

A Landscape of Culture and Haritage in Majuli- A Comprehensive Study

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Abstract

Majuli, the largest river island is gifted by Almighty to the earth. Its physical beauty attracts both the domestic and international world. It is situated in the middle point of the mighty Brahmaputra. The term “Majuli” composes into two words Ma means- Mother and Juli means- lap of Mother. Its land, river, natural beauty, Satra institutions, Mask making, Culture and Colourfull community are the tourist icon in Majuli. In this paper and attend has been made cultural and heritage of Majuli district, Assam.

Introduction:

Majuli is a river island in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. It is the world’s largest river island and at reassurance of cultural identity and heritage. Situated in the Brahmaputra River, Majuli is famous not just for its scenery but also for its deep connection to Assamese culture, spirituality, and traditions.

Being an important cultural landmark of Assam, the island is, in fact, often called the cradle of Neo-Vaishnavism, a monotheistic religious movement founded by the saint-scholar Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century. Among other innovations the movement entailed the introduction of “Namghar”, or prayer houses. These institutions are indeed vital to Majuli’s socio-religious life. Satras The island is full of satras – Vaishnavite monasteries, which have evolved into centres of culture with religious teachings, traditional arts, crafts, and the Sattriya variety of dance and music.

Majuli’s identity is as intricately connected to its heritage practices in forms of traditional agriculture, handloom weaving, pottery, mask-making, and boat-building. The island abounds with a life that bears uniqueness local tribal communities, such as the Mishing, Deori, and Sonowal Kachari- thus adding another layer to the rich mosaic of cultures across the island. Many communities maintained their indigenous customs, language, and festivals from generation to generation, which led to an evident uniqueness of cultural identity in the region.

The heritage of Majuli is at great challenges In preserving it, despite Its cultural wealth. On the island, severe erosion has been witnessed due to shifting Brahmaputra- losing land and livelihoods while threatening the survival of cultural institutions. As Majuli shrinks in size, growing concerns are there over the preservation of tangible as well as intangible heritage.

There have been a number of initiatives by the government and NGOs to sustain its culture and environments. In 2016, the government made Majuli a district which raised major attention towards its preservation requirement. The island is also placed under the preservation efforts. Majuli’s cultural identity and heritage gives importance to the socio-cultural fabric of Assam. It is important to preserve this heritage against all challenges brought on by the environment and modernity in safeguarding, not only island legacy but people’s heritage also.

Historical Background of Majuli District:

It is also a historical and cultural important island in the Brahmaputra River of the Indian state of Assam. It has recently been declared the world's largest river island and, in 2016, it was turned into a district. Here is a brief historical background of this island:

Early History:

Majuli was once a part of the main land but changed its course when Bhramaputra River took a disastrous turn in 13th century. This, over time, formed the island that exists today. From early times, various tribal groups such as Mishing, Deori, and Sonowal Kacharis inhabited in the region, thus shaping its cultural and tradition lines.

Ahom Era (13th–19th Century)

Majuli, as a religious and cultural center under the Ahom dynasty that ruled from 1228–1826, was also the greatest importance in the 16th century with the rise of Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by the saint-scholar Srimanta Sankardeva. Sankardeva and his disciple, Madhavdeva, established many Sattras (monastic institutions), where Vaishnavism became a cause for spreading teachings of devotion to Vishnu. These Sattras are also alive in the present and continue to be at the heart of the socio-cultural life of Majuli.

Colonial Period or 19th–20th Century

Majuli was ignored largely from the perspective of development but continued to hold significance in terms of culture. The agrarian society in the island was mainly dependent on agriculture, and Sattras, which were the monasteries, functioned as centers of culture and education for the local people.

Post-Independence Era or 20th Century–Present

Even after independence, Majuli was incorporated into the district of Jorhat. However, it lost some considerable area to Brahmaputra River through years of constant erosion. Besides, constant floods made life tough for the people living on the island and decreased the area of Majuli significantly.

In 2016, the river island Majuli was announced to be a district. It was the first river island district of India. This move motivated on administrative independence and further improvement of its unique cultural heritage. Today, the religious and cultural legacy is coupled with ecological importance with rich varieties of flora and fauna.

Traditional arts and crafts are emerging, such as pottery and mask-making, and there is also rich spiritual tradition which attracts attention towards this land, especially in festivals like Raas Leela, a dance based on the life of Lord Krishna. The district marks a symbol of Assam's native culture and heritage.

