

Folklore and Social Justice: Thematic Analysis of Oral Narratives in North-East India

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ABSTRACT— This manuscript presents a comprehensive thematic analysis of oral narratives collected from diverse communities across North-East India, examining how folklore both reflects and negotiates multifaceted social justice concerns. Drawing on a structured survey of 100 respondents supplemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews, the study identifies four overarching narrative themes—identity affirmation, resistance to marginalization, communal harmony, and environmental stewardship—that articulate community experiences of injustice and collective aspirations for equity.

KEYWORDS— Folklore; Social Justice; North-East India; Oral Narratives; Thematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Folklore—comprising the body of beliefs, customs, and stories transmitted orally through generations—serves as a living archive of community values, collective memory, and modes of resistance. In North-East India, a region defined by profound ethnic diversity, a history of colonization, insurgency, and complex state integration, oral narratives permeate everyday life. They function beyond mere entertainment, encoding moral codes, social norms, and community aspirations. When formal institutions falter in addressing grievances, folklore emerges as a potent medium for voicing dissent and asserting rights.

Despite burgeoning interest in the political dimensions of folklore, systematic research examining how narratives from North-East India articulate social justice concerns remains scarce. Existing studies often focus narrowly on single ethnic groups or examine folkloric motifs without situating them within broader justice frameworks. This study bridges that gap by conducting a mixed-methods thematic analysis of oral narratives across six states—Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. Through a survey of 100 participants and in-depth interviews with 30 selected storytellers, we explore how recurring narrative motifs—such as the valorization of indigenous heroes, environmental guardianship, and inter-ethnic alliances—function as instruments of social critique and catalysts for collective action.

Our objectives are threefold: (1) to map the prevalence of justice-related themes in contemporary folklore; (2) to unpack the narrative mechanisms through which communities negotiate identity, resistance, and reconciliation; and (3) to propose practical measures for leveraging oral traditions in cultural preservation and social empowerment. By integrating quantitative survey insights



Fig.1 Folklore and Social Justice, [Source\(\[1\]\)](#)

Employing Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis alongside NVivo software for systematic coding, the research uncovers how oral traditions function as repositories of collective memory, vehicles for social critique, and catalysts for community mobilization. Findings indicate that folklore empowers marginalized groups by preserving cultural identity, articulating grievances, and envisioning transformative possibilities. The study concludes with recommendations for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners to integrate oral narratives into curricula, support community-led documentation, and recognize folklore as a dynamic archive of social conscience that fosters resilience and solidarity.

with qualitative thematic interpretation, we offer a nuanced account of how folklore sustains community resilience and fosters dialogue on equity.



Fig.2 Oral Narratives in North-East India,[Source\(\[2\]\)](#)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early folklore scholarship emphasized classification and taxonomy of tales, relegating socio-political dimensions to the periphery. The pioneering works of Américo Paredes and John F. Kennedy in the late twentieth century marked a shift toward understanding folklore as expressive of marginalized voices. This “resistance” or “political folklore” paradigm posits that narratives serve as covert channels for critiquing power structures (Ben-Amos, 1992). In South Asia, research has illuminated how Dalit and Adivasi narratives encode critiques of caste oppression and land dispossession (Singh, 2005; Devi, 2014). However, studies specific to North-East India remain fragmented.

Anthropological and ethnographic accounts document the rich tapestry of folklore among the Khasi, Naga, and Mizo peoples, highlighting themes of migration, animist cosmologies, and inter-tribal exchange (Roychoudhury, 2008; Hrangkhawl, 2012). Devi’s (2017) qualitative study in Manipur underscores the role of folk songs in preserving memories of wartime atrocities, yet lacks a comparative thematic framework. Sociological analyses of insurgent movements note the instrumentalization of legends to legitimize armed struggle (Baruah, 2011) but seldom engage broader social justice concepts like gender equity or environmental rights.

Thematic analysis, as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), offers a robust methodological framework for discerning patterned meaning across qualitative datasets. It has seen application in oral history and narrative studies globally but is under-utilized in Indian folklore research. By adopting this approach and combining it with survey-based quantification, we address methodological shortcomings in prior work. Our review thus situates the present study at the intersection of political folklore, narrative resistance, and cultural memory,

underscoring the need for a multi-state, comparative analysis that foregrounds social justice as a central lens.

