

Songs Across Rivers: Transatlantic Black Identity and Subaltern Solidarity in Bhupen Hazarika's Music

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Abstract

Celebrated as the Bard of the Brahmaputra, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika was truly an artist of the masses. A musical genius of exceptional versatility, he excelled as a poet, lyricist, singer, composer, and filmmaker, leaving behind a timeless cultural legacy deeply embedded in Assam's history and collective consciousness. Guided by a strong humanitarian spirit, his vision reached far beyond regional boundaries. During his doctoral studies in the United States, he directly observed the harsh realities of racial discrimination and segregation faced by African Americans.

The self-proclaimed *Jajabor* ("wanderer") was deeply shaped by African American culture and literature, particularly the evocative Negro spirituals, as well as by influential figures like Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King Jr., whose art and activism left a lasting imprint that resonated throughout his work. The study concludes that Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's creations serve as a cultural bridge between the Atlantic and Indian worlds, blending elements of Black identity with the socio-political realities of India.

Keywords: Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Brahmaputra, black identity, racial discrimination

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1. Introduction

Music has long transcended the realm of mere entertainment, serving instead as a vital archive of political memory and collective resistance. Across the world, oppressed communities have relied on song to articulate suffering, express dissent, and nurture hope. African American spirituals emerged from the harsh realities of slavery and segregation in the United States, while in colonial India, music became a powerful medium to challenge imperial domination and rigid social hierarchies. In such contexts, music does not merely mirror reality—it actively shapes it, acting as both a witness and a form of critique.

Widely celebrated as the "Bard of the Brahmaputra," Hazarika devoted much of his career to exploring issues of racism, communalism, and human inequality through his music. A self-described *Jajabor* ("wanderer"), he travelled across borders, drawing creative inspiration from diverse socio-cultural movements and influential personalities. In 1949, he went to the United States to pursue doctoral studies at Columbia University, and his time there coincided with a period marked by entrenched racial segregation and the rising momentum of the Civil Rights Movement.

During his years in the United States, Hazarika engaged closely with Negro spirituals and the broader tradition of African American protest music. He found both friendship and inspiration in Paul Robeson, whose powerful blend of artistic brilliance and political commitment demonstrated how music could serve as a social mirror—exposing a society's contradictions and holding it to account. The rising influence and moral leadership of figures like Martin Luther King Jr. further deepened his appreciation of the ethical force of nonviolent resistance. These experiences did more than

expand his musical perspective; they profoundly shaped his understanding of oppression, revealing its recurring patterns across different regions and histories.

Hazarika's later adaptation of Paul Robeson's iconic "Ol' Man River" into the Assamese composition "Bristirno Parore" stands as one of the most striking examples of this cross-cultural engagement. The song represents a more complex process of political re-signification. The Mississippi River — a silent witness to centuries of Black labour and suffering — is reimagined as the Brahmaputra, a river that in turn bears witness to the struggles of workers and marginalized communities across Northeast India. This transformation reveals something deeper than adaptation: it marks a genuine ideological synthesis, drawing the socio-political realities of Assam into dialogue with the long history of Transatlantic Black identity.

To fully understand the significance of this synthesis, the paper approaches Hazarika not merely as a regional or national cultural figure, but as an intellectual who meaningfully engaged with Black Atlantic social history as a critical framework. Through an examination of his songs, it argues that he reimagines "Blackness" beyond a racial identity, transforming it into a broader metaphor for global subaltern experience. Employing recurring motifs—such as the river as a space of memory and witness, and the universal figure of the *Shramik* or worker—his music constructs a form of transoceanic solidarity. In doing so, it bridges the Atlantic and Indian worlds, positioning song itself as a decolonial archive of resistance.

2. Review of literature

(Baro, 2022) notes that Dr. Hazarika employed his music and melodies as a powerful medium to articulate

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his political beliefs. His works consistently reflect themes of humanism, social justice, cultural identity, and the welfare of marginalized communities in Assam and the wider Northeast. (Dutta, 2022) observes that his concerns extended far beyond the boundaries of his homeland. During his doctoral years, he was inspired to compose songs that spoke out against the racial violence and exploitation experienced by African Americans. Further studies emphasize that the thematic universality and emotional depth of his music allow it to transcend cultural boundaries, even as it reinforces the cultural identity of the communities it represents—making it a compelling example of cultural synthesis that blends global influences with Assamese traditions (Dutta, 2025). Scholars also underline that his music promoted ideals of universal brotherhood and unity across divisions of language, ethnicity, and culture. In this way, his works gave voice to the marginalized and served as a potent vehicle for social awareness and resistance against injustice (Sarma, 2015).

