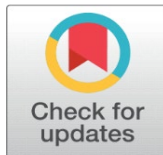
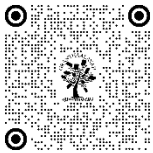


MAJULI RAAS MAHOTSAV AND ITS PRESENT-DAY RELEVANCE WITH RESPECT TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF MAJULI

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Received 05 April 2024

Accepted 09 July 2024

Published 22 July 2024

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.1065](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.1065)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Majuli, the world's largest river island (Guinness World Records) situated in the Brahmaputra River in Assam, India, hosts an annual cultural extravaganza in the month of November known as the Raas Mahotsav. This research article explores the historical and cultural significance of the Majuli Raas Mahotsav and analyses its present-day relevance in contributing to the socio-economic development of Majuli. For this study secondary data is collected through review of academic literature, from government reports, government websites and media articles. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of how the festival contributes to local economic growth, cultural preservation, and community cohesion. By examining the impact of the festival on tourism, local businesses, and community engagement, this study aims to shed light on the potential of cultural events like Majuli Raas Mahotsav as catalysts for regional development. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on leveraging cultural heritage for sustainable development and offers valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and cultural enthusiasts alike.

Keywords: Majuli, Raas Mahotsav, Culture, Development, Vaishnavism, Satra

1. INTRODUCTION

Majuli, the largest river island in the world, is not just a geographical marvel but also a cultural hotspot that showcases the vibrant traditions of Assam. With a population of 1,67,245 (2011 census), the island is surrounded by the Kherkutia Suti (an anabranch of the Brahmaputra) and the Subansiri river (a tributary of the Brahmaputra) in the north, and the Brahmaputra River in the south ([Figure 1](#)). Among the numerous festivals celebrated on this picturesque island, the Majuli Raas Mahotsav holds a special place. This festival is a celebration of the rich cultural heritage, traditional art forms, and the spiritual essence of Assam. Majuli, with its

unique cultural heritage, has been a cradle of Assamese neo-Vaishnavism for centuries.

