CHAPTER II

MAJULI: EPITOME OF VAISHNAVISM

Majuli (26°45’ N to 27°12’ N and 93°39’ E to 94°35’ E) one of the world’s biggest fresh water River Island, nestles in the lap of the mighty River Brahmaputra in Assam. It is situated in the upper reaches of the River about 1,100 Km from its confluence with the Bay of Bengal and is at 84.5 meters AMSL. The length of Majuli is about 54 Km and its breadth is only 15 Km. Owing to continuous erosion every year, the area of Majuli has been diminishing and at present its area is less than 420 sq Km. Because of the continuous erosion since the great earthquake of 1950, the very existence of Majuli is threatened. In the last part of the last Century till date, about $\frac{1}{3}$rd of its landmass has already been eroded. The flood of River Brahmaputra has been creating havoc every year in the Island which receive a mean annual rainfall of about 2029 mm.

Majuli is the epitome of natural and cultural heritage of Assam, and a judicious attempt has been made to preserve the Island under the aegis of UNESCO as a World Heritage Site (WHS). The Government of India on its part has been trying to save the Island and a number of civic and Government bodies are formed in this regard; however, there has not been any success so far. The continuous erosion is simply uncontrollable.
Majuli has a population of about 1,67,245 as per Census of 2011 with 85,797 males and 81,448 females. It is a Sub-Division under Jorhat district containing 248 revenue villages. The tribal communities like the Mishings, Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis and Mataks form 44.45 percent of the total population of Majuli. Total Schedule tribe (ST) population is 68,141 (2011 Census) of which Mishing numbers 63,572, Deuris 3,498 and Sonowal Kacharis 1,071. Literacy rate in the Island is 71.2 % (2001 Census).

The Brahmaputra’s riverine tract with its peculiar geo-environmental element forms a distinctive zone so far as bio-diversity of Majuli is concerned. The water bodies in the tract along with their conspicuously rich aquatic resource act as the nucleus of attraction for a large number of animals and particularly the migratory birds during the winter season. High amount of rainfall, very high moisture in soil during the summer, and the flat nature of the plains are ideal for the growth of a good number of evergreen, semi evergreen and deciduous trees, wide variety of marshy vegetation, bamboo, grasses and canes. Although growing pressure of population on the Island has created severe degradation of the natural environment including flora still the luxurious growth of the following vegetations are conspicuous in the Island: ajar (Lagerstroemias flos - reginae), amlakhi (Texminatia chebula), arjuna (Termintia arjuna), dimaru (Ficus glomerataa), jamu (Eugenia jambolana), kadam (Anthocephalus cadambas), neem (Azadirachta indicas), ou tenga (Dellenia indica), simalu (Bombax ceiba), siris (Albizzi procera) and so on.

Majuli falls under the tropical climatic zone. However the numerous wetlands, streams and water bodies endow Majuli with a subtropical climate. Maximum summer temperature goes up to 30°C-35°C with high relative humidity of 80%-90% and minimum winter temperature falls to around 10°C-12°C. Average annual rainfall is 2000 mm–2500 mm. There are more than 60 wetlands in Majuli of varying shape and size with different depth which include Bhereki, Chakuli, Dubaritali, Kharikata, Kharkhari, Oudubi and others. These water bodies are full of different kinds of aquatic life. However lack of a continuous forest belt in Majuli prevents large mammals to be visible. Whatever few
animals are seen consist of few wild water buffaloes (*Bubalus arnee*), barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), Chinese pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*), Eastern mole (*Talpa micrura*), Indian grey mongoose (*Herpestes edwardciii*), Rhesus Monkey (*Macaca mulatto*), River dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*), bat (*Scotophilus heathis*) and many others. Majuli also boasts of a variety of amphibians and reptiles and different kinds of local and migratory birds.

Agriculture is the primary lifeline of the people in the Island. People grow a wide variety of different agricultural crops including both Kharif (summer season crops) and Rabi (winter season) crops. Apart from agriculture, craft-making of bamboo and cane, boat making, cattle farming, handloom, horticulture, pottery, sericulture are secondary sources of income.

