MAJULI AS
A HERITAGE SITE
Majuli: The Place

Introduction

Majuli is a river-island of the Brahmaputra River, situated within the District of Jorhat in the upper Brahmaputra Valley of the state of Assam. It has got its distinction as a place of importance by virtue of a number of natural as well as cultural attributes. Firstly, there is the unique topography of Majuli as a river-island, surrounded from almost all sides by the mighty Brahmaputra. This has contributed to an ecological setup wherein a distinctive integration of man and nature has developed which is manifested in the form of a living panorama of man-made expressions and natural phenomena. Secondly, and more importantly, the presence of several numbers of Satras, – which are the monasteries of the Vaiṣṇava abbots and are the centres of various religious and artistic activities, has made Majuli the hub of the Vaiṣṇava culture and tradition of Assam. The satras, apart from being authoritative centres of the Vaiṣṇava faith, are the living workshops of different kinds of visual and performing arts acquired and displayed by the monks by virtue of traditionally transferred knowledge. In addition to this age-old Satrīvā culture, Majuli is also the homeland of three distinctive tribal communities, namely, Mising, Deurā and Sonowāl Kachārī, having their own traditional repertoires of living. Moreover, Majuli’s soil is also shared by the artisan groups like the Kumār Kalitās who are the traditional craftsmen of terracotta arts and crafts.

The issue of protection and conservation of Majuli and its diverse resources hails from the natural and socio-cultural threats that the island and its people are facing in contemporary times. The annual floods and land-erosions caused by the Brahmaputra every year during monsoon have reduced the land-mass of the island to an alarming extent. On the
other hand, the critical socio-cultural transformations caused by the external waves coming on the back of modernity have imposed a threat to the sustenance of the diverse cultures and traditions of Majuli.

**Geography**

The position of Majuli in terms of geographical coordinates lies in between \(26^\circ45'\text{N}\) to \(27^\circ15'\text{N}\) latitude and \(93^\circ45'\text{E}\) to \(94^\circ30'\text{E}\) longitude, with an average height of 84.5 meters from the sea-level. The total areas of the island as per the government records of 1950, 1971 and 1997-98 are 1246 square kilometers, 924 square kilometers and 875 square kilometers respectively. It is surrounded from all sides by the water-flow of the Brahmaputra except the north-eastern corner where it is connected to the land of the Dhemaji district through a man-made land connection. Along the northern shoreline of the island there flows the Luit or the Lohit River, which is the upper branching, and erstwhile main track, of the Brahmaputra. Its eastern portion is known as the Kherkatiya Suti. The current mainstream of the Brahmaputra flows in parallel to the southern shoreline of Majuli. Crossing these water-masses, there is Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts on the north and Jorhat and Sivasagar districts on the south of Majuli.

The geomorphological transformations that finally led to the current setup of Majuli are not accurately known. However it is believed on the basis of historical sources that the river Brahmaputra was flowing in the north of Majuli in earlier times and the current position of the island was resulted due to the geomorphological interplay of the Brahmaputra and one of its tributaries, the Dihing, which was at that time flowing in parallel to Brahmaputra. As explained by Kotoky et al:

During 1622 AD, the Brahmaputra river was flowing along the present channel of Lohit in the northern part of Majuli, while the Dihing was flowing along the present channel of the Brahmaputra, south of the island. In 1671 AD, the Dihing
changed its course and had a confluence with the upper Lohit, and in 1735 AD, the Brahmaputra, after abandoning its course due to a heavy flood, followed the abandoned course of Dihing. Thus, the Majuli was formed due to headward erosion and channel migration of the Brahmaputra river. Majuli then was formed with 13 'chaporis' or small islands intersected by channels of communication between Dihing and Lohit.

It is also opined by historians like Dambarudhar Nath that prior to the above mentioned transformation, the land mass of Majuli was attached to the current southern bank of the Brahmaputra, as an extended land in the shape of a gourd.

The present Majuli is a myrobalan-shaped plain land amidst the mighty Brahmaputra. Its physical landscape is characterized by the presence of frequent wetlands, static water-bodies, cultivable and grazing fields, sand-shores and naturally formed drainage systems. The only river flowing across Majuli is the Tuni River, flowing from its north-east to south-west. During the season of monsoon rains, water-level rises up to cover-up the major portions of Majuli.

Majuli is frequently quoted as the biggest river-island of the world, in several governmental and non-governmental descriptions and scholarly writings. A reliable clarification from officially authoritative agencies in this regard is not available so far. However, it may be mentioned here that in one internet website, titled as "Island Information" by Joshua Calder, it is informed that the "world's largest river island is Ilha do Bananal, a 7.720 sq mi / 20.000 sq km island formed by two channels of the Araguaia River in Tocantins State, Brazil". Calder also mentioned about Majuli, and the 'misinformation' about Majuli as the biggest river-island, in the table titled "Island Misinformation", describing the "Reality" that "Many river islands in Brazil and elsewhere are larger, beginning with Bananal at 7.720 sq mi / 20.000 sq km. Majuli is only 340 sq mi / 880 sq km".
The natural environment of Majuli has been shaped by its riverine ecology. It is a region of fluvial geomorphology, formed by the alluvial deposits in the river-basin of the Brahmaputra. Thus, it is a fertile land with alluvial sedimentation. Tuni is the only river of Majuli. Moreover, there are many other channels such as Mari Tuni, Sukan Suti, Khar Jan, Boka Jan, Dighali Jan, etc. The other striking feature of the physiography of Majuli is the existence of many inland wetlands (locally called as *bils*), especially marshes, ponds, the cut-off meanders and other water-logged areas. These are mostly filled during the rainy season. These water bodies, apparently the wetlands, while enhancing the beauty of Majuli, serve as the colonies of many indigenous migratory birds some of which belong to the endangered category. In a way, they are playing an important role in conserving the richness of the faunal world.

Majuli has a variety of the flora and fauna species. The faunal wealth covers more than hundred bird species and sub-species, more than twenty varieties of reptiles, mammals, and nearly ten amphibians. thousands of insects and other lesser forms and a wide variety of local fish. On the floral side, it covers more than thousand species of trees, grasses, creepers, flowers, orchids and other forms of plant life.

A list of the residential and migratory birds seen in Majuli is given in Annexure I.
**Population**

As per the Census information, the population of Majuli is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Census year 1991</th>
<th>Census Year 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>135378</td>
<td>153362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of males</td>
<td>70410</td>
<td>79490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of females</td>
<td>64968</td>
<td>73872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Caste population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of SC males</td>
<td>10133</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of SC females</td>
<td>9145</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Tribe population</td>
<td>57357</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of ST males</td>
<td>29052</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of ST females</td>
<td>28305</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
<td>146 per square kilometer</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 2: Table of Census figures in connection to population of Majuli

Ethnographically, the population of Majuli is composed of the tribal communities of Mising, Deuri and Sonowal Kachari; and the communities belonging to the greater fold of the Assamese Hindus such as Koch, Nath, Kalita, Ahom, Brahmin and Kaivarta. There are also Bengali and Nepali populations, although numerically few, who migrated to Majuli in relatively later times. As evidenced from the census information of 1991, 42.37% of the total population of Majuli belongs to the tribal category. It has been designated as a tribal constituency in State Legislative Assembly of Assam.

In terms of religion, the caste-Hindu populations are Hindu-Vaisnavites while most of the tribal peoples subscribe to their own traditional religious faiths. The fact is that the acculturation of the tribal communities with the dominant cult of the Vaisnavism is still observed to be an ongoing process, which is taking place in complex patterns of cultural dynamics. A sizeable portion of the tribal population has accepted the Christianity. There are also few Muslim families among the Bengali-speaking peoples.
Administration

Majuli is one of the Sub-Divisions under the District of Jorhat. As per the convention of the Government of India, the administration at different levels is conducted through various governmental bodies like local boards, *Gāon Pañcāyats*, Development Blocks etc. Entire Majuli is treated as rural area by the government administration, and as such, there is no urban area or urban population in Majuli. Some of the relevant information of the place from the administrative point of view is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Divisional Office</td>
<td></td>
<td>Garmur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue Circles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Majuli (Kamalabari)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipalities</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Committees</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Census Town</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villages (Habitated)</td>
<td>210</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villages (Unhabitated)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mouza</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kamalabari, Ahatguri, Salmora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaon Panchayat</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Station</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kamalabari, Jengrai, Garmur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Out post</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bongaon, Naya Bazar, Ahatguri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Station</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly Constituency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Majuli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Development Blocks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ujani Majuli (Jengraimukh), Namoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Majuli (Kamalabari)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig 3: Table showing the distribution of government administrative units in Majuli*

Education

Like many other parts of the country, the system of formal education in the modern sense began to grow in Majuli from the late nineteenth century with the influence of the British. However, prior to that, the various satras of Majuli had been playing a very important role in imparting traditional education. They were not only responsible for teaching and disseminating the specialized traditional knowledge pertaining different visual and performing arts, but they were also involved in maintaining *tols* (traditional Sanskrit-teaching schools) for teaching of Sanskrit and sustaining a tradition of writing in vernacular...
language. The affluent satras like Auniati, Natun Kamalabri, Dakhinpat and Garmur have been patronizing the establishments of modern educational institutions like schools and colleges, not only within Majuli but also in other places of the state. It was with the efforts of enthusiastic individuals and also sometimes by the active supports from the Satra institutions that modern educational institutions began to be established in Majuli. The first primary school in Majuli is said to be established in 1878\(^6\). In 1924, the first English-medium school was established in Bongaon as the Bongaon M.E. School. The Majuli College, first college in Majuli, came out in 1962 which was later affiliated to the University of Dibrugarh\(^7\).

Some of the relevant information regarding the present educational scenario of Majuli is given in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of primary schools</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of colleges</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincialized High Schools</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Schools</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate</td>
<td>68% (in 1991), 71% (in 2001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 4: Table showing figures concerning to education in Majuli

The relatively higher literacy rate reflects the sound achievement of the people of Majuli in the educational sector. The place is also acclaimed with the pride of producing several brilliant students who later demonstrated their specialized skills and talents in different service sectors both within and outside country.

**Economy**

The economy of Majuli is typical Indian agro-based rural economy. The island had been traditionally known as a place abundance of “crops and fishes”. Apart from government services, the various economic occupations of the people are agriculture, pisciculture,
sericulture, pottery, cattle farming and dairying, handlooms and handicrafts, etc. Small business class is emerging in recent times who are engaged in various local trades.

Transport and Communication

The only means of transport to reach Majuli is the waterways over the Brahmaputra. The most convenient and frequently used route is from Nimatighat of Jorhat where government and private ferry services are available to different places of Majuli, like Kamalabari, Salmora, Sumoimari, Dakhinpat, etc. There is also a land route which connects the Dhemaji on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra to the Jengrai area of northern Majuli. However, this route remains closed during rainy season of summer and not preferred by tourists.

Within Majuli, there are motorable roads contructed by the Public Works Department of the government, connecting important centres like Kamalabari, Garmur, Jengrai, etc. Sometimes the various embankments are also used as roads. There are local ferry services at the points where a land road is interrupted by a waterscape.
Fig 5: Map of India showing the position of the Assam State (in green)

Fig 6: Majuli Island (within the red rectangle) seen in a satellite map of Assam (Source: NASA)
Fig 7: Majuli as appeared in one satellite imagery (from website of NASA)
Notes


8 Map source: National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) <http://rapidfire.sci.gsfc.nasa.gov> 

Photo 7: Ferry services from Nimati Ghat

Photo 8: A ferry on its way to Majuli

Photo 9: Passengers rushing from the ferry to catch a bus in the Kamalabari Ghat
Photo 10: The Kamalabari chariali, the gateway to Majuli

Photo 11: A view of the Kamalabari centre

Photo 12: A flock of herons in Kamalabari
Photo 13: People crossing a marsh on boat, an usual scene in Majuli

Photo 14: A village road

Photo 15: An usual scene of transport in Majuli
Photo 16: A bridge whose both ends have been washed away by flood

Photo 17: Missing women and children having a bath
Introduction to the Satra Institution

The satras are the Vaisnava monasteries, emblematic entities of the Assam-Vaisnavism, which are the residential places of the Vaisnava monks called the bhakats. The beginning of the establishment of the satras in Assam can be traced in the neo-Vaisnavite movement in the 16th century under the leadership of Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568). It was Śaṅkaradeva who steered the neo-Vaisnavite movement in the state of Assam that promoted a liberal way of living for the common masses, irrespective of caste and creed. That new religio-cultural wave touched all the spheres of the social life of Assam including religion, literature, drama, visual and performing arts and music. In fact, the so-called mainstream culture of the Assamese people in current times is rooted in that cultural platform designed and developed by Śaṅkaradeva and his followers in succeeding times.

The term satra was understood, in the initial stage of the neo-Vaisnavite movement, in the sense of religious sitting or association. The emergence of the satras in the form of permanent institution with elaborate organizational setup was a later phenomenon that took place in post-Śaṅkaradeva times. It is opined by scholars that the term satra, which etymologically means “an association or a sitting (sad + tra) or an instrument which helps to liberate the noble (sad + tri)”\(^1\), was referred during the times of Śaṅkaradeva to mean the process of the reciting and listening to the expositions of the holy script Bhāgavata-purāṇa.

... we find that a religious sitting or association where the Bhāgavata was recited or explained was designated as a satra as the initial stage of the Vaisnava movement. With the progress of time, these associations of devotees began to develop on distinct line and ultimately emerged as a well-developed institution
having a distinct structural feature and an elaborate paraphernalia and practices. Henceforth, the term satra began to signify a distinct type of institution with characteristics of its own.²

S. N. Sarma has outlined three stages of evolution of the satras. The first phase refers to the Śaṅkaradeva’s times when the satra existed not in the form of a permanent institution but in the form of holy sittings centered on the expositions of the Bhāgavata. The second stage of growth of the satras took place after the death of Śaṅkaradeva, when his immediate successor Mādhavadeva (1489-1586) and the influential disciple Dāmodaradeva (1488-1598) took their initiatives, in different places, to shape the structural and organizational features of the satras. While Dāmodaradeva had initiated a satra at Patbausi, Mādhavadeva was prevailed upon by his followers to set up a satra in Barpeta. In this phase, the satras not only acquired the physical campuses of distinctive architectural setup but also had attained their organizational characters with varied daily and occasional activities and services to be performed by the residing devotees. The third and final phase of the growth of the satras was attained in the seventeenth century when the royal patronage was extended to them from the then Ahom and Koch kings. This contributed sound economic footings of the satras, and influenced their management, headship, formalities and dealings.³

The satras started primarily for the dissemination of the Vaisnava faith among the masses. In order to achieve their objectives, the satras evolved their characteristic traditions of literature, music (both vocal and instrumental) dance and drama, painting, manuscript-writing, and different genres of craftsmanship and architecture, bringing out a distinctive whole which is locally called as Satrīyā culture. The influence of the satras in the greater social and cultural life of the people is immense; they played significant role in the social, cultural and political history of Assam. It has been customary for each and every caste-Hindu family of Assam to get religious ordination from one satra.
The exact number of satras in Assam in present times is difficult to be ascertained. However, S. N. Sarma listed 380 satras in different places of Assam, while R. Thakuria believes that the number is above 650.

