

Sattras of Majuli Island: Unfolding of Relations between the Bhakti Movement, Architecture, and Ephemeral Landscape of the River Brahmaputra’s Floodplains

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Figure 1: Interiors of the Namghar of Sri Sri Dakshinpath Sattra, Majuli Island, Assam (Source: Minal Sagare)

The *Bhakti* movement (a spiritual movement in Hinduism) started in South India in the seventh-eighth century.¹ *Bhakti* means ‘love and devotion to one’s personal God’.² As per the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Bhakti Marg* (the path of devotion) is one of the four ways of attaining *moksha* (liberation/enlightenment). Within Hinduism, the *Bhakti* movement appeared as a rebel against the exclusive and elaborate *Brahmanical* rituals and customs, its hierarchical *chaturvarna*—the Hindu caste system and associated discrimination. The *Bhakti* movement included lower classes as well as women providing them equal access to spirituality and liberation that was earlier

¹ Karen Penchilis-Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

² Pranami Bora, “A study of the elements of mass communication in the Bhakti movement of Sankaradeva.” PhD thesis, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, 2018.

prohibited by the *Brahmanical* tradition. This socio-spiritual movement spread all over India from the eighth to eighteenth centuries giving rise to a diverse yet rich saint-poet tradition.³

By the fifteenth century, the *Bhakti* movement reached Assam in North-east India.⁴ *Sattriya* (*Sankari*) culture founded by the saint-poet Srimant Sankaradeva (1449-1568 CE) marked the most influential thread of the *Bhakti* movement in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Srimant Sankaradeva's *Sattriya* culture is anchored to the principles of the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁵ Apart from *Kirtan*—congregational singing of the name and deeds of Lord *Krishna*, the devotional practices of this Neo-*Vaishnavite* tradition gave rise to diverse performing arts such as *bhaona* (theatre), *Sattriya nritya* (a classical Assamese dance form), *borgeet* (devotional songs), *ankiya* (dramas composed by Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva), and *raas-leela* (musical performance based on the life of Lord *Krishna*).⁶ For the propagation of his *Eka Saran Hari Naam Dharma*, Sankaradeva established *Than*⁷—a place in the open/under the shade of trees—for daily congregation with his disciples and monks which later came to be known as *Sattra* institution.⁸ By the seventeenth century proliferation of *Sattriya* culture in the Brahmaputra Valley led to the practice of physical construction of the *Sattra* institution with *kirtan-mandap*—also known as *namghar* (place for chanting)—as its nucleus and houses of devotees and monks around⁹. The Majuli Island located amidst the ephemeral landscape of the River Brahmaputra's active floodplains in upper Assam, with the concentration of the largest number of *Sattras*, came to be known as the nerve centre of *Sattriya* culture.¹⁰ Over the period Majuli's solitary and serene environment has enriched and preserved the practices of *Sattriya* culture.¹¹

Unfolding the relations between the Neo-*Vaishnavite* tradition of the *Bhakti* Movement in Assam, the architecture of *Sattra*, and the ephemeral landscape of the River Brahmaputra's floodplains characterised by flooding and erosion, this paper discusses three thematic revelations from the architectural study of Sri Sri Auniati *Sattra* and Sri Sri Dakhinpath *Sattra*—two of the oldest *Sattras* (established in the seventeenth century) of the Majuli Island. First, the conception of the space of *namghar* mirrored the newly imagined informal relation between deity and devotee in the *Bhakti* Movement that was deeply rooted in the idea of love and devotion as against their formal, ritualistic, and symbolic relation as imagined and manifested in the Indian classical temple architecture. Second, the inclusion of temporality of the floodplains of the River Brahmaputra in the planning, design, and construction practices of *Sattra* dissolving divisive notions of time as past, present, and future. The quadrupedal layout of these *Sattras* with centrally located *namghar* and *hathis* (raised earth mounds) with dormitories of *bhakats* (disciples) built on them all along the four sides of the *namghar* separated by *phukhuris* (manmade ponds) is the most befitting response to the annual flooding of the island. Third, the intricate interweaving of devotional practices of performing arts of the *Sattras* with local craft traditions of mask making, pottery, silk and cotton weaving, and bamboo craft. Sheltering all these crafts together is the tradition of timber construction. The structure of *namghar* intended to accommodate large congregations is necessarily a long-span timber structure built by using timber log columns of the trees drifted by floods from the highland forests of Arunachal Pradesh.

³ Mohua Dutta, "Bhakti Movement: A Socio-Religious Struggle of The Marginalised Society," *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, 4 (2011): 685-687, DOI: 10.15373/2249555X/August2014/196; U.N. Goswami, *Vaishnav Bhakti - Dhara Aur Santa Katha* (Guwahati: Mani Manik Prakash, 2012).

⁴ Bora, "A study of the elements of mass communication in the Bhakti movement of Sankaradeva." 64.

⁵ Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, *Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, 2022).

⁶ D. Nath, *The Majuli Island: Society, Economy and Culture* (Delhi: Anshah Publishing House, 2009).

⁷ Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, ed. *Majuli: Resources and Challenges*. (New Delhi: Authors Press, 2017), 17.

⁸ Nath, *The Majuli Island*, 166.

⁹ Nath, *The Majuli Island*, 166.

¹⁰ Borkakoti, ed. *Majuli*, 17.

¹¹ Borkakoti, ed. *Majuli*, 17.

Similar to the other *Sattras* of the island, these two *Sattras* also have a history of the erosion of their lands, relocation, and reconstruction. Despite this, these *Sattras* have provided emotional, cultural, and spiritual anchorage to the shifting communities of Majuli and continuity to their craft traditions amidst the hostile and ephemeral landscape of the River Brahmaputra's floodplains.