

“The art you create  
eventually creates you”

*Sattyaakee D'com Bhuyan  
on Zubeen Garg*



# ZUBEEN

TWENTY SONGS AND SEVEN PORTRAITS

Edited & Compiled by  
Sattyakee D'com Bhuyan

THIS IS A DR. BHUPEN HAZARIKA CENTRE FOR CREATIVITY BOOK  
PUBLISHED BY THE ROYAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

ZUBEEN TWENTY SONGS AND SEVEN PORTRAITS



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## OVERTURE FROM THE CHANCELLOR

Zubeen Garg is a timeless icon whose music and spirit embody the cultural heartbeat of Assam. Through this anthology, Royal Global University pays tribute to his remarkable journey and enduring influence. May his art continue to inspire generations to dream, create, and believe in the power of expression.



Dr. A. K. Pansari  
Chancellor  
Royal Global University

## EDITOR'S NOTE

There are some voices that refuse to fade, they live on, echoing through time, not merely in melodies but in the very cadence of our collective memory. Zubeen Garg's was one such voice, luminous, untamed, and eternal. For many of us, he was not just an artist; he was a force of nature, unpredictable, profound, compassionate, and fiercely individualistic.

When The Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for Creativity, at Royal Global University, under the visionary guidance of Chair Professor Dr. Amarjyoti Choudhury, decided to create this publication - alongside the life-size statue and scholarship announced by our Chancellor, Dr. A.K. Pansari, it felt not merely like a tribute, but a moral and creative necessity. It was an act of remembrance rooted in love, art, and continuity. Zubeen was not just an artist; he was an idea. An idea that music could awaken empathy, that art could challenge indifference, that one voice could mirror the conscience of a generation. "Zubeen: Twenty Songs and Seven Portraits," humbly attempts to bring together diverse voices that have each known, observed, and felt Zubeen in their own unique ways.

As the editor and as someone who had the privilege of knowing Zubeen closely, this task was both a joy and a deep emotional journey. I found myself revisiting conversations, stage performances, quiet moments, and the creative tempests that defined him. Zubeen could move from laughter to melancholy in the blink of an eye, from rebellion to surrender in a single breath. He was an artist in the truest sense, restless yet rooted, constantly reimagining the world through his own eccentric brilliance.

At the heart of this book lies a musical treasure, the translations of twenty of Zubeen's loved Assamese songs into English by Arkupal Ra Acharya. His translations are not just linguistic bridges but emotional transcriptions, delicate and faithful to Zubeen's poetry, they bring to light the universality of his expression. The copyright for these songs, in consultation with Garima Saikia Garg, his wife and guardian of his legacy, will remain rightfully with her, ensuring that the music remains rooted in the home from which it blossomed.

Moreover, in these Seven Portraits, we find Zubeen through seven distinct lenses, each author illuminating facets of his life that words alone may never fully capture. Mitra Phukan writes with a quiet eloquence that draws us into the enigma of the man and his art. It captures the continued resonance of the phenomenon, how Zubeen's death became a state's song of mourning and a people's vow of remembrance. Rahul Karmakar, situates the artist in the rare space between cultural icon and posthumous phenomenon, contextualizing how the nation's media finally woke up to the universality of an Assamese soul. Zubeen's sister, Dr. Palme Barthakur in her tender reminiscence, offers us the most intimate portrait- of the brother, the dreamer, the son who never ceased to surprise. An inner portrait seen through the eyes of familial love and loss while Rakhee Kalita Moral, with her academic depth and lyrical pen, examines how his songs mirrored an Assam in transition. Ramanuj Dutta Choudhury, the Editor of The Assam Tribune, captures the societal and historical arc of Zubeen's influence - how one artist could become the soundscape of an entire generation.

Nise Meruno, the gifted pianist and composer, lends the book a rare treasure, the musical notation of Zubeen's unforgettable Mayabini. It is both a gift to musicians and an archival act that ensures Zubeen's music will continue to resonate, played and replayed, long after we are gone.

A special word of gratitude must also go to Mukul Madhav Baishya, the gifted artist from Jorhat who designed the book's cover. A close associate of Zubeen and introduced to me by his sister,

Dr. Palme Barthakur, Mukul has captured through his art the luminous enigma of a man who continues to sing even from silence.

My own closing note in this book is not an analysis, it is a conversation with a friend. For how does one 'edit' Zubeen? One can only listen - and then listen again. Moreover, for me, editing this book was a journey back to friendship, memory, and gratitude. I had known Zubeen up close since my early Cotton College days, his laughter, his silences, his unfiltered honesty. He had that rare gift of turning a rehearsal into a revolution and a conversation into a composition. He could argue about Nietzsche one moment and hum a Borgeet the next. He could be fire and calm, faith and doubt, a storm and a still river, all at once.

And every writer in this book approached Zubeen from a different horizon, yet all their words orbit the same luminous core: a man who made us question conformity and reminded us that true art is born not from perfection, but from passion uncontained.

I remain profoundly grateful to Royal Global University - its visionary Chancellor, Dr. A.K. Pansari, Vice-Chancellor, Prof. (Dr.) Alak Kumar Buragohain, and the entire management - for their unflinching belief in the power of art to heal and connect. Their decision to institutionalize Zubeen's legacy through this publication, a Life-size Statue, and the Zubeen Garg Memorial Scholarship, reflects their deep commitment to nurturing creativity in our times.

And of course, my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Amarjyoti Choudhury, my mentor whose portrait, "An Idea of Zubeen Garg," sets the tone for this entire collection. His philosophical insights remind us that artists like Zubeen do not belong to one time or one people-they belong to the human spirit itself.

This book, then, is not an epitaph. It is a celebration of songs and silences, of rebellion and tenderness, of a voice that refuses to die. Zubeen may have left us, but his music still walks among us, sometimes humming in a tea garden breeze, sometimes thundering in a concert hall,

and often, whispering in the heart of anyone who has ever loved Assam. And that somewhere between illusion and truth, between *Mayabini* and *Mon Jai*, lies the soul of Assam itself.

On 18 November 2025, as we release “ZUBEEN TWENTY SONGS AND SEVEN PORTRAITS” at The Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for Creativity, Royal Global University, we celebrate not just an artist who lived for fifty-two radiant years, but a philosophy that will live forever.

Now, as his ashes merge with the currents of the Red River, the Brahmaputra, I can almost hear him again, that fearless laughter, that gentle voice calling from somewhere beyond the horizon. The same Zubeen who sang our pain, our joy, our anger, now sings through silence itself. As the river carries him home, I know the world will keep hearing him, in every song that rises, in every kindness shared, in every act of courage that refuses to fade. He has transcended into what every true artist becomes, a sound without time, a presence without end.



Sattya D'com Bhuyan



TWENTY SONGS

## MAYABINI

In the bosom of the magical night,  
I saw a glimpse of you  
You came in quietly, in secret,  
And conquered a corner of my heart

You are, on my withered soul,  
An icy drop of dew  
Like a river of the sun descending  
You flow on my body each morning

I have danced with storms for ages  
The darkness too, is an old friend of mine  
My song of silence  
I feel, one day, shall end  
In your heart.

Each flower of an autumn morning  
Will speak to you of me  
The moon of every cloudy night  
Will murmur to you my pain

With storms, I have danced for ages  
The darkness too, is an old friend of mine

My song of silence  
I feel, one day, shall end  
In your heart.

When I look into your eyes  
Dreams disappear and reality descends  
When my hands reach out to touch  
Reality disappears and dreams come again

I have danced with storms for ages  
The darkness too, is an old friend of mine  
My song of silence  
I feel, one day, shall end  
In your heart.

In the bosom of the magical night,  
I saw a glimpse of you  
You came in quietly, in secret,  
And conquered a corner of my heart


You are, on my withered soul,  
An icy drop of dew  
Like a river of the sun descending  
You flow on my body each morning

## XANTI DIYA

Give us peace, give us freedom,  
to build our golden Assam.  
Give us green, give us harvest,  
so that the land may forever bloom.  
Bullets, gunpowder, smoke you scatter,  
innocent children are made to cry.  
Love is stolen from every home  
tell me, what do you gain, what do you give  
in return?  
Give us peace...

The path to truth is always new,  
the heart that seeks truth remains forever  
young.  
The fields of love are vast and open,  
the heart that stays awake is always new,  
the heart that stays awake remains forever  
young.  
Through our thoughts alone, the tides will  
rise.

Bullets, gunpowder...  
Give us peace...



We have the right to speak,  
the right to see ourselves.  
What do we gain by letting rivers of blood  
flow?  
We have the right to build anew,  
the right to see others clearly.  
Though you have eyes, why do you choose  
wrong?

Bullets, gunpowder...  
Give us peace...

## PRITIR XUBAAXE

The fragrance of love  
Has washed over  
This my melancholy mind  
The tune of a forgotten song came in  
Came in, the tune of a forgotten song  
And awakened my youth, why I wonder

The fragrance of love  
Has washed over  
This my melancholy mind  
The tune of a forgotten song came in  
Came in, the tune of a forgotten song  
And awakened my youth, why I wonder

I raise my two eyes  
And look around everywhere  
It is the blooming *rajanigandha*<sup>1</sup>  
I raise my two eyes  
And look around everywhere

It is the blooming *rajanigandha*  
In the skies, the autumn moonlight  
Is a descending Alaknada  
In the skies, the autumn moonlight  
Is a descending Alaknada

The tune of a forgotten song came in  
Came in, the tune of a forgotten song  
And awakened my youth, why I wonder

The fragrance of love  
Has washed over  
This my melancholy mind  
The tune of a forgotten song came in  
Came in, the tune of a forgotten song  
And awakened my youth, why I wonder

The darkness of a hundred nights has  
disappeared  
The hues of beauty now colour my life



1 Tuberose

In the skies, the autumn moonlight  
Is a descending Alaknanada  
In the skies, the autumn moonlight  
Is a descending Alaknanada

The tune of a forgotten song came in  
Came in, the tune of a forgotten song  
And awakened my youth, why I wonder

The fragrance of love  
Has washed over  
This my melancholy mind  
The tune of a forgotten song came in  
Came in, the tune of a forgotten song  
And awakened my youth, why I wonder



## JANTRA

Waking up in the morning,  
It's time to go to school already  
The heavy burden of books on my back  
Lugging them around, the day drags on  
endlessly  
After school, tuitions classes too  
I come back home to find nothing new  
After homework, I am exhausted  
I crawl in and it is my bed I embrace

We are like machines  
Machines  
Each one of us, a machine  
We are like machines  
Machines

Waking up in the morning,  
Sip some tea, read the papers  
The same news, the same faces  
The same violence, the same deceptions  
At 9 o'clock, have a bath

Fill the belly and put on clothes  
Go to office and slog all day  
Drag yourself home in the evening, worn  
away

We are like machines  
Machines  
Each one of us, a machine  
We are like machines  
Machines  
Waking up in the morning  
A walk in the garden; coffee in hand  
steaming  
In an AC car, get business done  
A few signatures, and act like an important  
one  
And then it's evening, time for the club  
Whisky in hand and someone else's wife  
beside  
Red and blue, the lights are flashing  
I return home, staggering

