

## Role of Sattras (Vaishnavite Monasteries) in the Socio-Economic Sphere of Majuli, Assam

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**Abstract:** The article by Dipannita Das has a detailed study on the socio-economic aspect of Sattras which plays a vital role in social and economic system of Majuli for accelerating its functions. Other than revenue system these Sattras have income generating sources like pottery, masks, boat making, manuscripts, handcrafts, incense sticks, metallurgy manufacturing industries etc. The Sattras are situated in mystical isle of Majuli, Assam which is known to be the largest inhabited fresh water river island in the world. Set amidst the mighty Brahmaputra, the only mythical male river, Majuli enjoys the status of a peerless bio-diversity hot spot. The word "Sattra" has its origin in Rigveda and it is significant that being a Vedic word it has been in continuously extensive use in religious scriptures, sanskrit literature and in other regional literature till today. The Sattra Institution of Assam is a hallmark of the religio-cultural resurgence brought about by the Bhakti movement in Assam during the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> cent. The study focusses on pottery as a traditional form of cottage industry of Majuli and a form of barter system among the inhabitants of this island.

The economy of Sattra is mainly related with its immovable property like land, forest, water body etc. the contribution by its devotees and well wishers also play an important role. The purpose of the study is to see the ethnographical prospects and socio-cultural and economic set up of the Sattras in Majuli. This study intends to research and tries to relate it with Archaeology through symbolism and cognitive way, and will surely benefit in the field of New Archaeology. The existence of this cultural heritage is under **serious threat** due to the recurring floods and incessant bankline erosion by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

**Keywords:** Sattras, Pottery, Boat manufacture, Barter System, Bhakti Movement, New Archaeology

**Received :** 09 August 2021

**Revised :** 30 August 2021

**Accepted :** 27 September 2021

**Published :** 30 December 2021

### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Das, D. 2021. Role of Sattras (Vaishnavite Monasteries) in the Socio-Economic Sphere of Majuli, Assam. *South Asian History, Culture and Archaeology*, 1: 2, pp. 147-163.

## Introduction

Assam is said to be the land of communities, each with its own unique way of life. With this multiplicity character of the Assamese social fabric, Assam witnessed the Vaishnavite movement along with the

rest of India in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. This movement is known as Neo-Vaishnavite Movement, led by Srimanta Sankardeva. *Sattras* are the gift of this movement. This institution became deeply rooted in all spheres of Assamese life and society. Especially *Sattras* in Majuli may be considered as a multifunctional cultural unit of Assamese society where the religious, social, literary and cultural activities are traditionally practiced. Majuli, the nerve centre of Neo-Vaishnavite culture, is a cultural heritage site of Assam, which is often inscribed as the ‘Cultural Capital’ of the state. It is the largest river island of the country and one of the largest inhabited riverine islands in the world. However, the existence of this cultural heritage is under serious threat due to the recurring floods and incessant bankline erosion by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Srimanta Sankardeva guided the neo-Vaishnavite movement with the basic principal of humanity and by involving people from all walks of life: that is from tribes and backward masses to high caste. Simultaneously, this movement also undertook works of literary creation of both prose and poetry. As a result, this movement was able to reach the heart and home of the common people of Majuli. As *Sattras* in different places of Majuli are the product of this movement, therefore, it became centre of both spiritual and social activities for all the sections of the people of the society. (Neog 1965)

*Sattras* are the Vaishnavite Monasteries of Majuli in Assam. The research has a detailed study on the arts and crafts, architecture, manuscripts, pottery and metallurgy of the study area. The *Sattras* are situated in mystical isle Majuli which is known to be the largest inhabited fresh water river island in the world. Set amidst the mighty Brahmaputra, the only mythical male river, Majuli enjoys the status of a peerless bio-diversity hot spot. The word “*Sattras*” has its origin in Rigveda and it is significant that being a Vedic word it has been in continuously extensive use in religious scriptures, Sanskrit literature and in other regional literature till today. Its meaning gradually extended from the sacrificial activity to

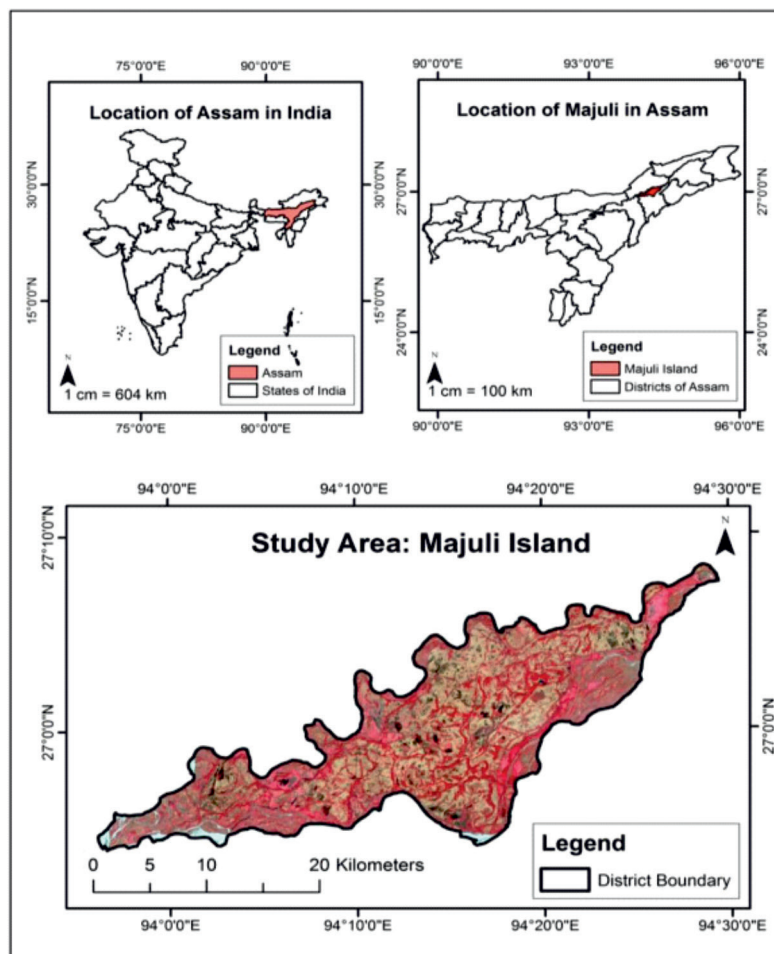


Figure 1: Kamalabari *Sattras* of Majuli (Picture taken during the field work)

denote places and abodes of various activities of allied nature. The “*Sattras*” Institution of Assam is a hallmark of the religio-cultural resurgence brought about by the Bhakti movement in Assam during the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> cent. As widely known, the movement was initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568), the great saint poet, saint, composer and philosopher, and his principle disciple Sri Sri Madhavdeva (1489-1596), giving rise to a distinct order of religion and theology, a social discipline with wider social, political, economic, moral and cultural ramifications. Hence, the primary aim of this study is to see the ethnographical prospects and socio-cultural and economic set up of the *Sattras* in Majuli. This study intends to research and tries to relate it with Archaeology through symbolism and cognitive way, and will surely benefit in the field of New Archaeology.

### Study Area

Situated in the middle course of the River Brahmaputra in the state of Assam, Majuli is the largest and the most populous riverine island in the world (Kotoky, Bezbaruah, Baruah, & Sarma, 2003). It is situated between 26°45' N- 27°12' N latitude and 93°39' E and 94°35' E longitude. The island is bounded by the river Brahmaputra in the south, river Subansiri in the north-west and river Luhit or Kherkatia Xuti (a spill channel of the river Brahmaputra) in the north-east (**Fig. 1**). The island covers a total area of 487.55 km<sup>2</sup> (LANDSAT 2017) with a population of 1,67,304 (Census of India, 2011). The island consists of three Mauzas viz. Ahatguri, Kamalabari and Salmora, 20 Gaon Panchayats (village councils) and 248 cadastral villages.



Map 1: Map indicating location of Assam, location of Majuli and the study area

## The *Sattra* of Majuli

Majuli lodges a large number of *Sattra*- both rich and poor alike a number of which owe their allegiance to the tradition of the Gurus and their successors while others do that of the successive rulers among which the *Sattra* like Auniati, Garamur and Dakhinpat etc. trace their emergence to political reasons. Although opinions differs as to exact number of *Sattra* that came to being and subsequently flourished in Majuli, as available documents put it from forty to sixty five in total. Here are some lists of *Sattra* that are still present in Majuli also those shifted from the island due to various reasons.

