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Negotiating Nation and Cosmopolitan Identity: Nationalism, Synchronicity and Transcendentalism in Bhupen Hazarika's Selected Songs in Bengali

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the instrumental role of the ideas of Romantic nationalism, cosmopolitanism, synchronicity, and transcendentalism in identity formation and nationalist self-fashioning in selected songs by Bhupen Hazarika (8th September 1926- 5th November 2011) in the context of late twentieth-century India. Given the limited scope of this paper, two songs from his oeuvre, namely “Bistirno Dupare” (1952) and “Ami Ek Jajabor” (1968), have been selected for a postcolonial critical analysis. The methodology applied herein is a close reading of his selected songs, translated into Bengali by Shibdas Banerjee. Some elementary works have been done primarily on Hazarika's influence on Assamese culture and literature through Marxist and thematic readings of transnationalism. However, this paper endeavours to contribute to the existing scholarship by situating Hazarika's songs within the ideo-cultural context of late 20th-century India, arguing that, despite their transnational bent, they remain deeply rooted in the ideo-political context of the same period, as they attempt a romantic nationalist self-fashioning of the newly independent nation.

Keywords: Bhupen Hazarika, Cosmopolitanism, Transcendentalism, Synchronicity, Romantic Nationalism.

Introduction

Bhupen Hazarika's songs, both in the original Assamese language and in translations, have not only been important works of literary art

but also a widely popular aspect of the evolving cultural space of twentieth-century India. His works are noted for their universality, socialist ideology, and simple yet beautiful lyrics – expressing the emotions of the masses. Hazarika has often been called the “citizen of the world” in research papers examining the transnational tendencies in his work. This research paper aims to problematise this transnational concept and trace the subtle ideological politics of romantic nationalism evident in his lyrics, which attempt at a conscious self-fashioning of the newly formed nation of independent India.

This paper uses select songs of Hazarika in Bengali translation for this purpose. A close reading of these songs as literary texts through a critical postcolonial lens, focusing on the Romantic nationalist ideological politics they embody, constitutes the primary methodology. Friedrich Engels's ‘cultural cosmopolitanism’ and Homi K. Bhabha's idea of ‘hybridity’ form the primary theoretical framework. The translations, mostly by Shibdas Banerjee, though not always literal, keep the essential meaning and flavour of the songs intact. “Bistirno Dupare” (1952) and “Ami Ek Jajabor” (1968) are the two songs selected for discussion. The researcher admits taking the liberty of translating the Bengali verses into English for the benefit of readers.

There have been other studies discussing Hazarika's lyrics as upholding North Eastern culture and concerns on the world stage. Dhrubajyoti Saikia's article, “Marxism and Political Praxis of Bhupen Hazarika”, explores the Marxist leanings evident in Hazarika's songs, which speak empathetically about the weak and the downtrodden (1). Dulal Hazarika's article, “Social Consciousness and Expectations of a New Society in Bhupen Hazarika's Songs”, through its analytical reading, articulates the vision of a “new society” in North East India (88).

The article “Lyrics of Bhupen Hazarika: A Thematic Study” by Subasana Mahanta, as the title suggests, explores the thematic concerns highlighting Hazarika’s universal and humanistic views (231). The doctoral thesis of Dhrubajyoti Malakar, titled *Riverscapes, Seasons and Love: A Study of Romanticism in Bhupen Hazarika’s Lyrics*, explores Hazarika’s poetic journey through a Romantic and ecocritical reading of his lyrics (v).

This paper specifically takes up what is largely unexplored: the problematic ideas of cultural cosmopolitanism and Romantic ‘national’ identity formation, a comprehensive space between regionality and universality. Thus, this research article aims to examine the politics of national identity formation that extend beyond immediate regional identity, while also highlighting the rootedness of Hazarika’s ideology in the Indian context despite its apparent universal, transnational veneer.

This paper has been organised into five sections, beginning with an introduction that highlights the research argument, the research gap, and the methods and methodology in brief. This section is followed by a discussion of Romantic Nationalism as evident in Hazarika’s selected songs in the second section. The third section guides the discussion towards changes in ideology over the decade and their manifestation in his select songs. The Fourth section attempts to assess the musical stylistics that substantiate the main research argument. The fifth section marks the conclusion.

Hazarika and the Legacy of Romantic Nationalism

Hazarika’s creative oeuvre emerges at the time of newly independent India’s emergence. His songs are set in the early years of a nation rebuilding itself from scratch, emerging from the shadow of colonial rule. Communal rifts, poverty and other generic socio-economic crises unique to India were the dominant issues of the contemporary period. In such a socio-economic context, he uses

his songs as an instrument for nation-building. His songs, through their unifying metaphors of time and space, primarily expressed in symbolic imagery of natural landscapes, become fundamental in forging a national identity. His songs attempt to locate a shared history of pride; imagine an eternal essence of shared values to forge a sense of belonging and create an identity rooted in its land, with a legacy that can forge a shared future. All of these are typical attributes of Romantic nationalist writings, which sought to construct an “imagined community” (Anderson 25), the nation of India, through constructing an essentialist idea using myths, legends and cross-cultural emblems.

