



Tribal Music Inspired Me: Bhupen Hazarika

Sanghita Singh

His voice speaks a language which communicates melody without the crutch of words. This Padma Bhushan recipient is as complex in the interpretation of his messages as he is simple in the spontaneity of his feelings.

For this singer, composer and poet, life is resonant with the rhythm of recognition. Yet, he has also suffered the jarring notes of destiny. Sanghita Singh unplugs the philosophy of a man who is as much a moving force for music as music is a moving force for him. I was born into a family of teachers: I was born in 1926 in Sadiya, a village in Assam. We were six brothers and four sisters. My grandfather established the Bankshidhar Hazarika School at Sibsagar. My father, Neelkantha Hazarika, taught at this school and, later, at Cotton College in Guwahati. I grew up in a family of teachers and was always inclined towards journalism. I was the first child of my parents and my grandmother's favourite. I attended Tejpur Government High School.

My brother's death still pains me: Whenever Gandhiji and Pandit Nehru came to Assam, they would request my father to send me and my brother, Jayanta, to sing for them. Jayanta succumbed to cancer. His death was a shock and I took a long time to overcome my grief. Even today, I feel his absence.

Tribal music made a singer of me: As a child, I grew up listening to tribal music — its rhythm saw me developing an inclination towards singing. Perhaps, I inherited my singing skills from my mother, who sang lullabies to me. In fact, I have used one of my mother's lullabies in Rudali. As a singer, I have also been influenced by Vaishnav thinker and Assam's most famous reformer, Sankardev, who is known for his devotional songs. I learnt music from Bishnu Prasad Rabha, who trained me in the Bhatkhande school of music. But I could not continue my lessons for long.

I became a revolutionary: Between 1936-40, I accompanied Assamese poet and film-maker Jyoti Prasad Agarwala on his trips to Calcutta. He introduced me to the works of George Bernard Shaw. After school, I secured a degree in political science from BHU, where former PM Chandra Shekhar was my junior. We attended meetings at the Sangeet Bhawan in Benaras. Somewhere down the line, the revolutionary in me was born. My music and, later, my film scripts portray the ethnic anger I suffer from.

I was too timid to pursue my love: I fell in love with a girl in Assam — she was 16 and I was 21. She sang so well that it struck a chord in my heart. Both of us worked at the local radio station and, on many occasions, we communicated through songs. But when our love blossomed, her parents had already found a suitable match for her. I blame myself for being a coward — I could and should have fought for her hand.

I wanted to see the world: In 1949, I secured admission to the mass communications course at the University of Columbia. Wanting to see other places on the way, I didn't take a direct flight. I first went to Colombo, from where I sailed to Marseilles aboard the Champolean. I became friendly with a French traveller called Andre, who was depressed. One night, Andre jumped off the ship. I was both shocked and saddened.

I met Picasso: Once in France, I had a strong desire to meet Picasso. An elderly guard informed me that if I managed to get up at 4 am, I might catch Picasso taking a walk with his friends. I did what I was told and, to my surprise, I actually saw Picasso. I went up to him and said, 'Sir, this is the best day of my life.' His reply was rather jocular: 'Hazarika is going to America after gathering information about me!' Picasso wanted to test my knowledge and asked me which of his paintings was my favourite. I told him I liked his works from the Blue period. He was pleased and blessed me.

I felt humiliated in America: In America, I was taken to an island where a banner reading 'For war prisoners' had been put up. The officers there asked me why I wanted to study journalism in America when I had already been to Leeds. Questions such as 'How will you solve the problem of poverty in your country?' were thrust upon me. After interrogation, I was brought back to New York. Initially, America was a shock. The positive side was that I interacted with students from other countries and this gave me a global perspective.

I found my soulmate in Priyamvada: At Columbia, I became friends with Priyamvada, who was pursuing an MA degree in political science. She belongs to a well-known Patel family and is of the same stock as Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel. We fell in love, but my parents opposed the match. So, before we returned to India, we got married in America.

Courtesy: TNN Oct 19, 2002



INDIA EMPOWERED TO ME IS When every Indian has knowledge, skill of communication

By Bhupen Hazarika

Way back in 1939, I wrote a song in which I said I was just a small spark of the age of fire, but even then I wanted to build a society where there would be no space for traders in religion and untouchability, where walls of discrimination would crumble and a paradise of equality would be created on earth.

That incidentally was my second song. In 1964, I felt that the sky had given me a wide vision, storm tremendous energy, thunder a loud voice, courage and reason-with which I would sing songs of humanity in a sea that was in the grip of pirates, and provide the silent masses a spark of life.

