
Living Heritage and Ethnographic Practices of Boat Builders in Majuli Island, Assam

Debasish Dey¹

¹. Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, Bolpur, West Bengal – 731 235, India (Email: debasish.archaeology67@gmail.com)

Received: 13 July 2021; Revised: 19 October 2021; Accepted: 25 November 2021

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 9 (2021-22): 1084-1115

Abstract: Majuli, the world's largest inhabited river island is located in the river Brahmaputra, the largest river of Assam. Majuli island is a highly flood affected district. Every year, it loses land due to rapid river bank erosion which has led to diminished land area of the island. Inhabitants of the river island are solely dependent on the Brahmaputra for their livelihood, both directly and indirectly. Boats play a major role in the lives of its people, essential not only for fishing, or during floods, but also for trading by river routes (existent even today) as well as reaching the island. The National Informatics Centre of the GOI mentions: "Boat making is the main occupation of people from Salmara, Borgayon, Nawsali". Hence, it becomes extremely important to document the traditional expertise of the boat builders and their ethnographic practices which has the possibility of depletion in coming future.

Keywords: Majuli, Assam, Boats, Kumars, Living Heritage, Ethnographic Practices, Brahmaputra

Introduction

"Intangible cultural heritage refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills handed down from generation to generation. This heritage provides communities with a sense of identity and is continuously recreated in response to their environment. It is called intangible because its existence and recognition depend mainly on the human will, which is immaterial, and it is transmitted by imitation and living experience. Intangible cultural heritage is also known as "living heritage" or "living culture" (UNESCO, Safeguarding Communities' Living Heritage).

Majuli Island is culturally rich, largely rural and a land of traditional art, skills and practices. Among all those traditional skills, boat making is notable. Expertise of Boat building of some communities of Majuli is considered a living heritage because they have preserved this skill from the time of Ahom rule and are continuing with those skills even today. This living heritage, also called as 'intangible cultural heritage' or 'living culture' undoubtedly provides those communities of Majuli with a 'sense of

identity'-identity of being a boat builder. Majuli is the largest inhabited river made island of the world (Guinness Word Record). It is situated in the river Brahmaputra, the largest river of Assam. The island is named based on its geographical location. Majuli means "land in the middle of two parallel rivers" (Nath 2009; Saharia et al., 2013: 16).

In the beginning Majuli was "a narrow and long piece of land" (Saharia et al. 2013: 16) and the two rivers were "Brahmaputra flowing in the north and the Burhidihing flowing in the south" (Nath 2009; Saharia et al. 2013: 16). However an earthquake has led to changes in the land map of Majuli. Little is known about the time since when people began to inhabit Majuli (Pegu 2013: 84; Nath 2009: 44). During the 3rd and 4th centuries however, trade was carried out with the people of Myanmar and East China through the Brahmaputra river route (Pegu 2013: 84). Human connection and passage through Majuli might have led to the settlement of some of the trading communities. During the medieval period there was rise of people inhabiting Majuli. Pegu (2013) gave three reasons for the settlement of people-*one*, the presence of river route as the sole means of communication due to absence of road transport system; *two*, was the geographic location of Majuli, from where people could easily connect with "Jorhat, Janji, Teok, Dikhowmukh" (Southwards); "Gargaon, Rangpur" (through Dikhow river); and *three*, the extremely fertile soil fit for agriculture as well as fishing in the river water attracted people to inhabit the island. Presently, Majuli is demographically dominated by the Assamese, Bengalis, Koches, Kaibartas, Missings, and several other communities. "Boat making is the main occupation of people from Salmara, Borgayan, Nawshali" (National Informatics Centre GOI; Nath 2009). Nawshali, dominated by the Koches, is a historic naval fleet of Majuli. Boats were stacked there during Ahom period. At present, no boat building is done in Nawshali village. Only Salmora and Borgayan are today boat building villages in Majuli.

The tradition of boat making is so much prevalent in Majuli that nearly "3000 families from these villages are dependent on this traditional craft of making boats". From the Ahom Period and may be earlier than that, the living heritage of boat making is being continued in Majuli from generation to generation. Almost every family of these villages have boats in their house. And many of them know the art of boat making. They are familiar with boats from their childhood, because almost every year Majuli is affected by flood and then boat becomes their only lifeline communication.

Among the Satras (vaishnavite temple), "Auniati and Kamalabari Sattra are famous for making good quality boats in the region" (Nath 2009). Many of the museums of Satras, as in Auniati Satra, boats are displayed in different forms to showcase the culture of Majuli. The Satras themselves have grown as "important cultural zone" (Nath 2009: 255) of Assam. The Ahom king, "King Jaydhvaj Singh (1648-1663) had established three important satras here-Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur" (Nath 2009: 255) apart from others like "Rangalugar and Jakhlbandhat satra" (Nath 2018: 234). In earlier times, the Satradhikars used to sail in a type of boat called as *Rongkoli nao* to collect *dakshinas* from

the inhabitants of Majuli. At present, this trend is no more, but still since Majuli is a highly flood prone district, boats are required by Satras for those who stay in the satras. This includes the Satra cultural administrators as well as the people who are brought to stay in the satras from childhood. Families with more number of children often give one child to the Satra, they think fit. Then the Satra takes all the responsibilities of the child right from childhood. Starting from education, the Satras fulfill the basic necessities of the child which stays there and serves the Satra entire life. As a result, huge numbers of people residents are there in satras which is not only their cultural institution but also their home. It is for the use of these men also boats are required in Satras. So, boats are built within the premises of the Satras and are owned by the satra authorities. One of the best examples of the use of boat is the *Palnam* festival of Majuli where a boat is brought from the Namghar to the river Brahmaputra for worship.

Previous Work

Boats have always been very important in every civilization, due to which several scholars have focussed on boats and boat traditions of various geographical areas. Eminent scholars like Mookherjee (1912), Hornell (1920), Varadarajan (1990), Varadarajan (1995), Kumar (2012), Jacob (2014), Seland (2014) have written in maritime tradition, trade and boat building in different parts of India. Notably, Hornell (1920) gave a description on the significance of boats and different boat designs in India; Varadarajan (1990) highlighted the intermingling of boat building techniques of the East with the Western countries. As she noted, prior to the advent of the Portuguese, the Indian subcontinent had three sets of maritime tradition- the “coir sewn tradition of Arabian sea”; the “Jong tradition of Southeast Asia” (p. 2) and the use of *Lashed Lug* from Austronesian/Indonesian maritime tradition. There are further various scholars like Deloche (1991); Haque (1998); Kentley, Mcgrail and Blue (1999); Hardgrave (2001); Varadarajan (2016) and Majumdar (2017) who have also highlighted boats and boat building tradition of Bengal (pre-partition and present). In Northeast India, scholars like Hodson (1912); Ramchandra (1978); Hazarika (2005); Bhattacharya, Manna and Choudhury (2004) are worth mentioning whose work on boats, fishing crafts and trade of Northeast India have been major contributions.

