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Issues And Sensibilities Of Ethnicity In The Lyrics Of Bharat Ratna Dr Bhupen Hazarika

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Abstract

The present study is a search of ethnicity represented by Bharat Ratna Dr Bhupen Hazarika in his lyrics. An attempt has been made to explore the invisible exchanges that exist between ethnicity and music in him and how the 'imagined communities' of Hazarika who remained dear to all people cutting across boundaries, generations, caste, creed or sect, evolves the myth of *bor-axom* (Greater Assam). Ethnicity is a form of cultural identity. Hazarika, who had a genius for weaving a magical tapestry out of traditional Assamese music and lyrics, was regarded as one of the greatest cultural communicators of South-East Asia. As a student of Political Science, he observed and understood the contemporary political scenario and as a student of Mass Communication he knew very well how to communicate people, how to go into the core of the heart of the mass people. As a performer, he utilized the strength of music as the weapon for bridging the gap among the ethnic people of the North East. With due methodologies of humanities, this socio-literary study finds the conclusion that this extraordinary balladeer had been rightly represented the ethnic identity of the North Eastern Region of India in his lyrics in an individual and meaningful way.

Index Terms: Ethnicity, Representation, Bhupen Hazarika, Lyric Poetry

The Full Paper

Introduction

With the evolution of Globalization the sensibilities regarding issues of ethnic identity is rising and, consequently, there is rising of ethnic consciousness and awareness all over the world. "Ethnicity is concept probably first used by David Reisman in 1953 but the concept itself is not new nor was the phenomenon new or unrecognized previously; it was merely labeled differently. It has objective as well as subjective connotations. Objectively, it is seen as primordial affinities and attachments and subjectively, as an activated primordial consciousness" (Agrawal 38-39). To quote Chris Barker, "Ethnicity is a cultural concept centered on the sharing of norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices. The formation of 'ethnic groups' relies on shared cultural signifiers that have developed under specific historical, social, and political contexts" (Barker 249). As a result, there seems to a general agreement among academicians, journalists and civil society that there are

serious challenges to the North East India in the forms of ethnic conflict and ethno-nationalism. During the last fifty years of his life, Bharat Ratna Dr Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011) maintained a bohemian life communicating people from place to place, country to country, caring little about his career and family life. This creative artist was a man of extra ordinary abilities, yet a human being having ordinary expectations like a common man. Therefore he could realize the memories and stories of common people including the tribal people of the North East India keeping aside his own personal gains and losses.

Statement of the Problem and Methodology:

The review of literature on Bhupen Hazarika indicates that there has been necessity of a comprehensive critical study of representation of ethnicity in the lyrics of Bhupen Hazarika. The present work seeks to explore selected lyrics of Hazarika in the light of the aspects of representation of ethnicity. The research paper concentrates on the existing critical literature on Hazarika to discuss the sensibilities and issues of ethnicity dealt in his lyrics. Supporting discourses include aesthetic theory, poetics, and cultural studies.

Objectives

The study attempts to explore Bhupen Hazarika's sensibilities regarding the issues of ethnic people of the North East India in his lyrics.

The study also tries to deal with the humanitarian perspectives of his ethnic consciousness as reflected in selected lyrics.

Discussion of Hazarika's Lyrics on Ethnicity

The North-East India is a homogenous zone which topographically lies in the extension of the sub-Himalayan zone. Since very ancient times, the North-East India has been the homeland of the Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids. Actually, maximum of the tribes of the North-East India are Mongoloid but, at the same time, Austric and Dravidian sub-strata have been discerned by the anthropologists. The North-East which is 'geo-politically a very sensitive area' has often been referred as both, 'the folklorist's paradise' and 'the anthropologist's paradise' (Datta 01-02). The North-East is the homeland of a number of populations of various ethnic groups having disparate socio-cultural heritages and speaking different languages.

Xudhakantha Dr Bhupen Hazarika selected the weapon of music for bridging the ethnic groups of people of the North East. A multifaceted genius, he was a poet, music composer, singer, actor, journalist, author, film-maker, politician and orator of the very highest repute. He had been therefore, rightly hailed as the uncrowned king of North East India's cultural arena. This amazing creator composed his own lyrics basically in Assamese language, invented tune, designed and directed music even for films and performed on the stages as a performing artist.

