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Translating Marginality into Lyric: Subaltern Voice of Bharat Ratna Dr. Bhupen Hazarika

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Abstract

The evolution of Globalization leads to rising of consciousness of marginality all over the world globally. Even different domains of creativity have emphasized the issues with due focus in forms of performances. 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. A multifaceted genius, he was a good lyricist, music composer, singer, actor, journalist, author, poet, filmmaker, politician, and social activist of the high repute. As the balladeer of the masses he selected the weapon of music for bridging the marginalized people of the North East India. Representing rightly the ethnic identity of the North East he became the voice of the people who were socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded or neglected. He translated their relative isolation into lyric, and both, Social and Spatial Marginality were reconstructed as the voice of the subaltern. Being a search of marginality represented by Hazarika in his lyrics this study is an attempt to explore the invisible exchanges that exist among ethnicity, subalternity and music in him and how he who remained dear to all people cutting across boundaries, generations, caste, creed or sect, becomes the voice of the subaltern.

Keywords: Marginality, ethnicity, lyric, bhupen hazarika, and subaltern studies.

Introduction

The evolution of Globalization leads to rising of consciousness of marginality all over the world globally. At the same time, in the domains of creativity the issues of marginality are widely exercised by the creators. Even artists cum creative personalities behave as researchers while conducting their investigations for creativity in the field of inter- and trans-disciplinary empirical study.

Marginality is one of the most contentious issues in the humanities in the post-colonial discourses. 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 marginality. Here are the pertinent questions: What is marginality and what are marginality indicators? Marginality is “generally used to describe and analyze socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access (societal and spatial) to resources, and full participation in social life. In other words, marginalized people might be socially,

economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded or neglected, and are therefore vulnerable to livelihood” (Gurung 10). Marginality is again defined as “the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic) ... in mind, when one excludes certain domains or phenomena from one’s thinking because they do not correspond to the mainstream philosophy” [International Geographical Union (IGU), 2003:2].

Marginality is primarily described by two major conceptual frameworks: societal and spatial. The societal framework focuses on human dimensions such as demography, religion, culture, social structure (e.g., caste, hierarchy, class, ethnicity, and gender), economics and politics in connection with access to resources by individuals and groups. In this regard, the emphasis is placed on understanding of the underlying causes of exclusion, inequality, social injustice and spatial segregation of people. The explanation of the spatial (also referred as geographical or physical marginality) dimension

of marginality is primarily based on physical location and distance from centers of development, lying at the edge of or poorly integrated into system. With this concept, it is intended to gain insights into the influence of physical locations and distance on the livelihoods of individuals or groups and the space itself.

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. He was a man of extra ordinary abilities but, yet a man having ordinary expectations, who could thereby understand the joys and sorrows of marginalized people including the ethnic groups of North East India keeping aside his own gains and losses. He selected the weapon of music for bridging the marginalized people of the North East. This extraordinary balladeer had been therefore, rightly represented the ethnic identity of North East in a meaningful way. Being immensely popular ambassador of North Eastern India's rich folk music, he wanted to provide safe and particular space to each and every marginalized community. He was the willful optimist who always dreamt of weaving together various marginalized aspirations to create a bor Asom (the great wider Assam) integrated in harmony. As the balladeer of the masses he always envisaged the creation of a great Assamese community, inclusive in its very essence.

This paper is a search of marginality represented by Bhupen Hazarika in his lyrics. An attempt has been made to explore the invisible exchanges that exist among ethnicity, subalternity and music in him and how he who remained dear to all people cutting across boundaries, generations, caste, creed or sect, becomes the voice of the subaltern.

In the fields of post-colonialism, the term, subaltern describes the lower social groups who are at the margins of a society. Also they are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure. Subaltern identifies the social classes who are excluded from a society's established structures for political representation, the means by which people have a voice in their society. The Italian Marxist and Communist intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) used the term, subaltern for the first time to mean the inferior rank. Gramsci was imprisoned for a long time by Mussolini's police (from 1926) until his death at age 46, and in prison, he wrote notebooks on politics and history and philosophy. He declared that the subaltern was the subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence.