Majuli is famed with the highest concentration of the satras. It is rightly acclaimed as the centre of Satrīya culture. According to a widely prevalent local supposition, there are 65 big and small satras in Majuli. Narayan Chandra Goswami, the present head (Satrādhikār) of the Natun Kamalabri Satra of Majuli, listed 59 satras of Majuli. Apart from this numerical strength, the significant fact is that Majuli is the place of some of the satras which are renowned for their superior positions in terms of affluence, full-fledged monastic structure, socio-cultural and historical significance, and influence over a wider section of people, in the state of Assam, in the matters of religion, education, arts and crafts and morale for the masses. The most notable four among them are Natun Kamalabari, Garmur, Auniati and Dakhinpat.

*Description of a Satra Campus*

The campus of a typical satra is composed of four architectural units: Bāṭcorā, Hāṭī, Nāmghar or Kīrttan-ghar and Maṇikūṭ. These are described below.

*Bāṭcorā*: The bāṭcorā is the entrance or gateway of a satra. It is also known as Karāpat. A bāṭcorā or karāpat is a small open house at the entry-point of the campus of a satra, constructed with a roof usually standing on four decorated pillars. Sarma observes that the “bāṭcarā of a satra is a miniature imitation of toran-grha of the Hindu temple”. It demarcates the satra arena from the other settlement in the neighbourhood. Distinguished visitors and guests are received in bāṭcarā in traditional Satrīya custom.
Hāṭī: The passage from the bātcarā leads to the hāṭīs, which are cloisters where the bhakat (devotees) reside. In a full-fledged satra there exist four hāṭīs, surrounding the nāmghar (prayer hall) from four directions. Each of these cāri- hāṭīs (four cloisters, cāri = four) is named as per the direction in which it stands in reference to the nāmghar, such as, pūb hāṭī (eastern cloister), paścim hāṭī (western cloister), uttar hāṭī (northern cloister) and dakkhin hāṭī (southern cloister). A single hāṭī exists in the form of an elongated structure consisting of a series of residual huts or compartments. Each of such compartments is called bahā. A bahā is the room for one or more devotees. On the other hand, a single devotee may avail one or more rooms depending on his status.

Nāmghar / Kirttan-ghar: The nāmghar or kirttan-ghar, meaning the prayer hall, is situated at the centre of the satra campus, surrounded by the four rows of hāṭīs. It is a big hall topped with gabled roof and having apsidal façade. Inside the nāmghar, there lies a central nave from the entrance door at the west to the manikūt (sanctum sanctorum) at the east. There are two rows of wooden pillars (khutās) on both sides of the nave, separating the nave from the aisles on its both sides. The walls of a nāmghar are left with perforated wood-carvings, called jālis, which function like windows for passage of light and air. Although the chief function of the nāmghar is to accommodate the devotees for choral prayers and hymns, it is also used by the devotees for holding meetings, discussions and enacting dramatic and musical performances.

Manikūt: The manikut, literally meaning ‘house of jewels’, is the sanctum-sanctorum of the satra institution. It is attached at the eastern end of the nāmghar. The deities either in the form of idols or the Holy Scripture (the Bhāgavata) are placed inside the manikūt on wooden pedestals (āsanas). This is regarded as the most sacred portion in the entire satra campus.
An important fact is that nāmghar, with the manikūt attached to it, is also an entity common to Assamese Hindu villages. In the general Assamese caste-Hindu society, the religious institutional unit which serves at the grass-root level is the nāmghar which is the identity-marker of a village. Each village customarily possesses one nāmghar which functions for multi-purpose activities, such as, community prayer and meetings, occasional rituals, etc. Each nāmghar usually functions, on
religious matters, under the authority of a satra. Thus the satras can be seen as the central authoritative bodies with the nāmghars as their peripheral units at the village-level. However, in the case of Majuli, it has been observed that the satras are relatively in closer links with the villages, as people find a satra in almost every next village in Majuli.

Besides the above mentioned built-in structures, a typical satra campus includes big water-ponds, crop-fields, vegetations of native plants and trees.

The above description holds true for a typical full-fledged satra. However, the satras vary in terms of their physical sizes, number of devotees and peripheries of influence in surrounding society. Some satras do not possess all the four hātis. Sometimes one or two families are seen to be running a satra which can not be differentiated, looking at the physical appearances, from commonplace family houses.

Different types of Satras

The satra institutions are seen to exist in different types or categories. The differentiations of the satras can be made in the following lines.

a) During the post-Sankaradeva periods, the Vaishnavism in Assam got splitted into a number of sub-sects which are called samhatis. There evolved four samhatis, namely, Brahma, Nikā, Puruṣa and Kāla. Each of the presently existing satras subscribes to the faith and conventions of any of the four samhatis. Thus, there are four different types of satras affiliated to the four different samhatis.

b) Satras are seen to differ on the issue of celibacy. There are satras where the devotees and their chief maintain a celibate life abstaining from getting married and forming their families. Such types of satras are called kevaliyā or udāsin satra. In contrast, there is also the other
variety where the devotees and the chief of the satra lead a householder’s life with their wives and children. These satras are called grhī satras.

c) Due to a number of reasons, few satras enjoy a superior position than the rest in terms of their names, reputations and authoritativeness over religious matters. Sarma observes,

...there are a few satras which are not only held in high esteem but their opinion and judgments on religious matters carry greater weight than the rest. ... ... The causes that contributed to raise the status [of such satras] in the estimation of the people above all other satras are mainly three, - (i) the royal patronage which gave them wealth and position, (ii) dignity and somber appearance maintained by them all through their history and (iii) their past tradition associated with some of the outstanding religious proselytisers of the Vaisnavite period.8

The few major satras which can be named in this line are Kamalabari, Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garmur, Camaguri, Bardowa, Barpeta, etc. etc. The first five of this list belong to Majuli.

Many of such major satras have their branch-satras in different places. Such branches are seen to be of two types. Sometimes the descendents and relatives, of the founder of a major satra, establish their smaller satras by fetching religious flickers from the main satra. Such branches are called ṣalā-banti satra. Again, those branches established by the disciples of a major satra in obedience to the norms and conventions of the major satra are called āgyābāhī satra.

d) Although there are several hundred satras in different places of Assam including Majuli, there are only few major satras among them where the full-fledged monastic culture and institutional environment are visible. A complete architectural arena, good number of residential monks, distinctive history and heritage etc are possessed only by such major satras, precisely by those where the celibacy is the norm. In contrast to these, the smaller satras, many of whom are
often run by a single family, do not possess the monastic and institutional flavours.

The Management System

A satras possess its own characteristic system of organizational management. As mentioned earlier, such organizational structure had been evolved in the hands of Dāmodaradeva and Mādhavaeva in post-Śaṅkaradeva period, and later acquired sophistications with the influences that came with the royal patronage. They developed a vernacular staffing pattern in each of their satras where the devotees are entrusted with different offices to handle with, under one chief-functionary of the satra who is called the Adhikār or Satrādhikār. Some of the important portfolios which are seen to be held by the residential devotees, generally called bhakats, in the present systems of the full-fledged satra institutions are described below.

**Adhikār / Satrādhikār** = chief functionary

**Dekā-Satrādhikār** = deputy to adhikār, also the would-be adhikār after the demise of the adhikār

**Bhāgavati** = person who recites and expounds the Bhagavata in the Brajabuli language at prescribed times

**Pāṭhak** = person who recites the metrical renderings of the Bhāgavata and the poetical works in Assamese

**Śravaṇī** = listeners who are to listen to the reading and expounding of the scriptures

**Gāyan** = singers

**Bāyan** = instrumentalists (drummers)

**Deuri** = in-charge of worshiping in the maṇikāṭ

**Nāmlagowā** = leaders in congregational prayers

**Dhan-bharāṭī** = treasurer
Caul-bharalī = store-supervisor
Hāṭi-matā = person who looks after the cloisters (hāfīs)
Bilaniyā = person who distributes offerings made to the deity
Thāi-macā = one who sweeps, washes and plasters the floors of the kirtan-ghar and manikūt
Likhak = copyist for writing and copying manuscripts
Khanikar = versatile artist does the work of painting, sculpting and other visual craftsmanship.
Al-dharā = personal attendant of the adhikār

The above one is a list of the most commonly seen offices of the major satras. Sometimes some satras do not possess all of them or may have slightly different terms for certain portfolios. In some satras, some of the office-heads have their respective assistants. In that case, the designation of the head is prefixed by the term bar (big, senior) and his assistant’s designation is prefixed by saru (small, junior). For example, bar-nāmlagowā (chief of the congregational prayers) and saru-nāmlagowā (assistant to the chief of the congregational prayers), etc. Also, some departments in big satras have a number of sub-departments. For example, the department of the management of store-keeping under the caul-bharalī, there may be precise sub-portfolios, such as, Lon-bharalī (store-keeper of salt and oil), guwā-bharalī (in-charge of the keeping of betel-nuts, cloves, cinnamon, etc), bheṭi-dharā (receiver of gifts), etc.

The above-mentioned portfolios are held by the devotees who reside inside the cloisters of the satra itself. There are also a number of other offices which are held by peoples who live outside the main satra campus, but enjoy revenue-free land of the satra for their settlement in return to their services. Some of such offices are as follows.
**Rājmedhi** = collector of the tithe (guru-kar) from disciples, observer of the religious life of people of a number of villages and their relationship with the satra

**Barmedhi** = subordinate to the Rājmedhi, in-charge of a single village under the latter's supervision

**Medhi** = assistant to Barmedhi

**Sājtola** = assistant to Barmedhi, engaged in collecting materials to be sent to the satra

**Pācani** = assistant to Barmedhi, informants.

The *Satrādhikār* and the senior devotees and departmental heads constitute a kind of advisory council for running the satras. This council is responsible for taking the major decisions.

The recruitment of the *bhakats* takes place in two ways. A matured adult man who willingly desires to be a devotee may get a seat inside the cloisters. The satras have their own norms to see that he is qualified, and there are prescribed customs of initiation the man would have to be through. Secondly, it has been a custom for many rural Assamese families, who are disciples (śisyas) of a particular satra, to offer one of their kids to their respective satras. Such child is brought up under the guardianship of the senior *bhakats*. They are made to go through the various trainings of general and religious education as well as the suitable specialized skills of visual and performing arts.

In usual case of the celibate satras of Majuli, *Satrādhikār* and the council of his advisors are responsible for the selection of the future *Satrādhikār*. Sometimes this process involves spotting out a child either in the same satra or in a different one. Sometimes such a child is selected from the families of the disciples outside the satra. Then the child is taken to the satra and then brought up with all the necessary trainings to lead the institution in future. In some other cases, efficient
adult persons from other satras are also invited to take the charge of the
_Satrādhikār_. In most of the household satras, the headship goes in the
hereditary line.

The financial requirements of the satras in present times come
from a number of sources. Sarma stated that “income of the satras is
derived from two sources. These two sources are, (i) lands originally
granted by the kings of pre-British days and subsequently confirmed and
recognized by the British Government; (ii) religious tithes contributed
by the disciples”\(^9\). In some satras the _bhakats_ do cultivation and cow
rearing. Some satras have also received grants in cash from the
governments in post-independent times for specific projects. As far as
the second source is concerned, the number of _śisyas_ or disciples matters
in the amount of income. It is customary for every disciple family to
contribute in cash annually which is called _guru-kar_. Thus, the bigger
satras having greater number of disciples get greater amount of income
out of tithe. There are also the occasional gifts and offerings from
private or public sources.

**General Customs and Important Rituals**

The residential _bhakats_ and their _Satrādhikār_ maintain an
intensely devotional life which is visibly different from that of laymen.
They possess a distinctive set of customs and mannerisms, food-habits
and clothing, daily and occasional ceremonials, and even spoken words
and phrases although they speak the same Assamese language.

Most of the major satras of Majuli are celibate. The cloisters of
such satras where the devotees remain bachelors all throughout their
lives are filled with the aura of a different world. The lives of these
_bhakats_ are filled up with their deep-rooted _bhakti_ towards god and the
many creative options of music, dance, drama, visual artistry and
manship. A loin cloth (_dhuti_), a wrapper (_cādar_) and a traditional
Assamese towel (gāmochā) constitute the typical dress of a bhakat in a satra. The foods in satra are the typical Assamese traditional foods with simpler preparation. However, in many cases strong reservations are observed in accepting food prepared by outsiders. Regarding non-vegetarianism, Sarma observed,

Fish and meat (with a certain exception) are not taboos. Almost all the reformers including Samkradeva and Madhavadeva were non-vegetarians. ... ... it [Vaiṣṇava religion] was intended for ordinary folk who could not be expected to give up fish and meat which form two principal items of diet. Self-mortification or self-deprivation on the one hand the self-indulgence on the other must be avoided according to this cult. ... ... Of course all kinds of meat have not been sanctioned; there are many exceptions. If in some satras the Gurus [Satrādhikār] and the devotees or disciples are not in the habit of taking meat and fish, it is not because of any prohibition but simply as a matter of convention.¹⁰

The inter-relationships among the devotees themselves are highly cordial. The child-bhakats are treated by elders as latter's own childs. These child-bhakats are given their education in the Satrīyā tols. The Satrādhikār is treated with high obligation and respect by all. He is not only the spiritual guide and guardian for all the devotees but also is regarded as equal to the deity.

