



## THE SUBALTERN IN BHUPEN HAZARIKA'S FILMS

GITALI SAIKIA

Research Scholar, Department of English  
Dibrugarh University



GITALI SAIKIA

Article Received: 24/02/2020

Article Accepted: 18/03/2020

Published online: 23/03/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.1.487](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.1.487)

### Abstract

As a film-maker Bhupen Hazarika visualizes the life of day labourers, tea garden people, small tribes, minorities, peasants as well as women in his films. The narratives of the films try to bring out the voice of the 'truly oppressed'. Different characters manifest resistance to authoritarian dominance and attempt to subvert the hierarchy of power. Bhupen Hazarika's characters have covertly and overtly put challenges to dominant discourse and thereby they create a counter-discourse. In this paper an attempt is made to study how Bhupen Hazarika depicts the subaltern, their suffering, pain, and their resistance in two of his films 'Era Baatar Sur' and 'Pratidhwani', and how the subaltern are narrativized in his films. This paper studies two of his films, 'Era Bator Sur' and 'Pratidhwani' from Subaltern Studies and Cultural Studies perspectives.

Key words: Subaltern Studies, domination, subordination, film studies.

### Introduction

Bhupen Hazarika, a great music maestro and film maker, visualizes the life of day-labourers, tea garden people, small tribes, minorities, peasants, share-croppers, women including widows, concubines, marginalized people in his films. The narratives of the films try to bring out the voice of the 'truly oppressed'. In his films Hazarika questions the dominant discourse constructed by the authoritarian hegemony. The characters portrayed in his films manifest resistance to authoritarian dominance and attempt to subvert the hierarchy of power. Bhupen Hazarika's characters, indeed, put challenges to dominant discourse and thereby they create a counter-discourse.

Just as Bhupen Hazarika's songs articulate the voices of the subaltern so also his films. The corollary of his films incorporates various facets of subalternity along with the presentation of the real condition of the subaltern. Hazarika's films can claim to have introduced a new genre, i.e. "socialist

realism, characteristic of the films of the early years of independence like 'Awarā', 'Do Aankhen Baarah Hath', 'Do Bigha Zamin' and 'Sujata'" (Mannathukkaren 4580). He directed seven films to his credit. These are 'Era Bator Sur' (1956), 'Mahut Bandhure' (1958), 'Sakuntala' (1961), 'Pratidhwani' (1964), 'Ka Swarati' (1964), 'Lati Ghati' (1966), 'Chick Mick Bijulee' (1969), 'For Whom the Sun Shines' (1974), 'Rup Konwar Jyotiprasad aru Jaymoti' (1976), 'Meri Dharam Meri Maa' (1976), 'Through Melody and Rhythm' (1977), 'Mon Prajapati' (1979), 'Swikarokti' (1986), 'Chiraj' (1988). He acted as the music director in all his films. Besides these films Bhupen Hazarika worked as music director in a number of films directed by other film makers such as 'Aarop'(1974), 'Chameli Memsaab'(1975), 'Shimana Perye'(1977), 'Aporoopa'(1982), 'Ek pal' (1986), 'Rudaali' (1993), 'Pratimurti' (1993), 'Do Rahain' (1997), 'Darmiyaan: In Between' (1997), 'Saaz' (1998), 'Gaja Gamini' (2000), 'Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence' (2001), 'Kyon' (2003),

'Chingaari' (2006), 'Gandhi to Hitler' (2011). He lent his voice as play back singer in a number of Assamese, Bengali and Hindi films. In Bhupen Hazarika's films, even in those where he acts as the music director we have the obnoxious history of domination and subordination which "occurs through the construction of the 'other'" (Mannathukkaren 4581) in his films.