In 1970s, the application of subaltern began to denote the colonized people of the South Asian Subcontinent. During that period subaltern described a new perspective of the history of an imperial colony, told from the point of view of the colonized man and woman, rather than from the points of view of the colonizers. In this respect, Subaltern Studies investigate colonial history told from the perspective of the proletariat. From having originated as an historical-research model for studying the colonial experience of South Asian peoples, the applicability of the techniques of subaltern studies transformed a model of intellectual discourse into a method of vigorous post-colonial critique. The intellectual efficacy of the term, subaltern eased its adaptation and adoption to the methods of investigation in the fields of History, Anthropology, Sociology, Human Geography, and Literature. Subaltern Studies emerged through the debut volume in 1982, and consequently there are a total of ten volumes (Subaltern Studies I-VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society; Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honor

of Ranajit Guha; Subaltern Studies IX-X: Writings on South Asian History and Society) published by Oxford University Press in India during 1982- 99. The group of scholars (namely Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Partha Chattarjee, Gautam Bhadra, Susie Tharu, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sumit Sarkar, Gyanendra Pandey, Gyan Prakash, Veena Das etc.) wanted to retake history for the under classes, for the voices that had not been heard previous. Scholars of the subaltern hoped to break away from histories of the elites and the Eurocentric bias of imperial history. In the main, they wrote against the Cambridge School which seemed to uphold the colonial legacy. Instead, they focused on subaltern in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture. They espoused the idea that there may have been political dominance, but that this was not hegemonic.

In the same spirit and sentiment, Bhupen Hazarika uttered, even in 1952 through his lyric, Atitar Buranji Likhake Likhail (Historians of Yore Recount) that while roaming throughout the world, he had heard different blubbers in different countries. He argued to write the history of them. He composed the lyric on the bank on River Nile in Cairo during Africa tour in 1952 (Hazarika, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Rachanawali Vol. II 1012). Whole the lyric is worth quoting here:

Historians of yore recount
Exploits of kings and queens
But history today is
The story of liberated humanity

The Fallahin by the Nile
Wept, recounting the woes
Of a peasant's life

Black John of the cotton fields
By the Mississippi
Wept talking of man's colors

Rongmon by the Luit
In the village graveyard
Clamors everyday
Talking of the free flowing mind

And I forget the feudal story
Recounted by history
With the courage of time
I will write today
The tale of human liberation

(Hazarika, Where Seas Meet 36)

On his way back home via Africa after completion of his Ph.D. in Columbia University, U.S.A. in 1952, Bhupen Hazarika observed the pitiful plight of the peasants on the bank of River Nile. In the meantime, he also came across the tyranny of apathy of the white people over Blacks. Even in India the classes of peasants suffer in all ages. The peasantry by the Luit, the Nile and the Mississippi has the same hopes, sentiments, sorrows and smiles of life, the same signs of agriculture. Leaving aside the tales of feudalism, he wants to write courageously the history of liberation of the marginalized people. Coincidentally, Ranajit Guha had written works on peasant uprisings in India. In his *An Elementary Aspects of Peasant Revolt* (1988) he had discussed how various peasants' revolts led India to her independence.

Commenting about the scope of subalternity, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in an interview at New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa (1992) has claimed that, in post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. The word, subaltern combines the Latin terms for ‘under’ (sub) and ‘other’ (altern). Yet context, time, and place determine who, among the peoples at the margins of a society, is a subaltern. In North East India women, rural, tribal are part of subaltern, and they are represented through the lyrics of Hazarika. His familiarity with the rich local traditions of the North East, awareness of the folk harmony enabled him to qualify, transmute and shape his music.

