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## Exploring colonial domination in Bhupen Hazarika's praxis of culture

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### Abstract

Politics and culture are two distinct dimensions of human praxis, yet they are deeply interconnected and influence one another in complex ways. Politics is often conceived as an instrument to resist injustice and exploitation, forming an integral part of revolutionary praxis. Within this context, culture plays a crucial role, as it mobilizes people to participate in social movements and advocate for transformative change. Artists inspired by communist ideology have frequently employed culture as a means to achieve political objectives, particularly the transformation of society. Bhupen Hazarika, the celebrated people's artist of Assam, pursued a cultural mission aimed at liberating the masses from various forms of bondage and exploitation. For him, culture was never detached from politics; rather, it was infused with revolutionary ideology, which found expression in his creative praxis. Disturbed by the turmoil and unrest brought about by British imperialism, Hazarika envisioned an independent India free from oppression and exploitation. This article seeks to examine Hazarika's anticolonial stance through the lens of his cultural praxis.

**Keywords:** Politics, culture, praxis, revolution, ideology

### Introduction

Politics and culture are two separate aspects of human life. However, both are interconnected and influence each other in complex ways. The reciprocal interaction between culture and politics, known as cultural politics in Marxian perspectives, gives new impetus to societal life. In cultural politics discourse, political and cultural movements are seen as inextricably linked. In Marxist thought, an attempt is made to develop a materialistic account of the interrelations between politics and other aspects of human praxis. This interface between politics and culture provides distinctive definitions of both politics and culture. Regarding the definition of politics, it is said that politics is an indispensable part of human society. Politics is conceived as an instrument to fight against injustice and exploitation. Thus, it is a part of a revolutionary process.

Culture is one of the important aspects of human practice. It is a separate sphere of aesthetic production that involves the cultivation and development of human practices, particularly in the productive life of the people. All the rituals, institutions, rites, art, music, rhymes, and rhythms associated with the cultivation and development of practices in productive life may constitute the culture of a people. It signifies both the material and spiritual development of humankind. In Marxist aesthetics, cultural products are seen as reflections of the economic and social relations of the base. In other words, the ideas, values, and consciousness of the people of a given political set-up are reflected through the culture of that society. People with an inclination towards communist ideology believe that culture is a powerful weapon of the masses against injustice, exploitation, and oppression.

In every society, men are involved in different types of creative activities, like arts and crafts, literature, dance, music, etc., that reflect the culture of that particular society. Music is an integral cultural component with a cohesive and perpetuating force. It can be used as a strong instrument of social change. Music is the most effective medium for communicating with the masses. Music has the natural power to draw the attention of the people. Therefore, it has always been used for the expression of social protest as well as for publicity. Songs based on nationalistic sentiment unite people belonging to various castes, creeds, and regions. The revolutionary songs can awaken the people and urge them to revolutionary change.

Music inculcates in us the feelings of peace, harmony, and national unity. Music can be a potent form of political expression, allowing artists to convey complex emotions and ideas in a way that transcends traditional political discourse. It can be used to promote political ideologies, challenge dominant narratives, and create a sense of community and solidarity among marginalized groups. At the same time, music can also be co-opted by political forces, used to manipulate public opinion, and even employed as a tool of social control.

Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011) was born at Sadiya (Assam) on 8th September 1926 to mother Shantipriya Hazarika and father Nilakanta Hazarika. In his 85 years of life, it is found that he worked and sang for the cause of humanity. His contributions to the social, political, literary, and cultural fields have a deep impact on Assam and the entire North-east India. When Bhupen Hazarika was born (1926), India was passing through a critical situation. At that time, India was under colonial rule. The people of India were fighting against British imperialism. The first twenty years of his life (1926-1946) were marked by the rise of nationalism, widespread economic exploitation caused by British imperialism, social disparities, and the rise of communalism. At that time, religious, caste-based discrimination was prevalent in Indian society. The British government's oppressive policies and disregard for the welfare of Indian citizens further intensified tensions and resistance against imperial rule. The exploitation and injustices faced by the Indian population under British rule led to a growing sense of national identity and unity among various communities. The period also saw the emergence of influential leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who played pivotal roles in India's struggle for independence. Everyone expected the change in society and the beginning of a new era. It was a period of unrest and conflicts, which Hazarika termed as Agni Yug (Age of Fire). In this regard, Professor Dilip Kumar Dutta comments:

The first twenty years of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's life, from 1926 to 1946, were referred to as the 'age of fire' because they encompassed the nonviolent freedom movement in India, which Mahatma Gandhi started. When Dr. Hazarika was young, he discovered a spark of the age of fire within himself. When he witnessed the British rulers' oppression at a young age, his heart revolted. Witnessing the psychological and physical torment of the people living under British rule broke his heart. He wrote the national song Agni Jugar Phiringoti Moi (I am the spark of the age of fire) out of his revolting mind, acting as though he had sworn to contribute to the creation of an independent India. His beliefs in communism and glimpses of revolution can be heard in a number of his songs <sup>[1]</sup>.

Hazarika was disturbed by British colonialism. Therefore, with the help of his praxis of culture, he tried to portray the colonial domination and exploitation of the Indians. In the song "Fesuye Karile Siu" (The Fesu Hoots) included in the film Maniram Dewan (1963), he narrates the cruelty of colonial rulers. The following song has a unique tune of protest:

The Fesu bird hoots, O my father

Fesu makes the sound 'siu'.

Maniram Dewan was hanged

His soul flew into the sky <sup>[2]</sup>.

Citing the example of Maniram Dewan, he tended to show how the colonial power used to suppress the spirit of the

rebels. In another song titled Dukhare Upari Dukh Mur Raij Oo, he explains how the sorrow and suffering of the Indian people had increased after the establishment of the Company Rule. He further added how Esta India Company, after coming for trade, captured political power. His criticism of British imperialism is very much evident in this song:

The company has come to the threshold

And said, let me sit for a while

Crossing the sitting room entered inside

Stabbed in the breast <sup>[3]</sup>.

In another stanza of the song, he writes:

In the court-yard of Rang-ghar has no cheer

Where does colour go?

Oh! my father

Gloom encompasses the Talatal

Oh! my father

Darkness culminates here <sup>[4]</sup>

In this song, he used certain metaphors such as "snakes" dwell in the floor of the main room" (barghar majiyat sape bahe lale), grass grows (banana uthile gaji), the country becomes a crematory (deshkhan hal marishali), no music is played in Shivadol (Shivaredolate doba naikiya), "no sound of the pipe" (pepati nebaje bhai), etc, to expose the exploitative and painful condition created by British colonialism.

In addition to it, two of his songs, Piyali Piyali Kateno Lukali (O Piyali Where Have You Hidden!) and Ramake Jamake Asil Mor Asomi (Mother Assam was Flowery and Joyous), also find expression of colonial oppression and suffering of colonized subjects. In the song titled Piyali Piyali, Bhupen Hazarika clearly expressed how Piyoli Phukon, who was hanged by the British, played a significant role in India's fight against the Britishers and enabled to instil a revolutionary consciousness among the Assamese people. He writes:

The people will light the flame of salvation

The Platform Set Up by Piyoli

The commander of the freedom struggle <sup>[5]</sup>

In Ramake Jamake Asil Mor Asomi (Mother Assam was Flowery and Joyous), he again explains the pitiable conditions of Assam as perpetuated by British colonialism. He explained how, after the advent of British imperialism, the condition of Assam worsened day by day. He writes:

Amar Mojiyat Hogun Bopurai

Khay Morah Tani

Joyare Dolote Fesai Kuruliyai

Asomor jatona Dekhi

Kinu Din Porile Aji <sup>[6]</sup>

In another song, O Mur Bhoyai (Ooh My Brother), written in 1946, he recalls the golden period of Ahom Rule and the pitiable condition of the people during the British period.

O' mur Bhoyai, O' mur Bhoniti

Puroni Asomor akashkhonit

Gourobor puhor oi romoke-jomoke

.....

Hikhon akashot Koliya dayore

Sariufale Abori dhorile

.....

Radhika Jayare Dhorom binondia

.....

Lachitar Hengdang pisoli porile

.....

