

## Today's Paper » FEATURES » FRIDAY REVIEW

Published: January 27, 2012 00:00 IST | Updated: January 27, 2012 04:02 IST

### Inheritance and loss

SANGEETA BAROOAH PISHAROTY



Culture at stake (clockwise from left) Hem Chandra Goswami trying to retrieve his art works from the flood waters; painted walls of a sattra; a mask-maker at work; Jogen Bora Bayan from Uttar Kamalabari sattra.

*issue With the Brahmaputra eating away at Majuli island, Assam's monasteries, repositories of its culture, face an existential threat. SANGEETA BAROOAH PISHAROTY*

"There is a strong belief here that the Brahmaputra doesn't harm our sattra."

This is the hope Nanigopal Deba Goswami, head of Dakshinpath satra, a revered neo-Vaishnavite monastery in Assam's Majuli, clings to. Or maybe it's a silent prayer to the Brahmaputra that it should not eat further into the island and swallow his monastery which has been there for the last five centuries. Eating into the sand banks of Majuli, the Brahmaputra is today barely 100 yards from Dakshinpat. But Goswami is not losing hope yet. Because the belief is, of the 22 monasteries left from the original 65 set up in the 16th Century in this largest riverine island of Asia — the rest swept away by Brahmaputra — only Dakshinpat has a ritual to appease the furious red river. But on a more practical note, the head priest, adds, "Also, we don't allow the potters of Majuli to weaken the soil by digging our land."

Not too many monasteries, set up in Majuli at the call of Vaishnava reformer Sankardeva, share Goswami's hope. Like Uttar Kamalabari and Bengenati. "We came here after our sattra was swept away by the river in the 1960s. It looks like this place will also go, we are barely a km away from it now," says Jogen Bora Bayan, the Burha Bhakat or the oldest member of the monastery.

Says Bengenati satradikar Bhabananda Deba Goswami, "In the last 51 years, this is the third place we have settled in. Of our 496 bighas here, we are left with only 96." The head of nearby Bhogpur sattra too helplessly points at the river just a few metres away from it. "Many Satras have left to settle elsewhere in Assam. We are biding our time."

The Assam Government is long aware of the danger to these repositories of Assamese culture, the fountainhead of Sattriya dance and music, and also the centre of the State's mask making art and mural painting. The monasteries are also storehouses of historical items belonging to ancient Assam including the precious xanchi puthis (religious treatises written on leaves), coins, robes, utensils, elephant tusks, gold and silver items, etc. from the Ahom era. To help sattras display what they have, the State wing of the Archaeological Survey of India has given grants to build museums. Bengenati has received Rs.5 lakh to build a museum. "In one swoop Brahmaputra can wash us away. What is more important for us is a piece of

land in some other part of Assam to keep the centuries-old culture alive," its satradhikar points out.

Though the Assam Government has barely helped the erosion affected people of Majuli, it has definitely given an ear to the satras and granted land to many elsewhere in Assam. But here too, it seems some are more influential. "The Government is yet to listen to our plea. I accompanied a delegation of satradhikars to Delhi to plead with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to control the river and save us. Despite his assurance, nothing has happened," says Bengenati satradhikar. The monastery has 100 families of monks but many are leaving as there is not enough agricultural land to feed all. By tradition, the local Mishing tribe till monastery land and share the yield. Like many satras, Bengenati's land that the mishings once tilled is in the Brahmaputra. So on one hand the State's cultural repository is under threat due to erosion, and on the other, it is also affecting those living off it.

"A centuries old tradition is on the verge of dying and all we get is a grant to build a museum. Among other precious things, we have kept safe a robe of the mighty Ahom king Gadadhar Singha. But who cares?"

Naturn Kamalabari satradhikar Narayan Deba Goswami, however, refused the State grant and lobbied to get Rs.6 crore from the Ministry of Culture to build a museum, an auditorium, a guest house and to renovate the monks quarters. "The State's grant is too little considering we have so much to do," he says. He admits he is trying to make best of the situation. But with the river just two-and-a-half kms away and not much done to stop it, he's worried. Though the satra has been granted land in Jorhat district, its 200-odd monks recently told him they are not willing to leave Majuli. "So there is an issue here," he says gravely.

Uttar Kamalabari too is in a quandary whether or not to shift out of Majuli. It has been granted 60 bighas in Golaghat district. But like all land-rich monasteries, Uttar Kamalabari has about 200 bighas, where the Mishing grow paddy, mustard, etc. and get their share. "The land we got is not enough to set up a monastery and also to get it farmed for our sustenance," says Jogen Bora Bayan. Bora, a musician who receives the State's artiste pension, mentions the original "Ratnabali" written by Sankardeva among the satra's precious possessions. A museum is being built with State money to display it along with other things but Bora asks: "Will the river let us be?"

Dakshinpat's Goswami, seeing the Brahmaputra's warning in other parts of Majuli, has allowed construction on the 350 bighas of land given it in Jorhat district.

The river has already proved a killer for smaller satras like Alengi. Its satradhikar Mitadeb Mahanta is today without his monks and occupies a village auditorium. Showing a file of letters to the Jorhat district Deputy Commissioner, the 74-year-old says, "I have been writing to the Government for help. But as you can see now, I've lost everything. My son has just got a job, I hope some day he buys some land so that we can move out of the auditorium."

Hem Chandra Goswami of Samaguri satra, known for its mask-making art, shows photographs of his masks and wood carvings being swept away by the Brahmaputra. "I have given some of my masks for safe keeping to Kalakshetra in Guwahati," he says. His brother and satradhikar, Kosakanta Deba Goswami, was awarded by Lalit Kala Akademi for mask-making. "But it is meaningless if we can't save Majuli," he adds.

To get a faint idea of what these institutions mean to Assamese culture, one has to visit Auniati satra. Not in the direct line of the Brahmaputra's fury, and powerful enough to be heard by the State, it has a well laid out museum and a library with precious scriptures. Also, a namghar, schools for its young monks, rooms to impart Sattriya dance and music, winding quarters for monks and huge agricultural land which the Mishings till for them.

"In the old days, we owned boats for the satradhikar to travel across Assam and spread Vaishnavism," says the present head Pitambar Deba Goswami.

The satra's reverence and influence in Assam continues. The Government has granted it land in Gohpur to set up additional satras. But Goswami notes, "We should not be seen complaining, but I would still say that the State has to be more proactive in safeguarding our culture. Hasn't China tamed the Yangtze? There is no scarcity of money in Assam today; what is lacking is the will."

***Hasn't China tamed the Yangtze? There is no scarcity of money in Assam today; what is lacking is the will.***

***Pitambar Deba Goswami***

More In: [FRIDAY REVIEW](#) | [FEATURES](#)

