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Confluence of Music and Literature: A Study of Bhupen Hazarika's Songs

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Abstract

Bhupen Hazarika's songs have travelled beyond literacy, class, caste, culture, geography and time. This paper argues that his songs are both a musical and literary achievement. Music is the art of combining sounds to create meaningful expressions of emotion: it may consist of vocal sounds, instrumental sounds, or a combination of both. A vocal song is a specific type of music that needs words. If a versatile singer writes the lyrics for his songs himself, has the talent to set fitting tunes to them, to compose the appropriate music for them, is a genuine poet, a voracious reader of serious literature, conversant with the poetic traditions, has extraordinary command over the language in which he or she writes, has the empathy for the sufferings of his people, he or she has a great opportunity to imbue his or her lyrics with deep philosophies of life, rhythm, and energy which can be felt even on paper without musical accompaniment. In that case, his or her lyrics may be read as serious poetry, and his or her songs may become both a musical and literary achievement. Bhupen Hazarika is a glaring example in this regard. What sets him apart is not the fact that he wrote the lyrics for his songs himself, set tunes to them, composed the music, and sang them; but that he was extraordinary in all of these roles. In this paper, I have regarded him as a singer par excellence, an exceptional music composer, and a serious poet through his lyrics. His lyrics hold their own as serious poetry, standing on words alone, on the page. The medium of literature is language, and poetry is its oldest branch.

Keywords: *Bhupen Hazarika, lyrics, musical artistry, serious poetry.*

Introduction

The medium of music is sound, and it is as old as humanity. It is an all-encompassing term: "the art of combining vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion" (Concise Oxford Dictionary 1004). The vocal song is a specific type of music whose core elements are lyrics, melody, musical composition, and vocal expression. When all four elements work in perfect harmony—powerful lyrics that delve deep into life's philosophies, a fitting tune, an appropriate musical composition, and deep singing that effectively expresses the emotion of the lyrics—in a song, it becomes an unforgettable masterpiece that stands the test of time. While the tune or melody of a song affects us emotionally with immediacy, the thought contained in its words may affect us intellectually. I want to emphasise one of the key elements of vocal songs: lyrics. If we examine some of our favourite songs very closely, we see that not all of them have powerful lyrics. Despite the weaker lyrics, we love to listen to them because of the great musical composition

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and singing style. Some songs of Jayanta Hazarika don't have powerful lyrics; it feels as though the words are just there to be sung. But in his inimitable melodic voice and strong musical composition, they become marvelous songs. This is simply because music is primarily the art of sounds. That is why we are mesmerized by some songs even though we don't understand a single word in them. We don't enjoy a song so much if it is musically weak and sung mechanically. Ultimately, a great song is one where the lyrics are magnificent, the musical composition matches the theme, and the vocal performance is marvellous. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines lyrics as "the words of a song" (2010: 921). Now one question comes to my mind: Can song lyrics be read as serious poetry? True, without musical accompaniment, song lyrics on paper often feel flat, lacking rhythm and energy, and seem to be loosely structured lines in casual diction. My attempt here is to suggest that some lyrics can easily be categorized as serious poetry. It will be a fallacy to expect every lyricist to possess poetic sensibility. But if a lyricist is a genuine poet, a voracious reader of serious literature, conversant with the poetic traditions, endowed with empathetic imagination to delve deep into complexities of life, can handle the language in which he or she writes in the best possible ways, he or she has a great opportunity to imbue his or her lyrics with rhythm and energy which can be felt even on paper without musical accompaniment. If the lyricist does this in the desired way, his lyrics will attain literary value, and they can be read as serious poetry. If the same lyricist is also endowed with singing talent, and has musical knowledge to give appropriate music to the words, then there is every possibility that his or her songs will be both a musical and literary achievement. People may listen to them for listening pleasure when they are beautifully sung with musical accompaniment, or read them on paper for the pleasure of reading poetry. Thus, songs may constitute a confluence of two autonomous territories: music and literature. Bhupen Hazarika is the glaring example in this regard.

