



Research Paper

## Tourism and the Commodification of Culture in Majuli Island

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**Abstract:** Located at the heart of the river Brahmaputra in Assam is world's largest inhabited river island, Majuli. The island of Majuli is well known for its excellent natural beauty, remarkable geography and most importantly for its spiritual and cultural density. The beginning of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement started by Srimanta Shankardev gave Majuli its identity as the religious centre of Assam. Shankardev and his disciples established religious institutions called Sattras to spread the idea of Vaishnavism. These institutions later became one of the main attractions in Majuli. For decades the island's cultural and spiritual grandeur has attracted tourists both domestically and internationally. Therefore, tourism has become one of the primary sources of economy building in Majuli. However, as tourism expanded in the island district, growth of commercialisation was also observed. With the establishment of the very first homestay in the early 2000s, tourism finally became to serve the economy of the island. Apart from developing accommodations for tourists, many places in Majuli began offering immersive experience to the tourists like mask making, pottery as well as learning the ways of the bhakats (Sattras Monks) and the sattras art forms (Sattriya Nritya, Gayan Bayan, Bhaona etc.) Although at the very beginning, tourism focused on showcasing Majuli's distinctiveness, in recent years many of the tourist experiences have been commoditised. This research thus aims to study how the growth of tourism has led to the commodification of Majuli's cultural traditions and how this process influences the preservation and representation of the island's heritage.

**Keywords:** Majuli, Tourism, Commodification, Sattras, Commercialisation, Economy building

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### I. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the fastest growing industries in the modern world. It plays a significant role in shaping local economies, cultural exchanges and the representation of heritage. In many places, tourism has contributed to the preservation of culture by creating awareness and economic incentives for maintaining traditional practices. At the same time, tourism can also transform cultural expressions into commodities designed primarily for consumption by visitors. Majuli Island in Assam represents a significant example of this dynamic relationship between tourism and culture. The island has long been regarded as the spiritual centre of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavite culture. The movement initiated by Srimanta Shankardeva in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries led to the establishment of religious institutions known as Sattras, which became centres for religious learning, performing arts and community life.

The island has gradually gained recognition as a tourism destination due to its cultural diversity, indigenous communities and unique ecological environment. According to Saikia (2016), Majuli has "received special attention as a tourists' destination" and the number of visitors has steadily increased over the years. Tourists are particularly attracted to the Vaishnavite Sattras, tribal culture and traditional art forms that have been preserved for centuries. However, the increasing interaction between tourism and cultural traditions raises important questions regarding authenticity and commodification. In "Commodification of Culture: Selling India", Lolita Kuršaitė argues about culture being associated with "meaning and creativity, imagination and aesthetic practices that are immaculate from the pursuit of economic profit and "commerce"" which is traditionally regarded as "a vulgar and materialistic world, in a sense of tourism destroying what is local, original, traditional, authentic" (2004, p.22). Cultural practices that once existed primarily within religious or social contexts are now often presented as performances or products for tourists. This study therefore examines how tourism has contributed to the commodification of culture in Majuli and how this transformation affects the preservation and representation of the island's heritage.

## **II. Theoretical Framework: Tourism And Cultural Commodification**

The concept of commodification refers to the process through which cultural practices, traditions or objects are transformed into commodities that can be bought, sold or consumed in a market economy. In tourism studies, commodification often occurs when cultural expressions are modified or packaged to satisfy tourist expectations. Shepherd (2002) explains that cultural objects and practices can become commodities depending on the context in which they are exchanged. He notes that “all things [including cultural productions] can be commodities, ‘at a certain phase in their careers and in a particular context’”. This perspective suggests that commodification is not necessarily a simple destruction of culture but rather a transformation of how culture circulates within society.