Majuli is the seat of Assamese *Vaishnavite* culture and is famous for the great *Vaishnavite* Saint and social reformer Shrimanata Sankaradeva who preached his *Vaishnavite* faith in the Island in the early 16th Century. Guru Shrimanta Sankaradeva propagated a form of *Vaishnavism* which was simple, easy to understand and more accessible than the other caste based Hindu religious activities of that time. He stressed in worshipping a single God, Lord Vishnu only through mass prayers, and devoid of any idol worship of any other God.

“The *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement initiated by Sankaradeva in Assam was a part of the large pan-Indian resurgence of Bhakti (unflinching devotion) in medieval India that spanned nearly a little over five centuries from the devotional cult of Alvars of Tamilnadu to the teaching of Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhavacharyya, Vallabhacharyya, Chaitanya, Kabir, Guru Nanak and others while it was basically a reaction against the excess of sacerdotal religion, the spirit of new ideas manifested itself in an overall social change almost unprecedented in its scale in the history of Assam. Sankaradeva was an extraordinarily gifted man, widely travelled, well versed in traditional Sanskrit learning, poet, playwright and musician par excellence” (Neog, 1988:1)
To quote Chatterjee (1970), “He gave to Assam a new discipline of faith……and helped Assam to break away with a past with its complicated esoteric doctrine and its unmeaning practices and gave to the people something simple and straightforward divested of all questionable associations or implications. He was the greatest builder of Assam bringing in a purer spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest India has produced and he deserved to be mentioned with Sankaracharyya, Ramanujacharyya, Basavappa, Ramananda, Kabir, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Tulsidas. He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of medieval India as a whole shown up upon the life of Assam” (cited in Neog, 1988 : 1).

It is noteworthy to mention that the Vaishnavite movement in Assam at that time was grafted in accordance with the social environment of that time, due to which the simple and illiterate people of Assam were greatly attracted to that religion. Sarma (1999: 1-2) writes: “The new cult thus moulded according to the local circumstance was popularly known as the Mahapurusiya-dharma. The real name of the cult was Ekašaramañdhharma or religion of surrender to one God, viz. Vishnu-Krsna. The term Mahapurusiya, generally applied to mean Sankaradeva. He was known to his followers as Mahapurusa (the great being) and therefore the religion propagated by him came to known as the Mahapurusiya-dharma. But another explanation of the designation Mahapurusiya-dharma may be suggested. The term Mahapurusa is also an epithet of God Narayana. In a few verses of Bhagavata purana (II/1/10,XI/5/33), it has been used in the above sense. Sukadeva, the expounder or the Bhagvata-purana, addressed pariksita as a Mahapurusiya, i.e., a devotee of Mahapurusa. As the Vaisnava cult of Assam enjoins the worship of Narayana only, the cult probably came to be known as the Mahapurusiya-dharma, i.e the cult of Mahapurusa”.

Shri Shri Sankaradeva devised various ways of spreading his thoughts and ideas. One of the foremost was the creation of two religious institutions namely Namghar (the village level prayer house) and the Sattr (the Vaishnavite monastery). The Namghar present in one or more numbers in each of the villages is a place where people congregate
for various religious activities like prayers, meetings and likes. The Namghar is a simple house which is divided into two parts - a small inner room and a big hall. The small room is known as Manikut where Kirtana, Dasama, Namghosa, Gunamala and Bhakti Ratnavali are placed in the thapana (a decorative wooden pedestal) or Guruasana (seat of the Guru). The hall is generally devoid of walls, where the regular and occasional prayers are performed, forming different groups in different times in the Namghar. Usually nobody resides in a Namghar. Each Namghar is affiliated to a Sattra.

