The Cultural Importance of River Island Majuli: The Living Heritage of Assam

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Abstract: Majuli, the river island is situated on the north-eastern part of Assam state on the River Brahmaputra. The island is famous for the *Vaishnavite* culture owing to its typical role towards living heritage in the region. The *Vaishnavite* faith was initiated in Assam by the Guru, Srimanta Shankardeva in the 15th Century, which is being continued as the foundation of cultural practices in the Majuli. The living heritage of Majuli island consists of drama, music, poetry and dance along with the performing art forms, which are in ritualistic practices only within the premises of the *Sattra*. Every year a large number of visitors and tourists visit the island to witness the *Sattras* and its multi-colored cultural heritage. Majuli was included in the 'Tentative List' of World Heritage Site (WHS) under cultural category at 28th Annual Session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee (WHC) held at Suzhou, China. Majuli Island was declared as the first island district of India by the Government of Assam on 8th September, 2016. The present research focuses on the living V*aishnavite* cultural heritage perspectives of the island and its tourism potentiality.

Keywords: *Island, Satras, Vaishnavite Culture, Living Heritage, Tourism*

1.0 Introduction

The performing art forms in ritualistic practices in the Majuli Island are considered as intangible cultural heritage, which is practiced through generations. Components of intangible heritage include ethnicity, cultural practices, representations, knowledge, skills and expressions continuing through several generations. Heritage contributes to a sense of identity to the communities. This is manifested in the form of a continuous mode of recreation in consonance with respective environmental perspectives. Intangible cultural heritage is also described as "living heritage" or "living culture"[1]. Majuli is a home to *Sattras* (monasteries) of Vaishnavite culture and is considered as an example of living heritage. There are many other living traditions in the State of Assam. Majuli is at centre to such diverse cultural practices nourished by the valuable knowledge and tradition of the Vaishnavite culture. The island was formed in the lap of the Brahmaputra River draining through many of the north-eastern states. The study deals with the living *Sattra* cultural heritage of Majuli and the associated cultural tourism potential in the Assam state.

1.1 Methodology

The current study is dealt with the practices of *Sattra* culture, related and intangible heritage and associated tourism perspectives of the Majuli Island. Secondary data sources form the basis of this research. Though a number of research papers were published on the subject, the specific study focusing on the tangible and intangible heritage of Majuli Island are yet to be explored. The present social status of local inhabitants and the communities living in the island coupled with their cultural perspectives have been taken into account for this research in the qualitative dimensions.

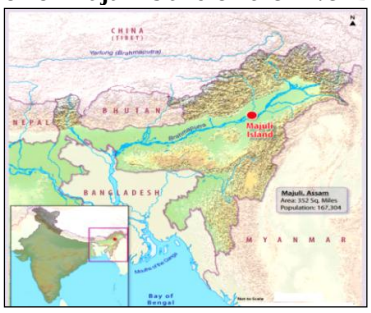
2.0 Discussion

2.1 The River Brahmaputra and Majuli Island

The River Brahmaputra is originating from the Trans-Himalayan region situated at about 100 km towards south-east of the Mapam Lake within the jurisdiction of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China (Fig.1). Brahmaputa is the seventh largest tropical river of the world (Tandon and Sinha, 2007)**.** Even though the total length of the River Brahmaputra exceeds the length of River Ganga by about 2,900 km but only 725 km of the course of Brahmaputra lies within the Indian Territory. The entire course of the Brahmaputra passes through the countries of Tibet, China, India and Bangladesh. The river transports huge sediment, flux of around 852.4 t/km/year, in Bangladesh (Singh, 2006).

The erosion of the Mountain Himalayas contributes huge sediment influx to the Brahmaputra River. The slope of the mountain carry the sediment influx to the foothills and thereafter it is stored in the valley of Assam state as the alluvial deposits (Thorne et. al, 1993; Garzanti et. al, 2004). The large catchment areas belonging to the narrow Brahmaputra basin in Assam is responsible for frequent flooding as parts of it experience exceedingly heavy precipitation. Recent scientific work is focusing on the understanding of hydrology[2] of the Brahmaputra, which is useful for effective management of the watersheds and mitigation of the flood hazards. Many large alluvial islands have been created by huge alluvial reaches of the Brahmaputra and quite a few of them are more than a century old and populated as well.

