

**KEY WORDS:**

Majuli, Satra, Assam, Brahmaputra, Satriya Culture

# The Satras of Majuli on the Brahmaputra

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## ABSTRACT

The Satras are Vaishnavite monastic settlements on the island of Majuli on the river Brahmaputra. This essay reflects upon the spacial relationship of a Satra with its unique environmental context and traditions of the Satriya culture. Acknowledging that sustainable practices are best understood as traditional responses to the natural and cultural landscape, the essay compares the 'formal' physical structure of the Satra with the organic 'informal' patterns and responses of a tribal living. This essay is based upon a student documentation project and attempts to situate the act of documentation in the larger scheme of architectural pedagogy besides being a vital tool for heritage conservation.



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*Figure 1: Along the river Brahmaputra*

## Introduction

Around seventeen years ago a movement was started to list the island of Majuli on the Brahmaputra river, in the North-Eastern state of Assam as a World Heritage Site. It is the largest riverine island in India with unique cultural and natural heritage. After three failed attempts in 2004, 2006 and 2012, and in spite of the UNESCO's encouragement,<sup>1</sup> the ambition is still a distant dream. One of the significant cultural features of Majuli's heritage is presence of the 'Satras'- Vashnavite<sup>2</sup> monastic community settlements, etymologically meaning 'an assembly of devotees'.

This essay reflects upon the spacial relationship of a Satra with its unique environmental context and traditions of the Satriya culture. Acknowledging that sustainable practices are best understood as traditional responses to the natural and cultural landscape, the essay compares the 'formal' physical structure of the Satra with the organic 'informal' patterns and responses of a tribal living. This essay is based upon a joint student documentation project between Kamla Raheja Vidyavidyalaya Institute of Architecture (KRVA), Mumbai and Guwahati School of Architecture (GSA), Assam. The essay

proposes a potential role of such an architectural documentation endeavor in strengthening the case of Majuli as a significant heritage site and therefore the treatment it deserves. The essay also briefly outlines the pedagogic process of documentation and its significance in the overall academic scheme.

## Geographical Context of Majuli

Majuli is located at a distance of around 350 km from Guwahati, the capital of Assam and is bounded by the river Brahmaputra on its south and its tributaries, mainly the river Lohiton on the north. Attributing to folklore and historical text, it is widely accepted that "the island has been a result of frequent earthquakes in the period of 1661-1696 which weakened the natural breaches in the upper reaches of Brahmaputra, leading to an extreme flood in 1750" (Assam State Gazetteer, 1999; Gogoi and Borpujari, 2014). The Brahmaputra and one of its major tributaries Dihing once flowed parallel and close to each other. This flood diverted the Dihing upwards by around 190 km, resulting in the birth of the Majuli Island (Sarma and Phukan, 2004).



Figure 2: Ruddy Shelduck and other birds near Dokhinpathin, Majuli

Over the centuries, fertile deposits and abundance of water on the island has led to a rich biodiversity attracting and supporting a diverse avian fauna (Figure 1, 2). Majuli once comprised of 15 large and small islands in 1792, and had officially recorded area of 1255 sq.km. in 1901. It has been constantly undergoing erosion & silting processes- eroding at a much rapid pace along the southern bank and depositing at a slower rate along the north bank resulting in consolidation of the multiple islands as one with numerous wetlands and swamps and in reduced area coverage of 421.65 sq.km. in 2001(Sarma and Phukan, 2004).

### The Peoples of Majuli

Negotiating these constantly shifting edges and the resultant displacements are the people on Majuli who are predominantly in the following groups:

1. **Monks of the Satra:** They are Assamese Vaishnavite<sup>3</sup> monastic community in the Satras. They believe in the *Eksarana Dharma* (Shelter-in-One religion) propagated since 16th century (Neog, 1980).
2. **Sonowal Kacharis:** The gold craftsmen to the Ahom Kings and followers of *Mahapurusha Vaishnav* Dharma. However, many have retained their sacrificial customs which predates their

conversion to Vaisnavism (Saikia, 2013; Bhadra, 2014; Bordoloi, 1991).

3. **Deoris:** An Indo- Mongoloid race of Tibeto-Burman linguistic group and the erstwhile priests of the ruling Chutiya lineage and believers of primordial power called Kundimama equated to Siva<sup>4</sup> & Sakta<sup>5</sup> cults (Assam State Gazetteer, 1999).

4. **The Mising:** A tribe of Tibeto-Burmese origin (Bordoloi, 1991; Pegu, 2014).

The study of the Satriya culture, life and rituals in a Satra, and its settlement represents the formal structure of a settlement on the island. On the other hand examining the narrative of the Mising tribe reveals tribal intuitive response to the environment. Both these provide an interesting comparison.

