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Sattras, Magical Power and Belief Narratives in the Context of Flood and Erosion on Majuli Island

Baburam Saikia

Abstract

Majuli is an island situated mid-stream in the river Brahmaputra, in India's northeastern state of Assam. The island is bounded by the river Subansiri – a tributary of the river Brahmaputra – on the northwest, the Kherkatiasuti – a spill channel of the river Brahmaputra – in the northeast and the main Brahmaputra river to the south and southwest. The river usually brings floods every year. Inhabitants suffer badly as a consequence of widespread severe bank erosion, which causes serious damage to residential blocks, paddy fields, grazing land and open areas. More than half of the island has eroded over the last 100 years. The government's role in terms of protection measures does not seem to be effective in controlling floods and stopping erosion. With land disappearing, there is a progressive loss of the traditional means of livelihood of the island's people, leading to their displacement. During times of erosion, inhabitants offer their prayers to the river Brahmaputra to stop rapid destruction and protect them from catastrophe. A section of the population has set up a congregational worship of the river Brahmaputra, which is performed on the riverbank every year before the monsoon begins. The islanders' relationship with the river is affectionate but also filled with hatred, depending on the activity of the river. This paper analyses the beliefs and narratives of the inhabitants of Majuli associated with the river Brahmaputra.

Keywords: Belief, narratives, Brahmaputra, Majuli, river worship, magical power, erosion

Introduction

Belief is essentially a thought process that evolves within a person based on his or her social environment, education and experience. Every human being has a belief system that they utilise, and it is through this system that people individually make sense of the world around them. Belief can also refer to some-

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thing as true, or true to someone. It is thus belief that shapes people's behaviour. We cannot change people's beliefs by forcing them to behave in a certain way – this rather creates conflict among people. At the same time “belief seems to be an elusive category, difficult to grasp and define if we think about it as an entity in the world of ideas. Understanding becomes easier if we look at expressions of belief in behaviour, ritual, custom, art and music in textual and other forms. These expressed beliefs can be reproduced, described, analysed and discussed” (Bowman / Valk 2014: 7–8). Beliefs appear in different forms within genres and other expressive modes. Belief could be considered as the first step for a person when it comes to accepting a faith.

Faith comes from belief and allegiance. Faith is something subjective, personal and emotional. Faith is a concept which is more understood in terms of religion even though it has other dimensions apart from religion. “Faith in a far wider sense is necessary for human life and knowledge outside religion, since it is the basic acceptance that the universe is reliable, albeit unpredictable in many respects; indeed F. R. Tennant regards faith as the volitional element in all knowledge” (Bowker 1977: 334). My intention here is to discuss the variation of beliefs within the same faith. I will also study how beliefs, within the same faith, are used, practiced and constructed in a different context and how sometimes fear is associated with the belief system.

Beliefs are often expressed in narrative form and mediated through storytelling. A belief narrative “brings together several genres that had been separated by former taxonomies, including myths, legends, and religious legends, but also urban legends, rumours, oral histories and other narratives told as true stories that contribute to transmitting and reproducing knowledge about the supernatural and mundane dimensions of the world” (Valk 2016: 27). In terms of the Indian context, belief narratives have always been taken seriously and practiced extensively by people to continue their tradition. Sometimes people feel free to include their own part in the mythic narrative to create a new meaning. This helps them to connect with a strong past of their society by adding a mythical story to their place, especially when it comes to place-lore. However, Indian mythical tradition can be traced back to the days of the Vedas and the Upanishads¹ and later could be found more profoundly during the time of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.² Indian folklorist and philologist A. K Ramanujan noted that “a text like Mahabharata is not a text but a tradition” (1999: 162). The flexibility of storytelling is quite evident in different narrative genres. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that oral tradition has always been part and parcel of the transformation and fabrication of mythical stories

1 The Vedas and the Upanishads are also known as *shruti* (Skt.) scripture. *Shruti* means “what is heard”. These scriptures are considered by Hindus as primordial origins realised by the ancient sages, the *rishis*.

2 The Ramayana and the Mahabharata both are known as *smriti* (Skt.) scripture. *Smriti* means “what is memorised or remembered”.

(see Datta et al. 2015: 41). Sharing different mythical stories of the past binds and connects people's feelings together and helps them to create a composite meaning. Therefore, collective memory continues to engender a situation of social bonding. However, "in order to understand how groups remember collectively, we need both cross-cultural and culturally specific concepts of collective memory" (Russell 2006: 801). In most cases, knowledge of the mythic heritage has been implemented and shared collectively by people since their childhood. It is important to look at how mythical stories, both age-old and recently created, can give deep cultural roots and amalgamation to a place or to a group of people or even to a nation. Below I would like to analyse narrative values, changes, beliefs and human-nature relations in the context of Majuli island.

Majuli island

While doing fieldwork on Majuli, an isolated river island situated in the north-eastern state of Assam, a narrative was shared with me on the origin of the island. A part of that narrative can be found in the *Bhagavata-Purana* (Duttabaruah 2001: 1038), but I came to know about it first from Maniram Bargarayan, a senior celibate devotee at Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā³ (interview on 14 July 2017, Majuli).

