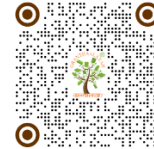


Original Article

FOLKLORE AND PUBLIC MEMORY: THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE OF 1950 IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The 1950 earthquake in Assam, locally known as the 'bor bhuikap' (Great Earthquake), stands as one of the most catastrophic natural disasters in the region's recorded history. Measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale, it wrought profound devastation — displacing communities, claiming thousands of lives, and fundamentally altering the geography of the Brahmaputra valley. This paper examines the intersection of folklore and public memory in the aftermath of this seismic event, arguing that oral traditions, folk beliefs, songs, and personal testimonies served not merely as cultural artefacts but as critical mechanisms of community resilience, meaning-making, and disaster memory. Drawing on fieldwork, oral histories, and archival sources, the paper demonstrates how the earthquake became embedded in the collective consciousness of diverse Assamese communities, generating a rich body of folklore — from mythological explanations of divine wrath to narratives of survival and solidarity. The analysis contributes to broader social science debates on disaster, memory, and the role of cultural heritage in community recovery.

Keywords: Folklore, Disaster Memory, Oral Tradition, 1950 Assam Earthquake, Public Memory, Assam, Resilience, Seismicity, Northeast India

INTRODUCTION

Throughout recorded history, human civilizations have been shaped and reshaped by catastrophic natural events. Earthquakes occupy a particularly fearsome position in this catalogue of disasters, given their suddenness, their capacity for indiscriminate destruction, and the profound psychological shock they leave in their wake. For the communities of Assam in northeastern India, the earthquake of 15 August 1950 represents an event of this magnitude — one that permanently altered not only the physical landscape but also the cultural, spiritual, and mnemonic landscape of the region.

North-eastern India is recognized as one of the most seismically active zones on earth, situated at the convergence of the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates. The region's seismotectonic framework encompasses five major domains: the North-eastern Himalaya, the Indo-Burma ranges, the Eastern Himalayan Syntaxis, the Shillong Plateau–Mikir Hills–Assam valley, the Bengal Basin, and the Tripura fold belt [Angelier and Baruah \(2009\)](#). The resulting geological instability has made Assam a recurring theatre of seismic catastrophe across the modern period, culminating in the catastrophic earthquake of 1950.

This paper examines how the 1950 earthquake was absorbed into and transformed by the oral and cultural traditions of Assam's communities. It argues that folklore and public memory functioned not merely as passive records of the disaster but as active social mechanisms: providing explanations for the inexplicable, sustaining community bonds under conditions of extreme disruption, and

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transmitting lessons across generations. The analysis is grounded in primary fieldwork, oral testimonies, and archival sources, and draws on social science frameworks concerning disaster, memory, and cultural resilience.

SEISMICITY AND TECTONIC CONTEXT OF NORTHEAST INDIA

The Earth's lithosphere is composed of rigid tectonic plates whose relative motion — driven by convective currents in the underlying mantle — proceeds at a rate of several centimetres per year [Wegener \(1966\)](#). As adjacent plates interact, stress and strain energy accumulate along fault boundaries. When this energy exceeds the elastic limit of the rock, sudden fracture occurs, releasing seismic waves and generating earthquakes [Kulhanek \(1990\)](#).

Northeast India sits at one of the most tectonically dynamic junctions on the planet. The northern subduction zone underpins the Himalayan ranges, while the eastern collision–subduction zone governs the Indo-Burma ranges. The Shillong Plateau, owing to its complex tectonic setting and continuous crustal movement, has been the locus of numerous large to great earthquakes [Bhattacharya et al. \(2010\)](#). Historical records document a sequence of significant seismic events prior to 1950, each leaving its mark on the region's physical and social landscape [Kyal \(1996\)](#).