Fig.1. Location of Majuli Island on the River Brahmaputra



Source Modified https://www.mapsofindia.com/answers/india/biggest-river-island-india

The schemes pertaining to the control of flood and installation of new embankments were started after 1954. For example, the Teesta Barrage Project is meant for addressing dual schemes like flood protection and irrigation. The Assam Arakhan foreland basin system includes the upper reaches of the valley of River Brahmaputra (De Celles and Giles, 1996). The island Majuli and its adjacent places are belonging to this system. The word 'Majuli' can be explained as 'the land in between two parallel rivers' and the same has been substantiated through the fact that the island was formed in the meeting point of the Brahmaputra and its anabranches. The entire district can be classified both as rural and agrarian. The land area of the island may be categorized respectively as; about 32237.16 hectares, about 14834.66 hectares and around 7671. 23 hectares as lands suitable for cultivation, remains always submerged in water and completely non-productive. Total 22 `Char areas' are encompassing the area of 5939.01 hectares and in addition to this around 61153.09 hectares of land is demarcated as the reserved land for government. Very small land holder farmers are having very less land (around 0.95 hector of land) for cultivation (Das, 2017). Even though the farmers are holding very less size of land for cultivation, the lands are blessed with conspicuous fertility, which is recommendable for producing main crops like potato, paddy, mustard, pulses, wheat and sugarcane coupled with the seasonal vegetables and fruits grows in copious extent.

2.2 Location of Majuli

The Majuli is situated in the lap of River Brahmaputra and is formed within the meeting point of both the Brahmaputra and Lohit rivers. The island is located in between the $26^0$39'57.6" & $27^0$16'19.2"N Latitudes and $93^0$34'12" & $94^0$42'3.6"E Longitudes. Altitude is 84.5 meters above mean sea level (a msl). Stratigraphic succession is observed along the walls of the deep wells installed in the vicinity of the island. This shows that the sub-surface geological formations are belonging to the Paleocene–Eocene age (Ranga Rao, 1983).

Majuli is encircled by River the Kherkutia Suti along with the Subansiri River and the Brahmaputra River on the north and south respectively. Majuli Island manifests through its characteristic geological estrangement from the majority of the Assam state on account of lack of road connection and inadequate water transportation, bank erosion trouble and frequent floods in addition to the big segments of tribal literacy. On account of most awful connectivity and regular floods, the region suffers from deficiency in terms of administrative and other developmental activities. The estimation indicates that the island has witnessed the loss of one third of its land in the last four decades. Besides the threat to this Vaishnavite cultural center owing to recurring land loss in recent past, Majuli is topographically represented by a physiographic elevation situated on the "high basement" (Lahiri & Sinha, 2014).

2.3 Tangible and Intangible Heritage of Majuli

Majuli is the land of unique religious culture of Vaishanavism and Vaishnavite institutions called *Satras*. The unique living heritage of Majuli has also been affected by the riverbank erosion. In Majuli originally there had been 65 *Satras* but now only 23 are surviving (Sarma and Phukan, 2004; Sarma, 2013). As a Vaisnavite site, the uniqueness of the Majuli represents an extraordinary

peculiarity in the global context. In the 16th Century A.D. simultaneously with the renaissance period, that transformed the look of the world. A similar rebirth in socio-cultural aspect took place in Assam, which was brought by the great Vaishnava Saint Sankaradeva. This was a concept of independent social principle, an amalgamation of various ethnic groups with common spiritualism. This established the basic foundation of a casteless social configuration in the Assamese culture. This has shaped a structure of social authority and community livelihood, which sustained over centuries and is an exclusive example of unity in diversity. The island is also enriched by the presence of vibrant culture of people belonging to the communities like *Mishings, Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis, Ahoms* and Nepali. The island is proud to have an array of ethnic tribes, who have hugely contributed towards its rich cultural heritage. The typical culture of the Majuli Island can be observed and analyzed based on the following perspectives:

i) Mask Making;
ii) Drama;
iii) Manuscript Writing
iv) Music
v) Dance
vi) Festivals
vii) Boat Making
viii) Fishing
ix) Pottery
x) Weaving

2.4 The **Vaishnavite Culture and the *Sattras***

Majuli, the first river island district of Assam in India that holds the top place of Neo-Vaishnavite movement has been pioneered by the great reformer Srimanta Sankardeva during the 15th Century. As per the statistics available with the Government of Assam, the island hosts around 65 Vaishnavite *Satras*. The severity of frequent river bank erosion is the sole reason of shifting of these *satras* to other places. However, at present out of 65, only 23 *satras* exist in the island.