Poetry, Music and Bhupen Hazarika

I would like to say that Bhupen Hazarika possesses poetic sensibility, is a marvelous singer, and an excellent musician. That is why his songs are loved by all sections of people—the uneducated, the educated, and intellectuals—and have travelled beyond literacy, class, caste, culture, geography, and time. His lyrics have become the voices of reason through music. His lyrics are assets for society. He can, therefore, be viewed as an agent of humanity who, through his music and poetry, reinforces and advances correct thinking in people in difficult times for the progress of society.

There are many definitions of poetry, and all of them are elusive, inordinate, and fail to define what poetry intrinsically is. We may find strong arguments to destabilize each of these definitions, making it highly likely we will conclude that defining poetry is an unstable affair.

Is it just the expression of feeling? None can ever think of composing lines that can be considered as poetry without "feeling". But poetry was never the mere expression of "feeling". William Wordsworth makes a mention of this word in his famous definition of poetry. Many interpret it either in the wrong way or conveniently. But "feeling", according to Wordsworth, has to be powerful. What, then, is powerful feeling? Feeling, Wordsworth suggests, will become powerful if it undergoes some stages of contemplation. Therefore, he says poetry takes its origin from the emotion recollected in tranquility. It is the "powerful" feeling which makes poetry "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge" and "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science" (qtd. in Hudson 64). Keats' negative capability seems to suggest, again, almost the same thing. Negative capability is the power in a poet to become terribly objective to maintain aesthetic distance as opposed to a subjective author (Abram 235). We can say that for poetic creation the poet must possess the power to negate his own personality and transmigrate to another object or person. In other words, poetry is empathy. It is emotion in its most powerful form, in its purity in appropriate style. According to Eliot, "poetry is not the turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality". And then he explains that "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (Enright and Chickera 300). Likewise, there are innumerable definitions of poetry, so much so that at last we have to realize that poetry defies definition.

Though defining poetry is an unstable affair, from among the available definitions, most of them are by eminent poets; one thing emerges very clearly: that mere expression of feeling can never be poetry. In that case, they can be just verse or lyrics. So, it is natural that such lyrics on paper often feel flat, lacking rhythm and energy. The term "lyric" derives from the Greek for lyre, a type of musical instrument, and once designated any poem designed to be sung while accompanied by a lyre (Abram 202). Today, the term refers to the words of any song. All lyrics can never be categorized as serious poetry. To transform raw feeling into powerful emotion, and to evoke the same emotion in the reader or listener, one must know how to write poetry with life, not with pen; how to write his powerful thoughts, not words; how to use imagery aptly. There should be the beauty of structure, diction, and thought. What I would like to say is that poetry is not written with a pen, but with life, and for life. The lyrics of Bhupen Hazarika have this power; they convey great ideas, delve deep into the hard realities of life, give hope, and take in numerous literary references. In my analytical part of his lyrics, I will show this. Therefore, when his lyrics are read on the whiteness of the page, they give us the delight of reading great poetry. Hazarika's lyrics are influenced by the literary greats.

Combining quality music, poetical lyrics, and great vocal range, he could create a performance dynamic in his own style, captivating the audience. Therefore, his writing is inseparable from their music.

From a broad perspective, the whole of the world can be regarded as one society for humanity. Within this great society there are many societies, great and small, and, therefore, there are many conflicts. However, the world is full of disorder; the poet tries to bring order to the society relentlessly. Among us, it is the poet who can play a significant role in creating order in society. Among the poets, it is the poet who is also a musical artist who can play the most significant role in changing society by exploiting the prospect of the art of sound in the best possible way. I lay emphasis on the word "unified", for the simple reason that music plays a very important role in unifying people. Or we can say songs serve to "unify" groups of people for common action. Bhupen Hazarika's "Manuhe Manuhor Babe" (people for the sake of people), written in 1960, is enough proof of this, and that is why it has got almost anthemic status in the Assamese and Bengali-speaking world. Music has long been a powerful expression of people from different cultures around the world. Songs are the reflections of the society and culture in which they are produced. For example, Hazarika's songs can be regarded as the encyclopedia of North-East India as they preserve historical, geographical, legendary, political, theological, philosophical, social, economic, religious and spiritual heritage of the land. Nevertheless, most of his songs have universal appeal despite the local setting. His songs serve as a forum for public debate about manners, morals, politics and social change. His songs use dense imagery, literary allusions, and existential questions that require active intellectual participation of the listeners. And they are always open to multiple interpretations.