Figure 1

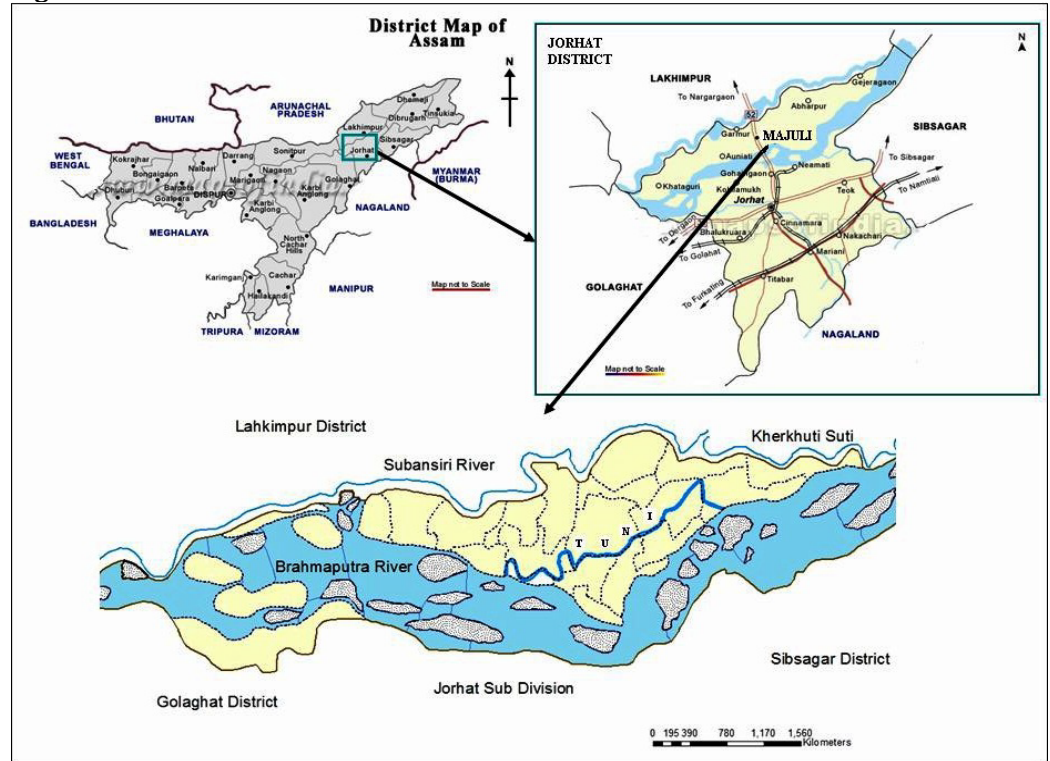


Figure 1 Map of River Island Majuli.

Source <http://lyfdaily.com/travel/majuli-island-cultural-face-assam/>

The Majuli Raas Mahotsav, an annual festival held during the month of November celebrating the rich cultural traditions of the region, has gained prominence in recent years. The Raas Mahotsav is held every year in the honour of Lord Krishna. The island's several monasteries known as *Satra* use folk dances, masks, puppets, music, and dancing, all enmeshed in a vibrant riot of colours, to present diverse aspects of Lord Krishna's life. For the past five centuries Majuli has been the centre of culture for Assamese community. From antique weapons, kitchenware, jewellery, ancient manuscripts, to pottery and other culturally significant objects are preserved by the *Satra* Sahariah et al. (2013) (Figure 2).

Raas Mahotsav, which depicts the life of Lord Sri Krishna, is the principal festival of the people of Majuli where people from all faiths are welcomed regardless of caste or community. People from across the nation and worldwide come together to participate in this celebration. It serves as a symbol of unity and camaraderie among the people of Assam. This article delves into the historical roots of Majuli's cultural significance and examines the festival's current role in fostering socio-economic development.

Figure 2

Figure 2 Museum in Auniati Satra Preserving and Displaying the 'Pal Naam Nao' (Boat), Antique Weapons, Kitchenware, Jewellery, Ancient Manuscripts, Pottery, and Other Culturally Significant Objects.

Source P. Tamuli, 2022

1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore the historical and cultural significance of Majuli in the context of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam.
- To analyze the evolution of Majuli Raas Mahotsav and its current format.
- To assess the impact of the festival on tourism, local businesses, and community development.
- To discuss the broader implications of cultural festivals in contributing to the socio-economic development of Majuli.

2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

2.1. NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM

Majuli has been a centre for the propagation of neo-Vaishnavism, a religious and cultural movement initiated by the saint-scholar Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century. Sankardeva, along with his disciple Madhavdeva, played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of Assam [Mishra & Tamuli \(2022\)](#). The Raas Mahotsav is a celebration of Lord Krishna's life and a tribute to the contributions of neo-Vaishnavism and a platform to showcase the various art forms that originated from its teachings. The island is home to numerous *Satras* (Vaishnav Monasteries) ([Figure 3](#)) that have played a pivotal role in preserving and promoting the unique cultural identity of Assam [Sarma & Phukan \(2004\)](#).

Figure 3**Figure 3** Auniati Satra

Source P. Tamuli, 2023

With its specific features, democratic organizational structure, and doctrinal strength stemming from the Bhakti movement, the Satra is a singular institution with a multifaceted social, religious, and cultural domain (Borkakoti). *Satra* is not just a religious centre but played a pivotal role in educating and developing the community in Assam. The great Vaishnav saint Shankardeva travelled throughout Assam and founded Vaishnavite monasteries known as *Satra* along with miniature replica of a *Satra* or prayer hall called *Namghar* (Figure 4). *Satra*, is a network of monasteries headed by a guru known as 'Satradhikar'. *Satra* helps to maintain and propagate the concept of the 'Ek Sarana Namadharma' as preached by Shri Shankardeva. According to Neog (1998), Neog (2004) *Satras* also served as centres of religious literary productions and development and propagation of various visual narratives in the form of *Bhaona* (Drama), *Borgeet* (Religious songs), and *Sattriya* (Classical dance form), etc through *Namghar* set up. However, today only 22 of the original 65 *Satras* are functional and prevailing soil erosion across the river island of Majuli possess a constant threat to their existence Sharma (2013).

