

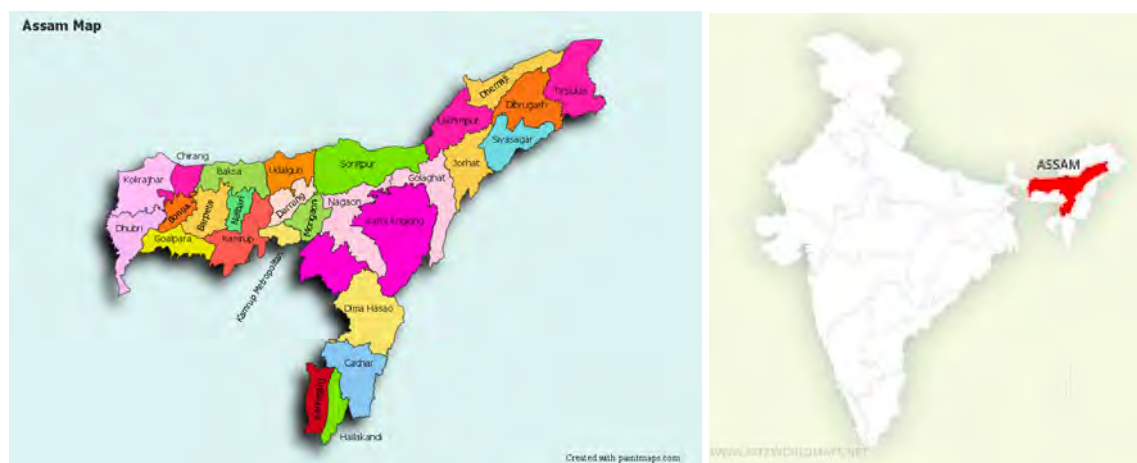
## **The Luit in Bhupen Hazarika's Songs: A Metaphor for Exploring Assam's Linguistic and Ethnic Politics**

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### Abstract

The river Brahmaputra, also known as Luit, has always occupied an important place in the cultural mindscape of the people of Assam, a state in the northeast of India. A source of great pride because of its sheer size and the myths and lore associated with it, it has nevertheless brought untold misery to people over the years because of annual flooding. Authors and musicians of the land have found in the Luit an apt metaphor to tell stories of love, loss, belonging and pain. In the songs of Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011), a renowned music composer from Assam, the Brahmaputra becomes a character through which the poet expresses both his anguish at the sufferings of the masses and his joy at the all-embracing nature of the valley. In songs like “Mahabahu Brahmaputra”, Hazarika tries to appeal to the people of Assam to maintain harmony and promote the land as one of plurality and hospitality. This song becomes significant when seen in the context of the Assam movement (a six-year long agitation to halt the illegal migration of people from neighbouring Bangladesh) and Hazarika’s own conflicted attitude towards it. This article is an attempt to examine how the Luit has been represented in a selection of Hazarika’s songs – the ways the river becomes a potent presence of deeply political and social overtones and a metaphor to underscore the turbulent history of Assam.

*Keywords:* Assam, Brahmaputra, metaphor, migration, plurality



A river is not just a geographical entity that criss-crosses a terrain. It also flows down the mind and memory of the people who live by it, who live off it. Great rivers like the Ganga, the Nile, the Mississippi, the Rhine and the Volga have had emotive significance for generations of people that have witnessed the rise and fall of civilizations on their banks. The mighty Brahmaputra, or the Luit, too, evokes sentiments at times of ecstasy and at times of agony as it continues its ageless journey.

The Luit, often called Bar Luit, or the Great Luit because of its sheer size and beauty – is spoken of or sung with reverence, awe and pride; but its propensity to wreak havoc on people's lives, causing floods every year and destroying crops and houses, also evokes fear and anger. Poets and writers have found in the Luit an effective metaphor for courage, boundlessness, inclusiveness or indifference, love or rage. People residing in the region nurture a relationship of affection as well as anger with the river, and it is this capacity of the Brahmaputra to simultaneously evoke so many emotions that is exploited by poets, musicians and writers to weave tales of not just personal love and longing, but also works of political and social significance. This essay is an exploration of how the Luit becomes an apt metaphor in music. In music, it is Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011), called the “Bard of the Brahmaputra”, who most cogently engages the image of the river in his songs. This essay will analyse some of the songs where Hazarika uses the river imagery to highlight his social and political concerns.

