

**EARTHQUAKE IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL
CONTEXT OF RABHAS IN ASSAM**

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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I, Chinmayi Sarma, declare that this thesis entitled “**Earthquake in the Socio-Cultural Context of Rabhas in Assam**”, submitted by me in fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** in the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, is my original work and has not been submitted in part or as whole, for any other degree of this or any other University.


CHINMAYI SARMA

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For

Aabu

My Paternal Grandmother

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PREFACE

Tone- Setting

Frankenstein No More

It was my first day in the University and for the first time I had heard words like hegemony and ideology so many times that it made me uncomfortable. Of course, I knew these words with meanings having used them to pass examinations but today I was lurching into an unknown spiral to understand the history, geography, biology and chemistry of these two. The urgency was great and supposedly only original sociological texts could decipher. In euphoria, I allowed myself to get indoctrinated. With the spirit of a crusader I began burying myself under sociological classics. I was so engrossed that I did not mind being buried with Durkheim and one day it actually happened. I slept off in a dusty corner of the third floor of our central library with *Suicide*(2002) on my lap. When I woke up, everyone was gone and the doors shut. Well, how the photocopier rescued me out is yet another story because now it is time to inform you about my progress with hegemony and how Durkheim puzzled me.

As I built the burden of research on my shoulder, I attended conferences and read highly jargonized journals which I could barely understand. I fancied undecipherable questions on ideology, learning to pity those who could not answer. In other words, I was becoming like them. Everyone appeared to vanquish hegemony with their words but in spirit, they were as brutal as Stalin. I was becoming like the poet Shelley who spoke of humanism and hope but had abandoned his own child. I was becoming like them! Indeed, my quest to become a pupil of sociology was so great that I could provide a sociological alternative to the scientific definition of boiling point. I was fast transforming into a bourgeoisie, but then something unusual happened.

I had taken the metro to Chandni Chowk, to explore the narrow alley and Mughlai cuisine of Delhi but in the brief twenty minutes travel, my castle of sociology crumbled. I met a girl of my age, who had enrolled for bachelors in Sociology in an open university from a distance mode. We embarked into a conversation and without delay I told her of my vocation. As expected, she was impressed. So, with much

humility asked in Hindi, “*ye social fact kya hota hai?*” seeking me to explain *social facts* given by Durkheim.

Truly, it wasn't difficult, a question from well traversed territory; so, I began without delay. First definition followed by an explanation and one example, very precise. I thought nothing and delivered my speech, then looked at her. Her eyes haunted me; it was clear that she did not understand. My language had lost its simplicity and power to pursue. I had become a sum of sophisticated words carrying the dead weight of schools of thought. Clearly, I had failed that day. The listless looks kept me awake and after several days of confusion, I embarked to restore my cerebral hygiene and decided to experiment with sociology. I decided to be free of the conventional sociological baggage of issues and concerns and study what interested me most. Rather than warring with social stratification, religion or power, I began my tryst with disasters. However, evading existential questions was not my aim. So rather than escaping, I embraced the challenge of bridging the conventional and experimental gaps. I choose the tribal question, more appropriately called ‘concerns of the indigenous people’ as an interrelated theme of enquiry but I decided to look beyond clan, marginalization and autonomy movements, seeking to do something fresh and simple yet basic keeping society into purview.

Tryst with Seismicity and Indigenous Culture

“The function of sociology, as every science is to reveal that which is hidden”

(Bourdieu, 1999: 17)

Earthquake as a natural disaster reveal hidden grammar of everyday existence and latent facts. Individual are least prepared to deal with suddenness of shock that the phenomenon renders thus making it worthwhile to ruminate in the sociology of exceptions. The Indian ocean tsunami revealed that majority of those who succumbed to the waves were western tourists whereas not a single member of the primitive indigenous community was affected. I decided to enquire into indigenous epistemology to understand and cope with precariousness.

Ulrich Beck while discussing about the risk focuses upon “...*fissures and gaps between scientific and social rationality in dealing with hazard potential of civilization.... Scientific and social rationality do indeed break apart, but they remain at the same time interwoven and interdependent...scientific rationality without social rationality remains empty, but social rationality without scientific remains blind*” (Beck, 2011: 30). I embarked on a journey with seismicity as a mark of general harmony between two streams. Earthquake has been researched and established as domain of scientific enquiry. From geologist to nuclear physicist and astronomers have been engaged with questions of unpredictability, magnitude and impact of tremors originating from movement of tectonic plates. The phenomenon has been greatly feared, slowly became manageable and the scientific community capable in demystifying it. An important point of contact it has with society is the ‘the body’, when people become its victims or succeed in surviving it. Enduring suddenness and intensity has been dramatized but without solution. The only solution was assumed to be in technology.

Technology became central to the process of understanding and adapting to earthquakes however such advancement was in favor of the affluent. Two major short-comings of this approach is; little can be done to prevent occurrence of the phenomenon as it always came as a shock to scientists and general population. Seismographs have failed to prevent chaos and predict. Continuous effort is made to tackle this indecisiveness but technology has failed to deciphering seismicity. People from the margins have been worst sufferers as the advance of technology and market further jeopardized them. Indigenous people are outside the sphere of ‘collective imagination of risk’ despite their resilience against disasters.

My study focuses on exploring their potentials. This journey is an attempt to decipher the social dimension of seismicity and sociological sensibilities are meant to be evident in the process, considering immense possibility of the discipline to humanize hegemony. However deconstructing earthquake based on experience and memory of communities is a challenging affair because of limited scholarship. Predicting or controlling the phenomenon is impossible making man its passive recipient and making the topic a dystopian one, rife with biases.

In seismically active zones collective memory of past earthquake evokes pain and anxiety in survivors conveying two important propositions, inevitability of risk and inability of society to curb fatality. Fear emerges not as an instinct but a cultural response to phenomenon, ‘fearing enough to identify impending hazards’ and ‘fearing adequately to remain safe’ which leads to calculation of risk and planning of evacuation routes. In the occidental world man is considered superior to nature and glorified as it conqueror and based on this the techno-centric model of disaster management emerged. Whereas the indigenous model perceives disasters as part of the ecosystem where communities must co-exist with risk. An attempt has been made to understand earthquake from a social perspective through spirits and symbols of forest dwelling Rabhas.

My ethnographic journey traces the trajectory of a seismically vulnerable terrain across two major Assam earthquakes of 1897 which gave rise to the Chandubi lake and the 1950 shocks which once again transformed the landscape. It is believed that the Brahmaputra valley is affected by earthquake at an interval of every fifty years by a major catastrophe, so I attempted to understand fear, premonitions and preparedness for the impending deluge. Two major earthquakes from adjoining Nepal and Imphal impacted the field which provides contemporary examples of loss and adaptation. I have tried to recount the anecdotes of living in asusceptible terrain and coping with everyday precariousness.

Living among the Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya taught me that disasters can become a point of departure for new beginnings. Emergence of Chandubi lake provided a congenial place for settlement thus commencing a saga of migration headed by a mythical ancestor. This work also entails stories of spirits and duels with nature. Today the headman *Gaon Bura*, shares his insights on clash of civilization and the manners in which the neo-liberal market is breaking subsistence of the forest economy. His son, Moinal guides me practically experiencing it. He educated me about the politics and extent of the lake, following the footsteps of his father. Listening to him I realized that experiencing catastrophe is a subjective experience. Thus, I began to understand why Ruskin Bond usually focusing on fictions for children wrote an illustrated piece called ‘Earthquake’. Bond beautifully captures surrealistic and multitude of emotions the phenomenon triggers. From the silence of a dog during the tremor, to a grandfather engrossed in a bubble bath failing to register

the quake, Bond goes on to a young boy who saw his cycle being gulped by a fissure. He emphasizes on earthquake as an epoch, demarcating between the past order and the importance of a new one. The literary description made the hitherto dry phenomenon and interesting one, inspiring me to probe on its social angle.

The pluralism engrained in sociology empowers me to look beyond the existing epistemology into exceptions and backyards which it remains untouched. The experience and impact of earthquake has ordinarily been documented for cities because these places are products of human labour. Impact of earthquake on indigenous landscape has not been captured so I attempted to break the glass ceiling and traverse an unknown path. Seismic threat is inherent in the terrain and it has been internalized by the community which finds expression in their cultural landscape. Today we are hypnotized by democracy and consumerism, the art and artefacts of indigenous communities may appear to romanticized or ancient. But my exploration brings to light traditions of the forest dwelling Rabhas that makes them resilient to face the inbuilt risks. There leisure is unheard of but when daily business is done, people partake to community activity such braiding long ropes, over drinks and dialogues.

Watching elderly weaving long ropes is an intriguing process and often observers end up asking, whether they are going to sell those. Taking a sip from the tumbler of *chokoth*, the old man often denies, saying, “*These are for the times of the catastrophe. These ropes are made from river reed and they are sturdy enough to anchor banana rafts during floods and elastic enough to hang objects between trees and aatals¹*”. I wondered if he lived in constant fear of catastrophe but he clarified “*this is culture of resilience.*” Thus, I entered the domain of indigenous preparedness against disasters.

As the ecosystem has predicaments, so does it enables members to be equipped against the underlying risks; it is an interplay of opportunities and challenges. Play in the forest is not separate from learning. The forest Rabhas may be materially scarce but the least every family has is a boat and every family member adept in rowing. Children are taught by elder playmate to row which familiarizes them tide and ebb of

¹Cane ceiling. People hand objects like transistors or basket of grains from ceilings to keep them from submergence.

the lake, the changes in season and depth of water and the skill of maneuvering the vehicle across deep and shallow water. Play is a training in disguise to survive in the mysterious forest. However, the holism is fast depleting with the lake region being declared an ecotourism hub, leading to museumization of these cultural practices. The modernist state has failed to acknowledge the despair of the Rabhas nor recognizes its indigenous resilience.

Organization of the Work: Chapters

The elements of my journey are distributed across four chapters. The first element is an introduction to my journey where I emphasize upon the nature and scope of my study, emphasizing on the sociological potential of earthquakes, in a personalized note. I tend to problematize the travel bringing forth the methodology, milestones and barriers. The engagement with thinkers and concepts enriched my understanding of seismicity, ethnicity, spirituality of a forest society and clash between modernist and indigenous world views. Trials and tribulations emerge in the process so did uniqueness of the study.

‘Earthquake in Society and Culture’ is the next chapter where I have focused on deconstructing the natural phenomenon from a social perspective. Battling over myths to marginalization, I enquired into the hermeneutic possibilities of understanding earthquakes. In the process, I discovered about everyday precariousness and indigenous ways to overcome them.

My ethnography is a longitudinal biography of Rabha people experiencing earthquake historically. It traces their story of their resistance and adaptation to the calamity. However, to decipher their risk it is essential to understand them, their identity embedded in religion and culture. The third chapter is a tryst to understand the forest dwelling Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya.

The fourth chapter is yet another interrelated theme of my journey where I seek to uncover indigenous ways to deal with catastrophe. Nemesis cannot be addressed merely by objects and artefacts so I have emphasized on the domain of faith and beliefs. Here, I have argued in favor of integrating localized strategies with techno-centric disaster management approach to undo development-divides.

In the conclusion, I have discussed on my role as a researcher and possibilities of praxis in the field. The academic journey transformed into a personal quest of trusteeship with the people wherein I realized the limitations of this study and my own.

My work is based on experience acquired and storied heard in the field. However, meaning making is evolving process; with each passing day in the field and writing the thesis I felt wiser. There is a great temptation to rewrite everything but for now I will settle with the questions raised about seismicity in context of an indigenous society and leave the rest for later.

Journey Towards Exploring Earthquakes: The Map, Milestones, Co-Travelers & Breaks

Why embark on the Journey?

A part of civilization has been dedicated to study human misery and ways to overcome them in the future. The manner, in which artilleries jeopardized counties and communities across seas and famines wipe out villages and empire subjects has been attended to in these studies. The clashes of men and their saga of despair and deprivation has found mention in poetry and politics. But, what has hitherto been left behind? The tale of man's duel and survival over forces of nature. Indeed, the task of decoding the mysteries of nature is a daunting one but societies have resorted to propitiating what they could not explain either through spirituality or techno-centric rationalism. Natural phenomenon continues to be a puzzle for 'the social'. This thesis is an attempt to resolve this natural-social duality by exploring how communities have understood seismicity and been impacted by earthquakes.

It was early in the morning and the rays of the sun had started seeping in through the crevices of the mud-bamboo walls, at first a deafening roar and then the shaking. With a startle, I pick my twins and rushed out of my house and jumped across the porch and into the last stair. By the time we were out, it was gone.

After-shakes followed throughout the day. We kept the door ajar, as we rushed in and out. Each time the tremors came, fear gripped, not for my own but my children's life. No one went to the forest that day except the Deo (village priest). He made an offering of one full grown cock to our deity, praying to subside the shaking.

Man, from his primitive state has lived by making out of the earth, he dwells on it and thrives from it. Therefore, any grinding and cracking of the terrain threatens the fruit of his labour. His coexistence with the earth is embittered by the coming of a quake. Seismic events are resented as betrayal by an otherwise benevolent, giving mother

earth. The apathy towards earthquake prevails because it takes roles and routine by surprise, that are unpleasant. Seismic stress which first builds over the epicentre affects communities residing over and around it at both physical and psychic level. Thus, a hazard translated itself into a disaster by encountering vulnerable communities. Memory of a past devastation generate fear with reference to its bygone experience but fear of communities experiencing earthquake for the first time is an instinctual response. Narratives of experience, survival and victimhood pile over giving fear a historical character. The young of that community are socialized into a *manufactured fear* of an upcoming unpredictable apocalyptic earthquake. Debates ensue of what to do when *it* strikes and how to save oneself and others? Fear becomes a legitimate response to avoid loss of life and asset.

The narrative recounted above is of a forest village and the bouts of fear it triggered in the family which has a long history of juggling with seismic risks. People though taken by initial surprise, knew of strategies to respond to it. The element of surprise and fear was mitigated at the psychic level but in Imphal, a terrain without memory of quakes, people were simply not prepared. The thickly populated urban sprawl was not ready for the shock. As building fell, men, women and children were buried by debris and disabled by falling rods and glasses. Here fear to save oneself assumed a gross physical character. Dead and mutilated bodies left permanent imprints in the minds of the survivor and created a data base for future terror. While the common-sensical understanding of fear may call it an instinct not behaviour, this study poses a question whether fear is sold, manufactured and socialized? Societies which experience fear frequently, adapt to it. Fear is mitigated by thinking and acting by societies at risk.

The hazard of seismicity is of geo-morphological origin, scientifically stated as emanating from movement of tectonic plates but what then makes these forces a disaster? A hazard originating below the crust of the earth becomes a disaster because it encounters the human agency. Communities settled across valleys and hills fear earthquakes because it jeopardises their existence and puts the habitats at risk. This fear is not so much for the tremors but for retaining social and structural order. The discomfort associated with seismicity is that it destabilizes cultural and occupational roles by according primacy to survival instincts. Thereby de-routinization of existing behavioural patterns makes earthquake a social malaise. This journey is an attempt to explore the interconnections between seismicity and the human agency through

experience. Biographies of earthquakes across centuries has painted it in a negative light reiterating tales of mayhem and loss. But are there communities which have experienced quakes differently? The quest is to trace an alternative narrative of earthquake.

What makes humans the ultimate raptor? The capacity to eliminate all threats which might endanger him and ability to adapt to an ever-evolving order. The chaos that an earthquake unleashes is not accepted as fate and communities experiencing it simply do not perish. Those vulnerable and at risk, undertake mediated action to overcome the state of chaos by receiving help from other agencies such governmental bodies or other unaffected nationalities. They also emulate other societies which have successfully managed to thrive despite threats. In doing so, two world views emerge; first, a techno-centric disaster management approach which is regulated by the state that makes mitigation an external act and second a community specific indigenous mitigation in which resilience to disasters is an internal act of doing and learning. This journey is an attempt to explore the later.

In the former, the state considers vulnerable communities as important actors in planning for safety but norms, prejudices and preferences of the recipient population are not considered. Usually a standard operating model is designed to suit across geographies and cultures, by emphasizing upon common traits. This state sponsored model is broadly applicable and does not take community specific cultures into account, as it is limited to scope and percolation. Appreciating diversities of groups and experiences has become imperative and developing a separate model necessary rather than emphasizing on a uniform model for both margin and periphery. A decentralised local approach is the only solution to address the burgeoning world at risk. Given this the indigenous modes of resilience taking social and structural potentials into account is the only route to humanize disaster management. The increasing susceptibility to catastrophes especially earthquakes is bringing in more deluge with each passing day. Inequality of risk and vulnerability, an ever-inflating residue of modernization has contributed to aggravating catastrophe. The indigenous model of resilience is superior given its contextual nature yet not full proof. The techno-centric model needs to substantiate in places where the locality based model falls weak. This journey is an attempt to explore the indigenous model of resilience as

it exists today besides envisaging the possibility of mixed approach at the global level.

The need of a mixed approach is because the techno-centric governmental model is failing. It has been unable to address regional variation of human agony. This model overlooks economic inequality which determines the extent of destruction. Thus, this journey pauses for a break and ruminates about *disaster divide*, i.e., economic inequality determines whether the recipient community will be victim or survivor. In the process, I take a while longer to reflect upon the role of man in aggravating catastrophe. Natural forces threaten the social world but what is the role of human being in aggravating their own risk? The focus is *not* on man-made disasters but on anthropomorphic factors which act as precedents to natural hazards thereby increasing the magnitude of loss. If one looks at the pattern of causalities of the Nepal Earthquake, it becomes evident that those occupying the slum clusters and overpopulated old towns died in great number. They lived in mud-brick houses with little access to open space thus turning the valiant Gorkhaland into a ghost city. The handful of rich outlived their poorer counterparts in great numbers. Economic inequality and surviving catastrophe are thus intimately connected to one another. The rhetoric is similar for developing countries who are affected much more by calamities but the agony of these nation does not come to limelight. Either the government has limited ability of fund research on disaster & death or accepted it as natural corollary to civilization.

Ethnographers have studied primitive and backward societies under the discipline of Sociology and Anthropology to explore and redefine various traits of culture but the interest in studying disasters and especially earthquakes finds limited mention. Inability of man to compete with nature and the dystopian approach of disaster research are cited as the probabilistic causes for such lack of interest. However, scientists have studied the phenomena in great details from a value neutral perspective, like it has no impact on human society. Disciplinary compartmentalization and obsession with objectivities has failed to appreciate the link between humanity and seismicity. The same is true for India. While famine and floods received recognition as disasters having social manifestation, earthquakes came within the frame of social research only with the Kutch Earthquake and Indian Ocean Tsunami. It appears as if the high loss of human resource and productive assets

triggered a possibility for social research. But with the passage of a decade or two, the techno-centric, economically driven model of disaster research is slowly getting dismantled. This journey is an attempt to drive that cause further.



Miles to Go Before I Sleep: (L) A signboard on the way to Chandubi. (R) Halfway- amidst bareness walks a Rabha woman with a child in tow.

The quest receives a humanistic turn on reaching the land of Rabhas, an indigenous community residing in the Brahmaputra valley. As I roamed and rested around a lake of seismic origin, Chandubi, unique tribal hamlets comes into picture. These hamlets in midst of Sal forest plays hide and seek with life and death, plenty and scarcity, peace and deluge. Taking the case study of the Jaramukhuriya forest village, this journey is enriched because the people therein are not simply surviving but co-existing with risk and mediating their everyday precariousness making use of indigenous ways. Their history, beliefs and practices keeps them better equipped to face threats in comparison to their urban counterparts, who fall lies flies during quakes.

An Analogous Tour at Psychic Level

Analogy allows salient characteristic of objects or events to be compared with another. In the process, both similarities and differences emerge between two elements. Replication is an important variable for theory building and similarity of traits between objects of enquiry enables it to be generalized. The event of an earthquake and response of communities experiencing it can be explained by an *elastic band analogy* that brings about a dimension of organic unity of seismic episodes.

The occurrence of an earthquake can be compared to an elastic band which is pulled without prior-warning. As it is stretched, the band expands and stress builds over its surface area. The band becomes thinner in size but ready to snap back to its original form, whenever released. Similarly, during an earthquake the capacities of individuals in a community gets jeopardized and stretched to its maximum. The instinct of survival enables the individual to outlive the catastrophe but the pre-disorder social role and norms comes to a striking halt with this stress. Like the expanding band which grows thinner, the individual is caught up in the conundrum that endangers his social etiquettes and responses. However, this instinct to survive exists only for a small span of time as a knee jerk reaction to the tremors that catches people off-guard. This is not a penultimate reaction to the epoch-making event i.e., thus Social Darwinism does not become a behaviour but only an immediate reaction to seismic stimulus.

It is during an earthquake that the individual is prepared to go to any extent for survival but once that goal is secured, he confirms to his pre-ordained goals and standards. He re-establishes contact with his significant others and resurrects faith into the social system. This stress however positively impacts cohesion. The detection of threat brings victims, survivors and aid agency into one integrated unit dedicated solely to re-establish stability. The sense of *being* transcends from individual to social level which creates euphoria and relief that suffering is a fellow feeling/ condition. This increases his awareness of 'the social' making him comfortable to operate within traditional delimitations. In this stage, survivors extend help to suffering members in regaining and resurrecting lost order, stability and status with minor adjustments. Any major change often leads to clash of opinion. Conflicts after disasters over allocation and access of resources is a common occurrence, which further aggravates the stress. For instance, among the warring chieftains of Afghanistan, death of the leader means battle of flesh and blood. Replacement of casualties of the catastrophe is thus a strenuous process.

Though catastrophes are out of routine situations where instincts of survival and fear holds primacy over organized behaviour, yet transitions in roles is not a random process, rather a rational one. Similar to an extended elastic band during times of stress, members do not abandon their fellow beings but exhibit extraordinary camaraderie, despite the pressure to relapse. People are seen delivering intense

caregiving roles despite danger posed to one's life. This I would like to phrase this as 'a step beyond Social Darwinism'. Herein, Aristotle's *Rational Man* comes into play, once the individual realizes that he has managed to survive the catastrophe. Keeping initial fears aside, he regains his social consciousness and hurries to rescue neighbours and strangers alike. This stage can be compared with the relaxed stage of the elastic band which has shrunken back after being pulled. Here, the band becomes compact and thick in appearance and shorter in length. Similarly, the individual after the catastrophe regains himself getting over initial fears and become comparatively calm. Fraternity and co-operation with his fellow survivors for rescue and rehabilitation is intrinsic to this stage. In short, his integration in the society becomes deeper post-catastrophe. He becomes its composite member and gradually registers that the threat was real but now bygone and he has adapted to it. And realization dawns that he is not alone.



Earthquake of 1897 An Act of Destructive Creation: (L) Sand boil after the earthquake showing a transforming landscape. (R) More than a century later, the Chandubi Lake, originating from liquefaction triggered by the earthquake.

Post-earthquakes, survivors adapt better to the newly emergent society and play meaningful role in its reconstruction. Earthquakes in course of history are considered great leveller because they have not only usurped the topography but also prevailing order and authority. Those who survive are often seen as wielders of power because they have a say in the new process of decision making and ability to climb up the social hierarchy. Through there is a continuous struggle to reintroduce the past order yet the new order is stronger. The new order brings in new opportunities and actors

into place. Decisions are made keeping in view these contemporary actors as the old ones are slowly forgotten and in this phase, great rush over resources ensue.

Besides the survivors there are the victims who are the dispossessed lot. They are unable to adapt to the emergent order despite a long duration. Their capacities are permanently impaired to uphold either social capital or physical prowess, post-catastrophe. They are not casualties of seismicity but of the system! So, there is a sharp distinction between the pre and post order of how a society behaves after being stretched to its optimum limits. This is just like the elastic band which shows cuts and crevices on its surface after being pulled hard and left to relapse.

Institutions like individuals also get affected by earthquakes and comes into the fold of the analogy. Like an extended elastic band, tremendous strain develops over institutions, making it thinner in width and appearance. Post-earthquakes, marriage to education operates with minimum potential which are challenged in discharging their normal functioning. Sometimes the institutions are affected *in-toto* owing from huge number of deaths and at other times a slowly recover from the disorder. Resurrecting the original institution is almost impossible until the new actors think in line of their dead counterparts. Though the intangible structure may start functioning yet traces of the crisis leaves behind its indelible mark. So, when I pull a band to its optimum, not necessarily it will always relapse back to its original form with some crevices, rather it can get completely snapped beyond redemption, just like the lost Pompeii of the ancient past.

Problematizing My Journey

When we embark upon a journey, we do not just roam about here and there. We follow a path, a mental map that enables us to reach the chosen destination. Upon arrival at the end, the entire journey becomes meaningful despite initial hardships and hitches. In this section I will put forth the statement of problem and the objectives which probed me to take the journey. It will enable a reader to understand the intent of my selection. In the process, the questions emerging will be put forth to unbundle the premises on which the study is based. Rather than calling it a study, I have termed it as a journey because research is a process of learning and unlearning. I make

conversations with concepts and theories constantly seeking to experience them in the field, but most times I am forced to debunk them. In this journey, I strived to bridge the theory-practice conundrum but this tension presented more clarity about what I wanted to do and why.

Earthquake is a natural phenomenon with social manifestation; communities attribute different meanings to this geomorphic epochs. The changes in landscape impacts not just concrete structures but lives in a deep intimate way. As survivors grieve the dead, they adapt by migrating, changing roles and occupations. Though seismic episodes are followed by secondary catastrophe such as flooding, which may paralyze the normative way of functioning and existence yet the wheel of society goes on. Survivors rationalize despite the fear of relapse. Conscious social action called 'preparedness' is undertaken to mitigate future risk. This journey is a tryst to understand the role of human agency in coping, co-existing and making meanings from exceptional situations such as earthquakes, which threatens order and stability. Illustrating the tryst is a vignette from the field;

Among the indigenous ethnic groups of the Brahmaputra valley, clan wars were common. The victorious would often take possession of virgin forest tracts and start settlements on them. These hamlets or villages were milestones of victory so as a marker of their autonomy the inhabitants acquired a separate clan name after their chiefs. In such cases, the name of the settlement and clan was the same, besides a totem to mark the distinctiveness of the settlement was also adopted. Khai (1995: 56) in his work reasserts the founding of new settlement and clan as a noble deed. The fact that Rabhas are dispersed across 23 districts in big and small pockets of the Brahmaputra valley is a testimony that their chiefs were expert warriors. However, the story of founding new settlement is not always about dueling chieftains for heads, forests and virgin territory. There is thus a variety in history.

My journey begins with reaching a forest village founded by a common Rabha man, who was no chief and had no followers yet founded a village by truce with seismicity. He had reached the bank of Chandubi lake searching for water but in the process founded a village and found home. He belonged to

Loharghat, a region across the hills and migrated across the *duar* reaching forest and lake which we today call the Chandubi Lake Region.

Like other part of Assam, the forest of Chayani Barduar also shook and trembled in the earthquake of 1897. As after-shocks and flood that followed subsided, the forest dwellers scattered to survey the change in landscape caused by the calamity. That is when Bura, arrived at Sal covered virgin patch of land which we today call the Jaramukhuriya Village, in the bank of the Chandubi lake. As his great-great grandchild of narrates, “*Bura was deeply struck by awe at how miles of Sal forest now hid deep in the lake bed. Miles of forest had disappeared and in its place a lake had come. He sat there by magnanimous water body that resulted from the earthquake and eventually decided to live around it*”. But Bura was no chief, so none of his kin followed him. Nevertheless, he decided to found a hamlet all by himself. He started living by the banks of Chandubi and married a Khasi woman from neighboring Meghalaya thus laying the foundation of a settlement, a clan with a distinctive totem of its own. Majority of families in Jaramukhuriya today are descendants of the Bura and his Khasi wife. Seeing the replenished settlement abundant in pristine forest and water Bura’s kinsmen eventually followed from Lorharghat. This story brings to light a series of events triggered by a natural phenomenon. A commoner becomes a founder father with divine status, he departs from his tribe’s tradition once again by marrying a Khasi woman, thereby leading to the emergence of a patriarchal Rabha village with high matrilineal influence. The reel rolls on because consolidation of Jaramukhuriya into a settlement attracted other members of tribe too. Families migrating from Loharghat, established an inalienable link with the forest and lake. They also inter-married with their half-Rabha kin. Thus, emerged a society from seismic pangs with distinct culture of its own.

This journey thus is a departure from the geo-scientific definition of earthquake which defines it as a physical force emerging from convergence, divergence or subsidence of tectonic plates. Rather it emphasis on the necessity of a social definition whereby seismic strains generated by non-human forces collide with human agency. “*Disasters provide opportunities to examine aspects of social structures and processes that are hidden in everyday life*” (Stalling, 2002: 4). Like other disasters,

disruption of orderliness or normalcy of everydayness is an inalienable character of earthquake but what pushes it to sociology of exception is its *unpredictability*. The failure of the human mind to perceive the coming of an earthquake and the relative futility of preparedness is a point of concern. The word *preparedness* comes with the baggage of modernity, emanating from a techno-centric, state sponsored disaster management approach. It sees disasters as existing out-there. Hazards seen as natural and therefore external to the social. Catastrophe and sustainable society are considered mutually exclusive and binary.

Modernization that resulted from the industrial revolution led to the consolidation of the nation state. The ideology, machinery and bureaucracy together broke down the nature-society continuum thereby decapitating man to interpret symbols and systems in the ecosystem. Intuitions were first replaced by technology followed by artificial intelligence. However, in this race for certainty, nature was more and more objectified yet mystified as undecipherable. Hazards came to be identified as crisis causing disaster thereby requiring management. Today independent departments in governments are dedicated to strategize signals of early warnings, mock drills, evacuation and rescue. But the state failed to appreciate that this heightened sense of risk is a fall-out of modernization. As market advances, ability to interpret stresses in nature that emerged organically has become dimmer increasing casualties. "*Beck's analysis of the 'risk society' suggests that centralized institutions such as national governments are fundamentally incapable of responding to contemporary environmental and risk concerns*" (Irwin, 2001: 52-53). In the journey, I sought to critically explore this externalization of risk by the state (through the disaster management policy) though available evidences suggest that man is becoming more and more vulnerable with such interventions. Preparedness strategies are highly biased in favour of the wealthy, they are centralized, homogenous and unilineal. The regional diversity in risk distribution is not deemed cost effective. My journey has been an attempt to capture this dynamics with the disclaimer that the human society is not progressing rather approaching a time bomb.

In dialogue with myself, I then asked, what is the solution? Well, there is none! The world has reached a state in which everything has become *-post* and hyper-reality the norm. Scientific research organizations and government are presenting facts predicting future catastrophe and deluge. So, is then the apocalypse coming or is the

doom inevitable? As I looked around desperately for answers, a deep walk into our democracy what the policy makers call the margins and fringes, I found an answer. Here, life is dependent less on machine produce and more on a primitive means of hunting and gathering. While there could be many answers to a problem, I found mine in indigeneity practiced through matter and spirit by the Pati Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya.

The burgeoning state of unpredictability of life and labour, vulnerability to risk can be addressed through decentralized culture specific strategies. Myth of preachers, medicinal knowledge of community healers, ethnic practice such as community rope braiding and locally appropriate architecturesuch as bamboo platform houses showed a way in which man co-exists with his everyday precarious. Not only is he able to interpret warning signals emitted by the ecosystem,he is also capable of successfully mitigating risk and protecting the communally owned habitat. The indigenous people are hitherto illiterate but experts in the art of resilience. Two aspects set them apart from the modernists. First, they see risks in nature as a part of the organic system and man must co-exist with the threats in the ecosystem by making minor adaptations. Second, Risks can be culturally managed and preparedness locally undertaken. This is based on the premise that character of hazard varies regionally and affectsdiverse groups based on their capacity. *Capacity* here does not connote internal strength or individual ability but a collective term denoting ‘community cohesion’. What then is indigeneity in context of my journey?*Indigeneity*in context of my journey can be understood as; *rootedness of man in his ecosystem bound by collective memory of a precarious past, invoking spirits using ritualsto overcome everyday threats andadopting local technology, objects or artefacts as measures against mundane risks.*

In a forest society binaries prevail where catastrophe is opposed to order and susceptibility to safety, therefore it is important to understand indigeneity as opposed to global connections. China despite being a technological giant has been the one of the most calamity prone country of the world. There were series of lab based innovations to deter the loss infrastructure during earthquakes such as,use of retrofitting in buildings and bridges which absorb shocks and lets the structure move without falling thus keeping skyscrapers and multi-storey overbridges intact. But since the last decade a growing movement for revival of timber and bamboo houses is

seen. Building material of these indigenous houses are ductile and therefore resistant to earthquakes. Ironically China still sells retrofitting to other countries also one of the largest exporters of concrete material for construction to the world which are worst shock absorbers. The Chinese are making their home safe from earthquakes but the world safer for business. Similar timber and bamboo houses are found in Jaramukhuriya and called *chang*, which acts as protective coverings during floods or shocks but today these have become artefacts of nostalgia. An elderly woman laments that the younger generation prefers to live in brick and mortar buildings and even the government is floating various welfare schemes like the Indira Awaas Yojna to make concrete dwellings at cheaper rates. She ended with a doubt whether these cement blocks will be able to withstand shocks or fall flat in the next jerks. One needs to question the approach of the state towards building a safer society or is it more interested in westernized model of concretized structures. Isn't it supposed to integrate the best practices to ensure safety rather than a robotic attitude which is detrimental than good? Looking westwards does not always provide answers but looking inside and locally may.

The old lady also shared her insights on how people of ethnic societies still track their age in reference to watershed catastrophes. In the forest, idea of calendar is a new one as natural phenomenon and movement of the moon were important time markers recording births, deaths, famine, chieftains, victories and festivals. Earthquake is considered a milestone in natural evolution because it has overwhelming impact on everyday life and remembered. The indigenous system of chronology is a completely different from the modern one that is depicted in the example below.

Me: How old are you *Aaita*²?

Kheri: I am *sari-kuri*³

Me: So, you have a birth certificate?

Kheri: No. But *Bura's*⁴ wife records that I was born *dui-kuri bosor*² after the *proloy*⁵.

²Grandmother in Assamese

³Sari Kuri means eighty-four years old. And Dui Kuri Bososr means forty years. Here Kuri means twenty and the old Kamrupi way of Assamese. I was told that most people in olden times knew to count upto twenty only. Once one would exhaust counting till twenty, s/he would restart from one to twenty again.

The prevalent traditions of the hamlet suggest that epoch making natural phenomenon becomes part of the mundane everyday existence. All acts of being and belonging are woven around nature and become milestones in recounting the historical trajectory of the community.



Artefacts and Memories: (L) A woman covering the bamboo wall with a mixture of lime, clay and cement. (R) An elderly recounting memories.

However, there is an imminent danger of my journey being called backward looking or in the realm of ecological romanticism but I had more hands-on experience with science and epistemology in the field in comparison to lecture halls of the University. Meaningful engagement with cultural practices of mitigating vulnerability taught me that consentization is not merely a concept but a reality which every researcher must embark upon. Thus, any criticism of my problem and methodology is an occupational hazard.

Mapping the Travel: Methodological Quests in Undertaking the Journey

Social science has continued to sit in the shadow of natural sciences for investigating into facts and phenomena. Step by step enquiry into formulating operational definition and research design continues to jeopardize the identity of social science

⁴ Bura here is the first man who is supposed to have moved out of Lohargat alone in search a new patch of land and his wife is supposed to have been a chronicler/ record keeper of the hamlet.

⁵ Proloy means catastrophe. But the use of the word is context specific. While for the community in question, Rabha tribe of Jaramukhuriya, the catastrophe is the marked a changed in their life world and triggerred their migration from lohargath to Jaramukhuriya to settledown near the newly emergent water body the chandubi lake. The 'proloy' thus refers to a permant change in the trajectory of the community.

possessing discreet modes of enquiry for itself. *“Indeed positivists, notably Durkheim, based their claims for scientific nature of social science on assertion of methods used to study the social world did not differentiate in any important way from methods used to study the physical world”*(William & May, 1996: 14). A focused approach is supposed to guarantee structure, discipline and a law like generalization for applicability of findings of social research. In this work, I take a departure from this approach and embark into a more hermeneutic decolonized methodology. The existential crisis about a well-carved methodology in this study is bound to arise because I intend to study a natural phenomenon from a social perspective. Positivism would have provided a comfortable detour to decode the role of earthquake in human society. The study could have been modelled around tables of magnitude and intensity of damage, disability and deaths resulting from tremors and numerical representations accounting for loss. To deconstruct the link between seismicity and humanity methods of natural sciences could have been replicated in social sciences, historically. Several facts from suicide to volcanic eruptions have been enquired making use of similar methods which are unilineal, evidence based and statistical. These methods pride itself as value free despite being embedded in human emotions. This study however takes a departure from the positivist methods to enquire about the truths, embedded in natural phenomenon, earthquake and embarks in an interpretative path. This section is meant as a map recounting of how the journey unfolded itself but with a question, why follow the interpretative tradition?

It is believed that when an earthquake occurs, it is felt differently by all. Besides a spatial and temporal variance, the recipient population is never the same. Earthquakes seldom occur in similar location but even if they do, the community in question is never static. With every passing day, the demographic dividends alter and the culture undergoes constant evolution. Though there may be similarity say between the impacts of earthquake in Nepal and Uttarakhand yet diversity remains. Say the visible difference in political identity of Nepal as an independent country and Uttarakhand a state of the Indian Union, impacted the access to relief and victimhood. The West rushed in with food aid and rescue team in Nepal but in the Indian state such interventions were highly regulated. This study attempts to bring out diversity in people’s experience of earthquake from their vantage point rather than a grand

generalization. To comprehend this nitty gritty of diversity an interpretative approach is must.

Secondly, the subject matter of this study is unique so adopting an experimental, hypo-deductive claim will jeopardize the problem itself. Exploring a natural phenomenon using a humanistic lens requires an interpretive outlook to prevent mechanical reproduction of natural science biases. I seek to study earthquake resilience of the Rabha population by way of exploring their indigenous culture. Culture itself is an intangible-dynamic entity and each single trait can vary every passing mile. For example, the food habit of forest Rabha is very different from that of village Rabha. While both prefer bamboo shoot, the manner of fermentation and preservation varies substantially.

Earthquakes has continued to be studied from a techno-modern perspective where people are regulated by global goals and the state. My study takes an alternative, less travelled path in which indigenous beliefs and practices for earthquake mitigation has been presented. The community in question has a long history of association with the natural phenomenon. The earthquake of 1897 which reconfigured the landscape transforming miles of Sal forest into a lake started a human exodus. The erstwhile water scarce region now became abundant in water and marine resources transforming the community from hunters and gatherers to expert fishermen. Migration to change in livelihood cannot be reduced to numbers and percentage rather it demands a narrative enquiry and representative exploration. Ethnography became a natural ally for the study and hermeneutics its chosen path. Calling ethnography, a tool for data collection trivializes its role because it enabled me to undertake learning by doing, consentize the people also reflect on my role as a researcher.

At level of the University when the synopsis was being prepared and research design ascertained, inductive ethnography tools appeared viable. But as I drew myself closer to the field, interpretative ethnography became the only means to the end of a meaningful social research. Questionnaire and structured interview could not penetrate the fort of 'everyday precariousness', 'culture of preparedness', 'religious symbolism' 'malevolent spirits' and 'ecstatic movement of birds and animals' in forecasting tremors. Logical categorization of sample sizes was simply inadequate

and therefore living in the field and being a focused-traveller emerged as modes to satiate my research questions. Speaking in tangible terms *observation in natural context*, *collecting life histories* (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2001) of migration, experiencing seismicity and *studying artefacts* (ibid: 2) for indigenous resilience were used for data collection in my ethnographic site, Jaramukhuriya forest village.



Fortified Symbolism: A dancer during Baikho performing fire worship.

Thus, this study is a departure from both inductive and deductive way of studying a natural phenomenon rather, its dialogue with hidden meanings become important. Social context, relationships, premonitions in excavating the human angle of seismicity acquires a new dimension in this journey. A *subjective involvement* with the ethnographic site, indigenous ways of disaster mitigation with the people gives an interpretative turn to the methodological frame, a step divorced from mechanical data gathering and reproduction.

When a placid lake undergoes convulsions in the face of tremors and starts emptying itself around surrounding villages it creates mayhem. The chaos caused is not because the lake has overturned to empty itself. It is because a lake is not expected to behave in that way. The average everydayness of the lake experienced by the community residing around it says that the lake should not behave in an animate fashion. The water must be calm and the lake giving.

Thus, to explore premonition and experiences of everyday precariousness, written words or verbal communication proves inadequate, making understanding the key. *Observing emotions and sounds*, from narrowing eye to clicking mouths, sharing tales of birth and death, conquest and crisis became an in-depth inquiry, losing myself in the field by internalizing the other became central to 'data-gathering'. Thus, this journey has been embarked using an alternative method. There are routes and legends which gives the journey its uniqueness such as the philosophical disposition and its practical strategy. The two has been discussed separately which convey the essence of spirit and strategy bound into one whole.

a) Spirit: Philosophical Concerns

The philosophical angle of research helps to understand “*our actions, their assumptions and consequences. For instance, Research issues will be informed by moral and ontological considerations about the social world.....*” (William & May, 1996: 15). Life histories were collected to narrate the journey but majority of the participants were elderly. The elderly shared their actual names and reiterated incidences of adaptation with minute details. At the same time the younger members were less interested and accommodative to questions and ideas. This pushed me to consider the difference in nature of being. Revealing the difference in engagement with life history by the elderly and the young is a vignette.

It was the second phase of living in the field and the initial glass ceiling between me and the people was no more. Constant engagement with the community was a salient feature in this phase. Here, I was a focused traveller, concentrated on exploring the role of state in mitigating disasters at the level of community. I started by asking a group of young men to share their opinion on role played by district administration in preparing the community for disasters and distribution of relief. The bunch of men gave their critical insight about the role of District Administration which they categorically called “*turning a blind eye to the unfortunate people who were to be approached during elections alone*”. They termed themselves as second grade citizens because neither the Block Development Officer (BDO) nor the Member of the

Legislative Assembly (MLA) would mediate their concerns with the District Administration. The cooking gas cylinders which they were entitled hardly arrived, their monthly ration pilferage and relief matter such as food and tarpaulin sheets never came on time.

A couple of days passed and my engagement with these group of men became intensive and revelatory. But the third day when I made my way to the *nogou* (community hall), not one of the four men were present. While I continued to follow them, trying to talk more, on the sixth day the oldest of the group agreed to speak. He began by saying “*Madam, we don’t want you to report all we said in your study. We don’t want you to report our names and don’t want any trouble.*” The departure in addressing from *Bhonti* (younger sister) to *Madam* spoke more than what he had put across verbally. The fear of jeopardized interest, the apprehension of being reported and likelihood of being harmed by the state were the possible causes for such withdrawal.