Bhismak, the king of Vidarbha,⁴ was a very capable king. He had five sons and only one daughter. Daughter Rukmini was very beautiful and wise. Many wise persons such as Naradamuni used to visit the palace. Naturally, Rukmini had a chance to talk with them, and in this way, she obtained information about Krishna. Simply by hearing about Krishna, she desired to surrender at Krishna's feet and become his wife. All the relatives of king Bhismak decided that Rukmini should be given in marriage to Krishna. But her elder brother Rukmavira, despite the desire of the others, arranged his sister's marriage with his friend Sisupala, the determined enemy of Krishna. Rukmini became disappointed to know that. Therefore, she selected a qualified and truthful Brahmin called Bedanidhi as her messenger and conveyed a message to Krishna with the help of the wise Brahmin. Once Krishna got this message, he became curious to come to Kundil.⁵ Finally, Krishna came and abducted Rukmini a day before her arranged marriage to Sisupal. While they were travelling on a chariot on the way back to Dwarka,⁶ they saw a beautiful little island from the sky in the middle of the river Brahmaputra and stopped there for a while. Both were amazed by looking at the beauty of the river island and Krishna said: "This is going to be the second Dwarka, [the god-

3 Sattras are a set of religious and monastic institutions that emerged as a part of the 15th century Neo-Vaishnava movement in Assam, which was led by the saint and philosopher Sankaradeva. Today, there are different variations among the groups and the sub-groups of the Sattrā institutions.

4 An ancient name of a place in Upper Assam.

5 Present day Sadiya, a place in the state of Assam, was earlier known as Kundil.

6 Dwarka is a sacred Hindu place situated in the present state of Gujarat, India. It is believed to be the very beautiful ancient kingdom of Lord Krishna.

dess] Laxmi will live here with wealth.” From that time the island slowly expanded and the name of the island became *Ma-jali* [Ass.]. *Ma* refers to Laxmi and *jali* means “beehive or house of wealth”. The island came to be known as Majuli much later, which is a revised form of the earlier name.

The narrative variation between the folk and the Puranic story is very crucial to consider in this context. According to the Puranic story, by obtaining information about Krishna’s glory Rukmini fell in love with Krishna. Then she sent a truthful Brahmin called Bedanidhi as her messenger, although her brother was fully prepared to give her in marriage to his close friend Sisupal. Eventually, Krishna came and abducted Rukmini from Kundil on the day before her marriage. From this point onwards, the folk version of the story comes into play, stating that both Krishna and Rukmini flew over Majuli island on their way back to Dwarka and were impressed by the beauty of the river island and therefore made a stop to delight in the natural beauty. At the end of the story, the name of the island emerged from Krishna’s mouth.

The story has changed over the period of time along with the need of the people, and it is fabricated and extended to fulfil the purpose of the community. While I was doing my field work in the Barpeta district of Assam, one of my informants told me the exact same narrative relating to a place called Phulbari, by simply changing the name of the place. Most of the time this is done deliberately in order to associate a meaningful mythical record with a place. This enhances the social value of the particular place compared to other places. In this case, collective narratives have a special role to play. Dwarka, which is situated in the Indian state of Gujarat, is the ancient kingdom of Lord Krishna and one of the most crucial pilgrimage places for the Hindus. Thus, in this view, creating a new narrative in relation to the Puranic or ancient stories does not demean the original value of the story, but rather bolsters an association with the ancient past. Indeed, the informants were also honest enough to reveal the fact that only a part of the whole narrative could be found in the Puranic source.

As there are no historical records on the emergence of Majuli island in the middle of the river Brahmaputra, it is difficult to ascertain when it first appeared. The historian D. Nath has mentioned that “on the basis of certain geographical evidences and literary accounts, it may be presumed that Majuli took its island shape at least before the 13th century A.D., before Sukapha’s coming to the Brahmaputra valley in the year 1228” (Nath 2009: 7).⁷ Robin Bhuyan described in his book that “until the time of the Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603–1641), the island was known as Majali. For example, it could

7 Chaolung Sukapha (1228–1268) was the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam. By crossing the Patkai hills, he migrated to Assam along with his army from present day China and the Myanmar region to establish a kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley (see Gait 2013: 74–75).

be found in the *Satsari Asom Buranji*⁸ that, during the second half of the 16th century, Chilarai⁹ ... had gone and stayed in Majali” (Bhuyan 2015: 1). Another piece of evidence, as I learned from the *sattradhikar*, the head of the Benganaati Sattrā, is that the Ahom king Lakshmi Singha (1769–1780) gave a land donation to the Benganaati Sattrā. As proof, the king gave a copper plate where the name “Majali” was mentioned. But it is uncertain when the name Majali became the current name Majuli. However, “there is no problem to assume that the name Majuli emerged because the island has always been surrounded by water” (Mahanta 2001: 21), as *majuli* in Assamese means to be “situated in the middle”.

Today’s Majuli island is a combination of a cluster of islets formed in the midstream of the mighty river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. “Presumably, the human habitation on Majuli started from the period when the agrarian people were in search of conductive and fertile soil” (Nath 2013: 23). People with various ethnic and social backgrounds can be found on the island, including the Mishing, Deuri, Sonowal-Kachari, Koch, Kalita, Brahmin, Nath, Ahom, Kaivartas, etc. who have come to live there over the years. There are also Nepali, Bengali and Marwari populations that migrated to Majuli during the 20th century. Bengalis and Marwaris, in particular, came to the island to run businesses. Each community on Majuli performs its own rituals and celebrates festivals in its own way. The majority of the people on Majuli consider two festivals as their grand celebration: the Rasa-lila and the Palnam festival. Whereas the Rasa-lila is a festival devoted to the different phases of Krishna’s play or dance (*lila*) with the Gopis (female devotees), the Palnam is a group chanting ritual event performed by the residents of the Auniati Sattrā on a constantly rotating basis. Even though all communities on Majuli maintain their religious and cultural roots, still, it could be said that with the help of the Sattrā institutions Neo-Vaishnavism plays a dominant role on the island. The total population on the Majuli island is about 170,000.¹⁰ According to the census report of 1901, the area of Majuli was 1255 km². But by 2011 the island had gradually shrunk to 491 km² because of erosion (Sarma 2013).