Methodology in the Study:

As such, cultural studies often permit more elastic or free-form methodologies. In most cases Cultural studies researchers will employ a qualitative research method, meaning that they will be using Interested in the causation of events or in the fulfillment of their curiosity by answering questions, rather than in collecting a massive amount of data. The study has been conducted based on both primary and secondary sources of data. It has laid emphasis most on the secondary sources of data. Limited primary data is used. A primary source of data has been being collected from the field study and interview from the selected area and individual. Here Descriptive method, Historical method, are also used.

The secondary sources will include all sort of published books, journals, magazines, articles and government records are used.

Objective of the Study :

The proposed study is intended to carry out the following objectives in view:

1. Identify the unique cultural identity of Majuli.
2. Study the role of Culture and Heritage in Community life.
3. Evaluate the threats to Cultural Heritage.
4. Propose Sustainable Strategies for Heritage Conservation.

Significance of the Study

There is a great need and significance of the study in relation to the “Cultural Identification and Heritage Preservation in the Majuli district”. Some of its key aspects are:

1. Majuli, as this research will serve to support the policy-making process regarding Safeguarding Cultural Identity: The cultural heritage of Majuli carries with its specific legacy attached to it, primarily because of the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition and indigenous community existing there, which therefore needs immediate documentation and preservation.
2. Responsible Cultural Tourism: As tourism rises in Majuli, there is the need for balancing economic benefits with cultural authenticity to avoid commercialization and cultural loss.
3. Vulnerability to Environmental Threats: The island is vulnerable to environmental threats in terms of erosion and flooding induced by the Brahmaputra River, which also threatens both the landscape and regional culture.
4. Research Contribution Towards Empowering Supportive Policy and Preservation Programmes: This research will present critical views concerning heritage preservation policies and programmes concerning tangible and intangible assets in Majuli.
5. Preserving Intangible Heritage: Preserves intangible heritage that includes traditional crafts, festivals, and monastic practices related to preservation of the intangible elements of culture.
6. Promotion of Community-Based Preservation: Involvement of local communities in processes of preserving the site would induce efforts towards inclusive and sustainable preservation of culture, thus empowering the people of Majuli to preserve their cultural customs.

Cultural Identity in Majuli :

Cultural identity is, therefore, the common characteristics, values, and practices that define a group of people and distinguish them from others. This is molded by different elements, among which comes language, religion, traditions, customs, and historical experiences. Cultural identity provides individuals with a sense of belonging and connection to their heritage, hence influencing their worldview and how they interact within the society. Cultural identity is therefore one of the evolving concepts as each draws from the collective and individual experiences. It reflects a common belief and value that anchors a community

but at the same time can be a dynamic concept changing with the currents of social, political, and economic contexts. For instance, when communities migrate or interact with others, cultural practices are likely to change with new additions while still maintaining a core element of their original identity.

Key Elements of Cultural Identity

Language: In the sphere of cultural identity, perhaps the very significant marker would be language, because it is both a means of communication and a conduit for carrying history, value, and tradition in a culture. The ability to speak a common language defines unity among people in a group, and maintaining the quality of language is always at the center of retaining one's cultural identity.

Religion and Spiritual Beliefs: Religion is important in the building of cultural identity. It touches on issues such as social norms, rituals, festivals, and moral values, which give a sense of belonging and community among people. Common religious practices unite the members of a culture, and festivals related to religion often symbolize the most significant expressions of culture.

Traditions and Customs: Tradition, rites and customs comprise the very fabric of a cultural identity that is passed from generation to generation. It conjures up the collective memory in terms of fairs, clothes, food, and fine arts.

Past and Heritage: The history of a community, its struggles, achievements, and shared experiences make all the difference to cultural identity. This gives one some kind of historical consciousness that helps collective memory and continuity as well as pride. Often enough, cultural identity is underpinned through monuments, literature, oral traditions, among other forms of historical preservation.

Social Values and Norms: Every culture gives values and norms by which its members guide their actions. These might include assumptions about forms of families, social roles, female/male expectations, and moral obligations. Common values strengthen feelings of unity and form a kind of social glue.

Key Elements of Culture:

- **Religious beliefs and practices (e.g. Vaishnavism)**

Majuli is the world's largest river island in Assam, India, in the Brahmaputra River. It is an important cultural and religious center, particularly of the Vaishnavite tradition. The religious teachings followed there are largely characterized by Vaishnavism, which is a stream of Hinduism, specifically that concerns the worship of Lord Vishnu, most importantly as his avatar Krishna.

