



# Songs as a Subject of Sociological Enquiry: Reflections from Bhupen Hazarika's Compositions

Sabiha Mazid

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Jesus and Mary College, Delhi University, India.

## Article Details

Article Type: Review Article

Received date: 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2023

Accepted date: 25<sup>th</sup> October, 2023

Published date: 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2023

\***Corresponding Author:** Sabiha Mazid, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Jesus and Mary College, Delhi University, India.

**Citation:** Mazid, S., (2023). Songs as a Subject of Sociological Enquiry: Reflections from Bhupen Hazarika's Compositions. *J Comp Soc Sci Res*, 1(1): 104. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33790/jcssr1100104>.

**Copyright:** ©2023, This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

"Music is without any beginning and without an end. Nobody knows when a man becomes a musician and nobody knows when a man ceases to be a musician"

-Pradip Kumar SenGupta

## Introduction

Music is a very significant cultural artefact of any society. Music is not merely a sum of different sounds and tonal arrangements, presented in a way to soothe the human ear and mind. Rather, much like other cultural artefacts, music/songs are potent areas of sociological analysis. 'Songs' or music in general is not independent from the social dynamics of the one who carves it/them - both as a reflection of his/her societal location and as a contribution towards it. Moreover, studying music as a social artefact can aid in uncovering complexities of human culture, organization, politics and identity.

The main focus of this paper would be on understanding how music can become a versatile and potent vehicle for identity and political expression. Throughout history, in multiple situations of conflict, music has been used as a platform for social commentary, as a form of protest, to celebrate cultural history, to establish one's own identity, or to connect with one's heritage. Music, politics, and identity have a dynamic relationship that can potentially reflect the shifting political and cultural environment. With this understanding in sight, the paper would attempt an analysis of songs composed by Dr Bhupen Hazarika during the most tumultuous political phase of Assam- the Assam Movement time period, i.e. 1979-85.

The aim is not a mechanical presentation of the jargon of theories that flood the academic discipline of Sociology in general and Sociology of Music in particular. Rather, a creative involvement with the topic, on the part of the researcher, seeks to present the interplay of the 'social', 'political' and the 'musical' in a rather interpretative and investigative manner. In doing so, references would be made to two major compositions of Hazarika- *Mohabahu Brahmaputra and Aami Axomiya nohou Dukhiya*- that capture, with multiple symbolisms, the complexities surrounding the question of identity that the Assam Movement brought to the forefront.

## Sociology of music: gauging for the social in the musical

William G. Roy and Timothy J. Dowd in their article: "What is sociological about music?" [1], write how music is a form of communication that expresses and creates social relationships as well as cultural presumptions about those relationships [2]. Music is not a singular phenomenon. A noteworthy point is the emphasis on the distinction between 'music' and 'not music', which, scholars in social sciences and humanities have deemed to be a social construct- one that is shaped by and shapes social arrangements and assumptions. As Line Grenier [3] writes, in approaching the field of musical studies, one can refer to Zygmunt Bauman's examination of the term "culture" in contemporary social sciences: "in each case the term, though keeping its form intact, connotes a different concept" [2,4]. The same situation, Grenier believes, seems to be prevailing in the study of music: even while researchers seem to be focusing upon what they term as 'music', they might be addressing different issues. The concept of music is connected to varied semantic regions, just like the concept of culture. It defines distinct observable phenomena and represents various, if not incompatible, research subjects [3].

The construction of the meaning of music, as emphasised upon by Roy and Dowd, can be understood by following the conceptualisations of musicologist Phillip Bohlman (1999) who asserted that music can be seen both as an 'object' and an 'activity' [2]. In terms of the former, music is viewed as a "thing" with a moment of origin, features that remain constant over time and space, and the ability to be used and have consequences [1]. Scholars assuming this position would focus on either the institutionalised system of tonality (as evident in Weber's work) or commodification of music (as lamented by Adorno). On the other hand, when music is seen as an activity, it is seen as something that is always in 'becoming', something that is unbounded and open. The focus on this aspect leads to the emphasis on what musicologist Christopher Small (1998) termed as 'Musicking'.

