

Folklore and Public Memory: The Great Earthquake of 1950 in Assam with Special Reference to the Misings

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The Great Assam Earthquake of 1950 was not only a geological catastrophe but also a profound cultural event for the indigenous communities of Assam. This paper explores how the Mising community, one of the largest indigenous groups in the region, memorializes the earthquake through oral traditions, including folk songs (oi: nitom), ritual narratives, and communal storytelling. Drawing from cultural trauma theory and vernacular historiography, the study highlights how these oral forms function as repositories of historical memory and tools for cultural resilience. The paper argues that folklore in the Mising context preserves both ecological knowledge and emotional truth, offering alternative modes of witnessing disaster that challenge state-centric historical narratives.

Keywords: mising, folklore, cultural trauma, vernacular historiography, oral history, 1950 assam earthquake

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1. Introduction

On the night of August 15, 1950, the region of Assam was rocked by one of the most powerful earthquakes in recorded history, measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale. The Great Assam Earthquake caused catastrophic damage across the Brahmaputra Valley, altering river systems and displacing thousands. While the geological and infrastructural impacts have been extensively studied, far less attention has been paid to the cultural imprint of the disaster-particularly how it is remembered and ritualized by the Mising community.

The Mising's, who predominantly inhabit the floodplains of Upper Assam, possess a rich oral culture that preserves history through sacred songs, ritual chants, and communal narratives. For them, the earthquake was not just a physical event but a cosmological rupture, interpreted through frameworks involving divine wrath, ancestral displeasure, and ecological imbalance. This paper examines how the Mising community encodes and transmits its memory of the 1950 earthquake through folklore, revealing processes of cultural resilience and historical meaning-making.

2. Methodology and Ethnographic Context

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach focused on oral history methods and folkloristic analysis. Fieldwork was conducted in villages such as Sisimukh, Silapathar, Dhakuakhana, Selek and Boralimora, where elderly community members, ritual practitioners (Mibus), and folk singers were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were employed to collect *oi: nitoms* (folk songs), ritual narratives, and local proverbs.

Transcription and translation were supported by native speakers and local linguists, ensuring cultural accuracy. Secondary sources, including ethnographies and folklore collections, were also consulted to contextualize the oral material. The study focuses not only on content but also on performance, ritual setting, and the moral and spiritual interpretations attached to the earthquake.

3. Theoretical Framing Cultural Trauma and Vernacular Historiography

Cultural trauma theory, as outlined by Alexander (2004), provides a lens for understanding how communities internalize and respond to catastrophic events. Among the Mising's, the 1950 earthquake is remembered as a rupture in both ecological and spiritual terms. Rather than being understood as a purely geological event, it is interpreted as divine punishment or ancestral warning - reflecting a cosmology where environmental and moral orders are inseparable.

This paper also engages with vernacular historiography (Pandey, 2006; Guha, 1997), which emphasizes the legitimacy of subaltern historical narratives produced outside state archives. Mising folklore, situated in song, ritual, and proverb, acts as an alternative archive that critiques dominant narratives while preserving local understandings of history and identity.

4. Oral Histories and Cultural Themes

4.1 Oi: Nitom (Folk Song)

*"The land quivered like a leaf,
The mother's hearth cracked in silence.
Was it the wrath of Donyi, or the sorrow of the river?
The trees did not dance in joy, but fell in grief."*

This folk song from Sisimukh encapsulates the emotional and cosmological trauma felt by the community. The earthquake is personified as both natural upheaval and divine lamentation, articulating grief in ecological terms.

4.2 Ritual Narrative: The Earth-Cracking

The Misings are the worshippers of numerous Uyus (spirits). In this context the Miboo (the priest) plays a significant role among them. He is supposed to know the Uyus responsible for all evils happenings of the Misings. It is notable that for any ritual works in Misings the creator of the mother earth is remembered by offering a prayer to *Chedi-melo* & *Donyee* (the sun), *Polo* (the moon).

In Silapathar, an elder recounted a tale of the earth splitting open after the quake - a sign interpreted as

the awakening of disturbed spirits. He mentioned that mother earth start shaking due to too many bad deeds of human being. This narrative is now told during *Dobur-Uier* rituals to underscore the importance of maintaining spiritual balance with nature.

4.3 Moral Interpretations and Ecological Imbalance

In Dhakuakhana, an elder recalled that the earthquake followed the improper performance of a ritual. The earthquake took place due to unsatisfied spirits. This was seen as a moral lapse that angered the spirits, indicating how the Mising's interpret natural disasters within a spiritual-ethical framework.

4.4 Oral Proverb

In Selek gaon, Majuli, an elderly man told that sudden shifts in river course are not merely viewed as natural events but as expressions of a cosmic silence - an unspoken verdict from divine forces. The encroachment of the Brahmaputra is interpreted not as chaos but as a recalibration of the sacred order, where environmental change is entwined with spiritual meaning.

5. Thematic Table of Oral Sources

Source Type	Village/Region	Theme	Interpretation
Folk Song (oi: nitom)	Sisimukh, Dhemaji	Divine wrath, natural grief	Emotional trauma expressed in ecological terms
Ritual narrative	Silapathar, Dhemaji	Earth-cracking, disturbed spirits	Spiritual geography disrupted
Elder's testimony	Dhakuakhana, North Lakhimpur	Improper ritual causing disaster	Moral causality of ecological events
Oral proverb	Selek, Majuli	River changing course as divine silence	Environmental change and cosmological order
Chant (Dobur-Uie)	Boralimora, Majuli	Appeasement of nature and ancestors	Restoration of ritual and environmental balance

6. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that for the Mising community, the 1950 Great Assam Earthquake is not simply a past disaster but a continuing presence in cultural memory.

Through folk songs, ritual narratives, and moral storytelling, the Mising's have encoded this event into their collective consciousness, preserving it not only as a tale of loss but as a lesson in ecological and spiritual equilibrium.

By applying cultural trauma theory and vernacular historiography, the study shows how indigenous memory practices offer vital insights into historical understanding, emotional resilience, and cultural continuity. In centering Mising oral traditions, this research affirms the value of folklore as a legitimate and rich source of historical knowledge in post-disaster societies.

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