The best word to describe Bhupen Hazarika is, therefore, "artist", literary and musical. Who is the artist? The artist, if he is true, has a unique sense of history. With this sense, the artist becomes fully conscious of his or her own generation. This sense enables the artist to be conscious of the basic values that sustain humanity, irrespective of the time. These values are timeless. The artist of a particular generation, therefore, draws the people into thinking whether the reality of that generation needs to be changed. The artist of a particular generation in his or her chosen genre is the only agent who persistently tries, to the best of his or her ability, to wash the dust of lives off the souls of people. In the process, the artist creates a myth for his people to live by; he or she compels his or her people to feel the complexities of life in a particular setting under particular circumstances in a particular period so that they realize in the right perspective the path to progress. The true artist thinks globally, but acts locally; he or she thinks, first of all, for the "men" and, in the process, he or she thinks for the "man". To sum up, we can say that the artist awakens society to truth.

Bhupen Hazarika, through his odyssey, which is both musical and literary, performed the role of a true artist.

Bhupen Hazarika's Versatility

Hazarika is generally known as a singer-songwriter. Born on September 8, 1926, he is one of the most influential figures in music and culture in India in general, in the North-East part of India in particular, in the present century. He died on November 5, 2011. Apart from being a singer-songwriter, he was also a writer, filmmaker, and journalist. He wrote and sang his songs originally in Assamese, his mother tongue. Later on, they were translated into Bengali and Hindi. His lyrics, as pointed out earlier, cover diverse subjects and are marked by humanity and universal brotherhood. He authored many books, of which the most notable are Moi Eti Jajabor (2008), Gitawali and Winged Horse (2018). During his lifetime, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika bagged many awards: Berlin's Performing Artiste Award, the President's Award for best music director, Padma Shri for his contribution to the cause of national integration, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Shankardeva Award and Dada Saheb Phalke Award. He was given the Bharat Ratna posthumously. But Bhupen Hazarika has got a permanent place in the hearts of people across the world not because of these bouquets. The awards, great and small, cannot glorify him. As an artist, he is autotelic in the truest sense of the term.

Diction and Musical Artistry

What Bob Dylan did through music for the English-speaking world, Hazarika did for Assamese and Bengali. Hazarika created new poetic expressions within the great Assamese folk song tradition. Hazarika had a great fondness for folk music as a whole, not only of Assam but also of the world, and his Assamese folk song tradition refers to the folk song tradition of the North-East of India. Once upon a time, the whole of North-East India was Assam. Here I would like to make a point. Hazarika is often regarded as a balladic singer. But to call him simply a balladeer or a folk singer is the trivialization of his multifaceted talent as a poet, musician and singer. True, the tunes of most of Hazarika's songs are based on the folk music of Assam. The rhythm in them is proof of this. But in adopting folk music tunes for his songs, he proves himself to be very creative. What I want to say is that in many songs of Hazarika, there can be an interplay of several tunes, be it the tune of Assamese or Punjabi folk music. All the tunes are perfectly fused into one. This harmonious fusion of several tunes into one is the very essence of Hazarika's music. As a roving minstrel, he keeps roaming around the world. Wherever he goes, he tries to collect folk music of that place. He himself admitted this in several of his interviews. But when he uses them in his songs, he marvelously refines them.