Tourism frequently plays a central role in this transformation. Scholars have long debated whether tourism leads to the degradation of authentic culture or whether it creates opportunities for cultural preservation and economic development. Some critics argue that tourism often produces simplified versions of cultural practices designed for easy consumption by visitors. According to Shepherd (2002), a common critique of tourism is that it “increases the demand for cheap copies of authentic art, leading to a desacralization of what once had been pure or whole”. In the context of Majuli, these debates become particularly important because many of the island’s cultural traditions are deeply connected to religious institutions and community life.

## **III. Cultural Heritage Of Majuli**

Majuli is regarded as one of the most important cultural centres of Assam. The island is deeply connected with the Neo-Vaishnavite movement that was started by Srimanta Shankardev in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Through his teachings and devotional practices, Shankardev introduced a form of Vaishnavism that emphasized on equality, community participation and spiritual devotion and to spread these ideas, he and his disciples established religious institutions known as Sattras, which gradually became the main centres of cultural, spiritual and artistic life in Majuli. The Sattras are places of worship and devotion; however in Majuli, they are also institutions or centres that preserve cultural traditions of Assam. In the sattras, monks known as bhakats practice and teach various art forms that are closely linked with Neo-Vaishnavite culture. These include Sattriya Nritya, Bhaona, Gayan-Bayan, Paal naam, manuscript writing, mask-making and traditional painting. Over the centuries, these artistic traditions have played a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of the region.

Another important aspect of Majuli’s cultural heritage is its diverse indigenous communities. Several tribal groups such as the Mishing, Deori and Sonowal Kachari have lived on the island for generations. Each community has its own language, customs, festivals and traditional knowledge systems. Festivals like Ali-Ai-Ligang of the Mishing community reflect the strong connection between culture, agriculture and nature. Moreover, traditional weaving, pottery and bamboo craftsmanship are also important parts of everyday and economic life in these communities. Their unique lifestyle, food habits and festivals contribute significantly to the cultural identity of Majuli. Saikia (2016) notes, “the tribal ways of living particularly their traditional food habit, food items, customs, festivals are the centre of attraction for many tourists”. Because of this cultural richness, Majuli has become a major centre for cultural tourism in Assam.

Majuli’s cultural heritage is therefore a unique blend of religious traditions, performing arts, indigenous knowledge and everyday cultural practices. This combination of spiritual institutions and living cultural traditions makes the island an important cultural landscape in Northeast India. The preservation of these traditions has allowed Majuli to maintain its distinct identity while also attracting scholars, artists and tourists who wish to experience its rich cultural legacy.

## **IV. Growth Of Tourism In Majuli: A Cultural Display**

Tourism in Majuli has grown gradually over the last few decades as the island gained recognition for its natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. Located in the Brahmaputra River in Assam, Majuli is widely known as the largest inhabited river island in the world. Its unique geographical formation, peaceful rural environment, and vibrant cultural traditions have attracted increasing numbers of visitors from different parts of India as well as from abroad. In earlier decades, Majuli remained relatively isolated due to limited transportation and infrastructure. Visitors usually travelled to the island mainly for religious purposes, particularly to visit the Neo-Vaishnavite Sattras established by the saint Srimanta Shankardev and his disciple Madhavdev. These Sattras function as religious institutions and cultural centres where traditional art forms such as Sattriya dance, Bhaona, and Gayan-Bayan (devotional music) are practiced and preserved. The Sattras serve as focal points for visitors who wish to experience devotional practices, festivals and performances associated with the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition. Konch (2024) notes that the Satras function as “centres of Majuli’s religious tourism with their traditional player from years old tradition of open-theatrical custom, classical dances and handicrafts”.

However, during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Majuli began to emerge as an important destination for cultural and eco-tourism. Improved transportation facilities, government tourism

initiatives, and increased media attention helped promote the island to a wider audience. Cultural festivals, especially the famous Raas Utsav, have become major attractions that draw thousands of tourists every year. Visitors are attracted not only by the scenic beauty of the island but also by its cultural and spiritual traditions. Saikia (2016) observes that “the prominent subjects or areas of tourists’ interests in Majuli are the Vaishnava Sattras and Sattriya culture, the colourful culture of the tribes, migratory birds, pottery making and mask making”.

