

The Majuli Island

Society, Economy and Culture



D. Nath

The book is a critical historical and sociological account of the famous river-island *Majuli* created centuries ago by the river Brahmaputra. Separated from the mainland society of Assam being encompassed all around by a large water body of that great river, the island nurtures a typical traditional social and culture systems that crystallized since the middle age when the rulers of Assam made it a land of the Vaishnava preachers and founded there, on their behalf, grand religious institutions called *Satra*. In the 20th century, especially in the post colonial period, geography and society of the island, its institutional structure and social stratifications have been significantly impacted upon by the forces of change created mainly by modernization, demographic change and globalization. The work looks at the evolution of the society in the island and its value systems during the last few centuries, and its response to the forces of changes in the modern times.

Dr. D. Nath is presently holding the prestigious *Shri Shri Aniruddhadeva Chair* Professorship in the Department of History, Dibrugarh University. Known for his work on the medieval history of Assam, Dr. Nath has to his credit a number of acclaimed research works in form of both books and articles on polity, society and culture of the Brahmaputra valley. He has also edited the work *Reopening of the Stilwell Road: Prospects and Problems*. Dr. Nath is currently working on religion and religious societies in Assam with special reference to the Vaishnava movement and its institutions.

THE MAJULI ISLAND

THE MAJULI ISLAND

Society, Economy and Culture

D. NATH



Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata



Anshah Publishing House

Genl

WISDOM LIBRARY

Acc No. 305472
Acc B. Penon/Genl

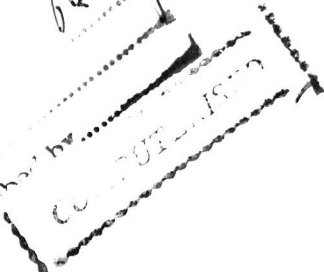
Date 30/4/10

Class

Sub Ha

Author

Translator



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher and the copyright holder.

NE
954.162
NAT;2

Price: Rs. 995 US \$50.00

ISBN: 978-81-8364-056-5

First Published in India in 2009

The Majuli Island: Society, Economy and Culture

© Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata

Published by:

ANSHAH PUBLISHING HOUSE

Delhi

Sales Office: 115-A, Vikas Marg, Shakarpur, Delhi-110092 (India)

Tel. : 9810522367, 22500954

*Sy/11 1235
3210*

Dedicated to the memory of
my late parents

Kanlara Nath Muktiyar

and

Pramila Muktiyar

Foreword

Majuli, a subdivision of the Jorhat district in Assam (India) and situated between 26°-25' and 27°-12' North latitude and 93°-39' and 94°-35' East longitude, is well known as one of the largest river islands in the world that immensely deserve the glory of a global heritage site for its unique scenic beauty and the cultural creativity of the indigenous communities that the island has nurtured since antiquity. Located close to the junctions where the rivers Dihing, Dikhou and Subansiri confluence into the mighty Brahmaputra, the size of the island was estimated towards the end of the eighteenth century by John Peter Wade to be 160 miles in length and 60 miles in width ($160 \times 60 = 960$ sq. miles). A. J. Moffat Mills found the area to be 2,82,165 acres in 1853, while B. C. Allen mentioned it be 485 square miles in 1901. That the area sharply depleted in the second half of the twentieth century due to wanton erosions is understood from the records of the Revenue Department of the Government of Assam which recorded the total area of the island to be 1,246 sq kms in 1950, 924 sq. kms in 1971, 875 sq. kms in 1997 and 480 sq. kms in 2001. On the other hand, the population grew from 31,219 in 1901 to 1,53,362 in 2001. The majority of the inhabitants in the island are the followers of *eka sarania dharma* or the neo-vaisnavite religion propounded by the great saint Srimanta Sankaradeva who was the apostle of the *Bhakti* movement in mediaeval Assam and the founder of the *Satra* system that happens to be a unique socio-cultural and religious institution in the Brahmaputra Valley. Three of the well known *Satras*, namely, Auniati, Garamur and Kamalabari, are situated in Majuli and the social and cultural processes in the island are by and large oriented towards these *Satras*. Although the immigrations and settlements of the other communities over the centuries have significantly affected the demographic complexion in almost all parts of the valley, the Majuli Island is almost an island of the traditional Assamese life and culture. The indigenous art and crafts, the music and dance forms, and the food and dress habits of the indigenous Assamese have considerably survived the stresses and strains of time and circumstances in Majuli. Nevertheless, the life in the island is as vibrant and as dynamic as elsewhere in the valley. The modern educational institutions and other modern amenities reached the island due to the efforts of the government and the *Satras* as

well as the enlightened leaders of the society. Some of the well known educationists, litterateurs, artists and scholars of Assam hailed from Majuli. The harmonious coexistence and the spontaneous blending of tradition and modernity is something that may not escape the experience of even the occasional visitors to the island.

Professor Dambarudhar Nath's *Majuli Island (Assam): Society, Economy and Culture* that emerges from the report of a project sponsored by the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata and the Department of Culture, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, is indeed a full length monograph on the fascinating island that happens to be a pride of the Northeast and the entire country. The study reflects on the geography, geology and antiquity of Majuli, its ecology and environment, society, economy, polity and cultural life, the *Satras* and their socio-cultural role, and the history of the island from earliest times to the twentieth century. Besides his lifelong experience as a native of the island, the author has been gathering data for many years for comprehensively profiling the land and the people—life and conditions—of Majuli. His work is sure to be acclaimed as a well researched and scholarly presentation of the society, economy and culture of Majuli with a concern for the place and its inhabitants. The problems of the environmentally threatened island, besides its serene atmosphere and the achievements of its inhabitants, are scripted by the author to focus on what make Majuli so unique. I have no doubt that many will like to visit Majuli to see the things for themselves after reading the book.



(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

Chairman, Institute of Northeast India Studies, Kolkata &
Ex-Vice Chancellor, Assam University, Silchar

Preface

The present work is the result of a persistent desire that preoccupied me for the last three decades since at least the late seventies of the last century when I first felt an obligation to make a systematic reflection on my native place—the Majuli island of the Brahmaputra which distinguishes itself both geographically and culturally. As a matter of fact, I began with an ordinary article on its historical geography and social formation in the *Post-Graduate Journal* of Dibrugarh University for the year 1975, perhaps the next specific writing on the island after Benudhar Sarma's "*Luitar Sontā*", later published in his *Buranjir Sanphura* incorporated in his *Rachanawali* (ed. Ajit Kumar Sarma) in the year 1987. His writing was, however, not warranted by his innate desire, nor that was aimed at understanding the entity of the world's largest river-made island; but it was simply to record a tradition that speaks about the changes of the courses of the largest river of Assam (the Brahmaputra).

Two important factors attracted me towards the study of the island's history- one, its integrated society shaped by geography and religion; and two, its distinguished culture formed and designed by the Satras to which, so many people of the state are attached. To this I must add another factor: I was born and brought up there, at least my upbringing was amidst the nature of the solitary island during my formative years. I still cherish that memory with a nostalgia in the core of my heart; and I feel a kind of attachment to its topographical and social atmosphere.

Often, I feel, I should have started with Majuli in my early research career; there was enough scope for that. But my watertight academic specialization and some other accompanying factors compelled me to do otherwise. Then there was the question of professional advances, and I had to follow the course for my career. And when I traced out some time for my preserved subject to look into, I felt, it was by then quite late. Fortunately, the esteemed Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, under the Directorship of Dr. Mahavir Singh, came to feel my pulse, and I was granted this research project. In this case I remember with respect the help and suggestions offered by late A. K. Rai, who was then an executive member of the MAKAIAS, a renowned scholar by his own merit, and a member of Indian Foreign Service; and

his daughter Reshmi Dasgupta who was in journalism, but who did her best to get the proposal approved at the Ministry. A. K. Rai is now no more. But his support for fulfilling my desire to do something good to the people of the North East still occupies my mind.

The present work is the result of this project on the Majuli Island. Two major questions have been addressed here: one is concerning its geographical identity-its distinction as a river-made island, and the other is its heritage character arising out of its geographical identity and religious distinction. The address has been made through an attempt at understanding of certain socio-economic and cultural aspects of the people on one hand, and its geographical antiquity and topographical conditions on the other.

The project was started from January, 2004. It was a two and a half year project to be completed by the middle of 2006. But it was not a work on a society which could be investigated in all times. Majuli island being cut off from the mainland by vast watermass all around, and it being subject to flood almost for the half of the year, field investigations could not be done in all the times. This was more so when flood seasons lengthen, and insurgency occupies the mind and movement of the society. *Bandh* due to killings and other causes, had made my work sufficiently slow for which I had to request the MAKAIAS authority many times to consider further extension. On the way, the two research assistants dropped themselves from the service to join their jobs elsewhere. To this must I add the poverty of power supply from which this University suffers regularly so that often I had to spend the whole day, or days together, without work. All this had made my work much delayed. I must thank the MAKAIAS authority for allowing me extended times to make amends for that delay.

I am indebted to the two Research Assistants, particularly to Sri Debajyoti Khataniar, who supplied me necessary materials as and when I needed them from the field. I am also grateful to all the individuals, Government Departments and institutions of Majuli which accorded their cooperation and help in the process of my completing the work. In this regard, I must sincerely remember the cooperation of Garamuriya *Satradhikara* Harideva Goswami, Auniatiya *Satradhikara* Dr. Pitambaradeva Goswami, Natun Kamalabariya *Satradhikara* Narayan Chandra Goswami, Uttar Kamalabariya *Satradhikara* Janardandeva Goswami, noted educationist of Majuli Bagaram Nath, Prof. K. C. Bora, Prof. R. P. Deori, Prof. D. Doley and Prof. J. N. Sarma of Dibrugarh University, Jagat Bora, Sri Rajib Lochan Pegu, MLA, Majuli, Hiteswar Bora, Ghana Kanta Nath, my friends Mrs. Arati Bora of the History Department of Majuli College, Mrs. Minati Saikia of Garamur

Pitambardeva High School, Rajen Bora of the Economics Department, Majuli College, Prof. Himadri Banerjee of Jadavpur University, Kolkata, Sri Manik Bora, a noted writer from Majuli, and all the Government Departments stationed at Majuli, and above all, all respondents from whom I have taken so much information in the process of completing this work.

Prof. Kulendu Pathak, the last Vice Chancellor of Dibrugarh University, had offered every kind of cooperation in my work. It was he without whose encouragement and cooperation the working out of the report would not have been possible. Equally, I would like to offer my thanks to Dr. K.K. Deka, the then Registrar and present Vice-Chancellor of the University, for all kinds of his official help and cooperation in carrying out the project. It is certainly my sincere duty to acknowledge my thanks to my wife Dr. Jahnabi Gogoi Nath, Professor and Head of the Department of History, Dibrugarh University, who offered all sorts of help and inspiration in completing the work. I must acknowledge that in most of the problems which I have experienced in the course of the work, she was the only person who encouraged me to face them, and helped me in solving them out. To this category of supporting people who offered to inspire me in more than one way, is Mr. Chandan Kumar Sarma, my junior colleague in the Department of History, without whose help a few books would have remained untouched in the process of preparing the report, which were of immense significance. Last but not, of course the least, I must acknowledge my thanks to my elder brother Sri Punaram Nath, Head Master, Jakaibowa Kalia M.E. School, Majuli, and my younger brother Sri Gunamani Nath, Vice-Principal, Garamur Pitambardeva College, Majuli, for their help in collecting data and for their constant inspiration in completing the work. In this group of constant inspirants are my two children—Mauman and Iman who exerted much pressure on me to swiftly complete the work. Equally I am grateful to Prof. H. Goswami of the Economics Department, Dibrugarh University, who has very carefully gone through some portions of the work scrutinizing their contents and compitions. I would also record my thanks to Sri Hemanta Kumar Nath, my cousin, and a lecturer of English, Sibsagar College, Jaysagar, for carefully looking at the draft. My thanks are also due to Sri Bidyut Chutiya who has typed out the work.

Place: Dibrugarh, Assam

Date: 30-10-2008



D. Nath

Contents

Foreword / vii

Preface / ix

Abbreviations / xvi

1.

INTRODUCTION / 1

Geography / 1

Vaishnavism / 2

Population / 3

Economy / 4

Location and Extent / 5

Antiquity / 7

Tracing the Geographical Background / 12

Ecology and Environment / 20

2.

SOCIETY / 38

Caste-Class Divisions / 56

Food / 58

Dresses and Wears of the People / 67

Position of Women / 70

Health and Family Planning / 73

Flood and Majuli / 77

Erosion in Majuli: Some Implications / 80

Decades Back—A Winter in Majuli / 85

Religion / 91

Education and Literature / 97

3.

ECONOMY

Agriculture, Occupation and Crafts / 115

Land System / 117

Agriculture / 120

Craft and Industries / 133

Labour / 143

- Employment as Occupation / 144
 Development of Communication System / 148
 Urban Growth and Emergence of New Trends in Economy / 152

4.

SATRAS OF MAJULI**The Neo Vaishnavite Institutions and Practices / 166**

- Early History / 166
 Classification of Satras / 174
 Inmates of the Satra: From Traditionalism to Modernism / 180
 Satra and Society / 183
 Performing Art in Satra / 190
 Fine Arts in the Satras / 197
 Satras—Internal Changes / 206
 Satra and Women / 209

5.

CULTURAL LIFE**Religious Festivals and Secular Celebrations / 222**

- Palnam / 222
 Ras Lila / 224
 Janmastami / 229
 Guru Tithis / 230
 Phalgutsav/Phakuwa/Dual Yatra / 232
 Barsik Bhaona-Sabah/Bar Sabah / 233
 Bihu / 237
 Ali-Aye-Lrigang / 243

6.

MAJULI IN THE STATE POLITY**Earliest Times to 20th Century / 252**

- Majuli in Tradition and History: Earliest times to 1228 / 252
 Majuli in Historical Times: 1228-1769 / 254
 Majuli in the Moamariya Revolt: 1769-1805 / 256
 Majuli During the Burmese Rule / 263
 Majuli in the Colonial Period (1826-1947) / 265
 Post-Independence Majuli / 279

EPILOGUE**Majuli—Past and Present / 290**

APPENDICES

I. Gaon Panchayatwise Village List and Population Figure of Majuli, 2001	303
II. Decennial Growth of Population in Majuli, 1901-2001	312
III. List of Revenue <i>Bils</i> in Majuli	313
IV. Medical and Health Facilities in Majuli	317
V. Road and Bridge Records of Majuli	319
VI. Market Growth in the Ratanpur Nayabazar Area, 2005 (A Survey)	322
VII. List of the Satras of Majuli (Past and Present)	326
VIII. Annual Cultural Programme of the Satras	330
IX. List of Select Manuscripts Preserved in a few Satras of Majuli	346
X. List of Freedom Fighters in Majuli	350
XI. Memorandum submitted by the Auniatiya Satradhikara to His Excellency Andrew Gourlay Clow, the Commissioner of Assam	357
XII. Table showing Women's Literary Rate, 2004-2005	358
XIII. Photo Copy of the Letter of Pitambardeva Goswami to Dehiram Nath (Ms.), dated 13 Kārtik, 1883 Saka	361
XIV. Open Letter to Sri Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, from Pitambar Deva Goswami	362
XV. A Cover Page from the Asam Bilasinee (12th Issue, 5th Year, March, 1876)	366
XVI. A Part from the Leaflet titled <i>Kartipakshya, Janasadharan aru Eke Pathar Pathik Guru Sakalar Ocharat Mor Antarar Bhav Nivedan, 28 Bohag, 1878 Sak</i> (used in the present work as <i>Confession</i>) by Pitambardeva Goswami, Satradhikara of Garamura Satra.	367

Bibliography / 368

Glossary / 375

Index / 379

Abbreviations

- ADB : *Ahomar Din* by H.Barbarua
- HAG : *A History of Assam* by E.A. Gait
- ABSM : *Asam Buranji obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta*
- ASBS : *Auniati Satrar Buranji* by T.N.Sarma
- DAB : *Deodhai Asam Buranji*
- MDPH : *Mahapurush Shrimat Dharmacharyya Pitambardev* by Gangadhar Hazarika
- GCK : *Guru Charit Katha* (ed.) M. Neog
- KGC : *Katha Guru Charit* (ed.) U. C. Lekharu
- SAB : *Satsari Asam Buranji*
- SHTN : *Sankaradeva And His Times* by M.Neog
- TB : *Tungkhungiya Buranji*

1

Introduction

Like few other places of India the Majuli Island in Assam is also a geographically and culturally known place with all its pride of past heritage and rich culture. A river-made island, Majuli is the largest of its kind over the world; and it is also the place of numerous Vaishnava monasteries of Assam called *Satra* that include the most well-known ones of the state. Naturally, its society also has some inherent features of its own, which are reflected in all aspects of its culture, although for an ordinary observer, its demography, economy, polity and culture may appear no different from those of the places like Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Nagaon, Tezpur, Guwahati, Goalpara, or for that matter, any other place of the state. It is not unlikely for some others to contend that the island is populated by the same people as found in other places of the state, and that they are members of the same culture as their brethren elsewhere. The most significant aspect of similarity they may see is in that all indigenous people here who have inhabited the island since at least the middle ages, inherit the same history and heritage as people in other parts of the state. To such viewers, topographically too, the island may not be much different from other parts of the country. For, Majuli nourishes the same soil pattern and topography and, therefore, agriculture and economy as any other riverine belt of the state; and its inhabitants live in the same pattern of houses, eat same food and use same dress and ornaments. Thus Majuli presents, according to them, a part of the whole system of the society. But this does not speak the entire truth about the island and its people, and their culture and society.