He never uses them in a direct way. There is always his unique creative touch which gives a folk tune its desired perfection. Even when he sings Bihu songs, the most popular folk song of Assam, they attain a kind of newness. This newness is not for its own sake. Rather, this newness makes the Bihu song more touching and lively.

What sets him apart is not that his songs are fundamentally different from other songs. What makes him the greatest musician is the fact that he transformed music into hope for humanity with his powerful lyrics and unique voice. He wrote lyrics, tuned them in accordance with the themes, and sang them so much better than anyone else. He transformed deep philosophy into song and musical expression.

Hazarika's use of language in his songs must be recognised as of central importance. Every word in the songs is precisely selected. To make the themes of his songs come to life, he uses appropriate imagery. It is the power of his words in his songs that captivates listeners. It is the power of his words through which he single-handedly transformed music into hope for humanity in India. It is through the power of his words that he has drawn the people of his generation into thinking whether the reality of the generation needs to be changed. His songs inspire the highly intellectual class and the common people alike. His songs are not just songs. Through the power of the words in his songs, he tried to awaken society to truth. Literary value depends on the power of words. It is the power of his words through which he held up to his listeners a faithful mirror of life. His lyrics brought poetic complexity.

Almost all Hazarika's songs are characterised by a reflective tone. In them has shown an uncanny ability to mirror, in everyday metaphors and toe-tapping rhythms, all the aspects of human emotions through the imagery of northeastern India. Very adroitly, he portrays the comedy of ordinary lives of the region in his songs. Despite the local setting, most of his songs have universal appeal. He is extremely sensitive to the burning problems that tend to enshroud society. He perfectly mirrors them in his songs, but not at the cost of musical beauty. He wrote songs on patriotism, communism, exploitation, poverty, class struggle, struggle of life, nature, love, death, physical love, platonic love, communal harmony, children, and whatnot. In all his songs, there is always a note of optimism.

Now I would like to analyse Bhupen Hazarika's two iconic songs Bistirna Parore and Dola He Dola. The way he uses the words, maintains rhyme, rhythm, metre, and structures the stanzas to fit his themes in the original Assamese versions cannot be maintained in my English translations. My translation is just for understanding purposes. However, I have tried to maintain the rhyme, rhythm, and metre of the original Assamese version to some extent, with some variations so that the spirit of the original version is not altogether lost. Particularly

while translating the song He Dola, I have not translated the words dola and heya na into English.1 These two words intensify the central idea of the poem. To feel the woes of the dola bearers, they are essential. I would like to begin with Hazarika's Bistirna Parore.

Bistirna Parore

Axonkhya jonore

Hahakar xuniu

Nixobde nirobe burha Luit tumi

Burha Luit buwa kiyo?

Noitikotar skhalan dekhiu

Manobotar patan dekhiu

Nirlajjo alax bhabe buwa kiyo?

Jnanbihin nirakhyaror

Khadyabihin nagorikor

Netribihinotat nimat kiyo?

Xahashra baarixar

Unmadonar

Abhigyotare

Pongu manabok

Xabal xongrami

Aaru agragami

Kori nutula kiyo?

Byakti jodi byaktikendrik

Xamasti jodi byaktitwa rohit

Tene xithil xomaajok nabhanga kiyo?

Tumiye jodi Brahmare putra

Xei pitritwa tene naam matra

Nohole prerana nidiya kiyo?

Unmatta dhoraare

Kurukhetrore

Xoro xajyaake

Alingan kora

Bhishmarupi

Ajashra beerok

Jogai nutula kiyo? (Dutta 53-54)

O old Luit, why do you flow? (English translation)

On your vast banks

They groan, and then cry

You hear their despair

Still there is no fire

In your eyes!

You flow silently

O old Luit, why do you flow in silence?

You witness erosion of morality

You witness the fall of humanity

How can you still flow lazily and shamelessly?

There are illiterate and obtuse millions

There are food-starved civilians

None leads them on

Still in silence you flow!

Why don't you give them

The hysteria of a thousand monsoons?

Why don't you turn them

Into fiery revolutionaries

To march forward?