What makes Bhupen Hazarika's work interesting is the manifestation of a lingering tension between his espousal of a distinct Assamese identity and ethnicity, and his humanist philosophy. While he subscribed to a leftist and socialist ideology, at the same time he lent his support to Assamese nationalist movements (labelled chauvinistic by some) and in the later stages of his life strayed into right wing politics.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bhupen Hazarika contested and lost the Lok Sabha election on a BJP ticket in 2004. Right wing politicians tried to read the narrative of nationalism in his older compositions. In an interview in 2007, he had said, “My only reason for joining active politics is to work towards the betterment of the North East...And, only if I am in Parliament, can I open up the treasury and ensure that the money allotted to the state is properly disseminated...I've never served any political party, only humanity at large”. He claims to have been inspired by Atal Bihari Vajpayee's liberal views and democratic vision. During his stay in America (1949 to 1953), he was inspired by the socialist ideologies and even went to jail for it. But later, he realised that a socialist society would not work in a rich country like America. Having met Paul Robeson (American singer who was an advocate for the Civil Rights Movement in the early twentieth century in the United States), he recognised the similarity between racism there and other kinds of biases in Indian society. On returning to India and seeing the debasement in free India, he sang songs that called for the upliftment of the poor.

### **Assam's Troubled History: A Brief Overview**

Hazarika's work has to be seen in the context of the fraught geo-political scenario of northeast India, particularly Assam. India's northeast is home to diverse communities and ethnic tribes. Sanjib Baruah in his book, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999) writes on the causes and developments of the ethnic unrest in this region. In it, Baruah gives details on the conflicts among the various communities, each struggling to assert their linguistic and ethnic identities, as well as the struggle by various groups to carve out independent homelands. These conflicts have claimed thousands of lives since India's Independence in 1947. The north-eastern region comprising eight states is connected to the rest of India only by the 22 kilometre-wide Siliguri corridor and is surrounded by China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The fragile geographical link and racial differences between the rest of India and the northeast has not only resulted in the latter's cultural and political distance from the Indian heartland but also contributed to a feeling of alienation and "otherness" that subsequently gave rise to violent separatist movements (Baruah, 1999, p. 99).

The region can be divided into the Brahmaputra valley, where most of the communities speak Assamese, and the Barak valley, which is dominated by Bengali-speaking populations. Bhupen Hazarika, popular among both the Assamese and the Bengalis, can be situated at the Assamese-Bengali fault lines in the pre- and post-Independence undivided Assam. Discriminatory colonial policies triggered the desire for a separate Assamese identity. It was felt that Bengali dominance would diminish employment opportunities for the Assamese and would be detrimental to Assamese language and culture (Baruah, 1999, p. 59). Post-Independence Assamese youth and the major literary and cultural organisation, Assam Sahitya Sabha, started demanding that Assamese be made compulsory in schools and offices in all regions, including the Barak valley. This led to a series of conflicts between the two communities in the 1960s and 70s (Gogoi, 2016, p. 9).

The Election Commission of India's report in 1978 on the rapid transformation of the demographic pattern of Assam due to the alleged influx of Bengali speaking immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh augmented Assamese anxiety. This led to a six-year-long (1979-1985) agitation led by students and middle-class Assamese who demanded that the immigrants be identified and further influx be stopped forthwith in order to preserve the political independence and cultural identity of Assam (Gogoi, 2016, p. 9). The seeds of the militant organisation, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), were sown in this anxiety as well as in the narratives and perception of step-motherly treatment of Assam by the central government even after Independence. The ULFA launched an armed movement demanding a sovereign status for the state which claimed thousands of lives in the 80s and 90s (Gogoi, 2016, pp. 191–194).

