



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-XIII, Issue-IV, July 2025, Page No. 181-187

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Sribhumi, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

DOI: 10.64031/pratidhwanitheecho.vol.13.issue.04W.019



Conceptualizing Politics and Culture in Bhupen Hazarika's Political Thought

Dr. Dhrubajyoti Saikia, *Asst. Prof, Dept. of Political Science, Kakojan College, Kakojan, Assam, India*

Dr. Lucky Chetia, *Asst. Prof, Dept. of Political Science, Sonari College, Sonari, Assam, India*

Received: 05.07.2025; Accepted: 13.07.2025; Available online: 31.07.2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Sribhumi. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

Politics and Culture are two significant aspects of human life. Both are interconnected and influence each other in complex ways. This interface between politics and culture provides distinctive definitions of both politics and culture. Regarding the definition of politics, it is said that politics is an indispensable part of human society. It is conceived as a strong instrument to fight against injustice and exploitation. In this way, politics is also viewed as a part of the revolutionary process. Although Bhupen Hazarika is perceived and projected as a cultural icon, he was not merely a cultural persona devoid of politics. No doubt he was a singer, an artist par excellence, who carried out his politico-cultural activities with a revolutionary zeal for social change. Since his childhood, a conscious appeal and effort towards social change are noticeable in most of his writings, which is reflected in his cultural activities. To bring about the desired transformation of society, Bhupen Hazarika conceived culture as an effective weapon of the artist. Due to Marxist influence and imbued by Marxist realism, Bhupen Hazarika developed his notions of culture and politics.

Keywords: Politics, Culture, Marxist, Bhupen Hazarika, Political Vision

Introduction:

In the history of cultural politics in Assam, the name of Bhupen Hazarika is of utmost importance. The interface between culture and politics is very much evident in the life and works of Bhupen Hazarika. He (1926-2011) was born at Sadiya (Assam) on 8th September 1926 to mother Shantipriya Hazarika and father Nilakanta Hazarika. In his 85 years of life, it is found that his creative hand and artistic mind have touched every facet of literature and culture, from prose to poetry to lyric, film, painting, journalism, etc. Because of his extensive and enduring contributions to each of these fields, he is now regarded as a cultural icon for Assam and all of North-East India. In addition to the multitudinous awards and recognition, Bhupen Hazarika was the recipient of National Film Award for Best Music Direction (1975) Padmashree Award (1977) Best Music Director Award by Bangla Film Award Society (1977), Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1987), Dada Saheb Phalke Award (1992), Padma Bhushan (2001), Padma Vibhushan (Posthumously in 2012)

Bharat Ratna (Posthumously in 2019). He was the President of *Axom Sahitya Sabha*¹ in 1993 and Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi from 1998 to 2003. Thus, Bhupen Hazarika created a new era in Assamese music and culture through his aesthetic creations. But it is wrong to perceive him as a cultural persona devoid of politics. He is a man of music and politics. He felt the need for a political revolution along with a cultural revolution to change society. That is why he was involved 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.

Bhupen Hazarika's conceptualization of Politics:

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). It is found that Bishnuprasad Rava equated politics with struggle. He defines politics in terms of the struggle necessary for human existence. In an essay, *Rajniti* (politics) he writes:

Babies cry as soon as they are born. He/she cries for three reasons. He comes out of his mother's womb with pain and difficulty -he gets tired -they become hungry and thirsty -then he cries. When his mother feeds him, then his crying stops. The baby comes out of its mother's womb and falls to the ground alone. The mother's womb is so tender, but the ground is hard. So, he cries for shelter. His mother then takes him in her arms and consoles him. Then his crying stops. Mother's womb is warm; he doesn't get cold there. Coming from Mother's womb, he shivers in the cold with the earth or the wind and cries. Then, his mother embraces him with her arms. He finds comfort in the covering of his arms and stays quiet. For this food, clothes, and shelter, people cry from childhood and keep struggling from his/her birth. The lack of these three makes people's lives critical. Death comes, conquering life. These three people cry and are involved in the struggle from birth to death. This is ... the politics -real politics. (Das, 1977, p. 852) (Translated from Assamese)

Here, Rava analyses how people face the harsh reality of society. Exploitation and domination prevail everywhere. People try to fight against injustice, exploitation, and subjugation. They tend to adjust to the outside world. From birth to death, people are involved in different types of struggles. So, in Rava's articulation, politics is conceived as a struggle. It is a fight against all kinds of evils. That is why he not only fought against British imperialism but also against native exploiters whom he perceived as the product of the former.

