

PROSPECTS OF CULTURAL ECO-TOURISM IN MAJULI WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO VAISHNAVA MONASTERIES

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Eco-tourism is a new form of tourism based on the idea of sustainability. Sustainable development is the slogan of 21st century and sustainable tourism is one section of sustainable development. Word sustainable tourism is synonym of eco tourism. In great sense eco-tourism means management of tourism and conservation of nature in a way as to maintain or fine balance between the requirements of tourism and ecology on one hand and the needs of the local communities for jobs, new skills , income generating employment and better status for women, on the other hand.

In 1991 the International Eco-Tourism Society produced one of the earliest definition-‘ **Eco-Tourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains of well being of local people.**’ Finally the WTO (World Tourism Organization)

Has defined it as ‘**Tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified object of studying, admiring and enjoying nature and its wild plants and animals as well as exciting, cultural aspects found in these areas.**’

All these definition focus on three significant aspects- **nature, tourism and local communities**. This being an environmentally friendly activity essence of ecotourism is development with minimum loss. Ecotourism as a concept has gained momentum recently in India, but as a way of life Indian have practiced eco tourism since time immemorial by their traditional approach to native and cultural heritage. It has a vast potential for ecotourism that needs to be tapped for economic benefits as well as for healthy conservation and preservation of nature.

Majuli has a lot of components in the field of eco tourism. These components may be placed in two groups- Natural and Cultural. The natural components are mainly rivers, rivulets, wetlands, innumerable sandy lands, flora and fauna etc. The cultural components are Satra instaurations, Namgharas , Satriya culture, its valuable age old Sashi Pator Puthi (Sashi manuscript) cottage industries, etc. Mising cultures are also included in this respects . Over and above, the natural components are located in the isolated places and in the hands of indigenous indigence or needy people. The attitudes of the people, their cooperation behavior, towards the local and foreign tourists are also most important points in this connection. The Satras , which have made Majuli the centre of cultural heritage in Assam and the ‘Vatican of Hinduism’ alone can attract the tourists.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are –

1. To give priority for development of tourism at Majuli through a study like this. Because tourism is said to have been a lucrative industry. So emphasis on tourism in Majuli will definitely contribute a large amount of revenue to our state exchequer.
2. This will attempt to bring interchange of ideas between Majuli and the rest of the World which will definitely be widen.

3. Study the status of the existing tourist spots and to identify potential once for the further development of the industry and to prepare tourist map to facilitate movement of tourist.
4. To evaluate the status of existing facilities for tourist in Satras of Majuli.
5. To give some workable suggestions for the development of the sector in Satra and Majuli on the basis of the findings of the study.

SATRAS AND MAJULI

Actually, Satra and Majuli are the two terms equivalent to the obverse and reverse of a coin. Indeed, Majuli is understood in terms of its Satras. Its society and culture are largely to be viewed in the context of its being a land of the Vaishnava Monasteries called Satra.

The idea of a Satra (Vaishnavite Monasteries) as a kind of religious asylum and a centre of religious activities was first conceived by Sankardeva (1449-1568), the great Socio-religious reformer of 15th -16th century Assam. The Satras, however, remained on idea in its most embryonic forms and did not develop into a class of organized social and religious institution during the life time of this great Vaishnava reformer. It is recorded that Sankardeva started the Satra as a kind of institution first at his native village at Bardowa, Nagaon in the year 1520. He then shifted to the north bank, and finally to a village called Belguri Dhuwahat within the territory covered by the island of Majuli. Which was a place of glory for the historic and auspicious, 'Monikanchan Sanjog' between Sankardeva and Madhavadeva. This was the first Satra of Majuli. Probably keeping in mind the unique character of Majuli with his composite nature of soil, population, culture, tradition and its most sustained environment, Sankardeva and his followers choose this island as a permanent seat for spreading the Neo-Vaishnava movement which was a part of the Vaishnava Renaissance throughout India. By the last part of the 17th century, Majuli became hold of numerous other Satras belonging to different Sanghatis, in to which Neo-Vaishnavaism was preached out in the post Sankar deva period. In the hay days of Satriya culture there were more than 65 Satras spread across the island. Now only 22 Satras exist in the island. Some important Satras of Majuli are- Auniati Satra Founded by Niranjan Deva in 1663 AD .Dakshinpat Satra founded by Vanamali Deva in 1662 AD. Garmur Satra founded by Lakshmi Narayan Deva in 1663 AD.Badala Padma Ata founded the Kamlabari Satra in 1663AD. Murarideva established Bengenaati Satra in the last part of the 17th century. As a kind of religious institution the Satra carry much significance to both ordinary and serious visitors. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the inherent importance of the Satras of Majuli as a prospective centers of tourist attraction.

