



Brahmaputra Cultural Foundation (BCF)

presents

majuli

“Majuli is a gift to any Festival”

- Tim Cornwell, Scotsman, 14th August, 2017

background

The Brahmaputra takes birth in China, in western Tibet, and courses through three densely populated, energy-hungry, rapidly modernizing countries — China, India, Bangladesh — before emptying itself into the Bay of Bengal in the massive Ganges-Brahmaputra mangrove delta, the Sundarbans.

The Brahmaputra basin is a part of the largest and most populated basin in the world, supporting over 80 million people and rich, rare and endangered biodiversity. What China and India do to this river will directly affect this ecosystem.

'Katha Yatra,' is our ongoing project, which translates to "a journey of stories". It explore this river as it enters India until it finds home in the Bay of Bengal, uncovering stories of tradition and change, of wins and losses, of old and new.

Through this 'Yatra,' we aim to create a research-based body of knowledge of the changing Brahmaputra, encapsulating impressions and understandings of the biodiversity, art, culture, identity, development, the hopes and aspirations of the people inhabiting the banks of the Brahmaputra in the project. The project Katha Yatra is much more than our own artistic ambitions. It aims to bring together the local communities in the region practicing various art forms. Katha Yatra facilitates cultural dialogue with the people from other parts of world. Under this project we also aim to curate workshops, exhibitions, installations and live art that will stimulate people from all over the world. By hosting and curating such artistic activities/events will provide spin-off into other industries that will eventually contribute to the economy of the region.

Katha Yatra is part documentation and part re-imagination of the cultural, identity and environmental landscape of the river.

With close collaborations with scientists, sociologists, artists, and local elders, and youth, this work attempts to capture and showcase the unifying role that the river plays in the lives of the communities inhabiting its banks, and the meaning of the meandering flows of the river for people and biodiversity.

majuli ~ the island

The island of *Majuli* is located in the upper reaches of river Brahmaputra in Assam. The island extends for length of 80 km from east to west and 10 to 15 km width from north to south with a total area of 875 sq. km. Majuli is the largest fresh water mid river delta system in the world with the total population of 1,72,592. Because of its peculiar location in the active flood plains of river Brahmaputra, Majuli gets flooded every year during the summer; people are uprooted and quaintly re-settle themselves as the season changes.

Constant floods and soil erosion on the banks are the major threats to the existence of Majuli. According to the reports in 1853 the total area of Majuli was 1,150 sq.km and about 33% of the landmass has been eroded in the latter half of 20th century. Over 35 villages have been washed away since 1991. The island is shrinking rapidly and would cease to exist in next 15- 20 years.

When the existence of Majuli is still of much concern, the social, cultural and spiritual values and traditions are still deeply rooted amongst its people. Majuli has been the cultural centre of Assamese civilization. The *vaishnavite* culture prevails in this region and the islanders are guided by the Neo-*Vaishnavite* faith. The establishment of many *Satra* (*Vaishnav* monastery) is a major component of socio-cultural fabric. Performing arts and craft find an important place in these monasteries. Intricate wooden carvings, paintings, bamboo and cane crafts are used to beautify them. The classical traditions of music and *Sattriya* dance are nurtured in the *Satra-s*. People practice farming and fishing along with creative pursuits like weaving, mask making and boat-making.



majuli ~ synopsis of the performance

The river Brahmaputra, landscape of Majuli and the social, cultural and spiritual life of the people in Majuli form the basis for this solo work. This production is an earnest effort to share the story of Majuli through a personal vocabulary of movement, dance and theatre.

Structurally the performance starts at any point, like on an island, to ultimately open up to a huge dimension in space. The performer travels as the river water, with different qualities and evoke many journeys within the space of visits to Majuli. The rhythms, flirtation of the folk, the catharsis of one's house getting washed away, the pleasures of rain, the spiritualism of the *Satras*, the structures, along with the imagery of a boat create 'Majuli'.

This piece is a celebration of the spirit of Majuli and the flows of the Brahmaputra, which weaves together to signify the intricate bond of people with their land and their resilient and adaptive relationship with the river.

The sync of traditional knowledge systems and practices with modernity has been the challenge that has engulfed the entire world in many ways, and this piece is an attempt towards sharing stories of adaptability, striking a balance between traditional and modern knowledge. These experiences and stories resonate well beyond Majuli and the mighty Brahmaputra.