Let us have a story of his life. The eldest of ten children, Bhupen was influenced to the musical insights of his mother who rendered him to lullabies and traditional Assamese music. Hazarika in his autobiographical essay, '*Moi Janmare Pora Jajabor/ Sadiar Pora Bharalu mukhaloi*' a story of his childhood when he was only nine months old: "One day, a few tribal girls of Arunachal Pradesh came and whisked him away in the wooden perambulator that his parents had made for him to lie on. For three whole days and nights he went missing and his parents and the entire family became worried and restless. His father even informed Commissioner and the Commissioner brought police from Tinisukia to search him. But on the fourth day, the tribal women came and returned him to his mother. His mother asked, 'What have you fed him as he is still on breast feeding.' They replied, 'he was indeed fed with the mother's milk of new born baby in our village'" (Bhuyan 20-21). This incident of his very childhood could be the starting point and one of the reasons of his psychological attachment and intimate bond with the ethnic people of the North East. This could be related to the observation: "the famous psychologist, Carl Jung had believed that the unconscious mind was like the earth itself, with layer upon layer of materials containing one's past existence. It was therefore no coincidence, for, the Austrian biologist, Paul Kammerer had said in his book, 'The Law of Seriality' that, 'coincidences did not occur randomly but in series and clusters.' He defined seriality as 'a recurrence of the same or similar things or events in time or space', calling it 'the umbilical cord that connects thought, feeling, science and art with the womb of the universe which gave birth to them'" (Dutta Baruah 27).

In a humanistic way he celebrated his own ethnic communities. He was popularly and fondly called as 'Bhupenda' by his musical fans and appreciators. His popularity amongst all the masses including the ethnic groups of Assam had made his living legend in his life time. He remained indebted to tribal music. In his own words- "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" (Kakati 137).

This extraordinary balladeer had been therefore, rightly represented the ethnic identity of the North Eastern Region of India in a meaningful way. Being immensely popular ambassador of the North East India's rich folk music, he wanted to provide safe and particular space to each and every ethnic community. In his famous song, *Lianmokao* (name of a Khasi young girl) he bade her *khublai shibun* (thanks) and also sang: *teor jainchame khani bijulire boa* [her *jainchame* (garment of Khasi girls) is woven by lightning].

In writing his lyrics, Hazarika basically believed in direct experiences and, as a result, maximum of his lyrics became autobiographical. "His lyrics are filled with allusions to the tribes of the North-East, their innocence, candour and hospitality,

'The Galong of Siyang,

The Khamti of Luit,

The Wanchod of Tirap,

Oh, why do they beckon to me...

...I clasped my Monpa brother to my arms,

He gave me an idol of Buddha in exchange,

Told me, the flag of age-old amity is fluttering...'

Binding the multifarious tribal and non-tribal ethnic entities of the North-East, with a single thread of love has been one of the missions of his life" (Dutta 16-17). Linguistic jingoism and radical assertions of upper-caste Assamese Hindus had led to a fragmentation of undivided Assam in the 1960s. Hazarika was dead opposed to this. 'The broad clouds of the wet Cherrapunji sky cuddle our Brahmaputra in the shape of rains,' he sang in the Assamese song,

'He he he dhole dagare

He he he hiyar umere

Nedekha anajarire

E bandho ami pahar khikharare mahan Siemak...'advocating the unity of Assamese in the plains and *Khasis* in the Meghalaya hills. And lyric such as-

'Tirap Ximanto

Rupor nai anto

Nokte wanchu

Tangsa uglir

Dekhilu monor seuj diganta...' created such a unique bond between Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. He used his music as a potent tool in bridging divides, but the same music also reflected a deep-rooted commitment to his Assamese roots, its people, land, language and culture. Hazarika appeared like a messiah of the Brahmaputra valley, representing their aspirations.

Benedict Anderson's popular work on nationalism, ('Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism') which describes it as 'imagined into existence', touches the spirit of Hazarika's lyrical narrative somewhat. Anderson believed that a nation is a socially constructed community imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. He defined a nation as 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'. An 'imagined community' is basically different from an actual community. The imagined community is not (and cannot be) based on everyday face-to-face interaction between its members. Instead, members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity: for example, the nationhood felt with other members of our nation when our 'imagined community' participates in the Olympics. Hazarika has created a huge imagined community in his life time through the humanitarian approach to his creativity.