GEOGRAPHY

Majuli is, first, a river-made island, a water-locked inhabited zone; and, second, it is known as a land of the *Satra* which has made its life and culture distinguished from other societies. Being an island cut off from the mainland, its inhabitants had no free contact with the mainstream society in early times, nor the mainstream had such contact with it. It is

sometimes said that most of the old generation people, born and brought up in the island, did not even cross the Brahmaputra to see the other banks of the great river during their life time. This was the situation till at least the sixties and seventies of the last century. The present investigator was informed by a few illiterate women of the island that they had never been to Jorhat, the nearest town on the other side of the Brahmaputra, the last capital of the Ahom state in the monarchical days. Crossing of the large river in boats before introduction of the steamer services during the British rule was so difficult and discouraging that only a few persons dared to cross the river for purposes unavoidable, who used to offer some *pūjā* or prayer and give feast to the neighbours before starting their journey as if that was their farewell function. Even today, hardly any village woman of old generation dare cross the great river without offering a prayer and some amount of *dakshina* to that large river and go out to the cities unless required by reasons of health. As a result, till a few decades ago rural Majuli presented the picture of a medieval society. Old beliefs and superstitions and blind support to whatever was preached by the religious *gurus* had kept it an unchanging, stagnant society. At the close of the 19th century, B.C. Allen, recorded that an 'old-world air' pervades the entire island¹ indicating that no sense of modernism till that time prevailed over the people.

Majuli being surrounded by water on all sides was a secluded site even before it took the form of a concrete island. It was then a kind of protected sanctuary sheltering varieties of wild animals—elephants, tigers, rhinoceros and others, and many migratory birds. During the middle ages, this topographical situation was taken advantage of by the rulers of the land who sometimes used it as a hunting ground,² sometimes, as a war camp,³ and sometimes as a place for exiles or punishment.⁴

VAISHNAVISM

The fact stated above does not, however, explain the total distinction of the island. Being perhaps a part of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa as testified by various legends, and in later times, of the Chutiya and the Bhuyan territories,⁵ Majuli was always an inhabited area although its population density was certainly very thin.⁶ Nakul Chandra Bhuyan, in his *Bara Bhuyanr Chamu Buranji*, has stated that after the main stream of the Brahmaputra had shifted to the course of the Dihing,^{6(a)} many villages on the mouth of the Dihing in its right bank became part of the Majuli island.⁷ It was here that Sankaradeva (1449-1568), the chief Vaishnava preacher and social reformer of the 15th-16th century Assam, first established his Satra at a place called Belaguri Dhuwahat and

proselytized Madhavdeva (1498-1596), chief among his disciples, in the first quarter of the sixteenth century.⁸ This historical background consequently opened the way for the next chapter of the growth of Neo-Vaishnavism there in the second half of the 17th century. Taking inspiration from this fact, and from the fact that the place was (and still is) isolated enough to accommodate the revolting Vaishnava spirit, the Ahom kings of Assam who ruled the state for about six hundred years beginning with the first part of the 13th century A.D., made it the home of the Vaishnava preachers by a royal decree so that all preachers would have their place in the island.⁹ Thus, Majuli became a land of the religious preachers and of their monasteries called Satras. Since then a large number of the monasteries had been established either through the king or through personal endeavour of the preachers. It is said that once there were about hundred such Satras in Majuli. Thus in course of time, Majuli became a place of the Vaishnava monasteries and the Vaishnava *gurus*, and therefore, a pilgrim's place to be properly called the 'Vatican of Hinduism'.¹⁰ It was from this fact, that the island came to be called as '*Etaka Mahantar Than*'.¹¹

The Satras were, and still are, the most influential socio-cultural organizations of the land, and every person—old or young, belong to one or the other of the Satras.¹² Members from non-Hindu and tribal families too are here under the stamp of the Satra culture which has shaped not only their moral life, but also their material culture. The Vaishnava monasteries are the centres of all sorts of arts and crafts, music and dance, and other forms of performing arts, such as theatrical performance called *bhāṅga*. Dances cultivated in the Satras called *Satriya Nritya*, form the classical Assamese dance forms. Similarly, songs called *bargeet*, composed by Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavdeva respectively, form the most distinguished class of Assamese classical song. It is to be noted that being the land of the Vaishnava monasteries, and isolated from the mainland urban society, people of the island developed peculiar behavioural patterns—simplicity of living, contented, and receptive in nature. Indeed, they form a distinct social unit with distinct value system that deserves to be noted.

POPULATION—COMPLEX

Being an isolated zone¹³ with abundance of unoccupied land, Majuli provided shelter to all immigrants coming from all around since the middle ages, particularly from its northern border across the Suvansiri river. Originating on the northern hills, this river has served as a migration route since ancient times; and it was through this river route that a section

of the hill tribes now known as Mising (earlier *Miri*) came down and settled in the northern and northeastern part of the island.¹⁴ It was from the north again, that large flocks of fugitives from erstwhile East Pakistan migrated to the island and settled in its periphery. Known earlier as *Silathiya* (Sylhetty) they now form a good segment of its population.¹⁵

Demographically, the society of the island presents a diversified complex, beginning with the tribes to the highly acculturated Brahmans and the Kayasthas. Among the tribes the most numerous are the Misings, earlier known as *Miri*. They form, according to the last census report, 34 per cent of the total population of the island. Other tribes include the Deoris and the Kacharis who together with the Misings form 43 per cent of the total strength, while the Scheduled Caste population forms about 15 per cent. According to the census of 1901, the density of population in the island was 24 per sq. km., which has reached the mark of 362 in 2001, which is higher than the state average of 340.^{15(a)} According to the same census report, it has a population of 1,53,400 souls consisting of 79,481 males and 73,919 females, their ratio being 930:1000.¹⁶ The society of the island could be seen also in terms of various linguistic and religious groups. There are Bengali, Marwari, Bihari (Deswali), Nepali, and a few Muslims. Thus the society of the island attracts much attention in so far as its varieties and distinguishing nature is concerned. One important aspect of their system is that despite all differences among themselves the people belong to a culture that is distinguished by what is called as *Majulial*—simplicity in behaviour and spirituality in living.

ECONOMY

Geographical location and topographic condition have much to do with the island's economy. Being surrounded by water on all sides, the land was once prone to recurring floods which were, of course, a regular source of fertility of the soil. Crops, therefore, regularly and abundantly grew here.¹⁷ But, due to its geographical condition, cultivation of summer rice called *qhu*, and the long variety called *bao* are still popular than wet rice called *sali*. Among the cash crops, mustard and varieties of pulses are abundantly produced. But as flood also is a strong threat to agriculture, winter crop has now become more popular here than summer crop which is uncertain in nature. There is no industrial work worth the name. Boat building has been, however, a known craft here since early times. Similarly, pottery has been still a widely practised craft of a section of its people as the riverbank soil found a few feet below the surface, is its best source. Thus, both boat and pottery form a part of its river-borne trade commodities since early times. Fishing is a profession of a significant

section of the people in the island. But many other traditional professions are slowly dying for want of innovation and competence.

There are a few semi-urban centers in Majuli; but no town as such. In recent years small townships are slowly emerging at Kamalabari and Garamur. Barring these two places, the entire Majuli is considered as rural area, and is treated as a *char*.^{17(a)}

LOCATION AND EXTENT

Believed to be the largest river made island in the world,¹⁸ Majuli, a subdivision of the Jorhat District of Assam today, is situated between 26°-25' and 27°-12' North Latitude and 93°-39' and 94°-35' East Longitude. Situated at 85 meters above the mean sea level; on the north of this island flows the old stream of the Brahmaputra—the *Luit* or the *Luhit Suti* with a thin stream of water at present and sparsely located reservoirs of water here and there creating numerous *chaporis* in its course. Its eastern part is called *Kherkatiya Suti* and the western part is *Suvansiri* (also spell as Subansiri). This part called *Suvansiri* is named after the river Suvansiri which is a tributary of the Brahmaputra (Luhit), and which, coming down from the northern hills, has fallen to the great river almost at the middle point of the island. Since the source of the *Luhit Suti* at its junction with the Brahmaputra through the *Kherkatiya Suti* has now been blocked by the Government of Assam by building a gigantic embankment across it,¹⁹ this part, till it conjugates with the Suvansiri river, is now dead leaving the latter to flow alone over the old course of the Luhit covering the part to the west from its confluence. On the south of the island flows the Brahmaputra proper which was once the course of the Dihing and Dikhow combined. Thus, the two extreme ends of the island—east and west, are marked by the bifurcation and unification respectively of the two channels of the same great river.

That Majuli has been a large island ever since is evident from the beginning of its known history. Muhammad Cazim, for example, the biographer of emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707), has stated that it was about 50 *kosh* in length²⁰ which is equivalent to 100 miles. In the last decade of the 18th century the British officer Ensign Wood, who was assigned the duty of surveying the Brahmaputra and preparing a report on Assam for the Company Government when he accompanied Captain Thomas Welsh to Assam in 1792 to quell the Moamariya disturbances,²¹ has recorded that the island ended at Kajalimukh, in Nagoan (southern mouth of the Kalang) comprising roughly 130 miles in direct line up to Tekelipotarmukh in the east where the Brahmaputra divides itself into two branches, the Luit or Brahmaputra and the Dihing.²² As published in

the map prepared by Arrowsmith and Company in London in 1814 on the basis of data collected by Ensign Wood, J.P. Wade and others, it was recorded as 'a very large island'²³.

Dr. J.P. Wade, who also accompanied Captain Welsh to Assam as a military surgeon in 1792, on the basis of his personal experience collected from the Assamese people, and on his own observation, has stated that at the close of the 18th century the island was about 160 miles in length and 60 miles in breadth in the maximum.²⁴ He wrote, "Above Coliaburh, and opposite to Banfangh, the two great streams called the Dehingh and Looicheh, formed by the principal branches of the Berhampooter, form a junction and again assume the name of the last. The interval from Banfangh on the west to Baignman on the east, is occupied by the great island, called by preeminence Majuli; one hundred and sixty miles are calculated as the length, and sixty miles as the utmost breadth of the third division of Assam."²⁵ Wade's calculation was based on the presumption that a man in those days and in such topographic conditions, could traverse on foot about 20 miles a day.²⁶ He has further stated that the island was then covering the territory extending over the region from Banfangh/Zoontiaran, a place about 40 miles above Kaliabar, in the west, to Baignman in the east. To be more specific, he further says, "The larger, and more rapid stream, named the Dehingh, takes its course to the southward, and passing Soonai, Deoorgown, and other celebrated places, turns to the westward, and joins the Looicheh opposite to Zoontiaran, about forty miles above Coliabar. Poolarghaut, on the southern, and Phogaderagown on the northern bank, are near the junction of these rivers. ... Ten miles above Coliabar, and a little below Soolalpath, the Berhampooter discharges a considerable branch to the southward, through Coliabar, Korungi, Nagown, Bebizia, Pait-burra-cossari, Jevointia, Dimurooa, Maiyung, and Kawjuli, where it resumes its connection with the Berhampooter at Kawjulimook, about twenty miles above Goahawtee, after performing a semi-circular course of one hundred and sixty miles or more, and returning in a northerly and westerly direction."²⁷

Thus, all early British writers while referring to Majuli after him, termed it as a "great/large island"; and in cases where they themselves took some kind of survey, they specified it in their own terminologies and concepts. For example, in the beginning of the 19th century, Francis Hamilton has recorded that "This island is said to be $7\frac{3}{4}$ days journey by land in length, and from one half to three fourths of a day's journey in width, the former we may call 30 miles in a direct line, and the width may be from ten to fifteen miles."²⁸ Similarly, A.J. Moffatt Mills, the Judge of the Sadar Dewani Adalat, Calcutta (Kolkata), who visited Assam in 1853, has reported that at that time the area of the Majuli island covered some

2,82,165 acres of land of which 7446 acres only paid rent.²⁹ Similarly, B. C. Allen while compiling the *Gazetteer of Eastern Bengal and Assam*, wrote in 1905 that Majuli island covered an area of 485 square miles, its western extremity being at the mouth of the Dhansiri river.³⁰

There is no doubt that once Majuli island covered a large tract of land. Records show that in the beginning of the 20th century it covered $\frac{2}{3}$ of the total area of the Jorhat subdivision of the then Sibsagar District.³¹ But, the island has been always prone to erosion since inception with consequent result of gradual reduction of its territorial extent. This is not only evidenced by large-scale migration of its inhabitants to other parts of the state, it has also been testified by growing population density in the island. As found in the state government revenue records, its area which was some 1246 square kilometers in 1950, was reduced to 924 square kilometers in 1971. It was further reduced to 875 square kilometers in 1997, and 480 square kilometers in 2001.³² It is stated by the older generation there that erosion has become more rampant and a havoc to the island since the 1950 great earthquake. Even at the time of preparation of this work, erosion of the island has been going on posing a threat to the Bengenaati Satra and its neighbourhood.

ANTIQUITY

The history of the creation of this island is shrouded in obscurity. Neither the date nor the record of the event of creation of this island has been available to us at present. However, on the basis of certain geographical evidences and literary accounts, it may be presumed that Majuli took its island shape at least before the 13th century A.D., before Sukapha's coming to the Brahmaputra valley in the year 1228.

Existence of an island between the Dihing river (combined with a stream of the Brahmaputra or Luit) and the Brahmaputra (the old stream Luit) at least as early as the 13th century A.D. can be known from the early Assamese chronicles. It has been mentioned in one of such chronicles that Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom state in Assam in the early 13th century, had followed the course of the Dihing river down the Patkai up to the Luit or Brahmaputra through which he sailed down and arrived at a place called Habung. Here at Habung he stayed for three years; but finding that the place was low-lying and affected by regular flood, he sailed further downstream (the Luit) and arrived at the mouth of the Dikhow river through which he sailed upstream and arrived at Sangtak near Charaideo within the area covered by the present Sivasagar district of Assam.³³ This geographical narration of the chronicle gives us a picture whereby it can be presumed that the mouth of the Dikhow at that time

was not very far from Sangtak, and that Habung was lying on the Brahmaputra a little to the west from the mouth of the Dihing, but contiguous to the mouth of the Dikhow. This mouth of the Dikhow river was certainly not the one at Kaliabar in Nagaon as known from the local tradition which states that at one time Dikhow had an independent course with the Brahmaputra till it empties itself into the great river at Kaliabar.³⁴ For it is not presumable in the then geographical context to think that Sukapha, sailed upstream the Dikhow from Kaliabar to Charaideo. Nor this mouth can be somewhere further east from Kaliabar on the northern branch of the Brahmaputra (called Luit) beyond the territory covered by the Majuli island. There is no record to show that the Dikhow had ever joined the old Brahmaputra on the north across the Majuli island. In that case there would have been a running stream (of the Tuni river) joining the Brahmaputra with the Luit across the island. The location of Habung and its nature of being a regularly flood affected region is to be noted in this regard. It appears to us that Habung at that time either included the region covered by the Majuli island, or the island itself was called Habung, a word which is derived from Bodo root meaning low lying and extensive flood-affected region, a name that points to the area of Majuli.³⁵ It is interesting to note that while narrating Sukapha's route from Patkai to Charaideo through the courses of the Dihing, the Brahmaputra and the Dikhow the chronicler did not mention the name Majuli, although it was certain that he was sure to arrive at the mouth of the Dikhow only after passing over a part of this island region.

