

The River Brahmaputra in The Songs of Dr Bhupen Hazarika: An Ecomusicological Study to The Threads of Identity of the People of Assam

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1. Introduction

Ecomusicology refers to an academic field, interdisciplinary in nature, that studies the cordial association in the fields of music, culture and nature. An entry into the sphere of music having the smell of soil and water releases the aura of 'knowing thyself' in a given context. When the natural environment serves the inspiration to express passion in a sonic medium enabling the urge for identifying oneself with the environment. The river Brahmaputra, as the name suggests, the son of Brahma, happens to be the prime propulsive force behind the making of identity of people on its bank in Assam. Among the major exponents of Assamese lyricists there is hardly any one left who has not featured the Brahmaputra in their creation of memorable songs. The way both the physical and psychological experience with the river takes on artistic or aesthetic form reveals its creative necessity. Experiences felt, constructed or created turns into musical or aesthetic experiences of ourselves.

Acoustic experience serves as a grand metaphor to understand the aesthetics of music that is based on natural environment. To refer to the concept the term 'acoustic epistemology' was coined by Feld in his landmark essay 'Echo-Muse-Ecology' published in 1994. The concept being a recent one has drawn the attention of researchers of divergent fields associated with music, landscape as well as identity formation in a given context. Notwithstanding the fact that such association is as ancient as human civilisation, theoretical study emerges as a reaction to the distinction between the contemporary notion of the ecological influence in building up the selfhood from that of the traditional ones. Eco critical theories deal with environmental crisis that has ravished the balance between man and nature. The present study is an attempt to assess featuring of the river Brahmaputra in the musical compositions of Dr Bhupen Hazarika with a view to focus on how his portrayal of the river provide a psychological space to identify a bond among the people on its bank. It is necessary to mention here that while discussing the songs of Dr Bhupen Hazarika, the lyrics of the songs receive the prime focus.

The river Brahmaputra is the lifeline for the people living on its bank. It flows from east to west to meet its final destination. The bank of the river, both towards the north and the south, is inhabited by a heterogenous group of people since time immemorial. The connectivity between past and present existence carries a legacy that helps to channelise the urge for searching the identity of people on its bank as a consequence of numerous changes passed over the years. Hence, the concept amplifies the communal

identity. Communal identity or communal selfhood refers to the distinct tradition, values, common practices and rituals shared by the members of the community.

Question might arise regarding the need to delve into the study of communal identity. As observed by S Clayton and S Optow ‘the group identity generates an imperative to act in ways consistent with the attributed consensus on issues important to the group’s values and goals’. (2003: 277) In the alluvial nature provided by the river, the history of the Brahmaputra river valley creates a space that is being referred to magnanimous and powerful too empowering the people on its bank. From the psychological perspective, the idea of collective consciousness works in this context of sharing values by the members of the community. Amartya Sen (2006) mentions ‘one’s identity with one’s community must be the principal or dominant identity a person has.’ People live in groups. Here lies the rationale for valuing communal identity.

Disciplines such as Sociology, Psychology, Public Administration and many other fields of have studied community identity or communal identity as active branch of study since the beginning of the 20th century employing thematic analysis both through primary and secondary sources. Initially the word ‘identity’ falls under the academic discipline of Philosophy having its early conceptualisation of identity to individual recognition of their group identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1999). One’s recognition among one’s community emphasises the social nature of the self. The concept lands one to the understanding of changing and reshaping nature of identity formation due to diverge factors around us, environmental, socio-political along with cultural transition. David Me Crome (1998) argues that “the study of communal identity is more often concerned with the manner in which identities are forged and reproduced across time and space and in what way does a national identity maintains temporal continuity, exerting its fierce gravitational pull from generation to generation.”

The paper focusses on threads of identity. ‘Threads of identity’, here, implies the feeling of belongingness that has been constant throughout the ages in a given context. The existence of the river Brahmaputra is much older than the beginning of the human civilisation on its bank. The might and magnanimity of the river with its water flow from East to West creates a phenomenal reality gifting an alluvial atmosphere for generating creative spirit in the works of various art forms. The featuring of the river adduces the factors of united strength and enormity considering it to be the witness of the socio-political as well as historical-cultural changes that has tells the saga of the land of Assam. The shift of considering the river Brahmaputra from the idea of a physical entity to a psychological one marks the functioning of cultural memory. Cultural memory, leading to collective identity, explores the societal remembrance and employing the past through shared knowledge and practices. Melucci (1989) observes:

Collective identity is an interactive, shared definition of the field of opportunities and constraints offered to collective action produced by several individuals that must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationship that link individuals to groups.