Why don't you make them dreamers?

If people are selfish

Then society is no more dynamic

Then why don't you break such a static society?

If you are Brahma's son

If you are filled with glories

You can't be lifeless.

Then why don't you ignite inspiration?

Why don't you give

The spirit of warrior Bhisma

Who embraced a bed of arrows

In the Kurukshetra battle mad

To millions and millions?? (Dutta 53-54; my trans.)

Inspired by the song Old Man River2 in Paul Robeson's iconic rendition, Dr. Hazarika's cry in this song is the cry of all the marginalized, weak, helpless people of the world. The setting is local: the vast bank of the old Luit, which is another name for the river Brahmaputra. But the appeal is universal: the cries of the suffering people in a disordered society, where there is no good governance and committed leadership. In the song, Hazarika uses the river Brahmaputra as the symbol of a worthless leader. He questions the mighty Brahmaputra for its apathy towards the terrible sufferings of the people living along its banks. Each stanza ends with a question. He asks the mighty river if it is the true offspring of Brahma (the creator). The people are poor, illiterate, and oppressed, and the river has borne witness to their struggles for ages. It has all the elements to make it a powerful poem: suggestiveness, allusion, apt imagery, appropriate diction, rhythm and rhyme.

The way he presents the cries of the people by using powerful imagery ("hysteria of thousand monsoons") and mythological reference (Bhisma), it becomes a powerful poem both in form and spirit. In many songs of Hazarika's there is the strong presence of the river Brahmaputra, which has both been a boon and a bane for the people living in Assam's plains. The devastating effect of Brahmaputra floods during the rainy season is well known. Every year, Brahmaputra

floods destroy many villages and many hectares of agricultural land. Many roads and bridges are washed away, cutting all road links to the rest of the country. In the line "The hysteria of thousand monsoons," Hazarika seems to suggest that if the water resource of the river Brahmaputra is used in the desired scientific way, the whole of Assam will progress by leaps and bounds. If this becomes the reality, the people of Assam will breathe freely under the free sky. To drive away the ills of society, people need a warrior like Bhisma, a renowned mythological figure for wisdom, valour and unwavering principles, ready to sacrifice everything for a good cause.

As a powerful protest song, it can claim a unique position both musically and thematically. From the musical point of view, this song can easily be regarded as a masterpiece. The words and tune of the song are so appropriate, the voice so infectious, that it can instantly trigger profound emotional upheaval in the heart of any sensitive listener, raising the hairs on his or her arms, awakening empathy in him or her for the oppressed class of people. It can transform a listener into a rebel against injustice. Hazarika's throwing of words with perfect pronunciation always adds extra charm to the musical integrity of his songs. Simply put, pronunciation plays a very important role in the singing of Hazarika's songs. In the original Assamese version, the words are tough. It needs a special effort to maintain their pronunciation within the musical framework in the desired way. And none can sing it in the desired way except Hazarika for the apparent reason that he is endowed with the rare talent of extracting the exact tune that a particular word intrinsically demands. He can feel his words exactly. We can say that in this song, Hazarika deliberately chose difficult words to express his anger against the ills of society. Each word in it is appropriately chosen so that the anger Hazarika wants to express here reaches its perfection. I want to say that the art of music as the expression of anger is at its best in this song: it has wholeness, harmony, and clarity. Listening to this song is, thus, a mind-blowing experience. The listener is provoked to think about society. As the listener reflects on the song, a desire slowly arises to do something to drive away society's rampant corruption in him or her. The song's tune captures the grand, sweeping rhythm of the Brahmaputra. Therefore, there are frequent ups and downs in the tune. It begins in bass, and at some points, when Hazarika wants to express extreme anger, it reaches the highest pitch in a superbly controlled way; then it comes back to bass. The ending is again in high pitch. Every word of it is strong, meticulously chosen. In the Hindi and the Bengali versions of the same song, he scolds the mighty Ganga in the same way.

Let me now come to He Dola, another revolutionary song of Hazarika.

