THE CONCEPT OF ECOMUSEUM: A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MAJULI AS A HERITAGE SITE

A thesis submitted for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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All help received by him from various sources has been duly acknowledged.

No part of this thesis has been reproduced elsewhere for award of any other degree.

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Introduction

The discourse of museum, heritage, conservation etc came out with radical changes in the later decades of twentieth century. The existing institutions and philosophies were critically examined and evaluated in the light of their competence to deal with the emerging social, cultural, political, economic and environmental conditions of late-twentieth century. As a result of these critical assessments, new museums or museum-like institutions began to emerge, which were radically different in terms of principles, modes of operation and objectives from those of their predecessors. The issues that these museums intended to highlight, or work with, were community identity, development through heritage, community involvement in museum, decentralized and fragmented site interpretation, etc. While the term 'new museology' is used to describe this revolutionary phenomenon of the museum world, the term 'ecomuseum' is the catchword which caught the widest publicity and popularity as a tangible outcome of that phenomenon. Ecomuseum is a community-based museum programming for a holistic development of a place and its communities which may lead to sustainable development and preserve the identity of the place and its people.

This research wok is an endeavour to study the concept of ecomuseum, its emergence and various philosophical characteristics. The study is aimed at exploring the theoretical prospects of this notion of ecomuseum for safeguarding the rich traditional heritage of Majuli, an island of amidst the Brahmaputra River in Assam. The selection of this particular place for this study is due to the fact that Majuli is the seat of the age-old Vaishnava heritage of Assam and the diverse traditional cultures of tribal and non-tribal populations. This culturally rich and naturally unique island is subject to repeated floods and erosions which

have not only threatened its physical existence but also have destabilized the life and culture in it. Despite these natural hazards, the age-old cultural traditions are facing uncertainties on the advent of an emerging industrial and urbanized society around them. An adequate heritage management system for the safeguarding of the resources of Majuli is felt to be a dire necessity. This research is an exploratory study that examines the prospect of ecomuseum in fulfilling that need.

This study is based on first-hand fieldwork as well as secondary data. For the theoretical part, the discussions on the theoretical and philosophical issues of ecomuseum are based on the data available on the few relevant writings of selected authors which have duly acknowledged in respective places of this work. In this connection, scholars in respective fields have been interviewed in person as well as through electronic means. First-hand fieldwork in relevant sites in India was also carried out.

For the second component which is about the place of Majuli and its heritage, the information has been collected chiefly from extensive first-hand fieldwork on the site. The various analyses concerning the place have been put forward on the basis of the feedbacks received from local individuals such as, teachers, performers, artisans, students, local activists, and political representatives. The methods of social sciences, such as non-participatory observation, interviews etc were used in this regard. In necessary contexts, collection of information was substantiated with audio-visual recording and photography.

This work has been categorized into two broad units. Chapter 2, 3, and 4 constitute the theoretical part dealing with conceptual features about ecomuseum. The rest of the chapters form the detailed discussions on the place of Majuli as a heritage site. The modern heritage studies

incorporate with entire natural and human landscape of a place, defying the art-based bias towards the notion of heritage. Majuli is truly a place of its distinctive traditional arts and crafts, and the diverse idiosyncratic living traditions of different ethnic groups which categorically described in Chapter 6, 7 and 8. In Chapter 10, a model for ecomusealization in Majuli has been suggested on the basis of the theoretical understanding of the concept of ecomuseum and the information gathered in regards to the rich heritage resources and the various ongoing problems in Majuli.

CONCEPT OF ECOMUSEUM

New Museology: The Discourse and Its Development

The decades of the late twentieth century can be seen as a period of several phenomenal development of social, political and economic life of people at the global scale. In the socio-political arena, this period was highlighted with the decolonization and identity-building of new nations in different parts of the globe. Added to this was the unprecedented development of science and technology, influencing the material and non-material life of people at all levels. Also, the human concern for ecology and environment was seen to be in its culmination during these times. And quiet obviously, it was also the time when various disciplines of human academia were set to bring out radical changes in their ethics, philosophy and objectives. In fact, the post-war decades were periods of significant renewal of the total world-view of mankind, and its manifestation was reflected in almost all human endeavors of thoughts and actions.

It was during the last quarter of twentieth century that the museum world had experienced the advent of New Museology, a phenomenon of re-assessment and re-thinking of the hitherto prevailing norms and practices of the conventional museum establishments, and also of exploring newer horizons for the museum as an active social institution. The beginning of this can be seen in the 1960s with the growing dissatisfaction of museum professionals with the traditional museum philosophies. Such discontents were primarily for certain *inabilities* or *handicaps* on the part of the traditional museums: their inability to take part in the processes of social development, identity-building of public communities; lagging behind the emerging and wider notions of heritage, environment and cultural relativism; and lacking of adequate inclusive means to deal with the emerging pluralistic society where refined understandings of gender, race and class began to

dominate. The advent of shifting perspectives in the museum-world to make museum closer to the communities in question, and for that matter, the confrontations for a necessary change in the very institution of museum, were described by Nancy Fuller, in 1992, with the following words:

> About twenty-five years ago, practitioners in many parts of the world began investigating the human dimension of museums. Fueled by principles of equality and autonomy, and focused on public education, they questioned the attitudes, assumptions, and principles that underlie museums. Often conventional-style museums were found not to have worked as models for community museums, because their social and cultural character was not appropriate to the needs of the audience. While some observers felt that increased public awareness of a museum's essential services would lead to expanded community use, others looked at the issue differently. They argued that it is better to change the museum into an institution that serves the needs of the public, rather than to try to change public perceptions of what museums are about.[1]

However, these efforts "to change the museum", if they were to constitute what is conceived as New Museology, neither evolved with atomistic origin, nor it took shape of a discipline of concrete theories and methods. Rather, the history of New Museology provides with a constellation of prescriptions and attitudes towards the should-be nature and functioning of museum in contemporary societies; and also in parallel, a series of museum programming in unconventional ways, in different places of diverse contexts, to meet such conceptualizations in reality. New museology, it seems, began with simultaneous deliberations on theoretical aspects of museums and museology, as well as with the innovative practical experimentations in different contexts, both of which enriched each other.

The UNESCO Round Table held in Santiago de Chile in 1972 was a landmark in history of museology which induced new radical ideas into the museological scholarship. That meeting, themed on 'The Role of Museums in Today's Latin America', was one of the first formal international events to discuss the functioning of museum from

interdisciplinary perspectives; and apart from museologists, subject-specialists from other academic fields were also invited to take part in the discussions. The deliberations made in that Round Table, which were published in the journal *Museum* in 1973, were successful in establishing a creative dialogue between the hitherto exclusively confined museum-world and other domains of academics. The most remarkable outcome of the meeting was the concept of 'integrated museum', put forward for a holistic approach from the museum's part to address the social issues. The guiding principles of the integrated museum, described by H. F. Guido, the Director of the seminar, in his report of the seminar read like this:

> GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE INTEGRATED MUSEUM
>
> The development of science reveals that reality is one and should be apprehended as such. Moreover, contemporary scientific development is based on multidisciplinary work and compartmentalized views are disappearing even from school textbooks. The variety and diversity of the problems confronting modern men will finally compel him to look on the world as one world, to be tackled as an integrated whole. All this implies that the trends should be towards the establishment of integrated museums whose subjects, collections and exhibitions are interrelated with one another and with the natural and social environment of mankind.
>
> The basic function of museums is to show their visitors their place in the world and to make them aware of their problems as individuals and as members of society. To achieve this purpose, museum should present those problems as well as indicating the perspectives that give a constructive meaning to human existence.
>
> This approach does not deny the value of existing museums, nor does it imply abandoning the principles of specialized museums; it is put forward as the most rational and logical course of development for museums, so that they may best serve society's needs. In some cases, the proposed changes may be introduced gradually or on an experimental basis; in others – for instance, museums not yet established or not yet definitively organized – it may provide the basic orientation.
>
> The transformation in museological activities requires suitable personnel, which implies a gradual change in the outlook of the curators and administrators themselves and in the institutional structures for which they are responsible. In addition, the integrated museum will require the permanent or temporary assistance of specialists from various disciplines, including the social sciences.

> The new type of museum, by its specific features, seems the most suited to operate as a regional museum or as a museum for small and medium-sized population centres.[2]

The interdisciplinary approach and the idea of integral museum encouraged in these resolutions had a profound impact on the museological activities in the succeeding years, and the Santiago Round Table opened the pathways for the emergence and promotion of a distinctive museological ideology.

The practical demonstration of new museological ideas can be traced back to the decades of 1960s and 1970s when different categories of innovative museums began to be established in European countries, viz., France, Portugal and Spain; and in the American countries, especially the United States, Canada and Mexico. Hauenschild observed that "Three parallel developments occurred, independent of one another and in separate social contexts: neighborhood museums in the United States, integral museums in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, and ecomuseums in France and Quebec"[3]. However, there are a number of important facts to be noted about the emergence of such categories of museums, and in placing them in the chronology new museological developments. Firstly, many of these museums were established prior to the UNESCO Round Table of Santiago of 1972, if that is to be understood as the first official dialogue in an international platform in the line of new museology. Secondly, although each of these museum-models can be treated as different and distinctive typology because of their independent origins and specific goals, most of their fundamental characteristics were similar. Thirdly, prior to the 'three' typologies mentioned by Hauenschild, museums did began to exist in 'unconventional' styles, such as open-air museums in Scandinavia, American folklife museums, etc which can be regarded as the precursors of the more distinctive new museums of later times.

A neighbourhood museum, according to Bhatnagar, "is a mid-way solution where an already established museum, if itself, can not break with tradition and can not follow new direction, then perhaps be made to realize the need to sponsor a supplementary agency which will serve as an intermediary between the museum and the community to serve its existing needs. The idea is that the central museum in a major city should begin to establish or assist chains of less extensive, new institutions which have been called *neighborhood museum*"[4]. The first neighbourhood museum was established under the name and style of Anacostia neighbourhood museum in the USA in 1967. This was the time that American cities were in the transition of ethnic topography, and the museum professionals were concerned with the "problem of the lack of contact between museums and the communities around them, for after whites had fled from downtown neighbourhoods following the civil disorders of 1968, many museums found themselves surrounded by divergent groups and discordant sounds"[5]. The Anacostia neighbourhood museum was the result of the initiations of S. Dillon Ripley, the then Director of the Smithsonian Museum, with the vision of a branch museum in Anacostia of Washington "that needed the infusion of form, of design, or varied color patterns and shapes, to inspire the young". Regarding the way of functioning of the museum, Kinard described: "... exhibitions have explored the community's history, African themes, the social situations of blacks and particularly woman... ... There is no permanent collection, but the special exhibitions are always stimulating, even when they focus on appalling reality".[6]

The most influencing and widespread terminology of the new museological discourse has been the *ecomuseum*. It was in France and French-speaking regions of Canada where ecomuseum found its initial incarnations since the later parts of the 1960s, and in the succeeding decades it became accepted with sheer enthusiasm in almost all parts of

the globe. The movement of ecomuseum in France is linked with the series of decentralized museums established in "historically and environmentally unique regions', under the leadership of George Henri Rivière (1897 – 1985), the celebrated French museologist and the pioneer-architect of ecomuseums in France. The term 'ecomuseum' was coined by another French museologist Hugues de Varine in 1971. The prefix "eco" can be seen as expressing the prominence of environmentalism in France during those times. But much before the coinage of this term, Rivière had been engaged in establishing new kinds of museums in different parts of France, which laid the foundation for a widespread ecomuseum movement in France in the successive years. The early experiments of Rivière, in 'distorting' the traditional museum-models to meet with the new contexts, were described by Hubert as:

> In 1967, the French Regional Nature Parks were established, by grouping together rural councils and providing substantial financial banking in order to implement a policy of economic and cultural development. Georges Henri Rivière took that opportunity to adapt the Scandinavian open-air museums to the French context, with the difference that houses would not be moved to an artificial site, but that sites would be restored to their former condition. These new museums aimed to offer all-round education, not just dealing with cultural practices or architecture but also with the relations between man and his environment. They represented a first attempt at a combination of the human and natural sciences. These experiments, for which the name of ecomuseum was coined shortly after, in 1971, clearly expressing their environmental aspect, very soon met with great success, echoing the development in the public at large of ecological and regional ideas.[7]

A typical ecomuseum operates through fragmented site-interpretation within a specifically defined territory of human and natural milieu, functions in a democratic way for community empowerment and identity building, serves for the total development of the territory through judicious exploitation of its natural and cultural resources. However, despite these seemingly unique generalizations, ecomuseums did emerge in different forms and styles in different places

of the world. Davis observed that "there is no single ecomuseum model, but the philosophy has been adapted and moulded for use in a variety of situations"[8]. In the 1970s and 1980s, France and the French-speaking regions of Canada took the lead in the experiments of ecomuseums, and towards the beginning of 21st century the ecomuseums spread over all the continents except the Antarctica. An important fact regarding the usage of the term ecomuseum is that there are institutions in different countries which use the term ecomuseum in their title and promotional literature without being conformed to an orthodox ecomuseum philosophy; and on the other hand, there are also institutions which fulfill the criteria for ecomuseum but do not use the term ecomuseum in their nomenclature[9]. The following words of Hugues de Varine, the man who coined the word ecomuseum, are significant:

> I have been the unfortunate inventor of the word ecomuseum although it is George Henri Riviere who has invented the contents, the professional contents. I invented the word by chance in 1971. I thought that it was just a sort of chance finding. But I must say I regret, because too many people have used that word for too many things.[10]

The evolution and widespread movement of ecomuseum in late twentieth century can be seen as the most spectacular phenomenon of new museology. The term as well as the practice of ecomuseum caught the public and professionals to such an extent that the term 'ecomuseology' was often used as synonymous to, and interchangeable with, the 'new museology'. While the detailed conceptual features of ecomuseums are discussed in Chapter 3, it may be noted here that the social, political, cultural and environmental situations of the later decades of twentieth century provided with a fertile ground for a worldwide boom of ecomuseums.

On the other hand, in contrast to these diverse developments in the practical field, the official deliberations on new museology at the

formal organizational level grew through 'considerable tensions'. As delineated by Davis,

> ICOM traces the origins of new museology to specialized circles in France during 1980s, when it represented a movement of criticism and reform. ICOM's International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM), which had been in 1977, provided a forum for early debate, and Van Mensch (1992) suggest that considerable tensions arose as new museology sought its status within the committee. Several difficulties arose in Mexico (1980) and Paris (1982) as a group of members headed by Rivière attempted to make new museology the focus of the committee's policy and activities. Debate continued at the ICOM General Meeting in London (1983) when Pierre Mayrand was asked to establish a temporary working group on ecomuseums and new museology for a proposed ICOFOM meeting in Canada in 1984. This meeting never took place as ICOFOM failed to organize a meeting. However, Mayrand and his colleagues went on to launch the 'First International Workshop on Ecomuseums and the New Museology', which took place in Quebec [of Canada] in 1984. At this meeting a policy statement was adopted which became known as the 'Declaration of Quebec'... ... ... In the same year a second international meeting was held in Lisbon, Portugal, which led to the formation of MINOM (International Movement for a New Museology) as an associate body of ICOM.[11]

'The Declaration of Quebec' is a significant manifesto of new museology. It not only defines the propositions of a new museological movement, but also vividly places the justifications of new museology in the socio-economic contexts of the late twentieth century. Some of the 'universal considerations' of the declaration, as appeared in the journal *Museum* in 1985, read in following words:

> In a modern world which is attempting to muster all the resources that can contribute to development, museology must seek to extend its traditional roles and functions of identification, conservation and education to initiatives which are more far-reaching than these objectives, and thus integrate its action more successfully into the human and physical environment.
>
> In order to achieve this objective and at the same time involve the public in its activities, museology must have increasing recourse to interdisciplinarity, modern methods of communication used in all cultural action, and modern management methods which involve the consumer.
>
> While preserving the material achievements of past civilizations and protecting the achievements characteristic of the aspirations and technology of today, the new museology - ecomuseology, community museology and all other forms of active museology - is primarily concerned with community development,

> reflecting the driving forces in social progress and associating them in its plans for the future.[12]

The statuettes of MINOM, *Movimento Internacional por uma Nova Museologia* (in English, *International Movement for a New Museology*), attributed the following characteristics for the initiatives of new museology:

> - their role is to provide with access to a better self-knowledge and understanding of the conditions of their existence;
> - this museological activity is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach in which human being is considered in the natural, social and cultural environment. Within this perspective the concept of 'milieu' and 'context' are essential;
> - in this museological activity, methods and practices are used to actively involve the population;
> - this museological activity is characterized by flexible and de-centralised structures which are appropriate to the territory and population involved.[13]

The objectives of new museology, classified by the members of the working groups of MINOM in 1986, included these elements: a global view of reality; research that satisfies social requirements; action that is continually adapted to a population and its territory; and an approach, research and actions that contribute to individual and social development[14]. As shown in *Fig. 1,* Hauenschild demonstrates the distinctions of new museums in contrast to typical traditional museums, with the constituent parameters of objectives, basic principles, structure and organization, approach and tasks.

The *territory-population-identity-development* format was seen to be the most dominant schematic conceptualization of new museology in the last three decades, both in philosophical-theoretical discussions and also in the practical museum programming. This scheme still enjoys a central place within new museolgy, and has been seen to be applied in many places of the world.

Schematic representation of the ideal "new" museum	Schematic representation of the traditional museum
1. **Objectives:** Building identity Coping with everyday life Social development	1. **Objectives:** Preservation and protection of a given material heritage
2. **Basic principles:** Extensive, radical public orientation Territoriality	2. **Basic principles:** Protection of the objects
3. **Structure and organization:** Little institutionalization Financing through local resources Decentralization Participation Teamwork based on equal rights	3. **Structure and organization:** Institutionalization Government financing Central museum building Professional staff Hierarchical Structure
4. **Approach:** Subject: complex reality Interdisciplinarity Theme orientation Linking the past to the present and future Cooperation with local/regional organizations	4. **Approach:** Subject: extract from reality (objects placed in museums) Discipline-oriented restrictiveness Orientation to the object Orientation to the past
5. **Tasks:** Collection Conservation Mediation Continuing education Evaluation	5. **Tasks:** Collection Documentation Research Conservation Mediation

Fig 1: Andrea Hauenschild's schematic representation of 'ideal' new museum and traditional museum[15]

As far as the term "New Museology" is concerned, it was originally used in the literal sense to signify some newer additions in the methods and practices of Museology, and later became a label for a wider domain of unconventional philosophies, ethics and functioning of museum including the re-thinking and re-assessments of the classical notions of museums and Museology. Peter van Mensch deciphered a chronology of the initial uses of the term:

> The term 'new museology' has been introduced in museological literature at least three different times at three different places. The use of the term is connected with the changing role of museums in education and in the society at large. Current museum practices are considered obsolete and the whole attitude of the professional is criticized. The profession is urged to renew itself in

> the perspective of a new social commitment. As such the term 'new museology' was first introduced (without much effect) in the United States at the end of the 1950s when the concept of the museum as educational institution was brought to life again. The second time was at the end of the 1970s when in France the social role of museums was re-defined by a new generation of progressive museologists. Finally, at the end of the 1980s the term appeared in the United Kingdom in connection with a re-assessment of the educational and social role of museums in the post-war period[16]

The British understanding of New Museology was reflected in the writings of Peter Virgo, whose book *The New Museology* gave emphasis on better presentation and effective communication of museum for its visitors. However, another British museologist Peter Davis pointed out that this "is a very 'English' view of new museology, and majority of the authors ignore all that has been written about the nature and purpose of museums in other countries"[17]. According to Davis, the re-assessment of museum that occurred from 1960s – which includes re-thinking ideas relating to representation, collecting, ownership, governance, social inclusion, environmental concerns and much more – is what can be called as New Museology[18]. He also refers to the fact that in Spanish, Portuguese and French-speaking countries new museology is still thought of as equivalent to community-based heritage or museum actions.

Peter Van Mensch recognized two 'revolutions' in his description of modern museum development during the last two centuries. He used the term 'revolution' to "emphasize the radical changes that took place in rather a short period of time"[19]. The museum modernization movement during the period of 1880-1920, which was concerned with the systematization of the practical museum works of all kinds of museums, has been referred by him as the first museum revolution. On the other hand, the changes that occurred to museum during late twentieth century, is identified by him as the second museum revolution. In his own words, "The new rhetoric of the second museum revolution has been referred to as new museology"[20]. He also sums up the

distinctive objectives of new museology, and the meanings of associated terminologies such as 'community museology', 'ecomuseology' etc with the following words:

> In new museology the museological objectives are geared towards community development, hence the term 'community museology'. Presentation and preservation of the heritage are considered within the context of social action and change. Heritage is a resource to be considered and developed within the context of community improvements. The people of the community themselves have to take care of their own heritage, hence the term 'popular museology'. ... ... Characteristic is the view that the concept of museum is not confined to a building. The museum can be anywhere, and is anywhere and everywhere within a specified territory. For this museum concept the term ecomuseum has been coined, hence the term 'ecomuseology'.[21]

The relationship between new museology and ecomuseology, however, needs to be noted carefully at this point. In contrast to the view that new museology is synonymous to ecomuseology, and for that matter the two are interchangeable with each other, scholars like Peter Davis subscribe to the opposite view. Davis draws a "clear distinction between ecomuseum and new museology", stating that, "New museology is a suite of ideas about the purpose and function of museums; ecomuseology is just one variation of new museology whose tangible expression is an ecomuseum"[22]. Davis's useful criteria of defining and understanding ecomuseum are discussed in the Chapter 3. In his seminal work *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place*, he follows a wider understanding of ecomuseology to include those museums and museum-like institutions which even do not use the terminology of ecomuseum in their identification, but they do fulfill this criteria to be called ecomuseum.

Notes

[1] Nancy J. Fuller, 'The Museum as a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project'. In Ivan Karp et al (eds.) *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1992) 329.

[2] H. F. Guido, *UNESCO Regional Seminar: Round Table on the Development and the Role of Museums in the Contemporary World* (UNESCO Document SHC.72/CONF.28/4. Paris, 1973). <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0002/000236/023679eb.pdf> 39.

[3] Andrew Hauenschild, *Claims and Reality of New Museology: Case Studies in Canada, The USA & Mexico.* (Hamburg 1988) 2.

[4] Anupama Bhatnagar, *Museum Museology and New Museology.* Sundeep Prakashan (New Delhi 1999) 94-95.

[5] John R. Kinard, 'The neighborhood museum as a catalyst for social change'. In *Museum.* No 148 Vol XXXVII, n° 4 (UNESCO. Paris, 1985) 218.

[6] *ibid,* 221.

[7] Francois Hubert, 'Ecomuseums in France: contradictions and distortions'. In *Museum.* No 148 Vol XXXVII, n° 4 (UNESCO. Paris, 1985) 186.

[8] Peter Davis, Introduction. *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place* (Leicester University Press, London and New York, 1999) xv.

[9] See *ibid.*

[10] Hugues de Varine, "New Museology and the Renewal of the Museum Institution", *Økomuseumsboka* , 1988: 65-66 as quoted in Anupama Bhatnagar, *Museum Museology and New Museology* (Sundeep Prakashan, New Delhi, 1999) 37.

[11] Peter Davis, (1999) 56.

[12] "Declaration of Quebec", *Museum,* No 148 Vol XXXVII, n° 4 (UNESCO. Paris, 1985), 201.

[13] Peter Van Mensch, *Towards a Methodology for Museology.* (Doctoral thesis, University of Zagreb. 1992) <http://www.xs4all.nl/~rwa/contents.htm.>

[14] Jean-Claude Duclos et. al. *Elements pour un essai de définition de la nouvelle muséologie* [Elements for an Attempt to Define the New Museology] Grenoble, 1986 as quoted in Andrew Hauenschild (1988) 5.

[15] Andre Hauenschild (1988) 11-13.

[16] Peter van Mensch 'Magpies on Mount Helicon'. In M.Schärer ed. *ICOFOM Study Series – 25: Museums and Community* (1995) <http://www.rwa.ahk.nl/03_onderzoek_ontwikkeling/03_publicaties/13_1996/magpies.jsp.>

[17] Peter Davis (1999) 55.

[18] Peter Davis. E-mail to the author. 01 Oct. 2004.

[19] Peter van Mensch (1995).

[20] *ibid.*

[21] *ibid.*

[22] Peter Davis (1999) 233.

Concept of Ecomuseum

The history of the development of ecomuseum, both in theory and in practice since the 1960s till date, has demonstrated that the concept of ecomuseum has been evolutive in respect of time; and adaptive in respect of geographical and cultural spaces. The evolutive nature of ecomseum can be seen in the context of the fact that ecomuseum evolved at a very crucial developmental phase of museology and museums, - to be precise, at a time when the two processes of professionalisation of the discipline of museology and the making of museums closer and more relevant to a changing society were going hand in hand. Also, being a manifestation of postmodern museology, there is the obvious difficulty of conceiving ecomuseum in terms of singular and simplistic models. The spatial adaptive nature of ecomuseum, which can be attributed to the postmodern essence of ecomuseum as an institution, has not only made every single materialization of ecomuseum unique and *uncopiable*, but also has left lesser scopes to talk about its generalized and all-encompassing definition, model, or methodology. How should an ecomuseum be established? How does it function? These are questions, quiet obvious, yet, too conventional about an unconventional phenomenon.

However, it is possible to delineate a set of essential features and 'indicators' of ecomuseum from the empirical knowledge generated for the last three and more decades. In the contemporary scenario, ecomuseums are reported to be increasingly established in diverse style, method and even under different names, in varied natural and human contexts. The knowledge gained out of these experimentations, although limitedly shared and disseminated (at least in English) till now, have brought out gradually vivid images of the ecomuseum.

Definitions and Elementary Philosophy

Georges Henri Rivière, the first architect of ecomuseum under its name and style, finalized the evolutive definition of ecomuseum in his third and last version of the definition of ecomuseum, in 1980, with the following text,

> An ecomuseum is an instrument conceived, fashioned and operated jointly by a public authority and a local population. The public authority's involvement is through the experts, facilities and resources it provides; the local population's involvement depends on its aspirations, knowledge and individual approach.
>
> It is a mirror in which the local population views itself to discover its own image, in which it seeks an explanation of the territory to which it is attached and of the populations that have preceded it, seen either as circumscribed in time or in terms of the continuity of generations. It is a mirror that the local population holds up to its visitors so that it may be better understood and so that its industry, customs and identity may command respect.
>
> It is an expression of man and nature. It situates man in his natural environment. It portrays nature in its wildness, but also as adapted by traditional and industrial society in their own image.
>
> It is an expression of time, when the explanations it offers reach back before - the appearance of man, ascend the course of the prehistoric and historical times in which he lived and arrive finally at man's present. It also offers vistas of the future, while having no pretensions to decision-making, its function being rather to inform and critically analyse.
>
> It is an interpretation of space-of special places in which to stop or stroll.
>
> It is a laboratory, in so far as it contributes to the study of the past and present of the population concerned and of its environment and promotes the training of specialists in these fields, in co-operation with outside research bodies.
>
> It is a conservation centre, in so far as it helps to preserve and develop the natural and cultural heritage of the population.
>
> It is a school, in so far as it involves the population in its work of study and protection and encourages it to have a clearer grasp of its own future.
>
> This laboratory, conservation centre and school are based on common principles. The culture in the name of which they exist is to be understood in its broadest sense, and they are concerned to foster awareness of its dignity and artistic manifestations, from whatever stratum of the population they derive. Its diversity is limitless, so greatly do its elements vary from one specimen to another. This triad, then, is not self-enclosed: it receives and it gives. [1]

Peter Davis rightly questions about this "beautiful piece of prose" whether it helps "us to understand what an ecomuseum really is"[2]. However, apart from the passion of community-centered French museography of the last quarter of twentieth century, this descriptive definition also reflects some of the fundamental concepts of ecomuseums and the underlying philosophical tone of new museology, such as, centrality of the *population* and its meaningful collaboration with the concerned public authority, the notion of defining a *territory* or *special space* instead of physically built structures as the museum-entity, taking care of the natural and human resources in their *in-situ* or true contextual settings, and consideration of these resources not in terms of some static snapshots but as reflexive of the *continuity of generations*, etc.

Thus, to begin with, the primary entity of an ecomuseum is the *territory*, in contrast to the building of a conventional museum. This territory is not necessarily be defined in terms of political, administrative or mere geographical parameters. It is the specially delineated area of human settlement or natural resources, demarcated by virtue of the ecological characteristics, which may include social, cultural or natural factors, to highlight a shared pattern of life and living. The prefix 'eco' in ecomuseum should suggest a spatial unit comprising of living human and natural systems, and the complex interplay between them. Davis interprets:

> The word 'territory' is a recurring theme in texts on ecomuseum, being an important facet of both philosophy and practice. Territory is not only an indication of the geographical limits of the ecomuseum but also has connotations of the subjects and communities with which the museum engages. Consequently, the 'eco' in ecomuseum demands considerable flexibility – it is both space and interconnections. The ecomuseum not only embraces everything within its geographical area but also emphasizes the cpmplex web of links between physical, chemical and biological systems and human activity.[3]

There is the notion of *antennae* within a territory, which may appear in the form of activity-centre, where community activities like public-gathering, research, education or the different museographical works like collection, documentation, exhibition, archiving and preservation etc can take place. Usually, the territory of an ecomuseum embraces a planned networking of several such antennae. This cluster of antennae in ecomuseums in the manner of fragmented sites is responsible to call an ecomuseum as 'fragmented museum'. As Davis observes,

> For the museum visitors the 'antennae' are frequently linked by waymarked footpaths, or if further afield by suggested scenic drives. The idea of the ecomuseum being a network of sites has resulted in the use of the term 'fragmented museum', and it is this aspect of ideology – the so-called 'musealization' of heritage sites – which has been utilized by many of the more recently founded ecomuseums.[4]

Within such a territory comprising a series of antennae, all the natural and cultural resources of the population are regarded as the contents of the ecomuseum. Unlike conventional museums, the heritage resources to be taken care of in ecomuseum are not merely those material products alone. Rather, an ecomuseum covers all the material and non-material cultural expressions such as, oral traditions and other expressions of folklore, language, customs, festivals, etc., of the native communities as well as the various items of their material culture. The notion of tangible and intangible heritage, the terms used by the UNESCO much later, is one and the same with the contents of an ecomuseum. The key term often used to denote the contents of an ecomuseum is the *collective memory* of the local population. The idea of collective memory induces the priority of a past shared by the members of the concerned community. This memory of a shared past invokes a process of identifying various tangible and intangible resources which manifest, in one way or the other, the bygone past and its continuation to

the present. This eventually leads to the process of identity-building of the people as well as the place. René Rivard, while summarizing the distinctive features of the ecomuseums of Quebec, described the place of collective memory in ecmuseums in the following words,

> The collective memory of the public is the primary heritage of the ecomuseum, and it is studied not only by a few isolated researchers and scientists but by the people themselves, guided by the most active already among them or who come to the fore.[5]

This notion of memory, which serves as the fuel for running the ecomuseum mechanism, suggests the special importance of *the past* in ecomuseum. In fact, the construction or reconstruction of the past is the criteria for the process of identity-building of a place or its community. It is the past, which authenticates an item of heritage; differentiates the specials from the ordinaries. For that matter, an ecomuseum can not remain as a business dealing only with the contemporary things; it always explores and exhibits a purposeful linkage of the present-day-existing resources within the territory to its shared past, and in that way, demonstrates a 'thread of continuity with the past'. As Davis illustrates,

> ... ... features of our environment that are important to individuals because they provide a link to the past are especially significant to the ecomuseum. Consequently, evidence of the living environments of the past – an old oak, a coppiced woodland that has long been a feature of the local landscape, the timeless quality of a local river, an orchard, traditional breeds of livestock – take on special significance. ... ... Ecomuseums ... serve to conserve and interpret all the elements of the environment ... ... in order to establish the thread of continuity with the past and a sense of belonging.[6]

Ecomuseum protects the identified resources right in their original contexts, and in the hands of the actual owners of the cultural traditions. Ecomuseological musealization does not involve decontextualization of the natural or cultural heritage. Rather, their existence within the true ecological milieu is respected; where their creation and recreation takes place as a part of the interaction between

man and his surroundings. As described by Hugues de Varine, the man who coined the term 'ecomuseum',

> The community museum, in order to be a museum at all, must have exhibits and collections of some sort. In order to achieve this, it has to discover what objects people have in their own homes and workplaces and to make an inventory of them, so that they can be used for exhibition purposes if and when the museum needs them. There is no need to move these objects into the museum as soon as one locates them. The community itself is the store and for this reason every household and every business has continuous links with the museum. The community is the museum. [7]

While a conventional museum is established with the capital of the specialized knowledge of experts, it is the local communities, or the 'active bearers of tradition' who enjoy the centrality in an ecomuseum. An ecomuseum is essentially to be shaped and operated by the local people for their own sake. The involvement of so-called external expertise, as and when necessary, is not to be at the cost of the voice of the locals. In contrast to conventional museums, an ecomuseum is meant primarily not for visitors from outside but for the host people themselves. The running force of an ecomuseum is the active participation of the people in their own capacities to preserve their cultural identities, and foster the appropriate mode of development of their place.

After Rivière, different scholars and organizations have put forward their own definitions of ecomuseum, and its comparing measures with the traditional museum, some of which are quoted below.

1. The ecomuseum is an institution which manages, studies and exploits - by scientific, educational and generally speaking, cultural means – the entire heritage of a given community, including the whole natural environment and cultural milieu. Thus the ecomuseum is a vehicle for public participation in community planning and development. To this end, the ecomuseum uses all means and methods at its disposal in order to allow the public to comprehend, criticize and master – in a liberal and responsible manner – the problems which it faces.

Essentially the ecomuseum uses the language of the artifact, the reality of everyday life and concrete situations in order to achieve desired changes.[8]

2. In one of his earlier approaches, Hugues de Varine showed the distinction of ecomuseum in contrast to traditional museums with following parameters[9]

MUSEUM	ECOMUSEUM
Collection	heritage
Building	Place
Audience	Population

3. Hugues de Varine also expressed the following words in connection to the principles of ecomuseum:

A few simple principles: the objective is the service of humankind and not the reverse; time and space do not imprison themselves behind doors and walls and art is not the sole cultural expression of humanity.

The museum professional is a social being, an actor for change, a servant of the community. The visitor is not a docile consumer, regarded as an idiot, but a creator who can and should participate in the building of the future - the museum's research.[10]

4. René Rivard provided the definition of ecomuseum with the following comparison of ecomuseum and traditional museum

traditional museum = building + collections + experts + public
ecomuseum = territory + heritage + memory + population

Rivard also makes a distinction between traditional 'museum of ecology' (= natural history museums), ecological museum (= field centres, interpretive sites, natural parks and nature reserves) and ecomuseums. He suggests that the latter look especially at the interaction between humans and the natural environment, and involve community in creating and 'improving' the environment by helping to conserve traditional habitats and ecosystems.[11]

5. Peter Davis sorted out following list of indicators applicable to most ecomuseums

- The adoption of a territory that is not necessarily be defined by conventional boundaries

- The adoption of a 'fragmented-site' policy which is linked to *in-situ* conservation and interpretation
- Conventional views of site ownership are abandoned; conservation and interpretation of sites via liaison and co-operation
- The empowerment of local communities; the involvement of the local people in museum activities and in creation of their cultural identity.
- The potential for interdisciplinarity and holistic interpretation.[12]

6. IRES (Instituto Ricerche Economico Sociali), the research institute of the regional government of Piedmont, Italy, has put ecomuseum within the following definition:

> "An ecomuseum is an agreement by which a local community takes care of a place. Where:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | *agreement* | means a long term commitment, not necessarily an obligation by the law |
> | *local community* | means a local authority and local population jointly |
> | *take care* | means that some ethic commitment and a vision for a future local development are needed |
> | *place* | means not just a surface but complex layers of cultural, social, environmental values which define a unique local heritage."[13] |

The above definitional texts, although, differ in rhetoric, do meet in the consensus to reflect a cohesive philosophical base of the ecomuseum: an ecomuseum is conceived and curated by a community, upon the place or territory defined by them, for collectively working for the development of the place and people in general and preserving their heritage and traditions in particular, and eventually protecting their community-identity and the distinctiveness of their place.

Functions of Ecomuseum

The ecomuseum, with its theories and principles described above, is capable of serving the place and the community in question in several ways. There are a set of objectives, for which the ecomuseum

was philosophically formulated and, which it has fulfilled in its practice in the real-world, although the specific goals and priority-areas of different ecomuseums may vary in different contexts. The various functions attributed to ecomuseum, and the issues upon which its existence is, and should be, justified, are discussed below. This can be useful in understanding what ecomuseum can do, but also what they are or what they can be.

a) Conservation of heritage: Heritage conservation has been the primary task to be performed by the museum since the time it was devised by mankind. It is still so in new museology, and for that matter, in the ecomuseum. However, in case of ecomuseum, the notion of heritage is more holistic and the purpose of conservation of heritage is much wider..

In the classical museology, heritage had been understood as a special category of material artifacts or tangible products. The *specialty* of such objects is because of their antiqueness, artistic appeal, exoticness or other such values, which are, more often than not, imposed by *the experts* who are far remote from the people who actually own or inherit these objects. In most cases such a collection of heritage represent died-out cultural traditions of the past; no longer surviving in the contemporary human practices. The importance of such material cultural objects can not be ruled out in portraying the human achievement of a place, region or nation. But there are several limitations in such object-oriented approaches to heritage, in the sense that it offers a very fragmented picture of man and his activities in his environment. Many of the vital aspects of heritage, as being realized in contemporary times, remain outside the compartments of this object-oriented format. The collection and exhibition policies of classical museography often impose limitations: "what is not collected, researched, documented or exhibited does not exist – for the museum or

its public.. ..."[14] Classical musealization process involves the dislocation of items from their original contexts, followed by the construction of new images for the audience which are not only incomplete but are also sometimes weird and falsified. Davis illustrated that,

> A museum visitor would (until recently) have assumed that women played a merely decorative role in history, that the history of the American continent began when Europeans arrived, that immigrants from India or the West Indies had nothing to do with English history, and that art produced by non-Western artists is displayed only in anthropology museums.[15]

Towards the late-twentieth century, both inside and outside the museum-world, heritage came to be a more comprehensive as well as complicated phenomenon, than the mere artifacts and built structures. The non-material aspects of culture and tradition got recognized with due emphasis. The vocabulary of conservation came to include "living heritage", "intangible heritage", "folklore", "traditional culture" etc. UNESCO has defined intangible heritage as

> ... ... all creations emanating from a cultural community and based on tradition, expressed by a group or by individuals, and that are known to respond to the expectations of said community with respect to the expression of its cultural and social identity; norms and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or in other ways. Its forms include, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rites, customs, crafts, architecture and other arts.[16]

This non-material aspect of heritage is more than significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it includes the treasure of vast traditional knowledge and skills learned and accumulated through ages and handed down from generation to generation. The repertoire oral traditions and other traditional cultures not only include aesthetically compelling resources; they are also the archives of the diverse indigenous knowledge acquired and practiced by mankind for its living in interaction with its surroundings. Secondly, while the accumulation of

this knowledge unmistakably took thousands of years in human civilization, the pace at which they are getting disappeared forever in contemporary times, because of the euro-centric industrialization in the name of modernization, is rather alarming. An African proverb - "when an old man dies, a library burns" – describes the significance of traditional knowledge, and the catastrophe caused by the breach in the continuity of traditions. In today's world of cultural imperialism, "old man" not only dies but he is also being "killed" everyday everywhere.

The importance of intangible heritage is more intensified by the fact that, unlike the material artifacts or built structures, the conservation of these non-material resources is far from being simple and beyond the means of conventional museography. Although, a folk music can be recorded or a ritual can be videographically captured and saved in appropriate mechanical devices for later retrieval, the very texture and ambience of the cultural milieu are missed in this method, not to speak about the post-facto interpretations and assessments. The ecomuseum, subscribing to the holistic understanding of heritage including its tangible and intangible manifestations, can be a better way for safeguarding heritage. In an ecomuseological territory, emphasis is given on the continuity of traditions within their own atmosphere. The loss or renewal of cultural traditions is under conscious checking by the active bearers of tradition. In this system-oriented approach, heritage conservation does not start with a process of selection of artifacts (and, for that matter, rejection of the rest). Instead of displacing the objects for showcasing them as specimens inside the cabinets, they are left to the hands of their creators or inheritors for their sustained and alive existence. Priority is given not on objects but on the knowledge that creates those objects, not on the products but on the processes that produce those products. In fact, ecomuseum is an arrangement where the total way of life of a community, in its organic surroundings, is

made to survive, sustain and flourish in its own track of continuity and change. Heritage is more a part of real life of the people in question than specimen for somebody's curiosity, pleasure and amusement.

b) Safeguarding of local identity: One crucial function attributed to the museum is the protection of the identity of the locale in which it operates. Here local identity is used in the broader sense to include cultural or ethnic identity of the local communities, and also the regional identity, in terms of geography, ecology, etc., of the place in which the museum exists. In fact, a scrutiny of the history of the institution of museum would reveal that many museums were established in different parts of the world primarily to serve as means for projecting the identity of the respective place, region or nation. However, the rapid social, political, economic as well as cultural changes of the twentieth century had converted the issue of identity into a *crisis*, which is characterized by the speedy marginalization and extinction of the identities of the underprivileged communities. This crisis has not only brought out struggles for protecting or sustaining the respective identities of ethnic or a culture groups, but also a dynamic of creation as well as recreation of the identity, as and when necessary, with renewed ethnic or cultural linkages. The fact that heritage materials are the symbols of the identity of a place or its community has made museum more significant than it was ever before.

Ecomuseum serves as a platform for exercising necessary activities by the communities in question to strengthen and sustain their identity in their own ways. The philosophy of ecomuseum is rooted at the idea of a self-identity to be developed by the people in order to "adjust to rapid change"[17]. It is the sense of belonging of the people to a common identity which is the driving force of an ecomuseological project.

c) Sustainable development: An ecomuseum, by generating a sense of collective identity among the citizens of its territory and activating productive exercises with the identified cultural heritage and natural resources, is more than capable of fostering the total development of the people in their place. Development can be wished, worked-out and achieved in ecomuseological territory instead of being imposed and accepted at higher cost. In fact, the ecomuseum is an ideal venture for the culture-and-development scheme where development is wished and worked-out in the ecomuseological territory instead of it is imposed and accepted at a higher cost.

The notion of development in recent times has been viewed from several critical perspectives. Also, the erstwhile evolutionary model and single-standard notion of development has been discarded with the realization that the nature of development varies in different contexts of human existence. Amartya Sen warns about the ethnocentric perception of development that,

> ... ... there is sometimes a temptation to take rather formulaic and simplistic views of the impact of culture on the process of development. For example, there seem to be many supporters of the belief – held explicitly or by implication – that the fates of countries are effectively *sealed* by the nature of their respective cultures. This would be not only a heroic oversimplification, but it would also entail some hopelessness to countries that are seen as having the "wrong" culture. This is not just politically and ethically repulsive, but more immediately, it is, I would argue, also epistemic nonsense.[18]

The ecomuseum strives for the effective modes of development in a specific situation. There is no notion of "wrong" cultures in ecomuseology; ecomuseolgical philosophy is based on programming the "right" ways for enhancing development of any given territory through active community-participation and wise use of available resources. The success-stories of ecomuseum in promoting rural economy and effective imparting of education in different countries are being increasingly reported in current times.

Tourism has been identified and tested as one of the avenues for local economic development and productive cultural interactions. Contemporary tourism is getting influenced not only by the advancement of communication and transport, but also by the changing scenario of society, culture and natural environment at the global scale. What is to be visited, seen or experienced not only includes the extra-ordinary sites, mass cultures or megalomaniac architectures but also the so-called ordinary landscapes with unique reflections of man and nature therein. 'Folklife' has become one key word in the vocabulary of today's cultural tourism. Alan Jabbour had presented a nice description about "what museums can offer folklife, and what folklife can offer museums". He illustrated the latter as:

> What folklife offers museums is a bit harder to simplify. Clearly it offers an array of thoughts and a network of professionals for a particular subject matter. But beyond the access to particular subjects, folklife seems to offer museums an approach to democratizing their exhibits, research, and other activities. Where other disciplines are national or international in thrust, folklife can highlight the local and regional. Where other approaches seem a 'bit elite' or upper-crust, folklife can be homespun and evoke life at the grassroots. Where other approaches emphasize the extraordinary, folklife can explore and celebrate ordinary life. Folklife offers a way of seeing form and splendor in what before seemed ordinary, and its emphasis on tradition presents possibilities for reconnecting the past with the present.[19]

Experiencing the folklife of a community, for a cultural tourist, would be much more rewarding in comparison to relishing their static, fragmented and decontextualized imageries in a conventional museum. The integrated framework of ecomuseum, embracing of the local life and lore in the territory, has provided with immense scopes to facilitate the tasks of projecting all the cultural and natural possessions of a place in a holistic, interactive and authentic way. Davis observes that:

> A region or a community does not consciously manage its resources to attract cultural tourists (local agricultural practices being an example), but nevertheless may have an intangible ambience or lifestyle that creates a unique experience – the

> culture of a place and its residents. The ecomuseum certainly has the potential to manage the resources in an appropriate way, by linking cultural sites and cultural activities, and so aid community development. The ways in which new forms of cultural tourism are emerging – such 'homestays' with foreign families or exposure to tribal groups, or simply trips to unfashionable destinations – are also significant for ecomuseums. [20]

Tourism, although is one of the significant aspects for ecomuseum as it is a kind of heritage institution, however, can not be the only means of development of a community. The mechanism of development through ecomuseum is not solely dependent on tourism. The greatest potency of ecomuseum towards development lies in its ability to stimulate among its people a keen awareness of their identity and the distinctiveness of their place, which can eventually lead to make the right choices for the betterment of the place and the people themselves.

d) Social inclusion: Social inclusion has been defined as a policy designed to make sure that people can get access to education, work, leisure and housing opportunities; a commitment to an ethos of fairness and equality which enables full access to educational opportunities for all learners and communities. The problem of social exclusion may occur across the lines of gender, race, class, religion, profession, etc., not only in the developing and under-developed countries where infrastructural facilities have been unevenly distributed, but also in the developing countries which are being faced with increasing Diasporas of migrated peoples. Ecomuseum, by virtue of its integrated approach to the people and their resources within the territory, can be a more socially inclusive than any other cultural institution. In fact, the fundamental ideas propounded under the label of new museology were the endeavours for none other than the socialization of the institution of museum. Peter Davis identifies that the UNESCO Round Table held in

Santiago de Chile in 1972, and the radical ideas of new museology thereafter, were "beginnings of 'socially inclusive' ideas and practices in the museum/heritage domain in the modern era"[21]. Ecomuseological philosophy advocates the democratic sharing and using of knowledge, and self-representation for all, including those hitherto unrepresented.

e) Preservation of global diversity: If the above-mentioned attributes of the ecomuseum are beneficial to its specific territory and its residents, the sum of all of them should also be desired from a contemporary global perspective – for preserving the global diversity of natural resources and human cultures. The industrialization and urbanization through unwise exploitation of the natural resources have reduced the global forest area with extinction of several plants and animals. The rapid development of communication and transport technologies, modes of production and marketing tactics have brought out injudicious transformations in the all the traditional cultures and societies. The final result is the loss of uncountable cultural resources and identities. The differences amongst the places are being reduced; the distinctions of peoples and their lives are being washed out. UNESCO has disclosed that "over 50% of the world's 6000 languages are endangered" and "one language disappears on average every two weeks"[22]. Similar is the case with all other traditional cultural traits: foods, dresses, music, dances, rituals, architectures and visual arts.

Ecomuseum can be seen as highly relevant in this context. The endeavours proclaimed and exercised in ecomuseology can contribute to protect the little geographical places, and the social and cultural spaces intricately webbed thereon.

Ecomuseum Methodology

The ethics and philosophy of new museology, and, for that matter, of ecomuseums, do not prescribe any concrete methodology for realizing the museological ideas. There is no standardized model to be applicable everywhere. Ecomuseology is a set of ideas which provides useful suggestions about what a museum should be. But the very philosophy upon which these ideas are based does not permit to authoritatively dictate how this museum should be created. The ecomuseum philosophy is essentially situation-specific, and it is against its own ethics to make generalizations and grand theories for universal application. This has been treated rather as the strength and not the weakness of ecomuseology.

This strength of the ecomuseum as a cultural institution needs to be appreciated in the changing conceptualizations of 'culture' itself. Cultural relativism and the postmodernity in intellectual spheres, and the growth of worldwide movements for community identities in late twentieth century's cultural and political realms, have replaced the erstwhile singular conception of culture with the notions of relativism and pluralism. This has resulted in "the move towards thinking of 'cultures' in the plural rather than the singular"[23]. The value-judgments in aesthetics, excellence and efficiency are no longer regarded as justifiable. These shifting paradigms of cultural relativism and pluralism are seen to be highly influencing in all throughout the discourse of new museology and the ideas of ecomuseology. Hence, it is not surprising that ecomuseology does not speak about one ecomuseum. It suggests to explore different possible ecomuseums.

This might be disappointing for those conventionalists who are accustomed to following prescribed models and methods. However, ecomuseums are being increasingly established in different places

throughout the world in the last two decades, and it has been seen that the shaping out an appropriate model and conceiving the suitable methodology for a specific situation is a part of ecomuseology.

Notes

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[1] Georges Henri Rivière, 'The ecomuseum – an evolutive definition'. In *Museum*. No 148 Vol XXXVII, n^0 4, 1985 (UNESCO. Paris, 1985) 182-183.

[2] Peter Davis, *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place* (Leicester University Press, London and New York, 1999) 67.

[3] *ibid*, 4.

[4] *ibid*, 68.

[5] René Rivard, 'Ecomuseums in Quebec'. In *Museum*. No 148 Vol XXXVII, n^0 4 (UNESCO. Paris, 1985) 204.

[6] Peter Davis (1999) 4-5.

[7] Hugues de Varine, 'Tomorrow's Community Museums', (Lecture given on 15 October 1993, in the Senate Hall of the University of Utrecht) <http://assembly.coe.int/Museum/tomorrow.htm>

[8] Definition suggested by Natural History Committee of ICOM, 1978 as quoted in Peter (1999) 69.

[9] Hugues de Varine, as cited in Maurizio Maggi and Vittorio Falletti, *Ecomuseums in Europe: What they are and what they can be* (IRES Piemonte, 2000).

[10] Hugues de Varine, as quoted in Patrick Boylan, "Defining Museums and Galleries" <http://www.city.ac.uk/ictop/mus-def.html> accessed on 09-02-05

[11] René Rivard, 'Museums and ecomuseums – questions and answers'. In J. A. Gjestrum and M. Maure (eds) *Økomuseumsboka – identitet, økologi,deltakelse* (ICOM Norway, 1988) as quoted in Peter Davis (1999) 69.

[12] Peter Davis (1999) 228.

[13] Maurizio Maggi, "What is an Ecomuseum?" <http://www.osservatorioecomusei.net/ENGLISH/osservatorio/definizione.htm> (2002) accessed on 18-10-04

[14] Peter Van Mensch, 'Museums and cultural identity'. In V. Sofka (ed.) *Museology and Identity*. ICOFOM Study Series, 11 (1986) 201-9 as quoted in Peter Davis (1999) 27.

[15] Peter Davis (1999) 27.

[16] UNESCO 'Recommendations on the Safeguard of Traditional Culture and Folklore' adopted by the General Conference at its 25th Session. Paris, 15 November 1989. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/paris/html_eng/page1.htm>. Accessed in April 2001

[17] Nancy Fuller, 'The Museum as a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project'. In Ivan Karp et (eds.) *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1992) 128.

[18] Amartya Sen, 'How Does Culture Matter?'. In V. Rao and M. Walton (eds.) *Culture and Public Action.* (Permanent Black, Delhi, 2004) 38.

[19] Allan Jabbour, Forword. In. Patricia Hall and Charlie Seemann (eds.) *Folklife and Museums: Selected Readings* (The American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, TN, 1987) xiii-xiv.

[20] Peter Davis (1999) 242.

[21] Peter Davis, 'Ecomuseums and the Democratisation of Japanese Museology'. In *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2004) 94.

[22] UNESCO 'Endangered Languages', <http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=8270&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> accessed on 13-02-05

[23] Rhiannon Mason, 'Conflict and Compliment: An Exploration of the Discourse Informing the Concept of the Socially Inclusive Museum in Contemporary Britain'. In *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2004) 58.

Ecomuseology in India

The Indian museological scholarship began to take its share in the new museology in general and ecomuseology in particular since the middle of the 1980s. This relatively late entry of the new museum philosophies into India can be attributed to the fact that the most of the writings on the pioneering thoughts and experiments of new museology of the 1960s and 1970s were limited in French only. The much needed writings in English, for countries including India, came up in the special issue of the UNESCO's journal *Museum* in 1985. Prof. V. H. Bedekar, the pioneer ecomuseologist of the country, described the new museological enlightenment in India:

> ... through the articles in UNESCO's MUSEUM special number 4, of volume XXXVII, 1985, on New Museology, Indians were made aware for the first time of the parting of ways of thinking between the traditional, conservative museologists and the champions of New Museology. Pierre Mayrand's article "The new museology proclaimed" was a wake up call for persons like me in India. The Declaration of Quebec made us sit up and take note of the new movement to which we were oblivious, because we were in "English knowing" country. [1]

That humble beginning was followed up in the obvious and inevitable manner. The practices and philosophies of new museology were taken for scrutiny by the Indian museologists, and deliberations were made on their possible applications and ramifications on Indian soil. In 1988, a national seminar on "New Museology and Indian Museums" was organized by the Museums Association of India at Guwahati. The participants of the seminar came out with the first Indian pronouncement, in formal and official manner, in the form of the "Guwahati Declaration on New Museology". It reads as following:

> GUWAHATI DECLARATION ON 'NEW MUSEOLOGY'
>
> Considering the changing demands on museums to care for and conserve heritage in its widest sense and to interpret it in ways which will make the heritage meaningful to the country;

Considering that, in the past, museums were concerned primarily with heritage simultaneously relating it to the ongoing struggle for socio-economic development and progress;
Considering the concepts, the philosophy and the practices of the exponents of the eco-museology or new museology as discussed in the seminar at Guwahati, 1988;
Considering the impetus in the so-called new museology to socialize it, to ensure community participation, community initiative, community ownership and continuous community support, desirability of identifying territory, concept of decentralization of work etc, which represent the major strength of the movement;
Considering world-wide recognition of the many ecomuseums in different parts of the world since 1971 in the demonstration of the values of feasibility of the new concepts;
Considering that name 'New Museology' has been creating a gap of dualism between the exponents of the new movements and the rest of museums professions because of their apprehension about the unity of the discipline of museology;
Considering that the kinds of impulses and actions which emanate from the new museology were and are in evidence in the work of many museums including those in India as discussed in the conference in 1988;

We hereby adopt;

1. That the attention of international museum community be invited to the apparent confrontation between the New Museology and the traditional museums which may divert attention of museologists from the most urgent crucial problems of conservation and interpretation of world 'heritage which is coming under growing threat.
2. That all possible efforts be made to recognize the value of the contribution of New Museology.
3. That in addition to the basic research, much new orientations to socialize museology be recognized, and –
    a) The ICOM's definition of museums and museology be suitably revised so that the new museums and concepts be incorporated in existing museums and museology.
    b) The Indian concept of trusteeship, as elaborated in the Gandhian philosophy be extended to the sphere of museums which are to be established, maintained and operated as trusts in the hands of representatives of the concerned communities for the value-based museology work in the directions chosen by each community itself.
    c) The contemporary museums be invited to open new channels of two-way communication with various sections of the community so that they themselves participate and support museums to attain the self chosen goals of integrative conservation of heritage.
4. That a temporary working group be formed in India with the support of Museums Association of India and Indian National Committee of ICOM and also the recently formed

> Indian Group of ICOFOM, to critically examine and incorporate the best concepts of New Museology in the contemporary concept of one universal museology to make it broad-based and report the ICOM as to how the International museum movement can be fully cohesive.[2]

What is evident in the declaration is the juxtaposition of two apparent polarities: one being the then indelible stigma of the modernist museum-centric conventional museology, a concern for safeguarding "one universal museology" and other is the recognition of the radical ideas ("self chosen goals" and "integrative conservation" "by each community itself") of new museology, if possible to be fitted as the extensions of the conventional museology. As described by V. H. Bedekar, one of the participants in the seminar for adopting the declaration, this "was directly related to the apprehensions or fears on the part of participants about the unity of the discipline of museology"[3].

The Guwahati Declaration can be seen as a prelude of the succeeding museological developments in India that occurred in the last decade of twentieth century. Firstly, many museums of India began to incorporate with comparatively broader views on cultural and natural events, with visible deviations from the prevailing rigidity in indoor and outreach presentations. Secondly, serious insights were put on the strengths and merits of the radical ideas of new museology as well as their necessity and possibility in Indian contexts. In 1995, the National Museum Institute of History of Art, Conservation and Museology of New Delhi published the first book on new museology, titled as *New Museology for India*, authored by V. H. Bedekar. In this book, Bedekar came out with a more unambiguous stand, concluding that "New Museology ought to transcend "museum-centric" traditional museology". He offered strong criticism of the traditional museums in the contexts of the issues of protection of the vast human and natural diversity of the country and ensuring their sustainability and developments.

In January 1999, under the active initiative of Bedekar, the "Korlai Community Museum" was started in Maharashtra. This museum has been recognized, both inside and outside[4] the country, as the first and the only ecomuseum in India so far.

Korlai Community Museum

Three place names are important to understand the territorial lay-out of the Korlai Community Museum: Korlai, Revdanda and Chaul. Chaul is a place in the Raigarh District of Maharastra, about 126 k.m. south of Mumbai. Revdanda, although is now a separate town, was a part of Chaul with a common cultural and commercial history. Korlai, a tiny village by the Arabian Sea, lays a furlong south of Revdanda. Chaul was an important port for international trade and its frequent references have been found to be recorded in several Greek, Chinese and Arabian sources dating from A.D. 150 to A.D. 1153, apart from its explicit description as a beautiful city in the copper plate inscription (A.D.1094) by the king of Shilahar dynasty. The history of Chaul took a turn on the advent of the Portuguese navy in 1505, who after their series of encounters with the rulers of Ahmednagar took the possession of Chaul in their hands and ruled, administered and fortified Chaul till their departure to Goa in 1740. They left in Chaul their vivid testimonies in the harbour and fort of Chaul in Portuguese style. But the most important legacy was a small community of Indo-Portuguese subject, formed out of the marital relationship of the Portuguese army men with native ladies, who has refused to go with their Portuguese masters to Goa leaving their native place and remained settled in Revdanda and Korlai till today.

The members of this Korlai community do possess their distinctive cultural traits, amongst which there is the unique dialect spoken by them. This dialect, which is the mixture of Portuguese and

Marathi grammars and vocabularies, has been named by the linguists as the Korlai Portuguese Creole. The community subscribes to Roman Catholic faith and they had their own church 'Our Lady of Mount Carmel' established after the departure of the Portuguese. The cultural distinction of the people is reflected in all the elements of their traditional life. However, threat to their identity, specifically to their distinctive language, came in late twentieth century when Marathi as a language began to be used in their church and in the Mount Carmel High School. The consequence of these developments is the resentment by the older generation for the use of Marathi in their church and school affairs while the younger people thought it to be better to know Marathi, which is the language of administration in Maharashtra, for educational and commercial activities while keeping their informal and intra-community conversations in Korlai Portuguese Creole.

It was in the above situations that Prof. Bedekar came in contact with the people of Korlai and Chaul-Revdanda in some day of the later part of 1990s. In the distinctive cultural expressions of the tiny Korlai community having their shared memories of a unique, eventful and unknown-to-others history and facing the crisis of their community-identity in contemporary changing situations, Bedekar "saw a fitting situation to organize an Ecomuseum"[5]. He started his extensive field-work in the region, collected information, interacted with individuals and participated in their community affairs. He shared his idea of an organized community activity in the spirit of ecomuseum with learned influencing individuals and laymen. Some of the developments that led to the formation of an ecomuseum, can be quoted from his own words as:

> During early contacts with the inhabitants of Korlai, it became known that old records and objects of arts and heritage were taken away [by outside researchers]. These acts deprived the Korlai community of opportunities to use their own sources of self-knowledge. ... ... For that reason during the first contact

> with the residents of Korlai, it was announced in unequivocal terms that all material of heritage value should be preserved in Korlai village itself individually or collectively. It was explained again and again that sufficient museographical expertise can be made available for preservation of heritage locally. An appeal was made for the formation of a community museum in Korlai. The local people were encouraged to take initiative in setting up a centre for collecting not only things but information about the people who used them.[6]

This was how the call for the Ecomuseum was made to people of Korlai. It was the interactive association of the scholarship of Bedekar, meaningful involvement of few learned and influencing individuals and the active participation of the general public that finally led to the inauguration of the "Korlai Community Museum" on 23rd January 1999. A collection of material artifacts and other goods of locally defined importance were housed in the rooms of a local high school. They were treated by the local students, teachers and other native individuals, in their own ways, who were given the necessary inputs of relevant museographical knowledge. Apart from the creation of this collection, people of Korlai also had extensive plans in relation to tourism activities in their area.

During this author's visit to the community museum of Korlai in December 2000, local individuals who were experts in identification of native plants were busy in collection, preservation and evaluation of local herbs. But the most perceptible effect which could be marked as the outcome of process of ecomusealization in Korlai and Revdanda is a strong sense of consciousness about themselves and belongingness to their unique place. Bedekar believes that ecomuseum, at least in Indian context, would be more a process than a finalized product. This character of an ecomuseum is to be understood in the dynamic nature of its constituting elements. The formation of a community, its construction of its own identity, and its relational differences and similarities with 'others' – are all the crucial processes for the concerned ecomuseum; and they are all dynamic in nature.

The success or failure of the Korlai Community Museum is a subject to assessment by the people in Korlai themselves. But so far, its credits can be seen in the facts that a) it has shown an alternative way of self-development through self-knowledge under the spirit of ecomuseology in India; and b) it has been able to tell the untold history of a tiny endangered community to the listeners at the global scale.

Contemporary Situation of Ecomuseology in India

Ecomuseology as a subject of academic interest is seen to be growing in recent times. It has been included in the syllabi of concerned subjects, such as, Museology, Cultural Studies, etc. in different Indian universities. It is to be noted that, till recently, ecomuseological activities (both in paper and in practice) in India had been being single-handedly shouldered by V. H. Bedekar with his untiring efforts and passion. Apart from the Korlai phenomenon, the community-based heritage activities in different places of Gujarat and adjoining regions are to be attributed to the influence of Prof. Bedekar. In recent times, however, deliberations are being made by new peoples in increasing numbers both in oral symposia and written publications. Different scholars have identified prospective ecomuseological territories inside the country and have proposed respective schemes of realizations of ecomuseums[7].

The cultural treasure of India ranges from the thousands of years old Vedic traditions to the many racial, linguistic and ethnic communities with their distinctive ways of life in their respective landscapes. While a major portion of its total population are still surviving in dire conditions of the primary necessities of life, the waves of undesired developments in the forms of modernization, industrialization, globalization are going to threaten its age-old diversity. The calls of the time should include, among many others,

efforts to protect the identities and the invaluable traditional knowledge-banks of each of its constituting communities; and to explore alternative means for development at all levels of race, class, caste, language, gender and religion. In this context, there is a sufficient ground to believe that ecomuseology can be, and should be, one of the ways for exploring the future of the many places of India.

