

## ASSAMESE ARTIST (SINGER AND MUSICIANS) AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO ASSAMESE SOCIETY

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### **Abstract**

Assamese music has developed through a long interaction among devotional practice, folk performance, theatre, cinema, radio, and modern media. Within this evolving tradition, singers and musicians have functioned not merely as entertainers but as carriers of language, emotion, social memory, and collective identity. This paper examines selected Assamese artists—ranging from Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva to Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Bhupen Hazarika, Pratima Barua Pandey, Khagen Mahanta, Dipali Barthakur, and Zubeen Garg—and analyzes how their music contributed to Assamese society in religious, cultural, educational, political, and emotional terms. The discussion traces the movement from congregational devotional song to modern recorded music and digital circulation, showing how artists helped preserve folk idioms, popularize regional language, support social awareness, and strengthen public belonging. The paper argues that Assamese artists played a formative role in shaping public culture by linking performance with reform, memory, and social communication. Their contribution remains central to the continuity of Assamese identity in a changing media environment (Borthakur & Kalita, 2018; Kutum, 2025).

The paper is descriptive in method and interpretive in orientation. It treats music as a social text and public practice rather than only as repertoire. The contribution of artists is therefore read through institutions such as the namghar, satra, stage, film, radio, gramophone, and digital platform. This perspective helps explain why many Assamese singers became symbols of community feeling, moral speech, and cultural resilience.

**Keywords:** Assamese music, singers, musicians, Assamese society, Bhupen Hazarika, folk music, Borgeet, performing arts, cultural identity, modern Assamese song.

### **Introduction**

The history of Assamese music is inseparable from the social history of Assam. Music in the region has moved across sacred and secular spaces: the satra and namghar, village performance grounds, theatre stages, cinema halls, radio studios, cassette culture, and digital platforms. This continuity has allowed music to become one of the strongest vehicles of Assamese identity. Artists in Assam have performed multiple roles at once—as singers, lyricists, composers, reformers, teachers, activists, and public intellectuals. Through devotional songs, folk tunes, film music, protest songs, and contemporary fusion, they have spoken to the concerns of ordinary people and helped interpret social change for wider audiences (Government of Assam, 2022; Borthakur & Kalita, 2018).

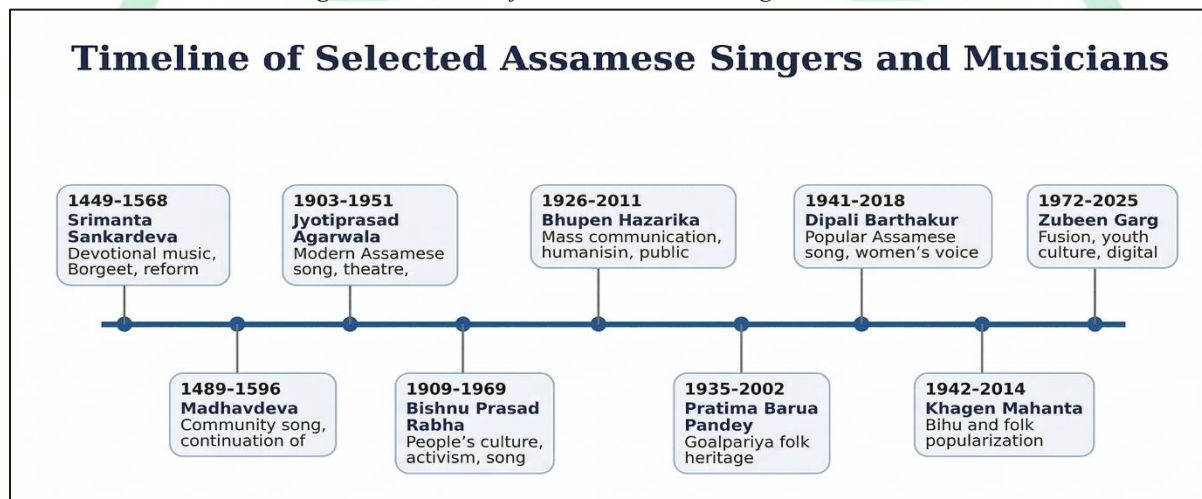
To study Assamese singers only as performers would therefore be insufficient. Their songs have shaped taste, language, memory, and even political feeling. Devotional music cultivated shared ethics; folk music preserved local worlds of labour and emotion; film and radio music enabled wider circulation; and contemporary fusion helped regional culture speak to new generations. This paper studies selected Assamese singers and musicians whose work left a lasting imprint on society. The focus is not only on artistic excellence but also on public contribution: preservation of language, transmission of values, community cohesion, regional consciousness, women's cultural representation, modernization of performance practice, and adaptation to newer media systems.

