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Remnants of a hungry tide

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HAUNTING MEMORIES: Sattras (monasteries) like Auniati have been constructed on land given to them by the State in Jorhat district. Photo: Parikhit Saikia

Clinging on to their cultural moorings are monks from Assam's Majuli islands who were forced to relocate in the 1970s

With land swallowed by the Brahmaputra, many monasteries of Assam's Majuli island were relocated to the mainland in the Seventies. The lives of the monks have never been the same.

Indrakanta Mahanta, the head of the Vaishnava sattrā (monastery), Bogi Ai, can't remember when somebody last asked him about Majuli. And there I was one recent afternoon, reminding him of the island that used to be his home before the mighty Brahmaputra came and disrupted his life.

"Nobody has asked me these questions for years. I have to think, I am 82, suffering from asthma," he says, leading me inside his modest home and calling out to his younger brother Bapukanta to join the conversation.

Back in the mid-Seventies, all the land owned by Mahanta's sattrā in Majuli was swallowed by the river. The Assam Government shifted him, two younger brothers, their families and 46 families of the monastery's monks to this village along the National Highway 37 in Jorhat district. In one tragic stroke of nature, they lost their ancestral home. From a wrathful Brahmaputra, they suddenly found themselves living by a brook of the Kakodanga river. "It was a jungle then, our monks cleared it and set up home," says Indrakanta.

Life changed but not culturally. "Our sattrā still organises *raas* (the main festival of Majuli sattras), we still make our own masks for the annual fest but it is not like what we had in Majuli. We don't get the crowd here. There, it used to go on for three days, packed with people; here, only one day, limited crowd," says Bapukanta.

Sattras in Majuli traditionally depended on the huge patches of agricultural land they owned. The Mishing community used to cultivate their land and share the yield. In the relocated areas, the monks (bhakats) had to take up the job.

"We only knew how to grow crops typical to Majuli like *bao dhaan* (a rice variety that grows under water), wheat and sugarcane. None of those grow here," says Bolen Mahanta, a bhakat. So rice gradually gave way to cultivating tea, the local popular crop. So now most houses here have a patch of tea cultivation in their backyards. "We sell the green

leaves to the tea estates around us," says Bolen.

The people of Majuli are usually inclined towards art and craft. Bapukanta typically knows wood carving, makes flutes and the dhol. But the demand for these crafts is limited here. "I try and practice my art lest I forget. I teach dhol to some children of the tea garden labourers. The wooden platform with carvings at the sanctum sanctorum of our naam ghar here is done by me," he says.

His neighbour Jadab Mahanta too has kept his art alive. He makes beautiful earrings from wood, kakoi (a traditional comb used by Bihu dancers) from buffalo horn and *sanchi paat puthis* (manuscripts made of leaves) akin to those used by the monks in Majuli. He has grown 100 Sanchi trees at his backyard, dries the barks, treats them and makes sheets to write on. "These are my hobbies, my effort at preserving our heritage, I run my family with the salary I get as a teacher," says Jadab. Teaching was a big occupation in Majuli with its many schools and colleges.

The people of Majuli displaced in the Seventies are mostly settled in Golaghat and Jorhat districts. Since these areas are mainly tea belts, most new settlers tried to find employment in the industry. Like Bolen, Bapukanta and their neighbours, Tarun Goswami in Bogijan area of Golaghat district too grows tea in his backyard.

Tarun's father takes out old utensils, many of them broken, tattered manuscripts and old clothes used in their sattrra in Majuli to show "what we were." He has taught Tarun to sing songs for *raas* and play the dhol in the *naam ghar* but his younger son Biren doesn't know any of it.

"I was born here," says Biren with a shrug.

Much better off than these two monasteries is the Kamalabari Sattrra which moved to Titabor area of Jorhat district around the same time. The sattrra is more typical of monasteries during their heyday in Majuli: young monks milling about, separate quarters for the sattradhikar, old monks and young ones, a granary, an auditorium, naam ghar, schools and agricultural land to grow their food.

"We have learnt to adjust in the new surroundings in the last 40 years. We teach our young monks Sattriya music, how to play the dhol and khol besides mask making -- the skills monks would learn in a Majuli sattrra. They study in our schools like young monks do in the island. We also send our students to parts of Assam and outside the State to perform Sattriya." The monastery is trying to preserve "Majuli culture" but it's not the same. "Many things are gone because we are not in Majuli anymore..."

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