Music is power. Music is empowerment. Remember how those great lyrics had set the entire subcontinent on fire and provided such a great momentum to the freedom struggle? Have you ever met a person who would say he does not like music? Have you ever found a doctor who would ask his patient not to listen to music? Music is communication, very effective communication. Why do you give a coin to the blind singer on the pavement? Not because he is blind, but because he can sing.

What did Rakesh Sharma tell Mrs Gandhi when she asked him how India looked like from space? Saare jahan se achha!

I had always dreamt of an India where every individual would acquire knowledge and skills of communication. Look how strong our tradition has been since the ancient times. One two-letter word-Om!-and you acquire such unbelievable energy. It is divine power and divine energy in the form of music that kindles the fire within an individual.

In 1976, I sang about inter-caste marriages, in which I told a couple who came to seek my blessings: This is the age of mass communication through satellites in outer

space. This is the age of nuclear energy, of snatching away that energy from the evil forces and using it for the benefit of the common man.

India is a vast country. Very few people have been lucky enough to have criss-crossed this country. I am one of the few who have had the opportunity as a singer and filmmaker. Whether it is the illiterate sarkari gaon-burra (village headman) at Dong, the village in the easternmost tip of Arunachal Pradesh where the sun's rays fall first on Indian soil, or the broker at Dalal Street in Mumbai, all are bound by the same music that is India. One hundred crore souls. It is not a matter of joke. Imagine their potential. Gandhiji had realised that. We are fortunate, our President APJ Abdul Kalam understands that. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh understands that. You have to be in touch with the people at the grassroots to be able to kindle the fire in them. You can do that with music. India, after all, is a wonderful mosaic of musical traditions, which can be transformed into musical power.

But I often feel sad when I notice a lack of confidence among the people, especially in the Northeast. I would not blame the young men for taking up arms. We must accept the fact that the benefits of development have not trickled down to the last village. There is a huge communication gap. The rights of the common man to enjoy the benefits of development have been usurped. It is good that the Right to Information Act has come into force. But have we told the masses about it? Have we, as the world's largest democracy, been able to evolve an effective communication model, a two-way model that would make every citizen a partner in our dream to become a developed country by 2025?

Source : The Indian Express, 25th Oct 2005, MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2008

Chronology of events in Dr Bhupen Hazarika's life

- 1926:** Born at Sadiya (Assam) on 8 September to mother Shantipriya Hazarika and father Nilakanta Hazarika.
- 1930:** First appearance as a singer at Cotton Collegiate High School at the age of 5 years. The singing enchanted the greatest Assamese litterateur Lakshminath Bezbaroa who blessed him with a kiss.
- 1936:** First recording of the songs *kakhate kolosi loi jai oi rasaki* and *ulahate nasi-bagi holi biyakul*, composed by Bishnuprasad Rabha, for *palnat* Joymati by Chenola Musical Products Company.
- 1937:** Composed the first song *Kusumbar Putra*.
- 1939:** First acting in the film *Indramalati*. Tuned and sang the song *moina ketia ahili toi* written by his father Nilakanta Hazarika.
- 1940:** Matriculated from Tezpur Government Boy's High School.
- 1942:** Passed Intermediate in Arts from Cotton College. Joins Benaras Hindu University and School of Arts.
- 1943:** All India Radio records Dr Bhupen Hazarika's first song with Queen Hazarika.
- 1944:** Graduated with Honours in Political Science. Contributed to Amrit Bazar Patrika (Allahabad edition) as a student critic.
- 1946:** Completed Post-graduation in Political Science from Benaras Hindu University. Joins B Barooah College in Guwahati as a lecturer for six months.
- 1948:** First appearance as Music Director with Sibaprasad Bhattacharyya in the film *Siraj* (Director: Bishnuprasad Rabha). Joined Gana Natya Sangha.
- 1949:** Joined Columbia University of USA for Ph.D. Participated in New York television programme.
- 1950:** Married Priyambada Patel on August 1. Joined Paul Robeson's Jepherson School of Social Sciences.
- 1952:** Received the Doctorate Degree from Columbia University for his thesis on "Role of Mass Communication in India's Adult Education".
- 1954:** Joined Gauhati University as a lecturer for two years.
- 1956:** Attended World Peace Conference at Helsinki, Russia as a member of Indian Cultural Association led by Dr Meghnad Saha.
- 1960:** Composed *manuhe manuhor babe*.
- 1963:** Presided over the cultural session of Assam Sahitya Sabha.
- 1967:** Elected as an Independent member of Legislative Assembly of Assam from Naoboisa.
- 1968:** The first long playing record of Dr Bhupen Hazarika was released. First in Assamese language.
- 1972:** Attended the Second World Music Conference in Berlin.
- 1973:** Attended the International Youth Festival held in Berlin as a special invitee. Received gold medal for performance. Directed music for the first time in the Hindi film *aarop*.
- 1978:** Performed in England against caste discrimination.
- 1984:** Performed in Dacca television.
- 2000:** Bhupen Hazarika Cultural Trust constituted.
- 2009:** The All Assam Students Union erected a life size statue of Hazarika on the banks of Digholi Pukhuri in Guwahati.
- 2011:** Breathed his last at the Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital and Medical Research Institute in Mumbai on November 5.