Apart from dominated Mishing community, Majuli is also a residence of other ethnic communities namely, the Sonowal Kachari, Nepalis and Deoris etc. The Vaishnavite Institutions like *Satras* mainly preaches about a caste and classless society that seeks religious elevation of a person as an individual. There are few *Satras* called as 'Udasin' *Satra*, wherein the *Bhaktas* follows celibacy, but a few *Satras* have the *Satradhikar* (head of the *Satra*) and the *Bhaktas* have provision to get married and form a family.

Even though each and every *Satras* in the Majuli follow the fundamental ideology of Neo-Vaishnavite movement, but each of the *Satras* has a few unique individuality in terms of their cultural mandates. For example, when few *Satras* expertise in the art of mask making, some *Satras* get superiority in *Satriya Gayan* and *Bayan* i.e., the music and dance forms that are intrinsic parts of the Vaishnavite culture. On the other hand, a few Satras have mastery over the *Bhaona* i.e., the

theatrical acts and *Paalnam*, the typical innovative art forms visualized and applied by Srimanta Sankardeva to spread the philosophy of Neo-Vaishnavite culture.

The *Sattras* are mostly located in the mainland and some are in the Chapori areas that maintain a distinctive spiritual atmosphere. The *Sattras* are mainly situated at the centre of the Majuli Island. Each *Sattra* acts as centre for performance and cultural activities and also plays an important role to dissolve the local disputes as a self-governing organization. Almost all the villages are associated with their respective *Sattras*, and the inhabitants contribute in various activities of their own *Sattra* on the occasions of festivals and rituals. In the way, these *Sattra* Villages perform as important centers and own a *Narnghar* (council house), which is meant for carrying out all the activities pertaining to the *sattra*. For example, the juxtaposition of semi-urban places with *sattras* are depicted in the manner that places like *Kamalabari*, *Garmur* and *Dakhinpat* with *Garamur Sattra*, *Natun Kamalabari Sattra* and *Dakhinpat Sattra* are having the main commercial places of trade and commerce. These *sattra* villages and other settlements having people with different dialects belonging to various ethnic people have settled in Majuli Island. The people of diversified tribal origin have distinctive settlement patterns of their own and particular characteristics of buildings.

Mishing and Deori are the major tribal communities and they have the most typical pattern of their houses, which is built on the bamboo stilts and are located in the vicinity of the river, wetlands and other water bodies. The entire settlements are well placed in the exclusive natural setting, having wide diversity of land character and water bodies, which have resulted due to the singular interaction in between geomorphologic set up and hydrological characteristics of the island in conjunction with the river Brahmaputra. These different water bodies and groves perform as a home for various types of flora and fauna in the island. The proper knowledge of the natural ongoing experience by the local inhabitants is sufficient enough and is portrayed in the regional fact systems. The categorization of each natural component of the backdrop has evolved over a particular time frame.

2.5 Musical Heritage and Cultural Performance: The Living Heritage

In Majuli the religious, cultural and social life of the people is greatly influenced by the *Sattras*. The *Sattars* and the associated culture have made Majuli the principal seat of pilgrimage for their followers in Assam. The audiences throughout the world gets attracted by the *Sattras'* performances, particularly at the time of more than centuries old *Ras Leela* festival performed every year in the island (Kakati, 2010; Kothari, 2013). The masks are designed by hereditory craftsmen and are prepared from the organic materials like bamboo, jute, wood and cloth. The theatre culture of Majuli is not explored to that extent as yet.

The birth of brand *mukha bhaona* or mask theatre is performed as main part of the neo-Vaishnavite culture and is admired since sixteenth century. The *bhaona* is performed throughout Assam and are related to spiritual gatherings in *nam ghars*, meaning the chanting houses. Sagas from the customary *ankia naat* (one-act plays endorsed by the great reformer Sankardeva) are in general performed by all-male ensembles, while women have entered in the current year nto the stronghold

of this male domain. The monastery of *Natun Chamaguri Sattra* is a famous centre for manufacturing the masks and one of its most proficient exponents is the awardee Hem Chandra Goswami of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. The masks made by Shri Goswami can factually 'speak' during the performances, since the jaws are prepared in movable form with bamboo and can be made flexible by the actors by wearing them.