Nogou: Community Hall where elders and bachelors gather for decisions and frolic

In sharp contrast was elderly were vocal and registered their dissent with utmost jest. Thus, there was an intergeneration difference of opinion and willingness to be represented as actors in the study. This drives home the point of *ontological difference in nature of being*. The topic was such that the government was destined to be criticised and issues of corruption and nepotism came into limelight. But the group of younger men stayed at bay, complacent and fearful. They feared of being harmed by

the governmental agencies. They called themselves men with family and responsibility and hitherto young to have an opinion on such matter. They did not want to jeopardize their social role, confronting politics. While they decided to wash their hands off their political opinion, the elderly engaged with it valiantly. As a response, an old man said, *“our roles in the society are relatively over and we don’t mind being jailed by the police for speaking the truth”*. Thus I was face to face with grammar of everyday existence and layers of truths.

Beings more technically ‘members’ are deeply connected to the roles they perform in society. Every person is supposed to discharge a set of functions cut out for him to have a well-oiled system. The group of young men considered engagement with the political question as jeopardizing their social existence but for the group of elderly, who have a different expectation set, expressing their disillusionment and distrust with the state was considered productive. This intergenerational difference in ontological roles of social beings and their ability to engage with the political question is connected to the concept of reality often posed with an enquiry, what is *real*? The younger men, performing economically remunerative occupation and procreation are perceived as *real*-contributing members of the society. On the other hand, the elderly performing subsidiary roles as relatively *less real*. So, criticising the government by the elderly is not considered socially disharmonious rather a natural expression.

Inalienable to this question of ontology vis-à-vis society, is the issue of *morality*. For instance, when the younger men withdrew from their testimony and requested to forfeit their names from the study, I was posed with a dilemma. The opinions and illustrations given by the group brought into light an entirely new scheme of things, the saga of nepotism and corruption came into picture but then the request came ‘*Madam, we don’t want you to report all we said in your study. We don’t want you to report our names*’, posed an ethical dilemma for the journey. This dilemma emerged hinged on two factors; interest of the study and interest of the people. Perspectives on nepotism and corruption by government would indeed enrich the study. Narratives of disillusionment with democratic agency experienced by the marginalised ‘tribal’ people would reflect the multiplicity of social situation but what about their everyday existence? What if my quest make them vulnerable? I too was encountering an

existential crisis, walking the insider-outsider tightrope and this made me reflect upon my responsibility towards the field and its people.

The group of younger men feared punishment and therefore emulated discipline in their public expression, a reproduction of consensual, filtered opinion. A dimension that eased my existential crisis was that people trusted me as a researcher but they did not trust the public body. In the end, it all became a matter of faith. I had to choose between data and people and I opted for the latter. Breaking people's faith has no alternative but presentation of data does. Social science has a humanistic role and is embedded in practical rationality. Adopting the approach of theoretical rationality, I should have presented the narratives provided by the group with details and analysed them. But integrating the opinion of an unwilling participant is not ethical. An act otherwise will not invoke any punitive action that I should be fearful of but it was an affair of trust. "*Every single human expression represents something which is common to many and therefore a part of the realm of the objective mind*" (ibid: 10)

Today the narratives are safe as field notes and do not figure in the thesis anywhere but those narratives built my perspective for the future. I realized that the government was biased towards indigenous people both in everyday & precarious times. Since I could not represent the voice of the people therefore I decided to make the government speak of its own biases. In their own voice and comfort of office space, the bureaucrats spoke. I listened patiently to unearth layers of biases. The fear of younger men was indeed right. I understood that *my philosophical trust in the field was with an interrelated system of beings*.

Saying thus the primary goal of Social Science is not to undertake exploration of research questions in a militaristic style but respect notions and value of the people who are the main actors of the study, a journey in my case. The researcher is only a medium through which the study manifests itself and the people as participants in the ethnography are its real directors. It is important to reflect the ideas of the people as they are rather than theoretical impositions by the researcher. In this whole process, *empathy* is central because it helps in understanding why the participants may choose to back-off or be involved.

One of the oldest men of Jaramukhuriya explained to me why younger men must stay away from criticising the government '*to have peaceful co-*

existence, yousee! We will stay here and so will the government therefore we must negotiate if we cannot have a consensus”.

The community was negotiating its existence vis-à-vis other agencies, balancing good and evil thus making it an ontological being; a whole with summation of its parts.

b) Strategy of Learning by Doing: Towards the Destiny

Undertaking an ethnography to study the culture of earthquake in context of a forest community requires walking an interdisciplinary tight-rope of being audience of possession acts to answering questions about identity. Ethnographer's conundrum which I experienced at every stage of my journey occurred from observing the mundane in the field and being hit by its meta-reality along with the remainders of scientific temperament acquired at the University. The tussle was to mediate myself with the people, their values and what I have learnt and been socialized into. During the second visit, I undertook hands on activity with people which was a leap from my previous visit. First visit was confined to sitting and conversing in verandas or orchards but I failed to penetrate beyond the words and sighs. Ventilation periods which were spaced between the three visits allowed introspection and contemplation as I tried to compile my field notes. These 'time-offs' from the field enabled to understand where I stood and how much more walking was required. Accordingly, the approach of dealing with the people was modulated based on the amount of insights gathered and explorations required further. The evolution in approach also impacted my relation with the people; from being a guest I moved on to become a friend and finally progressed to a confidante and advisor. The awe of an unmarried female researcher staying in the forest was gradually replaced by an equal relationship, but this transition did not come out of the blue but an assisted process of afterthoughts and calibrated efforts. It was visible that I carried several identity tags which were camouflaging sometimes and mutually incompatible at others. There were questions why an upper-middle class girl from city would be interested in forest people and living with them. People constantly tried to understand my stake in the process, my benefits and theirs.

On a day during my second stint, late in the morning and I had gone to the forest picking green chilli with Kabita. There was a strange tingling feeling around my ankle and as I bent for an itch, I could see something black. And there it was, a leach which was sucking my blood. At first, I was petrified but in the forest, everybody must survive on their own, others can assist demonstrate ways of safety but not beyond. I was desperate to remove the slimy leach and panicked as it grew fatter with my blood. It had rained the night before and the undergrowth was fully of crawling predators. While I had planned to accompany Kabita in her task enquiring about female dropout from high school, I was caught off guard by the ferocious forest. City life did not equip me with the idea that wearing slipper in the forest can be dangerous. Now anxious I tried to remove the leach with a stick followed by a leaf but nothing helped. Kabita assumed that being an adult I knew how to remove a leach and will probably use some urban technique but my experience with the ecosystem was limited and I was unaware its unseen hazards. Transferring my chillies in her basket, she asked me to spit on my right hand then hold down my leg with the left and finally with an upward stroke removed the parasite with the spit. I failed several times and despite urges she wouldn't perform the act for me. There was a belief that the leach will only react to the spit of its host, I felt empowered with the information and finally succeeded in the stunt. As we left, she showed me where to venture and where not to, also under which tree one must talk aloud to scare of spirits and squirrels and under which grove complete silence was required.

Learning by doing brought me face to face with ways of behaving around the ecosystem. The forest is alive, full of fruits, mysteries and dangers. It is a precarious terrain so thinking and acting around it carefully was essential to survive. My exposure taught me that dealing with everyday precariousness is an art which must be learnt over a period time from observing the elders and for people like me by unlearning.

Being a fan of grounded theory, I was prudent enough not to carry a questionnaire but I did carry a schedule and a basic framework as guide which I would look at every night to assess myself of deviations. Initially I would segregate between necessary conversations and unproductive talks based on a mental map of my agenda but I soon realized that rapport with the people was built over mundane discussions because it enabled the insider and outsider to rise above a utilitarian relation, thus forming 'the

bond'. Emergence of 'the bond' ensures fluidity in information and trust to venture inside homes and lives, which occurred as I continued staying in the field. Anthropological studies have fancied the use of camera but in my context, it emerged as a barrier. Obviously, I took with me a high definition device to capture the life in the forest, the indigenous culture, traditions, artefacts and perilous terrains but as time passed I realized that it was distancing me from being fully absorbed in the society. Often back-pack tourists used to come with long lensed cameras to capture primitiveness, nature and their conquests. Indeed, I was a traveller too but of a different kind, in search of wisdom of the people and their co-existence with the ecosystem. Thereafter I abandoned the big device and began photographing only when 'the bond' emerged, signally certain level of acceptance. Thus, I used the camera in a limited way and meaningfully.

Despite fluency in Assamese language, my tone and dialect differed from the people which sometimes started a spree of laughter and other times imitations. The Pati Rabhas also retained some words of the original Rabha language in ordinary communication. Soon I realised that I could not retain those words. The practice of keeping a diary helped me to scribble down a few words when no one was looking but when I took it out along with a pen in full show, it broke the flow of conversations. As a solution, I used to record some of the dialogues from the very beginning with prior approval that prevented ruptures in between.

My journey spans across three main domains, Earthquake, Rabha Tribe and Indigenous Culture. Each of these variables can be independent areas of study given their scope and importance but I chose to bring the three in confluence to arrive at something new. I tried to trace the longitudinal history of a seismically prone terrain and explore the reasons why an ethnic community must in living amidst risk. In this task, I faced several challenges such as generating interest in a dry topic such as earthquake which many thought was not sociological enough also presenting it aesthetically for academic consumption required much hardwork. On the other hand, for the community earthquake is a sensitive issue, evoking past-memories and impending fears because of suddenness and unpredictability. Thus, I had to strike a balance. The other deviation was that I sought to study disaster from an indigenous perspective was believed as a conjectural possibility. From my engagement in the field, huge amount of data which I would like to call 'peoples epistemology' emerged

but all of that could not be fitted into this travelogue, technically the thesis. I had to keep the basic tenants of the topic in mind and leave the rest of the information for future times. It was a difficult choice.



. *Unlearning: (L)A Rabha woman sitting by the fire place called 'chouka'. (R) Delecacies for a guest, severed the ethnic way.*

When I first thought about exploring earthquakes sociologically, it was already a rebellion but soon I assumed responsibility of my preoccupation. The deviation from standard sociological topics was relieving because I could connect with the issue free from previous injunctions. Rather my relationship became an intimate one which no longer required separation between theory and practice, 'us' and 'them'. The abundant use of 'I' in my work is a testimony to this relatedness. My academic quest became a personal journey of unlearning and re-discovering myself. The use of 'I' must not be seen as an obsession with self rather a hermeneutic communion with the field.

Locating the journey in a Theoretical Realm: Co-travellers

The journey may appear to be a distraction from the sociological realm as I constantly moving in and out the discipline to bridge gaps between construction and reality. That is when, Zygmunt Bauman's (1992) account of a postmodern world where old certainties have faded and unsettling uncertainties have taken place, give me the thrust to look deeper into the dynamics of an indigenous society which has withstood seismic brunt historically and continues to reside in a fragile zone gambling everyday precariousness. Geologists and Historians agree that the Brahmaputra Valley is

seismically prone and at an interval of every fifty years faces massive tectonic shock transformstopography,splittingwater bodies and giving a new shape to the landscape. Economists say that such catastrophe are of exceedingly low probability but exceedingly high impact, thereby making it easy for Sociologists to explain why societies sometimes seem curiously indifferent towards plausible but improbable risk. This triggers an Anthropologist to venture into the field enquiring experience of collective risk and its avoidance.

The study of environmental risk tends to blur disciplinary boundaries because it impacts almost all areas of human intervention and has repercussions for the society at large.All disciplines are imprisoned by the suddenness and unpredictability of earthquakes which makes articulations and contestations problematic. Remarkable works like Richard Posner's Catastrophe (2004) and Edward Simpson's Political Biography of an Earthquake (2013) emphasizes on the point that the possibilities of disasters on earth are few but its occurrence can cause massive destruction, here Posner was talking about asteroid hits. Simpson however transports us to a more subjective domain, transcending across politics of relief to rebuilding of Kutch, a city in Gujrat where class divides were reinforced after the earthquake⁶ and vulnerables pushed to the brink of extinction. Sitting among rubbles in the street, amidst clamour and bulldozers he observed the newly appointed Deputy Collector supervising reconstruction of the city. Simpson agrees that the earthquake did collapse houses and shops burying people under debris but he claims that post-earthquake reconstruction of the city was more devastating as it razed memories and residual assets of survivors to the ground. He recounts that a small shopkeeper had lost his dwelling to the earthquake and all he was left with was a pawn shop but now as per the new norms of city beautification the front of the shop had to be removed as its remains wereunattractive. After the bulldozers left, the homeless shopkeeper, was there but without a shop.

Most narratives of earthquakes are centre around urban spaces, the main reason is *visibility*. Loss of human capital and resources are more visible in urban spaces because each street and drain is mapped and individuals as economically productive members, contrary to the rural terrain as sprawling fields and folks as farmers. Cities

⁶Gujrat Earthquake occurred on 26th January on India's 51st Republic Day in 2001 measuring 7.7 on the Richter Scale.

are seen as products of human labour and its destruction jeopardizing human ingenuity thereby makes earthquake the natural enemy. Studying impact of the phenomena on city is preferred because destruction of homes and hearths can be counted as tangible loss of asset. Expansion of market has further populated the cities with simultaneous increase in risk, this leaves the slums to face the deluge despite the growing innovations in technology.

Distance is the primary cause for the increasing vulnerability because modernization has created several brackets in human existence. Man is increasingly getting alienated from nature leading to failure in comprehending signs and symbols of threat. Hypnotized by the market and driven by technology he fails to evaluate the ecosystem around. A frequent sight on the way to my field across national highway 37 are the hills surrounding the valley being cut into shape either to build private universities, hotels or spa-resorts. Indeed, business is growing and Assam has become a sought-after ethnic location to enjoy nature but the rampant exploitation of the commons has befallen several tragedies like Gareth Hardinge (1968) predicted and possibly many more are impending. Will the Assam valley resemble the Uttarakhand during the flash floods of 2013 when hundreds of houses and hotels superimposed on a fragile, unstable terrain simply perished in the river of rains? Infrastructure and other developmental activity must be undertaken but considering limits of the ecosystem, else it will bounce back leaving the structures in shambles. The gap can be bridged by acknowledging that man is a part of the ecosystem and not vice-versa, so he must co-exist rationally.

Habermas emphasized on *modernization as an enlightenment project* but Ulrich Beck (Beck, 2011: 2) rejects it and conceptualizes *reflexive modernization* to elucidate a *risk society*, which is suitable to explain the illustration above. According to him risks are not inventions of a modern society but existed since time immemorial. In the past risks were of personal nature, like Columbus setting out to explore India was an individual risk. But now risks have acquired a global character, possessing threats to destruction of life on earth such as the risk of nuclear fission which can end the world in matter of hours. Similarly, in the past dependence on forest was considered natural and despite risks of wild animals or unknown terrain people used to venture for fulfilling basic needs. But today the dependence has taken a wider dimension with illegal felling of trees by timber mafias that has led to decrease in forest cover also

loss of top soil to erosion. Besides forest is cleared to set up industries and townships. This dependence on forest is regulated by the need to modernize and in the process, risk is becoming a wholesale product, thereby endangering humanity.

Nature is egalitarian and has endowed all men with similar capacities and potentials but once he enters society, the nascent potentials are put to test under multiple layers of stratification. In short, society disobeys the natural principle of egalitarianism and makes some more vulnerable than others. Class distance⁷ enhances vulnerability because upper-class has control over resources of nature and safety thereby leaving the under-class to face scarcity and threat. Dialectical Materialism given by Marx focuses on this aspect. As empirical evidence has it that poor perish during catastrophe and leaving the rich behind to rule. This nullified disasters as great levellers instead reinforces the materialistic conception of haves, have-nots and the saga of alienation. Though I cannot guarantee the theoretical weight of my work yet I can assert that in course of understanding earthquake as a social catastrophe the ideas of inequality and divide in opportunities of life and resources has been conceptualized.

Dilthey's claims that social life is complex and can never fully be explained, thereby letting some questions go unanswered (Marsh, 2002: 14-15). So, I began my journey by exploring few unanswered questions. In the paradigm shift of conceptualizing earthquakes as atonement to natural phenomenon, why is the western model of disaster management adopted?

Ethnic communities have faced existential threats historically and have overcome those using their local ingenuity but there is a clear rejection of this model worldwide. When it comes to managing the unpredictability the techno-centric model is considered the most practical. My quest however found contrary results.

Rabhas are deeply intertwined with the ecosystem and evolve locally effective solutions. The forest dwelling community residing by the lake of seismic origin, juggling everyday precariousness yet they believe in spiritual symbiosis of the supernatural, ecosystem and man. This closeness enables them to tide over vagaries and fear. *Deo* tells me that the forest is a mysterious maze yet they understand signs and symbols emitted before threats. He says "*we are animists, so the birds and fishes*

⁷Class distance is more appropriate in comparison to difference because class is multilayered.

conveys us the risks before the catastrophe occurs.” Thus, there is a great deal of poetry to be deciphered if the indigenous belief system of the Rabhas are to be understood. But there is objectivity too. The community to deal with unforeseen threats have visible objects and artefacts, such as, gourd shell to preserve & transport grains these premonitions make them internally resilient, which a techno-centric model fails to achieve.

There are some points of contrast between indigenous ethics and modernist ethics of dealing with catastrophe. The indigenous model is context driven that emphasize upon relatedness with nature and living in harmony, whereas the modernists model having occidental roots and believe in man’s superiority over nature. So, there is a tension between the two world views which I will try to explain by the word *bonn*. It is an Assamese word capturing multitude of emotions and relations. It refers to the green cover for the forest department implying a formal-bureaucratic relation, for travellers and back-pack tourists it’s a place for fun to escape the humdrums of a city life thus implying an informal relation. Whereas for a forest dweller *bonn* is a confluence of both formal and informal where they live, work, play and punish. The literal translation of the word is *forest*, a domain where social and natural dissolves, based on relation and ideology.



Living Museums: (L) Models depicting cultural dress, jewellery and basket during Chandubi Festival. (R) A Rabha child posing with a back-packer’s bike.

Aided by Weber’s terminology the forest dwellers have been asked to rationalize their cultural capital into economic capital to make the *bonn* a congenial tourist destination. The loss of emotions and traditions has led to an identity crisis and alienation from the ecosystem which was central to a good Rabha life. Today the

subsistence based forest economy is part of the service industry. Government is further planning to build lake resorts in the area but will it not end the forest people as invisible prisoner, caged to depict a primitive savage life? They are in the process of losing their natural rights to evolve with the ecosystem. This rationalization will reduce the forest village into a living museum where their *changs*⁸ will become homestays and their festivals, talent search shows.

Milestones & Breaks: Trials and Tribulations while Travelling

Jack Katz (2002) says that ethnographers often start with fieldwork focusing on descriptive tasks in explaining social life, making transitions from ‘*how*’ to ‘*why*’. This process of transition however is neither smooth nor unilinear. The road from University with a computer-generated auto-corrected version of objectives and research question undergoes complete transformation in the field, which is sometimes fathomable and other times mysterious. From delay in onwards bus journey to Jaramukhuriya, to pompous officials who believed in protocols and appointments, besides my own reservations contributed to test patience. The concern of friends and family about pursuing a dystopian topic and self-doubt in the academic credentials of researching in an unchartered territory created some breaks in the journey.

Earthquake is perceived as existing outside the realm of human norms and imagination. Therefore, men are considered passive recipients of it. Sociological relevance of studying this natural phenomenon was questioned by many that led to initial desperation. During the phase of pilot study, earthquake emerged only as an apocalyptic phenomena external to society. While some said that role of human agency in earthquake is only conjectural others saw a causal link. Initial bouts of disappointment with the subject matter of the journey and the field was but obvious. However, what sustained me was the belief was the possibility of future questions which such a research will pose. When George Orwell wrote 1984, the hypothesis of a Big Brother Looking wasn’t real but today with CCTV cameras mushrooming in public spaces and each step of citizen being monitored by

⁸Indigenous houses made of timber and bamboo

government for national security, is nothing but the Big Brother Looking. Today Foucault's panopticon is no more a concept as it is applicable for all realms of human intervention and once again reasserting Orwell's contentions. Taking inspiration from such futuristic writings, I made inroads into excavating earthquake socially, despite initial hiccups.

Besides a social perspective on earthquake, a second related theme which emerges across my journey is 'mitigation of catastrophe using indigenous means'. To drive home the discourse on indigeneity, the Rabha community comes into picture. Historically the rhetoric on tribe in has revolved around the question of ethnicity, identity politics, autonomous movement and exclusion from the process of development. The ethnic identity of the indigenous people has also been enmeshed with nature and their role as natural people. My journey takes a step ahead in this route trying to trace myths and material culture of the Rabhas with seismicity. Only a few have walked this path so the journey was full of tricks and mazes. There were mistakes and questions left unasked. The trial vis-à-vis this point is that the potential of the area has not been fully explored and my study is only a brush into this universe of possibilities.

I tend to call my quest a journey rather than study which automatically leads us to the next question '*is it then a travelogue?*' The attempt has been to trigger academic discourse around seismicity in context of human agency. How have communities at risk negotiated their existence historically besides being active participants in mitigating their future vulnerability? Collective testimonies of resistance, survival, preparedness and resilience have been captured through narratives of their experiences. My journey thus takes an unconventional path making of 'de-colonializing methods'. This has come under the scanner of certified sociologists who pride themselves with authenticity of methodology and theory. I tend to depart from a stereotypical yet accepted way of studying natural phenomena from a positive perspective in favour of a hermeneutic one. Adopting a reflexive framework, probing into the field as a focused traveller surfaced questions on generalizability and verifiability. Society is transient where the symbiosis is of dialogue, engagement and moment makes research meaningful. Thus, I seek to understand the actors, their dialogues and subjectivities in reference to time and space. '*Time is experience subjectively and narratives (emerging out of living in various periods of time) are spontaneous acts of meaning making that*

take place and interweave through many moments of discursive time and space' (Cunliffe, Luhman & Boje, 2004: 27).

Epidemics are common in the aftermath of a calamities. To brace the village against the impact Deu who is the priest starts invoking ancestral spirits through Deodhani, transcendental dancers. A possession dance ritual is preformed just before the monsoon season to invoke the spirits for predicting the impact loss and how to curb it. Dead ancestors speak through the voice of the possessed dancer, predicting outbreak of diseases but at the same time revealing names of plants and weeds that will bring peace upon the sufferers. As an audience to this meta-reality, I, an ethnographer was unable to decide between being participant observer or asystematic narrator. As the meta reality unfolded in form of a furious dancer with a painted face and quivering voice, *verstehen*, an empathetic understanding, emerged as the only approach.

People are often used to survey as a mode of data collection. Subjective perception employed in my journey raised questions in their minds regarding the utility of my approach for them. They would ask "*what would you do of our stories? For whom are these and why?*" This probed me to question the utility of my approach for world epistemology in general and for significant others in the field. I was confronted by *researcher's responsibility* which I tried to resolve it by focusing on policy implication of indigenous disaster mitigation practices but a deeper look revealed the obsession of policy makers with quantifiable results. As I faced the challenge of meaning making of an interpretative study for a broader audience, I came across the most significant milestone of my journey, *consentization*. The series of hermeneutic acts in the field were part of a consciousness raising process.

I sought to ease my tribulation by engaging with the community and the bureaucracy not just with the question of this study but also making one party educate about the social and political condition of the other. This was for me a liberating process because I was no more just a researcher. I was becoming an actor in my own research. I was becoming an enabler and giving back to the field in some capacity.

Assam is the state with highest maternal mortality rate (MMR) besides being one of the worst performer with regards to infant mortality rate (IMR). The major cause is amnesia but incidence of mother and children succumbing to

diarrhoea followed by death is also great. A huge percentage of diarrheal attacks occur during monsoon months and post-flooding. A narrator remarked, “*relief camps flow with faeces and vomit thus people fall like flies*”. To enquire into this, I proceeded to the Public Health Office in Guwahati. The official told me that the ‘tribal’ people are not conscious and do not adhere to hygienic practices. He also pointed out that the people do not consume the medicines prescribed by camp doctors. They attributed deaths to the practice of ethnic medicine called ‘*jhara-fuka*’ in colloquial Assamese. He ended by saying that to eliminate diarrheal epidemic post-annual flooding, behaviour change among the ‘tribal’ people is must.

I sought to enquire the validity of the Public Health Official’s claim from the perspective of the people. I began by trying to inform the women about safe hygienic practices to prevent diarrhoea but a new angle came to light. Niva Ba, a middle-aged woman retorted, “*but where are the toilet and safe drinking water? We fend and feed on whatever is available!*” This clarification highlighted the structural failure to address the issue.

The information received from the two parties was substantial but mutually contradictory. Such information requires to be disseminated in the public domain and acted upon. Therefore, I decided to involve a third party, an intermediate agency who can disseminate the information and make praxis possible. I discussed the issue with the Gaon Bura (Sarpanch) of Rajapara, who promised to raise the issue with the local MLA, he hinted at the massive corruption in setting up relief camps. Given my limited capacity to intervene, I informed him of the WASH campaign initiated by the government and discussed the possibility of holding a hygiene camp in Rajapara High School so that children can become part of the change. He promised to look-into the matter!

As the field began to reveal itself more, I was becoming a passionate actor in it but at the very core of this engagement was *un-learning*. Sometimes the field situation itself were so overwhelming that the field diary would get flooded with entries. And very few of them had to do little with the topic of research. The struggle was to separate the relevant from the mundane. Given this the field evolves before the eye of the

researcher from a mere site, to a personal playground where one had to decide between becoming a goal-keeper or a striker. Thus, it was my engagement with the field as an ethnographer that affected the quality of the data and this struggle is a trial!

This is an age of heavy referencing where original expression is forced to hide in dark alley, so I had to constantly question myself what must I do about people's narratives of everyday life. Like a horse running a race with blinders, was I to be obsessed with theories or could I have the courage to narrate the truth. I decided to flow with the latter. In many ways, we researchers become detectives, trying to decode our topic during field visits but I realized this was counterproductive because people suffered from tension of being gazed at all hours thereby dramatizing their responses. So, the only option was to become one with the field. Only towards the end of my journey did I realize the need to shed the researcher's gaze and remain prepared to be caught off guard by the people. For instance, seismic events are colloquially termed as '*Jakra*'. Each time a person would use the word *jakra*, I would jot it down as earthquake in my field note, but my field taught me to interpret the lexicon as per context rather than imposing self-perception. A vignette follows to drive home yet another trial in the field;

A normal night in the field in an ordinary *Chang*, I could feel the ground shaking. It was eight in the evening and typically called night in the forest village, I had retired to my sleeping bag. Suddenly I could hear a whiff of whispers, followed by complete silence. Everything began to shake. I almost jumped out of my bag announcing *Jakra, Jakraahise!* Rita moved swiftly across the beetle wood floor and said 'quite', *the elephants have descended the hills for water, into the lake*. After that, only my eyes moved. I could see a herd. As I tried to fathom; heavy movements and slight tremors, finally followed by loud crackers. The next morning as I wondered over my obsession as a researcher with the indigenous way of life and earthquake, I was told by Kheri, "*those are Jakra (tremors) too, but not the ones you are studying. We can make these ones go away, we just have to burst a few fire crackers!*"

Uniqueness of the Journey: To and Fro into Sociology

This study means nothing without its context. The Pati Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya belong to the Chayani Borduar forest reserve, by the Chandubi lake so, when I sought to understand the people, it could not be devoid of their ecosystem. The idiom of the journey will be lost if the Rabhas are isolated from their environment. In course of my journey I realized that dilemma does not always occur from the being or his immediate surroundings but from an intercourse of different parts of the ecosystem. He shares anxiety of various parts as he belongs to the greater whole. For instance, *Deu*, the priest has an ugly dream prophesizing the doom of the hamlet. The next morning, he simply does not wake up to share it with his wife exploring Freudian repressions. Instead he wakes up and performs a sacred ritual amidst the *thaan*⁹ offering blood sacrifice to *Langa Deu*¹⁰. In the ancestral villages, the priest has a specific role to perform, handed down by his forefathers. He must keep evil at bay, which may mean fighting a malevolent spirit or interpreting an evil dream. Thus, he lays bare the intestines of a chicken, observes calculatedly screening the possibilities of deaths or famine. The *Deu* is the interpreter of maladies of the forest people. He belongs to the forest and the forest belongs to him, the two cannot be separated. Thus, I cannot break this holy alliance of belonging, so an attempt has been made to situate the people, their memories and issues in context of their surroundings. In this process, I became one among them, I began belonging to the forest despite hiccups.

As I grew akin to the idea of collective destiny of the people, my relationship with them deepened. Despite critical history and bewildering diversity, I began relishing a sense of brotherhood and fraternity with the forest and its folks. So, I decided to represent their voice making myself only a medium. Learning to reflect like the Rabhas and acting like them helped me to gain a better access in the world of mysteries and precariousness. To make sense of their world it became essential to lose my language and attitude acquired at the University. In the first visit, there were many stories told which I retained but could not become a part of the collective imagination. In the ventilation period before beginning the second phase of my journey, I began feeling a sense of disconnect and asked, what was holding me back?

⁹Sacred grove

¹⁰Titular deity

The chains of a standard sociological research. Thus, I risked by letting those standards go.

I began losing myself, started to fearing what they fear and tasting to relish what they ate thus acquiring the most important lesson. An ethnography cannot be completed without internalizing the emotions of the ecosystem, it is not actors or objects which I was observing but a subjective experience of being and belonging. Had I been travelling to and fro into the field with questionnaire and interview schedule, sympathy would overcome me, not empathy. But because I stayed in the field, sharing a common space, dissolving myself and emerging in their silhouette an in-depth, experiential ethnography became possible.



Praxis: An elderly couple choosing between land and water.

Another dimension of my work is that there is no segregation between ideas and practice, rather the work has emerged as a praxis of the two. This evolution is a crucial turn because sociology of disasters is a residual domain of enquiry unlike caste, class and gender, the scholarship is limited and discourses few. Studies on earthquakes makes victims the main point of interest and confuses the nature of risk and the kinds of responses. I have focused on social capital of the ethnic community in mitigating their seismic vulnerability. The reference to indigenous people in national imagination is less and their role in managing unpredictability is a hitherto uncharted territory. Thus, I departed from a conventional domain and engaged with earthquake and indigeneity not as a background noise but a central theme. The understanding of earthquake is neither from my experience or from what I have read but from the vantage point of the people which they describe as limiting and at other times liberating.

The region has been autonomous as the presence of state from medieval to British was shadowy and remote. When one looks at the role of administration either in managing welfare or catastrophe, its power appears to be less regulatory or less absolute. It is a reminder of practical limitations to one dimensional power contrary to what writings of Goffman or Foucault would lead us to believe. I have sought to explore various dimensions of this distance with the state in course of my journey. In the process, the slow transition in state's attitude also becomes visible. Economic potential of the forest as timber and the lake ecosystem as a tourism hotspot brought Jaramukhuriya in the mental map of the state's imagination but despite transition seismic vulnerability of the region has gone unnoticed. The cultural richness of the people is equated in money and floods are considered as the only threat. So, is ignoring the longitudinal collective memory of earthquakes a choice of the state to habitual coercion naturalized by the people? I kept pondering and found that some questions must be left unanswered. So, I continued my journey by trying to explore latent fear of living in a seismic zone, endemic culture and the memories of catastrophe which binds yet prevents them from abandoning their ancestral land.

Earthquake in Society and Culture

This chapter is one of the interrelated element of my journey where I attempt to deconstruct earthquake using a social lens. For instance, myths are functional prerequisites in explaining the occurrence of an earthquake for forest communities. There is absence of an unequivocal knowledge system to explore the linkages between seismicity and society but concepts such as social change, everyday precariousness of vulnerable communities has been visible themes. Before I proceed, it must be kept in mind that catastrophes do not occur in a cultural vacuum and social life and practices are inextricably entangled. In this chapter, I seek to present some of the spheres which bind seismicity and human agency with an assumption that social and natural are not separate.

Re-defining Earthquake: A Social Perspective

Gandhi practiced a distinctive approach of nationalism, one part of which Tagore shared with him and the other part he did not. Both men expanded the meaning of nationalism beyond the narrowly defined anti-colonial struggle. They also differed in their means while interpreting earthquake which during the colonial times was largely seen as an act of god by the Hindus and *quayamaat* or judgment day by Muslims. It was after the Bihar earthquake of 1934 that the difference in discourse came into being and the essence of it is captured by C.F. Andrews, a close associate of both. Gandhi reached Bihar on Rajendra Prasad's insistence who urged him to tour the distressed region keeping in mind the agenda against untouchability. It was during the heights of the relief operation that Gandhi spoke in Muzaffarpur. He was against the relief fund being used for charity and insisted against turning Indian people to beggars. He pointed that the relief fund should be used for rebuilding alone. And then he used his symbolic dialogic approach, the very tool of Hind Swaraj (2009) and raised a question, '*What has this calamity taught you?*' (Andrews, 2015: 12). In the usual appeal to conscience, Gandhi answered himself, "*I want everyone to be*

superstitious enough with me to believe that disaster is a divine chastisement for great sin we have committed and committing against the untouchables....” (ibid: 34). While it is true that his tour turned into a moral campaign of a sort but most importantly he raised the question of the marginalized who died in great numbers. It is said that before the catastrophe occurred on 15th of January, Hindus had reached the Munggerghaat of Ganga for a ritualistic bath on account of *Sankranti*, while the Muslims had thronged the narrow lanes of the bazaar for *Id* celebration. The congregation was great, escape routes few, stampede imminent and early warnings none thereby making death the single possibility. Any explanation could not suffice the quantum of loss and grief which the catastrophe entailed so the rhetoric divine intervention was repeated. However, Gandhi gave a new dimension to the seismic carnage by bringing in the question of untouchables who were far greater affected than the rest. However, cynical of Gandhi’s view was Tagore who wrote “*what is truly tragic is the fact that Mahatma Gandhi used by exploiting an event of cosmic disturbance, far better suits the psychology of his opponent than his own...*” (ibid: 36). With the episodes of seismicity occurring in British India we are exposed to multiplicity of opinions which broadens our frame of reference and understanding.



Ways of Expressing: (L) Gandhi in Mazaffarnagar after the Mungger Earthquake. (R) Tagore’s Untitled Painting known as ‘Figures in Sepia’

The classical social theory has had an ambivalent relationship with disasters but despite the silence there has been a long standing intellectual tradition of discussing the impact of earthquakes upon society. The exchange of view between Gandhi and Tagore introduces us to a realm of elements which helps in conceptualizing the relationship between man and earthquake and a sociological debate between realism

and constructivism ensues thereon. To explore these interconnections of consequences, collapses and change from simple organic peasant to highly mechanized neo-liberal societies the concepts of myth, meaning making from instinct to management and economy has been used to redefine seismicity as a social phenomenon.

a. Mythical Reconstructions:

My journey with earthquake an off-beat side of environmental sociology began with a newspaper report which stated that the Indian Ocean Earthquake catapulted a magnanimous Tsunami washing off army bases and civilian towns off Nicobar Islands but without killing even a single member of the indigenous tribe. It was surprising to see that not even single one of them was hurt. The Onge and Sentinelese fall within the category of primitive tribal group remain completely isolated from modernity and they resist any form of contact with the outer world. In light of the similar philosophy they withdrew from around the sea into the tropical forest well before the tsunami struck. A thorough survey of the location revealed that not a single one of them suffered. At the same time thousands of Europeans basking in the Christmas sun in various tropical islands were washed off by the tidal waves. The report simply stated that the tribes had mythical indigenous knowledge, system of signs and symbols which the modern world failed to comprehend. Thus, a quest for construction of man-seismicity link through myths emerged.

Earthquake is an event of geological origin leading to destabilization of landforms and communities occupying the terrain. It affects the social structure owing to its uncontrollable and unpredictable nature. In hazardous terrains, frequent seismic shocks reconfigure both landscape and memories of the people so the experience of collective stress when internalized and reiterated over a long period, takes the shape of myth. The earthquake of 15th August 1950 was considered 6th largest of the 20th century that killed more than 1500 people in a hitherto sparsely populated state of Arunachal Pradesh (Prakash, 2012). The impact of tremor was such that the hills started disintegrating leading to occurrence of landslides and consequent flooding. But blockage of rivers brought about the ultimate deluge. As people perished in great numbers under crumbling houses or getting submerged others survived. The survivors

remember those seven days as ultimate calamity which could befall men. The Noctes of Arunachal capture the calamity in their collective memory and tell tales of it often. But most interestingly, the tribal community in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh has a myth which justifies the occurrence. The Noctes who sit on the brink and co-exist with precariousness provide a mythical allegory justifying their vulnerability to the catastrophe and the uncertain pattern of life that follows.

The belief goes that there is a spirit called *Jovey* who lives inside the earth, he who takes the souls of men after death. Whenever *Jovey* gets hungry for souls, he shakes the earth so that people will die and he will have enough to eat.

This allegory is accepted among the indigenous group because it enables them to justify the periodic seismicity. The fact that the myth continues to thrive until today validates that there exist mechanisms and currents in society which are stronger than language and discourse. The myth of *Jovey* is an oral instrument with which the Noctes assign meaning to their unstable social world often wrecked by seismicity and casualties. At different periods of time in history different interpretations have been given about the event. There is a partial approach of handling earthquake and the others have looked at it as an entire system interwoven with big concepts. Both mythologists and geologists have subscribed to earthquake as an immense system and none can do in isolation of the other. Another belief from across the perilous hills of Assam prevalent among the Shingphos goes that there is water below the earth and in water lives a great fish called *Palang-Ananda*. From its back there grows a flower and the world rests on that flower; on it when a king is born, the fish laughs for joy, this shakes the world! Similarly, when the king dies the fish weeps for sorrow, this shakes the world too! Life and death are inevitable parts of social and natural therefore the great fish must both laugh and cry and earth shall shake without fail.

Language, art, belief system, myths and rituals compose a significant system of symbols which enables man to adapt to his environment. The way the Shingphos gave meaning to the geological phenomena is a testimony that tremors played a significant role in the community's everyday life. Numerous tribes which reside in the hills and valleys of the North East of India do not have written language or modern mechanism to record their history thereby making folklores an important alternative. Folklores pass down from one generation to next and myths are an

important part of it. Though a lot is lost in transmission yet the essence remains wherein the sacrifice of ancestors, migration from distant lands, history of arduous battles fought by fierce clan chiefs and battles against forces of nature remains intact. These folklores are often substantiated by motifs from the environment.

“The tales are remarkably original and seems to be genuine product of tribal creativity and imagination. These myths are socially relevant as these are recited during ceremonial gatherings of marriage, birth, funeral or harvest”
(Elwin, 2009: 46)

Taylor suggested that myth was primitive history and ethnology expressed in poetic form. Though myths are in the realm of imagination and beyond reason, yet it performs some inalienable functions such as cohesion in the community. It binds member to a common community imagination thereby unifying them against a one enemy.

In hazardous terrains falling in subduction zones prone to earthquakes and floods life is a tussle with forces of nature. Though environmental concerns and precariousness varies over time and slowly gets institutionalized yet for indigenous communities the society and nature dualism does not exist. It may appear too rudimentary a statement in a post neoliberal era but primeval communication with nature to meet bare necessities of life prevails even today. People are dependent on forest for food, on shamans for religion and animal sacrifices to forecast of monsoon and drought. Changes in nature are dramatized and depicted in symbolic terms through myths, thereby giving a cultural expression to the inanimate, unpredictable and the consequential. In *Contested Nature* (Macnaghten &Urry, 1998) makes a claim that there is no singular nature, only a diversity of contested natures; “.....each such nature is constituted through a variety of socio-cultural processes from which such nature cannot be plausibly separated” (ibid: 81)

Even in advanced and essentially scientific societies such as the Scandinavian nations it has been impossible to predict earthquake thus pushing seismicity to the realm of mystery. Despite the marked difference in managing the damage after an earthquake and public awareness between advanced nations and tribal economies yet a substantial similarity exists in expecting it. Usually people do not expect them and each thought of such expectation is shrouded in fear. Expecting an earthquake eludes

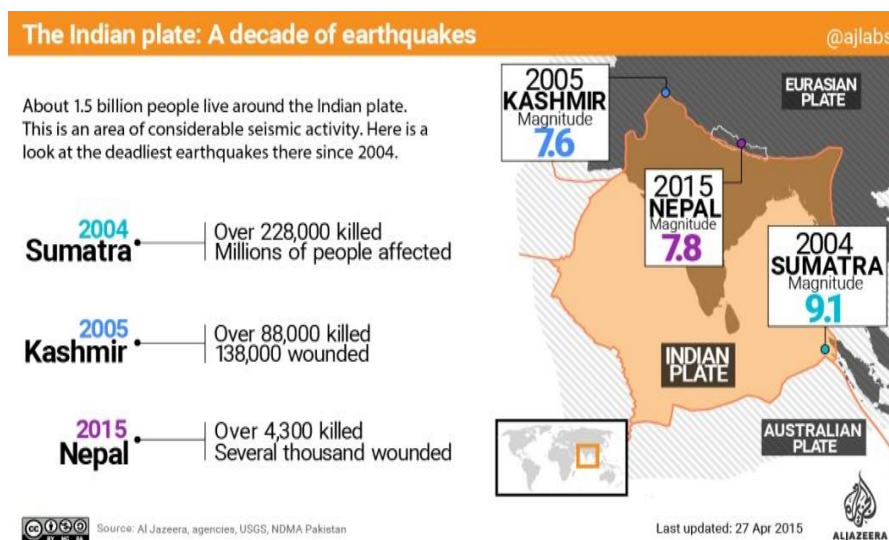
realism but managing its aftermath is a realistic enterprise. To tackle this grey area, of expecting the unexpected, for a realistic construction of the natural world based on cultural understanding and social contexts, myths arise. Thus, when myths try to deconstruct an earthquake as ‘swaying of a huge animal underneath the earth’, it must be appreciated as working of human perception and imagination, a landscape in the mind, a scenery built from strata of memory, striving for realism thereby legitimizing myth as an instrument of cultural preservation.

Beginning from the medieval period, accounts of earthquakes have been recorded and in the start of the seventeenth century, earthquakes were catalogued in Italy focusing on scientific and historical narrations. Christian Rohr (2003) mentions that according to the Bible, earthquakes and other disaster have been viewed as omen or divine wrath and at other times apocalypse. Religion has played an undeniable role in interpreting disasters for people at large. But in the later period, in the era of scientific rationalism, with the advent of modern science, number of men trained to observe phenomenon scientifically increased greatly. And in this quest, the theory of plate tectonics emerged. Alfred Wegner came up with the theory and proposed that the earth is an active planet and its surface is composed of many individual plates which moves and interacts, constantly changing and reshaping Earth’s outer layer. And it is this movement of tectonic plates lead to volcanoes and earthquakes. The plate boundaries are active zones where majority of the tremors occur and sudden slip on faults¹¹ often lead to quakes. There are several major and minor plates in the world and the Indian plate is one of them making seismic vulnerability a natural corollary. This emergence of deductive epistemology marked a worldwide departure from myth explaining earthquake. Though a majority of the population still considered earthquakes to be divine manifestation yet a strand of scientific empiricism began to take shape. At least it began to be discussed rather than being feared.