We are like machines

Machines

Each one of us, a machine

We are like machines

Machines

Waking up in the morning,

An old couple, holding onto each other

No one has time for them, nobody bothers

Waiting for just some tea

The old couple and their ways

Clinging onto but a lifetime of love

Leaving aside illusion, letting go of desire

Recalling the memories of days gone before

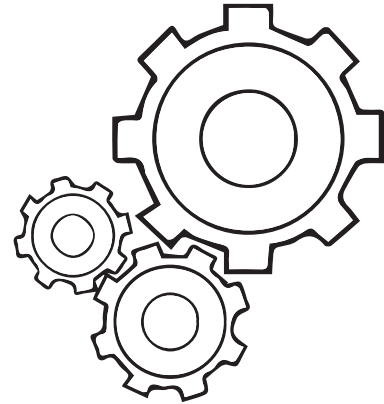
We are like machines

Machines

Each one of us, a machine

We are like machines

Machines

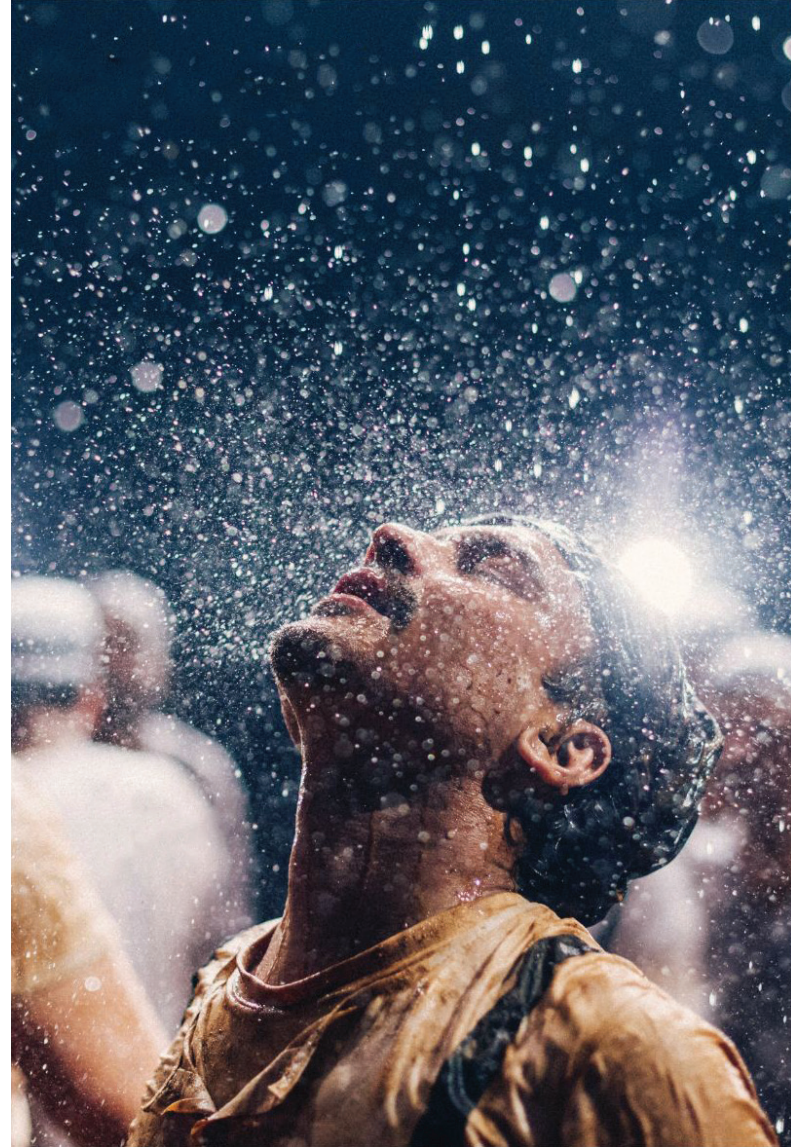


## ASHA

This my hope  
Is a speaking river  
That hope of mine  
Comes to me in colours  
Carrying in my song  
The joys and sorrows of the ages

In my song there are nameless illusions  
The uncomprehended tune of hope in dreams  
My song brings in various revelations  
The moonlight of what is found or lost  
As a moonlit heart you had come  
Carrying the burden of love

In my song is the fire of rain  
And the soft sun of a wet winter  
My song will give you a new tongue  
New moonlight, and a new direction  
The jaded heart will then weave  
The pure breeze of creation



## DIYA GHURAI DIYA

Give, give us back our world  
Grandma's tales on a starlit courtyard  
That is all that we need  
We don't want a world that's upside down  
Oh, it is but us, who are the new dream  
Of breaking and rebuilding our world

Bring, bring it back  
The untainted earth of the heart  
The soft tread of two feet  
On a bed of jasmine petals  
That is all that we need  
We don't want a world that's upside down  
Oh, it is but us, who are the new dream  
Of breaking and rebuilding our world

A, B, C, D and then E  
Arithmetic and lessons primary  
You taught us, we are studying  
You taught us, we are learning  
Why give us now this wound of death?  
If you turn the pages of history,  
It is our love that will remind

If our existence itself is obsolete  
Such a history no one would read

(The next few lines of this song which we have italicised were originally written and sung in English by Zubeen Garg)

*Touch it,  
Touch Your Freedom  
Grab it, hold it and bring to your knees  
Oh, with you,  
We all are with you  
We make the world shine like the sun  
That's it.  
Touch it,  
Touch Your Freedom  
Grab it, hold it and bring to your knees  
Oh, with you,  
We all are with you  
We make the world shine like the sun*

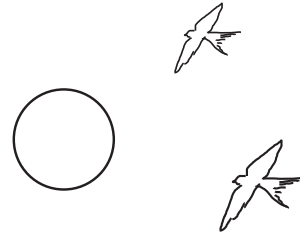
## MONOR NIJANOT

In the quiet of my mind, there was moonlight  
Wrapped in the fragrance of your love  
Suddenly it withered, this garden of light  
You, who are not even in the blue sky  
Do not come as sorrow,  
filling my heart

These emotions, the heart cannot endure  
Unabated and unchecked, these tears flow  
How long do I embrace these unfulfilled  
dreams  
That I had adorned with the warmth of my  
heart  
As a star of sadness, do not look me in the eye,  
the whole night long

In the quiet of my mind, there was moonlight  
Wrapped in the fragrance of your love

Life's aroma was there, within you,  
Alone, quietly, it existed  
Even the breath of true love was there,  
Within my lonely heart  
Do not come as a desert of illusion  
Into my heart  
In vain



## AAINA BHONGA DI

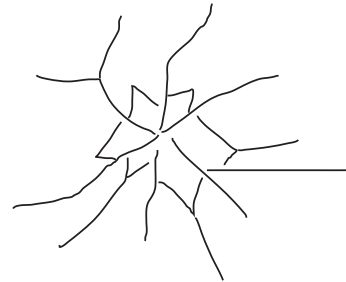
Like a mirror, the heart too shall shatter  
The currents of the Luit shall go weave a tear  
If you leave me and go away  
Like a mirror, the heart too shall shatter  
The currents of the Luit shall go weave a tear  
If you leave me and go away

Even the weather is not gloomy  
Why then leave your love half empty?

The sweet words of your lips  
Are unmatched  
Body like the slender vetiver  
No one to compare  
Even the moon adorned is out of place  
And the stars too seem less

I gaze and gaze upon your eyes  
As if it is there that I shall reside

You will come late  
Then don't say it's time to go  
You've lit a fire in my chest  
Then don't say it's time to go  
The tide of joy, as it must rise,  
Must also fall  
To bestow my heart's love true  
Give me a moment, just one or two





20

ZUBEEN TWENTY SONGS AND SEVEN PORTRAITS

## DUSOKURE NILARE

Am I there in the blue of your eyes  
Or am I the nebula in the starlit sky?  
These clouds of your thoughts,  
They embrace me, every passing hour

You; within the blue of my eyes  
You; the nebula in the starlit sky  
The light of your eyes kisses me like lightning

My world feels forever new  
When you call out just once  
You and I; within the blue of our eyes

The laughter of green spring swings the heart  
The laughter that is eternal  
My longing finds life in every breath;  
This longing is forever.  
Your laughter fills each morning, each night  
You and I; within the blue of our eyes  
You and I; the nebula in the starlit sky

In the form of beauty,  
Love descends upon me  
This love is of my life  
Words silent suddenly awaken  
Those words become my song  
From your heart flows  
This beautiful spring  
You and I; within the blue of our eyes  
You and I; the nebula in the starlit sky

## ENDHAAR HOBO NUWARU

I cannot be the darkness  
Nor do I wish to erase it all  
The past with its wings spread wide  
How do I forget its call?

I cannot be the darkness  
Nor do I wish to erase it all

I lived thinking it is light,  
alone within my soul  
The picture of the moon that my hands  
could never reach  
Dreams with their wings open wide accosted  
my life  
In the compassionate blue of some sky

That mind of mine  
Today seems like a desire dissolving  
In the distances  
How do I forget it all?

I cannot be the darkness  
Nor do I wish to erase it all  
The past with its wings spread wide

How do I forget its call?  
I cannot be the darkness  
Nor do I wish to erase it all

In ocean-blue eyes I see,  
what colours life brings to me  
I do not know, yet my arms are open wide,  
Even though I'm swimming through truth  
and lies  
Dreams still chase me and bestow sweet  
kisses

This mind of mine  
Today seems like a desire  
That is alive with light  
How do I forget it all?

I cannot be the darkness  
Nor do I wish to erase it all  
The past with its wings spread wide  
How do I forget its call?  
I cannot be the darkness  
Nor do I wish to erase it all

## MON DOLE

I don't know  
The heart sways in this breeze of spring  
The flowers bloom  
O' *Polaax*<sup>2</sup> and *Ximolu*<sup>3</sup>  
What's the colour you're bathed in?  
I don't know

I am the north star, lovely and beautiful  
I am the budding beauty, an enchantress  
O' *Polaax* and *Ximolu*  
What's the colour you're bathed in?  
I don't know

The fallen leaves are but like memories  
Their arrival is etched on the earth and the breeze  
I am but the shy fleeting fairy  
From afar, don't look upon me

O' *Polaax* and *Ximolu*  
What's the colour you're bathed in?  
I don't know

---

2 Flame of the Forest

3 Silk-Cotton



## ROI ROI BINALE

Wailed haltingly the night long  
How long to the morning?  
Darkness spreads its roots  
From cloud to cloud  
Light hides somewhere in the infinite

The unthought too, perhaps  
Comes down suddenly  
Lost what I got  
Before I grasped it all

Wailed haltingly the night long  
When will the night dawn?  
Darkness spreads its roots  
From cloud to cloud  
Not a trace of light  
Wailed the night –  
Haltingly, how long  
Is it to the dawn

I know and I understand  
And yet I cannot stand  
Inside myself, it's true  
I harbour only you

The chariot of dreams today  
Stands speechless and still  
The path of life today  
Lies pale and worn away  
This journey of life, it dissolves only in you

Wailed haltingly the night long  
How long to the morning?  
Darkness spreads its roots  
From cloud to cloud  
Light hides somewhere in the infinite

Youth now is mere illusion  
Every moment lost, dissolution  
Dreams deceived  
Reality within reach  
Wails rain down  
With only daydreams of the sun

Wailed haltingly the night long  
How long to the morning?  
Darkness spreads its roots  
From cloud to cloud  
Light hides somewhere in the infinite

The unthought too, perhaps  
Comes down suddenly  
Lost what I got  
Before I grasped it all

Wailed haltingly the night long  
When will the night dawn?



## XONERE XOJUWA POJA

The hut adorned with gold  
It moulders away  
Whoever will,  
can anybody,  
build this again?

The hut adorned with gold  
It moulders away  
Whoever will,  
can anybody,  
build this again?

Bit by bit,  
The earth is lost  
The seven-coloured rainbow  
Hides behind clouds  
Engrossed in the self  
None understands the other

The hut adorned with gold  
It moulders away  
Whoever will,  
can anybody,

build this again?  
At Granny's hearth  
Tears dry up  
Dad shares the same fate  
Looks beyond the threshold,  
It's been ages since  
The young one came  
No stars shine in her sky today  
Nor does the moon glow  
The bullocks are there in the shed  
The field too dries up  
Soon as it is dark  
Gunfire rolls all around

The hut adorned with gold  
It moulders away  
Whoever will,  
can anybody,  
build this again?

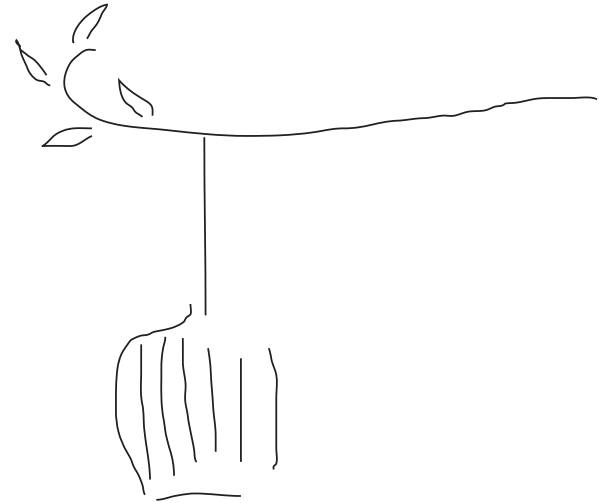
It took a century  
To come to terms with freedom  
The world of glow-worms

Of Bishnu-Jyoti  
Has not come about

Amidst humans ranged around  
The demon roars challenging  
Studies and cultures  
Are in the realm of hope  
Was this really the dream  
Of the twentieth century?  
All around the questions arise  
Of irregular acts and doings

The hut adorned with gold  
It moulders away  
Whoever will,  
can anybody,  
build this again?