For instance, in the first song in the selection, “Bistirno Dupare”, Hazarika extensively uses the metaphor of the Ganga (designated India’s national river in 2008 for its cultural, historical, and ecological significance) as the life force of the nation. The very use of the river Ganga is politically significant, especially the lines:

স্রোতস্বিনী কেন নাহি বও?
তুমি নিশ্চয়ই জাহ্নবী নও
তাহলে, প্রেরণা দাও না কেন?
উন্মত্ত ধরার-
কুরুক্ষেত্রের-
শরশয্যাকে আলিঙ্গন করা-
লক্ষকোটি ভারতবাসীকে,
জাগালে না কেন? (Banerjee, “Bistirno
Dupare”; *ln.* 23-29)

Dear River, why do you not flow?
You are not Jahnvi, definitely I know
Then why don’t you inspire?
The embracers of the bed of arrows
of the frenzied land of Kurukshetra¹,
The lakhs and crores of Indians
Why did you not awaken? (my trans.)

In these lines, the lyricists tacitly evoke the

epic myths of the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*, often called *itihasa* or ‘lived histories.’ He specifically champions the self-sacrificing, pure, and unfettered ideas intrinsic to Ganga. This may be clarified further by a brief explanation of the myths that the lyricist consciously evokes here. First, Hazarika specifically differentiates ‘Ganga’ from ‘Jahnvi’. Technically, Ganga and Jahnvi refer to the same North Indian River, but the subtle difference lies in their mythical symbolism. According to Hindu Mythology, when, on Bhagirath’s plea, Ganga descended to the mortal realm, she disturbed sage Jahnu’s meditation by flooding his hermitage, as she was unable to control her wild power. Enraged, the sage devoured her completely. Only after much request, did he release her through his ears. Thus, metaphorically, this became her second birth, and her association with sage Jahnu, who symbolically became her father figure, earned her the name Janhavi. (“Jahnavi”) But emblematically, what differentiates Jahnvi from Ganga is the disciplined, subdued nature mediated by a mortal ascetic. Thus, in Hazarika’s lyrics, Ganga represents the ‘original’, ‘untempered’, ‘uncorrupted’ heavenly spirit of unbridled life force which connects one to the divine.

Second, Ganga is referred to as the embracer of the “bed of arrows”. This evokes the image of Bhishma, pierced by arrows, lying in the battle of Kurukshetra, awaiting death. Bhishma is the son of Ganga and Santanu, known for his legendary oath and strength of character, a man who sacrificed his own happiness and material gains for the happiness of his loved ones. Throughout the lyrics, Hazarika evokes this image of the brave, self-sacrificing, courageous figure as the ideal Indian revolutionary man in his attempt to fashion an Indian identity imbued with patriotic zeal. In this song in particular, Hazarika imagines a reconstruction of a progressive, communitarian society to tide over the state of contemporary socio-economic crisis. In the song, he asks Ganga to destroy the “stagnant society” (my trans.) and “civilisation devoid of its

own independent personality” (my trans.), critiquing the colonial hangover. Ganga is considered a mother goddess who nurtures and purifies life, a problematic idea in ecofeminism, where the nationalist ideology of foregrounding mother and celebrating motherhood is held suspect. Even in this lyric, the tone of the song is that of complaint against a mother who is unperturbed by the rising decadence of her child. This song, written in 1952, was composed against the backdrop of the first Lok Sabha election in Independent India, following the first Indo-Pak war of 1948-49. The use of Hindu mythology and North Indian cultural references clearly indicates the lyricist’s rootedness in his own socio-ideological context. It was necessary to recreate a sense of Indian identity in line with the dominant nationalist ideological discourse. At this moment, one must remember that India was still in the process of organising and reorganising its state structure, creating a flux in the traditionally accepted ideas of one’s identity, which was still in the making.

The Changing Context and Ideas

Bhupen Hazarika wrote “Ami Ek Jajabar” in the year 1968. The decade after the first phase of nation-building saw a change in ideological prioritisation. The Cold War era, the Indo-China and Indo-Pak wars, and the nation’s changing socio-political landscape all contributed to this change. One must remember that by 1968, state reorganisation and assimilation had already reached their climax. A comprehensive democracy was already in place. The song “Ami Ek Jajabor” has a cosmopolitan bent that foregrounds the vision of cultural exchange with the world: assimilation and globalisation. In the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* by J. A. Cuddon, cosmopolitan writing is defined as “an attempt to cross the boundaries and frontiers of nations and nationalism; it stresses the global nature of everyday life and tries to depict societies and individuals as globally representative” (160). For instance, the following

lines from the poem clearly reveal this cosmopolitan urge:

আমি গঙ্গার থেকে মিসিসিপি হয়ে ভল্গার রূপ দেখেছি।
 অটোয়ার থেকে অস্ট্রিয়া হয়ে প্যারিসের ধুলো মেখেছি।
 আমি ইলোরার থেকে রঙ নিয়ে দূরে শিকাগো শহরে
 দিয়েছি।
 গালিবের শয়ের তাসখন্দের মিনারে বসে শুনেছি।
 (Banerjee, “Ami Ek Jajabor”; *ln.* 6-9)

From Ganga via Mississippi, I have seen the beauty of Volga
 From Ottawa via Austria, have I smeared the dust of Paris.
 I painted the distant city of Chicago, carrying colours from Ellora
 I have heard the *shayari* of Galib sitting from the minarets of Tashkent (my trans.)