For instance, it was found by geologists that the Indian Plate had drifted from what was once called the Gondwana land, a landmass that is Australia of today, over thousands of years. The migration of the Indian Plate towards the Eurasian Plate or Angaraland across the Indian Ocean, pushed the Tethyas seabetween the two

¹¹ A fault is a break in the rocks that make up the Earth’s crust, along which rocks on either side have moved past each other. The faults are most commonly found around the edge of the plates which are continental- size blocks of rocks that comprise the outermost part of the earth. The continental plates are constantly moving at an average rate of 10 cm/ year, though it may vary plate wise.

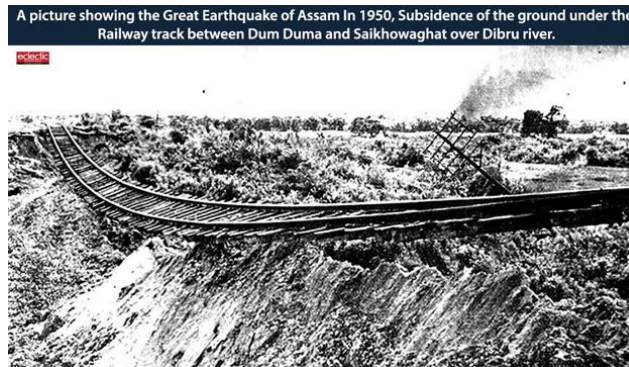
landmasses, upwards leading to creation of Himalayas. The thrusting has continuously increased the height of this young fold mountain besides the Tibetan Plateau. It has been found that Mount Everest which has risen by 9 KMS in height since its formation. The constant activity of the Indian plate makes it prone to seismicity. This proneness takes shape of vulnerability because of the high population density in this zone. The plate is home to approximately 1.5 billion people and that increases the potential of destruction manifold. In the present decade, there has been three remarkable earthquakes leading to immense havoc in present order of things.



Vulnerability Depicted: Earthquakes in the Indian plate and an estimate of affected.

Collision does not stop with increasing height of the Himalaya but impacts the North-East Region of India, one of the most seismically active regions of the world. Countless tremors have shaken the landscape but two great earthquakes in the magnitude of 8.7 in 1987 and 1950, has left its mark permanently in collective memory. As the Indian plate converges with another, these two earthquakes have been remembered in history as most devastating ones. These were so intense that rivers changed their course, ground elevation occurred and caused major upheaval. The massive territorial reorganization caused by the earthquake of 1897 led to subsidence and submergence, creation of hills in some areas and depression in others. Brahmaputra and its tributaries got diverted and massive subduction occurred. This

seismic episode also led to the emergence of Chandubi Lake, my site of ethnography and epistemological enquiry.



Derangement Captured: Hanging Railway Line caused by topographic transformation in the Assam Earthquake of 1950

b. Meaning Making: Instinct-Subjectivity Battle

Since sociological understanding of earthquake is central theme of thesis so it is essential to reconfigure the relationship to a geological phenomenon with the human society. What are the sociological imaginations attached to earthquake, i.e. do the human agency experiencing earthquake respond and understand its impact for the wider social realm? Humans are involved in the process of meaning making in a routinized life which is almost fixed in terms of actions and expectations within the cultural complex. The ongoing global paradigm at managing earthquakes shows that it relies on experience of survivors of past earthquake in building an epistemological repository of how one must behave during the event and the course of action to be adopted. There is no doubt that it is an extraordinary out of routine phenomenon with very low level of familiarity. Therefore, the attempt by disaster management professionals to accumulate the information of past experiences and club them up under *coping mechanism* is nothing but a routinizing response. Standardization and socialization of what is to be done during catastrophe promotes a new kind of behavior. First an ability to foresee and forecast followed by an ability to act in the eventuality of catastrophe. Since in case of earthquake the actors are less likely to have experienced the catastrophe before, so they rely on the body of knowledge which has been passed on to them orally, by trainings, mock drills though a

preordained knowledge base. Such knowledge may prove to be of great help but alternatively it may not be workable as the emerging situation may be a completely new one. Socializing oneself to respond to tremors such as getting away from fragile structures or staying away from water during tremors are definitely important information but practical action based on past knowledge may not be fruitful since an earthquake is often packed with elements of surprise and shocks. For instance, trekking is a common sport among nature enthusiasts and the trekkers are given directives to respond to emergency situations. But with the commercialization of trekking, safety has become disposable. Participants are often not trained properly and exit routes not properly mapped. Theni forest fire in 2018 is one such incident where about nine trekkers perished in Kurangani hills of Tamil Nadu in the forest fire. Account of about thirty-six survivors reveals how despite knowing the routes and being guided, the trekkers suffered massive loss. As one of them rightly recounted responses to emergency are largely situational and instinctive which categorically does not fall under any behavior type.

Largely members across all societies immaterial of the level of information have exhibited fear, confusion and flight as a reaction to disasters. Often habits are related to normalcy and routinized events but how do humans adapt to sudden and unexpected events? The chaos created in the society are mostly unconscious and unregulated and this leads us to two questions, do disasters reveal the true nature of man, as contended by Hobbes as selfish, poor, nasty, brutish and short? And, what has been the response of society at large to such crisis? So how does Sociology as a discipline cross the path of Earthquake which is a natural disaster?

Disasters set context for human being. Disasters are events which are beyond normal, often unpredictable and beyond the coping capacity of the people, usurping order and bringing about tension in existing relationships. It is rewarding for sociology to study disasters because it gives an alternative picture of existing relationships. It drives us to enquire into exceptions and the web of stress and strains which an unforeseen phenomenon reveals. Relationships are dynamic in nature but during periods of shock, the turbulence within them increases. Turbulence here does not carry a negative connotation but an altered state of social collectiveness. Biographical account of various disasters, especially post-earthquake situation reveals that cohesion increases and groups become more open to adjustments because

catastrophe has a larger than life impact. Post disasters the threat to society is considered far greater than narrow group interest driving members to de-cocoon themselves and unite. Alternatively, turbulence may assume a different character that is, disharmony and derangement during disasters is often normalized and chaos is considered as necessary corollary but such catastrophe is not always calamitous for everybody i.e., it may impact one group positively by allowing the emergence of a new world order. The assumption is that some groups benefit from calamities. For instance, Gujrat has a long seismic history and each episode came with socio-economic ramifications. Alexander Burns an East India Company Official and geologist produced a detailed report of the 1819 Kutch Shocks. Here he mentioned about submergence of an island a few miles off the coast with the loss of several hundred people. In this early colonial period, he calls devastation complete and without any exceptions but as a neo-liberalism progressed in the colonial and post-colonial era, avenues for profit during chaos became a possibility.

Let's take the case of Kutch again but in context of 2001 Bhuj shock. This quake flattening villages and destroyed heritage buildings. Both the quakes resulted from continental collision and impacted human life in a big way but there is basic difference in political and economic context of the two seismic episodes. While Burns' report mentions 1819 as turbulent times for the company, Edward Simpson in his Political Biography (2013) of the 2001 Gujrat Earthquake mentions that the episode was an opportunity for builders and commercial business houses to engage into city reconstruction. Simpson's ethnography recounts how mud huts to thatch and wooden houses were replaced by homogenous RCC structures. The government had outsourced rehabilitation to companies who now became masters of people's homes and hearths. Implementing technocratic rationality, architects built uniform houses for all without taking into consideration the caste dynamics or religious leanings. The corporates also gave new names these villages and townships. This regimental rehabilitation approach obliterated the diversity of history and culture these human settlements reducing them to mono-cultural barracks. People had no liberty to choose their dwelling or invest their labor into building a home rather were assigned and forced to settle down in these concrete structures. These settlements were far from agricultural fields and older areas of occupation so post catastrophe, life was a duel with spaces, between residential space and occupational space. Despite people's woes

the construction companies were hailed as social crusaders for restoring order and cleaning Gujrat. They were impacted positively by the catastrophe, i.e., the crisis for all was disabling but for the corporates enabling. The idea of uniform space for all and corporates as social guardians to tide over both economic and natural crisis was marketed in the subsequent election which also led to emergence of Narendra Modi cult in post-earthquake scenario. So not only did the corporates benefit, but a saga of political gains also ensues post-catastrophe.

The desire for gain in society is a part of its evolutionary trajectory. It does not exist by itself or in isolation but gain like power is exercised over something or someone. Being gainful is not in-referenceto oneself but to another making a competing claim. History is full of examples of coercion, undertaken to accumulate gains. Monopoly over gains ensure the establishment of authority and power. Feudal means of production and distribution gave rise to industrial society because the accumulation of gains was greater in the latter. Besides, the feudal society had failed to satiate the growing desire for gains in the modernization epoch so it gave way. The discourse on gains is mostly material and involves two or more entities. Dispute over its appropriation is visible in post-disaster situations also.

Distribution of relief to victims and survivors of catastrophe has been the usual approach in the Indian scenario where basic items are circulated by the government. Often communities at the receiving end of devastation are supplied relief as a step to return to normalcy. However, distribution of relief is envied as material gain by non-recipient communities which entails perpetual conflict. Disharmony during disasters are of various forms but the type arising out of distribution of material gains during relief distribution is a unique one. A vignette;

In the river island of Majuli a narrow yet steep road divides Kharjanpar village into two. The Brahmaputra falling on the left side, often inundates that part of the village submerging fields, livestock and platform houses. The impact on left Kharjanparis visible even during dry months. But the right side of the village remains relatively unharmed and untouched. Thus, there is a difference in experience and exposure of the places and people. Otherwise united, annual conflict between the two parts of the same villages arises when government starts distributing relief after the annual floods. Based on a

rational classification, the left part is entitled for relief because of its obvious vulnerability and the right part is not; yet war of words, filing complaints and launching cases for receiving compensation in form of money, livestock and items such as tin roofs or grains is resented. The right part of Kharjanpar raises a moral question, *“We are equally poor like the bao-poria (left-part). Nature has decided to make them vulnerable and it is none of our fault. Being one village we deserve as much gains as they do; after-all we are one village. For the outside world, we too carry the shame of being an underdeveloped village like the bao-porias.... Rather we suffer more because most of them live in camps and highlands for good four months and do not have to go to the field as government makes provisions for them. We toil, yet get nothing.”*

Mills (1959) writes about the feeling of individual members of the society face in their day to day private world. Men and women seem to get *“bounded by private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood. In other milieu, they move vicariously and remain spectators”* (ibid: 10). He is referring to routine existence of an individual in the social orbit and reproduction of one act after another in a quest for normalcy. But during disasters which are non-normal, out of routine situations, individual preoccupations around such social orbit goes amiss. There is complete or partial dislodgement of the private sphere of usual roles and expectations and new role sets emerge as a rebound effect to the catastrophe. The usual roles must be replaced by new roles because the context demands so. The context is one of confusion and chaos and the initial reaction to it is fear and flight. However, there is an eventual response shock i.e., a set of well-coordinated behavioral pattern to pull individual members of the society out of the shock. Therefore, responsible social cohesion is practiced by members of the society to adjust to the new normal. From here we have a distinction between two phases namely reaction and response where the first arises as a rebound to the shock and the second is a thought-out pattern designed to absorb the impact of experiential reality. So, reaction is the precursor to response during disasters.

During and immediately after earthquake, some take the flight of stairs and others jump off towers in anxiety and confusion but those who do not or cannot react are often found among rubbles. This phase is instinctual and linked to survival that comes before the response phase. This brief phase of reaction is analogous to Hobbes' *State of*

Nature where the individual has natural rights to save himself regardless of interest of others because life is a war of one man against another. In *Leviathan*, (Hobbes, 2002) he described the state of nature as one in which life is nasty, brutish and short. It is characterized without a government, civilization, laws or common power to restrain. Man in the state of nature has boundless possibility of unregulated freedom but he gives up all his powers by entering a *social contract* with others and begins to get governed. He enters the *social contract* with others for certainty. Similarly, people get adapted to the new normal in the aftermath of an earthquake, from an initial instinctual *reaction* in favor of socially mediated *response* with cohesion in view. This phase may also be termed as a *state of culture* in which man evolves from narrow self-interest to a wider realm of social belongingness. Man in this stage does not remain obsessed with his own self but takes into consideration the needs of others. A television telecast of a survivor's tale during the Great Nepal Earthquake illustrates this stage of cultural co-existence.

Mr. Mike had travelled to Nepal and to the South Base Camp with a dream conceived in his youth to ascend the Mount Everest. It was the month of April an ideal time for climbers. Reaching the Base Camp, meeting his Sherpa and seeing other enthusiasts was a great experience for Mr. Mike. The sun went down, he rested with excitement to begin the next day's ascent. Waking up in the morning and readying himself with his gears he began with a group of four climbers and three Sherpa. They began early in the morning and covered about 5 miles but then it came. The earthquake began followed by several aftershocks along with the avalanche.

The great earthquake of 7.8 magnitude started shaking the Everest vehemently. The ice caps started giving up and then the people. The earthquake triggered an avalanche from Pumori and a storm of snow enveloped everything, within no time. Caught in the outcry Mr. Mike was certain of his death. In the interview, he said that he was certain that he would never see Poland again, as everything turned blur before his eyes. As the telecast continued, the speaker's face suddenly lightened as he said "*But you know what? I did not die that day. My Sherpa Babu saved me. He was my destiny on that perilous day. My Sherpa could have just left me there and*

escaped. But Babu carried my immobile body braving the storm of snow. He is beyond a Shepra, he is beyond a savior. He is God to me!”

c. Earthquake Divide: Question of the Marginalized

Earthquake a spatio-temporal phenomenon which destabilizes recipient communities by inducing disorder in routines and structures besides inducing fear. Individuals experiencing shock tend to react instinctually and undertake flight to escape death. However, casualties are undeniable impacts of magnanimous shocks and an appraisal of those dying reveal that the hitherto powerless are more likely to perish. The fact and figures of death recounts that the weak and vulnerable are often compromised in their ability to survive. Children, elderly and mothers usually form the bulk of the dead. Survival and vulnerability in face of risk are intimately connected to socio-economic standing of a person in society.

“Marx put everything down to social classes, and class was the product of economic fact of life” (Inglis, 1994: 96). When I started probing into the economic ramification of earthquake charts, figures and statistics of losses of asset and human resource came to light. It emerged as a preferred domain of enquiry for disaster studies professionals. Any query on earthquake is followed by a subsequent question on damage and destruction; what however remains unquestioned is why some die more than others, why is the extent of loss greater among the poorer quarters? Indeed, the Marxist obsession with vulnerability of have-nots to economic delirium and catastrophe is right. But besides, there is something else too. Class has to be understood in relation to social hierarchy for a complete picture on disparity of exposure to seismicity. Identity roots based on ethnicity, gender and caste are undeniable part of the Indian ecosystem and therefore cannot be ignored if earthquake is to be defined in totality. I have used the term *Earthquake Divide* to connote the impact of catastrophe which is non-homogenous in nature, meaning socio-economic vulnerability coincides with seismic susceptibility. There is also no singularity in exposure to shocks but it is embedded in multiple domains of identity and belongingness. There is a division or disparity in nature and extent of exposure, chances of survival and victimhood.

(i) **Structural Divide and Vulnerability**

An old man once asked ‘*What is the ultimate fear of the living?*’; but without waiting for an answer he responded ‘*of death!*’

Any epoch of sudden nature, giving near death experience brings forth doubts of future eventualities. Humans are socialized into being status quoists thereby any derangement is suspected as threatening life and therefore controlled. Man is trained into expecting the ordinary and repeating what has already been tried and tested so any derailment is perceived as alienation. High magnitude earthquake leads to alienation from routine and maroon individuals to deal with unfamiliar chaos. It is this unfamiliarity which the individual is fearful of because he does not know what to expect. Similarly, policy decisions such as demonetization is considered an alienating affair. Pursuing it, currency notes of different denomination were made invalid in the November of 2016 in India. People had not expected such a move and were unprepared for it. The decision was sudden and shocking. It created a great upheaval, killing mostly the poor and driving the impoverished to the streets. Like the high priests who hail earthquakes as wraths of the gods to purge the earth, similarly many media houses applauded demonetization as wrath of a clean government to purge the Indian economy of corruption. Unfortunately, be it the tectonic tremors or a trembling economy, it is hitherto the have-nots who suffer.

Guwahati is fast sprawling urban center and like any other metropolis a huge informal sector consist its backbone. An encounter with a food vendor outside Meghdoot Bhawan, the Central Post Office of the State of Assam, revealed the brute impact of demonetization upon the informal economy. I was winding up my second field visits and on my way back from Chandubi to Guwahati, that is when I met Shyam Kanu's. His story of braving demonetization, being stranded in it and coping provides fresh insights into hardships of the poor in unfamiliar situations. Yet his narrative provides hope of how life springs back after an epoch.

After delivering the letter at the post office I moved towards the local *Muri Alla* (Puffed Rice Seller) who has been selling the delicacy in the same place since last twenty years. As I moved closer, his blue framed wooden shack consisting of 18 glass bottles looked much different since September. It was early January and two months since demonetization. In the past, the shack was

brimming both with supplies and customer. However, things had changed. One could see only four bottles that too with few supplies of puff rice. As a regular I asked “*Ki Khobor? Aru Baki?*” (How are you? How is everything else?) Kanu *Da* (brother) with his usual smile, revealing his beetle nut stained teeth replied “*Bhal, Kintu Ki Kom!*” (Good, but what to say!).

That day as he made me the *Mosala Muri*, but his usual condiments were missing also some essentials. Like other times, I could not ask for a little more or a second free serving. Sham Kanu knew me well so he offered without asking; I accepted his offer but asked him apologetically “*Ki hol Dada?*” (What happened, Brother) He replied, “*Note Bondii!*”(demonetization).

He narrated how he had managed to saved three FiveHundred Rupees notes every month for almost five years and had over One Lakh Twenty Thousand Rupees. He would go back home each day and would look at his savings. He was content all this while but then in November demonetization struck. This sudden fiscal policy which aimed at weeding out back money from the economy shattered Sham Kanu’s dreams. He said that like many of his fellow vendors he had no bank account also illiterate. He had absolutely no clue of how he could every deposit this money. Caught in the web of rumor, fear and despair he gave all his savings to his landlord, to be deposited in his account. The landlord, like any typical villain arising out of a common Bollywood movie deposited Sham Kanu’s money but with a condition; he would take twenty percent of the total sum!

As I finished chewing my last handful of *Muri* and my narrator gave his closing statement. He told me that he not only lost his hard-earned money but now been branded *asghus-khoor* (corrupt man, without a legitimate bank account). His land lady took pleasure in taunting him and sarcastically calling him a rich man and asked how does he manage to get so rich simply selling *Muri*?

Many have already told the tales of how poor perish in great number and many more intelligently depict the chaos in numbers. My experience in the field taught that truth does not reveal itself in information but unfolds in meaningless engagements of daily life. Therefore, I attempted to present an analogy of pain and deceit which an unforeseen epoch begets. This in my belief is somewhat like a post-earthquake

scenario where a factory worker is out of his job because the factory building has succumbed to tremors or a coal miner whose shaft is no more. The dilemma of living without an occupation is a shock and re-integrating oneself to the new order is another. Such derangements are however not uncommon in global south where development is skewed in nature and regional imbalance all-pervasive. Here, urban areas are called growth centres and drivers of development because they attract migrants to become cogs and spokes in the great wheel of informal economy; despite contribution, these daily wagers remain the most vulnerable and exposed to all kinds of dangers. Usually they occupy the slum clusters that lack in basic amenities like; drinking water, health facility, sanitation and education. It would be right to say that they live by mitigating risk on everyday basis. For instance, the great Haiti earthquake killed more than ten million people but majority of them were slum dwellers who made-up the informal sector of the country. The urban slums of Port-au-Prince is located where the epicenter was, which meant that most of the impacted were slum-dwellers. Like all other ghettos or *chawls* or *jhuggi*, Port-au-Prince lacked basic services, infrastructure and had poor housing but that's not all, the opportunity to be rescued was also miniscule. Narrow winding lanes which offer great spots during hide and seek games or chasing kites proved fatal. While the children somehow managed to escape, women and elderly failed. Tarpaulin sheets and tin roofs choked doorways to breaths. What was once comforting proved counter-productive. Thus, catastrophe is not an end but a means to an end, which is reproduced daily, by unequal economic relations and living conditions.

Existence of various forms of divide is reiterated by various schools of thought. While the pro-poor scholars attribute it unequal distribution of property, feminist scholars attribute it to non-egalitarian gender relations while the subaltern scholars blame it on various other layers of marginalization. Despite differences, the issue of economic divide and vulnerability is essential because it exposes us to the brute fact that brunt of tremors is not equally borne in society. Unlike rickety factories and narrow slums, organized offices have evacuation routes and residents of gated communities free space to escape from falling concretes. There is a basic difference in condition of life which determines survival or the lack of it. Multiple layers of vulnerability determine the ability to withstand a common geological phenomenon. Such vulnerabilities are however man made, anthropomorphic in origin.

Insights into this divide helps us realize that man has natural rights to survive and thrive but his involvement in society and economy depreciates his potential to survive. It is like venn diagram figure which depicts two circles overlapping one another, first majority of the people of the global south are poor and second majority of who die in earthquakes are poor too. This speaks volume about our craze of growth and progress and raises a rhetorical question ‘whose progress are we talking about anyway?’

(ii) Agency Divide and Vulnerability

Unexpected and unforeseen situations are hard to grasp but they bring into light new forms of reality which also offer new challenges that are difficult to decipher. The May 2015 earthquake in Nepal unsettled the economy of an already impoverished nation. The quake also rattled its social structure. The nature and extent any catastrophe such as the 7.8 magnitude earthquake in an otherwise old unplanned heritage town led a bustling town with visitors to become a ghost town of debris and dead bodies. A BBC News Report narrates thus;

Life did restart again but in tents and streets instead of home. Warm hearths were replaced by packaged food by donor agencies and domestic chores and bragging about work replaced by listless look.

So, what all did the earthquake do? A geological phenomenon, caught people by surprise. First it rattled the terrain below their feet and then pulling down their structures such as; homes, architectural marvels and historical artifacts into the ground. Members of the community were martyred and buried under the rubbles while some survived to grieve the dead. As derangement became the norm, survivors slowly adapted treading the path of decision, indecision, delirium and confusion.

Derangement manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, Material Derangement which is visible in terms of loss of homes or work places or places of worship or other assets like livestock or cattle. It also coincides with loss of asset and resources for the community. This aspect qualifies as property and gives security of life to the owners.



Lost Beyond Redemption: The Kathmandu Durbar Square reduced to rubles in the Nepal Earthquake of 2015

The Second is Non-Material Derangement, which though visible is more felt, such as loss of life or acquiring disability. A void is created among the survivors who must cope with the sporadic and unperceived loss of significant others. Along with the most obvious demographic transition, there is also a transition in social milieu.

The impact of such derangements whether of property or life is felt greater by the marginalized say for instance the Dalits. Excerpts from the destructive earthquake of Nepal 2015 says that Dalits were the worst affected. An aid worker reached one such settlement one month after the earthquake. His words can be quoted from what he saw, “*The settlement was far from any accessible roads. I had to walk three to four hours to reach the settlement. Not one house was standing. Each one had fallen down. Survivors were just sitting on the ground; they did not know what to do*” (Unknown, 2015). The Dalits of NepalIndia do not have access of information or education, they reside in remote areas with poor roads and work mostly as tenants. Theylack land ownership and denied of governmental services such as loans to rebuild destroyed homes or crop insurances. Even the chances of availing food under Public Distribution System is skewed because of high stigma. This forces them to live out of makeshift camps and engage into menial and hazardous occupations. The plight of these groups cannot merely be explained by class differentiation but layers of discrimination, isolation, injusticemust be excavated for a perspective. A seismic episode thus doubly burdens this group who continue to occupy the disaster-prone region not out of choice but constraint. The rate of recovery is also abysmally slow because of prevalent social taboo. For instance, in those societies where caste has become intrinsic, any contact with Dalits is rejected and termed as defiling so hospitals to schools are barred from entertaining them. Untouchability also gets replicated in government dealing because the high caste victims are often the first-

priority. According to an Amnesty International and the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) report, Dalits have experience wilful negligence from relief workers in the distribution of emergency supplies. The reason cited for such discrimination is that members of high caste have political connections and can manipulate supplies chains and accumulate goods for themselves.

Ordinarily, society has been called an aggregate of people living together in order. Order is an integral feature of any community which begins to crumble by an unexpected and unwarranted transitions often accompanied with seismicity. Survivors however must adapt to new roles in the emergent disorder, this process is not smooth, rather brutal. Some narratives assert that these periods are characterized by cohesion where communities overcome stigma and stereotypes for restoring stability. In the reconstruction phase after the Bhuj Earthquake, Hindu-Muslim unity came to the fore. From scholars to policy makers cited such co-operation as case study but one needs to question what brews below the advertisements? Such cooperation is only official and lasts as long as the crisis. Once the disorder subsides, different groups recede to their close quarters. Secondly disorder are times when people are disillusioned and in despair. History is replete with examples of riots which emerge after epoch thus co-operation moves are a great way to instill hope and ease the divide. Post-catastrophic crisis has a deep-seated impact in the new order. New order may see the dawn of hybrid culture representing mixture traditions, it may also open-up employment avenues for livelihood. After the earthquake of Japan and Nepal, a new form of eco-tourism emerged, *disaster tourism*. Tourists and scientists traveled close to the epicenters to watch half fallen monuments and leaning buildings. As a steady flow of outsiders began to pour in to witness the history in transition, governments employed nuclear scientists, architects and local people as tour guides to communicate about death, tragedy and suffering. While many condemn this as turning misery into a spectacle, other justified calling it empathy and compassion.



Dimensions of Damage: (L) Landscape after the Haiti Earthquake of 2010. (R) Triple Earthquake in Japan 2011 of Tsunami, Nuclear Leak and Fall of Yen

At the same time post disaster co-operations may also open new possibilities of coercion where groups with vested interest start taking advantage of victim communities. Often it is seen that the victims and survivors reel under shock is placed in austerities by aid and donor agencies assuming patronizing roles. Edward Simpson records how the Swaminaryan Group of Builders uprooted an entire village from its ancestral land and rebuilt it anew in a completely different location. The group was also mandated to follow of a new religious cult as an indirect method of repayment off the debt. The naming of the settlement as Narayannagar Village made it a strictly Hindu region thereby throwing out the Muslims who had lived in the village since time immemorial. The deep rooted political agenda prorogated by patronizing groups permanently alters heterogeneity and cohesion of the community.

Understanding Earthquakes: Debunking Seismicity

Poverty is hierarchy, earthquake is democracy. A seismic episode irrespective of its size and magnitude unifies victims across terrain and virtual world; it controls new sources of conflict and consensus. Earthquakes reveal the grammar of society that lies behind their day to day social acts which are tested under these conditions of stress. Status symbols serve to visibly divide the social world into category of persons breeding either solidarity or hostility (Goffman, 1959). However, such categories are challenged during earthquakes. This situation has been termed as *criserevelatrice* meaning, “revealing the crisis caused post-earthquake often laying the bones of the society bare and stripping them off cultural niceties” (Simpson, 2013: 27). It awakens dead institutions and rituals for the sake of sustenance.

A vignette;

For the first time in the month of August in 2015 the Hamren town of KarbiAnglong District was washed down by a flash flood. Flowing through the old and new market area of the small hilly town the water demolished houses, shops and cattle's. The devastation began late in the morning after heavy downpour started in the higher altitude locations. According to the local people earth shattering downpour like cloudburst took place in the upper catchment of the rivers resulting surge of massive torrent inundating the banks in the downstream within moments. The governmental agencies attributed the reason for flash floods to an immense deforestation in upper ridge of Hamrencaused by slash and burn method of cultivation. The flash flood led to extensive erosion owing to non-existence of foliage to store up the precipitation.

The local administration was least effective in responding to this sudden deluge. The community which was struck by the sudden deluge had to be mobilized by making use of traditional ties. Hamren region has three traditional local Kings with their territorial jurisdiction at *Rongkhang*, *Chinthong* and *Amri*. Though in real terms they are tribal chiefs with little constitutional power, yet people treat them as *Lingdokpo* meaning King. The *Bardilior* Prime Minister and the *Kathbura*, the Priest plays a substantial role in mobilizing the people to move to safety while the administration failed to grasp the situation.

This traditional body had lost its authority but the calamity, revived it and placed it at the helm of managing the disaster. With a *Mei* or Village Council the body became active during the flash floods not only in rescue operations but also rebuilding. Thus, latent power receives new lease of life with calamities.

-Narrative by an Official, Tribal Research Institute, Guwahati

In ordinary times, bureaucracy undertakes welfare role for the people but during emergency the customary body assumed importance. Period of crisis brought

cohesion and thus revival of a traditional body that was otherwise sidelined from power. But because personalized ties work during catastrophes, the unit came out of its slumber given personalized ties it had with the community, also its accessibility to the common man ensured its revival.

Another reason why people seem to bestow faith upon traditional systems during crisis is because disasters are perceived as bad omen. Rationality and catastrophe usually do not go hand in hand as people tend to attribute fate or omen to the occurrence of such disasters. Since the traditional institutions revolve around religion of the community therefore falling back on such a system gives them hope. The very backbone of the community is strengthened by investing into these latent power structures. Be it flashfloods, earthquakes or revolution, the society is at stake and irrespective of institutional revivals, the uncertainty it begets for the people is feared. Catastrophe of any nature, leaves questions unanswered about the future and haunts people until another disaster strikes.



Unusual Independence Day: Flag hoisting amidst raging floods, a story from Assam

Crisis situations lead to the emergence of cultural alternatives reconfiguring existing norms also enable social change. Ramifications of earthquake are many. It emerges from the nature as a *product* of geomorphic forces, shaking the foundation of the recipient society kick-starting a new *process* of restructuring existing relations. The insular existence of seismic episodes as exclusive domain of earth scientists must be abandoned and be reimagined in favor of double hermeneutics. Earthquakes trigger a dialectic relationship between social scientific knowledge and human practice. Giddens (1984) explains that concepts of social sciences are not produced about an

independently constituted subject-matter, which constitutes regardless of what the concepts are rather share a two-way relationship. Indeed, the scientific groups of experimental and cognitive practices using specialized language is important in understand earthquakes but indigenous points of view, cultural practices distinguished by various kinds and symbolic self-interpretation in experiencing seismicity cannot be ignored. Seismic shocks are accompanied by panic but what does such panic entail, altruism or egoism?

a. Post-Earthquake Altruism

Earthquake is a lone event of disruption in an otherwise peaceful, civilized society. Individuals are not brute beings, simply waging war on each other, as Hobbes projects but are socialized beings influenced by culture. During extreme events when the risk to life is optimum and survival instinct at its best, individuals overcome egoism and care for others, they sacrifice their own safety and fear to save others. Individuals move beyond Social Darwinism and make choices in favor of humanism. Young adults are often seen rushing to help children, elderly and women during extreme events. Despite threats, individuals exhibit extraordinary altruism in the face of crisis. Most people respond with empathy towards fellow victims rather than succumbing to fear. Caring for fellow humans in times of despair is a civilizational boon but what propels individuals into altruism in times of crisis, when they themselves are at risk?

This allows us to probe into the true nature of man. Is he a selfish brute like Hobbes says? Individuals often move out their cocoon and exhibit the spirit of voluntarism which is deep rooted in the community's cultural value, emotions and world view. Undertaking risk for others sake despites threats involves danger to one's life, is beyond rationality rather some form of civilizational altruism. Society as an aggregate of individuals undergo multiple forms of crisis, ups and downs; yet the goal of collective living, congregation and cohesion reigns supreme. Altruism or spirit of voluntarism during crisis is a cultural instinct which comes naturally to preserve the social. There may be barriers of many sort which he faces during catastrophe but he tends to overlook them in favor of his compatriots. Rather than being individualistic he rushes to aid his suffering fellow men. This is hinged on the fact that man is

intrinsically social and there is a need for co-existence rather than being a solo survivor. Staying alone without relation or reference is a meaningless exercise therefore he seeks to save the marooned despite threats to his own self. Thus, catastrophes bring to light new forms of communism aimed at preservation of the society.

Catastrophe are not considered as threat to individual's existence but to sustainability and order of the society. This lets individuals to rise over their partisan interest and exhibit exemplary solidarity, landing briefly in a phase communist utopia where survivors, victims and rescuers alike, realize the true human nature. In this brief honeymoon period, there is a new lease of life which the community gets, a sense of triumph over an apocalyptic enemy. Celebration of the collective spirit, redefining goals for a meaningful existence in the emergent order and othering of the natural are the most distinct characteristics of this phase. But as the euphoria of having survived the tragedy starts evaporating once old chains start reinstating.

But such euphoria may sometimes be dystopian. Instead of a phase for realization of true human nature, a complete Hobbesian state of nature may prevail. Earthquakes may prove like war, a period of phased madness, where people are freed from usual moorings, with new horrid roles. The new roles assumed by actors not to pursue their daily business but sort out the mad array of hyper-reality which emerged out of the crisis. Events like earthquake and war draws attention of actors by stimulating actual reality. The manner of living is altered by these stimulations which are responses to the event, there is a desire to escape this transitory stage of sudden madness and hit the usual mundane.

There is an urgency to return to the past order. Firstly, because the emergent order is one in which active members of the society are sacrificed be it war or earthquakes as martyrs or victims. Secondly, human agency has the least power to bargain with these kinds of reality. These events are imposed which keeps the human agency at its mercy. Thirdly, wars and earthquakes are periods which require extraordinary staging of cohesion during which no man can go about their inner callings. It is definite that man is a social being and assume positions in relation to another but the sense of self is totally undermined during these events. In the post-earthquake order, man is caught

in the web of hyper-reality from which he craves to return to an ordinary life though it may not have been socially rewarding.

This phase is rewarding for social scientists to observe because it exposes, exceptions in social functioning, desire for realization of true human nature and the undercurrent of laws, norms and taboo which tide and ebb. *“When war happens, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher, a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor history can be understood without understanding both”* (Mills, 1959: 6). Post-earthquake periods bear resemblance with interwar years when role reversal becomes common. In this brief phase of euphoria triggered by a catastrophe, hidden realities come to life and thrives until the hegemonic pre-order norms and structures spread their wings again. However, in the emergent order hope or despair slowly gets normalized and starts stinking of the pre-order phase with the passage of time. The chaos like Nietzsche said, gives birth to a dancing star but not for long. So, post-earthquake times are characterized by altruism where collective spirit is at its pinnacle and this phase opens two possibilities. The brief emergent order, can be euphoric where the survivors are hopeful of realizing their true human nature or it can be oppressive and dystopian. But irrespective the possibilities, return to the pre-earthquake order or a shadow of it is certain.

b. Beyond Social Darwinism

As argued, after a devastating earthquake, routine of life is disrupted and the humdrum of inter-personal relationship is broken. Personal troubles blow out of proportion and receive recognition in the community. Individual loss manifests at the social level and cohesion receives a new height as collective occupies the center stage. There are various reasons why individual's personal tragedy manifests socially in community space. Firstly, there is replication of personal loss, i.e. similar tragedy may have occurred to many members of the same society, thereby increasing its stature of recognition. Similar experience of loss of inter-personal bond is experienced by numerous members of the society making it a collective catastrophe. Collective empathy is garnered for individual tragedy. The magnitude of loss varies depending on the nature of relationship the survivors shared with the deceased, dying

or the injured. The experience of grief is categorized depending on whether the loss is permanent or transitory.

Secondly, experience of an earthquake becomes a social fact. The manner of acting, thinking and feeling are external to the individual for instance, the shock generates fear and anguish that is experienced by all members alike and psychic stress is experienced collectively. Though despair and uncertainty is later internalized but it originates as an external trigger, seismic episodes have coercive power over individuals. Communities are pushed in a lurch where they must escape from falling homes, factories or temples. They are forced to abandon places which were deeply comforting in the past, having ancestral heritage or producing marketable surplus for the family. A domino effect of coercion begins with the tremors. Erstwhile resources and assets become counter-productive so owners abandon ship in favor of life.



Livelihood and Cohesion: Women Proceeding for Community Fishing

Pomi is a hard-working woman in her late 20s. She remains busy going about her work but extraordinarily silent for her age. It was almost a routine to see her tending to her small patch of turmeric cultivation followed by which she would give fodder to the pigs. Often, she would sit on her haunches quietly, looking at the pigs as they hogged into the fodder. Then, she would go to her hand loom and start weaving. The loom was placed on the verandah of her thatched cottage just opposite to the piggery. She would weave tossing the loom to the right and then left and constantly cycling the lever with her foot. And in between she would look up at the pigs, get lost for a while, coming back and relentlessly weave again.

One happy day when people of Jaramukhuriya had gathered together to celebrate Ranjita's marriage, Pomi came too. It was a bit unusual to see her out of her routine and her *palemekhela chador* (traditional dress). She was dressed in bright red and yellow today, sitting among the other women folk singing *biya-geet* (wedding folk songs). But what remained constant was her placid expressions and listless eyes. Her appearance somehow convinced me that she is not the person she once had been.

Now, demystify her had become my task and I approached Kheri. Kheri being an elderly lady was quite well versed with all the events of the village and accustomed with its dynamics. In response to my probing, the old lady began, "*Child you are not married or are you?*" I replied in negative. She paused but started again, "*Pomi is an unfortunate soul...*"

"Pomi was once married in Loharghat, a village across the hillock. She was married four years back to a Rabha man and very happy. By the month of Jeth (June, 2012) she was in the fifth month of her pregnancy but then the floods came. The inundation was great and vast which lasted more than two weeks. Homes and hearths were surrounded by water and hundreds of people across villages took shelter in public places. Pomi and her husband like everyone else made way to the school compound but unfortunately their raft was caught in a whirlpool. It was an accident, Pomi lost her balance, she fell off the raft, into the water and lost her unborn child."

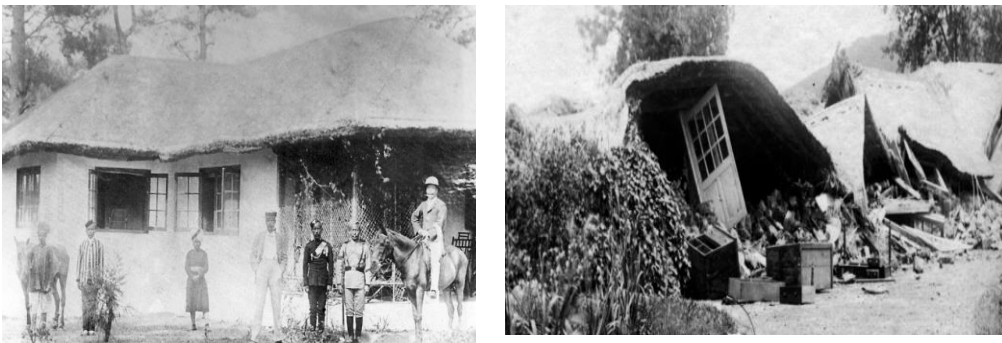
To my surprise, Kheri did not stop there, she went on. "*Can you imagine how it is to lose a child?*" Without waiting for my answer, she began, "*The young couple though devastated yet moved on. The water receded and the government relief came. People received rice and tarpaulin sheets but nothing to compensate their sorrow."*

"Banamali (the Lord of Forest) had his plans for the unfortunate couple," my narrator sighed.

"Last Magh (January 2015), Pomi conceived again. She was five months pregnant, again but by the time Bohag Bihu came (April, 2015) so did the earthquake. It was the dawn of 25th April, 2015 the dreadful happened. The Gorkha earthquake shook the Himalayas and with it shook Kamrup and

Chandubi. Severe tremors were felt here and before anyone could register, Pomi's the thatched cottage came down. The wood and straw ceiling became a merciless traitor and killed her husband!" Kheri looked up and I froze.

"That dawn the feeble ceiling of the old home weakened by years of flooding gave way in the earthquake. The ceiling crashed with all its might, killing Pomi's husband and usurped her womb once again." Kheri looked at me again and then at Pomi. There was nothing more to be said, nor to be asked!



Collapses: A house in Shillong (L) before and (R) after the Earthquake of 1897

c. Possibility of Double Hermeneutics

"At 3.40 am on 31st May 1935, an earthquake measuring 8.1 on the seismometer flattened Quetta, an army cantonment town in the westernmost corner of British India. Among the trapped under the rubble was Edward Wakefield, the Wazi-e-Azam (chief minister) of the state of Kalat, with which the British had negotiated territorial control in the region. Wakefield found himself under a wooden beam and unable to move. Near him, his wife was immobile and alive. The fate of his two daughters in the next room was unknown. Wakefield was near what had once been a window and shouted for help. No one came for rescue for more than an hour and a half. Then, in the faint light of dawn, and through the cloud of dust that had engulfed the town, he saw four shadow figures approach. An hour later, he was freed, and his wife, who was badly injured was taken to the hospital. Clearing the rubble

from the next room would need more hands, and the four men decided to get more help. At that point, it stuck Wakefield to find out who these people were. Three of them he vaguely remembered as a part of his retinue of guards. But he could not place the fourth. 'Who are you?' he asked. 'I am a prisoner', the man said matter-of-factly. 'Your Highness is to try me for murder the day after tomorrow.' It is not known if the murder trial took place or not” (Roy, 2012: 1).

When I first read the narrative, there were two distinct strands of thought that appeared in my mind. First the link between seismicity and humanity and the second interrelated thought was of grey sentiments. This narrative once again reiterates that earthquakes are not mere natural phenomena collapsing building and bridges. It evokes sentiments which are new and mostly confusing. It raises existential questions about an under-trial's pressing need to save his prosecutor. Criminals of any society are often pried with judgmental eyes of having threatening the social and jeopardizing morality. But the narrative reveals that emergency situations blur the binary relations between good and bad, judge and criminal; thereby revealing an array of confused grey emotions. Catastrophes are unusual times when normal rules and stereotypes do not apply. Individual aspirations and social acts are influenced by the catastrophe and people respond with altruism. The inherent goodness of man emerges as a response to catastrophe because the brief period is like a clean slate in which an individual can design his social engagements irrespective of pre-order oppression or guilt. This humanism has nothing to do with value system of a society, because the potential of voluntarism to care for suffering is a civilizational value of humanity. People respond to threat exhibiting extraordinary camaraderie but what meanings do individuals ascribe to such catastrophe? For the under-trial who was guilty of murder, did the earthquake provide an opportunity to undo his sins? Probably the earthquake was destined happen and he was bound to get an opportunity based on his past *karma*; or the prisoner simply believed that he must save a soul to have a clean chit on *quayamaat* day?