It has been seen how domination and exploitation over different subaltern classes continue in various ways, from feudalism, monarchy, colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism to neo-liberalism. "Human society goes through different phases, lots of changes take place, but, domination and subordination don't come to an end. Though feudalism or monarchy does not exist ostensibly today, exploitation lives in different modes and media" (Hazarika 141). The films of Bhupen Hazarika both apparently/concretely and symbolically present how domination is perpetuated through different agencies. "The social universe of" (Pandian PE-63) "is a universe of asymmetrical power. At one end of the power spectrum are grouped upper caste men/women, land lord/rich industrialists, literate elites and, of course, ubiquitous male — all of whom exercise unlimited authority and indulge in oppressive acts of power. At the other end of spectrum can be found the hapless victims—lower caste men, the landless poor, the exploited workers, the illiterate simples and helpless women" (Pandian PE-63). Along with class, caste, gender, peripheral identity, the painful process of forging identity is also undergone by the protagonists of Bhupen Hazarika's films. What is said by Subeshini Moodley about the delineation of borders in Meera Nair and Deepa Mehta's films, can be said about the representation of the subaltern characters of Bhupen Hazarika: "Borders are interesting locations (physical or imagined) where a variety of factors (race, class, gender, history and national identity) diverse and intersect" (78). It is true that "[b]efore borders are crossed, however, journeys are embarked upon, while border-crossing relates to the change-over or refreshing of identity" (Moodley 68). A number of characters living on the periphery with "common sense" (Gramsci 322), which Gramsci calls "the social forces ... and the ideology these forces have

generated" (321-322) are not mere fighters, they are the crusaders of the battle of equal rights.

More or less all of Bhupen Hazarika's films present the all-pervasive suppression over some sections of people on the name of power, privilege and money. The discussions follow show will how the film narrative narrativizes the outward world of subaltern masses, nature of subaltern people, their life, mentality, hegemony inflicted on the subaltern groups and the scintillation of rebellion as the aftermath of such hegemonic suppression. Many times exploitation and oppression are narrativized metaphorically. However, cinema as an art reflects what is going on in a society: "It is difficult to distinguish between art and life in South Asian Society, ... [they] appear to have merged ... It is thus possible to view the cinema a legitimate metaphor for society..." (289). "While 'art' and 'life' are treated as self-evident, universal categories" (Sircar 326) Bhupen Hazarika's cinema can be analyzed as the apparently idiosyncratic interaction of the two in the specific social context of" (Sircar 326) India. Bhupen Hazarika's films, no doubt, can be studied as "counter hegemonic projects of the subaltern classes" (Pandian PE 62).

#### **'Era Bator Sur' (*The Tunes of the Deserted Road*):**

"Thousands of people pick 'eti kali duti pat' (two leaves and a bud) in Ratanpur Tea Estate. Amidst thousands of the masses live Haran, Minni, Jhumnu, Ramu, Shamia and Lashmon. A close friend of these labourers, their near and dear one, Bodo peasant Bhujlong Kaka lives. Bhujlong Kaka's opinion is noteworthy, 'If the peasants and labourers live with unity and cohesion, who can kill us?' In Ratanpur Tea Estate, echoes the concert of unity" (Das 67). It is about Bhupen Hazarika's debut film 'Era Bator Sur' (1956). After Bhupen Hazarika had returned from America he felt unhappy while noticed the misery and poverty of common people. He joined Indian People's Theatre Association (ITPA) in 1952, and came into contact with a few stalwarts of communist movement in India such as Hemanga Biswas and Sada Maral, Salil Chaudhury etc. and with them they embarked on some cultural agenda to fight for equal rights. The cultural movement they involved earnestly reveals the sorrow and