An evident feature in the mannerisms of the devotees is their extremely polite and polished ways addressing, both among themselves and also with the visitors. The following observation made by Sarma still holds true for the satras of Majuli.

A devotee popularly known as Satrīyā-bhakat never speaks in terms of the first person, in as much as it indicates egoism. For instance, if a Satrīyā-bhakat is asked “Have you done it?”, he will never say, ‘Yes, I have done it’. He will instead reply, “By the grace of the Almighty and by your blessings, it has been done”. The use of the first person in singular number is rarely seen. In case of dire necessity they will rather use ‘we’ or ‘ours’. One will be surprised to hear their uniform use of sentences in passive voice in mutual discussions or talks.¹¹
The devotees observe a series of daily ceremonials (*nitya prasaṅga*) on everyday and occasional ceremonials (*naimittika prasaṅga*) on selected occasions. These daily and occasional events are observed strictly as per the tradition of the satra. The highly elaborate daily observances of a devotee include different prayer services; singing of songs specific to the time of the day; offerings to the deity; recitation, exposition and listening to specified portions of specified scriptures; enactment and performances of specified items of dance, drama and instrumental orchestra.

The occasional observances include festivals, ceremonies connected with death anniversaries of *Vaiśṇava* Gurus and previous *Satrādhikārs*, special ritualistic functions, etc. Some of the important events of such occasional observances are described in the following texts.

*Kṛṣṇa-Janmāštami*: This is the birth anniversary of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* which is observed on the eighth lunar day of the dark fortnight in the month of *Bhāda* (July-August). This is observed with placing new sacred clothes on the wooden pedestals in *manikūṭ*, followed by singing of songs and choral-prayers. The texts describing the various deeds of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* in His childhood are recited and expounded. In the evening, *bhāonās* (kind of traditional *Vaiṣṇavite* drama of Assam) are enacted.

*Rās-līlā*: The *Rās* or *Rās-līlā* is another festive event which is based on the theme of Lord Krishna’s amorous plays with the milk-maids. This is observed in the full-moon day in the month of *Kāti* (October-November). This is perhaps the most popular festival of the satras that attracts a large number of tourists from different parts of the state every year to Majuli. Its attractive theme and the autumnal climate of the river-island contribute to make it the single-most important festive occasion in Majuli.
Apart from the various satras, this Rās festival is also now observed by modern youth-clubs and other such organizations. Inside the satras, all the male and female characters of the story of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and the milk-maids are enacted by the male devotees. However, women also take part for respective characters in the enactments organized by the modern associations and clubs. In the latter case, modern electronic devices for sound, music, lighting, stage and choreography are exploited by different organizations with competitive zeal.

*Pāl-nām*: This is an important Satrīyā ritualistic occasion featured with congregational prayers and choral singing. It is usually observed during time of July-August and October-November. The duration varies from a couple of days to a month.

The other such occasional events are Śaṅkar-Janmotsav (birth anniversary of Śaṅkaradeva), *Phākuvā* (*holi* – the Indian festival of colours), and the different anniversaries of the bygone stalwarts of the Vaiśnava faith. The national festival of Assam – the *Bihu*, is also observed in the satras of Majuli in their own ways in the months of April (*Bohāg bihu*), October (*Kāti bihu*) and January (*Māgh bihu*).

**Some Important Satras of Majuli**

Natun Kamalabari Satra: One disciple of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, namely Badulā Ātā, established a satra in Majuli in 1673 which was known as the Kamalabari Satra. This satra received royal supports from the Ahom kings in pre-British times and came to be emerged as a highly influential satra in due course. However, towards the thirties of the twentieth century, Ghanakanta Deva Goswami, the pro-Satrādhikār of the satra had a split and he came out of the satra along with a number of his supporting followers. In 1936, he established the Natun Kamalabari Satra (*Natun* = new) on the bank of the Tuni river.
of Majuli. The old Kamalabari Satra, in later times shifted its campus because of flood and erosion to the southern bank – Titabar region of the Jorhat district.

The Natun Kamalabari Satra followed the old Kamalābarīa norms of celibacy and Nikā samhati. Both the Kamalabaris have their reputation for outstanding expertise in Satrīyā music, dance and drama. Their productions have been publicized through different mass media, and some of their exponents have received awards from the Sangeet Natak Akademi of the Government of India.

Auniati Satra: The Auniati Satra was established in 1653 by Niranjanadeva with the royal support from the then Ahom king Jayadhvaj Sinha. The Assam District Gazetteer describes,

Before Jayadhvaj Sinha ascended the Ahom throne, there had prevailed religious intolerance in the Ahom kingdom. Even some atrocities were committed to suppress Vaisnavism. These suppressive measures were followed by great calamities which made Swargadeo Jayadhvaj Sinha to revise the religious policy of the State. He organised a religious festival to get himself initiated into Vaisnavism. This was followed by some sacrificial ceremonies of great pomp at Galpurghat in A.D. 1653. He, thereafter assumed the Hindu name Jayadhvaj Sinha and installed Niranjanadeva as the royal Satradhikār at the Majuli. The place where the satra was constructed by Madhav Charan Barbarua was originally full of ‘Aunipan’ – a kind of wild bettle creeper, and hence the name Auniati.

The satra had to shift a number of times due to flood and erosion. The present campus of the Auniati Satra is situated in the Kamalabari mauza of Majuli. It belongs to the Brahma samhati and strictly maintains celibacy. This satra is one of the biggest and richest satras of Assam, with its highly esteemed collections of illustrated manuscripts and other works of intricate craftsmanship. Recently, the satra has also opened a new campus of it in the Kaliapani area of Jorhat District on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra. This arrangement has been made as a stand-by option in case its Majuli campus is eroded away.
Garmur Satra: The Garmur Satra was established by Jayaharideva, a saint of the Dāmodariyā sect, in the time of 1715-1744 (Sarma 1966: 217). This satra received royal patronage since the reign of the Ahom king Siva Sinha. Although the celibacy was the norm in earlier times, some amendments took place in later times.

... children are recruited from neighbouring villages and trained up to be bhakats, but, if at any time the find restraints of celibacy irksome, they are at liberty to return to the outer world. Relaxation of the law of celibacy had recently been granted by the last Satrādhikār Pitambar Deva Goswami which is an important feature of the Garamur satra. But the Satrādhikār himself is a celibate. The residing monks or bhakats who desire to get married are freely allowed to do so.13

Garmur Satra is one of the renowned and affluent satras of Assam. Its late Satrādhikār Pitambar Deva Goswami was a social reformer, activist and freedom-fighter for the country. The satra has also acquired its reputation for its exquisite works of word-carving in the past.

Dakhinpat Satra: Dakhinpat Satra was established by Banamalideva in the middle of the seventeenth century with the royal support of the then Ahom king Jayadhvaj Sinha. Banamalideva was a successor of Damodaradeva and established a number of satras in different parts of Assam. Regarding the establishment of the Dakhinpat Satra, the government gazetteer describes,

From Cooch Behar he [Banamalideva] came to the Ahom kingdom in A.D. 1654 on the expressed invitation of Jayadhvaj Sinha and brought with him an image of Vishnu from Orissa. The Gosain was not allowed to go back and arrangements were made for the establishment of his satra in the vicinity of Rangoli Bahor, the Ahom camp at Majuli. King Jayadhvaj Sinha treated him with utmost courtesy and endowed the satra with large grants of land. Subsequently the satra came to be known as the Dakhinpat satra and the image of Sri Sri Jadava Rai came to be the sole idol of worship in the satra.14

Dakhinpat Satra is held with high esteem by a larger section of people since its inception. It has several branch-satras in different places.
of Assam. Like the Auniati Satra, Dakhinpat Satra has also constructed its stand-by campus in the Sotai area of Jorhat.

_Satriyā Artistic Traditions of Majuli: Performing and Visual Arts_

_Satriyā_ traditions involve a set of distinctive performing and visual arts of different types, such as, vocal and instrumental music, dance, drama, painting and writing of manuscripts, wood-carving, cane and bamboo works, architecture, etc. Śaṅkaradeva, who himself was a versatile artist and showed his extra-ordinary command over such creative arts, emphasized a lot in the different artistic items as the aids for dissemination of his ideals of neo-Vaiśnavism among the common people. The neo-Vaiśnavite movement under his leadership produced a total and unique body of Vaiśnavite arts in different genres, either by nourishing the existing artistic traditions of previous times or by creating items anew. The satra institutions are the ones which have been carrying and preserving these neo-Vaiśnavite legacies till now, primarily through oral transmission from generation to generation.

The _Satriyā_ music tradition carries a set of rāga-based songs called _bargīt_ (great songs) which are the lyrical compositions of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. These are the devotional songs of classical nature each of which is set to a specific _rāga_ (melody). The _bargīt_ system also has its own set of _tālas_ (rhythms). However, there are two styles of singing the _bargīts_ – with _tāla_ and without _tāla_. Their singing in the satras is also restricted to pre-defined hours of the day (morning, mid-day, evening), depending on the _rāgas_ on which the songs are based. Śaṅkaradeva is said to have written 240 _bargīts_, but those manuscripts got burnt in accidental fire. He then asked Mādhavadeva to compose such songs. Mādhavadeva not only composed songs on his own but also collected his guru’s songs from the memory of other devotees. The total number of _bargīts_ then became 191. It is to
be noted that the satras possess different categories of songs other than these *bargīt*. The term *bargīt* is used particularly to denote these 191 songs composed by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva only. There are more than 30 rāgas associated with the *bargīts*. A list of the names of the rāgas and tālas recorded from Natun Kamalabari Satra is given in Annexure II.

The appearance of rāga-music like the *bargīts* in the satras can be seen in the broader perspective of the Bhakti movements in medieval India. As stated by Phukan,

> According to the ancient Indian thinkers the ultimate goal of all kinds of *vidyā*(art) was the upliftment of the soul leading to the realization of the unknown and a medium for the union of ātmā and paramātmā. This perhaps was the reason why all the saint-composers like Tulsidas, Kabir, Mira, Nanak and others used rāga music for their compositions. Sankaradeva and Mādhavadeva, the two great saint-composers of the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement of Assam, were no exception. Needless to say, rāga music was considered as the most sublime and pure of all prevailing musical forms of the country.

The *bargīts* are in the *Brajabuli* language (an admixture of early Assamese, Maithili and western Hindi) and of high literary values. They are held with respects and pride not only inside the satras but also by the greater Assamese society. The songs are taught and learned in different modern establishments. Voices have also been raised from time to time from different corners to establish the *bargīts* as a form of Indian classical music.

Apart from the *bargīts*, there are also other varieties of songs in Satrīyā traditions, such as, *āṅkar gīt*, kīrttan-ghoṣā, *bhaṭīmā*, nāṃghoṣā, etc. The *āṅkar gīts* (also called *nāṭar gīt*) are the songs of the plays composed by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. They are usually sung during the enactment of those plays. In terms of musicological characteristics they are similar to the *bargīts* except that, unlike *bargīts* each of the *āṅkar gīts* is always to be sung in a specific tāla. The
Kirttan-ghośā and Nām-ghośā are the two great treatises of Assam Vaiṣṇavism, written by Saṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva respectively. The various quartets of these two texts are sung in congregation. This ghośā-singing, however, is not of classical nature and can be performed by the laymen. Maheswar Neog describes,

A great number of people can not generally participate in the bargita or ankar gīta performances. The kirtana or kirtana-ghosa type of music, however, presents a different spectacle. All male members of a village, including boys, join congregational prayers in the form of singing of kirtana-ghosa. There are parallel congregations in the sattras. One person, called nama-lagowa (lit., one who sets the song of God’s name), responsible for leading the chorus, sets the refrain, ghosa (that which is loudly sung), which the whole assembly repeats with oneness of voice as far as practicable. The leader then begins reciting the padas, each two lines of the verses being alternated by singing of the ghosa. Each kirtana-ghosa recital, covering about ten minutes which can be lengthened without monotony to an hour, gives a pen-picture of Kṛṣṇa or Narayana, or describes a situation or a little action.

The bhatimās are the eulogistic orations in praise of the gods, kings, dramatic characters and gurus. They are sung in deep voices, often without any rāga and tāla, on different occasions.

Intimately connected with the music are the dances and dramas. The satras have evolved a school of classical dance called Sattrīyā-nāc or Sattrīyā-nṛtya. The Sattrīyā-nṛtya has its own sets of hand-gestures, movements, feet and poses, like the other classical dance-forms of India. This style of dance is said to be developed during early 16th century by Saṅkaradeva, with the synthesis of the elements from some of the then existing dance styles in Assam and those of some other parts of the country. There are different items of Sattrīyā-nṛtya, such as, sutradhārī-nṛtya, nātuvā-nāc, cāli-nāc, rāsa-nṛtya, kṛṣṇa-nṛtya, ojā-pāli, etc. Neog observes,

The school has some features in common with the Manipuri style, and could surmise the impact of this form on the Manipuri rather than the reverse as this is the style to have evolved and
been established earlier. No less an artist and authority than Shri Uday Shankar has called the sattra style ‘the fifth school of classical Indian dance’.

The learning of the Satriyā-nāc involves going through a series of tough physical exercises prior to acquiring the core lessons. These exercises are called māṭi-ākhorās. These māṭi-ākhorās are taught to the child bhakats by the senior bāyans inside the cloisters of the satras.

The Satriyā-nṛtya is getting its popularity outside the satras also. In recent times, it has got recognition as one of the major art forms of the country by the competent authority. The enthusiasm to learn and acquire the art of this dance is observed to be increasing in the new generation of people in recent times.

The Satriyā dramatic art form is called ankiyā-nāt or bhāonā. This traditional theatrical form is another creation of the great Saṅkaradeva. The bhāonās are based on Bhāgavata-stories, enacted with abundance of dances, songs, music and the dialogues being in the Brajabuli medium. However, in later times, contemporary Assamese language is also used and new themes are also seen to be created other than those from the Bhāgavata. Besides the ankiyā-nāts written by Saṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, there are several scripts written by other Vaiṣṇava gurus. It has been customary for the Satrādhikārs to compose scripts for bhāonā anew on their own. Apart from the satras, they are widely enacted in the village nāmghars. The bhonas were the powerful tools for spreading the neo-Vaiṣṇava ideals among the common masses because of its capacity to attract audience. Although this type of propaganda is no longer associated with bhāonā in contemporary times, its value and appreciation as an entertaining art blended with religious purity is still alive in Assamese rural society. In the words of Mahanta,
The bhāonā has ... been a monolithic tradition where individual artistic creation, collective participation and community creativity are blended. ... ... Apart from being an extremely satisfying and pleasant community task of the Assamese society the performance of bhāonā in itself is inspiring to the community as a whole at spiritual, temporal and folk levels. It may be surmised that Sankaradeva blended these three elements into the bhāonā depending on situations and popular mood. The old and the aged, the monks and the devotees always derive spiritual enjoyment through the devotional and ritualistic aspect of the performance which always enjoins upon undivided devotion to Lord Visnu. The bhāonā on the other hand is also a great source of entertainment to the younger generation with its tremendous dramaturgical potential, and the unlettered folk of the village also derive refined enjoyment combined with spiritual lesson from the performance.16.