In depicting the struggles of marginalized communities, his songs foster ideals of unity, equality, social justice, and human values (Hazarika, 2025). Studies suggest that his music functioned as a means of empowering and uplifting the oppressed. Significantly, Hazarika's humanist vision continues to hold strong relevance in confronting contemporary challenges such as social inequality, conflict, and intolerance (Baruah, 2026).

The songs of Bhupen Hazarika can be understood as significant sociological texts that mirror social, political, and cultural realities. Mazid (2023) highlights that music serves as a powerful medium for shaping identity, expressing political ideas, and mobilizing collective action within society. The scholar also notes that Hazarika's compositions during the Assam Movement captured public sentiment, cultural identity, and the aspirations of the Assamese people. Overall, his cultural activism fused artistic expression with social and political engagement, contributing to the vision of a more compassionate and inclusive society (Saikia, 2025).

3. Research Gap

Although numerous scholars have explored Bhupen Hazarika's musical archive from socio-cultural and historical angles, much of this work remains centred on regional identity, Assamese cultural nationalism, and folk traditions. His transnational engagements—especially with Paul Robeson—are acknowledged at times, but seldom examined in depth through the lenses of Black internationalism or Afro-Asian solidarity. This study seeks to fill that gap by analysing the ideological and musical expressions of Black solidarity within Hazarika's works, bringing together elements of transatlantic Black identity with the socio-political realities of Northeast India.

4. Research Objective

The present paper is intended with the following objectives:

(I) The study explores how Dr. Bhupen Hazarika integrated transatlantic Black identity with the socio-political realities of Northeast India.

(II) The study seeks to unpack the “river” as a metaphor and to interpret the socio-political significance of “Blackness.”

5. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative ethnomusicological framework to examine how African American spirituals and the socio-political history of the United States are reflected in Assamese musical and lyrical forms. Selected songs by Bhupen Hazarika are analysed both as literary texts and as cultural artefacts, enabling detailed textual reading alongside broader intertextual interpretation.

6. Discussion & Findings

6.1 The River as Historical Witness

One of the most powerful recurring motifs in Bhupen Hazarika's engagement with the African American experience is the image of the river. When he arrived at Columbia University in 1949, the United States was still deeply shaped by institutionalized racial segregation. His immersion in African American culture—especially his exposure to Negro spirituals—gave him a profound understanding of how music can preserve and transmit suffering across generations. The songs sung by Black labourers on the cotton and tobacco plantations along the Mississippi were not merely work songs; they functioned as forms of historical testimony, carrying lived experiences that official histories often ignored.

Within the African American musical imagination, the Mississippi River emerges as a silent yet perceptive witness to exploitation. In the repertoire popularized by Paul Robeson—most notably “*Ol' Man River*” (1927)—the river flows ceaselessly as generations of Black labourers endure hardship along its banks. It observes without intervention, standing as an unfeeling spectator to racialized labour and systemic inequality that persist, unchanged, through centuries of human suffering.

Hazarika absorbed this metaphor deeply and then relocated it within the Assamese landscape. In “*Bistirno Parore*” (1952), he writes:

“Mississippir Parorote / Kopahor Khetite / Nigro 'John'-e binaale / Koi manuhor boronor kotha.”

By evoking the cotton fields of the Mississippi and the lament of “Negro John,” Hazarika deliberately draws upon African American folk traditions—including figures like “John Henry”—where the suffering of Black labourers is etched into song. The riverbank thus becomes a space where history is both lived and expressed; a site where the silence of official records is countered by the enduring power of memory preserved through music.

This metaphor resurfaces with greater depth in “*Bistirno Parore*,” Hazarika's Assamese adaptation of Robeson's thematic vision. In this context, the Brahmaputra assumes the symbolic role once held by the Mississippi. The structural and thematic influence of “*Ol' Man*

River" is clearly evident. In the African-American spiritual tradition, the river is portrayed as an ancient, indifferent force:

*"Ol' Man River, that Ol' Man River,
He must know something, but he doesn't say nothing,
He just keeps rolling; he keeps on rolling..."*

Here, the Mississippi stands as a silent witness to suffering—aware yet unmoved, enduring yet detached. It observes generations of racialized labour along its banks without interruption or resistance.

In "Burha Luit Tumi," Hazarika addresses the Brahmaputra directly:

*"Nishobde nirobe burha Luit tumi,
Burha Luit buwa kiyo?"*

The apostrophe to the river retains the reflective tone of the spiritual while relocating its social context. Like the Mississippi, the Brahmaputra flows quietly, bearing witness to inequality and human suffering along its banks. However, the Assamese version introduces a crucial shift: whereas the American original accepts the river's indifference, Hazarika's rendition challenges it by asking, "Why do you flow in silence?" This question brings in an ethical urgency absent from the original—a demand that the river, and symbolically society itself, respond to the injustices it has witnessed

Through this adaptation, Hazarika does more than simply echo "*Ol' Man River*"—he decontextualizes its central metaphor and intensifies its moral force. The river emerges as a shared symbol across continents: a natural presence that holds within it the layered memory of labour, injustice, and endurance. By bringing the Mississippi and the Brahmaputra into a common imaginative space, Hazarika links the socio-economic realities of Assam to a broader global narrative of oppression, transforming the river into a timeless and universal witness to human inequality.