### **1. Historical Background of Assamese Musical Heritage**

Assamese music has grown from an old and layered musical field that includes folk songs, devotional compositions, dramatic music, and later modern recorded forms. Scholars of modern music in Assam note that the region's musical history draws from long-standing folk traditions, the Neo-Vaishnavite devotional movement, Zikir and Zari traditions, and later contact with classical, theatrical, and Western musical idioms. This multi-source history made Assamese

music unusually flexible: it could preserve inherited melodies while also opening itself to reform, experimentation, and urban circulation. Such a background is essential for understanding why later singers and musicians in Assam became public institutions in their own right rather than remaining only performance specialists (Borthakur & Kalita, 2018).

Figure 1. Timeline of selected Assamese singers and musicians



Source: Author's Conceptualization

## 2. Assamese Society and the Performing Arts Context

In Assam, music traditionally operates in close connection with community life. It accompanies worship, seasonal celebration, oral storytelling, marriage customs, agrarian rituals, and public gatherings. Because of this embeddedness, singers and instrumentalists have historically mediated more than aesthetic pleasure. They have circulated ethical values, social memory, and cultural instruction, while also reinforcing linguistic and regional solidarity. Recent work on ethnic folk music in Assam likewise emphasizes that folk song reflects the texture of life itself—birth, death, marriage, labour, festivals, sorrow, hope, and community continuity. The performing artist, therefore, becomes a cultural transmitter whose work bridges memory and lived experience (Advanced International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2026).

Within the Music and Performing Arts discipline, this social embeddedness is particularly important. Assamese performance practice is not limited to the recital model; it grows through participation, repetition, and locality. The audience often already knows the melody, the context, and the value system associated with the song. Because of this, the singer's authority is relational. A performer succeeds not only by vocal skill but by the ability to activate a shared emotional world.

Table 1. Selected Assamese artists and their principal areas of contribution

Artist	Period	Primary field	Key social contribution
Srimanta Sankardeva	15th–16th c.	Devotional music	Religious reform and community integration
Madhavdeva	15th–16th c.	Borgeet and congregational song	Continuity of Neo-Vaishnavite pedagogy
Jyotiprasad Agarwala	1903–1951	Modern song, theatre, cinema	Modern cultural awakening
Bishnu Prasad Rabha	1909–1969	Song, dance, activism	People's culture and political consciousness
Bhupen Hazarika	1926–2011	Song, film, public performance	Humanism, language, social awareness

Pratima Barua Pandey	1935–2002	Goalpariya folk song	Regional folk preservation
Dipali Barthakur	1941–2018	Popular Assamese song	Women’s cultural representation
Khagen Mahanta	1942–2014	Bihu and folk music	Popularization of folk idioms
Zubeen Garg	1972–2025	Fusion and mass media song	Youth outreach and contemporary expansion

Source: Author’s compilation

### 3. Srimanta Sankardeva: Spiritual Music and Social Reform

Srimanta Sankardeva occupies a foundational place in the musical and performing arts history of Assam. Government cultural documentation on Assam repeatedly identifies him as a cultural architect whose artistic interventions became integral to Assamese society. His devotional compositions, especially the Borgeet tradition, were not isolated liturgical items; they were part of a larger project of social communication through music, drama, congregational space, and shared ritual participation. By bringing sacred music into accessible community settings such as the namghar and satra, Sankardeva connected performance with moral education and social cohesion. His contribution to Assamese society lies in making music a medium of collective spiritual discipline, shared language, and social organization (Government of Assam, 2022).

From a performing arts perspective, Sankardeva also widened the function of music by integrating it with dramatic and participatory forms. This combination encouraged community spectatorship and collective singing, turning art into a social institution. The effect on Assamese society was durable: music became a site where devotion, education, and public life intersected.

### 4. Madhavdeva: Continuity, Pedagogy, and Devotional Community

Madhavdeva extended and stabilized the Neo-Vaishnavite musical framework associated with Sankardeva. Accounts of Assamese music history note that the Borgeet tradition gained enduring shape through the combined contribution of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. In social terms, Madhavdeva’s significance lies in continuity: he helped preserve a disciplined devotional music culture and transmitted it across institutional and community settings. This continuity mattered to Assamese society because it transformed music into an intergenerational pedagogic resource. Through repetition, collective singing, and ritual performance, devotional song became a means of cultural literacy and communal belonging rather than an elite accomplishment reserved for a small circle (Borthakur & Kalita, 2018).