### **Bhupen Hazarika and the Language Movements in Assam**

The concern for Assamese culture and values has been very effectively expressed by Bhupen Hazarika in his compositions, but he has also written and sung many songs in Bangla. Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, was a second home for him and he was widely popular with the Bengali audience. According to Dilip Kumar Dutta (1982), one of the first to compile and critically evaluate the songs of Hazarika, the language movements placed the singer in a peculiar dilemma. It was through the medium of music and the *words* in his songs that he conveyed his feelings and attitude towards this linguistic and cultural conflict. In the early

phases of it, Hazarika tried to promote Assamese-Bengali unity. In 1960, he composed “Maramar bhashare aakhar naikiya” (The language of love has no script), where he writes,

On the banks of the Ganga<sup>2</sup> too  
You will see the silt of the Luit<sup>3</sup>  
When yours and my mother cry  
They wipe the same tears

Here, by referring to the confluence of the two rivers, the Ganga and the Luit, Hazarika tries to portray the fact that there is no essential difference between men. He expresses his distress at the conflict over language; language, as he states in this song, is not a barrier to human understanding or compassion. This composition, along with his more popular song “Maanuhe manuhar babe” (Man for Man, 1960-61), reflects this humanist philosophy. Another song, “Ganga mur ma” (The Ganga is my mother, 1971) says,

This side or that, I don't know  
I am everywhere  
I compose Bhatiali<sup>4</sup> on the Padma<sup>5</sup> after sailing through Luit  
I dance in both the rivers spreading my wings  
The same love, the same hope, the same smile, the same language  
The same pain in the heart that carries joy and sorrow,  
O' the two streams of my tears, Meghna<sup>6</sup> and Jamuna<sup>7</sup>.

It is through the rivers that run through contentious spaces, recognising no boundaries, that the poet chooses to critique man-made barriers and differences. Hazarika comments that his art traverses both the Padma and the Luit, finding inspiration in both. Like the river, art does not respect limitations or physical borders but finds emotional connections in heterogeneous spaces.

And yet, while in the above song the Luit is seen in association with the Padma or it is emphasised that its tributaries flow through Bangladesh, in “Jui loi nekhelibi” (“Don't play with fire”, 1972), the river is perceived as an entity belonging exclusively to Assam. He expresses his surprise at the inability of people of some communities, despite being inhabitants here for several generations, to “call Assam their own mother”. The composer gives examples of friendship and unity and speaks of a shared heritage, trying to make art a pacifier. Hazarika seems to endorse not diversity but cultural assimilation, claiming it to be a true harbinger of harmony. He writes, in “Jui loi nekhelibi”,

So many Bengali brothers  
Have become friends of Assamese  
On reaching the banks of the Luit,  
Bearing its heart, Assam

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<sup>2</sup> Ganga – a river in India, considered sacred.

<sup>3</sup> Luit – another name for river Brahmaputra

<sup>4</sup> Bhatiali – a boatman's song.

<sup>5</sup> Padma – a major river in Bangladesh, a tributary of the Ganga.

<sup>6</sup> Meghna – a major river in Bangladesh, a tributary of the Brahmaputra.

<sup>7</sup> Jamuna – the third major river in Bangladesh, main tributary channel of the Brahmaputra.

Poured the honey of love.  
 Even the new bride longs  
 To make her husband's home her own.

Most of these songs advocate for *integration* between the two communities, but it is important to deconstruct the singer's idea of integration: in these same songs there is a strong sense of Assamese pride and of the necessity to keep it intact. So, the main thrust of his ideas point to a perceived requisite that all who live in Assam must be, or must become, Assamese. It is not just through songs that he promotes this unity, but also as member of Gana Natya Sangha (People's Theatre Movement).<sup>8</sup> With this movement, Hazarika toured the length and breadth of Assam in the 60s and 70s to dispel communal tension and remind people of the age-old tradition of Assamese hospitality. Similarly, in the early 80s, as president of the Assam Janasanskritik Parishad, a socio-cultural organisation, he took part in mass rallies and appealed to people to maintain peace and harmony.

