

## Ecotourism and Majuli: Prospects and Problems

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### ABSTRACT

*Eco-tourism is a tourism involving travel to areas of natural or ecological interest for the purpose of observing wildlife, learning about the environment and conserving them. It is entirely a new subject in tourism and has become an important economic activity in natural areas. Eco-tourism provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful manifestations of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity conservation and local cultures.*

*Majuli, with its natural beauty in the lap of the mighty Brahmaputra, and one of the India's biodiversity and cultural hotspots have tremendous potentiality to practice eco-tourism activities. The formation of Majuli, its geographical location, its climate and environment, its people and their life during flood, its rich culture and festivals, its arts and crafts etc. are the sufficient elements to attract curious eco-tourists.*

*The State Government, local authorities and private organizations should take proper initiatives in this regard to overcome the obstacles on its way, such as flood and erosion, transport and communication, infrastructural facilities etc., for the healthy growth of eco-tourism in Majuli.*

**Keywords:** Eco-tourism, Eco-tourist, Potentialities, Obstacles, Infrastructural Facilities.

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**Introduction:** Worshipping Nature and the ethics of conservation have been, since ages, an inseparable part of Indian thought and tradition. Traces go back to ancient civilizations of India, when people used to nurture the philosophy of the oneness of life. The Indian tradition has always thought that humankind is a part of Nature and one should look upon all creation with the eyes of love and respect. But it is tragic that since last few decades, the mad quest for the mean-materialism and economical progress in India and abroad has become identical with the exploitation of Nature on all fronts. The entire world today is facing a deep crisis and is in the danger of being doomed. Concrete walls have been erected by relentlessly divesting the rich forest areas and biological diversities. The continuous denuding of forest reserves has led to some realization also, and now the world has awakened for new beginnings about human responsibility towards Nature.

### **Materials and Methods:**

**What is Eco-tourism:** Eco-tourism is a combination of two words---‘Eco-system’ and ‘tourism’. The system in which we live including the earth, the water, the sky, and of course, the living and the non- living objects is called eco-system. It is a dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their non-living environment interacting as a functional unit. Tourism means---‘the practice of travelling for pleasure’. Thus, a tourism which contains a visit to an ecosystem is known as eco-tourism. But, that is not complete. Eco-tourism is not only travelling to such eco-systems, but also conserving them. Basically ecotourism means:

*“Tourism involving travel to areas of natural or ecological interest, typically*

*under the guidance of a naturalist, for the purpose of observing wildlife and learning about the environment and at the same time focus on wildlife and promotion of understanding and conservation of the environment”*.(www.ecoindia.com/education/what-is ecotourism.html)

Eco-tourism is entirely a new approach in tourism. It has become an important economic activity in natural areas around the world. Ecotourism not only provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful manifestations of nature and cultures but also enables them to learn about the importance of biodiversity conservation and local cultures. At the same time, eco-tourism generates income for conservation and economic benefits for communities living in rural and remote areas. Because of their ecological value, protected areas, especially those found in the tropics and in less-developed countries, contain many of the world’s greatest eco-tourism attractions. These attractions may consist of one or combination of rare or endemic species of flora and fauna, abundant wildlife, high indices of species diversity, unusual or spectacular geomorphological formations or unique historic or contemporary cultural-manifestations in a natural context.

The term, ‘eco-tourism’ was coined in early July 1983 by the Mexican architect environmentalist, Hector Ceballos Lascurian. At a presentation in Mexico City for PRONATURA he provided the preliminary definition of ecotourism:

*“Ecotourism is that tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and*

animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestation (both past and present) found in these areas. Ecotourism implies a scientific, esthetic or philosophical approach, although the 'ecotourist' is not required to be a professional scientist, artist or philosopher. The main point is that the person who practices ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing him or herself in nature in a way that most people cannot enjoy in their routine, urban existences. This person will eventually acquire a consciousness and knowledge of the natural environment, together with its cultural aspects, that will convert him into somebody keenly involved in conservation issues." (Ceballos, 1987)

The first broadly accepted definition that continues to be a valid 'nutshell' definition was established in 1990 by the International Ecotourism Society. "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well being of the local people". (TIES, 1990)

Martha Honey in her book, 'Ecotourism and Sustainable Development' has proposed an excellent and more detailed definition of eco-tourism:

*"Ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine and usually protect areas that strive to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and human rights".* (Honey, 1999)

However, consensus exists among organizations involved with ecotourism around the definition adopted by the

world conservation union in 1996. IUCM defines ecotourism as:

*"Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local people.* (IUCN, The World Conservation Union 1997)

Thus from the above mentioned definitions it can be summarized that eco-tourism must:

1. Have a low impact upon a protected area's natural resources.
2. Involved stakeholders in the planning, development, and implementation and monitoring phases.
3. Respect local cultures and traditions.
4. Generate sustainable and equitable income for local communities and for as many other stakeholders as possible, including private tour operators.
5. Generate income for protected areas conservation and
6. Educate all stakeholders about their role in conservation.
7. Ensure that the experience is positive for all parties including visitors and hosts.