Madhavdeva’s contribution may also be understood as a contribution to stability. Musical tradition survives not only by invention but by sustained transmission. The fact that Assamese society still recognizes and values this devotional repertoire shows the historical strength of the pedagogic structures through which Madhavdeva helped maintain musical community.

### 5. Jyotiprasad Agarwala: Modern Assamese Song, Theatre, and Cinema

The transition from older musical traditions to modern Assamese cultural production cannot be explained without Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Studies on the development of modern music in Assam describe him as one of the central figures who gave a new dimension to modern Assamese song and laid the foundation for the growth of music and film as a cultural industry. His role moved across lyric writing, music composition, theatre, and cinema, thereby widening the spaces in which Assamese music could circulate. Socially, Jyotiprasad’s contribution was transformative: he helped Assamese song enter modern public culture, linked music with dramatic storytelling, and reinforced language-based cultural confidence during a period of transition in the early twentieth century (Borthakur & Kalita, 2018; Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, n.d.).

His importance becomes clearer when one considers the emergence of Assamese cinema and modern stage culture. Through these platforms, song was no longer confined to live local performance. It could now be structured for

narrative, recorded, and repeatedly encountered. This shift altered the social reach of artists and helped create a modern Assamese cultural public.

#### **6. Bishnu Prasad Rabha: Music, Nationalism, and People's Culture**

Bishnu Prasad Rabha is remembered in Assam not only as a musician but as a cultural activist who treated art as part of public life. Biographical and cultural accounts describe his songs as deeply connected with nature, workers, peasants, and the social struggles of his time. In that sense, Rabha's music functioned as people's culture: it brought together artistic expression, reformist politics, and regional consciousness. His compositions contributed to Assamese society by making song a language of critique and participation. He also helped modernize inherited forms, proving that older Assamese musical resources could speak to contemporary concerns without losing their cultural ground (Bishnu Prasad Rabha, n.d.).

Rabha is especially significant for demonstrating that performance can be socially interventionist. In his case, the artist was not detached from public suffering or political reality. For students of music and performing arts, he represents a model in which composition, voice, movement, and ideology work together to shape a civic imagination.

#### **7. Bhupen Hazarika: The Public Voice of Assam**

Among Assamese singers, Bhupen Hazarika remains the most widely recognized public voice of the region. National and scholarly accounts alike describe him as a poet, lyricist, vocalist, filmmaker, and public cultural figure whose songs addressed humanity, brotherhood, justice, and social action. Research on his songs emphasizes that they shaped Assamese society by educating, emotionally mobilizing, and giving language to shared concerns. Hazarika's importance lies in scale as well as content: he connected folk resonance with modern media, carried Assamese music into cinema, and translated regional feeling into a wider human vocabulary. For Assamese society, his songs became part of everyday public memory—sung in cultural programs, political moments, and emotional rituals of belonging (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026; Kutum, 2025).

His contribution was also translational. Hazarika could take the sonic and emotional resources of Assam and make them understandable to audiences beyond the state while keeping their regional core intact. That ability gave Assamese society confidence that its music could speak nationally and even globally without losing its own voice.

#### **8. Pratima Barua Pandey: Goalpariya Folk and Regional Identity**

Pratima Barua Pandey played a decisive role in bringing Goalpariya folk song into public recognition. Educational and cultural discussions on her legacy present her as a key figure in the revival and popularization of western Assam's folk repertoire. Her contribution to society was especially important in two ways. First, she helped preserve a regional folk archive that may otherwise have remained localized or vulnerable to neglect. Second, by singing in a style close to lived oral tradition, she gave social dignity to rural and sub-regional voices within the larger Assamese cultural sphere. Her music therefore contributed not only to folk preservation but also to the expansion of Assamese identity as a plural and internally diverse cultural formation (Ajmal IAS Academy, 2025).

In performance studies terms, her work shows how locality enters public culture. Rather than flattening regional difference, Pratima Barua Pandey made it audible. The social significance of that achievement is considerable because cultural unity in Assam has often depended on recognizing and valuing internal diversity.

