

Zubeen Garg (1972–2025): the voice that carried Assam's soul to every corner of the world



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When Zubeen Garg stepped onto a stage, whether in a packed Guwahati stadium or before a modest rural crowd, something remarkable happened: the air thickened with anticipation, and the moment he sang, generations sang with him. On September 19, 2025, that voice — at once fiery, tender, and uncontainable — was silenced forever in Singapore under tragic circumstances. He was 53.

For Assam and the Northeast, Zubeen was not simply a musician; he was a living cultural movement, a heartbeat that synchronized with millions. A singer, composer, lyricist, actor, and filmmaker, his career spanned over three decades and encompassed songs in more than 40 languages and dialects. His music shaped identities, celebrated joys, soothed griefs, and became the common pulse of a people often left unheard in the national narrative.

From Jorhat's Son to National Icon

Born Zubeen Borthakur in 1972 in Jorhat, Assam, he was named after the world-renowned conductor Zubin Mehta — an omen that his life, too, would be tethered to music's universal language. In the 1990s, he adopted his stage name, replacing his surname with his gotra "Garg," marking the beginning of a transformation that would redefine regional music.

From his earliest days, the sounds of folk rhythms and devotional strains filled his home. His sister's tragic death left an indelible mark on him, and in her memory, he released *Anamika* (1992), an album that would redefine Assamese contemporary music and establish him as more than just a singer — as a voice of collective emotion.

He sang of love (*Mayabini*), of yearning (*O Bondhu Duhat Tumar*), and of identity (*Pakhi*). But Zubeen transcended regional boundaries when "Ya Ali" from *Gangster* (2006) stormed Bollywood, establishing him as a pan-Indian sensation and making him Assam's highest-paid singer for years to come.

A Voice That Bridged Worlds

While his discography reads like an encyclopedia of genres — pop, folk, devotional, film music, fusion — spanning over 40 languages and dialects, his greatest triumph lay in keeping Assamese music relevant and alive in the global age. Whether performing Subah Subah for Bollywood audiences or Kya Raaz Hai for national charts, he carried the essence of his homeland with him.

His artistry was inseparable from activism. He spoke against injustice, lent his voice to causes for the Northeast, and carried Assam's cultural pride into every performance, making himself not just an entertainer but a cultural ambassador.

A Final Song in Singapore

Zubeen had traveled to Singapore as Cultural Brand Ambassador for the North East India Festival, organized by the High Commission of India. The three-day festival was scheduled to begin on Friday, September 19 — the very day he lost his life. He had gone scuba diving, a recreational activity that turned tragic when he experienced breathing complications underwater.

Despite being rushed to the hospital and admitted to the ICU by members of the Assam Association Singapore who were with him, the voice that had energized millions fell silent forever.

Tributes Pour In: A Nation Mourns

The outpouring of grief that followed his passing underscored his monumental stature across political, cultural, and social lines.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote: "Shocked by the sudden demise of popular singer Zubeen Garg. He will be remembered for his rich contribution to music... His renditions were very popular among people across all walks of life. Om Shanti."

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma mourned: "Today Assam lost one of its favourite sons. I am at a loss for words to describe what Zubeen meant for Assam. He has gone too early, this was not an age to go. Zubeen's voice had an unmatched ability to energise people and his music spoke directly to our minds and souls."

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi called his death "a terrible tragedy," saying: "His voice defined a generation, and his talent was truly unmatched. He overcame personal tragedies to reshape the landscape of Assamese music."

Actor Adil Hussain expressed being "devastated and shocked," writing: "His contribution to Assamese music and culture is extraordinary... He will live amongst us through his songs."

Composer Pritam shared: "Zubeen losing his life in an accident is just the most terrible and saddest news. I'm still trying to come to terms with it."

Papon, fellow musician, wrote: "The voice of a generation! Gone too soon. Lost a friend. Lost a brother. A big void."

Beyond the celebrity tributes, fans across social media poured out memories: of first loves set to Mayabini, of long nights with Ya Ali on loop, of folk dances lifted by Pakhi, of the quiet comfort found in his devotional songs.

A Legacy Beyond Measure

Zubeen Garg will be remembered not only for the staggering breadth of his work but for the intimacy of his music. He sang as though he belonged to each listener personally — and for many, he did. Whether performing in Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, or any of the dozens of other languages he mastered, he carried the authentic spirit of Northeast India to every corner of the world.

Assam Cabinet Minister Ashok Singhal perhaps captured it best: "Assam has lost not just a voice, but a heartbeat. Zubeen da was more than a singer, he was the pride of Assam and the nation, whose songs carried our culture, our emotions, and our spirit to every corner of the world."

He once said in an interview: "I sing because silence is too heavy. Music lightens the load."

Now, as silence falls over one of India's most distinctive voices, his music continues to carry Assam's soul — fierce, tender, unyielding — to the world. His body will be flown back to Assam, where a state will mourn its favorite son.

Zubeen Garg's Essential Legacy: 10 Songs That Defined Generations

- Ya Ali (Gangster, 2006) — The Bollywood breakthrough that made him a national icon
- Mayabini — Haunting romantic ballad that became Northeast India's unofficial love anthem
- Anamika (Album, 1992) — Dedicated to his late sister, the album that revolutionized Assamese contemporary music

- O Bondhu Duhat Tumar — Timeless Assamese love song that transcended generations
- Pakhi — Perfect fusion of traditional folk with modern sensibilities
- Subah Subah — Another Bollywood chartbuster showcasing his versatility
- Kya Raaz Hai — National hit that solidified his pan-Indian appeal
- Raat Jaga Tara — His most beloved Bengali composition
- Ei Prithibi Ekhan Rangmancha — Theatre meets philosophy in melody
- Tumi Mur — The wedding favorite that echoed in every Assamese celebration

Life in Milestones

1972: Born Zubeen Borthakur in Jorhat, Assam

1992: Released Anamika, revolutionizing Assamese music landscape

1990s: Adopted stage name "Zubeen Garg," rose as leading Assamese voice

2006: Ya Ali catapulted him to national Bollywood stardom

2010s: Prolific multilingual output, became Assam's highest-paid singer

2020s: Continued as cultural ambassador, champion of Northeast causes

September 19, 2025: Died in scuba diving accident in Singapore while attending North East India Festival as Cultural Brand Ambassador

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