However, approaching music as merely an object or activity seems to portray it as set apart from social life, rather than being a part of it [2]. As a result, a lot of academics concentrate on the integration of music into society. The embedded nature of music makes meaning formation more difficult because meaning is not confined to one particular music

object or musical action. With regards to this aspect of music, there are two broad approaches. At one corner are the *textualists* who emphasise on the musical object. Their concern is in understanding the dialogue within musical structure (text) and perceived social life (context). At the other end are *contextualists* who emphasise on the activity or ‘musicking’. They take into account the listeners as well. For the textualists, meaning is never purely in the music. What people do with the lyrics and sounds has more of an impact on their meanings than the lyrics or sounds themselves [2].

What is of significance here is the realisation that music is not merely an aesthetic inner experience but also a social experience; in fact, both the aesthetic and social aspects continuously influence each other. Music, then, is a language or a medium of expressing feelings, ideas, while at the same time it becomes a source of status marker, a mediator in the process of identity negotiation. While the musical experience may be ubiquitous, it is influenced by social relationships. Be it the act of composing music, singing or listening, it is placed in a social context. In fact, the act of performance of music is a two-way social interaction between the performer and the audience; thereby providing it the status of a ‘social act’. Both the artist/musician and the audience are guided by the different social situations which surround and bound them. They become reflections of their social groups: caste, class, families and communities which influence their choice and taste (ibid: 7-10).

Swami Prajnananda [5], an eminent musical historian and musicologist, conceives that the art of music bears a social value and significance to the human beings by dint of being a part of the human society. The social significance of music, according to Prajnananda, is twofold:

“Firstly, it animates, adorns and intensifies the relation between the members of the community, and secondly, it helps to convey from individual to individual, and even age to age -these workings of the human spirit, which are at once penetrating and delicate, for crystallisation into the spoken word. Through art of music, men and women of the society realize not so much what they think or thought, but what is ever so much more significant and vital-what they feel or felt” [5].

It is man himself, motivated by his own inner need to feel, who creates music on the basis of one’s refined sense of intrinsic creativity [6]. Hence, society and music influence each other in an interdependent fashion. The social structure of music is created by the artists/musicians, audience etc. who are located in a social context and this in turn affects their work and also influences music. In fact, a musical performance is a process where a continuous interaction takes place between the artist/performer and the audience/listener. The artist/musician recreates and interprets a composition when he/she performs while the audience/listener responds to the performance on the basis of his/her creative sense or ability. Thus, a two-way interaction takes place and the absence of even a single ‘contributor’ to this process may lead to a broken communication.

Music (and songs), therefore, is a social phenomenon and a potent area of investigation for sociological research. Essentially, the study of the relationship between music and society has been the concern of one specific branch within Sociology- Sociology of Music. It focuses upon various aspects of the music-society relationship: the function of music in society; the societal influence on the growth and development of music; and the ways in which music reflects as well as influences society.

For the purpose of this paper, however, it is significant to take the social role of music one step further and incorporate the element of the ‘political’ in its explanation.

Any other type of cultural expression, including music, poetry, art, is typically considered to comprise a society’s ‘soft’ cultural heritage. Sociologically speaking, these so-called artefacts are more than just items; they represent a variety of cultural elements, including a people’s

history, beliefs, and most importantly, their collective sentiments. It is possible to look at poetry and music from a perspective that goes beyond aesthetics; poetry, songs, and music can all be invoked as ‘national’ forms that express a sense of ‘nationalism’.

The ethno-racial nationalist groups that emerged in the U.S. in the late 1960s rocked the status quo conception of poetry and music’s place in politics and society. Furthering that understanding, eminent social thinker Sanjib Baruah [7] has made an effort to consider how Bhupen Hazarika’s music and songs might be used to depict the strong Axamiya<sup>1</sup> (sub)nationalist feelings that have emerged in Assam in the post-Independence era, particularly between the late 1970s and early 1990s.

The ‘aspect’ that Baruah seems to discover in Hazarika’s songs has been categorized as ‘poetics of nationalism’ and must be understood in the context of Assam’s post-independence politics. Here, Nazneen Ahmed’s research of how poetry and songs of the East Pakistani resistance against state persecution eventually led to secession and the founding of Bangladesh can be used as examples to better understand the concept of “poetics of nationalism”.