Figure 4**Figure 4** Namghar of Auniati Satra

Source P. Tamuli, April 2023

2.2. MAJULI RAAS MAHOTSAV

According to the government of Assam's tourism website's blog - *Only Art can depict an Epic*, the Majuli Raas Mahotsav is held on the purnima or full moon day of the Assamese months of *Kati-Aghun* – falling sometime during October and November. It is a kaleidoscope of dance, music, and traditional performances. The festival brings together artists, performers, and enthusiasts from across the region to celebrate the diversity of Assam's cultural heritage. The festival celebrates the life of Lord Krishna through classical dance form- *Sattriya*, drama and other musical performances. These performances not only entertain but also serve as a means of preserving and promoting the cultural legacy of Assam [Tamuli & Mishra \(2023\)](#).

Sattriya, a classical dance form that originated in the monasteries (Satras) of Majuli, is a major highlight of the Raas Mahotsav. The dance, known for its graceful movements and intricate footwork, often depicts stories from Hindu mythology. Dancers adorned in vibrant costumes and traditional jewellery captivate the audience with their skilful performances, creating a visual feast that transcends time [Sahariah et al. \(2013\)](#) ([Figure 5](#)).

Figure 5



Figure 5 Performers Adorned in Vibrant Costumes and Traditional Jewellery

Source P. Tamuli, November 2022

The word Raas comes from the concept of *Raas Leela*, a traditional dance-drama portraying the divine love between Lord Krishna and Radha, is a spiritual and artistic highlight of the festival. And Mahotsav literally means celebration, so the Raas Mahotsav provides a platform for skilled performers to present the intricate dance form- *Sattriya*, enchanting the audience with the divine love story and the devotion it signifies. The shows demonstrated during the festival showcases various stages of Lord Krishna's life. For example, Lord Krishna's life as a child growing up

in Vrindavan to the Raas leela with the gopis (female cowherds) etc. are showcased during the celebrations ([Figure 6](#)).

Figure 6



Figure 6 Majuli Raas Mahotsav- Lord Krishna with Gopis

Source P. Tamuli, November 2022

Figure 7



Figure 7 Majuli Raas Mahotsav- Maa Yashodha Faints Learning About Krishna Jumping Into River Yamuna to Fight Kaaliya Naag

Source P. Tamuli, November 2022

Various communities on the island host celebrations and performances for Raas Mahotsav in community halls, on improvised stages in open fields, and even on school premises. The *Satras* serve as sites for these events. Typically, both men and women are allowed to perform in Raas Mahotsav but in some *Satras* there are certain restrictions. For women are not allowed to perform in *Uttar Kamalabari Satra* performances, in contrast to *Garamur Saru Satra* [Mazumder \(2005\)](#). The plays presented here are free and available to everyone irrespective of gender, caste, or creed. According to government of Assam's official website the first Raas Leela was performed at *Dakhinpat Satra* in 1840 A.D. and made into a stage performance by Pitambardeva Goswami of *Garamur Satra* in the year 1934; in the year 1950 he further permitted the girls of the *Satra* to take roles in the Raas Lila and dance [Nath \(2009\)](#). The festival's inception and its early years focused primarily on local participation and religious observances. Over time, it evolved into a more elaborate cultural festival attracting artists, performers, and enthusiasts from across the country and worldwide. Majuli Raas Mahotsav has transformed into a multi-day

event featuring a diverse array of cultural performances, exhibitions, and competitions opening new opportunities for cultural exchange and development in the island of Majuli ([Figure 8](#)).

