Majuli: Land of Tourism Resources

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Introduction:

Majuli is one of the largest inhabited mid river deltaic Island. It is located in upper reaches of the river Brahmaputra and within the latitude of 26°45'N-27°12'N and longitude of 93°39'E-94°35'E. Majuli is situated in the Northern part of Jorhat District separated from the main land by the river Brahmaputra.

A.J. Moffat Mill record in Report on Province of Assam land of Majuli was 2,82,165 acres in 1853, B. C. Allen in his Provincial Gazetteer of India, published in 1901, mentioned that Majuli’s total land area was around 185 sq. Miles. As per government survey of 1891 the total area of the island to be 1,256 sq.kms, the record of the Revenue department of the Government of Assam which recorded the total area of the island to be 1246 sq.kms in 1950, 924 sq.kms in 1971, 875 sq.kms in 1997, 480 sq.kms in 2001, 502.21 sq.kms in 2004, 506.37 sq.kms in 2008, 520.26 sq.kms in 2011 and 523.88 sq.kms in 2014.

Habung was the ancient name of Majuli. Habung is a Bodo word means low-lying flood affected extensive landmass. It is difficult to say that when the name Majuli came into used. In an old Assamese chronicle the compound word-Luitar Majuli, Assam Buranji Puthi by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan used the Majali, Harakanta Barua in his book used as Majoli, Vivek Ratna by Maniram Dewan used as Majali, Ahomar Din by Hituswar Barbaruah used the word Majali. Further from other source this word Majuli came from the word Majali, derived from two words Maj+Ali, ie, ‘a centrally located road or a lane lying in between’.

Majuli is the land of diversity. According to Census Report 1991, it has a population of 135378 souls consisting of 70410 males and 64,968 female, 2001 Census Report, total population was 153,400 souls consisting of 79,481 males and 73919 female and in 2011, total population of Majuli was 167,245 of which male 85797 and female 81,448. Total schedule Tribe (ST) population is 68,141(2001 Census) of which Mishing numbers 63,572, Deouris 3,498 and Sonowal Kacharis 1071. Literacy rate in the island is 72.2% in 2001, 84.74% in 2011, which male literacy stands at 93.76% while female rate was 75.37%.

Tourist resources of Majuli Island:

Social scientist Linton said, “Culture of a society is way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they earn share and transmit from generation to generation.”

Majuli largest inhabited river is the world is very rich in cultural heritage and has been the adobe of Assamese vaishnavite Satras. Different tourist resources in Majuli are discuss below-

a) Sattra: A Sattra has been defined as:

Ekanta Vaisnava yot nibasa koroi,
Jibako sarana diye, tak Sattra Kai.
(Where the single-minded vaishnavas reside, where they offer sarana (shelter) to the souls, that (place) is called a Sattra)

According to Williams (1997 : 113), Etymologically the term ‘Sattra is derived from ‘Sat’ meaning ‘honest-cum-pious person’ and ‘trai’ meaning ‘to rescue’ or ‘to deliver’. Majuli Cultural Landscape Regions Act 2006 has recognized 31 existing satras in Majuli. Some important satras of Majuli are - Adhar Sattra, Adi Bihimpur Sattra, Ahatguri Bar Sattra, Alengi Bahjengani Sattra, Alengi Modarguri Sattra, Alengi Narasina Sattra, Allengi Toloubari Sattra, Ananta Kakhalia Sattra, Auniati Sattra, Bali Chaporri Bor Alengi Sattra, Belexindhub Sattra, Bengenati Sattra, Bhogpur Sattra, Bihimpur Sattra, Charityingya Sattra, Chokala Sattra, Dikhanpat Sattra, Dikhomukhia Bor Alengi Sattra, Doloni Chamoguri Sattra, Garmur Sattra, Garmur Xor Sattra, Molual Bor Alengi Sattra, Moidhya Majuli Kamalabari Sattra, Natun Samuguri Sattra, Natun Kamalabari Sattra, Oa Sattra, Punia Sattra, Purani Samuguri Sattra, Rajguru Bari Sattra, Uttar Kamalabari Sattra, Xakopara Sattra.
b) Festivals : Majuli, the vaishnavite site is land of various cultural life. Throughout the year various colourful festivals celebrated in this island with joy and prosperities. Major festivals celebrated in this Riverine are-

i) Janmastami: Janmastami is the birth anniversary of lord Krishna celebrated on the 8th day of the dark fortnight of the month of Bhadra (mid August to mid September). Some of the Sattras perform this festival for two days and some of Sattras, performed for one day. Bhakats of Sattras offer Naivedya and Pakamithoi (a kind of sweet ball made of fried rice flour and molasses mixed together). On that day inmates of Sattra performed nam-prasangas, organised special congregational prayer called Janmastami geet. Bhakats of Sattras in Majuli go on fasting on that day. It is believe that fasting on the day of Janmastami would bring immense religious merit (Punya) equal to the offering of Pinda (Oblation) at Gaya on the Ganga.