An attractive genre of the Satrīyā performing arts is the dhemālis. These are the instrumental music performed with the khol (drum) and cymbals, by groups of several instrumentalists together attired in uniformed dress and turban. These dhemālis are performed in daily and occasional services of the satras and often played as the preliminaries before the performance of a bhāonā. There are several dhemālis. Their performance involves gestures, movements and sometimes acrobatic works.

Khol (drum) and tāl (cymbals) are the primary musical instruments of Satrīyā music which are most frequently used. There are varied tāls of different sizes and names. Other musical instruments are tokārī (a stringed instrument), ghantā (bell), kānh (gong), dabā (a variety of big drum), negerā (kettle drums), śāṅkha (conch), kālī (long pipes), etc.

The specialized abbots of the satras who are entrusted with the responsibilities of performing and teaching the above-mentioned arts are the gāyans (singers) and bāyans (instrumentalists). They not only perform the different items on necessary occasions but also hand over their knowledge to the young learning bhakats. Gāyan-bāyan is the term frequently used to mean a group of performers. The senior gurus who
acquire the skills of higher perfection are called barbāyan and bargāyan. They held respectable positions both inside and outside the satras. A number of such exponents have been crowned with national awards from the Sangeet Natak Akademi of India.

Apart from the above traditional performances of songs, dance, dramas and music, certain satras like the Auniati Satra have the traditions of puppetry also. Stringed puppets are used to enact plays which are called putalā-bhāonā.

The khanikars of the satras were the persons who were responsible for carrying on varied activities of visual arts and craftsmanship. They were the versatile artists having skills of painting, cane and bamboo works, wood-carving, mask making etc.

The glimpses of the Satrīyā painting can be found in the illustrated manuscripts and other painted decorations such as on the walls and ceilings of the kīrtan-ghar, manikīta and the hātis. Such decorations are done with the painted images of creepers, floral motifs, gods, animals, birds, mythological figures etc. The art of preparation and illustration of manuscripts made up of the sāci-pāt, folios prepared from the bark of Sāci tree (Acquilaria Agallocha) and tula-pat, ginned and pressed cotton into flat sheets, is an important tradition in the satras. These manuscripts carry along with their texts the colourfully illustrated paintings. Human characters from epics, animals, interiors of palaces, outdoor landscapes etc. are painted with local stylizations. All manuscripts are not illustrated ones, and the tradition of manuscript painting is found to be no longer alive. Some of the famous illustrated manuscripts found in the satras of Majuli are Anādi Pātan (Camaguri Satra), Sundarākānda Rāmāyana (Bengena ati Satra), Bhakti Ratnāvalī (Kamalabari Satra), Hastividyārṇava (Auniati Satra), Bhāgavata XI (Dakhinpat Satra) etc. “The Satrīyā painting style”, as stated by Naren
Kalita, “if perused would reveal that it was a regional development involving local attributes, hair-styles, costumes, landscapes and other accessories although it derived many motifs from Jaina, Lodi and other schools of north India and absorbed them all to constitute a regional school”.

The works of wood-carvings in the satras include the images of gods, wooden āsana (pedestals) inside the manikūta, šarāī (platter with a stand), thogī (platter for keeping the Bhāgavata). Among the different godly images, the Garuḍa kneeling with folded hands is found to be the most common. Other such figures are dvārpāla (gatekeepers), Hanuman, Jaya-Bijaya etc. Such works often involve application of colours and paintings, and sometimes partly involve works of ivory and metal. Apart from these items, the wood-carving specimens are also found on the perforated jālis on the walls of the kīrtan-ghar.

The works of cane, bamboo and pith are widely done in entire Assam. Certain satras of Majuli are known for their productions of bicanīs (hand fan), kāth (mat) etc. The Satrīyā craftsmanship has got the distinction for making of the mukhās (masks) to be used in the performances of bhāonā and rās-līlā. Different masks are made to personify human as well as animal characters. They are made with bamboo skeletons which are then plastered with clay and cloths. They are then painted with locally prepared colours, such as, heṅgul (vermilion), hāitāl (yellow), nīl (blue), etc.

The Verbal Arts of the Satras

Besides the various items of performing and visual arts described above, the satras are highly rich repositories of verbal arts which include the items like myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles etc. Also known as
Oral Literature or Folk Literature, these items are characterized by their transference from one generation of people to their successive generations by the words of mouth, through oral-aural performances. The devotees inside the satras do inherit a good number of such oral narratives. There are the myths about the different gods, goddesses and their divine acts, there are legends centering on the bygone gurus and their extraordinary powers. How a particular satra did get its name? How a certain musical instrument did come into existence? How a particular rāga (tune) did originate? There are answers to all these, in the form of interesting and explanatory narratives.

The devotees of the satras are also seen to follow a distinctive mannerism of speaking. Although they speak in the same Assamese language like the other people in their surrounding societies, a characteristic Satriyā style of speaking is visible in their communications. An evident feature in the mannerisms of the devotees is their extremely polite and polished ways addressing, both among themselves and also with the visitors. The following observation made by Sarma still holds true for the satras of Majuli.

A devotee popularly known as Satriyā-bhakat never speaks in terms of the first person, in as much as it indicates egoism. For instance, if a Satriyā-bhakat is asked “Have you done it?”, he will never say, ‘Yes, I have done it’. He will instead reply, “By the grace of the Almighty and by your blessings, it has been done”. The use of the first person in singular number is rarely seen. In case of dire necessity they will rather use ‘we’ or ‘ours’. One will be surprised to hear their uniform use of sentences in passive voice in mutual discussions or talks.

In an interview, Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami, the Satradhikār of the Natun Kamalabari Satra, disclosed that there was peculiar item called Sīṅghāt in the oral tradition of the satras. The term Sīṅghāt means a riddle-like statement, with seemingly paradoxical corollaries (See Annexure IIIA). These items, when they are cracked and explained by
the experts, take the form of understandable statements of the Vaiśṇava lore.

A very special item of the oral tradition of the satras is the custom of Carit-tolā. It is the recitation of the biographies of the Vaiśṇava gurus of previous times. As a part of the morning and evening services, the biographies of the two saints Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, and also Vaiśṇava gurus of the respective satras, are recited by the burhā-bhakat (senior monk) of the satra inside the kīrtan-ghar. However, it is not possible to recite the complete biographies at a time. Thus only the portions, selected for special moral and ideal values, are usually recited. This custom is called Carit-tolā (Carit = biography). The narrator memorizes the selected portion of the biography and recites for 10 to 15 minutes. Interested listeners (usually among the other devotees of the satra) may “enroll” themselves in this oral-aural session by paying offerings to the deity in the Kīrtan-ghar. The Carit-tola is also carried out at the residence of the Satriādhikār. On this occasion the complete biography of a guru is recited. It may be mentioned that there are a good number of biographical works of several Vaiśṇava leaders which are called guru-caritas in Assamese verse and prose in the written form. The most noteworthy one among them is the Guru-Cartia-Kathā, which is a collection of the biographies of several Vaiśṇava gurus including Śaṅkaradeva. However, scholars have opined that it was only in much later times that these biographies were rendered into written versions, prior to which, there had been customary oration of such biographies handed down by words of mouth from generation to generation.

Some specimens of the oral traditions of the satras of Majuli are provided in the Appendix III.
Folk-Classical continuum in Satrīyā Culture

An important feature of the Satrīyā culture is its position in the context of the analytical culture-typologies, such as, folk and elite or folk and classical. Taking into consideration the various aspects of the Satrīyā items, it has been seen that Satrīyā culture can be designated neither as folk nor as elite and classical. In other words, elements are found with affiliations to both the polarities. It is not easy to demarcate where the flavors of the folk disappear and where the blending of the elite/classical begins. Rather, the whole phenomenon demonstrates a folk-elite and folk-classical continuum.

It has been a cliché to generalize village-centric cultures as folk and urban-centric cultures as elite. It is clear enough that the Satrīyā culture bears intimacy more with villages than urban settlements. From that point of view, Satrīyā culture is indisputably village-centered or village-based and thus closer to folk culture. But the level of norms, values and mannerisms formally exhibited in this culture is of extremely higher level, and from that point of view, the presence of eliteness is irrefutable.

This folk-elite and folk-classical continuum is clearly visible in the elementary features of the performing and visual arts of the satras. Experts opine that the tradition of Satrīyā dance is enriched with many classical characters, yet it also bears elements of the folk dances of a number of local tribal communities. The hand-gestures of Mishing folk dances and the stepping of the Bodo (a tribal community of the central and western Assam) folk dances are seen in Satrīyā dances. The bargits are categorized as classical music as they are rāga-based musical compositions. However, folk attitudes are visible in the bargits both from the linguistic and musicological perspectives. Architecturally, the
pan-Indian temple architecture is seemingly preserved in the layout of the prayer halls of the satras. The garbha-grha is replaced with the manikīta, and the manḍapa is replaced with the kirtan-ghar. But the manikīta of a satra is not as much vertically heightened as that of a garbha-grha. The existence of rows of wooden pillars (in recent times, concrete pillars) to hold the ceiling and roof of the elongated kirtan-ghar bears structural similarities more with the raised-platform houses of the local tribal communities of the region. Moreover, unlike a classical Indian temple, a satra in its entrance does not have an elaborate gopuram, rather has the traditional bātcorā which is purely vernacular.

Egalitarianism and the Satras

The neo- Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam during the 15th century onwards was rooted in its philosophy of equality among not only people but also among all creatures. It was more a reform to establish dignity of mankind irrespective of caste and class. Śaṅkaradeva and his followers endeavoured to propagate a faith that gives equal place to all the sections of the society, which gave a revolutionary breakthrough in the prevailing social hierarchy of the four-fold class system (Brāhmin, Khyatriya, Baiṣya, Śūdra – in the descending order) of the caste-Hindus, and the tribal communities who were treated as outside of, and inferior to, this caste-Hindu hierarchy of peoples.

This spirit of equality was seen in the organization and functioning of the satras at the early phase. Sarma observes,

... democratic outlook could be noticed in the working of the satra institution and its practices in early stage of Assamese Vaiṣṇavism. In initiating disciples no discrimination was made between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, the high and the low. The fact that the Guruship was not reserved as the exclusive monopoly of the Brahmins and that the Śūdra classes, viz., the Kāyasthas and the Kalitās, were ungrudgingly raised to the position of the headship of many satra, bear eloquent testimony to the spirit of equality among the Vaiṣṇavas.
There were a number of illustrious Vaiṣṇava Gurus and Satrādhikārs who extended their teaching and preaching amongst the various tribal communities in Assam and the surrounding states as well. These people were given initiation to the satras without any discrimination.

However, this egalitarian character of the satras was seen to be diminished, in many cases with complete reversal of the erstwhile democratic norms, in later times. With the prevalence of the system of hereditary succession to the headship, in the case of non-celibate satras, the importance of the community of devotees in the management of the satra affair began to diminish. In the cases of several celibate and non-celibate satras of Majuli, the influence of the Ahom royal court brought out a parallel power structure in the organization of the satras putting the Satrādhikārs at the centres of power.

The Ahom administrative system with the king as the supreme head and assisted by a council of nobles (dāṅgariyās) and a host of officers of various grades owing allegiance directly to the king, seemed to have cast its reflections on the satra administration also. ... ... ... The principal satras of Majuli were favoured by their patron kings with several villages consisting of a few hundred paiks. Duties of these paiks were to serve their respective satras with manual labour and to supply to the satras with necessary things. ... ... ... The influence of royal court helped to develop unnecessary formalities which stood as barriers between the Guru and the disciples.

The discrimination in the lines of tribe, caste and class in the functioning of the satras of Majuli has been an issue much discussed in popular platforms. Because of such prejudices, many individuals of the tribal population in Majuli, particularly the Mishings, had withdrawn their faith in the Vaiṣṇavism of the satras, and became converted to the Christianity. However, in the recent times, consciousness seems to grow amongst the satras about the bigotry they had been doing, as the matter has been severely criticized in the public media. A number of Satrādhikārs have called for the need of self-assessment of the
functioning of the satras. Some of them are, quite significantly, even reported to seek direct public apology to the tribal people in Majuli and to appeal them to come back to their erstwhile faith in Vaiśṇavism.

Notes

1 S. N. Sarma Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam (Guwahati, 1966) 103.
2 ibid, 104
3 ibid, 105 – 107.
4 Ibid, 215
5 Ramcharan Thakuriya, Editorial Note. Sattra-Samraksan (Guwahati, 1998).
6 Narayan Chandra Goswami, ‘Mājulīr Satrasamuh’. In P. K. Mahanta (ed.) Majuli (Jorhat, 2001) 44.
7 S. N. Sarma (1966) 106.
8 ibid, 116-117.
9 ibid, 113
10 ibid, 143-144.
11 ibid, 148.
13 ibid, 105.
14 ibid, 106
15 Birendra Kumar Phukan, ‘Bargit As A Form of Raga Music’. In B. Datta (ed.) Traditional Performing Arts of North-East India (Guwahati, 1990) 76-77.
17 Maheswar Neog, ‘Classical Dance Tradition in Assam’. In B. Datta (ed.) Traditional Performing Arts of North-East India (Guwahati, 1990) 16.


24 *ibid*, 203
Photo 18: Bātcorā of Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 19: The cloisters (hāfī) of Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 20: Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami, the Satrādhikār of Natun Kamalabari Satra
Photo 21: Inside the kirttan ghar of Natun Kamalabari Satra: Devotees in a congregational session.