**Table 1: List of *Sattra* in Majuli Island**

1	Ahataguri	32	Ulutalia
2	Auniati	33	Phuwanhaat or Belguri
3	Baalichapori Bor Alengi	34	Kathbapu
4	Bagharganya	35	Aadi or Porabheti Alengi
5	Bahnjengani	36	Kaarkorikota Bor Alengi
6	Belsiddhiya	37	Kamjaniya or Bogi Ali Alengi
7	Bengena-ati	38	Dikhowmukhia
8	Bhagati	39	Adhar
9	Bhogpur	40	Nepali <i>Sattra</i>
10	Bihimpur	41	Ouwa
11	Bortatganya	42	Narasimha
12	Chamaguri (new)	43	Ratanpur <i>Sattra</i> (presently at Naanti)
13	Chamaguri (old)	44	Hemarbori
14	Chopua	45	Disiriganiya
15	Dakhinpaat	46	Laai- atli (presently in Nagaon)
16	Dighali	47	Nikamul <i>Sattra</i> (presently at Tezpur)
17	Dihing	48	Kamalabari (new)
18	Doukachapori	49	Kamalabari (north)
19	Garamur (big)	50	Chamaguri (Dalani)
20	Garamur (small)	51	Kalakata
21	Kherkatiya	52	Chakala
22	Letugram	53	Koupatiya
23	Matiabortia	54	Na- Gosain
24	Modarguri	55	Borchuk Soru Alengi
25	Molual	56	Saudkuchi
26	Nachanipaar	57	Kaatanipaar
27	Pohardiya	58	Karatipaar
28	Puniya	59	Gajala
29	Sankopara		
30	Saru Sankopara		
31	Tokoubari		

## Structure and Composition

The *Sattra* institution is the notion of a session of Harikatha, has been transformed to centres of permanent institutions which were in later years the centres for sustaining the tradition of religion, learning and the new social life born out of the renaissance. The *Sattra* is an organic body comprising if several adjuncts, which together present an inner structural wholeness.