Figure 8



Figure 8 The Demoness or Rakshasi Putona (Centre) in Her Form as a Young Woman (Mohini Putona) Promises Kansa (Left) That She Can Kill the Baby Krishna

Source Prakash Bhuyan, March 2024

3. IMPACT ON TOURISM

According to a report published in The Economics Times July 2023 the state of Assam saw a significant increase of tourist footfalls of 573% in domestic tourists and 783% in foreign tourists in 2023. Also, one Hindustan Times report dated Nov. 28, 2023; the Assam government financially assisted the Raas committees by transferring Rs. 25,000 each to about 3,000 organisers across the state. The Majuli Raas Mahotsav has emerged as a significant cultural tourism attraction, drawing visitors from different parts of India and abroad. The festival that lasts for four to five days at a stretch, and lakhs of tourists visit the island, and every family receives and accommodate the tourists according to their capacity apart from government and private accommodations for those days. [ANI. \(2023\)](#)

A surge in tourism often leads to increased revenue for the local economy. This additional income can be used by the local government to invest in infrastructure projects, such as improving roads, transportation, and basic amenities. The tourism industry creates jobs directly and indirectly. The need for more accommodations, restaurants, transportation services, and other tourist-related activities leads to job creation. With a growing workforce, there is an increased demand for better infrastructure to support the local population. Enhanced tourism can bring attention to the region, leading to increased focus on community development. Governments may allocate funds for community-centric projects, including schools, healthcare facilities, and other essential services [Macleod \(2004\)](#).

4. LOCAL BUSINESSES AND ARTISANS

Cultural festivals like Raas Mahotsav typically include a marketplace or fair where local artisans and businesses can set up stalls to showcase and sell their products. This provides artisans with a direct channel to reach a larger audience,

including tourists and visitors attending the festival. Such events often focus on promoting the rich cultural heritage and traditional crafts of the region. Also, according to a report by NABARD Geographical Indication (GI) tagged has been applied for Majuli Mask and Majuli Manuscript Paintings. And on March 4th 2024 the Central Government of India conferred the GI tag to the traditional arts of Mukha Xilpo (mask-making) and Manuscript Paintings (Figure 9 to Figure 10). Local communities are excellent crafters of man-made resources also like mask making, boat making, pottery making, bamboo and wood-based crafts etc. Konwar (2017) can display their creations, attracting attention and potential customers. The festival can create economic opportunities for local businesses by generating sales and revenue. This, in turn, contributes to the sustainable development of the local economy, empowering small-scale entrepreneurs and artisans. Moreover, according to the District Agricultural Office, Majuli the economy of Majuli District is agro based. As high as around 90 percent of the total population of the district depended for their livelihood on agriculture and allied activities. As per 2011 census. 37.13% of the total working population of the district are cultivators and agriculture workers (PLP 2023-24, NABARD, Majuli District). Therefore, local produce and yields will be exposed to large target audiences during a huge event like Raas Mahatso.