### **Results and Discussion:**

Majuli, the world's biggest river island, is situated in the heart of the mightiest rivers in the world, the Brahmaputra, flowing to the north-eastern Indian states and also through the neighbouring countries of India.

Flanked on its sides by the mighty Brahmaputra, Kherkatia Xuti and Suwansiri, Majuli, being so rich in art and its cultural (Tribal culture and Satriya culture) has a lot of potential to contribute in the World Tourism Industry. Andrew Wilson, American anthropologist once said after a visit to Majuli:

*"This is an amazing place where people live in the midst of the tempestuous river and yet maintain their distinct cultural traditions without any dilution."* (PTI, 2005)

**Majuli through the Lens of Tourism:** Majuli, the cultural capital of Assam, has tremendous scope for practicing ecotourism project beneficially successfully. This riverine island has every element to attract eco-tourists around the world.

**1. As Riverine Island:** Majuli, as the biggest river island, can attract eco-tourists from all over the world. Formation of Majuli, its geographical location, its climate and environment, its people and their life during flood etc. may attract curious eco-tourists.

**2. Its scenic beauty and pristine environment:** Majuli is a place of unique natural beauty. Its water bodies, sands with *kahuwas* (Saccharum Spontaneum, Catkin in English a kind of grass), yellow mustard fields, golden paddy fields, bills with lotus, water-lily and variety of fishes, abundance of milk, the mighty Brahmaputra with the setting sun, blue sky with colourful migratory birds can mesmerize every lover of nature. Furthermore, Majuli possess the least polluted environment layer in this industrial age. Nature has given everything in abundance to this island. Eco-tourists are always attracted by such type of pristine uncontaminated natural areas.

**3. As a cultural capital:** Majuli has been the cultural capital of Assam civilization. It has been the hub of the Assamese Neo-vaishnavite culture initiated by the great Assamese saint and social reformer Srimanta Shankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva, who preached a form of Hinduism called vaishnavism and established monasteries and hermitages known as 'Satra's. Auniati, Dakhimpat, Garamur, Kamalabari, Bengenati, Samaguri etc. are some of the prominent satras in Majuli. All these satras have preserved many valuable books written in distant past on Sachipat (bark of sacred Sashi tree), and are also the storehouse of antiques like weapons, utensils, jewelleryes and other items of Ahom Kingdom and cultural wisdom.

The *namghars* of different satras and of a very village in Majuli, decorated with divine and semi divine figures made of wood are very attractive. Different dance forms, such as- *satriya dance, chali dance, dashavtaar, maati-akharah, sutradhar, apsara dance, ojpali* etc. are not only popular in Assam but in the other parts of the country also.

The population, comprising of wide mix of tribal communities like *Mising, Deoris* and *Sonowal Kacharis* and other communities like *Brahmins, Kalitas, Ahoms, Koibartas, Naths, Baniyas* and *Koch-Rajvanshis*; makes Majuli an ideal place for enjoying the charm of life and culture of these varied people.

The unique styles of living with different social rites and rituals, modes of dressing cultures and food habits of this entire tribal and non-tribal people are sufficient elements to attract eco-tourists from any part of the world.

**4. Colourful festivals:** 'Paal-naam' and 'Rashleela' are the two main religious festivals of Majuli. Paal-naam utsav, celebrated in the Auniati Satra, is more famous than that of the Garamur Satra. Raas Utsav is celebrated on the day of Raas Purnima in autumn season. Raas Utsav is celebrated all over Majuli and people from different parts of the world visit this place to enjoy the colourful and religious festival. All the three Bihus are celebrated by different communities with traditional fervor. Besides these, other festivals like Ali-Aye-Ligang of Mising tribe, Deori bihu, Bathow puja of Sonowal Kachari tribe etc. are celebrated.

**5. Art and craft:** In the namghars of the villages and the satras wood carvings of divine and semi-divine figures can be seen. The Kamalabari Satra is well known for its decorated carvings. Auniati Satra and Dakhinpat Satra are renowned for *sora naos* (boats).

Mask sculpture of Majuli is well famed. It is generally used in *Bhaonas* and *Rasotsav*. Masks are generally made out of bamboo and clay. The Samaguri Satra of Majuli is famous for its mask sculpture. Besides Samaguri Satra, mask culture is also practiced in Alengi Narasinha and Bihimpur Satra.

Pottery, made from beaten clay and burnt in driftwood fired kilns, has been a dying art. The potter's wheel has become the thing of past. Pottery of Majuli reminds us of the ancient civilization. Archaeologists consider this to be a missing link between Mahenjodaro and Harrapan civilization.

