

## Majuli as a tourists' destination: Opportunities, challenges and prospects

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### Abstract

Majuli, the largest pollution free fresh water inhabited river island in the world, a treasure island of culture, snuggles in the bosom of the mighty Brahmaputra has gained worldwide reputation as one of the favorite tourists' destinations of India as the abode of Assamese neo-Vaisnavite culture and captivating natural environment. This landmass, with a population of 160000 majority being tribes, has a very rich heritage and has tremendous option for spiritual and Eco-tourism. The island is a bio-diversity hotspot and has rich ecology with rare breeds of flora and fauna. Majuli had a total area of 1,250 square kilometers (483sq mi), but having lost significantly to erosion its landmass has reduced to 421.65 square kilometers (163 sq mi) in 2001. It is situated in the upper reaches of the river Brahmaputra in Assam within the latitude of 26-45 N-27-12 N & longitude of 93-39 E 94-39 E with mean height of 84.5 Mt. above MSI. Majuli is land is accessible by ferries from the Jorhat city. The island is about 200 kilometres east from the state's largest city Guwahati.

**Keywords:** Majuli, tourist destination, prospect, challenges

### Introduction

During the last few decades Majuli has received special attention as a tourists' destination. There has been gradual increase in the number of tourists throughout these decades. Among these tourists a large number is from European countries. The number of domestic tourists is also increasing day by day. The prominent subjects or areas of tourists' interests in Majuli are- The Vaishnava Satras and Satria culture, the colourful culture of the tribes, Migratory birds, Pottery making, Mask making, and the sunset in winter. Majuli is regarded as the 'Barghar' of Assamese culture because of the Satras and Satria ways of living. There are about 36 Satras at present. Some historical Satras has been transferred to other places of Assam because of critical flood situation and erosion. The prevalent major Satras in Majuli are 'Auniati Satra', 'Dakshinpat Satra', 'Garmur Satra', 'Benganaati Satra', 'Samaguri Satra', 'Kamalabari Satra' etc. The Satras since their beginning have been engaging themselves with religious, cultural and social activities which draw the attention of tourists throughout the world. Satras are also the reservoirs of numerous historical resources having great archeological, architectural and cultural value. Some major art and craft of Satras are- 'Hengul Haithal' painting, Mask Culture, Pottery Culture, Bamboo works, Wood sculpture. Satria ways of living particularly the 'Udasin satras' has been a matter of great attraction for the tourists. Besides, every satras is the reservoirs of resources having great historical value which are the subject of great interest for many tourists. The resources of Auniati Satra are Mat made of elephants teeth, 'Shree, Tables and Chairs Made of Elephants' teeth, Footwear made of elephants' teeth, 'Joyghanta', 'Hangdang' used by the Ahom kings, ancient coins, 'Bortops', 'Palnamar Nauka' etc. The resources available at Shree 'Adi Bihimpur Satra' are 'Singhasan' of 150 years old, 'Maha pravu Bigrah' of 250 years old, 'Nam Ghosa' of Purusuttam Thakur, The 'Kirtana' of Mahapurush Sreemanta Shankardeva, 'Keligopal Nat', 'Sitaharan Nat', 'Gunmala' of Shankardeva, 'Dagdagi Lota' etc. The 'Uttar Kamalabari Satra' contains some

important historical resources i.e. 'Sashipatar Puthi' (300years old), 'Tamol Khowa Safura' (used by Shankardeva), 'Jabmala' used by Madhab Deva, utensil used by Badula Padma Ata, Hairs of Shankardeva and Madhabdeva. 'Natun Kamalabari Satra' has also some very important resources i.e. 'Padsila' of Shankardeva, golden statue of Bal Gopal, books written in 'Sashipat' etc. Dakshinpat satra has preserved many important historical resources such as 'The Hangdung' of Lachit Barphukan the great hero of Assam, 'gamkharu' made of gold and silver, more than 500 'Sashipatar Puthi' etc. The major historical resources that can be seen in 'Garmur Satra' are 'Pitalar Sarai' and 'Bankara Sarai' (given to the Satra as gift by Ahom kings), 'Asta dhatur Thal', 'Mayur ghanta' etc. Like the other Satras Auniati Satra has also some very important historical resources, of which prominent are 'Raj Avaran' (clothes of Gadadhar Singha), 'Rupar Dagdagi', Silver 'Mukta' of Phuleswari Kuori, Eight cornered coin of king Gaurinath Singh, and 365 'Sashipatar Puthi' etc. Along with the historical resources the Satras are also the treasure house of "Borgeet" "Matiakhara", 'Satriya Dances' (Jumora Dance, Chali Dance, Notua Dance, Nande Vringee, Sutradhar, Ozapali, Apsara Dance, Satria Krishna Dance and Dasavater Dance), all promulgated by Sankardeva. For many tourists these are also the subject of great interest. While the Satria culture in one hand is appreciated by the world on the spiritual ground, it is tribal culture that catches worldwide attention. The dwellers of Majuli are mostly tribal folk particularly the Mising who immigrated into the island centuries ago from Arunachal Pradesh. Apart from them, other tribal groups are the Deories and Sonowal Kacharis etc. Languages spoken here are Mising, Assamese and Deori. The tribal ways of living particularly their traditional food habit, food items, customs, festivals are the centre of attraction for many tourists. Ali-ai-ligang festival of Mising in Feb-March is famous among the tourists. The hand-loom work of these tribes is also internationally famous. Their unique ways of living invite many students and scholars abroad to peruse in dept study about tribal ways

