

Musician who united a divided state

With singer Zubeen Garg's passing, fans across ideologies in Assam are grieving the loss of a voice synced with their hopes and anxieties

RANJITA GANESAN

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Singer Zubeen Garg's hold over the public consciousness in Assam was so profound, even adversaries sought peace with him.

For three decades, he was the voice of spring in the state: Garg's Bihu albums were the soundtrack in households, and listeners thronged his shows throughout the festive month of April. At these events, together with his many Assamese songs, the singer-composer would break into Hindi and English hits when he pleased. This often earned the ire of separatist and traditionalist groups, but their diktats could dent neither the artiste's maverick spirit nor his popular acclaim.

"He would get threatening calls but those callers were also his fans," remembers guitarist Atonu Gautam, a second cousin who grew up with Garg. Their warnings, he says, would quickly turn into affectionate negotiations. "*Gali bhi dete the, pyaar bhi dete the* (They abused him, they also gave him love)."

Fondly known as 'Zubeen da', Garg was impossible to slot and invariably treasured. Though his repertoire was fluent, reportedly encompassing 38,000 songs in 40 languages, he remained rooted in Assam for most of his 33-year career.

The state's population plunged into collective mourning after the bohemian musician's unexpected passing. Garg, 52, drowned on September 19 in Singapore, where he was to perform at the Northeast India Festival. Followers gathered in hundreds of thousands for his funeral procession in Guwahati, and over the last several days '*Mayabini*' (a song he asked to be played when he dies) has become an anthem for the inconsolable. In the rest of India, this public display of grief has drawn attention to the phenomenon of Garg.

"Generations were caught in the tug-of-war between inherited tradition and a rapidly changing modernity. Young people sought a voice that could articulate their confusions and dreams," notes Swapnil Barua, retired IAS officer and close friend. "He reminded people that music could unify where politics divided, and that the Northeast's cultural richness was a strength to be celebrated."

After Bhupen Hazarika's folk



PHOTO: PTI

In decades fractured by separatist militancy, armed counterinsurgency, and human rights violations, Garg's songs echoed the political vexations, cultural pride, and emotional tumult that large sections of the population were feeling

music triumphs in the '50s and '60s, and Jayanta Hazarika's melodies with a western touch in the '70s, there were few artistic experiments of note. When Garg arrived on the scene in 1992 as a 19-year-old, sporting long hair and ripped jeans, he took Assamese music by storm. His blend of Assamese folk with pop and rock made his debut album, '*Anamika*', an overnight hit.

A song unshackled

In decades fractured by separatist militancy, armed counterinsurgency, and human rights violations, songs including '*Pakhi Meli Diye*' (Give me wings) and '*Shanti Diya*' (Give me peace) echoed the political vexations, cultural pride, and emotional tumult that large sections of the population were feeling.

By most accounts, Garg did not toe the line of any particular ideology. He

drank and swore on stage, eschewed his "caste, God, religion", and asked for trees and rhinos to be saved. Though he obliged the Bharatiya Janata Party with a campaign song in 2016, he did not shy away from opposing its Citizenship (Amendment) Act starting in 2019. "He managed to get away with very Bohemian behaviour because of his talent and sincerity," says Barua.

Behind the phenomenon of Garg was a person. "Unlike other celebrities surrounded by bouncers, he was directly connected to people at the grassroots. He mingled freely, and the public found him to be one of their own," says film critic and filmmaker Utpal Borpujari. Whenever Delhi-based Borpujari visited Guwahati, Garg would meet him for tea at roadside stalls, dressed in Hawaii chappals, t-shirt and Bermuda shorts — stopping to chat with strangers.

A people's star

His philanthropy during the Assam floods and Covid years, as well as the help he frequently offered for fans' treatments and education cemented his image as a people's star. It is said he would sing one track for emerging artists, because his face on the cover ensured their cassettes sold. Such was his appeal, Bihu shows where Zubeen's duplicates performed also became hits.

Garg had the makings of a star even as a boy, observes his younger cousin Atonu Gautam, who now lives in Mumbai. His father was a poet and mother a singer, which shaped Garg's view of the world and the arts. At 15, he would roam the streets of Guwahati on a cycle in a jacket styled out of a blanket, already good at composing and playing the keyboard. His flair came to be noticed at college festivals and Assam association programmes in other states. Gautam often found his brother up in the wee hours, rehearsing high notes.

His albums stimulated the Assamese music and cinema industries. At the height of his popularity, he wrote, directed and acted in *Tumi Mor Matho Mor*; his *Mission China* (2017) is among the highest grossing Assamese films. Garg's last movie, *Roi Roi Binale*, in which he plays a blind singer, is set to release this October and is expected to be one of the state's biggest hits.

A lightning quick worker, Garg is famed for having recorded 36 tracks in a single night. It was that kind of creative confidence that encouraged him to waltz two hours late into a recording studio in Mumbai. He made up for the delay by wrapping up the song in 10 minutes, prompting music director Rajesh Roshan to ask: Are you a man or a machine? His Hindi film crossover had included such hits as *Jaane kya chahe man bawra* (*Pyaar Ke Side Effects*) and *Ya Ali* (*Gangster*). He abandoned the pursuit of Bollywood milestones and returned to hilly Assam — his home.

"While many of his contemporaries drifted to Mumbai in search of Bollywood fame, Zubin chose to remain in Guwahati," Barua says of his rebel friend. "This was not provincialism but principle."

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist