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# Re-ordering a Border Space: Relief, Rehabilitation, and Nation-Building in North-Eastern India after the 1950 Assam Earthquake

Bérénice Guyot-Réchar

*Emmanuel College and History Faculty, Cambridge University*

[bcdg2@cam.ac.uk](mailto:bcdg2@cam.ac.uk)

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On 15 August 1950, just as India was celebrating its third independence anniversary, an earthquake of 8.6 magnitude struck the remote north-eastern state of Assam and its surrounding borderlands. Rivers came out of their bed and landslides blocked Himalayan valleys, destroying towns, villages, roads, fields, and tea gardens in their wake. Beyond the disaster's shattering impact on the physical geography of the region, this paper explores how it participated in another reconfiguration — that of Assam's place within India's political geography and national imaginary. The Indian public had hitherto known very little about India's remote 'north-east frontier'; the cataclysm and subsequent relief measures served to carve out a space for it on Indian mental maps. Simultaneously, by forcing a large-scale encounter between Indian authorities and the people of the scarcely controlled eastern Himalayas, post-earthquake relief and rehabilitation led to unprecedented state expansion in this newly strategic borderland. Yet in the same breath, the aftermath of the disaster fuelled stereotypes about Assam and its hinterland that would eventually further their marginality within India and undermine their continued unity. The crystallisation of Assam's image as a place irreducibly subject to the whims of nature, and more importantly incapable of taking care of itself (and hence, of its highland dependencies), would poison centre-state relations for decades to come. Imperfect and contradictory, the re-ordering of this border space from a colonial frontier to a component of independent India's national space did not end marginality, but instead reinforced it.

## Introduction

15 August 1950 had begun auspiciously for India. The country was celebrating the third anniversary of independence, and with the promulgation of the Constitution and the establishment of the Republic on 26 January, many considered that freedom had come in earnest. The mood was not so buoyant in Assam, India's easternmost state — its Chief Minister, Gopinath Bardoloi, had passed away on 5 August,<sup>1</sup> and the region was still reeling from partition riots in the spring.<sup>2</sup> Anticipation was in the air, nonetheless. In January, the Assam Rail Link, a railway track passing through the narrow land isthmus between Sikkim, Bhutan and East Bengal, had been inaugurated. Snapped by the creation of Pakistan three years before, the terrestrial connection between Assam and the rest of India had been revived. Meanwhile, in the scarcely administered eastern Himalayan regions that officially belonged to Assam, Indian authorities had just completed their first major infrastructure project, the Lohit Valley Road. Where previously only a dangerous hiking trail existed between the small town of Sadiya, in the Brahmaputra Valley, and Walong, India's last outpost near the Tibetan border, the two were now connected by road. Then disaster struck.

<sup>1</sup> 'Eminent leader's sad end due to thrombosis of heart', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (7 August 1950); 'All Assam in mourning: 20,000 people attend funeral of Sri Bardoloi at Gauhati', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (8 August 1950).

<sup>2</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal (c1985-). *Letters to Chief Ministers, 1947-1964*, ed. by G. Parthasarathi, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, see letters for March-May 1950.

That evening, as celebrations were on the wane, a quake of 8.6 magnitude struck Assam, Tibet, and northern Burma.<sup>3</sup> Located in an area where the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates collide, the region was no stranger to earthquakes. In the previous fifty years, it had experienced no less than ten strong earthquakes, most of which had caused significant damage to property. The last one had taken place just a year before, in July 1949.<sup>4</sup> Yet one had to go back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to find an earthquake of comparable magnitude. For two minutes on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1897, another tremor of 8.7 on the Richter scale had shaken Lower Assam — killing some 1500 people, levelling masonry buildings, blocking the roads, and damaging the courts, schools, circuit houses, and Christian missions that had marked the entrenchment of colonial presence in the region.<sup>5</sup> Tom La Touche, an officer from the Geological Survey of India, had toured the Goalpara District to evaluate the extent of the damage. In some places, he had noted to his horror that ‘[n]early all the houses [...] are half buried, up to the eaves in sand and mud which was thrown out from cracks in the ground, and it is a wonder that most of the people were not buried.’<sup>6</sup> The architecture of Shillong and other Assam towns had changed after the catastrophe: houses began to be built ‘in the Japanese way’ — with a wooden framework and plaster walls — thought to be aseismic.<sup>7</sup>

Yet if the 1897 disaster was bad enough, the 1950 earthquake was a cataclysm of even greater proportions. At the time, the latter ranked as the fifth biggest tremor ever recorded.<sup>8</sup> Newspapers likened it to a gigantic atomic bomb.<sup>9</sup> But on the ground, the situation rather resembled a tsunami being unleashed on Upper Assam. For no less than seven minutes, a length of time that must have seemed an eternity to the inhabitants, forty-one tremors shook the earth. In these seven minutes, monsoon-gorged rivers came out of their bed, and massive landslides blocked Himalayan valleys. Tremors then subsided. But the worst was yet to come. When these natural dams burst, the water engulfed the countryside, and rivers in spate

<sup>3</sup> ‘Upper Assam cut off’, *Times of India* (17 August 1950).

<sup>4</sup> This corresponds to earthquakes of a magnitude higher than 7 on the Richter scale: 1906, 1908, 1918, 1923, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1943, 1947, and 1949. (Note that due to technologies available at the time, the stated magnitude of the earlier earthquakes is likely an approximation.) Due to the collision between the Indian and Eurasian plates and subduction in the Patkai range on the border with Burma, Northeast India is one of the sixth most active regions in the world for earthquakes. Earthquake zoning maps of India place the entire region today called ‘Northeast India’ under Zone V, the area where the earthquake hazard is greatest. The only other parts of India to fall under that designation are the Rann of Kutch and small parts of Jammu & Kashmir, Uttarakhand, and Himachal Pradesh. See M.P. Tiwari (2002). Status of seismicity in Northeast India and earthquake disaster mitigation, *ENVIS Bulletin: Himalayan Ecology & Development*, **10**: [http://gbpihedenvi.nic.in/html/vol10\\_1/vol10\\_1.htm](http://gbpihedenvi.nic.in/html/vol10_1/vol10_1.htm) [accessed 18 December 2013].

<sup>5</sup> For more information, consult Government of Assam (1897). *Report on the earthquake of the 12th June 1897, so far as it affected the Province of Assam*, n.p., Calcutta; Basil C. Allen (1905). *Assam district gazetteer: Goalpara*, Vol.III, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, pp.10-13; Basil C. Allen (1905). *Assam district gazetteer: Kamrup*, Vol.IV, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, pp.14-15; P.H. Moore (1982 [1901]). *Twenty years in Assam, or Leaves from my journal*, Omsons Publications, Guwahati, pp.157-59; and Tirthankar Roy (2009). State, society and market in the aftermath of natural disasters in colonial India: A preliminary exploration, *Indian Economic Social History Review*, **45:2**, 276-77.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Roger Bilham (2008). Tom La Touche and the Great Assam Earthquake of 12 June 1897: Letters from the epicenter, *Seismological Research Letters*, **79:3**, pp. 426-37.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Thatcher (1979). Interview with Florence Meiklejohn on 17 July 1979 at the Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge: <http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/archive/audio/meiklejohn.html> [accessed 20 November 2013].

<sup>8</sup> ‘Violent earthquake rocks Eastern India’, *Times of India* (17 August 1950). In retrospect, it ranks as the tenth strongest earthquake since 1900. U.S. Geological Survey (2014). Largest earthquakes in the world since 1900: [http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/world/10\\_largest\\_world.php](http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/world/10_largest_world.php) [accessed 18 March 2014].

<sup>9</sup> ‘Assam earthquake released 1,000,000 times more energy than atom bomb’, *The Assam Tribune* (28 April 1951).

changed their course.<sup>10</sup> Villages and urban centres were levelled, standing crops were submerged, transport and communications networks were shattered. In a short period of time, the physical map of north-eastern India had been refashioned by a natural disaster.

This paper explores how the earthquake and its aftermath participated in two other reconfigurations — that of Assam's political geography as well as its place within India's national imaginaries. In the process, it also suggests that changing representations of India's national space in the early independence period served to create and reinforce, rather than erase, new forms of marginality.

As events that seemingly strike people and place unpredictably and irrespective of political or socio-economic boundaries, natural disasters may not, on the face of it, be likely candidates for state-making and nation-building. Yet, while modern political history has little to say about natural catastrophes in contrast to man-made ones, a burgeoning historiography shows that such disasters are anything but apolitical.<sup>11</sup> Not only are they a 'sudden, exogenous, and unexpected destruction of state capacity';<sup>12</sup> but they also represent 'breaches [...] in the normality of nature [which] given the often unconscious link societies make between the natural and socio-political orders, a breach in the common understanding of what nature is and does has consequences across other realms of thought and behaviour'.<sup>13</sup>

Under the guise of a crisis, natural disasters actually offer an important opportunity to reorder society and build political legitimacy. Indeed, in Japan, 'the opportunity [offered by earthquakes] to reorder society is unparalleled by any other historical event except perhaps war'.<sup>14</sup> Earthquakes did not just accompany the emergence of modern Japan in the Meiji era. Attempts to predict them, to manage their aftermath, or to create quake-proof architecture served as catalysts for nation-building, Japanese nativism, and a certain presence of the state in society — to the point where the Japan became 'an emergency-oriented state'.<sup>15</sup> Viewed from another angle, the importance of a particular earthquake is socially and culturally constructed, rather than a mere function of its magnitude or of the devastation it brings. Earthquakes had befallen Japan for millennia before it became characterised as an 'earthquake country' through the gaze of foreign visitors.<sup>16</sup> And it is not just in 'earthquake countries' that natural disasters are invested with political and cultural significance. In India itself, the aftermath of the 2001 Kachch earthquake in Gujarat led to a pitched battle between secularist and right-wing Hindu parties over Kachch's regional landscape and identity.<sup>17</sup> As the case of Assam shall demonstrate, the opportunity to turn earthquakes into 'knowledge-making' objects<sup>18</sup> is particularly big in border spaces.