DEFINITION OF SATRA

The use of the word Satra in the sense of a Vaishnava institution to be a new one in the religious history of India. It is the organizational structure of the Satra that makes it so strong and sustaining . To realize this, one has to go back to the origin of the word 'Satra'. The word 'Satra' has its origin in Sanskrit. In the Rigveda, the word means 'that which protects the good and the honest.' Yet another view point about the origin of the word 'Satra' is that the word can be traced to the word 'Satra' found in the Bhagavata Purana, which means a sacrificial session where the Bhagavata Purana is recited and explained to the group of devotees. This process of reciting and listening to the exposition of the Bhagavata most probably gave currency to the word Satra in Assam. The fact that a sacrificial session known as Satra proceeded concurrently with the act of expounding the Bhagavata, easily led the people to believe that a Satra and a holy association where the Bhagavata used to be discussed were identical. The word satra very naturally became Satra in Assam.Satra has also some affinity with the Buddhist Sangha . If the Buddhist Sangha have the Monks, the Satra have the Bhakata. The Buddhist Sangha are democratic , so also the Satras

CLASSIFICATION OF THE SATRA

There are two type of Satra in Majuli, Monastic (Udasin) and householding (Grihasthi), of which the Monastic Satras are ideal representative of the kind and hence most well known and influential. There number is small, but Satra like Auniati, Kamalabari, Garmur (presently semi monastic) Dakhinpat, belong to the stock.

STRUCTURE OF THE SATRA

These(monastic) Satras have their own respective identities with secluded and independent territorial and structural establishment. Details of these structure are noted below-

Batchora-Being situated in a solitary area the Satra has to be approached through a long way till one reaches the gate called Karapat allies Batchora that resembles the Toronagriha of a Hindu temple. Distinguished guests are first received at the Batchora and then they are escorted to the interior of the Satra.

Hati- Beyond the Batchora is the establishment of the Satra situated in a quadrangle having the residential quarters of the devotees around in four lines , and that of the Pontif (Satradhikar) in the midst of the side of the Namghar.These four rows of huts are known as Chari –Hati.

Namghar-The centre of the main activities of the Satras is the Namghar a common prayer hall. The size of the Namghar may vary according to the number of disciples it has to accommodate. The Namghar of Auniati Satra in Majuli is a huge building that could accommodate more than five thousand devotees at a time during the congregational prayer or during the performance of any art. The Namghar of Dakhinpat Satra is built on huge wooden pillars which were erected when it was first built in the present place in the early 18th century. When visited one is struck by the beauty and artistic design of the pillars with which they were made and by the atmosphere prevails in side.The atmosphere of the Garmur Satra is also more attractive.

Manikut-Attached to the Namghar is the Sanctum Sanctorium called Manikut that contains the Bhagavata and the images of Lord Krishna. It is a small structure than the Namghar and is generally attached to the latter adjoining the eastern end.

Each Satra consists of three principal parties, viz- **(1) Adhikar (The Pontif) (2) Bhakat (Devotee) (3) Sisya.** The first two parties generally reside within the four walls of the satracampus.Lay devotees or disciples of a Satra are called Sisya. They generally live in village and towns leading householder's life.

The Pontiff- Every monastic Satra has a Pontiff, i.e. the head called Adhikar or Satradhikar. He, like all residential devotees, is invariably a celibate person, and must belong to either Kayastha or Brahmin community. It is a custom to have two Adhikars in a Satra one junior and heir to the religious gurukul called Deka Adhikar , and another senior. The Adhikar, the actual head of the Satra, they have separate and independent establishments with a numbers of workers to serve them. The Adhikar is the religious head and spiritual guide of the group under his care, and is normally well-versed in all the scriptures of Hinduism. He is distinguished by his own dress including the head dress called Pag, a style which his class imitated from the Ahom kings who had established them with all sorts of royal paraphernalia. He by principle does not put his feet on the ground like ordinary men as he is the representing the god almighty and is called 'Prabhu Iswar', 'Tera' or 'Jagannath'.