This idea of politics also affected Bhupen Hazarika. This is evident in his second song, *Agni Jugor Firingoti Moi* (*Of the fiery age, I am the spark*), where he loudly protested against imperialism, communalism, and all forms of exploitation. This notion of politics led him to join the cultural movement launched by the IPTA. Most of the songs composed during his close association with the IPTA reflect his political vision. It is found that the idea of class,

¹Axom Sahitya Sabha is a non-profit, non-governmental organization of Assam that was established in 1917 to promote Assamese literature, culture, and language.

class struggle, and the fight against all types of evils is represented in the cultural practices of Bhupen Hazarika. Even the life of Hazarika was a life of struggle. He recognized struggle as another name for life – *Xangram An Eti Nam Jibanare* (Dutt, 2014).

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).

In an interview, Bhupen Hazarika said,

“Without contradiction, the transformation of the society was not possible. Contradiction is inevitable. The truth will come out as a result of the contradiction between two opposites”. (Hazarika, 2010a, p. 74).

Bhupen Hazarika was a singer, an artist par excellence. Loknath Goswami tends to call him a Political artist (Goswami, 2015). Moreover, he is acclaimed as an artist of the masses (*Ganasilipi*). Here, it is notable that as an artist, Bhupen Hazarika was greatly influenced by the political concept developed by one of his mentors, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. According to Dhiren Bhagawati, Jyoti Prasad accorded great value to politics in bringing about a new world devoid of duskriti –the evil. Jyoti Prasad assigned this great task to the artist. For him, politics means fighting against duskriti or society's evils. In this context, Dhiren Bhagawati comments:

Jyoti Prasad wanted the artist to create a beautiful world, and the world would be beautiful if it were free from Duskriti. He entrusted the responsibility of creating such a world to the artist. It would be the politics of the artist to uplift humanity to a free and beautiful condition. Jyoti Prasad was not alone in seeking the assistance of the artists to create a new world” (Bhagawati, 2012, p. 11)

Regarding the role of artists, JP Agarwala asserted that artists were the warriors in the war against evil to establish a new society. It is found that Bhupen Hazarika tried to perform the same role of the artist as envisioned by Jyotiprasad in his writings. He was also determined to fight against all types of evils through the medium of art and culture. Therefore, He conceived his songs as a great force to awaken the people. He wrote:

Let my songs be
Against adamant walls
A force invincible. (Hazarika, 2010b, p. 407 & Dekka, 2011, p. 186)

In another song, *Mur Geetor Hezar Shruta* (Myriad Listeners of my Song), he tries to express his endeavour as an artist or musician. He sings:

I just endeavour to bring
A Smile to your lips
As I try to shed a tear
In your moment of grief
Sharing your wrath do I write song
And offer for all a salver of Strains

And that is why we find today
Life glowing with a bouquet of song (Hazarika, 2010b, p. 409) & (Deka, 2011, p. 252)

Bhupen Hazarika was also influenced by the political ideas of the famous protest singer Paul Robeson. Paul Robeson, the great African American artist, leaves a great influence on Bhupen Hazarika's thought, ideology, as well as on his style of performance. During his stay in the USA, while pursuing a Ph.D. Bhupen Hazarika got the opportunity to meet the legendary black American singer, actor, and civil social activist- Paul Robeson. Robeson's fight against racial discrimination and crusade for social justice influenced Bhupen Hazarika a lot. Hazarika was greatly influenced by Robeson's saying, "Guitar is not a Musical instrument; it is an instrument of social change". So, his idea of politics, earlier in the close association with his mentors, namely Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava, was hardened further after his contact with Paul Robeson.

Bhupen Hazarika's conceptualization of Culture:

This section deals with Bhupen Hazarika's conceptualization of culture. The study reveals that Bhupen Hazarika was a People's artist who tended to use culture as an instrument of social change. He was greatly influenced by the concept of culture advanced by Jyoti Prasad Agrawala, Bishnuprasad Rava, and Paul Robeson. Bhupen Hazarika writes:

"The idea of society and culture was inculcated in my mind by Paul Robeson and Jyoti Prasad Agarwala" (Hazarika, 2011, p. 156).

