

Zubeen Garg: The Saga of an Artist & Activist from Assam

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ABSTRACT

Zubeen Garg the legend of Assam and North-East and revered by all sections of the north-east society as Zubeen Da, was more than just a living human being. His wife, Garima Saikia Garg had said, after his death, that I did not know that I was with a living God. A person's value is understood how many people are with him after his death, and it is said that Zubeen Garg's funeral had the fourth largest human attendees in the world and was compared with Michael Jackson's funeral. The paper draws contents from various videos in social media.

KEYWORDS: *Zubeen Garg, Artist, Activism, Music, Film, Protest, Environment, Philanthropy*

Introduction

Zubeen Garg was the very essence of not only Assamese music, but was cultural icon of the North-East India having its incursion to Bengal and Mumbai also. He was the melodic voice and a charismatic personality of a generation. Through his artistry, he expressed the emotions, frustrations, and aspirations of the people. With a vast repertoire of over 38,000 songs in 40 languages, he transcended boundaries and built bridges across cultures. His music inspired the youth, revived cultural pride, and empowered the regional identity to thrive with renewed confidence.

Zubeen was not only a singer but also a composer, actor, filmmaker, lyricist, producer, scriptwriter, and philanthropist. His versatility and passion made him one of the most influential artists in Assam and a beloved figure nationwide. Over a career spanning more than three decades, his dynamic contributions extended beyond music into activism, cultural representation, and charitable work, making him a true torchbearer of Assamese culture.

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Zubeen captivated hearts across Assam and beyond for over three decades with his enchanting voice passed away on 19th September, 2025 during scuba diving in Singapore at the age of 52. He had travelled to Singapore to perform at the North East India Festival. The last video of Zubeen showed him joyfully singing an English song, “Tears in Heaven” by Eric Clapton, with a live band at a popular pub in Singapore. Little was it known that it meant real tears coming out from his millions fan during his funeral procession on 21st September.

Upon his tragic passing, Assam united in profound grief as his mortal remains arrived at Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport. The flower-adorned ambulance emerged from the terminal to an overwhelming sea of mourners. Hundreds of thousands of fans lined the roads for miles, chanting his name, holding portraits close to their hearts, and showering the vehicle with *gamosas* and flowers. The airport and the roads leading to his Kahilipara residence became choked with mourners, bringing traffic to a standstill.

Fans travelled from every corner of the state, villages, towns, and cities alike; to catch one final glimpse of the man whose music had shaped their lives, voiced their dreams, and touched their souls. After the customary rituals at his home, Zubeen’s body was taken to the Arjun Bhogeswar Baruah Sports Complex, where slogans of “Jai Zubeen Da” and the melodies of his iconic song *Mayabini Ratir Bukut* filled the air, echoing the deep love and respect Assam held for its beloved cultural legend. “When I die, Assam should sing this song.” These were the words of Zubeen Garg about *Mayabini* – a song that has now become an anthem of remembrance for the legendary singer, echoing across Assam.

Early life & Education:

Zubeen Garg was born on November 18, 1972, in Tura, now in Meghalaya, into an Assamese Brahmin family. His family’s ancestral roots lie in Tamulichiga (Jhanji), Assam, and he was primarily raised in Jorhat, Assam. His father, Mohini Mohon Borthakur, served as a magistrate and was also a lyricist and poet known by the pen name Kapil Thakur. Zubeen’s mother, Ily Borthakur, was a singer and his first music teacher, playing a significant role in nurturing his early musical talents. His younger sister Jonkie Borthakur was an actress and singer who tragically died in a car accident in 2002. Zubeen is survived by his wife Garima Saikia Garg, his father, his sister, and extended family members.

Zubeen spent his childhood in various parts of Assam due to his father’s transferable government job. He completed his matriculation from Tamulpur Higher Secondary School and pursued higher secondary education in science at J.B. College and Karimganj College. He later enrolled at B. Borooah College for a Bachelor of Science degree but left before completion to pursue a professional music career.