Such tragedy also open-up possibilities and opportunities just like flowers which bloom amidst garbage. Actions post catastrophe are not unilateral performances by an individual to suit his morale but is part of a system of meanings in which he cooperates with others for a greater goal of social survival despite possibilities of future punishments or aberrations. Like Giddens says there is a two-way relationship in basic everyday concepts. For instance, caring gets an altogether different meaning during emergencies. Such situations also open doors for revelations. Catastrophe makes survivors humble because despite authority or economic prowess it makes one realize that he is only a figment of nature's creation, a miniscule in the universe. The ridicule which nature starts is often restored by fellow men and rescuers pulling victims out of debris by providing food, shelter besides nursing back his ego and self-importance. For instance, the Wazir-e-Azam once a dying man soon becomes the Highness. An hour and half ago he was striving to be alive with little choices but being rescued and addressed as his Highness, the dying gets a new lease of life. Now he had discretion over another man's life. The earthquake which levels everyone and everything creating a new order, a communism, though dystopian, but fast done away with. Victims and survivors are uncomfortable with such equality where the prisoner and the judge are in one pedestal. So, they return to the past order with speed. But what is the reason? Is the coming of the past order seen as inevitable or societies cannot do away with hierarchy, it requires further probing.

Illustrating Earthquake: Precariousness and Indigeneity

What does a definition do? An appropriate definition seeks to reduce vagueness by laying down paths in a precise manner. It is backed by explanation of symbols and concepts making use of both real situations and imaginative metaphors. Illustration play an important role to back definitions and enrich explanations. Earthquake is primarily a domain of geologists and geomorphologists taking pride in a scientific approach and strict disciplinary boundary. There are terms and terminologies which are exclusive to earthquakes and earth scientists are focused on understanding the physical aspect of the phenomenon. There is a visible insider-outsider relationship in studying the natural phenomenon, while some are considered as experts and specialists, others as generalists dealing with geo-poetry. Earthquake is generalized as

a challenge and the only opportunity it provides, is a look into the earth's interiors through fissures, to understand the structural and mineral compositions of the planet.

With the growth of neoliberalism, property began to be greatly cared for so the market employed insurance companies to survey loss and damage. Threat to property was considered destabilizing the market so a new training program began. It trained professionals to survey the impact of disasters and minimize loss. These professionals in turn sought to develop human capacity to face and withstand disasters so that material loss became few. Disaster management at least set the tone for humans to enter the scene and the government citing administrative stability began to use these professionals in town planning, flood relief and mob disposal. This discipline came with a new agenda to regulate human beings during stampede and riots into behaving rationally however its obsession with market remained pre-dominant. In the process, technology, method and structure undermined the *verstehen* causing total or partial exclusion of the social. Crisis began to be categorized but variability of impact on different strata of society or the social change such catastrophe brought about wasn't considered. For instance, colonial reports post-earthquakes stated the extent of damage in currency and number of lives lost but it forgot to ask basic questions about loss of collective memory or factionalism and mistrust which such epochs generated. Thus, an unconsciousness vis-à-vis the human factor.

Eventually, the impact of seismicity on society began to be studied and social scientists embarked to explore the two-way relationship which man had with different natural phenomenon. This process had led earthquake to extend in scope, lose its self-containment, become more humane and open to subjectivity. The entry of social sciences to understand natural phenomena is a recent development but it brought about a major achievement. It de-hegemonized so called natural processes thereby leading to the appearance of new forms of symbiotic knowledge.

Social science engaging with the natural process brought out a kaleidoscope of emotions and meanings which was earlier unknown. Rich narratives of tragedy, personal loss, longing and belongingness now became relevant in understanding the impact of natural phenomenon regionally. The inextricable linkages between space, time and culture now came to the fore. Unlike data and information, the subjective sciences produced profound illustrations which enabled natural phenomenon to be

studied holistically. My journey into understanding earthquakes became meaningful with people's stories about their beliefs and lives. And such a story is of a clan totem, the origin of which lay in an earthquake.

The Rabhas are divided into many exogamous clans known as *husuks*. The totem of one of the *husuk* is tortoise and members of that *husuk* are prohibited from catching, killing or injuring tortoise. Thus, the tortoise is set apart and forbidden, just like Durkheim said. This clan is called *Pomrei* after the tortoise. The name of the clan is significant because it overlaps with the name of the totem and this conveys its importance in average everydayness of 'the tribe'. During festivals, big or small, celebrations of birth and mourning, the story of how the clans came into existence is narrated.

The story of the *Pomreihusuk* goes that a Rabha couple once knowingly killed a tortoise. The tortoise or the *pani-mach* as the Rabhas colloquially refer it as, was the embodiment of a sacred spirit which regulated the resources of the forest. As the tortoise was dying, it proclaimed that the end of the world is near and that the clan of the sinners would perish for eternity. The couple, realizing their mistake asked for repentance of their sin. The dying tortoise in response to the prayer for amends of the Rabha couple said 'the world will come to an end with a great earthquake, the earth will shiver and cry but if the can wants to live, then it must henceforth abstain from harming the *Pomrei*.' The couple thus resolved to adopt the tortoise as the clan totem to undo the wrath. As per the myth of the *Pomrei* clan a devastating earthquake took place, leading to the over-turning of fields and loss of crops and death of animals but none-the-less, the clan survived.

The coming of the earthquake as a response to killing of a spirit shows that matter and non-matter are related and responds one another. The spirit which embodied itself in the form of a tortoise can cause devastation. This reflects the belief system community which is deeply connected to the ecosystem. However, why an earthquake, not other forms of malevolence? The response of an elderly widow in this regard is stifling. She says that to make the earth move, requires a great deal of force and influence and so only a pure spirit can cause it. Thus, the earthquake which came as a wrath indicating the power of the spirit. She went on to clarify that to make the

earth move synchronization with various other elements is required with water, forest and animals reiterating once again the symbiosis.

This narrative signifies how natural phenomenon are understood in a particular society and shapes its social institutions. The objective and value neutral way of looking at earthquake as simply affecting the terrain and people suffers from a masculinist bias and requires indigenous perspective for a better understanding. Rather the base must be broader to include memory and history, the way earthquakes bring about change in livelihood pattern and polity requires careful observation. A departure from macro perspective towards a subaltern perspective to bridge the binary gap between natural and social.

Animism is widely practiced by the Rabhas even today but the its nature has changed a great deal. Assimilation has begun in the Brahmaputra valley and the Rabhas are not free from it. Bridging seismicity and belief is yet another myth that has its origin in pan Indian Hindu mythology but well integrated by the forest community in interpreting their everyday precariousness. Shiva the Hindu deity of destruction is prayed in his tribal manifestation. Shiva's dance of destruction, symbolizing earthquake is accepted in popular realm. *Tandava* signifies destruction of evil and the community, living with everyday risk, such symbolizations are very much accepted. The culmination of an earthquake or for that matter any form of natural disaster is associated with the deity performing his destructive *tandava* dance to cleanse the world or sinners. For communities residing in vulnerable zones, earthquakes are nemesis, inevitable and inescapable; above human ability to control so there is a reliance upon the supernatural for explanation. Segal in his book on Myth defines *myth as a story* and reflects upon its function in unifying the society and its members by allowing them to simply believe (Segal, 2015). The very myth of Shiva performing *tandava* to sanitize the earth of evils, resulting in earthquake is an illustration of this definition. It is true that such mythical deconstruction has little of conventional scientific temper and not objectivity but such belief is of high social relevance. It binds the members of the society into one unifying whole. Standard scientific temper is literally non-existent among forest dwellers and myths provide a sound system of justify why communities must co-opt with risk rather than giving up. Emergence of these belief systems are context specific and ensures survival of people in the ecosystem. Also, the sense of inevitability instills in the members of the society

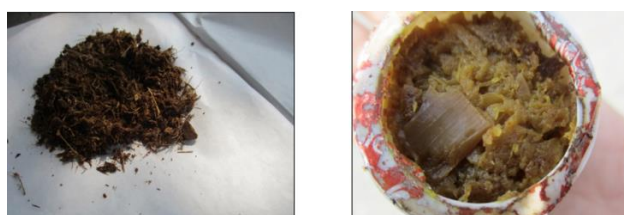
a sense of preparedness or readiness to face the event. This readiness contributes to solidarity and cohesion during crisis. Preparedness also enables the members of the society to come up with shock absorbing mechanism to dilute its impact upon members.

a) Precariousness and Co-existence

In the recent period, food enthusiasts have brought to fore ferment food which is abound in the North-Eastern region of the country. For a region dueling vagaries of nature, the culture of fermented food has a unique relevance. Fermented food is prepared and stored using economical methods for the lean periods, to meet the protein needs during emergency, also some have high medicinal value. Wild fruits and vegetables which are high in nutritional value along with various forms of meat are included in the huge range of preserved food. The age old techniques, which are indigenous and region specific enable communities to thrive during floods, famines and earthquakes. Bamboo shoot both fresh and fermented is an important ingredient among the ethnic communities. Bamboo shoot is high in dietary fiber and rich in nutrients such as protein, carbohydrates, amino acids, mineral, inorganic salt and so on. *Jim Tenga* is a form of fermented bamboo shoot product prepared and consumed by the Rabhas. Young bamboo shoot is cut, peeled into small pieces, sprinkled with water and stored in a jar to ferment. During annual floods, *Jim Tenga* is cooked with any available staple product such as vegetable, meat or fish that cater to the dietary supplements of stranded folks.

In regions where disasters are routine events, it tends to attain a permanent character in public consciousness. The community as a recipient of such routinized events sets aside portions of things which will be of use during the catastrophe. In the month of April men of the community start looking for young bamboo shoots and women tend to the collected produce. The relevance of undertaking the activity during April is that by the month of May flooding begins. Preparing *Jim Tenga* is a sign that the community is foreseeing an impending disaster. During crisis situations people can consume their traditional food which gives them a unique sense of belongingness and enhances their ability to cope. Familiar food increases connectedness and enables fast recovery from the disorder.

One persistent complaint which victims have in relief camps is of non-palatable food. During relief operations government follows a standard operating procedure providing grains and oil. With the marketization of the welfare economy packaged food such as protein bars and dehydrated biscuits are provided. These no doubt have longer shelf life and free from contamination but do not suit the taste buds of the people. In course of my journey, one of my confidante told that packaged food or canned cases tastes mostly taste like clay and the only benefit is they have beautiful packaging so can displayed in the living room for guests.

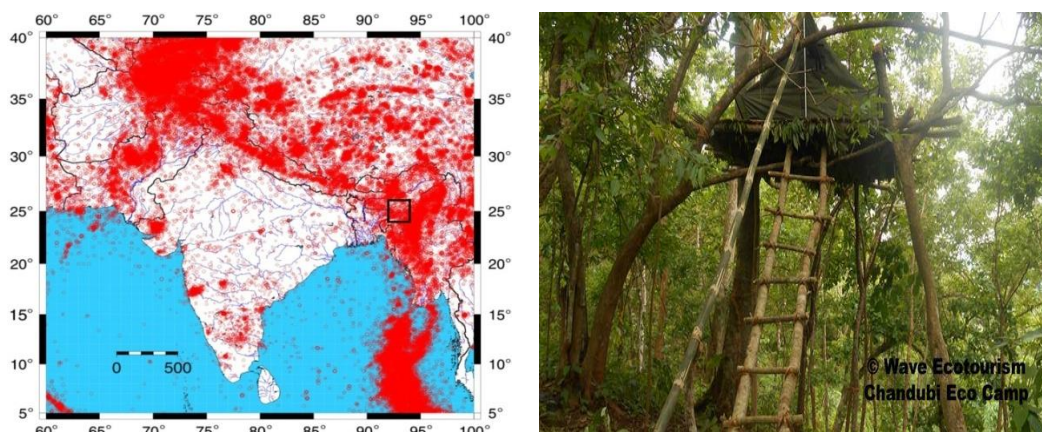


Fermented Delicacies: Khorisa prepared out of bamboo shoot and ginger

Alienation with regular intake of what is commonly consumed leads to longing for normalcy and return to home and hearth. An old man, languishing in the Rajapara Relief Camp remarked “*the aroma of JimTenga cooked with fish, even under the tarpaulin sheet reminded me of home.*” This throws light on community’s understanding of catastrophe that it is an unusual situation, a departure from normal. Keeping this in mind they store portable portions of *JimTenga* away for lean periods. During out of routine times, there is a longing for normalcy, a search for familiarity, which the fermented bamboo provides. Familiarity of taste is a cultural capital which the community carries with itself during order and disorder both. Thus, the aroma and taste of *JimTenga* helps the community to sustain itself during crisis and accept the hitherto unacceptable.

A dedicated food culture suitable for catastrophe exists because of frequent susceptibility of the region to disasters of different kind. The Assam Valley which falls in the NorthEastern region of India and a vulnerable terrain. This part falls in the convergent zone of three major continental plates pushing into each other resulting in earthquakes. High seismic stress is caused by the Himalayan plate interacting with the

Indo-Burma Ranges that meets at the Assam Syntaxes. Convergent zones of the world are characterized by magnanimous tremors and true to the rule, few large and hundreds of micro-earthquakes occur annually in this region. Thus, the population here live in a risk laden terrain and precariousness is a part of daily imagination. People co-exist with risk where fear is latent therefore context specific cultural techniques for protection and preservation of lives, memories and assets are adopted. Locally designed cultural edifices of various type seek to mitigate precariousness on daily basis. One such edifice which can be called an appropriate technology is a reed house or *chaang-ghor* where an ordinary forest dweller resides. The structure made out of bamboo is tremor proof and being a platform house on poles or tree it is free from submergence. However, we must constantly ask this question whether these resilient structures are absolute and the impact of neo-liberalism on them.



Coexisting Amidst Precariousness: (L) the seismic belt of India which coincides with the regions which indigenous people are settled. (R) A tree house model built by an eco-tourism resort in Chandubi.

Indeed, indigenous innovations have greatly benefited the forest dwellers by allowing them to respond to territorial risk yet they are mostly powerless against overwhelming natural transformations. Like we do not feel the rotation of the earth similarly micro-tremors are also not felt. These everyday tremors weaken the terrain and the structure. So, what we are dealing with is everyday precariousness that is not visible to the naked eye or a single generation. There are two cases why people tend to be oblivious of such transitions. First, these transitions can be told only inter-

generationally. For instance, the Chandubilake was deep once and now it has become shallow owing to sediment deposition thereby affecting the fish catch. Second, living in a terrain for long causes amnesia. Going about daily lives in routine, individuals become engrossed in duels of food and shelter leading to the perception of risk take a back seat. Humans are often short sighted and keep only the basic needs in purview. Fulfilment of those basic needs brings comfort so catastrophe takes a back seat and conveniently forgotten in an average everydayness. While members are aware of past calamities yet risk cognizance does not become the priority and they respond to situational triggers which are only felt and seen. This can also be attributed to the fact that humans are naturally adept to procrastinating and until hazards becomes disaster, they tend to ignore risks. For instance, mending a weak roof is delayed until hail storm brings it down or blows it off.

Coping with precariousness is not the only challenge because risks are not always inherent in nature. Rather risks also accumulates from outside. No discourse is valid without a bearing to history and in the Indian context, colonialism's role in shaping prejudices and practices must not be ignored. The 18th century British forest policy which was meant to keep timber mills and railways running in England and policy are still practiced in the Assam valley with minor modifications. The demarcation between protected and reserve forest segregating human interference is applicable even today. Indeed, there has been a growing threat of poachers but what then happens to the forest communities who are dependent on the ecosystem for survival? Is it legitimate, to bar people from their homes in the name of preserving flora and fauna? Unfortunately, vestiges of the colonial past are still carried with pride by the native forest officials who continue to exploit and harass the indigenous people. Besides, there is a craze to increase the base of tax paying citizens people are conveniently uprooted from the forest and pushed to the market to contribute to the burgeoning GDP surplus. Setting territorial limits to settlement and livelihood serves a practical purpose for the state.

Forest is projected as dangerous and chaotic thereby delimiting territory in the name of human rights is justified. Enforcing alien culture in the name of protective measure and forceful integration of the indigenous people has pushed their lives to uncertainty and impoverishment. Representing this saga of loss of home, livelihood and culture are the *Misings* of Bokakhat sub-division. The community has been

traditionally mobile but the introduction of territorial delimitation and *ryothwari* drew them out of the forest and forced them to engage into agriculture. But they were not accustomed to the system of cultivation and seasonal changes in crops and land. However, generationally they adapted, but the erstwhile nomads are faced with an even greater risk today. The land which was demarcated for them and is fast eroding today. They had settled where they were forced to because they had no power to bargain or choose. But what do they do now when every monsoon drowns acres of their land. They are losing their cultivation and people. Today they have given up their traditional occupation and *Mising* youth has little option but to move as casual laborers to urban centres as un-skilled laborers. *Mising* families have started migrating towards the Kaziranga National Park for search of stable terrain but here too they face the wrath of forest department who are evacuating them as illegal occupants. The saga of precariousness has become an endless ordeal.



Transient Terrain: Unabated river bank erosion by the Brahmaputra cutting gorges into reducing Jhanjimukhu, Teok.

b) Indigenous Ways and Sustainable Societies

Knowledge is a cultural entity, suitable to the local context which is mostly transferred through folklores. The kind of epistemology I mean to put forward here is indigenous in nature which is mostly ethno-social or ethno-cultural. This body consists of little traditions, which propagates, percolates and transmits orally from

one generation to the next. The universal appeal of such epistemology is unfounded because they are context specific and applicable for people following similar set of norms and beliefs. A standard, scientific gaze cannot decipher this body because the civilization aptitude of this kind is regional and specific to a group. This body is sustainable in nature and deeply connected to the ecosystem which determines their life and livelihood. But beginning with the colonial period in India such body of contextualized local knowledge has been systematically undermined and their culture looked down upon. With the penetration of market in these self-sustaining forest economies, autonomy began to crumble and with cultural alienation begun.

Post industrialization development paradigm is concerned only with the materialism and emphasis is on accumulation of private property; technology is designed to cater to this need. Modernization model seeks to be replicate this worldwide but for forest communities such model is not useful. In indigenous societies, objects are of little value, as land and other resources are communally owned. Man has a symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem and material possession is only for sustenance or preservation of ancestral heritage; non-material possession is the real asset. However, this ethic is fast declining with the erosion of traditional autonomy of these communities. Today they have landed into a broken juncture where they are introduced to new technology like mobile phones or high yielding variety (HYV) seeds of which they have no practical utility. The telecom companies market their product through various lucrative offers and government floats number of subsidized schemes. This has suddenly increased the urge for individual appropriation and like the older generation states it, individual gratification has increased and so has conflict. The atmosphere is tensed because the previous ideology is breaking down without a replacement and at the same time there is an outside agenda that has made inroads.

Specialists of domains often reflect the first world idea that tribal community's knowledge about phenomena is largely governed by superstition. This arm chair approach reduces oral traditions to be fables and knowledge to myths. In the post-colonial era, west conveniently discovered poverty in the third world to reassert their moral and cultural superiority (Escobar, 1994) and the arm chair *brown sabhas* simply imported this idea and applied to indigenous societies. Jawaharlal Nehru as

early as the 1947 spoke of autonomy of the tribal areas (Elwin, 2009) but despite that the concerns of these fringe societies have not been addressed. But why is the story of neglect of indigenous societies important vis-à-vis disasters?

“Throughout history, humanity has shaped nature and nature has shaped the development of human society...Landscape is the spatial manifestation of the relations between humans and their environment” (Laine & Subba, 2012:8). It is the landscape which determines scarcity and abundance. Rice is the staple diet of the Rabhas and other Assamese folk. In the winter months two principle variety of rice are grown namely *salidhaan* and *baodhaan*. Rabhas have been able to conserve these indigenous variety of rice despite state’s cajoling about HYV. Seasonality is very important character for growing the rice, the topography also plays a crucial role. While I try to make sense of all these variations sitting in the *nogou* verandah, an elderly remark that the region was gradually becoming unsuitable for the *salivariant*. The *salirice* needs rain yet not suitable during floods.

The Rani sub-division where the Chandubi Lake region is located is a transient topography prone to earthquakes both big and small. The repeated exposure to earthquakes has created topographic ruptures creating several visible depressions in the soil and depressions are easily visible in the landscape. Additionally, the region is infested by frequent flooding. Many a times flood water get accumulated in these caved zones thereby increasing the number of swamps. But what has the rising number of swamps got to do with culture?



Shrinking Waters: Dobka wetland and the adjoining agricultural fields near Guwahati airport will be taken over by the Assam Rifles

The rising number of swamps have impacted the food habit of the region. Low lying areas have increasing considerably, leading to change in the pattern of paddy. Land rupture is compounded by frequent flooding. The flood water which enters the region, now does not drain but accumulates. Higher retention of flood water in the field has also been recorded. This accumulation of water for longer periods in field has greatly affected *salidhaan* cultivation.

Despite the nutritional benefits and the government subsidy offered for *baodhaan* cultivation, but the old variety evokes a lot of nostalgia. Both *Chokoth* and *Bakhor* are prepared from *saalidhaan*.

Chokoth the fermented rice beer consumption is an inalienable part of the tribal culture of the entire Rabha tribe. Approximately one fourth of the daily entire calorific intake is fulfilled by *chokoth* consumption. It is said that in a Rabha society no ritual is complete without *chokoth* and *bakhor*. *Bakhor* or the rice beer cake is deemed to have high medicinal property besides its ritualistic use. *Ojha*, the community healer believes that rice beer relieves headache, body ache and diarrhea apart from curing cholera and worms. For a community of forest dwellers who scarcely depend on allopathic medicine and depends on ethno-medicinal healing, the abundance of both rice beer and rice beer cake is a matter of survival. One of the primary component for the preparation for rice beer is *salidhaan* seeds. Today the *salidhaan* seeds are procured from the market by the affluent Rabhas. Though a handful of them are able to preserve the *salidhaan* seeds in their granary yet with the increasing *baodhaan* cultivation, indigenous coffer is dwindling.



Indigenous Rice Beer: Chokoth or Junga in process which is consumed almost daily by the Rabha people.

Kheri, one of the significant others in the field and gave an insightful response to endangered *salidhaan* and its impact on indigenous brewing. For a woman who had never been in a formal education system and having no exposure to print or electronic media, she made interesting observations. She said that a series of herbs such as *Anaros*¹² and *Kuchibun*¹³ are required along with *salidhaan* for brewing *chokoth* and *bakhor* but the decrease in *salidhaan*, has led to these herbs go unused. Today these herbs have become weed.

Decline in brewing of traditional liquor had led people to buy canned beer from weekly *haat* (village market). This culture of drinking canned beer is affecting the health of community at large, especially younger men. Rabhas used to drink a couple of liters of *chokoth* on daily basis but now with the decline and replacement by branded liquor, liver and kidney diseases has increased. The traditionally brewed liquor was high on calorific value but the alcohol from market is devoid of it. Besides, the daily diet of the Rabhas is not nutritive enough to take the shock of synthetic liquor. Secondly, people are becoming poorer with the increasing intake of market alcohol. Most Rabhas are forest dwellers engaged in the subsistence economy who make their daily living by selling extra forest produces. But with the enhanced desire of market alcohol, individuals have started selling whatever they can lay their hands upon. Thirdly, both men and women were involved with brewing in the past leading to merriment and marriages but today drinking has become a man's affair. "So, we are in a unique juncture, sitting on a time bomb, facing a silent catastrophe on daily basis that is sharpening with loss of our indigenous culture," Kheri ended.

¹² Scientific Name is *Ananas comosus*, the tender leaves of which are anthelmintic and abortifacient

¹³ The leaves are used during measles and pneumonia

Man, Forest & Spirit: Metaphors and Meanings in a Rabha Society

As I sat in the comfort of air conditioner of my University's library, the thought of packing my backpack, boarding a fairly unreliable bus, crossing a lake and reaching the hot and humid *doars* of between Assam valley and Meghalaya plateau was somehow perturbing. It was December and a few of my friends knew that I was going to the field for so called 'data collection' and they asked me if my questionnaire was ready. I was confused between nodding my head and giving a blind stare. All I could say was that I had meticulously planned my journey to the field, made a framework and worked on a schedule sorted out the priorities of area meant to explore and questions I planned to ask. Caught in the assembly line production of collecting data and analyzing it, someone else probed, "*So what then is your tool for data collection?*" I gave a standard reply saying, mine is an ethnography so probably in-depth interview and other flexible stuff! Later I wondered if my exploration could be termed so, I shrugged and walked away. What did M.N Srinivas tell his friends at Oxford about his methods to understand the social structure and dynamics of Rampura, I wondered. Somersaulting between objective academic rigor and hermeneutic action, I left for the field.

I was constantly reminded by my reflections in windshield of my bus to Chandubi that I had no questionnaire at my disposal to excavate data. But then, in conversation with myself and my reflection, I realized that I wasn't looking for any excavation but something more meaningful which only living and learning with the Rabhas would reveal. I was in-tune with Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012), I got some confidence, so proceeded. Everyday precariousness, meanings and symbols intrinsic to the ecosystem and the culture of resilience in the face of adversity unless felt and seen cannot be understood. Sometimes smell can explain more than lecture series' and rejoinders but the mystery remains whether I was ready to deschool myself and learn from people and situations without always seeking an answer.

The encounters and experiences of forest dwelling Rabhas with seismicity is historically relevant but even more profound is their co-existence with risk on daily basis, the social structure that enable them to survive, indigenous cultural apparatus which ensures their perpetration but at the same time government and market interventions that make them vulnerable. I decided to explore the second interrelated element of my journey into hermeneutics of seismicity, the Rabha people by collecting narratives of migration, loss and fear. But who are these Rabha people? My work is not a survey and I do not burden myself with the universe of the Rabha population which consists more than 8.5% of the total population of the state. Rather I concentrated with that group which carried a seismic heritage and whatever knowledge I could gather about the same happened over associations with the people over a period of eight months in three periodic intervals.

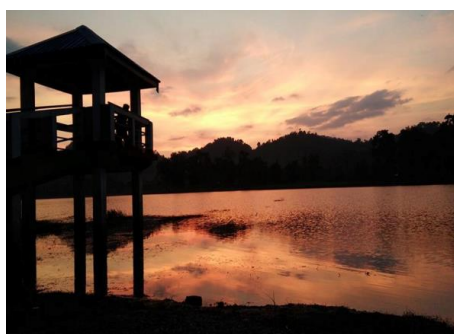
Road Less Taken

After a tedious journey across broken concretes what was once a road from Mirza of Kamrup Rural District, I reached the Chandubighaat¹⁴. As directed by Pobin, of Rajapara whom I met in over Facebook and had few telephonic conversations with about the place and people, I waited for Moinul, my boatman who would cross me over to Jaramukhuriya, a stretch of 2 nautical miles across the Chandubi lake. However, I reached an hour behind the schedule time of 12 p.m. and as presumed my contact person had left, but I decided to wait with hope. Having crossed the isolated forest beat office and few stretches of wide leafed tall Sal trees was itself unnerving. The bank of the lake commonly called *ghaat* was completely isolated except a few polythene bags and an abandoned shack. I frantically switch on and off my smart phone seeking some network or probably a minute of internet connectivity, but without respite. Alone I sat on the *ghaat* listening to the crickets from the hedges and occasionally sighting a bird or two. Probably Moinul has already left, I could not see any boat anchored either.

The winter sun was blazing down and I could sit no longer on the tree stump meant for travelers taking short halts. My backpack was weighing me down so I decided to

¹⁴ Bank of the lake also a tiny port to board boats.

the climb the forest department's bird view point for shade or any other person to cross by. Time passed and I grew impatient, I crooked my neck time and again watching out for Moninul, now counting the possibility of returning to Guwahati. But the last bus from Rajapara chowk had left at 3 pm, options were minimum, so I decided to wait a while longer before finally taking a detour to the forest beat office probably two miles away to take up accommodation at their guest house or make a phone call back home to Guwahati, 70 kilometers away for a taxi.



Chandubi Lake and Shifting Lenses:(L) ChandubiGhaat on a dry month. (R) The Forest Department's View Point at sunset.

Sunset in this part of the country is the earliest because of the latitudinal variation. Contemplating possibilities, I saw the sun in the horizon going down, it was 4.30 p.m. and I decided to make my move. I picked my bag and started descending the stairs but just before I stepped the landing through the corner, I saw a boat, cutting ripples through the water from the direction of sun towards me. I was thrilled. It was Moinul at last.

Unlike my imaginations of a boatman, Moinul was only a school going boy of 14. He not only became my first point of contact with the Rabha people but a comrade and confidante in all my explorations later to come. As I stood on the bank, he jumped out of the boat in the water and pulled it towards me. He introduced himself and began with an apology in Assamese, with a thick Kamrupi accent "*Baideo, there was a jhamela, meaning trouble, in the village today*". Two forest guards had come to survey yesterday's fire. Two Sal trees were burnt in it and three others were affected by the blaze. We don't know who started it besides nobody goes for bidi into the

forest in the evening. But we are answerable since my uncle is head of the joint forest management (JFM) committee. He was taken for questioning to the Ranger's office so there was a commotion in the village. Hearing this, I felt guilty for my earlier contemplations and something I read on forest fire during my stay at the University came alive. I had read that Veerapan the notorious Indian brigand and dacoit smuggled sandalwood from one location another by starting forest fire to divert attention of forest officials and forest tribes. I wondered if something like that was happening. However, I did not ask Moinul that day because a controversy at the start of my stay wasn't a healthy sign besides it would make me look like a gossip monger. Despite an itching curiosity, I decided to make my entry into the field with a positive note, with the aim of exploring life of the Rabhas in the Chayani Borduar forest surrounding the lake, origin of the Chandubi lake in the earthquake of 1897 and understanding the indigenous culture of resilience to seismicity and floods.

I crossed the Chandubi looking at the sun go down and nearing my destination, Moinul, boatman and guide cautioned me that venturing into the *khaal*, *beel* and *bonn*¹⁵ are forbidden at night so I ought to be careful. We reached Jaramukhuriya in little more than half an hour and as I stood on the bank looking around with excitement, I saw two boards. I read these two boards, one by a private firm Wave Ecotourism, proclaiming itself to be best in exploring nature and the other a Government of Assam sign stating the origin of the lake and dating it back 1897. It was strange how I had socialize myself to process relevant information, immediately opening the notepad in my connectivity less smart phone and clicking a picture of it despite darkness. He waited patiently and accompanied me to Sabita's house where I had booked for staying with advanced rental arrangement over phone with her son.

By the standards of a forest village, Sabita's house was well built and she took pride in it. The semi-circular concrete house with three feet plinth had a weaving shack with a traditional handloom installed and by its side was a *chang-ghor* of two rooms with traditional staircase called *jakhla* and a pigsty underneath. She was a good host and invited me inside the concrete house and volunteered to carry my backpack. I removed my shoes following her lead and headed into the room where there was *chalpira* or bed and a few plastic chairs. I was told that there wasn't any electricity in

¹⁵*Khaal*, *beel* and *bonn* respectively means pond, lake and forest in Assamese which is commonly spoken by the forest dwelling Pati Rabhas of Assam.

the hamlet but here I could see a bulb alight and provisions for a wall fan. Inquisitive, I asked and with much delight, the sturdy middle-aged woman replied that hers was the only house with a battery connectivity which she had managed to buy with her earning from the Chandubi Festival last year. She grew taller in stature and told me that there were two *bidekhior* fair skinned foreign travelers who had stayed at her rental facility, also had her food consisting of ethnic delicacies like minced pigeon fry and duck curry. Indeed, there wasn't any electricity but my host was a relatively rich lady with electric business potential. She knew I was Assamese but did not proceed to discuss my ethnicity or caste rather she asked with if I knew how to drape *mekela-chador*, traditional Assamese attire. When I responded in positive, without adieu she produced a bunch of catalogues and textures for me to see, I had to comply and looked through. Sensing my obvious disinterest, she said that I had come for a long stay and I could see them any other time. I was relieved but famished.

I was shown to the backyard where a tin mustered oil jar now used as a bucket waited for me, with water and a beer can as mug. I washed myself and reached back the house for tea and flat rice called *chira* locally. Sabita's husband sat cross legged along with Moinalas the food was laid on the thatch floor. However, I was the guest and instead of sitting on a straw mat, I was offered a flat wooden stool with very short legs, closer to the ground that was called a *pira*. It was completely dark outside, a fifty-watt orange bulb hanging from the ceiling glowed as insects big and small hovered around it. I took some dig into the food and as expected the questions began to poured. So, why was I there? I had come there to explore the linkages between seismicity and human society; the experience of occupying a hazardous terrain being exposed to fear and vulnerability and ways in which human skills and social institutions mitigate this precariousness. My explanation was followed by placid glances. By then Sabita had come, squatting next to me and she listened attentively and as soon as I stopped, she responded "*Oh, so our village! You have come to the right place.*"

I was galvanized by the response, shocked yet happy that the rhetoric of seismic vulnerability of the region falling in zone V did not have to be repeated as in the University, or about predictions of an impending earthquake of magnanimous nature, or even the longitudinal history of seismic encounters of the locale in 1897 and 1950. Being in proximity with the risk, she knew; probably past encounters and pre-

monitions are internalized being a members of the community in form of oral histories or natural symbols. It was my task to explore these dynamics and find answers. Her understanding also gave me a sense of acceptance into the field opening the possibilities to enquire into a domain, considered by many as strangely interesting. Though I had miles to go before I could sleep or engage with the field meaningfully, yet my first brush was of content. There were more questions directed to me about the utility of the study, kind of opportunities for a woman doing such work, whereabouts of my family and finally my marital status. After my answers, Sabita seemed a little startled that I was still unmarried, "*then you must have a partner at-least*" she probed. I did not quite understand until later that week when I visited the bachelor dormitory where young men and women met. Unlike older times, the youth did not cohabit but met there to choose partners after which they engaged into few sexual inter-courses elsewhere. These encounters would finally decide whether the couple should elope for marriage or not. Unlike the largely Hindu Assamese society where pre-marital sex is a taboo, among the indigenous people it wasn't. Among the Rabhas marriage by elopement was a legitimate choice. Despite familiarity with Margaret Mead who wrote that elopement was a prevalent form of marriage in Samoa, yet hearing it for myself meant that my journey was packed with more excitement than presumed. It was getting darker and Sabita left to cook dinner after making me know that she had two daughters, one of them my age, both had eloped to marry and it would be prudent for me to choose someone at the earliest.

Sabita's departure meant that I would have more time to speak to the men. Maju Da and Moinal were equally eager and their lack of inhibition told me that they were probably accustomed to travelers who came for various ecotourism adventure like hiking or biking as a stopover to Chandubi. Literally translated Maju Da means the middle brother but I wondered if Sabita's husband who look infirm yet mysterious had a real name. In a soft tone, he told that Moinal was his nephew, patting the boy he probed "*was there a problem in sailing the boat in the dark, did you see anything?*" Now he turned towards me and said "*one is supposed to keep away from khaal, beel and bonn after dark.*" Intrigued, I asked for an explanation. He looked in my direction and poked the boy pointing at the next room. Moinal disappeared, then reappeared with a dark wooden bowl with white liquid, *chokoth*. Maju da offered me, I denied and without insistence ordelay he took a sip urging Monial to begin, he

listened. He was shy at first so Maju da poked him again, saying “*You are the Gaon Bura’s son, tell the story!*” Probably with the pride of his father, Moinul began, “*In old times, boats used to be bigger but now we use smaller one, for greater manoeuvring. Father also other elderly say that there is a Memang, a sleeping spirit underneath the placid water and it isn’t fair to create too many ripples in the water least it should wake up.*” But why smaller boats? To my question the old man replied, “*Our tribe is old and hardly anyone can remember the its origin though there are songs but our village is not so old.*” I failed to understand. So, he explained that the Rabhas had descended from the neighbouring Lohargat to occupy a site by the bank of Chandubi. Back then Chandubi Lake was of a great expanse of about four hundred and fifty hectares like the records states but today both the depth and the width is only a third of its original. “*So, you see, we use small boats not to disturb the Memang and vegetation underneath,*” ending with a poke to the boy.

Moinul recounted a tale from few years back of a youth who tried to get rid of lake vegetation by clearing its roots from underneath, to make a smooth passage for the boats to Jarikamukh across the lake. The elders forbade him from disturbing the vegetation and spirit of the lake but he wouldn’t listen. As predicted, he came down with fever and died the same night. The *Ojha* was ready with his medicine and *Palisinging* praises of the *Memang* asking the spirit of the lake to forgive but like the lore warned, the boy died. The mood in the room was glum, the dinner was served, we ate and I retired and retired to my *chang*.

Field work can never be complete, without becoming a part of the field. To make that happen, it was important to uphold the moral principle of the community of not interfering with the natural course of the ecosystem. Violating the doctrines of faith would mean othering myself rupturing the foundation of confidence on which the relationship with the people depended. One of the religious proverbs among the Rabhas echoing an unquestioned balance is ‘*bairakhuwa, kai Kriktsa*’ which means ‘*God gives, man does not know how to take*’. Here it becomes evident that the human agency involved is required to be sensitive about the Spirit if they must continue to live. Sanskritization of the tribe is a recent phenomenon and most of the Gods are naturalistic in origin. The forest and lake are embodiments of the supernatural spirits through nature that can alter between benevolence and malevolence. The fact that acts of each forest dweller counts, which makes them an intrinsic part of the system, not

external to the super-natural and nature but intrinsically connected to the two. The three elements; spirit, forest and man make the holy trinity connected by the common thread of action that has ripple effect on one another's existence. Thus, I wondered what use sampling would be when one story teller was leading me to the next. I decided to flow with the field and reflected upon a question; are earthquakes seen as wrath of the spirit, though nature, over man's sins?

Man: Horizons of a Rabha Society

The Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya are living diary because they speak from where they belong, with their baggage of history and expectations. The richness of their lived experience is such that my field diary was overwhelmed. My journey of acquainting with the indigenous ways of co-existence with the ecosystem and its risks was undertaken in three phases and the passing of each phase brought in greater nostalgia and despair. But why? Technically speaking, every passing day the amount of information about the people, the place and their customs grew in great magnitude so, I was at a loss of how to process them. Indeed, I could write down some but most remained in my memory. When I sat down to read the notes from the field, recollections crowded my mind, while some data was systematically segregated others have been left behind for rumination in the future. In the initial phase, people responded to me in politically correct versions that barely resolved my purpose so, it became essential to interpret more. For instance, simple fights over a chicken carried tremendous weight to understand the dynamics of the society so I learnt to absorb what I saw and heard, like a sponge. Despite my eagerness, of knowing and recording more, it was undecided whether all the information would find a place in my thesis. In the second phase of my travel, I used to think whether this conversation will be useful over another. Caught in the conundrum of cost-benefit, I lost time and interest; once again I decided to flow in the field as people and situations guided me. In the last phase of my *rubaroo*¹⁶ in the field when people had decided to let their guards down, I invested in conversations without disclaimers, I realized the limits of my role.

¹⁶*Rubaroo* is an urdu word which means *face to face*. The emotional depth and precision carried by this word barely has an English equivalent

Unlike everyday one morning began with clamour; I was brushing and Rita passed like a whiff, wailing. I wrapped up my affairs at the earliest and proceeded in her direction. She was in the headman's house. As she registered her protest of having seen her husband in jungle with another woman from the village nearby. I listened with agony, wanting to help along with many others who had come for an early morning show. At the University, I was acquainted with ideas on feminism and women empowerment besides conceptual clarity on laws that declared women as equal partners in the society. Despite my learnings, the reality in a forest village was much different. The intrinsic interdependence of every man with another was important to survive amidst perilous nature and people could not simply break relationships based on social malfunctions. Each person in the village was part of a great wheel, they co-existed with one another not out of emotional or economic dependence but to survive in a perilous ecosystem. The headman addressed as *Gaon Bura* did not pronounce his judgement till the next day but and when it came, an underlying principle of a forest society was revealed. Rita was asked to register her grievance. Her husband asked whether he had indulged in deviance but he denied, leading to a war of words between the two. Intervening, the *Gaon Bura* pronounced that the parties would stay separate for a month succeeding which Rita would have the right to choose a new partner. The remaining elders of the village proclaimed the judgement as fair however the women folks asked Rita to forgive her husband and resume her marriage. Watching all this was the accused who stood with his bunch of friends mocking the aggrieved. From what was told, seen and felt, I understood that persons and sentiments in the forest are all replaceable but a fulfilling life was not. In contrast to a modern justice system, hearing was quick, pronouncement effective and parties fulfilled. This once again brought me in crossroad where women of rational societies die waiting for alimony and adultery takes decades to be proven. Thus, I was at a loss to bridge primitiveness and justice.

After the episode, I used to visit Rita frequently and engaged in lengthy conversations, and one day she asked me the procedure of justice delivery in my society. I told her that the system was very complicated and lengthy, invoking taboo and bad breath between families and advocates preying on people's miseries for money. That evening coming back to the *chang* a realization dawned that despite so many concepts and laws, women in so called modern societies are relatively

powerless. They are bogged down by the system and family with limited power to choose partners and protest deceit. The cultural difference I shared with the people who dwelled in the forest terminologically categorized as a simple society, calling themselves Rabha *Manuh*. But looking deeper from my vantage point of being an English educated woman from urban Guwahati, belonging to a highly stratified caste society and possessing adequate agency to pursue research in Delhi, I realized that the concept of justice among them was inspired from nature, quick and sensitive.

a) **Dilemma over Names and Origins**



Boat without Boatman: who will sail me through?

I had to approach my field via Guwahati where I face the undying clamour of relatives at home of having chosen a location of dangerous nature instead of picking something softer where I wouldn't have to reside among 'tribal' people. An uncle of mine working with the police, personally cautioned me that I was entering an enemy territory as the 'tribals' are always envious of the general valley population with non-mongoloid features. I rejected the general xenophobia but what he said next evokes more excitement than fear. He said that till a few years back, parts of my field was ininsurgency zone demanding for separate Rabha *Hasong* or Rabhaland and the cadre were expert guerrilla fighters. It was a tall claim and I was confused whether it was a fact, a caution to dissuade or a subliminal connection between ethnic strife and insurgency. I was journeying into the field but there were perforations of doubt. I constantly reminded myself to be sceptical however failed miserably each day as I understood the people better. From my *chang*, every morning, I could see the mist covered Khasi hills, a serene sky, lush forest and nestled in amidst it the breath-taking

Chandubi lake. Despite being only seventy kilometres away from Guwahati, how did the region feel so pristine, I wondered.

Different people cite different sources for the origination of the name Chandubi but the major opinions can be categorized into three. Carrying forward the colonial version, government records state the lake as consequential water body of tectonic origin. Located in the foot hills of the Meghalaya plateau amidst the Chayani Borduar forest reserve in Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council of Kamrup Rural District of Assam accessible via NH-37, is the Chandubi lake. The *beel* is called so because the Britishers saw the sun emerge from and immerse into it. Chandubi from this standpoint has roots in two words ‘*Chan*’ a distorted version of the word ‘sun’ and ‘*dubi*’ an Assamese word meaning ‘to set’. This connotation provided by colonial masters, is a classic example of how outsiders carve the identity of indigenous society. The natural gets embodied in a social nomenclature, i.e., name.

A strange way of disassociating ourselves from the field is that we do not see it in light of our past, as if the stories we heard which while growing up or the prose which transported us to the land of imagination carries no meanings. I agree that sometimes it is our ignorance but the possibility of superiority complex acquired in the process of education cannot be ignored. True that M.N. Srinivas (1978) spoke of one’s difficulties in studying own society and stressed upon the importance of depersonalizing the field but am I supposed to practice the same? In the second week of my fieldwork, I faced a dilemma as Kamala recited the tale of Beula and Chanda *xodagar*.