happiness, struggle, hope and hopelessness of the common mass, and specially Bhupen Hazarika embarked on writing history of common people and their struggle for liberty to arouse people's consciousness. That was, indeed, a crucial time, when "within European history, popular culture acquired a broad non-elite focus in which the perspectives and values of factory workers, agriculturalists, servants, craftsmen, beggars and thieves got their due" (Burke 69). Bhupen Hazarika spent his young age with these people, watched their lives and living from a close proximity, so his understanding of folk life, literature and society also helped him to understand what Gramsci calls "common sense" or "philosophy of the non-philosophers". "According to Gramsci, common sense is the ensemble of cultural presuppositions by which the subaltern classes make sense of the world they live in" (Pandian PE-62). The understanding of that "category of common sense" persuaded him to associate himself with the struggle for emancipation from domination and oppression. It is true that the history "belongs to the category of what might be called the discourse "of the real", as against the "discourse of imaginary" or the "discourse of desire" (White 23) is possible where such struggle for liberty takes place. Moreover, "real events should 'speak themselves' or be represented as 'telling their own story'" (White 8). The movie of the masses, 'Era Bator Sur', makes the 'people' —the labourers (*mozdurs*), peasants and women to tell their own stories; they participate, perform and rebel in accordance with their worldview. The story and music of 'Era Bator Sur' reflects the subaltern culture, celebrates the culture of the marginalized groups like peasants, tribes and tea garden labourers. The tea gardens in Assam incorporate the setting for the love story presented in 'Era Bator Sur'. Moreover, folk-songs of Assam are associated with the narrative and identity of the marginalized people. However, these people are denied "individual subject positions" for long by the dominant classes. The exploitation of *babu* or *sahib* was deployed as a motif in this film. The exploitation carried out by one class of the society was focused along with the life and struggle of 'others'.

In 1948 Bhupen Hazarika worked as the music director of Phani Sarmah's debut film 'Chiraj'. This was a great turning point as the songs of the film drew the attention of all. His talent as a music director of film revealed here. It was the flourishing time of Indian cinema led by Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Ray, Mrinal Sen, V Shantaram etc. Assamese film stalwarts Phani Sarmah, Kamal Narayan Choudhury and Bhupen Hazarika gave the leadership in making films. At that time Indian New Wave cinema emerged in the hands of Satyajit Ray, Hritik Ghatak, Bimal Anand etc. This Parallel Cinema Movement began under the stewardship of some innovative artists and film directors like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Ray, Mrinal Sen, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Chetan Anand and V. Shantaram. Bhupen Hazarika was immensely influenced by Satyajit Ray's ideology of visualizing the life of villagers and farmers through the narratives of cinema. 'Era Bator Sur' (1956) was the first film of Bhupen Hazarika. The story and music of 'Era Bator Sur' reflect the subaltern culture, culture of the marginalized groups like tea garden labourers. The tea garden in Assam is the setting for the love story presented in 'Era Bator Sur'. The film depicts the life of tea-garden labourers of Assam realistically; their folk-music found life here. The exploitation of *babu* or *saheb* is very prominent in this film. The exploitation carried out by one class of the society over the other is also unravelled by the film maker.

The folk music and dance belonging to various tribes in Assam-- Lusai, Naga, Bodo, Mishing are presented here and this is the first venture to present tribal music and dance in an Assamese movie." In 'Asamiya', 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1956, it was said that the story of 'Era Bator Sur' centers round the hopes and aspirations, life and struggle of tea garden people (P. 275).

In the poster of 'Era Bator Sur' Bhortaal artists, flautist and tea garden labourers are portrayed highlighting the folk art such as *Rukminihnatar layalas* (the sashayed walks of Rukmini and others), *Bhortaalor sabad* (the sound of Bhortaal), *Siphungor sur* (the tune of a flute). In the poster it was also written *Raj Aalir Era Bator Sur* (The Left Out Tunes of the Highway). The songs of oppression, exploitation and domination are

incorporated with the narrative of the film. The motif of the film is properly run throughout. Both the outdoor visuals and internal sequences of the film support the motif of the film that is to focus on the culture and mentality of the marginalized people.