Table 1

Table 1 Major Earthquakes in Northeast India up to 1950			
Year	Event	Epicentre Location	Magnitude (Richter)
12 June 1869	Northeastern India Earthquake	Eastern Himalayas (India–Bhutan border)	7.5
7 June 1875	Bengal Earthquake	Near India–Bangladesh border, Meghalaya region	7.6
12 June 1897	Great Shillong Earthquake	Shillong Plateau, Meghalaya	8.1
9 September 1923	Meghalaya Earthquake	Bangladesh–India border (Meghalaya)	7.1
2 July 1930	Dhubri Earthquake	Dabigiri, Meghalaya	7.1
15 January 1934	Bihar–Nepal Earthquake	Bihar–Nepal region	8.1
23 October 1943	Assam Earthquake	Hojai, Assam	7.2
29 July 1947	Assam–Tibet Earthquake	Mishmi Hills, present-day Arunachal Pradesh	7.3
15 August 1950	Great Assam–Tibet Earthquake	Mishmi Hills, present-day Arunachal Pradesh	8.6

Source: Compiled from [Kyal \(1996\)](#), [Richter \(1958\)](#), and [Poddar \(1953\)](#), as collated in [Ramachandra \(1953\)](#).

THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE OF 15 AUGUST 1950: SCALE, IMPACT, AND AFTERMATH

The Assam–Tibet Earthquake of 15 August 1950 stands as one of the most powerful seismic events of the twentieth century. Measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale, it ranks as the sixth largest earthquake of the entire century and the most devastating natural disaster ever to strike Assam. Its epicentre was located near Rima, in the eastern Himalayan range, close to the India–Tibet border, at a focal depth of approximately fifteen kilometres [Kingdon-Ward \(1951\)](#).

The tremors were felt across an extraordinarily wide area, extending from northeastern India into Bhutan and present-day Bangladesh, and reaching as far as Kolkata — some 700 kilometres from the epicentre. The eminent seismologist C. F. Richter observed that this earthquake was 'more damaging in Assam, in terms of property loss, than the earthquake of 1897' [Richter \(1958\)](#).

DEVASTATION AND PHYSICAL TRANSFORMATION

The destruction wrought by the earthquake was immense and multidimensional. Towns and villages across Assam suffered catastrophic damage: schools, hospitals, religious sites, and homes collapsed under the sustained force of the tremors. Official estimates placed the death toll at approximately 1,526 persons, though contemporaries widely doubted this figure as a substantial undercount given the remoteness of many affected areas.

The earthquake triggered massive landslides across a zone approximately 200 kilometres in length and 60 kilometres in breadth — representing roughly one-third of the region's total geographical area. Aerial reconnaissance revealed that entire mountain

ridgelines had effectively disappeared, the combined effect of steep slopes, deforested hillsides, leached granite, and prolonged climatic weathering Mathur (1950).

Sediment discharge into the river system was similarly staggering. Estimates suggest that approximately 47 billion cubic metres of material — predominantly mud rather than the usual sand — were released into the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. At Dibrugarh alone, the riverbed rose by approximately three metres, dramatically increasing the river's flood reach and permanently altering the hydrological regime of the valley Goswami (1985), Dutta (2005). Large portions of Dibrugarh were submerged as a consequence Smith (2006).

DISLOCATION AND RELIEF

In the earthquake's immediate aftermath, extensive flooding compounded the destruction as the Brahmaputra and other rivers burst their banks under the burden of sediment and disrupted flows Dutta (2003). The Indian government, with international support, mobilised substantial relief and reconstruction operations, focusing on infrastructure rebuilding and the rehabilitation of displaced communities The Times of India. (1950). The reconstruction of the Lakhimpur railroad bridge — destroyed by the earthquake and severing Assam's main rail connection to the rest of the subcontinent — was among the most urgent priorities.

FOLKLORE, FOLK BELIEF, AND THE CULTURAL ASSIMILATION OF DISASTER

The overwhelming force of the 1950 earthquake, and its recurrence within a region already familiar with seismic violence, naturally found expression in the cultural life of Assam's communities. As with major disasters across human history, the earthquake generated a body of folklore, legend, and folk belief that served to render comprehensible what was geologically sudden and humanly inexplicable Gautam (2008).