In case of Assam and ancient Kamrupa, scholars like Baruahabhadur (1988), Banerjee (1986), Khadri (1990), Lahiri (1991) are vital for understanding the boat tradition of ancient and present day Assam. While Barua Bahadur (1988) has provided an account of the history of Assam which, was called as Pragjyotisha or Kamrupa till 16th century when the Koch king Naranarayan died; Khadria (1990) in her study on the traditional crafts of 19th century Assam have discussed about boats on the eve of British arrival in Assam along with the changes brought out by the colonizers during the period. The author discussed the process of boat building by the use of woods like ‘Sal, Ajhar and Gunsiri’. Such boats could carry a weight of 30 to 35 tons. Looking into the largest river island Majuli located in the river Brahmaputra, Prof. Dambarudhar Nath has contributed much on the society and culture of Majuli. However, there also exist few

literatures written in local languages of Majuli. These include books written by Tamuly (2013), Thakuria (2016-17), Nath (2018) which have not only emphasized on the rich culture of Majuli but also boats which are part and parcel of the people of Majuli.

Context of Study

Boats of Majuli, despite being the lifeline communication of its people, have remained isolated from the purview of social-scientists and historians. From the ancient times till present, river boats have been tremendously used in this region as it situates itself in the Brahmaputra. Unlike the other parts of Assam and India, boat-making remains an important traditional work for which thousands of people from the island are dependent. This tradition remained due to the fact that boats are the only connecting vehicles for survival of the people of this island. This has also added to the rich tradition of boats in the island which have been retained by the boatmen and boat builders. Boats and boat builders need scholarly attention mostly due to three reasons:

1. The island Majuli is on the verge of extinction due to river bank erosion. According to a study on the geomorphology of Majuli, the land area of Majuli was 1255 sq. km. in 1901 which has reduced to 421.65 sq. km. in 2001 (Sahariah et al. 2013: 15). At this point of time, it is very important for researchers to uphold the rich cultural tradition of boats that exist in Majuli.
2. After the construction of bridge connecting Majuli with Jorhat, the traditional work of boat making may hamper. The boat builders may swift to other kinds of work for earning livelihood.
3. Most importantly, boat building is the living heritage of the Assamese Kumars of Salmora and Missing tribes of Borgayan village in Majuli which not only preserved their traditional expertise but has also provided them an 'identity' (UNESCO, Safeguarding Communities' Living Heritage). Hence, it needs documentation.

Methods of Data Collection

The present study is based on primary data collected through field surveys of various villages under Majuli district of Assam, as well as visits of Assam State Museum and Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra in Guwahati (Figures 1-9). However, for secondary sources, Majuli college library, Guwahati Archives and Assam State Library, Guwahati, have been visited. For primary data collection, I visited Majuli in February 2020. Boat was the only means to reach the island. From Nemati Ghat of Jorhat district, I took ferry services to reach Kamlabari Ghat in Majuli. I stayed near *Uttar Kamlabari Satra*. I visited the Satra and talked to the *Satradhikar* and local people about boats of Majuli. They suggested the names of Salmora and Borgayan villages of Majuli, which were the boat building hubs of Majuli. From Kamlabari, Salmora was in one direction and Borgayan was located exactly in the opposite direction around 7 kms away. The next day I moved to stay at Bongaon village of Majuli, around 10 kms away from Kamlabari town. There were no hotels, so I had to stay in rent. I stayed there for one

month to complete the field surveys in Salmora village and nearby areas. For careful observation of the people living in the villages, their ethnographic practices and richness of culture, I rented a bicycle to conduct the field surveys and reached the villages. I communicated with the locals there but since they do not know any other language besides Assamese and tribal languages, I took help from a youth who somehow managed to be my translator on daily payment basis. The locals there told that 75-80% boats of Majuli are built in Salmora. Initially I started field visits of Salmora village with my translator in two bicycles, which was around 4 kms. from Bongaon.



Figure 1: 17th century wooden Boat collected from Majuli Island, in Assam State Museum, Guwahati

The river Brahmaputra was around 200 metre away from Salmora village. On the way towards the village, I talked to my translator who told that in Salmora the Assamese speaking Kumar community builds boats and in Borgayan the Missing Tribes are associated with boat building. Reaching there I took interviews and the process continued until I gathered all data. There I came to know that the contribution of Kumar boat builders was not confined within Majuli, furthermore they also visited different parts of the Brahmaputra valley and build boats. Many of them also take contracts, build boat in their village and supply those to different districts and commercial hubs like Guwahati, Kamrup, Dhubri. It was comparatively easier for them to supply boats in these places, since to reach there, the boat builders have to sail downwards from Majuli through the river Brahmaputra. Unlike present boats which are run by engine, earlier they had to manually row the boat according to the stream of river. It is being continued since then. On my completion of field visits in Salmora, I

started the visits to Borgayan village which was around 20 kms from Bongaon. In Borgayan, Missing Tribes are build boats but only for self use, unlike the Kumars of Salmora. The first day when I reached the village, there was a *puja* called as *Donipolo puja*, worship of sun and Moon God. I interacted with the villagers, took photographs and recorded. In similar fashion, in Salmora too, I documented the data through pictures and videography. In both these places, I took interviews of not only boat builders, but also the women of the family and elders of the village to get an insight in the boat building tradition of Majuli (Figures 1-9).