A variety of written archives help us reconstruct the aftermath of the Assam earthquake. Much of the material comes from the Home and External Affairs Ministries, the latter being particularly involved in relief and reconstruction after the disaster on account both of international donations and of its administrative responsibility for Assam's Himalayan tracts.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance 'Upper Assam cut off'; and 'River Dihang overruns towns of Upper Assam', *Times of India* (21 August 1950).

<sup>11</sup> Gregory K. Clancey (2006). The Meiji earthquake: Nature, nation, and the ambiguities of catastrophe, *Modern Asian Studies*, **40:4**, 911–12.

<sup>12</sup> Roy, State, society and market, p.264.

<sup>13</sup> Clancey, The Meiji earthquake, p.917.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Borland (2006). Capitalising on catastrophe: Reinvigorating the Japanese state with moral values through education following the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, *Modern Asian Studies*, **40:4**, p.875.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory K. Clancey (2006). *Earthquake nation: The cultural politics of Japanese seismicity, 1868-1930*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, p.4.

<sup>16</sup> Clancey, *Earthquake nation*, Chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Simpson & Stuart Corbridge (2006). The geography of things that may become memories: The 2001 earthquake in Kachchh-Gujarat and the politics of rehabilitation in the pre-memorial era, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, **96:3**, pp.566-585.

<sup>18</sup> Clancey, *Earthquake nation*, p. 4.

Documents from the NEFA Secretariat, now held at the Arunachal Pradesh State Archive in Itanagar, complement this picture. Influential English-speaking dailies from western and eastern India — *The Times of India*, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, *The Statesman* — as well as the most popular newspaper in Assam, the Guwahati-based *Assam Tribune*, constitute another mine of information, not just about the disaster but about its impact on representations of Assam. The private and published papers of key individuals and institutions — Nehru, Verrier Elwin, the former governor of Assam Sri Prakasa, or the Assam Pradesh Provincial Congress — provide the last major source of material.

This paper argues that the 1950 earthquake represents a significant juncture in the evolution of Assam into the seven states of ‘North-East India’ — as the region is now known. On the one hand, the disaster and the relief measures that followed it carved out a space for the state and its Himalayan borderlands on Indian mental maps, where previously the region had largely been sidelined or considered an appendix of Bengal. By forcing a large-scale encounter between Indian administration and the communities of the hitherto scarcely controlled Assam Himalayas, the same relief measures led to an unprecedented movement of state expansion in this strategic borderland. Yet, in the same process, the aftermath of the disaster fuelled stereotypes about Assam that would eventually further marginalise it within India and undermine its continued unity. The crystallisation of the image of India’s north-eastern borderlands as a place irreducibly subject to the whims of nature, and even more importantly incapable of taking care of itself (and, therefore, of taking care of its highland dependencies), would poison centre-state relations for decades to come. Imperfect and contradictory, the re-ordering of this borderland – from a colonial frontier to a part of independent India’s national space – did not end marginality, but instead reinforced it.

### India’s mental maps redrawn

Just a week before the earthquake, the freshly departed governor of the state, Sri Prakasa, had mused at

How few of us, educated men and women, know anything about Assam—and among those who know so little about this fair State, one is inclined to include the Assamese themselves. It is curious—but it is a fact—that Assam has played little part in our thoughts. It has nested quietly in its native hills and dales, and has neither cared to advertise itself nor have any others worried to do so for her.<sup>19</sup>

Several factors played into Assam’s relative invisibility, starting with its geographic distance from the rest of the sub-continent and its nature (from that sub-continent’s perspective) as a ‘historically “transitional” region’.<sup>20</sup> Centred around the long, narrow valleys of the Brahmaputra and Surma Rivers, Assam also encompassed the eastern Himalayas, the highlands between India and Burma, and the hills on the northern edge of the

<sup>19</sup> ‘Our eastern frontier: Its safety and its service’, S.No.11, Sri Prakasa Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library [hereafter NMML], New Delhi.

<sup>20</sup> Sanghamitra Misra (2011). *Becoming a borderland: The politics of space and identity in colonial north-eastern India*, Routledge, New Delhi, p.1. Note that this characterisation should not create assumptions of Assam as a functioning, harmonious melting pot. Misra and others have explored the competing and contested identity narratives that flourished in Assam in the colonial period and continue to do so today, for instance: an ‘Assamese’ drive to make the history of Assam congruent with the history of Assamese-speaking people (Jayeeta Sharma (2011). *Empire’s garden: Assam and the making of India*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet); the resistance of Goalpara’s inhabitants to attempts to standardise their oral and literary tradition under ‘Assamese’ (Sanghamitra Misra (2006). Redrawing frontiers: Language, resistance and the imagining of a Goalparia people, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, **43:2**, pp.199-225); or the current affirmation of an Ahom identity in Upper Assam (Yasmin Saikia (2004). *Fragmented memories: Struggling to be Tai-Ahom in India*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC).

Bengal plains. This was, and still is, an area of extreme cultural, linguistic, social, and ethnic diversity, whose ‘links with the imagined core of Indian history were less significant than those with other areas’, particularly Tibet, Bhutan and the Southeast Asian highlands.<sup>21</sup> The two most spoken languages in the region, Assamese and Bengali, belong to the Indo-Aryan family, but they are native to the plains only; the mountainous areas that cover most of the region are characterised by an array of Tibeto-Burman, Tai-Kadai, and Austro-Asiatic languages. This linguistic diversity is rooted in numerous migration waves, big and small, which have seen people of various backgrounds (Tai, Tibetan, Bodo, north Indian Brahmin, to cite but a few) move and settle across the region. Most of it is home to ‘tribal’ (Scheduled Tribes) populations. Islam and Hinduism prevail in the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys while the highlands are home to animist religions, small Buddhist communities and, since the colonial period, Christianity.

Assam’s status as a border space had only been enhanced in the colonial period, when it became the ‘North-East Frontier’ of India. The region had been among the last to be conquered by the British Raj, which had done so only in a piecemeal and rudimentary fashion. Assam proper, i.e. the Brahmaputra valley, had been ceded by the Burmese in 1826, but most of the highlands were not annexed until the last decade of the nineteenth century. Even so, the province remained loosely integrated, both internally and with the rest of India. Unlike the North-West Frontier, it was not considered of geo-strategic importance, and extensive portions of territory, particularly on the Himalayan slopes and the Patkai Hills along the Burma border, remained uncontrolled even in 1947. A panoply of exceptions to the rule of undivided colonial jurisdiction created an ‘internal frontier of British rule, not only a physical line but a demarcation of the various realms of transitional sovereignty’.<sup>22</sup> Only in the twin valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Surma did Assam come under strong colonial control. There, the region became a frontier for capital and labour, due to the phenomenal growth of tea production and, later on, of oil and coal extraction. As often as not, European planters held the reins in the face of the limited presence and ability of colonial authorities.<sup>23</sup> Soon, it had turned into one of the most profitable provinces in colonial India. And yet, both because this was a two-tier economy and because most of the proceeds accrued to Bengal — the province hosting the industry’s headquarters — Assam did not benefit from this prosperity.<sup>24</sup> These economically unequal relations between Bengal and the North-East Frontier might have played into a broader phenomenon: the tendency, at least among colonial administrators, to see and even treat Assam as an administrative and cultural appendix of Bengal.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the dynamics of global uneven capitalist development enforced Assam’s situation on the margins of empire and emerging national consciousness, as a place of extraction and political backwardness.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Misra, *Becoming a borderland*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Robb (1997). The colonial state and constructions of Indian identity: An example on the Northeast frontier in the 1880s, *Modern Asian Studies*, **31:2**, p.250.

<sup>23</sup> David Ludden (2012). Spatial inequity and national territory: Remapping 1905 in Bengal and Assam, *Modern Asian Studies*, **46:3**, p.19.

<sup>24</sup> Amalendu Guha (2006). *Planter-raj to swaraj: Freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, 2nd Edition, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi.

<sup>25</sup> This was partly for linguistic reasons, as Assamese and Bengali belong to the same language and both use the Eastern Nagari script, and partly for historical reasons — the Raj having wrested Assam from the Burmese largely to protect Bengal. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region had come under the Bengal Presidency and vernacular schools were in Bengali. Even after its constitution as a separate province in 1874 and the founding of Assamese-speaking schools, Bengali-speakers (predominantly based in the heavily populated Sylhet District) were the largest community in Assam. For more information, see H. K. Barpujari (1977). *Political history of Assam*, Vol.I: 1826-1919, Government of Assam, Guwahati; and Arun Chandra Bhuyan (1978). *Political history of Assam*, Vol.II: 1920-1939, Government of Assam, Guwahati.

<sup>26</sup> See Guha, *Planter Raj to swaraj*; and Ludden, *Remapping 1905 in Bengal and Assam*.

[Place figure 1 near here]

### Figure 1. India's north-eastern borderlands

The Assamese intelligentsia that had emerged under colonial rule had long chafed at this absence of the region from India's mental maps.<sup>27</sup> Ever since Anundram Borooah in 1877, Assamese nationalists had tried to carve out a respectable place for Assam in Indian civilisation by locating it within Vedic and epic geographies.<sup>28</sup> Some even attempted to prove that, far from peripheral to it, Assam was in fact the cradle of Aryan-ness (the ancient Kingdom of Pragjyotisha was, after all, mentioned in the Mahabharata).<sup>29</sup> Yet these attempts to subvert the 'discursive hierarchy of Indian-ness' had found little audience in the rest of India.<sup>30</sup> The partition of British India only worsened Assam's geographic and psychological isolation. With eastern Bengal going to Pakistan, the region was left hanging by a thread to the rest of the country: ninety-nine percent of its borders were now international.<sup>31</sup> Concluded nine months prior to the earthquake, debates in the Constituent Assembly had underscored for many Assamese representatives just how marginal their province was. Furious at the lack of knowledge and interest in Assam evinced by his colleagues and at Delhi's refusal to increase the funds allotted to his state, the former Assam Prime Minister Syed Muhammad Saadulla had bitterly complained that 'the present [constitutional] set-up' would return Assam to the status of 'Cinderella of all Indian Provinces'.<sup>32</sup>

Then, on 15 August 1950, the earthquake struck. 1,500 people lost their lives that day. Hundreds of thousands more were affected. Damage to property and land was immense: in Upper Assam, 1,671 villages over a 6,500 square miles zone were inundated;<sup>33</sup> 12,000 buildings, including 2,000 granaries, were destroyed in North Lakhimpur District alone, and urban centres lay partly in ruins, almost all their earthen buildings damaged.<sup>34</sup> In Dibrugarh, ninety percent of the buildings would require massive repairs, including those of important companies. 50,000 of the town's inhabitants slept in the open, in the fear of constant aftershocks that could still be felt in November. Standing crops were washed away, and transport connections severed — the section of the Assam Trunk Road between Khowang and Barburua was sunk and torn over several miles, and many lesser roads were under water. Upper Assam was left with the wireless radio as its sole link to the outside world.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Sharma, *Empire's garden*.

<sup>28</sup> Boddhisattva Kar (2004). *What is in a name? Politics of spatial imagination in colonial Assam*, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, pp.20-36.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance politician Tarun Ram Phookan's opening address to the 1926 AICC Gauhati session, which stressed Assam's ties with, and contribution to, the Indian civilisation. A. M. Zaidi & S. Zaidi eds. (1980). *Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress*, Vol.IX: 1925-29: India demands independence, S. Chand, New Delhi, pp.95-103. Assam Prime Minister Gopinath Bardoloi's address to the same body twenty-three years later echoes it strongly. Speech delivered at the AICC session of May 1949 in Dehra Dun, S.No.1, Gopinath Bardoloi Papers (1930-50), NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>30</sup> Kar, *What's in a name?*, p.21.

<sup>31</sup> The border with West Bengal is approximately 65 kilometres wide, whereas the seven states share 5087 kilometres of borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Burma. For more information on these international borders, see Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (n.d.). International Border, *Look East Policy vis-à-vis NEER*: <http://www.mdoner.gov.in/content/international-border> [accessed 18 March 2014].

<sup>32</sup> Government of India (1947). Syed Muhammad Saadulla's address, Session of Friday 18 July 1947, *Constituent Assembly Debates (Proceedings) 1946-50*, Vol.IV: 14-31 July 1947, p.682: <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm> [accessed 11 January 2014].

<sup>33</sup> 'Road communications in Assam being restored', *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (25 August 1950).

<sup>34</sup> Lok Sabha Statement by Nehru, reported in 'Indo-Tibetan boundary: "No change to be permitted"', *Times of India* (21 November 1950).

<sup>35</sup> '90 pc of buildings badly damaged', *Times of India* (19 August 1950).

To make things worse, Assam's limited but vital industrial sector, concentrated in the area, was directly affected. At the heart of the oil and tea industry, the towns of Digboi and Doom Dooma lay in ruins, leaving three hundred families homeless.<sup>36</sup> The bridge on the Buri Dihing, essential to the transport of oil, had been washed away;<sup>37</sup> and erosion caused by both quakes and floods adversely affected the quality of topsoil, causing an alarmist tone to prevail regarding the future of the tea industry.<sup>38</sup> As for Upper Assam's food requirements, the procurement situation looked critical: fields and crops lay under several inches of water.<sup>39</sup> Provisional figures estimated the loss from the earthquake at a hundred million rupees.<sup>40</sup>

A disaster of unprecedented brutality and spectacular nature had befallen India's north-eastern borderlands. And ironically, it succeeded where the efforts and protestations of Assamese politicians had failed: in the weeks and months that followed the disaster, Assam suddenly turned into a tangible space for Indians across space, time, and social divisions. Official calls for help in the aftermath of the disaster served as a pedagogical introduction to the region. 'Look at the map of India,' said Nehru in an All-India Radio broadcast on 9 September 1950: 'you will find Assam on the north-eastern corner bordering Tibet and China and Burma and Pakistan'.<sup>41</sup>

This new interest in Assam found its materialisation in post-earthquake relief efforts. Fuelled by unprecedented popular sympathy, relief began pouring in. Help in cash and kind gathered in from all parts of the country, harnessed through the Prime Minister's Assam Relief Fund and the Governor's Earthquake Relief Fund, and whipped up by constant appeals in the press and by organisations such as the APCC.<sup>42</sup> Public opinion was mobilising. A doctor from Nasik suggested sending batches of Congress volunteer workers to Assam, laden with food, clothing, and medical supplies. A Parsi gentleman from Bombay advocated the issuing of stamps, whose sales proceeds would fund relief in Assam. Stressing that the poor and lower classes should also be able to offer their help, another reader urged postal and railway authorities not to charge for parcels sent to Assam.<sup>43</sup>

Assam's plight echoed beyond India. A new era of international humanitarianism was emerging at the time, ushered by the end of the Second World War and given added fillip by US-Soviet antagonism.<sup>44</sup> The earthquake stirred the international community into a frenzy of sympathy and humanitarian action. From Ethiopia to Lebanon, messages of sympathy poured in. From the available evidence, the aid given was plentiful and varied. Indian communities abroad — among whom it is unlikely that there were many Assamese — were among the first to donate. The Indian Association of Djibouti sent 5,000 rupees via the Indian Consulate

<sup>36</sup> 'Widespread devastation by earthquake in Assam', *Times of India* (20 August 1950).

<sup>37</sup> 'Road communications in Assam being restored'.

<sup>38</sup> 'Assam tea gardens face ruin', *Times of India* (24 August 1950). Provisional estimates indicated a loss of rs20,000,000 for Assam's industries. Donald F. Thomas, 'The 'quake – and after: The task that confronts Assam', *Times of India* (14 September 1950).

<sup>39</sup> 'Procurement in Assam: "Position critical"', *Times of India* (29 August 1950).

<sup>40</sup> 'Assam 'quake havoc: loss estimated at Rs10 crores', *Times of India* (26 August 1950).

<sup>41</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru (1993). 'Help to victims of the earthquake' (Broadcast to the Nation over AIR, 9 September 1950), in Sarvepalli Gopal *Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru – Second Series*, Vol.XV, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, pp.166-70.

<sup>42</sup> Proceeding Books of APCC Meetings (29 August 1950 – 31 Dec 1955), S.No.25, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Papers [hereafter APCC Papers], NMML, New Delhi; and APCC Proceedings 1935-55, Reel 3599, APCC Papers, NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>43</sup> See these letters to the *Times of India* editor: 'Assam and the Congress', *Times of India* (6 September 1950); 'To the Editor (by B.H. Daroowalla)', *Times of India* (12 September 1950); and 'Earthquake Relief', *Times of India* (15 September 1950).

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Michael N. Barnett (2011). *Empire of humanity: A history of humanitarianism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY; and Gerard Daniel Cohen (2012). *In war's wake: Europe's displaced persons in the postwar order*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York.

at Aden. The Addis Ababa community also contributed.<sup>45</sup> Offers for relief poured in from countries such as Burma, Yemen, the USA, specialised agencies such as the Watnumull Foundation in San Francisco, and the United Nations.<sup>46</sup> Even the Government of Pakistan contributed 440 tons of rice from East Bengal.<sup>47</sup> Available government records do not give us an estimate of the funds thus donated to Assam, whether through Indian or international channels. But Dr Naik, a Gandhian activist working with the Bhils in Western India who became an Honorary Secretary of the Earthquake Relief Fund, recalls that it gathered approximately eleven million rupees.<sup>48</sup>

The ‘discovery of India’ was therefore still taking place in 1950.<sup>49</sup> Nowhere was it more marked than for that part of Assam most affected by the earthquake — the Assam Himalayas or, as they were called back then, the North-East Frontier Tracts. If the rest of India knew little about Assam in 1950, it knew even less about its remote and sparsely populated eastern Himalayan hinterland. Indeed, until the mid-1940s this mountainous, jungle-clad region bordering Tibet had largely stayed out of the concerns of colonial policy-makers themselves. Provided the local inhabitants did not raid Assam’s valuable tea gardens (in which case they would be ‘pacified’ through military expeditions), Shillong and Delhi had seen little promise in interfering in a region that was neither profitable economically nor vital strategically (or so they thought). Though constitutionally part of Assam, most of the hinterland had therefore remained un-administered, separated from ‘settled’ parts of Assam by an Inner Line beyond which no one but frontier officials and a few government-approved visitors were authorised to travel. As for ‘the communities forced to stay beyond the Line,’ they ‘were seen as belonging to a different time regime—where the time of the law did not apply; where slavery, head-hunting, and nomadism could be allowed to exist’.<sup>50</sup> It is only during the Second World War, when the eastern Himalayan ‘Hump’ became crucial to Allied victory on the China-Burma-India frontline, that the Ministry of External Affairs had decided to expand Indian presence in the Frontier Tracts. Even so, this expansion had only been going at a snail pace, the other Delhi ministries being less than convinced of the region’s importance.

<sup>45</sup> See Contribution of Rs.5,000 to the Assam Relief Fund by the Indian Association of Djibouti through the Commission for the Government of India in Aden (1950), 1(13)-AWT, External Affairs Proceedings, National Archives of India [hereafter NAI], New Delhi; Sympathies extended by the Emperor of Ethiopia on his behalf and the people of Ethiopia towards the Assam earthquake sufferers. Contributions by Indian community in Addis Ababa (1950), 22-32-AFR-I, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi.

<sup>46</sup> See respectively, Offers of assistance from Burma towards Assam relief (1950), 48-129-BI, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi; Enquiry by the United States of America through Indian Embassy, Washington regarding immediate help in kind needed for the victims of the earthquake in Assam (1950), 154-NEF, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi; Watnumull Foundation of San Francisco. Offer of help for the Assam earthquake victims (1950), 155-NEF, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi; Resolution in the United Nations Organisation regarding sympathy for the victims of earthquake in Assam. Enquiry from Secretary General of UNO regarding requirements which could be met by UN and other specialised agencies (1950), 151-NEF, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi; and Contribution for Assam Relief Fund by Aden (1951), 1(6)-AWT, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi. Almost none of the files regarding the earthquake have been transferred, unfortunately (including those giving a summary of all the relief offered). However it is known that the US government offered to send six tons of emergency relief supplies and 427,431 tons of foodgrains at concessional prices. Nehru, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, p.210.

<sup>47</sup> Offer of contribution for relief from the Prime Minister’s Relief Fund and 10,000 maunds of rice by Pakistani Prime Minister from East Pakistan (1950), 142-NEF, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi.

<sup>48</sup> Uma Shankar (1973). Interview with Dr. Naik on 1 May 1973 at the Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge: <http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/archive/audio/naikd.html> [accessed 20 November 2013].

<sup>49</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru (1945). *The discovery of India*, Meridian Books, n.p.

<sup>50</sup> Boddhisattva Kar (2009). ‘When was the postcolonial? A history of policing impossible lines’, in Sanjib Baruah *Beyond counter-insurgency: Breaking the impasse in Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp.51-52.

As the Indian media started looking for the epicentre of the earthquake, a new awareness of the existence of the Frontier Tracts, and of their belonging to India, coalesced. Newspaper readers were appraised that the epicentre lay just across the Indo-Tibetan border, near the village of Rima — some 80 miles from a place called ‘Wolong.’<sup>51</sup> Between this border post and the plains of Assam lay a vast mountainous area called, one was told, the Abor Hills and the Mishmi Hills, which apparently belonged to India. If such was the devastation in the plains of Upper Assam, what could have happened there? Rumours and suppositions were that the Brahmaputra River had turned black;<sup>52</sup> that entire mountain chains had vanished or collapsed;<sup>53</sup> or that uprooted trees from species unknown in India were floating down rivers in spate.<sup>54</sup>

An evocative story emerged through the eyes of a figure seemingly belonging to the bygone colonial times — a British explorer. When disaster struck, the eastern Frontier Tracts hosted a singular couple: the ‘plant-hunter’ Francis Kingdon-Ward and his wife. Famous for discovering the mysterious gorges through which the Tibetan Tsangpo turns into the Brahmaputra River in the 1920s,<sup>55</sup> Kingdon-Ward had decided to undertake another plant-hunting trip in the eastern Himalayas. Outsiders were normally not permitted into the Frontier Tracts, but his celebrity status and contribution to the knowledge of the region was such that Indian authorities had allowed him and his wife to proceed right up to the border with Tibet. Now in the midst of their ‘botanizing’ spree,<sup>56</sup> they had pitched their tent in the Lohit Valley, downstream of Walong, when they suddenly felt a ‘vibration so rapid [...] as to suggest the toll of kettledrums’. Soon, everything seemed to be ‘falling down an immeasurable shaft’:

Dark as it was, we could see the ridges silhouetted against the paler sky, with their fuzzy outline of dancing trees. The noise was terrific, petrifying, and long continued as whole hillsides, studded with pine trees, slid into the valley. These external clatterings quickly drowned the internal rumblings deep within the crust. But the strangest noises of all came at the end of the shock, when five or six consecutive explosions, all exactly alike, following each other at intervals of several seconds, were touched off. These muffled booms — they sounded like Ack-Ack shells bursting high in the sky — [...] were heard on the plain of Assam 150 miles distant, and in Myitkina (north Burma) 200 miles away.<sup>57</sup>

Kingdon-Ward’s presence in the very heart of the cataclysm provided an ideal storyline: the testimony of one who had seen it all. Originally printed in the *Geographical Journal*, the account’s influence might be doubtful, had it not been for the high profile that the explorer enjoyed in the Indian media since the 1930s, at least in the English-speaking press. The article came out in pamphlet form in India,<sup>58</sup> and it is not unlikely that this narrative of the earthquake and the frontier percolated to an Indian audience wider than the small circles of botany and geography-enthusiasts.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>51</sup> In reality, the small settlement of Walong. Thomas, ‘The quake – and after’.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Brahmaputra water turns black’, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (20 August 1950).

<sup>53</sup> ‘Quake affects two-thirds of Assam people: Entire hills inhabited by the Abors subside’, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (26 August 1950); ‘Mountain chains said to have vanished’, *Times of India* (29 August 1950).

<sup>54</sup> Nehru, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, pp.196-97.

<sup>55</sup> Francis Kingdon-Ward. (2008 [1926]). *Frank Kingdon-Ward’s ‘Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges’: Retracing the epic journey of 1924-25 in South-East Tibet*, edited by Kenneth Cox, 2nd Edition, additional material by Kenneth Cox, Kenneth Storm, Jr. & Ian Baker. Garden Art Press, Woodbridge.

<sup>56</sup> Francis Kingdon-Ward (1953). The Assam earthquake of 1950, *The Geographical Journal*, **119:2**, p.169.

<sup>57</sup> Kingdon-Ward, The Assam earthquake of 1950, p.172.

<sup>58</sup> A copy of it is preserved at the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, in Delhi.

<sup>59</sup> The *Times of India* thus reviewed Kingdon-Ward’s frequent books almost without fail, eagerly published reports of his explorations, and promoted his regular pieces for the *Illustrated Weekly of India* as a big selling point in its adverts for the magazine. See for instance ‘People with a strange dialect: Assam border of Tibet’, *The Times of India* (9 February 1934); ‘Display Ad 7’, *The Times of India* (21 July 1933); and ‘Tibetan plants for museum: Rich collection’, *The Times of India* (22 April 1936).

In the process, the explorer's account may have helped to place not just the earthquake on the map, but India's north-east frontier itself. Far from merely describing the cataclysm, the plant-hunter systematically described the Lohit Valley and its tributaries — with a flurry of maps — before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the disaster's aftermath, and finally retelling his laborious escape from the shattered hills. With the first part of the account, the remote upper valley of the Lohit in the Mishmi Hills acquired a tangible geography (even as that geography was being wrecked); with the second one, an impressive picture of the power of Nature (a picture materialised in several photographs); and with the third, a classic ingredient to the construction of lasting impressions: a true adventure story.

In this illegible space made even more illegible by a natural disaster, and which yet was apparently India, events and cataclysms were happening that did not come to light, but that affected the lives of the people in the settled area. Through the trauma and sensationalism of a natural catastrophe, a new awareness of one of India's new corners was taking place. For the first time (and for a short moment), Indian authorities let journalists into the Frontier Tracts. The press reports, aerial surveys, and pictures published by the press were full of approximations, fantasy claims, and inaccuracies. Yet despite them — and perhaps partly because of them — they all participated in the carving of a niche space for the region in the minds of newspaper readers. Speeches like that given a week after the disaster by Jairamdas Daulatram, the newly installed governor of India, to mark the opening of the Governor's Relief Fund, were reproduced in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and other newspapers:

The State of Assam, rendered so beautiful by nature, has suffered a great calamity at the hands of the natural forces. One of the severest earthquakes in [the] world's history has rocked *the hills and plains of India's North-East Frontier*. The shock has been severest in the hills and upper half of Assam [...] The focus of [the] earthquake was just outside India's border and the brunt of the shock has had to be received by *hills which shelter* the valley of the Brahmaputra. [...] Communications in that tribal region were already non-existent. Those who lived or had to be on duty there as *sentinels of the nation* have been in the greatest danger and slowly news is coming in of what they have suffered.<sup>60</sup>

The Frontier Tracts may have been less talked about, less thought about, less immediately accessible; yet it was they that provided Assam with physical shelter — albeit not an earthquake-proof one — and it was their inhabitants, and those serving among them, that were the security bulwark of the Indian nation.