“Sattra is a Sanskrit word, the word Sattra has been used in two senses firstly, in the sense of an alms-house, and secondly in the sense of a sacrifice lasting from a few days to a year or more” (Sarma, 1999: 144). The Sattras have contributed a significant part of Assamese culture or in Vaishnavite literature, art, culture and spiritual elevation. (Sarma, 1999: I) mentions “The most notable characteristic of the Vaishnavism of Assam is the Satra institution through which the faith was propagated and stabilized. It may be monastic as well as semi-monastic in form. The former type resembles, to a certain extent, the Buddhist monasteries of ancient times and the mathas of medieval age. But the importance of the institution lies in the fact that it is intimately connected with the Assamese society and it has become a part and parcel of Assamese life. Contribution of this institution towards the spread of Vaishnavism in particular and the cultural development of Assam in general, are indeed great. The high percentage of people professing Vaishnavism in Assam is accountable to the activities of this institution during the last four centuries of the Christian era. It is because of the evangelical activities of this institution that many non-Aryan tribes today profess Vaishnavism in Assam”.

The Sattra institution and its enormity covered the Assam scenario. Majuli, one of the world’s biggest River Island as mentioned earlier, is one of the premier places of the Vaishnavite culture. It was here Saint Sankaradeva and Saint Madhavadeva had met for the first time at Dhuwahat. During post Sankaradeva period Vamsigopaldeva a famous proselytizer of Brahma Samhati reorganized and renovated the Kuruwabahi Sattra with a huge prayer hall in about 1634 AD. Ahom King Jayadhavaj Simgha (1648–1663) was
instrumental in establishing Brahminical Sattras in Majuli and Auniati is one of the most prominent Sattras among them which is standing with glamour reflecting the Vaishnavite religion and culture that Shri Shri Sankaradeva developed and propagated in 15th Century.

The very purpose of a Sattra, as desired by Shrimanta Sankaradeva and his disciples was to bring the people of all caste, creeds and races under a common roof for congregational prayer and for their socio-cultural and economic upliftment. Shri Shri Sankaradeva along with followers belonging to different caste groups representing the positions of Sattradhikars, prominent apostles, resident devotees and innumerable disciples succeeded in their mission.
PL.1: VESSEL GETTING READY AT NIMATI GHAT TO KAMALABARI GHAT, MAJULI

PL.2: A VIEW OF RIVER BRAHMAPUTRA

PL.3: WAY OF COMMUNICATION TO MAJULI
PL.4. MAJULI SHRINKS DUE TO REGULAR EROSION

PL.5. TO STOP RIVER BANK EROSION WITH THE HELP OF RCC PORCUPINES

PL.6(A). MIGRATORY BIRDS AT THE ISLAND
PL.6(B). MIGRATORY BIRDS AT THE ISLAND

PL.7: BIRDS NESTING IN ARECA NUT PLANT AT MAJULI

PL.8: REED BLOOMS
PL.9. PICTURE SHOWS YELLOW MUSTARDSEED PLANTATION IN MAJULI

PL.10. EARTHEN DYKES CONSTRUCTED ALONG THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER TO PREVENT FLOOD WATER INTRODUCING INTO THE MAIN ISLAND

PL.11. FISHERMAN CATCHING FISHES LATE EVENING IN THE MARSHY AREA AND THE SMALLER STREAMS ON THE ISLAND
PL.12: WOODEN ROW BOATS – PART AND PARCEL OF THE MAJULI FOLK FOR THEIR LIVELIHOOD

PL.13: HUT CONSTRUCTED ON THE EMBANKMENT IN MAJULI, DISREGARDING THE DAMAGE DONE TO THE EMBANKMENT

PL.14(A): A SECTION OF RASS FESTIVAL AT MAJULI
PL.14(B). A SECTION OF RASS FESTIVAL AT MAJULI

PL.15. ALI-ALIGANG –SPRING FESTIVAL (ASSOCIATED WITH AGRICULTURE) OF MISHING COMMUNITY OF MAJULI

PL.16. RASS PUJA AT DAKHINPAT SATTRA
PL.17. MASKS OF SAMAGURI SATTR A

PL.18. ENTRANCE OF BHOGPUR SATTR A

PL.19. SATTRADHIKAR OF GARMUR SATTR A
PL.20. ENTRANCE OF UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA

PL.21. FAKUA UTSAV (HOLI) AT BENGENAATI SATTRA

PL.22. RANGOLI CHORA OF AUNIATI SATTRA