In “Spiritual Consumerism and Cultural Tourism: Understanding Visitor Motivations in Neo-Vaishnavite Sattras of Majuli, Assam”, Bezborah et al. notes, “Tourists consume not just physical attractions but curated experiences that reinforce their sense of belonging, spirituality, or distinction” (2025, p. 4457). Therefore, the island’s Neo-Vaishnavite Sattras, scenic river landscapes, and indigenous communities are not the only attractions that have made it a major destination for cultural tourism in Northeast India. One of the main attractions for visitors is the traditional mask-making practice of Samaguri Sattra. These masks are used in the religious theatre form known as Bhaona. Saikia (2016) describes that masks are created by shaping bamboo strips, covering them with cloth and clay and later painting them with natural colours using the traditional technique known as “Hengul Haithal”. Tourists often visit the workshops where artisans demonstrate the entire process of making the masks. Many visitors find this activity particularly engaging because they are able to observe the craft closely and sometimes even try the entire process by themselves with the guidance of the local artisans. Pottery and traditional weaving are also other important cultural attractions in Majuli where the local communities, especially the Mishing tribe, are well known for their handloom weaving traditions. Tourists visiting Mishing villages often see women weaving traditional garments such as mekhela chador on a traditional weaving instrument called the taat-xaal. These experiences allow visitors to interact directly with artisans and gain a first-hand understanding of traditional craftsmanship. Similarly, pottery making in Majuli has ancient origins and is traditionally practiced by local communities using beaten clay and driftwood kilns. Jha (2014) observes that pottery made in Majuli “reminds us of the ancient civilization” and has been considered by archaeologists as a possible link with the Harappan tradition.

Apart from the local arts, festivals also play a crucial role in attracting tourists to the island. The most famous cultural event is Raas Mahotsav, which celebrates episodes from the life of Lord Krishna through elaborate Bhaona performances and devotional music. During this festival, the sattras become vibrant cultural spaces where visitors can witness traditional theatre, dance, and ritual practices. Similarly, modern cultural events such as the Majuli Music Festival bring together local and international musicians and create a platform that blends traditional Assamese culture with contemporary musical forms. In recent years, bird watching has also emerged as a new tourism activity in Majuli. The wetlands and riverine landscapes of the island attract many migratory birds, drawing nature enthusiasts and photographers. Through these activities, tourists are not merely spectators but often become participants in immersive cultural experiences, making tourism in Majuli both interactive and educational.

The development of tourism also led to the development of commercial infrastructure in the island. Introduction of La Maison D’Ananda (House of Joy), the very first home stay established in the island, was a revolutionary step towards booming tourism in Majuli. It was established by Jim Chauvin, a French architect and his partner in the year 2005. After its establishment many other home stays and small guesthouses began to appear in different parts of the island, allowing visitors to stay with local families and experience rural life. These home-stays offer the tourists an opportunities to explore local culture, traditional food, craft making, and everyday village activities.

Tourism in Majuli has expanded significantly over the past few decades due to the island’s rich cultural traditions, vibrant festivals, and unique ecological environment and even today, Majuli continues to attract visitors seeking cultural, spiritual, and ecological experiences, making tourism an increasingly significant part of the island’s economy and social life. However, while the discussed practices originally served ritualistic or utilitarian purposes within local communities, they are now often demonstrated specifically for tourists, thus gradually evolving into commercialised experiences.

## **V. Commodification Of Culture And Authenticity**

Although the rapid development of tourism in Majuli has brought new economic opportunities to the island, it has also led to the commodification of its cultural traditions. Cultural commodification refers to the process in which cultural practices, rituals, and artistic expressions are transformed into products or experiences that can be consumed by tourists. In Majuli, many traditions that were part of religious, ritual, or community settings are increasingly being adapted to suit the expectations of visitors. Therefore, the increasing commercialization of tourism has raised concerns about the authenticity of the cultural experiences offered to tourists, as well as the potential for the commodification of local traditions. Rise in commercialisation does bring temptation for communities to commercialize their heritage and culture therefore; the willingness to tap into the growing demand for new attractions by the tourism industry is strong.