The meandering character of the river and its cycle of give and take is due to undergo rapid changes with the ongoing plans of several hydroelectricity and infrastructure projects. For these projects to be sustainable, the innumerable stories of the resilience of the people-river interactions — much like the one she will tell — need to inform these changes.

The music created is from instruments that are played by the Assamese, Deori and Mising communities of Majuli. The projected images which will be used during the performance are of Majuli and at every point they are used to just give an impression, enhancing the journey of the audience to experience Majuli.



shilpika's note:

The island of Majuli, in the midst of the mighty Brahmaputra, has fascinated me from my early childhood days, through frequent boat rides that I shared with my father.

Majuli and its unique relationship with the people living on the island, has kindled my imagination to explore the seemingly normal human tendency to shift or settle in safer abodes. The Brahmaputra river embraces Majuli in its midst, and so does Majuli with its people, like a mother to a child, a source of life. The landscape of Majuli is beautiful with the splendid abundance of nature and the zest of its people. The flora and fauna, the seasonal dances of the river and the island, the symbiotic relationship between the people and nature, is indeed remarkable. Deep in this space, the music of peace and resilience stand out against the shrill of conflict and divide the region has seen in past decades. This has been the playing ground of the mighty Brahmaputra, the rain gods, where Srimanta Sankardeva and Srimanta Madhavdeva met and preached and enacted their devotion through music and plays. These stories find their source in the beautiful Satras, the villages, the streams, the ponds, and the unique life of people, the Vaishnavs, the Misings, the Deoris.

The soundscape:

Every time I have lived in Majuli the soundscape around me has created pauses for my mind to wander. Sitting by the river in the evening and hearing the far away sound of *naam* (*devotional singing*) or the unfettered sound of someone singing aloud while maybe working in the fields, or even just sitting in the field, sounds of laughter and sometimes dialogues of mythological plays spoken aloud inspired me. The audience hears natural sounds, far away sounds and tunes, which then invoke sounds from my memories, like father's dialogue from the mythological performance of *Raaslila*.

In our initial attempts to create 'Majuli,' we used already available instruments to create the sounds that were to accompany the narrative. But soon, we realized that we would need to create certain sounds for the drama. Three, one is perfect for water, another for birds, and third for dramatic moments of the play.

We also wanted to include as many extinct instruments as we could, and it has been a process sourcing them. We have 32 instruments playing in the soundtrack. Unfortunately, many of these are now in states of disrepair, because they are made from natural material. So we are trying to re-make, re-source them. It is a continuous process of a struggle with dying practices such as these.



description ~ few scenes of majuli

1:

Sometimes when one views a place, the perception or the way one views it is a coming together of so many things... memories, conditioning, dreams, notions etc. In the process of creating Majuli, I had to create these visuals that I was seeing.

When was the first time I saw the river? I asked myself this question as I started my work in New Delhi in September 2012. I realized that I had accepted the Brahmaputra as my own, as a space that I had heard and knew. A kid, every time I crossed the river I felt like I owned it; in retrospect perhaps, it owned me. The vastness of it, the quietness and all consuming, unifying nature was never a

question in my mind since it was home — a space that brought with it comfort, a warm feeling of wholesomeness, and content.

Thought of how perhaps I could blame photography for being the culprit that took away my actual or real memories of my first meeting with this river. I grew up in Jorhat, a town close to the Brahmaputra, and my early memories are a product of the photos of a picnic on its banks—journey with a group of uncles, aunts, food and the wind trying to take my hat away as I sat on the roof of our boat. I also danced my first creative dances to the songs of Bhupen Hazarika telling me about the massive armed river or the angst-ridden voice of the Luit. I came up with motifs of my impressions of Majuli and the river as I began the process of improvisation that led to this production you are seeing today.

I went back to Majuli during the course of this process many times.

In the studio later I had to create these visuals that I was seeing. I called this scene Architecture – but that which is beyond buildings, it is the landscape, the actions, imagery on the walls of the houses. If I was a tourist ... it would be a bunch of photographs I would take to remember. Here in a scene of Majuli that comes out is Architecture— an abstraction for the audience in which I share a piece of an intimate moment with the space.