### **Relief, rehabilitation, and state expansion**

In other words, the 1950 earthquake accelerated the integration of Assam, and particularly its Himalayan borderlands, into representations of India's national space. This re-ordering had a material counterpart: by causing an important humanitarian crisis, the earthquake triggered an unprecedented expansion of state presence in the Frontier Tracts.

At first glance, the earthquake had been, like other modern natural disasters, a 'sudden, exogenous, and unexpected destruction of state capacity'.<sup>61</sup> The catastrophe had befallen both the established administrative centres of the region and the fledging outposts in the hinterland. Post-earthquake floods were brutal for Sadiya and Pasighat, the only two settlements in the Frontier Tracts that hosted a substantial administrative apparatus in 1950. Though heavily damaged, Pasighat slowly made a recovery. Sadiya was not so lucky. The

<sup>60</sup> 'Governor's Fund opened: Sri Daulatram's appeal for aid to earthquake sufferers of Assam', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (23 August 1950). Emphasis added.

<sup>61</sup> Roy, *State, society and market*, p.264.

Dibang River had changed course, sealing the town's fate.<sup>62</sup> Eighteen months later, the administrative headquarters of the Mishmi Hills District were precipitously shifted higher up in the hills to Tezu, in the face of Sadiya's impending sinking.<sup>63</sup> Of this once 'beautiful township' and its 'tree lined avenues [and] spacious bungalows,' remained only a melancholic trace: the 'iron mast of a flag pole' in the midst of the waters of the Dibang.<sup>64</sup>

In the hills themselves, the situation was scarcely better. The signs that had hinted at the presence of the Indian state lay in ruins. At Theroliang, earmarked to be an important administrative outpost, '[e]verywhere the mountains were silver as lepers with shining white scars, a country of death. No vestige of bridge, bungalow, sheds, or terrace remained; only stones and stones. One would never have suspected that this valley had ever been inhabited.' Even worse, the road through the Lohit Valley, meant to become the cornerstone of Indian expansion into the area, was partly destroyed. In some places, the river itself was now using it as its bed.<sup>65</sup>

Fledging administrative expansion in the Frontier Tracts seemed to have been stalled at birth. And yet, precisely because there was so little state capacity to destroy, the earthquake could not deal an irreparable blow to Indian presence. What had been lost were but the few signs that had hinted at the Indian authorities' laborious expansion in the eastern Himalayas. Instead, by dramatically highlighting the existence of the region in the national and international press, the earthquake provided the Indian state with the opportunity to expand its presence locally. After several years of stunted development, the disaster whipped frontier administration into action. Far from being pure humanitarian enterprises, relief and rehabilitation became a testing ground for the state-building capabilities of the new Republic of India. The human suffering that the earthquake had caused turned into an opportunity to manifest the active, nearby, and positive presence of the Indian state to the indigenous inhabitants.

'Relief' and 'rehabilitation' had long become part of the colonial state's vocabulary in other parts of India. Since the late 1830s, famine management had constituted a significant source of state expansion and legitimisation for the Raj, which had used it to expand infrastructure and reinforce its structures of governance in north India.<sup>66</sup> State responses to natural disasters had shifted from laissez-faire to greater state intervention somewhat later, between the late nineteenth and the mid twentieth centuries.<sup>67</sup> More often than not, however, such relief and rehabilitation intentions failed to translate in practice.<sup>68</sup> For the independent Indian state — whose birth had been accompanied with the influx of millions of partition refugees — relief and rehabilitation played an even more important, and indeed constitutive, part in state-making and nation-building.<sup>69</sup> The successful management of refugee rehabilitation was vitally important to the Nehruvian state, both to stabilise itself after the turmoil of partition and to assert its greater legitimacy vis-à-vis the colonial predecessor.

Frontier Tracts authorities were authorised to incur two millions rupees worth of relief expenditure for the 150,000 and 75,000 people affected in the Abor and Mishmi Hills. The

<sup>62</sup> Sadiya District Congress Committee (1950-54), Packet 14 File 1, APCC Papers, NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>63</sup> Confidential reports on the NEFA (1952-44), S.No.111, Verrier Elwin Papers, NMML, New Delhi, ff.6-7.

<sup>64</sup> Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee (1993). *The frontier trail*, Manick Bandyopadhyay, Calcutta, p.7.

<sup>65</sup> Kingdon-Ward, The Assam earthquake of 1950.

<sup>66</sup> Sanjay Sharma (2001). *Famine, philanthropy and the colonial state: North India in the early nineteenth century*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, Oxford.

<sup>67</sup> Roy, State, society and market.

<sup>68</sup> David Hall-Matthews (2004). Famines in (South) Asia, *History Compass*, 2, pp.1-5.

<sup>69</sup> Joya Chatterji (2007). *The spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar (2007). *The long partition and the making of modern South Asia: Refugees, boundaries, histories*, Columbia University Press, New York; Udit Sen (2009). 'Refugees and the politics of nation-building in India, 1947-1971', unpublished doctoral thesis, Cambridge University.

Health Ministry made a further donation of Rs19,500,000, and the Assam Government offered surplus clothing. Another Rs2,700,000 were obtained from the public, as well as further contributions from several countries and organisations.<sup>70</sup> The importance of this expenditure — both in terms of the Frontier Tracts' sparse population and of previous budgets for them — signals the efforts made by local authorities to shape contact with populations of the interior in a positive way.

As far as the people of the mountainous hinterland were concerned, such earthquake relief was often the first encounter with 'the *sircar*' (the government). For some, this took the shape of a 'metal bird' (a plane) dropping much needed salt, tea, or blanket supplies from the sky; for others, that of an officer calling them to the new administrative centre to supply them with these same items, as well as kitchen utensils or agricultural implements.<sup>71</sup> Many people from the farthest reaches of the Siang Valley came all the way to Pasighat to obtain relief commodities from the government, which they then distributed locally.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile district officers were deputed to tour the affected areas, and various departments in the agency were instructed to employ tribal labour to inject cash into the economy.<sup>73</sup>

There is little doubt that local Indian authorities took the opportunities afforded by the earthquake seriously, not just in the eastern part of the Frontier Tracts but throughout the region. In Tawang, near the Bhutan border, far away from the earthquake's epicentre, the administration helped repair the Buddhist monastery, showing their endorsement of the values and symbols of local Monpa society and cementing their burgeoning alliance with monastic authorities.<sup>74</sup> Finally, the aftermath of the earthquake offered an opportunity to focus on a key strategy for winning the tribes over: the provision of medical help.<sup>75</sup>

These initiatives were not always an immediate or unequivocal success. Their organisation was difficult given the difficult terrain and the lack of administrative presence — several areas were still *terra incognita*<sup>76</sup> — and cases of mismanagement of funds were reported.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, some people came to regret coming down to the plains to collect relief: members of the Ramo and the Pailibo tribes, who live at high altitudes in the upper reaches of the Siang Basin, contracted malaria during their sojourn at Pasighat.<sup>78</sup> Despite these failings, relief and rehabilitation did succeed in two key state-building dimensions. To begin with, they brought the Indian state and frontier populations into unprecedented contact, including from remote areas. They also changed the pattern of interaction between the two, colouring it in a positive light. Under colonial rule, state presence on the frontier had largely been defined in coercive terms: military promenades and punitive expeditions. By contrast, the aftermath of the earthquake recast the state as a (potential) provider of tangible goods and benefits.

The unprecedented encounter between the Indian state and local society enabled by post-earthquake relief and rehabilitation eventually paved the way for state penetration in NEFA. Whereas only two outposts had been opened in 1950, nine of them were founded the year

<sup>70</sup> Question in Parliament of India by Shri Kamath regarding Assam earthquake (1950), 15/87-Public, Home Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi.

<sup>71</sup> Bhattacharjee, *The frontier trail*, p. 35. See also 'Subansiri River back to its course', *Times of India* (1 September 1950).

<sup>72</sup> 'Relief activity in Abor Hills District', *The Assam Tribune* (7 February 1951).

<sup>73</sup> S.No.111, Verrier Elwin Papers, NMML.

<sup>74</sup> S.No.111, Verrier Elwin Papers, NMML.

<sup>75</sup> R.N. Koley (c1997). *East Siang in the last fifty years (1947-1997)*, East Siang District administration, Pasighat.

<sup>76</sup> Tribal Areas of Assam. Expenditure on projects (1950), 146-NEF, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi, Doulatram to Keskar, 15 August 1950.

<sup>77</sup> Tour Diary of Assistant Political Officer Lohit, B.C. Bhuyan (1950), GA-12/50, NEFA Secretariat, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives [hereafter APSA], Itanagar.