Photo 22: A scene of Satrīyā nṛtya (Cāli nāc) in Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 23: Another moment of Cāli nāc, Natun Kamalabari Satra
Photo 24: *Dhemâli*, the musical preliminaries, Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 25: A *Bar bâyan* playing several drums at a time in a *dhemâli*, Natun Kamalabari
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Photo 27: Another moment of māṭī ākhorā, in Natun Kamalabari satra
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Photo 29: Some villagers participating in congregational prayer from outside the kirttan ghar, Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 30: A distant view of the kirttan ghar, of Auniati Satra

Photo 31: Auniati Satra: another view of the kirttan ghar
Photo 32: Auniati Satra: entrance-door of the Kirttan ghar

Photo 33: Wooden image of Garuda, inside the Kirttan ghar, Auniati Satra

Photo 34: The Simhásana and the paraphernalia in the manikūt of Auniati Satra, a bhakat giving offerings
Photo 35: Ākāś-banti, sky-lamps lit in the month of Kāti, Auniati Satra

Photo 36: The Dekha-Satraḥikār in his bohā, Auniati Satra

Photo 37: A bhakat making cane hand-fans: Auniati Satra
Photo 38: A bhakat giving final touch in his hand-fans, Auniati Satra

Photo 39: Weaving straw mats, Auniati Satra

Photo 40: Some puppets of Auniati Satra
Photo 41: An agar-bark manuscript, Auniati Satra

Photo 42: Manuscript paintings on agar-bark folios, Auniati Satra

Photo 43: Paintings on the plinth of the bāltcorā of Uttar Kamalabari Satra
Photo 44 (i- ii): Some paintings on the plinth of entrance of Kirtan ghar, Uttar Kamalabari Satra

Photo 45: At the end of a congregational prayer, Uttar Kamalabari Satra
Photo 46: Kirttan ghar of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 47: Another view of Kirttan ghar of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 48: A view of the campus of Dakhinpat Satra
Photo 49: The cloisters (hāṭ) of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 50: A pond in the campus, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 51: A bhakat preparing tea in his bohā, Dakhinpat Satra
Photo 52: Wood-works on the wall of the Kirttan ghar, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 53: A wooden decorated tray to put the Bhagavata on it, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 54: Another decorated tray, Dakhinpat Satra
Photo 55: A full view of a tray, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 56: Front panel of the manikat, illustrated with wood-works, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 57: Aisle in between two rows of pillars, inside the Kirttan ghar of Dakhinpat Satra
Photo 58: Side view of wooden Garūḍa, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 59: Front view of the wooden Garūḍa, Dakhinpat Satra
Photo 60: A wooden pillar inside the Kirttan ghar, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 61 (i - iv): The various idols kept in the monikāṭ of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 62: A Khanikar busy in wood-work, Dakhinpat Satra
Photo 63: Silver stick of late Banamalideva, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 64: Areca nut cracker, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 65: Sarāi, platter with golden top, Dakhinpat Satra
Photo 66: Some implements of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 67: Bangles (gám khāru) of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 68: Karlyā, wooden pots used in milking cows, Dakhinpat Satra
Photo 69: An Agar-bark manuscript in Natun Camaguri Satra

Photo 70 (i-ii): Two masks (Mukhā) of Natun Camaguri Satra
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Photo 72 (i-iii): Masks of Natun Camaguri Satra, painted with traditional colours
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Photo 74 (i-ii): Two masks of Natun Camaguri Satra
Photo 75: *Kirttam ghar* of Garmur Satra

Photo 76: Residence of Late Pitambar Deva Goswami, former *Satradhikar* of Garmur Satra, in dilapidated condition

Photo 77: Aisle inside the *Kirttam ghar* of Garmur Satra
Photo 78: Wooden image of Garuda inside the Kirttam ghar of Garmur Satra

Photo 79: Seat of the Satradhikar of Garmur Satra

Photo 80: Musical instruments: a Khol and a pair of Negera, Garmur Satra
Photo 81: Painting illustrating mythological episodes, at the plinth of the ceiling of the Kīrttam ghar of Garmur Satra

Photo 82: A closer view of the paintings, Garmur Satra

Photo 83 (i-ii): Two wooden images, hanged inside the Kīrttam ghar of Garmur Satra
Photo 84: Residence of the Satradhikar of Bengenaati Satra

Photo 85 (i-ii): Two cloisters (hāṭi) of the Bengenaati, a non-celebate satra. Concrete constructions are coming up in recent times.
Photo 86 (i-ii): Antique collections in Bengenaati Satra, kept without any preservation effort.

Photo 87: One painted Agar-bark manuscript in Bengenaati Satra
Photo 88: An Agar-bark manuscript of unusually small size.
The ethnographic composition of Majuli can be seen in terms of two broader categories of human settlements. One is the tribal population which includes three communities: Mising, Deuri and Sonowal Kachari. The other category is the category of the non-tribal Assamese caste-Hindus which includes the communities like the Brahmin, Kayastha, Ahom, Koch, Kalita, Nath, Chutiya, Kaivarta, etc. While all the communities belonging to the latter category possess more or less similar cultural traits and traditions, in terms of language, religion, festival, food habit, traditional costume, house-pattern and other overtly visible cultural expressions (although there are certain rites de passage, at the deeper level, distinctive to each of these castes and classes), each of the three tribal communities demonstrates idiosyncratic cultural elements of its own.

A third category of people can be traced to include the few non-Assamese families, the Bengalis, the Biharis, the Nepalis and the Marwaris, who migrated from other states of the country in much later times. However, they are numerically small and have not so far cast their prominent marks on the ethno-cultural landscape of the place.

The Tribal Peoples

The Misings: The Misings are the biggest tribal group in Majuli in terms of population. Their villages are scattered in southern and central Majuli, the concentration is found to be higher towards the Jengrai area in the north. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family sharing common racial ancestry with the Tani group of communities (which include the Adis, the Nishis, the Apatanis and the Hill Miris) of the Arunachal Pradesh. The Misings are known for their preference of settlement on the river-banks and for their skills in fishing.
and boating. Apart from Majuli, their settlements are also found along the Banks of the rivers Subansiri, Siyang, Dihing, Dibang, Dhansiri, Bharali, Buroi and the Brahmaputra. They speak Mising, their native language, but Assamese language is used by them as the second language for communicating with the surrounding non-Mising peoples. There was the term ‘Miri’ by which they were used to be referred to by the other communities, but presently they have denied this term and preferred themselves to be called as the Mising.

Scholars have observed remarkable proximity of the current cultural traits of the Misings with those of the above-mentioned peoples of the Tani group. Various narratives of oral tradition of the Misings are concerned with their migration from hills to plains at different times in successive hordes. Datta comments,

... what is significant about Mising culture and, for that matter, of Mising folklore, is not the erstwhile hill affiliation but the remarkable manner of adaptation of the hill modes and mores in the wider cultural setting of the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. Thus Mising traditional culture ... ... ... runs along a channel in which two different streams mingle with each other and moves towards a broader confluence.¹

The typical Mising dwellings are seen to be in raised platform-houses, made up of split bamboo walls, wooden posts and thatched roofs. The space between the ground and the platform is used for rearing pigs and poultry. The raised platforms of the houses also facilitate to survive during floods. In recent times, the affluent Mising families in Majuli have constructed concrete houses with cements and bricks; but the traditional architecture of the raised platform-house has been retained in this new medium too.
*Kebāng* is the traditional community council of the Misings, which is composed of village elders and headed by a headman to exercise social control. An important item of the Mising culture is the *morung-ghars* which are the youth dormitories and centres of multipurpose public activities.

Mising women are highly experts in weavings. They produce colourful and finely designed textiles out of their apparently simple looms. Their textile productions include traditional female attires, scarves made of endi silk, draperies, shawls, bags, etc. These are often illustrated with beautifully contrasting colours; and designed with human figures, flowers, butterflies and geometric patterns.

There are a number of Mising festivals such the *Āli-āye-ligāng*, *Po-rāg*, etc. The *Āli-āye-ligāng* is observed on the first Wednesday of the month of *Phāgun* (February-March). This is the seed-sowing festival (*Āli = crop-seed, ligāng = act of sowing*) which marks the beginning of the agricultural session for the year; and hence this is an occasion of worshipping the goddess of paddy. The event is celebrated in great festivity. Young boys and girls get attired in colourful dresses for community dancing and singing in accompaniment of traditional Mising music. The performance of *gumrāg* dance by the young ladies is a part of this festival; and it is believed that skipping of the *gumrāg* results in dry season ahead without rain which would prevent the germination of the seed sown on the field. Traditional recipes including the *āpong* (rice-beer) are served in *Āli-āye-ligāng*.

The *Po-rāg* is an elaborate festival which is celebrated in post-harvest times. There is no fixed time for *Po-rāg*; it is celebrated either in mid-October or in mid-February; the former being the time for the closing of the *āhu* paddy session and the latter is of the *śāli* paddy. The young folk construct elevated platform house, called *murong-ghar*,

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which is the venue for the occasion. People from other neighbouring Mising villages are also invited. The festival is marked with the collective participation in the act of preparing the rice-beer. Community dancing, music and feasting are parts of this occasion.

The Mising festivals and ceremonies, according to B. Datta, bear the mark of cultural convergence. Originally the Misings used to practice shifting cultivation (jhum) and their festivals were also in the main linked with that mode of agricultural operation. But they have since taken to settled rice cultivation and the timings and significances of the ceremonies have also undergone vital changes. It appears that in Āli-āye-ligāng, the emphasis in the meaning “first sowing of the paddy seeds” is a shifting from the “first planting of the yam”. Similarly the murong ghar or community hall, tenuously held to the Po-rāg festival, once used to be the centre of Mising community life but it has otherwise lost its original function².

The Misings have their rich musical tradition which is reflected in the different varities of Mising folksongs. Some such varieties are mibu-ābāng (songs of the priest), oi-nitom (songs of love and yearning), kaban (songs of lament), midāng-nitom (songs of marriage), bini-nitom (lullabies), etc.

The Misings worship their traditional gods Donyi-Polo (the Mother Sun and the Father Moon). The culture of the Misings in Majuli demonstrates interesting synthesis of their tribal culture with the surrounding non-tribal, especially the Satrīyā culture. The Misings observe the Bohāg-bihu festivals, making their own blending in it which is often called the Mising bihu. Datta observes that Misings have made the Assamese springtime festival “very much their own and come to observe it with lusty performances of Bihu songs and dances with a distinctive Mising flavour”³. In some Mising villages, the Satrīyā rās-
līlā is also enacted which is called Mising-rās by the others. While some Mising population has taken their ordination in the satras, others have subscribed to the faith of Christianity. In fact, in recent times, confrontations seem to prevail among the Misings regarding the choice of religious subscription. It has been stated overtly and covertly that certain Mising people had to give up their Vaiṣṇava affiliation with the satras because of the orthodox and discriminatory acts on the part of the satras. It was reported that, as a part of the reformatory tasks taken in the light of such situations, some Satrādhikār ventured to visit Mising settlements in person and sought public apology; and this could result in re-conversion of some Christianized Misings back to Vaiṣṇavism. However, no matter whether the affiliation is Vaisnavism or Christianity, the Mising in Majuli are observed to retain their distinctive Mising blend in both the cases.

_The Deuris:_ The Deuris were the priestly communities in the erstwhile Chutiya kingdom. They migrated from the Sadiya of eastern Assam. There were four different clans of the Deuris: Dibongyiā, Teṅgāpanāyā, Bargoyā and Pātorgoyā. The last one of these is extinct now possibly because of the assimilation with the Tiwas of central Assam. Apart from Majuli, the populations of the Deuris are also found scattered in various districts of eastern Assam. The Deuris of Majuli belong to the Dibongyiā clan. The Dibongyiās have their spoken language, while the other Deuris do speak Assamese. The Deuris of Majuli worship their traditional called Kundimāmā. They are also seen to be acculturated with the Satrīyā lore by getting initiated to the satras, and enacting the bhāonā plays. The Deuris celebrate the bihu festivals, which they call bisu, but the observation of each of the three bisus (bohag, kati and magiya) are delayed by couple of days because of the fact that they regard the last day of a month to be inauspicious. Deuri
women are seen to cover and tie their hairs with a gāmocā while they perform community dances on occasions like Bohag bisu.

*The Sonowal Kachari:* There is only one village of the Sonowal Kacharis in Majuli, the name of the village being Sonowal Kachari Village, which is towards the north-eastern corner of the island. Racially the Sonowal Kacharis are regarded as one sub-group of the Bodos; and the bulk of the Sonowal Kachari population is concentrated in the Dibrugarh District of eastern Assam. During the Ahom reign, they were to extract gold in the Sovansiri River. The original mother tongue of the Sonowal Kachari was Bodo, but at present they have accepted Assamese as their mother tongue. In their traditional narratives and songs, names and words of their erstwhile language can be found.

Presently, the Sonowal Kacharis have taken up agriculture as their occupation as their erstwhile profession of gold-washing is no longer in practice. The Sonowal Kacharis of Majuli follow Vaiṣṇavism, special with ordination from the Auniati Satra. They have their hāidāṅg-gūs which are the songs sung in rejoice the community dance-performances of the bohāg-bihu. A typical feature about their traditional dance performance by the males during bohāg-bihu is the act of beating by sticks on a pair of bamboo poles planted crossed at the courtyard of the host.

*The Non-Tribal Caste-Hindus*

This category includes those bearers of the so-called mainstream Assamese culture. The social hierarchy prevalent among this section may be seen to be loose a replica of the four-fold Indian caste-system (*Brāhmin, Khyatṛīya, Baiśya, Śūdra* – in the descending order). However, this caste system among the Hindus in Assam in general demonstrates its peculiarity in several aspects. While in rest of the
country the caste system is structured in a highly rigid and orthodox
hierarchy, in Assam, this system is observed to be largely flexible and
floppy. As recorded by Datta et al.,

... ... ... the caste system in the Assamese society is flexible and
fairly liberal. While Brahmins (and one or two other castes) do
occupy a higher position in the society, they do not dominate the
scene. All non-Brahmins are lumped together as sudirs (Sudras)
among whom there is considerable inter-caste mobility; and
there are practically no untouchables.5

This inter-caste mobility, which has been termed as
Sanskritization – the process of self-elevation of a particular class of
people to a higher class in the system, is still a living phenomenon in
this state of the country – which is again easy and flexible enough to be
executed within the time of a single generation. The most significant
aspect of the caste system in Assam seems to be the fact that there are
avenues even for the tribal communities to take part in this
sanskritization process – a phenomenon of tribe-caste continuum.