It is here mentionable that in many Indian languages, the term *Kristi* is used as a synonym for culture. Culture, in this respect, is linked with cultivation in its original Sanskrit meaning. In the Assamese language, the terms *Kristi* and *Sanskriti* have been used synonymously to refer to culture. However, Bishnuprasad Rava, the revolutionary artist, used the term *kṛiṣṭi* for culture instead of *sāṅskṛti*. He views *Kristi* as having a close relationship with the people. In *Asamiya Kristir Camu Abhas*, Rava held that *kṛiṣṭi* was inherently linked to people's everyday life. (Das, 1989, p. 1089).

Unlike Rava, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala tends to use the word *sāṅskṛti* as a translation of "culture". It has been mentioned earlier that he framed a special definition of 'artist' and 'culture'. In a speech delivered in 1948 at the All-Assam Artists' Association, Sibsagar, and published as *Silpir Prithibi* (The Artist's World), Agarwala defined culture as the symbol of all that was good in society, which was pitted against the evils of society, which he called *duskṛti* (anti-culture/evil). He described imperialism and capitalism as the twin evils or *duskṛti* of the present era. According to Jyoti Prasad, the role of the artist will be to expose the evils spread by capitalism. Thus, he perceived culture and politics as indivisible segments of the greater social process. He saw the clash between Culture (*sanskriti*) and Anti-Culture (*duskṛti*).

Agarwala further emphasized educating the People and developing their political consciousness through the means of culture. He wrote:

"Artists of the world will have to ignite the light in the minds of the people so that they stand united to establish an artist's world. World artists must wake up to form a new world" (Gohain, 2007, p. 485).

It is found that 'Beauty' finds the highest value in Agarwala's idea of culture. Here, a difference is noticed between JP Agarwala's views on culture and the concept of culture

developed by Bishnuprasad Rava regarding the meaning and origin of the former. Eminent writer and progressive thinker Prasenjit Choudhury, in this regard, writes:

“Agarwala’s definition of culture is basically beauty-focused, whereas the definition of Bishnuprasad is centred around the struggle” (Choudhury, 2018, p. 194).

Unlike Jyoti Prasad, instead of giving an idealistic view of culture, Rabha has given a realistic view of the same. However, Bhupen Hazarika, inspired by both, tends to present a blend of ideas of these two great cultural giants of the state of Assam. This is very much evident in his second song, *Agni Jugor Firingoti* (of the fiery age, I am the Spark). In this song, he has projected himself both as a worshiper of beauty and as well a well a revolutionary. “I consider myself as a worshiper of beauty, an aesthete”, thus claims Bhupen Hazarika (Hazarika, 2008, p. 1851).

It has been mentioned that Hazarika always considered art and culture as a powerful instrument of social change. He adhered to the concept of art for people’s sake since the earliest period of his cultural life. Hazarika perceived the role of an artist as visualized by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, he also had a great aesthetic sense and conceived culture as a domain of aesthetics where beauty is seen and expressed. It is things of joy (Hazarika, 1993, p. 2). He writes:

“Just as language is not a few words,
Or literature is not a few lines,
Or research is not just converting the old dust-covered manuscripts to printed form,
Likewise, culture is not a mere collection of a few songs and dances!
Culture is a vision of life.” (Bhupen Hazarika, 1993, p. 2) (Translated from Assamese)²

He further added:

Culture is not an empty word. It is the heart and soul of a nation. It embraces a lot of the past. It dares to fight for change in the present society. It envisions a just and free society for the future. (qtd in Kalita, 2011, p. 28).

Bhupen Hazarika used the term culture from a very wide perspective. It not only includes language, literature, songs, and dance but also covers the whole way of life. It represents the past, present, and future of human society. It reflects the reality. Through culture, one can mobilize and unite the oppressed and exploited class to bring about transformation in society. That is why Bhupen Hazarika used music as a cultural component to awaken the masses in different critical situations in Assam. It can be mentioned here that a large part of the Hazarika’s songs were responses to different social issues. The subject matter of his music is from the social milieu around him (Hazarika, 2008, p. 04).