The hut adorned with gold  
It moulders away  
Whoever will,  
can anybody,  
build this again?



## MONOLE UBHOTI AAHE

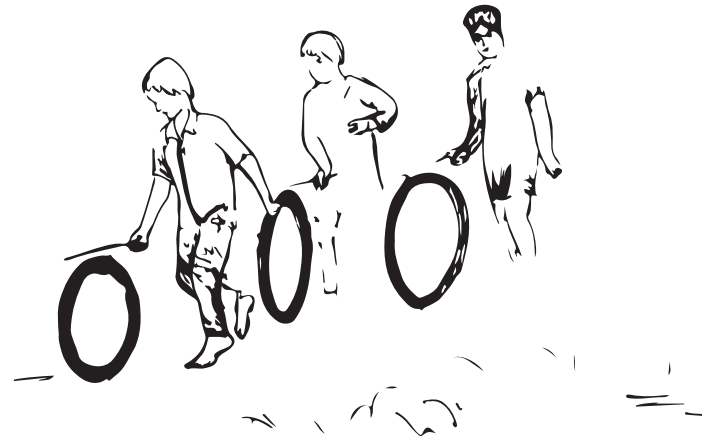
Childhood, it comes back to me  
Of every playful mischief between you and me  
We laughed and played in love's sweet light  
I, too, cherish those memories with delight

With you I dream every dream within me  
When emotions overflow too soon  
It is you who are my hope's moon  
I too, nowadays, dream often, night and day

Childhood even today has not gone away  
I too am your brother, what else do I say  
Childhood, it comes back to me  
Of every playful mischief between you and me

How do I forget your love, your affection  
I give you my word, I'll rein those dreams in  
Now on, you'll be my identity  
What else does one need

I shall also find you a girl  
Amongst many  
In the bride's attire, she will come  
The wedding banquet will be full



## MAYA

Illusion, nothing else but illusion  
Are you for real or just love's illusion?

Brimming with illusion, your two eyes  
Flow all through my heart  
Like moonlight in the distances  
Why did you pause suddenly?

Deep as the ocean, the love you bring  
Is what I hold on to and live  
If you are in my heart and in my being  
Why go away leaving me in tears and grief?  
Do not bring me these wet nights  
I do not want those memories

Illusion, nothing else but illusion  
Are you for real or just love's illusion?

With your two eyes, brimming with illusion  
You flow all through my heart  
Why did you pause suddenly  
Like moonlight in the distances



Illusion, nothing else but illusion  
Are you for real or just love's illusion?

On that magical night  
I had come close to you  
To be your pain  
In the quiet of my mind  
I smiled and hugged  
My tear-laden feelings

Love's illusory desire  
Shall only bring sorrow

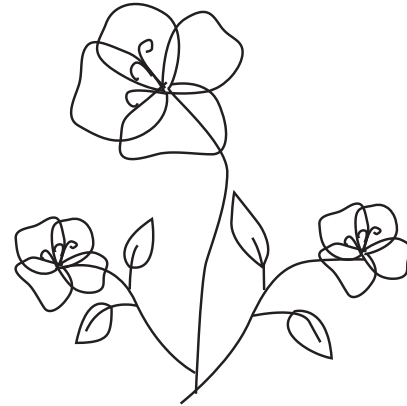
Illusion, nothing else but illusion  
Are you for real or just love's illusion?

## PROTI DINE

Everyday you come and bring me a flower  
Life, you are the melody of a myriad colours  
A petal of laughter, a petal of sorrow  
With that I adorn my face anew  
Everyday you come and bring me a flower  
Life, you are the melody of a myriad colours

My heart longs to embrace the sky  
My heart would rest where the oceans lie  
Life lets the kite of longings fly  
Life lets the kite of longings fly  
May our moments stay golden and bright  
Sweet as honey in our hearts' quiet light

A song that makes the heart tremble  
A song of gaining and of losing  
Perhaps there I lose my rhythm  
Yet in that reality within a dream  
I embrace you in a vermillion street



## RO'DOR SITHI

The sky's letter written in sunlight  
The earth, you know, hugged it tight  
It lies scattered, the ink of light  
The sky's letter written in sunlight  
The earth, you know, hugged it tight

Life rested in the shade of trees  
In return, it knew nothing to give  
Today, man with each step  
Stumbles, looking for himself  
To the cause of others, bestow yourself  
And flow on, like the river's waves

The sky's letter written in sunlight  
The earth, you know, hugged it tight  
It lies scattered, the ink of light  
The sky's letter written in sunlight  
The earth, you know, hugged it tight



## TUMI SUWA JETIYA

When to see, you raise your two eyes  
Lightning breaks across my sky  
The sun smiles, flowers bloom, when you speak  
At your touch, it turns to spring  
Even storms, they grow calm  
In you lies the horizon;  
The wondrous infinity of creation

In your cloudy tresses,  
The sunlight plays and sways.  
A glimmer of laburnum shines  
Within your smile's golden rays.  
In your glistening gaze,  
The stars softly gleam;  
On your vermilion lips,  
Words of solace teem.  
Within my heart, the dreams arise  
I sketch your face upon my eyes.  
I'll burn in your love, and lose all else beside.  
At dawn, I open my eyes  
Just a moment or two of sunlight  
A silent, hushed evening

Hoping only for you  
The dew adorned petals of jasmine  
Rest in the gateway  
And if you tread on them  
They too will turn golden  
A step or two, you are so near  
Uncontained joy smiles in my heart  
Now the distant sky slips softly into my  
open arms.

## MUKHA

Why do you wear these masks?  
So often you change your form.  
Someone waits for you somewhere  
Yet perhaps you never see them.  
Behind the mask, so many games,  
Behind the mask, so many plays,  
Behind the mask, so many lies  
How long will you live this way?

Bosoms break bosoms,  
Hearts barter hearts.  
In the corners of my mind,  
These worms still squirm.  
Behind the mask, someone is black,  
Behind the mask, someone is white.  
Behind the mask, so many deceits  
Behind the mask, how long will you live?

Someone devours it all  
Someone snatches with ten hands  
Someone kills in all directions  
Longing to become a God  
Behind the mask, countless schemes  
Behind the mask, endless plays  
Behind the mask, ruins and remains  
Behind the mask, how long will you stay?



## XOBDO

This is the beginning; first we learned,  
We understood ourselves, our own  
existence;  
this was the first word  
We spoke,  
Childhood; we learned,  
We saw, we knew; we were dependent on  
words,  
Guided by words, buried in words.  
And suddenly, the words went wrong  
Now we speak, and yet we don't know  
How much we say, how much we can still  
hold on to.  
We are shameless...  
If words are inspiration, if words are  
strength,  
Why are words today afraid?  
If words are the cosmic tree,  
If words are ever pure,  
Why are words today diminished?  
Words today are silenced,

Words today are imprisoned,  
Words today are bound within themselves.  
Like a eucalyptus tree I wish to grow tall,  
Eternal, everlasting; I wish to touch the sky.  
But some dreadful words  
Erase my being,  
Destroy me,  
And try to give birth to some  
Who have no right to be born.  
And yet, I am a fighter  
By birth, till death, it is my resolve:  
Existence is unconquerable.  
Words now mean war,  
Words now burn with anger  
Words today bring no ideals  
Why? (Why? Why?)  
Words arrive as agony.  
If words are the river of death,  
Then words today are a dead craft.  
Words - a nauseating sound,

Words under the pale moonlight,  
Words - my own creation's extinction.  
Enchanted  
If words are inspiration,  
Why are words today afraid?  
If words are the tree of colours,  
If words are ever pure,  
Why are words today diminished?  
Words today are imprisoned,  
Words today are bound within  
themselves.





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ZUBEEN TWENTY SONGS AND SEVEN PORTRAITS



SEVEN PORTRAITS

## THE IDEA OF ZUBEEN GARG

Dr. Amarjyoti Choudhury

The idea of Zubeen Garg has a huge overlap with the ways of creativity. It was thus natural that Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for creativity, should desire to have insights into his creative ways. On our behalf, our colleague, Sattyakee D'com Bhuyan, his close friend approached him. There D'com floated the idea of our centre having a dialogue with him on creative struggles. The icon instantly agreed. In fact, we were waiting for a firm date from his end. Instead came the devastating news from the far-off sea.

The tragedy unfolded quite like a symphony. First, it came in trickles. Slowly it morphed into a piece that haunted us inside. A piece that fused our grief, helplessness and anger. Soon, it rose to an unbelievable crescendo. We were devastated, shell-shocked. As I walked the streets of the locality by the evening that day, there was a hush all around. It resembled a dead land. Soon our restlessness multiplied. Menacingly it raised its hood like a storm. Very much like the singer, the rebel Zubeen Garg himself. The defiant centre piece of the tragedy. Meanwhile “Justice for Zubeen” emerged as the constant refrain. And the idea of Zubeen Garg loomed large in our hearts. The idea of the muse of love and hope. Of rebel that provoked us to question. Of the humanist that taught us to reach out to the distraught. And of the activist that had concern for all lifeforms and nature. The rest is now history.

Once when I met Zubeen Garg years ago, he proposed a deal with a twinkle in his eyes. I still recall his words, “Ok, here is the deal. You teach me quantum mechanics. In return, I shall teach you to negotiate whirlpools. I love swimming near whirlpools. When I swim in the vicinity of whirlpools, I feel as if I am with my mother. So comfortable. You can surely trust my lessons.’ He

laughed like a child. During our subsequent discussions, he suddenly declared, “I love Kafka, I love Nietzsche. I adore Bishnu Rabha.” Slowly he brought out a piece of paper from his pocket. It had a Nietzsche quote in it. “To live is to suffer. To survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.” I realized he was out and out an existentialist. As we departed, his final words were, “But what I love most are trees, water and animals. I love our rivers and seas.” When the news of the tragedy at sea reached me, the words resonated in me repeatedly. Everything seemed quite surreal.

As his mortal remains were taken from Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport, Guwahati, a vast ocean of humanity saluted the legend. It was a moving spectacle of mourning. In fact, I found the very word “mourning” inadequate. To my mind, it failed to represent the collective feeling that hovered around. What we witnessed was utter grief in our moment of abyss. It was spiritually uplifting to observe how the idol who openly announced he had no religion, no caste, no creed and who bowed only to the religion of nature and compassion, drew one and all from their narrow boxes of the divided society. Spectacularly he united them all. That too in his death.

And the mainstream national media was so shocked by the flow of events that it fumbled for words. Unable to apprehend the phenomenon that is Zubeen Garg.

True, he had an exceptional voice. It drew the listeners either into a frenzy or a trance. His lyrics also had all the elements deep delved in our hearts. It had youthful energy, restlessness, despair and optimistic dare- all rolled in one. With all the right notes. There the voiceless heard their own agonies and ecstasies. Their own frustrations and hopes. In fact, the complete restlessness of the volatile times. In it, they also had lessons on the power of resistance. With his words, his music he used to create an ambience hitherto unfelt. The way he delicately shaped the musicality of his radically romantic signature-song “*Mayabini Ratir bukut*”, it transcended to a national prayer for love and compassion on his death. No genre seemed to constrain his creations. From

folk to devotional, rocks to reggae, he was at ease with all. Yet what he loved most was our folk heritage and its imaginative blending with the modern. With this, he created a legacy where the youths of the region could identify themselves with universality and the power of rebellion. It is also true he refused to be a part of the beeline to Bollywood. But he stayed firmly rooted to his beloved Assam. He never wavered from the music of his passion that started with this land and its treasure trove of melodies. It was he who revived the market for Assamese songs almost single-handed. It was he who made people flock to cinema halls. On the day of his cremation, a slogan that overwhelmed us was ‘How could our god die so young?’

Only the other day, I joined a candlelight procession at Kharghuli hill in his honour. As the procession walked up to his former house at Kharghuli, a local resident recounted how he transformed his campus into a paradise for numerous animals, living species, trees and herbs. He was so absorbed with the idea of living in harmony with nature that he never wavered from this idea. Whenever nature was in danger of losing its beauty and soul, he stood firmly against it like a rock.