A distinct Tagorian ethos of East-West confluence and synchronicity is evident in these lines, resonating with Rabindranath Tagore’s poem “Bharattirtha,” translated into English as “The Indian Pilgrimage” by Indira Devi Choudhurani:

Now the door has opened to the West
 and gifts in hand, they beckon and come--
 they will give and take, meet and bring together,
 none shall be turned away
 from the shore of this vast sea of humanity
 that is India. (*ln.* 19-24)

Tagore makes India the site of confluence, where the “principles of unification and assimilation” are at work (8). Hazarika’s poetic self goes a step further, embodying the very site of cultural confluence, becoming a site of “hybridity” (Bhabha 25). The idea of the unity of all creation, which forms one of the central spiritual tenets of transcendentalism, comes into play.

It is interesting to note the application of the transcendental metaphor of a nomadic wanderer in

this respect. It has been problematised. Unlike an aimless nomadic wanderer, the poetic persona once again tacitly isolates himself in his clear statement of purpose. “বহু যাযাবর লক্ষ্যবিহীন, আমার রয়েছে পণ-রঙের খনি যেখানে দেখেছি, রাঙিয়ে নিয়েছি মন” (Banerjee, “Ami Ek Jajabor”; *ln.* 14-15): Many wanderers wander aimlessly, I have a goal—/ Wherever found I mines of colour, have I coloured my soul (my trans.). First, the lyricist subtly advances the idea of embodying the Indian spirit, as Tagore clearly states in his poem “Bharattirtha”. Second, the driving force for his action, or his ‘goal’, is rooted in his ideology of socio-political egalitarianism and cultural synthesis. In this context, his early association with the leftist IPTA may also be cited as an influencing factor. Marxism held bourgeois cosmopolitanism as suspect. Hazarika, however, emphasises “cultural cosmopolitanism”, celebrated by Friedrich Engels (305). There is a shift of ideas commensurate with the growing socio-economy of diaspora and migration, where the home is in the mind.

The Politics of Music

Songs are not mere lyrics. They are poems set to music. Hazarika himself was the music director for both songs. Notable is the distinct use of the flute in the Bengali versions of the songs, giving them an unmistakable Indian flavour. The song “Bistirno Dupare” is inspired by Paul Robeson’s “Ol’man River”, a song carrying forward the legacy of the Blues music, which became an expression of the plights of the racially subjugated Afro-American communities in the Deep South of America of the 1870s. The two versions, Assamese and Bengali, have subtle differences. The former is closer to the orchestral composition of Robeson’s song than the latter. Nonetheless, the revolutionary accent remains intact in both. The other song, “Ami ek Jajabor”, uses a stylistically altered version of Indian classical ragas to cater to the aesthetic tastes of the populace of contemporary society. This pan-Indian flavour that Hazarika applied in his music

choreography further substantiates my argument. India by then was an established “Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic” as stated in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution (ln. 2-3). Hazarika’s songs embodied these values.

Conclusion

As the discussion above shows, in a nutshell, Hazarika was a consciously national lyricist and composer, beyond his regional and transnational tendencies. In the formative years of the independent nation of India, Bhupen Hazarika’s songs carried forward the legacy of Romantic nationalism to hammer out a national identity on the lines of the dominant, pragmatic ideological view of the time, which changed over the years. Though romantic nationalism is problematic in itself, it has nonetheless been instrumental in shaping collective identity in the early phases of all nations. Added to this was consideration of the popular taste of the Bengal audience at the time, which the Bengali version of the song catered to. It is worth noting that throughout his long career, Hazarika sought to overcome this restrictive lens through his socialist and secular bent. This paper acknowledges its limited scope, as two songs can by no means provide an exhaustive picture. However, the selected songs, chosen over an almost decade-long gap, allow one to perceive the evolving ideas over the years. If anything, this research paper may be seen as one of the many entries into the dynamic and rich literary cultural reading on Bhupen Hazarika, who had won Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian award in India, for his contribution to Indian music and culture, a fact that in itself substantiates the argument proposed in this paper.

End Notes:

¹ Kurukshetra, or ‘Land of Kurus’ is currently, a district in Haryana, India. “Kurukshetra has been described in the first verse of the Shrimadbhagavatgita, in the form of Dharmakshetra Kurukshetra. Kurukshetra is a place of great historical and religious significance, which is seen with reverence in all the countries due to its association with the Vedas and Vedic culture. This is the land on which the battle of Mahabharata was fought and Lord Krishna gave Arjuna a fair knowledge of the philosophy of karma in the Jyotisar.” (“About District”)

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