He Dola

Dola, he dola, he dola, he dola

Eka beka baatere korhiau korhiau

Bor bor manuhor dola |

He dola

Apun korilu bonuwar jeewonok

Deha bhagorai tola,

He tola ||

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

Dolar bhitorot tirbir korise

Chohoki paatore paag

Ghone ghone dekhisu

Lorsor korise shukula sunworor aag

Murhe loratik

Eibar bihute

Nidilu xutare sula |

Sokulu ulaleu monnti nebhangu |

Korhiyai loi jau dola!

Heiya na heiya na heiya na heiya!

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

Juge juge japi diye metmora bojati

Kandh bhangu bhangu kore, he kore

Bor bor manuhe dolat tuponiyai

Aamarhe ghambur xore o' xore |

Ukhokoi paharor tingti uthisu

Bhalkoi khujti mila

Aamar kandhor pora pisolibo lagile

Bagori poribo dola

Roja moharojar dola

Bor bor manuhor dola

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya! (Dutta 45)

Dola, o' dola, o' dola, o' dola (English translation)

Through the tortuous serpentine roads

I carry I carry

The big men's dola

O' dola

I have embraced my body's torture

Of sweating million drops

Just to live o' dola

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

Inside my dola

Glitters the big men's turbans silk

Oh the turbans silk!

My eyes fall on them

Again and again

As I move on and on

Glittering turbans sway

Back and forth

Playing hide and seek with me

Oh my son's bare body!

He did not get a cotton shirt

During last Bihu's festivity.

I dare not cry for it

Oh tears! Well up not

I am carrying the dola o' dola

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

As my sweat-soaked body marches on

The big men inside dola doze off

For ages I have been forced

To carry this load heavy

My shoulder tends to break

I mustn't feel the pain

It's time to match the steps

We are climbing the hill's top

Or the dola will fall

The dola mustn't fall

It's the dola of raja and maharaja

The big men's dola

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya!

Heiya na, heiya na, heiya na, heiya! (Dutta 45; my trans.)

The English word for dola is palanquin. Once upon a time, it was used as a vehicle by raja, maharaja, and the most powerful class in society. It was carried by the people belonging to the downtrodden class. In some parts of India, it is still used to carry the bride to the groom's residence by the relatives of the groom during the marriage ceremony. This is just a part of marriage tradition. By vividly portraying the manual activity of carrying the dola by the dola bearers, this deceptively simple song in simple diction addresses a perennial issue of society: the woes of the working class who easily fall victim to the exploitative design of the powerful class in society. Many songs of Hazarika portray the world of the weaker section of society. People of this section are economically vulnerable, and they experience layered levels of alienation. Even in this era of globalization, the condition of these people remains the same. Hazarika is acutely conscious of it. In this song, he intensifies the hardships of the dola bearers stanza by stanza.

These dola bearers can be taken as representatives of all types of manual workers of the world, who continue to put up with poor wages and pathetic living conditions. The dola can be taken as the symbol of exploitation, an unbearable burden for the oppressed working class. In India,

they are often referred to as "unskilled labourers". But many industrialists have already made a huge fortune on their manual labour. The sugar industry in the West Indies revived because of the "unskilled labourers" from India. The tea industry prospered by leaps and bounds on their labour. But the labourers themselves always remain insecure and economically vulnerable.

