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## **Marxism and Political Praxis of Bhupen Hazarika**

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### **Abstract**

Politics and culture are intimately connected. One influences the other. Politics is viewed as a struggle to fight against exploitation. On the other hand, culture is used as an instrument of social change. Bhupen Hazarika, the great political artist and world-famous musician, stood for the praxis of social change. Although he is perceived as a cultural icon, in reality, he was a man of music and politics. His cultural interventions were not devoid of political and ideological convictions. During his lifetime, he explored various ideologies in search of pragmatic solutions to societal problems. A close and critical study of Bhupen Hazarika's political praxis reveals that different ideologies found expression in different periods of life. To put it another way, Hazarika's ideology directed him to be involved in numerous socio-political activities. In the early period of his life, he was greatly influenced by Marxist philosophy. During his close association with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), his Marxist leanings became quite evident. The majority of his compositions reflect his concern for the poor and downtrodden. He produced the best of his artistic creations during the period. Though Hazarika never declared himself as a confirmed Marxist, his advocacy of socialistic principles, his avowed interest in class conflict, the anti-establishment stance, and his perpetual endeavour to transform social order clearly suggest some inspirations derived from Marx.

**Kew Words:** Politics, Culture, Marx, Praxis, Ideology

### **Introduction:**

Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011) is the most prominent figure in the history of cultural politics of Assam. His life and work clearly demonstrate the intersection of politics and culture. He was born on September 8, 1926, in Sadiya, Assam, to Shantipriya Hazarika and Nilakanta Hazarika. His brilliant intellect and creative hand have influenced all aspects of literature and culture over the course of his 85 years of existence, including prose, poetry, lyrics, film, painting, journalism, and more. Hazarika had a mission in his life and felt the need for a cultural revolution along with the political revolution to bring about change in society. For this reason, he became active in politics. His involvement in politics was closely connected with his Marxist leanings. It is found that due to his leftist leaning, he developed a unique definition of both politics and culture.

The study reveals that Bhupen Hazarika was influenced by the Marxian notion of Politics. In this regard, the influence of Bishnuprasad Rava, the great Revolutionary communist

leader of Assam, is very much evident. Loknath Goswami observes: "From Bishnuprasad Rava Bhupen Hazarika learned the lesson of politics". (Goswami, 2011, p. 13). Thus, Bhupen Hazarika conceived politics as an attempt to change the existing state of affairs into a new one. This means politics involves the transformation of society. Bhupen Hazarika firmly believed in the Marxian dictum –contradiction is the law of development. In chapter I of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx states,

"No antagonism, no progress... This is the law that civilization has followed. ... Till now the productive forces have been developed by virtue of this system of class antagonism". (Cited in Bottomore, 1991, p. 238).

That does not imply, however, that his political praxis is solely based on communist ideals. His political praxis reveals that different ideologies found expression in different periods of life. To put it another way, Hazarika's ideology directed him to be involved in numerous socio-political activities. His political activism became evident in his praxis of culture.

The term Praxis finds its fullest expression in Marxist philosophy. Indeed, the concept of Praxis occupies a central position in Marxism. In Marxist philosophy, the term Praxis refers to the free, universal, creative, and self-creative activity through which man creates and changes his historical, human world and himself; an activity specific to man, though he is basically differentiated from all other beings (Bottomore, 1991, p. 435). Praxis involves the creation and reproduction of cultural forms. Praxis can reflect and challenge power dynamics within cultures as individuals and groups resist, subvert, or reinforce dominant cultural narratives. Culture shapes and is shaped by praxis, as individuals and groups negotiate, create, and transform cultural meanings and practices through their actions.

Bhupen Hazarika's political praxis for social change is well connected with Marxism's basic tenets. It reflects his belief or faith in Marxist ideology, which he has expressed in his songs and other writings. His faith in Marxism becomes evident when he said in an interview,

"We respect Marxism as a science. After seeing the world, I realised that Marxism, whether intentionally or unintentionally, brings about a change in the entire system of government in the world". (Hazarika, 2010a, p. 55).