Another chronicle, containing the geographical narration of the campaign of the Koch king Naranarayan (1540-1587) against the Ahom kingdom in 1562, has stated that Chilarai, the Koch general, had halted first at Dikhowmukh, and from there, he deputed one Lathuna Karji, his deputy, to proceed upstream through the Luit and then downstream through the Dihing to arrive at the mouth of the Dilih,³⁶ a tributary of the Dikhow.³⁷ This geographical scenario indicates the existence of an island located between the Luit on the north and the Dihing on the south which were forming the eastern extremity of the island through their junction. It also speaks of two mouths (*mukh*) of the Dikhow (one forming the western extremity of the Majuli island, while the other lying on the Dihing on the south of Majuli which was nearer to Gargaon. Thus, it was possible for a person to sail upstream the Luit (on the north) and then downstream the Dihing (on the south) and reach the mouth of Dikhow on the way. Therefore, it can perhaps be contended on the basis of this chronicle that from Narayanpur onwards the fleet of Naranarayan followed the course of the Luit flowing on the north of Majuli and reached its eastern extremity from where it turned westward downstream the Dihing and arrived at the

mouth of the Dikhow. This further indicates that by that time the eastern border of the Majuli island was almost demarcated by the channel of the Dihing which has left its old mouth and has fallen into the course of the Dikhow that finally emptied into the Brahmaputra at Solalpath near Mahura about 40 miles to the east of Kaliabar by creating an almost a straight course.³⁸ As a matter of fact, another Assamese chronicle has referred to the island in the Brahmaputra very much distinctly as 'Luitar Majuli.' It has been stated therein that the Koch king Naranarayan had made his camp at Majuli, and it was there at the camp, that he received the tributes and presents from the Ahom king Sukhapha *alias* Khora Raja (1548-1563) who was defeated in the war.³⁹ In another such early chronicles also it has been stated that during his campaign, Naranarayan built a road (the *Gohain Kamala Ali*) from Koch Behar up to Narayanpur on the north, from where he sailed upstream the Luit and reached Chinatoli at Habung and made his camp at Juriya.⁴⁰ The name Chinatoli is well-known in the northeastern part of Majuli near Ratanpur. While Habung indicates a larger area, Chinatoli is a historic village of Majuli; and Juriya might have meant the junction of the two large rivers, for it is also recorded in the same chronicle that the Koch army then crossed the Dihing and reached the Ahom capital at Charaideo (through the Dikhow).⁴¹ The crossing of the Dihing by the Koch soldiers at the point of the mouth of the Dikhow to arrive at Charaideo, when their king was encamping at Majuli, is important, for this information clarifies that by that time the Dihing was taking its southern course through the Dikhow, a process which had created the Majuli island. There is still another chronicle in original Tai, which mentions that the Koch army under Naranarayan and Chilarai advanced up to Narayanpur on the north and then crossing the Luit entered Majuli. "The Koch king entered into our country and stopped in Majuli. Chaopha Sukham ordered Chao Phru Phrang Ikhek to go to the Koch king to negotiate peace with an offer of two gold vessels, two silver vessels and a large silver jar. Chao Ikhek came to the Koch king who was in Majuli and offered him those things."⁴² The Koch king received them along with the hostages at the turn of the *Dariya jan (dariya janar kokh)*.⁴³ It appears that the Koch forces divided themselves into two parts at Narayanpur, one was a fleet under the command of Chilarai, while the other was a land force under the command of king Naranarayan.⁴⁴

The next reference to the island by name (*Majali*) is found in another chronicle where it is stated that king Pratap Singha (1603-1641) built an embankment connecting the northern and the southern borders of his kingdom called *Meragarh* in Majuli, *Choatar* Garh on the north bank, and *Lahdoi* and *Kotoha Garh* on the south bank.⁴⁵ But the most distinctive mention of the island is made by Muhammad Cazim, the biographer of

emperor Aurangzeb, who, on the information supplied to him by the soldiers accompanying Mir Jumla to Assam, has mentioned the island as existing between the rivers Dihing and the Brahmaputra. In his language "To the northward is the plain of Khata (Tibet/Chia), that has been before mentioned as the place from whence the Brahmaputra issues, which is afterwards fed by several rivers that flow from the southern mountains of Assam. The principal of these is the Dhonce (Dihing), which has before occurred in this history. It joins that broad river at the village Luckeigereh (Lakhaugarh). Between these rivers is an island well inhabited, and in an excellent state of tillage..... extending to the distance of about fifty cos,"⁴⁶ equal to 100 miles. It is interesting that Cazim not only recorded that there was an island between the Brahmaputra and the Dihing, but he has also recorded its length.⁴⁷ Significant aspect about this information is that it was supplied to him by soldiers accompanying Mir Jumla to Assam in 1662 who had direct experience about the physical geography of this region.

Towards the second half of the 18th century we get a different account from a more serious observer. It was in the year 1792-94 that a serious internal commotion in the state⁴⁸ invited the British intervention, and Captain Welsh of the Bengal army, had to launch a campaign to the state to quell the internal disorders.⁴⁹ He was accompanied by a group of experts including Dr. John Peter Wade, a medical surgeon, and Colonel Ensign Wood. Wade has mentioned this island as Majuli, and gives an estimate of its measurement on the basis of information supplied to him by the people and on his own observation.⁵⁰

Thus, the large island located between the Brahmaputra and the Dihing, has been known since at least the 13th century onwards. It is not known by what name it was called at that time. But it appears from contemporary geographical narrations as recorded in the early Assamese chronicles that it was perhaps called by the name Habung. The simple reason for such a contention is that after crossing the Patkai, Sukapha is recorded to have followed the course of the river Dihing downwards till he arrived at the Luit or Brahmaputra. Then he followed the Brahmaputra downstream to arrive at Habung. Being affected by regular flood, he is stated to have left Habung and sailing down stream the Brahmaputra he arrived at the mouth of the Dikhow wherefrom he sailed upstream that river and reached Charaideo.⁵¹ This geographical picture indicates that Habung was no other than Majuli, a part of which falls in between the mouths of the Dihing and the Dikhow, or at least, Majuli formed a part of it. That this contention has some ground can also be understood in the light of its morphology. As we have stated above, Habung is a Bodo word meaning a low-lying flood prone area.⁵² This fact justifies Majuli's identification with Habung

as it is a low-lying and flood-prone area. It is to be noted that Majuli and its neighbourhood was once ruled by the Chutiyas who belong to the Bodos.⁵³

It is difficult to ascertain when did the name *Majuli* first came to be used replacing the word Habung, if at all, it was so called. But there is confirmed evidence to show that the first mention of the term *Majuli* to mean that island of the Brahmaputra, was made at least before the mid-16th century A.D. In an old Assamese chronicle the compound word—*Luitar Majuli* (literally, island of the Luit/Brahmaputra) was used as early as 1562 to mean the island.⁵⁴ Consequently, that *Luitar Majuli* became simply ‘Majuli’ indicating the conversion of a terminology to a nomenclature. So, in some other chronicles the island is very clearly mentioned by the name Majuli.⁵⁵ The present author, however, believed that the island was called *Majali* prior to its taking a complete island form, which, then it was believed, took place long after the 16th century.⁵⁶ Some others even went to the extent of explaining the formation of the word (*Majali*) as *maj+ali* i.e. a road lying in between: *maj* means middle/in between, and *ali* means road⁵⁷ although it might be known that in Assamese there is no provision for conjugation of words (*sandhi*). There is no doubt that the word *Majali* sometimes occurs in some of the literary and epigraphic records along with the name Majuli. But these mentions are not only casual, but also indicative of being a substitute of the term Majuli. We find how even as late as the 19th century *Majuli* and *Majali* were synonymously used to mean the same island. Thus in Kasinath Tamuli Phukan’s *Asam Buranji Puthi* (1844) we find the term *Majali*,⁵⁸ and in Harakanta Barua Sadaramin’s *Asam Buranji* (c. 1870-1880) as *Majoli*, and Maniram Dewan’s *Buranji Vivek Ratna* as *Majali*⁵⁹ while Hiteswar Barbarua in his work has used the word *Majali*.⁶⁰ Further, in a land grant inscription of the Bengenaati Satra recording grant of land to the Satra in Majuli in the year 1699 *Sak* (1777 A.D.) we find both the terms—*Majuli* and *Majali*. Interestingly, this inscription adds a third term—*Majali* to mean the same island.⁶¹ It is interesting to note that the term *Majali* and *Majuli* were used in the early chronicles indiscriminately to mean any island in the Brahmaputra. For example, the *Asam Buranji* obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta, which is one of the earliest pieces of the Assamese chronicles, has mentioned that the Mughal forces were fought by the Ahom army in the year 1634 at the *Majulir bali* (sandy shore of the island) at Agiathuti in Guwahati.⁶² This Majuli of the chronicle is simply an island in the Brahmaputra. It is far more interesting to note that the same chronicle mentions both the terms—*Majali* and *Majuli* to mean the same island in a different context.⁶³ Similarly, in the *Satsari Asam Buranji*

and the *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, two of such early chronicles, we find both the terms—*Majuli* and *Majali* or *Mojali*—all casually used to mean the island.⁶⁴ Thus, *Majali*, *Majali*, *Mojali* or *Majoli* can be some of the corrupt forms of the name Majuli. There is, therefore, no denying the fact that *Majali*, *Majali*, *Mojali* or *Majoli* are some of the local or individual uses only on part of the copiers, or writers of the chronicles or of the epigraphs. They do not indicate certain geographical stages of the island at its formation process. As a result, the word *Majali* which was earlier used by the present author and by some others to mean the land mass lying between the Dihing-Dikhow combined and the Luit, i.e. the strip of peninsular land extending from the southern mainland like a gourd that finally formed Majuli, has perhaps no standing.⁶⁵ It is significant that no British record dealing with the geography and topography of this region beginning at least with the 18th century has mentioned the island by any other name than Majuli (written, of course, with different spellings). Existing evidences, make it clear that the term *Majuli* to specifically mean the great island, emerged during the 16th century, more specifically, in the mid-16th century when Assamese language slowly became popular in the official circle of the Ahom state. It is to be noted that when Suhungmung *alias* Dihingiya Raja conquered Panbari across the Luit to the west of Majuli, he conquered Habung, a name which we have identified with a place that included Majuli, on the way, in the year 1512, and subjugated its Bhuyans.⁶⁶ But, when Naranarayan, the Koch king, invaded the Ahom kingdom in the year 1562, he encamped at the Majuli island (but not referred to it as Habung) of the Brahmaputra and received tributes from the Ahom king at the turning of the *Dariya jan*,⁶⁷ a dead river channel, a part of which is still inside the Majuli island.⁶⁸ Thus, the years from 1512-1562 were significant in the history of the island in so far the development of its name (*Majuli*) is concerned.

TRACING THE GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Some Presumptions

On the basis of traditions it was once believed that the island was created due to extensive siltation by the Brahmaputra at its bottom.⁶⁹ Researches done on the subject, however, have shown that the island was created due mainly to the geological causes leading consequently to the changes of the courses of the two rivers—Dihing and the Brahmaputra. The time and the process of creation of the island are, however, still remaining hypothetical.

According to traditions prevalent among the Assamese people, once (in unknown ancient times) the Dikhow had an independent course running almost parallel to the course of the Brahmaputra till it met that great river at Kajalimukh in Nagaon.⁷⁰ At that time Disang, Dikhow, Jhanji and Dhansiri were Dikhow's tributaries; and Dihing was falling into the Brahmaputra 'further east'.⁷¹ In between the courses lay a long and a narrow strip of land extending from the southern landmass with almost all characters of an isolated island.⁷²

In course of time (that too is not known when), the junction of the Dihing with the Brahmaputra, slowly dried due possibly to some geological process and consequent siltation in its mouth leading the course of the river to divert towards Dekhow.⁷³ It is presumable that there might have been already some connecting but peripheral or dead channel, or depression in the span of the landmass lying between the Dihing and the Dikhow which had facilitated Dihing's diversion towards the latter river. As a result of this turn a strong and a large volume of water began to pass through the course of the Dikhow making its course almost straight and parallel to the course of the Brahmaputra. This strong flow of water fell into the Brahmaputra at Lakhaw, about forty miles above Kaliabar in Nagaon leaving a part of Dikhow's old course beyond Lakhaw to fall into the Brahmaputra at Kajalimukh.⁷⁴ According to the traditions that left out part of the Dikhow beyond Lakhaw is the Kalang river of Nagaon.⁷⁵ As a result of the straightening of the course of the Dikhow, another curve of that river, resembling the circumference of a bow was left out on its right bank within what later came to be known as Majuli. This part of the Dikhow, according to the same tradition, is the Tuni river of the great island.⁷⁶ Lieutenant Wilcox, therefore, while collecting the tradition about the creation of the island, has stated that once "the Dihing did not disembogue itself where it does now into the Brahmaputra, but turning to the south-east received the Disang, and Dikho, the Jazi, and Disai river, and was discharged into the great river near Mahura."⁷⁷ It is possible that curves and channels of the Dikhow river creating and running around some smaller islands in its course facilitated the water mass of the Dihing river to flow straight through them from Majuli downwards as happened when the latter river first diverted itself to embrace the Dikhow leaving its old mouth.^{77(a)} Thus, at this time, as pointed out by Sir Edward Gait, the Brahmaputra "flowed down the course of what is now called the Lohit river, along the north of the Majuli island, while the Dihing followed the present channel of the Brahmaputra to the south of it, and, after receiving the waters of the Disang and the Dikhu, united with the Brahmaputra at its western extremity."⁷⁸ *Thus, the land mass now encircled by the Brahmaputra on the north, and the Dihing-Dikhow combined on the*

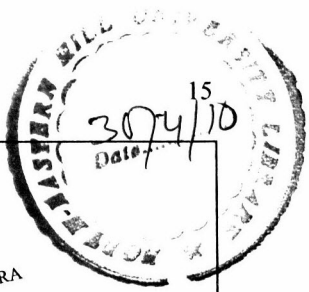
south took shape of an island in its most embryonic form with the half-dead mouth of the Dihing demarcating its eastern extremity. This historic event must have happened at least before the 13th century A.D. when Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom state in Assam, had arrived in the Brahmaputra valley. The narration of Sukapha's travel through the Dihing-Brahmaputra-Dikhow streams towards Charaideo as recorded in the early Assamese chronicles, and as stated above, is indicative of such a conclusion.

Dikhow, now being embraced by the Dihing with its enormous volume of water, came to be called as Dihing, and the former became one of its major tributaries. As a result, when in the middle of the 17th century the big Satras were established in Majuli, the biographical works of the *Satradhikaras* have mentioned them to have been established on the south of the Brahmaputra.⁷⁹ There was, however, a small stream of water that had been maintaining the connection between the Dihing and the Brahmaputra through the former river's old mouth which could still then be topographically very much distinguished. This stream was perennial, periodical or occasional; and, as could be presumed, had been living during the summer.