Figure 9

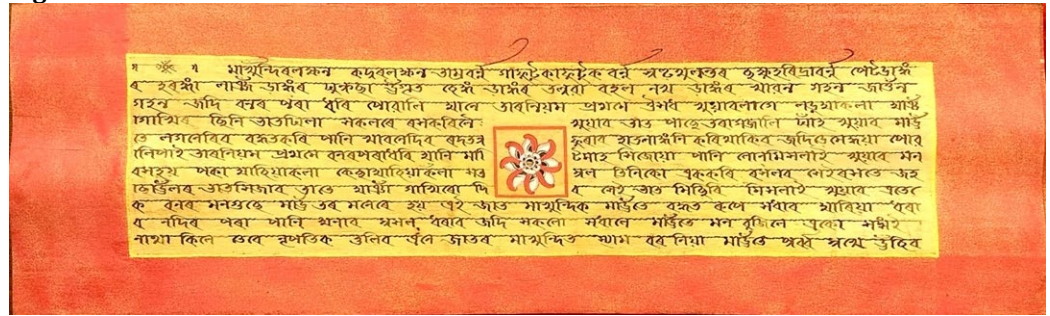


Figure 9 Manuscript Preserved in the Museum at Auniati Satra

Source P. Tamuli, April 2023

Figure 10



Figure 10 Manuscript Preserved in the Museum at Auniati Satra

Source P. Tamuli, April 2023

Painted masks are used in performing arts of the *Satras* of Majuli and are typically used in the *Bhaona* performances and are of religious and ritualistic significance (Figure 11 to Figure 12). Composed by Sankardeva in the 16th century the *Bhaona* performances are based on the mythological tales of Bhāgavata Purāna and Ramayana. Out of the functioning 22 *Satras* only four *Satras* namely *Alengi Narasinha Satra*, *Bihimpur Satra*, *Chamaguri Satra* or *Shamaguri Satra* and *Natun*

Chamaguri Satra are known to carry out the custom of mask making in Majuli. The mask making custom was strictly confined within the walls of these four *Satras* but to keep the custom alive and expose it to national and international communities some artisan voluntarily shares the knowledge of mask making to the outsiders through workshops and live demonstrations during peak tourist seasons (Figure 13) Chanda (2019).

Figure 11



Figure 11 Mask of Narasingha Avataar

Source The Hindu, August 22, 2019

Figure 12



Figure 12 Mask of Jatayu

Source P. Tamuli, April 2023

Figure 13

Figure 13 Demonstration of Mask Making Techniques to Foreign Tourists at Samaguri Satra
Source P. Tamuli, November 2018

Festivals are not just about business especially in the context of Raas Mahotsav of Majuli; they also provide a platform for cultural exchange. Visitors, including tourists, get a chance to learn about the local culture and traditions through interactions with artisans. This cultural exchange can lead to increased appreciation and demand for authentic local products. The festival environment often facilitates networking and collaboration among local businesses. Artisans may form connections with other entrepreneurs, buyers, and even government agencies, fostering potential collaborations for future ventures. Festivals attract a significant number of tourists and visitors [Konwar \(2017\)](#), and increased footfall benefits local businesses, as they get exposure to a broader customer base. Tourists, in turn, get the chance to take home unique souvenirs and products that reflect the local culture. By providing a platform for artisans to display and sell their products, events like Raas Mahotsav contribute to the preservation of traditional arts and crafts. This is crucial for maintaining cultural identity and passing down traditional skills to future generations.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

5.1. SOCIAL IMPACT

The festival serves as a catalyst for community engagement, fostering a sense of pride and identity among the local population. Festivals often involve active participation from community members. Whether it's in the form of dance performances, organizing events, or volunteering, the community gets involved, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity ([Figure 14](#)). Festivals often attract people from different backgrounds [Khargharia \(2011\)](#). This cultural exchange can broaden perspectives, promote understanding, and create a more inclusive community.

Figure 14



Figure 14 Community Participation

Source P. Tamuli, October 2023

5.2. EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES

The festival also provides a platform for educational initiatives, promoting traditional art forms and cultural practices. Raas Mahotsav typically promoted by the *Satras*, being a cultural festival, can contribute to the preservation and promotion of the local cultural heritage of Majuli [Hussain & Mahanta \(2010\)](#). Educational initiatives can be designed to incorporate aspects of the local culture, including traditional dance, music, and art forms. This helps in fostering a sense of identity and pride among the younger generation. Cultural events draw attention to the unique aspects of a region. This can be utilized to create awareness about the educational needs of the community [Mishra & Tamuli \(2022\)](#). Educational campaigns during Raas Mahotsav can highlight the importance of education, encourage enrolment, and address any specific challenges faced by the local education system. Festivals often showcase local talents. This can inspire young individuals to pursue their interests and talents, including academic pursuits. Educational initiatives can include talent development programs, mentorship, and scholarships to encourage students to excel in both cultural and academic fields.