2:

The seasons make us different people because we sense different things... one such favourite time was winter in Majuli. The fog enveloping us when I took a boat ride, not seeing much at first, but then beginning to see things that emerged slowly. One such foggy morning I was on a boat that was just tied to the bank... on a marshy wetland. I had vivid imaginations of all kinds of things. This was a subconscious conversation with the landscape. I was looking at a few lotus flowers bloom and it reminded me of the story of Tejimola (Lakhinath Bezboruah's Tejimola is a story of a little girl much loved by her father, but tormented and killed by her step-mother when her father is away. Her dead body thrown away comes to life as a tree, bird and finally as a lotus...). I saw myself as a character in that story— her father or perhaps the boatman looking at the lotus flower, only to realize later that this was Tejimola herself in a new form. Perhaps the writer too was inspired by such moments spent alone with nature. I present this vignette as a tribute, an ode, to the artists, who like me, find themselves moved by nature.

3:

My father dropped me at Nimatighat (the ferry point to Majuli). Kamal Musale (my film-maker collaborator) and I climbed on board our ferry. I sat downstairs initially while he took his place on the roof. I met our old carpenter Sharma, and smiled at the gathering of old men around me having oranges and not bothered or even remotely exhibiting any signs of excitement that mirrored mine on being on "the" ferry to go to Majuli. I discovered that it was the final day of Paal-Naam (religious ceremony) in Auniati Satra (Satra – the centres of neo-vaishnavism in Assam). After an endless wait we saw another boat approaching ours on the Ghat (ferry point) and the entire unit... men, women, animal, car, cycle, motorcycle etc shifted to new boat. This time both Kamal and I took our place on the roof. As the boat passed by, there were people who asked me to go downstairs. I ignored them and looked around. My fellow travellers had already formed a circle and started their game of cards. Few just sat and stared ahead or stared at me. One man with his back towards me opened black umbrella to protect his tanned brown face. Amidst all was a Shiv Bhakt dressed in red with dread locks that flew in the wind and he stood stylishly posing with his Trishul, As our eyes met I sensed his invitation to take his photograph. As if on cue, Kamal on the other side fixed his Tripod and the Baba shifted his own momentous and heroic look towards the camera. I thought of what an unusual sight this was (2012) in my journeys to and from this island with monks dressed in white, and wearing their hair in immaculate buns. In my flights of thought I felt happy to have him with me. It felt complete to be travelling on the son of Brahma, towards an island of Vishnu worshipper with a Shaivite. I settled down to feast on the sights of chars/chaporis (impermanant islands), birds, cows sometimes, boats like ours, and the water sparkling in this union with the sun.

I found us a bus and I stood on the doorway, welcomed by all —the dust, the trees, the glares and stares from the tribal homes on the way. Nitul came into the frame, striking a conversation with my foreigner collaborator. I overheard him describing the road as "Hopping" to Kamal. Nitul was a monk who curiously seemed so very savvy, and later I found that he worked as a tourist guide. He gave us very useful information on the Bhaona (Mythological play) that would take place in the evening and invited us to the Aunati Satra for "Paal-Naam".

"Paal-Naam" felt like my welcome function. I always knew that my project was about boats and here I was in the Naamghar where people sat around this

decorated boat, chanting, singing, and praying. It was melodic and so familiar, like I had been carrying it in my blood, from another time or dimension. Beautifully lit up with candles, the doorway brought in the afternoon sun in a kind of dreamy light that mingled with the smoke of *diyas* and incense. It was the most beautiful, surreal stage. I walked around, interacted like I was ... I could feel deep pulsations in my body; my blood felt like a river of memories and it felt that all my past had led to this moment. I had found my first inspiration. The boat. The medium, which carries, protects, supports, leads, and connects. This beautiful function of sound and light gave this to me... I was humbled, stirred, shaken, and thankful.

