

HIS PEOPLE'S VOICE: BHUPEN HAZARIKA AND HIS BALLADS OF CHANGE

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Abstract

The history of English Literature boasts of many a poet who delivered the clarion call for change and the common people felt inclined to listen. In the context of Indian literature too since times immemorial poets have let the torch up to the lacks of society. Dr. Bhupen hazarika's songs have inspired the downtrodden to rise up and fight for their rights. He points at the social evils and calls for an overhaul of the evil practices that plague the basis of society. His songs are mostly revolutionary in nature but speak of assimilation and not disruption. He is patriotic in feel and encourages people to unite and combat against all kinds of social atrocities and vices. Bhupen Hazarika remains as a poet who spoke for the people through his poetry and music.

Keywords- *revolution, patriotism, myth, oppression.*

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The appellation “Bard of Brahmaputra” to eulogize the maestro, Dr. Bhupendra Hazarika, is not an undue phrase of praise if one considers his immense contribution to the field of music occasionally gilded by the silver-screen. Dr. Hazarika has composed and sung more than 1,500 songs (Nazir) which continue to captivate the hearts of the music lovers all over the world thereby earning him numerous accolades. The voice that reverberates in the valleys of Assam and the banks of Brahmaputra also echo across the world immortalizing the numbers. He has sung, more often than not, only the lyrics composed by himself; and rarely have we ever heard him singing someone else’s composition. His numbers vary from romantic to philosophic to revolutionary songs which has attained a universal significance. The present paper shall analyse the revolutionary songs of Dr. Hazarika in the backdrop of political turmoil that had engulfed Assam for quite a long time.

A common attribute that can be noticed in every revolutionary soul is that the spirit of revolution is ignited at an early stage in one’s life and is vigorous throughout the rest. There are very rare instances when an effervescence of revolutionary zeal is visible in later part of one’s life; and if seen at all it is not as strong as to endure the upheavals of time. Dr. Bhupendra Hazarika is no exception to this law. The seeds of revolution have been implanted in the mind of this child prodigy as one can trace the presence of fiery revolutionary zeal in the songs of this angry young poet from his early days. No wonder he had been under the profound influence of the several contemporary revolutionaries but poets: Rupkonwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Natsurjya Phani Sarma, and Bidrohi-Kabi Kazi Nazrul (Dutta 42). Their life and philosophy had cultured the

young mind of Dr. Hazarika from his formative years which molded and shaped his revolutionary spirit:

In Tezpur, the Hazarika home played host to several literary and cultural figures, among whom were Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rava, and Phani Sarma. They all doted on young Bhupen, known as Bormoina to his family. According to Sarma, it was Tezpur that saw her brother realise his talents (Reporter).

Like them, Hazarika too has assailed the evildoers and corruptors of the society. The legacy left by the crusaders like Rabha and Jyoti Prasad has been faithfully honored by this young leftist who advanced the movement, advocating in support of the common, weak and helpless people. *His song, Jai Jodi Jibon Tu Jak (Dutta 54-55), reminds us of Bishnu Prasad Rabha who had once beckoned his fellow comrades with a similar song. In his song – Bol Bol Bol, Krixak Hakti Dal (Rabha 134) -- Rabha incites the peasants to march forward in unification to fight against the zamindars. One can sense the same revolutionary zeal of P.B. Shelley's Song: To the Men of England, where he addresses the peasants and workers of England to revolt (Dewri):*

*Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear? (Shelley)*

Whereas, Rabha invites the peasants to join the war against the capitalist and exploiters; Dr. Hazarika invites common masses to protest against the social inequalities. Dr. Hazarika dwells on the allusion from the Indian Epic 'Ramayan'. He reinforces the notion of a society based on Ram Rajya, as this is the land of Ram and hence should be devoid of Ravana. He is also willing to sacrificing his life in the process of annihilating the Ravana, if situation so demands. The essence of this allusion is to contrast the image of good pitted against bad; and at the end it is good which always triumphs, as depicted in the mythologies. With similar expectation, Dr. Hazarika sings to herald the inception of a Ram Rajya. However, his helplessness to affect the society makes him sing Pratidhwani Xunu (Dutta 47). This song

records the poet's helplessness as identified with the helplessness of the common masses. He believes, the time is ripe for a revolutionary change and millions of voices could be heard shouting for emancipation from the clutch of slavery and bondage perpetrated by capitalism. These voices are distant and faint, and the poet can recognize the call of freedom from slavery from among the Babel of the masses. *Similarly, in Andhar Katir Nixate* (Dutta 49-52), which is a heart rendering story of a mother who could not afford to provide meal to her child, the voice of the poet becomes identical with the voice of the mother who urges other mothers to ensure the safety of their children. The mother envisages a new future where the exploiters would be brought to book and justice be meted to them. This would only be possible if the mothers of other children consciously participate in the revolution.