8 A history book written by the Assamese historian Surya Kumar Bhuyan (1894–1964).

9 Chilarai was a commander in chief to the Koch King Naranarayana. He was named Chilarai because he executed troop movements as fast as a “kite” (*chila*).

10 For more information see <http://majulilandscape.gov.in>.

Worship of the Brahmaputra

The Brahmaputra

The river Brahmaputra has always been part and parcel for the inhabitants of Majuli since the island was created by the river centuries ago. It emerges in two popular forms, creator and destroyer. By providing water it makes paddy fields fertile, and by producing fish the river provides a basis for the livelihood of the inhabitants. At the same time, it creates enormous destruction by flooding and eroding the island. Due to the continuing erosion by the river Brahmaputra and other tributaries, many inhabitants, including the Sattras – socio-cultural and religious institutions following the Ekasarana tradition of Vaishnavism – have been compelled to shift to other places. Thus, of the initial 65 Sattras only 32 have survived; the others have been forced by erosion either to move away completely from the island or to relocate elsewhere on the island. Many informants told me that since the 1950 earthquake, erosion on Majuli has taken a serious turn.

The term *Brahmaputra* means “Son of Lord Brahma”. The narrative on the genesis of the river Brahmaputra was shared with me by Sarbeswar Hazarika Bayan, a 62-year-old Vaishnava devotee, as follows (interview on 19 July 2017, Majuli):

Brahma’s daughter Saraswati got married to Ashoka. One day Brahma came to visit his daughter and son-in-law, but Ashoka was not at home when Brahma arrived. When Brahma saw his daughter’s beauty and grace, a desire of lust arose within him that his daughter could immediately feel. She ignored him and went inside her house. Brahma could not control himself, and as a result his semen fell in front of the house. On his return, Ashoka somehow came to know that someone else was at home in his absence and asked his wife about it. Then she replied: “It was my father, but I don’t know why he came here. He looked at me with a lustful desire.” Ashoka then said: “Why did you not fulfil your father’s desire? He must be upset, now you go and eat that semen.” Ashoka himself ate the semen, when she refused to eat it. After eating Brahma’s semen Ashoka started to have sex with his wife. After a few days, a ball of flesh was born out of Saraswati’s womb. To hide it from others they threw it into a deep place of the Himalayan mountain ranges. There, a huge water hole emerged, which later came to be known as Brahmakunda.¹¹

After a long time, sage Jamadagni, father of Lord Parashurama,¹² asked his wife Renuka to fetch some water from the river for his rituals. While returning from the river, Renuka saw the messengers of Indra [Skt. *Gandharvas*] flying in the sky. She became so enraptured by the beauty of the Gandharvas that hours passed, yet she did not return

11 Brahmakunda perhaps may refer to the Angsi glacier located on the northern side of Burang country in the Himalayas in Tibet. It originates in the Manas-Sarovar lake and Yarlung Tsangpo river, which flows through the South Tibet valley down to Arunachal Pradesh, India. In Arunachal Pradesh, the river is known as Siang whereas the same river in Assam is known as the Brahmaputra and in Bangladesh, it is known as the Jamuna.

12 According to Hindu belief, Parashurama is considered as the sixth incarnation (*avatar*) of Lord Vishnu.

home and forgot her task. When she arrived home, the time of her husband's ritual was over. Renuka realised her mistake and asked her husband for mercy. Instead of mercy, angry Jamadagni ordered his five sons to cut off her head. No one was willing to do that. Eventually, son Parashurama agreed and beheaded her with his axe. Then Parashurama was unable to detach the axe from his hand. His pleased father asked Parashurama, what would he like as a reward? Parashurama asked that his mother's head be restored to life. Parashurama also asked his father what he should do to get rid of his sin and to detach the axe from his hand. Jamadagni advised him to earn *punya*¹³ and go on pilgrimage. Following his advice, Parashurama started to travel to many holy places and pursued a righteous path. But he still was not able to detach the axe from his hand. At last, Parashurama decided to move towards the east. One night, he was resting near a cow-shed that belonged to a Brahmin family. Two bulls near him were discussing in the shed that they had been harassed and misused by the Brahmin family for a long time. So, the next day in the early morning they were going to run away towards Brahmakunda and jump in there to gain salvation [Skt. *mukti*] so that they could fly to the celestial abode [Skt. *Vaikuntha*]. As Parashurama was listening to their conversation, he also decided to do the same. In the morning when the two bulls started running towards the Brahmakunda, Parashurama chased after them. The bulls jumped into the Brahmakunda, which caused their death, and their souls flew to Vaikuntha.