On the matter of authenticity, Lolita Kuršataitė explains that the concept of authenticity “implies that certain spaces have inherent essential qualities, which make them unique, pristine and therefore valuable” (2004, p.25). Therefore, when a tourist visits a certain destination, they are often attracted to anything that is marketed as authentic. In *Commodification of Culture: selling India*, Kuršataitė further argues that:

On the level of tourism market, the term "authenticity" is very important and drives the whole tourism economy: tourists are hunting for "authentic" culture and "authentic" experience. Hence this instrumental use of the term is not relevant for analytical purposes: cultures are not stable, monolithic, spatially bounded and territorially coherent, migration of objects and people existed always, so labelling something as "authentic" or "inauthentic" becomes insignificant. (Kuršataitė, 2004, p.26)

As Shepherd states, "if we can agree that culture is dynamic and fluid, then today's staged hokiness stands a good chance of becoming tomorrow's authentic cultural tradition" (2002: 193). It is therefore a responsibility of each and every individual how they want to define their culture and what they want to feature about their culture to the spectators. Shepherd (2002) also argues that whenever tourists visit a place, the cultural practices belonging to that place may be reconstructed and performed in modified ways that make them easier to consume. Hence, as a result:

- Culture becomes packaged for tourists
- Traditions may be simplified or altered
- Cultural expressions gain economic value

However, he also emphasizes that commodification does not always destroy culture. Instead, it can sometimes help communities preserve traditions while generating income. Therefore, to analyse how Majuli has come under the influence of commodification, it is necessary to look into the visible changes in the representation of culture, tradition, religious practices and art forms.

## **VI. Conversion Of Culture Into Products**

One of the most important observations of commodification is the transformation of culture into goods that can be sold in the market. Shepherd (2002) argues that tourism encourages communities to package their culture in ways that appeal to visitors. Moreover, in regards to the traditional Mishing textile, Chutia and Sarma (2015) observes that whenever folk arts are commoditised for economic means, change becomes an indispensable part of it. This aligns with the process described by Shepherd, which emphasises on culture being sold as commodities for the tourism market. In Majuli, traditional crafts such as weaving, pottery, mask-making, and textile production have increasingly become part of the tourism economy.

Traditionally, many of these crafts were produced primarily for local use or community exchange. However, with the rise of tourism, artisans now create products specifically for visitors and external buyers. The change is very evident especially in the art of tradition weaving which has developed its original complex and intricate motifs and designs into larger, less complex statement pieces. As Chutia and Sarma states, “The commercial endeavour among the Mishing weavers is leading to the transition in the design and structure of the traditional garment of the community. Artisans have adopted heterogeneous design elements to complement the use of orthogenetic design in order to keep the products interesting and in demand” (Chutia & Sarma, 2015, p. 37). Apart from the changes visible to the eye, Chutia and Sarma also record significant change in the materials used for manufacturing the textile mostly to compete with the growing demand and cut costs of production. They state, “A drift can be seen in the use of basic raw materials too as artisans are increasingly using synthetic yarns replacing the tradition of using hand spun cotton and Eri fibre due to its ready access, less cost and available colour choice” (Chutia & Sarma, 2015, p. 37). Moreover, not only the textile are being made with reduced quality materials and in less cost but are also sold at extremely high prices to international travellers.