The other interest that he fervently harnessed was his love of reading. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Maupassant, Kafka, Camu, P.G. Woodhouse were his all-time favourites. He was deeply fascinated by the autobiography of Charlie Chaplin. He often declared, ‘These books keep me connected to the world.’ He also never lost an opportunity to urge his fans to read as voraciously as they could. His contribution to the growth of sports, especially football, was phenomenal. This was how, in him, everybody found someone who had figuratively scaled the sky in whatever he attempted. Incidentally, this is one of the meanings of the word Zubeen in Persian.

How could a singer be so wildly loved? How could he be adored so widely? Everybody in the mainstream media seemed acutely clueless. Why is it that his songs resonate from the flood ravaged lands of Majuli to the urbanities of Guwahati.

The truth had to be mined from deeper layers. He was not a mere singer. Here was an artist

who was passionately connected to the misery of the common people. Often he went out of the way to help the helpless. He also never floundered from the path of preserving nature. It was interesting how he redefined his rockstar image with infinite humility. Normally it was always lonely at the top. The more popular he is, the more detached he is from people. This is what may be called a pyramid of loneliness. But here was Zubeen who deftly inverted it. Instead, he made himself available to common people. Indeed, he created an image of him as one of their very own. He conversed with them in their own phrases and idioms. His habit of consuming dry tobacco leaf and sharing it with people around too further strengthened this image. In him, the people thus found an aura they could relate to. When he raised his voice against injustice or corruption, they discovered in him their own windows of autonomy. It drew him closer. Indeed, they thus discovered in him a mode of challenging the dominant discourse. They found a tunnel to break this narrative where earlier there were only silences. Further, when he deviated from the performance-norms on the stage, it was as if door to their freedom and happiness was opened ajar. Finally, it was his declaration that he had no religion, no caste, no creed that provided him with an aura they looked up to. It was his religion of nature and compassion that had the ultimate appeal. This was how he made his way to every household, to every paddy field, every bank, every hill and every household. And even in death, the legend grows. His ideals of harmony beckon. His professed belief on transcending religion, caste and creed glows brighter. Yet we know the forces of division are also on the prowl. In fact, a fierce war is on. We know how he binds us together. How he illuminates our road ahead. In our hour of crisis, we need to keep the idea of Zubeen Garg shining at all costs.



Professor Amaryoti Choudhury, a former Vice Chancellor of Gauhati University, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya and Assam Downtown University and a former Pro Vice-chancellor of Tezpur University, is currently Professor Emeritus at Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for Creativity at Royal Global University. A noted physicist of the region, he has also significant contributions in the fields of literature, and culture.

## THE ERA OF ZUBEEN GARG A CULTURAL RENAISSANCE IN ASSAM

Palme Borthakur

Some people come into the world to sing its story, to bring joy where there is silence and hope where there is doubt. My brother, Zubeen, was one of those rare souls. His music still fills our homes, our hearts, and the air we breathe. To me, he is not gone. He is just somewhere near, still singing, still smiling, still touching lives.

Zubeen Garg, born on 18 November 1972 in the quiet green hills of Tura in Meghalaya. From the very beginning, music was a part of him. Our father, Mohini M. Borthakur, a civil servant, and our mother, Ili Borthakur, a gifted singer, nurtured our home where songs were as natural as breath. My sister Jonkie and I also shared the same love for music and art. We grew up surrounded by rhythm and melody, and Zubeen carried that music within him all his life. Because of our father's work, we moved often, to places like Jorhat, Tezpur, Karimganj, and Tamulpur. Each new town brought new sounds, new people, and new colours. Those travels shaped Zubeen's spirit at the same time allowing him to experience the state's cultural and linguistic diversity.

He studied at J. B. College in Jorhat and later at B. Barooah College in Guwahati. But more than books, it was music that called to him. He eventually dropped out in the second year of college to follow his passion for music.

He followed his heart with courage and never looked back.

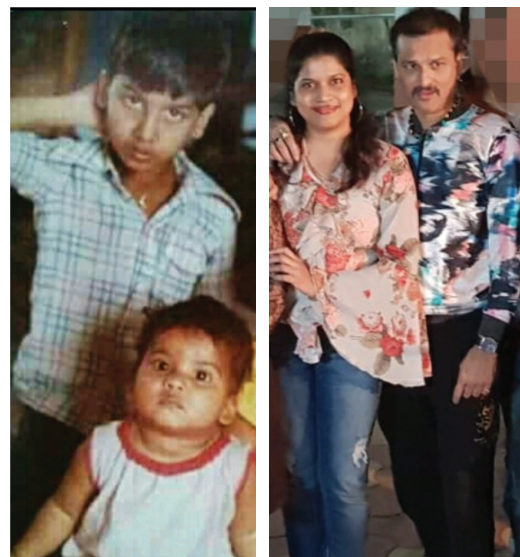
Zubeen was a complete artist- a singer, music composer, lyricist, actor, filmmaker, director, poet, social worker, philanthropist, and sports promoter. When his first album *Anamika* was released in 1992, Assam found a fresh rhythm. His voice was full of emotion, truth, and tenderness. With

over thirty-five years of active contribution, he has been a leading figure in the artistic and cultural landscape of Assam and India since 1992. With his immense creative contributions, he ensured a place for Assam and Assamese people in the world map. He was always creating, always giving.

He sang in many languages, including Assamese, Bengali, and Hindi, and recorded nearly forty thousand songs. Yet every song he sang carried the spirit of Assam. He has released more than forty five music albums and contributed immensely to folk and indigeneous music across communities such as the Bodo, Rabha, Tiwa, Mising, Garo, Karbi, Khasi, and many others. His efforts have been instrumental in reviving traditional Assamese music genres like *Borgeet*, *Bihugeet*, *Jikir*, and *Dihanaam*. His passion for fusion music created many soulful renditions by blending traditional forms like *Borgeet*, *Bihugeet*, *Jikir*, and *Dihanaam* with modern instruments and keeping them alive for generations to come. In 2002, he got married to Garima Saikia Garg, a noted fashion designer and film producer.

When ‘*Ya Ali*’ from the film *Gangster* became a national hit in 2006, he carried Assam’s name across the country. But fame never changed him. He remained the same simple, fearless, and loving person, someone who laughed easily, spoke honestly, and cared deeply for others.

As a music director, he composed music for thirty-four Assamese films, more than anyone else in history. His work in *Echoes of Silence* earned him the National Film Award for Best Non-Feature Film Music Direction in 2009.



Zubeen started film making as a director and actor with the assamese film *Tumi Mur Mathu Mur* (1999) followed by *Mission China* (2017), and *Kanchanjangha* (2019). These films marked the revival of the Assamese film industry, bringing audiences back to theatres after years of decline. His final cinematic gift to the people of Assam, *Roi Roi Binale* (2025), continues this legacy. His performances in *Dinabandhu* (2004) and *Mon Jai* (2008) earned widespread acclaim, with both films receiving the Rajat Kamal for Best Assamese Film at the National Film Awards.

But what truly defined Zubeen was his kindness. He believed that love and help must go hand in hand. Through his Kalaguru Artiste Foundation, he supported young artists, helped those affected by floods, and reached out to anyone who needed care or education. He was gentle with animals and received PETA India's Hero to Animals Award in 2018 for speaking up against cruelty. People often said, "If no one helps, Zubeen will." And it was true. He never turned away from anyone in need. For the people of Assam, he was not only a musician, he was family.

He received many honours, including the Stardust Award, the National Film Award, and the title of Assamese of the Year in 2024. Yet what mattered most to him was love, not recognition. He lived for his music, for his people, and for his land.

And then came what I call The Great March. On 19 September 2025, the day that will forever remain the darkest in the history of Assam, my brother breathed his last in the waters of the Indian Ocean near Lazarus Island in Singapore, under mysterious circumstances. That moment plunged our world into grief and disbelief. The people of Assam wept together in the largest and longest collective mourning ever seen. The sadness spread beyond borders, touching hearts across the country and around the world. Even today, people wait for answers, for truth, and for justice. But I believe that Zubeen's soul, free and fearless, simply walked ahead into eternity, singing as he always did, his great march into the light.

I know he never truly left. His music still floats in the air of Assam, in the laughter of children, in the voice of a young singer learning his songs, and in the sound of the river flowing by the

Brahmaputra. He lives in every note of kindness, in every act of courage, in every melody born out of love. Zubeen Garg is the person who believed in music, clarity, truthfulness and love irrespective of cast and creed. 'Zubeen' is a Persian-origin name which means "something that touches the sky" or "the man who touched the sky" - and Zubeen Garg is the true reflection of the same. Because my brother, Zubeen Garg, will never truly be gone. He lives wherever music breathes, and wherever love finds a song.

#### *A Sister's Note*

*Every time I hear him singing, I feel his presence beside me. His smile, his words, his voice, they are alive in every corner of our home and in every heart that loved him. Zubeen is my brother, my friend, my pride, and my inspiration. He taught me courage and to move on with the rhythm of life, must not stop by any barriers.*

*I would only say 'Na Hanyote' - a phrase from Bhagavad Gita to express that soul cannot be harmed or destroyed, it is immortal so you are!*

*With love,  
Momon*



Palme Borthakur, PhD is working presently as an Assistant Professor of Geography & IKS (Indian Knowledge System), Royal Global University, Guwahati. Her Ph.D. work was on the topic of "Modern Music in Guwahati (GMA), Assam: A Study Of Cultural Fusion And Diffusion" which is a pioneering work in Music Geography in the region of Northeast India. Dr. Borthakur credits 13 research articles published in various journals, seminar proceedings and books so far and published one edited book. Her works are basically devoted to the study of music, culture, gender in respect with the surrounding of the region. She is also supervising research scholars on diverse themes of Human and Cultural Geography.

DHUMUHAR XOTE MOR  
BOHU DINOREY NASON

Mitra Phukan

He sang. Through many ages have I danced with the storm.

At this point, it's been more than a month since that death in distant waters which left an entire State shell shocked. But the *dhumuha* with which he danced, has, if anything grown even stronger. It has entwined itself in the hearts of thousands, lakhs of people. His *Samadhi Sthal* has already become a shrine. People come from distant towns and villages to pay homage to a beloved icon. Devotional songs, *naams* are sung with feeling. Even as a State waits for justice, it shows no signs of coming to terms with its sense of loss, its collective grief.

Zubeen Garg did more than dance with the storm. He *was* the storm, a tempest the likes of which these hills and valleys had not seen or heard before. He burst into the State's consciousness with "*Anamika*" in 1992, and moved across the entire country, and abroad, like a hurricane.

A month ago, the news of Zubeen Garg's passing in the waters of Singapore brought, at first a feeling of stunned disbelief. And then came the spontaneous expression of a peoples' grief, expressed movingly through the singer's own songs. As they lined the streets to pay homage to him when he was brought home, as they streamed into the Sarusajai grounds in their thousands with grieving eyes but orderly queues to place *gamosas* and flowers on the body of their departed idol, his songs were everywhere, touching the skies, echoing back from the hills, rivers and forests that he so loved. Visuals of these huge crowds went viral worldwide, leaving people to wonder, "Who was this who has evoked such adoration, such love from the people?"

When the heads of the powerful and the mighty of the land bowed with respect at his pyre, when he was accorded a State funeral with a twenty one gun salute, it was a testament to a life lived on his own terms. Never compromising, unafraid to call out wrongdoings in high places. He stood with the people during the anti Citizenship Amendment ACT demonstrations, and frequently walked the streets at night, talking to the homeless, giving them monetary help, taking off his own jacket and shoes, and giving them to a man shivering in the cold. He would engage the ordinary people, the farmers and fishermen, the street vendors and hawkers in conversation, and listen with genuine empathy. He would laugh with them, sing with them, eat with them. Not for him an ivory tower, in spite of his phenomenal success.

In an increasingly connected world, these stories spread. They endear, they bring solace and hope. He has become, in death as in life, much more than an icon. Through his Borgeets and devotional songs, he was faith. Through his songs in numerous languages, he transcended his linguistic and cultural boundaries, putting our valleys and hills on the maps of peoples' minds everywhere.. Through his films, he was the metaphor for all the positivity that the world still offers, the hero who trounced the baddies spectacularly He brought a sense of pride to the people through his accomplishments, the recognitions he was given. .