Vaishnavism and the Role of Srimanta Sankardeva

The presence of Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568) imbues the island of Majuli with much spiritualism as an iconic saint, poet, scholar, and social reformer who established the **Eksarana** Dharma, a monotheistic worship sect of Vaishnavism. Sankardeva propounded easy, non-ritualistic forms of worship that focused on being devoted to just one god, Lord Krishna. This practice of Vaishnavism also stressed the dignity of equality, opposed the bias of the caste system, and the ritualistic practices of the present day orthodox Hinduism. Sankardeva's religious message was propagated through Namghars (prayer halls) and **Sattras**

(monastic institutions) and even today, remains a very effective pillar of religious activities in Majuli. The Namghar is a social gathering place with the conduct of prayers, hymns, and other religious discourses. In contrast, the Sattras are sacred places where the bhakats (monks) dwell, seek devotion, and spread the philosophy and cultural movement launched by Sankaradeva.

The Vaishnavite religion and culture: Shrimanta Sankaradeva, a 16th Century religious preacher, social reformer, poet, musician and dramatist brought about a cultural renaissance in Assam through an institution known as Sattras (Vaishnavite monastery) which provided the venue and atmosphere for religious, social and artistic activities. This institution not only served as the vehicle for propagating Vaishnavite faith and religion but also helped in making the society free from blind religious dogmas, superstitions and ritualistic processes. After Shrimanta Sankaradeva, the faith was propagated by his two chief apostles Sri Madhavadeva and Sri Damodaradeva. 64 Sattras were established in the 16th and 17th century, of which only 22 remains at present. The rest have either been eroded away or had to be shifted to other places. Majuli is regarded as the nerve centre of Neo-Vaishnavite religion, art and culture.

The Sattras and their influence in their religious, cultural and social life of the people have made Majuli the principal seat of pilgrimage for all people in general and the Vaishnavites (followers of Vishnu, who has a thousand Names) in particular. Following are some of the prominent Sattras of Majuli-Auniati Sattras, Uttar Kamalabari Sattras, Dakshinpat Sattras, Natun Kamalabari Sattras, Garmur Sattras, Natun Samuguri Sattras, and Bengenaati Sattras.

- **Traditional Festivals and Rituals and their role in cultural Identity.:**

Majuli is not only known for its natural beauty but also due to vibrant cultural heritage. The island retains a high intensity of Vaishnavite culture with its traditional festivals and rituals determining an important part of the people's cultural identity. A selection of important festivals and rituals observed on Majuli follows:

Raas Mahotsav (Raas Leela):

Raas Mahotsav is one of the most significant festivals of Majuli, in which the life and teachings of Lord Krishna, especially his childhood and youth, are enacted with dance, drama, and music. The festival is performed elaborately because various Sattras of Majuli combine to perform an elaborate show. In most of the Sattras Raas Mahotsav is celebrated. Along with these in private haals Raas Mahotsav is also organized.

Ali Ai Ligang:

This is the spring festival of the Mishng tribe, one of the indigenous communities in Majuli. This falls during February, which identifies with sowing paddy. The name "Ali" signifies seeds; "Ai" signifies fruits; and "Ligang" signifies sowing. Ali Ai Ligang is the celebration of agrarian life and the bond between human lives and nature. It is an integral part of the cultural identity of the Mishng community, where strong agricultural roots are preserved and sustainability is practiced. Traditional dances such as Gumrag go a long way in adding some fabulous folklore to Majuli.

Deori Bihu:

The Deori people, another ethnic group, celebrate Deori Bihu as a festival, which like that of Assamese, Bohag Bihu, marks harvest time. The climax to the harvesting season necessitates this festival, hence, marking the beginning of a new agricultural cycle. The festival serves as a marker of cultural diversity in Majuli. It gathers the Deoris and emphasizes their special ethnic identity within the larger Assamese cultural texture.

Sattriya Dance and Rituals:

This is one of the classical dances of India and originates from the Vaishnavite Sattras of Majuli. The essence of this dance was predominantly performed as a religious ritual and drama within the Sattras, but essentially included musical and narrative elements based on the life of Lord Krishna. Sattriya is not a dance system; it is their spiritual and artistic life. The practice of it helps in maintaining the legacy of Srimanta Sankardeva's teachings. Further, Vaishnavite tradition is maintained with the help of Sattras. These Sattras function like cultural and religious centers that maintain the island's religious identity.

Ankiya Bhaona (Srimanta Sankardeva's Plays) :

Majuli is known for its strenuous tradition of drama called Ankiya Bhaona, which Sankardeva started as a dramatization of the Bhagavata Purana stories. Such dramas are performed on special religious festivals and celebrations. These programs are vital in providing the youth with moral lessons and religious education. In the meanwhile, it helps sustain oral narration traditions and yet continues to imprint their cultural-spiritual personality.