Reference can also be made to French Anthropologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) who shifted his focus from individual domain to the realm of social frame of collective experiences. The experiences with regard to the river Brahmaputra secure space in the lyrical representation of in the musical compositions of innumerable lyricists who have considered the river as a metaphor in the discourse of identity formation.

Composing lyrics, music making, listening to music is felt as an experience of self in the process. The study of music from such a perspective requires deep insight into aesthetic expression of the soul. In music we express ourselves, our own sense of rightness, and suborn ourselves, lose ourselves, in an act of participation. The familiar postmodern point that we live in an age of plunder in which musics made in one place for one reason can be immediately appropriated in another place for quite another reason, but also that while music may be shaped by the people who first make and use it, as experience it has a life of its own. Marx remarks somewhere that it is easy enough to move analytically from the cultural to the material, easy enough, that is, to interpret culture, to read it ideologically, to assign it social conditions. The difficult trick is to do the analysis the other way round, to show however the base produced this superstructure, to explain why an idea or experience takes on this artistic or aesthetic form, and not another, equally 'reflective' or 'representative' of its conditions of production.

The fusion of culture and nature in music in the best possible way finds its visibility from the connotation of semantic aspect of language. For Dr Bhupen Hazarika, the Brahmaputra as addressed 'Luit' acquires a human personality who is blamed for not listening to the woe and cry of the people on its bank:

Hearing the cries of myriads of people
Living on two shores around you
Old Luit You! Old Luit why you flow in silence?
... ..
Why don't you empower and help to advance
The paralysed man
With your experience of sanity during the flood? (Own translation)

The lyricist experienced a living with the metaphoric meaning of the river, it is not merely the water body that supplies the necessity for agriculture, irrigation, navigation, hydro-electricity or the aquatic resources, rather a personified entity who carries a non-Eurocentric mood of being empowered to connect the diversities scattered on its bank. The narrative constructed around the river does not land one in watery surface, it indeed generates a phenomenal space to locate the sense of belonging around the river. Being with music is not a way of expressing ideas rather it is a living with the ideas of life. By living with this idea music reveals a group of people organizing and involving themselves with their own communal relationships - a participant- observer's comment, so to speak, on the processes of living together. The aesthetic point of the exercise is not to reflect a reality which stands behind it but to ritualize a reality that is within it. In short, different sorts of musical activity may produce different sorts of musical identity. The focus, in fact, is directed to how the music becomes a platform for expressing selfhood.

Ecomusicology deals not only with human made sound rather its components cover comprehensive conception of music and sound. Luca Gambirasio (2022) observes:

The *music* component of the word requires more details. Considering its broad and interdisciplinary point of view, ecomusicology does not deal with specific styles or genres – nor does it deal with human-made sounds only – rather, it advocates for a more inclusive and holistic conception of music and sound. In detail, this field deals with human-made sounds, non-human-made sounds, and music. In this sense ecomusicology takes into consideration the soundscape of a place, meaning all the acoustical characteristics of a place, and music being only one of them.

Hence, the contribution of ecomusicology in forming a concept of community identity helps to imbibe an ecological self by fostering environmental awareness in Dr Bhupen Hazarika's songs. A socially committed lyricist Dr Hazarika works broadly for searching newer and newer layers of meaning of the cultural context of the environment around us. An analysis of the songs on the river Brahmaputra reveals that he was more preoccupied with assigning the reciprocal relationship between nature and mankind. To refer to these lyrics as ecologically informed lyrics indicates that they not only deal with nature in an objectifying manner, but they have grown out of and reflect a more holistic concept of ecological life. But the noteworthy psychological support that he has provided to the people living on both sides of the river Brahmaputra requires critical understanding of Luit as synonymous to the land of Assam both Geographically and politically. He sings "I have seen Volga enroute Mississippi from the Luit". When he sings "We are born at the bank of Brahmaputra, Water is our Father, our Strngth" it directly links human existence with the strength of the river. The river for him is a metaphor for social and environmental struggle including displacement, environmental degradation, and political neglect. Hazarika's use of the Brahmaputra as a symbol in songs like "Today the Brahmaputra is agitated" (where the river's tumultuous state is compared to the clouded minds of people during the Assam Agitation) ties human confrontation with societal change directly to the natural landscape.