The most striking point is that without musical accompaniment, the words in this song in three stanzas don't feel flat, lacking rhythm and energy. It can be read as a powerful poem in balladic form. It can also be read as a dramatic monologue. The speaking persona in the poem is a dola bearer who expresses his private thoughts. We, the readers, are the passive listeners. He is telling us that he and his fellow bearers sweat heavily as they carry the heavy dola through the serpentine, tortuous roads. Inside it sit the powerful people of the society. When they carry the heavy dola, they have to maintain a rhythm in order to maintain their pace. Though it is a physically very tiresome task, he and his fellow bearers have embraced it as the source of their livelihood. However torturous it may be, they cannot afford to lose this job. Hazarika successfully maintains the rhythm of carrying dola by the bearers in the whole poem. In the very first line of the first stanza, he repeats the word dola four times. After the second and third lines in the first stanza, he repeats it twice. In the penultimate line of the first stanza, he uses a word twice that rhymes with the word dola. The stanza comes to an end with the word heya na, which does not have a meaning as such. While carrying heavy loads, our mouth and nose produce involuntary grunting noises. Heya na is the word for this grunting noise. It is repeated several times. Each of the three stanzas of the poem comes to an end with the repetition of the word heya na. It can be taken as the expression of physical exhaustion. It can also be taken as the expression of despair. The use of this word gives the poem an extra dimension. The word makes the song extremely beautiful musically.

In the second stanza of the poem, the bearer tells us one pathetic aspect of his story. These powerful people sit inside the dola happily ignoring the physical exhaustion of the bearers. Tears well up in the bearer's eyes when he catches sight of the glittering silk turbans worn by the powerful people they carry. At such moments, he thinks of his children whom he could not even provide cotton clothes during the Bihu festival. When in front of him there float the images of his helpless children, he terribly suffers from emotional pain. But to carry the heavy dola smoothly, he suppresses his personal sorrows like a cruel ruler.

In the third and last stanza, the poem reaches the climactic point. For the bearers, the dola is an unbearably heavy load both mentally and physically. They have been forced to do it. They have been doing it for ages. The bearer now appeals to his fellow bearers to be extraordinarily

careful in matching their steps, as it is the time to climb the top of a hill. At such a time, if they fail to coordinate their feet, the dola will slip. The result will be disastrous.

Thus, the poem shows the stark contrast between the haves (raja, maharaja and the most powerful people) and have-nots (dola bearers). This disparity still exists in our society. While reading it, we get the feeling as if the dola bearer is carrying the dola with his fellow bearers and telling us his story. His story is the story of all the oppressed labourers of the world. As we listen to his story, we feel his pain; we see his sweat-soaked body in front of us. Even for a moment, we don't get the feeling that Hazarika is narrating the bearer's story. What we feel is that the bearer is directly telling us his story. He is not under the control of the authorial voice; his is the independent voice. This is enough proof of Hazarika's negative capability. He empathises with the dola bearers.

It has the elements of a folk song. But it cannot be regarded as a typical folk song. Rather in it there is the interplay of several tunes which is in conformity with the movement, sufferings and sorrows of the bearers. When the bearer appeals to his fellow bearers to be extraordinarily careful in matching their steps to climb the top of a hill, the tune goes to the highest pitch. By taking the tune to the highest pitch, Hazarika tries to make the listeners feel that it is the hardest thing to climb the top of a hill while carrying a dola. Most importantly, Hazarika wants to say something very important through these lines: the haves of the society are very much dependent on the labour of the have-nots. This is the greatness of Hazarika as a singer. He feels exactly what he is singing and why he is singing. He knows very well how to hit the notes in the right order.

Conclusion

In the light of the above analysis, we can say that Bhupen Hazarika had mastery of phrasing, rhythm and cadence, so much so that his lyrics do not fall short of genuine poetry even without musical accompaniment. They are artistic, literary and profound. He is a poet before he is a lyricist and performer. He has his own music. He, most importantly, showed the world that a song is anything that can walk by itself: it may have melody, anger, provocation, crying, sorrow, etc. That is why when we listen to his songs and then read the lyrics—that deal with the burning problems of society using poetic techniques, appropriate music, and his inimitable voice—we experience a true confluence of two autonomous territories: music and literature. In both territories, he can be considered great.

End Notes

1. By and large, dola is a known word in India, if not in the world. There is every scope for better translation or, more specifically, transcreation.

2. In Paul Robeson's rendition, "Ol' Man River" became so famous that many think Robeson himself wrote the lyrics; it was written by composer Jerome Kern and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II for the 1927 musical Show Boat.

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