#### **9. Khagen Mahanta: Folk Popularization and Bihu Culture**

Khagen Mahanta is widely associated with the popularization of Bihu and Assamese folk music in the twentieth century. He is remembered as a singer and composer whose work kept folk idioms alive in public performance and broadcasting culture. Accounts of his career show that he was active across several genres, including Lokageet, Borgeet, and concert performance, and that he remained deeply connected with public movements and community values. His contribution to Assamese society may be understood as cultural mediation: he carried the sound of folk Assam into modern circulation without dissolving its identity. In doing so, he strengthened Bihu as a shared cultural marker and helped sustain everyday public attachment to Assamese musical tradition (Khagen Mahanta, n.d.).

The persistence of Khagen Mahanta's popularity suggests that Assamese audiences did not treat folk music as a relic.

Through artists like him, folk genres remained emotionally current. This continuity is one of the reasons Bihu music still operates as a public sign of Assamese belonging rather than a museum-like remnant.

#### **10. Dipali Barthakur: Women's Voice and Cultural Representation**

Dipali Barthakur occupies a notable place in Assamese music as a female singer who helped shape the public soundscape of modern Assamese song. Her career matters socially because representation in musical culture is never only about performance; it also concerns visibility, aspiration, and symbolic belonging. Women singers such as Barthakur expanded the range of Assamese public culture by making female artistry more audible in modern media and popular song traditions. Her recognition at the national level further enhanced the prestige of Assamese music and made regional song legible beyond its immediate linguistic community. In this sense, her contribution to Assamese society lies in both artistic excellence and the strengthening of women's cultural presence (Dipali Barthakur, n.d.).

Her legacy also reminds us that the history of Assamese music should not be narrated through male artists alone. Women's voices helped shape emotional texture, performance style, and public memory. The inclusion of singers such as Dipali Barthakur is therefore necessary for a fuller understanding of Assamese musical society.

#### **11. Zubeen Garg: Youth Culture, Fusion, and Contemporary Reach**

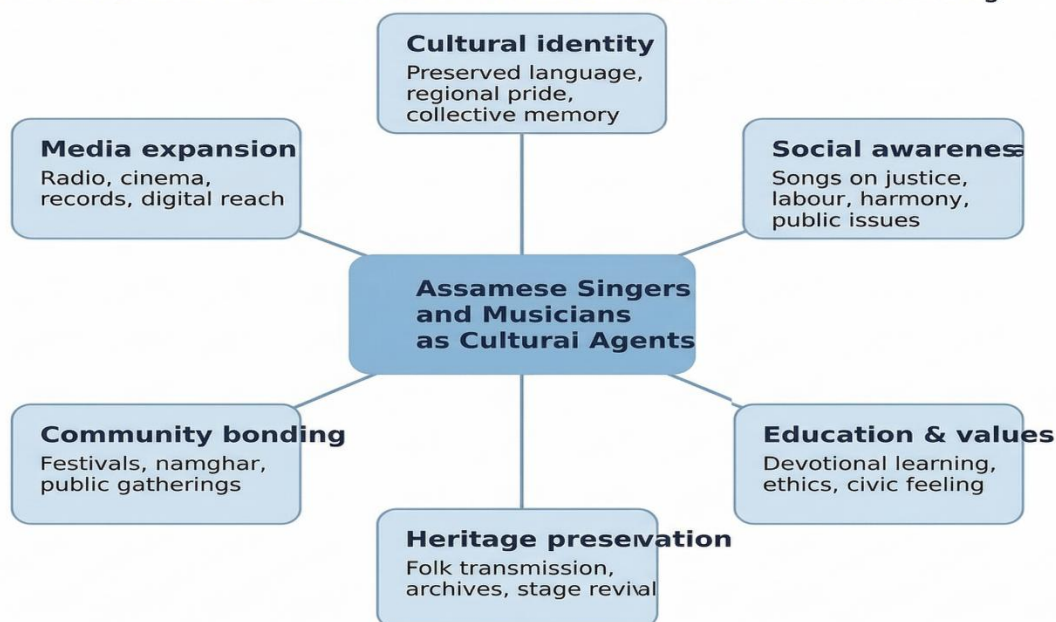
Zubeen Garg represents a later phase of Assamese musical expansion in which regional music moved forcefully through cassettes, television, live festivals, cinema, and digital media. Accounts of contemporary Assamese music describe him as a trendsetter who blended Assamese folk elements with Western, popular, and multilingual styles while also reviving traditional songs for newer audiences. His contribution to Assamese society is closely linked with generational communication. He helped younger listeners experience Assamese music not as a static heritage category but as something contemporary, emotionally immediate, and adaptable. Through this fusion-oriented but recognizably Assamese practice, he widened the audience base of regional music and renewed its public relevance (Borthakur & Kalita, 2018; Zubeen Garg, n.d.).