As Anderson puts it, a nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"(Anderson 06). Members of the community probably will never know one another face to face; however, they may have similar interests or identify as part of the same nation. After the death of Hazarika, his own 'imagined communities' paid tribute to him that shocked the world for the participation of his imagined communities. He envisioned the creation of a great Assamese 'nationality' with due inclusivity and plurality in its very essence. He constructed a landscape of green and golden Mother Assam. His one of the popular songs, *Mahabahu Brahmaputra* visualizes the mighty Brahmaputra as being the holy site of great synthesis through the ages. His became the voice of the people of Assam in the expression of sub nationalist Assamese aspiration. He glorified every community of the North East and paid particular respect to each and, thus, he built his own 'imagined communities' having a dignified space for tribal people of the region.

Wherever he was, the entire North East remained in his heart and as a result, he became the last of the crusaders of the myth of *bor-axom*. From his root he sang the songs of nationality, humanity and universality. Romanticizing his imagination he composed—

'Moi Kohimare adhunika Dalimi

Moi Godapani adhunik bhoiyamar

Aji ami duyoy sahajatri

Guwahati abhimukhi nisar railor.

(I am a modern Dalimi of Kohima

I am Godapani of modern valley

Tonight, we are co-passengers

On the night train to Guwahati.)

He remained responsible to the tradition of Assamese music. 'He prefers to retain the simplicity of folk-music and use as few instruments in his compositions as possible, that too primarily indigenous ones' (Dutta 07). He not only studied folk, indigenous and tribal music but also revived and popularized; he did to Assamese folk music as Lakshminath Bazbarua did to Assamese folk tales. He was inspired by Assamese *bhakti-sangeet* and *jikir* and *jari*; and contributed a lot for these kinds of music. Indeed, the self-critical, self-analytical and self-confessed 'roving minstrel' belongs to all, cutting across caste, creed and religion, crossing borders of states. He represented green landscape of the tea-estate and its people:

“Eti kali duti pat
 Ratanpur bagichat
 Lahpahiya hatere koneno singile
 O’ koneno single?”

(Two leaves and a bud
 In the Ratanpur tea-estate
 Who plucked with bonny hands?)

The allusions of his songs depict ethno-culture of the North East. Such as:

Ei maihung batit khoad pani
Jase kone kot?

(Where and by whom

The tasty water is offered in the *maihung* bowl?) Here the liquor served in the *maihung* bowl is a dish used by the Ahoms of rank.

The entire philosophy of his musical performances is reflected in his song:

‘*Moor gaan hauwk*
Bahu asthahinotar biporite
Ek gobhi rasthar gaan...’

(Let my song be
 A profound assurance
 Against the pervading lack of trust.)

Conclusion

As the balladeer of the masses Hazarika always envisaged the creation of a great Assamese community, inclusive in its very essence. His lyrics are filled with allusions to the tribes of the North East. The Ethnic awareness of him focuses on the ethnic groups’ customs sensed by a group of its cultural distinctiveness in contrast to other group. His music, being the popular culture, represented the ethnic life and culture as constructed images. The ethno-cultural landscape of his music refers to the form of representation as an art and as a complex system of meaning.

He was the willful optimist who always dreamt of weaving together various ethnic aspirations to create a ‘Golden Assam’, integrated in harmony. As he befriended the legendary Paul Robeson, his lessons on humanity and universalism were to last Hazarika’s entire life. Known for writing strong lyrics with themes of communal amity, universal justice and empathy, his songs have become popular among all sections of ethnic and religious communities.. His music evolves out of a mix and cross-fertilization of cultural practices, and the same is attained through a performative aesthetics. His lyrics are his sayings to show the future path for his ‘imagined communities’. He chanted with his divine voice:

'Manuhe manuhar babe

Jadihe akano nabhabe

Akani sahanubhutire

Bhabiba koneno kowa, Samania...'

(If man does not think of man
Who else, my friend, will think
Of man
With sympathy?)

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