The Devotee- The devotees called bhakat or more specifically kewalia bhakat live in small houses consisting of one or two rooms called Baha cloistered in a row or such houses called Hati.They are by custom, celibate individuals, with a supposedly perfect celibate character. They are brought to the Satra when quite young, knowing nothing about the worldly life, from the lap of the parents, and are brought

up in a way to adopt to the celibate life style both mentally and physically, and trained throughout their youth to a life of devotion and culture. Above all, a system of living distinguished by habits and way of behavior. This is what makes the Satra a unique organization with a distinguished and identifiable society, and it is here one sees its uniqueness and as a source of attraction

The buildings constructed in these Satras represent a unique style and architecture not found anywhere in the world. They constructed with locally available materials like bamboo, threads, wood, and cane etc. using local workmanship. The Satras buildings are not gigantic in scale but have a dignity of their own. The District Gazetteer of Sibsagar, 1905 records the following about the apparent look of the Garmur Satra in Majuli as follows-

- *The building of the Satra are approached by a good road which is constructed at some expanses. The Namgahr is a huge structure, the roof of which is supported on huge wooden pillars and the great floor space is entirely bare save for one or two lecturns on which the sacred writings are reposing. The actual shrine is a separate building closely adjoining the eastern end of the Namgahr. The shrine is very different from the penetralia of the Sakta temple. There is no trace of blood and grease, there is nothing distinguishing or grotesque and the whole place is dominated by the note of decency and propriety which is so marked a characteristic of Vaishnavism of Majuli.*

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES OF THE SATRAS-

Majuli is known as the heart of Satriya culture, where the Satra have been contributing to literature, dance drama, music art and artifacts etc. since the time of their inception. In either case of a visitor is sure to experience one of such activities once he/she is visiting a monastic Satra. They have their own schedule of performance either in form of nitya(daily) or in the form of naimittika (occasional). Congregational prayer (namprasanga), recitation of the Bhagavata (Bhagavata path), recitation of the biographical works of the Vaishnava saints (Charit path), theatrical performance (Bhaona), Playing of lord Krishna's childhood days in Vrindavana (Sisulila), Playing of Radha-Krishna story (Rass Lila), celebration of phalgutsava, Palnam etc. are some of the best known cultural activities performed in the satras all throughout the year.

Besides, many other forms of arts and crafts are practiced by the inmates which attract the interest of visitors, these included painting, mat and fan making, boat making and more importantly, mask making for which the Chamuguri satra in the island is more well known. Generally, the Satra is a centre of beautifully decorated wood work, or a place where one could find an exquisite collection of wood work. The Kamalabari Satra of Majuli was well known for its decorated carvings. Generally the wood carvings in a religious institution represented some well known episode for Hindu mythology. The Singhasana, or the multi-tiered raised platform on lions, in a Satra, is usually the first object that attracts the visitors. The Sighasana in the Aunati and Dakhinpat Satra were inlaid with gold and silver. The Kamalabari Satra possessed the most beautiful and the largest Singhasana.

The wood carvers also painted their products with different colors, mainly Hingul (vermilion) and Hatal (yellow Arsenic). Wooded sculptures were carved in round and in relief. Round figures of Jaya, Vijaya, Dvarpalas, Garuda, Hanuman and other mythological beings were cut out from logs of wood, something showing the entire figure or at times only the upper part of the body. The giant sculpture of garuda, nearly 11 ft in height, is still preserved in the Aunati Satra and speaks very highly the artistic skill and execution of the wood workers in Satras.

Relief works showing divine beings, as well as creepers, Hewers and animals were executed in the door frame, lintels, rafters and posts. Wooden panels in bas-relief were also fitted to the walls. The Vaishnavite heads or Satradhikars used multi colors boats known as 'Sora Nao' as a means of travels. The Aunati and Dakhinpat Satras are renowned for the manufacture of 'Sora Nao'. One such Sora Nao can be seen in the state museum at Guwahati. Magar and imaginary animal resembling a fish with a trunk, at both ends of a boat or a top rafter of a house. The Magar motif also occupied a prominent place on the doors and door lintels.

Manuscript logy is a primary part of the traditional and cultural heritage of the people of Assam. The glory of Assamese manuscript logy is known the world over, and a few copies of assamese manuscripts are preserved in the Sewai Raja Manshing museum, Jaipur in Rajasthan, and in British museum, London. Manuscripts are preserved in the Satras of Majuli which attract the visitors and scholars alike from all over the world. The most well known of them are the Chitra -Bhagavata of the 16th century and the Hasti Vidyarnava of the 17th century preserved in the Aunati Satra. According to E.F. Muller, an engineer scientist of South Africa who visited Majuli from April 3 to April 28 1996, said, “ *The Satras of Majuli are depositaries of a large number of valuable religious and cultural documents and articles of great historical values* ”.