Figure 2: Ferry Services from Nemati Ghat, Jorhat to Majuli



Figure 3: Signboard, Pub Majuli College Library



Figure 4: Kumar Women Making Handmade Pottery



Figure 5: Directions of Dakhinpat satra and Salmora

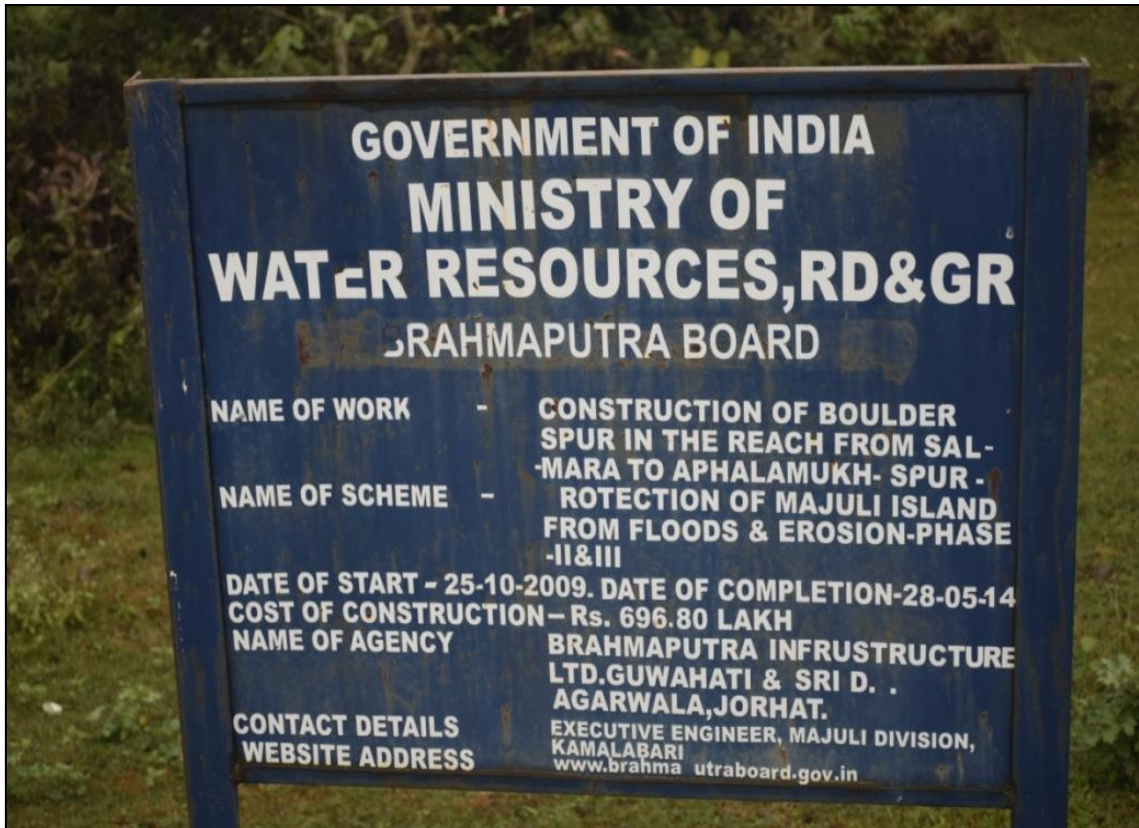


Figure 6: Board Showing flood Prevention construction works at Salmora



Figure 7: Mud Road towards Salmora village



Figure 8: Researcher and Dharmeswar Hazarika in Majuli Island



Figure 9: A Missing villager of Borgayan rowing Boat

Historical Background of Majuli Island

Although “the history of creation of the island is shrouded in obscurity” (Nath 2009: 7), Majuli’s medieval history can be known from written records as well as oral sources. It is possible, as Prof. D. Nath claims, that Sukapha, the first Ahom ruler, crossed Majuli while he went from “Patkai to Charaideo” (Nath 2009: 7). However absence of the word ‘Majuli’ and presence of the word *Habung* (Nath 2009: 7; 2013: 21), which “has a Bodo root meaning low-lying and extensive flood-affected region” (Nath 2009: 7), in the written records made the author claim that “Habung at that time either included the region covered by the Majuli island, or the island itself was called Habung” (Nath 2009: 7). According to the 14th century text *Yogini Tantra*, “Chutiya king Ramchandra founded his capital in Ratanpur, Majuli, which was perhaps washed away by the Brahmaputra” (Nath 2013: 21). Majuli is known as the cultural hub of Assam. The written history of Majuli growing as a Vaishnavite hub, sprang from the fact that the island was made home to Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) (Roychoudhury 2013: 172) and his followers by the Ahom rulers as the island was “isolated enough to accommodate the revolting Vaishnava spirit” (Nath 2009: 3). Since then Satras were built and Majuli turned to be in the present state of being. There is also a popular belief about the relation of Majuli with Vishnu. As Prof. Nath (2013) pointed out “Lord Krishna when eloping with Rukmini from Kundilya (present Sadiya) sojourned for a while in Majuli” (Nath 2013: 21).

Beliefs apart, records also show that during the 16th century, “Koch king Naranarayana had made his camp in Majuli” (Nath 2009: 9) and it was during his rule (1540-1587) “Srimanta Sankardeva migrated to Koch Behar, the capital of Koch kingdom” (Roychoudhury 2013: 172). This series of connections and dialogues between Sankardeva and Naranarayan might be a reason why “the Vaishnavite religion more or less placed a dominant centre of Koch kingdom” (Goswami 2013: 292). King Naranarayan, during his camp in Majuli “built a road from Koch Behar upto Narayanpur on the North, from where he sailed upstream to Luit and reached Chinatoli at Habung and made his camp at Juriya” (Nath 2009: 9), where “Chinatoli is a historic village of Majuli” (Nath 2009: 9). In the 17th century too, Muhammad Cazim, “the biographer of Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707)” (Nath 2009: 5) talked about the size of Majuli island and “stated that it was about 50 *kosh* in length” ((Nath 2009: 5).

During the 18th century Moamaria rebellion, “When the Moamarias had reached Majuli” (Bhuyan 1933: 106), a “batch of Moamarias exercised independent authority over” (Bhuyan 1933, p. 120) the island. There “the Moamarias ravaged the people of all grades including the spiritual leaders, belonging to Majuli, Rangpur and Abhaypur; they devastated their territory and compelled to desert their homesteads” (Bhuyan 1933: 129). As Borah (2013) noted “most of the Satras including the Mowamoriya or Kalanghati Satras were affected in the Mowamoriya revolt” (Borah, 2013: 256). During the revolt, ‘the British officer Ensign Wood” (Nath 2009: 5) who was assigned the task “to quell the Moamariya disturbances” (Nath 2009: 5). He discussed about the geography of Majuli: “the island ended at *Kajalimukh*, in Nagaon 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” (Nath 2009: 5).

Profile of Boat Builders of Majuli Island Based on Personal Interview

Given the fact that the traditional skills and expertise of boat building is still intact with this generation of boat builders, it is important to know about them. The next generation is moving away from this traditional occupation. They are getting educated and are willing to get into government service or other kinds of works and are unwilling to work as boat builders. Hence, profile of the boat builders of Majuli (Figures 10-12) has been documented to understand the present status of boat builders.

Thaneswar Hazarika, a 50 year old boat builder of Kumar community, started building boats from the age of 18. Originally, the family of Hazarika belongs to that of potters but later they started the practice of boat building. Studied upto class VIII, Hazarika could manage to educate his children better. Of the five children, three are sons and two daughters. The elder son is aged 30 and after completing higher secondary, he went to Bangalore for work. The second son, aged 25 has similar educational qualification and has works at Kolkata. The younger son aged 22 is a graduate and stays at Majuli. Of the two daughters, the eldest has studied upto H.S and the youngest is currently at upper primary level. Hazarika’s parents had studied upto primary level only. In Hazarika’s family, alike other Kumars, the males are engaged in the work of boat building and the female members are engaged in pottery.

Khageswar Bhuyan, a 60 years old OBC boat builder is a resident of Salmora. The old builder started boat building at age 30 despite the fact that carpentry was the family’s main occupation. Unlike Hazarika, Bhuyan’s family is not engaged in pottery. Alike his father, Bhuyan has also studied upto class V. Father of three daughters or *jiyori* (as called in local language), Bhuyan’s mother was illiterate. His eldest daughter is a graduate, the middle one is studying at Higher Secondary and the younger one is currently at upper primary level. At the time of interview in 2020, Bhuyan was building a boat at 2 No. Khowal Gaon for a resident of the area, Kon Bora.

