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Published: February 11, 2012 00:00 IST | Updated: February 11, 2012 04:01 IST

### An isle of hope

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BEAUTY UNTAPPED At Majuli Photos: Ritu Raj Konwar and Bedabrata Dutta

*GETAWAY Majuli could be a tourist destination if only the Government gets proactive*

As the ferry chugs ahead breaking the grey waters of the Brahmaputra, I peek out of a tiny window of the liner. Icy winter winds hit my face as I try to catch a glimpse of the other side of the giant river. I shall soon be in Majuli, Asia's largest riverine island, in Assam's Jorhat district.

My destination is Kamalabari, at Neemati Ghat, the entry point to Majuli from the mainland. Old timers remember seeing ships plying from Neemati — the British used it as a port to take away Assam tea — definitely a rare sight in hilly North East India. After years of Governmental neglect, the ghat is today a slush bowl. A good part of its approach road is broken, there is no signage whatsoever to show visitors the way. Majuli is the seat of Neo-Vaishnavite sattras or monasteries set up by the legendary Assamese reformer Sankardeva in the 16th Century. My taxi passes by rows of makeshift *chang ghars* (dwellings on stilts) of Mishings, the largest community living in the island for centuries. The river has eaten away their home and hearth, compelling them to stay on the roadside. I visit the four major sattras — Dakshinpat, Bengenati, Auniati and Uttar Kamalabari. In serene surroundings, these are abodes of believers, silently busy in devotion to Lord Krishna. Being granted the patronage of the Ahom kings who ruled Assam for 600 years, these sattras are a storehouse of antiques spanning centuries.

#### Treasure trove

At Dakshinpat, I follow the monastery bhorali (store-keeper), the silver-haired Haren Deka. I stand in front of a creaky door as he carefully turns a rusty key into the hole. "This is the first concrete house of Majuli," he says, leading me into a musty, dark room, where a mustard oil *diya* lights up the ivory idols of Shiva and Parvati placed on the cold floor.

With a kerosene lamp, he takes me round the outer chamber of the bhoral, showing me centuries-old pieces of ivory, gold, silver, bell metal, bronze and copper utensils, giant keys and padlocks from the British era, kingkhop (traditional Assamese cloth made of gold thread worn by Ahom kings), wooden poles, spears, swords, shoes made of ivory, and a palanquin of Ahom kings.

Pointing at a *diya* in the inner chamber, he says, "It has been burning for 189 years. It is my responsibility to keep it burning." "Only bhakats (the monks) are allowed to enter it," he says. What I see from the threshold are old iron trunks said to be filled with coins belonging to the Ahom era, precious utensils and books on rituals made of leaves, wrapped in cloth. "The sattradhikar (monastery head) has the key to these boxes," says Deka.

In the outer chamber is Deka's bed. "I left home when I was six years old. Since then, the sattras has been my home." When

he enters the bhoral in the night to sleep, he carefully turns the pillow to ensure that there is no snake lying there. "There are a lot of them here; often I find skin shed by snakes under my pillow." A museum funded by the Archaeological Survey of India is being built in the monastery to display its riches. If only someone had cared to keep the traditional sattras' bhoral alive rather than build concrete museums! The Assam Government besides forming the Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority, has also applied for a grant of heritage status to UNESCO for Majuli. "A UNESCO team visited this storehouse and told us to keep everything properly," says Deka. Over 100 species of migratory birds visit Majuli every year. However, there is no official information on them available for visitors. With so much of natural wealth tourism could be a viable alternative for them. While there has been no significant government initiatives, there are a few private ventures that make an attempt to showcase the place.

There is Me: Po Okum, a clutch of bamboo huts on stilts, made on the lines of Mishing dwellings. Owner Ranoj Pegu has employed four locals who offer visitors a taste of Mishing food and a peek into the community's culture. Then there is Bamboo Cottage run by Bedabrattra Dutta and Jyoti Sarma. The seed money for it came from a Danish tourist they came across in the Kaziranga National Park. Every Sunday, the duo gets out to look for newer spots in Majuli for tourists. "We now know where to sight the best sun set here, the best spot for birds," says Dutta. Yet another youth from the island started Do: Nyi Po : Lo Okum some years ago on the lines of La Maison De Ananda, arguably the first eco-friendly bamboo cottages in Majuli set up by a French tourist.

All these are a refreshing change from the ugly concrete tourist lodge built by the Government sometime ago. Sudershan Thakur, a local businessman based in Guwahati, who runs the lodge on contract, says, the lodge is still incomplete. He is keen to do something for tourism in his native land. "I turned a part of our house into a lodge (Seuz Bilaas). Till then, there were only one or two guest houses in sattras for visitors," he says. He also paid for a signboard in front of the Kamalabari police station asking foreign tourists to register their presence in Majuli.

Giving an estimate, Majuli SDO Krishna Barua says, "In 2011, we have received over 2000 foreign tourists and around three lakh domestic tourists during the annual festival of raas." Recently, the Planning Commission has approved a development project for Majuli. The Assam Government's New Year package also mentions funds for the erosion hit there.

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*(The reporter was in Majuli recently on Inclusive Media Fellowship 2011 of the Centre for Study of Developing Societies)*

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Printable version | Jul 4, 2012 7:05:36 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/article2880746.ece>

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