<sup>78</sup> Malaria protection for the hill tribes coming down to the plains and plan for anti-malarial measures (1951), M/94/51, NEFA Secretariat, APSA, Itanagar.

after. In early 1951, an Assam Rifles patrol was sent to take official possession of Tawang, where Tibetan and Indian officials had jostled for control for years. The takeover was ostensibly linked to ‘earthquake relief measures.’<sup>79</sup> This new dynamism was not limited to the strategic corridors of the Lohit valley and the Charduar-Tawang route. For the first time, frontier authorities launched expeditions in the country of the Ramo and Palibo tribes in the Abor Hills, and to Gusar in the upper Subansiri. A year later, a series of Assam Rifles outposts and administrative centres were opened in these newly explored regions. Pangin, Mebo, Maryang, Damro, and Mechukha were the most important of them. By 1952–53, the whole frontier — or, as it was becoming known, NEFA — was targeted for administrative expansion.<sup>80</sup>

By then, the drive for increased state presence no longer stemmed primarily from the earthquake’s consequences, but from another sort of tremor: the annexation of Tibet by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Tawang’s Tibetan abbots, whose links to Lhasa monasteries had become a liability, were gradually replaced by Monpa clerics.<sup>81</sup> The fear of China did not translate into the militarisation of Indian presence in the Frontier Tracts, however. By smashing down the topography of the Lohit Valley — the easternmost major trade and human corridor between India, China, Tibet, and Burma — the earthquake had also reinforced a false sense that the Himalayas formed an impassable natural frontier with Tibet. India seemed protected from a large-scale invasion. Therefore, the authorities’ key concern from then on lay rather in convincing frontier communities not to look towards China.<sup>82</sup>

Attuned to the risk of an increased Chinese presence in the region long before 1950, officers in the Frontier Tracts had advocated securing the loyalty of their inhabitants through development facilities ever since the Second World War.<sup>83</sup> The earthquake finally gave them the increased development and welfare budgets that they had long demanded. In 1952-53, a community project was established in Pasighat to resettle Pasi, Minyong, and Pangi evacuees from the interior, rehabilitating them in ‘model villages’ where the practice of wet-rice cultivation was introduced.<sup>84</sup> One year later, in late 1953, Indian authorities brought in a self-taught anthropologist, known for his strong advocacy of tribal culture and rights, to work on NEFA. His name was Verrier Elwin. Unlike existing frontier officials, Elwin benefited from a high (though not always positive) profile in the Indian media and from a close relationship to Nehru.<sup>85</sup> His task would be to provide a rationale for the Indian state’s expansion on the frontier — a welfare and development-centric strategy of incorporation that would let the tribes develop ‘according to their own genius and tradition’ before joining India.<sup>86</sup> Yet while it is tempting today to correlate NEFA’s incorporation into India through tribal developmentalism solely with Elwin, the elements of the ‘philosophy for NEFA’ had been established on the ground at least three years before his appointment — and it is through post-earthquake relief and rehabilitation efforts that they had been launched.

<sup>79</sup> Occupation of Tawang, earthquake relief measures by Major Khathing’s party (1951), CGA/56/51, NEFA Secretariat, APSA, Itanagar.

<sup>80</sup> List of administrative centres in NEFA (1958), P66/58, NEFA Secretariat, APSA, Itanagar.

<sup>81</sup> CGA/56/51, NEFA Secretariat, APSA.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Assam Rifles post at Walong was set up in 1944’, *Assam Tribune* (15 November 1962); ‘The Himalayan Frontier: I – Background of quiet’, *Times of India* (22 November 1950).

<sup>83</sup> G.E. Walker, ‘Blueprint for Sadiya: A post-war reconstruction plan for Sadiya Frontier Tract (1945), Mss Eur D1191/11, Miscellaneous papers relating to the Northeast Frontier of India, British Library [hereafter BL], London.

<sup>84</sup> Bhattacharjee, *The frontier trail*, pp. 64-66.

<sup>85</sup> Ramachandra Guha (2001). *Savaging the civilized: Verrier Elwin, his tribals, and India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

<sup>86</sup> Verrier Elwin (1957). *A philosophy for NEFA. With a foreword by the Prime Minister of India*, 1st Edition, North-East Frontier Agency Administration, Shillong, p.11 (paraphrasing Nehru).

## The realm of nature's chaos and man's mismanagement

A devastating natural disaster had served to re-order India's mental and political maps, stretching them in an unprecedented way to encompass its north-eastern borderlands and seemingly secluding them from their Tibetan hinterland. Yet while the earthquake and its aftermath participated in independent India's early state-making and nation-building processes, they did so in a way that, instead of paving the way for Assam standing on an equal footing with other regions, led to the entrenchment of the region's marginal status within the country.

To begin with, representations of Assam in the major English papers outside the state did not take on truly positive tones. Official and press reports in the aftermath of the earthquake cast it as a region martyred by natural forces — forces so powerful that they could re-shape the crust of the earth in a whim, and even swallow up the very Dibrugarh house that had hosted India's Prime Minister a month before, during his visit to Assam.<sup>87</sup> The official report drafted by the Geological Survey of India after the earthquake left no doubt about this:

Assam is *literally known as the home of earthquakes* [...] This region is the most unstable in India; it lies along the main boundary fault line along the foot of the Himalayas and the eastern Assam ranges, and has been the scene of nearly a dozen major earthquakes during the last century.<sup>88</sup>

Nehru pointed out that other Indian regions regularly suffered from natural catastrophes, and that they '[were] all in the same boat. Each [...with] a tale of woe to tell'.<sup>89</sup> Yet none of the floods experienced by other regions — even Bihar and its 'sorrow,' the Kosi River — could be compared with riparian tsunamis rolling down the Himalayan slopes, or with rivers simply coming out of their beds to carve out another one through the midst of a busy town. As the Assamese politician Hem Barua put it twelve years later, in a speech on flood control on the Brahmaputra: '[i]n Assam, Nature's war is a perpetual affair'.<sup>90</sup>

'Nature's war' proved an influential theme in Assam-related news and discussions after 1950. This was particularly the case in the summer months, a season when floods seemingly adopted a metronome-like regularity year after year.<sup>91</sup> Some years were particularly devastating. In 1951, floods turned Upper Assam into 'a vast sea of water.'<sup>92</sup> In 1954, the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* even reported that the major town of Dibrugarh was about to collapse into the Brahmaputra.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, flood control figured prominently in Lok Sabha discussions on Assam. Two years after the earthquake, Nehru announced that a central team

<sup>87</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru (1993). 'The problems facing India', in Sarvepalli Gopal *Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru – Second Series*, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, pp.8-28 (speech at a public meeting in Delhi on Gandhi's birth anniversary, 2 October 1950, original in Hindi).

<sup>88</sup> A preliminary report of the Assam earthquake by M.C. Poddar, Geologist, Geological Survey of India (1951), 7/2-Public, Home Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi. Emphasis added.

<sup>89</sup> 'Building anew', *Times of India* (14 September 1950).

<sup>90</sup> Hem Barua (2010). *The fearless democrat: Hem Barua*, edited by Deepak Kumar Das, Bhabani Print & Publications, Guwahati, p.38.

<sup>91</sup> '30-mile belt under water: Brahmaputra in heavy flood', *Times of India* (7 July 1955); 'Part of Assam trunk road washed away', *Times of India* (1 July 1956); 'Brahmaputra fast eating up Palasbari in Assam: Town with population of 5000 to be abandoned by state govt', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (11 July 1956); 'Patrika-Jugantar Assam Flood Relief Fund', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (30 July 1959); 'Assam flood hits people hard', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (19 August 1959).

<sup>92</sup> E.P. Gee, 'The Brahmaputra Valley is changing: Nature's mutilation and Man's mistakes', *The Assam Tribune* (7 October 1951).

<sup>93</sup> See for example 'Brahmaputra erosion threatens Dibrugarh Town', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (17 July 1954). 'Brahmaputra now a "river of grief"', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (18 August 1954).

of officers deputed to report on the State's immediate and long-term problems had recommended the establishment of a River Investigation Division, a four-mile long stone revetment to save Dibrugarh, massive embankment and drainage works, and a contour survey of the entire state.<sup>94</sup> This did little to appease doomsayers like Kingdon-Ward, who warned that '[i]f all [the factors causing the floods] were adverse in any one year, the results might be catastrophic — so much so that Lakhimpur might become un-inhabitable, and the head of the Assam Valley converted into a vast swamp'.<sup>95</sup>

This recurring characterisation of Assam as a region living to the rhythm of natural catastrophes participated in a long line of representations of the Brahmaputra Valley and its hinterland. Early colonial encounters with Assam had marked it out as the home of diseases — not just malaria but also the *kala-azar*, a mysterious but devastating epidemic that left the countryside depopulated.<sup>96</sup> The trope of a singularly unhealthy province lived on in other forms, such as unsavoury accounts of rat plagues, rodent invasions that followed the periodic flowering of certain bamboo species and could destroy the entire food supply of highland communities.<sup>97</sup> Not all representations of Assam were negative, however. Exotic tales of *shikaris* (hunters), in particular, formed a strong part of the imaginaries attached to the province.<sup>98</sup> Thus, between April and June 1952, *The Statesman* dedicated but one article to Assam — and that was in the form of a one-page photo reportage romanticising Assam as a hunting ground for the rhinoceros.<sup>99</sup> But all these narratives had one thing in common. They mapped out Assam as a space that was, for all the wealth of Digboi and Margherita's tea plantations, the realm of Nature rather than of men.

This was particularly evident in the ways in which the memorialisation of the earthquake cast the Himalayan Frontier Tracts primarily as a physical space, silencing its complex human landscape. Kingdon-Ward's description of the Lohit Valley in the aftermath of the disaster, for instance, made but one allusion to the region being an inhabited space ('well preserved terraces'), and consequently also failed to mention the human and material losses it had suffered.<sup>100</sup> Only the small administrative presence and a stranded Assam Rifles party were mentioned. Descriptions such as these served to memorialise the Frontier Tracts as a space largely empty of human presence, only disturbed by the advance (or here, the epic struggle) of the Indian administration.