We frequently resort to Benedict Anderson when discussing the idea of ‘nationalism’ because of the way he connected the concurrent growth of modern nationalism and the novel (written words). Ahmed [8] challenged the commonly held association between a book and a nation by showing that, in nations with low reading rates, “print-capitalism” may not always provide the impetus for the creation of the ‘national’ imagination. The imagined nation is created through poetry (or songs), and it is typically distinct from the one created through prose since poetry makes use of features like a common dialect and the development of a national sublime to create a “adored nation” [8]. This, according to Ahmed, is a result of poetry’s/songs’ ability to spread orally, which in turn makes it a possible vehicle for group expression. In fact, if we carefully reread Anderson’s writing, it becomes evident that he does not view the novel as the exclusive form of expression and formation of nationalist consciousness. Instead, it is merely one of the many cultural expressions that actively contribute to the formation and expression of group identity. Anderson claims that music does, in fact, play a significant influence. He emphasizes how national anthems help members of a group that is too huge for them to personally know one another to instil strong feelings of camaraderie:

“There is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests—above all in the form of poetry and songs. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance”. (ibid)

However, the sensation of unisonance is not just a result of the anthems’ perceived simultaneity. The use of a variety of linguistic, sensory, poetic, and symbolic techniques in the formation of these “anthems” is essential for the successful construction of an imagined society. This is strongly related to Michael Billig’s concept of “Banal nationalism”, which refers to everyday national symbols that foster a false sense of human unity and belonging. In the form of national anthems, poetry and music, which uses symbols that are most potent due to their frequent repetition and nearly subliminal character, reproduces the idea of some sort of implied togetherness [2].

But the main question at hand is how do songs or poetry ignite ‘nationalism’ in people. How can a few, possibly quickly written, phrases move a sizable crowd to action?

Poems, songs, music, and films fall into the category of the most accessible national expressions to the collective, regardless of literacy, according to Ahmed [8]. Again, Ahmed claims that poetry is frequently the most effective tool for collective mobilization among

all of these due to its ability for oral diffusion. And it is precisely this oral aspect of poetry and music that makes it more effective at stirring up (nationalist) feelings.

In fact, orally recited poetry played a particularly important role in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, which allowed African Americans to inform people about cultural distinctions through a variety of styles and mediums. Poetry readings were used as a teaching method the most frequently. African Americans used performances to promote their own causes, organizations, and political campaigns. However, in colonized (or post-colonial, to use another term) nations where the dissemination of literature had been constrained by colonial power, the significance of poetry and song is particularly significant. Kamau Brathwaite (1984) posits that reading-

“...is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition on the other hand demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence, we have the creation of a continuum where meaning truly resides. And this total expression comes about because people ...come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their very breath rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines” [8].

Ahmed writes that after Bengali was made one of Pakistan’s national languages in 1956, a lot of literature, songs, and plays were produced that referenced the events of one significant day in the history of Bangladesh's independence movement—21 February 1952—in a direct reference to the Bangladesh war of 1970–1971. The Bengalis of the former East Pakistan adopted this day as a symbol of ‘national’ pride, and in defiance of the Pakistani government, a body of artistic creation known as “Ekushey writing” (writings about the 21st) arose. A sense of “unisonance” was sparked by poems and songs, both those written during the height of the 1952 protest and those written afterward in its memory. These poems and songs evolved into a vehicle for remembering and denouncing state atrocities. They were especially successful when they were a part of the clandestine opposition to the Pakistani government [8].

Thus, poetry and song might operate as the most effective form of social mobilization due to its ability to spread orally. Collective political expression may be made easier. In fact, throughout the history of liberation movements, poetry and song have served as a means of nationalist expression and an essential component of anti-colonial political resistance and affirmations, despite the focus paid to the novel form.

Sanjib Baruah situates Hazarika’s songs in the context of Assam’s political circumstances following Indian independence using the idea of poetry/songs. According to Baruah, the intertextuality of Hazarika’s songs—their relationship to conversations in Axamiya’s “private” and “public” life about what may be referred to as the “state of the nation”—is what gives them relevance.

If nations and nationalities are “imagined communities”, then according to Baruah, this is a poetics that turns a place’s topography into a primeval, humbling, or sacred location and turns a population into a group with fictitious ties to shared ancestry and kinship. According to him, this can be found in Bhupen Hazarika’s songs, which echo the voice of the “common aspirations” [7].