Notes

[1] V. H. Bedekar, 'The Ecomuseum Projects in the Indian Context'. Lecture given in the Second International Conference of Ecomuseums, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 16-20 May, 2000.

[2] V. H. Bedekar, *New Museology for India* (New Delhi, 1995) 167-169.

[3] *ibid,* 169.

[4] The Italian OE (Osservatorio Ecomusei) has included the Korlai Community Museum in the distribution map of ecomuseums.
http://www.osservatorioecomusei.net/ENGLISH/ECOMUSEI/INDIA/schedapaese.htm

[5] V. H. Bedekar, (2000)

[6] V. H. Bedekar, 'Korlai Community Museum'. In Sunjay Jain (ed.) *Studies in Museology,* Vol. XXXI (Department of Museology, M.S. University, Baroda, 1998) 6.

[7] Under the active initiatives of V. H. Bedekar, the *Forum For Indian Ecomuseologists* was started which exist now in the form web-based correspondences amongst its members. In this forum, a number of scholars, activists and students came with their ecomuseological visions for specifically identified places in different parts of India.

Photo1: Prof. V. H. Bedekar in Korlai Community Museum

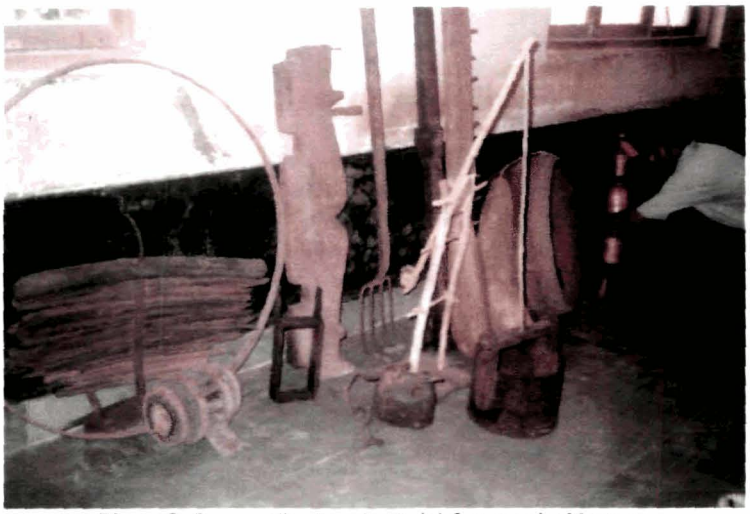

Photo 2: Some collections in Korlai Community Museum

Photo 3: Some collections in Korlai Community Museum

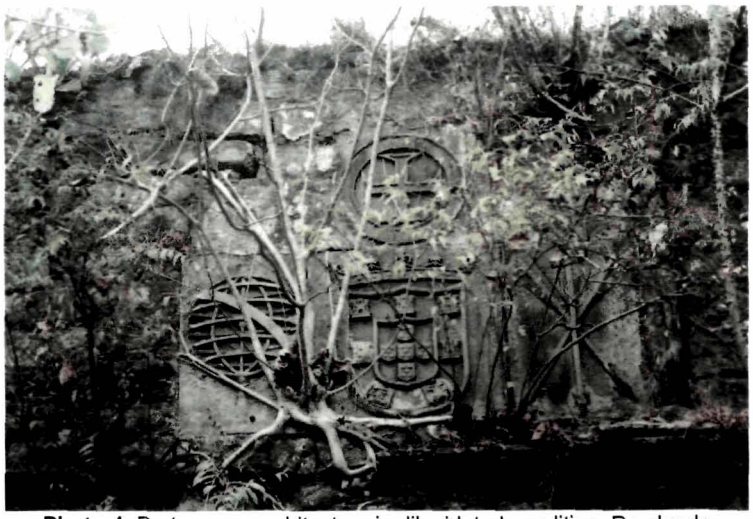

Photo 4: Portuguese architecture in dilapidated condition, Revdanda

Photo 5: The jetty constructed by the Portuguese in Korlai

Photo 6: An inside portion of Korlai Fort

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 *Satra*s, – 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 *Satrīyā* 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 Kalitā*s 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°45′N to 27°15′N latitude and 93°45′E to 94°30′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 geomorpgological 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 Brhmaputra 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 Dihing4. 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.[1]

It is also opined by historians like Dambarudhar Nath[2] 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 maior 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"[3]. 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"[4].

Natural Environment

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:

Item	*Census year 1991*	*Census Year 2001*
Total population	135378	153362
Number of males	70410	79490
Number of females	64968	73872
Scheduled Caste population	19278	-
Number of SC males	10133	-
Number of SC females	9145	-
Scheduled Tribe population	57357	-
Number of ST males	29052	-
Number of ST females	28305	-
Population density	146 per square kilometer	-

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[5].

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:

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

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.

Item	*Data*
Number of primary schools	350
Number of colleges	7
Provincialized High Schools	2
Middle Schools	96
University	Nil
Literacy rate	68% (in 1991), 71% (in 2001)

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.

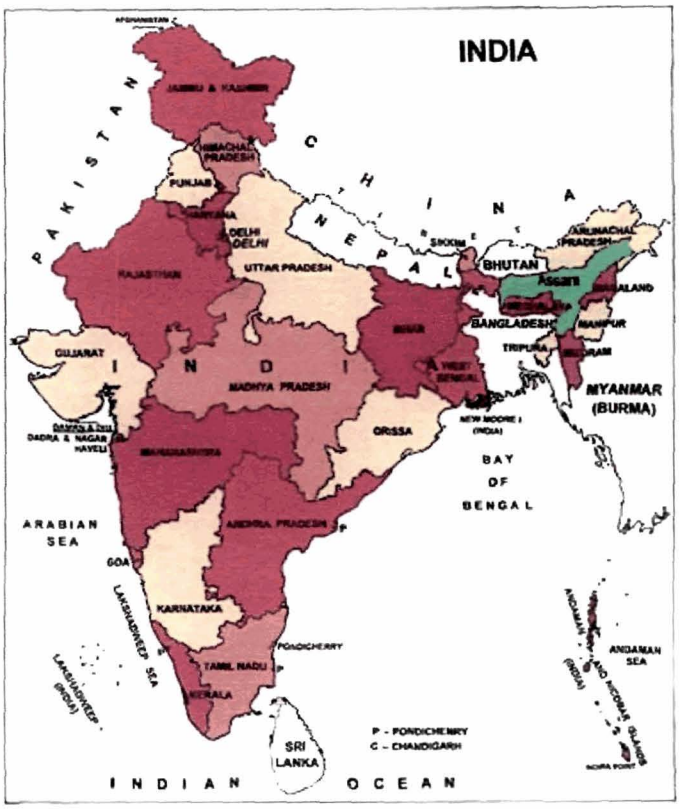

Fig 5: Map of India showing the position of the Assam State (in green)

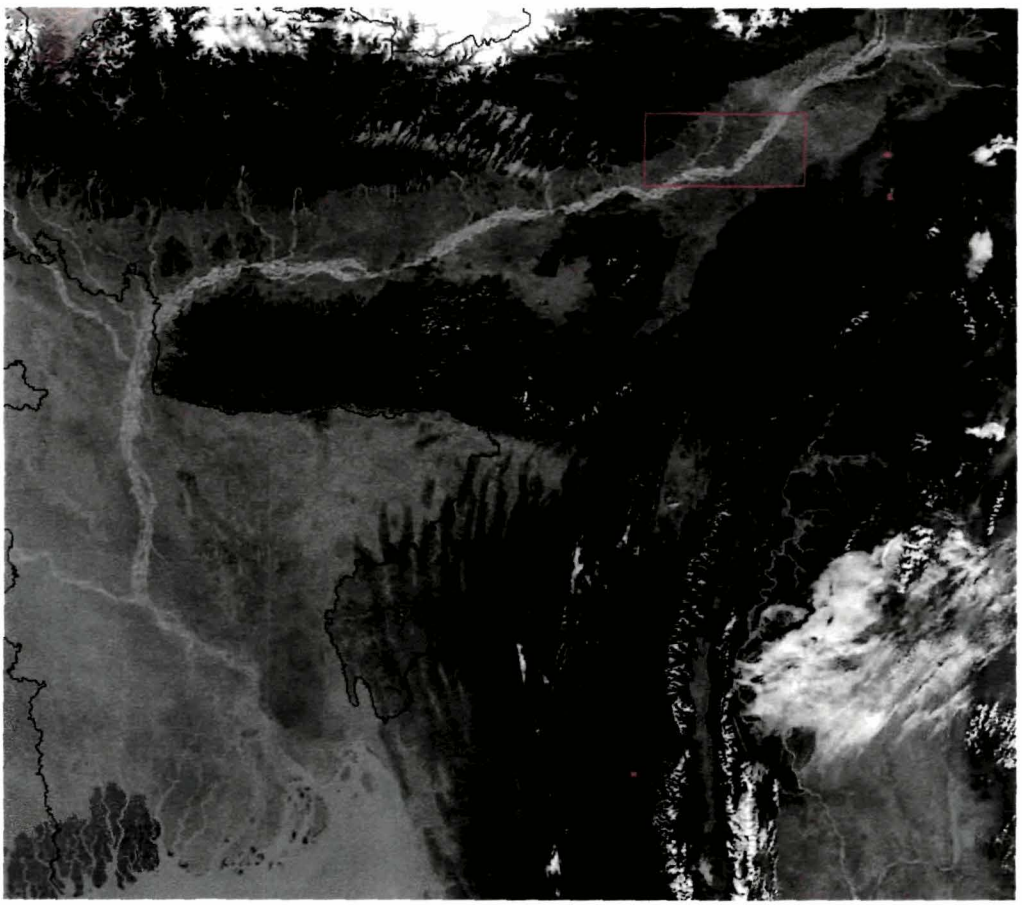

Fig 6: Majuli Island (within the red rectangle) seen in a satellite map of Assam (Source: NASA)[8]

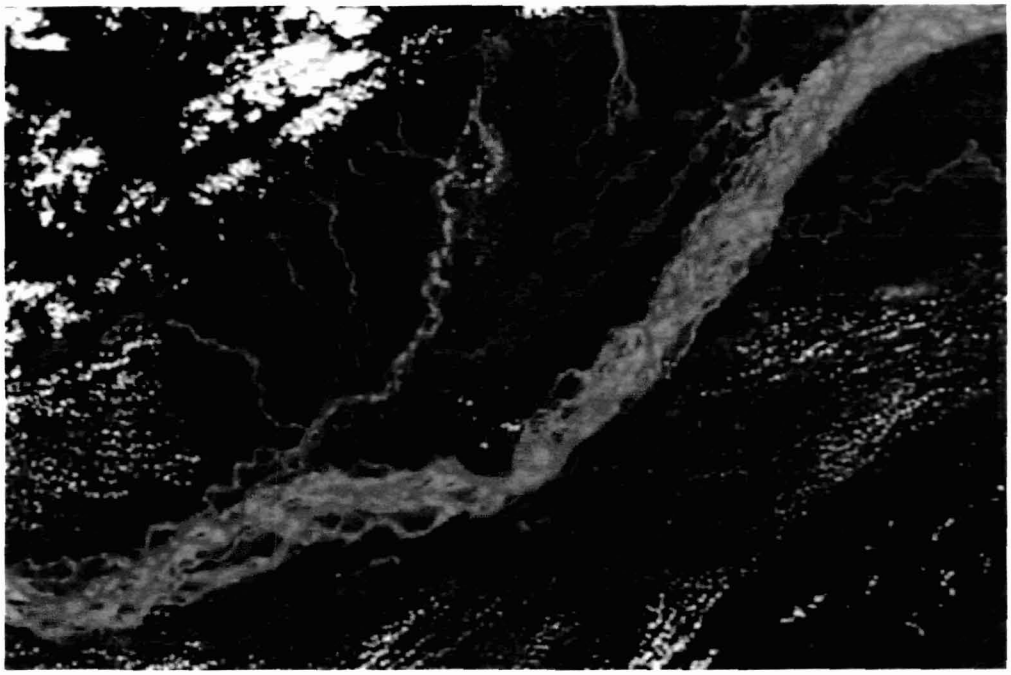

Fig 7: Majuli as appeared in one satellite imagery (from website of NASA)[9]

Fig 8: Map of Majuli (Source: Circle Office, Kamalabari, Majuli)

Notes

[1] P. Kotoky et. al. 'Erosion activity on Majuli – the largest river island of the world'. In *Current Science*, Vol. 84, No. 7 (2003) 929.

[2] Dambarudhar Nath, 'Mājulī: Eṭī Oitihāsik Paricay'. In Kanak Chandra Kalita (ed.) *Mājulī* (Cambridge India, Kolkata, 2001) 3.

[3] Joshua Calder, "Island Superlatives", http://users.erols.com/jcalder/SUPERLATIVESV2.html, 2005. (accessed on 21/02/2005)

[4] Joshua Calder, "Island Misinformation" http://users.erols.com/jcalder/MISINFORMATION.htm, 2005, (accessed on 21/02/2005)

[5] Amritewar Chutia, 'Mājulī Āru Iyār Janagāthanir Swarūp' In Kanak Chandra Kalita (ed.) *Mājulī* (Cambridge India, Kolkata, 2001) 93.

[6] Bhuban Chandra Thakur, 'Śikhyār Bibhinna Diśat Ālokpāt' In Prasanta Kumar Mahanta (ed.) *Mājulī* (Jorhat, 2001) 190.

[7] Atul Chandra Goswami, 'Mājulīt Ānusthānik Śikhyar Samprasāraṇ' In Prasanta Kumar Mahanta (ed.) *Mājulī* (Jorhat, 2001) 187-188..

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

[9] Map Source: 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 Kmalabari 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: Mising women and children having a bath

Living Cultural Heritage – I: The Satra Institution

Introduction to the Satra Institution

The satras are the *Vaiṣṇava* monasteries, emblematic entities of the Assam-*Vaiṣṇavism*, which are the residential places of the *Vaiṣṇava* monks called the *bhakat*s. The beginning of the establishment of the satras in Assam can be traced in the neo-*Vaiṣṇavite* movement in the 16th century under the leadership of Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568). It was Śaṅkaradeva who steered the neo- *Vaiṣṇavite* 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-*Vaiṣṇavite* 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 + √trai)"[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 Vaiṣṇava 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 Śaṇkaradeva, 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 *Vaiṣṇava* 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[4], while R. Thakuria believes that the number is above 650[5].

Majuli is famed with the highest concentration of the satras. It is rightly acclaimed as the centre of *Satrīyā* 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[6]. 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 "*bātcarā* of a satra is a miniature imitation of *toran-gṛha* of the Hindu temple"[7]. It demarcates the satra arena from the other settlement in the neighbourhood. Distinguished visitors and guests are received in *bātcarā* in traditional *Satrīyā* 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 *dakkhiṇ 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 / Kīrttan-ghar: The *nāmghar* or *kīrttan-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 *maṇikūṭ* (sanctum sanctorum) at the east. There are two rows of wooden pillars (*khuṭās*) 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.

Maṇikūṭ: The *maṇikut*, 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 *maṇikūṭ* on wooden pedestals (*āsanas*). This is regarded as the most sacred portion in the entire satra campus.

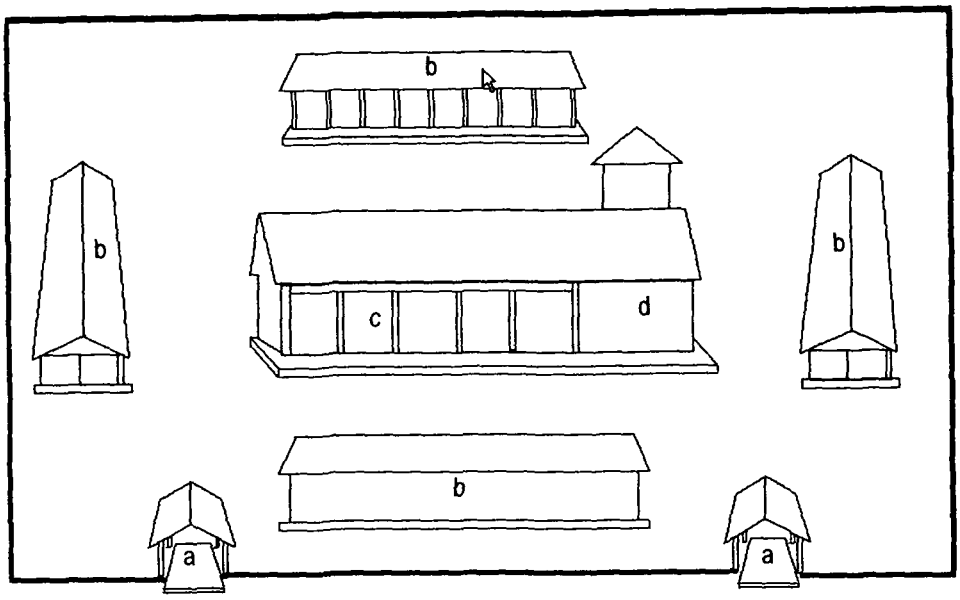

Fig 9: Layout of a satra campus: a) *bāṭcora*, b) *hāṭī*, c) *kīrttan-ghar* or *nāmghar*, d) *maṇikūṭ*

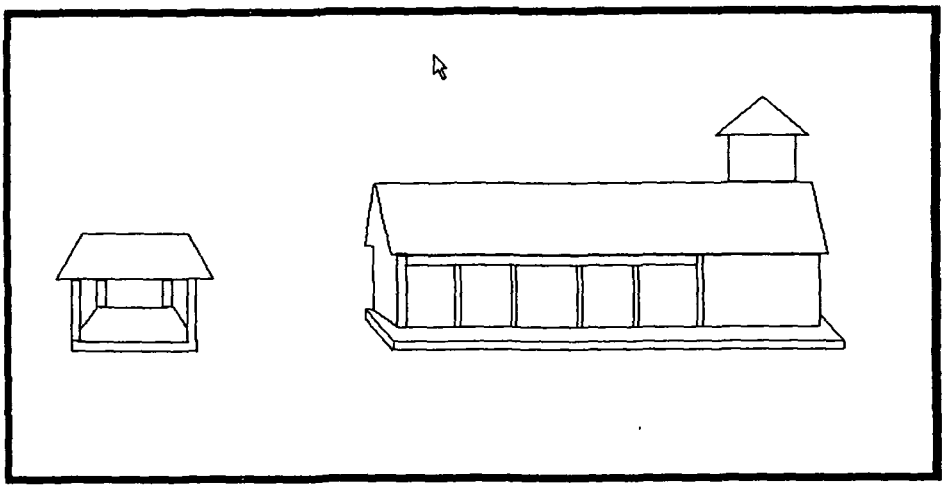

Fig 10: Nāmghar arena as seen in villages

An important fact is that *nāmghar*, with the *maṇikūṭ* 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 *nāmghar*s 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 *hāṭī*s. 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 *saṁhati*s. There evolved four *saṁhati*s, namely, *Brahma, Nikā, Puruṣa* and *Kāla*. Each of the presently existing satras subscribes to the faith and conventions of any of the four *saṁhati*s. Thus, there are four different types of satras affiliated to the four different *saṁhati*s.
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 *kevalīyā* or *udāsīn* 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 *gṛhī* satras.

c) Due to a number of reasons, few satras enjoy a superior position than the rest in terms of their fames, 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 *śalā-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 posses 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

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

Bhāgavatī = 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)

Deurī = in-charge of worshiping in the *maṇikūṭ*

Nāmlagowā = leaders in congregational prayers

Dhan-bharālī = treasurer

Cāul-bharālī	= store-supervisor
Hāṭī-maṭā	= person who looks after the cloisters (*hāṭīs*)
Bilanīyā	= person who distributes offerings made to the deity
Thāi-macā	= one who sweeps, washes and plasters the floors of the *kīrttan-ghar* and *maṇikūṭ*
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 *cāul-bharālī*, there may be precise sub-portfolios, such as, *Lon-bharali* (store-keeper of salt and oil), *guwā-bharālī* (in-charge of the keeping of betel-nuts, cloves, cinnamon, etc), *bheṭi-dharā* (receiver of gifts), etc.

The above-mentioned port-folios 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 *Rājmdhi*, 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
Pācanī	= assistant to *Barmdehi*, 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 *bhakat*s 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 (*śiṣyas*) 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 *bhakat*s. 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 *bhakat*s 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 *śiṣya*s 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 *bhakat*s 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 *bhakat*s are filled up with their deep-rooted *bhakti* towards god and the many creative options of music, dance, drama, visual artistry and craftsmanship. 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-*bhakat*s are treated by elders as latter's own childs. These child-*bhakat*s are given their education in the *Satrīyā tol*s. 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 *Vaiṣṇava* Gurus and previous *Satrādhikār*s, special ritualistic functions, etc. Some of the important events of such occasional observances are described in the following texts.