Another thought provoking song in this segment is Sangram Jodi Jobonor Eti Naam (Dutta 55) where the singer exhorts his fellow countrymen to take the path of revolution and seize what belongs to him or her. *If one does not get what he/she deserves, it is better to use force to establish one's rights. It should be remembered that, Dr. Hazarika was profoundly influenced by the works and activities carried on by the great revolutionaries, and as such we can see a similar spark of revolution in his songs. His encouragement to take arms and fight does not put him on the pedestal of violence; rather it comes from the spirit of self-righteousness and a desire to be a free man which was installed in him during the freedom struggle of India.*

Patriotism, as witnessed in his songs, was not alone restricted to the freedom struggle, but it also inspired to fight against the atrocities in the society against the poor and proletariats. Very much like Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Dr. Bhupendra Hazarika too, had the art of transforming his songs into inspirational revolutionary numbers. His composition, *Agni Jugor Firingoti Moi* (Dutta 298) was one of his earliest compositions marking the beginning of a career in revolutionary songs. The song records protest against the oppressors, exploiters and tyrants in the society who had been feeding like parasites on the

poor laborers. To revolt against anarchy is a natural phenomenon; whenever there is excess of oppression, there has had always been a revolution as history testifies. Thus, in his song *Bixubdha Biswakanthai* (Dutta 44) he explains that revolution is a natural and innate phenomenon in human society ignited by the fire that burns in every human spirit. Although we are averse to destruction entailed by revolution, yet revolution is inevitable because there is a need to chastise the grim in the society by the fire of revolution. Similarly, after a long heinous regime of the British, freedom was inevitable in India. *Unfortunately, the powers glided from the British rulers to the hands of a powerful few, and the condition of the deprived became worse, and he voiced this dissatisfaction through his songs.*

The song *Hey Dola Hey Dola* (Dutta 45) is a typical exemplification of Bhupendra Hazarika's art of narrating the social inequalities that has existed since time immemorial and continued even after the so-called Independence. The song records the burden shouldered by a class of deprived proletariat to ease and provide comfort to the wealthy class of exploiters. Whereas the hardship, strife, trials and tribulations of the winding and gravelly path is experienced by the poor people, the rich people remain oblivious of the hardships of life. The silk they wear on their body and the turban that asserts their status is symbolic of deprivation of the naked proletariat. The irony of the situation is that this deprived and subjugated class of people act like the cog in the wheel which keeps the entire machinery in motion; and if somehow this cog is cracked under immense pressure, the load would dismantle on the dust and the machinery would come to a halt. The capitalist society fails to discern that they would be utterly helpless without the working class people. Therefore, in *Bhang Xil Bhang* (Dutta 48), Dr. Hazarika celebrates the hard work of a labourer who with his constant effort constructs the path, rather a beautiful and strong path, which would be trodden by the posterity. And this path would be the road through the great men and aristocratic people would embark to the world of fame. It is sad to recall that, whereas, the path helps to undertake a journey, the labourers who had built this path

are forgotten. Despite of this, the poet encourages these people and exhorts them not to lose hearts. In his encouraging song *Mukti Kami Lakha Janar* (Dutta 48-49), Dr. Hazarika inspires the poor people to come forward united and break the bondage of slavery with their tidal force. The poet uses metaphors of fire, tide and wind to illustrate the power of the proletariat which can break and sway the influence of the capitalists. The flames of freedom will conflagrate the bondage of slavery however; they must muster the courage to ignite this flame and fight against the capitalist. The poem ends with a proverbial statement that the clever jackal (Capitalist) is always afraid of the lion (Common men united). With a similar vein, the poet sings in *Jhak Jhak Rail Chole* (Dutta 46-47) to unite against the atrocities of the capitalist class if they want to establish a society based on communism.

Apart from exhorting the common people; he also addresses the great and mighty river Brahmaputra to take part in this revolution in his song *Bistirno Parore* (Dutta 53-54). This is one of his most famous and widely popular songs, which has been inspired by *Paul Leroy Robeson's Ol' Man River* (SALAM). *If, we consider Dr. Hazarika to be the Bard of Brahmaputra, then Hazarika invokes this mighty Brahmaputra to change its course and bring tidal waves to wipe out the atrocities in the society. He incites the son of Brahma, i.e. Brahmaputra to be true to his name and bring some change in the sterile society. He urges the river to inspire the warriors who, like Bhishma, have embraced the 'bed of arrows'. These great warriors must wake up from the slumber in order to take part in the revolution. The poet complains that despite of witnessing the erosion of ethics and destruction of humanity in the present society, the old river is rolling silently. Dr. Hazarika raises a series of rhetorical question to the mighty river and thereby encourages it to take the initiative to empower the society severely handicapped by moral paucity.*

His humanitarian feeling for the poor and the weak, the deprived and the dislocated, the immigrants and the refugees that followed the independence made him a fence-sitter regarding certain burning issues in Assam. On one hand, his solidarity to the "The Assam Movement" manifested by his song, Tez Dila Pran Dila Tyag Dila Deka Bandhu (Dutta 441);

and on the other hand his compassion for the immigrants put him on the crossroads of hope and despair. This trust with fate was such that he was misunderstood and had to face rejection from a certain class of people. But he was a *jajabor*, an internationalist, and hence momentary local indifference could never limit his spirit, and the bard sang and soared high over the troubled waters. This capacity to overcome obstacles made him capable of achieving great heights; and eventually we know him now as a great poet, a singer, a lyricist, a writer, a composer, a film-maker, an educator and a great revolutionary.

"Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood." (Emerson)

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