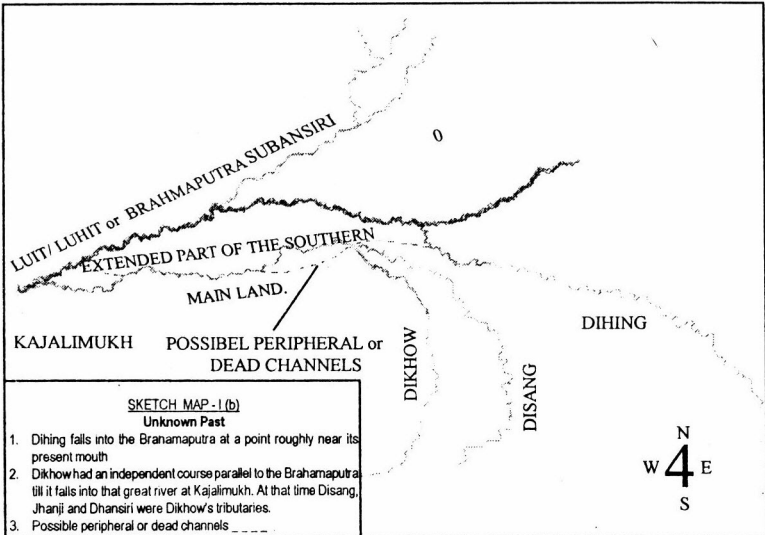
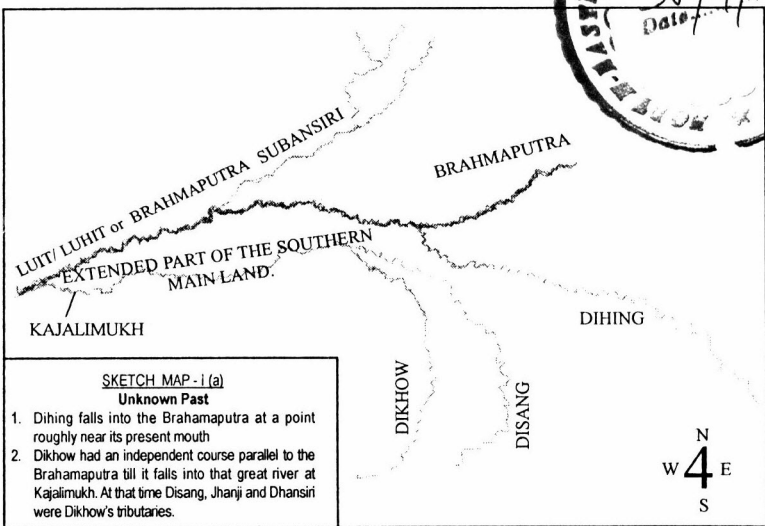
Be that as it may, the landmass lying between the two large and long streams of water now took the shape of an island—*chapori*, variously called in Assamese as *Luitar Majuli*, *Majuli*, *Majali*, *Mojali*, *Majoli*, or *Majuli chapori*, etc. all meaning a piece of land encircled by river waters,⁸⁰ although the extreme eastern boundary was till then very much flexible, not well-demarcated. In the Assamese dictionary therefore, *Majali* is called an adjective of Majuli and is defined simply as a landmass encircled by water.⁸¹ In the chronicles, inscriptions and the biographical literature, therefore, while describing any event of later times where the island was associated, all the terms were found to have been used indiscriminately to mean the same place according to the practice of the writers or copiers.⁸² This clearly shows that the landmass that formed *Majali* or *Majuli* was possibly not known at that time by the name *Majuli* or *Majali*; for had it been so called, Sukapha's chronicler must have mentioned it by name as he had done in other cases, and, as he must have passed a part of it to arrive at the mouth of the Dikhow.⁸³ After this geographical developments both Dikhow and the Dihing had two confluences—one each at the places of their merger, and the other—first at Kajalimukh in Nagaon, and then subsequently at Solalpath or Lakhaugarh near Mahuramukh where the two jointly emptied into the Brahmaputra.⁸⁴

The final stage was extraordinary; and it reflects nature's secret power to create and destroy. The major channel of the Brahmaputra then flowing on the north might have faced natural blockade in its course by its own

305472



Introduction



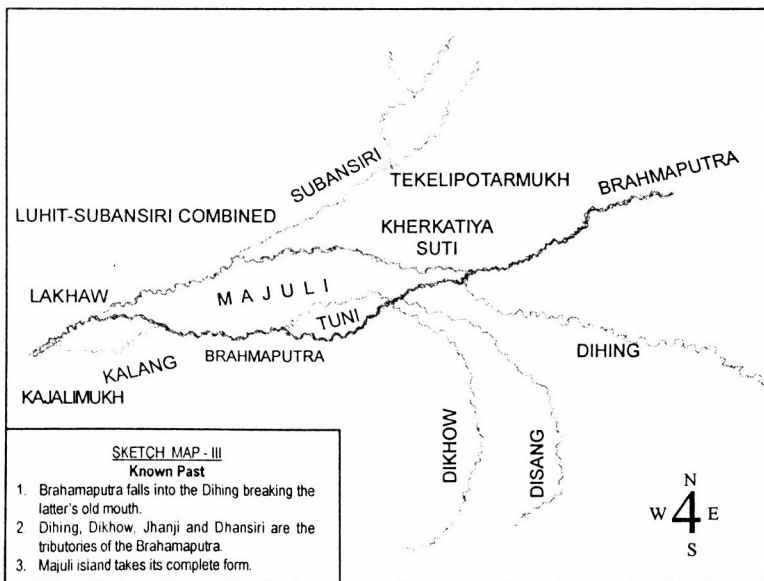
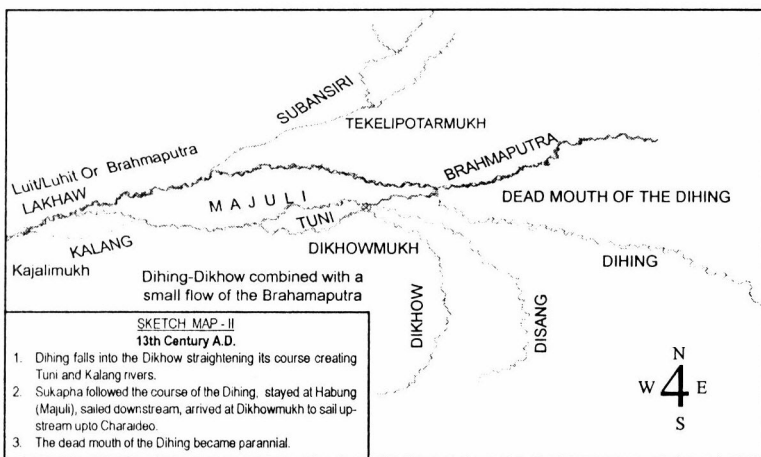
deposition leading a major volume of its water to divert to and flow through the courses of the Dihing-Dikhow combined through the perennial stream at the dying mouth of the Dihing. Traditions have it that a great flood which occurred in the Dihing river in the year 1735, or half a century before that date, led to the diversion of the course of the Brahmaputra to fall into the Dihing, consequently completing the process of creating Majuli as a well-demarcated island. Recording this tradition in 1825 Lieutenant Wilcox has stated that he was informed by one Bagadamara Barphukan and some well-informed Assamese gentlemen that in the year 1735 or about fifty years before that date (all on ordinary presumption) there was a great flood in the Dihing/Dihong river the force of which was so great that by breaking one side of its bank the forceful stream created a new channel of the Dihing (called Noa-Dihing) and then fell into the Brahmaputra for which the latter took a southern turn near Tekelipotarmukh and joined the existing channel of the Dihing-Dikhow-Disang combined.⁸⁵ After this event the main channel of the Brahmaputra flowing on the north of Majuli, slowly died. This event finalized the process shaping the land mass into a well-demarcated island, distinctly cut off from the mainland, making it gradually larger in the coming years with the addition of almost the entire dead bed area of the great river lying in the north.

Thus, as recorded by Wilcox, "the great river from near Silani Mur to Sisi, flowed in a bed which still continues to fill in the rains, though it is of diminished size to the north of the present channel. It is called the Buri Suti, or Suti Lohit. The Buri Lohit, since this singular division of its former supply of water, has become of so little consequence that above the junction of the Subansiri, it is barely navigable in the dry season."⁸⁶ On the basis of traditions handed down from old generations, also supported by historical evidence of major earthquakes and floods bringing in astounding natural and geographical changes in Assam, it can be presumed that this great and significant event took place sometime in the last part of the 17th or early part of the 18th century.^{86(a)}

About the creation of the island there is also a legend, which is recorded in a work of the late 18th century called *Adi Charit* or *Bhuyanr Puthi*. According to this legend, king Arimatta who was ruling in the Biswanath region within the present Sunitpur district, committed patricide for which he was to go for penance and make gifts to the Brahmans to amend for his sinful act. He approached many Brahmans including Lord Jagannath and the Bhagirathi Ganga. But all refused to accept his gift. Finding no way he approached the river Ganga in the form of Dikhow and sank into it his one hundred and seven boats laden with gold and silver and

committed suicide by drowning. But Dikhow too rejected the gift and abandoned it by creating a large pool within it and placing all gold, silver and gems there. The news of the king's death reached Brahmaputra who was his son-in-law. Brahmaputra then rushed to Ratanpur, the capital, and buried all its gold, silver and gems under a heap of sands, and changed its course by bifurcating itself into two streams at the head of the heap. This heap of sands thereafter became the famous island Majuli with Ratanpur within it as a city of gems.⁸⁷ This name Ratanpur is still applied to a place in the extreme northeastern extremity of the Majuli island although the original place with that name had been eroded by the Brahmaputra long time before. The legend possibly has no significance in understanding the history of the creation of the island. It is, however, indicative of the fact that the Majuli island was created due to siltation and the changes of the courses of the rivers Dikhow and the Brahmaputra. It is to be noted that the legend forecasts that in the middle of the Kali age, the northern branch (Luhit) will take its course with the southern one, and Brahmaputra himself will uncover the buried Ratanpur city by eroding the heap of sand again.⁸⁸ The work called *Adi Charit* or *Bhuyanr Puthi* which relates the story, is in fact, an attempt to construct a history of the Bhuyans by some member of the (Kalita/Kayartha/Kath) Bhuyans themselves⁸⁹ who were ruling over the Majuli area in the early middle age including Ratanpur, a place believed to be named after the Chutiya king Ratnadhvajpal(1210-1250 A.D.).⁹⁰ Construction of the legend may therefore be an attempt on their part to rechristen the name of the city rejecting the Chutiya (tribal) identity, if it was at all named after their king.

There is no doubt that the final stage was materialized through the sudden shift of the course of the Brahmaputra through the dead channel of the Dihing. Suspecting that a single flood in the Dihong could not have altered the entire state of the geographical situation, Lieutenant Wilcox has stated: "Judging from this wild story as a specimen, it might be inferred, that the Assamese account of the singular rise of the Dihong in 1735 (?) is not well authenticated. Not only, however, have we the evidence of their histories for this fact, but sufficient proof exists in the great alterations in the state of the rivers which then occurred... The Abors and the Miris ought to be in possession of all the facts relative to this occurrence, as they were the first observers of it, and the latter tribe having their village on the east bank of the Dihong in the plains desolated by it; but they deny all knowledge of these remarkable circumstances.... The Abors gave a reason for the rise of the Dihong; but they did not speak confidently; they thought it was occasioned, by the river having suddenly penetrated, at a sharp turning, the earthy barrier opposed to it, or overturned a ledge of rocks. That this enormous body of water having so



large a fall in that part of its course southward through the Abor mountains must exert an extraordinary force cannot be doubted".⁹¹ But what created that 'extraordinary force'?

Decades ago, we presumed that the situation which compelled Dihing to shift its mouth from the Brahmaputra to Dikhow, the same situation now made Brahmaputra divert its course from the line of the Kherkatiya Suti to the course of the Dihing-Dikhow combined widening the old mouth of the Dihing.^{91(a)} There is no doubt that large flood was essential for creating such changes in the existing geographical set up. But flood alone cannot bring about such changes unless earthquakes of higher magnitude accompany the flood. The earthquakes of 1897 and 1950 give ample illustrations for that. Interestingly, however, there is no reference in the Assamese chronicles to any earthquake of higher magnitude that occurred in Assam in the year 1735. But they refer to two great earthquakes which were also accompanied by floods of higher magnitude about half a century before that date. The chronicle called *Tungkhungiya Buranji* has mentioned that in the years 1613 and 1618 *Saka*, i.e. in 1691 and 1696 A.D. two great floods overflowed the state. According to this chronicle, in the year 1691 there occurred two great floods within a span of three days time when the entire state was submerged in flood, and its height was such that the level of water reached up to the third stage of the ladder reaching the platform of the king's palace at Gargaon.⁹² Termed by the people as *Sanka* and *Sankini*,⁹³ it is recorded in the chronicle that as a result of the flood and earthquake that occurred in the year 1696 fishes like *magur* and *kawai* at Sadiya in the neighbourhood of the Dihang and Dibong rivers came out from their deep holes, mountains broke down, and great rifts occurred in the earth's surface leading to the burst of sand and water.⁹⁴ If, according to the tradition kept alive by the Assamese people, it is believed that the shift of the course of the Brahmaputra occurred about half a century before 1735, then it were the floods of the years 1691 and 1696 that resulted in the final shaping of the Majuli island. As a result, all biographical works written at the Satras have stated that both Auniati and Dakhinpat, the two most well-known Satras of Majuli, established sometimes in the mid-17th century, were established on the south of the Brahmaputra.⁹⁵ Contemporary records have mentioned that the name *Dakhinpat* means a settlement area (*pat*) in the south.⁹⁶ It is to be noted that even though the four years, 1691-1696, were the turning points in finalising the process of creation of the Majuli island, the entire process took some time, at least after the flood, to complete its creation process—dying out of the old channel of the Brahmaputra and making of its old bed into a landmass attached to the mainland Majuli on its north.

Thus, the process of creation of this historic island testifies to the fact that the island was born not by siltation alone, but that a major part of it was formed with a sliced out portion of landmass lying once to the south of the old Brahmaputra, i.e. Luit. This character of the island—an amalgam of sand (siltation) and clay (hard soil of the south) is still apparent there; although most part of its south-eastern territories consisting originally of the sliced out land mass being gradually washed away by erosion, almost the entire remaining part presents the bed of a dead river course with layers of sands and sediments, buried reeds and with innumerable ponds and dead river channels criss-crossing each other.

ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

Physical Feature

As the formation process indicates, the island has been once marked by a large number of dead river channels, ponds and marshes.⁹⁷ Dr. J. P. Wade at the close of the 18th century had noted that the territory covered by the name Majuli was criss-crossed by numerous river channels making it a cluster of islands. Even at present an acute observer will notice numerous and scattered dead river channels covered by village sites and agricultural fields. It was so distinct geographically that Dr. Wade has called Majuli the third division of Assam. He says, “Assam was divided by the Brahmaputra into three grand divisions, called Outrecole or Outre parh, (north bank), Deccancole, or Deccanparh, and the Majuli, a large island”.⁹⁸ He has further stated that Majuli was intersected, in several places, by channels of communication between the Dihing and the Luhit (Luit, old Brahmaputra); which in actual sense, converted it into a ‘cluster of islands.’ In addition to these subdivisions, numerous smaller islands ranged along its whole length, all formed by various branches of the great river. He, however, clearly stated that ‘these smaller islands were not included in the general appellation of Majuli, but were indiscriminately called *Chaporis*; or small islands. Some of these were ‘always overflowed in the season of inundation, others occasionally only.’⁹⁹ He then mentions a number of such *chaporis*, such as Rupei Chapoori, Runga Chapoori, Haludiati, Buragohain Chapoori, and a number of other distinct territories with specific and extended areas, such as Haludiati, Tamoolbari, Ghoria, Auneati, Baignauti, Comolabbari, Cowpotia, Poritia, Decanpat, Goromoor and Pohmara.¹⁰⁰ Dr. Wade, however, confessed that a “considerable part of Majuli, probably one fourth, remained unnoticed.”¹⁰¹

The *chaporis* mentioned by Wade have now either fallen to erosion or else have come under human settlement. Almost half of the island towards west from Ahataguri onwards have been seceded by criss-crossing of the

channels, and a separate zone called Dhodang Chapori has come into being. This zone is physically attached to Dergaon on the south bank although for all practical purposes, it is considered as a part of the Majuli. Similarly, most part of its southeastern zone have fallen to erosion,¹⁰² and many known villages are shifting either to other parts of the island or have shifted to outside. Noted among those villages were the villages of Lahkar Gaon, the Salmara Gaon, the Meragarh Gaon, the Salmara Kumar Gaon, Ratanpur area and so forth. On the northern side, of course, old *chaporis* which were once full of reeds and jungles, and were shelters of many wild animals and birds, have come under human settlements. It is on this area of the island that most of the Mising villages are now located. One of such *chaporis* earlier known by the name Yogi Pathar Chapori, which was till early sixties a natural sanctuary of varieties of birds and wild animals, has now become a large inhabited area. It is to be noted that among others, there is a large village with more than five hundred population belonging to the East-Bengal Hindu immigrants locally known as *Silathiyas* (Sylhetty). Called by the name Manik Chapori village at present, this village was started by one or two settlers in the midst of the jungles in the late fifties when one had to cross a large channel of the old Brahmaputra from the mainland to arrive at the *chaporis*,¹⁰³ and compromise with its wild animals including densely populated tiger families. Many other such large *chaporis* on the northern side of the island which once spread over extensive tracts throughout its length could now no longer be seen, nor even heard of. For a minute observer, however, this part of the Majuli island still bears the stamp of its creation history.

Majuli island can be divided into two broad divisions—outer and inner. Most river bank sides are made of sandy soil and prone to recurring floods. This region consists of the outlying *chaporis* and the lands lying outside the embankments, which is suitable for winter cultivation like pulses, mustard, vegetables and for making poultry and cattle farms. Almost all the buffalo rearing areas are within this part of Majuli. It is in this region that the ferry-ghats are located and which are inhabited by a major part of the tribal population. This part of the island form the outer area. The inner division too is made of sandy soil, but it has a thick layer of fertile crust made of black soil. It is this region which shelters the villages, Satras, schools and colleges, towns, administrative corners, and above all, the permanent agricultural fields. It is surrounded by high embankments all around, and it is this region which is drastically affected by break of embankments during the flood. The area lying inside the embankments can be divided into swamps (*bil /doba /pukhuri*), and habitable and cultivable areas. While *bil* or *dobas* are used mostly for fishing, habitable areas provide for men's habitation (*bari*) and agriculture.