Mask making is another indigenous art form that is native to Majuli. These masks are used in the traditional theatre performances called bhaona and can differ in sizes from a very small face mask to life-size replication of the theatre characters. The Samaguri Sattra in Majuli is the centre of the art of mask making, where artisans have mastered the art for centuries. Traditionally, these masks are made with natural materials like bamboo, cloth, clay, and cow dung. The art of mask making is an immersive activity for tourists because they can visit the workshops and have firsthand experience of the entire process with the guidance of an artisan. In many such workshops tourists can learn the art of mask making from an expert where they also get to keep the mask made by them as souvenirs. Now these masks can also be bought from various places in and around the island of Majuli. In Recent years, this art has travelled from being taught only in the sattras to becoming replicas produced by commercial units and are sold at high prices.

Pottery is yet another form of art that has come under the influence of commercialisation. Earlier it was a part of the daily life of the tribal communities however, in recent years; it has developed into a commodity for sale. In “Impact of Biodiversity and Potentialities of Eco Tourism in Majuli in the Context of Viksit Bharat-2047”, Goswami and Das highlights that in most of the villages in Majuli, “tourists can learn pottery and also buy or make their own souvenir. For many travel agencies this has become a very common itinerary activity

offered to the international travellers. This has led to the increase in the prices of the artefacts sold to the tourists” (2026, p. 7).

The examples of weaving, mask making, and pottery shows that tourism has transformed traditional art forms in Majuli into marketable products. Although this process has created new financial opportunities for artisans and has helped bring global attention to the island’s unique traditions, it has also led to visible changes in materials, designs, and production methods. As Shepherd’s concept suggests, cultural practices are increasingly shaped by tourist demand rather than solely by traditional needs. Consequently, Majuli’s heritage now exists at the intersection of preservation and commercialization, where cultural expressions continue to survive but are simultaneously redefined within the framework of the tourism market.

## **VII. Conversion Of Culture Into Commercial Acts**

The influence of Neo-Vaishnavism did not only bring spiritual and religious identity to the island of Majuli but, the entire movement was the reason that the performing arts of the Sattra culture found a stable and strong foundation to nurture the arts. In Majuli, classical arts like Sattriya Nritya, Gayan Bayan, Bhaona etc. were earlier practiced as a form of devotion and community life, and it holds immense spiritual value and cultural significance. These performances were deeply connected to the Neo-Vaishnavite faith introduced by Srimanta Shankardev. They were not meant for entertainment but for spiritual expression and religious learning. The performers considered their art as a form of service to God, and the audience experienced it as a sacred event. For example, Gayan Bayan is a long and elaborate performance that combines singing, drumming, cymbals, and rhythmic movement.

Traditionally, such performances can continue for two and a half to three hours. However, with the increase in tourism, these classical forms are often presented in shorter versions for visitors and now in the sattras, a 15–20 minute segment of Gayan Bayan is arranged as a special demonstration for tourists, especially foreign visitors who would wish to experience the cultural heritage of the island. Similarly, Bhaona and Sattriya Nritya are also performed in selected parts rather than in its entirety. These performances were made into shortened presentations to make them easier for tourists to watch and understand within a limited time. Scholars such as Shepherd (2002) argue that tourism often encourages communities to reconstruct and present their cultural practices in ways that are easier for visitors to consume. As a result, culture may become packaged for tourists, traditions may be simplified, and cultural expressions may gain economic value. However, even if the subtle changes made to these performances allow accessibility to the tourists to enjoy each and every unique part of Majuli’s culture but, it could never be the experience of a whole.

On the matter of accessibility, even the folk arts have come under the influence of being performed as commercial acts. Folk traditions like Bihu Naas, Mishing Bihu, Husori, Jeng Bihu etc. have become a part of this commercial display. In several homestays and guesthouses in Majuli, the host organizes evening cultural programs where guests can watch these folk performances that are arranged mainly as entertainment and as a way to give them a quick experience of local traditions. In some places, tourists are also shown short theatrical performances inspired by Bhaona, which can be considered the simplified versions of the traditional plays. It is important to consider the effect of easy accessibility of these traditional practices on its authenticity and originality. According to Kuršaitė (2004), the idea of “authenticity” plays an important role in tourism, as visitors often search for experiences that appear traditional and unique. Because of this demand, communities sometimes present their culture in ways that meet tourist expectations. As a result, these traditions or culture becomes packaged goods for tourism, as highlighted by Shepherd (2002), as traditions may be simplified, and cultural performances begin to gain economic value.