Dharmeswar Hazarika (Figure 10) is a resident of Samugori Boniya gaon, the village known for its mask culture. He is by profession engaged in agriculture and fishing. However, he has built two boats for fishing purposes. He learnt boat building from the builders of Salmora after watching the building techniques from years. Around 10 years back, when he was aged 37, he took up the work of boat building, which ended with the completion of the two boats only. Belonging to a Hindu Vaishnavite family, the family’s main deity God is Krishna and Vishnu. They are scheduled castes. He has four children and all of them are sons. The first three have studied upto class X and the younger one is studying at H.S with science as the stream of study.

Anil Kalita, a 39 year boat builder from Afolamukh Ghat, Salmara belongs to the Kumar community. Boat building and pottery are the main occupations of the family.

Father of a 8 year old son, Kalita has studied upto higher secondary. His parents were literate and so was his grandfather. He started the work of boat building from the age of 14, when he was studying in class IX. Since then work and study went on side by side till he completed his higher secondary. He earns around 60,000 rupees per year. Anil Kalita's wife comes from a different village where pottery is not the main occupation as in Salmora. So she cannot make pottery. Alike other Assamese women of Majuli, she has expertise in weaving, and making woolen sweaters and other cloth materials. Hence, through her work of weaving, she contributes to the family.



Figure 10: Dharmeswar Hazarika, playing a flute made of ox horn

Niron Saikia, also from Afolamukh Ghat, Salmara is aged 60. Belongs to OBC Kumar community, Niron's family have resided in Majuli from earlier times. The main occupation of the family was agriculture and farming earlier. His forefathers were engaged in farming until his father's generation. But this has changed because no agricultural land is left with the family at present. Due to river bank erosion, their agricultural land has been occupied by the mighty river Brahmaputra. Hence, from Niron's generation, they took boat building as the main occupation. He started the work of boat building when he was 18 years old. Niron is a father of five children, three sons and two daughters. Two of his sons have studied upto class X; one is mechanic and the other is singer with A.C band in Majuli. The second son has studied upto B.A but failed the final exam. He now works as a mason. Both the daughters have studied upto class X and are married. Marriage of daughters is within caste.

Ghuran Bhuyan, a 35 year old boat builder of Majuli, took up the task of boat building as the main occupation from the age of 11 when he was studying in class V. Initially he

worked with his father and uncle, both of who were boat builders. He learnt the work from them. Ghuran's father also did farming along with boat building and pottery, but unlike Niron Saikia, the land of farming was eroded as part of river bank erosion. At present, Ghuran's family took up the task of boat building apart from pottery. They belong to the Kumar community. Alike his father, Ghuran has also studied upto tenth class. He has no children as of now.

Bipin Chamuah, another Kumar boat builder of Salmora, took up boat building as the primary occupation at the age of 16, after his class tenth in school. The 60 year old Bipin is also engaged in farming and pottery alike most others of the village. Bipin have two children, a son and a daughter. Both the siblings have studied upto higher secondary. He earns around Rs. 3000 per month. Bipin's son works on erosion prevention projects of the river Brahmaputra and his daughter weaves cloth.

Dhaneswar Bhuyan, a 54 year old boat builder from Salmora, took up the work of building boats after his upper primary schooling. He didn't go to school thereafter. Apart from boat building, the family is also engaged in pottery. Alike Niron Saikia and Ghuran Bhuyan, Dhaneswar's agricultural land was also engulfed by the Brahmaputra, before which, the family also did farming. The Kumar has two sons; one has left studies after higher secondary and the other studies at middle primary level.



Figure 11: A Boat builder preparing Tea near the place of work

Indro Hazarika, took up boat building as the main occupation when he was aged 20. The 37 year old Indro is also engaged in carpentry and pottery making. The earlier generations of Indro also did farming but as is the case with majority of people in

Majuli, the agricultural land is eroded. So agriculture was last done by his grandfather. Educationally, Indro has passed his H.S.L.C exam and is a father of two school going sons. Indro also belongs to the Kumar community. Similar is the family occupation of Arun Bhuyan, a 50 year old boat builder of Salmora. Arun started the work of boat building from the age of 16. The female members of the family, including his 17 year old daughter, make pottery. She is studying at higher secondary level. His two sons have passed the H.S.L.C exam and are working in informal sectors. Annually, Arun earns around Rs. 20, 000.



Figure 12: A Boat builder of Salmora Village

Viswajit Payeng is a 40 year old boat builder from 2 No. Borgayan. He started the work of boat building at an age of around 25. He earns around Rs. 7000 per month. According to Viswajit, earlier agriculture was the main occupation of the Missing community. But presently, they also build boats, work as *mistris* and build houses, apart from agriculture. Educational pattern of the community reveals requirement of possible improvement which can help for their progressive development. Viswajit has learnt to give his signature only. He has four children. His only son, Aurobindo, is studying at class XI and all the three daughters dropped out of school after ninth standard. The eldest one has been married in a nearby village. Daughters are married early. Also, elopement marriages are common among the Missings of Majuli but that too with the groom of same community. When the daughter elopes, the family brings the bride and groom and follow the traditional marriage rituals. Missing women are engaged in weaving clothes (Pegu, 2013: 94).

Boat Building Communities of Majuli Island

Of the various villages of Majuli, Salmora and Borgayan is known for its engagement with boat building occupation. The Kumars of Salmora and Missing Tribes of Borgayan are mostly associated with this occupation. A close observation of the villagers reflect that the people of these villages have several customs related to boat building which is associated with their traditional expertise of boat building as well as rituals of their daily lives.

Boat Building Communities of Salmora: Salmora village is known for being the main hub of boat building and handmade pottery making in Majuli (Figures 13-16). As per local history, naming of the village as 'Salmora' is associated with the *Mans*. A resident boat builder of Salmora narrated story of the cruel "*Man Raja*" who attacked Assam and Majuli twice. The story says that the *Mans* made sharp pieces of bamboo called as *sal*. These *sals* were pierced into the body of local inhabitants and then the bodies were fixed in bamboo trees with the help of *sals*. Huge number of people was killed like this and hence, the place came to be known as *Salmora*, where *Sal* refers to a 'sharp bamboo stick; and *Mora* is an Assamese word for 'death'. Thus *Salmora* means *death by sal* (Hazarika 2015: 20). The story of this Man Raja refers to the Burmese "atrocities" committed towards people during Burmese invasions of Assam, because "Mann" refers to the Burmese soldiers (Nath 2018: 326; Official Website of Jorhat District). A report of the Northeast Today (2016) also had similar observations: "Locally, this period [1817-1826], is called as 'manor din' by the Assamese" (Northeast Today 2016). This was the time when the Burmese or Mans invaded Assam thrice in 1817, 1819 and 1821 (Nath 2018: 326-331). This period witnessed "horrible cruelties, which are still remembered with a shudder, for they would burn, torture and slay" (Acharyya 1957: 15). Glimpses of "Manor din" can be understood from Nath (2018): "Humans were caught and burned at the stake, and Jiyari and Bowari were all raped" (Nath 2018: 339). He further narrated: "Mansena chased Habi, grabbed and killed them. Some of them were skinned alive. Some were killed by putting in hot oil. Many were tied in the Namghor and burnt at stake alive" (Nath 2018: 339-340). Such were the atrocities meted out to the people of Assam and Majuli by the Mans which is remembered with terror even today, as is known from the people of Salmora.