Dhorota norole kunu <sup>[7]</sup>

Apart from visualizing the darkest period of British

colonialism, this song also mentions the historical legends (Lachit, Jaya) as the epitome of bravery and sacrifice to reiterate the past glory of the land. It is found that Bhupen Hazarika was disturbed by the situation of unrest that occurred due to British colonialism. It was in this period that Bhupen Hazarika wanted to be a spark for social change. Agni Yugor Phiringoti Moi is a clear manifestation of the situation. He writes:

Of the fiery age I'm a spark  
I will build up a new Assam  
To the have-nots I'll bring  
Back whatever they've lost  
I will build up a new Assam  
Making arms of human bones  
The exploiters I will kill  
To the have-nots I'll bring back  
Whatever they've lost)<sup>[8]</sup>

Bhupen Hazarika's vision of a new society was clearly reflected in this song. He envisioned an ideal society where there would be no distinctions between individuals based on their caste, religion, or community. This society, he envisaged, would be free from all types of exploitation. It would be a society without any conflict. Such a society would be a heaven of equality, love, and brotherhood. Besides, his protest against all forms of exploitation and injustices is expressed.

He indeed wrote this song in his teenage years (13 Years). At that time, he did not come closer to Marxist philosophy. But it is assumed that it was due to his close association with Bishnuprasad Rava, the communist revolutionary who inspired him to compose such a rebellious song. His song Agni Jugar Phirangoti Moi, written during his stay in Tezpur, bears traces of Rabha's socialist idealism. Although this song reflects his agony toward the British Rule and urge for an independent India (New India), no evidence is found that he actively participated in the nation's war for independence. It is notable that his mentors, JP Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava, actively participated in the freedom movement launched by the INC. But such a type of political praxis is found to be lacking in Bhupen Hazarika. Regarding JP Agarwala's active involvement, Dhiren Bhagawati writes:

It was the time of the freedom movement of the country under the leadership of the Indian National Congress. Jyotiprasad plunged into the movement from his student days and took an active part in organizing the workers for the movement. Once, he was sentenced to fifteen months of rigorous imprisonment. When his health broke down in the prison, he was to be released on parole, but he refused it and completed the term. His involvement in the Non-cooperation Movement of 1920 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 was most inspiring for the people. Like Orpheus, Jyotiprasad, with his musical and poetic skills, ignited the fire of patriotism among the masses and enchanted them to throng the freedom movement<sup>[9]</sup>.

Likewise, Bishnuprasad Rava became revolutionary during his student life. From his student life itself, he launched a struggle against both British imperialism and the native exploiters<sup>[10]</sup>. According to Dr. Hiren Gohain, "The massive public awakening of the 1940s inspired Jyoti Prasad and must have inspired Bhupen Hazarika"<sup>[11]</sup>. It was quite natural on the part of Bhupen Hazarika that a boy of just 4/5 years did not take part in the civil disobedience movement that started in 1930. But it is unnatural that he did not participate in the mass movement of 1942, popularly known

as the Quit India movement, when he was 16<sup>th</sup> years old. At that time, Hazarika was studying at Cotton College, which was one of the centres of the political rehearsals in Assam. It is noteworthy that in 1936, students of the College protested against the Cunningham circular. Surprisingly, being a student of Cotton College, who had already utilized his revolutionary song, Agni Jugor Phiringoti Moi, to voice his disapproval of British rule, had seen the turmoil and unrest in Tezpur and Guwahati and had a close relationship with JP Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava, did not participate in any freedom movement activities during the Quit India movement.

Thus, it can be deduced that at that time, he was more concerned with his academic career and the poor economic conditions of his family, rather than the freedom of the country. Compared to his cultural pursuits, he was less politically involved. At that time, people came to know him because of his musical talent. He could ignite the fire of patriotism with the help of his musical talent. But, except for the revolutionary cultural practice (Agni Yugor Phirigoti Moi), which expressed his frustration with the British Rule and desire for an independent India, no concrete attempt was made by Bhupen Hazarika in this regard.

## Conclusion

Bhupen Hazarika's aesthetic production or cultural practices were a strong response to contemporary historical developments. He was a total artist. Imbued with socialistic and nationalistic sentiment, he reacted to almost all the major happenings during his lifetime. In a colonized country like India, Bhupen Hazarika's political praxis evolved in response to the anti-colonial struggle. The first twenty years of his life (1926-46) are considered the Age of Fire. However, anti-colonial pan-Indian nationalism was later replaced by communism. During his close association with IPTA, his anti-establishment stand and fight against exploitation and domination become more intensified, and this was reflected in his praxis of culture. In conclusion, it can be asserted that, Hazarika's anti-colonial stance makes it abundantly evident how politics and culture interact and how culture may serve as a vehicle for political expression.

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