Majuli can also be divided into two broad divisions as far as its soil type is concerned. As we have stated earlier, a major part of the island was formed with a sliced out portion of the southern landmass. The rest was by the siltation and by the addition of the dead bed of the Luit (Luit/Brahmaputra). The sliced out part has formed its southern belt mainly. Thus, one finds here both hard soil—*alatiya mati* and sandy soil—*bali-mati*. A part of this hard soil is used by the potters to make pottery. It is called *kumar-mati*, i.e. soil used by the potters. This class of soil is available in the south-eastern part of the island.

Rivers, Channels, Swamps, and Ponds (*Sota* or *Suti*, *Bil* or *Jan*, *Doba* or *Dubi* etc.)

Till half a century ago Majuli was a land of numerous dead river channels, most of them converted into ponds or *bils*. Their number was certainly enormous during the initial years of its (Majuli) creation; but gradually this number decreased due mainly to the topographical changes and dying out of many of them, and (then) their conversion to agricultural fields. According to an estimation made by the *Survey of India* there were at least 49 named river channels (dead and alive) and 112 swamps and wetlands in 1917. This number decreased to 50 in 1966-1972. It is to be noted that according to the same estimation, the total forest area of the island was 22.19 per cent in 1917 which decreased to 1.02 per cent in 1966-72.¹⁰⁴ Now, there is no forest, or jungle, even the *bils* and swamps have decreased to a much smaller number.¹⁰⁵ This topographical condition has given it a distinct ecology and a structure of economy. As we shall see in a subsequent chapter (Chapter on Economy), the *bils* and dead river channels once provided flourishing breeding ground for fishes in the island which gave it a distinguished character as a land of fishes and scenic beauty.

There is no river as such inside the island. The only river is the Tuni. Originating from the Brahmaputra at the northeastern part, it flows through the island to fall into that great river again on its southeast. As we have mentioned elsewhere, it is a cut off part of the river Dikhow which once had a long course running almost parallel to the Brahmaputra.¹⁰⁶ In fact, this was the only flowing river that acted as drainage in the island. But, recently the river has been blocked at the Patiya Gaon village by building a large embankment across the river by the villagers thinking that it will block incoming of flood water from the Brahmaputra. But, what has happened after the blockade is horrible; all lands on its banks which once were good cultivable zones for winter crops, have now been submerged under water for a long time creating an artificial lake due to the land-locked water mass which would otherwise have passed into the

Brahmaputra sweeping all garbage from all around. Similarly, the old channel of the Brahmaputra called Kherkatia Suti which separated Majuli from the north bank creating an island, has also been blocked by the E & D Department, Government of Assam, in 1979 by building a large embankment across the channel at its extreme eastern point where it originates from the present Brahmaputra. As a result, Majuli has lost not only a great drainage channel on its north, but what is galling is that it has also to lose its identity as an island, the largest of its kind, and unique in its character of being made by a river. Thus Majuli's identity as a river-made island has now been questioned in certain quarters.

Climate

Like any other place of Assam, Majuli falls within the tropical zone being located within 26°-25/ and 27°-12/ North Latitude and 93°-39/ and 94°-35/ East Longitude. But encircled all around by the great water bodies, it possesses a moderate climate, cold from November to February, pleasant in mid-September to October and March-April, and summer in May to mid-September. A cool breeze always submerges it on the river sides, and it is not so rare also in the centre. Muhammad Cazim while recording about it has stated that the island "contains a spacious, clear, and a pleasant country."¹⁰⁷ Similarly, the account of Shihabuddin Talish about the climatic condition of Assam also applies equally to the island. He says : "The climate of the inhabited and lonely places on the banks of the Brahmaputra suits natives and strangers alike. But at a distance from the river, the climate agrees with the natives, while it ranks poison to foreigners. It rains for eight months (in the year); and even the four months of the winter are not (altogether) free from rain"¹⁰⁸ Thus, being situated amidst the two great rivers, its climate was pleasant and suitable for all people including the outsiders.

The same sort of climate prevailed over the island during the British. Francis Hamilton writing in 1808 has recorded it to be a very fine island. John MCosh writing in the year 1837 has recorded about the climate of Assam as follows:

Assam is quite uninfluenced by the changes of the monsoon; the wind blows from east or north-east for more than nine months in the year, and seldom from any other direction for more than a few days at a time. At the commencement of the rains it more frequently blows from the west than at other seasons; these westerly winds are always hotter and more unpleasant than the easterly, and are as unwelcome as the east winds in the Upper Provinces during the hot winds. There is a greater equality of temperature whether during the 24 hours or throughout the year, than it is general throughout India. The hot

weather is much more moderate and endurable; there are no "hot winds", and a *tattie* is unknown. The nights are cool and refreshing, and a *pankhah* is seldom put in motion. It must be allowed that the cold weather is not so cold and bracing as in Upper India. During November, December, January, and February, intense fogs prevail, impenetrable to the sun's rays till eleven and twelve o'clock. March, April, and even May are the most agreeable months in the year, and during that season, Assam has better advantage than most provinces. So cool and congenial is the temperature during April that warm clothing is then not agreeable."¹⁰⁹

Record of M'Cosh that "long continuance of the rains, together with the heavy fog, renders the atmosphere extremely damp,"¹¹⁰ has no longer hold good now. As per data available, maximum temperature in Majuli today remains between 30°-34° Celsius in summer, and minimum 10°-12° in winter; its humidity being as high as 80 per cent. Summer is a season of heavy rain, annual average being 200-250 inches.¹¹¹ It sets in beginning with April and continue till first part of September. With sandy top layer one significant aspect of the island's physical feature is the absence of forests and jungles, and due to population growth and urbanization, winter and the dry seasons here as a whole are marked by clouds of dust-smoke which makes movement quite unpleasant and difficult.

Flora and Fauna

Being made fertile by flood and rain, the soil of the island has been suitable for growing varieties of herbs, trees and crops. Assamese chronicles have made few references to its topographic conditions. Being contiguous to and identifiable with Habung,¹¹² Majuli and its contiguous region on the north were always affected by flood. Sukapha is recorded to have left Habung for recurring flood.¹¹³ King Pratap Singha (1603-1641) built large embankments to prevent havoc of flood here. King Gaurinath Singha (1781-1795) spent much time in Majuli while chasing game birds and animals.¹¹⁴ Muhammad Cazim while recording about it has stated that "the cultivated tract is bounded by thick forest, which harbours elephants, and where these animals may be caught, as well as in four or five other forests of Assam. If there be occasion for them, five or six hundred elephants may be procured in a year."¹¹⁵

While recording about the general condition of Assam in the mid-17th century, Shihabuddin Talish has noted as follows:

The trees of its hills and plains are exceedingly tall, thick and strong. Its streams are deep and wide, and both those that contains pools and those that do not, are beyond the range of numbering. Many kinds of

arduous fruits and herbs of Bengal and Hindusthan grow in Assam. We saw here certain variety of flowers and fruits, both wild and cultivated, which are not to be met with elsewhere in the whole of India.Large high spirited and well-proportioned elephants abound in the hills and jungle. The deer, elk, nilgau, fighting ram and partridge are plentiful."¹¹⁶

The middle age scenario continued till the beginning of the last century as testified by the office records. At the close of the 18th century, Dr. John Peter Wade has noted that Majuli being regularly inundated, is possessed of a stratum of rich soil above a deep layer of sand, and often clay."¹¹⁷ A century later the *Gazetteer of Eastern Bengal and Assam* (1905), recorded at the close of the 19th century that Majuli "contains numerous streams, lakes, and patches of tree forest covered with beautiful cane brake; and the general effect is very picturesque."¹¹⁸ Stretch of green grass and forests and large *chaporis* provided for rearing herds of cattle, especially buffalo and cow and sheltered folks of wild animals. In another context, the *Gazetteer* recorded that Majuli 'presents a very different appearance. The land lies low, the population is comparatively sparse, and extensive tracts are covered with high grass jungle and forest, which is rendered particularly beautiful by the luxuriant growth of the creeping cane."¹¹⁹

Once full of jungles and forests, and shelter of enormous wild animals and birds, Majuli has, however, gradually lost its forest resources. It is interesting to note that while ¼th part of the island was still undiscovered till 1800 A.D.¹²⁰ due to its impenetrable topographic conditions, its forest cover has since been reduced to insignificance.¹²¹ Even a few decades ago, Majuli was a land of forests and jungles, and large boats capable of bearing loads of enormous quantity and size could be built from a single trunk.¹²² During the middle ages Majuli provided the Ahom state with a few boat-making factories (*naosal/naosal*) at Salmora, Auniati, especially Saraibari and a few other places.¹²³ Baloram Nath who hailed from village Baraguri in northeastern part of upper Majuli, and who studied in the Majuli Auniati Hemchandra High School (at Kamalabari) in the thirties of the last century, has noted his experience by saying that in those days it was awesome to go to the school hostel located at Kamalabari, a distance of about 20 kilometers from his village, due to thick forests and jungles that covered the path and sheltered wild animals.¹²⁴ There was no road as such, and one had to move amidst jungles full of tigers and wild buffaloes.¹²⁵ A dense forest wooded with Urium, Autenga, Azar, Koroi, and other valuable trees stretched over the region surrounding two large ponds called *Batamari* and *Solmari bil* created long back by the dead

river channels.¹²⁶ Pitambardeva Goswami, *Satradhikara* of Garamur Satra (1885-1962), was to devote most part of his daily life in hunting tigers in the neighbourhood for the safety of the cows and the villagers.¹²⁷ The present author experienced in his childhood (during the early sixties) how moving to and fro in the evening in the village was not at all safe because of frequent roaming of wild animals. It was quite enjoyable to hear a tiger's roar, jackel's evening cry, and regular rhythms produced by flocks of birds called *haikali* and *dauk* coming from amidst the jungles covering the *chaporis* across the river channels. Remembering his early days in the early decades of the last century, Tarun Chandra Pamegam one of the early educated persons from among the Mising tribe of Majuli, has recorded as follow:

Till that time most of its areas were covered with the forests, jungles and ponds, and grazing lands with high grass jungles. The forests were full of trees such as *uriam*, *koroi* and *ejar*. There were large number of fruit trees from where men and the birds had eaten fruits in their own way. The forests were known by various names such as Barbari, Dhekiajan, Paikpara, Chakarpeti, etc. At that time Majuli was thinly populated and the land was the abode of wild animals. Although there was no scope for catching elephants through *mela chikar* or *kheda chikar*, there were herds of wild elephants roaming hither and thither in search of food. During this time cultivators used to build elevated tents on the branches of the large and long trees and lit lamps to ward off the wild elephants which came to eat the paddy from the field. Some times even rhinoceros were also appearing in its jungles. I remember, one of such rhinos was killed by the people near Kamalabari about the mid thirties of the last century. Rhino hunters were not penalised which was due possibly to the fact that Majuli being situated far away and cut off from the district headquarters, no body came to know about it. ... The forests of the island were also the roaming ground of herds of wild buffaloes. Among the wild animals tigers were the most numerous in the forests of the island.¹²⁸

This picture is no longer there in Majuli now, and by early seventies, its forest cover was reduced to just 1.02 per cent only.¹²⁹ And now, except the peripheral *chaporis* with thinly covered *birina* reeds, no jungle or animal herds are to be seen there, although in the months of December-January mustard crop with yellow flowers still covers the field up to the extreme horizon. In February and March, villages look ablaze with the blooming flowers of *simalu*, *palash* and *modar* trees. And in winter like early times, some flocks of migratory birds still try to make here a heaven of their sports.¹³⁰

With river channels, marshes, swamps and ponds Majuli was till recent

years a land of fishes. Indeed, it was known for both fish and milk. It is a folk saying that if men had not eaten fish, the fish would have eaten them (men) here. It is stated by the elderly generation in Majuli that during the 1950 earthquake, men could not move around due to the rotten smell of volumes of fishes that got scattered over the fields and grazings.¹³¹ Majuli, however, does not present such a picture of availability of fish today.¹³²

THE STUDY

Scope and Objective

The scope of the work is confined to the study of the Majuli island in its historical perspective. It includes study of its social, cultural and economic aspects in the past and in the present. The objective is to unearth the distinguished features of the society in the island and the extent and nature of changes it has experienced through the ages. Attempt has been made to understand its cultural heritage and its present status.

Literature Survey

There is no existing research work on Majuli in humanities and social sciences. There are however, a few works on the Satras: T. N. Sarma's *Auniati Satrar Buranji* (Assamese, 1975), Benudhar Sharma's *Dakhinpat Satra* (Assamese, 1977), Gangadhar Hazarika's *Mahapurush Dharamacharaya Sri Srimat Pitambardeva Goswami* (Assamese, 2 vols. 1924, 1964), Narayan Chandra Goswami's *Satra Sanskritir Swarna Rekha* (1987), Dr. Pitambardeva Goswami's *Satriya Utsavar Parichoy aru Tatparyya* (2001), and the present author's *Adhunikatar Unmeshat Shri Shri Auniati Satra* (Assamese, 2004). But they are all on certain individual Satras only; even those by Narayan Chandra Goswami and Dr. Pitambardeva Goswami are mainly about Kamalabari and Auniati Satra respectively. And Gangadhar Hazarika's work too is a biography of a *Satradhikara*. Moreover, except the one by the present author, most other works are not based on proper historical methodology and interpretation. Another work on the economy of the island is the *Income Expenditure and Savings in Rural India* (1985) by K.C. Bora. But this is strictly a work on 'behavioural relationships between income, expenditure, savings and investment in the rural areas of Assam' for which a few villages from Majuli were taken as model study. Besides, there are two other edited works on the Majuli island; one edited by K. C. Kalita, and the other by P. K. Mahanta. But they are merely collection of some unsystematically arranged articles attempting on some fragmentary aspects, mainly on the Satras of Majuli. They not only fail to be a systematic study, but they are also devoid of any methodology. At the same time, the one edited by



FIG. 1.1 MIGRATORY BIRDS VISITING MAJULI

P. K. Mahanta is but a form of conglomeration of some illogically arranged emotional writings where the editor has presented them in his own cut-and-paste methods.

There are however, a few articles on the historical geography of Majuli. The first one, titled 'Brahmaputrar Sonta' by Benudhar Sharma, was published in 1987 in his collected work (Vol. II) where the author without reference to any source has attempted to record the change of the course of the Dihing and the Brahmaputra. Long time after, in 1993, the present author wrote his paper titled "Luitar Majuli Majuli Dvip: Iyar Sristi aru Aitihasik Avasthan" which the organizing committee for the 14th session of the North East India History Association, held at Jorhat, had published in its *Souvenir*. This paper is, in fact, the first attempt to make a scientific study of socio-geographical and cultural history of the island. This was followed by J.N. Sarma's paper titled "Origin and Some Geomorphological Changes of Majuli Island of the Brahmaputra River in Assam, India" which was published in the journal *Geomorphology* (Vol. 60, pp. 1-19) in 2004. The paper deals with certain geomorphological aspects about the island. Recently, the present author has published a few research papers on the Satras of Majuli and their role in the social change and development of Assam. These include *Satras in Colonial Assam: Their Response to the Emerging Socio-Political Issues* (published by the ICHR, Regional Centre, Guwahati, 2007), *Social Change in Rural Assam in the 20th Century: A Study of the Majuli Island (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 66th Session, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 2005-2006)*, and *Preparation*

and Preservation of Manuscript—A Dead Tradition in the Vaishnava Monasteries of Assam (published in the *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, 25th Session, Shillong, 2004).

Thus Majuli despite its long history and heritage, still awaits a proper historical study. It is expected that the present work will open a new chapter inaugurating the study of history and culture of the island, and of such societies elsewhere.

Methodology

Materials for writing the present work have been collected from various sources which can be broadly divided into (a) literary-cum-historical and (b) field report and personal observation. Thus the present study is based on both empirical and historical methodology. Extensive field work was done in the nook and corner of the island to collect materials on the basis of direct investigation and observation.