ii) Phalgutsav /Phakuwa/Daul Yatra: This colourful festival is celebrated in the full moon day in the month of Phagun (mid Feb-March). It is stated that Phalgutsav was first introduced by Sankardeva himself in Bardowa Thaan, birth place of this saint. Gayan-bayan, nam-prasanga are performed in this day.

iii) Raasila : Raasila or Rashila commonly known as Krishna lila or Raas Yatra. This popular annual festival celebrated of Sattras of Majuli on the full moon day (Purnima) in the month of Kati-Aghun (mid Oct-mid November). The first Raas lila was performed in Dakhinpat Sattra in 1840 AD. Sattras of Majuli performed this festival with elaborate agenda. Namkirtan, Oja Pali, gayan-bayan, bhaona are performed in this days. Raas festival has a great impact on the life of people of Majuli. Tourist came in the Majuli for that festival day and enjoys the colourful and unique Raasila of Majuli.

iv) Guru Tithis: Guru Tithi mainly is the death anniversaries of the two Saint Sankardeva, Madhavadeva and all the preceptors of the post Sankardeva times. In Satras Damodardeva, Vamsigopaldev, Bhavanipuriya gopal Ata Alias gopaldeva, Late Sattradhikar death anniversaries are celebrated. On this day inmates of Sattra organised annadan (Gift of cooked food), nam Kirtan, varieties of classical dance like natwa nach, Ojapali, Bhaona etc.

v) Bihu : Bihu is the national festival of Assam. The three Bihus of Assam namely – Magh Bihu, Bohag Bihu and Kati Bihu. Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu celebrated in the month of end of Pausha or Puh and beginning of month Magh (mid of Jan), Bohag Bihu, also called Rangali Bihu which is elective of Caste and religion on the last month of Chaut and beginning of Bohag (Mid of April) and Kati Bihu also known as Kangali Bihu, which is a celebrate in the Assamese month Ahin or beginning of Karitik or Kati (mid of Oct). Bhakats celebrate Magh Bihu by building a meji (a nay-rick, a stack of wood) and it burn on the day of Bihu in presence of Sattradhikar. Bohag Bihu celebrate for three days namely Uruka, Guru Bihu (Cow Bihu), Manuh Bihu (man Bihu). In the day of Guru Bihu Bhakats bath their Cows in river and water pools and then bed with pieces of Gourd, brinjal, amber and Kerala (bitter ground) and given new ropes (Pogha). On that day Nritya, Ojapali, Gayan bayan etc are performed. In the Kati Bihu, they plant Basil (Tulasi and burn earthen lamp in the surrounding of Sattra. Another important and unique tradition followed by Auniati Sattra, i.e. Akash Banti on the Kati Bihu celebration. Three Bamboo poles of the height of 20/9/5 Cubic long are prepared, coloured with lime, and then posted in the middle of the campus. The inmates prepare for Akashbanti long before the Kati Bihu. Twenty one pairs of lamps are lighted, and they are refilled daily with mustard oil in every morning and give new cotton threads (Salita) this continue for the whole Kati month.

vi) Palnaam: Palnaam is a religious festival organised by the various Sattras in Majuli. Palnaam was originated in the mid 16th century. Palnaam is derived from two words i.e. Pal and nam. Pal means by turn and nam means Prayer. The objective of holding Palnaam is defined as seeking welfare for all living and non-living brings of the world. It is believed that the tradition Palnaam began at the Auniati Sattra. In the Auniati Sattra Palnaam is held during the last five days of the Kati month (Oct-Nov). Palnaam is the heritage festival for the Natun Kamalabari Sattra and Uttar Kamalabari Sattras of Majuli. Earlier it was seven day festival, but now it is celebrated for three days in the month of Jeth. Congregation prayer called nam-daka is performed from the creation of Madhavdeva’s Nam-Ghoshia. Offering salt is the tradition of the sattra in the occasion of Palnaam. In medieval time, gift of salt was considered as to the gift of Gold.

vii) Ali Aye-Ligang: Ali Aye Ligang or Ali Aye Ligang is a traditional festival of Mishing the second largest tribes of Assam. This cultural festival is usually observed on the first Wednesday of Phagun (mid Feb) month and is uniformly celebrated by Mishing in Assam. The literary meaning of Ali Aye Ligang stand for first sowing of roots and fruits in which all stands for seeds,
Aye stand for fruits in which Ligang for sowing. Ahu Paddy was their principal product and such the oncoming of the ‘Ahu’ and ‘Bow’ season is marked with the celebration of Ali Aye Ligang. Prayer, dance and feast are integral parts of the festival. Gumrag So: man is a combination of dance and beating of drums and cymbals. The Mishing people believe that lakshmi will satisfy and bless for Good harvest if Gumrag so: man is performed on the Ligang Day. The celebration of the Ali Aye Ligang not only reflects the socio-cultural identity of the Mishing people, but also has a definite role in the cultural convergence with the greater Assamese society.

viii) Porag: Porag is an agricultural festival of Mishing. It is observed at the post-harvesting seasons, in the month of Ahin (Aug-Sept). Porag is celebrated in Murang (Common Hall for the village) also called Deka Chang with singing of Songs called Oi-nitom. Porag is considered as a symbol of unity and brotherhood of Mishing people.