A similar narrative slant is in evidence in official accounts of the disaster and subsequent relief and rescue attempts in the Frontier Tracts. One particularly dramatic episode was the daring rescue operations at Nizamghat, upstream of Sadiya. Immediately after the quake, this

<sup>94</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru (1997). 'Floods in Assam' (Statement in parliament, 13 November 1952), in Sarvepalli Gopal *Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru -- Second Series*, Vol. XX, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, pp.265-67.

<sup>95</sup> Francis Kingdon-Ward (1955). Aftermath of the Great Assam Earthquake of 1950, *The Geographical Journal*, **121:3**, p.302.

<sup>96</sup> Boddhisattva Kar (2008). 'The Assam fever: Identities of a disease and diseases of an identity', in Debraj Bhattacharya *Of matters modern: The experience of modernity in colonial and post-colonial South Asia*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, pp.78-125.

<sup>97</sup> Sajal Nag (2008). *Pied pipers in the hills: Bamboo flowers, rat famine and colonial philanthropy in North East India, 1881-1931*, Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge.

<sup>98</sup> See for instance Fitz William Thomas Pollok & W. S. Thom (1900). *Wild sports of Burma and Assam*, Hurst and Blackett, London; and Frank Nicolls (1970). *Assam shikari: A tea planter's story of hunting and high adventure in the jungles of North East India*, Tonson, Auckland.

<sup>99</sup> 'Rendez-vous with rhino', *The Statesman* (13 April 1952).

<sup>100</sup> Kingdon-Ward may partly be forgiven for this — his was, after all, an article for a geographical journal, and the highly atomised social structure of Mishmi society, which led this tribe to live in hamlets of just a couple of houses often miles apart from one another. Nevertheless, there was still ample proof of human presence on the Indian side of the border, for instance at Walong. Instead, Kingdon-Ward's account only emphasises human presence and suffering in relation to areas on the other side of the Indo-Tibetan border.

small settlement inhabited by the Adi (Abor) tribe lay completely cut off from the world. Less than a year later the Dibang River, still reeling from the disaster, changed its course. In a matter of hours, a new channel had appeared. Nizamghat was encircled. The new island would soon be submerged; yet the current was so strong, and the weather so appalling, that any boat-rescue was impossible. Assisted by local planters, frontier authorities put together a daring mission to rescue the inhabitants from the now fast disappearing island.<sup>101</sup> Vividly retold immediately after the end of the operation in an official press conference, the struggle to save Nizamghat's population is striking for its focus on the plight of the administrative staff marooned on the island and the heroism of the rescuers, at the expense of the experiences of the tribal population of the Nizamghat area.

When no traumatic, newsworthy events such as floods and landslides surfaced, the smattering of Assam-centred articles that percolated in the English-speaking press beyond Assam emphasised the picturesque aspect of its 'hills and vales,' and the sheer excitement of hunting tigers or rhinoceros in its meadows — thus ensuring the permanence of north-eastern India's image as a *jungli* place: savage, separate, and inferior.

The earthquake also served to vindicate an idea of Assam that had begun to take root in the preceding years: the idea of a province incapable of taking care of itself. Considered of secondary geo-strategic importance until World War Two, when it became a key frontline against Japan almost overnight, Assam was progressively acquiring a new status as India's strategic frontier, both against East Pakistan and against China.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, provincial authorities were trapped in a dire financial situation, worsened by the transfer of its richest district, Sylhet, to Pakistan and the loss of most of its trade and communications networks after partition. Hence, Assam quickly became characterised as a 'problem province' — a derogatory label stamped in during Constitutional Assembly discussion on state finances. Ten days before the earthquake, Sri Prakasa had penned an article that stressed that 'the place [was] bristling with problems,' from defence and under-developed natural resources to geographical isolation and divide between hills and plains.<sup>103</sup>

The earthquake contributed to the entrenchment of the 'problem province' label. While immediate relief flowed relatively easily in a context of emergency and public sympathy, discussions between Central and State authorities regarding long-term relief and rehabilitation were much more protracted. The Assam Government drafted a Rs37,956,200 long-term plan which, in view of its depleted finances and the scale of the disaster, required extensive central involvement: a three-year grant of Rs34,728,500 and a two-year loan of Rs3,227,700 repayable in twenty years.<sup>104</sup> But in the post-partition context — where refugee rehabilitation and economic disorganisation made financial retrenchment the order of the day — such demands were not favourably looked upon by the Centre. In fact, they aroused suspicion, as the Assam Government was simultaneously resisting Central and West Bengal demands to share responsibility for the rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees. Such suspicions were likely heightened when sections of the Assamese press urged the State Government to use the devastation and landlessness caused by the earthquake as grounds to refuse to accommodate partition victims.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>101</sup> 'Earthquake and flood: Operation rescue', *The Assam Tribune* (14 July 1951).

<sup>102</sup> See for instance 'Agreed decision on certain incidents in Border Areas', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* (13 August 1949); 'We are sentinel at gates of India and defender of borders: Governor's independence message to people of Assam', *The Assam Tribune* (17 August 1949); and 'Alleged encroachment of the Indian Territory on the Assam frontier by Pakistan (1949), 5(9)-Pak III, External Affairs Proceedings, NAI, New Delhi.

<sup>103</sup> S.No.113, Sri Prakasa Papers, NMML.

<sup>104</sup> See Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Finance notes of 6 and 11 December 1950, respectively, in 15/87-Public, Home Affairs Proceedings, NAI.

<sup>105</sup> 'Editorial — Refugees', *The Assam Tribune* (8 July 1951).

The issue of earthquake relief soon turned acrimonious in the central Legislative Assembly. Rohini Kumar Chaudhury and other Assamese representatives accused Delhi of dithering instead of sending financial help to Assam.<sup>106</sup> Junior members of the central Government, meanwhile, chastised Assam for (apparently) blaming others for its misfortune.<sup>107</sup> The Calcutta- or Delhi-based papers soon followed this with accusations regarding the passivity of Assam's authorities. The latter were blamed in half-veiled terms for creating a frenzied atmosphere on the basis of wild claims and speculations:

National thinking as to recent tragic events in Assam can profit by some mental re-adjustment. There is no gainsaying the gravity of the havoc [...] But the severity of the disaster as pictured by State spokesmen and represented by the radio and the press does not fully accord with reality. The generality of these reports will have one believe that the very earth had risen in nature's wrath, that entire districts are missing. Volcanoes are reported to have revived after centuries of dormancy [...] There is a leaven of truth in some of these statements; but the overall picture is out of focus with the facts [...] The Government machinery has shown neither the resilience nor the stamina one would expect in a region so prone to natural calamity. Control and co-ordination are conditions that are absent on the governmental plane. Shillong [the provincial capital] appears to deplore the disaster; but has done little positive to meet it. There is an all-too great dependent upon the District Officer already swamped under diversified tasks few are able to tackle [...] The will and the capacity to rehabilitate the afflicted people and the affected area are greater essentials to recovery than the means [...] The future, therefore, turns on the heights to which the leadership within the State can rise in this crisis.<sup>108</sup>

Critical assessments of governmental apathy were all the more credible as, ever since colonial rule, the primary stereotype of the Assamese as a people was that they were easy-going and nonchalant (if the observer was in a compassionate mood) and lazy and criminally indolent (if she or he was not).<sup>109</sup> 'Yours is a land for gods to live in', declared Vallabhai Patel with a speech during a visit to Shillong in January 1948, before adding: 'get rid of your enemy, which is laziness.'<sup>110</sup> Such stereotypes of Assam as the land of *lahe lahe* (slowly-slowly) had likely been strengthened among India's nationalist circles by the fact that the only Assam-specific policies of the Indian National Congress during the freedom struggle were anti-opium resolutions.<sup>111</sup>

This severe opinion of Assam became anchored in the highest reaches of the Indian state. In a letter to the Chief Ministers in October 1950, Nehru noted that '[t]he earthquake and after have shaken up Assam. At the same time, I believe, it has done good in the sense that it has roused up the people of Assam and made them realise that it is up to them to pull their province up'.<sup>112</sup> A year later, he had become even harsher. There is no mistaking the tone in this letter dated 4 August 1951 to Bishnuram Medhi, Assam's Chief Minister:

I realise that [your food situation] has suffered greatly from recent happenings in Assam. I feel, however, that your Government is not relying on its own resources as much as it ought to. We have become rather slack because we think that foreign food has come or is coming. This is a very dangerous attitude of mind [...] After all Assam had a big surplus a year ago. There is no reason why it should become so terribly deficit as is made out, in spite of floods, etc.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>106</sup> 15/87-Public, Home Affairs Proceedings, NAI.

<sup>107</sup> 'Constructive efforts and not mutual accusation', *The Assam Tribune* (19 July 1951).

<sup>108</sup> Thomas, 'The quake – and after'.

<sup>109</sup> Allen, *Assam district gazetteers*; Nari Rustomji (1983). *Imperilled frontiers: India's north-eastern borderlands*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p.10; Jayeeta Sharma (2009). 'Lazy' natives, coolie labour, and the Assam tea industry, *Modern Asian Studies*, 43:6, pp.1287-324.