Once Parashurama arrived there he also jumped into the Brahmakunda, and finally the axe was released from his hand. When he was about to come back from that pit (Hindi *kund*), he heard a voice issuing from the holy water, which said: "I released you from your sin, but you should also release me." "How?" asked Parashurama. The unknown voice replied, "I have been stuck here around these mountain ranges for a long time, so help me to get out." Parashurama agreed [to help] and started to release Brahmakunda by digging the mountain to bring the water down to the plain. While he was bringing the mountain holy water into the plain, Parashurama stopped at a place which later came to be known as Parashuram-Kund,¹⁴ for his evening prayer. But the flow of water continued without getting permission from the Lord Parashurama. At that time Parashurama became angry and cursed it: "You will not be treated respectfully by the people because of your rude nature!" Then the Son of Brahma [Brahmaputra] realised his mistake and begged for mercy. Eventually, Parashurama said, "Listen Brahmaputra, I am allowing you two times in a year when people will come and pay you respect, during the Makara-Sankranti¹⁵ and the Ashokashtami."¹⁶ Since then the river has been known as the Brahmaputra.

Performing rituals and offering *puja* to please the river deity has become a common practice during the monsoon time among the islanders on Majuli,

13 There is no equivalent English word to explain *punya*, which is sometimes interpreted as "merit" or "good karma". One can earn *punya* through righteous work, for example by helping the needy ones, reading holy scriptures, doing deep meditation or by choosing an ascetic life.

14 Parashuram-Kund is a very holy Hindu pilgrimage site situated in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, India.

15 Skt. *makara-sankranti* refers to the first day of the Sun's entering of the *makara* (Capricorn), constituting the end of the month with the winter solstice and the start of the longer days. It is regarded as a special time for spiritual practices and during this time, Hindus take a holy dip in rivers.

16 The legend behind Ashokashtami is this – while Lord Rama (the main character of the epic Ramayana) was fighting with king Ravana, it became very hard for Rama to kill Ravana. Then Rama got some advice from Vibhishana that he should pray to the Goddess Shakti for blessings. Lord Rama worshipped Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti near the bank of the sea for seven long days and got the Goddess's blessings on the *ashtami*, the eighth, day. After that Rama was able to kill Ravana. From that time this day is celebrated as Ashokashtami, a grand celebration in some parts of India, particularly in the Eastern part.

especially for those whose settlement is near the riverbank. The belief among them is that the yearly worship of the river Brahmaputra, which is a daylong celebration, should be conducted during the time of Makara-Sankranti. But it may be delayed until the monsoon begins (January to May). The river worship is organised by a Sattra called Dakhinpat in order to celebrate congregational ritual by offering *bhog*,¹⁷ chanting mantras, playing devotional music, etc. The main purpose of the river worship is to establish a good spiritual relationship with the river and to save islanders from floods and erosion. Other Sattras like Bhogpur and Benganaati also arrange a ritual event separately dedicated to the mighty river Brahmaputra during the monsoon time. This is because all Sattras have their own sect-orientated ideology and devotees. They do it for the sake of their own belief and followers in order to keep to the path based on their own religious principles. All three Sattras mentioned here are located very close to the riverbank. For all of them, the *bhog* offering to the river Brahmaputra is a crucial ritual, because devotees believe that feeding a spiritual meal fulfils the desire of the river and shows the devotee's respect for the river deity.

A notable concern here is that by telling me the origin story of the river Brahmaputra, my informant Sarbeswar Hazarika Bayan, who is a Vaishnava celibate devotee of about 62 years of age, revealed his fear that the younger generation seems to be reluctant to learn the place-lore and the river-lore on Majuli. In a way, this hints at the lack of interest among the coming generation in their own mythical roots. According to some members of the younger generation on the island, the whole origin story of the Brahmaputra is not mentioned in scriptures; therefore, it has no truth. However, in this case these youth seem to be failing to acknowledge the multiplicity of truth, which is also constructed by society. The main point here is to think about how these stories serve the people's belief, rendering it meaningful, rather than to spend time contemplating whether they are factual or not.

Unlike other deities, the Brahmaputra does not seem to be worshipped by the islanders at their homes as a deity. People have started worshipping the river Brahmaputra out of fear of its destructive power. During an interview a Mishing couple, Prasanna and Anjana Payeng, who had lost their land due to erosion and started living on the embankment, told me (interview on 2 July 2018, Majuli):

I had lost my house and five *bighas*¹⁸ of my land two years ago. We prayed a lot to the Brahmaputra Baba¹⁹ to save our house and land, but the Baba did not listen to us. Now we live here on the embankment. My wife and I have to go every day to someone's

17 Ass. *bhog* is an offering which is cooked with rice, milk and sugar, cardamom, saffron and other spices. It resembles Indian rice pudding or *kheer*.

18 The size of a *bigha* varies from one place to another. According to the international system of units, five *bighas* would be equivalent to five acres.

19 Ass. *Baba* ("ascetic") is used by local people as a prefix and suffix of the Brahmaputra.

house to find work. If we don't find work, then we have no food to eat. We have two children and they are getting some help from local people to study at school. I am still hoping that we will get help from the government.

This led me to ask them, why did they think that the Brahmaputra Baba did not listen to them? Anjana Payeng replied:

Baba had appeared in my dream and asked me to offer a *bhog*. But the next morning I forgot about it. I only realised it [again] when all this disaster happened to us. This river has many *avatars* [incarnations]. It is calm now, but if you come here a month from now then it will resemble an angry river, washing away animals, houses, land, trees, etc.