The above-mentioned account holds true in the case of the
ethnographic profile of Majuli also.

The various non-tribal communities found in Majuli are:
Brahmin, Kayastha, Ahom, Koch, Kalita, Nath, Chutia, Kaivarta, etc.
The Brahmins have a considerable concentration in Majuli. They are
supposed to have come originally from Kanauj, Orissa, Banaras and
Mithila before the advent of the Ahom Rule in Assam since the 13th
century A.D. The Brahmins of Assam in general have little in common
with the Brahmins of Bengal and South India. Traditionally, Assamese
Brahmins obtain their living from agriculture although they do not
plough the crop-fields themselves. The Kayasthas of upper Assam, who
also migrated from the places of Kanauj and Mithila like the Brahmins, served as scribes and officers in the Ahom court. The Ahoms are the descendents of the Shan tribe of the present Myanmar who came to Assam in the 13th century A.D and their kings ruled for glorious six centuries in Assam till the advent of the British. The Koches are originally supposed to be an aboriginal tribe of western Assam who in the 16th century became powerful enough to conquest the places of Assam. Many of the other tribes got converted to become Koch in those times of Koch supremacy. The Kalitas were, as opined by scholars, supposed to be a class, rather than a caste, that descended from early Aryan colony that settled in Assam before the emergence of the functional caste division. The Naths were the people who were associated with the occupation of weaving. They believe to be descended from high origin and observe the “sacred thread ceremony”. The Chutiyas had their princely kingdom in the eastern part of Assam since pre-Ahom times. The Kaivartas are the scheduled caste people who were associated with fishing as their chief profession, apart from agriculture and trade.

The people belonging to the different groups under the non-tribal Assamese caste-Hindus may be said to represent the general Assamese culture. They speak Assamese language and subscribe to the Vaisnava faith of the satras. Bihu is the primary festival observed by these peoples, which is celebrated thrice a year: Bohag bihu in the month of April, Kati bihu in the month of October and Magh bihu in the month of January. Larger sections of these peoples are ordinates of the different satras and actively participate in the different events and programs of the satras. The women-folk of all the groups are traditionally experts in weaving.
Following is an extracted text of B. C. Allen written in 1906 to describe the traditional dwellings in the Assamese villages which still holds true for a larger section of the non-tribal caste-Hindus of Majuli:

The homestead of the ordinary peasant is generally separated from the village path by a ditch or bank on which there is often a fence of split bamboo. Inside there is a patch of beaten earth which is always kept well swept and clean. Round this tiny courtyard stand two or three small houses, almost huts, and in a corner there are generally two open sheds, one of which contains a loom, while the other serves the purpose of a cow-house. The whole premises are surrounded by a dense grove of bamboos, plantains, and areca nut trees, and there are often numerous specimens of arum family covering the ground. The general effect is picturesque enough, but the presence of all these plants and trees makes the whole place very damp and excludes all sun and air. At the back there is generally a garden in which vegetables ... are grown... The houses are ... built on low mud plinths ... The walls are made of reeds plastered with mud, or of split bamboo, the roof of thatch, the rafters and the posts of bamboo.

The houses of the middle class are built on practically the same plan, but they are larger, and wooden posts and beams are often used in place of bamboo, while roofs of corrugated iron are sometimes to be seen... 6

What can be said about the changes that have occurred so far in the above description is the emergence of concrete houses of the affluent families.

From the present-day settings, none of these groups can be distinguished from one another on the basis of any outwardly visible traits. However, some of them may differ in terms of certain aspects such as, marriage-rules, funeral-rites etc; and some of them such as the Ahoms, Naths etc. have their exclusive rituals and festivals. In the
context of the contemporary identity-building paces, some of them are in struggle to achieve ethnic distinctions through cultural revivalism and renovation.

Notes

1 Birendranath Datta, ‘Introduction I: The Misings and Their Folklore’. In Datta, B. ed. *Folksongs of the Misings*. (Guwahati, 1992) I.

2 *ibid*, II.

3 *ibid*, II.


Photo 89: A Mising village

Photo 90: Raised platform-houses in a Mising Village

Photo 91: Mising children and woman at home
Photo 92: A Mising woman at her loom

Photo 93: A Mising loom

Photo 94: A piece of traditional textile product of the Mising
Photo 95 (iii): Some traditional textile productions in a traditional loom

(iii)
Photo 96 (i-iii): Some Mising textile productions in traditional loom
Photo 97: A Mising girl in traditional dress

Photo 98: A Mising lady in traditional dress

Photo 99: Two Deuri girls in traditional dress
Photo 100: A Deuri lady, back home from field

Photo 101: Two Deuri women at a loom

Photo 102: Deuri ladies back from the field
Photo 103: A weaving session at the courtyard of a Deuri household

Photo 104: Rice pounding, under the granary (bharā) in a Deuri village

Photo 105: Getting rid of lice, a leisure session of three Deuri girls
Photo 106: A Deuri lady

Photo 107: A Deuri lady with her spinning wheel (jatar)

Photo 108: A Deuri lady at her loom
Photo 109: Another weaving session at the courtyard of Deuri household

Photo 110: Sonowal Kachari ladies in traditional dress

Photo 111: Sonowal Kachari men performing *bihu* dance
Photo 112: A typical scene of the Sonowal Kachari performance

Photo 113: A Sonowal Kachari man blows the horn (pepa)
Salmora is situated on the eastern front and on the southern shore of the Majuli Island. It is directly connected by water-routes from the Nimatighat of Jorhat to the Salmora ghat. Salmora is the seat of the traditional terracotta industry run by the people professionally called the Kumars, who otherwise belong to the Kalita and Koch communities. Often these artisans are referred as Kumar Kalitas. They produce different types of house-hold containers and toys in the forms of woman, child, different animals, etc. The history of the Kumars and their craft is yet to be explored. Some believe that they were settled in Salmora by the Ahom kings for assured supply of necessary clay implements to the royal *satras*.

The entire process of the craft is highly laborious. It is a collective effort of several families of the Kumar villages, with equal involvement of men and women. It is seen that, only the women-folk usually takes part in the actual creation process of different implements while the men shoulder the responsibilities of digging out the clays and selling the products.

The different phases of the work, from collection of the clay to the final firing of the implements, have different names. These are described in the following texts in the sequential order.

*Khani diyā*: The men-folk digs at the adequate spots on the river bank to acquire the necessary clay material, called *kumar māṭi* (Kumar's clay) or *māṭi*. It is a soft, sticky and elastic mud suitable for giving shapes with hands. The Kumars have to dig several meters under the ground, making the holes in the shape of big wells. These are called *khanis*. Before the layer of the *kumar māṭi* is found, the Kumars need to dig the other different layers of soil which are on the top of the layer of
There are different terms to mean the acts of digging of these different layers. In the order of the sequence, they are: ālotīyā māṭī khandā, lodhā khandā, gaspatīyā khandā, haguwā khandā and finally kumar māṭī khandā.

Men get inside such khanis and cut out the clays with the help of spades. The cut-out pieces of clays are thrown upward from the bottom the holes which are again stacked by other groups of men on the river-bank. Sometimes a single group takes the contract of extracting the māṭi for artisans of several villages. Then the women carry these māṭi on bowls from the stacks on the river banks to the courtyards of their respective houses.

Māṭī sijuwā: The māṭis acquired from the khanis are to be mixed with sands. The women do this work of mixing with their feet. This process is called māṭi sijuwā (literally meaning – ‘boiling of the clay’). After the sands and the clay got properly mixed and adequately squeezed for a considerable, the mixture becomes ready to be shaped.

The next steps following the māṭi sijuwā are actual phases of shaping and creating the implements. An important feature of this tradition of the Kumars is that they do not use the wheel to shape their products. Instead they use the technique of pressing and shaping the clay with hands, beating with small wooden implements. Instead of a single term to denote this process of shaping, there are different terms for the different styles of beating and pushing involved in the process. Some of the steps involved in the making of a pitcher, which is the most common item of production, described below:

\[ \text{kholani diyā} = \text{giving cylindrical shape to the māṭi. This is done by placing the clay stuff on a round flat dish or bowl. The woman moves the dish (or bowl) with the toe of her foot and shaping the clays with her hand simultaneously.} \]
gorhā = shaping the mouth of the pitcher

pitā = beating at the surface of the pitcher with wooden tools to make it round at its belly

tokā = further beating to get it enlarged

mājon diya = plastering the surface to seal perforation, if left any

raṅgoni diya = to colour the surface with a special reddish clay mixed with water

Then the shaped items are kept in the open courtyard to get them dried in the sun. It is to be noted that only the women are involved in this phase of the work of shaping and creating the implements out of the raw clay.

In recent times, the state Government has allotted a few numbers of wheels to the Kumars, and sent some young men to Andhra Pradesh to avail the training to work with wheels. The young section seems to be enthusiastic with this new technique as it helps to produce more items at faster speed. This has also contributed to the making of certain non-traditional items which have been learnt in other places.

Peghāli diya: This is the act of firing the implements prepared by women, and the last phase of the process of production. Peghāli is a huge burner which is constructed in an open field to fire several hundreds of items at a time. The peghāli, the construction of which is another laborious job, has a round elevated top with the provision of putting fire from it’s below. The firing is done by men usually at night. It takes more than eight hours of uninterrupted firing to complete the task. The productions from several houses are fired in one peghāli.

The various items produced with the above technique include pitchers of different sizes and shapes, flower-vases, ritualistic items, lamps, stands for incense-sticks, bowls, toys etc.
The making of the toys in Salmora is a special feature, which is more an art than to be called craft. These toys are called putala. They are seen to be prepared by women at their leisure times for their children. These beautiful toys, which are of about 10-15 centimeter height, are highly stylized figures of women. Regarding the style of the making folk toys in Assam in general, it was observed by Datta that,

As is common with the making of folk toys, Assamese folk toys betray little concern for strict naturalistic representation of objects; instead, one finds suggestive highlighting of characteristics of the objects concerned, determined partly by the nature of the material used and partly by the conventions handed down through generations.¹

Salmora appears to be the lone pocket in eastern Assam as this tradition is more frequently found in the regions of Goalpara and Kamrup in eastern Assam. The images and objects of the toys produced in Salmora are visibly distinct from those produced in the other parts of Assam.

However, these toys seem to be given lesser importance by the Kumars because of their lower commercial value. Apart from the koina putala, other varieties of toys are also prepared by the mothers for their children. The objects of these casually created toys range from mythical characters to the popular faces of contemporary times. A favourite game for the children of the Kumar families is to enact the stories ras-leela with the help of the toys which they call putala-ras.

The Kumars of Salmora carry their terracotta products on boats to sell them in different places along the Brahmaputra River. This involves journeys on boat for as long as a month or more. The places of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh of upper Assam and places of Arunachal Pradesh in the east; and the Darrang-Tezpur region of Assam
in the west are usually the areas within which the Kumars do their direct marketing of terracotta products.

The Kumars are also experts in the making of boats. Their fame in boat-making is not only confined to Majuli alone, but is also well-known in other places since earlier times. Apart from making boats for themselves, they also accept orders for making boats from different satras, individuals and transport agencies.

Notes

1 Birendranath Datta, *Folk Toys of Assam* (Guwahati, 1986) 12.
Photo 114: The khanis

Photo 115: Digging of kumar mati

Photo 116: A Kumar woman, giving the shape of a pitcher
Photo 117: Rangoni diya: adding the colour to the pitchers

Photo 118: Kumar women making pitchers at the courtyard

Photo 119: Some tools used by Kumar women in their craft
Photo 120: Stacking of the finished pitchers

Photo 121: A boat full of pitchers: The Kumar artisans carry their products on boat to sell them in distant places

Photo 122: An young Kumar with his new wheel
Photo 123: Making toys by old Kumar women

Photo 124: Some toys, shaped but not yet burnt

Photo 125: Some Salomora toys of female form, shaped but not yet burnt
Photo 126: Salmora toys of in finished (burnt) form

Photo 127: Influence from the satras: a terracotta image of Garuḍa produced by the Kumars
Photo 128: Various forms of Salmora toys
Chapter 9

Problems and Threats:
The Issue of Conservation and the Ecomuseum as an Alternative

For quiet some years now, the issue of conservation and preservation of the Majuli Island and its heritage has been raised and discussed at different levels. The crisis of Majuli has been disseminated widely through different print and electronic media to catch the attention at regional, national and international levels. The voice for protecting the island, its people and their rich heritage has been raised by the people of Majuli in different platforms. Appeals have been made to the state and national governments, and also to international bodies like the UNESCO for adequate support and appropriate measures to save the island and to ensure the existence of the life and culture in it. The presently existing situation of hopes and despair has put the challenge for all concerned to think of possible ways and mechanisms which can lead towards the optimum solution of the crisis of Majuli and its heritage.

This chapter is an examination of the issue of the heritage-conservation in Majuli. It is an attempt to look at the different problems and threats; and to construct the various parameters which would testify a conservation system for Majuli. Finally an effort has been made to look at the situations from the ecomuseological viewpoints, to see how far the principles and philosophies of ecomuseum will be applicable to the situation of Majuli.

Natural Threats

Because of its physical position amidst the watercourse of the mighty Brahmaputra, Majuli has been subject to the monsoon flood every year. Occurrences of flood in the place have been mentioned in historical accounts. References of devastating flood causing the huge loss of crops and animals in the years of 1570, 1642 and 1735 are found
in historical sources. However, the worsening situations of recent times have been attributed to the earthquake in 1950 which caused big changes in the river-system of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries especially in the upper Assam. Apart from causing changes in the courses of the rivers, the earthquake elevated of the river-beds with excessive sedimentation which eventually reduced the water carrying capacity of the Brahmaputra. Because of this, the intensity and frequency of floods in Majuli have increased hugely.

Rainy season usually starts from the month of April and lasts till the month of September. This is the period for growing rice, the staple crop of Assam. “Nearly all the Majuli”, as observed by B. C. Allen a century ago, “lies too low for the cultivation of transplanted rice, and the staple crops are summer rice and mustard”. The picture remains same till now. The summer cultivation every year has become an uncertain investment for the cultivators of Majuli because of the annual floods. Not merely the cultivation alone but the entire living of the people is put into standstill by the water flown over all the island, damaging the houses and properties, destroying the systems of transport and communications, and also causing loss of lives of man and animals. The affected men, women and children need to take shelter on the embankments, on the platforms of storehouses or on boats when their houses get submerged in water.