Some of his songs written during the language movement of 1972 record his frustration and anger at the bloodshed and discord that ultimately scarred the movement. In "Aaji Aai Asami" (Mother Assam today, 1972), the killings of both Assamese and Bengali people give him pain. He ends the song with the claim that the Assamese nation is a peaceful one. However, it is possible to read the narrative of nationalism in the very songs where he speaks for cross cultural harmony. In "Asamiya jatituwe asamiya kabalai kaknu karise balatkar!" (Who has the Assamese nation raped to speak Assamese!, 1972), he writes,

If anyone with a superiority complex  
 Provokes mother Assam  
 Millions of young men and women  
 Will shed their heart's blood.  
 Our goal is not to  
 Harbour ill-will against anyone, deride anyone's language  
 If you cannot understand this song, I will compose a hundred more  
 To awaken the banks of the Luit

### Hazarika and the Assam Agitation

Hazarika wrote several songs during the Assam Agitation where the imagery of the Brahmaputra reflects not only his emotions, but also changing attitudes towards this popular uprising. In this regard, his work shows support for the Assam Agitation, at least in its initial stages. It has been documented that the migrant Muslim peasantry of East Bengal origin, unlike the "tribal" communities, or the Bengali Hindus, had chosen integration with the host society to secure their economic and political future in an adopted homeland. The Assamese community also had embraced the East Bengali Muslims as *Na-Asamiya* or neo- Assamese. However, the movement against "foreigners" and "infiltrators" had alienated the East Bengali Muslims (Baruah, pp. 55–58). As is seen in his earlier compositions during the language movement, Bhupen Hazarika had sung about integration, but during this phase, he speaks for a more exclusivist society. A song which he had composed in 1968, "Aami Asamiya nahau

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<sup>8</sup> People's Theatre Movement – IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) established at the national level in 1943, progressive theatre groups and creative artists came together to create awareness for socio-political change. The Assam branch was established in 1948 and Hazarika was an active member of it.

dukhiya” (We Assamese are not poor) has one of its stanzas changed in the wake of the agitation in 1980. Earlier, he had written,

There is no Jyoti Prasad<sup>9</sup>  
To make a man of a coward  
‘We shall die if Assam dies’  
There will be no Tarun<sup>10</sup> to say this.

He changes this to,

There is a Jyoti Prasad  
To make a man of a coward  
‘We shall die if Assam dies’  
There are martyrs to say this.

Thus, Hazarika here registers his empathy with the mass movement that gripped Assamese society and expresses hope in the youth that was trying to protect the indigenous culture and language, though in earlier songs he passionately sang about marginalised sections across the ethnic, caste and religious divide. M.S. Prabhakara in “Of State and Nationalism” says that the Assam agitation posed grave challenges to

...the self-perception of the Assamese as a distinct and internally coherent people, a nationality within the broader framework of a pan-Indian civilisation and the Indian nation-state, a jati, and to use Baruah’s (Sanjib) expression, a “sub-nation”. (1999, n.p)

Sanjib Baruah, in his book *India against itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999), analyses the points of tension between Assamese sub-nationalism and pan-Indian nationalism. Bhupen Hazarika’s songs have espoused the cause of the Assamese identity but at the same time have tried to convey that the two identities, Assamese and Indian, can co-exist.<sup>11</sup> In “Aami asamiya nahau dukhiya”,

Hazarika has further claimed,  
Every Assamese is a good Indian  
And every Indian coming from far  
Who calls the soil of the Luit his mother  
Is a new incarnation of the Assamese.

This song was a clarion call to all Assamese people to recognise their place in the world so that Assam does not become “a dysfunctional organ in the body of the world”. Assam has its own identity but it is an integral part of India and the world. Separation would have an effect on the world’s “body”; the song thus promotes a rejection of isolationism and self-determination. This can also be Hazarika’s rendering of the notion of the Assamese “imagined community”, to use

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<sup>9</sup> Jyoti Prasad – (1903-1951) noted Assamese music composer, playwright, filmmaker, writer and poet.

<sup>10</sup> Tarun – Tarun Ram Phukan, 1877-1939. Congress leader of Assam.

<sup>11</sup> Subir Bhaumik has observed in his book, *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India’s North East* (2009) that the agitators also discovered, after initial hostility, that the Indian federal government was their only safeguard against illegal migration from Bangladesh.