SURVEY OF ORAL NARRATIVES

Between January and March 2025, we administered a structured survey to 100 participants across six North-East states (approximately 16–17 per state). Purposive sampling ensured diversity in age (18–65 years), gender, education, occupation, ethnicity, and rural/urban residence. The survey instrument comprised four modules:

1. **Demographics:** Collected data on age, gender, education level, occupation, and ethnic affiliation to assess demographic variations in narrative exposure and theme prevalence.
2. **Narrative Engagement:** Measured frequency of listening to or telling folk stories (daily, weekly, monthly, rarely) to gauge the vitality of oral traditions.
3. **Justice Themes Identification:** Offered respondents a checklist of eight justice-related themes—land rights, gender equity, environmental protection, communal harmony, historical grievances, identity assertion, governance critique, and youth empowerment—and asked them to indicate which appeared most often.
4. **Impact Perception:** Employed a five-point Likert scale to assess beliefs about folklore’s role in preserving culture, educating younger generations, raising awareness of injustices, and motivating social action.

Key Findings

- **High Engagement:** 72% reported engaging with folklore at least weekly, with rural respondents showing slightly higher frequency than urban counterparts.
- **Dominant Themes:** Land rights (68% of respondents), inter-ethnic cooperation (55%), and gender roles (49%) were most frequently cited. Environmental protection (43%) and governance critique (38%) also featured prominently.
- **Perceived Impact:** A remarkable 83% agreed that folklore “reminds communities of past injustices,” and 78% believed it “inspires people to seek social change.” Only 12% viewed folklore as purely entertainment.

Cross-tabulation revealed that younger respondents (18–30) were more likely to recognize themes of youth empowerment and governance critique, whereas elders (50+) emphasized historical grievances and identity assertion. These quantitative insights informed the selection of 30 participants for qualitative interviews, ensuring representation of both prevalent and less-common themes.

METHODOLOGY

Adopting a convergent mixed-methods design, this study integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to yield a rich, triangulated understanding of social justice in North-East Indian folklore.

1. Survey Analysis

- Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) summarized engagement patterns and theme prevalence.
- Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests examined demographic associations with theme recognition and impact perceptions.

2. Thematic Analysis of Oral Narratives

- **Participant Selection:** From the survey cohort, 30 individuals (five per state, balanced by gender and rural/urban status) were purposively invited to share two to three oral narratives each, resulting in 75 stories.
- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted in participants' native languages, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Professional translators then rendered transcripts into English, with back-translation checks to preserve nuance.
- **Coding and Theme Development:** Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:
 - *Familiarization:* Repeated reading of transcripts to note preliminary impressions.
 - *Initial Coding:* Using NVivo 12, text segments were coded for justice-related content (e.g., "land seizure," "matrilineal inheritance," "river goddess protector").
 - *Theme Construction:* Codes were grouped into candidate themes—Resistance, Identity, Environmental Justice, Inter-Ethnic Solidarity, and Gender Narratives.

- *Theme Review:* Themes were refined by checking coherence within coded extracts and ensuring clear boundaries between themes.
- *Defining Themes:* Each theme was clearly defined with illustrative quotations and descriptions of its unique features.
- *Report Production:* Analytical narrative integrated thematic findings with socio-historical contexts.

3. Ethical Considerations

- Received clearance from the XYZ University Institutional Review Board.
- Obtained informed oral and written consent; assigned pseudonyms to protect participant identities.
- Ensured cultural sensitivity by engaging local researchers and translators.

By triangulating survey and thematic data, the methodology balances breadth (prevalence across 100 respondents) with depth (rich qualitative insights from 30 storytellers), enhancing the credibility and transferability of findings.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis revealed four principal themes that articulate the multifaceted relationship between folklore and social justice in North-East India. Below, each theme is described with illustrative narratives and interpretive commentary.

