

ON A SHRINKING 'ISLAND' CALLED MAJULI

Relevant for: World & Indian Geography | Topic: Islands & Coral Reefs, changes therein and in Flora & Fauna and the Effects of such changes

Majuli PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

You can drive from Assam's Lakhimpur district's Dhakuakhana, on the northern bank of river Brahmaputra, to Majuli for most part of the year. This, perhaps, doesn't make Majuli an island — geologically, a landmass completely surrounded by water — enough. But Majuli has often been viewed emotionally from the perspective of the people of Jorhat district on the southern bank, and for them it is a nodidwip (river island) whose nearest popular jetty, Kamalabari, is an hour's ride from Neamatighat on a ferry.

Majuli is a story for reporters of almost every beat. The frequency of my visit to the 'island', a constituency reserved for the Scheduled Tribes, has usually been dictated by Assembly elections. There have been the odd trips in between for cultural pieces; Majuli is the epicentre of the classical Sattriya dance and Bhaona (musical plays soaked in spiritualism) that evolved from the satras or monasteries adhering to the Vaishnavism that the 16th century saint-reformer-playwright Srimanta Sankardeva had established. And for coverage of devastation during or after a major flood; the Brahmaputra has devoured much of the 'island', reducing it from some 800 sq km a century ago to less than 400 sq km now.

But the shrinking hasn't robbed Majuli of its status as Assam's cultural soul. And as Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal's constituency, it has become the State's political nerve-centre since May 2016 and a district since September that year. Almost a year after the foundation stone of a bridge over Majuli was laid, he began pushing for linking the 'island' to India's railway grid. Many 'islanders' I have interacted with are upbeat about these projects, but feel Majuli might melt into the river. They include Upen Gayan, a vocalist-monk from Kamalabari Satra that has been relocated thrice since establishment in 1673. He hopes he lives long enough to see Majuli become erosion-proof for the bridge to have a strong base to stand on.

Such interactions are often with an eye on the watch to ensure that I don't miss the last ferry from Kamalabari to Neamatighat at 4 p.m. Staying back on the island is not an issue, mobile phone connectivity is. Poor data speed often makes it impossible to send stories and photos, and I learnt it the hard way while covering Mr. Sonowal's campaign. I missed the ferry and took a cab to Dhakuakhana, where the Internet speed is pretty good. But it was well past deadline when I pressed the send button.

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