Salmora during those days was a huge village situated in the bank of Brahmaputra. At present, the village area has shifted inwards because, according to a villager, river bank erosion has grabbed land of Salmora. Over the years, the size of Majuli has also diminished. Salmora is inhabited by a majority of Assamese Kumars who write their surnames as Hazarika, Bhuyan, Kalita, Bora, Saikia, Kalitas, Bhorali. Besides Kumars, a small proportion of "Brahmins, Kaibartas, Chahariyas and Gossains" (Das 2014: 10) are also there. Shaikia (2018) who wrote about the village mentions that "Majuli Shalmora is not usually the name of a village but of a large Kumar settlement" (Shaikia 2018, p. 13). It was a "vast area" (Shaikia 2018: 13) and the middle of this vast area is the village Shalmara" (Shaikia 2018: 13). According to a local organization of Majuli-the *Jayatu Salmora Jubak Bijoy Milon Sangha* (2010), in pre-independence days, people belonging to

various communities like “Gosai, Brahmin, Kumar, Kaibarta, Musalman and Mishing” lived in Salmora (Kalita 2010: 15). The Kumars earn their livelihood by boat building and pottery (Kalita 2010: 15). Choice of occupation may be “due to the easy availability of raw materials for boats and clay materials” (Shaikia 2018: 13). At present, 80% people of Salmora are engaged in these two works for livelihood (Kalita 2010: 23). In fact, the Kumars of Salmora and “Chinatoli Kumar gaon” (Fukan 2013: 81; Kalita 2010) are known for pottery making.



Figure 13: A house in Salmora village with a boat and pottery

Historically, during the Ahom period, there were five categories of Kumars present in Assam, which included, “Rajarbhagiya, Bilatiya, Satriya, Deoliya and Rajhuva” (Fukan 2013: 81). In Majuli, the major Kumar settlements are in “Salmora Kumar gaon, Dakhinpat Kumar gaon, Chinatoli Kumar gaon, Bogriguri Birinabari Kumar gaon, Bhekulimari Kumar gaon, Mudaibil Kumar gaon, Kamlabari, Bangaon, Dhobachola” (Kalita 2010: 21). But it is only the Kumars of Salmora and Chinatoli who have retained the work of making clay materials (Kalita 2010: 21). It is “not known what class the Kumars of Salmora and Chinatoli belonged to” (Fukan 2013: 81) but they were an important segment of Salmora village during pre independence days too (Kalita 2010: 15). Presently, they make several kinds of clay pots and “sell them from Sadiya to Dhubri by boat or exchange them with other commodities” (Fukan 2013: 81). Since boat become very essential for the Kumars to earn livelihood, they have become engaged in building boats in Salmora. They use woods of *Ezar*, *Uriam*, *Wei* trees to make boats. Boats of different sizes are built which includes small boats carrying 4-10 people to big ones capable of carrying 100-200 people (Kalita 2010: 22). Boats built by these boat

builders are found in various parts of Assam, especially boats travelling from Nemati Ghat to Majuli are mostly made in Salmora village (Kalita 2010: 22).



Figure 14: Boat building in the banks of Brahmaputra



Figure 15: Mar Boat is Repairing on Brahmaputra River



Figure 16: Boat building on the bank of Brahmaputra near Salmora village



Figure 17: A House in Borgayan Village

Boat Building Communities of Borgayan: In Borgayan, the Missings are engaged in the task of boat building, but unlike the Assamese Kumars of Salmora who built boats for commercial use, the Missings built boats for self use . The Missings were “earlier called as *Miri*” (Chutiya 2013: 87; Nath 2009: 47) but since the word *Miri* is considered “derogatory” (Pegu, 2015: 4), they use the word *Missing*. Literally, ‘*Missing*’ means ‘a good person’ where *Mi* means ‘People’ and *yaching* means ‘good or superior’ (Chutiya 2013: 87). Originally “an agricultural tribe” (Nath 2009: 49), the Missings, who are basically “hill dwellers” (Pegu 2015: 5) today constitute around “37% of the total population strength in Majuli” (Nath 2009: 47). The “sub-ethnic divisions” of Missings are “Chayengia, Mayengia, Ayengia, Tayu-taye, Pagar, Dambuk, Chamaguriya and Tamar” (Nath 2009: 51) of whom the first two categories dominate Majuli. They are Scheduled Tribes and are concentrated in “Jengraimukh, Daphalakata, Jakaibowa, Rangachahi, Miri, Ratanpur, Kalitapur, Patharichuk, Chitadarchuk, Phutuki Chapori, Baraguri, Naganachuk, Bargaya, Dhapak, Baralimara” (Nath 2009: 48). Besides Arunachal Pradesh, in Assam, they are also found in “the districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur” (Pegu 2015: 1). Nath (2009) has commented on their history of migration:

“It is not possible to trace exactly the history of migration of the Missings in the Majuli island. But it is almost certain that they did not inhabit this area long before, atleast before the early 19 th century ...Shiabuddin Tallish, the official Mughal historian who accompanied Mir Jumla to Assam in his campaign during 1662, and who had one of the army camps in the Majuli island, has noted that the Miri Mismis dwelt on the hills ‘which lie on the east of Assam on the *Uttarkul* side at a distance from eleven days’ journey from Gargaon” (Nath 2009 p. 48).



Figure 18: Missing Families get-together in the day of *Doni* Worship

When interviewed, the Missing boat builders of Borgayan had similar opinions about their migration. One boat builder said that their forefathers came to Majuli from Pasi gaon, Arunachal Pradesh in the first decade of 20th century. The Missings are divided as *Dus Gami* and *Bara Gami*, where *dus* and *Bara* literally means 10 and 12; and *Gam* means a chief. Thus, *Dus Gami* means 'chief of 10 villages' and *Bara Gami* means 'chief of 12 villages'. The chiefs of these 10 and 12 villages were brothers and the Missings of Borgayan are the descendents of either the *Dus gami* chief or *Bara gami* chief. This was an earlier practice of the Missings and exists in Arunachal Pradesh even today. In Majuli though, this system has changed at present and the new system allows one chief from each village. In Borgayan, there are around 150 Missing families (Figures 17-19). From these families, around 40 people took up the task of boat building. According to a Missing boat builder of Borgayan, Viswajit Payeng, more number of Missings are concentrated in *Chelek Gaon*. With around 600 Missing families, the village has more number of boat builders.



