Assam has been blessed with many legendary stalwarts. The tallest and most venerated legend is of course Shrimanta Shankardeva and his chief disciple Shrimanta Madhabdev. This duo brought about a revolutionary transformation among the people of Assam from engaging in animal sacrificing rituals and belief in black magic, to a highly refined social order focused on devotion to Shri Krishna. Another figure that comes to mind is Lachit Barphukan, the legendary Ahom General. He saved Assam from the clutches of the Mughals and his determined fight stopped the Mughals from advancing further. In modern times, the names that come to mind are Lakshminath Bezbarua, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bishnu Rabha in the field of art and culture; and stalwarts like Gopinath Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phukan among mass leaders. Gopinath Bordoloi can be described as architect of post-British Assam. Last but not the least of modern legendary figures is Dr Bhupen Hazarika. The kind of popularity he won is unique. His place in the life of the people of Assam is incomparable and unique. Indeed, we do not come across anybody of his type and his popularity in the rest of our country. This special issue of Ishani is being brought out as our humble tribute to this great soul.

Dr Bhupen Hazarika suffered from indifferent health for more than two or three years before his passing away. When he visited Assam for the last time, it was seen that he was no longer his former self. An important engagement he attended was the unveiling of his own statue erected by AASU to honour him. It was an event which deeply stirred the sentiments of all those who were present there and even all those who came to know of this event and had seen it on TV. It was seen on TV that he was frail, tired and weak. He soon returned to Mumbai his home for the last several years. His health deteriorated subsequently and he had to be admitted in hospital. The last spell of his hospitalization was a prolonged one. He was admitted on the 29th of June 2011 at Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital and Medical research Institute in Mumbai where he breathed his last on the 5th of November 2011. Prior to this, he used to be hospitalized off and on.

From the time of his last visit to Assam and from the accounts published about his health since then and his hospitalization now and then was keenly followed by the people of Assam. Everyone feared that he may leave for his eternal journey any day. The people of Assam prayed for his recovery and kept hoping that the determined soul that he was he would overcome his ailments and will be back to Assam specially during Bihu festival to sing his
immortal songs. The people of Assam were just not ready to believe that there can be an Assam without Bhupen Hazarika! But the inevitable happened and he breathed his last. Entire Assam and even neighbouring states and region were surged with emotion and the cloud of gloom spread out fast all over. Finally when the dead body of Bhupen Hazarika was brought to Guwahati, it is reported, “thousands wept unashamedly. It was a heart broken wave of humanity that stood outside Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi Airport, sobbing unembarrassedly for a man who sang his way into their hearts, lives and minds. They wept, they wailed, they gathered dust from the maestro’s cortege and smeared it on their faces, sang an impromptu chorus and grieved in a way only Bhupen Hazarika could command.”

Bhupen Hazarika expired at a Mumbai hospital from where his dead body was brought to Guwahati. Right from the day the dead body arrived in Guwahati till the cremation on the 9th and even later on till the adya shraddha all the newspapers in Guwahati and even elsewhere in Assam carried reports and stories about the beloved legend. The conversations in every family and every private and public place centered around his work and his personality and their impact upon the people. The memory of those days and all the events and expressions through writing and through other means will remain indelible in my memory. It was an extraordinary experience to witness the demonstration of the love and respect by the people towards a legendary singer. The knowledge gained by me by reading reports and materials and also listening to knowledgeable people has enabled me to understand the values and the aspirations that were highly treasured and effectively expressed by the lyricist singer. It appears to me that besides his poetic and singing talent Bhupen Hazarika was a great humanist. The values he treasured were humanistic. It is seen that one of the most popular lyrics composed and sung by him exhorts his fellow human beings to be sympathetic and compassionate towards one and all. The same song explains different aspects of human values and human considerations. The other themes close to the poet’s heart were nature, the mighty Brahmaputra also known as Lohit or Luit, Assam with all its grandeur, its people, glorious history, fight against injustice, great leaders and teachers of Assam and the world. What emerges from his songs is something full of nobility and tender sentiments. There is nothing base or hateful in any of his songs. He exhorts human beings to love each other, care for each other, and also care for nature as well as nature’s children, the flora and fauna around us. Bhupen Hazarika popularly addressed as Bhupen Da was certainly a unique creation of the Almighty. He was also blessed with great singing talent which enabled him to express his incomparable and ennobling sentiments and beautiful thoughts in his inimitable voice. His voice was captivating and even magical. People simply listened to him in silent awe, and a great sense of joy.

While concluding my tribute to the immortal legend, I am reminded here of Mahatma Gandhi’s definition of great literary creations and great masters of literature. While addressing a literary conference he expressed that to him a great literary creation should be such which can be followed and remembered with love and respect even by an ordinary farmer and water carrier as well as by a learned scholar. He then quotes the names of great saints like Tulsi, Kabir, Meera, Surdas, Tukaram, Gyaneshwar and other saints. Centuries have passed after their departure from the world but their songs and lyrics are sung everywhere even today in all nooks and corners of the country. In my humble opinion Bhupen Hazarika was such an immortal creator similar to the venerable saints mentioned above. He is not described as a saint but in my humble opinion his aspirations were saintly and his songs motivated many to rise high in life.

I am glad we are able to pay our humble tribute to this great lyricist singer and a great humanist Bhupen Hazarika by publishing special issue of our journal Ishani which is dedicated to him.

Natwar Thakkar
05-09-2013
Guwahati