswami and Prasanta Das get married. Dr.

Bhupen Hazarika resigning from the job of a university lecturer readily chose the life of a nomad. This revolutionary artist roamed nook and corner of the world. He heartily felt the struggle and suffering of the subaltern. Representing the voices of the subaltern Dr. Bhupen Hazarika calls himself an immortal voice (*Sudhakantha*). He used music as the “instrument of social change” following the path of Paul Robeson who once told him about his guitar. Bhupen Hazarika remembered his whole life how in his class once Paul Robeson picked the guitar high and told the students, “Guitar is not a musical instrument, it is a social instrument.” (Hazarika 64) No doubt, this *Ganasilpi* (artist of the masses) is a new historiographer who has written the history of the peasants, labourers, lower caste, minorities and small ethnic groups, women and widow. While humming or listening to his songs one can hear that heart-touching voice that compels everybody to think earnestly about the subaltern.

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