### The Satriya Tradition, Arts and Crafts

The Satras were founded by the saint- scholar Sankardeva, also a poet, playwright, social-religious reformer along with his followers with the patronage of the Ahom Kings of Assam around 16th century. The website of Auniati Satra,<sup>6</sup> one of the significant Satras of Majuli, describes them as “places where the Vaishnavs dedicate themselves to serve God and also inspire people to follow the path of devotion

towards God. They make use of various ritual and devotional performances to inspire the masses into practicing the principles of Vaishnavism and realize that belief in one God is the means to achieve eternal peace.” In one of the local publications, Dr. Pitambar Dev Goswami, the present *Satradhikar* (spiritual head) of Auniati Satra, is quoted as stating that the main objective of a Satra, as an institution,

**The arts, both literary and performative as well as crafts used in these performances have been developed over centuries and have made the Satra an important centre of art and culture in Assam.**

is “to motivate people to realize the existence of the Supreme power of the world through spiritual performances and Sharana -daily and occasional prayers and rituals.” (Kakati, 2010).

The arts, both literary and performative as well as crafts used in these performances have been developed over centuries and have made the Satra an important centre of art and culture in Assam. In the year 2000, through a conference held for the purpose, the Satriya dance got its due acknowledgement as one of the eight classical dances of India (Kothari, 2013).

Majuli once had as many as 65 Satras on the island, around 22 have survived (Karmakar, 2016, Kakati, 2010) of which only 10 are active. Each Satra observes a combination of arts and craft practices but has developed an identity of being a repository of specific art forms. For example, the Satras of Auniati, Dokhinpat, Benganaati, Bhogpur, Garamur and Kamalabari (including Uttar & Notun) are known for their



Figure 3: Mask making is an important craft practiced in Satriya culture. The mask above is used in Raasleela performances at Dokhinpat Satra

contributions in the field of Satriya dance forms, songs and literature. The Satras of Chamaguri and Notun Chamaguri have received accolades for their mask making crafts (Figure 3). Fan making is another craft practiced in the Satras of Nutan Kamalabari and Auniati (Kothari, 2013; Kakati, 2010). The Satras have also been instrumental in promoting and contributing towards education, health care, relief and other formal developments on the island.

Satra, as established by Sankardeva spread the message of *Bhakti* (devotional) movement in Assam and helped in bringing reforms within the caste based Indian society by giving an opportunity and enabling individuals from tribal communities which were considered as lower caste to be equivalent to the upper castes. Given the large tribal population of Assam including the rulers, Satriya culture found ready acceptance. Their predominant challenge was from the Sakta and Shaivite practices (Saikia, 2013; Dutta, 2004).



Figure 4: Idols being readied for Raasleela, Dokhinpat Satra

After Sankardeva, over centuries, four predominant sects or *sanghatis* emerged within the Satriya practice based largely on the beliefs of their initiators but which can be seen vis-à-vis their stance with the *varna* system (Saikia, 2013).

1. Purush Sanghati: Maintained the belief in the original teachings of Sankardeva.
2. Kala (Kâl) Sanghati: Further challenged the social order and found followership from the people across all castes and some Muslims as well.
3. Nika Sanghati: Sought to renew the strict adherence to purity, as preached by Sankardeva. Could be considered as “born again”.
4. Brahma Sanghati: Reverted to the pre Satra belief in the Brahmin dominated social order.

The three orders of Brahma, Purush & Kala Sanghati are also understood to be the three forces and part of the “*Mahapurush*” representing soul, physical flame (energy) and skills/ arts respectively (Ganguli, 1896). The Nika Sanghati introduces the concept of purity to the mahapurusha (Chatterji, 1978). Indraneel Pegu (2014) cites Damrudhar Nath (2009) while mentioning that “Satras belonging to all four Sanghatis are found in the Island. Auniati, Garamur and Dakhinpat Satra belongs to Brahma

Sanghati, Kamalabari Satra belongs to Nika Sanghati while Bengena Ati and Chamaguri Satra belong to the Purusha Sanghati. Although Kal

**The Satras have their influence in the religious, cultural and social life of the people in Assam and have made Majuli the principal seat of pilgrimage for their followers- the lay people initiated in the *Eksarana Dharma* in Assam and neighboring states who contribute to the Satra economy through taxes and other religious duties.**

sanghati do not have Satras but at present there are a few villages of the Mayamara sect that belong to that order.”

### The Satriya Performances

Thus the Satras have their influence in the religious, cultural and social life of the people in Assam and have made Majuli the principal seat of pilgrimage for their followers- the lay people initiated in the *Eksarana Dharma* in Assam and neighboring states who contribute to the Satra economy through taxes and other religious duties. The daily rituals are performed in the form



*Figure 5: The Dashavatar of Krishna performed during the Raasleela in Dokhinpat Satra*

of devotional songs and dances as practices of some of the 14 Prashangas (prayers). The songs “Bongeet” Matiakhara, and dances include Jumora, Chali, Notua, Nande Vringee, Sutradhar, Ozapali, Apsara, Satriya Krishna and Dasavatar. These daily rituals along with celebration of religious festivals and observance of birth and death anniversaries of founders of the Satra and recitation of rhymes and scriptures of Lord Krishna form the cultural core of the Satriya practice (Kakati, 2010; Kothari, 2013).