There are more than 210 cadastral villages in Majuli at the time of our field investigation. They are distributed in two blocks—Majuli Development Block and Ujani Majuli Development Block comprising of twenty Gaon-Panchayats. We have surveyed 33 villages, 15.71 per cent of the total, for our investigation selected on certain parameters, such as geographical distribution, administrative distribution, class and caste distribution, and on the basis by religion, economy and education. Thus, the villages under survey are distributed over all regions of the island and represent all communities inhabiting it. Well-devised questionnaires were prepared and distributed among certain families of a village consisting of not less than 15 per cent of the population. These families were selected on the basis of certain criteria, such as education, economy, family status, location and so forth. Investigators visiting the families supplied the questionnaires to the head of the family and filled up the answer sheets by noting them down right at their place. In some other cases, written responses were collected. The Principal Investigator frequently visited the field and supervised the system and, if necessary, himself noted down or tried to find out the answers to certain queries. The latter also visited the libraries for purpose of verification of data so collected, or to collect new and additional data. Collected data were then assimilated and verified, and used as per requirement. Some of the data thus collected and used in the report are placed in the appendices. Historical data used in the present work include all literary sources, epigraphic records, Government and non-government documents, biographical works, foreign travelers' accounts, chronicles, diaries and letters and so forth. Indeed, the work being historical, most part of the work is based on these data used in the pattern of historical analysis.

Most literary materials are taken from early Assamese chronicles (*buranjis*), biographical works (*charit puthis*), Persian chronicles (in English translations), British records including reports, gazetteers, census records and accounts, archival records, modern Assamese literature, and oral traditions prevalent among the people of the Majuli island. Assamese chronicles are used for understanding of the geographical formation of the island, and for study of its socio-economic and cultural base. The biographical literature are used for the same purpose. It is to be noted that some of the later biographical works written on the life and works of the *Satradhikaras* of the Vaishnava monasteries (*Satra*) of the island, are useful not only to investigate the socio-cultural aspects of the 18th—19th century society, but they are also useful to understand political history of the island, more particularly, to understand the relationship between religion and politics, or relation of the Satras with the politics of the state. We have one modern biography of a *Satradhikara* (Pitambardeva Goswami of Garamur Satra), called *Mahapurush Sri Srimat Dharmacharyya Pitambardeva Goswami* (by Gangadhar Hazarika), which is not only most exhaustive, but also authentic to understand 20th century socio-cultural history of the island as it contains most of the documents recording the events of the time. Many original records which are difficult to procure at present, are quoted from this work. Similarly, a good number of biographical works composed in the Satras of Majuli supply material for the period of the British rule in Assam. Most modern literature used in the report include works of Tarun Chandra Pamegam, Pitambardeva Goswami, Tirthanath Sarma, Benudhar Sarma, and those of the present author.

The work important groups of literature include the records, accounts, and reports of the British administrators. Mention may be made of Horace Hayman's *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese Wars* (for Ensign Wood's map and survey report, published in 1827), Dr. J.P. Wade's *A Geographical Sketch of Assam -1800*, Captain Welsh's *Report, 1793*, (incorporated in Mackenzie's *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*), reports left by Neufville and Lieutenant Wilcox (in the *Asiatic Researches*), Francis Buchanon Hamilton's *An Account of Assam* (1808), John M'Cosh's *Topography of Assam* (1837), William Robinson's *A Descriptive Account of Assam* (1841), A.J. Moffatt Mills' *Report on the Province of Assam* (1853), W.W. Hunter's *A Statistical Account of Assam* (1872), Gait and other's *Report on the Census of India, 1891*, B.C. Allen et.al.'s *Gazetteer of Eastern Bengal and Assam* (1905), and E.A. Gait's *A History of Assam* (1905).

The work has been prepared in historical perspective, and due care has been taken to make interpretations rational and scientific.

END NOTES

1. B.C. Allen et. al., *Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India* (earlier *Provincial Gazetteer of India: Eastern Bengal and Assam*, 1905), Reprint, New Delhi, 1979, (Reproduced, 2001), p. 159.
2. See the *Tungkhungiya Buranji* (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan, Reprint, Guwahati, 1964, p. 93 (abbreviated as TB).
3. See *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, (ed) S.K. Bhuyan, Reprint, Guwahati, 1990, p. 47 (abbreviated as DAB).
4. Assamese chronicles refer to the exile of the second queen of the Ahom king Tyaokhamthi (1380-1389) in Habung on the Brahmaputra where she was given shelter by a Brahman family. It was here that she gave birth to Sudangpha *alias* Bamuni Konwar, who ascended the throne in 1397 after the death of his father. See, DAB, p. 11; also E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, 2nd edition Reprint, Gauhati, 1981, p. 82 (abbreviated as HAG).
5. This has been discussed in Chapter VI of this work. Also see B. Sharma, *Dakhinpat Satra*, Guwahati, 1977, p. 7; K.L. Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa*, Gauhati, 1966, p. 181.
6. Dr. J.P. Wade in his *A Geographical Sketch of Assam, 1800 A.D.*, (incorporated in his *An Account of Assam*, ed. B. Sharma, North Lakhimpur, 1927) has stated that till the close of the 18th century about 1/4th part of the island remained undiscovered and uninhabited. See p. 32. The *Gazetteer* of Allen et. al. (pp. 159, 572) has mentioned that at the beginning of the 20th century there were only 35,000 inhabitants in the island.
- 6(a). This aspect has been discussed later. See *infra*, pp. 19ff.
7. Golaghat, 1961, p. 47.
8. M. Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam*, Gauhati, 1965, p. 110 (henceforth abbreviated as SHTN).
9. HAG, p. 171; D. Nath, 'Satra and Social Change in Majuli,' in *Jyotirgamaya* (a commemorative volume published on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the Garamur Satra, Majuli, April, 2007), ed. D. Saikia, Garamur, 2007, pp. 127ff.
10. See D. Nath, 'Majuli-Eti Aitihāsik Parichay' in K. C. Kalita (ed.), *Majuli*, Guwahati, 2001, p. 11.
11. This has been discussed in Chapter-V of this work.
12. D. Nath, 'Sattras in Colonial Assam—Their Response to the Emerging Socio-Political Issues', occasional lecture no.5, ICHR, Guwahati, 2007, pp. 6ff; Audrey Cantlie, *The Assamese*, London, 1984, p. 152; Anil Raichaudhury, 'Nava Vaishnav Sattrar Artha-Samajik Dis: Eti Samikshya' in S. Barman et.al. (ed.) *Amalendu Guha Abhinanda Grantha*, Guwahati, 2005, pp. 26ff
13. Technically, Majuli has now no longer been an island, isolated and cut off from the mainland society being open to all sorts of contact with the

- outside world. As an attractive place of tourist interest, Majuli receives few thousand tourists from all over the world annually, and lakh of visitors every year who go there to participate in various religious festivals. It is stated that the Auniati Satra *Palnam* held in the month of October/November, and the Garamur Satra *Ras* festival, held immediately after the *Palnam*, together attract few lakh people from outside. Thus, the island has now no longer been a virgin place for the outside visitors; nor its culture has been so secluded as we some times presume it to be.
14. See Chapter-II of this work, pp. 56f
 15. They have mainly settled in the *chapor*i lands where native people have little or no entry. Some of them have also settled in the neighbourhood of some of the township areas. Milanpur in Garamur and Manikpur nearby, are two such villages surveyed for the present work.
 - 15(a). Growing density of population in Majuli is mainly due to its erosion problem leading to the contraction of its territory. This has been discussed in Chapter-II of this work. See pp. 97f
 16. *Census of India, Assam, Majuli*, 2001; K. C. Bora, 'Economic Profile of Majuli', a paper presented at the state level Seminar, held on 26 March, 2004, at the Auniati (Branch) Satra, Teok, on the subject "Majuli Island—Erosion and Protection" (Ms).
 17. *Gazetteer* by Allen et. al., p. 159.
 - 17(a). K. C. Bora, *loc cit.*, (Ms.), Majuli is now treated under the *Char Area Development Plan*, Government. of Assam. Also see R. Kerim, 'Majulik Char Bulato Uchitne?', *The Dainik Janambhumi*, 28th Feb., 2005.
 18. The belief that Majuli is the largest river-made island in the world has now been challenged. It is stated that there are even larger such islands elsewhere in the world. But there is a difference between the other river-islands and the Majuli which is the only inhabited and fresh water island of its kind. See D. Nath, '*Luitar Majuli-Majuli Dvip: Iyar Sristi aru Aitihāsik Avasthan*', in the *Souvenir* published from Jothat on the occasion of the XIV annual conference of the North East India History Association (NEIHA), 1993, p. 81. It is interesting to note that Dr. J. P. Wade has called it 'a great island', while Francis Hamilton (*An Account of Assam* (1808), 3rd print, Gauhati, 1987, p. 26) calls it to be 'a very large island.'
 19. The embankment was built in 1978 by the E & D Department, Government. of Assam, which completely blocked the river. See Illustration
 20. *Alamgirnamah* by Muhammed Cazim translated (English) in the *Asiatic Researches*, Vol II, 2nd edition, New Delhi, p. 132.
 21. Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, (ed.) S. K. Bhuyan, 2nd edn., Guwahati, 1963 p. 27; S. K. Bhuya, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, Gauhati, 1948, p. 519.
 22. Hamilton, *op cit.*, p. 26.
 23. *Ibid*, p. 27; S.K. Bhuyan, *op. cit.*, p. 519
 24. *A Geographical Sketch of Assam*, *op cit.*, p. 32. Wade's record about its breath is not perhaps correct. For, it is neither supported by any other

record subsequent to Wade, nor by the present geography of the island, nor by the width of the Brahmaputra flowing on the south of Majuli. The span of the Brahmaputra together with the entire breadth of the island does not make even half of that measure today. It appears that it was sixteen in stead of sixty; and probability is that it was a typing error.

25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid, p. 31.
28. op cit, pp. 26f.
29. *Report on the Province of Assam* (1853), 2nd edition, Gauhati, 1984, p. 504.
30. Allen *et. al. Gazetteer*, p. 159.
31. Ibid, p. 583.
32. cf. J.N. Sarma, 'Origin and Geographical Changes of Majuli Island of the Brahmaputra River in Assam, India', presented in a state-level seminar held on 26 March, 2004, at the Auniati Satra, Teok, on the subject 'Majuli Island—Its Erosion and Protection'. Also J. N. Sarma and K. Phukan, 'Origin and Geographical Changes of Majuli Island of the Brahmaputra River in Assam, India', in *Geomorphology 60* (2004) 1-19, p. abstract.
33. DAB, p. 8.
34. HAG, p. 133.
35. In Bodo *hā* means extensive land, and *bung* means affected regularly by flood. According to R. M. Nath, Habung 'extended to the west up to the Subansiri river and included the present North Lakhimpur sub-division and a portion of Majuli—the richest paddy growing area—which the Bodos called *Habung* or vast land (*Hā*-land, *Bang*—plenty, vast). The kingdom was called *Hābang* or *Habung*, and the people were generally known as Kaltas or Kalitas." See *The Background of Assamese Culture*, Shillong, 1948, p. 6.
36. *Satsari Asam Buranji*, (ed.) S. K. Bhuyan, 2nd edition, Guwahati, 1964, p. 72 (henceforth abbreviated as SAB).
37. The Dilih has its source at the Naga hills, and when Wade had recorded in 1800 A.D, it fell into the Dikhow about four miles above its present mouth. See Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam*, p. 24.
38. *Infra*, p. 19.
39. DAB, p. 47.
40. *Asam Buranji* obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta, (ed.) S. K. Bhuyan, 3rd edition, 1988, p. 32 (henceforth abbreviated as ABSM)
41. Ibid, p. 33; Although Suhungmung is better known as Dihingiya Raja for his building a new capital city at Bakata on the Dihing. (See HAG, p. 86), Charaideo always remained the first capital
42. *Ahom Buranji*, (Tr.) G. C. Barua, Reprint, Guwahati, 1985, p. 87
43. Ibid.
44. It appears that Dikhow had by that time three mouths, one at the present

place where the Dihing had merged into it, one at Lakhau near Solalpat near Mahuramukh where it emptied into the Luit (Luhit) or Brahmaputra along with the Dihing, and the other at Kajalimukh at Kaliabar in Nagaon. This contention has also been supported by local traditions and historical evidence. Gait has stated that at one time “according to native traditions, the Dikhow had an independent course as far as Kajalimukh, part of which still survives in the Majuli as the Tuni river, and (a) part in Nowgong, as the Kallang” (cf. HAG, p. 133). This condition was there till the early 19th century. Standing on the eastern extremity of Majuli, Ensign Wood says in 1825, “On the right bank is the Mojoulee, or island formed by the two branches of the river, which, separating at this point (at the eastern extremity), unite at Solal Paat, near Maura Mookh; on it are also found remains of villages, of which Ruttunpore alone is thinly populated.” Cf. H. H. Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War*, London, 1827, Appendix, p. ii.

45. *Asam Buranji Sar* by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan, (ed.) P. C. Chaudhury, 4th print, Guwahati, 1991, p. 40
46. Cf. *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. II, *op cit*, p. 131.
47. *Ibid*.
48. In the year 1769 there occurred a rebellion in the Ahom kingdom caused by the Moran tribe who dethroned the reigning king and occupied the throne for a time being. The rebellion soon spread like a wild fire all through the state and took the form of a civil war with involvement of almost all classes of people. As the Morans were also called *Matak*, this rebellion was also called ‘*Matak Bidroh*’. The rebellion ended in the year 1805 along with the grant of an autonomous state for the Matak with present Tinsukia as its headquarter. For a comprehensive account of this rebellion, see M. Neog, *Socio-Political Events in Assam leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaishnavas*, New Delhi, 1982; also A. Guha, *Vaishnav Badar para Moamariya Bidrohloi*, Guwahati, 1993. See also Chapter-VI of this work., pp. 273ff.
49. See S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo Assamese Relations*, Guwahati, 1949, pp300ff.
50. *Ibid*, p. 579; Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam*, *op cit*., p. 32.
51. DAB, p. 8
52. See fn. 35 above
53. R. Endle, *The Kacharis*, Reprint, Delhi, 1979, pp. 1ff
54. DAB, p. 47
55. *Ahom Buranji*, p. 87
56. D. Nath, NEIHA Souvenir, 1993, loc. cit, also see D. Nath, ‘Majuli—Eti Aitihāsik Parichay’, and D. Goswami, ‘Majulir Bhu-Prakritik Parichay’, in K. C. Kalita, *op cit*., pp. 1ff and pp. 23ff
57. D. Goswami, ‘Majulir bhu-Prakritik Parichay’, *ibid*, pp. 26f
58. See p. 27
59. *Asam Buranji*, *op cit*., p. 40; *Buranji Vivek Ratna* by Maniram Dewan Barbhandar Barua, (ed) N. Saikia, Dibrugarh, 2002, p. 26.
60. ADB, pp. 68, 128,143

61. See the *Bengenaati Satrar Bhumidan aru Paikar Nibandhanar tamar Pholi*, in M. Neog (comp. & ed), *Prachya Sasanawali*, Guwahati, 1974, Ins. No.82
62. ABSM, p. 58
63. Ibid. p. 57
64. DAB, p. 47; SAB, p. 23.
65. D. Nath, in K. C. Kalita, *op cit.*, p. 6; Goswami, in K. C. Kalita, *op cit.*, p. 24; D. Phukan, 'Majulir Jana-Gathani aru Samajik Paribesh', a paper presented in a state level seminar organized jointly by the Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, and the Ministry of Culture, Government of Assam, at the Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra Society, Guwahati, on 15-16 June, 2005. It is interesting to note that the term *Majali* was perhaps used also to mean the best convenient/central place communicable and reachable from all directions. At least this is what the author of the *Auniati Satrar Buranji* has stated. See, ASBS, p. 224
66. HAG, p. 86.
67. ABSM, p. 33; DAB, p. 47.
68. It lies on the Kamalabari-Garamur-Jengrai Road. Also see J. N. Sarma and K. Phukan, *Geomorphology*, *loc cit.*
69. D. Nath, *NEIHA Souvenir*, *loc cit.*, p. 133.
70. HAG, p. 133.
71. Ibid.
72. See D. Nath, *NEIHA Souvenir*, *loc. cit.*, pp. 82f. Also see Sketch Map—1
73. Ibid; HAG, p. 133; also see See Sketch Map-2.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
77. Cf. *Asiatic Researches*, vol. XVII, p. 320.
- 77(a). See Sketch Map-I (a).
78. HAG, p133.
79. *etekese Auniati nama satra kahe,*
dakhine Dihinga nadi mahabege bahe
mahadeva daula nadi sikule achay.
Keshavdev Charit,
cf. ASBS, p123fn. (tr. Therefore, it is called Auniati. The Dihing flows fast on the south, with the Siva Mahadeva temple standing on the other side.)
namata dakhinapata buli sabe kahe
uttarata mahanadi Brahmputra bahe
Banamalidev Charit,
cf. B. Sharma, *Dakhinpat Satra*, Guwahati, 1977, p. 6 (tr. It is called Dakhinpat by all. For, on the north flows the Brahmputra)
80. D.Nath, in K. C. Kalita, *op cit.*, p. 6.
81. *Hemkosh*, p. 805. The attempt to define the name *Majuli* as 'store house of the love of the mother, or 'the place of the goddess Lakshmi'—*ma*—Lakshmi, *juli*—store. (See B. K. Barua, *Asamiya Bhasha aru Sanskriti*, p. 89) is simply emotional and fabricated.

