



The Musk-Laden Life and Legacy of Zubeen Garg: A Cultural Analysis of Mourning and Artistic Influence in Northeast India

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Abstract

Zubeen Garg (1972–2025), a prominent multifaceted artist from Northeast India, passed away on September 19, 2025, in Singapore, eliciting an unprecedented wave of public mourning across Assam and beyond. This article examines the circumstances surrounding his death, the collective societal response, and the enduring cultural legacy of Garg as a symbol of unity and artistic excellence. Drawing from media reports, social media analyses, and eyewitness accounts, the study highlights how Garg's demise transcended regional boundaries, fostering a unified expression of grief that integrated elements of Assamese folklore, music, and intercommunity solidarity. The analysis posits Garg as a modern cultural icon whose life and work embodied a "musk-laden" essence—evocative, pervasive, and deeply resonant—mirroring the aromatic allure of musk in traditional Assamese metaphors for profound influence. Key findings underscore the role of digital platforms in amplifying mourning rituals and the potential for posthumous institutional recognition to preserve his contributions.

Keywords: Zubeen Garg, Assamese culture, public mourning, artistic legacy, Northeast India

I. Introduction

In the cultural landscape of Northeast India, few figures have commanded the reverence and emotional attachment afforded to Zubeen Garg, often hailed as the successor to legendary Assamese musician Bhupen Hazarika ("Sudhakantha"). Born on November 18, 1972, in Tura, Meghalaya, Garg's career spanned singing, acting, filmmaking, and philanthropy, encompassing over 38,000 songs in approximately 40 languages. His death on September 19, 2025, in Singapore, marked a pivotal moment in contemporary Indian cultural history, prompting widespread vigils, tributes, and reflections on his life. This article reinterprets Garg's biography and posthumous impact through a research lens, analyzing the "musk-laden" quality of his existence—a metaphorical reference to the enduring, fragrant imprint of his artistry on Assamese society.

II. Objective:

To reinterpret Garg's biography and posthumous impact through a research lens, analyzing the "musk-laden" quality of his existence—a metaphorical reference to the enduring, fragrant imprint of his artistry on Assamese society.

III. Methodology:

The study is informed by a qualitative synthesis of data from diverse sources, including newspaper articles, television broadcasts, social media posts (e.g., WhatsApp and Facebook), and informal interviews with community members. This approach captures the organic, grassroots nature of the mourning process, which occurred without formal governmental directives. By structuring the narrative around biographical details, death circumstances, public reactions, and legacy, the article contributes to scholarly discussions on celebrity death, cultural unity, and the intersection of art and identity in postcolonial India.

IV. Discussion and analyses:

- **Biographical Overview**

Zubeen Garg, affectionately known as "Goldie" or "Dada," emerged as a versatile artist whose work bridged Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and other regional languages. Raised in Assam, Garg's early life was influenced by the region's ethnic diversity, leading him to self-identify as "half-Bengali, half-Assamese" and proclaim, "I have no caste, I have no religion, I have no God, I am free." His discography includes iconic tracks such as "Mayabini Raatir Bukut," "Mor Mrityur Dinaa/Tumi Aahiba," and "Mon Mor Rosona," which became staples in Assamese households and film industries.

Garg's contributions extended beyond music; he produced and acted in films, advocated for environmental causes (e.g., planting trees), and demonstrated a profound affinity for animals, often incorporating them into his performances. Reports indicate he envisioned himself akin to global icons like Michael Jackson during his youth, a aspiration reflected in his dynamic stage presence. His philanthropy included support for education and intercommunity harmony, positioning him as an "unwritten king" in the artistic realm.

- **Circumstances of Death**

Garg's death occurred unexpectedly during a scuba diving excursion in Singapore, where he reportedly drowned. Initial reports surfaced on social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook on September 19, 2025, initially dismissed by many as rumors—similar to false reports surrounding the death of Indian singer Lata Mangeshkar. Confirmation of the event led to a second post-mortem examination amid public skepticism, a rare procedure underscoring the cultural significance attached to his passing.

The artist's body was repatriated to India, with Assam's Chief Minister personally traveling to Delhi to escort the remains. This act symbolized the state's recognition of Garg as a cultural asset. The body lay in state for approximately one and a half days, during which time communities across Assam engaged in silent vigils, lighting lamps and reciting his songs as per his expressed wishes.