Prasanna and Anjana Payeng belong to the Mishing²⁰ community, which has a very close relationship with the Brahmaputra river in terms of their livelihood. The couple, along with some of their Mishing neighbours, are very much influenced by the Neo-Vaishnava ideology promoted by the different Sattras on the island and thus have also adopted their river worship habit. They told me that there are two reasons to follow the Sattras' practices, such as offering *bhog* to the river: first, to get rid of the fear of natural devastation caused by the river from time to time. And secondly, as the Sattra institutions play a very dominant role in terms of religious and cultural activities, they felt bound to follow them, thus joining the mainstream religious and cultural practices of the islanders.

Neo-Vaishnavism and the Sattras of Majuli

The Sattra order was conceptualised by Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449–1568) and introduced by his chief disciple Madhavadeva (1489–1596) during the 16th century in Assam. It emerged as a result of a religious movement known as *eka-sarana-nama-dharma* (Ass.), a religion devoted to one God and supreme personality, i.e. Krishna or Vishnu. This Neo-Vaishnavism had a mild connection with the *bhakti* movement, which originated in eight-century South India. Neo-Vaishnavism started to flow in Assam under the tutelage of saint Sankaradeva. It stood against the sacrificial rituals that were more prominent in the *shakta* tradition. In the beginning, image worship²¹ (Ass. *murti-puja*) was not supposed to be part of the Neo-Vaishnava faith. The principal focus of the Neo-Vaishnava movement was to introduce an ideology of an egalitarian society based on fraternity, humanism and equality. It firmly questioned

20 The Mishings are an indigenous group of people in India's northeastern states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. They follow a religion called Donyi Polo, worshipping the Sun and the Moon. Already during the 15th century Mishings in Assam came under the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism, and later a part of them converted to Christianity.

21 In this context image worship means the denial of the anthropomorphic association with the imagery. In Neo-Vaishnavism, image worship could be explained and understood as an anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic duality according to its context.

Brahmanical orthodoxy and conservatism. As time passed, the Neo-Vaishnava faith witnessed a schism and spread into four sects (*Ass. sanghati*). In the later period of the power politics of religious leaders, discrimination based on caste had become a crucial practice among Neo-Vaishnava followers. It was little in tune with the pan-Indian *bhakti* movement that had started to spread all over India. The disintegration of Sankaradeva's order after his death had a fertilising effect on the culture of the Sattras, as the difference of opinion amongst the followers, particularly between the high-caste *brahmins* and the lower-caste *shudras* arose. That led to the establishment of new Sattras (Barua 1960: 101). Over time some Sattras began to lose the rigour of injunction of their faith against image worship (*murti-puja*) and as a result, some Sattras established by *brahmin* leaders introduced idol worship by placing images of Krishna and Vasudeva (Vishnu) in the prayer hall. Indeed, at the same time, some others still abstained from image worship. Neo-Vaishnava faith in its institutional order had witnessed social hierarchy, and also accommodated tantric²² rituals by worshiping imagery, which seems in contrast to Sankaradeva's view. Even though devotees of the "clean sect" (*Ass. nika-sanghati*) claim to be non-idolatry believers, still image worship takes place in their practice in a muted manner.

At a place called Dhuahatbeloguri on Majuli, Madhavadeva met Sankaradeva for the first time to debate his *shakta* belief against the Neo-Vaishnava ideology and faith preached by Sankaradeva. After a long debate Sankaradeva won by expressing the idea that if you water the roots of a tree, this also supplies water to the branches, but if you water the branches of a tree it does not help the tree as a whole. Likewise, Lord Vishnu is the main source of all creation including other gods and goddesses. Thus, the choice is up to you whether you water the tree's roots or its branches. Eventually Madhavadeva became initiated and gradually turned himself into a chief and a dedicated devotee of Sankaradeva's doctrine (Neog 1962: 46–47). The meeting moment of these two saints is popularly known as *manikanchan-sangjog*²³ and has since become an important place of pilgrimage in Assam. This place was eroded by the river Brahmaputra and turned into one of the main channels of the river, but still Majuli remains an important pilgrimage site for Neo-Vaishnava followers.

As the Dakhinpat Sattra,²⁴ too, has been going through many difficulties due to floods and erosion, the managing head, Basudeva Goswami, set up a river worship ritual about seventy to eighty years ago to please the Baba Brahmaputra. Since then the river worship ritual has been followed by the devotees

22 "Tantricism" can be understood differently according to its sectarian association. But in this context, "tantric" means refusing the idea of image worship and sacrificial rituals.

23 A combination of two Assamese words which means an auspicious union.

24 Dakhinpat Sattra is an ancient monastery-like Neo-Vaishnava institution situated on Majuli island. It was established by Vamshigopaldeva in 1584 under the patronage of the Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singha.

of the Dakhinpat Sattrā. It is considered a very auspicious occasion, therefore many islanders come to participate. It is believed that the Brahmaputra does not erode the island if the Dakhinpat Sattrā offers the worship (Ass. *puja*) accordingly on behalf of the islanders. However, the river worship ritual is particularly followed by those whose settlements are very close to the riverbank. Villagers in the Dakhinpat area of the island additionally offer milk once or twice a month to the river, and organise a collective offering from the village community once a year in April, in addition to the Sattrā's river worship ritual.