The three-day long *Raas* festival around November, depicting the life of Krishna, engages almost every person on the island. Our study was timed to coincide with the preparation and the final performance of the *Raasleela* (Figure 4). The central space called the *Namghar* (the prayer hall) becomes the stage while the peripheral space beyond the massive columns accommodate the audience. Devotees from across Assam come to witness the *Raas*. The performances depict snippets from the life of Lord Krishna. The ‘*Dashavatar*’ (Figure 5) where Krishna reveals himself as one of the ten forms of Vishnu, is the most popular at the Dokhinpat Satra. The evenings are lit with hundreds of oil



*Figure 6: Lamp flags made out of bamboo used for the evening light show in Auniati Satra*

lamps rendering the place in a warm glow. At Auniati, series of *Aakashbanti*, skylamps made of crafted Bamboo (Figure 6) enhances the ambience further.

### The Settlement of a Satra

A Satra is largely a self-sustained community for its day to day functioning and like any Indian village has in-house tradesmen viz. carpenters, weavers, boat-makers, potters, tailors, etc. Sometimes, they may also employ craftsmen from adjacent villages. The subsistence is largely agrarian and the diet involves simple vegetarian food of rice, lentils and vegetables grown within the Satra or bought from the nearby market. Paddy is grown in the fields surrounding the Satra. Cows are maintained for dairy requirements. Fields are cultivated with help of labour from adjacent villages or migrant workers.

Three representative Satras were chosen for documentation out of the ten active ones on the basis of their historical, cultural and architectural significance; ability to retain their characters through times and frequent relocations, and accessibility in terms of

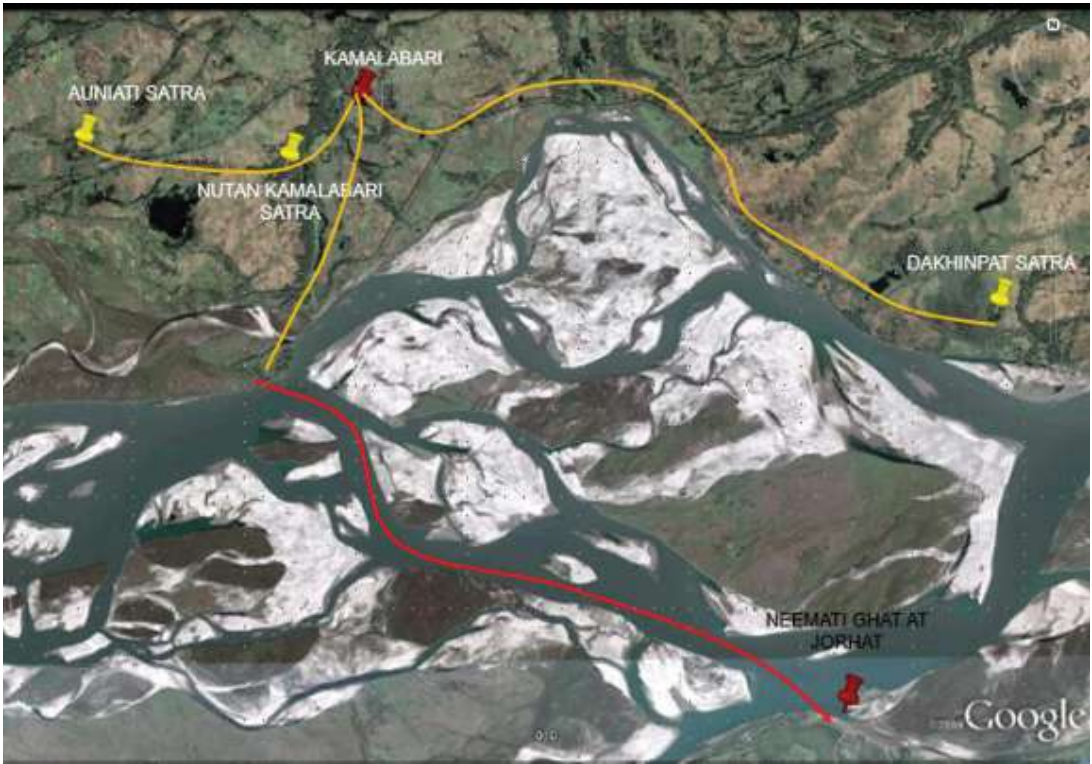


Figure 7: Location of three Satras with reference to Jorhat (Neemati Ghat)

permissions and commuting distance from the place of accommodation. These were **Dokhinpat**, situated on the eastern part of the

**The physical space of the Satra is arranged as a formal gridiron and comprises of a centrally placed Namghar (Prayer Hall) and Manikut (Sanctum Sanctorum) around which are organized other spaces.**

island and the oldest surviving Satra, **Auniati**, situated on the western part and the largest, and **Nutan Kamalabari**, situated centrally nearer to the market place (Figure 7). The documentation primarily focused on the built spaces and their relationship with the surrounding landscapes.

### The Form and Space of a Satra

The physical space of the Satra is arranged as a formal gridiron and comprises of a centrally placed *Namghar* (Prayer Hall) and *Manikut* (Sanctum Sanctorum) around which are organized other spaces such as the *Karpat* (gateway of the Satra), residence of *Satradhikar* (the head of the Satra), store-house, quarters for *bhaktas* (disciples), guest house, etc. This organization typically divides the courtyard around the *Namghar* into four parts. Each part has an excavated water body with rich biodiversity including fish. This serves as waste water recycling and also nourishes a rich ecology. The water from these ponds is used for non-potable needs. The rear portion of the quarter accommodates private portions of the

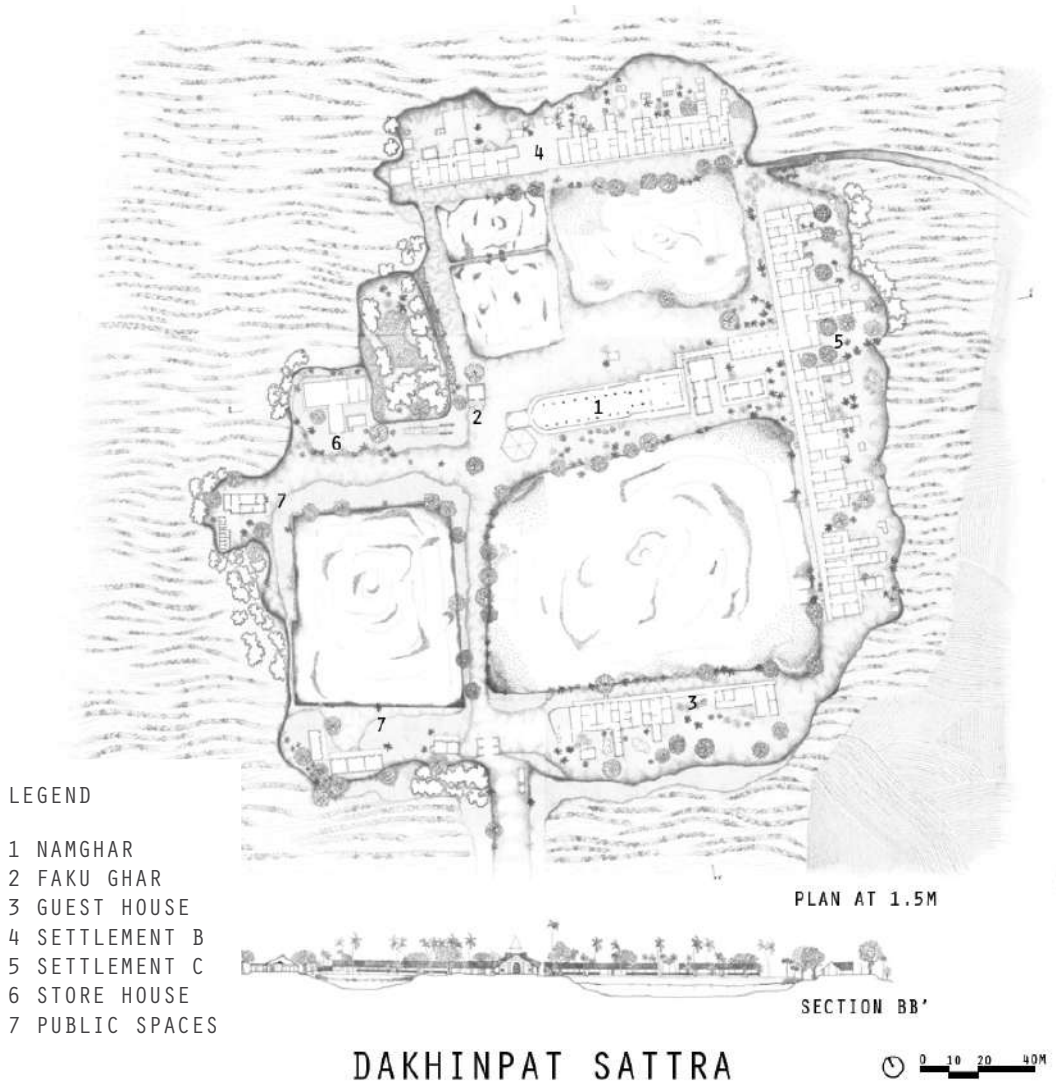


Figure 8: Site layout of Dokhinpat Satra. Credit: KRVA Students' work 2010

residence including kitchen and has wells, and in more recent times receive treated water through pipelines (Figure 8, 9, 10)

These rectangular settlements with each side ranging from 300-500 meters exhibit a unique tradition of sustainable planning of settlements arranged as a gridiron. The 40 to 70 residential

units on each side of rectangle forms the envelope to the central space.

### The Built Form and Construction

The plinths of the Namghar and the residential units are constructed out of the soil excavated for formation of the ponds. Above this plinth the construction is of timber frame with wattle &



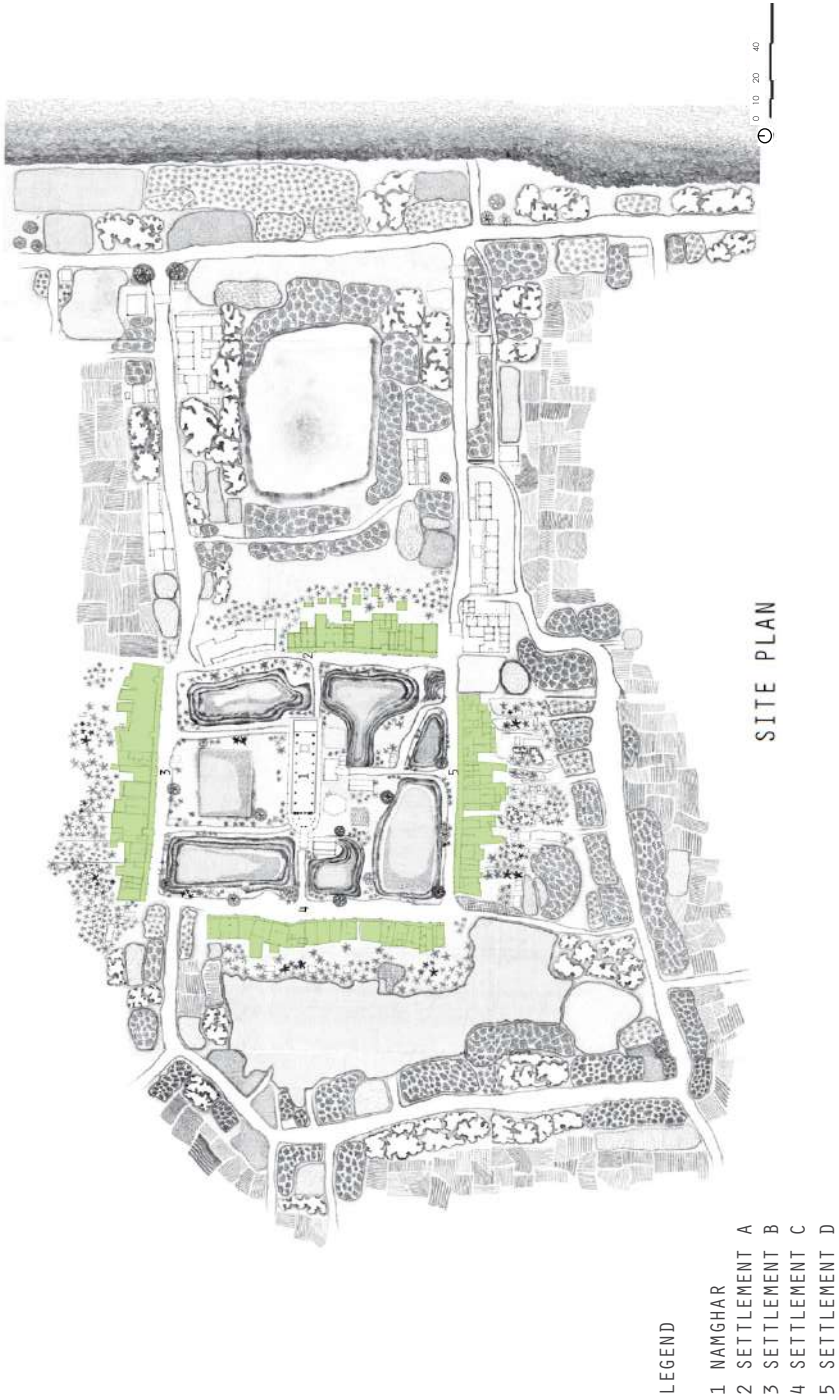


Figure 9: Site layout of Notun Kamalabari Satra. Credit: KRVI A Students' work 2010