So, he believed in Marxism as a theory of change. Again, in the article 'Marxbad aru Byakti Swadhinata' (Marxism and Individual Freedom) he clearly said, "In the twentieth century, only the fools or ignorant can neglect Marxism. I do not want to offend anyone, but it is the truth. (Hazarika, 2008, p. 331). However, he was critical of a fake Marxist-one who gave a wrong interpretation of Marxism. He believed that Marxism in its purest form can ensure individual freedom. Criticizing those fake or so-called Marxists, Hazarika said, "Fake Marxists have lost the issue of Socialist realism while explaining Marxism. Such activity has created division among the progressive people. As a result, it has given a chance to awaken the non-Marxist rightists". (Hazarika, 2008, p. 333). It makes clear that he conceived Marxism as a progressive ideology.

Although he actively and wholeheartedly participated in the IPTA-led left cultural movement in Assam, which was based on communist ideals, he never became a member of the Communist Party. However, his political praxis clearly shows that he was influenced by Marxism and guided by the latter in different periods of his life. His activities as well as his artistic creations, provide adequate evidence of his commitment to communism and Marxism.

The study reveals that Bhupen Hazarika was influenced by Marxism in the early period of his life. In this regard, the influence of the progressive thinking of JP Agarwala and the Revolutionary ideas of Bishnuprasad Rava is significant. JP Agarwala initially was an ardent advocate of Gandhism and later leaned towards Marxism. On the other hand, Bishnuprasad Rava was a Communist leader (Initially a member of RCPI and later of CPI) who fought not only against the British but also against the native exploiter whom he perceived as a product of the former. His close association with Bishnuprasad Rava attracted him towards leftist ideas. Hazarika acknowledged Rava's influence in a speech delivered on 23rd May 1999 at Gauhati University in the inaugural function of 'Bhupendra Sangeet Sammittee'. He says:

In 1939, I took a different approach and wrote the song 'Agni Jugar Firingoti Moi'. Till then, I had never read Marx or anything about him. Without any knowledge of Marxism, I wrote – 'Nara Kangkalar Astra Xaji Xoankarik Badhim'. In those days, the AK-47 had not yet been invented; therefore, I imagined weapons made of human bones and expressed through my song the determination to destroy the exploiters.

He further recounted his early association with Bishnuprasad Rava, the revolutionary cultural leader and R.C.P.I. activist:

Later, Bishnu Rabha wrote a book titled 'Mukti Deol' and told me that he would include two of my songs in it – 'Agni Jugar Firingoti Moi' and 'Janatar Kolahol'. That was the first encouragement I received for writing songs. After my songs were added to 'Mukti Deol', both Bishnuprasad Rava's and my names appeared on the cover page of the book. By including my songs in a political work, Bishnuprasad Rava gave me special recognition and encouragement. (Hazarika, 2011a, p. 147).

It is quite evident that in the early phase of Bhupen Hazarika's life, he was profoundly influenced by the revolutionary ideals of Bishnuprasad Rava. However, at Banaras Hindu University and then in New York, the revolutionary spirit that had grown under the guidance of his two mentors—JP Agarwal and Bishnuprasad Rava—was further accelerated. At Banaras, he met Joy Prakash Narayan, the great socialist thinker. He also attended the Marxist class delivered by Archya Narendradev. In Banaras, he began to read the writings of great socialist writers like Munchi Premchand and Firaq Gorakhpuri. Moreover, he became a member of the Socialist Forum. In New York, he met famous socialist leader, protest singer Paul Robson from whom he learnt that music was an instrument of social change. Robeson performed and spoke at public gatherings to help the underprivileged and reawaken their buried desire to create an egalitarian society. Bhupen was very much influenced by his ideology. Apart from Robeson, in America, Hazarika's interactions with Howard Fast, Pete Seeger, Pearl S. Buck, Arnold Toynbee, and others significantly influenced in thought process and ideological orientation of the former. As a result, he actively participated in the left-wing cultural movement initiated by IPTA after returning from America in 1952 to convey his anti-establishment stance through his praxis of culture.