of living. For example, Emile, a scholar from French is pursuing her Ph.D on Missing Community who has been in the island for more than one year. Pottery is made in Majuli from beaten clay and burnt in driftwood fired kilns in the same mode carried out by the peoples of the ancient Harrapan Civilization. From sociological and anthropological point of view it has great implication. Sociologists have stressed on the preservation of these unique peoples, whose culture and dance forms are untouched by modernism. Majuli is an island full of wetlands, stagnant water bodies, hills etc. These wetlands are hotspots for flora and fauna, harboring many rare and endangered avifauna species including migratory birds that arrive in the winter season. Among the birds seen here are: the greater adjutant, stock, pelican, Siberian crane and the whistling teal. After dark wild geese and ducks fly in flocks to distant destinations. Along with these, the island is full of many local birds. Mask culture is another subject of tourist interest in Majuli. Mask culture is traditional culture of 'Samaguri Sattrā' of Majuli. Mask is the primitive literary works of mankind. It is also primitive literary works of art. In Assam the mask culture was began from primitive age. Generally masks are used in 'Bhaona' (theatrical performance in old Assamese style). Mask is made using bamboo, rattan cane, cow-dung, soil and cloth. An ancient formula is used in making mask, which is known as 'Lakhimi Formula' Thin strip of bamboo is used in this formula of making of mask. After giving shape of the mask, rattan cane is used to fasten the bamboo strips. Then the shape of mask is covered by a cloth and plastered by mud of potter's clay. After that the mask is kept to expose in sunshine. In the second stage, the mixing cow-dung and sticky soil are used to plaster the mask to give it a shape. Again the mask is again covered by a cloth which is then plastered by mud of potters' clay and continued to expose in sunshine. Third stage is painting of masks by Hengul Haithal. There are three types of masks i.e., Face Mask- it covers only face or head; Lotokai Mask- it is made part by part, Head and body part are separate. Hand, leg, etc of this mask can move. The third kind of mask is Chow mask - it covers whole body. The height of this mask is about 8 to 10 feet. This mask culture has great appreciation and for a tourist it is one of the prior areas of his choice to visit Majuli The mask and the boats are paint with a special coloring matter called 'Hengul Haithal'. The painting process by using Hengul Haithal is called Hengul Haithal painting. 'Hengul' means vermilion and 'Haithal' means the yellow orpiment. Hengul Haithal is a mixture of minerals, vermilion and yellow orpiment, indigo and pale soil etc. At the early stage the ashes of skull of bottle gourd are used for black coloring. After this, charcoal is used in this process. A type of gum found in seed of the wood-apple is mixed in Hengul Haithal. It is a long process, where red color found from vermilion, yellow from orpiment, blue from indigo and white from pale soil. One week to a month is required in the process, where all the ingredients of Hengul Haithal paints are grind in a stone slab. The amount and shining of the colors depend on the grinding of the ingredients. These paints are kept in a vessel of bamboo tube. The painters use appliance like brush from feathers of pigeon, hair of goat etc. This Hengul Haithal painting has great historical and

archaeological implications and by such it may become the subject of tourists' concern.

### Prospects of Tourism in Majuli

As a growing tourist place Majuli has great potentialities. At present there is a worldwide inclination towards ecotourism and here in this regard Majuli has great potentialities. Followings are the major prospects in the island that need to be properly assessed by the government.

#### 1. Wetland Management

Wetlands are some important resources for tourism and recreation and provide opportunities for wildlife viewing and bird watching, research and education, enjoying the landscape, boating and canoeing, diving and snorkelling, sport fishing and hunting, photography etc. Wetland tourism is a growing type of tourism in the world. Large numbers of regional and nationwide visitors are drawn to wetlands areas of high ecological value. International visitors are drawn to major wetlands or wetland complexes in the US like the Okefenokee, Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp, in Olgavanga Delta in Botswana Land, the Canarge in France, the Pantanel in Brazil and others. Ecotourists or ecotravelers include birders, hikers, nature enthusiasts, canoes, kayakers, students, teachers, researchers and members of the public. Ecotourists or ecotravelers include birders, hikers, nature enthusiasts, canoes, kayakers, students, teachers, researchers and members of the public.