The mask-making culture aimed at divine performance or simply as cultural objects is gradually diminishing. Majuli is continuously under the threat of destruction. The previous research indicated that there is a threat that around 10-15 years Majuli may stop to exist... The *putala nach* or indigenous puppet theatre is directly related to the mask theatre. Again the performances are linked to the *ankia naat*. They use tiny puppets made of woods. Further, this form is kept alive because it is associated with the religious system of performers at the pilgrimage site of *Auniati Sattra*. Majuli's indigenous theatre is yet to be discovered by the mainstream section, which may be considered as a match in a well-built system of theatre performed in rural Assam. The network could hypothetically extend from Goalpara, where the theatre combined *Badungduppa Kalakendra* that is created by late Sukracharjya Rabha and is operating to Dhemaji. This is located close to the border between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, where Pankaj Chetia's Macbeth Drama is performed. These forms, definitely rural and are much more up to date in their viewpoint than the Vaishnavite string of theatres, which is the calling card of Majuli Island.

2.5.1 Dance Forms of Majuli

Sattriya dance accompanied by the music (*Sankriytana*) may be considered as one of the 8 classical dance forms of our country, which blends with the religion and aesthetic components and is represented through drama, dance and ballads. This is the living heritage of Majuli. The popular traditional dance form *Satraranga* (Fig.2) is performed by the group of Vaisnavite disciples and artists in the island. The performing artists have devoted their whole life for development of the sattriya art and culture. The saint Sankaradeva developed innovative dance forms to perform exclusively in the *Sattras* and is called Sattriya Nritya as complement to *Ankiya Naat* (an one-act form of Assamese play) in the Majuli island. The Sangeet Natak Academy has recognized the five centuries old *Sattriya* dance as a classical dance in the year 2000.

Fig. 2. Traditional *Sattriya* Dance of the Majuli Island



Source: https://www.esplanade.com/festivals-and-series/kalaa-utsavam-indian-festival-of-arts/2018

2.5.2 Festivals of Majuli

Being the Vaishnavite site of Assam, the Majuli Island is the centre of a variety of multi-coloured festivals. Some of the major festivals celebrated in the island, are *Janmashtami, Phalgutsav or Phakuwa, Ras Lila, Guru Tithi, Bihu*, etc (Nath, 2016). The birth anniversary of Lord Krishna is celebrated on the *Janmastami* i.e., on the 8th day of the dark moon in the Bengali month *Bhadra* on a date between mid August to mid September. The multi-coloured festival is celebrated in the full moon day of local month *Phagun* falling between mid of February to March. *Janmastami* is performed by the *gayan-bayan* and *nam-prasanga*. The *vaishnavite* performances like, *namkirtan, oja pali, gayan-bayan, bhaona* etc. form exclusive part of the *Raas Lila* celebration. The death anniversaries of the *gurus* like Saint Sankardeva, Madhavadeva and all the preceptors of the post Sankardeva times are performed during *Guru Tithi*. *Bihu* is the national festival of Assam, which is celebrated in Majuli with great grandeur.

The Mishing tribes follow agricultural cycle to celebrate other two important festivals namely, *Ali-aye-legang* and *Pohrak*. The commencement of the sowing season is celebrated on the first day of February month by the *Ali-aye-legang* festival. The five-day long *Ali-aye-legang* festival is celebrated through sowing of seeds in their respective fields and they pray for good harvest round the season and for the well-being of the family. The young men and women of every household celebrate the festival in their courtyard with song and dance accompanied by playing of traditional folk musical instruments. On the third day the families offer a feast for guests and in the subsequent fourth day no wrongful deed is performed. Wet rice boiled with cardamom and wrapped in leaves is offered to the guests during the feasts. In the early winter months, the post-harvest festival *Pohrak* is celebrated with music and dance. The three-day festival of the tribe is celebrated inviting a large number of people from adjoining villages.

2.6 Traditional Tribal Houses in Majuli

The Mishing tribes live in the traditional houses (Fig.3), which are generally made of wood with a thatched roof, bamboo flooring, ceiling and walls. The houses of Mishing tribes are built on top of concrete pillars. This is done to protect the house from flooding during peak monsoon season.