To understand this overlap of the musical and the political better, let us consider two compositions of Bhupen Hazarika from the Assam Movement (1979-85): *Aami Axomiya Nohou Dukhiya and Mohabahu Brahmputra*.

#### **Aami Axomiya Nohou Dukhiya**

This song was first written in 1968, the year of Lakshminath Bezbarua’s birth centenary, much before the Assam Movement materialised. This song was not only Hazarika’s dedication to Bezbarua but also an attempt to remind the people of Assam about the golden

Assam Bezbarua imagined and dreamt of, about the sentiment of nationality and patriotic love that Bezbarua tried to instil in the minds of the Axamiya people. Almost 6 decades later, Bhupen Hazarika revisited the song to interpret the situation of an Assam marked by numerous conflicts, violence and struggles; be it based on language or ethnicity. Assam, at that time, was boiling under the question of ‘who is an Axamiya?’; the debate of indigeneity in the face of a surge of illegal cross-border immigration had led Assam to a brink of uncertainty and insecurities. Hazarika, in that context, sought to urge the youth to dig deeper into their history and understand who they really are as a community. There were numerous political elements presenting multiple narratives. But, as a concerned citizen, Hazarika’s prime emphasis was urging the youth (the forerunners of the Movement) to understand the real issue at hand rather than getting swayed by any specific political interest [2].

Hazarika’s understanding of what constitutes the Axamiya cultural identity is rendered poetically in this song. Assam has never been a land of homogeneity. It is through the union of various tribes, languages, religions and cultures that the Axamiya society had come into being. That historical significance of accepting the differences has to be remembered. And he emphasises upon this very strongly when he sings:

“Myriad races and faces  
colourful, many cultures  
Embracing them all  
was my land born”

Again, he seeks to present an answer to the age-long question of ‘Who is an Axamiya?’ in a very blatant way by singing:

“...traversing through distances,  
Resting on the Luit’s banks  
Every Indian, we embrace  
in a new garb, as a new Axamiya.  
Acceptance, a virtue to favour”

The highlight, however, in this following stanza from the song. Previously when he wrote its first version in 1968, he wrote:

“We have no Jyotiprasad  
transforming cowards to heroes.  
We have no Tarun  
claiming ‘I’ll die with Axom’s death’  
The death of a nation, day and night  
We have no Ambikagiri, reiterating it”

Here he had lamented the absence of figures like Jyotiprasad Agarwala<sup>3</sup>, martyr Tarun Ram Phukan<sup>4</sup> and Ambikagiri Raichaudhury<sup>5</sup> to save the Axamiya society from getting shattered. But with the advent of the protests and mobilisations in 1980, he saw the possibility of such figures again emerging out from the youth. He saw a possibility of another Jyotiprasad, Tarun Ram and Ambikagiri leading the people, reviving the philosophy of these cultural icons. Hence, he changed these lines in the context of the movement that had begun to emerge, giving it a flavour of what he perceived to be the reality of that time. He even added a online speech before the stanza which expresses his hopes for a change that can be brought about by the young minds- *Axom morile aamiu morim buli koboloi kunu je nai buli aaji kune koi!* (Translation: Who says that there is no one today to claim ‘If Assam dies, we shall die too’).

Nevertheless, he refrains from assuming a very idealistic image of the possible outcomes of the Movement. He simultaneously expresses his concerns for the possibility of the growing Assamese regional chauvinism as a result. The following lines from a subsequent stanza almost reflects upon what he foresaw as a threat to the Axamiya society:

“Co-existence, if fails at home,  
How could it ever be anywhere else on earth?  
Loving one’s own mother, does it equate  
Looking at another’s mother with disgust?”

<sup>3</sup>He dominated the Assamese literary scene in the latter half of the 19th century and is best known for his dedication towards the revival of the Assamese language in the context of Bengali being recognised as the official language in the courts and educational institutions of Assam.

<sup>4</sup>He is a significant cultural icon of Assam. Also known as the Rupkonwar, he is sometimes referred to as the father of Assamese popular culture, including Assamese cinema

<sup>5</sup>Popularly known as Deshbhakta, Tarun Ram Phukan was a leader during the non-cooperation Movement in Assam, propagating the messages of Gandhi across the state.