Moreover, the Satras of Majuli contributed significantly to the vast traditional Indian theater with its distinctive traditional of vaishnavite called Ankia Nat or Bhaona. Satras like Auniati , Garmur, Kamalabari, Uttar Kamalabari etc. have successfully staged Ankiya Bhaonas in the different part of country and introduced Satriya culture to the people of those far away places. Even, at the behest late president of India Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed, the disciples of Kamalabari Satra performed ‘ Ram Bijoy’ an one act play written by Sankardeva, at Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, an Islamic country where they put the audience spell bound by their successful dramatic performance. This glorified Satria cultural in abroad. The main festival of Garmur and Dakshinpat Satra is Rasslila. The Satra records that every year the Satra is visited by more than one lakh people during the Rass festival that continues for 4-5 days at a stretch. Kamalabari Satra is known for its Satriya Dance, the dance has been performed in different parts of India and abroad. Mati Akhara Nritya is a attractive dance form of the Satra.

The Chamaguri Satra is famous for mask craft. Mukha Nitriya (Mask Dance) and Rasslila is the famous festivals of this Satra. The present Satradhikar Sri KosaKanta Goswami is the recepent of Sangeet Natak Academy Award,2003 for his excellence art. However , the tourist from all over the world frequently visit the Satra and they fell spellbound enjoying the artistic beauty of mask made here. A mask of Ravana has been preserved in Indira Gandhi National Center of Art, Bhupal.

CONCLUSION

Thus the vaishnava monasteries are by their own right form distinguished sites of tourist interest all through the centuries. It is by seen absence of vision and negligence on the part of our planners that we have failed to spotlight them to the tune of their importance in the tourism map of the state, As the Satras are a school of Assamese classical art and culture, and this is where their significance lies, and which the government and other responsible authorities may take advantage of, in order to make the Satras a significant tourist aspect to accelerate the process of growth of tourism industry in the North East.

After evaluating the tourism scenario of Satra of Majuli , the following suggestions are put forwarded to promote tourism in Majuli.

1. Formulation of need based tourism policy is an urgent requirement for the promotion of tourism in Majuli. Both government and private agencies should give a serious thought in this matter.
2. All the tourist information centers should be equipped with adequate facilities and should be supported by services of trained staff. They should offer information round the clock.
3. Intensive campaign should be carried out by government and private agencies through print and electronic media at both national and international levels to project the positive image of the site. Web site should be opened to provide up to date and location specific tourism information through World Wide Web.
4. Considering Majuli's rich natural environment, eco-tourism practices should be initiated. As eco- tourism requires less economic investment, it may prove to be quite suitable in the context of Majuli.

5. Crossing the Brahmaputra is a thrilling experience. It is possible to introduce a floating restaurant cum cruise ship to well come tourists at Majuli. Boat house can also be made to accommodate tourist with modern facilities.
6. Introduced some water based adventure activities like paddle boating and rowing in some lakes and ponds in Majuli. However no provision of boating facilities for tourist has been developed so far in Majuli as per the project of 1988-89.
7. Tourism promotional activities of the state should be parallely supported by promotional venture of potential tourism products like indigenous craft, folk art, performing art, music, oral literature, other cultural components. Central and state government along with non government agencies can play important role in this regard.
8. The roads and communication system should be improved.
9. Lodging facilities in Majuli should be improved. Some new projects should be taken.
10. System of regular package tours to Majuli should be introduced.
11. More publicity about the tourism facilities of Majuli should be given
12. Publish photo album cum book , tourist guide book cum history of Majuli.

The study has thus tried to unfold a number of important issues related to the development of tourism in Majuli. However it may be mentioned that in view of vastness of the study and the treatment of the problem leaves further scope of study in a number of directions. The findings and the suggestions of the study would also be useful in formulating effective plans and programmes for sound development of tourism in Majuli.

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The combination of physical and cultural factors that make each place different. Human curiosity about other places, which comes the growth and development of tourism. However, there are enormous prospects to attract tourists in Majuli. The island with its rich bio-diversity, island life style, endangered species is also known as 'heart of the Assamese Culture' as well as 'Satria culture', The Satras , which have made Majuli the centre of cultural heritage in Assam and the 'Vatican of Hinduism' alone can attract the tourists.