The importance of such a figure in contemporary society is substantial. Younger audiences often negotiate identity through mediated sound, celebrity culture, and hybrid taste. By making Assamese music work within that environment, Zubeen Garg participated in the reproduction of regional identity under modern conditions.

#### **12. Media, Recording Culture, and the Expanding Reach of Musicians**

The influence of Assamese singers and musicians increased dramatically with the growth of theatre, film, radio, gramophone culture, studio recording, and later digital circulation. Studies on modern Assamese music identify radio songs, movie songs, and urban recording systems as major engines of musical dissemination. These media changed the role of artists: the singer no longer addressed only an immediate local audience but entered homes, markets, schools, and public memory through reproducible sound. Such expansion magnified social influence. Artists could now standardize pronunciation, circulate emotion at scale, popularize folk and devotional forms, and participate in the shaping of a modern Assamese public sphere. In contemporary times, digital media continue this process by enabling archiving, remixing, and transregional reach (Borthakur & Kalita, 2018).

## How Assamese Artists Contributed to Society



Source: Author's Conceptualization

Media technologies also changed expectations of musicians. A singer increasingly had to engage with recording aesthetics, publicity, audience branding, and cross-platform circulation. Yet in Assam, many artists used these technologies not to abandon tradition but to renew it. Radio carried Bihu and modern song; cinema absorbed folk texture; digital circulation now enables preservation and rediscovery.

### 13. Collective Contribution of Assamese Artists to Assamese Society

When seen together, Assamese singers and musicians have made contributions that go far beyond musical enjoyment. Their work has supported religious instruction, cultural continuity, language preservation, social reform, regional pride, women's participation, artistic modernization, and intergenerational communication. In village and urban settings alike, music has acted as a public language through which society remembers itself. The table below summarizes the principal domains through which Assamese artists have shaped social life.

**Table 2. Contribution domains and social outcomes**

Domain	Representative artistic role	Social outcome
Spiritual life	Devotional singers and Borgeet practitioners	Shared worship, ethical instruction, community cohesion
Folk heritage	Folk singers and collectors	Preservation of local memory and oral tradition
Language and identity	Modern songwriters and public performers	Strengthening of Assamese linguistic pride
Social awareness	Activist musicians and public intellectuals	Discussion of injustice, labour, harmony, and citizenship
Education	Songs in theatre, school, and public culture	Transmission of values and historical memory
Women's representation	Female vocalists in public media	Expanded visibility and cultural participation of women
Youth outreach	Contemporary fusion artists	Renewed relevance of Assamese music among younger audiences

Media circulation	Radio, film, and digital musicians	Wide dissemination of culture within and beyond Assam
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Source: Author's compilation

The collective effect of these domains is profound. Through music, Assamese society has repeatedly negotiated continuity and change: inherited traditions are preserved, yet they are also reinterpreted for new publics. This explains why artists in Assam often occupy the position of moral voices, regional icons, and cultural educators rather than being confined to the entertainment industry alone. Their songs are remembered because they help society imagine itself (Kutum, 2025; Government of Assam, 2022).

### Conclusion

Assamese singers and musicians have contributed to society at multiple historical levels. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva embedded music in devotional community life; Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnu Prasad Rabha linked music with modern public culture and social consciousness; Bhupen Hazarika transformed song into a language of humanity and civic emotion; Pratima Barua Pandey and Khagen Mahanta preserved and popularized folk traditions; Dipali Barthakur enhanced the public presence of women in Assamese music; and Zubeen Garg demonstrated how regional sound can remain vibrant within contemporary media culture. The cumulative result is that music in Assam has functioned as a social institution. It has preserved memory, shaped identity, educated audiences, and offered symbolic unity during times of change.

For departments of Music and Performing Arts, this history shows that Assamese artists should be studied not only for style and repertoire but also for their enduring role in the making of society itself. Their contribution lies as much in social resonance as in melodic craft. Future research may further explore performance practice, archival recovery, gendered musical histories, and the changing relationship between local tradition and digital circulation in Assam.

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