In 'Era bator Sur' the protagonist walks on an astride path; a path usually an educated young man like Jayanta Duwerah would not tread on. In search of the songs scattered among the farmers and workers Jayanta roams Ratanpur Tea Garden of Assam. Nisha, the daughter of a wealthy tea planter Biswa Phukan falls in love with Jayanta. But Jayanta is a man of principle and high idealism who prefers living with the labourers, Haran, Minni, Jhumnu, and old farmer Bhujlang Kaka (grandfather). He has a soft corner for a labour girl Minni; but rumour against Jayanta brings disgrace to him. Manager Rupen Barua exploits the labourers; this exploitation saps them day after day. In the meantime, Cholera comes as an epidemic and claims lots of lives there. Death, disease and oppression bring sorrow to the labourers. At last, the labourers protest against the authority. They demonstrate and take part in strike. Jayanta calls on Biswa Phukan. The situation has been tackled through reconciliation and apology as well as reform. Jayanta offers Minni to Jhumnu. This girl is an illegitimate child of tea planter Biswa Phukan.

These oppressed people make their culture alive though living amidst grim poverty and exploitation. Minni is again the instance of the oppression of *sahibs* over the tea garden women. Here, tea garden women are depicted as the gendered subalterns who are sexually exploited by the *sahibs*. Minni's mother became pregnant as tea planter Biswa Phukan sexually exploited her. So, Minni was born as an illegitimate child. Jayanta Duwera, though, loves her much has not married her; his sacrifice is another praiseworthy feature of his character. Bodo farmer Bhujlong, Haran and other characters of Ratanpur as well as the characters of various tribal people form the whole gamut of the subaltern in this film.

#### **'Pratidhwani' (Resonance):**

In 1964, Bhupen Hazrika made 'Pratidhwani' (Resonance). It was the third film directed by

Bhupen Hazrika which was released in Rupayan (Guwahati), Krishna (Nagaon), Sankar (Jorhat), Rupalim (Sivasagar) on January 22, 1965. The storyline was taken from a popular Khasi folk story, "Manik Raitong". Manik Raitong is a young man living in a village surrounded by beautiful natural scenery. He has none but his old ailing father. Poor Manik herds the cows and plays his flute. With the tune that he emits through his flute calms his sorrow. He is handsome; indeed, a man of sound health. A beautiful young girl, Lien Makao falls in love with Manik Raitong. One day she goes to the forest to bring firewood; all of a sudden, an ox chases her. Manik rescues her; he wraps her wound by tearing his cloth. They love each other deeply. But Khasi King Siem offers the proposal of marriage to Lien Makao. Despite her unwillingness Khasi Siem has married her against her will. She has lost her peace of mind. She cannot accept the king heartily. So, she does not conceive. The king remains childless. Then, the king sends her to her maternal home and he himself goes to some other place. Manik also lives an unhappy life. One stormy night Lien Makao comes to Manik's place; and offers her love. They make love. Consequently, Lien becomes pregnant. Siem returns, he becomes very angry while gets the news. Manik has been brought under trial. The later is accused of adultery and it is declared that he would be burnt for his offence. Before he is burnt Manik wants to see Lien with her baby. Lien comes and after feeding her baby she too jumps to the fire.

The queen, Mahadei, thus, silently rebels against the king. Power wins over the weak and the frail. Manik Raitong has to sacrifice his life for his love towards Mahadei. He has been burnt alive. The domination and subjugation is very clearly shown in the film.

"Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" questions the notion of colonial (and western) 'subject' and provides an example of the limits of the ability of Western discourse, even postcolonial discourse, to interact with disparate cultures" (Maggio 1). Moreover, though Spivak later on clarifies her opinion and states that her essay has been misconstrued. In an interview, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak comments that a subaltern can

speak but nobody listens to them. She says, "the subaltern cannot speak", means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act" (Landry and Maclean 292). In another interview with Kock De Leon Spivak says about "speaking for" (45) the subaltern.

In his films Bhupen Hazarika like an activist works for/with the subaltern. The story and the narrative of the films of Bhupen Hazarika represent the subaltern. The politics of dominance and subordination is vividly revealed through the story and visuals of these films. The language and narratives of the films bring out the voice of the subaltern representing their life, mentality and consciousness.