6. DISCUSSION

The Majuli Raas Mahotsav offers valuable insights for policymakers on how to harness cultural festivals for regional development. The following points, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), should be considered:

- 1) **Support for Local Artisans and Artists - SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth:** Previous studies have established that for the promotion of local artisans and craftsmen policymakers have to take initiatives [Majeed et al. \(2023\)](#). Therefore, government aids should be provided to local artisans and performing artists, enabling them to establish their own enterprises and enhance their business opportunities during the Raas Mahotsav.
- 2) **Business Skill Development - SDG 4 - Quality Education and SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth:** Studies have shown that due to the

lack of marketing and entrepreneurial skills artisans often lose opportunity to carry out sustainable business [R & Sundararaman \(2021\)](#). Therefore, government should implement business skill development programs for local artisans and performing artists, ensuring they can maximize their benefits during the peak tourist season.

- 3) **Collaborative Tourism Enterprises - SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities and SDG 17 - Partnerships for the Goals:** One of the fastest growing industries- tourism must be explored by the local community of Majuli along with the help of the government for the holistic development of the island [Petrevska \(2012\)](#). Satras and government entities should jointly establish tourist-focused enterprises to expand Sattriya culture and associated performing arts, promoting sustainable community development.
- 4) **Educational Promotion - SDG 4 - Quality Education and SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth:** The Raas Mahotsav can serve as a platform for higher education institutions, including the Satras [Devi et al. \(2022\)](#), to promote cultural and religious studies or academic programs to both domestic and international tourists.
- 5) **International Cultural Exchanges - SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth and SDG 17 - Partnerships for the Goals:** Studies have shown that sustainable development can be achieved through cultural exchanges in the context of tourism [Pearce \(1995\)](#). The island of Majuli having such tremendous tourism potential must explore the opportunities of sustainable tourism [Hazarika \(2016\)](#). Exploring avenues for international cultural exchanges and business opportunities which will also significantly contribute to the socio-economic development of Majuli.
- 6) **Highlighting Environmental Challenges - SDG 13 - Climate Action and SDG 15 - Life on Land:** The island of Majuli is marred with rapid soil erosion and annual floods which possess a significant threat to the local community, the art and the cultural heritage [Sahariah et al. \(2013\)](#). The Raas Mahotsav can be used by Satras and local authorities to draw international attention to the issue of soil erosion, which poses a continuous threat to the world's largest river island. [Largest river island. \(n.d.-b\)](#)
- 7) **Economic Growth and Infrastructure Development- SDG 9 - Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure and SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth:** Every year the budget of each Raas celebrating committee is increasing the footfall of tourists as well [Bhuyan \(2023\)](#). Therefore, government must recognize the revenue-generating potential of the Raas Mahotsav and accelerate the promised infrastructural developments in Majuli to boost the region's economic growth.

By aligning these above discussed initiatives with the SDGs, policymakers can ensure that the Majuli Raas Mahotsav not only preserves cultural heritage but also drives sustainable socio-economic development in the region.

7. CONCLUSION

The Majuli Raas Mahotsav, rooted in the historical and cultural fabric of Assam, has evolved into a dynamic platform with far-reaching implications for the socio-economic development of the region. By attracting tourists, fostering local businesses, and promoting community engagement, the festival exemplifies the potential of cultural events in driving positive change.

The Majuli Raas Mahotsav stands as a testament to the enduring cultural legacy of Assam, fostering a sense of pride and unity among the people. As the festival continues to evolve, it not only preserves the rich cultural heritage of Majuli but also ensures that the traditions of Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva are passed on to future generations. Majuli Raas Mahotsav is not just a celebration; it is a journey into the heart of Assamese culture, where art, spirituality, and tradition converge in a harmonious dance of life. Policy makers must identify the economic potential of the Raas Mahotsav and associated social enterprises. The ongoing infrastructural development projects like the 6.8-km two-lane bridge as cited in a February 2023 Times of India report, including approach roads between Majuli (Kamalabari) and Jorhat (Nimati Ghat), will be constructed at a cost of Rs 925.47 crore and proposed projects must be completed as promised for the betterment of the community and enhancement of socio- economic exchanges.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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