6.2 River as the Universal Witness beyond Race

As Hazarika's work evolved, the river metaphor moved beyond its initial racial context, extending into a broader human landscape. In "*Ganga Mor Ma, Padma Mor Ma*" (1984), the river is no longer confined to witnessing a single history of racial exploitation; instead, it emerges as a transnational, civilizational presence, flowing through and encompassing multiple histories at once:

*"Eke Akah, Ake Botah / Dui Kolijat Ake Uhah"
"One sky, one air, one breath in two hearts..."*

By invoking the Ganga, Padma, and Jamuna, geopolitical boundaries are dissolved in favour of a shared emotional landscape. The river emerges as a symbol of continuity that transcends borders, suggesting that political divisions cannot truly separate what ecology and culture have long kept interconnected.

A similar restlessness pervades "Sagar Sangamot" (1953):

"Sagar Sangamot Kotona Xaturilu Tothapito Howa Nai Klanto..."

(I have swum through countless confluences, yet I am not tired...)

*"Nobo Nobo Sristhi Doityo Danobe Kore Nisthur Aghat"
(Newly emerging demons inflict cruel blows...)*

The river here endures repeated cycles of violence — colonialism, war, partition, exploitation — and still flows on. This image of endurance appears again, even more powerfully, in "Krishnakaya Africa Mor Krishna Koli Maa" (2006):

*"Ethiopia r Khuda r Jala, Kanna Hoye Sesh
Congo Nodir Shroter Dhara, Gangate Aaj Mesh
Praner Xutaye Gatha moder Dukh Ebong Xukh....."
(The burning hunger of Ethiopia, turning at last into tears,
flows the currents of the Congo River,
and today merges into the Ganga.
Threaded together in the string of life...)*

Here, the river emerges as an archive of suffering—absorbing the hunger of Ethiopia and the violence of the colonial Congo, yet continuing its steady course toward the sea. It is no longer confined to Assam or even India; it takes on a broader, civilizational and human dimension. In Hazarika's vision, the river witnesses all, carries all, and flows on—uninterrupted.

6.3 Universalizing the Shramik

If the river stands as the enduring witness in Hazarika's musical universe, then the shramik—the worker—serves as its living counterpart, embodying suffering in human form. During his time in the United States, Hazarika came into close contact with the lives of African American labourers, whose everyday realities were still shaped by the lingering legacy of slavery and ongoing structural discrimination. Although legal slavery had been abolished, its economic and psychological consequences endured, most visibly in the plantation labour systems that continued along the banks of the Mississippi.

In "Moi Eti Jajabor," Hazarika writes:

"Bohu Deshe Deshe Grihodos Dekhi Sintito Hou Bor."

The wandering speaker surveys different nations and discovers, in each, some form of bondage. Slavery is no longer limited to a particular place or moment in history; it emerges as a recurring pattern in human society—reappearing under different names and conditions. In his journey, the Jajabor does not merely witness isolated instances of suffering, but identifies a broader, systemic logic of domination operating across the world.

This awareness deepens in "Manuhe Manuhor Babe," whose melodic cadence echoes the rhythms of Negro Spirituals such as "Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley" — songs that enslaved workers had once sung in the fields as they picked cotton:

*"Manuhe Manuhok Besibo Khuji / Manuhe Manuhok
Kinibo Khuji /*

*Puroni Itihaas Duharile / Bhool Jaanu Nohobo Kuwa,
Somoniya?"*

The act of buying and selling human beings is not invoked here merely as a reference to the Transatlantic slave trade. It becomes something broader: a warning against any system — past or present — that reduces human beings to commodities. The historical reference opens outward into a universal ethical claim.

A comparable universalism appears in Hazarika's "Moi Asomor, Moi Bharator," which bears a certain structural

resemblance to Paul Robeson's "Ballad for Americans" — a song that celebrated the United States as a nation constituted by many ethnic communities whose destinies are fundamentally intertwined. In Hazarika's version, the speaker identifies with the full diversity of Assam's indigenous and ethnic communities:

*"Moiei Khasia moi Jayantia /
Dophola Aabor Oka /
Moiei Singphou Bhoiyamor Miri /
Suwonsiriyā Deka..."*

The speaker dissolves the rigid divisions of tribe, caste, and origin, claiming all of them simultaneously. Like Robeson's America, Hazarika's Assam is constructed as a space of inclusive rather than exclusionary identity. The marginalized worker is not isolated, but embedded within a plural and interconnected social fabric. The universalization of the shramik, in this sense, is also a universalization of identity itself.