Folklore, as the voice of the people, operates at the intersection of lived experience, cultural memory, and imaginative response Souman (Ed.). (2000). It is not merely retrospective documentation but active meaning-making: communities use oral narrative, song, ritual, and symbolic belief to assimilate traumatic events into their ongoing social worlds. The 1950 earthquake became a powerful catalyst for precisely this kind of cultural creativity in Assam.

MYTHOLOGICAL AND SUPERNATURAL EXPLANATIONS

Among the most widely circulated oral traditions is the legend attributing the earthquake to the anger of the serpent goddess Manasa, offended by the construction of a bridge over the Brahmaputra River at Tezpur. This narrative is typical of the broader folk tendency to explain seismic catastrophe through the frame of divine wrath or supernatural transgression: the earthquake is interpreted not as a random geological event but as a morally significant punishment for human hubris or impiety (C. Bora, personal communication).

Across diverse communities in Assam, folk belief encoded the earthquake within a dualistic framework that interwove the natural and supernatural. Earthquakes were simultaneously understood as the product of geological forces and of divine or demonic intervention. This dual framing is analytically significant: it reflects the social function of disaster folklore in providing communities with a sense of agency and moral order in the face of overwhelming material destruction.

Specific folk beliefs included the attribution of the earthquake to divine punishment for collective human sin; the interpretation of unusual animal behaviour, atmospheric changes, and mysterious sounds as forewarnings of seismic activity; the deployment of talismans, amulets, and sacred objects for personal and household protection; and the characterization of the earthquake as a powerful but negotiable entity — a force to be approached through diplomacy, ritual propitiation, and reverence rather than direct confrontation.

SONGS, POEMS, AND ORAL NARRATIVES

Alongside mythological explanation, the earthquake generated a rich tradition of expressive oral culture. Folk songs and poems were composed in the disaster's wake, thematically organized around loss, survival, and the moral and emotional meaning of catastrophe. These compositions served multiple social functions: they gave voice to grief and trauma, celebrated acts of courage and solidarity, and created shared cultural objects through which communities could process collective experience.

Narratives of survival and heroism were — and continue to be — central to the oral tradition surrounding the earthquake. Ordinary people who survived and assisted others in the chaos became the subjects of stories passed down through families and communities, constituting what might be termed a vernacular heroic tradition. In the absence of formal memorialization, these stories carried the weight of disaster commemoration.

Folk remedies and protective practices also proliferated in the earthquake's aftermath, reflecting both the practical dimensions of post-disaster coping and the blurred boundaries between pragmatic action and symbolic belief in disaster cultures. Practices such

as sleeping on beds of neem leaves for protection, or consulting traditional healers for the treatment of physical and psychological trauma, illustrate the integration of somatic and spiritual concerns in folk responses to disaster.

PUBLIC MEMORY, ORAL TESTIMONY, AND COLLECTIVE COMMEMORATION

If folklore represents the imaginative and cultural dimension of disaster memory, public memory encompasses the social processes through which shared recollections are sustained, transmitted, and mobilized within communities over time. The 1950 earthquake generated both dimensions in abundance, and the two are deeply intertwined in Assam's ongoing relationship with the event.

ORAL TESTIMONY AND PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Oral testimonies from survivors offer vivid and historically irreplaceable accounts of the earthquake's immediate impact and its resonance in personal and communal life. Renu Majumdar, born in 1936 in North Guwahati, recalled the events in the following terms:

I experienced a strong tremor and a loud sound in the evening. The house started trembling suddenly and the ground started shaking violently. During that time, my father was returning from the Adya Shraddha of our first Chief Minister of Assam... the whole night, at intervals of some time, the tremors used to shake us. We could not sleep. People gathered on the streets and open fields. All we could do was chant prayers and call for God's help. The mighty Brahmaputra was next to our residence; we saw big ships, boats, and fish washed to the shore due to the tsunamic disturbances in the river bed. The smell of sulphur gas surrounded the bank of the Brahmaputra the next day. Large numbers of dead animals, river dolphins and turtles could be seen floating in the river... The Brahmaputra changed its course and submerged half of Dibrugarh.