1. Identity Affirmation

Participants across states recounted stories celebrating indigenous heroes and founding ancestors whose deeds legitimize contemporary claims to land and cultural autonomy. For instance, a Manipuri recounting of the tale of Lourembam, a legendary princess who defended her realm against invaders, underscores collective pride:

"When I tell my children about Lourembam's valor, they learn that our history predates any colonial map. That gives us strength to assert our rights today." (Interview 5)

Such narratives reinforce social justice as the right to cultural self-determination. They operate as antifragile devices, transforming experiences of marginalization into sources of communal resilience.

2. Resistance to Marginalization

Stories of peasant uprisings against exploitative zamindars or British tax collectors were ubiquitous. A Tripura folktale describes Parbati, a farmer's wife who orchestrates a cross-village march to reclaim seized paddy fields:

"The day Parbati led her neighbors to the collector's bungalow, the forest echoed with chants for justice. Even now, our paddy fields are called Parbati's Fields." (Interview 18)

Respondents linked these tales to modern land-rights movements, indicating a living continuity between folkloric memory and grassroots activism.

3. Communal Harmony and Inter-Ethnic Cooperation

Despite contemporary tensions, many narratives valorize alliances across ethnic lines. A Khasi folktale tells of a warrior who marries a Jaintia princess, forging peace between erstwhile rival tribes. Such stories function as normative scripts for reconciliation:

"When I hear the Khasi-Jaintia tale, I remember that our ancestors chose unity over enmity. It inspires us to bridge divides today." (Interview 23)

This theme illustrates folklore's capacity to mediate conflict and model inclusive justice.

4. Environmental Stewardship

Environmental justice emerged as a salient, if less documented, motif. Narratives describe river goddesses who curse polluters or forests that shelter those who protect them. A Mizo elder shared:

"The story says anyone who cuts the sacred meluh tree will be transformed into its spirit—destined to guard the forest forever. It keeps us mindful of our duty." (Interview 30)

Such cautionary tales underscore the symbiosis of people and nature, framing ecological protection as an ethical imperative.

Quantitatively, land-rights and resistance themes appeared in over two-thirds of narratives (68%), while communal cooperation (55%) and environmental stewardship (43%) featured in roughly half. Notably, younger respondents more frequently highlighted governance critique and youth empowerment themes, signaling evolving justice concerns.

CONCLUSION

This enhanced analysis affirms that oral narratives across North-East India serve as dynamic repositories of social justice consciousness. Themes of identity affirmation, collective resistance, inter-ethnic solidarity, and

environmental stewardship not only preserve cultural heritage but also articulate grievances and inspire collective action. By integrating survey-based quantification with rigorous thematic interpretation, the study illuminates the multifaceted ways in which folklore sustains community resilience and frames visions of equity.

For policymakers, these findings underscore the importance of recognizing folklore as a living archive of social critique. Educational institutions should integrate oral narratives into curricula to foster cultural pride and teach principles of justice. Cultural heritage bodies and NGOs must support community-led documentation and dissemination of folk traditions, ensuring they adapt to contemporary platforms—such as digital storytelling—to reach younger generations.

Future research could expand this framework to include performance dimensions of folklore (e.g., folk theatre, song, dance) and examine how digital media transformations affect narrative transmission and thematic evolution. Nevertheless, this study lays a robust foundation for understanding the interplay between folklore and social justice in one of India's most culturally vibrant and contested regions.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Scope

- **Geographic Breadth:** Encompasses six North-East states, enabling comparative insights across diverse ethnic and linguistic contexts.
- **Mixed-Methods Integration:** Combines quantitative prevalence data with qualitative thematic depth, enhancing overall validity.

Limitations

- **Sampling Approach:** Purposive sampling may have favored individuals already inclined toward folklore, potentially inflating engagement metrics.
- **Translation Nuances:** Multilingual data collection necessitated translation; some metaphors and idiomatic expressions may have been altered.
- **Temporal Constraints:** Data collection occurred within a three-month window; festival-specific narratives outside this period remain unexamined.
- **Researcher Positionality:** Use of NVivo and researcher interpretations may introduce subjective biases in coding and theme delineation.

Addressing these limitations through random sampling, longitudinal studies, and participatory translation protocols

would further strengthen future investigations. Nonetheless, this study offers critical insights into how oral traditions inform and sustain social justice discourses in North-East India.

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