<sup>6</sup>He was a poet, playwright and a patriot who actively participated in the Independence movement against the British.

Indeed, the seeds of divisive politics had already been laid during the 1960 Language Agitation and 1972 Agitation for medium of instruction. He warned the people of such perspectives and ideologies gaining stronger grounds. And in the context of the Assam Movement assuming a linguistic (and possible communal character at that time), the tendency to be divided among numerous lines of identity markers seemed to take a dangerous turn. Assam has been a heterogeneous society, historically. And if the Assamese-speaking cannot co-exist peacefully with the non-Assamese speaking people in Assam itself then they cannot co-exist in any part of the world. That would lead to linguistic short-sightedness [2].

Unfortunately, divides along linguistic (and religious lines) ultimately marred the original issue raised by the Movement, leading to multiple divisions, and culminating in the worst violence the region had ever witnessed. The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 symbolically sought to restore political stability after 7 long years of discontent.

He closes the song with a plea to the Assamese people, addressing both the locals and the 'Na-Axamiya' or the assimilated Axamiya who do not speak Assamese. He calls on all the groups to coexist peacefully as they have always done. Additionally, he makes extensive use of the image of *Bihu*, the Assamese cultural festival that serves as both a celebration and a symbol of the unification of the people. *Bihu* is connected to the purifying and cleaning of one's soul. *Bihu* instills fresh optimism in the prospect of self-reflection and advancement, surpassing the mistakes of the last year. Hazarika uses the melody and allusions to *Bihu* to remind all Axamiya people (regardless of their language, religion, or tribe) that the Bhogali *Bihu*, which stands for hope, harvest, and prosperity, will ultimately bring about a famine in the heart of the Axamiya culture if they don't learn to be wary of the divisive mentality that is invading them.:

“Forgetting yourself, in your own land  
Only famine you would harvest.  
And bereft of colour, hope and joys  
Death is where Rongali *Bihu* would rest”.

#### **Mohabahu Brahmaputra:**

*Swokiyo roop loi Bohag nu aahе koloi? Brahmaputra'r duyu paroloi nohoi jaanu? Ei Brahmaputra'r mohaаn oitijyo ba ki?*

(Translation: Where does *Bohag*<sup>6</sup> arrive in its truest form? Isn't it to the two banks of the Brahmaputra? What might be the great traditional significance of the Brahmaputra?)

“The mighty armed Brahmaputra rolls on  
The pilgrimage of the great meeting  
Rolling on down the ages and showing  
The meaning and worth of harmony” [2]

This song was written in 1980, as the Assam Movement was starting to gain traction.

In *Bohnimaan Brahmaputra*, Bhupen Hazarika introduces this song by writing the words: “Till the time a good amount of study is done about the unity of both the banks of the Brahmaputra, what advice should I give to people with a perverse bent of mind” [9].

This song fits into the broader discussions about “Who is an Axamiya?” that arose during the Assam Movement. Disagreements among the Axamiya people themselves arose since many started to view the Assamese language as their foundation, with others even trying to give it a communal perspective. Hazarika aimed to remind the Assamese people of the historical assimilation of many ethnicities and groups along the banks of the Brahmaputra. Additionally, although being seen to be from “outside,” these diverse populations are an essential component of the diverse and assimilated Axamiya civilization; for this reason, they should not be conflated with the idea of “foreigners”. He uses the names of icons, starting with Srimanta Shankardev and ending with Jyotiprasad Agarwala, who the Assamese consider to be the cultural “forefathers”, to evoke a sense

of “oneness” among the various groups that make up the larger Axamiya society. Hazarika appears to be stating his own personal definition of what an Axamiya is for him in this manner as well.

