Zubeen Garg: Assam, Society and the Rhythm of a Universal Vision

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In the history of Assamese music, the arrival of certain artists marks not merely the emergence of another artiste, but the beginning of a new era. Zubeen Garg was one such artist. He gave Assamese music a new sound, a new musical vision and a powerful connection with the younger generation.

To see him merely as a singer, musician or filmmaker would be to overlook an important dimension of his personality. His creative work reflected social responsibility, compassion for people, deep attachment to Assam and its culture, and an eagerness to connect with the wider world. His outlook combined strong roots with an open mind.

Zubeen was born into an ordinary family in Jorhat. Because of his father's profession, however, he spent much of his childhood and adolescence in different parts of Assam. His exposure to different communities, cultures and social environments appears to have broadened his worldview. He was interested not only in music but also in books and publications covering different subjects. His curiosity about literature, society, politics, culture, cinema, nature and human life gradually made him a multifaceted personality.

With his first album, *Anamika*, a transformation began to be felt in Assamese music. Zubeen brought Assamese folk melodies and traditional musical elements together with modern Western arrangements, rhythms and instruments. The fragrance of Assam's soil met the pulse of contemporary music. He did not simply imitate Western music; he adapted modern sounds to Assamese melodies and cultural roots, creating a distinctive fusion.

His approach demonstrated that Assamese language and traditional musical heritage could coexist naturally with guitars, keyboards, drums, modern rhythms and contemporary arrangements. His music therefore sounded modern while remaining deeply Assamese. *Anamika* came to represent a new chapter in modern Assamese music and influenced the musical tastes of a generation.

An equally significant aspect of Zubeen's personality was his humanistic and secular outlook. He respected people across religious, caste and social boundaries and emphasised the importance of viewing people first as human beings. Equality, dignity, empathy and social harmony were important elements of his public personality.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to place him within a single political ideology merely because he spoke about equality and social justice. Concern for disadvantaged people and opposition to inequality are not exclusive to one ideology. His outlook can more appropriately be described as humanistic, secular, egalitarian and socially conscious. He was modern without becoming disconnected from his roots.

His humanism was also visible in times of crisis. During floods in Assam, the Kalaguru Foundation associated with him was involved in collecting donations and extending assistance to affected people. Such actions reflected the idea that an artist's responsibility can extend beyond the stage and into society.

His compassion also extended to animals and nature. His affection for dogs, cats, monkeys, egrets and other birds was widely known, while his concern about deforestation and the destruction of Assam's forests reflected his sensitivity towards the natural environment. His idea of compassion therefore extended beyond human society to animals, birds and nature.

The turbulent political atmosphere of Assam in the 1990s was another important influence on his social consciousness. Violence, uncertainty and conflict deeply affected ordinary people, and the emotional atmosphere of that period could be felt in some of his early works. Songs such as *Mukti* and *Xishu*, among others, reflected the concerns and restlessness of their time.

Amid the unrest, Zubeen expressed the need for peace and dialogue rather than violence. His appeals to young people associated with ULFA and other militant organisations to abandon violence, return to the mainstream and work for Assam's future reflected his preference for peaceful solutions. Rather than reducing conflict to an “us versus them” framework, he appeared to emphasise the human beings affected by conflict and the need for a peaceful future.

Cinema provided another medium through which Zubeen expressed his creative and social vision. Films such as *Dinabandhu*, *Mon Jai*, *Mission China* and *Kanchanjungha* explored different aspects of society, human relationships, identity and contemporary life. What he expressed through music in the language of emotion, he attempted to present through cinema through characters, stories and images.

His popularity and creative energy also helped bring Assamese cinema closer to a younger audience. *Mission China* and *Kanchanjungha*, in particular, demonstrated possibilities for Assamese filmmaking through larger-scale storytelling, modern technology, action, entertainment and contemporary narratives. As in music, he attempted to give Assamese cinema a new scale and connect it with a new generation.

Another defining feature of Zubeen's public personality was his deep attachment to Assamese identity, language and culture. He wanted Assam to preserve its distinctiveness while moving forward. His public positions during the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Bill and later the Citizenship Amendment Act reflected his concerns regarding Assam's identity, rights and distinctiveness.

Yet his love for Assam need not be understood as narrow nationalism. Loving one's own language and culture does not require disrespecting the identities of others. His attachment to Assamese identity existed alongside a broader respect for India's diverse communities, languages and cultures.

It is equally difficult to place Zubeen's political outlook within the boundaries of a single political party. Rather than displaying permanent loyalty to one party, he often questioned political forces and demanded accountability. The central concern was not necessarily which party was in power, but what political leadership was doing for Assam and its people.

His criticism of corruption, abuse of power and actions that he considered contrary to public interest further reflected an issue-oriented approach. The freedom to question, the courage to speak independently and the refusal to see society entirely through political divisions were notable features of his public personality.

Perhaps the most significant dimension of Zubeen's thinking was his universal outlook. He did not encourage Assamese youth to remain confined within their own language and culture. He also encouraged learning English so that young people could access the enormous body of knowledge available around the world. The message was important: learning English does not mean abandoning one's mother tongue.

Rather, one can remain firmly rooted in Assamese language and culture while using English to access knowledge in science, technology, literature, education and other fields. The roots may remain in Assam, but the vision can extend to the entire world.

There is a striking harmony between Zubeen's music and his philosophy. Just as Assamese folk melodies and Western musical elements came together to create a new sound, Assamese identity and universalism coexisted in his worldview. He demonstrated that modernity does not necessarily require abandoning one's roots.

To love one's identity while respecting the identity of others; to embrace one's own language while opening the doors to global knowledge; to speak for Assam's interests without promoting hatred; to question political power rather than blindly follow it; to remain modern without forgetting one's roots; to stand for peace while speaking against injustice and inequality; and to extend compassion towards people, animals and nature—these ideas together reveal the broad scope of his worldview.

That is why Zubeen Garg was more than a popular artist of Assam. He became a bridge between Assamese identity and universal thought. He loved Assam without making the world smaller. He wanted Assamese people to take pride in their language and culture while acquiring education, learning English and engaging with global knowledge and opportunities.

Perhaps the most beautiful way to understand his philosophy is this: **Let your roots remain in your own soil, but let your vision extend towards the entire world.**

Zubeen Garg's music, therefore, is more than melody. Through his music, cinema and public life, we encounter a distinctive synthesis of Assam, humanity, equality, identity, peace, freedom, justice and universalism.

An artist's life may come to an end, but the questions raised by an artist can remain alive for generations.

Zubeen Garg has left Assamese society with many such questions: How far can we move forward with the world while protecting our identity? Can we become modern without losing our roots? And while loving our own land, how generously can we embrace the wider world?

Perhaps it is in our continuing search for answers to these questions that the enduring relevance of Zubeen Garg's creative legacy will remain alive.

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