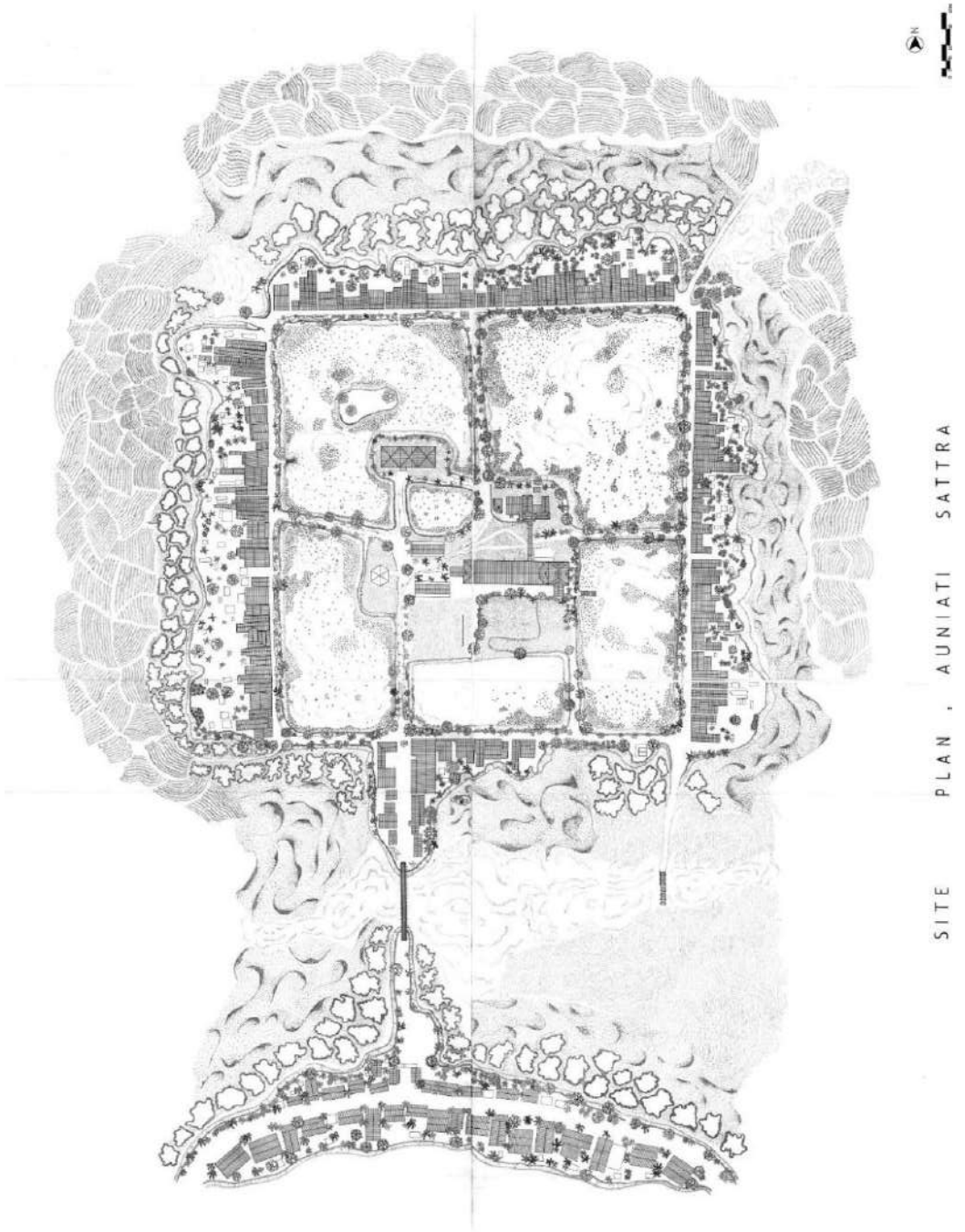


Figure 10: Gridiron layout of Auniati Satra. Credit: KRVIA Students' work 2010



Figure 11: Mud plinth of Namghar, Dokhinpat Satra



Figure 12: Mud plinth in residences, Auniati Satra



Figure 13: Spire clad in copper sheet, Namghar, Dokhinpat Satra



Figure 14: The interior being readied for the Raasleela. Note the size of solid timber posts which have been draped by fabric.