The power of his voice, combined with the evocativeness of his lyrics, as well as his ideals, could not help but enter the minds of the people. He had a song for every event, every thought, every emotion of their lives. There was anger, but there was also tenderness, and love. No wonder that outpouring of grief and adoration was the expression of a people now bereft of a Voice they could call their own.

How can one explain the phenomenon that was Zubeen? What were the skeins that made up his persona? For he was a singer, a filmmaker, a lyricist and composer, a screenwriter too, but he was not “merely” all of that. His songs, his voice had become part of the fabric of the peoples' lives in this part of the world

Through his art, Zubeen Garg became the voice of an entire generation of people. But his relevance was not restricted to the youth only. He spoke to the essential humanity that lies in the hearts, sometimes dormant, but present nevertheless, of all.

Even though Zubeen Garg towards the end of his 52 years of life was a multifaceted personality who excelled in many different creative forms, it was as a singer that he was best known, as a musician that he started his formal career at the young age of twenty with the album “*Anamika*”. There was no looking back after this. By the time his life ended, he had recorded around thirty eight thousand songs in forty or so languages. He was constantly working ...writing, recording, planning, singing, giving stage shows, travelling, filming, acting ...

His innate musicality merged with his feel for words, to create unforgettable songs that were evocative in both melody and lyrics. He had a voice that was hugely flexible, with an impressive range. Many of his songs begin in the higher part of the octave, and then gradually explore the lower parts if the lyric so demands. This signature pitching as well as his vocal “throw” accounted for the innate power of his presentations and their individuality. He was a musician who knew the exact tone and timbre of the many musical instruments that he used in his shows and recordings, the unique moods that they were capable of showing, and deployed them for best effects accordingly. And of course, he did have a fine understanding of the technical aspects of recordings and live music,

Yes, certainly he was eccentric. His clothes were often quite outlandish. And also, on so many occasions, was his stage behaviour. While pouring out song after song, he would decide to, for instance, climb up a tree or a stage pole, with his mike, and sing from there. But the thing is, it was genuine eccentricity. Genius often marches to a different tune, which is why many ordinary artistes fake eccentricity, sometimes to attract viewers and listeners. It’s a kind of PR thing with them. But it was never that with him. Zubeen’s eccentricity was part of who he was. And, let’s

be clear on this, it was never hurtful to others. If anything, on occasion he seemed hell bent on hurting himself.

Besides his astonishing creativity in the sphere of music was also that admirable but increasingly rare trait, his strong individuality, and his genuineness. He was his own person, though he was always thoughtful and caring to those around him, and to his fans. But he had spine, and an unwavering sense of right and wrong, in the larger context. Never afraid of speaking his mind, he cared little which person held how much power, in whatever sphere, when he spoke it. Nobody could doubt his patriotism, his love for Assam, its language, its culture, its people. But it was not that weak kind of love that needed to be spoken about all the time. It was robust, and so obvious that it needed no reiteration. But when, once, overzealous organizers stopped him from singing Hindi songs on the Bihu stage, he simply walked off. What he was about to sing was his own chart buster, “*Ya Ali*”, but this did not sit well with the Committee. He told the audience, “*Moi apunalokok bhaal pao,*” I love you people, and left. The audience roared their approval.

It is only people who are confident of their own abilities who can encourage talent in others. Many singers and artistes have come forward to recount how Zubeen encouraged them at the beginning of their journey, sometimes by inviting them to perform along with him on stage, at other times by discreetly giving monetary help, often by asking struggling musicians from his home state to stay with him in Mumbai, in his house, while they tried to find their footing.

His artistic mediums were many. Music, films, screenplay, lyrics. But they were all much more than art for him,. They were the vehicles for his thoughts, his protests, his angst, his deep, deep patriotism, his love for his homeland, Assam. And the people of this land he so loved, received them as such

Many have said that the world will not see a second such phenomenon. He was a product of, and at the same time a rebel against his time. He understood the angst of the youth of his generation,

and voiced their protests against what they perceived to be an increasingly rotten social and political order. He had said, multiple times, that he had no caste, no religion. The practice of his art was his worship, and worship he did, relentlessly, frenziedly, ultimately leaving behind a huge legacy. The numerous tongues of India's Northeastern States figured prominently in his oeuvre, along with so many others, all with flawless diction. In an increasingly divisive society, this egalitarianism, apparent in his life as also his art, was one of the strands that endeared him to the people across divides.

His anti-establishment acts were both an outlet for the peoples' anger, but also a balm. He spurned the benefits of being part of a political party. Here was somebody who still had his moral compass intact. For the generations who listened to him, he was hope. If somebody could put their frustrations into words, into songs of power and dissent, it meant that they were understood. There was optimism therefore, even the expectation of change.

Zubeen Garg's songs were not different from his actions. His was not just lip service. He walked the talk, singing of humanism, but also engaging in many philanthropic acts. He himself hardly spoke of these, but the beneficiaries often did. In a world of acquisitiveness and greed, this too could not but appeal to the inherent idealism of the youth. No wonder they wept even as they sang his songs. Who would be their ray of hope, their sword of courage now? He was firmly anti-establishment, never courting political power. Crowds and controversy followed him everywhere. He rose much above the conventional, was fearless as well as melodious. His irreverence for the establishment was legendary

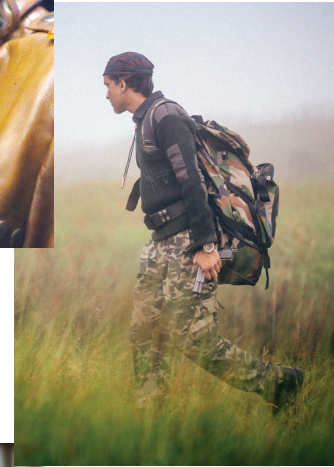
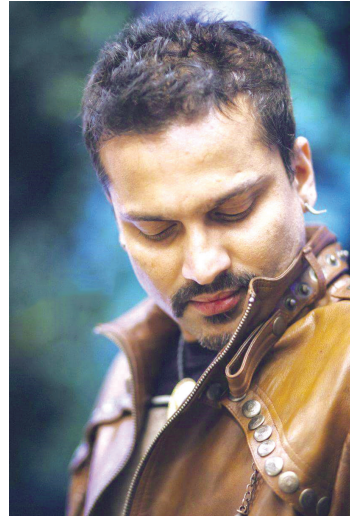
And he remained accessible to all, from the people in the villages on whose makeshift stages he sang his heart out, to the posh auditoriums abroad.

It's been more than a month now since his passing, and the adulation continues. It takes different shapes, but fans, admirers still flock to *Zubeen Khetra* to pay homage to a departed icon. Demands

for justice have not muted at all. And the waves of fandom, of admirers, have spread across the world.

The amazing thing is that so many new aspects of the artiste and his art keep coming to light. Ever newer songs are “discovered”, rather “rediscovered”, as they bob up on the internet. Some, from way back when his long hair and John Lennon glasses framed a face that attracted with its innocence, though even in those days he already commanded huge crowds at his shows. So many songs from so many different languages that he sang, have only now come into the consciousness of the Assamese people.

His has been a very well documented life. Numerous clips of different kinds are enriching our lives now. There are so many songs sung extempore at a simple gathering, in perfect “*sur*”, with feeling. And then there are the stage performances, those vibrant events in which he took along the teeming audiences with him. He was an entertainer, but in so many videos



in different languages that are now coming into our awareness he is also an extremely serious musician. The depth of his knowledge of music, his mastery of, and knowledge of so many genres, ranging from Western rock and classical to folk and ethnic melodies of this entire country, and more, continue to amaze. His mastery of the nuances of Rabindra Sangeet is astonishing. The man is no more, but his creations are even now flooding our consciousness.

We had always heard that he was well read, but now we know through a widely shared interview with a prominent writer, that he was familiar with the ideas of Nietzsche. How many contemporary musicians can have this philosophic depth?

And his philanthropy, his generosity. So many people are coming forward, weeping, to disclose how much they owed the legend, how he helped them in their hour of need, no questions asked. He funded peoples' education, he took the sick to hospital himself, and paid for their treatment. His was a hands on, person-to-person philanthropy, a generosity that gave not only money, but also himself, and his time.

Some of his sayings have already entered popular lore. "*Mor kono jaati nai...*" "I have no religion, no caste..."

From the very beginning, prayers have been, and are still offered across religions, by people of all faiths. And in that massive turnout of people mourning him, there is no differentiating between religious denominations, even in these divisive times. Zubeen would have been pleased.

But it is up to us now to keep these ideals alive in the way we conduct our lives, and the way we behave with others.

Even as we wait for justice to be delivered, we must prepare ourselves for the tasks ahead. His work needs to be documented, and categorized. They should be made available to serious scholars, and academic researchers. Much study needs to be conducted on his lyrics : the variety, the thematic originality, the meshing of the poetry with the melody. His films, too, need to be

studied and archived, their astonishing popularity explored in depth.

These works are necessary, of vital importance. We will be failing our icon if we do not make a start on these aspects of his work, and more, as soon as possible, while his voice still echoes in our minds, and hearts.



Mitra Phukan is an award winning writer, translator, columnist and trained Shastriya Sangeet vocalist. Her eighteen published volumes include children's books, biographies, (including on Bharat Ratna Dr Bhupen Hazarika,) three novels, "The Collector's Wife", "A Monsoon of Music" and "What Will People Say". A collection of short stories, "A Full Night's Thievery", all brought out by international publishing houses. She has translated major Assamese authors into English, including Jyanpeeth awardee Birendra Kumar Bhattacharjee's, "Blossoms in the Graveyard" Sahitya Akademi Awardee Harekrishna Deka's, "Guilt and other Stories" Arupa Patangia Kalita's "The Owl, The River and the Valley" etc. She has selected, partly translated and edited "The Greatest Assamese Stories Ever Told". Her column "All Things Considered" in the Assam Tribune is widely read. She writes frequently on Indian music.

Mitra Phukan's works have been extensively anthologized and she herself has been translated into several other languages. Her fictions are taught in colleges and universities across the country, and there are many research papers on them.

## DANCING INTO THE TEMPEST ASSAM'S NEW HISTORY OF GRIEF

Rakhee Kalita Moral

The stretch of national highway 37 from Guwahati's international airport to the Sarusajai stadium where Zubeen Garg's hearse arrived carrying his remains in a casket draped in the traditional Assamese *gamosa* and Bodo *aronai*, had never seen so much footfall. Nor had the miles ever stretched so long and somber, teeming with endless multitudes of a stunned public, and ardent admirers across the state, people young and old, their feet shuffling slowly along the road, as they wept and waited that solemn September Sunday from the early hours to catch a glimpse of the cortege bringing Assam's fondest hero back home to his own heartbroken people. Zubeen liked to famously recall his first arrival to this city in the nineties from the Upper Assam town of Jorhat as "the boy on a bicycle with a keyboard strapped to his back". In three decades, that new kid on the block who had donned psychedelic clothes and wore a rakish smile on his impossibly handsome face with a mop of unruly hair had outgrown those early fetishes and emerged from a singer to an iconic rockstar leaving his cavalier image behind to assume the portrait of the artist as a new-age cult. In each of these avatars, Zubeen fashioned himself as a new voice resonating with the crowds speaking in the language they spoke. His songs mirrored the unspoken desires of the young and his lyrics voiced the pulse of the land, breaking new ground and creating new yardsticks of music and melody that were eagerly embraced by a people weary from long years of existential unease as the troubled nineties in Assam teetered precariously into an uncertain future. His songs dotting every emotion and mood of the people provided sap, as it were, to the parched soul in times of despair.

And Zubeen became the new face of Assam asserting regionalism with a boldness unknown in the past, his compositions in every language of Northeast India capturing the aspirations of a people's belonging which he located in the heart of the pristine region, its ethnicities, tribes, folkways and ecology. Borrowing motifs from these familiar lands he simultaneously adopted the cosmopolitan language of the nation, effortlessly transmuting homegrown idioms into a sophisticated mix of genres, lingos and styles always backed by his fierce Assamese pride. On stage, the performer endeared himself to all by his disarming simplicity that the young idolized and the old indulged.