The outward and physical conditions of the subaltern are exquisitely presented in the films. Dresses and residences help him to represent reality. Khasi 'Jeinsem' was prepared in Sualkusi from silk. Bishnu Rabha played the role of Khasi King, Siem, Iva Achao was the queen, Balin ( Ahom King) Tarun Duetwah (Khsi Danbir), Haren Das( Assamese royal officer), Kanu Deka (Barphukan), Philkin Lal (Khasi adviser) etc. helped him a lot to make the film a great success. Old King Siem has a young wife who comes of a poor family. Lien Makao is in deep love with a shepherd (a cattle herder) Manik Raitong. Here the life of subaltern is succinctly depicted. Lien Makao, the poor girl is forcefully made wife by the rich powerful king who is always represents domination and force. She rebels silently by developing a extra-marital relationship with Manik Raitong and bearing his offspring. She does not consider the question of morality. Character is spoiled by too much money, too much power as well as by wants. The poor queen who is deprived of love and life chosen by herself and goaded by her will developed an relationship with Manik in the absence of the King. Her hidden suffering is expressed in Bhupen's song:

*Oi oi akash suba*

*Oi oi batah babo*

*Digantate hahakar habo*

(The sky will sleep Wind will blow Agony will grasp the horizon.)

The queen, Mahadei though silently rebelled against the king at last the monarchy wins; power wins over the weak and frail. Manik Raitong has to sacrifice his life for his love towards Mahadei. He was burnt alive. The domination and subjugation is exquisitely unearthed in the film. Bhupen Hazarika again transformed 'Pratidhwani' to a Khasi film 'Ka Swarati', meaning the flute. Khasi writer Primrose Godfo and his daughter, a professor of Lady Kean College praised his 'Ka Swarati' for its treatment of the story and background as well as for the aesthetic presentation of Khasi culture. Primrose Godfo said, "Nature has found its tongue." Bhupen 'Pratidhwani' brought him the President's Silver Medal for the best Regional film for the second time. In both 'Pratidhwani' and 'Ka Swarati' Bhupen Hazarika vehemently showed the magnificence and aesthetics of tribal culture which is generally overshadowed and eclipsed under the hegemony of mainstream elite culture.

#### Works Cited

- Bhadra, Gautam. "Subaltern Mentality: Kantanama or Rajdharm". *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986 -1995*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. Oxford University Press. 2006 [1997].63-99. New Delhi. Print.
- Biswas, Hemanga. *Rachanawalee*. Ed. Paramananda Majumder. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam. 2008. Print.
- Burke, Peter, "Oblique Approaches to the History of Popular Culture" C.W.E. Bigsby. ed. *Approaches to Popular Culture*. London. 1976. P- 69. Print.
- D. Dutta. *Bhupen Hazarika Geet aru Jivan Rath*, Bonlata, 1981. Print.
- de Kock, L. ( 1992). "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*. 23(3) 29-47. Web. 3 Feb. 2015.
- Deka, Kangkan. 'Colonialism , Migration and the Problematics of the Making of an Identity: Tea Tribes and 'Adivasis' of Assam'. *Souvenir*, North east India History Association, 2008. Print.
- Gramsci. A (2014). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (Ed and trans. Quintin Hoarse and

