MAJULI
The island of light

By Prof. Samudra Dev Phukan

_The Majuli island, located in the district of Jorhat, Assam, is known to the outside world perhaps more for its flood and erosion. Despite the consistent episodes of disaster, the Majuli Island in the river Brahmaputra possesses a profound history and heritage. This article endeavors to present some of the information the visitors would like to have before planning a visit to the island._

- Author

Whosoever plans a trip as a tourist to Assam in general and Upper Assam in particular, must remember to assign a slot to Majuli, the biggest freshwater river island in the world not only geographically but culturally as well. Best reachable from the present town of Jorhat, a major centre for tea plantation and research, which used to be the last capital of the Ahom kings, via Nemati ghat a small river port, the island throbs with activities related to the doctrine of purified Vaishnavism promulgated by Shri Sankardeva in the last decades of the 15 th century. Shankardeva is also considered to be the founder of the Vaishnava monastery or Saatra system about which more discussion will follow.

From Nemati Ghat, you catch a river ferry boat run by the Government or authorised motorboat run privately and reach the Majuli island.

Literally, the word Majuli in Assamese language means island but Majuli has supposedly derived its name from its location between two streams, Lohit and Khirkatia Suti. The exact location of the island is between latitude 26 degrees 45 minutes N and 27 degrees 12 minutes N. and between longitudes 93 degrees 39 minutes E and 94 degrees 35 minutes E. Its elevation from the mean sea level is 84.50 m.

Majuli is 800 sq km. In area and is located in the Brahmaputra river. It is 12.94 km. from Jorhat. Jorhat is situated 310 km. East of Guwahati. Jorhat is connected by road to Guwahati. Assam State Transport Corporation and private buses leave Guwahati early in the morning and in the evening. Time taken is 6.5 to 7 hours approximately. Jorhat is also connected by train. The train station is Jorhat. The closest airport is at Jorhat. There are daily flights from Guwahati as well as from Kolkata.

**Best schedule for visit:**

The best season is from October to March. Most of the dance, music and drama festivals are organised during this period. It is preferable to coincide the holiday with a Krishna-related festival like Raas. Ali-aligang is also another festival to enjoy. The exact timing is October-November. In general, the whole of Majuli can be considered as a spot of religious tourism as well.

Tourists can stay in some hotels located at Garmur and Kamalabari. The Department of Tourism, Assam, can arrange for stay at the Circuit house. The Saatras also run guest houses where only vegetarian food is served. The Tourist Office of the Government of Assam is located at Delhi. The address is Assam Tourism, Emporia complex. New Delhi 110011. Tel:011 3345897.

**HISTORY OF MAJULI**

According to ‘Yogini Tantra’, a Khatriya named Dharma Pal came from the west and founded a kingdom. His capital was near Guwahati. He brought there some Brahmanas as well as some high-caste Hindus from Upper India. The sage Kendu Kalai is said to have lived in this region. He was succeeded in turn by Padma Narayan, Chandra Narayan, ending with Ram Chandra whose capital was at Ratnapur, Majuli. Old legends distinctly mention this place as the capital of various kings like Kusharany, son of Harabinda, etc.
‘Dipika Chand’ it is mentioned that Ratanpur perhaps was washed away owing to the change in course of the river Brahmaputra.

In about 1189 A.D. Shri Gouri Narayana of Great Bodo tribe of Sino-Tibetian origin founded a dynasty with capital at Ratnapur and assumed the name of Ratnadhranj Pal. Ratnapur was situated near Kherkatia Suti on South bank of Lohit. As two channels were flowing on either side of Ratnapur, it was also known as Majali or Majuli.

Other salient information:

LAND MASS
Majuli, located within two arms of the mighty Brahmaputra, is a site having extreme historical and cultural importance. It needs immediate attention of the scientific community mainly from the consideration of preservation of heritage and extinction from geographical existence triggered by erosion. The land area of the island as evidenced from the IRS Satellite imageries of 1998 was 577.65 sq. km. compared to 1245 sq. km. mentioned by Mr. A.J. Mafat Mills of the British East India Company. Available data indicate an erosion rate of 19 sq.Km. per year. If the situation remains unaltered, the island is likely to be engulfed soon by the Brahmaputra river and will be extinct from the world map.