The articulation in the Assamese folk songs too procreates to conceptualise the understanding of such a concept of selfhood formation to necessitate the value of water as well as the bank of the Brahmaputra. The role that the river water and its bank played in defining and maintain identities work at many levels within a community or between communities. The mention of the river draws people to connect to a higher reality referring to the feeling of belongingness. Using the river water as a route for communication and the riverbank as places for congregation happens to be the main motivating factor to feel psychologically attached to the river. It reinforces the idea that what links the responses from the listeners to the expression through music is the assumption that music, the experience of music for composer or performer and listener alike, gives us a way of being in the world, a way of making sense of it. Musical appreciation is, by its very nature, a process of musical identification, and the aesthetic response is, implicitly, an ethical agreement. Dr Bhupen Hazarika sings:

What is the great heritage of the Brahmaputra?

The massive Brahmaputra

Pilgrimage of great union

Expressing throughout the long ages

Meaning of concord. (self translation)

This song narrates how the Assamese mind has experienced the phenomena that gave its footing throughout the ages. The beckoning ambience of the river was instrumental in the occurrence of these episodes:

The two banks (of the Brahmaputra) welcome numerous visitors

Something is to be taken

Something is to be given

In order to get accustomed.

When the notion of selfhood adheres to the issues of community identity, it automatically bears the notion of 'tradition', in the words of T S Eliot (1919). In the light of his understanding a historical sense lies

underneath. The contemporaneity is judged in the light of the past heritage of the river Brahmaputra in the minds of people.

The use of the term '*luitporia*' meaning inhabitants of the bank of the Brahmaputra is used immensely used to refer to strong sense of belongingness signifying the association with the strength of the water body. The following song sings the heart of mass of people living on the bank of the river:

We are the youth at bank of Luit

Death we not fear.

He also sings:

My home is in Luit

Luit is my strange land

Luit destroys and creates dear dream

Reading the notion of ecomusicology, the landscape is experienced acoustically by Dr Bhupen Hazarika expediting the value of belongingness. The “musicology” of “ecomusicology” is more precisely what Seeger propounded as including what today are historical musicology, ethnomusicology, and other related interdisciplinary fields. On the one hand, this encompassing sense results in ecomusicology as an implicit umbrella term that may bring together fields that do not usually interact. From that perspective, the communal identity formation requires thread to connect; the thread here has continuously been supplied by the cognition of the river through melodious songs. On the other hand, such broadness allows scholars considerable flexibility to combine diverse disciplines in ecocritical studies of music. “Nature” is one of the most complex words in the English language, and the study of it, as with the similarly contested words “music” and “culture,” can take many approaches. The ecomusiological approach considers the tradition and perception including studies of influence, mimesis and also at the same time reference to natural environment. Its influence on memory and thereby disseminating the same from generation to generation puts a permanent factor for the formation of communal identity. Dr Bhupen Hazarika offers his acknowledgement to his motherland because of the presence of the river on the bank of which lies beautiful habitations. Dr Hazarika has also sings about the challenges posed by the river during the flood in summer season which in turn turns out to be lessons of solidarity and strength for the people of Assam.

The concept of identity that has been in discussion in this study implies mostly the embodiment of cultural identity ensuring that the human and ecological histories of the region are intertwined in the collective memory. Dr. Hazarika once said, “Songs are a definite way for social change. Social awareness is essential to write and sing songs.” It leads to the birth of the awareness that tends towards more cultural turn than the societal one. Dr Hazarika felt with this manifestation he creates his numbers. His compositions act as a window to provide a wider portrait of Assam as melting pot via the medium of Brahmaputra.

The values assigned to the river due to the inability to understand its worth inspires the composers to think that the river possesses the power to shed away the evils from the society and thereby injecting a feeling of blessedness into the hearts of the people:

The gargling wave of the age old Luit which is flowing in front

The big waves inundate the whole paddy field

Please shade away the poisoned hyacinth.

The feeling of vastness generated in the backdrop of the river ignites worldwide view on humanity as a whole. We are drawn to a similar attitude towards the highest vale assigned to human cause in the words of the Nobel Prize winner Indian author Rabindra Nath Tagore who said ‘the Ultimate truth is Man’ ; Dr Hazarika sings:

If man does not think for man
Who else will do this?

To conclude, The cultural, political, economic and social reform of the society has entered through the metaphor of this song. Referring to the quintessential essence of the only male river in India, the Brahmaputra, his music which he has recreated by using the tunes of the music of Assam for singing new lyrics and poems become voices of the speechless persons. Approaching the great numbers of the lyricist from an ecomusocological approach, the formation of a communal identity gets triggered from the perception of cultural memory thereby establishing a thread of solidarity.

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