- Geoffrey Nowell Smith). New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan. 2009. Print
- Guha. Ranajit. ed. *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986 - 1995*. Oxford University Press. 2006 [1997].63. New Delhi. Print.
- Kataki, Kamal. "Bhinna Sattaar Samahar Dr. Bhupen Hazarika" [Dr. Bhupen Hazarika: Combination of Different Entities]. *Gariyashi*. Vol.XIX.Issue No. 4. (2012). 45.print
- Landry, Donna and Maclean, Gerald. *The Speavak Reader*. London, Newyork: Routledge. 1996. Print
- Maggio, J. "Can the Subaltern Be Heard?" Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak". *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*. Vol. 32, No. 4. (Oct.-Dec. 2007). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40645229>. Web. 8 March. 2020.
- Mannathukkaren, Nissim. "Subalterns, Cricket and the Nation: The Silences of 'Logaan'". *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 36, No. 49 (Dec. 8-14, 2001). Pp-4580-4588. Web. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4411449>. 21 Sep. 2018.
- Moodley, Subeshini. "Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking Through an 'Accented' Cinema: The Construction of Indian Women in the Films of Meera Nair and Deepa Mehta". *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*. No., 58. African Feminisms Three. 2003. Web. Pp-66-75.
- Nath, Ratimohan. *Kalaratna Bhupen Hazarika* [Artist Bhupen Hazarika]. Guwahati: Banimandir.2009. Print
- Nilmes, Jill. ed. *Introduction to Film Studies*. London and New York: Routledge. 2007 [1996]. Print.
- Pathok, Tarinee & Pathok Dakuwa, Monomatee. *Bhupen Hazarika Geet Samagrar Samu Bishleshan*, Pathok Prakashon, Guwahati, 2009. Print
- Hazarika, Dr. Bhupen . *Sundarar Saru Bor Aliedi*. Guwahati: Banimandir 1980.Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_.*Bahniman Luitar Pare Pare*. Guwahati: Banimandir. 1993. Print
- \_\_\_\_\_.*Mor Desh Mor Monor Kotha*. Guwahati: Banimandir. 1993. Print
- \_\_\_\_\_.*Moi Eti Jajabor*. Guwahati: Banimandir.1993. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_.*Rachanawali* . Ed. Nath, Ratimohan. Vol 1. Guwahati: S.H. Education Trust. 2011. Print
- P. Dutta. "Samaloshakar Dristit 'Era Bator Sur'". *Sardiya Dainik Asom*. October. 2013. Pp-275-279 .Print.
- Pandian, M.S.S. "Culture and Subaltern Consciousness: An Aspect of MGR Phenomenon". *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 24, No. 30 (Jul. 29, 1989, pp. PE 62-PE 68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4395134>. Web. 21 Sep. 2018.
- Prakash, Gyan. "Subaltern Studies as Post-colonial Criticism". *The American Historical Historical review*, Vol. 99. No. 5 (Dec., 1994): 1475-1490. Web. 2 Dec. 2014.
- Sarmah, Phani. *Phani Sarmah Rachanawalee*, Second Edition. Guwahati: Asom Prakashan Parishod. 1998. Print.
- Sircar, Ajanta. "Of 'Metaphysical' Politics: Bombay Films and Indian Society". *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 1995), Pp. 325-335. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/312816>. Web. 21 Sep. 2018.
- U. Dutta. "Cinemar Parichalak Bhupen Hazarika, Eti Asampurna Toka". Unpublished.
- White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality". *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 7, No 1. On Narrative. Autumn, 1980. Web. Pp 5-27.

#### About the Author

**Gitali Saikia** is a bilingual writer, a translator, a poet and a short story writer. Her translations have got published in *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi's bi-monthly journal), *The Thumb* Print, nezine etc. Her *Sahitya-Kosh* (2009), a book on literary terms, *Jonakat Batahar Haat* (2012) an anthology of Assamese poems, *Moi Vidya* (2013), translation of India's first transwoman's autobiography, *I am Vidya, Aching Void* (translation of Dr. Nagen Saikia's 'Mitabhash') catch the attention of the readers and critics. She has edited a few books including *Indian Drama: Tradition and Transition* (2013), *Ethnic Women in Changing Social Scenario in North East India* (2013), *Myriad Canvas* (2016), *Natyakarar Galpa, Mahapurush Jyoti* etc. She had her master's degree from Gauhati University, and at present she is an Associate Professor in English at HCDG College, Nitaipukhuri, Sivasagar, Assam, under Dibrugarh University.