82. Here I have modified my earlier contention that the 'term *Majali* must have preceded the word *Majuli* to mean the same strip of land.' See D. Nath, K. C. Kalita, *op cit.*, p. 6 and also NEIHA *Souvenir*, 1993, *loc. cit.*
83. See sketch map 2; also see fn. 13 above.
84. D. Nath, in K.C. Kalita, *op cit.*, p. 4.
85. *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. XVII, pp. 320f; B. Sharma, *Benudhar Sarma Rachanawali (Buranjir Saphura)*, Guwahati, 1987, p. 334.
86. Cf. *Asiatic Researches*, *op cit.*, p. 320.
- 86(a). D. Nath, NEIHA *Souvenir*, *loc cit.*, pp. 81ff.
87. *Adicharit* (Ms.), pp. 200-300.
88. *Ibid*, pp. 293-296.
89. See SHTN, p. 29.
90. See Chapter-VI, p. 270.
91. *Asiatic Researches*, XVII, pp. 326f.
- 91(a). D. Nath, NEIHA *Souvenir*, *loc. cit.*
92. TB, p. 25.
93. *Ibid*.
94. *Ibid*, p. 28.
95. Cf. *Keshavdev Charit*. See fn. 79 above.
96. *Dakhinpat Satra*, *op cit.*, pp. 5f.
97. Despite many topographical changes in the past centuries, there are still a part of those marshes, ponds and river channels. See Appendix—V.
98. *A Geographical Sketch of Assam*, *op cit.*, p. 3.
99. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
100. *Ibid.*, pp. 32f.
101. *Ibid*, p. 33.
102. See Sketch Map showing bank-line between 1917-2001 in Chapter III.
103. See illustration.
104. *Survey of India Reports*, 1917, 1966-72; cf. J. N. Sarma, 'Origin and Geographical Changes of Majuli Island ... etc', (Ms.), *loc cit.*
105. Also see Appendix-V
106. *Supra*, fn. 44.
107. Cf. *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. II, *op cit.*, p. 130.
108. Cf. Ms, DHAS, Transcript No.300 *Assam and the Ahoms in 1600 A.D.*—being a Portion of Shihabuddin Talish's *Fathiya-I-Ibriya*, translated into English by Sir Jadunath Sarkar, and published in the *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. I, Part-II, December, 1915; cf. HAG, 41.
109. *Topography of Assam* (1837), Reprint, Delhi, 1986, *op cit.*, p. 0.
110. *op cit.*, p. 72.
111. information obtained fro SDO (civil) Office, Majuli.
112. See above fn. 35.
113. DAB, p. 8; ABSM, p. 6; *Ahom Buranji*, (tr. G.C. Baruah), p. 46; Wade, *An Account of Assam*, *op cit.*, pp. 17f.
114. TB, p. 93.
115. *op cit.*, p. 131.
116. Cf. HAG, pp. 142f.

117. *A Geographical Sketch of Assam, op cit.*, p. 32.
118. p. 159.
119. p. 572.
120. Wade, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam, op cit.*, p. 33.
121. See fns. 104, 105 above.
122. U.N. Gohain, *Assam Under the Ahoms*, 2nd edition, Guwahati, 1992, p. 127.
123. ADB, p. 552; Wade, *An Account of Assam, op cit.*, (Introduction), p. xxxv.
124. B. Nath, *Aranye Aranye Garaki*, North Lakhimpur, 1995, pp. 10ff
125. Ibid.
126. Ibid; T.C. Pamegam, *Tarun Chandra Pamegam Rachanawali* (2 Vols.), Vol. II, (comp. & ed.) B. Kagyung, Guwahati, 2005, pp. 38ff
127. G.D. Hazarika, *Mahapurush Sri Srimat Dharmacharaya Pitambardeva Goswami*, 2 Vols. combined, Titabar, 1964, pp. 131ff (henceforth abbreviated as MDPH), pp. 131f
128. T.C. Pamegam, *Tarun Chandra Pamegam Rachanawali*, II, *op cit.*, pp. 46f
129. J.N. Sarma, *loc cit.*
130. See illustration.
131. Information collected from the living memory of the old generation people of the island.
132. T.C. Pamegam, *Tarun Chandra Pamegam Rachanawali*, II, *op cit.*, pp. 47ff.

Epilogue

Majuli—Past and Present

Majuli is considered as the largest river island in the world. It is situated in the Brahmaputra river in Assam approximately a little above the middle part of that great river that falls within the territorial area of the state. Administratively, the island is within the territorial jurisdiction of Jorhat District of Assam; and it forms a sub-division with more than one and a half lakh population according to the last census enumeration. Cut off from the mainland of Assam all around by river channels, Majuli forms a distinct geographical, social and cultural entity with its own norms and value systems. The present investigation is a systematic study of its society, economy and culture in historical perspective. Sources for the work have been derived from both historical and empirical data based on investigation and the author's own observation. Attempts have been made to interpret things as objectively as possible.

Majuli's standing as the largest river-made island in the world has now been questioned in some quarters. Two questions are raised: (a) whether Majuli is yet the largest island of its kind in the world, as there are evidences to the effect that its territorial extent has been increasingly reduced due to erosions; and the island which was once 160 miles in length (perhaps, may have been more than that at other times) and about 60 miles in breadth (in the maximum), now stands at 75-80 kilometers in length, and, at the maximum, 10 kilometers only in breadth; and (b) whether Majuli can be considered an island at all as its northeastern boundary formed by the Kherkatiya suti, a channel of the old Brahmaputra, has been spanned by an embankment that connects Majuli with the northern mainland making it look like a peninsular extension of a landmass from the northeast. While both the arguments have some justification, the present investigation has led to the conclusion that (i) there is no contrary evidence to prove that there are such other fresh water river-islands which not only embrace large chunks of landmass, but also shelter more than one and a half lakh population as Majuli does today, and

(ii) despite its man-made artificial connection with the northern mainland,¹ Majuli has been essentially an island with perfect island-features in all aspects of its society and culture. It is not unlikely that this man-made embankment connecting Majuli with the northern landmass will some time fall a victim to the roaring flow of the great river. At least, evidence of its creation and existence of numerous dead river channels inside the greater landmass point to its possibility.

Antiquity of the island still remains obscure. There are varying presumptions about the time of its creation, although as to its formation process, there are not much variations in ideas. On the basis of a tradition, of unknown origin, it is still believed that the island was created not long ago, may be in 1735, or half a century before that date, as Captain Wilcox has mentioned.² The present investigation, however, comes to a different conclusion. On the basis of the existing literary and other evidences and their re-interpretations, it has been found that the island was sufficiently older than it was thought to be. It took its island shape in an unknown past, at least before the 13th century A.D. The only question was: what volume of water formed its four boundaries at the initial stage—big or small, seasonal or regular. It is also found that the name *Majuli* was used to stand for this island at least as early as the mid-16th century A.D.; before that the territory was perhaps called *Habung* which is a Bodo word, meaning low-lying flood affected but extensive landmass, or, was a part of it.

As most parts of the island are comprised of the *chaporis* and the beds of the dead river channels—large and small—Majuli had always been a marshy zone in the past with innumerable ponds, rivers, swamps, jungles, forests, fishes and varieties of wild animals. This topographical situation is, of course, not there at present; at least there are no jungles or wild animals, and many ponds and river channels have dried up and died; more so in the second half of the last century when not only number of its inhabitants increased leading to reduction of agricultural lands, but also because of growing administrative and semi-urban centres at few places of the island. To an outsider, however, Majuli still presents a topographical zone with nature's gift of green landscape and varieties of flora and fauna,³ although to a native it is a dismal picture of what it was half a century ago. The rate of change has been swift and sweeping in the post-Independence periods. The factor behind this change is the human activity.

Society in Majuli consists of both castes and tribes. Of the known indigenous castes are the Brahmin, Kayastha, Kalita, Keot, Koch, Nath-Yogi or Katani, Kaivarta (including Matak), Hadi and Sut. While the tribes include the Mising, the Deori and the Kachari, among the

non-indigenous communities are the Bengali, Bihari or Deswali, Marwari, Nepali and a few Muslim families. All the people live in well-demarcated villages distinguished mostly by caste and topography. Located on higher sites with high housing plinths to avoid submersion by flood, villages in Majuli look like an embankment covered with bamboo bushes and other jungle vegetation. All Mising villages are located on the river banks or on low-lying lands in the vicinity of swamps. They live in platform houses (*chang-ghar*) except otherwise necessary, such as those living in the semi-urban or township areas who have their *kechq* houses. On the basis of distinction maintained in selection of sites and the designs followed in building respective houses, tribal and non-tribal villages can be distinguished from a distance.⁴ Formed with inhabitants of specific caste or tribe, all villages in Majuli have their individual characteristics stamping individual identifiers.⁵ Thus, we find independent culture cells under the cover of a greater cultural identity.

Caste system prevails in the society as do the caste distinctions; and although it has gradually lost its earlier hold among the elite sections, caste prejudice is still inherent in men's mind.^{5(a)} But, there is no untouchability as it exists in societies of some other parts of the country. The late 19th and early 20th century social mobility movements started by some of the depressed castes contributed to this on a large scale. The system of initiation to Vaishnavism of one form or the other of the members of the lower social echelons by some of the Satras, and the provision of allowing entrance of all to the common prayer hall—the *namghar*, have perhaps contributed a share to that end. The role of the late *Garamuriya Satradhikara* Pitambaradeva Goswami boosted up the emerging social values.⁶ But, there are social classes based both on caste and economy. Affluent section here generally belongs to the higher castes except a microscopic minority who comes from among the lower stratum. To this group may be added the ecclesiastical section—the *Satradhikaras*—who enjoy both economic and social power. Thus, caste and class in Majuli are related and reciprocal to each other.

Geography and economy are complimentary to each other in Majuli. Mainly based on agriculture, economy of the island was, and still is to a certain degree, a subsistence economy. In medieval times when land was sufficient in proportion to population, shifting was the system of cultivation here.⁷ But along with the growth of population and consequent scarcity of agricultural lands shifting became limited, and at present, it has become almost obsolete. Constant clearing of jungle lands and their conversion to agricultural fields to meet the growing demands, and the necessity to convert the otherwise *chaporis* and the riverine belts into

agriculture fields, slowly extending the plough up to the river banks, not only have reduced the number of ponds, *bils* and river channels, but have also affected its economy in other ways, such as reduction of cattle farming and fish and milk sources. Thus Majuli is bound to borrow from outside to feed its people today. Markets of Majuli today are alive with *chalanī māch* (imported fish), *rechanar chāul* (subsidized rice), *Shillongiya alu* (Shillong potato), *Punjab piyāj* (Onion from Paunjab), Bombay textiles, and so forth.

About 80 per cent of the total labour force in Majuli is engaged in agriculture.⁸ Rice, different varieties of pulses, sugarcane, potato, mustard and vegetables are the major crops grown in the island. But, the volume of production does not tally with the need of the growing population. Rice is the staple food, and wheat has been lately introduced. But it is not at all popular. Mustard is the only considerable cash crop. In the past, neither there was need nor there was knowledge of using chemical fertilizer. Soil was naturally rich with fertility due to annual inundation. But it has slowly lost its earlier fertility due mainly to the prevention of flood by building of high embankments all around the island. Thus, unless fertilizer is used, production is bound to be nominal per unit of land under cultivation. But not many people can afford to purchase it. Loss of the *chaporis* has affected the cattle rearing farms; and most cultivators have now no bullocks to plough, nor even the ability to use tractors or power tillers. As a result, although both fertilizer and machinery have entered the system of agriculture, their use is bound to be limited in Majuli.

As there are limited avenues for other vocation than agriculture, most educated and professionally trained persons here form the valued emigrant group of the people. It is to be noted that a good number of scientists, intellectuals and writers in Assam who have earned names in their respective fields, earlier hailed from Majuli. The rest seek jobs in the schools and colleges. As there is not much scope to absorb them in the few colleges and the schools, mushroom growth of schools can be seen in the island, one at least in almost every two/three villages so that the graduates of the village could be accommodated in those schools. But due to lack of adequate school fund, these self-employed teachers have to spend most part of their life without earning sufficient money and at the same time, losing some valuable time of their life.⁹

In the medieval times people had their own professions; some used to trade in fish, some in weaving and production of silk, some in pottery, some others in building boats, making of fans, working on ivory, and so forth. And life was one of contentment and self-sufficiency. With whatever was produced they maintained their life, and there was little or no trade.^{9(a)}

Milk and fish, and vegetable and herbs were abundant. Now, topography has changed leading to significant change in the life-styles. Growing consumerism and modernization of the life styles have also increased the needs of men. This fact has compelled its inhabitants to search for other means of livelihood. As a result, trade and market system has been slowly growing during the colonial and post-colonial periods; and a few places have emerged as semi-urban centers and townships. Towards the close of the Ahom rule, and more particularly, during the colonial period money economy entered Majuli. Slowly along with the growth of township and markets, have emerged administrative set up. Things earlier gifted or exchanged for another, are now sold in the bazaars; and poor cultivators having no source of income, live a wretched life. Thus there is sharp stratification among the inhabitants with salaried teachers and service holders, officers and contractors on one side, and the marginal cultivators on the other, forming the two distinct groups. Economically therefore, Majuli witnessed emergence of two opposite classes—the poor class having neither enough cultivable land nor enough resources to earn, and the affluent class having both land as well as resources to earn. With comparatively less cost of living, therefore, service holders and the contractors are the most affluent class in Majuli. They have social status in the villages on one hand, and on the other, they find enough time to participate in and control rural politics.

Majuli has a strong cultural heritage of its own in its Satras. Sankaradeva, the founder of Assam Vaishnavism, had been here for more than two decades (1522-1546) establishing the centre of his religion and proselytizing people to it. It was here that he discovered his great disciple Madhavadeva who was initiated to non-violence and monism by the saint in about the year 1522. Recorded as *mani-kanchan yog*,¹⁰ their combined effort left a permanent legacy to its society; and Majuli still takes pride in the *dujana-guru*'s¹¹ activity in the island. It was against that background that one has to understand the establishment of numerous Vaishnava monasteries or religious colleges (Satras) in the island in the subsequent centuries.

There were once numerous Satras in Majuli numbering nearly a hundred as a matter of patronage and policy of the Ahom kings for which it has earned the name *etaka mahantar than*, i.e. a place of the religious men. Hundreds and thousands of pilgrims are visiting the island annually only for attaining religious merit. The Satras are the repositories and practising centres of all Assamese classical dance and musical forms, tagged together as 'Satriya culture' (*Satriya Sanskriti*) consisting of all forms of performing arts-*bhaona* (*nataka*, *ankiya nat*), *bargeet* and other religious songs, and dance forms. These are at the root of what is often

called by the social scientists as Assamese identity and nationality formation.¹² As a derivative from the all India Bhakti movement, Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism stressed on social equality in the religious plane and enlightenment of the commoners in religious scriptures.¹³ Satras being a legacy of this movement, have contributed significantly towards social uplift and public edification here. It is therefore not at all surprising to learn that almost all men and women in the island irrespective of being literate or otherwise, are acquainted with the stories and teachings of the *Puranas*, the *Bhagavata*, and more particularly, of the epics. Indeed, children in Majuli learn the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* when they are in their mothers' laps! This uplift is however confined to the religious life alone, for, according to the proselytizers, poverty or low birth does not prevent one to worship Hari (God).¹⁴ It is interesting to note that by two of the forms of *bhakti*, Sankaradeva taught complete submission of the self to the *guru* (*dasya*), and services to his feet (*pada-sevana*).¹⁵ Hiren Gohain has therefore pointed out that by these forms of *bhakti*, God Hari is made all powerful, shelter of the helpless, and a symbol of patriarchy in the form of a feudal lord.¹⁶ Here poverty is considered as a qualification to become a beloved of the God, and low-birth disqualification of a man is rejected for his devotion to Him.¹⁷ Interestingly, as against this, the Satras of Majuli often advocate that rules for maintenance of caste as laid down by the ancient law givers cannot be broken or disrespected by them.^{17(a)} For both the above reasons, Satras as the guardian of controlling men's religious and moral life have slowly lost their popularity in modern times in the elite circle.¹⁸

Despite decline in popularity among the elites, Satras are still the practising centres of moral values and social norms among a large section of the people in Majuli, particularly among the villagers. Their impact is felt to a large extent on men's daily and social life, food and dress habit, their behaviour and speeches. As a consequence, despite differences between various culture and caste groups, and caste distinctions, there is one common bond, the bond created by the Vaishnavite systems, that binds its society into an integrated whole; and it is here that the island derives its identity.