Hazarika's sharpened sensitivity to racial discrimination found direct expression in "Jhok Jhok Rail Sole," composed in Chicago in 1949:

*"Kola Kola Koilaar Dhuli Laagi Kola Pora /
Bahur Sokotire Susonor Kona Baat /
Huhokai Thoi Moi Somoior Aalidir /
Nishaan Urao...."*

*(With arms blackened by coal dust,
Thwarting the blind alley of exploitation,
I raise the flag of time.)*

The image of coal-darkened arms moves beyond racial identity into the realm of industrial labour. Here, "Blackness" signifies toil and exploitation—borne on the body not as a marker of racial difference, but as a testament to work and endurance. The worker thus transforms the mark of labour into a symbol of dignity rather than shame. In doing so, Hazarika broadens the discourse of racial injustice into a wider critique of economic exploitation, connecting the plantation labourer with the factory worker, and linking the Mississippi to industrial centers like Chicago.

Across these songs, the Shramik gradually emerges as a universal figure, transcending racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. The plantation worker along the Mississippi, the industrial labourer in Chicago, and the peasant or tribal worker in Assam are connected not by shared ethnicity, but by common experiences of marginalization. Within this framework, "blackness" shifts from being primarily a racial identifier to a broader metaphor for structural subordination. In this way, Hazarika's musical project reworks the specific histories of racial discrimination he encountered in America into a wider ethical appeal—one that calls for human solidarity and the potential for collective resistance.

6.4 Revolutionary Ferment and Global Solidarity

Hazarika's universal vision of the shramik gradually assumed a distinctly political dimension, especially through his engagement with the Black Civil Rights Movement and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. His time in the United States, along with the deep influence of Paul Robeson, strengthened his identification with global movements resisting systemic

injustice. The philosophy of nonviolent resistance advocated by Martin Luther King Jr. left a strong impression on him—particularly as it was repeatedly met with violence, legal barriers, and institutional repression. These realities sharpened Hazarika's understanding of how power responds when its authority is meaningfully challenged.

This political consciousness found expression in a set of songs marked by what might be called a "revolutionary ferment." In "Topto Tikhare Ogni Sokti Rokto Borne Jwale" and "Aah Aah Ulai Aah," Hazarika writes with urgency and a sense of historical awakening. The rhetoric intensifies in "Prosonda Dhumuhai Proshno Korile Muk," where he writes:

*"Bojroi Dile Muk Udatto Kontho /
Aaru Dile Saahosor Jukti /
Bojror Konthore / Dhumuhar Saktire /
Geet Gai Kopam Diganta..."*

*(Thunder has given me a resonant voice
And the courage of conviction;
With the voice of thunder,
With the force of storm,
I shall sing and shake the horizon.)*

The imagery of thunder and tempest is used with intent, conveying not physical aggression but moral intensity. The voice of the worker, long suppressed, now gathers an elemental power. In this context, "blackness" moves beyond racial meaning and comes to represent the rising, insurgent energy of the oppressed—a force that cannot be contained indefinitely.

Hazarika extended this solidarity explicitly to South Africa in his song "Mandela Jindabad, Mandela Zindabad" (Long Live Mandela), written in tribute to Nelson Mandela and in solidarity with the anti-apartheid struggle. Drawing on his humanitarian philosophy and his earlier engagement with African American protest music, Hazarika positioned apartheid within the same continuum of injustice he had witnessed directly in America. The song functions as a protest anthem — affirming human dignity and refusing racial segregation in any form.

A related solidarity appears in "Krishnakaya Africa Mor Krishna Koli Maa," where Hazarika writes:

*"Bishyojuri Mandela Ar Hazar Logon Paar ...
Bornovede Megh Soriye Dekhai Alor Mukh..."*

*(Across the world, Mandela and thousands of others
Dispel the clouds of racial hatred, and reveal the face of light...)*

By invoking "dark-skinned Africa" and imagining the continent as a maternal figure, Hazarika recasts blackness not as a marker of otherness, but as a bond of kinship—an emotional connection rather than a point of distance. This symbolic move reinforces the ethical perspective that runs through his work: that oppression, whether shaped by race, caste, or economic class, operates through similar structural patterns across different regions. To understand one manifestation of it clearly is to gain the insight needed to recognize its many other forms.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's engagement with African American musical traditions enabled him to reframe particular histories of racial oppression within a wider human discourse on injustice. Through recurring motifs such as the river and the shramik, he forges connections between the Mississippi and the Brahmaputra, linking plantation labourers, industrial workers, and marginalized communities across continents. His songs thus transcend regional limits to express a universal ethic of solidarity, memory, and resistance, presenting music as a powerful medium through which suffering, dignity, and collective struggle are preserved and shared.

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