Kṛṣṇa-Janmāstamī: This is the birth anniversary of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* which is observed on the eighth lunar day of the dark fortnight in the month of *Bhāḍa* (July-August). This is observed with placing new sacred clothes on the wooden pedestals in *maṇikūṭ*, 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, *bhāonā*s (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 devises 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), *Phākuwā* (*holī* – the Indian festival of colours), and the different anniversaries of the bygone stalwarts of the *Vaiṣṇava* 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 *Kamalābarīā* norms of celibacy and *Nikā saṁhati*. 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 Sàtra: 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 Satrādhikār 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[12].

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 saṁhati* 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 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.

Satrīyā Artistic Traditions of Majuli: Performing and Visual Arts

Satrīyā 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-*Vaiṣṇavism* among the common people. The neo-*Vaiṣṇavite* movement under his leadership produced a total and unique body of *Vaiṣṇavite* 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- *Vaiṣṇavite* legacies till now, primarily through oral transmission from generation to generation.

The *Satrīyā* 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 *tāla*s (rhythms). However, there are two styles of singing the *bargīt*s – 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 *rāga*s on which the songs are based. Śaṅkaradeva is said to have written 240 *bargīt*s, 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 *bargīt*s then became 191. It is to

be noted that the satras possess different categories of songs other these *bargīt*. The term *bargīt* is used particularly to denote these 191 songs composed by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva only. There are more than 30 *rāga*s associated with the *bargīt*s. A list of the names of the *rāga*s and *tāla*s recorded from Natun Kamalabari Satra is given in Annexure II.

The appearance of *rāga*-music like the *bargīt*s 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 Madhavadeva, 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[15].

The *bargīt*s 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 *bargīt*s as a form of Indian classical music.

Apart from the *bargīt*s, there are also other varieties of songs in *Satrīyā* traditions, such as, *aṅkar gīt*, *kīrttan-ghoṣā*, *bhaṭimā*, *nāmghoṣā*, etc. The *aṅkar gīt*s (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 *bargīt*s except that, unlike *bargīt*s each of the *aṅkar gīt*s is always to be sung in a specific *tāla*. The

Kīrttan-ghoṣā and *Nām-ghoṣā* 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 *ghoṣā*-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 gita* 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 Krsna or Narayana, or describes a situation or a little action[16].

The *bhaṭimās* 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 *Satrīyā-nāc* or *Satrīyā-nṛtya*. The *Satrīyā-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 *Satrīyā-nṛtya*, such as, *sutradhārī-nṛtya*, *naṭuwā-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"[17].

The learning of the *Satrīyā-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 *Satrīyā-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 *Satrīyā* dramatic art form is called *aṅkīyā-nāṭ* 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 *aṅkīyā-nāṭs* 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[18].

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), *śaṅkha* (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 *gāyan*s (singers) and *bāyan*s (instrumentalists). They not only perform the different items on necessary occasions but also hand over their knowledge to the young learning *bhakat*s. *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 *khanikar*s 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*, *maṇikūṭa* and the *hāṭi*s. 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 Rāmāyaṇa* (Bengena ati Satra), *Bhakti Ratnāvalī* (Kamalabari Satra), *Hastīvidyārṇava* (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"[19].

The works of wood-carvings in the satras include the images of gods, wooden *āsana* (pedestals) inside the *maṇikūṭa*, *śarāi* (platter with a stand), *ṭhogī* (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), *kaṭh* (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 *Satrīyā* 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 *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.[20]

In an interview, Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami, the *Satrādhikār* of the Natun Kamalabari Satra, disclosed that there was peculiar item called *Siṅghāt* in the oral tradition of the satras. The term *Siṅghāt* 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 *Vaiṣṇava* 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 *Vaiṣṇava* gurus of previous times. As a part of the morning and evening services, the biographies of the two saints Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, and also *Vaiṣṇava* 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 *Kirtan-ghar*. The *Carit-tola* is also carried out at the residence of the *Satrādhikār*. On this occasion the complete biography of a guru is recited[21]. It may be mentioned that there are a good number of biographical works of several *Vaiṣṇava* 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 *Vaiṣṇava* 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[22].

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 *bargīt*s are categorized as classical music as they are rāga-based musical compositions. However, folk attitudes are visible in the *bargit*s 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-gṛha* is replaced with the *maṇikūṭa*, and the *maṇḍapa* is replaced with the *kīrtan-ghar*. But the *maṇikūṭa* of a satra is not as much vertically heightened as that of a *garbha-gṛha*. The existence of rows of wooden pillars (in recent times, concrete pillars) to hold the ceiling and roof of the elongated *kīrtan-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, Khyatrīya, Baiśya, 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.[23]

There were a number of illustrious *Vaiṣṇava* Gurus and *Satrādhikār*s 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 *Satrādhikār*s 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[24].

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 *Satrādhikār*s 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 *Vaiṣṇavism.*

Notes

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[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.

[12] *Assam District Gazetteers: Sibsagar District* (1967) 107.

[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.

[16] Maheswar Neog, *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam* 1998 ed. (Guwahati, 1965) 279.

[17] Maheswar Neog, 'Classical Dance Tradition in Assam'. In B. Datta (ed.) *Traditional Performing Arts of North-East India* (Guwahati, 1990) 16.

[18] Pradip Jyoti Mahanta, 'Bhaona: The Traditional Vaisnavite Theatre', In B. Datta (ed.) *Traditional Performing Arts of North-East India* (Guwahati, 1990) 74-75.

[19] Naren Chandra Kalita, Forward. In R. D. Choudhury and Choodamani Nandagopal (eds.) *Manuscript Painting of Assam State Museum* (Guwahati, 1998) xii.

[20] S. N. Sarma (1966) 148.

[21] Narayan Chandra Goswami, *Sattrīyā Saṁskṛtir Svarṇarekhā*. (Majuli, 1984) 28.

[22] Birendranath Datta, 'Satrīyā Saṁskṛtit Śiṣṭa Saṁskṛti Āru Loka-Saṁskṛtir Sañjog', In *Garīyosī* (October 1995) 15-23.

[23] S. N. Sarma (1966) 200.

[24] *ibid*, 203

Photo 18: *Bātcorā* of Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 19: The cloisters (*hāṭī*) of Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 20: Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami, the *Satrādhikār* of Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 21: Inside the *kīrttan 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: *Dhemālī*, the musical preliminaries, Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 25: A *Bar bāyan* playing several drums at a time in a *dhemalī*, Natun Kamalabari

Photo 26: Handing down the tradition: A child devotee being taught *mātḷi ākhorā*, the initial lessons of *Satrīyā nṛtya*, Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 27: Another moment of *mātḷi ākhorā*,in Natun Kamalabari satra

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

Photo 28 (i-iii): Few snapshots of a training session of *mātli ākhorā*, in Natun Kamalabari Satra

Photo 29: Some villagers participating in congregational prayer from outside the *kīrttan ghar*, Natun Kamalabari Satra

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

Photo 31: Auniati Satra: another view of the *kīrttan ghar*

Photo 32: Auniati Satra: entrance-door of the *Kīrttan ghar*

Photo 33: Wooden image of *Garuḍa*, inside the *Kīrttan ghar*, Auniati Satra

Photo 34: The *Siṁhāsana* and the paraphernalia in the *maṇikūṭ* of Auniati Satra, a *bhakat* giving offerings

Photo 35: *Ākāś-banti*, sky-lamps lit in the month of *Kāti* , Auniati Satra

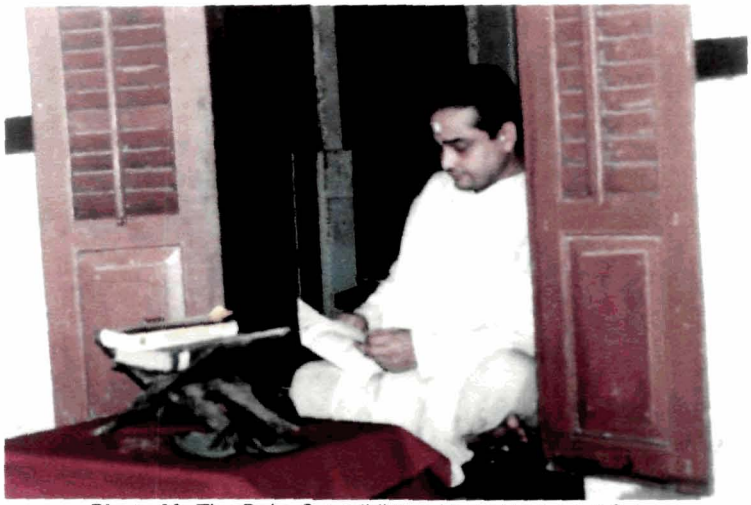


Photo 36: The *Deka-Satrādhikār* in his *bohā*, Auniati Satra

Photo 37: A *bhakat* making cane hand-fans: Auniati Satra

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

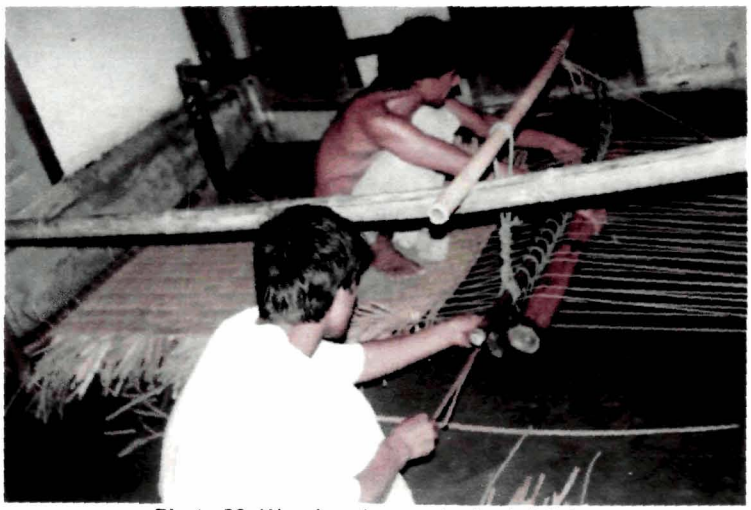


Photo 39: Weaving straw mats, Auniati Satra

Photo 40: Some puppets of Auniati Satra

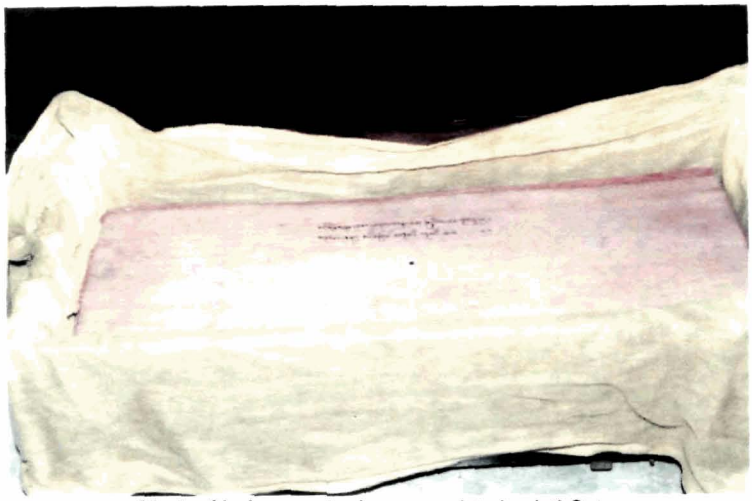


Photo 41: An agar-bark manuscript, Auniati Satra

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

Photo 43: Paintings on the plinth of the *bātcorā* of Uttar Kamalabari Satra

(i)

(ii)

Photo 44 (i- ii): Some paintings on the plinth of entrance of *Kīrttan ghar*, Uttar Kamalabari Satra

Photo 45: At the end of a congregational prayer, Uttar Kamalabari Satra

Photo 46: *Kīrttan ghar* of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 47: Another view of *Kīrttan ghar* of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 48: A view of the campus of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 49: The cloisters (*hāṭī*) 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 *Kīrttan ghar*, Dakhinpat Satra

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

Photo 54: Another decorated tray, Dakhinpat Satra

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

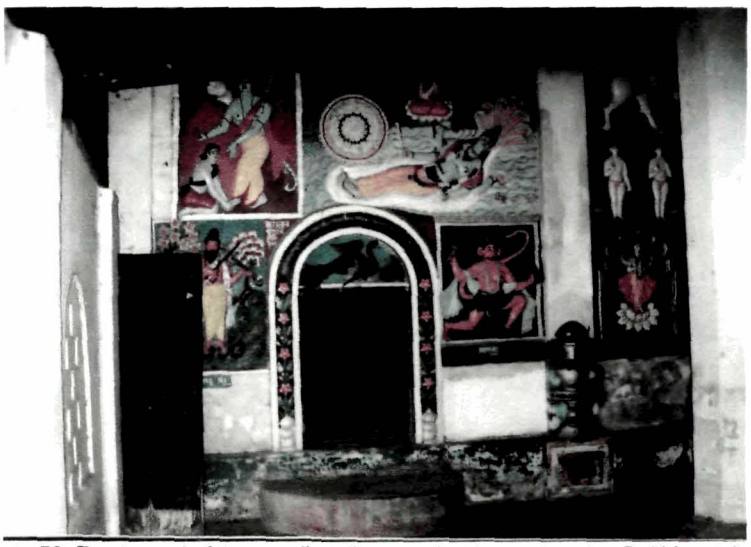


Photo 56: Front panel of the *maṇikūṭ*, illustrated with wood-works, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 57: Aisle in between two rows of pillars, inside the *Kīrttan ghar* of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 58: Side view of wooden *Garuḍa*, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 59: Front view of the wooden *Garuḍa*, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 60: A wooden pillar inside the *Kīrttan ghar*, Dakhinpat Satra

(i) (ii) (iii) (iv)

Photo 61 (i - iv): The various idols kept in the *maṇikūṭ* 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: *Śarāi*, platter with golden top, Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 66: Some implements of Dakhinpat Satra

Photo 67: Bangles (*gām khāru*) of Dakhinpat Satra

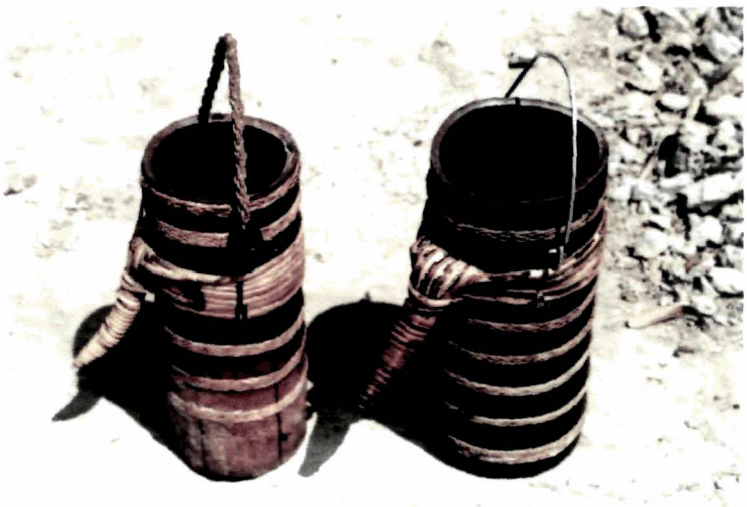


Photo 68: *Karīyā*, wooden pots used in milking cows, Dakhinpat Satra

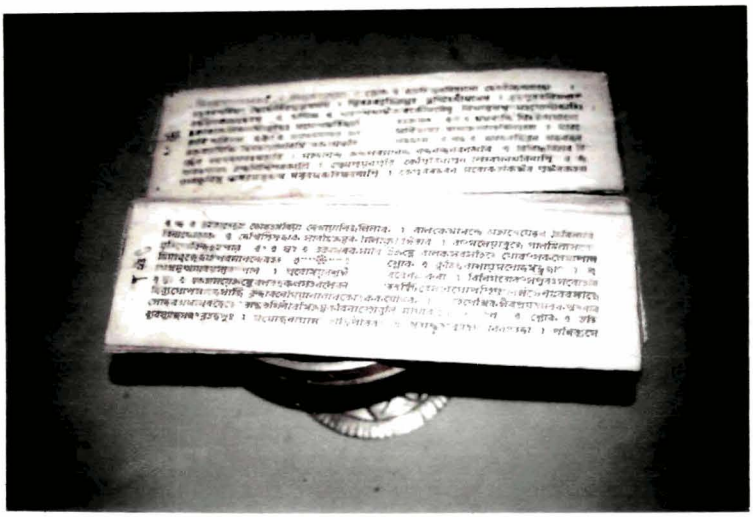
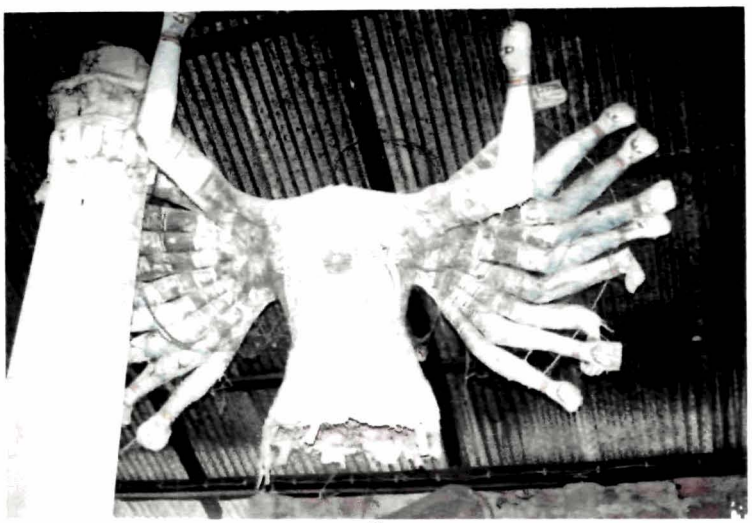


Photo 69: An Agar-bark manuscript in Natun Camaguri Satra

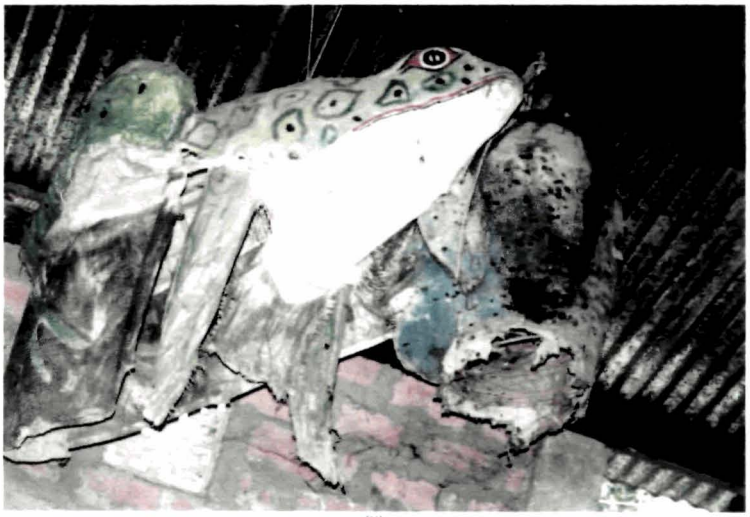
(i)

(ii)

Photo 70 (i-ii): Two masks (Mūkhā) of Natun Camaguri Satra



(i)



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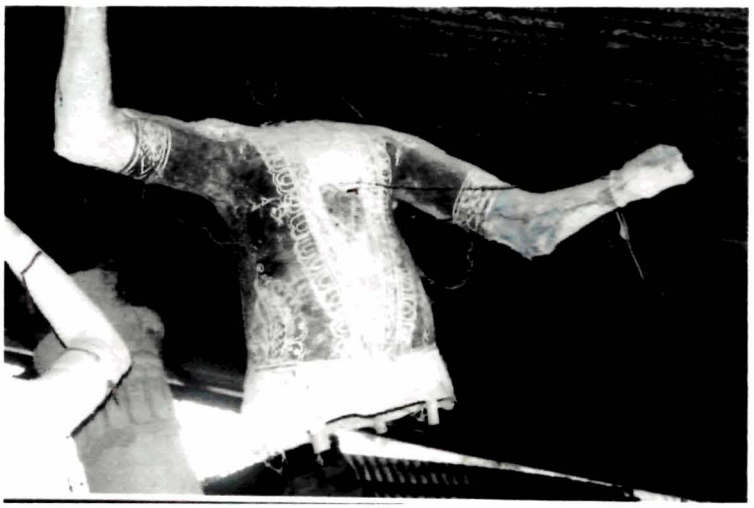


(iii)

Photo 71 (1-iii): Masks of Natun Camaguri Satra

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

Photo 72 (i-iii): Masks of Natun Camaguri Satra, painted with traditional colours

Photo 73: Three unfinished masks, Natun Camaguri Satra

(i)

(ii)

Photo 74 (i-ii): Two masks of Natun Camaguri Satra

Photo 75: *Kīrttam ghar* of Garmur Satra

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

Photo 77: Aisle inside the *Kīrttam ghar* of Garmur Satra

Photo 78: Wooden image of *Garuḍa* inside the *Kīrttam ghar* of Garmur Satra

Photo 79: Seat of the *Satrādhikār* of Garmur Satra

Photo 80: Musical instruments: a *Khol* and a pair of *Negerā*, Garmur Satra

Photo 81: Painting illustrating mythological episodes, at the plinth of the ceiling of the *Kīrttam ghar* of Garmur Satra

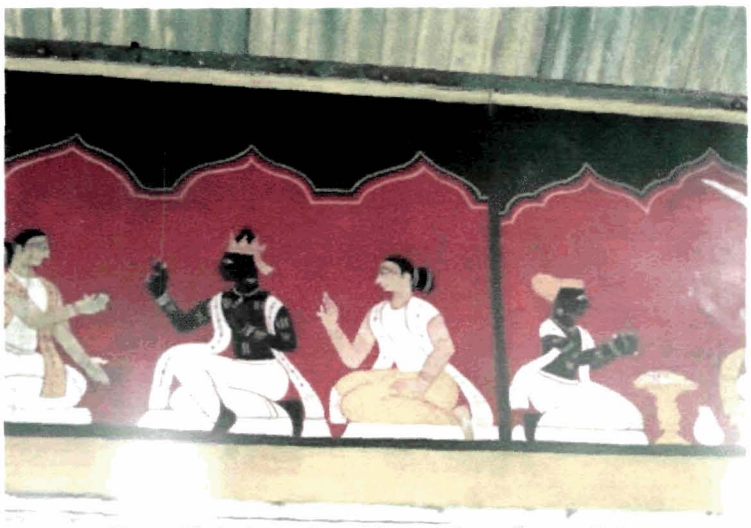
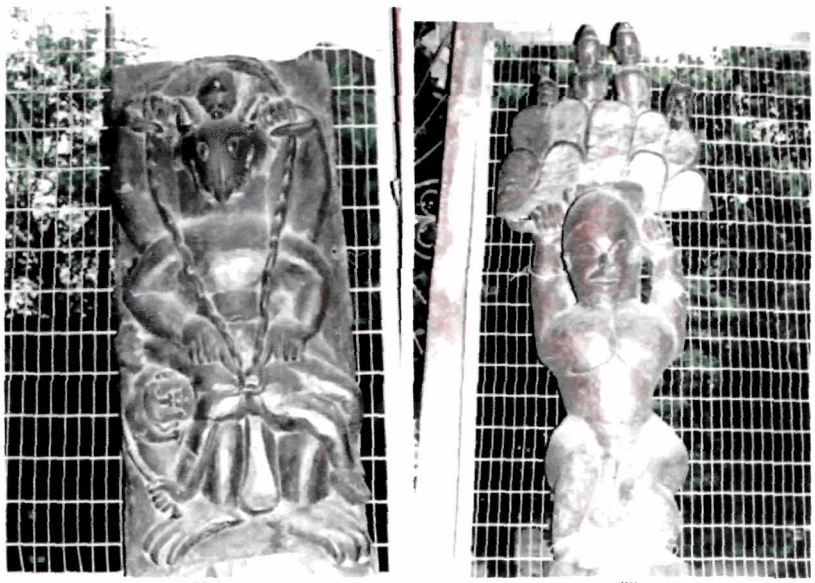


Photo 82: A closer view of the paintings, Garmur Satra



(i) (ii)

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

Photo 84: Residence of the *Satrādhikār* of Bengenaati Satra

(i)

(ii)

Photo 85 (i-ii): Two cloisters (*hāṭī*) of the Bengenaati, a non-celibate satra. Concrete constructions are coming up in recent times

(i)

(ii)

Photo 86 (i-ii): Antique collections in Bengenaati Satra, kept without any preservation effort.