Majuli is the hub of hundreds of wetlands. Their management in a proper way would develop the tourist industry to a great extent. The major wetlands are 'Vaukatidua wetland', 'Barbil', 'Mudoibil', 'Gatanga', 'Utmari', 'Sesabil', 'Mahkhuti', 'Jorbil'. These wetlands are very rich in bio-diversity. They cover varied fish species, water birds and plant species that grow in water dam land. They are very rich in ornamental fishes. They are also the resting home for the migratory birds. This richness in terms of species diversity carries all the possibilities to make them cherished destinations for the eco-tourist. The eco-activities that have great potentialities for expansion of eco-tourism are fishing, angling, boating, swimming etc. By govt. initiatives and through the encouragement of the private sector, if tourist lodge is set up amidst the wetland, it will surely increase the number of tourists. Along with these recreational activities these wetlands also carry the potentialities to become the subject of research. Through proper awareness and publicity, they can draw the attention of the students, scholars particularly in the field of zoology, botany, ornithology etc.

#### 2. Prospect as in the Field of Agro-Tourism

Majuli Island has tremendous potentialities in the field of agro-tourism. Its fertile land is ever ready to let varied seeds to be germinated. Among these crops the most important one is mustard cultivation (Sariyah Kheti). The season of this crop is usually from November to February. Mustard flowers last for months during which Majuli transforms into a yellow world. Many tourists travel the island during this season only to see the scenic beauty created by the mustard crops. Another significant crops having potentiality in the field of agro-tourism is 'Baodhan'. The Season for this crops is usually from April to November. This crop grows in

relatively downward or low areas and it needs plenty of water. This Baodhan has great tourism potentialities because it makes the special exotic appearance. Beside it has ample opportunity for the activities i.e. angling, bird watching, swimming etc. Construction of sang ghar /Tangi Ghar amidst of Baodhan is another potential step that can be taken.

### 3. Prospect as an educational hub of Sankari and Sattriya culture

Majuli as an educational destination has tremendous potentialities. It has about 36 Satras at present which are unique in their activities. Besides the religious activities they are associated with many cultural activities like Ankia Bhowna, Bargit, Satria Duncce, Mati akhora, Bhortal and so on. Sattriya dance is one among the eight classical dances in India recognised by The Sangeet Natak Academy. Bargeet with its unique and heart touching lyrics has also got reputation all over the world. In addition to Bargeet 'Raslila' is also very famous among the tourists. It has been performed in abroad and has been greatly appreciated there. Even there are some foreign tourists who have been in Majuli for years and learning Sattriya dance and Bargit. The growing interest among the tourists on Sattriya Culture certainly carry great prospects to transform the island into an educational hub in Sattriya culture.

### 4. Prospects as a bird sanctuary

Like wetland management, careful planning to make it as a bird sanctuary will enhance its status as a tourists' place. Many endangered birds are found in Majuli. For example, we can point out to 'Hargila' and adjutant. These two birds are regarded as extinguished birds which are found in Majuli. Another rarest bird i.e. white winged wood duck is also found in the island. Besides these birds' stork, pelican, cranes are also available here. Along with these the wetlands in the island giving shelter to thousands of water birds. With a congenial environment to support the bird population to survive, to be fed up Majuli has the best potentiality to emerge as a bird sanctuary.

### Challenges Hindering Development

The erosion caused by mighty river Brahmaputra paralyzed the island. Its landmass is continuously depleting. According to reports, in 1853, the total area of Majuli was 1250 km<sup>2</sup> and about 33% of this landmass has been eroded in the latter half of 20th century. Since 1991, over 35 villages have been washed away and this phenomenon still continuing. Surveys predict that in 15- 20 years from now, Majuli might be ceased to exist.

Along with the problem of erosion the other major challenge in this regard is misutilization of allocated funds which are sanctioned for different sorts of developmental works. These funds received from World Bank, UNESCO, central government and state government etc. It is an open secret that there is a very strong contractor lobby in Majuli on whose hand Majuli would never be safe. It is to be mentioned that the proposal to include Majuli as world heritage site has been sent back to the Indian Government by UNESKO because of incomplete documents. The dossier

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UNESCO was termed as technically incomplete. It reveals the fact that the government is not at all sincere to play a positive role.

### Conclusion

To make Majuli a tourist destination there must be a collective effort from different corners i.e. from local people, government, NGOs and department of tourism. Need is felt to develop entrepreneurship among the local youths to create ample opportunities for self-employment. Government has to ensure proper utilization of funds. The activities of the Brahmaputra Board have to be properly monitored and to be fruitfully carried out. Initiatives can be taken to conduct sincere surveys of the resources lying scattered in every nook and corner of the island so that these could be utilized and adequately channelized conducive to the development of the tourism industry.

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