Hazarika influenced the marginalized people through the weapon of music for raising their voice against the evils and injustice prevailed in the society. He tried to provide voice to the subjected people, to restore history to the subordinated. In other words, to give the common people back their agency. From his very childhood he had a revolutionary mind. That is why, even at the age of 13, he could utter for the sake of the down-trodden in his lyric, Agniyugor Firingoti (A Spark of Fire):

A spark of the age of fire I am
And will build up a new Assam
I'll bring back
Everything of the down-trodden
And shall create a new Assam

He became disciple cum comrade of the progressive artists like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha and Hemanga Biswas who discovered his love and responsibility for the proletariat. Even before his encounter with Paul Robeson, he had come into contact with the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA). During the language conflicts of the sixties, he toured the state with an IPTA group towards peace and reconciliation. After meeting the artists like Paul Robeson, Howard Fast and Pit Chigar he rediscovered his revolutionary spirit of his personality. They left a lifelong mark on him. Paul Robeson taught him that the guitar is not just a musical instrument; it can be a social instrument, an instrument for change. In 1925, Robeson gave his first vocal recital of African American spirituals in Greenwich Village, New York City, and he became world famous as Joe in the musical play Show Boat with his version of ‘Ol’ Man River’. Through Robeson, he was inspired by the music of the blacks. Speaking about the emergence of the black spirituals into the public knowledge of United States and Europe, Dena J. Epstein comments, “Before the Civil War, people outside the black community were only dimly aware that a body of song called spirituals existed. To most whites in the United States and Europe, the music of the blacks was the music of the minstrel theater, songs like ‘Old Black Joe’ or ‘My Old Kentucky Home’. European travelers who visited the South expected to find the slaves singing such songs” (Epstein, “Black Spirituals: Their Emergence into Public Knowledge”). Just like the evolution of Afro-American folk music, Hazarika did introduce the folk music of the North East India to the pan-Indian audience. He not only studied folk music but also revived and popularized. He did to Assamese folk music as Lakshminath Bazarua 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. 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).

Writing about the relationship between Marxism and Subaltern Studies, Jess Bier has commented that “in recent years, subaltern studies have often been seen as a post-Marxist movement because many of its scholars selectively combine Marxist theory with a variety of other influences. The relationships between cultural Marxism and subaltern studies were particularly close during the 1980s, with the group's focus on material analyses of subaltern political movements” (Bier, “Subaltern Studies”). Hazarika, throughout his life, raised his voice with the weapon of music to establish a classless society. Bhupen Hazarika, a name very close to the hearts of his own imagined communities, evokes a feeling of pride, awe and inspiration and continues to arouse curiosity to know more about this jajabor silpi (bohemian artist). The music maestro was a stalwart in the annals of India's cultural heritage. He had been therefore, rightly hailed as the uncrowned king of North Eastern India's cultural world. Every aspect of Assamese life and society find a place in his songs. In his lyrics, we meet the barely clothed farmer, landless farmers and laborers, workers of industry, tea garden laborers, poor fishermen, palanquin bearers, drivers, clerks, widows, and different kinds of women. Through his lyrics, he appeals the common masses to protest against exploitation, corruption and all the evils and injustice done to them. Celebrating egalitarianism, he included his song, Ami ekekhon naore jatri, xahajatri... (We are in the same boat brother...) approximately in all the musical performances. Thus he became the voice of the voiceless. In the parallel, he described Marx, Gorky, Lenin, Paul Robeson, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. as his ideals. He sang about Nelson Mandela, and about racial discrimination.