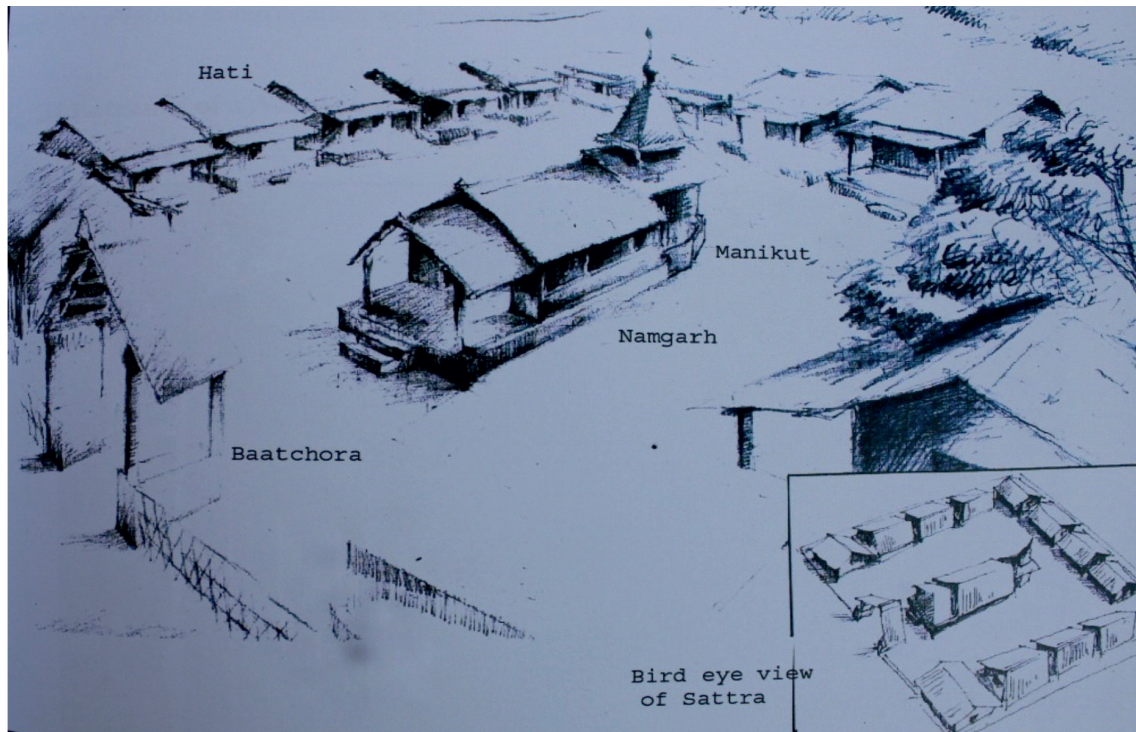


Figure 1: Line drawing of a *Sattrra*

### The Naamghar

The most indispensable and the most distinctive features of a *Sattrra* is the naamghar or kirtana-ghar (prayer house). It has a large open hall rectangular in structure with gabled roof having an apsidal facade. It is the main hall where devotees and the chief of the *Sattrra* assemble for chanting prayers. The naamghar as described in the caritas is also known as deva-griha, deva-mandira, hari-mandira, kirtana-ghar, gosain-ghar etc. The size of the naamghar depends on the resources and the number of disciples of the *Sattrra*. It acts has diversified functions such as village parliament, a public theatre, a seat of justice, promotion of tolerance and harmony and a place for religious congregation and community festivals.



Figure 2: Naamghar (prayer house) of Kamalabari *Sattrra*



Figure 3: Inside view of Manikut

### Manikut

It is an adjunct of the main prayer hall constructed as its eastern end at perpendiculars to it. It is considered to be the sanctum sanctorum where all the valuable properties including the idol of the deity, manuscripts etc. are kept. In many *Sattra*, the holy throne (simhasana), the principal object of worship and prayer are kept inside the sanctum. It also acts like a store house of all sacred accessories. Some scholars surmise that the larger naamghar hall seems to be the original part of this central institute of the *Sattra* and the manikut appears to be its adjunct added later.

### Relic Shrines (math, pada-sila ghar)

The *Sattra* which are associated with the lives of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and Damodardeva themselves are venerable for Majuli Vaishnavas. The *Sattra* are considered to be relic shrines which also preserves some of the articles used the saints. Relic worship, as it is current in the Vaishnava monasteries is also a mild type having for its purpose the preservation of certain things in the perceptor's use as objects of veneration. These objects are taken out on very rare occasion, when all people pay their obeisance to them. In the porch of the shrine an earthen lamp is daily lighted and one or two monks recite verses from religious writings. The main article that a Vaishnava reliquary enshrines is a slab of stone, believed to be marked with footprints of the Gurus (pada-sila).

### Rows of dwellings of huts (hati)

The rows of huts for the monks within the *Sattra* have been a distinctive phenomenon of the *Sattra* structure. The planning of such rows or sets with the naamghar at the centre is also interesting. A row or a hati is a set of houses constructed in a line as residence of the monks. There are four such hatis in the east, west, north and south of the naamghar and manikut. How the structure of these hatis came into existence is not to be known from the caritas, but the idea of carihati (four rows) has come always to be associated with all the saints and apostles in establishing their *Sattra*. These stes of cloisters are exclusively means for the celibate monks, and householders or married classes are not accomodated



there. Such married clerics who want to stay within the *Sattra* enclosures were given separate rows of cloisters built for the married or housholders outside the precincts of the *Sattra* which is called as *bahirhati* (Neog 1965: 324).