The tale goes in the backdrop of medieval Assam, as merchant Chanda had suffered the wrath of goddess Manasa leading to the death of all his sons one after another. His youngest son Lakhimidar was poisoned by Manasa’s snake on the day of his marriage. His newly wed bride Beula was devastated and decided to undergo penance until the goddess would bring back her husband to life. She undertook her promise, carrying the lifeless body of her husband on a raft, across a huge lake. After a long ordeal, Manasa answered her prayers, bringing back Lakhimidar to life, but with a condition that his father, merchant Chanda must become her disciple. Lifting of the wrath and bring back his dead son to life, the *xadagar* though unwilling yet complied. This put an end to the feud between the goddess and the merchant. Kamala stopped

for a moment and pointing in the direction of the lake from where we were sitting, she said this is where Chanda *xadagar*'s sorrows came to an end. The place is named after the merchant as Chandubi.

I had heard this story several times as a child but never did I imagine the strange coincidence of having to hear again from a so-called 'respondent.' The futility of distancing myself from the field became apparent. Thus, I embarked on a journey of relatedness, seeing memories and artefact of the forest village in continuum with my life. Chanda *xadagar* was a mythical character for me but suddenly became real. This realization, made me aware of the commonness in literary background of general valley population and tribes of the *doars* or the *terai* zone between hills and valley.



A story woven across the lake: Beula Tending to her dead husband across the Chandubi lake with all the Gods and Goddess watching her penance

Despite being a part of patrilineal Assam with the only male river of the country, the region has high matrilineal influence from across the Khasi Hills. The hill people descend to the *doars* for business and occasionally left behind meanings and symbols of importance. The influence of hill dialect upon the Rabhas is observable. Carrying this forward, we have yet another tale of how name come into being from contact with outside groups. Today the two state governments of Assam and Meghalaya follow a strict demarcation of territory and distribution of welfare services but such compartmentalization is missing from among people. The forest dwellers have

assimilated the idea of mixed etymology for the word Chandubi but the governments have not.

Another day sitting with the adept storyteller, Kamala, who never received formal education, the mystery of *Chand-Ublee* was resolved. Unlike shrines of organized religions which are confined within walls, the tribal the form of worship is free and spiritual. The Khasis of Meghalaya overlooking Chandubi, worships hillocks. An interconnected system of several hillocks makes up for one shrine. For instance, Dangor Pahar, Teponhalia, Kundaburha, Loru Khund a Ghuli, Tengabari Ghupa and Ouguri Ghal together compose one shrine, named *Chand-Ublee*. Literally translated the 'Chan' will mean five and 'Ublee' means 'statue of Gods'. Indeed, the lake is surrounded by five hillocks and is a composite whole. This makes us conscious of the vastness of indigenous ethos in comparison with rational modernity. Connectedness with the entire ecosystem as single unit and man being a part rather than a recipient becomes evident. Today Chandubi is probably a distorted version of the Khasi nomenclature but the Rabhas have accepted it as, yet another meaning to describe their abode. Here, there is no othering.

Though not ethnically related yet me and the Rabhas are parts of one political unit. We share similar historical trajectory and some strands of literature. In some sense, I was an outsider, considering appearance and language but an insider at heart. Being an insider, I could not completely overcome my 'initial preconceptions' of who are Rabhas are and their society at large (Srivastava, 2004: 14). Had I been a complete stranger to the Rabha nation, I would be free. So, I decided to dig deeper and learn more about them.

b) Rabha *Manuh*: Being & World

Edward Gait came to India with an evangelical zeal but instead ended up writing rich ethnographies of tribal communities from across the hills, valleys and mountains of India, also ended up marrying a Gond woman from the forest of Chattishgarh. In context of the Rabha community he pointed out that, "*there seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to who these Rabha people really are*"! Indeed, the uncertainty still prevails; in Assam, the community is given the status of tribe whereas in West

Bengalthey are identified as scheduled caste. The determinant for difference in political status and protective discrimination is based on regional dynamics and history. As myth has it, strands of Rabha are also found in Afghanistan but the identity of this group in the war-torn country is a mystery. In the Assam valley, the Rabhas were identified as tribe based on their racial character, isolation, animism and primitive character. This colonial nomenclature conveniently segregated between caste and tribe, *jati* and *janajati* that is visible even today but in the present paradigm, politics of reservation has made the distinction worse starting feud between people of different ethnicity. But if we must understand the Rabha as a community and holistically, confirming to its tribal dimension in context of the Assam valley is inadequate. Despite members of the community being spread across numerous pockets from Bangladesh to Afghanistan, a single mythical origin and unity in collective consciousness of language and traditions binds them. So Rabhas cannot narrowly be called as a tribal group rather a more broader terminology is required. Xaxa (1999: 3592-93) tends to resolve this terminological dilemma by popularizing the word indigenous. Instead of tribe, he advocates for *indigenous communities* to address groups who are geographically isolated, have poor standard of living, are backward, practice simplistic forms of religion such as animism or naturism and speak non-mainstream language with oral histories rather besides possessing distinct racial features. His justification appeals to my conscience so the word indigenous is used as a suffix to Rabhas in my journey.

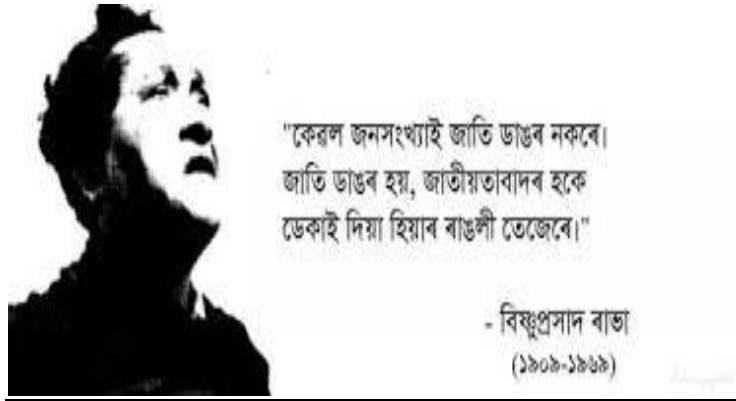
While the macro level terminological dilemma is resolved, yet another arises. In Jaramukhuriya the forest dwellers identified themselves as Rabha *Manuh*. *Manuh* is an Assamese word equivalent to individuals but in the lyrical imaginations of Bhupen Hazarika, the bard of Assam, the word acquires a new meaning describing the entire human race. The bard's version seems more applicable in context of my field not because it suits my research sensibilities but a voluntary expression by the people themselves who content that *Manuh* denotes the 'community'. This pluralistic transition speaks volume about camaraderie of the community where property is not owned by individuals but by the group and resources are equitably distributed among all. Most families do not have shrines at home even today because the site of worship is communally established and propitiated. *Banamali* is the lord of the forest and pastures and it is said "*that which does not belong to the community belongs*

to *Banamali*”. *Banamali* is an interesting deity with indigenous character but Hindu name, which once again reasserts that the community has been exposed to the mainstream faith system during cultural revivalism started by Shankardev. The animists of the past are today practicing caste culture in visible ways. One day I was asked to check the spellings in the birth certificate of the *Deu*’s grand-daughter. The spellings and format were correct, but I was surprised to see that instead of *Rabha* as surname, *Das* was mentioned. I demanded an immediate explanation. *Deu* complied with my request telling a tale. *Dipti*’s father has gone out as wage labourer in the paddy fields of an Assamese family in Palashbari. He had a daughter after the harvest and gave her the name *Dipti Das*, surname after his employers. He said that with a non-*Rabha* surname the chances of acceptance in the outer world becomes easier. From this, three ideas emerge, first that the boundaries of *Rabha* existence was slowly becoming porous with growing outsider influence, this triggers the dilution of tribe-caste differentiation overtly visible in the Brahmaputra valley thus making it the second dimension. It leads us to the third idea that breaking the barrier leads to greater acceptance of the forest dwellers and alleviating their prospects in the market.

In most scattered pockets of the community across states and borders assimilation is a visible theme however what hitherto connects these scattered pockets is language despite dialectical variations across the *seven* group of *Rabhas* namely *Rongadani* and *Maituri* belonging to Meghalaya exclusively, *Dahori* group scattered across East Garo Hills, *Bitalia* settled in Goalpara and Kamrup of Assam, *Hana* *Rabhas* belonging to Kamrup, *Totla* of Darrang and Lakhimpur districts of Assam and *Pati* with their home in Kamrup. And each group shares a collective memory which is unique to them. For instance, *Hana* *Rabhas* identify themselves with an oral narrative which states that those *Rabhas* who using Assamese songs to make horses dance are called *Hana*. On the other hand, the uniqueness of *Pati* *Rabha* is that they speak no special dialect of their own but the common Assamese tongue which is a branch of Kamrupi¹⁷ with occasional imports from *Rabha* dialect such as, *jakra/ jakri* meaning

¹⁷ Assamese tongue is broadly divided into Scriptural that is Likhita Axomiya and Spoken that is Kothita Axomiya. Though the Scriptural Assamese is used for writing throughout Assam and spoken mostly in the Upper Assam or the upper stretch of the Brahmaputra River. Kathita Axomiya is spoken mostly Lower Assam or Lower stretch of the Brahmaputra river. It is closer to Bengali in terms of pronunciation. Kamrupi dialect falls within the range of Kathita Axomiya. The difference in the two can be illustrated thus. What are you doing in Likhita dialect would be ‘kikoriasa?’ where as for Kathita dialect will be ‘kikossa?’. There are also differences in usage of words. For instance, fermented

earthquake. The literal translation of the word *Pati* means ‘ordinary or typically available’ which signifies their numerical strength in the Kamrup district. But the Pati Rabhas of Assam are culturally unique and hold on to it with pride. A comparative analysis of the seven groups of Rabhas reveal that the group is the most forward when it comes to education or accessing organized forms of livelihood opportunities.



Kalaguru: Bishnu Rabha¹⁸ an icon of the Rabha community and freedom fighter from Assam

Bishnu Rabha is the cultural icon of Assam and his contribution to the freedom movement has been unparalleled. He gave the slogan ‘*Ye Azaadi Jhooth Hai!*’ Though he was himself a village Rabha, culturally forward. He ardently advocated to uplift the condition of tribes of Assam. He remarked that a lot of people are accustomed with the term Rabha community but only a few people understands the community in its entirety, (Ranghk, 2010: 433)

rice which is commonly consumed by the Assamese community is called ‘potiyabhaat’ and marigold flower is called ‘narjiful’ in the upper stretch whereas in the lower stretch they are called ‘pontabhaat’ and ‘gendheful’ respectively. There is a visible difference in terms of culture and history of the two regions. Upper Assam was the strong hold of Ahoms for six hundred years however Pragjyotishpur which was later called Kamrup where today’s Guwahati lies is a zone of melting culture because it falls in the migration route. The influence of Hinduism and Trantrism is evident here.

¹⁸The word template in the photograph is a quote by the Kalaguru which says “KebolJanasankhyaeeJatikDangorNakare. Jatidangor hoi jatiotabadorhokeedekaeeediyahiyarrangolitejeree.”

It means that a community does not attain glory by the sheer size of its population but by the blood sacrifice made by the youth of the community with a nationalistic fervour.

“*Rabha Jatrirnaam bahute janee kintu kamahi buje jatitok.*”

Tribesmen of the *doars* were known for clan wars and fierce chiefs during the colonial times which strengthened the notions of noble savages. Besides little was known about their social system, institutions; colonial ethnographers such as Haimendorf (1978) reasserted the notions of static society. The Rabhas were caught up in this politics of representation which once asks the basic question, who are they?

Indeed, they fall within a constitutionally defined category of *janajati* and today they reside within an autonomous territory called Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. But within the council also, there is distinction between the village Rabhas and forest dwellers. For a rural Rabha political discourses stems from commonness in class situation, dependence and exploitation by money lenders, intrusion of immigrants and failure to maximize crop production. But issues of forest dwellers are entirely different, ranging from clash with forest beat official to declining forest produce and dissenting museumization which is promoted by policy decisions such as ecotourism.

Given the vote bank politics and the race to be backward, according sixth schedule status to Rabhas of Assam may not be far but the utility of such autonomy is amorphous. The kind of development promoted in the area is mainly oriented towards economic growth leading to the steady erosion of the cultural ethos of the community. Rather than tapping strength of the people, western standards of are imposed making development unattainable. For instance, music is an integral part of the community and resonates the sounds of the ecosystem. *Kham* is a longitudinal drum made from wood of Sal tree and goat skin. Today *kham*¹⁹ players are fast declining and during festivals old recordings are played on mobile phones. Music is no more the language of everyday expression of fervour and anguish but a technocratic ritualism.

¹⁹Khaam is an essential musical instrument which is played during festival be is Baikhu or Farkanti and even during magic-religious ceremonies. In the above picture a Rabha man is playing the kham and seated in front of him is an elderly man measuring rice beer or Chokoth during Baikhu festival in Goalparadistrict in the month of June 2017.



Tunes of indigenous music: Playing drum, Kham & serving rice beer, Chokoth

The great Mao myth speaks of *Dziiliamosiiro* the purest water, considered as the first woman to have brought life into the earth. Her holy union with the cloud below a banyan tree led to the birth of *Okhe, Orah* and the *Omei* who are the tiger, the spirit and the man respectively. The Rabhas like the Mao's of Makhel have similar myths. The *char-khilainee* masked dance reiterates this tradition although with some manipulations and regional variations introduced by Christianity and with assimilation into the Assamese society. Often a troupe of men and women dressed in yellow and red with traditional forest clearing tools, dance synchronizing foot movement to the sound of *badung*, crymbal and *singa* celebrating the holy communion of the forest, the man and the spirit collaborating with one another to maintain a worldly balance. The theatrical dance form is like the *nrityanatika*, performed in *bhrayaman* theatre. During the dance, story of Rabhas travelling down to the *doars* from Tibet braving the fruit and fury of nature is recited. The role of played by animals such as a mythical tiger, bear, elephant and vulture in guiding their way to the destined land is eulogized.

As the saying goes, the spirit of Rishi manifested itself into animals guiding the man to his destiny, the forest. The communion of the man and the forest is thus destined. In the Loharghat forest range, vulture is considered to be the observer of the forest and thus sacred. The site of the vulture's nest is a site of worship for the Pati Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya who are animists. As the saying goes 'greater the number of nest more alive the forest becomes' the sky dotted with *Xogun* or vulture is the indicator of its health. Raben used to work in the Food and Civil Supplies Department of the state as a contract employee and now his job supposedly is taken over by the nazaret officer's candidate. He calls himself relatively free now and solely devoted to tending

to his two pigs. Raben gave interesting insights on culture of Rabhas which is harmonious with the ecosystem. Sounding anxious, he informed that in the outskirts of Guwahati, lies Amingaon where that government has a vulture incubation centre but “*how will they know the trick to tame our bird! First, they kill the bird and now the government is giving birth to them artificially. Our bird is a big bird. It need Sal trees and blue sky to spread its wings.*”

Indeed, Raben is true. Vultures which are found in the deciduous tracks are fast disappearing because of consumption of diclofenac which is used as pain killer in cattle that enters their bodies as food instead poisons them. These high-flying birds with strong beak, narrow necks and magnificent feathers simply fall off the trees as they sleep. The foot fall of vultures as natural scavengers has phenomenally reduced and has led to consequent increase in number of pariah dogs in the Guwahati city, spreading rabies thereby changing the nature of food chain itself. Vulture is highest in the food chain that salvages the forest from any harm and Rabhas continue to resent the fading brown dots from the sky. This in turn has affected the belief system of the community who are gradually transitioning from animism to Hinduism. Today the Hindu ethics is setting in where good karma is supposed to beget a pleasant future. This change in value base has led to the introduction of new tools and equipment altering the material condition of social existence. Initially only *dao* was used for slash and burn cultivation because the Rabhas are hunters and gatherers but the ethics of karma has sown a spirit for settled agriculture thus today even with little money they are ploughing the land also using improvised seeds and fertilizers, besides adopting surnames of agricultural communities. Like the elders say, ploughing was considered as tearing apart the bosoms of mother earth but today outlook has changed and Rabhas are becoming settled agriculturalists.

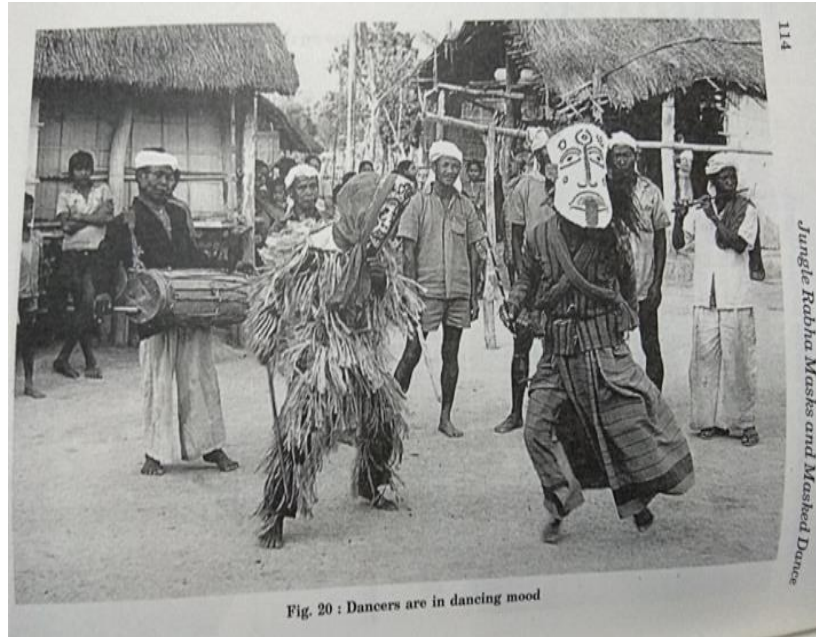


Transforming Tools:(L) A Dao. (R) Women using Jakoi for Fishing

However, the transition in livelihood pattern of the Rabhas is not new as it began with the ecological catastrophe. The Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya who were hunters and gatherers reached their Rabha Israel 'jaramukhuriya' after the earthquake of 1897 in search of a pristine land for settlement and water body to replenish, but were introduced to the prospects of a new mode of material acquisition, fishing in the new ecosystem. The prudent planters and healers now responded to the call of the topographic and started experimenting with Piscean culture. This transition from gathering to fishing gave a permanent occupational direction to the community. The occupational diversification was in response to the changing landscape and life situation. This response has today assumed the shape of a profession for which the community is reputed. The community which once took pride in *dao* alone, today flaunts *jakoi*, *kook* and *polu* alongside the *xaal* (hand-mill) and all these material manifestations of culture were brokered by the emergence of Chandubi *Beel*.

The transition in livelihood and subsequent culture among the Rabhas was enabled by the colonial system of revenue generation. Ryothwari²⁰ was introduced in Assam under which land was divided into *basti* (home land), *rupit* (paddy land) and *faringati* (highland growing inferior crops). However, the reserve forest was free from such categorization because the British saw tremendous timber potential in the forests. Rabhas of Goalpara and adjoining West Bengal were taken as indentured labour and settled in forest tracts for silviculture. They found the Rabhas to be expert planter of Sal trees which was an industry grade, expensive timber. Slowly, mono cultivation of Sal emerged and Rabhas became mere protectors of the trees without any form of ownership whether private or community.

²⁰ In the ryothwari system, each district was divided into several blocks called mouza and each such unit was assigned to an influential person called mouzadar who collected the revenue (Inflibnet, 2016: 80)



Mask or Cloak? Char Khilanee, masked dance and old picture from secondary literature.

This ghettoization led to the emergence of culture of resistance. The *Chaar-khilanee* dance masks of dance now began to mock the Planters and their officials impersonified as a bear, *Mapar Char*. Apathy against the Sal planter began to be voiced from under the mask by these indentured forest dwellers. The enclosure provided by the mask became a free space for self-expression. The transition in nature of the dance has come to the fore with travelogues of enthusiasts seeking to get a taste of ‘tribal dance’

c) Rabhas and Others: In the Melting Pot of Assam

Assam is a land of blue hills and red rivers but it is also the land of migrants who reached and assimilated in the region. Each strand of population who joined the confluence brought in its own myths, memories and practices that gave the Assamese society its rich cultural heritage. The Tai-Ahoms reached Assam in the early thirteenth century under the leadership of Sukapha and besides a stable reign their most important contribution was maintaining historical records. The dynasty had a meticulously system of preserving chronicles describing exploits, expansions, deceits and disasters in *Buranjis*. These chronicles provided explicit account of socio-cultural

milieu across six hundred years of Ahom rule maintained by an official scribe give called *Likhakar Barua*. Generations for people continue to use this title as surname even today. These manuscripts written on *sachipaata* (bark of the sachi tree) in Tai-Ahom language also give accounts of earthquakes and occasional mention of Rabhas as a tribe of the western *doars*. For instance, 1548 AD account of an earthquake in the period is being described “as a violent act in which pebbles, sand and ashes came out bursting from the surface of the earth” (Barua, 1930: 13). These historical anecdotes are also rich in records of various indigenous groups entering the valley at different junctures, waging barbaric wars, getting defeated, accepting truce and settling down in the ‘sleepy hollow’ (Gait, 1906) of Brahmaputra.



Old Tales on Leaves:(L) A sanchi folio²¹ from in Tai-Ahom Language which records the conquest of Ahom King Suhum in the 16th century. (R) A folio²² from ChitraBhagawat, preserved at Assam Museum, Guwahati.

History is unfair and biased in favour of the powerful. Unlike the Ahoms, other tribes of the Brahmaputra valley aren't aggressive in preserving their past exploits in

²¹ The script is derived from old Burmese however the original nature of these scripts were manipulated by repeated by copying by the next generation into new sanchi folios. Noted Assamese intellectuals such as Surjya Kumar Bhuyan took intense interest in studying these scripts.

²² An antique textual tradition of using the bark of Agar tree popularly known as Sanchi Pat before and during the medieval times which are rich source of archaeological account. Another kind of handmade paper was used during the Tai Ahom period to keep record in Buranjis which are known as Tulapat. A special type of ink was used to write these manuscripts popularly called mohi. The black ink is a mixture of mainly three ingredients namely urine of bull, khilikha (a citrus fruit) and iron ore. For further illustrations indigenous dye is used known as hangul or haital. The mohi and sachi pat are joined together by a pen called nalkhagair, a reed found along rivers. Most of the Ahom Buranjis between 13th and 19th century A.D. and also Vaishnavite literature are written on sanchi pat. SahapariUpakhyan is a sachi pat manuscript of 1797 A.D. highlighting Muslim Tradition.

writing. The history of the Rabha being oral in nature is more conjectural yet preserved with equal pride. Today there is a RabhaSahitya Sabha which is working towards reclaiming the rich heritage in writing and popularizing the indigenous tales thorough booklets. Unfortunately, voices of different groups are not equally represented as village Rabhas continue to predominate. Forest Rabhas have receded deeper into the Sal grove for intellectual sojourn but for economic solace has come closer to the market. In this conundrum folklores are dying, affecting distinctiveness of the whole tribe. Will they be left as citizens without history, only as fanciful memories, I wonder?

Despite reservations, pockets of collective imagination espousing a strong Rabha nation exists even today. In festivals and mourning, the community continues to recite its bloody journey across mountains and plateaus to finally reach the valley in Assam. The constant recollection of the treacherous travel is a reminder of their origin and everyday perils of existence. The community is scattered across twenty-three districts of the State also in the neighbouring West Bengal, Meghalaya and Bangladesh where the common tale of the journey of descend to the valley is told with minor regional variations.

Deu, priest of the sacred Sal groves of Jarmukhuriya recites despair of the people crossing Mongolia, China and Tibet. In a rhythm, he then repeats '*Rishi, Rishi, Rishi*' invoking the supreme deity a who mercifully guided the people to the *doars*, the promised land where woman and children would be safe, abundant in rice and beer for warriors and cultivators alike. Falling and dying men with their wives and infant in tow walked behind the supreme deity in various animal apparitions from vulture to tiger across steep ranges and gorges and finally reached the land of plenty and peace, '*hasam*'. As per Rabha language, '*Ha*' means land and '*Sam*' means grassland, therefore the promised land were the lush grasslands of the Assam valley. The Rabha word *hasam* sounds similar to the Ahom word '*asam*' or '*aham*' but the meaning differs. Unlike above, '*asam*' means an uneven land. *Deu* contends that *Bura*, the grand old man who founded Jaramukhuriya was also guided by the same supreme deity and therefore divine.

Historians believe that both the words were used by the first wave of migrants and they described the valley depending on their entry point. While the Ahoms entered from the East and North East of the Brahmaputra valley, The Rabhas entered from the North and North West. Besides, they described the valley in light of their previous residence. The fierce Ahoms warriors had origin in relatively plain China, however generations of Rabha families had trekked down the deserts of Mongolia and mountain slopes of Himalayas. Thus, experience of Assam for both the groups was different and so was their expression. Despite variation in expressions between Rabhas and Ahoms about ‘*hasam*’ and ‘*asam*’ yet the two words today are considered legitimate roots to deconstruct the words Assam and Assamese. The subsequent Vedic ethos which was imported to the valley enriched the melting pot syndrome. Sanskrit text such as Magadhi Apabhraṅsa shows several infusions of Tibeto-Burman words and usage.

The assimilation of different ethnicities culminating into the Assamese nation is not simply linguistic but also ritualistic. Fusion of Hindu myths with belief system of the forest dwellers is common besides similarity in symbols and practices. Today many tribal deities find expression in Sanskritized forms. The supreme god Rishi who is supposed to have directed the Rabha to their promised land is understood as manifestation of Shiva. Sarukanta tells me that there is not much difference and if I must to acquaint myself with the traits of his lords, I must look deeper into my own society. “*Your Shiva and our Rishi Dev are alike, both are gracious but angry,*” he said. Finding a Hindu equivalent for the tribal deities is a part of the assimilation process that instils a sense of acceptability. Attributing likeness is not owing to compulsion but familiarity; but to be a part of the greater traditions and a predominant worldview. I am told that the fusion is harmonious and not imposed by any outsider. Then, why Sanskritize?

Sometimes asking does not yield an answer so I had to understand by reading between the lines. There are two factors, first that the forest dwellers do not want to be perceived as isolated, that is a desire to be visible yet keeping pockets of uniqueness alive. For instance, the nature and character of Rishi and Shiva are considered similar yet the original name Rishi is retained in worship and usage without replacing it with the Hindu deity. Secondly, little traditions get a new lease of

life by borrowing from greater traditions, in this case borrowing from Hindu pantheon into animistic realm.

Nearing the end of the first week, I was now accustomed with routes and shortcuts around the village. After lunch, I used to take a brief nap of about an hour in my *chang*. Waking up, I began with my usual round around hearths and homesteads. Being a woman it was easier for me to venture into the closer quarters where during evenings women would be busy separating weed from spinach. Spinach and ferns are common under-growths found in backyards and fringes of the forest and its sheer availability made it a commonly consumed dish. Every time a woman would sit on her hunches to pick spinach, she would make a hand gesture of touching her forehead. Curious, I asked. Rita, who would later become my host and friend, who explained “*We must offer our regards to Rungtuk.*” I sat with her picking mustard and fern which she was going to fry for dinner. “*Are there prayers you offer to Rungtuk as well?*” I asked. “Yes, *now* we do!” The use of *now* was puzzling; so, I asked, what about before? With earnest she explained that Rungtuk is the goddess of wealth and prosperity ‘*like your Laxmi.*’ A new tradition had begun in the village since 2012 that annual floods, a Hindu priest is called to bestow blessings to the people and property. “*The previous year he came and taught us women a prayer that will keep Rungtuk pleased and keep her from not deserting home and granary during catastrophe*”, Rita stated. This assimilation rather than diluting faith on the indigenous deity, had strengthened it. It renewed their belief, as people found new characters of their old goddess. They beheld with surprise.

Kamrup²³ in Assam since ancient times is famous for tantric practices and Kamakhya temple has been a site of confluence bringing together naturalism and functionalism.

²³ The name Kamrup has a fascinating mythological tale supported by the ruins of Madan Kamdev near Rangia and Kamakhya Temple as the site of Tantric Hinduism. The tale goes on that Sati, a princess, enflamed herself at the discourtesy shown to her husband Shiva, cited as the lord of destruction and death in Hindu mythology and a tribal deity, by her father Daksha. Shiva on knowing about the vexation overcame with grief and wandered around the world carrying dead Sati. Since death and decay came to a halt in the world, Vishnu, the lord of continuity, tried to break the spell of Shiva by dismantling the body of dead Sati into fifty-one pieces, with his discus. The procreative organ or Yoni of Sati is supposed to have fallen on top of the Nilachal hill which later came up to be a shrine ‘Kamakhya’.

However Shiva’s spell of grief remained unbroken. Thus kamdev, the lord of love and passion was recruited to regain the senses of Shiva. Kamdev tried to lure the lord of destruction from his grief but that enraged Shiva and he razed Kamdev in ashes but that broke Shiva’s spell. Eventually with much

Today the temple is known as *ashaktipeeth* (Hindu shrine representing feminine divinity) but a dig into its history reveals the cult of fertility and animal sacrifices which are basic to tribal constitution of Brahmaputra valley. Annually, in the month of *Jeth*, approximately around June *Ambubachi Mela* happens. Instead of *organized*, I am using the word *happens* because *Ambubachi Melais* associated with a natural process which presumes that the principle goddess of the shrine menstruates for a three days period. Menstruation among the Hindus is considered polluting, meaning the woman must abstain from worship, sexual intercourse and cooking thereby creating a divide between holy and unholy. *Kamakhya*, despite being a Hindu shrine the deity is brought down to the stature of humans who succumb to pollution. This is not de-hegemonization of Hindu religion but irreplaceable influence of ethnic customs where menstruating women are not considered profane rather sacred. Once again, my insider-outsider dilemma is resolved because of having grown adhering to such composite culture.

Irrespective of ethnicity, *tulani biya* is performed in most parts of Assam where attaining puberty for girls is celebrated with great pomp and show as the first marriage. Fish, the backbone of the food economy of the state is also a symbol of fertility. The largest fish available is presented to the girl who has now become a woman. This Assamese custom has its roots in Rabha traditions where attainment of fertility is celebrated. Therefore, assimilation in Assam has been a two-way process where forest people are not simple recipients but active agent influencing *Axomiya Jatiyatabad*.²⁴

penance Kamdev regained his original form or rupa. So, the region came to known as Kamrupa, where Kamdev regained his original form or rupa.

Taken from Edward Gait's 'A History of Assam' where the author quoted the source of the story as Gopatha Brahmana.

Kama as a suffix of various names is common in the Brahmaputra valley and abundant in the ancient and early medieval texts of the region. The meaning of the Sanskrit term 'Kama' is desire. Thus, this part of the Brahmaputra valley is known as land of desire or procreation by many.

²⁴Assamese nation-building.



Transcendence and Fusion: Deodhani Dancers in Kamakhya Temple in the Kamrup District of Assam

Kamakhya is also famous for a shamanistic dance held annually in month of *Xawaan*, approximately August that once again marks fusion of tribalism and Vedic ritualism. Communion between the supernatural and human agency happens through a *deodhani*, a transcendental dancer who bridges the two worlds. The dancer represents echo of the deity for the human world for three days in succession. The dancer is also referred to as a *Jaki* and being possessed by the spirits is capable to visions, apparitions and premonitions. I once went to a conference where the possibility of participant observation in shamanistic dance was being discussed. It is quite possible that one may come to Kamakhya and partake in such transcendental acts also claim to experience the divinity but the question is without knowledge of assimilation of tribal faith and Vedic beliefs is liminality possible? A *Jaki* resonates true fusion of the two belief systems making the collective imagination of religion in the Brahmaputra valley unique. Here the dispute between animism, naturalism and Hinduism are resolved by tantrism. In Assam even Buddhism, the faith system for peaceful coexistence acquires a tantric form. Vajrayana a tantric form of Buddhism is followed by numerous tribal groups thereby re-defining religious innovations regionally.

d) Rabhas and Seismicity: Nemesis or Liberty?

The term ecology focuses on the study of nature and overlooks the role played by man as a non-substantial factor in the shaping of the natural environment. But on the contrary environment considers the role played by man as crucial, human being as an

important catalyst in shaping the natural history of a nation (Nag, 2017). Donald Worster defined Environmental History in 1988 as “*an interaction between human cultures and environment of the past*” (ibid: 43). The study of earthquake is a mirror image of this perspective. Earthquake is a hazard that originates in tectonic movement leading to metamorphosis of the crustal terrain, water bodies and communities. It is said that in the planet Mars hundreds of earthquakes occur at frequent intervals leading to physical and chemical alteration in the body. In context of earth the physical and chemical dimensions are studied, but the additional angle of vulnerability of groups of people in society who reside in risky terrains where the hazards originate cannot be ignored. The addition of the human lens to this hazard activates narratives on danger, destruction and fear. Disciplines such as Disaster Studies or Disaster Management explore earthquakes as a tumultuous interaction between physical forces and the human agency where the latter is at the receiving end and perpetually gambles with the risk of getting muddled. The emergence of these disciplines brought a ray of hope because they started focusing upon disasters as manageable rather than a wrath. Now, communities could be capacitated to face tremors to resist with action and intellect because coping became possible, rather than simply perishing. Humanitarian organization advocated for departure from scientific explanations of seismic episodes focusing singularly on intensity and magnitude of deaths and destruction, rather focusing more on community resilience and survivor tales to further earthquake epistemology. The role of technology in simplifying human confusion and drudgery during disasters also came to the fore, with earthquakes came to be understood as a structural constraint. The fresh perspectives debunking the myth of earthquake broke the erstwhile tautological trap of magnitude, intensity and death, enabling interpretivism. It is important to consider the subjective dimensions of earthquake because numbers fail to convey commotion and emotions. If we consider the earthquake of 1897 and 1950 we will see that the magnitude of both are almost same which are 8.7 and 8.6 on Richter scale respectively however the nature of impact is very different dependent upon the terrain and the people.

i) **Psychological Apprehension**

Life in the Jaramukhuriya forest village does not mean living in harmony with nature but continuously evolving patterns of adjustments, responding to nature's demands. It means understanding the dangers of living in a highly seismically active, fault-line area and co-existing with it on everyday basis. Threat is enmeshed with fear and changes character periodically leading to the emergence of a cultural complex of fear, entailing beliefs, customs, capabilities and habits. This evolving culture of fear which emerges as a response to impending earthquake, serves a powerful goal of survival in an ever-precarious environment. It is important to explore the nature of this fear because fright is not an isolated response, it is a resultant of situational triggers. Risks inherent in the ecosystem contribute to an intermittent nature of fear allowing people to build mechanisms or controls to address, leading to the emergence of newer patterns of behaviour. Every time anyone would require crossing the mainland to reach Jaramukhuriya a non-mechanized boat was the only mode of transportation. Usually Monial was my trusted ally to &fro and through him, I came across boys and girls of his age going to Rajapara High School. Very few girls made it to the High School not because the system of education was favourable for men but because of limitations in the ecosystem. According to the state's education policy detainment was absent, so there should be no reason or fear of failure. The success rate of this policy was such that literally most adolescent boys were ninth pass, however only Saben's brother pursued higher education. Distinctively, girls had education upto primary level only i.e., skewed representation of girls in formal education, who often dropped out.

The usual infrastructural disparity did not stunt the accessibility of schools for girls but another factor which can be termed *ecosystem anxieties* did. There were three girls approximately of Moninal's age in the hamlet who have dropped out after primary school. In conversation with the school principal who enlightened me about mock drills for earthquakes and relative futility of such exercise in tribal areas, also informed me about the skewed gender ratio in the schools that has roots in the culture of fear. He said, "*All of us are intimidated by danger of some, such anxiety gets normalized owing to inherent triggers in the ecosystem, checks and balances are thus introduced to avoid members from trespassing risky domains that prevents the*

eruption of dormant fears". To enquire further, I decided to explore the linkage between ecosystem anxiety and school dropout.

To probe further, I had decided to talk to the group of girls who had dropped out of primary school. I met the shy trio who were once Moinal's contemporaries. I asked why they were unwilling undergo further education. First, they avoided the question with smiles and silence so I tried the second time, with greater empathy, "*we prefer weaving in the loom mostly or knitting fish nets,*" the response came. Dropping out from school to contribute to the economic productivity could be one logic but what were the other possible factors, I enquired. My group approach of questioning was a clear failure so I decided for a more personalized approach.

I proceeded to meet Chumki who's father had recently began cultivating turmeric on the small patch of land that was granted under the Forest Rights Act of 2006. After spending a day at the turmeric field with Chumki to enquire about her dropping out from school new dimensions came into being.

Unlike the primary school in the fringe of the hamlet, the high school was far away. The lake had to be crossed on daily basis and from the *ghaat* it was another 3 kilometres away by cycle. At first my engendered mind perceived that it was forbidden for Chumki to row or difficult to go all the way cycling, to and fro but the culture and context was different here. Her family owned two boats and she was adept in rowing. So, what then held her back? Her father blurted *Memang*. The school gets over in the afternoon and it is a forbidden time for girls to pass through the forest or the lake alone at that time. Going to school meant that Chumki would have to row in the afternoon every day. Even if she was accompanied the boys of her village, she would still have to ride the water in some capacity. *Memang* being a free spirit was not kind to maidens. Her loneliness cried to companionless women in the blazing afternoon sun for union, so it was forbidden for Chumki to travel across the lake in the afternoon.

Another option was that she could wait in the *ghaat* or under the shade of a Sal grove for the afternoon to set. But then, did I forget Bira, a malevolent male spirit, possessing lonely travellers, thankfully her father reminded me. Indeed, how could a little girl wait for long under a *live tree* only to be

violated. Besides, the whole process of being accompanied by an elder was too cumbersome rather it was considered a modernist approach where one person in charge of another. Indigenous people are often free to move and communicate without taboo. Only then did I contend that living in the forest is a gamble with sense and sensibilities of its spirits. Sociologically speaking, these social controls are meant to maintain a delicate balance between man and nature. The perception of risk in the ecosystem and underlying fear acts as deterrents for deviation from norm which are biased in favour of some.

Coming back to the formal education system and schools, it is important to note that the government school building is not only a place to receive and deliver skills for life but also for safety and security during perilous times. Despite developmental failures in the region, there is one faith, that when everything is submerged, the school building will stand tall providing safety to the marooned; when everything falls one must abandon the ruins and make your way to the school. It is not only the point of relief distribution during times of calamity but also the confluence for survivors from various hamlets to meet, grieve losses and extend solidarity. Thus, there are latent functions of places and objects which were hitherto unknown until emergency occurs. In most occasions people are sceptical about government's role but when it comes to the government school, it is the strongest building on high grounds. When someone is lost, the search begins and ends at the school with headmaster taking a lead role in guidance and recovery, school is the cog around which the wheel of information rotates.

The role played by the school hasn't gone unnoticed rather with the passage of time, its role has multiplied. Today the school has become a formal body to deliver disaster management training to the progeny. Annually mock drills are performed where students are taught safety measures to avoid falling beams, use fire extinguishers and rescue people from under debris. These are standard operating procedure for mock drill during earthquakes. But in forest region where there is abundant free space, dwellings made from shock proof bamboo and thus these procedures are mere gimmicks. These drills are suitable for the urban area and there is a need to reimagine a fresh model for rural and tribal regions where the nature of vulnerability is very

different. The seismic hazard originating below the earth may be same for all the regions but its manifestation above the ground depends upon the structures above, whether natural or man-made.



Unbound & Bound:(L) A winding path into the leading a sinister wanderer into to the deep forest. (R) A grandfather in his homestead has tied his grandchild around himself preventing the little one from venturing into the wild alone

ii) Systemic Apprehension

The Panchayati Raj Act defines a village as a ‘habitation or a group of habitation or a hamlet or a group of hamlets comprising a community and managing its affairs in accordance with traditions’ and each such village has a *gram sabha*. Jaramukhuriya village is a part of the Rajapara Panchayat which plays an active role in managing minor water body, regulating education, undertaking family planning, restriction of sale & consumption of liquor, regulating the village markets, ownership of minor forest produces and so on. It also resolves disputes and provides for health and sanitation facility, also striving for rural electrification.

I had two days of long conversation with the elected *Gaon Bura*, but third day there was a fallout, followed by which the fourth day an amicable settlement was achieved. I was keen on knowing about the roles of the decentralized body vis-à-vis disaster management. He told me that the role was fast changing from the time of his predecessor since 2005 with the coming of the Disaster Management Act. Mr. Das spoke of directives which were received from the block level on risk reduction and

post disaster management under which annual mock drill for students are conducted, financed by the Government and the Assam State Disaster Management staff who train students. He was a formal man, accustomed to probing outsiders and usually conversations beginning in the morning ended with lunch at his home. The entry into the homestead was a step ahead to informalize the formal conversation to a deeper and a more meaningful level. Personalized conversation enabled one to explore the subjective view of the objective reality and find out what was displeasing behind the curtain of norms and pleasures. Finally, he said;

“There are some measures to be taken during the earthquake, such as one can take shelter under sturdy tables or under beam of houses. But do you think these are applicable for our students? There is so much open space and so less concrete building. Tables and desks are unknown things in forest villages and student happen to see the furniture only on reaching high school.”

This raises question about the nature of development in India which is focused on the growth centres and from investment to preparedness revolves around it, leaving the rural and tribal areas to simply get the residue. Mere duplication of urban practices in the rural set up is nothing but a failed solution however it seems to matter least to government and policy makers because the so called ‘hinterlands’ are not growth centres where loss of life are considered as casualty but not loss of economic asset like in urban areas. Since the transition of Indian Economy from agriculture to service sector the value of human life has declined. Growing inequality is a testimony of the trend thus there is a pressing need to identify situation specific solutions also replicate the best practices of rural areas in other regions. For instance, children are theatrically trained into something which is of no practical utility. These children who live in bamboo houses and trained in the ways of the forest life, shelter under the table and being careful from falling rubbles, makes absolutely no sense. The threat of seismicity is real for them but the measure to address them must be in sync with their pattern of life otherwise the standard procedures practiced as mock drills becomes mere amusement without utility.



School or Shelter? A building of hope

The risks encountered by forest villagers during an episode of earthquake is completely different from their city counterparts. These people who stay in bamboo houses with raised platforms face the risk of falling wooden pillars, cane-mud walls and hay roof which leads to death from asphyxia rather than being buried under it. Communities live closer to rivers and earthquake in these zones causes liquefaction²⁵ and flooding. There is a regional variation in the belief system which governs perceptions about earthquakes so preparedness measure must not violate the cultural norms of the people. Usually official *farman* and government directives are handled with awe but it is fear of divine wrath which prevails. Validating this is the *GaonBura*'s statement which goes, “...*here with stay in the mercy of Gods. We may disobey the farmans and hide from the government but there is no hiding from the Gods. His wrath shall beget drought and his blessing rains....*” In the forest tracts earthquake is considered a divine manifestation and necessary evil to cleanse the earth of sins. Inclusive democracy is not supposed to be unilineal or mono-cultural it must harbour diversity and promulgated different policies to suit varying interest. The *gaonbura* ended the discussion but his apprehensions to speak directly about Jaramukhuriya was felt also when we began speaking about relief distribution post-catastrophe his discomfort became visible. Thus, I sought to explore the question with other parties.