Land-erosion in Majuli is perhaps the biggest natural threat which comes along with the problem of flood. The intensity of the menace of land-erosion is so high that it has reduced the total area of the island to a frightening extent. The total land area of Majuli in 1950 was 1246 square kilometer which has been trimmed down to 875 square kilometer in 1997-98. The Ahatguri mauza of Majuli is now practically out of its map. While the flood makes people to suffer intensely for period of
several days or weeks, the erosion brings out irrecoverable losses of land.

From the above description, it is needless to say that the flood and erosion have emerged as threats not merely to the heritage resources of Majuli, but to the very existence of the place and continuity of life in it. It is well-imaginable what could have happened to the heritage in such a context. The loss of built-in structures and objects of heritage is beyond the means of counting. A good number of satras shifted their campus from Majuli to other places of the state. Other affluent satras have constructed their alternate campuses in other places outside Majuli and are ready to shift permanently from Majuli at any time. Similarly, many able families have either shifted their residences or have purchased land in other places for alternative arrangements.

Social and Cultural ‘Problems’

While the above-mentioned natural threats are exclusively affecting in Majuli, the various changes in culture and heritage due to social and cultural factors of contemporary times are of common relevance to the wider Assamese society. The post-independence decades, particularly the years after the 1990s and onwards, have been highlighted with significant changes in the socio-cultural life in the region. On the onslaught of the socio-economic processes of urbanization, industrialization and modernization; and the intrusion of western markets to marginalize the native products of everyday life, the traditional societies have undergone many crucial transformations. In many cases, it has been manifested in the loss of traditional knowledge, values, customs and practices of arts, crafts, performances and other creative activities.

The rich traditional cultures of Majuli, its satras and the tribal and non-tribal domains, are not remaining out of these sea-changes. The
spirituality associated with the centuries-old religious norms of the satras has got to cope with the newly emerging technocratic and market-oriented society. The cultures of the tribal and non-tribal populations have also experienced significant changes in their traditional characters. However, the amount of 'loss' in that way is, till date, far lesser in Majuli in comparison to other places of the state. The many distinctive traditions are still alive due to its physical insularity and the strong institutionalized structures of the satras. Also, the local consciousness grown out of the exposures to tourism, and due to the recent campaigns for saving the heritage of the island, has played a role to retain its distinctive characteristics. Yet, a policy of conservation of heritage in Majuli in the holistic sense can not undermine these strongly prevailing socio-cultural dynamics of the region.

In identifying these socio-cultural changes of recent times as 'problems', one needs take note of the fact that culture as a whole is essentially dynamic, and so are its different constituents such as language, arts, values and customs. Change is the very characteristic of a living culture and its different traits. Any notion of imposing static fixity on the life and culture of people in the name of conservation would be far from acceptable. At this point it would be relevant to examine the functions of heritage and the aims and objectives of the conscious efforts of heritage-conservation in contemporary times. Apart from contributing to the joyful recollection of the past of a community, the conservation of heritage also should lead to the building of community identity and activate a process of holistic development. In this perspective, the heritage conservation should be able to check those cultural changes which can transform a community to become socially and culturally spaceless, or which can avert the process of development in an undesired way.
In the situation of Majuli where active interventions on the part of competent agencies and experts have been demanded for the causes of its rich tangible and intangible heritage of traditional cultures, the issue of development needs to be treated with optimum care. The development strategies for the societies having age-old traditions should be designed taking adequate note of the local aspirations and other local conditions. A lapse on this part may not only prevent the desired result, but it may also go in the negative way. In this context, an on-the-field experience has been described below.

As a part of the strategies of developing and facilitating the traditional crafts, some government department sent few young Kumar artisans of the Salmora area of Majuli to Andhra Pradesh, for getting necessary trainings on working with the potter’s wheel. As described in details in the Chapter 8, the Kumars of Salmora, traditionally, do not use the potter’s wheel for their craft. After coming back completing their training, some of them were provided with potter’s wheels to help in making their articles with speed and ease. As a result of this, the young artisans started making those items which they were trained to make in the other state. These items include terracotta lamps and flower vases of new designs, cool vegetable containers (which they call ‘fridge’), etc. They looked enthusiastic with their new products of potential market-value. But as a consequence of this, they stopped making their age-old traditional products. In another instance, they were also trained by the experts from Gauripur, a place in the Goalpara District of western Assam, famous for its traditions of exquisite terracotta craftsmanship. As a consequence, it was noticed that new generation artisans of Salmora prefers to make the toys of Gauripur instead of making in their own style.
It is apparent from the above discussions that an adequate mechanism for safeguarding the Majuli Island and its various natural and cultural resources is a dire necessity. Such mechanism must be holistic in approach towards whole situation. The care and concern for the heritage materials and cultural traditions in isolation would be meaningless unless the physical existence of the island is not ensured. The development of local economy should not be at the cost of distinctive traditions and collective identity of the people.

The factors which are to be fulfilled, and the goals to be achieved, in the much needed safeguarding system(s) are described and discussed below.

Ensuring the physical existence of Majuli: As discussed, the causes which are threatening the physical existence of the island are the flood and land erosion. It is a fact that comprehensive study and research, which can qualify for leading towards the best defensive mechanism, is yet to be made. The knowledge and insight of the specialist experts would be indispensable for fighting against these hazards. The observations and opinions held by the local public, however, may perhaps not be undermined. It is to be noted that, on many occasions the local people are rather critical about what have already been done for the mitigation of flood and erosion in Majuli. As for, the few embankments constructed in different places of the island, according to some local opinions, are rather doing more harm than reducing the disasters. Also, the artificial sealing of the Kharikotiya stream in the north of Majuli is supposed to be causing more flood than it was before. Opening of that sealing, at least during the season of floods, is a suggestion from some local sides. The authenticity of such propositions is subject to detailed and in-depth study.
As an obvious impact of the flood and erosion, some satras have either shifted or on the verge of shifting themselves from Majuli to other convenient places. The state government has provided them with lands in other places. This displacement, however, seems to be not the foremost solution for the greater interests of the place of Majuli as well as for the satras. G. C. Chauley, the Superintending Archaeologist of the Archaeological Survey of India, commented in his inspection report that this “would be something like a suicidal bid to the sanctity of Majuli” (See Appendix V)). Perhaps that could be the last option, and only after exploring all the means to safeguard the physical and cultural integrity of the island.

**Protection of heritage**: An important dimension of the cultural heritage of Majuli is that they are the strong elements of the process of building the greater Assamese identity, apart from being the identity-markers of the place of Majuli itself. The five hundred year old Vaishnavite traditions are the building blocks of the twentieth-century formation of the Assamese nationality. Similarly, the diverse tribal traditions are to be seen as the manifestations of the multi-faceted and pluralistic character of the Assamese entity. Because of these attributes, Majuli is often quoted as the centre-place of Assamese culture.

The uniqueness of the heritage of Majuli lies in their *continuity* and *liveliness*. Their characters are more of cultural processes and living traditions than of ‘products’ and ‘specimens’. The tangible dimension of the various heritage resources, however, can never be under-estimated; in fact, they are to be seen as the products of those traditions which are continuing for centuries.

Thus, the protection of the heritage of Majuli would involve upholding the intangible heritage as well as the conservation of the
tangible products, which would contribute to the process of building local and regional identities.

*Sustainable development:* Development of a place, in its true sense, is closely connected with the natural-environmental and socio-cultural aspects. The idea of progress and the notion of development vary from place to place and people to people. Many often the local specific situations do not come in conformity with the broader generalized frameworks. It may also necessitate sometimes breaking of the prevailing conventions to explore new, yet justifiable, action plans. This fact is more relevant in the context of the development of a place like Majuli.

The paradigm of 'heritage in development' seems to be the prospective discourse in planning and executing developmental strategies for the river island. In the context of emerging prospects for tourism and leisure industries, the heritage resources of Majuli bear sufficient scopes to activate a balanced developmental process which can provide qualities of life as per local aspirations in one hand, and maintain the 'personality' of Majuli as place. The traditional knowledge of art, crafts, performance, agriculture, fishing etc. can be streamlined to meet with the modern day needs of the local people. These traditional knowledge-systems seem to be potential enough to open up new vistas not only for local and regional pride but also to contribute in generating economic strength, provided their dissemination is put through adequate developmental strategy. In this context, the following observation of A. Galla on the paradigm of development through heritage in the Asian context is highly relevant for the situation of Majuli.

The challenge is to come up with principles and processes that govern the transformation of heritage institutions in the twenty-first century resulting in indigenous institutions that excel in the preservation, presentation, continuation and management of movable and immovable, tangible and intangible heritage.
resources of rich and diverse cultural and environmental systems. They can then play a catalytic role in relating heritage and sustainable development so that culture is seen as constitutive of and not instrumental in development. It will also assist in reorienting heritage tourism to conservation and appropriate economic empowerment of stakeholder community groups rather than the objectification and exploitation of community heritage.³

The ‘Ecomuseum’ as an Alternative

In the quest of an adequate system of heritage management, for the specific causes and issues concerning the safeguarding of the Majuli island which have been already discussed, the concept of the ecomuseum may be thought of as a judicious option. The justification of this proposition is based on the understanding that the ecomuseum philosophy of community-based heritage programming has been tested in the local contexts of the places of various countries. While the detailed description of the ecomuseum concept and philosophy is given in Chapter 3, some of the theoretical aspects of ecomuseum which are of immediate relevance in the contexts of Majuli are discussed below.

Holistic perspective of heritage: Ecomuseum does not follow the convention of treating heritage in isolation from the natural, social or cultural contexts. In fact, it works with a broader understanding of heritage which includes the tangible cultural objects as well as intangible cultural elements in the form of customs, rituals, festivals, and creative traditions of arts and craftsmanship, folklore, natural and cultural landscapes, and so on – within its purposefully defined territory. This system-oriented approach would be fitting in the case of Majuli, where the intangible dimension of heritage is predominant, where the fate of the age-old traditions is intricately connected with the ecological factors apart from the social and cultural ones.

Development through heritage: Ecomuseum sees heritage as means for the development of those who are the actual owners and
producers of heritage. The preservation, documentation and presentation of the varied manifestations of heritage are aimed not merely for the pleasure and satisfaction of the visitors, but they are to be programmed so as to contribute in fulfilling the collective aspirations of the local people. This aspect of ecomuseum would provide ample scopes for exploring the right avenues for development of Majuli through its rich heritage.

**Community participation:** One of the distinctive characters of an ecomuseum is that it is run by the active participation of the members of the concerned community. The local people are the decisive force in shaping the fate of their place and heritage, or changing them as per their collective needs in the democratic manner. The provision of expert-advice from specialists, scholars, scientists may also be incorporated, but they would be only in the manner of assisting, and not commanding, the local communities. This feature of ecomuseum would be useful in incorporating the traditional knowledge of the locales with the specialized technical skills from outside experts to deal with the matters of heritage preservation and disaster management.

**Maintaining identity of the place and the people:** By protecting the heritage of a place, and streamlining the collective energy of the communities towards sustainable development of the place, an ecomuseum eventually takes care of the identity of the people and their place. In case of Majuli, the real challenge is to sustain its unique physical identity and also to maintain the cultural distinctions of its people. An ecomuseum, for that matter, would be obvious relevance to that cause.

The above-mentioned characteristics are some of the core ideas of the concept of Ecomuseum which are highlighted in some relevant contexts of Majuli. In fact, the concept of ecomuseum does not provide
one concrete and universally applicable model. The question whether an
ecomuseum is possible in a particular place does not make any sense in
ecomuseum philosophy, as an ecomuseum is theoretically possible any
place anywhere. How an ecomuseum would function in a place, what it
would be able to offer to the locales and the outsiders, who would be
responsible for establishing it, etc. are dependent on the local-specific
situations. The truest answers of all these would be have to be sought
through action programmes in the real field.

**Ecomuseological Potential of the Majuli Island**

Majuli Island is frequently described as *living museum* by many
vernacular columnists in popular writings, in the sense that the place
houses varieties of cultural traditions. V. H. Bedekar, the pioneering
ecomuseologist of the country, during his visit to Majuli in 2001,
commented that Majuli was already an ecomuseum in itself. In fact,
from the perspectives of the western conceptualizations of the
ecomuseum, there are a number of features about the place of Majuli
which would suffice to say that this place in itself is conditioned to
fulfill some of the theoretical parameters of ecomuseum.

Fig.11 on the next page illustrates the core parameters from the
classical scheme of ecomuseum as juxtaposed in the context of Majuli.
What could be summed up from the table is that, as a pre-musealized
territory it significantly fulfills those theoretical preconditions which
were constitutive elements in the definitions of ecomuseum given by
Rene Rivard and others. *Territory, Heritage, Collective Memory and
Population* – the four ecomuseological parameters are seemingly fitting
with the case of Majuli. Any tourist visiting Majuli easily gets caught by
the satras and the activities therein, the lively ethnic traditions and the
ecological features of the island which eventually contribute to a strong
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters of Ecomuseum</th>
<th>Situation in Majuli</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Territory</td>
<td>Distinctive territory. Well-defined geographically, culturally and administratively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heritage</td>
<td>Both tangible and intangible. The latter, in the form of the age-old customs of the folklife including the creative traditions of arts and crafts, is seen to be more dominant in making the characteristic of the place. Heritage is very much a part of life of the people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Memory</td>
<td>Collective memory of peoples of different communities seems to be working as the driving force in carrying on, and re-creating of, the above-mentioned heritage objects and traditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (Community)</td>
<td>Heterogeneous culture groups. The identities of different communities are actively associated with the respective traditions. In recent times, collective identity as the “people of Majuli” (Majulian) is also seen to be projected.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Fig. 11: Parameters of ecomuseum vis-à-vis the situation in Majuli

*sense of place* that is unique to Majuli. But what is missing, and for the lack of which it is not a complete ecomuseum right now, is an organized community effort to streamline the existing resources of the island to bring out the desired development of the place, including sorting out the crises and preservation of heritage.