In several essays Homi K. Bhabha, the Post-colonial critic emphasized the importance of social power relations in defining subaltern social groups as oppressed, racial minorities whose social presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group; as such, subaltern social groups, nonetheless, also are in a position to subvert the authority of the social group(s) who hold hegemonic power. In the Marxist tradition, Antonio Gramsci elaborated the role of cultural hegemony in ideology as a means of bolstering the power of capitalism and of the nation-state. In the same way Hazarika composed a number of lyrics conveying his own philosophy of liberty and equality. Still “he himself is no ideologue- his longing for a classless society, free from exploitation; his love for common people and concern for their welfare, is instinctive rather than based on any ideology. ‘I have always written and sung about ordinary people, their hopes and fears, problems and desires, tears and laughter. Even my romantic songs reflect the lives of the common multitude.’” (Dutta 75). In the lyric, He Dola He Dola (The Sedan) the palanquin and its bearer represent the feudal age. The sedan has become the symbol of power politics. The song writer utters:

The sedan
Through zigzag paths I carry
The grandee's sedan.

I have made my own
The tiring life of the laborers
.....
I might shed tears
But will not break down
And carry the sedan on my back

The creaking burden of the ages
Breaks my shoulder
The grandee's dose in the sedan
While our sweat drips

(Hazarika, Where Seas Meet 34)

Here is portrait of the life of poor, distressed and exploited labor class. He has reported the politics of domination and subordination, and the bearers are submissive which the mentality of the subalterns is.

Hazarika's passionate love and his voice for humanity throb in his lyrics. The silent sufferings of the subalterns become a strong voice, and again their stories are narrated in the song, Shitare Shemeka Rati (On a Damp Winter Night):

On a damp, winter night
In the sagging hut of an unclad peasant
Let me be the red warmth
Of the smoldering cinders

On a damp, winter night
Let me be the tremendous power
Of the smoldering hunger
Lurking in the starving worker
Suddenly bursting into flame

On a damp, winter night
Let me express the suppressed outcry
Of some frightened minority
And become a sweet security

(Hazarika, Where Seas Meet 06)

In the song, Pratidhwani Suno Ami Pratidhwani Suno (We Listen to the Echo), he recounts that he hears from beyond the hills the echoes of the grief-laden song of a young girl, the grief, hunger and pain of a peasant. The lyric-poet is quite optimistic towards the betterment of the social system as he hears the footfalls of a new day in the tumult of the sea of humanity.

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. His popularity amongst all ethnic groups of Assam is a matter of some incredulity. 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). 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, candor 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). From his root he sang the songs of nationality, humanity and universality. Uttering the message of unity he composed-

'Moi Kohimare adhunika Dalimi
Moi Godapani adhunik bhoiyamar
Aji ami duyo 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.)

The use of ethno-musicology boosted up his voice for the marginal. 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 maihung is a dish with a foot used by the Ahoms of rank. 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?)

Being aware of ethno-marginal landscape, 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]. Here the lyricist has provided Lianmokao the particular respect by using the vocabulary, teor not tair. Again he expresses ironically the attitude of the patriarchal society towards women as:

Tumi biyar nishar sayan patir
Epahi rajanigandha
Tomar mulya enishar...

(Hazarika, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Rachanawali Vol. II 1014)

(You are a tube-rose on the wedding bed
Having the value for one night...)

Here the bride is compared to the tube-rose who is treated as commodity by the patriarchal society. Through his song, Mor gaan haok..., Hazarika communicates his audience the objectives of his musical compositions. The entire philosophy of his musical performances is reflected in his song:

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

Let my songs be
A hymn to truth
Against false imaginings.

(Hazarika, Where Seas Meet 02)

Arup Kumar Dutta asserts that Hazarika “exhilarates his audience with the innate joy in his melodies even while conveying or philosophic concepts to them,

‘I have seen rows of sky-kissing mansions
And in their shadows homeless men and women.
I have seen houses fronted with gardens
And also wilted flower-petals prematurely falling...
Too many have become strangers in their own homes
And that is why I remain a roving nomad...’

It is this mingling of the aesthetic and altruistic, which places him in the tradition of poet-reformers like Sankardev, Rabindranath Tagore, Nazarul Islam, Jyotiprasad and Rabha” (Dutta 72). In this way, music of Bhupen Hazarika is always a voice for the subordinated social groups who belong to both societal and spatial marginality.

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