Fig.3. Traditional Tribal Houses in Majuli Island



Source: https://thirdeyetraveller.com/majuli-island-travel-guide-2018

3.0 THE SOCIETY AND COMMUNITIES IN MAJULI

As per 2011 census, the total tribal population is 77,603 that includes 39,328 and 38,275 are male and female respectively. Like many other islands in India, there is a heterogeneous society in Majuli, which boasts of a diversity of ethnic tribes resulting in its affluent and multi-colored heritage with unique cultural perspectives. The population of the island comprises of the communities like tribals, non-tribals, and scheduled castes. The society of the island is a combination of different creed and religions include Ahoms, Mataks, Chutiyas, Suts, Naths, Koibartas, Brahmins, Kalitas, Kochs, Sonowol Kacharis, Nepalis, Bengalis, Mishings, Deori, along with a few Marwaris and the Muslims. The major tribal population of Majuli includes the ethnic groups like *Sonowal Kacharis*, *Mishings* and *Deoris*, whereas the scheduled castes population includes the communities like the *Kaivartas*, the *Brittial Banias* etc. The following major groups are living in the Majuli Island:

3.1 Monks of the Sattras

Monks in the *Sattras* are belonging to the Assamese *Vaishnavite* monastic community. They practice *Eksarana Dharma* (Shelter-in-one God) that propagated since 16th century (Neogi, 1980).

3.2 Mishing

As per 2001 census, the Mishing people were 63,572, covering 42% of the total population in the island. They belong to the Tibeto-Burmese branch of the Mongoloids and are designated as the most significant tribal community of Majuli Island (Bordoloi, 1991; Pegu, 2014).

3.3 Deori

As per 2001 census, a total of 3498 (3%) of the island population belonged to the *Deori* i.e., the class of the *Chutiyas* originating from the Tibeto Burmese branch of the Mongoloids. The village economy, homes, farms, and marriage functions are similar to those of the Mishing tribe. With preservation of their own dialect and culture, the *Deori* groups of the island observe the Bihu along with own dance form the *Hurairangali*. The Deori groups are mainly residing in two villages namely, *Major Deori* and *Sriram Deori*, located at 7 km to the south-east of Jengraimukh (Assam State Gazetteer, 1999).

3.4 Sonowal Kacharis

Total 1,071 people of *Sonowal Kacharis* community are living in the island (2001 census) and most of them reside in the *Sonowal Kachari* villages located in upper part of the island. During the reign of *Chutiya* and *Ahom* kings, the community was engaged to collect gold from the heap of sands from the rivers like Subansiri and others of Assam state (Saikia, 2013). The Sonowol Kacharis group used to perform the dances like *Bohua, Haidang and Hagro*.

3.5 Mataks

The term Mataks fit in to the historic *Moamaria* community. In Assamese language, the word 'mat' means decision and 'ek' means one. In this way, the term 'Matak' derives as the unanimity in decision-making. During *Ahom* rule the *Moamaria* community wae termed as Mataks. Shri Shri Aniruddha Deva is their spiritual leader. The community are residing mainly in the Ashokguri, Dekasensawa and Burhasensowa villages of Majuli. The villages are situated on the north of Rawanapar. The Mataks are also popular for their exhibition of the musical instrument like Mridanga.

4.0 Livelihood

The rate of literacy among the Mishing tribes is approximately 68%. The occupations of most of the tribes are agriculture and weaving. The Mishing families grow a variety of crops like vegetables, tobacco, rice, bamboo and mustard. They also practice pisciculture of the endemic varieties of fish, sericulture, cattle farming, boat construction, handloom and handicrafts (Dutta, 2014). The tribal women gain knowledge of the art of weaving at a very tender age and weave cloth pieces out of muga or silk and cotton yarns. The Mishing tribes are popular for weaving of *Gadu*, a famous type of blanket. Preparation of the blankets demands special knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, the art is becoming extinct over the last few years. The Mishing women also contribute to the family earning by keeping pigs, cattle etc.

4.1 Tourism Aspects

There are a total of eight ghats in Majuli. Ghat means jetty. Nimati has the same meaning. The place were the steam boats launch. These are, (i) Kamalabari Nimati, (ii) Afala Nimati, (iii) Dakshinpath Nimati, (iv) Chalbhara Nimati, (v) Baguriguri Nimati, (vi) Phoolani Dikhamukh, (vii) Shikari Dikhamukh and (viii) Sumaimari Nimati, which perform ferry services for ferrying people from Majuli to Jorhat and back. Nimati Kamalabari is the biggest ghat. The tourists usually visit different *Satras* in Majuli, which are famous as centres of Vaishnavite culture.