²⁵Liquefaction is caused by the shaking motion of the earthquake causing saturation or partial saturation whereby soil loses strength and rigidity. Water contained in soil, subject to liquefaction, frequently rises to the surface.

iii) Spiritual Apprehension

It was the month of October and one could hear Bijuli's voice ringing clearly in the air. She was one of the most potent *hamzar* singers of the Jaramukhuriya. This year it was decided that the party will move west of *Bornijora*, the largest spring, so everyone was busy clearing the sloping piece of land of smaller trees and shrubs; I accompanied them and tried to make myself useful picking weed as I could not be assigned tasks. I was helping Bijuli who was hoeing a patch, she was singing the *dhamgaan*, a popular folk song revolving around the fall and rise of mythological character. She stopped once and explained that usually one does not sing this song during shifting cultivation called *jhum* in these parts. Why now, I asked? She said that the previous year, *jhum* had completely failed as there was drought, "*wrath of Mahakaal, you see.*" So, this year she was designated to sing and appease the deity, to invoke his blessings upon the field.

But there was another side of that drought besides the deity's anger, which Bijuli reiterated with concern. She said that the *jhum* site selected the year before was 2 miles south west of the present site, but there was no problem with the place. The crops failed because there was breach of traditions. It is usually the hereditary headman of the village who axes down the first branch, marking the beginning of the clearing season of the patch selected for *jhumming*. But last year the politically elected *gaonbura* from Rajapara was called in to inaugurate the plot instead of the traditional headman, spiritual head of the people.

The elected headman Mr. Das usually, called *Das Kai* came and as per tradition ripped one branch at a time of a jackfruit tree with his *dao*. Despite following the rule, there was pest attack followed by drought. Wrath had befallen because the *Das Kai* was not from the clan and the norm of *jhumming* had been flouted. *Ojha* and *Pali*, the medicine man with his team sang praises of the deity to lift the wrath from the field and to lift the drought but nothing happened. So, this year, the plot was change and the traditional head man, *Bura* was called in despite his illness, for the inauguration of the *jhum* field. Bijuli ended the story and began with her praises of the lord, singing the *hamzars* loud and clear.

This allowed me to introspect into a new dimension of traditional authority conceptualized by Weber. Traditional authority is a form of leadership in which the ruling regime is in accordance with traditional norms and customs. The *GaonBura* of Jaramukhuriya is a hereditary leader of the village and a descendant of the *Bura*, the primal ancestor who founded the village. Apart from his traditional or historical role of being headman, his position also commanded a *divine diligence*. In various parts of Assam, there was poor harvest in 2014 but in the forest tracts of Chandubi the reason for the catastrophe was attributed breach of traditions. This allows us to reimaging traditional authority from an indigenous perspective. The traditional headman is seen as the sole protector of long established custom, habits and social system and his acts begetting divine manifestation. He commands authority of a legitimate leader because people believe him as possessing the legacy of an eternal yesterday. I understood the elected *gaonbura's* apprehensions.

The elected headman possesses only legal rational authority of issuing MGNREGS job cards, certificates declaring citizenship, but the moral and social high-ground is still occupied by traditional-charismatic leader. Each has their demarcated roles and non-infringement in others functioning was followed as a policy in the village; the incident of drought strengthened this belief. This sometimes led to conflict because in legal terms, the elected headman is supposed to resolve territorial disputes on land between families of the village and its hamlets but in most cases people approached the traditional headman. Once again, I understood *Das Kai's* apprehensions.

Moinal was to become a headman someday in the near future so he had to well versed with the ways and words of the village. He had to muster his forefather's knowledge and add new information wherever possible. For instance, Moinal had his own story to share about how the lake ecosystem which he learnt very well from folklores but added a few stands from his experience. He was right in saying that in the great earthquake of 1897 a whole stretch of forest got sub-ducted and submerging eight feet under the water, leading to the emergence of a huge water body of about 450 hectares. But more rightly he observed that the extent of the lake was decreasing. He mentioned his uncle saying that during their youth they could not see the branches

and tree tops visible over the lake's water. Today when one tries to cross the lake, it is visible with naked eyes Having gone through reports on wetlands and their shrinking size, I approached the forest beat official with a query about Chandubi. He confirmed Moinal's doubts, the lake was indeed shrinking and becoming shallower.



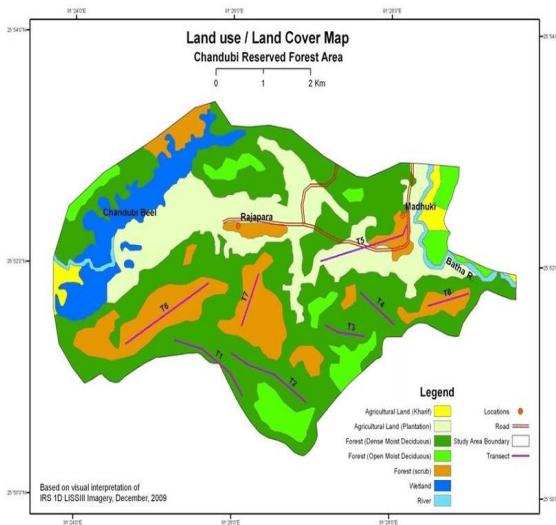
The Guide & Me: Moinal ever ready to satiate my curiosity

Forest: Politics of an Evolving Ecosystem

I met a Public Health Engineer Mr. Baruah from Dibrugarh in one of my visits to the Rajapara Government Dispensary. It was a lucky day for me as the entire staff of doctors and nurses was present because of the inspection. First the doctor was skeptical of me meeting the visiting engineer who was responsible for region but when I assured him that I would not spill the beans about his regular absence he gave me a go ahead. I introduced myself and the middle-aged man seemed quite fascinated by the kind of sociology I was doing, sensing potential deviance he asked me about my University and the prevailing political atmosphere. He posed a decisive question “*Is KanahiyaKumar Anti-National?*” Now the doctor who was observing the situation from far jumped into the discussion passing on his insights about JNU and how he had seen a mob of unruly students sloganeering on TV. It was an ordeal explaining the two, who kept bombarding questions about wasting tax payer’s money by public institutions, utility of social sciences in real life and punishing Pakistani agents in disguise but the pain was worth taking. The discussion remained inconclusive and

agreeing to disagree I now proceeded to ask the engineer a few questions about the physical characteristics of Chandubi.

Pointing to the map handing behind my head, he said that the lake resembled an amoeba having length of approximately 7 KMS, covering an area of 2000 hectares. He once again cleared the doubt Moinal had raised about the depth of the Ramsar site depleting in depth to a mere 3 meters now.



Design and Designation: (L) A physical map of the Chandubi Lake Region.
 (R) A board of the government stating the origin of the Lake

As the technical version of the question ended, it only added to tales the forest dwellers had already told me. Thus, a revelation struck me that natural phenomenon such as earthquakes are beyond geologic gaze that must be understood in the realm of poetry for its complete disclosure. Numbers cannot weave the complete picture but memories of the people living in the ecosystem can. Sarukanta and Aata two the village elders recollected a *Hamjar* couplet that stood the test of time in the forest often sung during *jhum* or shifting cultivation.

Eyanchingicharpak, eyanchingicharpak
Patharinimaynari, eyanchingicharpak
Patahaynipayanari, eyanchingicharpak,
Hirihirikhichinrampa, Chaktamoterenga

*Chikurchikur nuke kakay,
Chingikhapakkhichinamao
Chingikhapaykhichina*

(Rabha, 2011)

a) Cultural Transience

Sarukanta explained the *hamzar* couplet, which meant “*Sweet wind blows over our bodies, we feel cool, we are son of farmers, our soul is in the farm.*” He said that the forest and the people were fast changing; today songs of the forest and field are recorded and popularized by civil societies such as the RabhaSahitya Sabha. Along with music, the livelihood is also undergoing transition, from a subsistence based fishing society to being ecotourism based. Besides drudgery of the women has reduced with social innovations supported by voluntary organization. For instance, drinking water from the BorNijor today did not have to be carried across the hillock but transported with bamboo pipes to homes directly, thus increasing comfort and certainty of life. There was a decline in attack by jackals also accidents on slippery slopes in the water front. Now women had more time to weave and tend pigs, thereby increasing their economic stature.

Aata seemed disapproving of Sarukanta and commented that people have become money minded with the passage of time. He was obviously complacent of the emerging division of labour and the increased circulation of money in the forest economy. He meant that demand and supply of indigenous good and culture was phenomenally increasing. The regular inflow of tourists during festivals such as Bihu, new year and Chandubi festivals provided easy market for ethnic handicraft, food and homestays which ruined youth and ethos of the forest village. I did not quite understand the aspect on youth so he elucidated with an example of mobile phones. Despite the lack of electricity in the village every adolescent boy had a handset on which they watched movies and recharged at a common point in Rajapara. This he perceived was bringing a doom to the ancestral village as their minds are getting corrupted by mainstream culture besides being deviated from traditional ways of forest. Flaunting a molar of Bengal tiger around his neck, Aata said, I killed this when

I was young but today the laws have changed and you cannot feel the forest around; besides the youth do not take pride in the past. He ended with lament that the fierce tribal has today become a simple villager raising poultry and livestock instead of hunting. His knitted eyebrows pushed me to feel the tension of transition in the forest village which hitherto appeared as a static society to an outsider.



Art & Irrigation: (L) Cane sculpture of Vulture atop the Rabha Sahitya Sabha. (R) Building and bamboo based drip irrigation, a technology for transferring water from bornijora to homes

Technically, settlement pattern of the village is nucleated with homes confined to light forest while the denser forest was used for procurement of minor forest produce only. Each forest hamlet consisted of almost 20 household and each settled family had a plot of land for cultivation under the Forest Rights Act of 2006. The Assam Tourism website features the forest as nature's sojourn to taste ethnic life and cuisine besides being a biker's paradise. The Chandubi Lake has history and mythology of its own but laymen know it more a picnic spot. Since my journey aims to explore a forest village coexisting with everyday precariousness, I asked the question, why reside in a fragile ecosystem?

This forest village is not an ancient one and its history coincides with the great earthquake of 1987 when small tracts of land appeared out of the submerged forest. The *Bura*, today a divine ancestor came and settled in the area from Loharghat, a relatively plain area which had greater access of resources. The *Bura* and his family decided to stay back in Jarikamukh, *why?* Kamala makes it known that each household of the village has descended from the mythical father and despite risks all villagers continue to stay back in the precarious environment, often ransacked by elephants and inundate by floods, additionally sitting on a time bomb of earthquakes. The juggling with risk on everyday basis led me to perplexity. I did not understand

why generations of people would decide to stay back in a precarious environment, despite opportunity to move to a relatively non-hazardous terrain.

The forest dwellers had low regard for specialization and technology but vouched to deeper primary kinship relation. For an outsider, this is just a notion but for Rabhas, clan based cohesion is utilitarian. They not only showed content with living in uncertainty but envisioned a common future for the upcoming generation free from greed. Sarukanta remarked that individualism is a dangerous disease and the greed it promotes incurs loss rather than prosperity. Living in a forest fuels collectivism and cohesion. The ecosystem satiates the needs of man but not his greed, this he felt was the ideal condition for the progeny to sustain.

He said if the risk originates in nature, so does its cure. The indigenous logic suggested that ecosystem included both the cost as well as benefit. The region falls in the seismic zone and prone to earthquakes, to curb this vulnerability there are techniques and mechanisms drawn from the forest and lake. For instance, the *changghar* is made from bamboo and river reed, making a relatively shock free structure to face tremors, floods and elephant attacks. The Rabhas are not altogether detached from the fold of the state. Forest rights are another reason why they still live in the forest. Not only they have access to minor forest produce but have the right to sell of them, a subsistence based living. This provides them a better quality of life, rather than toiling in the urban factories amidst soothe and grime.



Advertising the ecosystem: Promoting a drone view of the lake as an ecotourism stunt

But the sensation of precariousness is subjective in the forest. The state is striving towards a more objective model where everyone has similar perceptions of fear. This is being inculcated in the students through the modern education system and mock drills thereby introducing the children to imagining risk on every day basis. This process of 'intentional creation of exception' to tackle abnormal phenomena has enhanced the sense of vulnerability among the people. The recognition given by scientific knowledge about the existence of risk has validated the traditional claims. Besides, the government has begun considering that traditional knowledge is better suited in some situations than a top-down approach. Today during the relief phase, the state emphasizes on use of allopathic medicines as an emergency measure but during recovery, the use of traditional ethno-medicine is allowed as per community customs. The state has learnt it the hard way after decades of failure that people prefer indigenous medicine and suspicious towards modern medicine. The forest dwelling community has been identified as vulnerable, this recognition makes co-opting with risks possible.

b) Repressed for Economic Dividends

Could there be hidden aspects for *not* declaring Chandubi hazard prone?

The answer is not evident but has to be understood by reading between the lines from conversations of forest people and officials. Despite being seismically active, the ecosystem is advertised as realm waiting for nature lovers to explore. The block development officer contended that development activities are not undertaken in this zone because the place must be kept 'natural', the more ethnic it is the better revenue it will collect! Despite being a short distance from Rajapara, the forest villages across the lake have no access to basic amenities such as schools, primary health facility and a panchayat building. The state has a visible presence in Rajapara, the red and green sign boards announce the amount of money spent on MGNREGS and facilities accorded under rural electrification and concrete roads; all these however seem visibly absent from Jaramukhuriya despite the difference of only two nautical miles which separates the places. Only a few well-to-do houses in forest village which have light bulbs and wall fans running on battery while its other parts remain in

perpetual darkness. And all this is done to preserve a backward primitive image so that ‘nature lovers’ may enjoy a pure state. The wilful abstinence of the state from developing the region is a propaganda to sell an ecotourism idea. Youth are brain washed with regular inflow of money which keeps them satisfied despite denial of basic right to develop.

At least motor boats could have been supplied in the area that would ensure fast and steady communication across the lake and greater mobility during floods but the big-brother has avoided that too. A new watch word ‘sustainable ecosystem’ has been incorporated in the vocabulary and people have been forced into believing that diesel used in motor boats pollutes the forest and water, also the noise harms the fauna. People are tricked into using manual boats only to serve the hidden agenda of ecotourism that is sold with a tag-line ‘welcome to the abode of nature.’ Indeed, the ecosystem is breath-taking but given the risks involved why is Chandubi promoted as a safe destination?

The primary reason is its closeness to the Guwahati city. The city folks can access the region for a weekend detour unlike remote locations like Diphu or Dibrugarh which are hundreds of kilometres away from the capital of Assam. Chandubi is promoted as a nature’s sojourn in the backyard of bustling Guwahati, a place for quick respite from city. The underdevelopment of the habitat is glorified and romanticised to pull tourists while the residents of the forest are duped into believing that hardship is for their own good and will bring them prosperity.



Duped into Indigenous Ways: (L) A Rabha man buying²⁶ fire wood from Rajapara and taking it to Jaramukhiriya in preparation of bonfire for traveller. (R) A back-packer watching Bornijora

²⁶Often during tourist seasons such as Bihu, New Year or Chandubi Festival, forest dwellers are forced to buy fuel wood from the Rajapara main market because tourists are keen on ethnic cuisine cooked in fire wood. Additionally, the villagers cannot make use of the trees from the forest because it is prohibited by law to fell tress. They can only collect dead logs.

The lack of electricity and concrete roads is marketed as indicators of being natural and therefore pristine. Fashionable backpack travellers desperately look for bon fire and kerosene lamps in *changghors* thereby pressurizing the Pati Rabhas to embrace their deprivation. Raben voices his concern saying that “*crores of money are allocated yearly for rejuvenation of the lake and development of nearby villages but forest folks have never seen a dime of it. The money is just siphoned off from papers to pockets of officers.*” At some level people are aware of their deprivation and administrative apathy towards development but what remains unclear is why people continue residing amidst peril?

The mere mention of Chandubi brought in memories of an exquisite family picnic with the sun setting in the forest over a boat ride. But this memory of a tourist who visited for a day or two to experience nature’s sojourn is very different from forest dwellers who have spent their entire life amidst the Sals, shedding bark season after season and the lake becoming shallower with time. They have seen the benevolent forest become treacherous during floods and its cruelty during earthquakes. Despite doting over the eco-system for its tourism potential, no attention is given to its seismic vulnerability. There is no evacuation plan or village development councils for community based disaster management. Tourists are unaware about the precariousness, they simply seek enjoyment but the resident must mitigate this fear on everyday basis and despite apprehension play the role a welcoming host for exuberant visitors. The steady flow of money enables to ignore the risk till the time it strikes lose. The wilful ignorance is not voluntary but coerced. Government is aware of the inherent precariousness but continue to brush it under the carpet because it is simply expensive. Besides if travellers get to know of the vulnerability they will stop visiting making the spot uneconomical. The BDO’s office has maps identifying the area carefully projecting the hazard zone but these documents are languishing in dusty cupboards. I was shown a thick file stating the amount of money spent on distribution of relief post disaster but these failed to answer one basic question, what preparedness measure had the government taken before the disasters struck?

Chandubi is dear till the time it is viable for tourist but when catastrophe strikes it is simply termed as dangerous terrain to venture and forgotten till the risk subsides. The forest dwellers who are trained into playing excellent host by the tourism department are left to fend for themselves in the wake of disasters. Relief operations begin only

in the later phase when a few tarpaulin sheets and some grains are provided to those who were forced to abandon home and relocate to stable landforms.



Remains of economic gains: The fragile lake and forest is increasingly becoming vulnerable with wastes disposed by unmindful tourists, which terribly affects the marine life, jeopardizing the livelihood of the Rabha community. The Forest Department has taken to cleaning the locale and banned plastic in the area.

The Upper Division Assistant of Chayani Bordua explained me the reason why the region is being overlooked. Firstly, annual flooding is a regular feature of the lake ecosystem compounded by intermittent, catastrophic earthquakes that not only impacts people's lives but the terrain. According to him it is beyond the control of god and man to prevent vagaries of nature through damming, bunding or any cemented construction, "*Why should the taxpayer's money be fed to the floods? No construction will stay in place more than eight months until the rain comes and the Brahmaputra²⁷ swells*". Thus, any developmental activity was perceived as useless hammering upon an un-tameable terrain, destined to despair. There is thus a collective consensus among the bureaucracy to withhold development.

The second factor which infused hesitation among the functionaries to enter the area was the indigenous capacity of the people. The Rabha people were said to be experts in handling and responding to crisis locally so they are presumed to be self-sufficient, requiring limited supervision from the outsiders. Can such a statement be accepted without scepticism? On being enquired Gaon Bura remarked with some apprehension, "*but the official never come and if they do, it is only during dry months.*

²⁷ The Chandubi Lake has one stream connected to Kulsi River which is the southern tributary of Brahmaputra.

They drop in for jalpan²⁸ and chokoth. Once one officer came during bohagbiyu and made two of my sons and my niece to fish all day long. He gave me five hundred rupees for five chitals²⁹”. Here the prejudice is evident and I needed no further clarification.

In commonwealth republics, the legacy of bureaucracy is very strong and stronger yet is the tendency of white man’s burden among those in power. Ridden with biases, the administrative duties are performed, in the mode of charity. More than seven decades have passed since independence yet the brown sahibs and his clerks must be patronized for using public money to build roads, houses and ration. He sees forest dwellers as crude people, desiring isolation and no outside interference in times of need. He calculates spending on them because the dividends of investment may not multiply in the perilous locale. This attitude of neglect is another face of our democracy which ‘domesticates disasters as natural and people as innate victims beyond help’.

Spirit: Scientism Versus Poetic Metaphor

The Rabha people of Jaramukhuriya in course of my journey came across a spiritual society practicing animism originally but today undergoing a transition with the seeping in of Hindu ethic through market and state. Today belief system of the forest village is undergoing metamorphosis that reflects in their cultural practices. Rabhas worship two forms of supernatural powers, *firstly* benevolent deities who manifest as animals, *second* the ancestral spirits with whom communion through transcendental possessions happens. *Farkanti* dance is a funeral dance where women dance with swords and shield and male dance with *manchelengka*.

The story goes that once, all male Rabhas went to war where many were killed thereby threatening the subsistence of the clan. Sensing the possibility of disappearance, wives and daughters left home to search for their husbands

²⁸ Snacks in Assamese. Jalpan often consists of flat rice with curd and *chokoth* is fermented rice beer a Rabha necessity and delicacy

²⁹ The wetland is threatened by declining Piscean diversity affecting almost 90% of its species. The tectonic wetland is favourable habitat for Chital and near threatened species as per the IUCN list. Often the fish enters the lake via kulsi channel because the wetland provides a healthy ecosystem.

and lovers who had not returned. There they encountered the enemy. They had no experience of battles and were oblivious of art of weaponry so encountering the enemy, they started facing defeat however they did not abandon their search. Seeing this, souls of the dead husbands descended and showed women their way to their fallen bodies. These souls took shape of birds namely *Manchelengka*, *Tandalengka* and *Badadika* which are different variants of kingfisher. At once the women recognized their partners from the bird's flight and followed. They found the dead bodies of their lovers lying in a cave holding each other.

It is said that the community from then on started performing *Farkranti* annually as a sign of reverence to the souls, promising to protect the clan.



A Dancing Prop to Invite the Spirits: Manchalenga³⁰ used during Farkranti festival

³⁰According to Rabha beliefs soul of the dead are swift like kingfishers, fetching fish from water which may decide to take shelter in safe places such as woodpecker's nest if not liberated. These can fly high up in the sky and live a heavenly life. This belief is materialized in form a symbol, which exists in form of a ceremonial prop called *manchalenga*. This prop is a musical instrument with a goose on its top and kingfishers in the bottom, on either side. This string instrument is essential because it is used for preparing music during Phakranti. The depiction of birds is essential because like kingfisher, spirits too can fly and like goose, souls of the dead too can swim. Music is considered as a bridge between the living and the dead and making of music out of *manchalenga* signifies that the dead and living are connected.

a) Being and the Supernatural

Invoking the spirits of powerful and benevolent ancestors has been a practice long prevalent with occasional additions from Hinduism like induction of holy fire during festivals. There are various mediums through which the spirits communicate and possess or invade the body. The invading spirits are mostly of benevolent ancestors who makes pronouncements of various kinds such as, possible enemy to be encountered in the future, diseases likely to spread and catastrophe likely to occur. These ancestral prophecies are perceived as warning signals to avert misfortunes in the future.

There is another kind of possession, by malevolent spirits. Benevolent spirits are invoked to ward off evil powers which tend to possess sinister wanderers. From one perspective, I may call this a cultural malady of the indigenous people but a deeper insight into the lives of the forest dwellers reveal that their belief serves a utilitarian logic. Every time I used to venture outside the homestead, one of the woman would caution, *avoid the bamboo grove* but called out with similar intensity asking me to offer oblation to a wood apple tree. So, forest is not a simple economic entity providing for livelihood of its dwellers but a being where each tree is alive and home to spirits, merciful or grim.

Bira is a formless malevolent spirit capturing lonely travellers feeding into their souls. The afflicted usually demonstrates abnormal behaviour which makes inroads for the *Ojha*, the medicine man of the village to enter the scene. The afflicted is taken to community ground and tied there where the expulsion ritual begins; till the possessed is relieved from the invading spirit. In the entire process the afflicted begs mercy of the possessing spirit to free his body but the malevolent continues to feed on him. At this point, one body is capable of two voices, the first which belongs to himself is usually a shrill cry of pain and the other belonging to the invader is placid and coarse. Sabita built the tension in the air explaining me the procedure and the shifting voices appeared to me like a dialogue between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but with exception that physical attributes of the actor remained unaltered.

I was keen on observing the ritual but failed to witness the act during any of my stay. It felt wrong to wish for the act to happen as it brought pain to the possessed but despite all goodness, one cannot control the mind of a hungry researcher. On my insistence, Sabita arranged a meeting with the *Ojha* but cautioned me that I must not mention about the story of *Bira* which she told earlier. The *Ojha* was an old man who wore a white loin cloth, wrapped a crimson Rabha *gamcha*³¹ around his body and a yellow body cloth around his neck. This was unlike the commoner's attire because the loin cloth worn by them was green in colour besides they did not wrap their body in a *gamcha*. The aura, attire and ambience drew me to the *Ojha* and step by step he guided me to knowing the nature and form of spirits, inflicting beings.



Woven Identity: (L) Motifs, a typical Rabhagamcha. (R) A RabhaMan donning his traditional attire.

Expelling an invading spirit from the body that ordinarily resides in trees is not an easy task. As the *Ojha* began, I got excited, immediately and started scribbling a few terms which I feared forgetting ejecting a tiny note book from the pocket of my kurta³². At once the old man stopped and asked me if I was carrying a recorded. I denied and in a stern voice he asked me to put my note book away, a remark that once again reminding me that I am an outsider still. He said that the charms and chants would lose their effectiveness if written down, these invariably must be learnt by heart and delivered in a human voice to be functional enough to draw the spirit out of the body.

³¹Body cloth, which is often hand woven. In the valley among general Assamese population the *gamcha/ gamucha* is white with red borders with motifs but among the tribes including the Rabhas the *gamcha* as they call it, is usually colorful with checked patterned with a contrasting color.

³² My mother tells me that no Kurta use to have pockets in the past however she believed that such innovation was made by girls going to the field to strike a balance between convenience and custom

He started afresh by saying that the process of expulsion of spirit is a tedious one, and the first step is the singing of chants accompanied by the sound of cymbals, which he calls *taal*, an indigenous percussion instrument made from a hard alloy of bronze, tin and copper called *kah*. He is assisted by two apprentices' *Bejand Beja* who along with repeating the chants also undertakes ritualistic torment upon the possessed. The act is witnessed by the entire village with awe and fear and those who sit must participate in the act without break, till the very end. Audience to this ritual mandatorily performs two organic functions. First, they witness the ceremony as a warning, not to venture into the wild alone and screams of the afflicted serve as lessons for aimless wanderers. From what the *Ojha* was conveying, I could gather that the second function, such magico-medicinal ritualism instils in the people a sense of cohesion and reverence for the forest and its spirits, making the ecosystem a living entity. This provides an socio-religious dimension to nature.

It was growing dark and *Ojha* changed his posture. He lit the kerosene lamp and asked me to be careful of crawling insects. I looked around, couldn't find anything, resumed hearing him and looking directly into my eyes, he began again.

After the initial ceremony the main ritual begins, with a pair of pigeon and a cock being sacrificed, offered along with rice beer to the principal forest deity, *Longa Deo*³³. *Longa deo*, a benevolent spirit who is invoked with ceremonial recitals to fight the malevolent *Bira*. My narrator, the *Ojha* mediates this duel of good over evil. After recitals, the benevolent deity arrives, sometimes it takes the whole night to appease him and at other times

³³*Longa* is a tutelary deity for the entire Rabha community but different villages possess different spirits, is the belief. The collective psyche of the community is impacted by two factors, first, is given and the later, adapted. In the first case the tribe accepts *Longa* as the tutelary deity engaging with performance of ritual and habitual obeisance with the belief he is the guardian spirit. Almost every village of the Rabhas have a dedicated permanent place for worship with upright stones placed together often called *LangaThaan*, whether in Goalpara or Kamrup. Worship of *Langa Thakur* by Rabhas is a *doxain* itself because it is naturalized as an essential feature of the tribe to appease the benevolent spirit. The Rabhas do not innovate with the rituals since the deity's worship is a standardized over a long period of history of the tribe and generalized adequately, thus making it appear as self-evident to their social world. *Langa Thakur* worship by Rabha, the Bohag month of the Assamese calendar becomes important. It is in the spring month of Bohag that he is worshipped and a festivity ensues. Coinciding with Bihu, *Langa Thakur's* worshipped is followed by ritualized dance and music by the community youth.

he appears in no time. His arrival is marked by a new shift “*I go into trance as the good spirit enters me*” he ended.

The battle between the benevolent and malevolent begins with confrontation of two bodies, the body of the medicine man versus the afflicted, possessed by good and evil respectively. At this time, the *Bej* and *Beja* are in their ordinary senses and play the *kham* building suspense, followed by a jerk or two in the *nagra*, another form of drum to release the tension. The *Beja* examines the afflicted time and again and in addition to attack by the *Ojha*, who thrashes the body of the afflicted with a broom of wood-apple tree leaves. The climax of the battle comes when the malevolent’s body starts trembling; seeing this the *Ojha* trembles along, signifying the final act, *walking across the burning coal*³⁴. Trembling marks that the malevolent now wants to surrender, so the possessed must take a walk across the fire followed by the *Ojha*, representing the benevolent. The walk across the fire is the most awaited act when the audience zooms closer on their haunches and some offer oblation falling on their hands and feet. It is the final act of victory of good over evil.



In Peace & At War: (L) *Ojha* and his *Pali* including the *Bej* and *Beja* are singing in ordinary times. (R) The Picture on the right shows the *Ojha* in action performing the spirit expelling fire walk

³⁴this is believed to be influenced from Hindu tradition

Conclusion of the walk marks the *Biragetting* vanquished by *Longa Deo* represented by the *Ojha*, who is now offered tobacco. Ritualistic smoking of marijuana (cannabis) is undertaken by the whole audience, to mark the winning of benevolent, a celebration that the afflicted stands relieved of malady. To heal further, the *Bej* in his senses prescribes specific doses of *sugandhamantri*, a soothing herb, pigeon meat and water from the sacred pond. Besides restrictions are also issued, forbidding him from venturing into the forest for two full moons. This marked the end of my conversation with the *Ojha*, who now stood and gave me a handful of herbs to smell. Keeping the herbs on my palm, I smelt and hurried my way back to Sabita's from beneath several trees and hanging branches. It was dark and I was scared.

I reached my *chang* with a racing heart but as my body cooled I realised that the entire community comes in communion with the spirit behind the backdrop of the forest. After the act, the forest dwellers take turns to care for the healing and the healer. This stands in sharp contrast to modern medicinal practice where the clinics are the safe-haven for the diseased and remedy suggested impersonal basis. However, indigenous healing practice exposes the ailing to the other members of the community making it a social affair. I also understood that there is no categorical opposition between the disease-free and the ailing as both are connected by the thread of forest and spirit. Being possessed is not merely a state of disease, which one needs to be cured of but a temporary condition in which the possessed exhibit limits to reason; when a man transcends to metaphysical realms.

Another dimension which the *Ojha* mentions was that the vanquished spirit as a mark of his defeat, leaves behind substantial information, about impending plagues or catastrophe. The information he spares is a price he pays for the misadventure. Such possession cannot be termed barbaric given the conclusive revelation of wisdom that opens windows to see the future. I was told that such prophecies often come true and communication with supernatural a meaningful exercise. Thus, I kept wondering about the malevolent spirit, its prophecies, whether dubious or definite yet a reality for the forest folk.

b) Magic, Malady and Witches

Religion of the Rabha is a perfect blend between sacred and secular elements well distributed between worship of ancestors and supernatural. To enquire further, I proceeded to meet the *Deu* the priest of the sacred grove *Thaan* where deity like *Langa* and *Rishi* co-existed. The mention of principal deity's name gave a new spark to the communication as *Deu* was keen on sharing about him. *Langa Thakur* require less maintenance since he is benevolent and by the side of every upright Rabha as guarding spirit, *Deu* remarked. Even if the deity is not maintained for days he does not get angry because hemerciful. This suggests that the forest dwellers enjoyed a sense of security with the benevolent powers. The prevalence of binaries in the faith system is a striking character where good is pitted against evil and security must overcome insecurity. *Deu* contributed to this discourse with a quick mention of malevolent spirits who have the tenacity to causeharm, destruction, chaos and fear in the forest, thereby reigning insecurity. He reflected that the PatiRabhas of Jaramukhuriya are therefore involved in various forms of personalized innovations to keep a malevolent at bay;magico-religious rituals to keep the community safe. In these tracts, however the western distinction between religion and magic is not prevalent rather both are seen in a continuum where magic and miracle are inalienable part of the tribal universe to preserve faith and the faithful.Malinowski's contention on magic comes handy in this regard as he emphasized on the social aspect of it. Benevolent deities are worshipped to overcome evil by the tribe across clans but propitiated malevolent to lift spells or overcome consumption of soul by the spirit. There is a certain degree of ecosystem based imagination which is undertaken to give shape to the malevolent and rituals innovated to expel it depending upon disease, death or disaster. Malinowski (1979) said "*magico-religious practices are used by man to bridge gaps of knowledge or power to practically control situations.*"

The failure of man to explain out routine occurrences or inability to control are vented as acts of the supra-natural. The prevalent perception is that supra-natural possessing no body of its own, pines to get taste of human flesh and therefore inflicts the body of a livingcausing malady. The other factor is malaise, where a human occult takes control of a non-human spirit and releases it on people out of vengeance or jealousy causing pain and torment. It is said the malevolent *Bhakra* walks around

orchards and porches of families at midnight and its formless-shadowlike body is visible under the moonlight but a *dainy* or sorceress walks in flesh and blood among people into their houses at mid-day spewing venomous chants, vermilion and rice powder. Both the form and the formless are deemed to be responsible for diseases, ranging from schizophrenic attacks to epileptic seizures and cerebral malaria. Reliance on medical practitioners in the forest tracks is a taboo. Causes of diseases are not attributed to virus, protozoa or any genetic anomaly but to decaying spirits or uncanny occults who take *pleasure in other's pain*, which in German is termed as *schadenfreude*.

Deu explains that when a person experiences continuous fever or sudden pain, *Bhakra* is said to have taken over or probably the work of an out-caste *Dainy*, staying deep inside the forest. The sorceress captures malevolent spirits and releases them on people to satisfy her personal agenda of harm, vengeance and vendetta. "But who is this woman, is there someone here in Chayani Barduar?" I was inquisitive to know.

I had read stories of witchcraft and witch hunting in the Brahmaputra valley but now that I was going to come face to face with a living person branded as *dainy*, gave an unexpected turn to my journey into everyday precariousness of the Rabha society. While I waited for *Deu* to take me to the sorceress he was more interested to talk about the disease-causing *Bhakra* and procedures of its expulsion from human body. I decided to give him a patient hearing with the expectation that he will comply with my request later. I had heard about expulsion ritual of *Bira* and proceeded with a notion that it is going to be same for *Bhakra* but the village priest vehemently shook his head and announced that it was different. While the former possesses bodies of sinister forester wanderers, the latter enters human bodies to cause disease. Besides, the *Bira* resides in trees and groves while *Bhakra* is a relatively free spirit trespassing into people's homes.

A systematic ritual is undertaken with the help of locally available resources from the Sal forest accompanied by animal sacrifices. The ceremony for expulsion of the disease-causing spirit is undertaken in the courtyard or *chotal* of the diseased making it an affair of the family and clan kin. An effigy of horse is built from water reed and longitudinal symbols drawn on it by the family. This time, *Ojha* is not accompanied

by his apprentices, *Bej* and *Beja* but *Paliwho* sing, play cymbals and *tokari*³⁵ continuously in front of the effigy. An earthen lamp is placed before the effigy and simultaneously sacrifice of a wild cock is made. The ritual is associated with recitals with pauses commanding *Bakra-deo* to leave the body of the diseased. This continues throughout the night and clan kin of the diseased are required to be present. At the break of the dawn the ritual concludes, upon which the diseased is blessed and a feast ensues (Unknown, 2012). It was an enriching experience to know about two types of expulsion rituals which conveyed that ceremony varied depending upon power and impact of the invading spirit. The intensity of the ceremony depends upon strength of the possessor. However, there is a similarity in pattern between the two, chants by the *Ojha* plays a crucial role in dispelling the spirit besides the constant playing of indigenous musical instruments that sets in an environment of premonition, awe and relief.



.The Act and Its Announcement: (L) An expulsion ritual from Mayong in Darrang. (R) Rabha woman with a detachable Kham

Once again, I started my pursuit about the *Dainy*, the one performing witchcraft in the village. My question was evaded once again with the offer of tea and *jalpan*. That evening and the two days which followed, I explored the issue as much as possible even asking visitors of from the nearby village but all I met was disappointment. The otherwise willing and supportive villagers had now turned a blind eye to my request and evaded the topic in all earnest. By then the news about my query had spread and reached the ears of the headman and as expected the summon came to visit him. I complied and in the process, came *rubaroo* with yet another hidden reality of the

³⁵Tokari is an indigenously made music instrument made from dried gourd shell with a bamboo handle and a single string. The instrument is played with finger.

village. He knew what I sought, even before asking he denied the prevalence of witchcraft in the village. So, was the *Deu*'s claim false? He did not answer but responded by saying that the *Deu* is an old man and perhaps forgotten that the *Dainy* who lived in the forest died long ago and instead Jaramukhuriya was an occult-free society. He backfired demanding why did I perceive forest people to be superstitious? His agitation hinted me to stop the quest for the time being however I decided not give it up sensing wilful avoidance.

As I wrapped up my second trip, Moinal dropped me at the forest beat office from where I had booked a private taxi back to Guwahati, I met Mr. Boro a forest guard. Exchanging usual pleasantries with Moinal and conveying the next date for next visit after a month, I bade adieu. Immediately thereafter I began conversing with the forest official. He already knew about me also about my area of enquiry. First, I had meant to ask him a few questions related to man-forest relationship but his insights led me to an unfinished business of black magic and witch hunting. I shared about my inability to procure any information about witch-hunting. He began with the remark that despite staying in their homes and sharing rice in the same plate, "*Rabhas preserve secretes in the marrow of their bones*". He said that they will not share any information that would jeopardize the name of the village. I conveyed that I was well versed with expulsion ceremony and other aspects of religion but I could not decode the mystery of sorcery.

He began with a question, if I had heard of *Project Prohori*? I denied. He said that witch hunting had become a menace in the tribal societies of Assam whereby innocent young women are branded as witch and abused. Witch hunting is used as a tool to assert dominance over family feud, personal rivalry and rise of feminine voices in patriarchal societies. Especially widows are accused of sorcery when they deny advances from men. They are excommunicated from society and pushed to stay in the forest alone where they are abused.

Declaring a woman *Diany* is only a pretext to torture her, burn her and parade her naked through the village. He condemned the *Ojha* and *Bej* taking turn to identify such women and abuse her. I was shocked and asked if such was the case in Jaramukhuriya. He denied but pointed to the west of Bornijora, to Pomaii Mari, saying "*there!*" As I looked in the direction, he said that there was *a case*;

A sister had come asking for a piece of ancestral land to cultivate rice. However, the three brothers denied her the right so she braved her way to the Block Development Office (BDO) of the region, where she procured information about her rights. In the evening when she got back to Pomaii Mari hamlet, a mob was waiting and her brothers led the army of kith and kin.

First, she was branded a witch of having caused drought in the village the previous year, thereafter, she was raped and brutalized. Finally, she was tied on a fire alter and burnt to death with the pretext to avenge the draught.

Obviously, the brothers were jailed thereafter when incident came to limelight but stereotype against single women prevails in the entire region none the less.

The gory details were enough to understand why the people of Jaramukhuriya were desperately avoiding³⁶ my questions. The two villages are a part of Loharghat Forest Range and had similar culture so avoiding any association with a politically sensitive topic was imperative.



Condemned & An Activist:(L) Witch hunting a practice to exploit helpless women. (R)BirubalaRabha, crusader advocating against the evil practice

³⁶Magico-religious practices fall in a dangerous territory with porous walls between human salvation and abuse. The fact that physical torture is a part possession rituals, so *Ojha* and *Bej* stand the danger of committing wrong voluntarily or involuntarily. This makes percolation of modern medicine in forest villages an essential step to overcome blind perceptions.

The hired taxi, now arrived and as I regained signal on my mobile after crossing long stretches of broad leafed Sal trees I read about *Project Prohori*. It is a state level police project, an initiative to curb the danger of witch hunting. It is aimed at dispelling old customs and beliefs that single women are capable to generating evil forces. The project seeks to educate villagers about the issue and prevent them from committing mass murder. The initiative is taught in Harvard and IIM (A) as a case study of social innovation where stakeholders from different levels such as women group, student's organization, ASHA workers are involved in ameliorating the social evil. Birubala Rabha from the nearby Goalpara district is a social crusader fighting the menace of witch hunting.

Truce with Seismicity: An Anecdote on Indigenous Resilience Versus Techno-Centric Practice

It was the third visit to my field and I had started staying with Rita in her *Chang*. This was after her tumultuous separation with her partner so now she was looking forward to meet someone new. The period was very different from my earlier trip because I was sharing space with my host. Her place was not professionally maintained but there was warmth; we could sing Bollywood song from the 90's, she taught me a few local slangs and I taught her some English ones, in short we gelled well. Unlike earlier times when I used to go to forest picking fallen branches and roots, this time I focused more on angling as Rita taught me the techniques to swish and flick the bait, in and out of the water and I was getting better with fishing every passing day. My host had become my constant companion in the field and probably someday I could write an essay or two about the Rabha community based on her insights and our nightly conversations. But early that week like a seismic jerk, I was brought back to my tryst with earthquake and indigenous resilience during one of my morning ritual sessions, which I used to attend with Rita waiting at a distance.

It was the beginning of March of 2016 only two months since the massive earthquake in nearby Imphal with a moment magnitude of 6.7. I had departed from the field just before the earthquake. After the news, I had spoken to Moinal over telephone who reassured me that everything was safe besides the falling of an old *chang*, a hysterical woman who fractured her leg running in panic, falling of a few withered trees and nests, so there was nothing to worry about. But after I returned there was a change in the air, conversing with the people the consequences of the recent earthquake in this 'tribal forest village' began to unfold. What immediately caught my attention was that the drip irrigation system which was made from bamboo to carry water from Bornijor, down to the houses was no more. The water system also catered to drinking needs was dismantled by the tremors. And all that I discovered was by an accident, as the facts were concealed from me. Only occasionally did I drink water in the village,

when offered as a gesture of acceptance otherwise solely relying on bottled water during the entire period of stay. There was no difference between my previous stays and this one in terms of availability of water; I never faced scarcity so never asked. However, in reality the water availability in the village had changed.



Living by the field: fish catch of the day and angling the indigenous.