<sup>110</sup> Vallabhbhai Patel (1993). 'No time for grieving (Speech given at a public meeting in Shillong on 2 January 1948)', in Verinder Grover *Political Thinkers of Modern India*, Deep and Deep, New Delhi, p.61.

<sup>111</sup> Zaidi & Zaidi eds., *Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress*.

<sup>112</sup> Nehru, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, pp.212-13.

<sup>113</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru (1994). *Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru – Second Series*, Vol.XVI, edited by Sarvepalli Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, p.346.

Thus, while relief coming into Assam from all around India and beyond heralded a certain consciousness of the region as part of the national space, worthy of sympathy and assistance, the aftermath of the earthquake also reinforced stereotypes that would structure centre-state relations for decades afterwards. On the one hand, the Government of India's attitude was experienced in Assam as abandonment. Reinforced by the continued under-development of the region and the memory of the 1962 Sino-Indian war,<sup>114</sup> the 'step-motherly' figure of the central government is still deeply rooted in the Assamese mental soil.<sup>115</sup> On the other hand, the stereotype of Assam as a problem region — a state incapable of taking care of itself — was seemingly vindicated. Mutual incomprehension between centre and state would only increase over the course of the 1950s, notably as a result of a worsening independence war in Assam's Naga Hills District.<sup>116</sup>

As far as the Frontier Tracts (officially renamed the North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA in 1954) were concerned, the earthquake and its aftermath became a stepping-stone in convincing the centre of the inadequacy of ever integrating the region within Assam — a scenario envisioned by the Indian constitution. Initially, the earthquake had been an occasion for provincial authorities to retain a foot in the Frontier Tracts: in the aftermath of the disaster, both relief expediency and the need to assuage Indian public opinion made it difficult for the NEFA administration not to resort to the Assam Government's assistance. Assamese leaders, starting with Bishnuram Medhi, had jumped on the opportunity to visit the affected hill areas and meet the local populations. They also arranged for relief to be provided to affected Adis (Abors) at Dibrugarh.<sup>117</sup> The appointment of an Assamese, S.N. Hazarika, as Secretary of the Relief and Rehabilitation Committee at Pasighat in the Abor Hills, may have represented another success.<sup>118</sup>

The collaboration between frontier administration and provincial authorities did not last. As 1951 waned, the NEFA administration gradually closed the door momentarily kept ajar. Inner Line regulations were once again strictly enforced, causing non-governmental organisations and the Assam Government to lose physical access to the frontier. State expansion in the eastern Himalayas continued throughout the 1950s, but with an administrative cadre increasingly separate from Assam's bureaucracy, and the provincial government saw the Governor and his Adviser's Secretariat becoming increasingly reluctant to keep them informed of developments in NEFA. It would take longer for the eastern Himalayas to be detached from Assam and turned into a separate territory in 1972, and longer still to become the State of Arunachal Pradesh. But after 1950, internal discussions within the NEFA administration show less and less evidence of any will to bring about the merger of the frontier with Assam.<sup>119</sup>

Herein lay all the 'ambiguities of catastrophe'.<sup>120</sup> Even as the earthquake helped to carve out a niche space for Assam and its Frontier Tracts in India's national space, this

<sup>114</sup> 'Nehru did not bid farewell to Assam in 1962!', *The Assam Tribune* (12 December 2010).

<sup>115</sup> See for example Subir Bhaumik (2009). *Troubled periphery: Crisis of India's North-East*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p.327: 'Fifty years after partition, India's north-east remains the stepchild of the republic. The kind of attention lavished on Kashmir is nonexistent there, though in terms of resources the North-East is far ahead.'

<sup>116</sup> Udayon Misra (2000). *The periphery strikes back: Challenges to the nation-state in Assam and Nagaland*, 1st Edition, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

<sup>117</sup> See editions of the Amrita Bazaar Patrika for August 1950, for instance 'Road communications in Assam being restored'.

<sup>118</sup> 'Relief activity in Abor Hills District'.

<sup>119</sup> Bérénice Guyot-Récharde (2013). 'Decolonisation and state-making on India's north-eastern frontier, c1943-62', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge.

<sup>120</sup> Clancey, The Meiji earthquake.

reconfiguration in parallel entailed that the British Raj's 'old imperial frontiers' became naturalised within this Indian national space,<sup>121</sup> keeping them hierarchically inferior to, or at least on another plane from, the rest of India.

## Conclusion

Six decades later, the Assam earthquake remains a vivid memory for many inhabitants of Guwahati, Dibrugarh, or Pasighat. On the roadside or on building walls, ubiquitous billboards advertise different cement brands. To convince people to build their home in *pakka* (sturdy) material, they sometimes caution against a second 1950. Meanwhile, people have settled again in the watery landscape where the Siang, Lohit, and Dibang Rivers meet to form the Brahmaputra. A new township, Chapakhowa, has emerged. Yet the Sadiya of old has not been forgotten. Submerged as it may be, the former town still gives its name to an administrative subdivision in Tinsukia District, and the ferry crossing is called Sadiya Ghat.

Nor has the image of north-eastern India as a 'problem region' died out. If anything, it has become even more dominant. The region is now divided into seven states, of which Assam is but one. The mention of 'North-East India' evokes a series of overwhelmingly negative images — the seemingly vicious circle between what the Indian state calls 'insurgencies' and its own heavy-handed response to these militant movements; fraught ethnic and linguistic relations, fuelled by land and migration issues; intractable under-development despite plentiful natural resources; and finally, a national security nightmare as a region sandwiched between Bhutan, China, Burma, and Bangladesh.<sup>122</sup>

In its attempts to delineate North-East India's spatial, political, and psychological marginality within India, scholarship has given pride of place to the genesis and trajectory of its various autonomist and independentist movements, and to Delhi's counter-insurgency strategy.<sup>123</sup> What is suggested here is that, beyond overtly 'political' events like partition or armed militancy, multiple historical contingencies contributed to the transformation of old colonial Assam into North-East India. The aftermath of the 1950 earthquake is one such contingency. It may be that the accidental symbolism of a disaster striking India on its independence anniversary heightened reactions to the Assam earthquake. Yet its impact should also be read in the context of the early 1950s. A new development and modernisation paradigm — embodied in the freshly minted constitution — was then taking root in India, sidelining alternative imaginings of the nation while justifying increased state involvement in society and economy.<sup>124</sup> Relief and rehabilitation were a crucial channel for that involvement.

How then can the disaster's legacy help us understand the construction of locality and marginality in a border space? Many works discuss the role of the British Raj in fostering this isolation — for instance by 'objectifying the geo-body of India's North-East'.<sup>125</sup> Some also point to the devastating effect of partition in turning post-colonial Assam into a landlocked

<sup>121</sup> David Ludden (2011). 'The process of empire: Frontiers and borderlands', in Christopher Bayly & Peter Fibiger Bang *Tributary empires in global history*, Palgrave Macmillan, New Delhi, p.133.

<sup>122</sup> The best introduction to the subject is Sanjib Baruah (2007). *Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>123</sup> E.g. Sanjib Baruah (1999). *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia; Misra, *The periphery strikes back*; Sajal Nag (2002). *Contesting marginality: Ethnicity, insurgency and subnationalism in North-East India*, Manohar, New Delhi.

<sup>124</sup> See for instance Dilip M. Menon (2002). 'Lost Visions? Imagining a National Culture in the 1950s', in Alice Thorner *Land, labour and rights: Ten Daniel Thorner memorial lectures*, Anthem, London, pp.250-68; Benjamin Zachariah (2005). *Developing India: An intellectual and social history, c.1930-50*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>125</sup> David Vumllalian Zou & M. Satish Kumar (2011). Mapping a colonial borderland: Objectifying the geo-body of India's Northeast, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 70:1, pp.141-70.

region. Both observations hold true. Yet independence might not be the only significant disjuncture for the region. While the geographic contours of today's North-East India mark it out as a 'geo-political accident' resulting from partition,<sup>126</sup> the re-fashioning of the region's geo-body in this transitional period did not stop there. The earthquake became an opportunity to discover an area that was considered a 'frontier' in 'the Indian "civilisational narrative"' (from that narrative's perspective).<sup>127</sup> And the resultant trauma reminded many people that, even after partition, part of India's territory still lay beyond the confines of East Pakistan.

Furthermore, the Assam earthquake underscores that, rather than the product of top-down, well-planned strategies, state-making and nation-building are often reactions to extraneous events or crises. In turn, this means that state-making and nation-building are much more differentiated, convoluted, and contradictory processes than generally thought — all the more so at the periphery of large, diverse polities like independent India. Northeast India reminds us that the post-colonial as a historical process 'looks necessarily clumsy, complicated, and inherently incomplete (that is, fragmentary)'.<sup>128</sup> It is not merely that imperial processes—with their hierarchical underpinnings—continue to exist within nation-state projects such as India's.<sup>129</sup> it is very much the reproduction of imperial structures of power and hierarchy that enables some border spaces to become part of a national space.

<sup>126</sup> Thongkholal Haokip (2011). Conceptualising Northeast India: A discursive analysis on diversity, *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*, **8:11**, p.111.

<sup>127</sup> Misra, *Becoming a borderland*, p. 12.

<sup>128</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar & Andrew Sartori eds. (2007). *From the colonial to the postcolonial: India and Pakistan in transition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New Delhi.

<sup>129</sup> Ludden, 'The process of empire'.