Figure 4: Main shrine of Kamalabari *Sattra* in Majuli



Figure 5: View of Hatis (residence of the monks)

### Functions of *Sattra*

Function of a *Sattra* has been classified into two categories: primarily they are to propagate the Vaishnava faith to initiate discipline, to provide ethico devotional codes and rules of conduct for neophytes and to hold daily as well as occasional divisional services. The secondary functions of the *Sattra* are to see that good social relation is maintained among the fraternity, 'to develop the spirit of co

operation to provide adequate facilities' for dissemination of ancient and traditional learning, including the cultivation of art and craft. Educational and cultural activities fall within the second category and apart from religion, this aspect is most important having direct bearing on the Assamese society. Sankardeva also introduced the art of dancing mainly in connection with the dramatic performances, called Bhaona. The Bargeet and other similar songs, sung on the basis of classical ragas, are also worth mentioning. It is a matter of pride that these dramatic literatures in Assamese show an uninterrupted continuity from the time of Sankardeva down to the present day. Puppet-dance which is now almost on the verge of extinction was also cultivated in the *Sattrā* circle.

The musical instruments like *doba* or *damdama*, *negera* and *khol* (either of clay or of wood) were made and prepared by the people of the *Sattrā*. The ceremonial high tray- *Sarai*, for divine and reverential offerings, bookcase and bookstand – *thagi* (Fig ) and the holy pedestal – *asana* or *simhasana* all made of wood is found in the prayer house are engraved, painted and decorated in the *Sattrā*. Besides woodcarving like lion over elephant of the *simhasana*, wooden lamp stand- *gocha* and legs of a stool (*karani*), the process of puppet making either of rags or of bamboo deserve appreciation. Women also play their roles by weaving *Gosain-kapur* (pieces of finely woven cloth placed at altar) with various motifs, flowers and creepers.

### Recruitment and Training of Monks

In the days of Sankardeva, people in large number flocked to the saint and got initiated into *Ek Sarana Nam Dharma*. They were attracted by various facts of the faith. Some of them were enchanted by imposing personality of Sankardeva. Some people after initiation remained with the Guru as monks whereas some of them dedicated their children at the disposal of the Guru for the service of the holy assembly. In later years the monks or the *Sattradhikars* (Fig XX) picked up accommodated bright and promising youths when very young. He would be trained up with all necessary learning of the *Sattriya* life in addition to imparting general education especially learning of reading the scriptures both in Sanskrit and Assamese in the institutions of *tols* run by the *Sattrā* themselves so that they would be able to work in the future as a responsible functionary of the *Sattrā*. To dedicate a male child to the services of a *Sattrā* was even considered a privilege or an act of piety for a family affiliated to Assam Vaishnavism. Thus, a disciple of any *Sattrā* dedicated one of his children to any *Sattrā* with great sacrifice.

In some of the celibate *Sattrā* like the *Kamalabari Sattrā*, exponents of various art forms bring up young artists and impart exhaustive training under their personal care as a result a highly refined tradition of Assamese painting particularly the miniature painting, wood carving, highly stylized traditions of drama and theatre, music, dance, the great body of Vaishnava literature including the development of the Assamese literary prose and the bibliographical narratives (*caritas*) etc, which are exclusively the contributions of the *Sattrā*.

### Art

All art and crafts practised by the Assamese society centred around the activities of the *Sattrā* institutions. The initiates of the *Sattrā* eagerly visited the holy places of Vrindavan, Mathura, Puri, Gaya etc. as Srimanta Sankardeva himself had done so (as mentioned in the *carit-puthis* or biographies). Possibly these excursions might have exposed them to the existing dance, music, paintings and literature of these regions. The *Apabhramsa* language of medieval India influenced the language of Sankardeva and his disciples which is called *Brajabuli* in Assam which is like the *Vraj bhasha*, used for propagating Vaishnavism in Assam.



The art of painting, use of colours like Hengool-hiatal, is a significant contribution of the *Sattra*. The tulapat and sanchipat were used not only for writing but also used for miniature painting. A large number of manuscripts of that era have excellent paintings on them, one of the most being famous *Hastividyanava* (a treatise on elephants). The Assamese *Chitra Bhagavata*, the illustrated copy of the *Geet-Govinda*, *Lava Kushar Yuddha*, *Vanamali Devar Charita* are also some of the specimens of *Sattriya* School of paintings. Most of the Vaishnavite miniatures date from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries mainly with the birth of the religious literature i.e., the works written and translated by numerous scholars and by the saints themselves. The paintings run close conformity to the text where mode of narration is about people, characters and environment. The figures and essential motifs are prominent while the rest is underplayed. Symbolic gestures are also used to convey dialogue between characters thus creating a moving pattern to the otherwise static figures.