In February 2018, the Dakhinpat Sattrā organised a huge Brahmaputra *puja* on the riverbank, where about 30,000 devotees participated in the ritual ceremony. The main river worship rituals were preached by four *sattradhikars*, who represented the Dakhinpat Sattrā, Auniati Sattrā, Garmur Sattrā and Aua Sattrā. The organisers had built a temporary platform to be able to make a prayer-hall and a stage where devotees performed dances and sang songs. It was a day-long programme that included a long procession from the Dakhinpat Sattrā to the riverbank, congregational prayer (Ass. *nam-prasanga*), Brahmaputra worship (Ass. *Brahmaputra-pujan*), the offering of *bhog* to the river Brahmaputra (Ass. *bhog-archan*), having a meal together (Ass. *samuhik-bhojan*), etc. According to the believers, the Brahmaputra gets angry if this ritual is not performed accordingly at the proper time. The same belief also prevails among the devotees of Bhogpur Sattrā. Once the *sattradhikar* of Bhogpur Sattrā did not organise this ritual on time and the Brahmaputra Baba appeared in his dream to warn him (interview with Sri Duttadev Goswami, 27 July 2017, Majuli):

I had a dream yesterday, the Brahmaputra Baba appeared in my dream and asked me, "Why are you afraid of me?" Then I replied, "Baba, you are destroying our land and crops, you have brought real danger into our lives and that's why I am afraid of you." Then Baba said to me that the people had stopped offering him *bhog*. "I am hungry. If I don't get *bhog* by tomorrow, then I will bring more damage to people's lives. I am here to warn you." Then he disappeared.

On the next day the *sattradhikar* arranged a ritual ceremony that included the offering of *bhog* and the recitation of the Bhagavad Gita on the banks of the Brahmaputra with the presence of many of his followers to please the river. As a result of this, he told me, the Brahmaputra has since slowly reduced his dangerous erosion and floods. The *sattradhikar* stressed how the annual river worship continues to make the river deity happy and avoids future destruction.

The *sattradhikar*'s magical power

A *sattradhikar*, the priest and managing head of a Sattrā, holds a very important position among the Sattrā's followers. Even though the *sattradhikars* are bound by some traditional customs set up by the Sattrā community, they have

the power to decide which rituals to conduct and which to leave aside. *Sattradhikars* are expected to give advice under any circumstances to their followers; in most Sattras only a Brahmin is permitted to hold this position. Thus, the ethos of Brahmanical dominance is still rooted in the Sattra organisations, and caste differentiation and social hierarchy are still common among the Sattra devotees. In some Sattras there is an executive committee that has the supreme power to take decisions even against the head of the Sattra, whereas in some others, the *sattradhikar* is the one to decide in all cases. Sometimes so-called upper caste Kayasthas²⁵ are also allowed to hold the position of *Sattradhikar*. Depending on the sect variation, there are some unparalleled traditional customs even within the Sattra system when it comes to beliefs and rituals. This becomes especially obvious when we look at the river worship and at its connection to the Brahmaputra.

While I investigated the Brahmaputra narratives on Majuli, I discovered that only a few Sattras (such as Dakhinpat, Bhogpur and Benganaati) consider the river as the deity to whom they offer worship during the time of monsoon. Their settlements are on the bank of the river; therefore, they feel the need to worship the river to save them from danger. In this context the devotees of Dakhinpat, Bhogpur and Benganaati Sattra compromise with their belief system, because, according to their monotheistic principle, they should not worship other deities except from Lord Vishnu and his incarnations. The remaining Sattras, whose settlements are a bit further from the riverbank and who are thus not living in constant threat by the river, are not interested in worshipping the river; worshipping deities other than Vishnu and his incarnations is not part of their religious belief. Another contrast can also be found among the Sattras in terms of belief: some Brahmin *sattradhikars* are involved in tantric practices, whereas some of them are not.

In an interview I (BS) conducted on the effect of flood and erosion, my interviewee, the *sattradhikar* (SA) of Punia Sattra, revealed some information that shows his involvement with tantric practices.

BS: How long has this Sattra been here, at this place?

SA: Originally this Sattra [the Punia Sattra] was at a place called Chinatoli. Because of erosion we had to shift to this place. It happened before 1951, we were not even born then.

BS: How often does erosion happen on Majuli?

SA: The place of our earlier inhabitation now lies in the middle of the Brahmaputra, which is about 700 meters away from the bank of the river. Once, when I was young, my friends and I wanted to watch the erosion that was taking place in an area called Meragarh. We were so afraid while watching the devastation that took place there. All the people were crying because of the damage and displacement caused by the river. It was the worst situation [I have ever experienced]. Since then I don't go to watch ero-

25 A Kayastha is a group of people consisting of several sub-groups or castes.

sion. Erosion takes place on Majuli quite often, even now you can go to the riverbank and see it.

BS: Can you tell me something about the ritual of the Dakhinpat Sattrā offering *bhog* to the Brahmaputra river?

SA: Usually, they offer *bhog* every year during February–April. Mostly they organise this ritual close to the ferry port. Sometimes near a place where erosion takes place. First, the Sattrā devotees select a place by putting the branch of a tree in the riverbank. Then the next day it is inspected and found to be cleaned automatically by the river itself. When devotees are done with their rituals and offerings, the water of the river comes to the ritual place after an hour or so to take away the *bhog* offerings.

BS: What do you worship, what rituals do you have to practice on a daily basis?

SA: We worship *salegram*,²⁶ [and] the image of Gopal [Ass. *Gopal murti*]. Whatever *salegram* that we have, we need to wash and worship them every day. If we don't continue this daily ritual, then they will displace themselves from their original position. Some [many] days ago, we had a problem because of a mistake made by a devotee. The devotee did not perform properly his required ritual while giving offerings. Because of that, snakes started coming into the altar continuously for six months on a daily basis. I even stepped on them several times, but they did not bite me. In 1998 we had a big flood here on Majuli. As our house was full of water, we had to sleep at night in our storehouse, which was situated in a high place. A snake climbed on my body in the middle of the night, but it did not bite me at all.