- **Public Mourning and Societal Response**

The announcement of Garg's death triggered an immediate and spontaneous societal response, freezing daily activities across Assam. Streets, markets, temples, mosques, schools, and universities resonated with his music, particularly "Mayabini Raatir Bukut," without any official mandate. This organic outpouring united diverse groups, transcending caste, creed, and regional divisions such as Upper Assam, Lower Assam, and Barak Valley.

Estimates suggest over 1.2 million "Zubeenians" (devoted fans) gathered for his final procession, marking one of the largest public gatherings for an artist in Asian history, second only to Michael Jackson's memorial according to preliminary records (potentially qualifying for the Limca Book of Records). The procession, lasting 6–7 hours, featured chants of "Joy Zubeen da, Joy Ai Axom" and floral tributes, including mountains of gamusas (traditional Assamese scarves) from various communities.

Notable elements included interspecies mourning: animals such as bulls, dogs, monkeys, and crows were observed near his portrait, reflecting Garg's documented love for wildlife. Political figures, including West Bengal's Chief Minister and representatives from Tollywood, paid homage, while international media in New York, Bangladesh, and structures like the Burj Khalifa acknowledged his legacy. Digital platforms amplified these tributes, with reviews of his works flooding television and social media.

However, the mourning was not without controversy. Some individuals disseminated defamatory claims against Garg's widow, highlighting societal undercurrents of misogyny. Additionally, extreme fan behaviors emerged, such as youths climbing trees or attempting self-harm at the cremation site in Sonapur, rationalized as emulations of Garg's adventurous spirit.

• Institutional and Cultural Tributes

Posthumous honors underscored Garg's influence. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) announced a 40-minute biographical program at the Women's World Cup inauguration on September 30, 2025. Proposals emerged for universities, schools, and scholarships named after him, aligning with his secular ethos. Garg's father expressed intentions to author a new biography, a rare familial endeavor in artistic historiography.

Global recognition included Google's moniker "The Humming King of the World" and performances of his songs in Kolkata bands and American venues. Messages of condolence from India's Prime Minister and international admirers further elevated his status. The cremation utilized sandalwood from a tree Garg planted in 2017, symbolizing his environmental bond and merger with the "five elements."

• Legacy and Cultural Implications

Garg's life and death encapsulate a "musk-laden" narrative—permeating and transformative, much like the scent of musk in Assamese poetry. His passing fostered unity in a region often divided by ethnicity and politics, with organizations like the Assam Sahitya Sabha and All Assam Students' Union (AASU) collaborating with the government. This "spirit of the republic" highlighted humanity over partisanship.

The despair among "Generation Zubeenians" reflects concerns over cultural reproduction: the improbability of another artist of his caliber in the coming decades. Fellow Assamese musician Papon's attendance at the cremation exemplified cross-artist solidarity. Critiques of Garg's lifestyle (e.g., alcohol consumption) surfaced posthumously, shifting from earlier derogatory labels like "mad" or "drunkard" to reflective laments.

The digital dimension of mourning—through online portals for ashes distribution and social media dissemination—illustrates how technology mediates grief in Digital India. Questions of justice arise regarding societal pressures that may have contributed to his demise, prompting calls for accountability.

V. Conclusion

Zubeen Garg's departure on September 19, 2025, not only marked the end of an era but also reinforced his role as a unifying cultural force in Northeast India. His "musk-laden life," rich with artistic innovation and humanistic values, continues to inspire through songs, institutions, and collective memory. Future research could explore comparative analyses with global icons like Michael Jackson or quantify the economic impact of his cultural contributions. As tributes persist, Garg's myth endures, inviting the next generation to proclaim, with substantiated faith, the legend of this noble artist.

References

This analysis is compiled from various sources, including:

- Newspaper reports from Assam and international outlets (e.g., New York Times, Bangladeshi dailies).
- Television broadcasts covering the procession and tributes.
- Social media analyses (WhatsApp groups, Facebook posts) documenting public reactions.
- Informal conversations with community members and "Zubeenians" in Digboi and surrounding areas.
- Official statements from the Government of Assam and cultural organizations like AASU and Assam Sahitya Sabha.