Janmashtami

Lord Krishna's Birth-day, Janmashtami is another major festival of Majuli. Fasting, prayers, and cultural events are performed by the devotees in the Sattras. In every Namghar Janmashtami is celebrated in a grand way. Janmashtami happens to be an important religious practice that heralds the fact that the people of Majuli are part and parcel of the Vaishnavite tradition. Participation of the village community at large during the celebrations gives importance to shared cultural heritage.

Palnamm

It is a five-day festival that starts on the Assamese 25th day of Kartika. It's a very important month in the Hindu calendar from mid-Oct to mid-November. Palnamm is celebrated in a grand way in the Auniati Satra. Thousands of pilgrims visit every year to witness this event. Nowadays, there is a ritual to offer "Salt" to the Lord, as there is a belief that the donation of salt is equivalent to the donation of gold.

- **Art and Crafts:**

Majuli, in particular, is known for its profound cultural heritage. Majuli is a wide and an excellent hub of traditional art and craft that reflects the island's history, spiritual practices, and tribal influences. Therefore, the craftsmanship in Majuli is closely tied to Vaishnavite heritage and indigenous traditions and daily life of this land. That they permit the confluence of religious devotion, environmental sustainability, and ethnic diversity.

Mask Making (Mukha Shilpa)

Majuli is known for its rich tradition in mask making, more particularly in the context of Vaishnavite Sattras. It is above all through the use of masks, of bamboo, clay, and cloth, that Ankiya Bhaona has been performed - a religious theatre form initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva. Samaguri Satra plays a vital role in the mask making practices. The raw

materials applied to make the masks are natural like bamboo, clay, cow dung, and cloth and are painted with herbal colors.

Pottery

Majuli has had a long history of pottery, primarily by the 'Kumar' community. What makes pottery unique to Majuli is that they do not employ a potter's wheel; instead, pottery hand-shaped by an individual's hands through an ancient tradition passed down from generations. In many villages of Majuli pottery making is a means of livelihood for most of the people. One such type of village is Salmara, Sinatoli. It is hand-shaped and fired in open-air kilns, which is locally sourced and river clay. Pottery from Majuli is used for both everyday and religious usages. Cooking vessels, lamps, and water jars are mostly made; even during festivals, clay idols of the specific event are prepared for worship. Out of all crafts present, perhaps pottery work on Majuli is the most earth-friendly. There is a deep interaction with Mother Nature. This craft mainly survives through the help of female artisans and still meets the demands of utility as well as cultural demands.

Handloom Weaving

Weaving is one of the most significant crafts at Majuli, particularly among the Mishing tribe. These women are known to be more expert weavers, famous not only for their detailed hand woven cloth but also for the Eri and Muga silk. They made various traditional clothes. Fabric Used- Only the natural fibers of cotton, Eri (Ahimsa) silk and Muga silk, used exclusively in Assam are used. Natural dyes prepared from plants and herbs are mostly used to dye the fabrics. These traditional attires of the Mishing peoples-the Gadu, a thick woven shawl- and Ribi Gaseng, a hand woven wrap- are significant cultural emblems. Besides this, the clothing serves various functions in ceremonies, such as a wedding and festivals.

Boat Making

Being a river island in the middle of the Brahmaputra River, making boats is a most important craft here. The boats at Majuli are primarily made from wood and bamboo sourced locally and made through generation-to-generation technique. Most people from the kumar community were expertise in boat making. They take the boat making practice as a source of livelihood. In Salmara village we find a large number of such craftman.

Boats are an integral part of life in Majuli and are used for transportation, for fishing, and even on festivals and rituals. The craft reflects the deep connection of the reverie people with the river and their dependency on traditional knowledge to navigate the reverie landscape.

Conclusion :

The study concludes that with immense cultural, religious, and ecological importance in the district, the heritage of Majuli is under severe threat. The very identity of the island rests in the Vaishnavite traditions, the satras, and all indigenous art forms because it faces extreme environmental challenges, such as river erosion, frequent flooding, and climate change. All these led to the loss of land and important cultural sites, alongside socio-economic factors such as migration, modernization, and lack of adequate infrastructure and funding. Despite all this heritage, no coordinated, overall strategy of preservation has prevented the cultural assets of Majuli from being wasted. This is because traditional knowledge, art forms, and practices are gradually funding away from the place as younger generations are moving away or

modernization changes the social fabric of the island. Tourism provides economic potential, but unregulated growth remains harmful to the balance between heritage and environment at Majuli.

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