The institution of the satras, particularly, is highly significant from the ecomuseological perspectives. Although these monasteries have been working with their official agendas which are seemingly far apart from the modern discourse of museum and heritage, assessing the service they have been rendering towards the society, which has been discussed in details in Chapter 6, would reveal that they are not lesser than an ideal ecomuseum. Some of the outstanding features of the satras which should justify their ecomuseological characters are cited below.

a) The satras, particularly the major ones in Majuli, possess completely institutionalized setup. They have their campus built on
vernacular architecture, management systems which are self-sufficient and tested through generations; their authority upon specialized fields of social life is recognized by people at the grass root level.

b) The primary task of the satras has been the dissemination of Vaisnava faith among the masses. In doing so, they have been taking care of the continuity of a set of cultural traditions. These traditions, which are otherwise part of the daily lives of the residential monks of the satras, have become the most vital elements of Assamese heritage in the contemporary context. In fact, these cultural traditions have turned into the iconic projections of the modern Assamese identity.

c) In addition to their holdings over the religious and art-based traditions, the contribution of the satras to the social development, not only of the people of Majuli but also of Assam in general, is immense. Despite imparting high morale among the people, the satras have been contributing substantially to the field of education. Several schools and colleges were established, and are still maintained, under the generous support from the able satras. The collective memory of people would include the glorious enterprises shouldered by certain satras in the past, such as, bringing out of the second Assamese newspaper (in fact, it was the first one brought out by Assamese people, the first one being launched by western missionaries), the activities of the illustrious Satradhikar like Pitambar Deva Goswami (1885–1962) with his revolutionary visions of social equality and national independence.

There are indeed certain grey areas, such as, the decline of democratic environments and the discrimination in terms of caste and class in some cases. These factors have to be put through adequate correctives. Growing consciousness inside and outside the satras, and the increasing criticism in various media about these factors, are seen to
be positive signals for some better times ahead. In fact, the contribution of the satras in the social, cultural and educational life of people is outstanding, and this age-old community-based institution can definitely be treated as a highly gifted infrastructure in ecomusealization of a place like Majuli.

Besides the satras and the ethno-cultural varieties in Majuli, the most crucial aspect to be noted in thinking of an ecomuseum project in Majuli is its contemporary situation, which is marked with visible threat to the physical existence of the place in one hand, and the seemingly covert process of cultural homogenization. There are issues which are rather outwardly paradoxical. When the very existence of the place is under threat, is it relevant to think of a museum thereon? When people are uncertain about their land and property, how much is it justified to talk on preserving their heritage? This kind of hopelessness is based upon obvious assumptions, but adequate scientific investigation and analysis to forecast the fate of the physical existence of the island in future is yet to be conducted. In reality, majority of the local people seems to live with the hope that their place can be saved, although they do not know how it can be done. Moreover, it is observed that survival of life and the celebration of heritage go hand in hand in Majuli. If it is the fearful summer of flood and erosion till the month of September, people do not loose their heart in November to celebrate the great Ras festival with all its grandeur. From these observations, it is evident that a comprehensive and interdisciplinary action-plan for physical protection of the island and ensuring the life and culture of people in it is a dire necessity. The concept of ecomuseum, which has the potential to transgress other segregated efforts of protecting natural and cultural resources, can be an effective vision for the case of Majuli. In that sense, Majuli is not only a potential place for ecomuseum, but ecomusealization is highly necessary for Majuli.
Notes

1 Dulal Chandra Goswami, ‘Majulir Bhu-prakritik Paricay’. In K. C. Kalita (ed.) Majuli, (Kolkata, 2001), 27-28
In the light of the issues discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, it is evident that ecomuseum can be a potential tool for safeguarding local heritage and identity. A strong undertone in the philosophy of ecomuseum is felt to be its special concern for the so-called marginalized communities, little traditions and threatened culture-traits. Instead of segregation and de-contextualization, ecomuseum philosophy endeavours to take up holistic action through community participation, in-situ preservation and integration of heritage with the process of development. Its final objective is to preserve the individuality of a place and its people. In the context of India, these features of ecomuseum should bear vital significance.

That the characteristics of Indian culture and civilization are continuity and diversity is of special significance in the context of ecomuseology in India. Indian cultural traditions bear the long tags of the history and the past. They are the results of the thousands of years of inter-generational exchange. This has resulted to the vital synthesis of past and present in Indian panorama where history and heritage are very much a part of present-day life. If this phenomenon is to be seen along the axis of time, the axis of space then would reveal the bewildering variety of regional and local cultural traditions.

Many of the aforesaid culture-groups, in the advent of imposed processes of cultural change of twentieth century, such as, industrialization, modernization, globalization, etc., are facing severe threats to their identity and cultural survival. The conservation of Indian cultural heritage, in the present-day context, must be able to sort out an adequate strategy to withstand this seemingly unstoppable wave of cultural homogenization.
The academic concern for museum and heritage in India remained, till the end of twentieth century, as some annexure of the disciplines like anthropology, archaeology and history. A colonial stigma was evident in the concerns of these parent disciplines towards the many-faceted culture and traditions of the country. They seemed to be more occupied with the colonial periodization of Indian history, the so-called classical and great-traditional aspects of art and heritage. This is evident by the fact that most of these scholarships, including Museology, still give much lesser space to the items of oral history, folklore, and the ethnic arts and crafts, - the so-called little traditional resources which are, in fact, the true building blocks of Indian culture and tradition. Perhaps the finest illustration of the importance of the study folklore and oral tradition in the Indian context was given by A. K. Ramanujan:

In a South Indian Folktale, also told elsewhere, one dark night an old woman was searching intently for something in the street. A passer-by asked “Have you lost something?” She answered, “Yes, I’ve lost my keys. I’ve been looking for them all evening.” “Where did you loose them?” “I don’t know. Maybe inside the house.” “Then why are you looking for them here?” “Because it’s dark in there. I don’t have oil in my lamps. I can see much better here under the streetlights.”

Until recently many studies of Indian civilization have been conducted on that principle: look for it under the light, in Sanskrit, in written texts, in what we think are well-lit public spaces of the cultures, in places we already know. There we have, of course, found precious things. ... ... ... we may say we are now moving indoors, into the expressive culture of the household, to look for the keys. As it often happens, we may not find the keys we were looking for and may have to make new
ones, but we will find all sorts of other things we never knew we had lost or ever even had. (Ramanujan 1991)

In order to showcase and preserve the Indian culture and heritage in their totality, the Museological scholarships will have to incorporate, both in theory and practice, with the protection and promotion of the many regional and local traditions of indigenous peoples. It will be a real challenge to protect the distinctiveness of the many little cultural spaces which are contributing to the total cultural image of the country. The concept of ecomuseum seems to be potential enough to provide effective ways towards meeting that challenge.

The empirical study on the place of Majuli as a heritage site reveals that ecomuseum principles can be applied to Majuli to bring out an effective strategy towards protecting the physical existence of the island and towards preservation of its rich tangible and intangible heritage. The concept of ecomuseum may bear special significance in the context of heritage conservation in Majuli because of the fact the conventional modes of heritage conservation are not expected to bring out holistic and effective criteria for conserving heritage in Majuli’s condition. Moreover, a number of features of the place of Majuli may be treated as ecomuseological advantages, which need to be integrated with active community action, judicious modes of tourism and sustainable development.

The issue of the problem of land-erosion, and the uncertainty caused thereby about the physical existence of Majuli, is something for which serious thought has to be given. In one hand it imparts the feeling of despair, both among the local residents as well as among concerned individuals outside, and it apparently puts in hopelessness to think of
any museum-like enterprise in Majuli. On the other hand, it is unmistakably the primary cause for which the issue of conservation in Majuli has arisen. The public action strategy with total community participation may well be explored to build up a collective force for exploring possible solution.

In the following pages a humble attempt is made to construct an ecomuseum layout for the Majuli river island. This scheme for ecomuseumization is based on the theoretical concepts of ecomuseum in one hand, and the first-hand survey of the various in-situ heritage and communities of Majuli on the other. The necessity of such a scheme is to be understood, as stated earlier, in regard to the appeals and campaigns by individuals and public organizations both from Majuli as well as from outside, for bringing out an effective plan for saving the island and to ensure the continuity of its glorious traditions.

**Majuli Ecomuseum**

*Ecomuseum territory:* Being a river island, the boundary of Majuli has already been made clearly visible by nature. In terms of the government administration, the island is one subdivision under the Jorhat District. The geographical boundary of the island, which also tallies with administrative terms, would be the boundary of the proposed ecomuseum. The total landscape and waterscape under the entity of the name Majuli would form the territory the Majuli Ecomuseum.

*Fragmentation of the Site:* The Majuli Ecomuseum would treat the whole of its territory as a living museum. All the tangible and intangible items within its territory, which are understood to be important by the local population for their collective interest, would be regarded as the resources of the ecomuseum. For acquiring effective control of the various distinctive neighbourhoods, the fragmented-
policy would be adopted for the benefit of the local communities and for the convenience of the visitors. A number of community interaction centres would be highlighted which may be treated as the antennae of the ecomuseum. The various satra campuses, village namghars, youth-dormitories or community-centres of the tribal groups (morung-ghar of the Misings, deoghar of the Deuris, etc), or the selected establishments like schools, colleges, clubs, etc. would serve as the antennae for the Majuli Ecomuseum. These antennae would serve as the centres of meetings and discussions among the members of the communities in respective places, for identification, collection, recording, documentation, interpretation and presentation of the items of tangible, intangible, natural and cultural heritage. The various plans and activities in these different antennae would be interconnected through an effective networking scheme.

Management of the Ecomuseum: The functioning of the ecomuseum would be democratic both in theory and in practice. The various communities of different villages or neighbourhoods (which may be groups of villages) would form local management units in their own. These local units would be coordinated and supervised by an ecomuseum committee which would be formed with the representatives of different local units, members of the concerned departments from government administration, and also specialist experts in the fields of conservation, water management, social sciences, financial management, natural history, fine arts and performing arts, and so on and so forth. This committee would be responsible for maintaining the coordination among the local units, and also to provide necessary help and suggestions to them. However, the interaction of the committee with the local units would not be a one-way process. It would also take into account the suggestions and aspirations coming from the local units. As and when necessary, the ecomuseum committee would invite higher
level of expertise and knowledge from individuals or institutions from outside.

*Ecomuseum activities:* The ecomuseum would sort out certain set of activities to be committed in phase-wise manner. In the initial phase, the various activities to be carried out may include the following:

- Preparation of a complete inventory of the various items of material culture in different *satras*, institutions, or household families, along with necessary information of history, belief-system, customs etc associated with those items.
- Audio-visual recording of the traditional skills (music, dance, drama, fishing, cooking, weaving, painting, and different craftsmanship) and the items of folk literature (myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, songs, etc)
- Arrangement for organized display, conservation and interpretation of the above items in the community interpretation centres. The exhibitions in these centres should be periodically changing and be reflective of specific themes (such as themes of *ras* festival of the *satras* or *ali-aye-ligang* of the Misings in one hand, and the damages caused by the flood and erosion on the other)
- Preparation of a calendar of events which would include the various rituals and festivals observed in different *satras* and tribal and non-tribal localities in a particular year.
- Advertising of the above calendar of events to be available for wider audience and visitors.
- Opening of local emporiums for exhibition cum sell of the products of local craftsmanship. In these emporiums, visitors should be provided with facilities to see not only the products,
but also to experience the actual process of production of those products.

- Way marking of the different land and water routes from one community-centre to other
- Construction of tourist-lodges in local architectural style.
- Arrangement for locally guided tours for the tourists.
- Activation of in-depth studies on the issues of flood and erosion, as joint ventures of local knowledge and expertise of specialized science and technology from outside. These studies should find put phase-wise actions towards the control or mitigation of the disasters

**Principle of Ecotourism:** The principle of ecotourism would be followed in projecting the Majuli Ecomuseum as a tourist destination. However, all the stakeholders have to be aware of the fact that tourism, specially the so-called mass and commercial tourism, can be a two-sided sword. Menon rightly observes that tourism brings about more complex changes than other economic development projects, because it necessarily juxtaposes people of different cultures and attributes\(^2\). He also recommended that,

The objectives of the Government Tourism Policy should look beyond increasing the number of tourist arrivals and *gross foreign exchange earnings* to the effects of the increased tourism activity on the socio-cultural well being of society at large. This will require a conceptual shift at the policy-making level: viewing tourism as a *multi-disciplinary* activity. Under the circumstances, it will be necessary to include experts from other disciplines like social anthropology, ethnography, cultural administrators and social workers in the policy making team.\(^3\)

It is a fact that tourism would be an important channel for linking up the *territory* of Majuli with the rest of the world, and to bring out the
obviously expected economic rewards. But it has to be kept in mind that
the unique character of the life and culture in Majuli has so long been
retained due to, among many other reasons, the apparent physical
insularity of the place. Thus, at the moment of opening this hitherto
closed cultural space to the tourists from the rest of the world, it has to
be checked that no undesired changes are resulted. In this context,
arrangements would me made to make the visitors pre-informed about
the customary prescriptions and prohibitions of different localities of
Majuli. They would be made aware about the parameters which are
crucial to maintain the natural and cultural sanctity of the island.

The Ecomuseum as a Process: It should be understood that
cultural and natural phenomena, and the human perceptions about them,
are all dynamic in nature. This has entailed the fact that the notions of
the entities like heritage, development, identity etc do change with time.
Thus the ecomuseum in Majuli would have to respect this dynamism by
adjusting and adapting to changing situations as and when they arise.
Therefore, and ecomuseum would be a process in its nature rather than
being an institution finalized once for all. In this respect, the term
ecomusealization would be central to the functioning of the ecomuseum.

The initial phase of ecomusealization may start with the
interventions from the activists or the voluntary organizations who are
working for the Majuli Island at different levels. The pre-musealization
survey shall have to be carried out in the form of in-depth feasibility
study by complete interdisciplinary scholarships. The local populations
are to be made aware of the ecomuseological options available before
them, and to be encouraged to participate in the process. There has to be
a consensus between the aspirations of the local people and those of the
external experts and activists. These motivational drives, however,
should not take the form of one-way teaching to the communities. The
concerned communities do have their rights to their heritage and place.
They should be inspired to exercise that privilege for the development of their place, protection of their heritage and sustain their identities.

Fig 12: A graphical representation of the proposed ecomuseum in Majuli
Notes


3 ibid, 92.