BS: Why do snakes have such a sympathy for you?

SA: I worship Lord Shiva and the Goddess [Ass. *Goshani*]. If a child is possessed and their hair becomes matted [Ass. *jota*²⁷] then I will release them with my power. If someone has been suffering from pox, I will cure them soon with my power. My power comes from them [Shiva and Goshani]. Sometime Ma Bhagawati, Parvati and Ai appear in my dream to give me some ritual instruction, as I don't worship them every day. When both of my eyes stopped working then I started doing meditation [Ass. *dhyān*] at my worship place. After performing *dhyān*, I used to tell them that you put me in such a condition, so give me a way to live my life. How can I survive without my eyes? Then Shiva gave me a power. Since then snakes started moving here and there at my place.

BS: Do people still believe in the Sattrā's sacred power like before?

SA: Okay, let me tell you a recent story. There was a natural beehive in Sotai Sattrā. A boy had planned to take it away at night from there without informing the authorities. When the boy was about to move from the house to accomplish his plan, he fell down suddenly on the floor and started vomiting blood. All family members of the boy were so shocked and preparing to take him to the doctor. But, the boy said, if you take me to the doctor then I will die. Better you take me to the Sotai Sattrā from where I wanted to steal the beehive. Only the *sattrādhikar* will be able to cure me. Then everyone, who was present there knew that he had committed a sin. So, he was taken to the Sattrā. The boy revealed his secret unfortunate plan in front of the *sattrādhikar*. Eventually, the *sattrādhikar* cured him with the help of his shamanic skill and said that he must not do it ever again. If you think of taking away the Sattrā's property, then you will have to pay the price.

²⁶ *Salegram* (Ass.) is a piece of stone that is considered as living and sacred.

²⁷ If someone's hair becomes matted, then it is believed that she or he is possessed by Lord Shiva.

The interview reveals that floods and erosion have been a constant threat for the islanders, because of which several villages along with Sattras have had to move from one place to another for resettlement. Indeed, the situation gets worse when it turns into a natural disaster. In such cases some of the local people thus evaluate their own belief system to measure the furious role of the mighty river. However, during my interview, I noticed the multiplicity of the ritual practices within Sattras and the flexibility of their beliefs. When it comes to image worship, in some Sattras they don't believe in image worship or *murti-puja* (such as the Kamalabari school), whereas some others worship idols in an intense form (such as Auniati Sattra, Benganaati Sattra, Dakhinpat Sattra), etc. Even though Neo-Vaishnava doctrine is based on monotheistic principles, still some Sattras don't stick to that. I observed that even though some devotees are found to be committed to their faith, still they allow young ones to participate in different rituals of other Hindu beliefs on different occasions. For example, Sattra devotees worship the river Brahmaputra during the time of flood and erosion. They commemorate the day of the Goddess Saraswati (*Saraswati puja*) especially at school, for pupils to have good luck in education. At the same time devotees who are involved in business celebrate the day of Biswakarma (Ass. *Biswakarma-puja*) to have luck in business. In ancient times, many Brahmins were recruited in Hindu temples to conduct the ritualistic system of the faith. Later they received a priestly position in society. To be able to maintain their traditional practices, *sattradhikars* still continue some of their own Brahmanic rituals secretly even though it does not fit in the Neo-Vaishnava order according to their ideological principles. The tension and fear among some followers and critics arises from the fact that Sattra followers have not been able to maintain their traditions homogeneously. Even though all Sattras could be put beneath the umbrella of the Neo-Vaishnava order, traditional rituals and practices seem to be different because of the schism that emerged after the demise of Sankaradeva. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that the Sattra culture in Assam has very deep traditional roots and remains lively.

Apart from that, the last part of the above-mentioned interview with the *sattradhikar* of Punia Sattra suggests that some priests take the liberty of expressing and continuing their magical practices without considering the concerns of present-day dynamics. While interviewing some educated youths of Majuli, I learned that the presentation of the hierarchy through the expression of the *sattradhikar*'s belief and ritual practice does not seem to include all segments of people in the society. Only a particular, marginalised section continues to follow this path of belief. The intention of some priests to present themselves as divine-like figures does not have relevance among the educated youth. Rather, this separates the educated youth from the Sattra tradition. According to them, no one should demean someone else's belief narrative, but narrating a belief for one's own sake can lead people to doubt a belief system.

From several interviews I discovered that members of the young generation are a bit sceptical of giving space to the magical parts of the *sattradhikar's* belief narrative to fit in their own understanding of the world.

Beyond worship – ongoing erosion and governmental response

There are several natural disasters that the Majuli islanders have experienced over the past years. The fear of flood and erosion always remains in the minds of the people all through the year and they get prepared for it. Almost every family has its own boat to help it survive during the flood season. The river Brahmaputra swells every monsoon. In the monsoon season, every time it rains, people start praying to the river not to bring floods in order to save their land from erosion. Those whose land has been lost have been living on the embankment for years. There are many families on the embankment who need resettlement, several villages that need to be shifted because of erosion every two to three years. This causes enormous harm to their lives. As there are no good and sufficient medical facilities people have to go to another place for quality medical treatment. Sometimes seriously ill patients die on the ferry while they are being referred to another medical facility for better treatment outside Majuli. It takes about 1.5–2 hours, depending on the water level of the river Brahmaputra, to cross it by ferry. Indeed, this indicates the complexity of the transport system for islanders with the mainland. However, some Sattras have shifted their campus to other parts of the state and some others have their alternative campus outside Majuli. Likewise, many families who are able have purchased land outside Majuli for alternative arrangements. Unfortunately, Majuli has shrunk from 1255 square kilometres to one-third of its original size because of its constant erosion. Local people have also taken some practical protective initiatives together with government representatives to reduce river erosion. Sometimes these help, sometimes they do not.