ix) Majuli Festival: Majuli festival is celebrated on the banks of the River Brahmaputra in Majuli. Cultural programmes takes place with the participation of various traditional and classical cultural troupes of Assam and troupes from rest of the Country. In addition to rich cultural heritage of Majuli, the beauty of the surrounding and the splendidours landscape lure tourists to visit the Majuli festival from all concern of the Country. The native Assamese and tribal cuisine are a part of the celebrated food festival which is organized during the Majuli festival. Exhibition are also organized with the presentation of various Assamese items, specially designed and prepared by expert artists displaying traditional glory of Majuli to the festival displays the rich art and culture of the State of Assam.

c) Mask Making: Mask making is one of the famous Craft practiced in Majuli. Mask making is the traditional craft for the Alengi Narasinha Sattra, Bihimpur Sattra, Chamuguri (Natan and Purani) and Uttar Kamalabari Sattra. Mask making is another well known craft in the Sattras for the purpose using it in Bhaona (drama), Raas festivals and also as source of earning. Traditionally, there are three types of masks which are prepared in the Sattras of Majuli. These are – Mukh Mukha, Cho Mukha and Iotokai Mukha. There are two types of Masks based on frame material used – Made of Bamboo and made of Paper. Hengul, haital, neel are natural colour used for the colouring the mukhas. The Natun Chamuguri Sattra is well known for the traditional mask making. The present Sattradhikar of Natun Chamuguri Sattra Sri Koshakanta Deva Goswami, Sri Umakanta Dev Goswami, Phanidhar Goswami, Krishnakanta Goswami, Hem Chandra Goswami are some of the reputed person who give the devotion to all in mask making.

d) Pottery: Pottery is the most significant traditional form of Cottage industry in Majuli. Pottery makers popularly called as Kumar, they are inhabited in the Salmarra, Chinatoli and Dakhinpata. Pottery making process is continuous from generation to generation this is island. They use a different technique of Pottery making in which the potter’s wheel is not used. More than 5000 people are depended on this traditional and unique craft for their livelihood. Potteries are used as a exchange for paddy which is important staple food for the inhabitants of this island. The women folk of Majuli produced 26 varieties of earthen Pots such as mola, nadia, charu, pati Kalah, becha kalah, Chaki, Sakidan, kata, Dhudpani, Tekeli and so on.

e) Boat Making: Boat is the prime means of communication in the island of Majuli. Craft related to boat making have been practiced in Majuli since the time of the arrival of diverse communities on the island. The craft of making these vessels are traditionally passed on from generations within the families who have mastered the art. Traditional boats are generally used for fishing, small Cargo handling, passenger carriers in rivers and tourism etc. Boat making is popular among the Sattras like Auniati & Uttar Kamalabari and other villages i.e. Salmarra, Bargayan, Nawalsali etc. nearly 3000 families are engaged in this Craft.

Problems of Tourism in Majuli:

i) Soil erosion is the biggest problem to the Island as well as the tourism industry. This soil erosion and continuous siltation are rapidly taking place which lead to shrinking the island.

ii) Flood is one of serious problem which threatens the existence of Majuli, one of the oldest cultural heritage site of Assam.

iii) Transport and communication, one of the biggest problems in Majuli. Roadways and waterways are the only two transport system available in Majuli. During the flood time Majuli totally cutoff from the outside areas. Poor transport and communication are major obstacles for the tourism industry of Majuli.

iv) Absence of tourism policy: for growth and development of tourism industry in Majuli, there is
no any tourism policy. Assam Tourism Development Corporation has a policy for development of tourism resources in the state, but Majuli yet to receive the proper policy.

v) Infrastructure facilities like good hotel, lodge, resort, restaurants, road are not much developed in Majuli. This is strong discoursing factors for the tourism in Majuli.

vi) Majuli is rich in cultural, natural and biodiversity. Majuli is known for rich cultural heritage. People of Majuli are not so much aware about the importance and benefit of tourism industry.

Conclusion:
The Riverrine Island Majuli attracts tourism from all over the world. Majuli has been the cultural capital and cradle of Assamese civilization for the past five hundred years. Majuli is known as pollution fresh water Island. Tourism industry has a great scope for development of Majuli. The Majuli Cultural Landscape Authority (MCLMA), pursuant to Majuli cultural Landscape Region Act 2006, essentially a legal framework for conservation of cultural and heritage of Island. Different fairs and festivals of this Island contributed to national integration and preservation of cultural, natural environment. Proper tourist policy, publicity, infrastructure facilities and developments of amenities to the tourist of Majuli will improve tourist traffic both domestic and international. Sattras of Majuli are store house of manuscripts, dance, music form, antiquities craft and other. Hence of preserving and promoting the old customs and cultural activities, Govt. of Assam an Act announcing Majuli as a Culturally Protected Area and Govt. of India proposed Majuli as Cultural landscape type World Heritage Site to UNESCO.

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