Bhupen Hazarika was very much aware of the role of culture in society. He even expressed his strong desire to work in the field of culture. He writes: “I will do work associated with culture only” (Hazarika, 2011, p. 111). Like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, he also believed that artists should have social responsibility. Regarding the role of culture during

²Translated from Assamese by Dr. Sikhamoni Gogoi

crisis situations, he expressed his views in a speech titled 'Culture builds the bridge of the mind' delivered on 27th June, 1982 at Rabindra Bhaban, Guwahati. He says, "With the help of culture, we can at least bring integration, harmony, and understanding, and also proceed together. Culture can build a bridge in the mind. (Hazarika, 2011, p.37).

Conclusion:

Thus, it is clear that Bhupen Hazarika had a wider view of politics. His politics was confined to electoral or party politics. He conceived politics as a struggle to fight against exploitation and injustices that prevail in society. His lifelong struggle for all kinds of evils in society is a clear manifestation of his political goal. As an artist, he used all of his cultural practices to liberate the masses from all types of bondage. Notably, one of the important dimensions of his politics is the association of politics with culture. It means the political outlook of the Hazarika is reflected in culture. Regarding his concept of culture, it is observed that it was the influence of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava, Hazarika developed his own concept of culture. In this context, Pulin Kalita comments:

"Jyoti-Bishnu has the greatest contribution and influence in the formation of Bhupen Hazarika's cultural thought" (Kalita, 2011, p. 26).

However, the concept of culture as perceived by Bhupen Hazarika is not contradictory with that of his mentors, i.e., Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava; rather, complementary. Like Jyoti Prasad, he also believed that conflict or contradiction between culture and anti-culture is inevitable. In the conflict between culture and anti-culture, the former will triumph (Hazarika, 2010a, p-74). He further added: "No transformation without contradiction" (Hazarika, 2010a, p. 74). In the tune of Jyoti Prasad, Bhupen Hazarika also said that culture and revolution were mutually connected. It is the culture that can bring about revolutionary change in society. Thus, the interface between politics and culture is very much evident in the life of Bhupen Hazarika. In conclusion, it can be said that in Bhupen Hazarika, one can find a unique combination of an artist and a political activist who carried out his cultural activities with a definite political goal.

References:

1. Goswami, L. (2011). Bandita Bhupenda Nindita Bhupen Hazarika. Aak Baak.
2. Das, J. (Ed.). (1997). Bishnu Prasad Rabha Rachana Sambhar. Vol. II. Rabha Rachanawali Prakashan Songha.
3. Dutta, D. K. (2014). Bhupen Hazariakar Git aru Jiban Rath. Banalata.
4. Bottomore, T (Ed.). (1991) A Dictionary of Marxist Thought. Wiley-Blackwell
5. Hazarika, B. (2010a). Sakhatkar. S.H. Educational Trust.
5. Goswami, L. (2015). Anahut Bitarkarpora Shriteeshilatar Aotasloy. Rekha Prakashan.
6. Bhagawati, D. (2012). Jyotiprasad Agarwala's Politics and Ideology in Dutta. A.R. (Ed.). Culture Ideology Politics: Jyotiprasad Agarwala and his vision of social transformation. DVS Publishers.
7. Gohain, H. (Ed.). (2007). Jyotiprasad Rachanawali (The Complete works of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Publication Board Assam.
8. Hazarika, B. (2010b) Dr. Bhupen Hazariakar Geet Samagra (Geetawali). Bani Mandir
9. Deka, B. (Ed.). (2011). Dr. Bhupen Hazarika: A legend. Orchid Publications.
10. Hazarika, S. (Ed.). (2011). Moi Eti Jajabor. S.H. Educational Trust

11. Das, J. (Ed.). (1989). Bishnu Prasad Rabha Rachana Sambhar. Vol-I. Rabha Rachanawali Prakashan Songha.
12. Choudhury, P., & Deori, I. (2018). Jyoti-Bishnu Sanskritik Rupantoror Ruprekha. Assam Publishing Company.
13. Hazarika, S. (Ed.). (2008). Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Rachanwali (Pratham Khnada). S.H. Educational Trust.
14. Hazarika, B. (1993). Kristir Pothare Pothare. S. H. educational Trust.
15. Kalit, P. (2011). Agni Yugar Firingati. Banalata.