Bhupen Hazarika's political praxis during the IPTA era (1952-1960) is a clear manifestation of his Marxist leanings. Most of the songs written during this period reflect his socialist realism. The sufferings of the poor and exploited masses are expressed in a number of his popular songs. Besides, one can find Hazarika's uncompromising anti-

incumbent spirit in most of the songs written during his close association with IPTA. Important songs written during the periods were, Endhar Katir Nishate (1953), Sagarsal Selabor Dabuwa Katari- (1953), Pratidhwani Suno Moi (1953), Dola he dola (1953), Bhang xil Bhang (1953), Parahi Puwate Tulunga Naware (1954) Rod Puwabor karane (1956), Snehei Amar Sata Shravanar (1954), Nami Aha Sundarare Sena Dal (1953) Manuhe Manuhar Babe (1960) etc. Among these, Endhar Katir Nixate has remained the manifesto of Hazarika's revolutionary philosophy. Depicting a pathetic story of Panei and her son, the song conveys the lyricist's message to the common people and a warning to the exploiters. The song expresses the lyricist's hatred for the exploiters and feeling for the downtrodden sections. He used the phrase Bar bar Manuhar to indicate the bourgeoisie class that exploits the poor. The spirit of rebellion is also very much prominent in this song.

Bar bar Manuhar bharalar Pora moi  
 Karhi ani phal dim  
 Darab -jati dim  
 Gakhir gur dim  
 Pahralipati dim  
 (Hazarika, 2010b, p. 125)

In Dola he dola, he attempts to reveal the social and cultural aspects of feudal exploitation and practices. This song is based on the life of the palanquin carriers. He said that the palanquin carriers are not seen in the present times. In the song, palanquins are portrayed as emblems of the oppressed in feudal society. He says:

The dola (the palanquin) is no longer in use. It has remained the symbol of oppression of the feudal age. However, the oppressors' tyranny hasn't decreased, has it? Does reminding them no longer seem necessary?  
 (Hazarika, 2014, p.17).

The song mentioned above is also a representation of class conflict in the line of Marxist philosophy. In this song, he discusses a specific social class and its continuous oppression over the lower classes. Besides, the power relation is also displayed throughout the lyrics. It is due to the influence of Marxism that one can find the element of protest in several songs composed by Bhupen Hazarika. Compositions like Jhak Jhak Rel Sole (1949), Bhang Xil Bhang (1953) manifest his voice of protest against the age-long, exploitative system. The first song, composed on the life of railway workers, firemen, signalmen, linesmen, and drivers, expresses his deep realization of long-term exploitation. Class consciousness is also present in this song. The song's most crucial element is that it indicates the inevitable change by the portending Xamyar dhumuha (the gale of Socialism): Akash Paraxi joa ekatar bandhonak/ Rudhiba kone?/Xamyar Dhumuhai thele (Who is going to break the high bond of unity? It has been propelled by the socialist storm). The second song, Bhang Xil Bhang depicts the phenomenon of exploitation. It also contains the element of protest. The song says that the propertied calls or the wealthy exploiters, have been ruling society for a long period, raising their heads like black stones in the landscape. The lyricist, as a Marxist revolutionary, identifies himself with the exploited masses and feels that these exploiters need to be destroyed like massive black rocks.

He believed in the Marxian dictum- 'contradiction is the law of development'. Following Marxism, he declared without contradiction that the transformation of society is not possible. In an interview, he said,

“Contradiction is a must for transformation. The conflict between two antagonistic forces reveals the truth. After that new truth will come up”.

In this way, he adhered to Hegelian dialectics, which constitutes the foundations of Marxism. It is apparent in both his writings and songs. Here example can be given of a famous song composed by Bhupen Hazarika in 1956. The song was Sagor Songomot (At the Oceans’ confluence) in which he says that ‘the blows of infliction bring in conflicts/But the crusaders of peace are countless/The conflicts open in my Pacific/ A new horizon of real progress’. Here, he indicates that conflict and contradictions can bring progress to human society.

The Marxist theory tries to depict the sufferings of the poor and the downtrodden. In *Shitare Semeka Rati* (Chilly is the Winter Night), written in 1969, Hazarika tends to depict the suffering of the oppressed section of society. It has been observed that the Indian peasants suffer significant challenges that jeopardize their socioeconomic stability. With the following song, Hazarika attempted to paint a clear picture of the persecuted minority groups, wage earners, and peasants in Indian society. The lyricist also tries to give voice to their liberation in the following way:

Shitare semeka rati  
Semeka shitare rati  
Bastrabihin kono khetiyakar  
Bhagi para pajatir  
Tunh jui ekurar  
Umi umi jwali thaka  
Raktim jen eti uttap hau  
(Chilly is the winter night  
Chilly is the winter night  
The chilly winter night  
Chilly winter night  
In the smouldering heap of paddy husk  
In the worn-out cottage  
Of a peasant hard up for clothes  
Let me its glowing warmth)  
(Hazarika, 2010b, p. 468) (Deka, 2011, p. 190)