Figure 6: Training of *Sattriya* dance to the monks which is carried out in the *Sattra*

### Architecture

The *Sattra* monuments are not gigantic in scale but have the dignity of their own stature. Stone masonry were the privileges of the royalty, so the large and rich *Sattra* like Kamalabari. Garamur, Auniati and Dakhinpat *Sattra* were almost wholly built of wood and embellished lavishly with carvings paintings and other objects. The walls are usually left with jallis (railings) or perforated wood carvings of devotional imagery, which embellishes and allows light and air at the same time. The door towards the top is the main entrance, mukhduar-the ones at the side are the petduar. Doors with carvings of lion's motifs are called simhaduar and those with floral patterns are called phultetelikataduar. Some brass with floral and figurative motifs is also used.

### Crafts

*Sattra* were also conspicuously treated as important institution for various crafts of wood, clay etc. Celibates in their off-time used to engage themselves in producing crafts of wood, brass, cane, ivory, clay and other materials. Some remarkable pieces of wooden culture in *Sattra* include the throne,



Figure 7: Traditional wall carving depicting Narasimha killing Hiranyakashipu



Figure 8: Mural Paintings on the walls of *Sattra*



animal motifs carved at the four corners of the throne. The divine figures of the mythological icons of Hinduism and other specimens of handicrafts made of cane, ivory and metals were also found. The various articles like the Guru Asana- pedestal of the lords, hand fans with zari work, brass metal gong, ivory paduka, gogol mattress and cushion, royal arm chair made of ivory, brass metal door are some of the excellent examples of craftsman in the *Sattra*. Thus a school of Sattriya crafts-style emerged in the medieval Assam within the *Sattra* institution.



Figure 9 : Beautifully carved door depicts the architecture of *Sattra's* prayer hall



Figure 10: Folding wooden Sarai and wooden Rangoli Sarai of Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra*





Figure 11: A monk preparing cane hand fan in Auniati *Sattra*



Figure 12: Making of Gurumala, Auniati *Sattra*

## Manuscripts

The cultural lineage of manuscripts in Assam seems to be very remote. But the material being organic in nature, and the region being prone to natural hazards, most of the evidence seems to have been lost owing to the ravages of time. This handwritten document, form a rare category of antiquities and art objects in Assam. Manuscriptology of Majuli was one of the unique tradition and these were produced following native range of indigeneous raw materials, by the class of artists called *khanikars* for preparing the folios, the ink, the pigment, the tools and other implements and using techniques both for writing and preparing all other items needed for compiling the manuscripts. A large section of



manuscripts in Majuli are illustrated with paintings. The raw materials of paintings of the manuscripts are being derived from nature. The manuscripts that generally found are written on Sanchipat and Tulapat i.e., variety of ginned cotton paper.



Figure 13: Bhakat while reading a manuscript

### Masks

In Majuli, masks are used in Bhaonas, the traditional dramatic performances of Assam. Masks both of wood and bamboo are related to the Bhaona performances and are readily available. The Sankara Carit of Ramacharan Thakur mentions one incident in the staging of the first play of Srimanta Sankardeva, the foremost religious and social reformer, named Chinha Yatra in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, where amongst other activities- “Sarvajaya performs the role of Garuda putting on a mask resembling the head of a bird. In Sattriya culture the purity and sanctity of masks in regards to their use is strictly maintained. The size of the masks varies from some that cover only face to those that envelope the full figure. Some of very large ones are worn from the waist upwards. The traditional colours used to paint the masks were hengool and haital are red and yellow with black and white as accents.