Although Shepherd (2002) suggests, such changes may also help communities sustain their traditions while creating new sources of livelihood, it also leaves the opportunity to question the authenticity of these traditions. In “Cultural Commodification and Its Implication in Tourism: Systematic Literature Review”, Erwen et al. argues that:

By ensuring cultural integrity, tourism destinations can preserve the significance of cultural expressions, preventing them from being reduced to mere entertainment. Authentic cultural tourism can foster meaningful interactions between tourists and local communities, promoting a deeper understanding of the culture. This involves navigating attracting visitors and preserving genuine cultural practices. Authenticity necessitates a true depiction of local culture, which commercial interests may overlook. By providing authentic experiences, tourism can educate visitors about the cultural context, fostering greater appreciation and respect for local traditions, and can contribute to more sustainable tourism practices that benefit both the community and the environment.

This suggests that with advancing tourism, although change is inevitable, the authenticity of the cultural practices can be preserved by ensuring cultural integrity. Cultural expressions such as traditional dances, rituals, crafts and festivals often carry deep historical, spiritual and social significance for local communities. Preserving this significance is essential for maintaining the identity and heritage of the people

who practice these traditions. By maintaining cultural integrity, tourism destinations can protect the true essence of cultural traditions instead of reducing them to some form of entertainment. This requires balancing the need to attract tourists while still preserving genuine cultural practices leads to authentic cultural tourism which allows visitors to interact with local communities and understand their culture more deeply.

Tourism destinations often face the challenge of attracting visitors while also protecting the originality of their traditions. In some cases, commercial interests may encourage communities to simplify or modify their cultural practices to make them more appealing or easier to consume for tourists. While such changes may increase tourist interest, they can sometimes overlook the deeper meaning of cultural expressions. When tourism focuses on authentic experiences, visitors gain a better understanding and respect for local traditions, which can support more sustainable tourism that benefits both the community and the environment. In this way, tourism can contribute to more sustainable development by supporting local economies, strengthening cultural pride and promoting respect for both cultural traditions and the natural environment.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

The discussion in this study shows that tourism has had a significant influence on the cultural traditions of Majuli. The island has long been recognised as the spiritual and cultural centre of Assam because of its Neo-Vaishnavite Sattras, classical performing arts and the traditions of its indigenous communities. For centuries these cultural practices existed mainly within religious institutions and community life. Art forms such as Sattriya Nritya, Gayan Bayan and Bhaona were performed as acts of devotion, while activities like weaving, pottery and mask making were closely connected to everyday life and local needs. But, with the gradual growth of tourism, many of these traditions have begun to interact with the tourism economy. Cultural practices that once had mainly religious or social purposes are now often presented as experiences or entertainment for visitors. Tourists who travel to Majuli are interested in observing traditional performances, learning about local crafts and exploring the cultural lifestyle of the island. Because of this growing interest, several traditions are now demonstrated or performed in ways that are easier and more accessible for visitors to understand.

As a result, some cultural practices have slowly changed in their form and presentation. Classical performances are sometimes shown in shorter versions, while crafts and artistic products are often made for sale to visitors. These changes show how cultural traditions are gradually becoming part of the tourism market. At the same time, this process has also created new opportunities for the local community. Tourism has helped bring wider recognition to the cultural heritage of Majuli and has created new sources of income for artisans, performers and local families. While these changes raise questions about the originality and authenticity of certain practices, they also help sustain many traditions that might otherwise struggle to survive. Therefore, the cultural life of Majuli today exists between preservation and commercialization, where traditions continue to survive while also adapting to the growing influence of tourism.

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