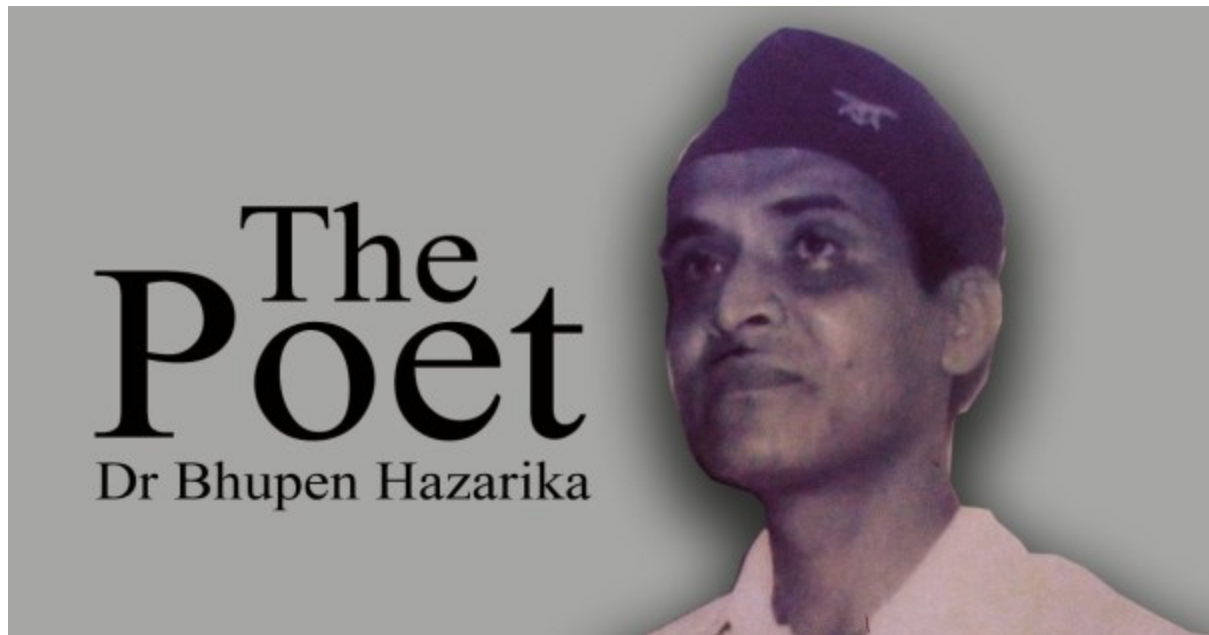


# The Poet Bhupen Hazarika

By Ananda Bormudoj



Bhupen Hazarika's songs are generally poems set to music. The songs have such an adhesive quality in them that they stick to the memory of the listeners. Anybody who has listened to the songs of Bhupen Hazarika is likely to perform a song to himself or herself when alone.

As M. H. Abrams defines, a lyric, in the most common use of the term, is any fairly short poem, consisting of the utterance of a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought and feeling. From this it is clear that a lyric is a poem and a lyricist is a poet. The word also retains the sense of a poem written to be set to music. In any case a lyric is also a poem and the lyricist is also a poet. From this point of view, Dr Bhupen Hazarika is a major modern Assamese poet. The word 'lyric' is a synonym of the word 'poem'. But in Bhupen Hazarika, the eminent musician, the composer and the singer of songs have overshadowed the poet. A close reading of the texts of many of his songs, however, reveals the eminent modern poet in him.

Thematically the poems of Bhupen Hazarika are in sharp contrast with many of his contemporaries. When some of the leading Assamese poets in the fifties of the last century felt that the stream of collective life was running dry and the individual felt lonely and isolated, Bhupen Hazarika boldly addressed the problems faced by the masses of the people and urged upon them to solve their problems with united efforts. He was always optimistic and sanguine and never gave in to despair. He had regards for his audiences and he admitted that the artist in him was a discovery of his audiences. Some of his poems have a story line and the characters are picked up from among the poor and the suffering people.

Bhupen Hazarika, the greatest ever poet singer of modern Assam, began to compose songs in the thirties of the last century. As a poet singer he delights, instructs and provokes thought. Though he

instructs, he should not be judged a didactic poet because he never narrowly enforces meaning. His early songs are marked by a critical awareness of the past. His contact with Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rabha enabled him to be keenly aware of the living moment of the past. His early songs like 'Kusumbarar Putra' and 'Valmiki Ashram' are just two examples.

Bhupen Hazarika's songs are generally poems set to music. The songs have such an adhesive quality in them that they stick to the memory of the listeners. Anybody who has listened to the songs of Bhupen Hazarika is likely to perform a song to himself or herself when alone. His songs have recorded social, political and cultural history of Assam of more than half a century. Most of the memorable songs of Bhupen Hazarika are exquisite lyrics of great emotional intensity and they express emotions and feelings of a single speaker in a personal and subjective fashion. The speaker need not necessarily be the poet-singer himself. In some lyrics autobiographical elements, however, are unmistakable.

Lyricists usually select soft and melodious words for their lyrics but with Bhupen Hazarika it is all different. Some of his poems have passages which are prosaic but the poet singer has the rare gift of creating poetry and music out of any dull and prosaic passage. While composing a lyric, he does not go by the lyricism and musicality of the words. Meaning matters for him and he composes accordingly and he can set any prose passage also to music.

Bhupen Hazarika's audience must have noticed how he uses difficult words with clusters of consonant sounds in some of his popular songs. The language of his poems and songs differentiates him from all other poet singers. The cluster of consonant sounds does not matter when it is the language of love, freedom, friendship and humanity. He can carry his themes across languages and cultures. His songs translated to other languages are an evidence.

Incidentally it may be mentioned that Dr Hazarika had thorough knowledge of modern translation theories. In one of his famous songs Brahmaputra in Assamese original became Ganga in Bengali. Language is culture bound and in translation cultural equivalents are as important as verbal equivalents. Susan Bassnett in *Translation Studies* (Revised Edition, Routledge, London and New York, 1991) makes an important point about cultural equivalents. She says that Scotch whisky in the British context may be defined as the equivalent of Martini in the Italian context, and vice-versa. In the same way Brahmaputra in Assamese becomes Ganga in Bengali though they are two different rivers.

Bhupen Hazarika was keenly aware of the fact that the society he lived in was a class society and some of his exquisite lyrics were written from a class consciousness. The song titled 'Dola' is one such lyric with great emotional intensity. The *dola* bearer sweats his blood out without openly making any protest but his silent suffering and endurance confirm the tragic note in the song. Silent suffering of the masses of the people is a repeated theme in his songs. In a song composed in 1977 he writes: "Haven't you heard/The silent protests of the millions?" In the same song he assures his audience that the break of day lies hidden in the darkness of the night.

Some of the songs of Bhupen Hazarika have a story and they have the quality of ballad that ends in a tragic note. 'Endhar Katir Nishate' composed in 1953 was one such ballad like song. The song is a series of images depicting stark naked poverty of marginalized family.

In an early poem composed in 1965, the poet asks the mighty Brahmaputra some rhetorical