The cultural heritage, together with rich biodiversity, unique ecosystem in Majuli have a significant tourism potential if the ethnic communities and traditional village institutions, like the *Dorbars* (Duncan, 2009), *Gaonburhas* (Sinha, 2007), etc. are empowered to preserve the tangible and intangible heritage of the island. Majuli maintains a fine link with the remaining part of India through water transports and road overland. There are a good number of guest houses (Fig.4) and lodges owned by the government and private sectors. These house a great number of tourists who visit the island each year. The major attractions of Majuli include the *Sattras*, the sunrise, the sunset, and *beels* (water bodies) for bird watching. The main tourist attractions are as follows:

i) The wheels of the carriage that was brought from England in the eighteenth century and was used by the then *Sattridhakar* of *Garamur Sattra*.

ii) The Manuscript given by the Burmese to *Narasimha Sattra* subsequent to assassination of the then *Sattradhikar* by the Burmese army.

iii) Robe gifted by the *Satradhikar* of *Bengenaati Sattra* to the then King of Ahom. The gift is prepared on silk with the elaborate brocade design with threads of silver and gold.

iv) The set of miniature cannons and a gun that are made of wrought iron, which were gifted to the *Sattradhikar* of *Auniati Sattra* by the British.

Fig.4. Traditional Bamboo Cottage for the Tourists



Source: http://travelwithdare.blogspot.com/2018/08/majuli-island-assam.html

At present across the North-east states festivals of music contribute hugely towards the progress of tourism. The target is to showcase the region's exclusive diversity, to draw more attraction to the tourists and to spread the flavor of typical music of the river island. The recent statistics indicate that about 42,000 and 60 lakhs of foreign tourists and domestic tourists respectively visited the Assam state in the year 2019 and it is hoped that there will be increase in number. The island has better tourism growth rate compared to the national average. The cultural capital Majuli attracts of huge number of tourists, especially during autumn and winter. Tourists are exclusively attracted by the neo-Vaishnavism culture of the island. The previous research reveals that Srimanta Sankardeva, the social reformer, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism movement in the medieval age has preached the Vaishnavism, which is the monotheist form of Hinduism, in the 16th Century. During his preach, Shri Sankardeva had established 65 monasteries and hermitages in Majuli, which are popularly known as the *Sattras*.

There are only 23 or 22 *Sattras* in functional condition in Majuli, of which the main existing ones include *Kamalabari, Benegenaati, Dakhinpat, Garamurh, Auniati, and Shamaguri.* These *Sattras* have conserved in their museums the antiquities, such as, ornaments, weapons, utensils, and other items having cultural significance. These treasures create a center of attention for the great number of tourists every year and fulfill the demand of livelihood to the island inhabitants. The island maintains adequate facilities of lodging for the tourists (Fig.6). However. The high endemic floods

coupled with continuous river bank erosion leading to depletion of landmass have compelled many of the established '*Sattras*' to relocate to places outside of Majuli for reasons of safety and economics. If this adverse situation cannot be checked it may finally bring the curtain down on the age old cultural richness of the region and would lead to a sharp decline in the arrival of tourists in Majuli.

4.2Government and NGOs contribution towards the goal of sustainable development

Majuli, the largest fresh water river island deserves an attraction of the government and non-government organizations (NGOs) for rural and socio-economic progress of its economically downtrodden people. The NGOs have an essential role to play in the economic development of the island people. The performance of the chosen NGOs is praiseworthy in this regard. Apart from contribution towards earnings, the NGOs are playing an important role in spreading literacy, bringing health consciousness and employment generation for the inhabitants of the island. Some NGOs significantly working for the development at Majuli include, River People, Shradha, Sadbhavana, IMPACT-N.E., Kalabhumi Majuli, REDS, and MIPADC etc.

The organizations provide the avenues for independent earning to the educated unemployed youths as well as try to safeguard the island from land loss to the mighty River Brahmaputra. The study reveals that three people friendly NGOs are facilitating people of the island with programs for development. These NGOs are entrusted with implementing diverse projects including income and employment generation,, health project, cultural, and educational projects. However, the field study indicates that out of 34 registered NGOs only a limited number of them are devoted for the welfare of the people and remaining are not functional in the island.