Self -admittedly, a man without race, religion or god, Zubeen wrote his songs in the language of love for the common man and gradually morphed into a cultural giant that the powerful hesitated to take on in Assam's restive environment. Fearless and passionate about everything he believed in, from doing charity, sponsoring education for the poor to rescuing animals, greening the environment and advocating citizenship for refugees and migrants, Zubeen grew larger than himself.

Though he still swaggered on to the stage and dared to defy the social apparatuses or an irate press, the restlessness of his youth had tempered into a philosophical 'coolness' as he spoke to Gen Z with his songs and became a guru to the young who lived their dreams through them. Unfazed by the many challenges he had faced, Zubeen rose to occupy a space free from judgment and prejudice, bias or bigotry. His was the liberty of the unaffiliated in the time of cronyism and trusteeship and his music allowed him that freedom of indifference to Assam's burgeoning class of wealth and privilege.

When he stormed annually onto the *Bihutolis* (the public marquees of the spring festival), he recreated a surge of the old Assamese way, celebrating the charm and redolence of small towns and agrarian life from where the songs of youth and his romantic idealism had issued. Against the grain of militarization sweeping the region Zubeen's irreverent voice stole into the new era, ushering in a fresh wave of confidence for the 1990s, with thousands of songs that rekindled the native magic, hope, and love and longing in the decades after.

A rebel-artist, Zubeen embodied the free Bacchanalian spirit, swinging from the pin-up icon to your friendly neighbour across the street, ally to pauper and prodigals, or a modern-day Robin Hood whose music earned him money he could dole away to the needy. Zubeen's tireless romance with the underdog easily made him everyman's soul, "*Jonotar pranor Zubeen*", whipping up a mass hysteria and crippling grief as news poured in of his sudden death on a distant shore that fateful afternoon. His tragic destiny enacted out his grand poetic vision of lying on the floors of the seas ("*xagor tolit xubore mon*") imaged in one of his popular songs as he slipped out of this world that Friday to a watery grave, dancing into the tempest as if in a dark Greek tragedy, succumbing to the very elements he had long flirted with in his imagination. Orphaned suddenly, Assam canonised '*Mayabini*', the 2000s song he chose to be remembered by as it gathered into a haunting refrain to become an anthem, a totem of collective grief and mourning, immortalizing its creator.

In the wake of Zubeen's premature passing, grief has acquired a new definition and a new look. Cities and towns, villages and suburbs, markets and meadows lie devastated and emptied of people as Assam and its northeastern neighbour-states mourn him and remain stunned in disbelief at the cruel way in which he was snatched from their bosoms. Posters of the star are draped on pillars and buildings, schools and universities, front yards and entrances to private homes, while giant Zubeen hoardings stare at commuters and passersby from every street corner and flyover, bridge and bus-stop as the entire state wears this new and unspoken garb of grief. Life comes to a standstill while all that breaks the silence and the hushed stillness are songs that he wrote and sang, as people throng city squares or village greens and sing his favourite '*Mayabini*', and social media creates new records of content on the icon, breaking all boundaries as voices rise in unison sharing a common tragedy: the loss of the chosen son of the soil.

How does a people grieve for its loveliest child? And what name do we give to that emotion welling up like an ancient ache, the visceral pain of loving and losing him, of a thousand griefs

rising as one, of his songs beating in our pulse, and of knowing that voice has been stilled. And yet, how do we explain that his voice reverberates in the hills and plains of our land, in campuses and parks, creeping like dew in the quiet corners of our aloneness and streaming like sunshine in our veins, invading even sleep with greater meaning and truth than ever before? And what can we say of that shared grief coupled with the crushing regret and guilt of loving and owning him, if vicariously, and of losing him to a whim, an act of indiscretion even, and of its atonement if ever? In his departure Assam witnesses the moment of the man meeting eternity, blurring out the mortal from the eternal, reminding us that “*the communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living*”, as Zubeen intersects the timeless.



Rakhee Kalita Moral is Professor and Head of English and Chair of the Centre for Women’s Studies at Cotton University, Guwahati, where she also serves as Dean of the Faculty of Arts in Language, Literature and Linguistics. Her research engages with postcolonial literature and society, gender and feminist theory, environmental humanities, and Northeast India studies.

Recipient of the WISCOMP Saahas Prerna Award from the Dalai Lama’s Foundation for Universal Responsibility in 2020 for her pioneering work in promoting gender equity in higher education in Northeast India, she has also been a postdoctoral Nehru Fellow at Teen Murti, New Delhi, and a visiting faculty member at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Professor Moral’s scholarship includes *At the Frontier and Beyond* (Macmillan, 2005), *Gender and Society in Northeast India* (2010), *Women, Peace and Security in NE India* (Zubaan, 2017), and *Once Upon the Hills: A Handbook of Naga Women’s Voices and Visions* (2022). She has recently edited a special issue of *South Asian Review* on Northeast Indian Anglophone Literature (2023), and her forthcoming monograph, *Under the Shadow of the Red Sun: Gender and Insurgency in India’s Northeast*, explores the lives and narratives of female rebels in Assam.

## ZUBEEN'S ABYSS WHISPERS MELODY

By Banasmita Das

Those who think deeply often walk alone. They are accompanied not by crowds but by shadows. Nietzsche knew this well when he wrote, “If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.” His words were not so much a warning as a confession. More than a century later, that same abyss seemed to peer into the life and art of Zubeen Garg. A singer loved by millions yet forever restless, he spoke often of nothingness and even quoted Nietzsche. It might have seemed strange: how could an artist rooted in Assam’s cultural soil echo the despair of a German philosopher? Yet perhaps it was not strange at all. The search for meaning knows no borders. The questions Nietzsche wrestled with: identity, despair, the urge to create after collapse; are the same fires that forged Zubeen’s art. In his melodies, pauses and silences, one hears that same urgency that once drove Nietzsche toward both brilliance and breakdown.

Nietzsche lived at a time when faith was crumbling under the weight of modern reason. For him, the death of God was not liberation but rupture: a breaking apart of the shared moral fabric that once held people together. The abyss, for Nietzsche, was this moral emptiness, the frightening realization that there is no given purpose to life. Yet he refused to yield to despair. He believed that by facing this void, one could become a creator of new values: what he called the *Übermensch*, the higher human who affirms life even when meaning collapses. Art, to him, was not an escape from truth but a way to bear it. “We have art,” he wrote, “so that we do not perish from the truth.”

Zubeen, too, lived through contradictions that both fed and tormented his genius. For over three decades, he remained an unpredictable force: singer, composer, actor, philanthropist, socialist; impossible to contain within categories. Beneath the fame, there was a man wrestling

with himself. Passionate yet wounded, rebellious yet tender, he carried the burden of being the “voice of a generation.” Many saw the performer; few noticed the philosopher beneath: a man thinking beyond applause. When he sang *Ami Jen Jontro*, it was not just a critique of monotony but a cry against the dulling of the soul. *Mon Jai* carried the ache of someone who could not fit into moulds; *Mayabini* blurred the line between reality and dream. His songs were not polished statements but instinctive gestures: art made from chaos, born of defiance. Containment was never possible, because his fire was fed by the disorder he refused to escape. He wanted life to remain raw and alive, even if that meant living close to chaos.

Assam has always offered a rare sense of rootedness: a culture of shared music, stories, and collective warmth. But it also demands belonging, a quiet conformity. In such a setting, Zubeen’s philosophical turn felt both radical and revealing. He was perhaps Assam’s first true existentialist: not in doctrine, but in temperament. Through his songs, he asked if identity can stifle creativity, if reverence can become a kind of prison, if success can isolate. When he spoke of nothingness, it was not despair but inquiry: a question of whether the collective had left any room for the individual to breathe, err, and grow. For decades, he carried Assam’s joys and sorrows, its festivals and its griefs. But he also bore its silences: the things unspoken, the pressures invisible. Nietzsche might have seen in him what he once called the “tragic artist”; one who turns suffering into song and despair into creation.

True artists, Nietzsche believed, do not flee from the void: they give it shape. They wrestle with chaos until it begins to sing. Zubeen did just that. His music was not simply melody; it was philosophy rendered in sound: a refusal to give in to nothingness. Even when his songs ached with sorrow, they were acts of resistance against silence. His creative energy was not about power over others but power over despair: the force that kept him moving, questioning, creating, even when misunderstood. Both Nietzsche and Zubeen knew that creation is born from crisis, that art is the brief peace we make with meaninglessness. To turn chaos into beauty is, in its own way, divine.

But such intensity has its price. Nietzsche's brilliance ended in madness; Zubeen's light burned out too soon. Both were consumed by the very fire that made them unforgettable. The abyss they faced eventually looked back, leaving marks too deep to heal. Yet their lives remain testaments to courage: the courage to think, to feel, to create without safety nets. As Nietzsche wrote, "One must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star." Zubeen was such a star: erratic, radiant, human.

His journey leaves us with a question: what does a society do with a soul it cannot classify? We celebrate art, yes, but do we allow artists to falter, to heal, to be human? Nietzsche's abyss was philosophical; Zubeen's was heartbreakingly human. One wrote of nothingness; the other sang through it. And both reached the same truth: meaning is not given but made; shaped from uncertainty, defiance, and longing. That may be Zubeen's greatest gift to Assam: not just his music, but the rebellion it carried. He gave listeners permission to doubt, to dissent, to break form, to begin again. His art did not deny the void; it conversed with it. He did not fear the abyss. He listened to it: and taught us how to make it sing. In doing so, he left us more than melodies. He left us a mirror. And in that mirror, perhaps, our own silences might finally find their voice.



Banasmita Das, currently working at NIPER, Guwahati, is a writer from Assam. Her works: essays, reviews, poems and travel pieces; have appeared in The Assam Tribune, The Story Mud, Book Nerdection, Spillwords (New York) and Cold Moon Journal. Her debut anthology *Gilded Verse* (April 2025) and her blog *Literary Voyage* mark her creative journey.

## POSTHUMOUS PHENOMENON

Rahul Karmakar

Vincent Van Gogh is often considered the template for artists whose fame increases exponentially after their death. Some, like Gregor Johann Mendel, who pioneered genetics in 1865, were regarded as being too far ahead of their time to be appreciated during their lifetime.

The world of music has examples of both kinds. The Baroque-era German composer Johann Sebastian Bach, the American soul, rhythm, and blues singer-songwriter Otis Redding, the American rapper Tupac Shakur, and the English folk singer-songwriter Nick Drake became famous after their deaths. Moheener Ghoraguli, the Kolkata-based band that pioneered Bengali rock with a folksy twist in the 1970s, were considered too radical to attain popularity until their creations “inspired” Bollywood hits decades later.

Zubeen Garg was in the league of Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Bob Marley, Michael Jackson, and Amy Winehouse, who were immensely popular during their lifetime but achieved a new level of global recognition after their death. Garg came close to Jackson when his funeral drew a record-breaking crowd, but he was much more than most performers who became a phenomenon posthumously.

The multilingual Garg was a household name in Assam and had a huge fan following in West Bengal and other Bengali-dominated parts of the world, such as Bangladesh, because of his body of work for Tollywood films. His popularity across the Hindi heartland during his lifetime was limited, with most branding him as the blockbuster ‘*Ya Ali*’ singer who also sang a few chartbusters such as ‘*Jaane Kya Chaahе Mann*’ and ‘*Dil Tu Hi Bataa*’. People beyond these zones were perhaps not as familiar with Garg and his creativity, let alone his activism and philanthropy.

It all changed when death while swimming off an island in Singapore on September 19, 2025 triggered an outpouring of emotion on the streets of Guwahati and almost every inch of public space across Assam over the next four days until his funeral on September 23. It made the world – from Sadiya to San Francisco and from Silchar to Seoul – sit up and take notice of the mass emotional storm that hit Assam for the iconic singer who avowedly knew the “ways of the tempest for ages”.

The scenario was no different for representatives of metropolis-based, mainstream, or multi-edition print media houses in Guwahati, who are invariably lone rangers covering all or most of the eight northeastern states. Garg often became front-page news for more than a week after his unnatural death, and websites of the frontline dailies ran video stories – live too – at regular intervals. Suddenly, the mainstream media houses could not have enough of Garg and the developments around his “mysterious” death that put at least seven suspects, including his manager and an event organiser, behind bars.