None of the figures that Hazarika refers to in the song has an origin in the Assamese society, if it is to be seen in terms of the Assamese language. Shankardev's forefathers had come from Kanyakunja<sup>7</sup>; they had accepted and assimilated the culture of Assam and ultimately produced one of the greatest cultural leaders. Similarly, the Muslim mystic Shah Milan, popularly known as Azan Fakir came to Assam sometime around 1630 A.D. from Baghdad. He is known for his devotional compositions called *Zikir* which embodied the fundamental tenets of Islam in simple Assamese language. From Punjab came the disciple of Guru Nanak, Teg Bahadur. Although Teg Bahadur came with the army leader Ram Singha as a friend of the king, he acquired Shankardev's teachings and propagated the teachings of the Sikh Bani in Assam; building what Hazarika saw as a ‘religious bridge’ between the two communities. Even Lachit Barphukan<sup>8</sup>, one of the bravest leaders that Assam's history reverts to with great respect was not originally from the Assamese-speaking society. Lachit Barphukan was called the ‘son of the soil’ but originally belonged to a so-called settler-family in Assam, yet he fought to protect the prestige of Assam from invaders. A very tactful use of the term *duroir* (meaning- from far away) has been done to portray the paradox of Lachit Barphukan's actual origin being away from Assam yet his unforgettable contribution towards Assam through his loyalty.

Hazarika identified his mentors- Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnu Rabha- with non- Assamese roots too. While Agarwala's family had originally belonged to the Agarwala caste of Rajasthan, Bishnu Rabha was a Kiraat. Agarwala's mother tongue was not Assamese, yet he spread, what Hazarika termed, ‘the light of unity’ among the Assamese. Rabha was a Bodo, a Mongoloid race. In ancient Indian folk tales these Mongolian races have been termed as Kiraat, Ashura or Klas. He was not originally from the geographical location of Assam nor belonged to a group that spoke Assamese, yet he worked relentlessly for its growth and development.

The most alluring element of the song, however, is the way Hazarika refers to the Padma River to represent the people of Bangladesh. In a symbolic gesture, he refers to the political and natural upheavals that have impacted the lives of those who depend on it by using the term ‘*dhumuha*’ (meaning storm). Assam has always welcomed anyone seeking safety when things go tough because it is a good neighbour. This metaphor might be interpreted as a place where Hazarika gently expresses how he views an Axamiya in contrast to a ‘foreigner.’ There have been a lot of people who have come from what constituted East Pakistan pre-1970. Many people have immigrated from the region that was East Pakistan until 1970. The Axamiya society has accepted those who were compelled by circumstances to leave their homes and adopt a new culture as their own, but those who have persisted in entering Assam/India only for their own personal gain and who have been used by political forces as their ‘vote bank’ are nothing less than ‘foreigners’. The Na-Axamiya (or New Assamese) are those who have integrated themselves into the Axamiya community among those who appeared to have arrived with the ‘storm’ of the Padma. They are now an integral component of the Axamiya. However, not every person who crosses the boundary automatically becomes an Axamiya. Giving these immigrants a constitutional status is unacceptable since they are undesirable immigrants in Assam or India. This distinction is further emphasised with the lines: *Kisu lobo lage kisu dibo lage, Jin jaboloi hole, Milibo lage, milabo lage, Rabindra Natheu kole* (To meet and merge, give and take; As did Rabindranath say) which reflect what his mentor Jyotiprasad had once said: “With time, in new developments we need to give up a few old cultural obsessions and the ones who come (to our culture) too need to give up a few of theirs”.

It is true that any person would feel unsafe in his or her own country

<sup>6</sup> This is the first month of the Assamese calendar, coinciding with the month of April in the English calendar. It is often used to symbolize ‘rebirth’ or new beginnings.

<sup>7</sup> Srimanta Shankardev was a scholar, religious reformer, musician, artist in Assam in the 15-16th century. He is widely credited for devising new forms of music (Borgeet), theatrical performance (Ankia Naat, Bhaona), dance (Sattriya), literary language (Brajavali).

<sup>8</sup> Erstwhile name of an area located somewhere between present day Bengal and Bihar

<sup>9</sup> Bir Lachit is primarily known for commanding the Ahom Army and leading the Ahoms to victory in the Battle of Saraighat (1671) that thwarted an invasion by the vastly superior Mughal Forces.

if a situation like this occurred and their rights were being infringed upon or illegally taken over by people who are not citizens. And in that situation, the former is entirely within his or her rights to start a demonstration. However, if the protests are motivated by political cynicism and short sightedness, they are pointless. In order to prevent the movement's youth participants from losing focus on the main issue (illegal foreigners posing an economic and political threat to Assam) and becoming involved in unnecessary confusions and conflicts, Hazarika saw the necessity of historicizing the entire concept of the 'Axamiya' identity that was being debated. He felt that every state had a fundamental right to be foreigner-free and supported the legal deportation of foreigners. Immigrants were allowed to vote illegally due to political reasons, which went against every Indian citizen's fundamental right. That was abhorrent and served as the movement's central concern. The protestors needed to keep this main vision in sight and the song *Mohabahu Brahmaputra* sought to act as a reminder to that.