The Brahmaputra Board²⁸ was established under an act of Parliament known as the “Brahmaputra Board Act” in 1980 by the Ministry of Irrigation (later renamed the Ministry of Water Resources) of the government of India for the management of floods and bank erosion, drainage congestion and development, and the utilisation of the water resources of the Brahmaputra valley. In terms of flood and erosion on Majuli, the board’s protective measures have not been enough to date (2018) to protect the island from erosion. On the other hand, however, the Assam government has introduced a river worship trend in the form of a huge festival to be able to inculcate a religious na-

28 For more information, see <http://brahmaputraboard.gov.in>.

tionalistic idea among the Assamese people. This seems to be an effort to place more emphasis on the pan-Indian nationalistic religious ideology being highlighted by the RSS²⁹ rather than an attempt to promote local beliefs on river worship. In April 2017, the government of Assam organised a huge festival in 21 districts of Assam to worship the river Brahmaputra by naming the festival “Namami Brahmaputra”. The present BJP Government spent large sums of public money to celebrate the festival without representing the riverine communities.³⁰ Priests were specially invited from Varanasi to lead the main ritual. It was clear to the public that the RSS force was playing a vital role to homologue the local culture in their form of religious reform. A *sattradhikar* who belongs to the clean sect (*nika-sanghati*) also took part in the river worship even though according to their faith they should not pray to deities other than Vishnu or Krishna. This provides a clue to think more about how local culture is being forced to merge with the mainstream narrative of nationalistic propaganda. The government has seemed more interested in promoting Hindutva ideology rather than addressing the real problems of the local population. And this has been a big fear and concern for the public in today’s context. Indeed, those *sattradhikars* who have accepted the Hindutva idea of the RSS have been diluting the egalitarian essence of Sankaradeva’s doctrine, which is also a big fear for some socially concerned people. Apart from that, the practice of nature-worship by the riverine community, for whatever reasons, suggests that the non-dualistic aspect of nature v culture is very much part of the local belief system on Majuli, allowing the establishment of a human relationship with nature without considering it as “other”. However, recently the river worship has been misused by nationalistic forces and is being forcibly placed under the umbrella of Hindutva.

Concluding remarks

It is crucial to mention that traditional roots and faith matter to every community to preserve and continue their own identity. In the process of the continuation of tradition, some elements are included, and some are excluded, of course. As its traditional roots are very lively and strong, Majuli could be called the main centre of Sattria culture in Assam. Indeed, cultural assimilation is not a new phenomenon in the context of Assam, as it accommodates people from different backgrounds and localities. Likewise, cultural heterogeneity cannot be denied among the people of Majuli. The island shelters people from

29 The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a nationalistic Hindu organisation established in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889–1940). It advocates a Hindu patriotic agenda under the banner of *Hindutva* or “Hindu-ness”.

30 See <https://www.sentinelassam.com/news/namami-brahmaputra/>.

different religious backgrounds, such as Hindu believers including Thakur Anukulacharya followers, Krishna-Radha followers of the Marwari community, as well as Christians and Muslims. Apart from that, indigenous beliefs in the form of worshipping trees, the Sun and Moon, etc., have always been a part of the indigenous community's life on Majuli. However, as Majuli is surrounded by the river Brahmaputra, the river has always been part and parcel of the lives of all of these heterogeneous populations. People express their respects in various ways to the river Brahmaputra, as it has a strong relationship with the livelihood of the communities. I observed that the fear of destruction is associated with the river worship even though devotion is an essential part of it.

The river worship also suggests the fact that some Sattra followers do not specifically limit themselves to one particular monotheistic belief. They cross religious affiliation when it is needed and try to survive according to the circumstances of nature. This shows that nature and the demands of time play an important role in shaping their lives. I came to know from the devotees of Dakhinpat and Bhogpur Sattra that nature holds enormous power rather than being simply the cultural construct of social belief. Therefore, it needs to be worshipped by crossing the religious limits of their faith, if necessary. River worship is a new adaptation of some Sattras and recently it has become a part of the political agenda for some people attempting to promote a nationalistic idea based on religion. Moreover, I observed that it is not only the island that is being eroded, but the traditional knowledge of the people as well. The position of the Sattras as carriers of knowledge and centres of power has changed. Knowledge is kept in a small circle among the *sattradhikars* and devotees who practice secret rituals. However, this knowledge is there to assist the people. Arranging rituals to appease the river is certainly a psychological help and source of hope. The huge festival of the BJP in contrast, a very public one, obviously remains a bit alien for a section of locals and fails to offer any help. Finally, the question is: where are the responsible authorities to control and solve the problems of flood and erosion? The *sattradhikars* have set up rituals to worship the river Brahmaputra, but the responsible authorities have so far failed to install protective measures to control floods and stop the erosion of the island of Majuli.

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