5.0 Protection of The Cultural Heritage and Promotion of Tourism

The study reveals that the following strategies would be beneficial for re-establishment of security against devastation caused by the River Brahmaputra, in the economy of Majuli and promote of its tourism potential:

(i) In order to curb the undesirable recurrent floods and change of the course of the river in the island, modern science and technology coupled with the traditional local knowledge and practices may be used effectively.

(ii) Sustainable special purpose vehicle programmes and specific policies need to be implemented for arresting losses due to flood, its intensity management and long term prevention of river bank erosion in convergence with the line departments and stake holders of the island.

(iii) Infrastructures at the presently operative ghats should be developed, so the that island people and vehicles may be transported without constrain..

(iv) Greater number of tourists may be attracted with the introduction of Star as well as budget hotels. At present there is less number of standard hotels available for tourists for night stay at Majuli.

(v) The char settlers are mostly dependent on cultivation. It is the mainstay of their livelihood. An urgent measure needs to be initiated at the Government and NGOs level to support them with an alternative occupation, such as, non-agricultural job for betterment of their livelihoods.

(vi) Sustainable Tourism by responsible tourists may help to achieve sustainable tourism in the study area by adopting following strategies:

- To include sustainable tourism alternatives with emphasis on the existing tribal culture.
- To sustain long term useful strategies in the prominent destinations of the island.
- To give due concern to the artefacts having importance of inheritance.
- To hold up the initiatives and tourism with participation of the local community.
- To admire the religious practices of local residents.
- To make use of the eco-friendly materials.

xi) Dumping of single use polythene bags and water bottles into the river is the huge environmental challenge in the island. Endeavour needs to be undertaken to inspire and work with the young people and with the local artists having regional cultural knowledge to explore substitute home-grown resources that could be used as replacement of harmful plastics.

xii) To conserve the multi-colored cultural heritage of Majuli island, the following steps are really noteworthy:

- To collect basic data followed by the listings of 23 major *Sattras* and its impact on the local people of the island.
- To build up a record of spiritual heritage and architectural characteristics as identified in the list of intangible heritage under threat.
- To develop an outline for codification of cultural resources (tangible and intangible) available in continuously from 16th century, followed by preparation of preliminary reports highlighting the profile on awareness about the threat to the Majuli community and to design the sustainable measures for alleviation of danger.

6.0 Conclusions

Majuli as a cultural heritage site is only one of its kind. It is noteworthy to comprehend the active and mutual interconnection between the island people, cultural diversities and environmental perspectives. The island showcases the deep insights into the perseverance of the cultural heritage created by Shri Srimant Shankardeva during the period of 1449-1568 CE on the basis of obvious principles of social equality as manifested in his philosophy through the dance forms like *Sattriya* and *Sankari*. As a gifted dramatist, Shankardeva created his own classical theatre, art and music,

which elevated him as the predecessor of Bhakti movement in our country over the years. In the lap of River Brahmaputra, Majuli has become the home of both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The huge tourist influx and earning of revenue of the island may be credited to tourism activities on river Brahmaputra. Hence, the River Brahmaputra is considered as the main support system of the island. However, in the last fifty years, the severe impact of anthropologenic interventions coupled with anti-natural activities has curbed the benevolence of the River Brahmaputra, which is utterly shocking and frightening for the sake of the foundation of socio-economic and geo-economic life of the inhabitants of the island. The Mishings and other marginalized communities are migrating from Majuli to the urban areas as land loss is occurring through the effect of river bank erosion. The severe land loss has wiped away around 2500 villages and 18 towns including the cultural heritage sites and tea gardens in Assam and is responsible for the adversity for about 5 lakhs of people of Majuli Island. In the last five decades, the river island has lost about 371 sq. km. land of its total land mass along with the distinguished Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage centres as a prey of River Brahmaputra. Majuli witnesses numerous touristic related activities, but there much more yet to be looked at and highlighted. Considering the benevolent role on the socio-economic life, all the stake holders of the island should come forward with the immediate, short-term as well as long-term sustainable protection measures that includes the environmental, economical, social and cultural perspectives and would be beneficial to safeguard the exclusive diversified cultural and living heritage of the Majuli Island.

End notes

1. The Convention of UNESCO's 2003 for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
2. Brahmaputra Board, (1997). Report on the Erosion Problem of Majuli Island, Brahmaputra Board, Guwahati.
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