majuli ~ trailer



majuli island ~ my relationship today

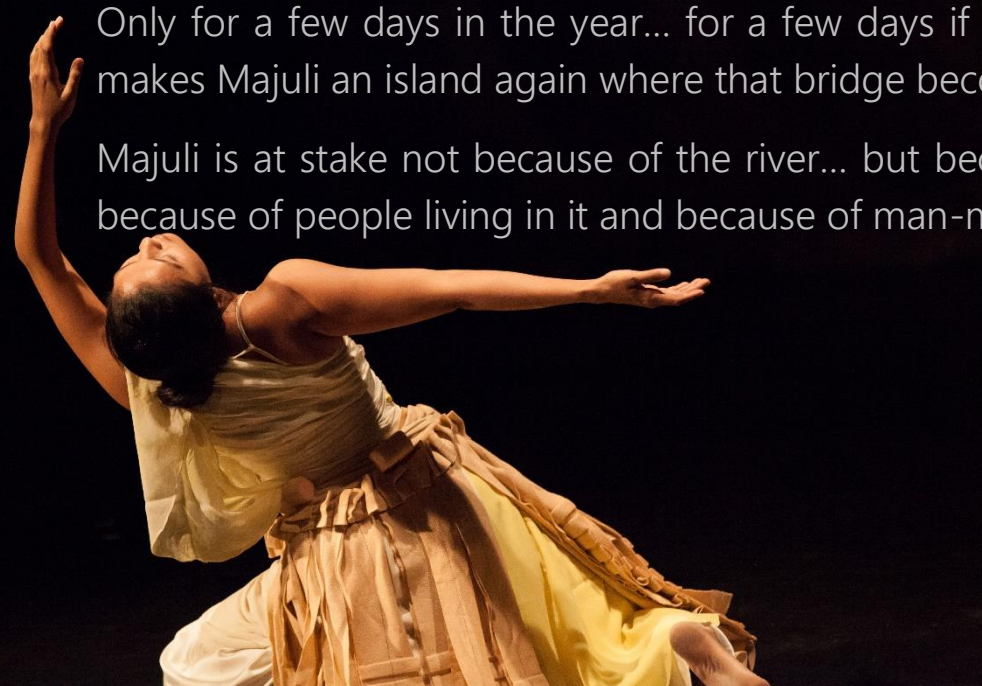
I moved out of Majuli in early 2015, but spent a lot of time there during the making of this piece beginning November 2012. This piece is an abstraction of my connections with this space from my childhood to early 2014.

Many islanders don't beckon me anymore... In the last three years a lot has changed in my experiences there. The island has become popular and captured the business minds of the islanders ... of the ones living in the urban places of Majuli. Sadly this orientation to business and this shift has not always been developmental. Mostly, the transformation has produced a mind-set to make money against all odds. Even my own rented space on Majuli, was rented out by my caretaker, the owner's son, my knowledge. A positive business mind would have spoken to me and I could have even guided his endeavour, but the cunning saddens me...

Sadly rapid changes to the landscape and interactions have come up... urbanization has gripped Majuli. To me, the island does not need bridges connecting it to other areas... it needs good roads within. However, now it is no longer an island. A night bus goes directly from Majuli to Guwahati... there is a fully functional bridge connecting it to Lakhimpur. The river is receding... due to many man-made disasters. Majuli needs developmental tourism ... where there is a give and take, instead of a quantitative measurement of footfalls and an increase in exploitative businesses.

Only for a few days in the year... for a few days if the mighty river feels like... it makes Majuli an island again where that bridge becomes inaccessible.

Majuli is at stake not because of the river... but because of people coming to it, because of people living in it and because of man-made threats.



touring details

SCALE OF VENUE: Mid to Large

DURATION: 55 Mins.

FORMAT: Non-verbal

MIN. PERFORMANCE AREA: 30'w x 20'd

COMPANY MEMBERS: 5 dancers | 2 Tech (1 Light | 1 Stage) | 1 Manager | Total: 8 people

ACCOMMODATION: For 8 people for 2-3 nights depending upon the schedule and distance from the base for 1 performance. Each additional performance will require 1 additional night of accommodation.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION: Technical specifications as mentioned below. All lighting / sound hires and projection are the responsibility of the local venue.

DAYS IN THEATRE: Day before Get in, Performance day, Strike on same evening.

AGE SUITABILITY: Suitable for all ages, but best experienced by 11+ year old

stage | general requirements

Stage Size: 13 M (W) x 12 M (D)

Floor: Marley Dance Floor (Black) | Linoleum Flooring (Black – 1.5 mm thick) | Wooden Flooring. Floor should have no nails, splinters etc.