Usually during my morning ritual, I could hear the tingling sound of flowing water descending the hillock through topless solid-raw bamboo pipes but today I could only hear the roaring spring. Once again, I strained my ears but the sound was gone. So, without delay I hurried towards the Bornijora, baffled, the water system had fallen and there was nothing to observe besides the damage. Some of the supporting posts which were fitted in the crease of rocks were still intact. Often these posts resembled an 'X' from far, tied together by ropes made of jute where pipes were laid. Some of these posts survived the tremors but the bamboo pipes could not. One could see a few pipes strewn across the stream but the system was gone. *How could Moinal have not told me, I was angry?*

I had read that '*ethnography refers to the whole process of conducting research and producing texts about culture*' (Konopinski, 2013: 16) so despite my fury, I decided not to confront or ask Moinal why had he concealed the collapse of water distribution system. I decided to wait for him to come and open the issue because it would be customarily inappropriate as there may have been directives from above. Besides even a polite confrontation would cause insider-outsider compartmentalization to deepen. The channel of communication had been blocked either by lack of trust or outside interference, *I had to be sensitive.*

Popularly, an earthquake is understood as a seismic event caused by collision or movement of plates. The release of seismic energy which radiates outside leads to large scale displacement and damage depending on underpinning rock, slope of the terrain and the kind of soil. This is how the phenomenon has come to be understood in the post enlightenment era and with the onset of rational scientism, it was further distanced from the society and associated more with structure of rock, changing dynamics of lithospheric plates also went to the extent of astronomy wherein fissures produced by earthquake presented possibilities to understand other planets. Advent of neo-liberalism brought in a new perspective that condemned earthquake as threat to stability of market because it wrecked shops and granary, twisted railway lines, sank cargo ships and ruined township. The British were particularly resentful of catastrophic natural phenomenon so they built emergency ports to exit ailing towns and more fortified settlements to keep themselves safe. However, a lot was missing still. The account of how ordinary people behaved and adapted to earthquakes is rarely discussed. Like all other historical accounts which speaks of kings, queens and their lineage, history of earthquake reiterates the allegory. Only theme of god, his wrath on sinners and earthquake withstood the difference in space and time and brought the question of militia into context. *But why am I bringing these debates into picture and what has it got to do with Moinal and his concealment?*

I began my journey with seismicity not to reiterate the existing contentions about loss of human life, crumbling buildings or extent of depressions and fissures but to explore its impact on ordinary people; their ways to abate risk, placate fear and fortify forest & home. What has already been said about earthquakes is not incorrect but my perspective deviates from those norms as I seek to actively reimagine earthquake from the standpoint of Rabha community, their indigenous ways of dealing with the phenomenon, their preparedness, the politics it generates and the impact it begets for future. The forest dwelling community, settled in the banks of the only lake of seismic origin, Chandubi, which is highly represented when it comes to experiencing earthquakes. Their experience is a saga of conjoined history that gave birth to the ancestral village after the earthquake of 1897, the collective trauma confronted by the wave of 1950 earthquake making them homeless, thereafter juggling with the probability of impending tremors and finally the coming of the earthquake of 2016. Discourse run from animal gods to corrupt officials contributing to their vulnerability

but what appears beyond reasonable doubt is a body of local knowledge they possess, making them resilient to catastrophe. Scientism and numbers cannot explain the everyday grammar of their precariousness. Therefore, I advocated for a humanistic approach to understand and interpret earthquakes from the voices of the Rabha people.

Moinal and his forefathers have been great storytellers who uncovered susceptibility and horrors until now, so I waited for him to lay bare the politics underlying the recent earthquake and why parts of its impact were hidden from public view. As perceived, he came the same evening I had visited the site of destruction. After an initial chat about his stints with the English teacher, he asked me if I required any help. So, I told him, that I wanted to survey the reminiscence of the water system better. *Visible apprehension, arrival of tea, sipping the sugary brew, thick taste of powdered milk hitting the tongue and a nod from my guide.*

With hesitation, he confessed that the water system had fallen on the same day of the earthquake, at dawn to be precise. After the initial shocks, along with the boys of his age he went to survey the damage, it was followed by a batch of elders. The system had disintegrated at nodal points so it requires massive reconstruction, he ended.

Me: *Is there any difference with the water system gone?*

Moinal: *There are two.*

From that day onwards, the direct supply of water to our homes have stopped completely so younger boys and girls are required to fetch drinking water, directly from the Bornijora. Of course, my aunts and other women also go but it is very slippery and a steep climb. My friend, met a new girl from the neighboring village there, adding a few smiles to the otherwise glum situation.

Me: *But has there been any accident?*

Moinal: *Yes. Three fractures!*

Me: *What's the second impact?*

Moinal: *The water system cannot be reconstructed, it must be rebuilt from a different point, from the scratch. But like my father (GaonBura) says, it is too expensive. We cannot take all the bamboo from the forest nor can we buy!*

There is much more to that dialogue which conveys the misery of the indigenous people. Caught in the trap of eco-tourism, they are forbidden from using the much cheaper plastic pipes but worse is the fact that they cannot share the agony of the damage caused by the seismic episode. When subordinate officials came for investigation, the residents were promised indemnity from government with a veiled condition that the damage must be kept a secret. The tourist season was underway and publicizing a grim reality would amount to scaring the outsiders and subsequent fall in business. Besides it would vindicate the image of the government for its inability to arrange safe space for travelers. After the Modi government came to power, North-East India is being promoted as a traveler's paradise and any kind of negative advertisement would jeopardize the Prime Minister's claim. Thus, the forest dwellers had to bear loss of basic-necessity in silence, replacing which was almost impossible for them. This was compounded by coerced concealment of the loss incurred and instead projecting a romanticized forest abode, flowing with rice beer and smoked meat, so that weekend back packers may enjoy the nature's paradise, unhindered. Moinal ended with a sigh saying "*father commanded me not to tell you!*"

I wasn't angry anymore but it set me thinking in lines of Arthur Escobar who asked, "*who's development are we talking about anyway?*" Decentralization thrived only in policy documents and conference proceedings, whilst the only reality is deprivation of the marginalized, who must bear the burden of the elites, in silence to save somebody's fame and make some money. The state government took pride in Assam having the most efficient disaster management unit of the country but I doubt whether they were managing disaster or managing publicity? Disasters do not make the indigenous people vulnerable but their identity markers such as isolation, lack of awareness, voice and resources do. Despite the dialogue, an existential question emerged, "*Was I, an outsider still?*" Wondering about Partha Chatterjee's 'rule of difference' I reflected whether I resembled a colonizer in this free country or in any-way the forest people were inferior to me. *Of course not!* I did not embark on this journey with biases rather with the idea that indigenous people are uniquely endowed with knowledge and resource endemic to the ecosystem. Their standards of richness are different so I was determined not to access them by my urban sensibilities.



Rabha Tales of Unique Co-existence: Learning through play and weaving through talks

Indispensable Doom: Insights on Indigenous Beliefs

During an earthquake people do not have control over its occurrence. For a community residing in a vulnerable zone, an earthquake is almost a nemesis, inevitable but inescapable. Living with everyday risk becomes the most acceptable norm. In the tribal tracts of Assam Shiva the Hindu deity of destruction is prayed in his tribal form. Shiva's dance of destruction is equated with earthquake because it came accompanied with, noise and shaking that lead some to think that the world was coming to an end. Shiva's *standava* began to be blatantly accepted as the preordained reality. It is said that a tourist does not simply come with his back pack but also with his beliefs, so when he leaves some of them stays behind with the indigenous people and Hindu ethics is one of them.

The obvious lack of power to predict and manage a catastrophe leads to a sense of helplessness, this inability leaves only limited options open such as, pray and prepare. The penetration of Hindu pantheon into the tribal system of animistic belief is a result of modernization. The belief in the Hindu pantheon arose out of assimilation. Kheri however did not sound very convinced while categorizing this intermixing of animism with Hinduism as assimilation. She said that Hindu injunctions were adopted into the Rabha system of faith mostly as interpositions. So, Hindu beliefs are only filling gaps, which were left blank by animism. This interposition strengthened the indigenous faith system instead of weakening.

Fish occupies an important position in the riparian state and its status as interpreter of maladies gets elevated during calamities. Bopai, the oldest boatman of the village who has many sons yet continues his trade out of passion says “*when something irregular is about to happen, it is the fishes which get to know first. Before earthquakes, the water becomes warm so the puthi, koi, rou, borali, xol*(types of river fishes) *get the sense of approaching doom and starts fleeing*”. He stressed and said the koi and puthi gives the strongest signals also alarming us humans. The fishes start by jumping out of the water in school. They move in crest and trough either vertically or horizontally. The direction of their movement signals the route of the seismic wave. “*We call this movement ‘j-aaur’*” he however ended by saying that the animal kingdom has superior sense than humans. They feel the waves before it is about to strike but humans feel when it strikes thus people become victims of disasters. Despite his claims there is a norm in the village that when anyone sees the *j-aaur* coming they alert other members of the community to make contingency arrangements to evacuate. Especially during monsoon months people start by packing roasted and fermented food and moving valuable to higher pedestals.

Boapai paused his rowing and let the boat slow. He approached a patch of floating grass caught around something that appeared to be branches of a tree. He pointed out to the branches, emerging over the lake and asked me to look deeper. Pointing anxiously, he directed me to look with concentration “*there, do you see the great oak?*” I did. When all this was once forest, like my father used to say, our forefathers used to come out hunting into these *seduars* and rested under this great oak. I became perplexed and asked him the silliest possible question “*but this is under water!*”, did they rest under water, I wondered. He laughed and begging me to listen said, “*this noble tree went under water in the earthquake of 1897 but till today hasn’t stopped growing*”. Yes, I remembered that the entire forest had vanished under Chandubi more than a hundred and twenty years back in the great earthquake. The forest and the lake both hold the testimony of the quake even today.

Under the muddy water one could see the oak, its leafless branches peeking above the water. It was the place where most floating vegetation had accumulated, from wild butterflies to grasshoppers, tiny birds hovered over it. However, the introduction with the noble oak, growing under water for more than a hundred and twenty years was deeply perplexing. It was a sign of resilience and hinted at a unique ecosystem. This

was a constant reminder that the lake had its origin in seismicity. I wondered if the tourists knew or asked; as an adolescent when I visited the lake, I never knew nor asked.



The Noble Oak Peeking Above Chandubi Lake: (L) *A Rumours*³⁷ from far.
(R) *A Memoir*³⁸ from near.

He carefully manoeuvred his boat around the oak and the branches and as we approached the bank, said, there are colonies of fishes in layers of the oak. He pointed at one of the A-line Sal tree and said ‘*look the canopy is not layered but in the noble oak, canopies still exist.*’. He continued that a day before the earthquake of 1950, several schools of small fishes were seen deserting the oak and the *j-aur* continued all day long, even at noon. And at dusk when the sun was setting, one could see *boralis*³⁹ moving out in hoards. Then, *Koka*, father of the present headman, *Bura* was the headman, he came to the lake and sat by it. He sat and observed and after an hour announced, ‘*no one shall catch these fishes anymore; let them pass freely!*’ It was the

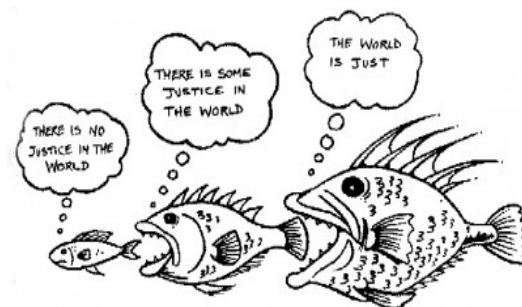
³⁷The oak stumps are visible over water. The level of water decreases during the winter months which enables some developmental activities. Hinged on the undergrowth/ remnant forest entities, bamboo poles are installed to pull the electricity line from the mainland to the island

³⁸The oak stumps rising above water are visible again, with the mass of floating vegetation These serve as excellent markers to test the depth of water for armature boat men. The pockets with underwater vegetation are also fishermen’s delight but the indigenous fishermen follow a strict code of fishing. They abstain from community fishing during the monsoon months and the traditional panchayats regulate it. However, during winter month fishing goes up and is exported also dried and preserved for lean seasons.

³⁹*Borali* are big fishes often found in deeper waters

month of August and people were preparing for the monsoon floods but *Koka* made a different announcement that day, ‘*something else is coming, be prepared!*’

The component of faith is essential in to understand and decode the indispensability of earthquake because it induces cohesion in members. Communities who live proximity to risk are socialized into a system of accepting threats on everyday basis. This acceptance allows it to be mitigated, through timely measures. Rather than living in denial of an existing hazard, acknowledgement of risk enables calculative preparedness. Faith operates through stories and metaphors which are pass from one generation to next and situated carefully in context of the ecosystem. Given the relevance of fish in the live and livelihood of people of Jaramukhuriya, the Hindu metaphor of *matsyanyaya* came to picture that justifies the occurrence of an earthquake. The philosophical system envisages that during droughts big fishes eat little ones, in other words, ‘survival of the fittest’. Similarly, during earthquakes the weak perish and the strong prevail. Going by Bopai’s logic, humans are doom to perish unless we grow closer to nature and start interpreting signals our ecosystem. The *matsyanyaya* allegory is yet another interposition which the forest dwelling Rabha community has incorporated in its animistic faith system.



A caricature: *matsya-nyaya simplified*

There are various dimensions of this philosophical system for instance, in the state of nature cohesion is replaced by competition, for survival of self and to survive by defeating others. Thomas Hobbes makes similar contentions in his classic *Leviathan*(1651) from a political standpoint. Now if we apply it to the process of relief distribution post-catastrophe, survival of the fittest takes a gendered turn. Often

men headed households are the one to secure relief first. From securing tent to access of toilets and drinking water post-catastrophe depends upon the prowess of the man of the household. Gender stereotypes are reinforced during emergency. Despite matriarchal influence, Rabhas are deeply patriarchal and governmental agencies do not deviate from the norms during emergencies from the fear of aggravating tension. The woman headed households run pillar to post to get their entitlement, while others get extra. Muster rolls compiled by the elected headman often serves a practical guide for the Law & Order Officials but the saga of misrepresentation and denial behind those names often goes unaccounted! The government becomes the final arbitrator and adjudicator, *maai-baap* in determining human survival during emergency and prevalent biasness towards tribal areas are strengthened. Surviving during catastrophe, a period of phased madness contradictions becomes the norm and leviathan the divine.

Tribal communities are rich in indigenous wisdom that is these forms of knowledge are spatio-temporally suitable. Indigenous knowledge also exists in form of technology, expertise or institution which evolve to cope with ecological imperatives (Sengupta, 2017). Such systems pre-date scientific knowledge and are historically precise. These are engrained in the beliefs and practices of the people. For instance, Rabha women are expert weavers and the custom of Jaramukhuriya prescribes that women must sit in the loom during the monsoon period and when the spell is over the loom must be set to rest. This practice is more like an ecosystem specific prescription because venturing in the forest may prove to be dangerous during the rains. Fruits and roots are gathered before the rains because with shower snake pits get inundated and the reptiles leave their burrow becoming active predators. Folklores thus advise women not to venture into the wild rather weave and weave, until the sun goes dim. The local epistemology is meaningful because it makes harmonious co-existence a reality, simple livelihood activities carry instructions, contingency provisions also cure. I wonder whether scientist apprehensive of stepping out of their labs will ever appreciate such localized ingenuity.

Despite interpositions or claims of assimilation there is a desire to retain some of the dying traditions which are at the core of the belief system, survival and subsistence of the economy. For instance, the use of poison and various alkaloids in fishing and hunting was frequently used in the past by ancestors. But as the state attempted to

civilize these forest communities by settling them down and training them into agricultural activities, poisoning the tips of arrow heads to kill small animals such as hare (for food) was banned and invoked punitive action. The forest beat constable was specially deployed on duty to prevent such ‘barbarism of the tribe’ followed by the debates on poaching. Meat of small animals, composed staple diet for the forest people but these animals began to be protected under law and forbidden from hunting. What was food once now got police protection. It did not matter that the forest dwellers were becoming malnourished and starving. Tales of a glorious past when archers used to pride themselves the largest games are told even today. The GaonBuralamenting breakdown of the food-chain said, *“The forest is our home and we live in harmony with the animals as brothers. We donot duel with the animals rather we are a family. But we must survive, before killing we seek their forgiveness. Today animals in the forest exceed us in number and in no-time they will surpass and overpower us. The forest is no longer safe, we may have to relocate in near future. And if we must live, we must kill; the choice is between our ancestral home and a dark prison cell.”*

He showed me a broken arrow, a family heirloom to be passed on to Moinal, it is supposed to havekilled the largest leopard. He ended with the lament thatRabhas are animists so the balance with animals of the forest must not be broken and the progeny must not be deprived of their natural rights.

Withstanding Emergency, the Local Way: Artefacts& Herbs

Risk is laden with mistrust and pessimism but my ethnographic engagement shows that the Rabhas have devised appropriate technology in consonance with the ecosystem to meet its vagaries. The objects and artefacts are institutionalized as per the social system in an orderly manner to deal with inherent hazards and insecurities besides the threats introduced by modernization. The evolution of these structures and practices suggest that threats of earthquake has been an old and people have withstood it at various stages making use of local strategies.

A couple of years back after decades of resistance, bamboo was declared as grass from its earlier plant status given its centrality in the life and economy of semi-deciduous *duars* of Assam. The decision was celebrated as pro-people because bamboo is the basic raw material for indigenous production and its use is deeply embedded in the culture; from hand mill, *xaal* to community granary, *bharal* are prepared from bamboo. Its flowering indicates an approaching rat famine, while its tender branch is used to prepare string instruments called *gogona* spreading the music of love in the air. The sharpest cane is used to discipline pupils, while the broadest is for baking rice cake called *chungapitha*⁴⁰. Weaving baskets is a trade every man is adept in and perfection in fishing with *jakoi*, *polu* and *sepa*⁴¹ are qualities determining spouse preference. It is possible to reiterate endlessly the pivotal role which bamboo as a raw material plays in the indigenous economy but we are still to uncover its role in withstanding earthquakes and ensuring safety.

Risk and raw material co-exist to shape human history differently leading to emergence of grassroots epistemology for rationalizing seismic threat. Based on my experience three dimensions of locally appropriate technology to mitigate risk becomes available namely; *structure*, *product* and *medicines*.

Every hamlet has a community granary besides the bachelor dormitory, *nogou* and behind it is the firewood shack. A remarkable feature of the *bharal* is that it is higher than all other structures of the area, keeping it safer during inundation besides, its compound is kept free from canopies shielding it against pests. Walls of this traditional structure is made from cane and plastered with mud which can withstand intense ground motion. Unlike cement building, bamboo structures are ductile enabling it to resist collapse during tremors. The cane wall is woven and not stiffly plastered which allows it to vibrate, rubbing one lock against another but without falling apart. Mud plaster may crumble during shaking but it integrates the walls giving stability to stand otherwise the light cane may drop from the hinges and supporting pillars.

⁴⁰rice cake prepared in bamboo shells, where the batter is poured inside a hollow bamboo pipe with knots in between. The mouth of the vessel is covered with cloth and baked over fire. The cake is obtained by cutting the shell out.

⁴¹ Fishing equipment made from bamboo.

The granary is not like a food corporation's warehouse but a 10X12 room consisting of compulsory donations of grains made by member families for feasts and exigencies. The floor is covered with hay and beneath it lies longitudinally placed tree trunks. The timber frame, bamboo ties and mud cover together dissipates the earthquake energy ensuring that the structure stands during adversities and provides for food and shelter to the community during contingency.



Products of a Resilient Grass: (L) A Bamboo house being plastered by mud. The practice is called Lepa. (R) A bamboo pipe called Chunga, used to build a blow air into the fire-place directly.

The functional requirement of these structures is today backed up a business logic where urban tourists throng to forest villages for weekends to get a taste of ethnic life amidst nature. For the tourists, a day or two of ethnic life is meant for relaxation, to refresh themselves from the monotony of a concrete-urban life but at the end they all return home, to the cities. The outsiders fail to realize the everyday precariousness because their risks are mediated by an indigenous tour guide⁴² who ensures safety in return of money. But for the guide and his fellow men the risk is real. He must conquer it through fight or appeasement of the supernatural.

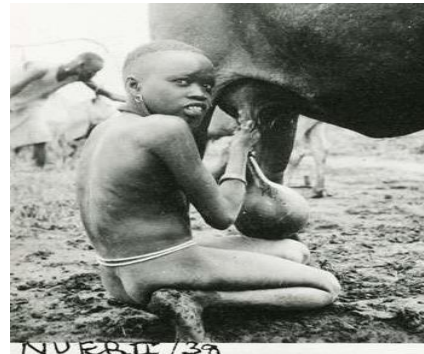
Ethnic structures are glorified in survival tales and Kheri narrates one such tale of the 1950 earthquake.

The Assam earthquake of 1950 was followed by a massive flood which altered the course of Brahmaputra. The inundation was untimely and people were not prepared for it nor did it bring the fertile alluvium from the rivers like the seasonal

⁴²The system of tour guide is not institutionalized but a new nomenclature which some youth insist on identifying themselves as.

monsoon. This seismically induced flood inundated the entire landmass around Chandubi and people started climbing the nearby hillocks and stayed there for days without food and shelter. She said, “*then I was a little girl but even today I remember the stagnant water and the Koi fishes which climbed up to the aatals⁴³ of our houses and the coconut trees.*”

For those with urban sensibilities fishes climbing ceilings and trees seems hypothetical but Kheri wasn't lying. It is said that the water had turned toxic because of the presence of excessive sulphate and it led marine life to abandon water. Indeed, some part of the tale is history but the rest remains is collective imagination of a resilient community.



Indigenous Artefacts Across Ages: (L) A combination of two Attals. A bamboo one conjoined with a cane sheet. (R) Archive: A Nuer Girl Milking cow and using Gourd shell as vessel. Similarly shaped vessels are used to ferment rice beer by Rabhas.

Awareness for my surroundings grew with tales of susceptibility and I began looking around on entering homes and hearths. Now I could see objects hanging from the bamboo ceiling and one such familiar sight was *gourd shell*. Dried gourd shell was used to store smaller quantity of grains and in houses which acted as portable vessels during catastrophe to be carried around. Today people are offered drinks in steel or

⁴³Aatals are ceiling like structures constructed close to the roof above the floor. It is often made of bamboo and may look like a raft. It is supported with the help of wooden pillars or bigger bamboo. The bamboo attals are found among well off houses, such as of the head man. It is used for storing contingency items like grains, fruits and vegetables for consumption during emergency. Small children and women often climb the aatal during inundation but for commoners people the aatals are made of cane sheets which can be used for storage only and not strong enough to hold human weight.

glass tumblers but in olden times gourd shell was used for drinking also for carrying water⁴⁴.

Trauma caused by the catastrophe is aggravated by diseases and the indigenous traditions prides itself of ethno-medicinal traditions. The healing practices emerged as a negotiation of the forest community with its wider context of risk. *Sugandhamantri* a rhizomatous aromatic herb is found in the forest of this region and since time immemorial Rabhas have made use of it to cure pain, inflammation and septic. As ethno-botany made inroads into the region other pharmacological properties of the herb came into picture, such as possessing analgesic, antidepressant and antifungal benefits (Raomai, Kumaria, & Tandon, 2013). But the extraction and use of these herbs is a secretive process exclusively undertaken by the *Beja* under the guidance of the *Ojha*⁴⁵. The season and hours for picking the herb is preordained and its composition is decided by generations of oral traditions.

On the way to Chandubi one can see Borduar Tea Estate on a hillock after which the descend to the Sal forest begins. The estate houses several labour family who are originally Oraons and Munda but having lived in Assam since generations they adopted the local culture and Assamese language. Snake bites are common in the estate and so is epilepsy. I am told that there is a doctor for treatment but what I felt and saw was contrary. The inroads of allopathy in the forest and tea estate was limited to quinine alone. People of Jaramukhuriya visited the *Ojha* for big or small ailments and so did their neighbours, the coolies⁴⁶. While the dispensaries called the traditional healer a quack, people are still connected to him and believed that he understands the interplay of spirits, insects and ailments.

⁴⁴ One can hardly locate clay pots in this part of the country. Rabhas have traditionally been outside the caste society and did not use service of the *Kumars* or potters. The dependence on aluminium utensils is seen. Bigger metal vessels are used to store goods during catastrophe because they are durable and can stay afloat.

⁴⁵ *Ojha* is the primary medicine man equipped with ethno-medicinal epistemology as well as charms and spells. *Bej* and *Beja* are his apprentice who executes the processes.

⁴⁶ Tea garden labourers are locally called Coolie. Historically, the British brought in the indigenous communities from central India as bonded labourers and settled them in tea plantation because they were considered less aggressive than communities of North-East India. Today they have been given the status of Tea Tribes in Assam but despite the constitutional status the indigenous communities consider them as lower in hierarchy. I am told by an adolescent Rabha boy that the Coolies are not free people.

The healer speaks their language and diagnose using familiar techniques, injecting confidence in the diseased. The healer practising ethno-medicine does not differentiate between ‘things’ and ‘words’(Foucault, 1973: xi), that is his medical language is simple. Seeing and saying same which he can communicate to the ailing, and the ailing understands.

The trust he shared with the community is remarkable. Despite my insistence he did not share information about herbs. I had to read up about *sugandhamantrito* identify it and he explained thus “*I am protecting the community’s heritage.*” He did not let me witness his private consultation nor photograph it. This connectedness between the healer and the healed is liberating for the forest people thus preferred it over coercive clinics and medical gaze during emergencies and otherwise.

Fractured Indigeneity: A Tale of Two Rabha Communities

Societies are dynamic entity; from norms to beliefs and practices, everything undergoes transition. Change in the pattern of life and behavior is the only permanent reality. These changes, can be internal or external, triggered by actors or events. Colonialization played a crucial role in cultural transition of the indigenous people who were in the initial times outside the fold of the state. Customary laws of the ecosystem bounded them and at the maximum they paid tribute to the rulers of the valley for unhindered trade. While they bought salt from the valley, their counterparts bought hide & leather from the people of the *duars*. Subsistence of the indigenous people was broken by the coming of British rule in the Brahmaputra Valley with the culmination of the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826. The pristine forest which were home to the indigenous people became raw material to lay railway tracks and fuel industries back in Britain. In this pursuit, traps of deceit were laid thereby evicting the forest people from their ancestral domains, leaving them to be homeless with only two available options; either to become bonded laborers of the valley people tending to agricultural fields and livestock or settle down in barren areas and become casual laborers in European plantation companies.

The fate of colonial eviction befell upon the Rabhas of Golapara district who were pushed out of their traditional dwellings and resettled in bare zones between Assam Valley and Bengal plains. The community was known for their skills of raising and tending Sal so, the white man unleashed his burden and gave the homeless Rabha a home and livelihood. The mission of civilization was however a sham in exchange of *begar*. They were engaged in plantation drive of Sal with the aim of converting fallow land into reserve forest. The plan worked, today these areas are reserved forest and protected by the state but happened to the resettled community, their fate and at what cost?

There is a collective history of coerced eviction and a great rebellion of chieftains but the power of the English double-barreled gun with bayonet proved greater. The forest people were crushed and pushed out of their habitat. The trauma of loss of ancestral habitat where they lived since time immemorial was great. This was compounded by loss of cultural ethos. The norms of behavior revolved around past-memories of ancient trees not tiny Sal saplings. So, pulling out the community from their context affected their customs and rituals. The Rabhas are great lovers of undergrowths and spun poems around grass and fern, however none of this was available in the new land. In the alien land, they were required to abide by the laws of their employers. They were supposed to tend to Sal sapling, make them grow and there was nothing else to bind them. In resentment the community rebelled in its indigenous way, behind masks and poetry through *Char-Khilanee dance*, an expression of their ethnic solidarity. But they were burnt, beaten and repressed by the plantation managers. The oppressors did not understand the cultural crisis of the people. The dance was the last expression to retain their identity and memories of a greener past instead more brutal laws were passed to civilize the savage. Today the community despite living in the forest calls themselves cosmopolitan, however the truth remains that they were forced out of their indigenous ways.

Like the Rabhas of Goalpara today settled around Cooche Bihar, the Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya too have a collective memory of relocation. They relocated to the new land after the earthquake of 1897 but their migration was voluntary and endowed them with better socio-cultural alternatives in comparison to their past home. Descending to the *duars* and settling down by the bank of Chandubi enriched their cultural thickness. Indeed, the forest was new and they were inexperienced with the

lake but eventually they adapted. The lack of coercion enabled the free flow of old customs and allowed concocting new ones around huge stretch of forest that belonged to them. There was nobody supervising them or regulating their movement and relation with the Sal tree, so they evolved harmoniously a cultural complex endemic to the surrounding. Today, despite the seeping in of modernity their indigenous knowledge is fairly-intact and efficient enough to absorb shocks of outside influence or inbuilt risks. It must be borne in mind that local knowledge and indigeneity are subject to two conditions namely, freedom from coercion and belongingness to the ecosystem.

The trajectory of historical evolution impacts the identity, space and the native political system. An example of this could be the *Marab Son* or the council of elders who compose the socio-political unit of forest Rabhas making crucial decisions about social, religious affairs of the community besides mediating conflicts and liaisons. Among the resettled Rabhas of Cooche Bihar *Marab Son* is only a term acknowledged by the elders who heard it from their fathers and grandfathers but if I must talk of Jaramukhuriya, the indigenous political unit is a highly respected entity, despite its declining influence.

It is said that immediately after the resettlement, the *Marab Son* did come into being but only with indicative powers as the plantation manager was the ultimate lord of the forest. The traditional body failed for two reasons; *first*, most people who were identified to be re-settled were men and women of working age and elderly were left behind in the hamlet of origin to supervise the felling process. This broke down the intergenerational harmony of social roles. With resettlement *Marab Son* as an institution was retained but without its true character. Oldest of the working population was made a member of the body but it failed to garner the original respect. This is because wisdom is equated to experience, that is gained with age not with superiority in number and this affected the ethos of the institution, finally losing its validity. *Secondly*, the community itself had changed because there were hardly any oldleft with ethnic wisdom. The erosion of the political system left the resettled community with no alternative but a life regulated by colonial laws, a final nail in the coffin marking total departure from indigenous traditions, beliefs and practices. Slowly the plantation became a reserve forest and the intergenerational disjuncture of roles, loss of ethnic wisdom is visible even today.

But for the Rabhas of Jaramukhuriya, migration has been a harmonious process which enhanced their symbiosis with the forest. Their traditional ways became more cohesive with the passage of time and the *Marab Son* retained its original authority despite periodic juxtapositions with modernity. For instance, excommunication is a measure of social control in the hands of the political unit of keep the member of the forest village into check. It is often used as the last resort. There is a difference in attitude of the two communities about the practice. In resettled forest villages excommunication is commonly flouted and usually issued as a warning to erring resident but in Jaramukhuriya, as Saben remarks, “*all families took ex-communication with utmost seriousness.*”

Given the authority the political unit possesses, it becomes important to understand its role in handling catastrophe, especially earthquakes.

The coming of the Panchyati Raj system brought a great deal of change leading to dilution in of the traditional body because today the authority to propose and implement changes has been legally attributed to the elected body. The role of the Gram Sabha in the three-tier democracy is substantial during evacuation, providing shelter, relief, disposal of dead bodies, prevention of epidemics and so on. However, for a forest hamlet which is both geographically and socially isolated there is interchange of roles between the elected and the traditional body, who work in complimentary fashion during emergencies. Decisions of the *Marab Son* are respected by the district administration and forest department besides the legitimacy it enjoys among the people. This sometimes becomes the bone of contention and conflict of the traditional body with the panchayat ensues. Disposal of dead bodies is a role of the panchayat under 243-G of the constitution. Also, it has the role to provide for making necessary arrangements to evacuate the vulnerable during emergency. These roles often come in logger head with the traditional institution. Customarily the Rabhas burn their dead but death in catastrophe is termed as ‘*okaalmrityu*’ or ‘untimely death’ and often categorized as unnatural so burial is the only method to perform the last rites.

A narrative of condescending roles and dispute over last rites emerged between the Rajapara Panchayat and the *Marab Son*⁴⁷. One summer that Rani and Biju had eloped⁴⁸ to marry⁴⁹ from Jopong Bari⁵⁰. Babu, the narrator recollects;

“I stood under the neem tree and could feel the wind blowing in waves since morning and as I looked up, nests started falling. There was clamor in the air and around afternoon all I knew was, the ground was shaking beneath my feet.” It was the Gorkha earthquake he remarked, felt at 7.3 Richter scale as per media report and supposedly hit the Assam valley with great intensity. Babu continued, *“People started pouring out of their houses and fine lines began developing over the moist alluvial soil around the banks of the lake. All the boat though afloat had water on them and that is when it was noticed, Biru’s boat was missing!”*. The search began with looking for Biru, a young boy from Jaramukhuriya and the rescue party found that Rani from the nearby Jopong Bari was missing too. As my narrator puts it, *“the two had eloped!”*

⁴⁷In case of combined Marab Son of Jaramukhuriya and Jopong Bari-a nearby forest hamlet. Both the GaonBura or traditional headman has equivalent authority and agrees to respect the other’s decision in such cases.

⁴⁸Elopement is a legitimate way of getting married in a Rabha society. The eloping couple sneaks out of the village for a period of about seven days, consummate the relationship and come back before the council of elders and asks for forgiveness. The unit ask the boy’s side to pay penalty, usually of a full-grown pig and *chokoth*, implicitly consenting the relationship.

⁴⁹ marriage among the Rabhas is solemnized and concluded under the sal grove, in which member of all the members of the clan are present except the groom. Those attending the event are offered Chokoth (for both men and women alike) and baked prawn and fish with salt. The guest themselves must barbecue the prawn but the rice beer is severed by the hosting household. Marriage is a community affair and burden of responsibility is dispersed socially. There are several aspects of culture to show that it has assimilated the traits of the mainstream Assamese Hindu society but the reverse is also true. Tribal tradition of tying the nuptial knots without the groom and communal cooking of the marriage meal are adopted by the mainstream Assamese society. Thus, there is a transition from little tradition to great tradition. But at the same time other tribal traditions are seen as totally contrary. Co-habitation before marriage is practiced by the Rabhas but this is strictly prohibited for the other. The census of 2011 puts forth an important data that approximately 47% of the tribal population of Assam has never married and the percentage of population never married for the Rabhas is 55%. However, in the recent periods, the relevance of marriage is growing in the community and there is a rise in stigmatization for those co-habiting without marriage. Inter-marriage among the Rabhas different groups of Rabhas is acceptable who are dispersed across 23 districts of Assam

⁵⁰The hamlet shares nuptial relations with Jaramukhuriya and seen as a mushrooming out of it and adjacent to Jaramukhuriya



A Boat and A Marriage: A boat Afloat in the lake, indicating a rough night⁵¹ and a marriage ceremony⁵² witnessed by the village after elopement

None of the Assamese daily reported loss of property and life in the Gorkha earthquake, but here I was told that the two had gone missing, obviously they were not casualties of the quake but of love. The two hamlets waited for the duo to return following the normal course of elopement, but they did not. A couple of months passed and then the month of July came bringing rains followed by floods. People waited for them to return still.

And one day, someone sent the news that Rani's body has been discovered near Palashbari *ghaat*, a town plagued by erosion. After identification, her body was brought back to the village which at that time was also submerged under water. It was the responsibility of the panchayat to take care of body of the deceased. As per the traditions it was decided to bury her as she was unmarried besides the fact that she had gone missing during one catastrophe and found in the next. She had eloped, her relationship was technically not institutionalized but the state of her body suggested that her death was '*okalmrityu*.' So, the panchayat decided to bury her.

But then members of the *Marab Son* retorted and rebuked saying that she had eloped to marry and it is only a matter of formality that her relationship could not be institutionalized. They favored burning her with the reason that Rani was not a maiden at the time of her death. Also, they rejected that the death was unnatural

⁵¹The picture is from the North Bank of Chandubi after a stormy night. I was told that a vessel gets inundated in similar ways when earthquake strikes the region. The intensity of the seismic waves on water is more profound. The water spills out of the banks and makes vigorous ripples.

⁵²The statistics of 2011 suggests that more than 55% of the Rabhas have never been married and despite that the rate of desertion is very low. The institution is relatively new. Unlike the other communities the groom does not take part in the marriage ceremony.

because nobody knew how she died. Despite contradictions and inconsistencies in both decision, her parents finally agreed to the *Marab Son*'s opinion. The community showed solidarity thus establishing the supremacy of the indigenous political unit over the democratically elected body.



Ethnic Ways: Young Rabha girls donning their traditional attire which is usually worn during special occasions such as marriage ceremonies and festivals and an old lady gulping down Chokoth, the traditional rice beer from a gourd shell.

Revamping Techno-Centric Practice: Incorporating Indigenous Ethics

The negative connotation associated with catastrophe is largely western which assumes that man has utilitarian relationship with nature. When nature fails to procreate it is condemned as pernicious requiring containment. Today man has unilineal relationship with nature wherein the former is only a receiver and nature the giver. Disaster management as a practical strategy that emerged out of this perspective that the ecosystem must behave in an orderly fashion and be stable always.

The indigenous system does not consider order and disorder as polar-opposites rather parts of a whole. Sarukanta contends that like humans, the forest and lake has emotions, the spirit in them is living and they react to the way man communicates. Ancestral wisdom testifies that indigenous beliefs and practices are not new but have stood the test of time, being passed on from one generation to next. With the increase in amplitude of modernization, our distance with the ecosystem has increasing. Today we fail to understand the signs and symbols of nature thereby demonizing it as unruly. Modernization has denaturalized man and his relationship with his ecosystem. But forest communities who till now are relatively aloof from gross mechanization of daily life and consumerist goals, accept the ecosystem as it is. They focus on a

reverse relation where humans must care for nature to thrive and prosper. Recent environmental policies have taken this indigenous perspective ‘man caring for nature’ into concern after several catastrophic man-made disasters.

Seismic hazards originate in nature but these do not entail destruction. The damage is caused by risks the market and society builds through structure. A simple taxi ride across the Assam Trunk road is enough to demonstrate the growing distance of the newly urbanized community with nature which makes people susceptible to catastrophe. Concrete building on slopes and flouting building codes is now an organized nexus of the government and contractors as people fall prey to cheap offers and synthetic dream of a shining future. Floods and landslides are like chronic illness plaguing the city, and earthquake is like plague that will leave none behind. The Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) makes cosmetic arrangement in terms of resources and responsibility but without a permanent solution. There are also blueprints of evacuation, emergency rescue teams and identified hazards but the core concern remains unanswered. Why are communities becoming more vulnerable? Today we are not sensitive towards the ecosystem, simply plundering it without giving back a dime will bring more damage in the long term than good.



Awaiting the Earthquake Plague: Visuals of Landslide and Floods in Guwahati cause due to unregulated construction and insensitive settlement flouting ecosystem limits

The standardized model of development is considered the birth right of society where everyone has equal rights to prosper. But what about rights of the ecosystem? Understanding the other side of the story will help to demystify disasters

that there are limits to growth. The Brahmaputra valley is prone to annual flooding but the ethnic community who reside in its bank and face the deluge of submergence, do not lament the phenomenon. They highlight the positive aspect and points out that the alluvium carried by the water called *polokh* leads to bumper harvest. The *Misings* and *Rabhas* call annual flooding a necessary evil which helps us in reimagining disaster not as purely dystopian but a phenomenon with varying possibilities depending upon the recipient population. Besides, earthquakes have retained its symptomatic devastation of upturning mountains and creating gorges yet the *Rabhas* who have a history of experiencing and adapting to seismicity do not brand it as unnecessary “*nature must take its course,*” quoting Sarukanata. The religion and ideology of indigenous communities are accommodative of chronic or episodic catastrophes and gives legitimate space for justification of hazards. The ability of indigenous communities to outlive disaster has been phenomenal because their solutions are locally oriented.

Frenzy of modernization is growing, people are becoming increasingly vulnerable, fearful and pessimistic with each passing day. However, there are no quick fixes; the solution in the context, neither modernization or indigeneity can work alone, both must work together to overcome an apocalyptic future. Cultural relativism is important if the hermeneutics of earthquake is to be decoded. The rhetorical reproduction of disaster management cycle not only jeopardizes survival but skills of mitigation as well. A look at the mock drill manual suggests that the training offered for a rural and urban schools are same though the needs and capacities of the two groups are entirely different.

It seems we are proceeding in a wrong direction where money is slowly corrupting the forest tracks. We are undergoing a regression from being an ecologically conscious society where man was a listener and observer of nature to a market driven society where nature is categorized as undecipherable and mysterious. As the elders reiterates, ‘*the signs and symbols have stopped speaking to the younger ones and they fear the complete loss of it with the coming of mobile phones*’. Development in our society has been incomplete because it has leap frogged several stages and created a cultural lag between technology and traditions.



School, Space and Students: Another journey another school but the state of Rabha students are same everywhere; in Tamulpur subdivision. The students are not taught in their language but in Assamese and there is demand for its constitutional recognition.

Indigeneity is projected as binary to modernity and this has led the sacrosanct character of myth which were instrumental in attaining social cohesion to be debated. The necessity and utility of mythical beliefs are questioned and rejected. This has left a hole in the belief system of the community because the society is not yet ready to adopt technical rationality. Rejection of indigenous belief as superstitious and simultaneous absence of another scientific justification to explain existing phenomena led a culture of void.

The word '*jakri*' is often used among the Rabhas and could be translated as '*a sudden spell*' meaning anger of gods to diseases. An unanticipated earthquake in Rabha language is expressed thus, '*jakri-anin ha dirr-a*'. This narration is backed by secondary evidences which suggest that *jakri* is a noun. During fests and funerals, *Ojha* makes offerings to the clan deity *Rishito* to prevent any kind of '*jakra*' (verb). A vignette of confusion over the word goes thus;

A team of researchers from IIT came about two years back with their sophisticated instruments. They took several rounds of the lake and visited areas which are prohibited from venturing. *Ojha* remarked "*there was a white man too, aningraaj!*"

To observe the party everyone left their day's work and thronged near them. The frenzy of the forest people continued and after a couple of days the elected headman was summoned for discussion. After much waiting the *GaonBura* returned with his chest protruding, he sat in the community hall, *nogouand* declared '*the team is here to lay pipelines!*' None could confirm whether it was a study or a survey and what it meant by pipelines, but one thing was clear that the coming of the team was a great spectacle in the village.

The *Ojha* continued with his story, "*the team camped outside the village and maintained limited communication with the villagers despite the eagerness of the people to communicate. There was excitement in the air. But two weeks after their arrival, the unexpected happened. They called a meeting of the Gram Sabha and announced that the pipeline project was now stalled as the terrain was unstable*". From the hand gesture and shaking of heads the reason was clear, Chandubi is seismically prone and therefore abandoned "*ha dirr, jakri, kaphai*"⁵³

My narrator made his disillusionment evident because had expected the pipeline to bring jobs and more tourists. He was disappointed and said "*How could these people having so many machines be fearful of the jakra,*" earthquakes? "*Jaga khonjakriboee,*" meaning the region will shake, nothing can help!

The people of Jaramukhuriya took pride in their legendary migration and origin of the lake. They enjoyed the delicate balance between prosperity and sorrow. So, the sudden declaration by the scientists that quakes are incongruous to the locale and barrier to developmental activity was unacceptable. Seismicity bears cultural meanings to the people which the outsiders could not realize. The blatant declaration of the region as untenable replaced awe to aversion. Who requires to be sensitive here, the people or the outsiders? Was the possibility of consultation with the forest dweller about locally available solutions for laying the pipelines explored or was the project abandoned simply following a text book approach, I wonder.