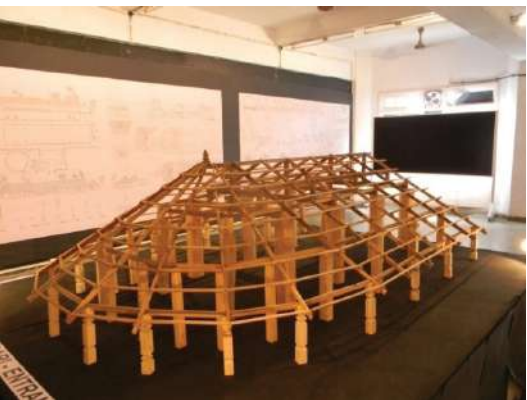
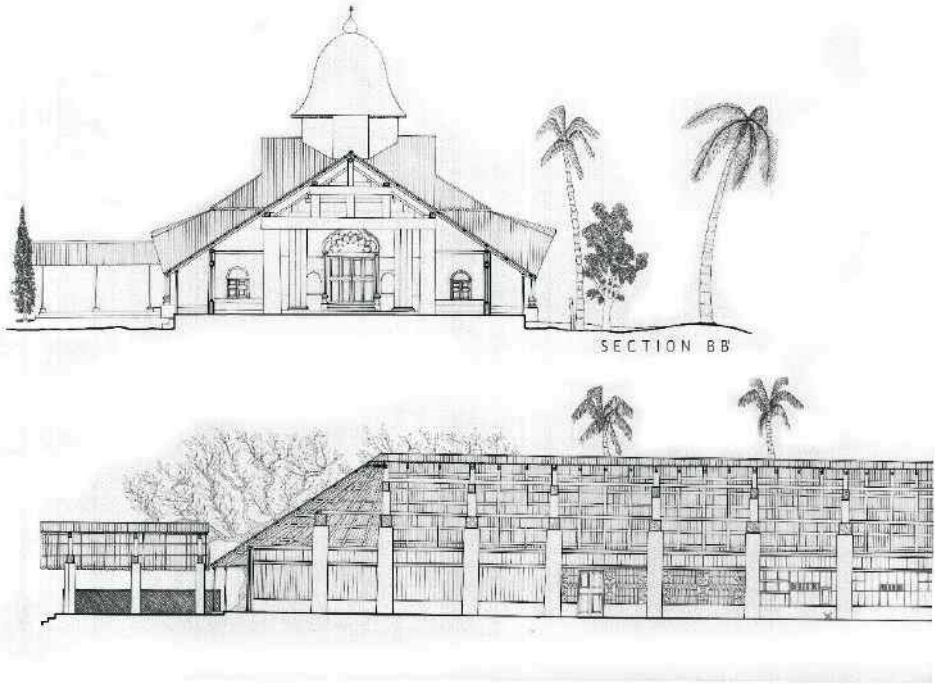


Figure 15: Model of Post and Lintel timber construction of Notun Kamlabari Namghar.  
Credit: KRVA Students' work 2010



Figure 16: Model of Post and Lintel timber construction of Dokhinpat Namghar,  
Credit: KRVA Students' work 2010



*Figure 17: Section through the Namghar, Dokhinpat Satra  
Credit: KRVA Students' work 2010*

daub (bamboo matt panels plastered with mud mortar on either side). The sloping roof is made up of timber frame and covered with corrugated metal sheet cladding. More recently masonry construction using burnt brick is also seen. (Figure 11, 12)

The roof form of Namghar is more elaborate and extends over a relatively larger span (Figure 13). Namghar of Dokhinpath Satra, the oldest surviving Satra, utilizes post and lintel construction of a robust nature wherein the timber sections for the column posts are 900 mm in diameter (Figure 14). The Namghar at Nutan Kamlabari utilizes timber truss construction leading to more economical use of

timber, while the more recent at Auniati utilizes steel trusses for its roof.

### **The Mising Tribe on the Island and their Settlement**

In Majuli, one of the predominant settlement pattern other than the Satra is that of the Mising tribe, which has immigrated from Arunachal Pradesh and settled in Majuli over centuries. This settlement is presented here through a photographic survey to compare the responses of a tribal community and that of a Satra to the flood prone fertile plains in the basin of Brahmaputra. The Mising tribe is patriarchal and have Tibeto-Burmese origin. They believe in Donyi-Polo (sun and moon) and over time have been absorbed into Hindu fold. Some may also follow



**Figure 18:** Spinning and weaving as the primary occupation of the Mising tribe



**Figure 19:** Bamboo craft is evident in furniture as well as architecture



**Figure 20:** The changghars (stilt houses) in the Mising settlement



**Figure 21:** Bamboo bridge leading to a stilt house (concrete is the modern alternative to wooden post)

Christianity (Pegu, 2014). Their traditional occupations include weaving, fishing, gathering, pig and poultry rearing, agriculture, bamboo crafts etc. (**Figure 18, 19**). Their diet comprises of fish and meat (pig & poultry).

Apart from the isolated changghar (stilt house) strewn across the landscape as individual structures, we noticed that the two tribal settlements that we came across on way to Dokhinpat Satra as well as the Mising tribe village which we were invited to, were along the primary access road. (**Figure 20, 21**).

The *changghars* are of light weight bamboo or timber structures on stilt, traditionally of wood post but more recently of concrete post. In recent times these structures also utilize wattle & daub construction (Timber frame with bamboo matt infill, plastered from both sides). The sleeping accommodations were organized around the kitchen, which itself was where the family got together and guests were invited for hospitality (**Figure 22, 23**). Dung plastered low level ground is used for poultry, pig rearing and other occupational activities.



*Figure 22: The kitchen is where guests are invited, fireplace on a split bamboo floor*



*Figure 23: The private quarters seen from the kitchen*

### Comparing a Satra with the Mising Settlement

While a Satra represents the formal structure of society based on response to cultural conditions, the tribal way of living is a response to the natural conditions. For many centuries, the tribals have been conditioned into believing that their responses have been inferior to the extent that during the prevalence of *varna* system, the tribals were outside the *varna* system- the outcasts. Satra offered them an alternative, yet inside a Satra – residences or the Namghar are not built with bamboo on stilt. A Satra embraces itself more firmly to the land and makes soil embankments around it trying to protect itself from the annual erosion of Majuli caused by the course correcting Brahmaputra.