Figure 19: Kumar women drawing water in terracotta pots from the river Brahmaputra

Ethnographic Practices

Gods and Goddesses: Majuli is a land of Vaishnavite culture (Figures 20-23 and 25). The boat builders of Borgayan do worship Viswakarma but in Salmora, all the boat builders worship Viswakarma, Brahmaputra, Krishna, Siva (Figures 24) and Vishnu. Being followers of Vaishnavism, the boat builders pray for Srimanta Sankardeva (Figure 22). They pray in the Namghar of satras and at home they also read the *Naamkirtan* book. A common custom for all boat builders is that they worship God

Viswakarma and the river Brahmaputra when the boat is first brought into water. Anil Kalita, a boat builder narrates that they started boat building with the worship of Viswakarma, the divine architect. For *Prasad*, they use fruits like coconut, banana, apple, *chola*, apart from rice, dal, kheer and milk for *bhog*. After that boat building is started.



Figure 20: Vishnu worship



Figure 21: Worship of Narasimha avatar of Vishnu

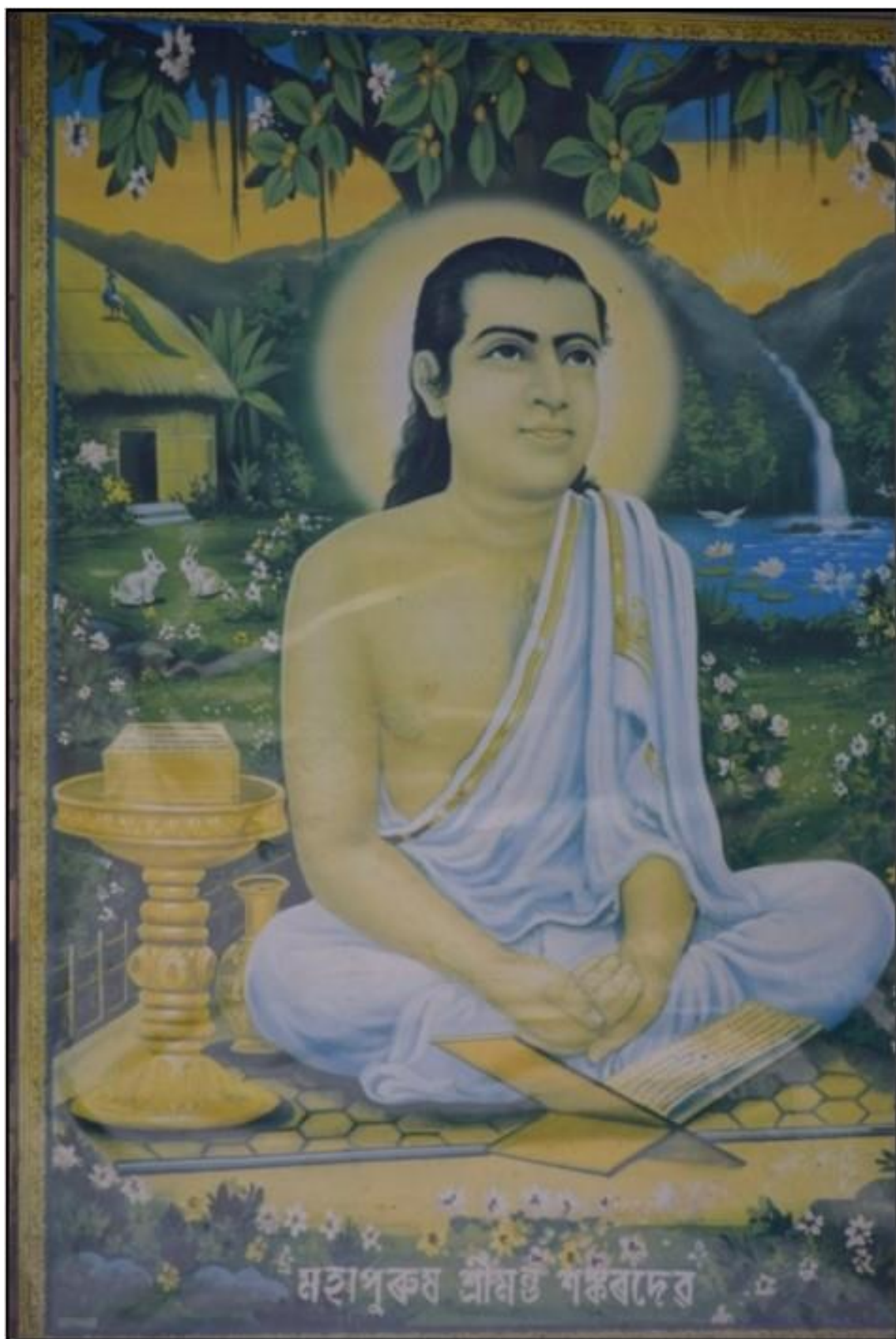


Figure 22: Srimanta Sankardeva



Figure 23: Namghor (Vaishnavite Prayer Hall) in Salmora village



Figure 24: Worship of Lord Siva

Worship of River Brahmaputra: Brahmaputra is the largest river of Assam, but for the people of Majuli, the river is called as *Brahmaputra baba*, which assigns the status of a God to the river. When boat builders complete the boat building, the river Brahmaputra is worshipped with milk, rice and banana. All the boat builders there

follow similar practice but, as Dhaneswar Bhuyan revealed, this custom of worshipping the Viswakarma is followed in case of building big boats. Building of small boats is started simply by burning incense sticks. Otherwise, worship of the river Brahmaputra is a significant aspect of Majuli. In *Ashok Astami*, a local ritual of Majuli, the mighty Brahmaputra is worshipped instead of Ganga puja. As narrated by Niron saikia, *Ashok Astami* is celebrated once a year. At that day, the people of Majuli do their prayers in *Namghar* of Satras. Then they go to river *ghat* of the Brahmaputra to worship the river God Brahmaputra.



Figure 25: Daily Worship by People of Salmora Village inside a Home

Absence of Shakti Goddesses: Throughout Assam, Shakti Goddesses are worshipped with full devotion. Existence of ancient Kamakhya temple signifies this. Majuli is an exception in this regard. For the daily puja, the boat builders of Salmora worship Krishna, Siva, Vishnu and Laxmi in daily basis. The only female diety worshipped in Majuli is Laxmi, the goddess of wealth but that too inside the home at a regular basis. No other female Goddesses are worshipped unlike the rest of Assam, where Durga and Kali plays an important role. However, mostly being Assamese, the boat builders of Salmora celebrate *Kati Bihu*. One of the boat builders, Ghuran Bhuyan also talked about Tulsi puja, worshipping Tulsi plant. Another boat builder, Arun Bhuyan talked of some rituals being carried out in the *Thapona bedi*, an elevated structure where rituals are conducted.