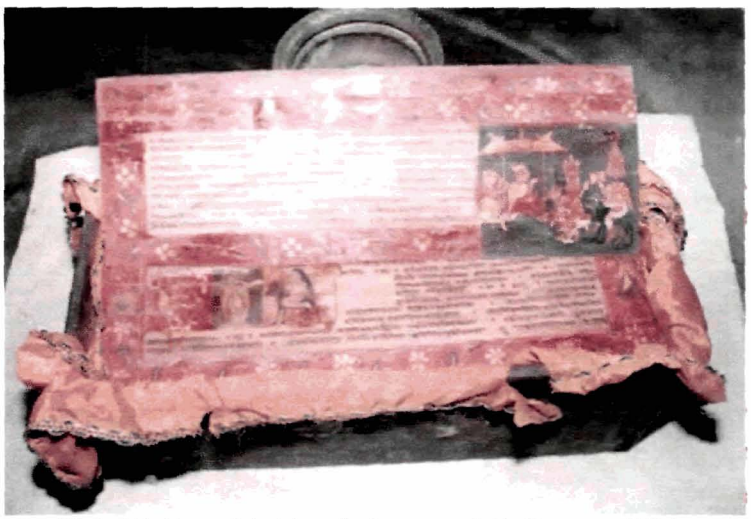


Photo 87: One painted Agar-bark manuscript in Bengenaati Satra

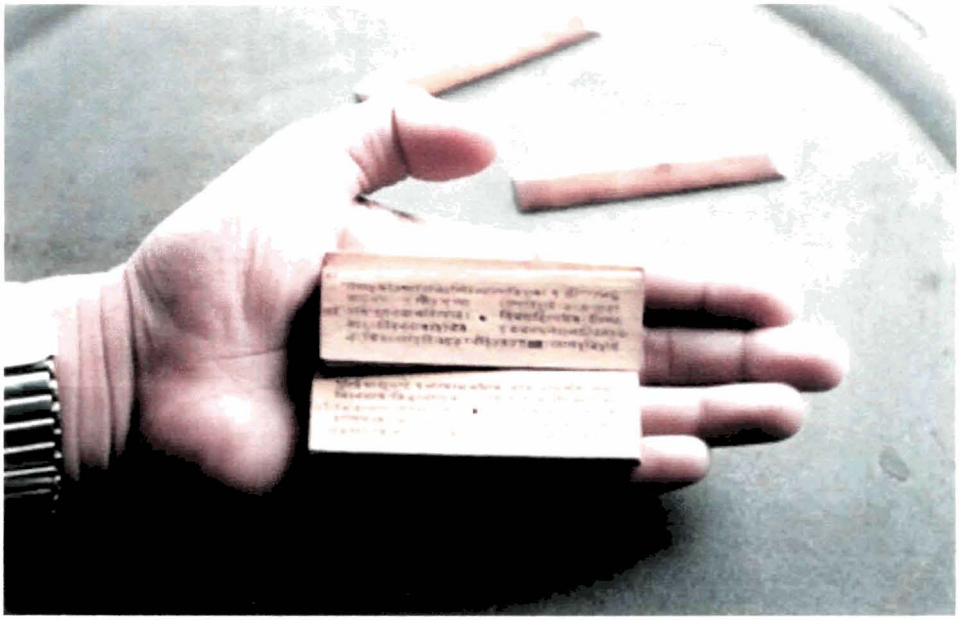


Photo 88: An Agar-bark manuscript of unusually small size.

Living Cultural Heritage – II: The Ethno-Cultural Profile

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.

Kebāṅg 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-ghar*s 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-āyei-ligāṅg*, *Po-rāg*, etc. The *Āli-āye-ligāṅg* is observed on the first Wednesday of the month of *Phāgun* (February-March). This is the seed-sowing festival (*Āli* = crop-seed, *ligāṅg* = 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 *āpoṅg* (rice-beer) are served in *Āli-āye-ligāṅg*.

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*,

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-ligāṅg*, 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 function[2].

The Misings have their rich musical tradition which is reflected in the different varities of Mising folksongs. Some such varieties are *mibu-ābāṅg* (songs of the priest), *oi-nitom* (songs of love and yearning), *kaban* (songs of lament), *midāṅg-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 reformative 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 Misings 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: *Dibongīyā*, *Teṅgāpanāyā*, *Bargoyā* and *Pātorgoyā*. The last one of these is extinct now possibly because of the assimilation with the Tiwas of central Assam[4]. 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 *Dibongīyā* clan. The *Dibongīyā*s have their spoken language, while the other Deuris do speak Assamese. The Deuris of Majuli worship their traditional called *Kundīmāmā*. They are also seen to be acculturated with the *Satrīyā* lore by getting initiated to the *satra*s, and enacting the *bhāonā* plays. The Deuris celebrate the *bihu* festivals, which they call *bisu*, but the observation of each of the three *bisu*s (*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-gīt*s 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, Khyatrīya, 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 *Vaiṣṇava* 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.

[4] Khagen Chandra Deuri, 'Mājulībāsī Deurīsakalar Atīt Āru Bartamān'. In Mahanta, Prasanta Kumar ed. *Majuli*. (Jorhat, 2001) 75.

[5] Birendranath Datta et. Al., *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India* (Guwahati, 1994) 13.

[6] B. C. Allen, *Sibsagar*, Assam District Gazetteer, Vol.II. 1993 ed. (1906) 173-174

Photo 89: A Mising village

Photo 90: Raised platform-houses in a Mising Village

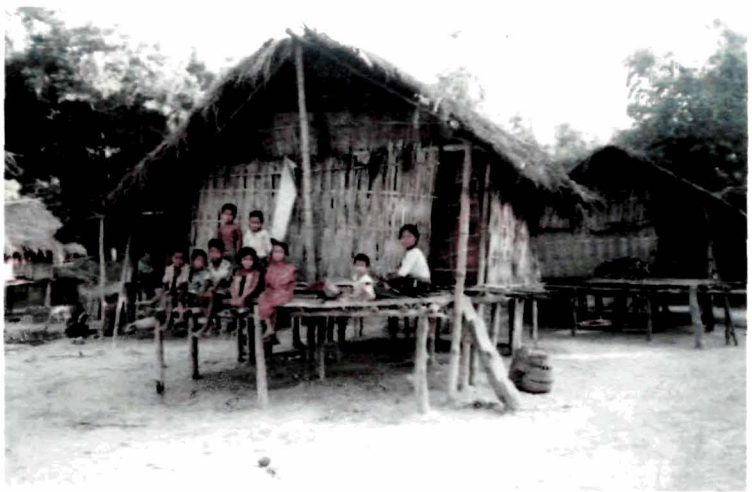


Photo 91: Mising children and woman at home

Photo 92: A Mising woman at her loom

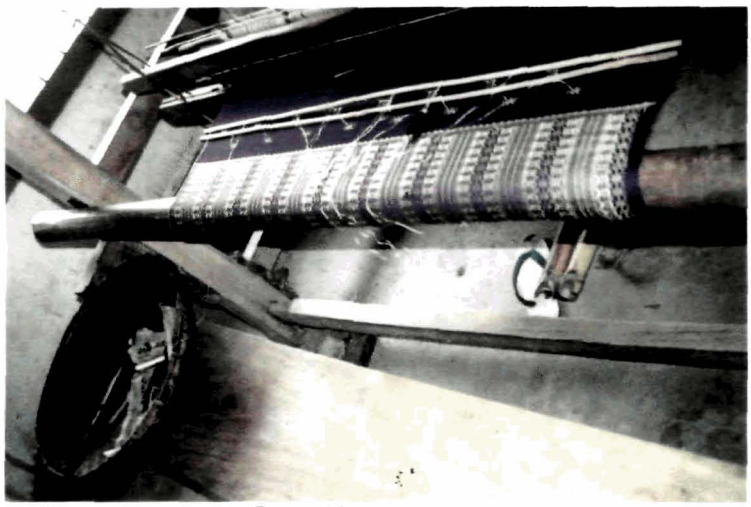


Photo 93: A Mising loom

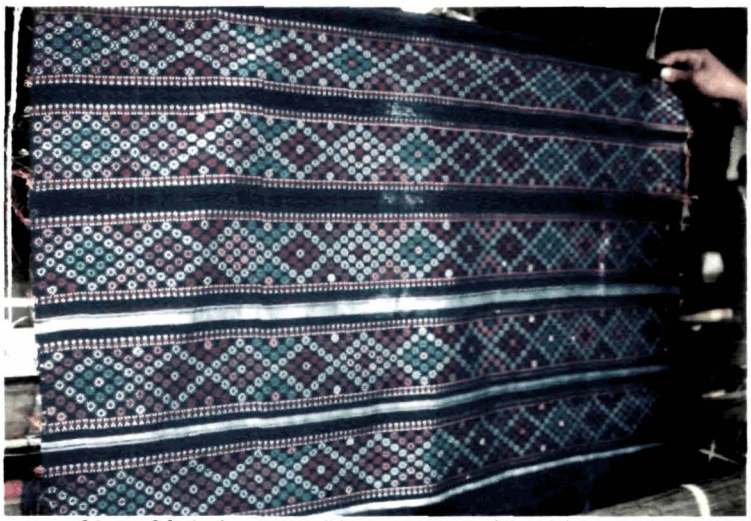
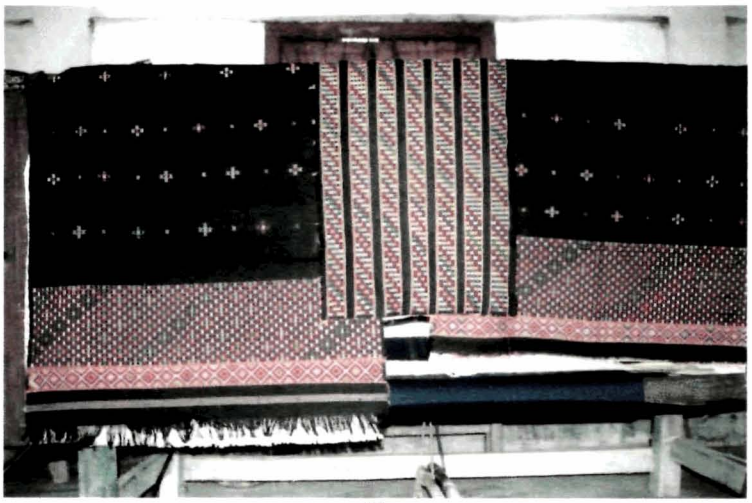


Photo 94: A piece of traditional textile product of the Misings

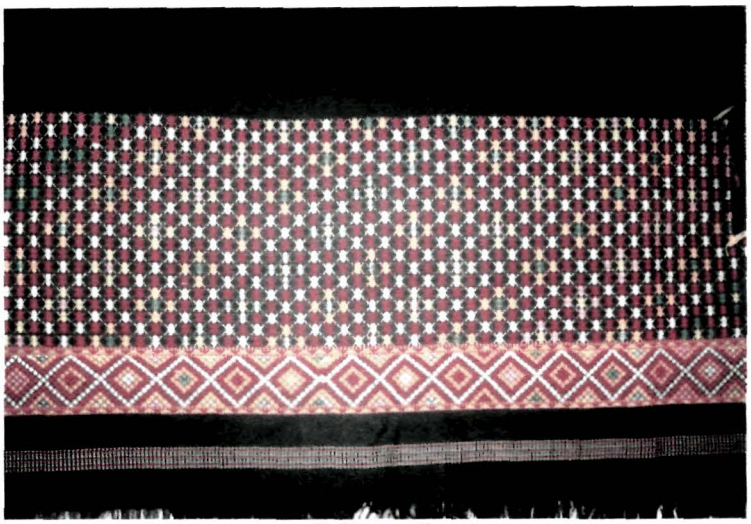
(i)



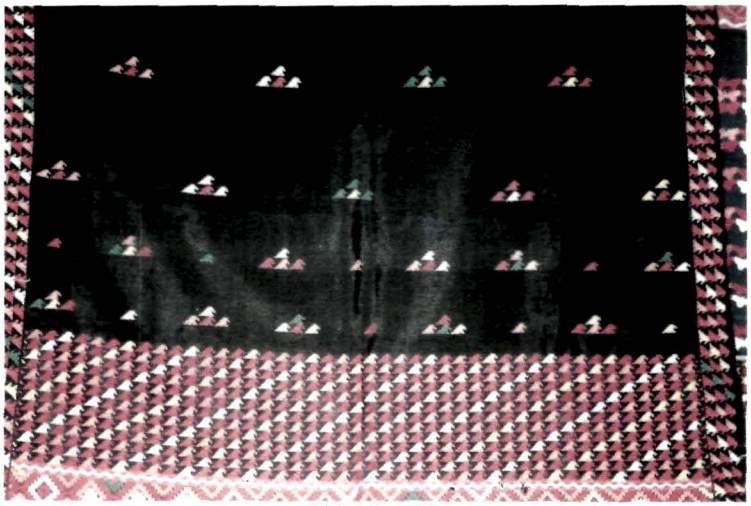
(ii)

(iii)

Photo 95 (i-iii): Some Mising textile productions in traditional loom



(i) Star motifs



(ii) Bird motifs

(iii) Butterfly motifs

Photo 96 (i-iii): Some Mising textile productions in traditional loom

Photo 97: A Mising girl in traditional dress

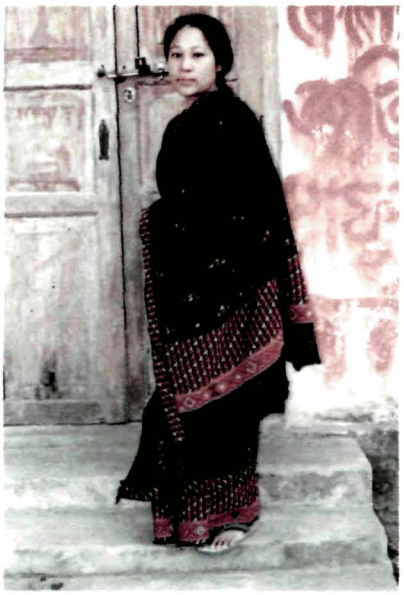


Photo 98: A Mising lady in traditional dress

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 (*bharāl*) 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*)

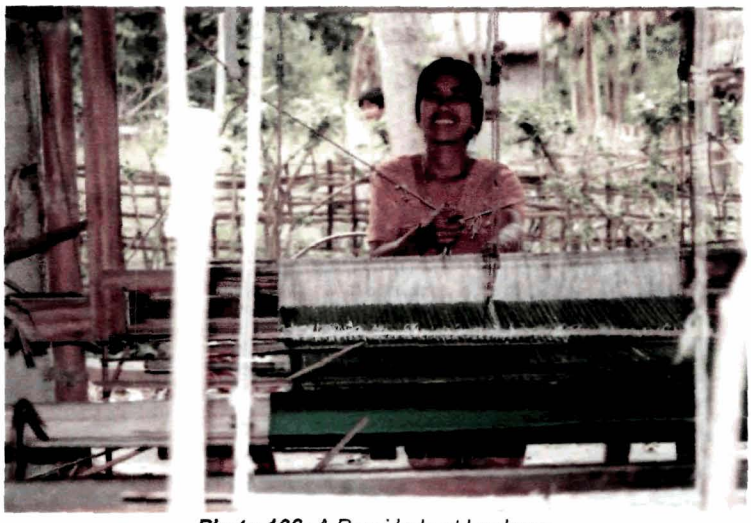


Photo 108: A Deuri lady at her loom

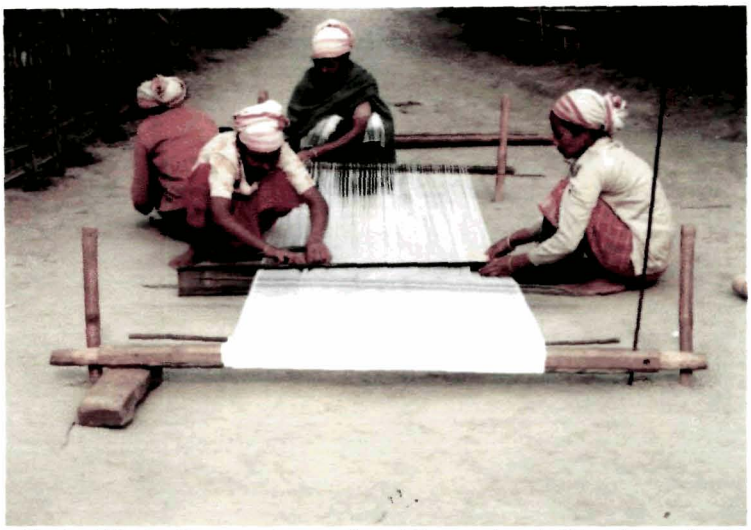


Photo 109: Another weaving session at the courtyard of Deuri household

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*)

Living Cultural Heritage – III: The Terracotta Crafts of Salmora

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 *satra*s.

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 *khani*s. 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

kumar māṭi. There are different terms to mean the acts of digging of these different layers. In the order of the sequence, they are: *ālotīyā māṭi khandā*, *lodhā khandā*, *gaspatīyā khandā*, *haguwā khandā* and finally *kumar māṭi khandā*.

Men get inside such *khani*s 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.

Māṭi sijuwā: The *māṭi*s acquired from the *khani*s 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:

kholani diyā = 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 diyā = plastering the surface to seal perforation, if left any

raṅgoni diyā = 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.

Peghālī diyā: This is the act of firing the implements prepared by women, and the last phase of the process of production. *Peghālī* is a huge burner which is constructed in an open field to fire several hundreds of items at a time. The *peghālī*, 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 *peghālī*.

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 *satra*s, individuals and transport agencies.

Notes

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[1] Birendranath Datta, *Folk Toys of Assam* (Guwahati, 1986) 12.