(R. Majumdar, personal communication)

This testimony — collected decades after the event — demonstrates how personal memory intersects with collective knowledge to constitute a layered and emotionally resonant account of disaster. The specific sensory details (the smell of sulphur, the sight of dead dolphins), the communal gathering in open spaces, and the turn to prayer all exemplify the lived texture of disaster memory that oral testimony uniquely preserves.

Fieldwork interviews with elderly residents of Dhekiajuli (Sonitpur District) and Dhakuakhana (Lakhimpur District) corroborate this pattern of vivid, embodied recollection, often framed within broader narratives of community survival and recovery (C. Bora, personal communication; M. Patir, personal communication). The persistence of such memories into the twenty-first century testifies to the depth of the earthquake's imprint on the region's intergenerational consciousness.

COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY AND COMMEMORATIVE PRACTICE

Public memory of the 1950 earthquake has consistently served as a resource for community solidarity. Commemorative events, memorial practices, and anniversary observances have enabled affected communities to gather, share experiences, and collectively honour those who perished. These practices perform a dual social function: they maintain the vitality of disaster memory against the erosion of time, and they reinforce communal bonds by grounding collective identity in a shared history of loss and recovery [The Sentinel Assam. \(2021\)](#).

The earthquake's persistence in public consciousness has also informed disaster preparedness culture in Assam [Ayothiraman and Hazarika \(2008\)](#), [Srivastava \(2004\)](#). The event is widely invoked as a benchmark of seismic hazard, and its legacy has shaped public and institutional attitudes toward earthquake risk, infrastructure resilience, and emergency management across the region.

ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION: FOLKLORE, MEMORY, AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE

The foregoing analysis invites reflection on the broader theoretical significance of the Assamese case for social science understandings of disaster, culture, and memory. Three analytical themes deserve particular attention.

First, the 1950 earthquake demonstrates the cognitive and moral work performed by folklore in disaster contexts. The transformation of a seismic event into a narrative of divine punishment, demonic presence, or supernatural transgression is not a failure of rationality but a culturally sophisticated strategy for restoring moral order and human agency to an experience of radical contingency. As scholars of disaster and culture have observed, communities consistently frame catastrophic events within pre-existing cosmological and moral frameworks, and this reframing is itself a form of resilience.

Second, the case illustrates the social function of oral tradition as a technology of collective memory. In the absence of formal archives, public monuments, or institutional commemoration — particularly in the immediate post-earthquake decades — oral narratives, songs, and testimonies carried the full weight of disaster memory. The transmission of these accounts across generations ensured not only historical continuity but also the reproduction of community identity and emotional solidarity.

Third, the Assamese material speaks to the entanglement of material and symbolic dimensions in disaster recovery. The folk practices of protection, propitiation, and healing that emerged after 1950 were not separable from the practical business of reconstruction and survival; they constituted part of the same integrated social response to catastrophe. This integration challenges reductive distinctions between 'rational' and 'irrational' responses to disaster, pointing instead toward a more holistic understanding of community resilience.

CONCLUSION

The Great Earthquake of 1950 stands as a defining moment in Assam's modern history: a catastrophe of exceptional scale whose reverberations — geological, demographic, and cultural — continue to shape the region to the present day. This paper has argued that the earthquake's assimilation into the folklore and public memory of Assam was not merely a by-product of the disaster but an essential dimension of community response and recovery.

Through oral narratives, folk beliefs, songs, and testimonies, the communities of Assam created a shared cultural framework for understanding and surviving the earthquake. These traditions served simultaneously as explanatory systems, emotional resources, vehicles of historical transmission, and foundations of collective identity. They demonstrate, with particular clarity, the centrality of cultural and mnemonic processes to the social experience of natural disaster.

The 1950 earthquake's legacy also carries a forward-looking dimension. As Assam continues to confront the reality of its seismic hazard, the oral traditions and public memories examined in this paper remain a living resource — one that embodies accumulated community knowledge about disaster, resilience, and solidarity, and that deserves recognition as a vital component of the region's disaster preparedness heritage.

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