His musical journey began at home, inspired by his parents' artistic backgrounds, especially the guidance and training from his mother. At the tender age of three years, he practised tabla under the guidance of Pandit Robin Banerjee for eleven years and learnt Assamese folk songs from Guru Ramani Rai. He was a follower of Kalaguru Biswa Prasad Rabha, a great artist of Assam. Zubeen released his debut album *Anamika* in 1992, which catapulted him to instant fame, marking the beginning of a prolific and transformative career in Assamese music and beyond. It was the period after the turbulence of Assam unrest from 1979 to 1985 when the Assam movement against the illegal settlers was just paving the way for peace and coexistence. The movement led by the All-Assam Students Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad was primarily carried by the younger generation, came to an end in August, 1985. A militant outfit named United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) also emerged in 1979, and gained momentum in the following decade. The Indian Army launched an unsuccessful *Operation Bajrang* in Assam to flush out ULFA militants that lasted from 28 November to 20 April 1991. Assam was beginning to a new dawn and the youthful mass gradually drifted to the innovative voice of Zubeen who mesmerised with his Assamese songs and music and became a hit in the Bihu celebration. In one of his Assamese songs, the line, 'give peace, give freedom for making a golden Assam' reflects his commitment for the cause of building Assam. Against this backdrop, in 1996-97, Zubeen got life-threat for singing Hindi songs by the militant organisation ULFA. This made difficult for him for live performance which he loved as it was a direct connection with all his fans. He was confined to studio recordings that brought in songs like *Mrttiyu etiya xohoj* (death was cheap here then). Another song *Phul phulok* brings back hope in the prevailing unrest and was critical of ULFA activities and his *Priyotoma* in the song was nothing less than his land and people. All these happened to Zubeen at the tender age of twenty-five years, a phenomenon that sparked during his early career.

Artist

He released his debut music album *Anamika* in November 1992 that was an instant hit among all the sections of the Assamese society. His first Bihu song album *Ujan Piriti* released in 1995 was a big commercial hit. He has an unofficial feat of recording 36 songs in a single night. He created a new style of music in Assam. He introduced the style by blending rock, folk and other genres. He had mastered the art of playing twelve musical instruments. He was inspired by singers and music composers like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Kishore Kumar, S. D. Burma, R. D. Burma, KK, and international singer Sting and Pink Floyd.

Zubeen carved a niche for himself in Bollywood as well and gave many super hit songs like *Ya Ali, Rama Re, Jaane Kya*, etc. He later went on to produce movies and score music for films, where he tasted equal



success. Zubeen was awarded the Best Music Director in the non-feature film music direction category for the film *Echoes of Silence* at the 55th National Film Award in 2007. With his Hindi music albums like *Jalwa* and *Yuhi Kabhi* and movies like *Fiza* and *Kaante*, Zubeen took the Bollywood film industry by storm after he won the award for Stardust best playback singer for his solo song *Ya Ali* from the movie *Gangster* (2006). He was instrumental in reviving the Assamese film industry by producing movies for the regional film industry in the form of *Kanchanjangha* and *Mission China*. *Mission China* was his first film based on anti-terrorism that was followed by *Chakra*, an emotional film. *Tumi Mur Mathu Mur*, released in 2000, was the first directorial venture of Zubeen where he also played the protagonist. His last Assamese film *Roi Roi Binale* is scheduled to be released on 31st October. With regard to his films he had said that the films had a clear message based on social issues, and is not linked to politics at all.

Activist

Zubeen Garg stood out as a true rebel when he defied the ban imposed by the militant outfit ULFA on singing Hindi songs during Bihu celebrations, asserting that no force could dictate an artist's freedom. He famously declared, *Mur kunu jati nai, mur kunu dharmā nai, mur kunu Bhagwan nai, Moi mukto. Moi Kanchanjunga* (I have no caste, I have no religion, I have no God, I am free. I am Kanchanjunga), reflecting his fearless spirit and commitment to transcending social divisions based on caste and religion. As a fearless social activist, Zubeen rejected societal barriers, emphasizing freedom, equality, and human dignity throughout his artistic and social life.

In one of his old interviews with AajTak Panchayat Assam, he said, "I am a socialist, and all artists should be socialists". In the same interview he had said that a system change is required as for the last fifteen to twenty years we have tolerated and suffered a lot. Now MLAs and Ministers are not working for the people, they are all corrupted, it's a straight thing. I do not believe them. Just like we change a computer system and recover it, we also need a change. He also suggested that the Constitution can be changed if the public want. He was a person who believed in change and it had much wider ramifications than just cosmetic changes. He said, "I am a rebel, I am a fighter, I am not a politician. This I learnt from Che Guevara". He also said, "Nothing is last. One goes, another new comes; actually, if nothing changes, nothing happens". In this context, a line from his song, *parivartan hobdot hunibole bhal*, is apt exemplify his feelings.