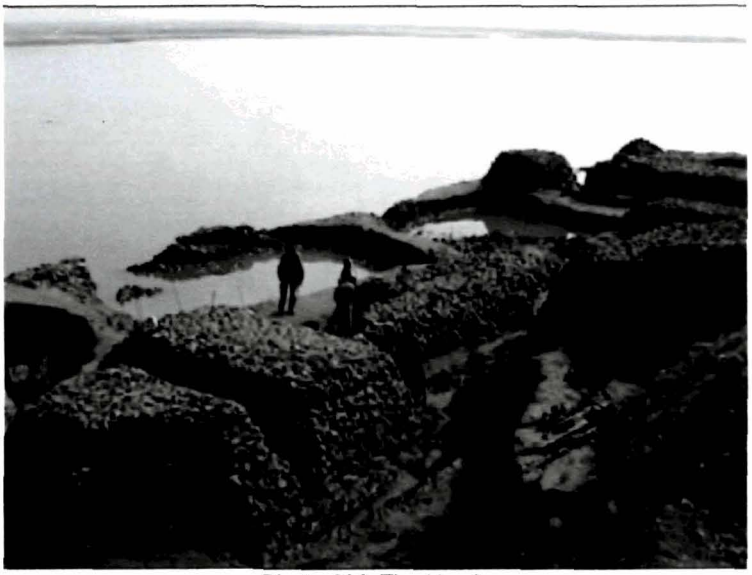


Photo 114: The *khanis*

Photo 115: Digging of *kumar mati*

Photo 116: A Kumar woman, giving the shape of a pitcher

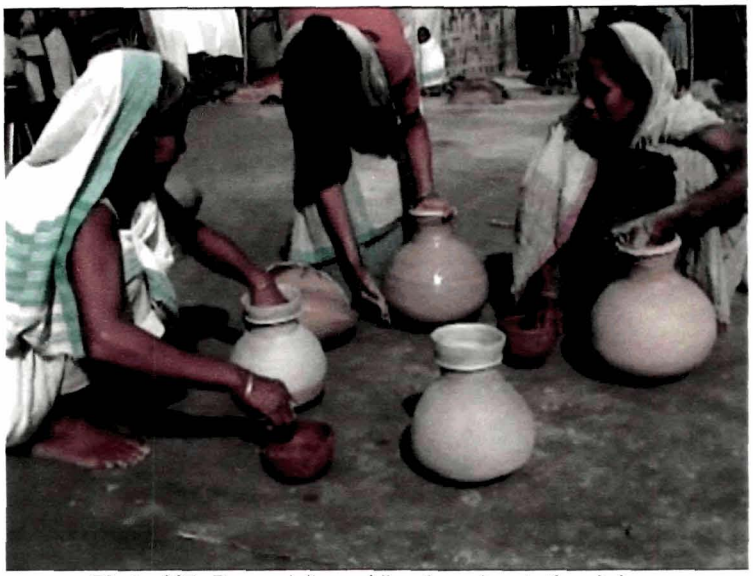


Photo 117: *Rangoni diya*: adding the colour to the pitchers

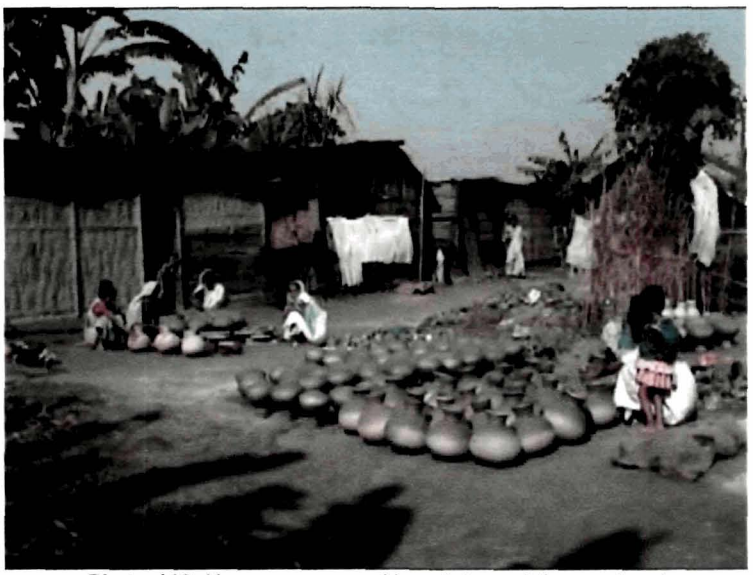


Photo 118: Kumar women making pitchers at the courtyard

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

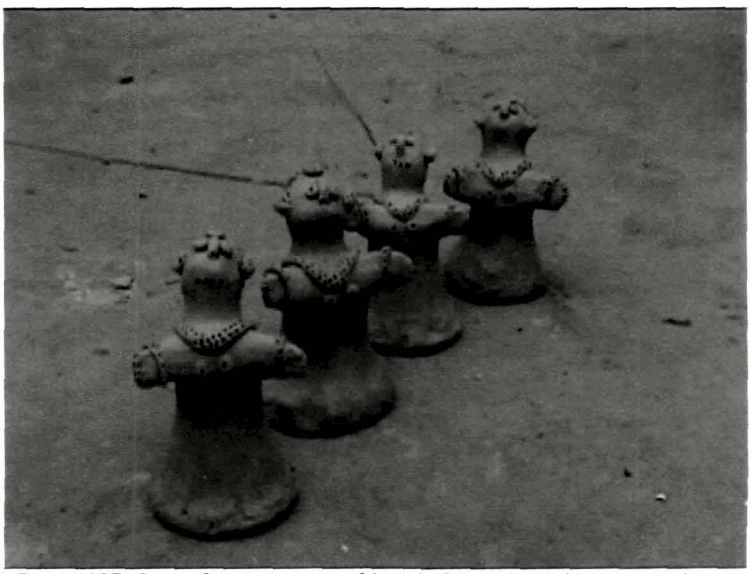


Photo 125: Some Salomora toys of female form, shaped but not yet burnt

Photo 126: Salmora toys of in finished (burnt) form

Photo 127: Influence from the satras: a terracotta image of *Garuḍa* produced by the Kumars

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

Photo 128: Various forms of Salmora toys

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[1]. 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"[2]. 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 *satra*s 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.

Heritage Conservation in Majuli: Need for a Suitable Paradigm

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 *satra*s 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 *satra*s. 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

Parameters of Ecomuseum	*Situation in Majuli*
Territory	Distinctive territory. Well-defined geographically, culturally and administratively
Heritage	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.
Collective Memory	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.
Population (Community)	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.

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.

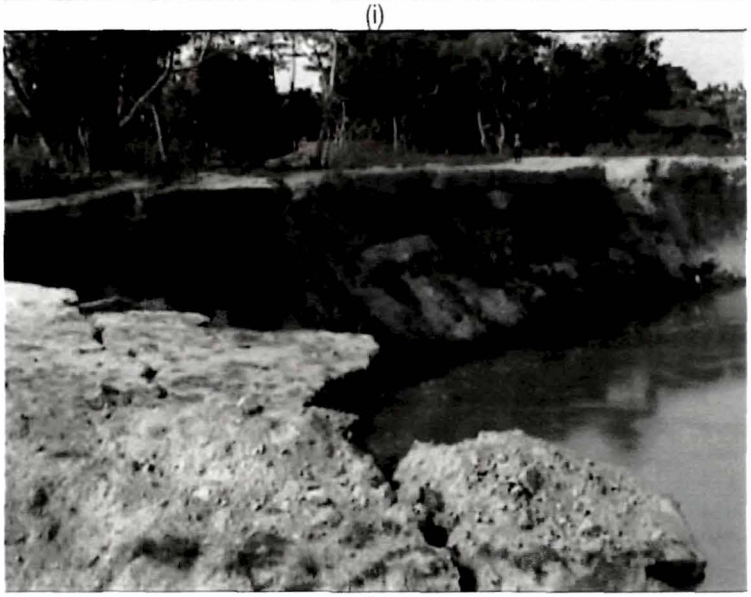
Notes

[1] Dulal Chandra Goswami, 'Majulir Bhu-prakritik Paricay'. In K. C. Kalita (ed.) *Majuli*, (Kolkata, 2001). 27-28

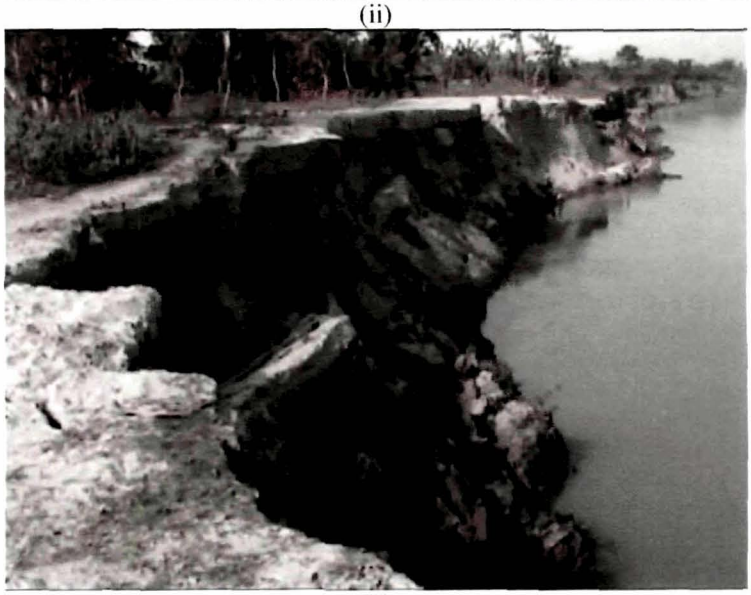
[2] B. C. Allen, *Sibsagar*, Assam District Gazetteers, Vol.II. 1993 ed.. (1906) 5.

[3] Amreswar Galla, 'Culture and Heritage in Development: Ha Long Ecomuseum, A Case Study from Vietnam' (2002) 64.

(i)



(ii)



(iii)

Photo 129 (i-iii): Land erosion at the river-banks of Majuli

Conclusion: An Image of Ecomuseum in Majuli

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.[1] (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 ecomuseolgical layout for the Majuli river island. This scheme for ecomusealization 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- site

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 *namghar*s, 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 *satra*s, 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 *satra*s 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.

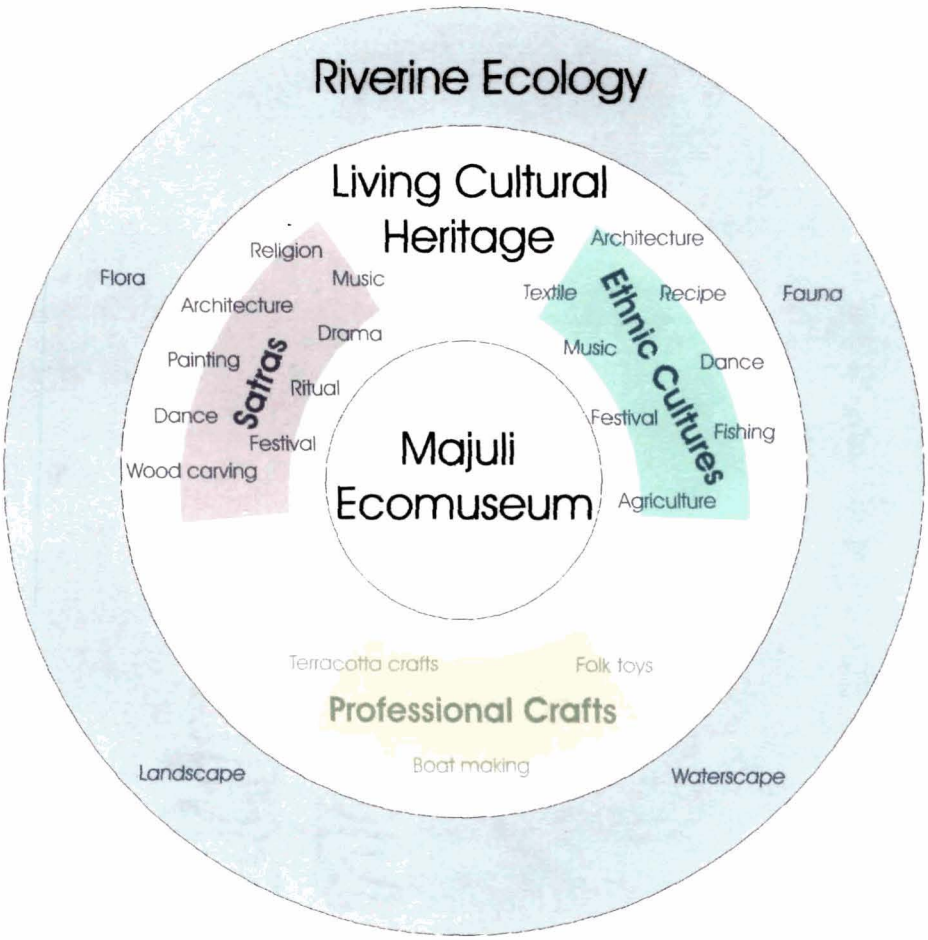


Fig 12: A graphical representation of the proposed ecomuseum in Majuli

Notes

[1] A. K. Ramanujan, Introduction. *Folktales From India.* (1994) xiv.

[2] . A. G. Krishna Menon, *Case Study on the Effects of Tourism on Culture and the Environment: India: Jaisalmer, Khajuraho and Goa.* (Bangkok, 1993) 84.

[3] *ibid,* 92.

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List of Residential and Migratory Birds seen in Majuli[1]

Sl. No	*Name*	*Scientific Name*
1	Little Grebe	Tachy baptus ruficollis
2	Spotted Billed or Grey Pelican	Pelicanus phillippensis
3	Large Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo
4	Little Coronet	Phalacrocorax niger
5	Snake bird	Anhinga melanogaster
6	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea
7	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea
8	Pond Heron	Ardeola striatus
9	Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis
10	Chestnut Bittern	Ixobrychus cinnamomeus
11	Great Egret	Ardea alba
12	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta
13	Open Bill Stork	Anastomus oscitans
14	Black Crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax
15	White Necked Stork	Ciconia episcopus
16	Greater Adjunct Stork	Leptoptilos dubius
17	Lesser Adjunct Stork	Leptoptilos javanicus
18	Greyleg Goose	Anser anser
19	Barheaded Goose	Anser indicus
20	Lesser Whistling Teal	Dendrocygna javancia
21	Large Whistling Teal	Dendrocygna bicolor
22	Brahminy Duck	Tandorna tandorna
23	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos
24	Cotton Teal	Nettapus coromandelianus
25	Pintail	Anas acuta
26	Spotbill Duck	Anas poecilorhyncha
27	Red Crested Pochard	Netta rufina
28	Black Winged Kite	Elanus caeruleus
29	Pariale Kite	Milvus migrans govia
30	Brahminy Kite	Haliastur Indus
31	Pallas's Fish Eagle	Haliaeetus leucoryplus
32	Short-Toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus
33	White Backed Vulture	Gyps-bengatensis
34	Swamp Patridge	Francolinus gularis
35	Grater Coucal	Centropus sinesis
36	Red Jungle Fowl	Gullus gallus murgli
37	Common Crane	Grus grus
38	White Breasted Water Hen	Amaurornis phoenicurus
39	Purple Moorhen	Porphyrio porphyrio
40	Pheasant Tailed Jacana	Hydrophasianus chirugurus
41	Bronzed Winged Jacana	Metopidius indicus
42	Indian Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus
43	Redwattled Lapwing	Vanellus malabaricus
44	River Turn	Sterna aurantia
45	Black Headed Gull	Larus ichthyaetus
46	Common Green Pigeon	Treron phoenicoptera
47	Spotted Dove	Streptopelia Chinesis
48	Red Dove	Streptopelia tranquebarica
49	Ring Dove	Streptopelia decaocto
50	Little Brown Dove	Streptopelia senegalensis

[1] Source: Prasanta Kumar Mahanta (ed.): *Majuli*, 2001, Jorhat

51	Large Indian Parakeet	Psittacula eupatria
52	Rose Ringed Parakeet	Psittacula kramari
53	Indian Lorikeet	Loriculus vernalis
54	Common Hawk Cuckoo	Cuculus varius
55	Cuckoo	Eudynamys scolopacea
56	Jungle Nightjar	Coprimulgus indicus
57	House Swift	Apus affinis
58	Pied Kingfisher	Ceryle rudis
59	Small Blue Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis
60	White Breasted Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis
61	Small Green Bee Eater	Merops orientalis
62	Chestnut-headed Bee Eater	Merops leschenaulti
63	Small Green Barbet	Megalaima viridis
64	Blue-throated Barbet	Megalaima asiatica
65	Lineated Barbet	Megalaima lineata
66	Hoopoe	Upupa epops
67	Indian Pied Hornbill	Anthracoceros malabaricus
68	Black-backed Woodpecker	Chrysocolaptes festivus
69	Lesser-golden-backed Woodpecker	Dinopium benghalense
70	Greater Racked Tailed Drongo	Dicrurus paradiseus
71	King Crow	Dicrurus adsimillis
72	Pied Myna	Sturnus contra
73	Bank Myna	Acridotheres ginginianus
74	Grey Headed Myna	Sturnus malabaricus
75	Jungle Myna	Acridotheres Fuscus
76	Common Myna	Acrodotheres tristis
77	House Crow	Corvus splendens
78	Jungle Crow	Corvus marorhynchos
79	Black-headed Oriole	Oriolus xanthornus
80	Magpie Robin	Copsychus saularis
81	Redvented Bulbul	Pyconotus cafer
82	Red-whiskered Bulbul	Piconotus jocosus
83	Grey Tit	Parus major
84	Baya Weaver	Ploceus philippinus
85	Black-breasted Weaver Bird	Ploceus benghalensis
86	Shama	Copsychus malabaricus
87	Tree Pie	Dendrocitta vagabunda
88	Purple Sunbird	Nectarinia asiatica
89	Indian Roller	Coracias benghalensis
90	Tailor Bird	Orthotomus sutorius
91	White-browned Fantal Fly Catcher	Rhipidura aureola
92	Grey-headed Fly Catcher	Culicicapa ceylonsis
93	White Jora	Aegithina tiphia
94	Stone Curlew	Burhinus oedicenemus
95	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba
96	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerrea
97	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus
98	Red Munia	Estrilda amandava
99	Spotted Munia	Lonchura punctulata
100	Laggar Falcon	Falco juggar
101	Soptted Owlet	Athene brama
102	Barn Owl	Tyto alba
103	Common Swallow	Hirundo rustica gutturalis
104	Brown Shrike	Lanius cristatus

List of the *Rāgas* and *Tālas* of Natun Kamalabari Satra[2]

Rāgas

1. Ahir
2. Asowari
3. Barari
4. Basanta
5. Belowar
6. Bhatiyali
7. Bhupali
8. Dhanasri
9. Gandhar
10. Gauri
11. Kalyan
12. Kamod
13. Kanada
14. Kedar
15. Kau
16. Lalit
17. Mallar
18. Maur
19. Maur-dhanasri
20. Nat
21. Nat-mallar
22. Sindhura
23. Sri
24. Suhai
25. Syam
26. Syam-gora
27. Sri-Gandhar
28. Sri-gauri
29. Tur-bhatiyali
30. Tur-basanta
31. Sareng

Tālas

1. Etali
2. Joti
3. Kharman
4. Pari
5. Rakta
6. Rupak
7. Saru-bisam

[2] Source: Archive of the Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University

Specimens of Oral Tradition

A. One Satriya *Singhat* (Wise Saying in riddle)[3]

One *katha*[4] of sugarcane was planted
The foxes ate six *kathas* of it
The rest was to make one jar of molasses
With that, six funerals were observed
And nine *bhaonas* were enacted
There are interferes from the kiths and kin
And are the guests to intervene
You the host, be careful
Keep half of the molasses
For the *bihu* in *Bohag*.

Explanation: There is one absolute being, which is gobbled by the six evil passions of the human mind. What remains is one pure realization of the self with which the evil passions are suppressed. And there are nine different modes of *bhakti*. There are always constant disturbances to the self from internal stimuli and outside influences. It is hereby advised to be careful, and to preserve the purity of the mind and soul for the better times ahead.

B. One Legend about the name Salmora[5]:

The Ahom king Gadadhar Simha ordered capital punishment to some rebels during his reign. Those rebels were executed under a mango tree called *Kanai Kalia* on the bank of a small rivulet. They were killed by driving spikes into their bodies. This particular method of killing was locally known as *salmora* (*sal* = spike). Because of this incident, that particular region later began to be known as Salmora.

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[3] Narrated and explained by Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami, Satradhikar of Natun Kamalabari Satra, Majuli, in an interview on 04 Nov 2002.
[4] *Katha* is a unit for measuring land. One *katha* is equal to 2880 square feet.
[5] Narrated by Sri Dimbeswar Kalita of Salmora, in an interview on 11 May 2002.

C. Three Mising Folk Songs from Majuli[6]

(i)

Tëlë gunggag bë:du:në bëlë gunggage bë:du:në
Pëntod pentodpë daglen bidu:në
Oiye oisiri
Amiglog miksiri
Kapë mëla du:yenë.

Free English rendering: The jew's harp is being played in the east, the jew's harp is being played in the west. Somebody has fittingly appeared before my eyes. [Is it you?] O my precious darling, your eyes are so lovely. How can I live without you?

(ii)

Ti:në alo tingkampë ti:pumsuge:la
Dïgnë mïrsï dïkkampë dïgpansuka:në
Oiya oisri
Rëigonë doksiri
Oinom kapë mëyenë.

Free English Rendering: You gave the taste of salt as it were. Then why do you make me burn as if with chillies? My precious love, you are beautiful like a necklace of fine beads. How can I live separated from you?