Worship of Nature: Missing boat builders, as narrated by Viswajit Payeng of Borgayan, traditionally worship Vishwakarma, but what is different from others is their worship of nature. For instance, the Missing boat builders worship *Donipolo*

(Figure 26), where *Doni* means sun and *Polo* means moon. That means, they worship the sun and moon. For worship earthen idol of sun god is prepared and kept with the Missing priest. A cock is required for the rituals. Different body parts of cock like the head, feet and feathers are attached to the top of a bamboo stick and placed in front of sun and the chicken is then eaten. In some occasions, they also use pig for their ritual purposes.



Figure 26: Doni (sun) worship of Missing Boat Builders



Figure 27: Preparing Tea in mud *chulha* (oven)

Food Habits

Rice is the staple food of people in Majuli. Assamese Kumars apart, “During the last one hundred years, the Missings have [also] undergone significant changes in their socio-economic life” (Nath, 2009: 51). There is a slow process of assimilation with Assamese food and culture and the Missings have today “adapted to the life-style of plains” (Nath 2009: 51). They prefer to eat *Aaho* rice on a regular basis. Red rice is a common eatery not only in Borgayan and Majuli, but in the whole of Assam. As described by Thaneswar Hazarika and Anil Kalita, at morning 8-9, the Kumars of Salmora eat rice. They have rice with Dal, fish, meat of chicken, goat, duck and pigeon interchangeably. They have their lunch at 12 noon and dinner at 9 P.M. As to Missings, besides vegetables, fish and meat of various kinds- chicken, duck, goat, pork meat is also eaten deliciously. The Missing boat builders drink a type of tea called *poro* (Figure 28). During special occasions they eat a type of rice cake or *pithas* called as *Purang* (Figure 29). To make *purang*, whole *Joha Chawl* is placed in *Torai* leaves and boiled. For drinks they prefer a locally made rice beer called as *Apung* or *Porapung*. In common, people of Majuli prepare several delicacies during Bihu (Figures 27-31). For instance, the Kumars prepare *Til pitha*, prepared with rice and sesame seeds; *Gila pitha* and *Laddu* with rice and rava sooji during festivals like *Kati Bihu*.



Figure 28: Black Tea Serving with jiggery



Figure 29: Women in Grinding Rice in *Dheki* to prepare Rice cake



Figure 30: Tea and *Til Pitha* (Rice cake with coconut), Salmora



Figure 31: *Tambul paan* (Betel nut and leaf) serving after tea

Dressing Pattern

As to dressing pattern of boat builders, the Kumars follow traditional Assamese dressing pattern (Figure 32) which includes *Mekhla Chador* and blouse. *Mekhla* is worn in the lower part of the body above a petticoat, and the *chador* is worn above it covering the blouse with pleats. Traditional dresses of the Missings are *mrigo galok*, *gonro*, *gegasor* and *gero*. The first two are worn by men and the last two by women. *Mrigo galok* is used to cover the upper part of body and *gonro* is like a dhoti used for the lower part of body. *Gegasor* covers the whole body of the women above which the *Gero* is worn. Unlike Kumar women who make pottery, Missing women weave clothes (Pegu 2013: 94).



Figure 32: Assamese traditional dress (made by wife of Dharmeswar Hazarika (Right)

Death Rituals

Missings of Borgayan follow tribal practices and bury the dead as per the living identity of the deceased. For priestly people for instance, they put the dead body in a wooden box and then bury. The box is not like a coffin, as Christians make, but only a square box. All used clothes of the deceased are put inside it during burial. They retain the unused and good clothes with them. With the dead person, they provide food there with a belief that they are fed for the last time. The Missings also provide a *lota* (vessel to carry water) and a bowl after breaking it. This might be due to their belief that the dead person's cannot eat and drink anymore, the prime things required for survival and which ends after death of a person. After that, the dead body is covered with a white cloth. When all the burial process is complete, the Missings place a white cloth flag near the burial. This is done only to identify that a dead is buried in that area.

Death ritual of the Kumars of Salmora is different. They cremate the dead body. After cremation they pour in water with the help of mud pots to cool down the burnt coal. Then they cover all the remaining coals and ashes with mud, thereby giving it shape of an elevated structure from ground. After it is done, they fix four bamboo sticks in four corners of the place and then a white cloth is attached with the bamboo to cover the cremation area, sometimes they use bamboo fence instead of white cloth.

Conclusion

Majuli island, located in the Brahmaputra is extremely important for the state of Assam due to its rich religious and cultural significance and it being the holder of Srimanta Sankardeva's Vaishnavism. Its importance cannot be denied because it is the largest inhabited river made island in the world. Its inhabitants are highly dependent on boat for the obvious reason of it being an island. But with a new bridge project in working that connects Majuli with Jorhat through road, the extensive use of boats is going to be hampered. Moreover, the occupation of boat building taken by several people in Majuli especially by the Assamese Kumars of Salmora and Missing tribes of Borgayan will also be shackled to an extent. It is also important to document the living heritage of the boat builders of Majuli due to rapid changes in the mindset of younger generations regarding the occupation of boat building. And overall, as Majuli's future shows a dismal picture due to heavy river bank erosion affecting the size of the island, study of Majuli's society and boat builders gain importance.

The study reveals that the Kumars whose traditional occupation was pottery have taken up boat building as a major occupation. There is a nice occupational division in the Kumar family of Salmora and Chinatoli. Men of the house build boats and women have taken up the task of retaining their traditional occupation of pottery. In Borgayan, many Missing families have to leave their traditional work of agriculture due to river bank erosion. However, most of them are engaged in building boats for their own use. Some has taken up the occupation professionally. Hence, all the two villages, Salmora and Borgayan which are the hubs of boat building have been surveyed in details to gather information essential for documentation.