Benedict Anderson's terminology. In the "imagined community", Assamese society experiences a feeling of fraternity with other communities within the Indian nation. The myriad ethnic groups that have migrated to Assam also identify as Assamese. The historical reality of the northeast, however, is one of rift and distrust among the diverse ethnic communities, both indigenous and migrants.

Hazarika was traumatised by the violence committed by state agencies during the agitation. His anguish is voiced in "Juye pura tirasir nirbasani basar" (The fire burnt election year of '83) and "Shahid pranamu tumak" (Martyr, my salute to you). In the former, the singer cries out for his lost younger brother, pointing out how the "devils" have killed many on the banks of the Luit. The latter song praises the martyrs who laid down their lives while trying to preserve the identity of the "jati" (nation) and rescue the daughter of India- Assam, through a non-violent war. Examining the relation between nationalism and death, Benedict Anderson describes how nationalism "makes it possible for... millions of people, not so much to kill as willingly to die" (1983, p. 7). Dying for one's country gives one a sense of agency and a kind of control over death. Hazarika's song, which eulogises sacrifice for the nation, can be criticised for its glorification of nationalism and fusion of individual identity with the nation.

The increasing violence of the Assam movement that ultimately led to the tragedy of the Nellie massacre<sup>12</sup> of February 18, 1983, deeply disturbed many intellectuals in Assam. Bhupen Hazarika, who always sang for the downtrodden, was completely silenced by the atrocities on poor Bengali Muslims. Many opponents of the movement spoke up in the press, "Where is Bhupen Hazarika now? Why is he silent now?" Loknath Goswami in *Dr Bhupen Hazarika Janasanskritik Parikrama* says, "The same Bhupen Hazarika who, inspired by Assamese nationalist emotions, added fuel to the fire of the movement through his thundering voice and stirring music, is now being burnt by the flames of that same fire" (2005, p. 20).

It is at this time that he composed a song, according to Goswami, not of nationalist fervour, but one redolent of rain-soaked earth. "Meghe gir gir kare" (the clouds are thundering/ a shower of rain is about to fall) (1983) is a song of the revolutionary struggle of the farmer, with the rain signifying promise and abundance, and perhaps peace, after the fire imagery of "Juye pura tirasir". Hazarika was at this time president of the Assam Janasanskritik Parishad (founded in 1982), which had the goal of initiating a National Mass Democratic Cultural Movement, carrying forward the legacy of Sankardev, Azaan Pir, Jyoti Prasad, Bishnu Rabha, Parbati Prasad Barua and Lakshminath Bezbaruah<sup>13</sup>.

Despite the accusation in media that the National Mass Democratic Cultural Movement was simply the face of CPI(ML), an ultra-left movement, people from different communities and classes worked for the organisation. In a speech made on June 27, 1982 at Rabindra Bhawan, Guwahati, Hazarika pointed out that different communities should forsake their differences, arrogance and sense of superiority if they were to resolve the present cultural crisis (Goswami, 2005, p. 23). Ultimately, the violence of this movement turned Hazarika away from the nationalist songs to a more universalised song of a farmer.

<sup>12</sup> Nellie massacre – took place in Nellie and other villages of the Nagaon district in Assam. It claimed the lives of 2,191 people (unofficial figures run to more than 5000). The victims were poor Bengali Muslims.

<sup>13</sup> Sankardev, Azaan Pir, Jyoti Prasad, Bishnu Rabha, Parbati Prasad Barua and Lakhminath Bezbaruah are Assamese cultural icons.



Sanjib Kumar Baruah, in “Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: A Comment” (1981), says that Hazarika’s dilemma is that there exists a schism between his concern for broader, humanitarian ideals and his support for the preservation of Assamese identity. These overlapped, and the universalist in the artist prevailed: Even at the height of the agitation, Hazarika wrote songs about brotherhood and humanity, finding the seed of this spirit in the Brahmaputra itself. The song “Mahabahu Brahmaputra” (The Mighty Brahmaputra, 1980) expresses his view of Assam as a land of harmony and hospitality.

The mighty Brahmaputra  
A pilgrimage of many confluences  
Has expressed for so many ages  
The meaning of harmony....  
Hundreds came suffering the storms of the Padma  
The banks of the Luit too embraced so many guests.