Backdrop: White Cyclorama. NO advertisements/ logos on any part of the stage including backdrop/ wings/ underside of stage

Wings: 3 Wings on each side (4 Ft Wide X 10 Ft High covered with Black mask)

Green Room: 1 for Ms. Shilpika Bordoloi | 1 for Females | 1 for Males. Quick change rooms required on both side of the stage.

Rake: Stage to have NO RAKE. Should be marked as per water level

Entry | Exit: To be marked with glow | white tape. Staircase on both side in case of outdoor built up stage

Others: Ironing Board | Snacks | Bottled Water | Tea – Coffee | First Aid Kit

technical requirements

Light

QUANTITY	PARTICULARS	SPECIFICATIONS
11	Profile	
20	Par can	
15	PC	
10	LED	
1	Strobe	
2	Haze Machines	Good quality liquid
1	Projector	
TBC	Dimmer Racks	As required
1	Light Board	As required
TBC	Generators Power Supply	As per the load

Efficient Console Programmer and Technical Crew to help with the set up.
4 Sided Iron Truss in case of Outdoor performance.

LIGHT PLAN - Available upon request.

Sound

QUANTITY	PARTICULARS	SPECIFICATIONS
7	Mikes	
2	Mikes – on stage	
4	Monitors for the Dancers	EAW LA 215 or Equivalent On tripod stands
TBC	Main PA FOH	To reach 90 db volume (throughout the venue)
2	Walky Talkies Intercoms	For communication between backstage and technical pit
TBC	CD Player Laptop Aux	To play music from CD Pen Drive Aux
TBC	Sound Console	As required

shilpika bordoloi

Brought up in Jorhat, Assam, Shilpika Bordoloi's initiation to dance started very early. At the age of three, she began her training in the Indian Classical dance form of Manipuri under Guru Rathindra Sinha and later on with Padmashree Darshana Jhaveri. Then she went on to study Bharatanatyam under Padmashree Leela Samson, and later worked in her company, Spandan from 2003-2004. Gradually, she went into the world of Martial Arts and is trained in Chi-Gong, Martial Arts (Chinese and Korean) including Tai-Ji-Quan under Sensei Rashid Ansari along with Voice and Theatre Movement.

She holds a master's degree in English Literature from Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi.

She has spent considerable amount of time, travelling along the river Brahmaputra and researching on her multi-media project called "Katha Yatra". She is a visiting faculty to National School of Drama (NSD), NSD (Theatre-in-Education Wing) and School of Film and Television (SIFT). She is also actively involved in yoga and is a certified yoga teacher providing workshops to people of different backgrounds.

Shilpika has received India's most prestigious National Young Artist

Award. She has been conferred the Sangeet Natak Akademy Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar in 2015 for contemporary/experimental dance. She is the founder member of Brahmaputra Cultural Foundation and has created a Centre of cultural exchanges called NOI at Jorhat, Assam. She is the playwright, lead performer and director of A Human Endeavour, a play which has also been showcased by the National School of Drama as part of its Bharat Rang Mahotsav 2020.



brahmaputra cultural foundation

Brahmaputra Cultural Foundation (BCF) is a not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to preserve and promote cultural traditions of North-east India and showcase the best practices in the field of performing and visual arts from all over the world.

The Foundation aims at striking a balance between the flows of traditional and modern knowledge. It offers a fresh and alternative perspective relating to the art, culture, traditional knowledge systems, environment, and biodiversity. Through research based projects the foundation aims to address the social, cultural and developmental conflicts in the states of North-east India.



credits

Direction | Choreography | Performance: *Shilpika Bordoloi*

Movement Dramaturge: *Michel Casanovas*

Musicians: *Mukunda Madhab Bora | Ananta Bora | Paramananda Kakoti Borbayan*

Light Design: *Ronal Hussain*

Set Design: *Manish Kansara*

Costume: *Tanmay Gupta, 'Bird' by Vivan Sundaram from Gagawaka*

Images: *Kamal Musale*

Production Coordinator: *Ranjan Dutta*

This performance was created supported by the *Ministry of Culture* and the *India Foundation for the Arts*.

contact

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