Before one jumps to a conclusion, one has to understand what makes news for major newspaper brands such as The Times of India, Indian Express, Hindustan Times, and The Hindu, which are essentially local in nature, catering primarily to readers in and around the publishing centres, but with more resources to devote space to “national” events or happenings deemed newsworthy. State or regional representatives, like yours truly, have been for The Hindu since 2018, from across the country, have to fight for this limited space. The stories that carry more weight or are deemed important for a wider audience, irrespective of the region, find their way in print, while others are either relegated to briefs or diverted to the website.

The seemingly never-ending mass mourning for Garg made his story – how he lived life and how he died, what he created, what he stood for, what he believed in, and who he helped quietly – huge for the mainstream media. The eagerness of our editors, driven by the hunger of our readers, made the one-person bureaus cover the aftermath of his death extensively. Barring the

ethnic conflict in Manipur, I cannot recall a phase in more than three decades of my career as an outstation correspondent when I wrote reams on any other development in the Northeast, not even when the legendary Bard of Brahmaputra, Dr Bhupen Hazarika, died on November 5, 2011.

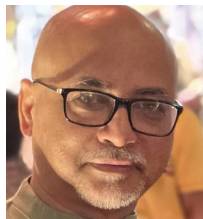
Correspondents or reporters are usually not art, film, or music critics/specialists, and they are not supposed to editorialise their content or use adjectives and adverbs. This was primarily the reason why Garg seldom made news for the mainstream media when he was alive, although he commanded more space than most others of his ilk because of speaking truth to power and taking up issues he was passionate about. In *The Hindu*, for instance, he grabbed headlines after walking off the stage during his performance at a Bihu event in May 2017 after the organisers asked him not to sing Hindi songs. This was two years before he defied a similar diktat by the United Liberation Front of Asom (Independent). He made news the following year for his call to end animal sacrifice at Guwahati's Kamakhya Temple, and in 2019, when he became the face of the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act movement in Assam. The attack on him by miscreants in Guwahati in August 2020, his opposition to the idea of carving out a Kamatapur state in January 2023, and his 2024 protest against the felling of trees for a flyover project in Guwahati made news, too. In between, the release of his album '*Pakeeza*', his first as a Hindi lyricist, found space in the arts section. The piece was by an art critic.



Assam has had five cultural icons – all multifaceted. Garg, the fifth icon, was connected to the first, Srimanta Sankaradeva, through the Borgeets he sang. He was inspired by the second, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, heavily influenced by the third, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, and mentored by the fourth, Dr Hazarika. I have had the misfortune of covering the demise of the last of the two legends 14 years apart, but Garg’s death impacted me more than Dr Hazarika’s in the sense that I began to appreciate the lyrical quality of his songs. If I failed to do so earlier, it was because of my inability to break out of the “old is gold” perception that prevented me from upgrading my ear for music beyond the 1980s.

Only a genius could have composed and sung gems such as ‘*Aami Jen Jantra*’ (We are like machines), a cry against being caged by any system; the 10 minutes 46 seconds-long ‘*Mon Jai*’ (My heart desires), invoking the freedom-seeking spirit of the Assamese youth; ‘*Pakhi Pakhi Ei Mon*’ (This bird-like heart), emphasising the restless nature of the heart; ‘*Sagor Tolit Xubore Mon*’ (I want to sleep deep in the sea), interpreted by fans as a haunting premonition of his death off a Singapore island; ‘*Maya Mathu Maya*’ (Everything’s an illusion), which seeks to know if love is real or deceptive; and of course, ‘*Mayabini Raatir Bukut*’ (In the embrace of the magical night), which became an anthem after his death.

If only we could ask Garg’s agnostic universe to ‘*Diya Ghurai Diya*’ (Return) our cultural icon who ‘*Hothat Heral*’ (Lost suddenly)!



Rahul Karmakar has a fancy designation, Deputy Editor, but is essentially a reporter primarily covering the eight northeastern states for The Hindu. He has been writing for a living since July 1989 and is arguably the only journalist to have worked along the Tropic of Cancer - from Arunachal Pradesh to Gujarat.

## ZUBEEN THE PHILANTHROPIST

Ramanuj Dutta Choudhury

The songs of Zubeen Garg will continue to mesmerize generations for years to come and after his tragic demise, his songs can be heard all over the state and other parts of India. We all knew about the popularity of Zubeen but the actual level of his popularity came to the fore after his tragic demise as all sections of people, with tears in their eyes, came out to the streets to pay their homage to the departed soul. In fact, I can vouch that Zubeen is not dead. He is mortally not with us but he will always remain alive in the hearts of people through his creations.

Zubeen was a man with a big heart and he was never afraid of speaking out his mind. After the bomb blast in Dhemaji during Independence Day celebration in 2004, in which three women and 13 children lost their lives, Zubeen wrote a strongly worded song against violence. At that time, militancy was at its peak and very few persons had the guts to speak out against them. But that did not deter Zubeen to write such a song.

When majority of artistes toe the line of the party in power, Zubeen the rebel, always had the guts to stand up against the ruling dispensation whenever he was convinced that something was not right. He was not a political man and wrote "*Politics Nakariba Bandhu*" (do not do politics friend). He was at the forefront of the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 movement because he knew that the Act would be bad for the state. Though some artistes, who were part of the movement, later joined political parties, he never budged from his stand.

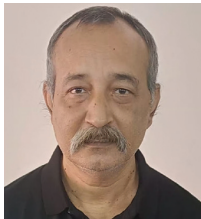
But Zubeen's one trait which did not come to the forefront before his death was philanthropy. After his demise, many people started coming out and saying how they were helped by Zubeen and they now consider him as a demi-God. But the most heartening fact is that Zubeen did not

help people to gain publicity and he was doing so quietly out of public glare.

In my long career as a journalist, I have seen many people and organization seeking publicity after helping out someone. In this context, I want to reveal one interesting incident. My wife was taking chemotherapy in Dr. B. Barooah Cancer institute a few years back and I was sitting near her bed working on my laptop. I saw a group of ladies moving around in the chemotherapy hall taking pictures. Initially I did not bother, Afterwards, a few of them asked me to move from the place so that they can take photos. I simply did not budge. On the same evening, I received a press release from a ladies' organization which said that its members visited the cancer institute and did counseling of patients. I simply threw the release to the dust bin i know what they really did. I narrated the incident just to show how people seek publicity without even really helping people.

That is where Zubeen was always different. No one knows how many poor people received his help. We only know about those who have come forward to narrate their stories. From those narrations we have come to know that Zubeen silently extended helping hands to poor people for treatment, studies and what not. Owners of a few private hospitals have come forward to narrate how Zubeen sent people unknown to him for treatment and footed the bills. Only a person with a heart of gold can do such things without seeking any personal glory. He could have easily spent the money to complete his dream house or live a life of luxury. But instead of that, he decided to help out people.

May be some day, some researcher will do a detailed research on the philanthropy of Zubeen and only then we will come to know details about that.



Ramanuj Dutta Choudhury, is the executive editor of The Assam Tribune. He started journalism during his college days. He has a written nine books so far including one on the 14th Dalai Lama after a long interview with him

## THE BACK STORY

### *When Notes Heal*

*It all began in Dimapur, a few weeks before our TEDx Royal Global University event. Nise and I were sitting together, speaking of music, friendship, and of course, Zubeen, our brother, our muse, our storm who suddenly passed away. The memory of his songs was still raw, the silence he left behind still heavy. Somewhere in that conversation, as we remembered his laughter and his unending passion, I turned to Nise and said softly,*

*“Let’s make sure the world can play him. Let’s immortalise Mayabini.”*

*That single moment of instinct became a promise.*

*It was decided that Nise would create the Western musical notation of Zubeen’s “Mayabini” as a gesture of love, memory, and gratitude. It was not planned as a grand performance. It was born of emotion, as a way to let the world hear Zubeen’s soul through another instrument, another heart.*

*On the evening of October 8, 2025, when TEDx Royal Global University came alive with stories of originality and courage, Nise took the piano and played Mayabini after the speakers finished their presentations. The hall fell utterly silent. It wasn’t just music; it was remembrance. It was as if Zubeen was there with us, smiling, listening, conducting the air itself.*

*As the final notes faded, there were tears, quiet smiles, and the kind of silence that follows truth. For me, that evening was not merely a performance, it was a tribute from Nise, myself, and Royal Global University to the man whose music shaped lives.*

*That evening Mayabini found a new instrument...*

*Sattyakee D’com Bhuyan*

# Mayabini

Zubeen Garg

Arr. Nise Meruno

Intro

La la la....

1. 2.

Verse 1

Pre-Chorus

Detailed description: This system contains the first 22 measures of the piece. It begins with an 'Intro' section (measures 1-4) featuring a treble clef melody with eighth-note triplets and a bass clef accompaniment of chords. The lyrics 'La la la....' are written below the bass line. Measures 5-8 include two first endings, labeled '1.' and '2.'. The 'Verse 1' section (measures 9-13) continues the melody and accompaniment. The 'Pre-Chorus' section (measures 14-22) features a more active treble melody with eighth-note patterns and a steady bass accompaniment.

26

30

34 Chorus

38

42

47 Interlude

Detailed description: This system contains measures 23-48. Measures 23-25 are the continuation of the previous system. Measures 26-29 are the first part of the 'Chorus', featuring a treble melody with eighth-note patterns and a bass accompaniment of chords. Measures 30-33 continue the chorus. Measures 34-37 are the second part of the chorus. Measures 38-41 are the continuation of the chorus. Measures 42-45 are the continuation of the chorus. Measures 46-48 are an 'Interlude' section, featuring a treble melody with eighth-note triplets and a bass accompaniment of chords.



End - Can Improvise



Nise Meruno is an internationally acclaimed concert pianist from Nagaland, trained in Singapore with Piano as his major, along with voice, conducting, and composition. He has performed and conducted workshops across Europe and Asia, including Germany, UK, Hungary, Switzerland, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Korea, China, and Thailand. A TEDx Speaker, his music has graced prestigious audiences ranging from presidents and foreign dignitaries to Indian icons like Amir Khan and the Ambanis. A proud brand ambassador for AKG microphones and in-ear monitoring systems, Austria, Nise is also the first Indian to be honoured as a 'Yamaha Artist' by Yamaha Pianos, Japan.



70

ZUBEEN TWENTY SONGS AND SEVEN PORTRAITS



EPILOGUE

## MY REQUIEM FOR ZUBEEN

Sattyakee D'com Bhuyan

When the editorial team from a Mumbai daily reached out to me to write a tribute on Zubeen Garg for their readers, I paused for a long time before I could say yes. How do you write about someone who has been a part of your very being for over three decades? How do you capture a storm, a silence, a soul in words? They told me that the new generation in Mumbai knew him mostly as the “*Ya Ali*” singer, the haunting voice that had shaken the country in 2006. But they also wanted to understand why, years later, when that same man left us so suddenly, the farewell that followed back home in Assam became one of the most emotional, massive public outpourings of love in recent history. I knew then that this couldn't just be a tribute. It had to be a confession.

Zubeen Garg. Even his name felt like thunder rolling down the hills. To some he was a singer. To others, a star. To me, he was an uncompromising, uncommon individual who refused to live life in lowercase. He was always in ALL CAPS. He walked into our lives like a storm, unapologetic, messy, dazzling, and full of a courage most of us only pretend to have.

I have known him since my college days. We laughed through cheap tea, heavy rains, and endless dreams that seemed impossible then but became possible only because he had the gut, the madness, the reckless genius to chase them. I worked with him in films, in theatre, in creative projects where art bled into life and life bled back into art. Through it all, one truth never wavered, Zubeen only listened to his own gut. And his gut was tuned like his voice: raw, sharp, fearless, unbroken.

He was a man who refused to bow. Most of us spend our lives trying to please people. Zubeen spent his life pleasing only his soul. That made him extraordinary, that made him gutsy. He

carried his contradictions like medals: soft at heart, sharp in tongue, caring in silence, chaotic in action. He could enter a room and instantly you knew the air had shifted. He wasn't just present, he was a presence.

He taught me something that no textbook, no theatre workshop, no film script could teach: live loud, live true, live now. That was Zubeen. Not a man of later. Always a man of the present.