His 2019 song *Politics nakariba bandhu*, brought political awareness and resistance among the mass in Assam. In December 2019 anti-CAA protest at Chandmari in Guwahati, he said, "I will die, but not allow the CAA. The government should feel the pain of the people of Assam, but they are killing the children". He associated with the All-Assam Students' Union during the anti-CAA protest movement. His music and



public statements were his methods for fighting the causes he believed, and it also portrayed Assamese rights and identity.

He extended his activism to Brahmaputra movement, environmental concerns, speaking out against the cutting of trees for development, especially in Digolopukhari area of Guwahati, and advocating for the preservation of environment. As a wildlife lover, he was closely associated with the Kaziranga-based Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation and had taken the initiative to shift a number of rescued animals to the centre. He appealed people to plant trees for the preservation of the environment.

He spoke for his Assamese language and was enthusiastic for its promotion, but it did not deter him to sing in other languages. Infact he sang in forty different languages. He believed that in ancient period India had the languages like, Pali, Prakrit, Sanskrit, and then all other languages evolved. This combination of boldness, activism, and inclusivity made him a legendary and transformative figure in Assam's cultural and social landscape.

During the Covid 19 he extended support by converting two floors of his house in Guwahati as a Covid shelter-home. His philanthropic activities were also marked during the floods in Assam. He has supported fifteen children for their upbringing and education. Whatever the occasion may be, he was directly accessible to anyone who needed him and was really a 'straight-forward' and 'down-to-earth' person who candidly spoke without fear or hatred. All these qualities may have made him a 'cult-figure' in Assam and the north-east. He had formed Kalaguru Artist Foundation, a voluntary organisation, which supported many artists in their endeavour. His music and public statements were his way for fighting the causes he believed.

During his college education, he had the interest to enrol at the Trinity College of Music in London, but the exorbitant fees and the high cost proved prohibitive for him and so he dropped his desire. However, his in-born talent in music made him a great music composer and singer. His unfulfilled dream of pursuing an educational career at Trinity College envisioned him for a world class music institute in Assam, like the Berkeley College of Music, which was started by his bandmate Raja Baruah. However, his untimely death could not make is a reality.

Controversy

The demise of Zubeen that was said to be due to drowning in sea as per the post-mortem report in Singapore, snowballed into a controversy under public pressure and various videos emerging in social media of the last yacht ride on 19 September and subsequent swimming and drowning of Zubeen. A total number of



sixty FIRs were filed across Assam demanding justice. However, as evident from the videos, a public perception gradually arose over the suspicious behaviour of the associates of the singer during the sea-ride on the yacht. The Assam government formed a SIT to investigate the death of the singer and activist and issued notice to Siddharth Sharma, manager of Zubeen, and Shyamkanu Mahanta, the organiser of the North East India Festival in Singapore, both of whom were arrested on 1 October. Later, the drummer Shekhar Jyoti Goswami and actress Amritprabha Mahanta were taken into custody as co-accused. It was alleged gross negligence on the part of those present on the yacht led to the drowning of Zubeen. Supplementing this, Zubeen's wife Garima Saikia Garg in an online interview to *The Print* said, "Me and my sister-in-law (Zubeen's sister) can smell something, and can see it was pure negligence and our Zubeen was totally neglected. He was advised to stay away from water and fire due to seizure, and it is known to everyone, but he was taken in the yacht. I have lots of questions. Investigation is on now. If there is any conspiracy, any intention they had in mind, this investigation should come out".

The government of Assam also formed a Judicial Inquiry Commission under Justice Soumitra Saikia, sitting Judge of Gauhati High Court to probe the circumstances leading to the death of Zubeen Garg and submit report within six months from 3 October. The Commission will conduct its inquiry based on four terms of reference- (a) to investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding Zubeen's death, (b) to ascertain the sequence of events in the period preceding & following the incident, (c) to examine any lapses, negligence or misconduct by individuals, authorities or institutions, and (d) to determine whether foul play, conspiracy, or any unlawful acts were involved.