Spinning and weaving are common practices of the tribal and non-tribal people in Majuli. The colourful

designs made by them are much attractive. The textile produced in each satra is different in quality and depicts scenes from the life of the Lord Krishna.

All these arts and crafts can attract anybody from any part of the world.

**Problems of ecotourism in Majuli:** Majuli has immense potentialities of ecotourism which have been overlooked or not practiced in true sense. To attract eco-tourists from all over the world we must depict Majuli as a biodiversity hotspot and a land of unique natural beauty. A few problems related to ecotourism in Majuli can be mentioned as:

**1. Natural calamity:** Surrounded on all sides by the mighty Brahmaputra nothing can be done permanently in Majuli. The land areas of Majuli have been reducing annually due to the devastating floods and erosion. Due to soil erosion, many historical places and sites of cultural attraction have been dissolved into water by the mighty river. Many satras have shifted to other parts of Assam. It becomes a great challenge for the inhabitants of Majuli to survive along with their rich culture.

**2. Transport and communication:** In terms of transport and communication, Majuli still remains a backward region. Roadways and waterways are the only two transport systems available in Majuli. Though the condition of transport and communication has improved, it becomes miserable again due to the floods. Majuli has been found completely cut off from world during floods. There are places in Majuli which are deprived of bus services due to the lack of suitable roads. People from outside Majuli hesitate to come to Majuli due to the time consuming and painful journey. Hence, the poor transport and communication are the



major obstacles for the healthy growth of ecotourism in Majuli.

**3. Terrorism:** Terrorism has always been a negative factor not only for the tourism industry in Majuli, but also for entire North-East, India and the world as well. The entire North-East has been experiencing violent movements for a long time. Tourists from outside hesitate to visit the place as they may be a soft target of the insurgents.

**4. Negative publicity:** publicity is always much more than the actual situation and such a negative image of a place hinder the flow of tourists. After the murder of Sanjay Ghosh, The Secretary of AVARD-NE, Majuli has been projected as a disturbed area which has reduced the flow of tourists to Majuli.

**5. Lack of organized effort:** Majuli has tremendous potentiality to practice ecotourism activities like bird watching, rowing, sailing, cycling, rafting and hiking etc. But due to the lack of organized effort of both the government and the private agencies along with the local people, the ecotourism base of the areas is yet to be tapped and properly protected to meet the demands of the tourists.

**6. Lack of awareness:** Success of any ecotourism project depends upon the participation of the local people in planning implementation and monitoring of that particular project. But a few people of this riverine island are aware of and have knowledge of ecotourism and its benefits.

**Remedial Measures or suggestions:**

For the healthy growth of ecotourism industry in Majuli the following remedial measures may be suggested:

1. Sincere effort, with all its resources should be made by the government to solve the problem of soil erosion and flood which in turn will automatically improve the transport and communication system.

2. A peaceful socio-economical environment is a pre-requisite for sound development of tourism. As such, a whole-hearted effort on the part of the government is required to maintain law and order situation.

3. Schemes should be undertaken by the government to introduce small boats cruise vessel or hover craft for river cruising facilities for adventurous eco-tourists. Government should provide minimum infrastructural facilities such as accommodation, electricity, roadways to the eco-tourists.

4. As ecotourism in Majuli is of seasonal nature, to paying guest system, tree house, non-fixed roof accommodations should be introduced with the initiative of local people.

5. All efforts should be made to increase the awareness and knowledge of local people regarding ecotourism and its benefits. They should be made the main stakeholders in ecotourism projects.

6. Training programmes should be organized to prepare the local people to take up various vacations related to ecotourism project.

7. Positive image of Majuli should be projected through print and electronic media at both national and international levels by the government, local authorities and private agencies.

8. An arrangement of well-educated and informative tourist's guides should be made. Various delicacies of the tribal and non-

tribal communities should also be provided to attract the tourists.

**Conclusion:** Majuli, one of the India's biodiversity and cultural hotspots in the lap of the

Brahmaputra---the lifeline of Assam is more than a tourist paradise. With all its cultural and natural resources it is an ideal place for ecotourism industry. With minimum infrastructure and minimum investment this industry will enable the local people to be socially and economically powerful and protect their culture, natural resources and arts and crafts as well. The government, the local authorities, the developers, the operators and the local people are the key

players or the main stakeholders of an ecotourism project. As such, they need to be very sensitive to the environment and local traditions and should follow a set of guidelines for the successful development of ecotourism in Majuli.

Non-government organizations and scientific research institutions of the state also have a key role to play for the development, growth and success of ecotourism in

Majuli. Therefore, different organizations, the state government and the local people should take the proper measures and initiatives to make eco-tourism in Majuli a success.

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