OTHERS

The presently available landmass for cultivation is 326 sq. km. approximately
The wetland mass is 1165 hectares.
The growth of population is as below:

1901: 35,000
1971: 94,000
1991: 1,35,000
1996: 1,52000

Estimated growth rate
1971-91: 1.8%
1991-96: 2.4%

CULTURE

The Saatras:
Saatras or Gurukuls are the famous Vaishnav monasteries of Assam. They are very closely associated with Assamese culture, art and music and the day-to-day life of the people. This makes Majuli, a principal place of pilgrimage for all in general and for the Vaishnavites in particular. There are several such Saatras. Of these holy seats AUNIATI, DAKHINPAT, GARAMUR, KAMALABARI and BENGENA ATI are more famous. Of special importance are the establishment of Saatras, structures and the purpose for which they are built.

As noted earlier, Vaishnava Saatras were found by Sankardeva, the father of Assamese culture. Subsequently, 65 Saatras grew which propagated the ethnic and socio-cultural ideals. At present, only 22 Saatras are located in Majuli. Others have shifted due to flood and erosion. These Saatras are cultural development foci of Borgeet, Matia khara, Sumar dance, Chali dance, Noyua dance, Nandi Bhringi, Sutradhar, Ojapali, Apsara dance, Satria Krishna dance, Dasavatar dance, etc. These were all contributed by Shri Sankardeva.

The working of some of the Saatras along with their functions are noted below:

DAKHINPAT
Founder: Banamali Deb, an ardent exponent of Raas Leela.

GARAMUR
Founder: Lakshmi Kanta Deb.
Famous for Raasleela performance.
Some ancient weapons are preserved in this Saatra.
AUNIATI
Founder: Niranjan Pathak Deb.
Famous for Paal Nam and Apsara dance.
Has considerable collection of Assamese jewellery, handicraft and utensils

KAMALABARI
Founder: Bedula Padma Ata
A centre of art, culture, literature and classical studies. Its branch Uttar Kamalabari Saatra prepares cultural programmes for the state and outside

BENGENA ATI
Founder: Murari Dev, grandson of Sankardev's step mother
It is a store house of culturally important antiques and is an advanced centre for performing art.
The royal robes belonging to the Ahom king Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha made of gold and an umbrella which is also made of gold and preserved here.

FLORA AND FAUNA
Isolation from the main land has helped the protection and preservation of some of the rare species of flora and fauna at Majuli Island.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DATA
Main occupation: Agriculture and agriculture-based
Main crops grown: Rice
Sericulture: 20 – 25 villages are exclusively meant for developing mulberry, endi and the rare muga silk
Pisciculture turnover: Rs 6 – 10 crores per year

Other social engagements are found in pottery making, boat making, cattle and dairy farming, handicrafts and trades.

Land holdings: Half of the cultivable land was originally owned by the saatras. After imposition of land ceiling the maximum size of land holdings by the Saatras is reduced to 50 bighas (17 acres).
Banking: There are 7 branches of nationalized banks.
Health care: There are 7 PHC's and two private nursing homes.
Electrification: Nearly all villages are electrified.
Administration: Consists of 3 moujas (revenue blocks) which form a sub-division. The sub-division is under Jorhat District Administration.

Majuli is a reserved Assembly constituency (ST)

EROSION
Erosion and flood in Majuli are two problems which must be explained to any visitor to the island. Developments through ages are nullified in an instant of high flood and severe erosion. The fortune and lives of the inhabitants of Majuli are dominated by the river Brahmaputra. Description of the behaviour of rivers and their outcome are to be considered as issues of much wider scope and falls beyond the purview of this paper. Regarding the studies on erosion and flood, it can, however, be rationally concluded that technical efforts without study may not be of much value and use. Stabilization of soil materials, erosion protection device successfully practised elsewhere in the world may give positive results. Adhoc methods of flood protection and erosion protection practices must be reinforced with modern concepts, otherwise we are likely to land in serious failure situations.

We must not allow Majuli to vanish. Concerted opinions instead of lone expert assistance should be practised. Any protection and preservation device must have a strong technical base such as study through physical or mathematical model. It is alright to have a general public opinion but the decisions must be scientifically based.
Majuli deservedly can be placed as a centre of world heritage. We have come to know that certain other centres now are also bracketed with Majuli. It was not a dire necessity and perhaps could have waited for some more time. Those who know Majuli and its cultural background are very likely to feel mortified if such a negative situation develops.

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(Note : The author of the article Prof. Samudra DevPhukan is a well known educationist & technocrat of Assam. Some of the important positions held by him were - (a) Professor and Principal of Engineering Colleges of Assam. (b) Director NEIRIST. (c) Advisor and Consultant on Technical Education, North Eastern Council, Govt. of India)