From the point of view of Sociology of Music, Hazarika's songs can become potent sources of understanding how the entire Movement had progressed, what was its philosophy and how the common people related to it. Coming back to what Baruah [7] had reiterated, Hazarika's music is a constant reflection of the political moods of the Axamiya. Indeed, Hazarika's songs can be used to construct an unofficial history of the (Axamiya) nationality its hopes, aspirations and disappointments [7].

The usage of numerous motifs in Hazarika's songs, as Baruah had also emphasised, carry significant political connotations. As for instance, referring to the river Brahmaputra as a patriarch, head-of-the-household (of the Axamiya community) indicates a recurrent theme in nationalist myths and accomplishes a variety of goals, including connecting the people to their homeland at a fundamental level and implying the existence of a common ancestor, both of which foster a sense of shared roots among the populace (ibid: 655). Similar to this, according to Baruah, the usage of *Bohag* and *Bihu* as powerful imageries creates the Axamiya nationality as a collectivity with a memory and a will. It is not only about festivities and celebration. Instead, the concept of a nation reflecting on its history and making plans for the future is one that is strongly constitutive. (ibid: 656). What is significant, however, is the manner in which the 'stock-taking' about the Axamiya collective past and the resolve to carry out its historically constituted collective will, the duties to honor the memory of martyrs, offer significant hints to the 'imaginative geography and history' that marks the way the Axamiya perceive themselves as a 'nation'. These images, which capture the core of what makes Axamiya society unique, are aimed at the common Axamiya person.

The main issue at hand is not whether it was motivated by feelings of nationalism, expressions of expectations, resentment, rage, or

frustration. The point is that rather than using songs as his primary mode of expression, Hazarika could have easily turned to (and been content with) formally publishing his opinions about the Axamiya society and its issues (like he did in Assamese magazines and newspapers). (Why he chose to do so is perhaps related to his idea of the societal role of an artiste and can be learned by referring to his biographical circumstances). However, he opted to share his ideas through his songs, which had a much wider audience than his papers. With oral communication as its main asset, the role of 'poetics' was able to interact with individuals from all social classes and walks of life. For Hazarika, the moniker "singer of the masses" indeed has some significance.

The songs that have been discussed in this paper are still popular amongst the people of Assam and have even been translated into multiple languages. Today they might be looked at as isolated pieces of aesthetic compositions with brilliant penmanship and metaphors. However, placing them in the context of a Movement may reflect the cultural imagination of an entire ethnic community. Not taking them as serious academic material may lead to a grave oversight of the power of musical compositions in depicting, reflecting or even adding political meaning to a social reality.

## References

1. Roy, W. G. and Timothy J. Dowd. (2010). "What is sociological about music?" *In Annual Review of Sociology*, 36: 183-203
2. Mazid, Sabiha. (2015). Music, Society and the Musician: A study of Bhupen Hazarika's songs in the context of the Assam Movement (1979-85). MPhil Dissertation. Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
3. Grenier, Line. (1990). "The Construction of Music as a Social Phenomenon: Implications for Deconstruction." *Canadian University Music Review*, 10(2): 27- 47.
4. Bauman, Z. (1973). Culture as Praxis. Routledge and K. Paul
5. Prajnananda, Swami. (1979). Music of the South Asian peoples. Calcutta: RamakrishnaVedanta Nath.
6. Sengupta, Pradeep Kumar. (1991). Foundations of Indian Musicology. New Delhi; Abhinav Publishers.
7. Baruah, Sanjib. (1994). "Ethnic Conflict as State-Society struggle: The Poetics and Politics of Assamese Micro-Nationalism." *Modern Asian Studies*, 28(3): 649-671.
8. Ahmed, Nazneen. (2012). "The Poetics of Nationalism: Cultural Resistance and Poetry in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, 1952-71." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50(3):256-268.
9. Hazarika, S., ed. (2013). *Moi eti jajabor: a transcribed autobiography of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika (in Assamese)*. 4th edition. Guwahati: S.H. Educational Trust.