Instead of voicing his protest against the “influx”, Hazarika here depicts migration and cross-cultural contact as a positive trend that has enriched the land of the Brahmaputra. The song also shows that even in the early stages of the movement, Hazarika was not comfortable with the disruptive forces and underground cells that lent secessionist overtones to it.

Hence, the Brahmaputra of Hazarika’s songs has the connotation of a vast, all-inclusive entity that can accommodate diverse peoples. It thereby attains a symbolic meaning of harmony and plurality and is effectively used by Hazarika to express his political views during this tumultuous phase in Assam’s history.

Phil Wood and Charles Landry, in their book *The Intercultural City: Planning for Diversity Advantage* (2008), point to different kinds of responses when varied cultures meet. One of them is assimilation to the host culture and rejection of one’s origins. Another response, apart from others, can be to synthesize elements of one’s culture of origin and that of the host. Reflecting Hazarika’s dilemma, his songs seem to favour assimilation while also voicing a strong regard for cultures of other communities.

The same person who has so powerfully advocated for the cause of Assamese ethnicity and identity is often called a “world citizen”. Wood and Landry speak of the associations between the terms “cosmopolitanism” and “interculturalism”. The term “cosmopolitan” refers to a capacity to recognise and engage with cultures other than one’s own and to describe a universal love for humankind as a whole, regardless of nation. This cosmopolitan character is noticeable in many of Hazarika’s songs. The sense of universalism, a sense of belongingness to the entire world is expressed in “Mai eti jajabar” (“I am a wanderer”, 1968), where he claims to be a wanderer who has visited and embraced the many cities of the world, but who has also seen the homeless in the shadow of towering mansions. He has realised that suffering also is universal.

From the Luit through the Mississippi I admired Volga’s beauty  
From Ottawa through Austria, I embraced Paris.

Hazarika sings that he may be a wanderer, but he is not aimless (“many wanderers are directionless, but I have an aim”).

## Conclusion

Partha Chatterjee, in “Whose Imagined Community?” observes how nationalism’s contest for political power led it to challenge “the rule of colonial difference” – which is the chauvinistic distinction between coloniser and colonised – in the domain of the state, but it insisted on distinction - “the marks of difference” (essential marks of cultural identity), in the spiritual domain. Chatterjee places art, literature, language and culture in this latter domain, which should remain untouched by colonial influence (2007, p. 75). Hazarika’s songs seem to reflect what Chatterjee says about nationalism’s project in this spiritual domain. His songs are nationalist in that they focus on retaining the essential markers of Assamese cultural difference. But he also drives home the need to embrace other communities in one’s own home and, at the same time, be at home in the larger world. Despite the tensions, many of Hazarika’s songs reflect this need for plural identities, tolerance and interculturalism.

Sudipta Sen, in his book, *Ganga: The Many Pasts of a River*, says, “The river as a clearly defined object—with a beginning, a middle, and an end—is, after all, a human fabrication. As a natural phenomenon it is part of the earth’s water cycle, the endless succession of clouds, rain, snow, and glacial melt that merges into other rivers, lakes, or the ocean” (2019, p. 6). He further says how “At the same time, the Ganga is also a river incarnate, indispensable to thinking about the history and culture of the Indian subcontinent. In this sense it is not only a natural entity outside the frame of ordinary human experience, but also a reflexive extension of something akin to a uniquely Indian consciousness” (2019, p. 6).

Because of the inherent fluidity of the river with its borders and boundaries merging with other bodies of water, it has lent itself as an effective signifier of pluralism and heterogeneity. In Hazarika’s songs, one can see this idea of the river along with a more exclusive notion of the Luit as symbolic of a unique Assamese consciousness. The river is seen as a carrier of history and memory. Sen writes of the notion of the river “as a living presence in the history and culture of a people” (2019, p. 8). The river’s significance, therefore, goes beyond that of a spatial entity; rather the poet, musician or filmmaker can employ it as a trope to voice his/her opinions on issues of belongingness, identity and memory.

*All translations of songs are by the author.*

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