The ideology of Marxism always stands against exploitation. It tends to eradicate all types of injustice and exploitation that prevail in society. In every society, a handful of people dominate the economic, political, and social structure of the society. The rich, propertied class often exploits the propertyless poor class. The following song is a beautiful expression of Bhupen Hazarika’s thoughts on the problem of exploitation. He sings –

Jug jug dhari echam loke Xoxan kimano kariba?  
Natun surjyak kala daware Arunu kiman dhakiba?  
Samajar mustimeya xoxake  
Banuak sadai thagiba khoje  
Chan para monbor sahai loi  
.....  
Shramar phal khini xamabhage loi  
Bahutor mritut garji utha

Natunar anka sabati loi  
 Ajir xamyar prithivi garhiba kone?  
 Tumi! Tumi!! Tumi!  
 (Hazarika, 2010b, p. 417)

Bhupen Hazarika raises the question in this song: How long will some individuals continue to take advantage of others, and how much longer will the dark cloud cover the sun that is just emerging? The lyric says that the few exploiters in society want to cheat the working class. The exploiters do not realise the dignity of labour. The lyricist appealed to the working class to fight against such a type of exploitation. Finally, Hazarika asserts that it is the working class that will build a new world based on socialism.

The ultimate goal of Marxism is to establish a classless society, i.e., communism. In Bhupen Hazarika's political praxis, one can find an innate desire to establish a society based on socialism and communism. Examples can be given of *Agni Yugor Firingoti Moi*, *Jhok Jhok Rel Sole*, *O' Junali Dipannibta*, *Attitor Buronji Likhoke Likhisil*, *Bhang Bhanh Si Bhnag*, *Nami aaha Sundorehere Sena silpi dal*, *Rong kiniba kune* etc. In *Agni Yugor Firingoti*, he says, "Breaking all walls of prejudices/ A heaven of equality I will make". In the song *Jhok Jhok Rel Sole*, he used the phrases *Samyai Ringiai* and *Samyar dhumuhai thele thele*. In *Bhang Bhanh Si Bhnag*, he identified the working class as harbinger of communism. The song *Attitor Buronji Likhoke Likhisil* talks of the emancipation of the people. Likewise, he appealed to his fellow artists to participate in the struggle against injustice and contribute to the establishment of communist society in the song *Nami aaha Sundorehere Sena silpi dal*. Similar hopes and aspirations are expressed in the other songs quoted above.

It is found that Marxist ideology has been a constant source of inspiration and a vital aspect of Hazarika's praxis of culture. In 1982, he wrote a song *Meghe Gir Gir Kore*, which reflects his fight against injustice and exploitation. It portrays the inhuman condition faced by the poor. It gives vent to the long-standing struggle between the feudal lords and the poor workers and pronounces an ultimate warning to the mahajans. A roar of protest is also heard in this song. He sings:

The clouds roar  
 (Ah) they rumble  
 In the wind, tender plaintain leaves sway  
 A shower seems to be  
 On it way  
 .....  
 I have allowed many a drop of my sweet to trickle  
 Have also offered much blood of my bosom  
 I've now sharpened my sickle  
 I'm filled with courage.  
 (Hazarika, 2010b, p. 402) & (Deka, 2011, p. 330)

This song serves as one of the best illustrations of his ideological position about socialistic ideals. In the same line, in 1986, he wrote another song *O Mur Dharitri Ai* on revolution and conditions of cultivators where Marxist ideology is expressed. The life of a poor peasant is the basis for this song. A peasant lives by cultivating his or her land. But feudal lords alienate the peasants from their own land. He expressed concern about the advent of neoliberalism and neocolonialism as part of his belief in Marxism. In the decade of 1990, a shift was noticed

in the Indian economy from a socialist pattern of society to a neoliberal state system. Interestingly, Francis Fukuyama presented his 'end of ideology thesis in the book titled 'The End of History and the Last Man' published in 1992. In this book, he declared liberal democracy as the final form of government. Capitalism is the last stage of human development. He claimed that the ideological conflicts of the past, such as those between communism and capitalism, had been resolved, and that liberal democracy had emerged as the dominant ideology. In such a situation, the question arises on the relevance of socialism. In this contest, Bhupen Hazarika as a follower of Marxism, strongly declared socialism as the goal of today's society. In 1995, he composed a song *jiban sindhu bohu bindure hoy* (The Oceans of Life Is Made of Countless Drops) in which his emphasis on socialist ideology is expressed. He sings:

Xamajak eri kono bad nahay  
 Xamaj bad ajir lakshya  
 Jibon bodhhein byaktir babe  
 Paridhi matho hay nis kokhya  
 Swarthapar jantrik dristiye  
 Xaxanak kare xangkirna'  
 (Hazarika, 2010a, p. 227)  
 (No ism is possible outside society  
 Our aim is socialism  
 For as person, deaf to call of life  
 His own room is his orbit  
 The selfish and machine-like view  
 Make the ruling narrow)  
 (Deka, 2011, p. 354)

Thus, it appears that Bhupen Hazarika's political praxis reflects his inclination towards Marxism. It is the Marxist influence that led him to join in IPTA led progressive cultural movement in Assam. The majority of songs composed during his active participation in the IPTA, imbued with socialistic contents incurred the displeasure of the people in power. Some of his songs (Sagar Chal Selabor) were deemed anti-authority due to their radical nature, and he was accused of inciting opposition to the government. There was an 'undesirable smell-the smell of the Communist ideologies' that people detected in his songs. A discussion of it is made in chapter IV.

The study reveals that the two decades between the 1950s and the 1970s were a significant period in Bhupen Hazarika's artistic career. His creative ability reached a new level during this time when he wrote some of his ferocious songs to rouse the oppressed masses of Assam and other places. His songs during this time period gave the impression that he was a staunch advocate of socialism and Marxism. Obviously, this period can be considered the most productive one for Bhupen Hazarika's contributions to Assam's progressive and cultural movement to date. Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Hemanga Biswas, and members of the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association, Communist Party of India, and Revolutionary Communist Party of India were all very helpful to him during that mission.

### **Conclusion:**

The study reveals that due to the influence of Marxism or his sense of social responsibility, Hazarika was actively involved in the IPTA-led left cultural movement in Assam. During

his close association with IPTA, his Marxist leanings became quite evident. The majority of his compositions reflect his concern for the poor and downtrodden. He produced the best of his artistic creations during the period. Since, IPTA was a cultural wing of the Communist Party, therefore (although he was not a member of CPI), he was labelled as 'communist'. He remained in the communist bloc till the first half of 1960. (Gohain, 2014, p 20). That does not imply, however, that his political practice is solely based on communist ideals. From 1937 (the creation of the first song, Kusumber Putra) to 1962, he wrote several songs expressing different ideologies. For example, his fifth lyric, *O Bhayai O Bhaniti* of 1946, is based on Assamese nationality, where he recalls the golden period of Ahom Rule and the pitiable condition of the Assamese people during the British period. In the same year, Bhupen Hazarika composed the lyric *Mahatam Hachibole Ram O Rahim* on the basis of communal harmony. But the lyrics *Jilikab Luitore Par* (1954) and *Junakore Rati Asomire Mati* (1956) are mainly based on nationalism. Again, his lyrics *Manuhe Manuhor Babe* (1960), were based on humanism. However, Marxism was the dominant ideology during the period. The shift of ideology in the political praxis of Bhupen Hazarika was first noticed during the Chinese aggression. It is mentionable that in 1953, Bhupen Hazarika composed and sang his famous song *Pratidhwani Suno Moi*, praising the rise and spread of Communism in neighbouring China. But after witnessing the brutal attack by the Chinese army in 1962 and seeing the dead bodies of the Indian soldiers on the Kameng front, he became so upset that he composed a series of songs that reflect his pan-Indian nationalism. He wrote *Kata jowanor mritu hol*, *Rana klanta nahau moi*, *Buku hom hom kore*, where the ideology of nationalism is expressed. He even changed a few lines of his earlier song *Pratidhwani suno moi*. Then, he was criticized by the Marxists and alleged that he was changing his ideology from communism to nationalism. The Marxist critics are right from their point of view. However, an impartial analysis, shows that a complex and socially concerned artist such as Bhupen Hazarika cannot be contained inside the confines of any one ideology. In reaction to the shifting social, political, and moral circumstances of his era, his artistic and political praxis underwent constant evolution.

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