Number of the Satras in Majuli has slowly been decreasing, mostly due to erosion and consequent reduction of territories leading to shifting of many of them to other places out side Majuli. Even the large Satras still having foothold in the island are making alternative arrangements elsewhere. The present languishing condition of the Auniati and the Dakhinpat Satras, the two largest Satras in Majuli, speaks much about their future in the island.^{18(a)}

Satra systems of life style, particularly monasticism and celibacy, have lost popularity in the face of the growing consumerism creating gradually a need for the Satras to adopt a more liberal attitude towards the traditional systems, and the movement and activities of their inmates. Today, the place of traditional education for the pontiff as well as for their inmates has been taken by growing desire for modern education and learning; and the art forms which were once confined to the limited number of inmates in the Satras alone or to the members of specific castes and communities in their vicinity, have now become consumers' commodity being out of the closet of their traditional boundaries. No able parents today, therefore, desire to send their sons to the Satras simply to learn those art forms and culture by adopting a celibate and a restricted life completely devoted to the *guru* in the form of the *adhikara*. Under the circumstances, number of celibate inmates in the Satras today were bound to decrease. Thus, Dakhinpat Satra which once sheltered some hundreds of them have now hardly fifty; and Auniati which had in the past thousands of them, now possesses just above three hundred.¹⁹ Thus, the Satras are now a continuum of a medieval institution in its bare essentials only; it is languishing for survival in a modern setting. There is enough scope to further investigate into the Satra system, and the place of the Satras in the social formation process of the island in particular, and that of the state in general.

Like any other place of the state cultural life in Majuli consists mainly of festivals and celebrations, a peculiar mix of secular and religious ones. Secular festivals and celebrations are to be seen mainly in the villages while religious ones in the Satras. One interesting aspect of such observances is that in Majuli even the secular festivals have been Vaishnavised to a certain extent, so much so that they have become part of the overall cultural agenda of the Satras. Thus, all secular festivals celebrated in the villages are observed in the Satras. For example, although *Bihu* is a secular and a village festival, it is also occupying an important place in the agenda of the cultural festivals in the Satras. Similarly, we find here how religious festivals celebrated normally in the Satras are also observed in the villages, or, at least, participated in by the villagers. Thus while the *Ras Lila* is mainly a festival of the Satras, it is also performed in the village public halls as a secular festival. The only distinction is in their agenda. Even in the villages secular festivals are accompanied by some religious resonance. The only significant aspect in this regard is that no tribal festival—religious or secular, has yet entered the Satra circle with either modification or purification, although a few religious festivals celebrated in the Satras, like the *Ras Lila* or *bhaona* have slowly entered the tribal villages. It therefore appears that major

festivals of the greater Assamese society have been slowly entering the tribal agenda in an increasing process of marginalising them; but at the same time, the growing fear psychosis of the ethnic communities has inspired them to retain and cultivate their own systems in more vigorous ways. Thus the Mising in Majuli celebrate their ethnic festivals in the same manner and extent as they celebrate the non-tribal festivals. Similarly, the Kacharis celebrate both the Brahmanical and their own tribal festivals. Even among the Deoris, best known for their orthodox attitude, are fond of celebrating *Ras* festival and *bhaongas*.²⁰ It appears that the ethnic tribes have not only imitated the life styles and culture of the non-tribal societies, but they have also maintained with equal vigour their own ethnic cultures. As a matter of fact, tribal society in Majuli today maintains a common bond with the other parts of the society. While one is necessary for their uplift, the other is essential for protection of their identity. This recent trend in cultural reconfiguration is interesting to understand the inherent force that has been working beneath the emergence of resituating a maze of value systems in a recognizably heritage site in rural India.

As a part of the mainland Assam, Majuli has always been in the political scenario of the land. Although there is no specific record to ascertain, Majuli was perhaps within the sphere of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa Pragjyotisha; but there is no doubt that Majuli, like most other places of Assam, was under the politico-cultural domination of the Bodo speakers at an early time. The picture becomes more clear as we approach the early middle ages when the Bhuyans had their hold over this region in the post-Kamarupa times.²¹ There is no doubt that many legends and myths connecting Majuli were created at this stage of the Bhuyan rule attempting to sanskritise, or more properly, brahmanise, the old Bodo names and to legitimize their rule.²² It was perhaps, at the same time, that a part of the island in its northeast was brought under the Chutiya territory which was then emerging on the north across the Luit (old Brahmaputra). Thus when the Ahom king Sukapha entered the Brahmaputra Valley, mainland Majuli was under the Bhuyan-Chutiya rule, and Sukapha was bound to spend three years in its flood affected riverine belt on the bank of the great river. Traces of the Bhuyan-Chutiya rule could still be found in the island's social complex.

Majuli formed a part of the Ahom state in the year 1512 when Suhungmung Dihingiya Raja conquered Panbari and Habung, the two places on the north. In the 17th century, king Jayadhvaj Singha established the three big Satras here—Auniati, Garamur and Dakhinpat. Since then Satras of Majuli were the ardent supporter of the state; and with this dignity of being established by the king along with enormous grant of landed and other properties, they still support the Government of

whichever party it is formed. As a matter of fact, the Satras supported the state in the late 18th century when the Moamariya Revolt took place. During the Burmese wars too, Majuli was not spared mainly because of its Satras which used to direct the society in support of the state. The Burmese too planned to obtain the support of the Satras in their favour. Thus the big Satras in Majuli became the target of the invaders till they okayed their invasion.²³ Similarly, the British too tried and succeeded in obtaining the support of the Satras in their colonising period.

During the freedom struggle, Majuli under the leadership of Keshabram Borah and Pitambardeva Goswami took part in the various phases of the struggle beginning with the Partition. Even after Independence, Majuli has been always a part of the political system of the state. Thus, despite geographical isolation and natural barrier, Majuli has always been associated with the mainland politics of the state. This fact indicates that there was always a minority elite class which was concerned with the current politico-cultural developments elsewhere. At least the presence of Sankaradeva, Madhavdeva, Aniruddhadeva, Vamsigopaldeva in the island is significant. The middle age was also noted for regular visits of the Ahom kings to the island. In the modern times too, we find how Dattadeva Goswami introduced Majuli to the 19th century technological renaissance of Bengal; and, Pitambardeva and Keshabram Bora made it a force behind the freedom struggle in rural Assam.²⁴ It is to be noted that Pitambardeva Goswami had played a significant role in protesting against Assam's merger proposal with East Bengal (Pakistan), and in bringing to light the foreign-national influx problem into the state as early as the 1960s.²⁵ Thus, despite its geographical isolation, Majuli has always been politically and culturally vibrant and connected with the mainland systems.

Majuli is both geographically and culturally a heritage site of India; at least it has maintained that character for the past centuries since the middle ages. But, there are forces of changes that have been at work since at least the close of the middle ages; and more significantly, since the second half of the 19th century. The trend of changes are apparent in both moral and material life. Colonial rule and post colonial conditions—both man-made and natural, have acted upon the life styles of the people and on the system of its culture.

Although not much is known about its ancient systems, there is no doubt that during the Ahom rule (1228-1826) an established system of society governed mainly by the political system of the state and the moral ethics of the Satras was coming into being which lasted with the same strength and weakness till the later half of the 18th century when the Moamariya Revolt first gave it a jerk and opened the initial crisis for its

breakdown. The Revolt subsided by the beginning of the 19th century; but it led to a more serious crisis in the form of the Burmese invasions and the British responses. Thus the later half of the 18th and the early part of the 19th century were a periods of crisis in the island as it was all over Assam. In the year 1838, Upper Assam was annexed to the British Indian empire and Majuli became a part of this integrated system. But this did not immediately uproot its old systems for the colonial Government retained the old ones, specially the Satras, with all sorts of power and status they had enjoyed during the monarchy. Majuli therefore still remained an ecclesiastical state with the same kind of 'old world air' till at least the close of the 19th century. For, the new regime was certainly dependent on the old regime of the island for maintenance of its economy and society, peace and stability; and in most cases, for information and advice of the *Satradhikaras* who formed a part of the elites of contemporary Assam. Thus the Auniati *Satradhikara* Dattadeva Goswami met the British Commissioner Jenkins and explained and acquainted him with the prevailing customs and systems of the society. Similarly, *Satradhikaras* of the other large Satras were also taken into confidence by the British.

This is, however, only one aspect of the developments. The British soon introduced new revenue policy and began to assess even the island which was once, more or less, a revenue-free zone. Mills in his *Report* (1853) has noted that although it was a very large island, its revenue collection was considerably small. Mills report was soon taken into account when much of the revenue-free lands were reclaimed by the British and converted into revenue-paying or half-revenue paying lands, and amount of charge was also raised. In the meantime, ferry *ghats*, roads and other means of communications began to develop and they could gather more information about the island of their own through investigations and surveys. Building of road and ferry *ghats* slowly replaced the old communication hazards, and by the post independence period, Majuli had a new system of travel and communication inside and outside. Thus, economically, this was a period of transition from medieval system to a modern setting.

Towards the close of the 19th century the British introduced new education system through the establishment of the L.P. and M.V. schools although the island had to wait till 1924 to have its first English school. Consequently, the British had no longer any necessity to request the *Satradhikaras* for advice, information and help. They could now call upon the *Satradhikaras* to their courts to discuss anything of their liking, and even imprison some of them for reason of their participation in the

freedom struggle. Thus, politically, while the late 18th and early 19th century witnessed a crisis in the form of Moamariya Revolt and the Burmese invasions in both of which Majuli had played its role, the rest of the century witnessed a period of consolidation of the British colonial rule compromising with some of the old but strong traditions, such as the Satras and the caste systems, but at the same time, introducing certain new systems for their own advantage.

Socio-culturally, this period for Majuli was both a continuum, and an evolution. It is interesting to note that the Satras have remained as an institution till now as they were in the 17th and the 18th centuries; but they had undergone internal and external evolutions at least since the second half of the last century. There were now Satras and *namghars*; but neither the *namghars* were the village courts as it were earlier, nor the comment of the *Satradhikaras* on the criminal cases were abiding on the people. Neither all of their lands were revenue-free nor they were empowered to possess so much of lands received from the Ahom kings as gifts, nor they are confined to the old system of caste and religion based education. Even the system of culture which they advocated, is now no longer confined to the Satras alone; it has an open space to spread now—thanks to the system of open economy and commercialization. In the society everywhere—inside and out side the Satras, old systems and customs have given way to the new which could perhaps be called *modern*. Thus, despite continuity in many aspects, in the second half of the 19th and in the entire 20th century, a stream of change, continuous but uneven, marked the life and culture of the island creating a break with the continuities of the 18th and the early 19th century. If, however, one looks at these changes that have occurred in the mid-20th century, they seem to be the last phase of an evolution, but when looked at the close of the century, they appear to constitute a revolution.²⁶

END NOTES

1. See *Illustration*, and Chapter Introduction.
2. See Chapter-I, fn.85.
3. M. Islam, *The Flora of Majuli*, Dehra Dun, 1990, for details.
4. See Illustrations. The Kalitapar Mising Village (in the illustrated sketch) is located on the bank of a swamp. It is a cluster of platform houses built in lines. The Dhapak Gaon (illustrated) is situated in a part of a *chapor* on the bank of the Brahmaputra.
5. This difference is noted in their food and dress habit, housing and living systems, thoughts and ideas, and even in some cases, in languages, tones and speeches. Thus, while the inhabitants of the Kalitapar and Phutuki Chapori Mising villages go to the bed early in the evening, those of

Gopalpur, Madhupur and Meruwabari in the immediate neighbourhood go sufficiently late. Similarly, when both old and young use to consume rice beer (*apong*) in a tribal village, smoking is largely treated as a matter of shamefulness in a non-tribal village. Even in dress and housing systems distinct features can be noted for different villages on the basis of economy which is largely based on caste or tribe affiliation. Thus, although the Vaishnava culture forms the surface of the culture systems of Majuli giving it a greater identity, beneath the surface can be traced different independent cells represented by villages, castes and communities.

- 5(a) Sanjay Ghose has noted that an unknown person visiting a family in any village of Majuli, is sure to face certain questions at the time of his/her introduction. The normal question in greeting is: "we don't recognize the new guest, where is he from? And when they would get a little more familiar, they would ask, *Das manuh?* Scheduled caste?" Cf. Sumita Ghose, *op cit.*, p. 105. There is no doubt that untouchability has largely been eradicated in the society; but that constitutional and colonial term 'Scheduled Caste' still carries some element of that social evil in the traditional and orthodox caste-based society of the island.
6. Pitambardeva Goswami of Garamur Satra undertook certain socio-religious reform agenda beginning with 1908, the year of his assumption of the *adhikarship*. These agenda included movements for widow remarriage, temple entry and uplift of the low-castes, reform of the religious sect of which his class is the upholder, and against child marriage. Being the *Satradhikara* of a royal Satra, Pitambardeva Goswami and his class had the recognized authority to shape and change things in any rural society of Assam. Pitambardeva Goswami's stamp of reform can still be felt in Majuli, particularly in the Garamur Satra and its neighbourhood. About Pitambardeva Goswami's reform movements and consequent impacts on the society, see D. Nath, 'Social Change in Rural Assam in the 20th Century: A Study of the Majuli Island', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 66th Session, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, Calcutta, 2006, pp. 706ff.
 7. Hunter, *op cit.*, p. 251; also see chapter-III.
 8. K.C. Bora, *loc cit.*, (Ms.).
 9. See Sumita Ghose, *op cit.*, p. 108.
- 9(a). Gunabhiram Baruah, *op cit.*, pp. 185f.
10. See Chapter-II.
11. Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva together called *dujana guru* by the Vaishnavas of Assam. On any occasion of religious or ritual function of a family the officiating person—*pathek/patheki/pathak/ namlagowa* while chanting the *asirvad* offers salutation to the *dujana guru*.
12. Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony*, Delhi, 1990, pp. 130ff; also see for opposite view R. Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam 1853-1921*, Delhi, 2000, p. 136; D. Sarma, *op cit.*, pp. 54ff.
13. SHTN, pp. 360ff.

14. The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement of Sankaradeva advocated equality for all irrespective of caste or birth status; and affluence is treated as detrimental to *bhakti*. See the *Nam-Ghosha* by Madhavdeva, vv.130, 482, 610, 671, 686; SHTN, p. 328 (fn.40); S. N. Barman, *Srimanta Sankaradeva—Kriti aru Kritittva*, *op cit.*, pp. 91ff.
15. SHTN, pp. 218f
16. Hiren Gohain, *Kirtan Puthir Rash Bichar*, Guwahati, 1981.pp. 26f.
17. See the *Nam-Ghosha* of Madhavdeva, *op cit.*, vv. 130, 482,686; Barman, *op cit.*, pp. 109ff.
- 17(a). Cf. ASBS, pp. 321f.
18. This is also the finding of an investigation among selected members of elite section of the island. Arati Bora of the History Department, Majuli College, for instance, told us that the Satras being centres of traditionalism and orthodoxy, have gradually lost their early popularity among the elite classes.
- 18(a). The differences between the newly built *namghar* of the Auniati Satra at Teok, and the old one at Majuli can be cited as examples. See Illustration.
19. Findings from our field Investigation.
20. Ibid.
21. D. Nath, 'The Bhuyan Land-Lords and Their Role in the Economy of Medieval Assm', *India Past and Present*, Vol. IV, Bombay, pp. 243ff.
22. See Chapter-VI.
23. For the interaction between the Auniati *adhikara* and the Burmese general details are recorded in the biographical works of the Satra, See *Padmapanidev Charit* (Ms.); cf. ASBA, pp. 481ff.
24. D. Nath, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, *loc cit*, pp. 706ff.
25. Pitambardeva Goswami wrote letters to the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru explaining to him about the Pakistani (now Bangladesh) influx problem and about possible consequence in the politico-economic and socio-cultural life of the people of Assam. See Appendix-XIV.



ANSHAH PUBLISHING HOUSE

Delhi

Sales Office:

115-A, Vikas Marg, Shakarpur,

Delhi – 110092

Ph.: 9810522367, 22500954

Marketed by Shipra Publications, Delhi – 110092

ISBN 978-81-8364-056-5



9 788183 640565