(iii)

Abu ru:yi ru:yilok miksi dïnamdë
Asi billam billamdo bittok mïndunë
Oinokkë pïgodo pumsa:la ka:langka
Lakke pongkog pongkogdo yaluëm ka;begye.

Free English Rendering: The tears that I have shed on the river bank have gone downstream. My love, take water in your cupped hands at your river-landing – you will see my shadow through the openings of your fingers.

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[6] Source: Birendranath Datta (ed.), *Folksongs of the Misings*, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1992.

D. One Migration Myth of the Deuris[7]

In earlier times the Deuris were the priests in Sadiya, a place at the eastern corner of the state of Assam. Due to an unknown reason, the Mishimis (a tribe in Arunachal Pradesh) attacked on the Deuris. Then *Kundimama*, the god worshipped by the Deuris, showed a dream to the chief Deuri priest. The god in that dream advised the Deuris to leave that place. Following that advice, the Deuris left that place within the night. They moved in four rafts in the downstream of the Brahmaputra. Their rafts came to halt at a sandy highland of the river. But one of the four rafts was lost. That lost raft was the *Patargoyan* clan of the Deuris which is now extinct.

[7] Source: Bidyasagar Deuri, "Majulir Deurisakalar Itibritta" in Prasanta Kumar Mahanta (ed.): *Majuli*, 2001, Jorhat.

List of Manuscripts in the Satras of Majuli[1]

Painted Manuscripts

Sl No	Name of the Manuscript	Location	Period	Author / Scriber	Material & Number of folios	Measurement
1	Sachitra Bhagavata	Bengenaati Satra	17th century	Sankardeva	Sanchipat, 256	40 x 22 c.m.
2	Udyog Parva	Auniati Satra	19th century	Bholaram Ojha	Sanchipat, 38	46.5 x 18 c.m.
3	Mantraraj Pratingara Strota	Auniati Satra	16th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 10	15 x 50 c.m.
4	Adya Dasama	Bengenaati Satra	18th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 100	64 x 21.5 c.m.
5	Puranas Dasama	Auniati Satra	16th century	Not Found	Sanchipat, 101	45 x 15 c.m.
6	Srimad Bhagavat Gita	Auniati Satra	16th century	Sankardeva	Sanchipat, 120	55 x 11 c.m.
7	Boghasura Vadha	Auniati Satra	18th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 100	20 x 7.2 c.m.
8	Citra Bhagavata	Auniati Satra	18th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 52	55 x 10 c.m.
9	Bhakti Ratnavali	Auniati Satra	17th century	Madhavadeva	Sanchipat, 30	55 x 15 c.m.
10	Jugal Mangal Gan	Auniati Satra	16th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 26	25 x 6 c.m.
11	Srimanca Sesa Ekadeshapada	Auniati Satra	17th century	Not Found	Sanchipat, 101	58 x 18 c.m.
12	Mahabharata	Auniati Satra	16th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 100	55 x 18 c.m.
13	Ekadasha Skandha Bhagavata	Auniati Satra	16th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 57	54 x 17 c.m.
14	Patra Kaumudi Sloka	Auniati Satra	16th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 60	11.5" x 2.5"
15	Bhagavata Gita	Auniati Satra	19th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 57	54 x 17.5 c.m.
16	Mantra Raj Patyangira Stotra	Auniati Satra	Not found	Not found	Sanchipat, 10	6" x 2"
17	Bhagavata Gita	Auniati Satra	19th century	Not found	Sanchipat, 76	15" x 4.5"
18	Bara Dasama	Auniati Satra	18th century	Sankardeva	Sanchipat, 108	23" x 8"
19	Bakasur Badha	Auniati Satra	16th century	Ramcharan Thakur	Sanchipat, 60	20" x 7.2"
20	Addya Dasama	Bengenaati Satra	18th century	Sankaradeva	Sanchipat, 108	64 x 21.5 c.m.

[1] Source: Punya Baruah *A Catalogue of Painted and Unpainted Manuscripts Found in Satras of Majuli and Other Sources of Assam, Period May, 2001 to January, 2003*. An unpublished report submitted to the Indian Archaeological Society, New Delhi.
It is to be noted that many of the manuscripts scattered in the satras like Natun Kamalabari, Garamur, Dakhinpat, Natun Camaguri and many others are not listed in this catalogue. It seems this catalogue is mostly confined to Auniati Satra only.

21	Hastividyarnava	Auniati Satra	17th century	Sukumar Barkath	Sanchipat, 108	55 x 21.5 c.m.
22	Hastividyarnava	Auniati Satra	18th century	Sukumar Barkath	Sanchipat, 108	24" x 8"
23	Ratnavali	Auniati Satra	18th century	Madhavadeva	Sanchipat, 200	16" x 6"
24	Adbhuta Ramayana	Auniati Satra	Not known	Not known	Sanchipat, 42	15" x 4"
25	Vaisnava Kirtana	Auniati Satra	Not known	Not known	Sanchipat, 22	13.5" x 4"

Unpainted Manuscripts

1	Ratnavali	Auniati Satra	Not known	Not known	Sanchipat, 42	16" x 5"
2	Bhagavata Mahapurana	Auniati Satra	Not known	Not known	Sanchipat, 80	16" x 4"
3	Harischandra Uakhyana	Auniati Satra	20th century	Sankaradeva	Sanchipat, 40	13" x 5"
4	Kiskindhya and Sundara Kanda	Auniati Satra	Not known	Mdhava Kandali	Sanchipat, 99	16" x 5"
5	Ramayana	Auniati Satra	19th century	Not known	Sanchipat, 65	16.5" x 5"
6	Bhisma Parva	Auniati Satra	18th century	Not known	Sanchipat, 121	18" 6"
7	Satrunjaya Balira Digvijaya	Auniati Satra	Not known	Not known	Sanchipat	16" x 5"
8	BHarata Yajnaparva	Auniati Satra	18th century	Not known	Sanchipat, 171	20" x 7"
9	Jibana Carita	Auniati Satra	20th century	Not known	Sanchipat, 62	17" x 5"
10	Prathama Skandha Bhagavata	Auniati Satra	19th century	Not known	Sanchipat, 43	13" x 4"
11	Damodardeva Carita	Auniati Satra	19th century	Not known	Sanchipat, 55	16" x 4.5"
12	Sailya Parva	Auniati Satra	Not known	Not known	Sanchipat, 50	13" x 4"
13	Ekadash Skandha Bhagavata	Auniati Satra	15th century	Sankaradeva	Sanchipat, 57	54 x 17.5 c.m.

Inspection Report on Majuli Island (Recommendation for enlisting as World Heritage Site)[9]

Dr. G. C. Chauley
Superintending Archaeologist
Archaeological Survey of India
Guwahati Circle
Date: 7th - 9th Dec, 1998

Introduction

Majuli Island, Latitude 26°-25'N to 27°-12'N and Longitude 93°-30'E to 94°-35'E with average height of 84.50 m. above mean sea level. It is situated in the upper Brahmaputra Valley in Assam in the District of Jorhat and said to be the largest river island in the world. It is presently 900 square kilometer area; from British East India Company's record of 1835 it was 1200 square kilometer. The loss of area was tremendous (320 kilometer) as has been assessed in 1971, only after the severe earthquake of 1950. This has threatened the existence of Sattras, the unique ecology, biodiversity, population, etc. The island is surrounded from all sides by the river Brahmaputra with one man-made land connection at the easternmost end with Dhemaji District of upper Assam. The rivers Subansiri and the Lohit join the Brahmaputra in the north side of the island Ditrict of Sibsagar and District Lakhimpur are on the south of Majuli Island.

The story of Majuli Island echoes the land itself, an arduous expense of shimmering mass caught between the fury and favours of the monstrous Brahmaputra, the fourth largest river in the world. Growth and decline, hope and disappointment, all play out across centuries at this wonder land Majuli of Assam. Each year brings to the great river island a frenzied monsoon that swells the water in the white foams of rage, eating out huge chunks, forcing people to leave their homes and the island. But as the season changes, the river ebbs and life resurrects itself. By winter, the flowers are bloomed, new hut dots the river shores and the forlorn misery, just a few months old, is forgotten. Suddenly there is no better place to live in.

As things stand today, to get to this island one has to board a huge ferry from the town of Jorhat in upper Assam. The ferry is large and wondrously wide packed with cars, scooters, men and materials. Running everyday, up and down from the main land, it is Majuli's only link with the outside world, it's lifeline. The boat traverses about ten kilometers of river that takes one and a half hour, before a huge land mass arises out of the water like back of a tortoise often seen bathing sun at the shore lines of Majuli. Majuli contains two townships i.e. Kamalabari and Garamur and 244 villages as per 1990-91 census. Unknown to outside till recently, it is in fact, a civil sub-division with two development blocks.

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[9] Courtesy: Sri Bharat Chandra Saikia, General Secretary, Majuli Island Protection and Development Council (MIPADC), Guwahati.

The island with population of 1.75 lakhs, majority being tribal, has a very strong and unique cultural heritage. The highly fertile land mass is also endowed with clean and rich environment with rare breeds of flora and fauna. The Missings, a tribe from Arunachal Pradesh who migrated to Majuli centuries ago comprise 40% of the mixed indigenous Assamese population - the Deoris and the Vaishnavites etc. all existing as one unit. They live like everybody else in an amphibious culture roaming the numerous river channels of the island in their boats. They warmly greet the visitors with traditional hospitality. Each year after the devastating floods the people regain their paradise inch by inch from the jaws of the river almost every August.

Majuli is world famous for it's Satriya Dance form. SATRA is a traditional seat of Vaishnava Religion, Art & Culture founded by the great Vaishnava saint Sri Sri Sankardeva in the 15th century A.D. The Satras founded throughout the places of undivided Assam (including highest number at Majuli) have been the nerve centres of social life, culture & education of the people of NorthEast India since last five hundred years. The colourful tapestry of the Assamese past has been carefully preserved in these Satras. Accommodating 40 to 500 disciples each, these ancient huts pulsate with dance, drama and Kirtan - integral components to the satra way of life. At this juncture, people of Majuli are isolated and parched precariously in the midst of the mighty Brahmaputra. The annual devastating flood, rapid erosion of the island by the river Brahmaputra has threatened its very survival. Government and non-governmental organizations are trying their level best for an everlasting solution & number of Technological missions of National & International level formed & reviewing the present state of affair for its protection & posterity. MIPADC, one such N.G.O., too is on the fray.

On the basis of the report submitted by the Majuli Island Protection and Development Council to the Govt. of India through the Honourable Chief Minister of Assam to the Honourable Prime Minister of India for consideration of its inclusion/declaration as World Heritage Site, Govt. of India has directed the Department of Forest and Environment and the Archaeological Survey of India to have a detailed study (Inspection) for assessing the potentialities of the island for recommending to the UNESCO for World Heritage Site (Naturally and Culturally).

Accordingly in between 7th - 9th December, 1998 a joint inspection was conducted by above Departments under Shri S. K. Das, Regional Dy. Director, Forest and Environment (Eastern Region) and Dr. G. C. Chauley, Superintending Archaeologist, Guwahati Circle. It was a happy coincidence that Dr. A. K. Sharma, Hon'ble Member of Paliament (Rajya Sabha) and Dr. Atul Sharma, Member, Planning Commission joined with the above team. The inspection was more effective and fruitful as District Administration has provided security, conveyance, special motor-boat etc. there by helped the team to cover up more areas without difficulties, in spite of bad conditions and road communications, as the devastating floods washed away a number of roads and bridges. The executive members of Majuli Island Protection and Development Council, headed by the Member of Legislative Assembly Shri K. Dutta, Shri B. C. Saikia, General

Secretary, Shri B. C. Patwary, Shri S. K. Bordoloi, M. K. Das, J. N. Deka and others, also accompanied the team from the beginning to end of the inspection.

Inspection cum Recommendation

The recent devastating flood of the Brahmaputra has created panic and scared many Satradhikars of Majuli Island about the future of the Satras. If such flood or deluge of Brahmaputra affects Majuli Island in future also since a large number of books, manuscripts, furnitures, art objects and even the very buildings where the satras are existing got damaged by way of crack, uneven settlement / partial collapse etc. So many Heads of the Satras in Majuli have decided to shift their monastic establishments on left bank close to Jorhat town and correspondences with the Govt. of Assam are going on for allotment lands etc. which would be something like suicidal bid to the sanctity of Majuli which had earned name and fame for its association with Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavadeva and thus Majuli has left tremendous impact on the people of Assam and its culture.

In course of inspection, most of the important satras were inspected and it is observed that the same tradition is continuing even today in unbroken sequence (from teacher and taught) with high degree of morality practiced under the feet of the learned Satradhikar governed by their institutional codes of conduct. They are centres for art and culture and helped to unite and enrich culture of Assam & cultural synthesis of diverse tribes and communities of North East region achieved right from late medieval period, in spite of severe political upheavals. The Bhakti movement flourished throughout India under Kabor, Namdev, Ramanuj, Sri Chaitanya, Gurunanak, etc. In North Eastern region contribution of Srimanta Sankardeva is most significant and even has long impact in the society, as described elsewhere in the report. Namghar becomes an essential part of each & every village in Assam, seldom seen in other parts of the country.

The most of the satras are acting as treasure houses of invaluable and innumerable antiquities viz. coins, manuscripts, copper plates, ritualistic implements with inscription on it (name of donor/king, date etc). Besides, wood carvings, wooden works, wood carved images of gods and goddesses, divine beings, Dwarpalas etc. speak the tradition of fine arts evolved within the satras besides a seat of learning.

The satra buildings are ancient in nature. As for example, in Dakshinpat Satra one building is existing over 300 years in more dilapidated condition. I have proposed to the Satradhikar (Chief) to hand over it to A.S.I. for its conservation and preservation. Besides each Namghar and Manikut are having wooden pillars of huge size (70 to 80 cm dia), wooden architectures of traditional type not normally come across or having any bearing on secular building. Architectural members (damaged/weather worn & affected by insects) may it be replaced by the authority from time to time in regular intervals to cope up with the excessive rainfall and annual flood. But in general they are maintaining their originality and deserve attention and shall not look down upon with remarks

"recent origin of 50/60 year old". The preservation of the satras namely AUNIATI, GARAMUR, KAMALABARI AND DAKSHINPAT are outstanding example of the satra culture founded, preached and propagated by great Shri Sankardeva and his disciples which are in true sense are institution with multi purpose activities like higher education, Sanskrit Vidyalaya, writing of enumerable Granthas (books on religion, philosophy, literature), centre for arts and crafts, centre of dance, drama, Kirtan, bhajan, traditional music with musical instrument, besides leading a pious and dedicated life within monastery following its own regulations and codified & dictated for the services of mankind.

A cursory glance at it would not be much help but if with determination and devotion one would like to study its aspects, the onlooker/scholar would be overwhelmed to see that basically the workings of Ramkrishna Mission and of the Satras are on the same line, and the satras are progenitors, evolved in 15th century A.D. under the great Vaishnavite apostle Sri Sri Sankardeva about 400 years before the Ramakrishna Mission was formed.

I have no hesitation to stress further that the Majuli Islandis projecting a mixed culture comprised of traditional Hindu and of Tribals viz. Missings and Mayanmar groups who are now intermingled with the mainstream of culture of the land even though they are maintaining certain significant characteristics/traits of their own.

The inspecting team was taken to Missing village and traditional hospitalities were extended to all of them. People are sober, gentle; they are living in houses having special significance. Construction is made keeping in view of annual flood and attacks of reptiles i.e. wooden platforms of 2-3 mtr. High connected with a ladder are highly impressive.

The dresses and costumes of the women folk are highly colourful, woven in domestic handloom, each house has such handloom sets, wooden grinding platform, pig yard, fowls etc. Still surroundings are neat & clean. The folk dance performed by a group of Missing girls are unique.

All the above combined living traditions of the area could be seen in its own place of origin or habitate vis-à-vis its rich cultural heritages which are survived in unbroken sequence and continuing till date in the satras. If Govt patronization is provided, the type of house, the folk dance, the Missing food and drinks, etc. could be served and projected to honoured guests and tourists who so ever visit under conducted trips organized by travel agents and Tourism Department.

The preservation and protection of the satras of outstanding nature vis-à-vis Majuli Island as pointed out deserve:-

1. Systematic protection, preservation for posterity.
2. The antiquities and art objects require photo documentation and cataloguing
3. The effort be made for proper cataloguing of all available unpublished manuscripts now lying in dumps

within satras and getting deteriorated due to lack of scientific knowledge and scope.

4. The buildings which are more than 100 years old shall be got declared as heritage buildings and immediate action deserves to be taken to save them for posterity. Delay and inaction may lead towards their extinction.
5. Flood control measures to be taken up as a challenge instead of surrendering to the vagaries of nature by simple words "natural calamities". Govt of Assam and Central Govt. may constitute Experts Committee involving both Indian & foreign experts (Japan, Canada, Europe) and systematic survey may be made on the Brahmaputra course at least from border of China to upper Assam region as aerial survey may help to detect the areas where de-silting etc. could be made for easy flow of water, presently being obstructed and creating flood.

Thanks to the people of Majuli who are fighting with nature and surviving with courage and self-respect.

6. The pollution-free zone of Majuli Island can be traveled by boat over 45 minutes to 1 hour from Neemati Ferrighat in Jorhat. Natural beauty with its jheel, streamlets, flora and fauna, cultural traits with gentle and hospitable people, shelters of migratory birds, the endangered species like river dolphin % Brahmini Ducks, the exhibition of Satriya culture, its various curricular activities, dance, drama, Gayan & Bayan, orchestra, Apasara dance, Chali dance, dances performed with variety masks are of outstanding significance.

The Ram Vijay Bhaona of Kamalabari Satra performed in Jakarta earned international reputation presented during the time Fakar Uddin Ali Ahmed when he was the President of India.

Even Natuwa Nach and Jhumura Nach (dances) too are popular dances performed by the students of the satras. Samaguri satra till date engaged in making traditional masks and putola (puppet) dance by its dedicated artists as legacy of the tradition from time of Sankardeva.

The following infrastructure required to be made available in the island for convenience of experts, tourists for better exposure and publicity.

1. Construction of air strip or helipad in the island for urgent and emergency use by higher officials and experts.
2. Tourist lodge/Tourist complex with both arrangement of Indian and European Style to accommodate them in the Island
3. Improvement of the existing ferry system by providing good motor boats and operational facilities at least 5 times daily for the convenience of both tourists and inhabitants of Majuli
4. Arrangements for performances of Satriya dances and Missing folk dances on important occasions for tourists and guests on charity show basis to provide financial benefits to artists and organizers
5. Construction of a "Museum on Satras" in Majuli in order of Auniati and Bengenati Satras where large number of antiquities and art treasures are preserved by the satra-administration and a museum-like atmosphere is prevailing

but in unscientific manner and shortage of space made them clumsy and over-crowded with antiquities dumped one above other. If a museum is constructed by collecting valuable antiquities from other satras also, and scientific display is arranged and spacious and scured storage facilities provided, it would be another attraction of the Island. So Archaeological Survey of India and National Museum personnel required to be consulted, a suitable decision is to be taken (be it late than never). A blueprint of a museum building of traditional type should be prepared and approved to achieve the goal.

Epilogue

I waited long to include the inspection report of Shri S. K. Das, Regional Dy. Director, Forest and Environment, Calcutta with this report but even though month has passed no response from the said authority, and finding no other alternative, I am presenting my views and observations to avoid inordinate delay.

I would further stress on the vital point that it would be better if immediately a general conscious is created against the moves of the important and prestigious satras to evacuate from Majuli and to re-settle on left bank, close to Jorhat town and joint venture followed by undertaking various measures to control the fury of flood and to create a sense of security in the minds of people of Majuli and also to the Satradhikars.

It is needless to say that it is high time now to take a resolution (action oriented) by the Govt. of Assam in collaboration with Govt. of India, UNESCO to ensure flood control measures to save the world's largest pollution-free river island and its invaluable cultural heritages that are survived with Satras and amongst its inhabitants.

On the basis of the above observations, I have no hesitation to recommend for its inclusion in World Heritage List as it is a fit and appropriate case both from cultural and natural point of view.

I am thankful to Sri B. Mathur, IAS, Additional Director General, Archaeological Survey of India for nominating me to represent Archaeological Survey of India in the joint inspection in Majuli. My thanks are due to the District and SubiDivisional Administration of Jorhat and Majuli respectively for their kind help and co-operation. I am highly indebted to Dr. A. K. Sharma, Hon'ble Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) for his kind company and guidance and to Dr. Atul Sharma, Member of Planning Commission for kind co-operation and valuable views. My thanks are due to Shri Karuna Dutta, Member of Legislative Assembly of Majuli constituency and all the executive members of Majuli Island Protection and Development for their valuable help, co-operation and suggestion and making all arrangement to make the trip a great success.

I shall be failing in my duties if I won't convey ny sincere thanks to all the Satradhikars and their staff & disciples, for warm hospitality and Mr. B. C. Saikia, General

Secretary, MIPADC, a champion in designing and planning the whole scheme on Majuli, and liasioning the trip.

Last but not the least I am thankful to Sri Utpal Chakravorty, Shri Milan Kumar and Shri Kumud Roy and Madam, and Atul Sharma for active participation and help without them the trip might not be so successful.

G. C. Chauley