Ah, that voice. God takes centuries to carve a voice like that. It wasn't trained, it was destined. His timber carried the echo of our hills, the laughter of our markets, the whispers of our rivers. He sang what our hearts couldn't say. He sang for the broken, the joyous, the mad, the lonely, the lovers, the rebels, the ordinary. He became the voice we borrowed when our own words failed.

And now that voice is gone. Or is it?

No. A voice like that doesn't die. It lingers in the air long after the singer has walked away. Silence itself now seems to mourn the loudest note he ever left behind. People often misunderstood him. They thought he was reckless, arrogant, and impossible. But peel away the chaos, and you'd see a man who cared deeply, intensely, sometimes to the point of pain. I have seen him stay awake for someone else's sorrow. I have seen him give away what he had to people who had less. I have seen him stand by friends when the world had turned its back. His was not the care of calm saints, it was the care of raging storms. Fierce. Uncompromising. Real. He Was Not Just One of Us - He Was All of Us

When Zubeen sang, we found pieces of ourselves in his voice. He sang our joy, our pain, our anger, our yearning. His songs were not just entertainment. They were confessionals, open diaries, raw outpourings that we carried home in our hearts.

He never belonged to one genre, one language, one community. He was larger than definitions. He was one of us, yes, but he was also all of us. A thousand identities stitched into one restless soul. I call him brother not because of blood, but because of bond. We walked through the wild lanes of creativity together, often clashing, often laughing, always dreaming. He was difficult to

tame, impossible to predict, but always impossible to forget.

Now, as I stand in this silence, I realize he was a flame. Flames don't last forever. Flames don't promise permanence. Flames promise light. And he gave us that light, sometimes soft, sometimes scorching, but always unforgettable.

The question now is not how long he lived but how brightly he burned. And he burned with a brightness that generations will see even when we are long gone.

It is easy to drown in grief today. Easy to let the silence swallow us. But that would betray the very essence of Zubeen. He would never want us to lower our voices. He would want us to sing louder, laugh harder, dream wilder. He would want us to be gutsy, to follow our instincts, to care when the world tells us not to.

So, let us keep the flame alive. Let his madness fuel our courage. Let his songs echo in our classrooms, our streets, our theatres, our festivals. Let children yet unborn grow up humming the words he left behind.

Zubeen was never just an artist. He was a phenomenon. A man who sang what our hearts couldn't say. A man who listened when the world was too loud. Most people saw him under the bright lights of the stage, a force of nature in motion, commanding the mic like a magician. But a few of us knew him off stage, where he was gentle, deeply personal, and incredibly human. I was lucky to be among those few. Ours was a friendship that began in college, bound by books, music, and a shared madness for art that blurred the lines between dreaming and doing.

We met during a time when life was simpler and ambitions were wild. He had that rare glint in his eyes even then, a mix of innocence and fire. We would sit in studio's fixed road side joints (Gauhati Medical College being one such place) drinking, the sound of rain against tin roofs, our conversations stretching into the night about music, theatre, poetry, and the meaning of freedom. Zubeen listened more than he spoke, which is ironic because his voice would one day

come to define a generation. I remember once telling him that he had a voice that could break hearts and heal them in the same breath. He smiled, shrugged, and said, “D’com, it’s just what I have. I’ll sing till it breaks.”

That was him, fearless, instinctive, impulsive. He lived his life like a song without rehearsals. There was no room for pretence. He was the same Zubeen in the studio, in a protest, in a flood relief camp, or in the quiet of his room surrounded by books and old instruments. He could be chaos and calm in the same moment. He was a well-read man. We often exchanged books, underlining passages that moved us. He loved literature that questioned the world, Friedrich Nietzsche, O. Henry, Neruda, Tagore and others who he revered deeply. Dylan’s “Death Is Not the End” come to my mind when he suddenly left us and how hauntingly true those words feel now.

Over the years, our friendship grew from shared curiosities into creative collaborations. We worked together in theatre and films and he helped me at times with the soundscape for my plays. When I returned to Assam after serving the World Bank Group for a decade, he called me with his familiar warmth, “D’com, welcome home. Now let’s do something together again.” That’s how I found myself acting in his film “Mission China” where he chose to keep my real name for the character of the Sniper. Being on his set was like being inside his mind, unpredictable, vibrant, and full of conviction. He knew exactly what he wanted, but he also allowed space for magic to happen. Between shots, we spoke about how art is not perfection but truth. He said, “We don’t create for applause, we create because we must.”

Many people knew Zubeen as a singer, but he was also a composer, director, lyricist, actor, and above all, a humanist. He cared with a depth that most could never comprehend. I have seen him walk quietly into flood camps in Assam without any entourage, just to sit with people, share food, and listen. I have seen him donate his entire concert earnings for someone in need, someone in the hospital, without ever mentioning it publicly. He loved animals. He loved trees. (one good

reason why he left Bombay at his peak as there were less trees and he found it to be chaotic) He often said, “I feel calmer with them than with most people.” And he meant it. He could stop his car just to feed a stray dog, or plant a sapling by the roadside and forget to mention it to anyone. That was the essence of his kindness, silent, sincere, unannounced.

The world called him unpredictable. I called him honest. He never sugar-coated his opinions, and when he stood up for a cause, he stood like a mountain. Behind that apparent rebelliousness was a simple truth, he believed in humanity above everything else. His now-iconic words, “*Mur kunu zati nai, mur kunu dharma nai, moi okol manuh*” : “I have no caste, I have no religion, I am just a human” , came not from any political stance but from the core of who he was. He said it often, long before it went viral after his passing. It was not rhetoric; it was his way of life. He had friends across divides, he spoke to everyone with the same warmth, and he saw divinity in simplicity. In a world obsessed with labels, Zubeen was label-less.

When “*Ya Ali*” happened, the world discovered what we in Assam already knew, that this man’s voice carried something divine. I remember when that song from Gangster released. The entire country was hypnotized. The melody, the emotion, the rawness, it was Zubeen at his best. But what the rest of India did not see was what followed. The calls from producers, the flood of offers, the red carpet that Bollywood rolled out. And then, quietly, without any drama, he left it all behind and came home. When I asked him why, he looked at me with that calm conviction and said, “I owe it to my people. I live because of their love. I have to be with them. Mumbai gave me fame, but Assam gave me purpose.”

He could have stayed and ruled the charts. But he chose the quieter, deeper path. He chose to sing for the soil that shaped him. That was the measure of his greatness. For him, music was not a ladder to climb but a bridge to connect.

He sang in more than forty languages, but every note carried the heartbeat of Assam. Whether it was “*Mayabini*,” “*Maya*” “*Pakhi*,” or the stirring “*Amanisha*,” he gave us not just songs but

identities. His music became our collective memory. He was the sound of our laughter, our heartbreak, our resistance.

I remember one night in Guwahati after a small, impromptu concert. The crowd had gone home, the lights were dimmed, and it started drizzling. He sat on the edge of the stage, wet hair sticking to his forehead, nursing a drink, and humming to himself. I asked him what he was thinking. He smiled and said softly, “You know, D’com, these are the moments I live for. When it rains, and I can hear my people humming my song in the distance. That’s my award.”

That was Zubeen. He didn’t chase trophies. He chased truth. He didn’t crave luxury. He craved connection. And yet, behind all that brilliance was an incredibly sensitive man. He felt deeply, sometimes too deeply. Fame never insulated him from pain. When people suffered, he suffered. When injustice happened, he couldn’t sleep. He was restless by design. That restlessness was both his gift and his curse. But he never let it turn him bitter. He channelled it into creation, into compassion.



He would say, “people think we perform on stage. But actually, the stage performs on us. It changes us each time.” On September 19, when I heard the news of his death in Singapore, I froze. It felt unreal, cruel, wrong. I still believe it was a freak accident, but there was loads of negligence that cost us this precious life. The more we learn, the more painful it becomes. A voice like his deserved protection, not carelessness.

The days that followed were a blur of disbelief. Assam was weeping. Lakhs of people lined up in Guwahati to bid him farewell. I had never seen anything like it in my life. Despite the pouring rain, people stood for hours, singing his songs, holding flowers, some just standing silently with tears. The crowd wasn't a mob of fans. It was a gathering of family, every person who had ever been touched by his music. His body lay in a glass casket, surrounded by love so immense that it felt like the sky itself was mourning. It wasn't a state ceremony. It was a people's embrace. I remember looking at his face one last time and thinking, even in stillness, he looked peaceful, almost smiling, as if he knew his voice had done its work. As if he had sung his final verse and handed the rest of it to us.

In that silence, Dylan's words echoed again in my mind, “Death is not the end.” For some, it's poetry. For me, it's truth. Because Zubeen isn't gone. He has simply changed forms. His voice is now in the rain, in the rustle of leaves, in the hum of every child who sings “*Ya Ali*” or “*Mayabini*” without knowing where it came from.

When I spoke to yet another dear Brother Papon after that dark day, his voice broke. We both grew up within the All India Radio Guwahati family where our fathers once worked. Papon said, “I will never be able to fill the vacuum left by Zubeen. But I'll sing to make Assam proud, to take our traditions to the world.” His grief mirrored the grief of millions. We both knew that Zubeen's shoes could never be filled. They were made for one man only.

What made Zubeen special wasn't just his music. It was his humanity. He cared. He noticed. He remembered names, faces, stories. He wrote to people he barely knew if he felt they needed

encouragement. He stood by friends through their darkest nights. And he was incredibly loyal. No matter how big he became, he never let go of his roots. I've seen him share laughter with children in tea gardens, sing casually in village courtyards, and play the synthesizer for hours just because he felt like it or for that matter the guitar.

He often said, "We are nothing without our people. What's the point of fame if you can't use it to make someone smile?"

That's the side of him the world didn't always see. The humanitarian who believed that art must serve, not just shine. He was a flame that gave light, never caring if it burned itself in the process.

The night before I started writing this, I went back to some of our old photographs. In one, we're both young, laughing uncontrollably over something silly at a theatre rehearsal. In another, he's standing barefoot by the Brahmaputra, staring at the horizon, lost in thought. That was where he found peace, near the river, close to the sound of home.

It hurts to think that his ashes will now become one with that very river. But perhaps that's how it was meant to be. Because the Brahmaputra has always carried voices. And I know, somewhere in its eternal flow, his voice will continue to sing - timeless, untamed, unforgettable.

Zubeen taught me that greatness has nothing to do with power and everything to do with empathy. He taught me that art means nothing if it cannot touch hearts. He reminded me that silence, too, is music. And that the truest artists are those who live and love without filters.

He once told me, after a long night of talking about life and death, "D'com, when I go, I hope people remember me not for the songs, but for the silences between them."

Now, as I write these words, I realize what he meant. His music was the voice of our collective soul. But his silences-well, those moments of listening, of stillness, where his humanity lived.

I don't know how to end this because how do you end something that refuses to end? Maybe that's the point. Zubeen isn't a memory. He's a movement that continues. As his ashes merge with

the currents of the Red River, the Brahmaputra, I can almost hear him again. The same fearless laughter, the same gentle voice singing, “*Mayabini*.”

I am sure the world will keep hearing him, in every song, every silence, every act of kindness that carries his spirit forward. Zubeen Garg was not just a singer. He was a soul who turned life itself into music.

And though the stage is empty now, the echoes remain. Forever.



Sattyakee D'com Bhuyan is a multifaceted artist, actor, director, playwright, and columnist who breathes life into the world of theatre. A true philomath with the rare INFJ personality type, he has devoted his soul to the timeless art of storytelling. As the founder and guiding force behind D'Passion Collective, Bhuyan's creative brilliance has illuminated stages with over twenty-five remarkable productions, each echoing his vision and passion. His artistic journey, rooted in his youth, has been one of relentless purpose and heartfelt expression. A TEDx speaker and former member of the IFC–World Bank Group's South Asia Communications Team, his influence transcends theatre, shaping minds through transformative workshops on creative writing and effective communication. Honoured as India Today's Youth Icon in 2010, Bhuyan continues to inspire, nurture, and empower emerging talents, leaving an indelible imprint on the cultural landscape of the nation. As a columnist, his words - whether spoken on stage or etched in print - stand as a testament to his enduring devotion to the arts. He currently serves as the Deputy Dean (DSW) at Royal Global University and as a Resource Person for Performing Arts, Design, and Outreach Programmes at The Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for Creativity.



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