Observation of Bhupen Hazarika on some eminent personalities

Sri Sri Sankardeva

Nowhere in India was a versatile personality like Shri Sankardeva been born. Mahatma Gandhi had named the untouchables as “Harijans”. But five hundred years ago, Shri Sankardeva had accorded due status to the highly knowledgeable Radhika, though she belonged



to a low caste. At a later stage, Shri Ram Ata, a disciple of Shri Sankardeva named the tribal chief of Tirap as “Narottam”. According to us, the word Narottam is more meaningful than “Harijan” in the sense that Brahmins and Shudras are also “Harijans”- sons of God. Much before Tagore, Shri Sankardeva initiated residential universities called satras where training was provided in many disciplines. The

Guru also made immense contribution in the field of Philosophy, literature, culture and social reforms. During the days of yore, when means of transport and communication was not as improved as it is now, Shri Sankardeva travelled towards the South and the West, earned and exchanged knowledge. It is largely due to the influence of Shri Sankardeva’s teachings Hindus and Muslims have lived amicably in Assam through generations. The philosophy espoused by Shri Sankardeva is no less revolutionary than that of the modern generation in the sense that Shri Sankardeva’s philosophy is the only “moral embankment” against the erosion of moral ethos of the Assamese society. Shri Sankardeva’s philosophy is relevant even today because he opposed the feudal system, espoused equality, spirituality, and economic reformation, scientific analysis of philosophy and worship of ultimate beauty.

Paul Robson

...My hand is trembling as I am writing this. Paul Robson, the son of a poor slave roared and said , “ As I took the first few steps of my life I realized I am the son of my father who happened to be an American Negro. That was my first challenge.” With this challenge throughout his life, revolutionary singer Paul Robson scaled the heights of international fame. But he spent the last days of his life in despair and passed away at the age of 77. I had the privilege of meeting him personally in New York. Like Ekalavya, from afar I bowed before his towering personality and slowly approached him.

....His songs touched us like flashes of lightning. In a moment at lightning speed , the assembled crowd was inspired to fight against apartheid. His songs opened before us a whole new world of music. His style of singing was unique. Every word of his songs was clear and hence the meaning of his words could pull at the strings of everyone’s heart. The different manifestations of his songs were surprisingly

Bhupen Hazarika on himself and on eminent personalities of India and the world

like that of a classical singer and yet different . One of his spiritual songs, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child; a long way away from home” is still afresh in my mind. I felt as if it was the voice of the lakhs of black people who are fighting to gain dignity as human beings.

Lata Mangeshkar

The famous Urdu poet, Jigar Moradabadi had once said, “a song which flows from the heart and sung by the heart is a true song.”

The Time magazine of America had listed Lata Mangeshkar’s voice as one of the best five voices in the world. As per my personal



experience, Lata is an ‘extraordinarily simple’ lady who does not wear make-up, loves to wear white cotton sarees. She has long black hair which falls below the knees. Lata is a person who donates generously to noble causes. Though she is spiritual like a conservative Hindu, she does not dither to go to the Pakistan border to meet singer Noorjahan, whom she addresses as her guru to gift her a mango grown in her backyard.

A song is not just words and music. A good song also depends on the way it is sung and the pronunciation of the singer. One god-gifted quality of Lata is that she does not depend on electronic tune. Lata does not sing. She paints pictures with music. Lata masters the language in which she sings and pronunciation is usually flawless.

Picasso

Picasso’s unique cubism was born in 1907. He wielded his brush in a manner different from the conventional style. He drew landscapes not with lines but with cubes. His paintings done with cubes of different sizes with broken motifs created lot of furore in the world. His cubistic expressions were a deviation from the established styles of paintings.

He drew his famous painting “Guernica” in the midst of a war. In this famous painting, the pieces of a crying woman’s body strewn here and there and the anatomy of a braying horse were drawn to depict the horrors of war.

Original in Assamese from “Dr Bhupen Hazarika a legend”. Translated in to English by Jolly Saikia Gogoi.