In both cases traditional patterns evolved and have been reflected in their respective architecture. Both these have withstood tests of time, responded to the demands of the natural forces and have demonstrated ecological sustenance. The Satra has also demonstrated a way of living which

sets to achieve community living and growth in knowledge, skills & spirituality. Some of these institutions have positioned themselves as central to their neighbourhood's wellbeing and growth. The institution of Satra has played an important role in the spiritual and physical growth of the region in the past. Today while we struggle to create harmonious coexistence of people, amongst themselves and with their natural environment in our cities, these Satras have established distinct identities and also have been able to reach out to the remote lands and influence their way of life. The tribal community living on the other hand, reflects a culture that is more reverent, dependent and respectful of its natural environment. In the flood plains of the Brahmaputra, these are two diverse responses to natural conditions- one of resistance and the other of resilience. There are many more lessons to be learnt from juxtaposing a traditional formal system with the tribal responses of a region.

## **Documentation- its role in Pedagogy and Conservation**

Documentation is an important tool of conservation especially for an island which faces an almost certain extinction. Experts predict that by the year 2050 the island as we know today will no longer exist and most settlements on the island will have to be relocated to other places. Under threat of constant erosion, many of the Satras on Majuli have already acquired land elsewhere around Jorhat for future relocations. In the event of relocation of the Satra, this work is expected to serve as a valuable document of planning and construction. This documentation is first of its kind on the island and could set the standard for all future documentations.

The pedagogic outcome, which in itself was an evolution of earlier such studies in the institute, further set the bar for such exercises in future. The process of documentation served many interesting roles in the scheme of teaching- learning of architecture as demonstrated by this exercise. These included learning to plan the logistics of long distance travel to a remote place involving multiple modes of transport and then adjusting to a life entirely different from their urban existence. The four days spent on the island was a learning experience for the city students to come to terms with and then meld with the local geography, culture, food and dress.

Further, this exercise involved integration of several discreet courses such as surveying & levelling, construction technology, graphical representation and carpentry workshop- each of them orienting their instruction towards the objectives of this documentation. The students also spent a day on the island searching for three artifacts - which were to be carried back

to Mumbai, around which they would build a narrative for their respective architectural design interventions in the following semester- a house for a character that was imagined through the three artifacts. This ensured that the students did not do the documentation as a distant object/ space but were far more engaged with the stories around the place.

Besides obvious relevance in the cause of creating an awareness of cultural heritage including its preservation, documentation serves a vital role in architectural pedagogy. It plunges the students in a different socio-cultural environment, sensitising them in the process. In the present case, a study of the Satriya way of living and the tribal living patterns has been very important to understand the influences in creating these diverse regional identities in our multicultural landscape. Even though it was important to understand this variation in response to a stimulus, the documentation could do justice to only one in detail- the Satra, the culture perceived to be richer, under threat and which has become synonymous with Majuli. ■

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**Photo Credits:**

The drawings and timber models were prepared by the second year students (2010) of KRVA, Mumbai and they are a property of the institute. The images of the same are reproduced here with the permission of the institute.

All photographs are by the author.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> As per WHC- UNESCO, 20,000, USD were approved for the initial study in 2001, but not requested.

<sup>2</sup> Vaishnav followers are believers of Lord Vishnu. Vaishnavism and Shaivism are two important sects within Hindu manifold.

<sup>3</sup> The worship of Vishnu and his incarnations was prevalent in Assam from early times. The Great Saint Sankaradeva referred the earlier Vaishnavism in the 15th century and professed a cult of Bhakti (devotion) and this Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva differed from earlier Vaishnavism which was based on Tantrika rites. Sri Sankaradeva and his close disciple Sri Madhabdeva resisted the sacrifice of animals or bloodshed in the worship. They preached to worship only Vishnu or Krishna (*EkSarana Dharma*). They do not believe that the worship of innumerable Gods and Goddess is essential for earning religious virtues. (Assam State Gazetteer, 1999)

<sup>4</sup> Shaivism or the worship of Siva prevailed in Assam from a remote past and it was the popular form of religion both amongst the aboriginals and the Aryanised people before the popularity of Kamakhya the guardian deity of the region. (ibid).

<sup>5</sup> Stating from circa 7th century CE, throughout the medieval period, even down to the 18th century, the leading religion of Assam, was Shaktism- worship of the Goddess. Kamakhya is the most holy and famous shrine of the sect, and with its worship was associated the various rites, *mantras*, *mudras* and sacrifices. According to the KalikaPurna, the genital organ of Sati fell here when her dead body was carried by her husband Siva. (ibid).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.auniati.org/>

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