⁵³nearby

Remarks on State Sponsored 'Disaster Management'

Modernity envisaged nature as unruly requiring to be disciplined and beaten into shape; it must be conquered by man for economic gains. The indigenous way however contradict this perspective because they do not equate nature by its economic productivity alone, they do not simply commodify products of the ecosystem but focuses on its socio-spiritual aspect. These practices are termed as too simplistic to be accepted by the neo-liberal world and therefore useless. A technocratic model envisaged by the world today emphasizes on using services of experts and specialists to train people to cope with environment and its vagaries. The manualized epistemology has also reached the indigenous zone as the state continues to ignore the capacity of the local people. The state has embarked on the project with willful amnesia failing to appreciate that ethnic people have traditionally mitigated their own risks for generations since centuries. True that the local knowledge is not full proof with the changing times, assimilation and world-wide environmental degradation but the solution is not to discard them or leave the isolated tracts as they are by to make a homogenous mixture of traditional and mechanical approach. Suitable indigenous ways are required to be identified and applied to modern context. For instance, government supplies of relief post-disasters is a highly mechanical process requiring care and sensitivity that are central to indigenous ethics. The rescuers are often male but most vulnerable victims are women. In a patriarchal society such as India, bridging the gender gap is essential, so wouldn't it be prudent to engender the rescue forces, overcoming biases and making it more egalitarian.

The prevalent disaster management model very generic as the standard procedures are applied irrespective of composition and culture of communities which is why recovery is never complete. Pity and fate are end products to this system because scientism cannot address human misery adequately. It is essential to humanize the process of disaster management in lines of indigenous communities, prepare like they do and mitigate like them. Rather than an umbrella model, we need a locally sensitive model where the recipient community is participant in the process of designing their rescue and rehabilitation. Becoming stakeholder will enhance ownership and make safety a public priority rather than a government goal. In other to alter the present system we need to understand it and find its loopholes.

The standard disaster management system has four stages namely, preparedness, rescue, rehabilitation and mitigation making it a cycle. There are standard operating procedures and experts, trained into memorizing each step and replicating those correctly. Besides there are handy manuals to provide quick reminders. Innovations are appreciated falling within the purview of the system so there is a failure to appreciate diverse needs of indigenous communities. For instance, The Disaster Management Policy 2009 suggests for preparedness of communities in contiguity of risk. It mentions caring for the regional needs but the reality is quite contrary, because uniform procedures persist for all. Uniformity has been a dubious concept from the start as vulnerability depends from individual capacities to limitations of the terrain. In case of exposure to earthquakes, victimhood is determined by age, gender, caste, class or any other unit of stratification. For instance, the number of casualties in the Indian ocean tsunami, triggered by an underwater earthquake, revealed that women died in greater number in comparison to their male counterparts. *Saree*, children in tow and inability to swim made them easy target. While in Latur, women became victim again because unlike men, ladies slept inside the house for safety and shame. In the flash flood of Uttarakhand, where pilgrim women fell prey to the calamity. But in the perilous landscape became doubly burdened by their cultural adornment, jewellery. Thieves molested women for gold. The storyline does not change in Nepal. Little girls orphaned by the earthquake were trafficked out of their country and sold in brothels of India or sent as domestic workers to the Gulf. Thus, a regional model, specific to the ecosystem is required to address the disasters locally.

For a society where traditional mechanism have proven effective, there is no harm in adapting those for future but areas where local culture have failed and become defunct borrowing from best practices of other societies will be beneficial. But all said and done, the umbrella approach is required to be replaced by a micro model which will reduce casualty and enhance opportunities for life.

a) Preparedness: A Virtual Reality

Preparedness is a pro-active approach of managing disasters which came in the 90's, marking a shift from the erstwhile reactive approach. The paradigm shift from

atonement to natural phenomenon brought disasters down from realm of gods to market. Increased business required regions to be secure and free from catastrophe, in other words a stable market thus technology and skill were used to control the environment. At first ‘preparedness’ became just a phrase to instil confidence for ease of doing business and only after the Indian Ocean Tsunami the idea began to be replicated in practice.

Traditionally societies took measures to protect themselves but in the colonial period the subsistence was broken as flooding and famine intensified owing to diverting of water channels for commercial agriculture, dredging of rivers to desilt ports, replacement of food crops by cash crop and arbitrary collection of taxes. Officers never succumbed to hunger or disease, some merchants did die of epidemics and drought but the real sufferers were millions of farmers and sharecroppers who perished from lack of food and inflicted by disease. To curtail the wetting backyard, the Provincial Famine Code was instituted in 1883. The decade which followed saw the Great Indian Famine from 1896-97 affecting approximately 62.5 million in the British territory followed by a malarial epidemic and bubonic plague. While in the United Province the famine relief was partially successful, tribal groups of Central Province declined to undertake public works in exchange of food and perished. They died in great numbers and making charitable relief a failure.



From the Archives: Map indicating the 1896-97 Famine

A missionary’s account⁵⁴ of the Earthquake of 1897 describes relocation of survivors from the danger zone which is possibly the first intervention by an outside agency in

⁵⁴Reverend Evans gave his own explanation of the cause of the earthquake of 1897 which hit the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and the contiguous Khasi Hills of Meghalaya and its spiritual effects. To

the North East, before that the region was absent from the national imagination of even the British.

In the later stage, relief approach became mechanical and retained the burden of white man. The state would patiently wait for the catastrophe to strike, people to get de-capacitated, starve and perish and only then government would release some grains and provide shelter. While thousands would die during the disasters, hundreds would die waiting for state intervention. The relief approach to address disaster was realized to be flawed though the Indian state continued to practice the same till the beginning of the 1990's, true to colonized spirit of the state. 'Preparedness' emerged as the catch word in the Indian context in 1993-94 when a central sector scheme on Disaster Management was implemented for hazard mapping and vulnerability assessment; it suggested up-gradation of early warning systems and seismological instrumentation network but implementation of the proactive approach remains a distant dream. For instance, Approximately 58.6% of the Indian landmass is prone to earthquake (India Disaster Report, 2011: 5) and the Brahmaputra basin which stretches parallel to the Himalayas, the youngest fold mountains of the world qualifies as one of the most tectonically active regions of the world. The Sikkim earthquake which occurred in 2011 caused great loss of life despite being relatively moderate in the Richter scale of 6.8. It claimed 60 lives in Sikkim, including 16 at the Teesta Stage III hydroelectric power project site, injuring 719 persons and causing extensive damage. *"The devastation caused by the earthquake was intensified by seasonal heavy monsoon rains that caused landslides, mud slides and also caused floods that destroyed thousands of homes, buildings and infrastructure"* (ibid:5-6)

The entire North East is a vulnerable zone thus preparedness is a dire necessity. Preparing the social infrastructure such as health care system, education and social welfare system besides the administrative system is important. Cultural heritage sites such as monasteries and archaeological sites often crumble down during earthquakes. Therefore, those surveying the region must take cognizance of the existing resources

quote him *"There were many people in Khasia who heard the Gospel and accepted its truth, but without obeying its demand. Many of them got close in some ways but nothing they heard made them forsake their old faith and their sins and claims Christ as their Savior. A big event was needed to force them to realize the presence sanctity of God....The earthquake was literally a kind of Pentecost in that it converted sinners and became a huge pouring-forth of the Holy Spirit upon the country's Christians"* (Bhattacharjee, 2004:608-10)

and how people's lives revolve around it. Undertaking calculative speculation of calamities and planning necessary measures for evacuation are key for safety. Though collective planning of various actors engaged the process from scientist to the community's knowledge and the administration's penetration are important yet a techno-centric perspective continues to dominate. The concern with earthquake is unpredictability and most of the preparedness mechanism for it has remained confined to scientific deconstructions, largely acceptable for urban centres only. The tribal and rural India have remained cut off from those interpretations because of isolation, inaccessibility and distance from GDP turn over. Also, investment in technology for these areas is not considered viable citing threats of insurgency. But is mainstream technology applicable for the margins, isn't there need for appropriate technology suitable to the forest economy, which people can be a part of? For instance, GIS and Remote Sensing are used to detect potential threats in the ecosystem by the metrological department but such endeavour will be complete such when the information is passed on to the community not just on early warning basis but as regular communication.

Tribal people are lower in number and speaking for the Rabhas they are dispersed across 23 districts of Assam. Lower population density, near primitive forest based subsistence and limited exposure to democratic process reduces their visibility from collective imagination of the Assamese nation despite the baggage of disproportionate risk they carry in everyday lives. True democracy requires the indigenous people to have equal safety but why is preparedness ignored for these people?



Life and Livelihood: A gathering of Rabha Men and men heading to the field on a normal day with Plough on shoulder and Japi on head

The phrase which keeps earthquake preparedness going is ‘earthquakes do not kill, structures do!’ but this is highly biased in favour of urban areas only because tribal areas lack infrastructures and are relatively absent from the map of cement. But there are other and much bigger threats in these areas; rivers and tributaries change course during earthquakes besides convulsions of water bodies which become deep or shallow with every passing flood. Unlike the urban areas the water bodies are not dammed therefore the slightest tremors break the banks and cause unseasonal submergence. The river Bathou which flows on the way to Chandubi is booming with such possibility as its sandy bed is constantly on rise. Today sand mafias are mining sand and sending truck loads away to construction sites. The local people are too powerless to resent and the administration maintains its silence. Disaster preparedness which is also supposed to consider local politics and design strategies to mitigate risk locally is merely a hearsay here. The loss of livestock or inundation of fields contributes to the misery of the Rabhas but it does not make headlines as such news is of low market interest. This leads to what can be called ‘uni-dimensional preparedness’ because it ignores the margins and is obsessed with saving urban areas.

The first early warning system was installed in Gurgaon in July, 2016 because it is a millennium city. According to a newspaper report, the installation made in Haryana Institute of Public Administration is aimed at helping district officials, industrialists, private developers and companies to know about the benefit of technology. *“The technology alerts as soon as the primary waves strike so that people get some time before the secondary waves (actual earthquake) hit the area. It raises an alarm 30 seconds before the actual earthquake...its system also opens emergency exits, as pipelines.... switches of electricity supply...”* (Kumar, 2016). Optimizing technology is good but are these mechanisms decentralized enough. Haryana and its adjoining areas fall in the seismic zone IV, the Brahmaputra basin falls in the seismic zone V⁵⁵. Despite its greater vulnerability, preparedness attempts in earthquake prone areas are making no headways, let alone technological breakthroughs. There has been promises to set up more Earthquake Monitoring systems, Telemetered Seismic Stations and Meteorology and Hydrography Departments in the valley, but implementations

⁵⁵ Find seismic vulnerability map of India and North East in the Appendix

appear to have gotten stuck in the Siliguri chicken neck corridor joining mainland India with North East. Preparedness is thus a gamble over power.

b) Rescue and Rehabilitation: Soliciting Sensitivity

I travelled in and out of the field as it was essential to talk to significant others who had bearing with the field though not its part. Venturing into the domain of a third party, I moved to the Deputy Commissioner's office to enquire about mitigating disasters in 'tribal areas'. The highest executive authority of the district was in habit of asking some fundamental questions before beginning the conversation, so he did. As per his request, I gave a 'bird eye view of my research study', he looked satisfied and produced a Village Disaster Management Plan and I took it. I was thorough with the plan as it was required to be reproduced in an examination taken during post-graduation but when I came to the field no traces of it were found. Despite apprehensions I decided to give the Officer a fair hearing of his version and remain patient during the twenty minutes meeting booked over a telephone call.

The Hindi speaking officer stated that people have historically faced the challenge of being victims to catastrophe of different kinds, but its magnitude was increasing annually, as per survey of the total affected area. He contended that despite the growing intensity of disasters, the community is unwilling to relocate and even when the hazard hits. The community resists moving out of its niche, they suffer from what he calls "*an oriental logic against evacuation. They become victims because they hide from the rescue teams especially during floods.*"

After any catastrophe or given its early warning signals, the administration starts preparing for rescue and rehabilitation as per the state sponsored disaster management policy. The standard operating procedure says that people must be evacuated from the danger zone and brought into safe shelter. Accordingly, the administrator executes. However, people resist evacuation and do not evacuate their homestead. While the rescue forces such as the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and State Disaster Response Forces (SDRF) are deployed to pull people out of their homes, while the community often prefers to stay back. Having lived with the community for

some time now it wasn't hard to decipher why. Belongingness to the ecosystem, belief that it changes and heals by itself prevented the forest people from abandoning it. But it is not prudent to assume so I decided to explore the question further.

It was important to make peace with Sabita, my earlier host, who was disgruntled that I shifted with Rita for my third visit. She told me that I was a valuable guest and demanded to know if I was mistreated. However, I wanted to understand the village from a different vantage point which is why I shifted, I explained my reason to Sabita but the point wasn't taken well. So, I had to find a new one, "*Rita was lonely and in need of money*⁵⁶*so I thought I could give her some company*", this explanation seemed marked truce. It was important to be in congenial terms with her because she was kind of a leader with opinion. Besides she was the point of contact for officials and other networks, so I began to explore my ruminations about rescue and rehabilitation with her.

"*When I was little my mother use to scare me with the story of a fissure,*" Sabita was referring to the earthquake of 1950 which had opened many fissures in the ground that was closely followed by great flooding. She began her account thus;

"I wasn't born back then, but my mother says that we had more pigs than the others. The stay was just below our chang. It was afternoon and people were taking their naps after lunch and that is when the tremors came. There was slight shaking in the beginning and later the deafening sound along with violent rattle. My mother was carrying me at that time and she fell off from the porch of the house. When she fell on the ground, she could see the supporting pillar of the chang quivering badly. And suddenly with a gasp only kuri (twenty) meters away from her, the earth opened-up, a wide fissure. My mother could not stay still and as the ground agitated below her back, she tried to hold on to whatever was available, shrubs or roots but a slope had developed and everything started falling into the fissure. It was only a fraction

⁵⁶During my first visit to the field, I put up at Sabita's *chang* and took food from her a paying Rs. 5000 for three weeks. The next visit was of two weeks and I continued staying with her despite the high charge because it was safe besides she was affluent and helped me build networks. In my third and last stay however, I required to have a different outlook, feel the forest and people from other angles and explore other plausible options therefore I shifted to Rita's for three weeks. She had not expectation to be paid for pay the stay as I was using my own sleeping bag and clothes possibly to contribute in the food. But I paid her by prevalent rates.

of seconds when she could see the earth's interiors. The north and the north-western pillar disappear in it along with two of the largest pigs. However, a few seconds later the fissure closed! My mother continued to gasp in fear of having seeing death from so near, she saw two pillars and two pigs had disappeared into the earth just before her eyes. The only difference the fissure had left behind was a fresh row of brown earth, the fallen chang which now partially hanging with six pillars, a broken stay and five piglets.



Grammar of Structures⁵⁷: (L) An affluent homestead with a pig stay below. (R) House 'chang' under construction, replacing hay roof with tin and an elevated hand pump.

Looking up Sabita asked, “*what could anyone do about it, let alone the administration?*” After episodes of earthquake, there were years and years of submergence due to the changing course of Brahmaputra. Each time the government insisted on evacuation which meant leaving homes and forest for four to five months and staying on top of dams called *mathuri* without basic amenities or safety, so “*we choose not to go, we choose to stay and fight unless it was urgent to evacuate.*” The resistance to being rescued out of danger was according to her, enforced and she put

⁵⁷ The figures depict Platform houses, called *changghor*, these are semi-indigenous with improvisations such as tin roof and lime coloring on walls. However, in the figure on the left side also depicts a sturdy indigenous structure with hay roof, bamboo walls wooden pillars. The indigenous houses are seismicity resilient and much cooler during warm and humidity summer & monsoon, besides being an excellent shelter during floods. These represent the affluent homestead. The figure on the right also depicts a hand pump, the level of the hand pump is much higher than usual, it is for times of floods when submergence happens. For a limited period of time these hand pumps provide clean drinking water.

it thus “*calamities are a part of the whole natural system, as they come, so shall they pass. People have lived through ages and must continue to stay alongside risks.*”

While the theoretical module to manage disaster strongly advocated saving people and moving them out of danger zone, interesting enough, people see these zones as homes, roots of belonging. Rabhas and their landscape are in a holy communion and catastrophes are a part of that system. It becomes evident that the patrilineal state is not the best judge of strategies to be adopted during catastrophe because since long the community has thrived over threats and been resilient. Rather than assuming people will do as directed, the state needs to consider the culture of the community and must act in consonance of indigenous values to be successful. The community terms the rescue and rehabilitation to be dangerous as these separate them from their homestead, categorizes the terrain and forest as hazardous besides trivializing their bond with nature.

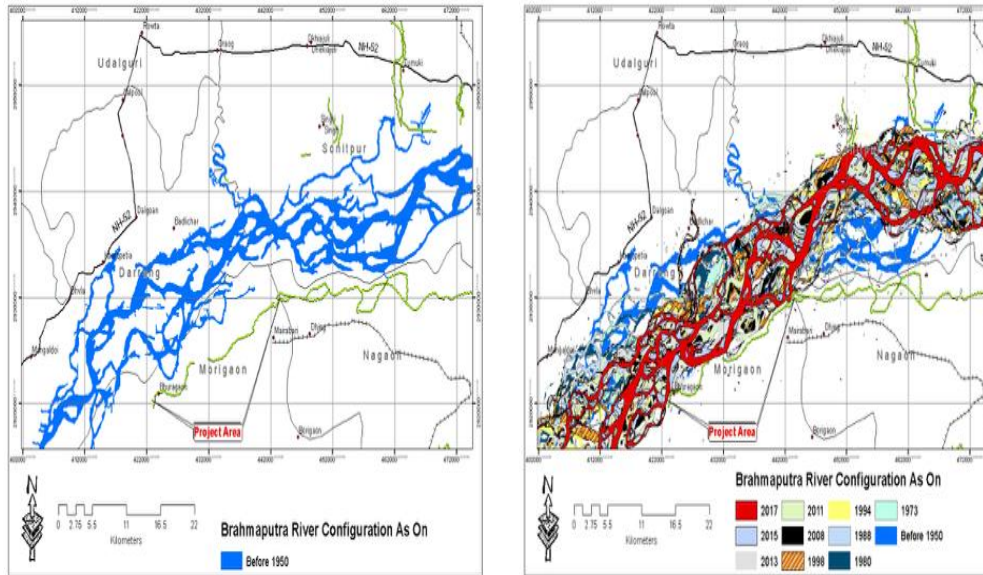
Me: But what do you do when the impact of calamity is beyond your comprehension?

GaonBura: “Well, we just don’t abandon, we wait. We try to adapt and when it surpasses our capacity, we call for a meeting of elders and to move to the highlands for a few days.”

The headman also gave an interesting insight that calamities bring new opportunities. In forest villages where the people are prohibited from collecting wood, the floods provide opportunity to engage into lumbering. Dead wood comes floating by and people during that period can collect it and sell it. Besides fishing flourishes and robust market relations develop in the period immediately following floods. Though flooding is not the primary disaster for enquiry, yet it makes up for the secondary or the triggered disaster which usually follows an earthquake, as a shadow in a valley full of rivers.

The Brahmaputra is an antecedent river, which means it originated well before the Himalayas so the river was a catalyst in shaping the valley as it is today. The shape of the landscape is ever changing, determined by the movement of the river. Seismic activity plays a crucial role in altering the course of Brahmaputra and the catastrophic earthquakes of 1897 and 1950 give evidence of it. Scientists believe that a large

magnitude earthquake is expected anytime this decade in the valley which will presumably alter the course of the river once again and lead to massive restructuring of the landscape. So, earthquake has been a progenitor and flooding its corollary.



***A migrating river:** The two figures show the southwards shift of the Brahmaputra River. The worst affected district in Assam is Morigaon, which is also the point of reference in both the figure. The satellite imagery of the Brahmaputra, on the left depicts the status in 1950 & right 2017*

The episodic change of course the river its constant southward shift has opened new doors in history. Communities residing by the river are aware of changes in the ecosystem and better judge of its impact. Their exposure tells them what and how much to expect and ways to mitigate. For instance, if one passes through Palashbari on the way to Chandubi, small hamlets of fifteen to eighteen houses are visible. These settlements appear new but the people are old and have stayed in the region for generations. What then is their story? A village of today will be five nautical miles inside Brahmaputra tomorrow. Every year the river inflates invading new villages, the river shifts and along with it the villages so people are always resettling and there is not permanence. Erosion is the only permanent reality. This not only affects their economic status but also their identity. The people who experience of loss inheritance, objects, artifacts and family share a collective memory displacement. The outside agencies must take cognizance of their loss, experience and survival strategies rather than imposing arm chair policies.

c) Community for Itself and the Trojan Horse of Catastrophe

This part of the chapter caters to communities as stakeholder in planning and mitigation of emergency. The involvement of communities in managing risk and understanding vulnerability began as a concept in 2002 under the GOI-UNDP Disaster Management Programme and is commonly termed as Community Based Disaster Management (CBDM). It is conceived as a participatory approach with the belief that people have a better understanding of their context, when imparted with skills and equipped with resources; their ability to avoid risk and perceive threat increases. Bangladesh as a country has long coastline and prone to Indian ocean cyclone. The CBDM approach was primarily kick-started there with the community radio to monitor the spreading early warning signals for uninterrupted communication during rescue and rehabilitation. This marked a transition of people being victim to becoming stakeholders. The guidelines for community based disaster management⁵⁸ is given by the National Disaster Management Authority of India in 2005. Now the policy directive made mandatory for the administration to learn about risks and vulnerabilities from the community.

The idea is to have a top-down model, a departure from policy driven approach which has found mention in several national and state level plans of the government. The proposed system states for a collaboration of technical experts with the grassroots but despite the blueprint in black and white is something of this nature happening? Nothing from the field suggest that a new approach has come about. The old relief centric model is in place but with a change in climate. *“Today people are more*

⁵⁸The GOI-UNDP Disaster Risk Management (DRM) programme (2002- 2009) was executed by Ministry of Home Affairs with UNDP with support of community-based initiative in 176 multi hazard districts in 17 States/UTs, at a total estimated cost of Rs. 153 Crore.

Under CBDM, disaster management plans are prepared at district and village levels; village volunteers trained in first-aid, search and rescue, evacuation; relief and shelter management; disaster management teams constituted at the district and sub-district levels and mock drills conducted at various levels. It is known to be the largest community-based DRM programme in the world. This was followed by GOI – UNDP Disaster Risk Reduction Programme between 2009 and 2012 which was aimed at institutional strengthening for target states, districts and cities where targeted community capacity building was also undertaken for teachers, town-planners, masons, etc.

aware!” like the Headman of the Panchayat says. In isolated regions and tribal hamlets, communities are usually the first responders and there is little outside intervention till the danger has passed. As has been reiterated, the grassroots have traditional knowledge of *what, when, how* and *why* of calamities. The existence of indigenous beliefs and practices gives testimony of the community’s knowledge. So, the idea of being first responders exists among the people but they require resource both economic and skills which governmental body must take responsibility being a welfare state. However, bureaucratization did some good too, because it removed the official stigma about locally available knowledge. It simplified disaster management and made communities a participant in deciding their destiny. Today local level diversity has become a legitimate concern, departure from an umbrella approach though the problem of implementation continues. Another challenge is corruption and occurrences from the field will throw some insights.

The Rajapara village panchayat is supposed to be involved in environmental impact assessment and vulnerability mapping of the area. But a murmur about the panchayat’s involvement with timber contractors is jeopardizing this whole process. Involvement of forest officials in making the mafias pass check gates in exchange of money is also not unheard of. The cumulative effect of these nexus is that the health of the ecosystem is getting affected. As per law, no Sal tree is supposed to be felled or sold and only the dead trees to be logged and auctioned but reality is otherwise. Some boys of the community are part of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) and with anonymity speak that the timber mafia have a wide network and controls the forest officials too. Men on the ground not only illegally fell these trees but also sets parts of the forest on fire. The semi burnt trees are then logged and sold. This is affecting the health of the Chandubi Lake.

When trees are felled and forest burnt, stumps usually stay behind and gradually the soil around it loosens and gets drained into the lake during monsoon. The depth of the lake has declined by a third over a period of fifty years. The erosion of top soil, its draining and deposition has aggravated flooding. In monsoon months, the lake swells faster leading to prolonged submergence. Also given the seismic proneness unnatural deposition of the top-soil will aggravates liquefaction in the future. Any impending

seismic hazard will become a man-made disaster this time. Today, Chandubi Lake has small ox-bow pockets of water bodies. These smaller pockets of water are constantly becoming shallow due to top soil deposition. These mud-marshes are devoid of fishes and the little water therein is unfit for consumption of wild animals too. There was an instance where a fully-grown elephant was caught which could only be released by zoo official after three days. And according to Rita, these mud-marshes are breeding grounds for malaria epidemics.

The community is aware of this whole process of timber nexus, top soil erosion, turning of water body into mud-marsh and malaria epidemic, yet they are unable to make a difference. When the people's representatives are involved with the executives in degrading the health of the ecosystem the status of community as first responder is merely titular. A growing lust of the timber mafias is making the ecosystem vulnerable and people need to rise in movement against this. At present, there is resentment⁵⁹, *but can the fire be far away, when the smoke is near?*

Resilience Activist: Exploring the possibilities of a Grassroots Institution

The Resilience Activist will be an independent yet integrated institution at the level of the community who will identify risks and liaison with the administration. This person shall be technically trained into preparedness and mitigation of disaster who will ensure people's capacity building besides understanding local needs within a broader global framework. Such a person should be locally recruited because there will be belongingness and monitoring. Besides the person will be well versed in the caste-class dynamic of the village which will help in identifying individual needs and designing relief and rehabilitation plan. The primary idea why Community Based Disaster Management emerged was to fight the inadequacy of top-down management and the absence of a permanent body has affected communication between the state

⁵⁹People are resentful because of two reasons. The immediate reason is that whenever there is forest fire, the beat constables accuse the people and torture them. In the past two people were arrested and cases pending against in the court. Their guilt has not been proven but they plead not guilty. The rhetoric of oppression of powerless by the powerful emerges here but there is much more. The people resent the decline in health of the forest. The forest is their home, they are emotionally connected and nostalgic about it. So, they are getting alienated from a meaningful co-existence which is central to their lives.

and community. The Resilience Activist will mobilize people and ensure service delivery during and after disasters

The Auxiliary Nurse and Mid-wife, ANM *baideo*⁶⁰ is considered the savior of rural health in Assam and has become a foot soldier representing the whole infrastructure of the state. In similar lines, there is a burgeoning necessity of a similar personnel in each village of the state and especially the disaster-prone regions. The acute susceptibility of the state to periodic earthquakes, annual flooding, river bank erosion, thunder strike, cloud burst, landslide epidemics is not only costing the exchequer but also the primary reason for developmental delays. There is therefore the need of a permanent infrastructure dedicated for the cause of disaster mitigation in lines of an ANM worker.

“One problem which civil societies face today is that they may be seen as outsiders requiring to undertake icebreaking or rapport building initially. But for a resource person within the community such conditioning will not be required”(Sarma, 2017: 61). Besides, every village may not have access to civil society organizations or operational SHGs. So, having a Resilience Activist in line of an ASHA worker who will create awareness of potential hazards and risk in the community, bring the same into the notice of the Panchayat/ Block/ District and collaborate with other public resource persons like ASHA worker (to provide for emergency medication) will be a game changer.

As I explored the possibility of a grassroots institution to bridge the gap between indigenous and techno-centric approach, I was nearing the city of Guwahati, a school bus had stopped near my taxi from where it rung;

Ring around the Rosies

Pocket full of Posies

Achoo, Achoo,

All fall-down.

⁶⁰elder sister, used to refer to a woman with respect, in Assamese

It was during the plague that people, especially children were made to wear flowers, garlands around their neck to ward off miasma and this rhythm is a reminder of those black times, but we sing without realizing. Unfortunately, such preparedness did not have any effect and it is evident from the last line that people simply succumbed to the flu, i.e., “*wearers gasped for breath and fell dead on spot*” (Davis, 2000: 210). Thus, it is high time to realize that preparedness must be a meaningful activity, it must integrate the context and be objective to control hazard rather than a cosmetic arrangement.

CONCLUSION

Looking Back

Living in Chandubi despite Risk: Demystifying Why

In Jaramukhuriya, there are ‘runners’; one day I came face to face with them. These are small boys not more than twelve. Each runner has an older partner which makes them a team. But what do they do? As the monsoon arrives the runner and his mate activates and acquire positions in tree-houses from where they observe the rising water level of the Chandubilake and the Bathou river. With incessant rains the level of water rises and breaches its banks moving towards the village. The mate keeps track of the approaching flood, constantly informing the runner, who in turn informs the headman about the advancing water running at break neck speed, between the tree-house and the village. Depending upon this information, the community decides whether to start loading essentials in boats or remain calm. Such responsibility to a young boy may not suit our modern sensibility but for an indigenous community this has been a time-tested practice.

The tree-house along with the runner is a complete system of monitoring the level of rising water. It is a practical strategy of preparedness against flooding which makes the community resilient. Sheds on canopy trees are also built during harvesting seasons near fields to keep track of scavenging animals. Many times, elephants descend in hordes to ravage crops, in which case the shed turn in base camps bursting fire crackers to scare the animals off.



Indigenous Monitoring: *Tree House from where ‘the runner’ operates to and fro the village, informing about the rising water level.*

Today with the coming of mobile phones, young boys are not required to become runners and tree houses can be operated single handedly by ‘the mate’ alone. Indeed, life has become easier yet old men tell nostalgic tales recounting stories about racing heart and storming floods.

The Rabhas of Jaramukhirya co-exist in the ecosystem of mysteries, innovating locally. These strategies have ensured their survival over generations and made them resilient against threats, which is why they continue to live there. Their sustainability is reinforced by the faith system which prepares them to evade risk. The indigenous community has not rationalized all threats rather they attributed some of them as acts of the supernatural. To an outsider, their behavior may appear superstitious but living amidst them one realizes that the beliefs are check and balance co-exist in the ecosystem of risk. For instance, the fear of malevolent spirits acts as social control to prevent deviation and ensure safety. But contradictions cannot be overruled. The *Ojha* and *Bej* become supreme authority to determine disease and possession; this opens the saga of human rights violation when individuals are targeted to settle personal score, threatened by mistreatment or tortured. Thus, there are limits to cohesion in a forest society also.

Despite challenges the Rabhas have continued in the perilous terrain because modernization has opened new livelihood avenues. In the past decade, the youth use

to migrate outside the region for employment but today the promotion of eco-tourism has retained them. Nature enthusiasts visit Chandubi to get a taste of ethnic life, cuisine and adventure sports; this has opened options to make money and retaining the youth in the hamlet. However, increased circulation of money in the forest economy has broken its previous holism with nature and today the ethnic culture has become a tradable entity. Older generation laments the lack of skills in youth to interpret signs and symbols of nature also resent the waste left behind by modernization such as, money mindedness and plastic bags which are polluting minds and the ecosystem respectively.

Unlike the young who consider disasters as problems, the older generation understand vagaries as changing mood of nature but at the same time glorify man's survival over them. Earthquake is not a puzzle for them but a part of the ecosystem's mood which can be benevolent sometimes and at other times, fearful.

Responsibility, Trusteeship and Limits of a Researcher

Jack Katz (2002: 1) says that ethnographers often start fieldwork by focusing on descriptive tasks in explaining social life thereby making transitions from 'how' to 'why'. This process of transition is not smooth. The road from University with a computer-generated auto-corrected version of objectives and research question underwent complete transformation in the field, which was sometimes fathomable and at other times wild. This transition was marked by an evolution of my own identity. From being a researcher with sociological intent to deconstruct earthquakes in context of an indigenous society, I became a friend. As I journeyed from being an 'outsider' to 'some sort of insider' a sense of responsibility towards the people dawned. This transition is however neither patronizing nor charitable.

In the process of exploring the natural-social duality, I penetrated the world of beliefs, loss and politics that surrounds a forest village undergoing modernization. I became connected to Rabha way of living, landing my ethnography in a juncture where it transitioned into a personalized manuscript of in-depth involvement with 'the other'. Thus, it became easy to empathize with their concerns and fears also feel the jokes and festivity. This accessibility landed me up with an academic responsibility

whereby I was honour bound to represent the Rabha cause. Advocating their cause in public forums was an option I am exploring besides the possibility of *consentization* through research.

It is possible that this work ends up in the dusty shelves of the library and only decades later, some confused scholar deciding to read up on ‘Sociology of Disaster’ may end up looking. Indeed, it will be a pleasurable moment but as the pages turn yellow my journey too will lose its meaning. As my thesis becomes history so will the forest, its spirit and the Rabha *Manuh*. I doubt if the beliefs and practices which make the community resilient against catastrophes will remain intact in times to come. As the wheel of modernity continues to race, the indigenous culture of resilience will perforate, existing only in memory lanes. So, today I have a role!

Having known the Rabha world and as a part of the academic fraternity I must popularize the concerns of a forest society, their unique yet depleting belief system and indigenous practices; so that they do not transform into a languishing third grade modern society but continue their own rights being a forest society with unique epistemology. Trusteeship here does not mean that I am higher than them in any regard rather connotes my access to communication with the outside world, through which their cause may be highlighted in the wider realm. This work has not been structured as a policy document to retain the uniqueness of the forest Rabhas or their indigenous culture but carries possibility for such conceptualization in the future.

This ethnography revolves around a unique forest community with a seismic heritage so it does not posit a clear cut global perspective. International linkages can be traced in terms of similarity with culturally unique indigenous communities such as the Maoris of New Zealand. The Maori tribe celebrate their ancestral wisdom and communion with nature yet carry a saga of despair and abuse by European immigrants. Their Whananui river of the North Island has recently been granted the status of a living entity after a century’s struggle. As I read about such communities, I also explore similar possibilities for the Chandubi lake to be given legal rights of a human being in the future. Today the Maoris are empowered to follow traditional rights of their own and have a say in governmental policies. Scholars who wish to study their indigenous culture must have an ethical clearance from them to prevent misrepresentation, once again I think in similar lines for the Rabhas.

This account is a proof that history can be interpreted from different vantage points. A hundred and twenty years ago, Jaramukhuriya had no existence but the earthquake of 1897 transformed the topography, causing liquefaction of forest leading to the emergence of Chandubi Lake in its place. The earthquake gave a new meaning to the locale after which people started migrating and settling in its banks. So, catastrophes are not always destructive rather can pose new beginnings. Plagues and wars have been researched as potent agents for reimagining history but the role of earthquakes is relatively underplayed. As one after another seismic epoch followed by annual flooding has transformed the terrain of Assam behaviour of the people has been impacted too. For instance, In Jaramukhuriya, the response to sudden shocks is not flight but adaption to the terrain using local strategies and suitable behaviours which made the Rabhas internally resilient. Example of bamboo houses to sustain seismic shocks has been reiterated at various points in this thesis which makes up for a tangible preparedness. There are intangible practices too such as the ritualized summoning of benevolent and malevolent deity to maintain the delicate balance between fear and prosperity is one of them.

Another vignette, similar understanding;

The Report on the Great Earthquake of 12th June 1897 by Oldham mentioned that Barnadi River changed course but the medieval bridge, *Silasako* stood its ground.

Before the earthquake, the river flowed from beneath the bridge which served as an important trade route for Hajo and Kamrup but the earthquake changed the course of the river, leaving only a puddle of water but the bridge unharmed. This leads us to two insights; *first*, catastrophes do not always entail destruction but rather deranges the existing socio-political and economic order; *second*, traditional structures have a stronger history of withstanding disasters than concretes of today. This also comes with a lament that seismic history of the countryside has remained hitherto untouched.



Host no more: heartiest welcome, hardest goodbye, with Sabita, bidding adieu.

This work is meant as a praxis which is why the partition between methodology and narratives do not exist. Dialogues are intertwined with concepts because in real life compartmentalization between theory and practice is absent. I had entered the field with a set of research objectives and framed questions and exited it, *not* with answers but with insights on conflict and communion of man with catastrophe.

Until Tomorrow?

My feet are deep in mud and I sit amidst the grass,
Looking up at the sky, I see birds fly;
Today it is serene but there may be chaos tomorrow.

I am here for its dry and beautiful,
Will, I still be around when it's full of debris and grime?
Will, I then sit by the television set lamenting the scene?
Or, Will, I put on my clothes to be dirty again?

I sit amidst the people savouring their food and water;
Will, I be there to return the favour tomorrow?

I wonder!

I know that my hardbound thesis will be amidst thousands of red, blue
and green labels

But will the voices and tears of the people go numb then?

I shall not let that happen.

-The Journeying Researcher

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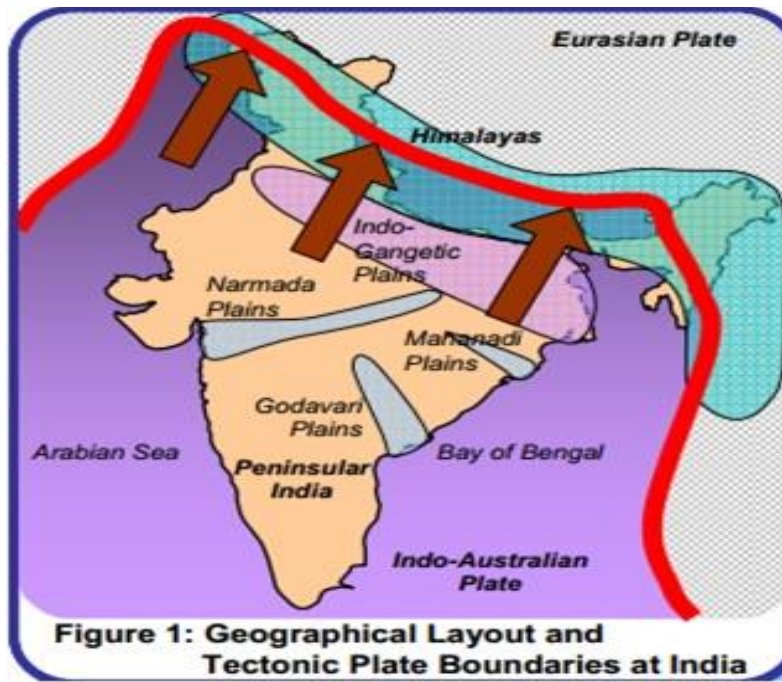
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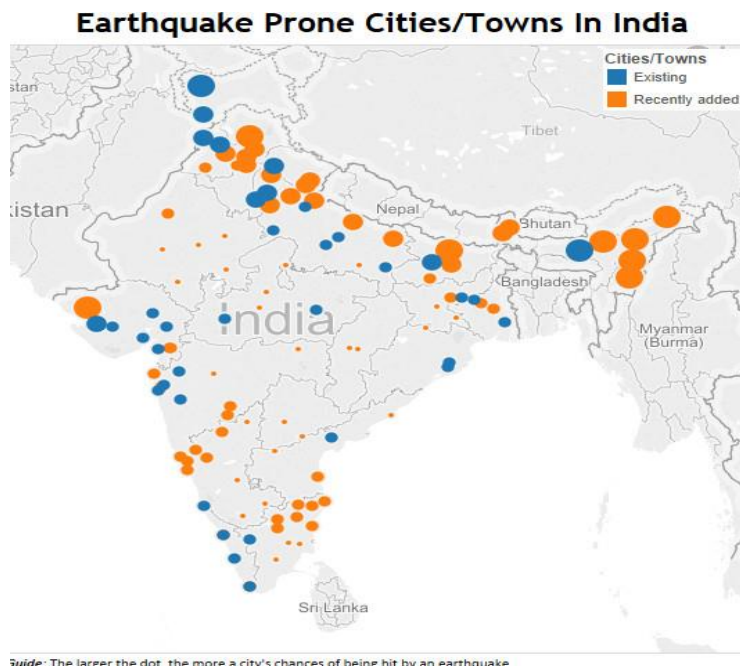
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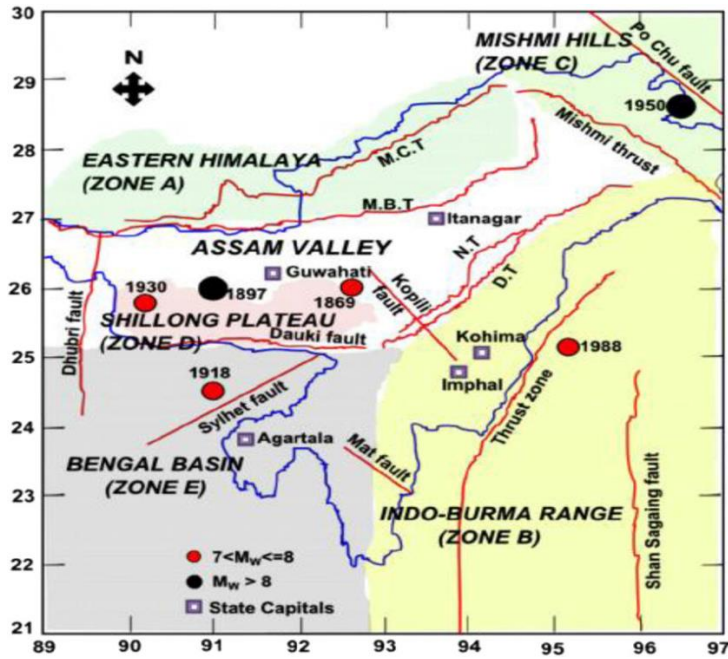
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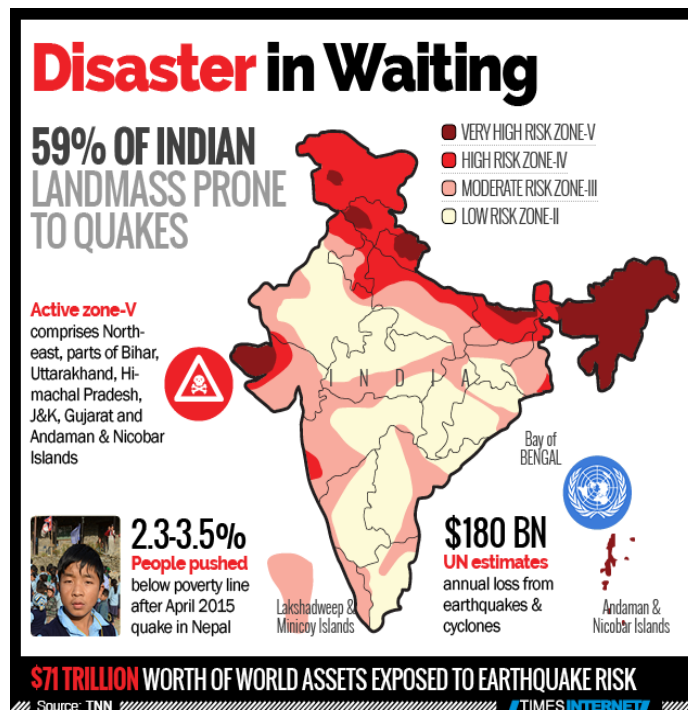
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