With the consent of Garima Saikia Garg, wife of Zubeen Garg, a second autopsy was conducted by Assam government on 23 September, however the report was not accepted by Garima who stated that it was not her 'personal document' as the investigation is under process. The Chief Minister addressed in social media on 28 September about the growing public unrest on the conspiracy angle, and dismissing narratives comparing Assam's situation to Gen Z revolt in Nepal, urged people to remain calm and assured that the government is committed to ensuring justice and will take strict action against all those involved in the case. With the Assembly elections due for the next year in 2026, the Assam government under Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is facing a tough challenge to pacify the public outburst amongst electoral prospective. The Chief Minister in the winter session of the Assembly clearly stated that the death of Zubeen Garg was a murder and the SIT is going to submit its charge sheet on 12 December 2025.

The SIT in its charge sheet claimed that the death of Zubeen Garg was 'premeditated conspiracy'. The Charge sheet contained 12,270 pages and was submitted to the Chief Judicial Magistrate. It attributed the



death due to excessive consumption of alcohol and encouraging the actor for risky behaviour in the sea. It accused the seven in differing roles leading to the death of the actor. The seven includes, Shyamkanu Mahanta, Amrtiprabha Mahanta, Siddharta Sharma, Shekharjyoti Goswami, Sandipan Garg, Nandeswar Bora & Prabin Baishya

Conclusion

The most significant aspect of Zubeen's life is the ray of positivity and his fighting spirit to overcome all odds. He believed himself to be no less than a King and entire Assam was his kingdom. In a video interview, he said, "People love me because I am always available. I never hide anything. The new generation believe I can do anything, that's not true, but I can fight for them". With regard to Assamese pride he said, "it is our heritage, our culture, our music. We are very strong in that, and we should promote our culture, our silk clothes, our food, like we are trying to build up a revolution everywhere, all in villages, the girls and women, and my music is there. It is a process we are going through". He also said, "We should move forward based on our culture. Never lose confidence, we should know ourselves, and over-confidence is not good". He advised to the younger generation, "What you do, do it right now. I don't believe in past; I don't believe in future; I believe in the present. That is why I am Zubeen Garg". Very few might know that Zubeen was conferred with an Honorary Doctorate degree by University of Science & Technology Meghalaya in 2024.

His love for his roots was so strong that he left his rising Bollywood career and returned to Assam to strengthen the *Ahomiya* cultural pride. In an interview to India Today NE, he stated that Bollywood industry should come to Guwahati for film related work and emphasised that work should be locally given to generate employment and work. Initially he stayed in Mumbai in his own house for a few years but eventually left after about six years as he did not like the life-style in Mumbai and also the local traffic problem that took long hours to commute. In an interview, he said, "I left Bombay because of our film industry. I want to boost it up. Last year a three-crore budget film was made and it was a record. Every year I want to promote one film".

He is referred as the 'Humming King of the World', and is compared with Elvis Presley in popularity. His sudden demise has left a complete void in the *Ahomiya* cultural renaissance and his legacy is irreplaceable. In his last podcast with Rita Chowdhury, he said, "Almost all people are alone. Even you are alone. I am also alone, but I am strong. I want to live like Alexander". It is a paradox that in his last podcast, he had said, "I play with the waves, I love to play with sea. The first poster of my next film, I touch the sea. It starts with the sea and ends with the sea", and reality was that his life went away on the lap of the sea.



In one video, Zubeen said, “How can a man become blind, when he can see? He can see anything, but he cannot see anything. That is blindness. That is my film *Roi Roi Binale!*” This sound like prophesy in the aftermath of his suspicious death that is under investigation by the SIT, Assam. The greatness of the man can be gauged form his statement that “Some are rich by money, some rich by mind. I am rich by mind not by money. I can spend twenty lakhs of rupees in a second in good work promoting art, culture and cinema, and not on myself”. Upon his demise, the Prime Minister very aptly described him as the *Kohinoor* from Assam. *Times of India*, in an editorial on 4 October stated, Heramba Nath in *The Assam Tribune* (24 September 2025) wrote, “Zubeen’s legacy is not just his music-it is the community his work created that lifted all Assamese above their differences”. Like Bhupen Hazarika before him, he transformed music into a language of the masses, a medium through which society expressed itself. His songs were not jus entertainment; they were literature, philosophy, and politics in melody”.

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