References

- Acharyya, N. N., 2017/1957. *The History of Medieval Assam (A.D. 1228 to 1603)*. s.l.:Proquest LLC. [Online]. Available at:<https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/29178/1/10731273.pdf>
- Banerjee, T., 1986. A Note on the River Borne Trade of Assam. In: *Studies in the History of North East India*. Shillong: NEHU Publications.
- Barpujari, H., 1992. *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
- Barua Bahadur, K. L., 1988. *Early History of Kamrupa*. Guwahati: Lawyears Book Stall.
- Barua, B. K., 1951. *Cultural History of Assam: Early Period*. Madras: Barua, C. S. Press.
- Bhaskar, B. et al., 2010. Remote sensing and GIS in the management of wetland resources of Majuli Island, Assam, India. *Tropical Ecology*, 51(1), pp. 31-40.
- Bhattacharjya, B. K., Manna, R. K. and Choudhury, M., 2004. *Fishing Craft and Gear of Northeast India*, Barrackpore, India: Published by the Director of CIFRI(Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute).
- Borah, D., 2013. The Social Role of the Satras of Assam In The 19th Century and Its Consequences. In: *The Blessed Island*. Guwahati: Doordarshan, pp. 251-268.
- Chutiya, A., 2013. Majulir Ganagathnir Swarup. In: *Majuli: A Comprehensive Book*. Jorhat: Grantha Sanskriti, pp. 86-91.
- Census of India., 2001. *Census of India: Assam Data Highlights: The Scheuled Tribes*, S.l.: Government of India. [Online]. Available at: https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_assam.pdf
- Census of India., 2011. *Census of India; SERIES-19; Part XIIB: District Census Handbook, Jorhat: Village And Town Wise: Primary Census Abstract (PCA)*, s.l.: Directorate of Census Operations.
- Das, M., 2014. *Majulir Mrit Silpa*. Dibrugarh: Kaustuv Publication.
- Deloche, J., 1991. Boats and Ships in Bengal Terracotta Arts. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaised Extreme-Orient*, Volume 78.
- Fukan, D. K., 2013. Majulir Brittial Gainsomuha. In: *Majuli: A Comprehensive Book*. Jorhat: Grantha Sanskriti, pp. 81-83.
- Gait, E., 1906/1926. *A History of Assam*. Second Edition. Calcutta and Simla: Thacker, Spink & co..
- Goswami, M. C., 2013. Satra Institution of Assam and Royal Patronage. In: *The Blessed Island*. Guwahati: Doordarshan, pp. 282-296.
- Haque, E., 1998. Maritime Activities and the Indigenous Tradition of Boat-Building in Ancient and Medieval Bengal. *Journal of Bengal Art*, Volume 3, pp. 243-262.
- Hardgrave, R. L. J., 2001. *Boats of Bengal, Eighteen Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*. New Delhi: Manohar Publisher.
- Hazarika, B., 2015. *Chinaki Achinaki Majuli*. Majuli: Brishti Barbi Prakashan.
- Hazarika, S., 2005. The Brahmaputra: muse, metaphor, source of life. *Indian International Centre Quarterly*, 32(2/3), pp. 243-252.
- Hodson, T. C., 1912. Meithei Literature. *Folklore*, 23(2), pp. 175-184.

- Hornell, J., 1920. The Origin and Ethnological Significance of Indian Boat Design. *Memoris of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, pp. 3-7.
- Jacob, D., 2014. India's Maritime Heritage and Its Milestones. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 4(5), pp. 1-7.
- Kalita, D., 2010. Nao Sojai Beparoloi Jao Bol. In: *Salmora Jubak Bijoy Milon Sangha Sriti grantha*. Jorhat: Salmora Jubak Bijoy Milon Sangha, pp. 21-23.
- Kentley, E., McGrail, S. & Blue, L., 1999. Further Notes on Patia Fishing Boats in the Bay of Bengal. *South Asian Studies*, 15(1), pp. 151-158.
- Khadria, N., 1990. Traditional Crafts and Occupational Structure of the Assamese Rural Society in the 19th Century. *Social Scientist*, 18(11/12), pp. 36-63.
- Kumar, A., 2012. Maritime History of India: An Overview. *Maritime Affairs*. 8(1):93-115.
- Lahiri, N., 1991. *Pre-Ahom Assam: Studies in the Inscriptions of Assam between the Fifth and the Thirteenth Centuries AD*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority, s.l.: s.n. [Online] Available at: https://majulilandscape.gov.in/culture_boatmaking.php
- Majuli The River Island, s.l.: s.n. [Online] Available at: <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/largest-river-island->
- Majumdar, N., 2017. *Ebong Banglar Loukik Joloyan*. Kolkata: Atmajaa Publishers.
- Mookherjee, R. K., 1912. *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-Borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times*. London: Longmans Green and Co.
- Nath, D., 2009. *The Majuli Island: Society, Economy and Culture*. Kolkata: MAKAIAS.
- Nath, D., 2018. *Asom Buranji*. Jorhat: Bidya Bhawan.
- Northeast Today., 2016. *LEST WE FORGET: The Burmese Invasions of Assam(1817-1826)*. [Online] Available at: <https://thenortheasttoday.com/states/assam/lest-we-forget-the-burmese-invasions-of-assam1817-1826/cid2552327.html>
- Pegu, B., 2015. *Changing Beliefs And Practices Of the Missing Tribe of Assam : A Case Study of the Majuli Island*. s.l.:s.n.
- Pegu, I., 2013. Majulir Mishingsokalor Porichoy. In: *Majuli: A Comprehensive Book*. Jorhat: Grantha Sanskriti, pp. 91-94.
- Ramachandra, G. P., 1978. The Outbreak of the First Anglo-Burmese War. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 51(2 (234), pp. 69-99.
- Risley, H. H., 1892. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. Calcutta: The Bengal secretariat Press.
- Roychoudhury, A., 2013. An Aspect of Relevance of Srimanta Sankardeva. In: *The Blessed Island*. Guwahati: Doordarshan, pp. 171-180.
- Sahariah, D. et al., 2013. Majuli at the Crossroads: A Study of Cultural Geomorphology. *Space and Culture*, 1(2), pp. 12-20.
- Salmora Jubak Milon Sangha, 2010. Salmorar Shaikhik Dishoto Ebhumuki. In: *Salmora Jubak Milon Sangha Sriti Grantha*. Jorhat: Salmora Jubak Milon Sangha, pp. 15-16.
- Seland, E. H., 2014. Archaeology of Trade in the Western Indian Ocean 300 BC-AD 700. *Springerlink*, pp. 367-402.

- Shaikia, B., 2018. Mritsilpa aru Nao Shilpa Prankendra Majulir Salmora Gaon. In: *Salmora: Sadou Asom Kumar Juba Chatra Sammilonor Rajyik Pratham Di-Barshik Adhibeshonor Sritigrantha*. Salmora, Majuli: Rajyik Samiti, Sadau Asom Kumar Juba Chatra Sammelan, pp. 13-17.
- Tamuly, D., 2013. *The Blessed Island*. Guwahati: Bhabani Offset.
- Thakuria, N. C., 2016-17. *Noi, Majuli aru Manuha*. Kamlabari: Majuli Press.
- UNESCO. n.d. Safeguarding Communities' Living Heritage, Culture, [Online] Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/resources/in-focus-articles/safe-guarding-communities-living-heritage/>
- Varadarajan, L., 1990. *Maritime Encounter of East and West: Indian Shipbuilding Techniques*. Goa, s.n., pp. 1-25.
- Varadarajan, L., 1995. Indian Boat Building Traditions: The Ethnological Evidence. In: *Athens, Aden, Arikamedu*. New Delhi: Manohar, pp. 167-192.
- Varadarajan, L., 2016. *Bengal Water Craft: Boat-Building and Fishing Communities*. New Delhi: Manohar.