### Boat Making

Boat making is one of the most common activities practiced on the island. Crafts related to boat making have been practiced in Majuli since the time of the arrival of diverse communities on the Island. Hence, the locals are proficient in the knowledge of making boats. This craft is popular among both *Sattras* as well as other communities. Auniati and Kamalabari *Sattras* are famous for making good quality boats in the region. Usually all the families in Majuli have boats which are used mainly during the Monsoons and during floods. Boats are used for commuting from one place to another as they are easily available and an economical mode of transportation. Boat making is the main occupation of people from Salmara, Borgayon, Nawsali. 3000 families from these villages are dependent on this traditional craft of making boats. Traditionally, boats were made of Azhar wood which is presently very costly. Hence, the chief material used for construction of boats is the wood from Semalo tree,



Figure 14: Theomorphic masks prepared at Natun Samoguri Sattrā

Uriam, Outenga, Atrocarpus chaplasha (Samkathal) and Hijal tree which are locally available in plenty. Traditionally, single piece of wood from a big tree was used to make boats called Guttaiya nao. Today boats are made from split timber. Boats are named on the basis of the use they are put to. Traditional hacksaws and blades, chisels and rivets are still used to make boats. The economics of boat making is dependent on a sustainable cycle of production and consumption of boats on the island. Presently, the production of boats is on a small scale. There is a ready market available in the nearby areas and also within Majuli which helps to sustain this traditional craft.



Figure 15: Making of a boat in Auniati Sattrā



### Ancient handmade pottery and centuries-old barter trade system alive in Majuli

Salmora village in the southeast corner of Majuli Island on the bank of mighty Brahmaputra has somehow kept the historic tradition alive. Close to Dakshinpath Satra, the Kumar potters of Salmora make handmade pottery and supply them to various villages inhabited by Mising community apart from Assamese villages through river trade. They also make watercraft for sailing in the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Size and shape of boats vary depending upon its usage in various kinds of water bodies including ponds and swamps. The business of pottery is partly through the barter system and partly through direct selling. Pottery is a traditional form of cottage industry of Majuli. Pots were generally exchanged for paddy, which is the staple food of the inhabitants of this island. Historically pots were marketed from Dhuburi to Sadiya along the Brahmaputra. Kumars are the main communities practicing pottery in the Majuli. The Kumars are concentrated mainly in Salmora, Chinatoli and Dakshinpath i.e. mostly in the south-eastern area of the Majuli. They use a different technique of pottery making in which the potter's wheel is not used. Despite various challenges this ancient craft is still considered as an important income generating cottage industry of the river island.



Figure 16: Pots ready to be bartered from Barboka, Kamjan Elengi and Besamora of Salmora in Majuli

**Findings:** Archaeological sculptures, idols, ivory, brass metal, silver made embroidered utensils, canons used during Ahom rulers, wheels for elephant cart, manuscripts, wood carving, murals etc. were found.





### Conclusion

It was at Mājuli (then known as Dhuwāhāt, Āhom territory) that Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva met his foremost disciple and apostolic successor, Madhavadeva for the very first time, in the 16th century. This event, referred to as Manikānchan Sanyog is the single most epoch-making event in the history of the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement. After this meeting, the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement gained momentum and the medieval caritas (the hagiographies) are full of references to Mājuli. It is said that Sankaradeva established the first *Sattra* here by planting a Bilva tree and naming the place Belguri. Here it was again that Sankaradeva's son-in-law Hari, was executed under royal orders. Sankaradeva stayed at Dhuwāhāt for 14 years before proceeding to Western Assam. In the post Sankara-Madhava period (17th century onwards), Mājuli once again became one of the main centres of propagation of Neo-Vaisnavism and a centre of art and crafts specialization and cultural heritage primarily to the pioneering efforts of Saint Vamsigopaladeva and his successors.

It is indeed very difficult to cross the river Brahmaputra, where the lodging in the island is not so easy, there are certain stipulated timings of the river boats for crossing the river. There are numerous rules and regulations which are very strictly followed in the *Sattra*. So it is not easy to abide by all the rules and regulations especially for the out siders. The existence of this cultural heritage is under



serious threat due to the recurring floods and incessant bankline erosion by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. It is matter of profound interest that the political turmoil of the late medieval Assam also could not diminish the abiding influence of the *Sattra* institution on the life and culture of the inhabitants till the advent of the western education which however seemed to erode some of its roles and influences. However, the *Sattra* maintained its requisite spirit to keep the people rooted to their culture till this day. In spite of their proliferation in the last few centuries the *Sattra* have functioned almost in isolation, may be in groups without communication with other regions of the country. Thus, they became confined to themselves as a result of which their existence was not generally known to the rest of our country. But of late, the scholars and intellectuals have come forward to bring this unique institution to the light of the masses.

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