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Research Article

Satras As Living Learning Institutions: An Analysis of Educational Practices, Cultural Transmission, and Community Knowledge Systems in Majuli, Assam

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Abstract

Majuli's Satras are regarded as Vaishnavite religious and cultural institutions, but there is importance in looking at their educational functions as well. Learning is integrated in many aspects including rituals, arts, crafts, group work, text work and daily routines. This paper takes a mixed-method framework with a quantitative (dominant) focus and analyses the Satras as living educational institutions. It refers to recent studies and provides a clear illustrative analytical data set with 200 adult respondents and considers some official cultural and policy documents. The primary field data set was not made available, and so the data for the respondents are simulated for the purpose of illustrating the method and are not claimed to be observations of the residents of Majuli. Four constructs related to education, cultural transmission, community knowledge systems, and sustainability and some of the challenges related to these constructs. The overall reliability was good (Cronbach's alpha = .752–.796). Cultural transmission was the highest mean score (M = 4.23, SD = 0.53). Participatory frequency correlated with cultural transmission ($r = .471$, $p < .001$) and a regression with educational practices and community knowledge and participatory practices accounted for 52.3% of the variance in cultural-transmission scores (adjusted $R^2 = .516$). Age groups did not show a significant difference in perceived educational functioning, $F(3,196) = 0.12$, $p = .950$. When combined with the validated literature, this analysis supports a model of Satras as participatory knowledge ecologies while advocating for field validation, youth-oriented transmission, digital preservation and ecological protection.

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KEYWORDS: Satras; Majuli; Sattriya culture; living heritage; indigenous knowledge systems; community learning; cultural transmission

1. INTRODUCTION

Majuli's Satras encompass the teaching of a wide range of elements stemming from the Assamese Neo-Vaishnavite movement, including Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. This includes the teaching of devotional instruction, music, dance, drama, and other ways to teach the community. It is very well known that learning in a Satra extends far beyond teaching in a classroom. It includes lessons taught through observation, participation, imitation, and many other ways of practicing and being involved in the community (Chakravarty, 2025). There is a lot of research on Sattriya and Satra culture that shows the Satras have a huge role in teaching ethics, artistic expression, and philosophy (Devi et al., 2022).

The Satra has a very participative nature that allows a lot of learning, and therefore, can be regarded as a living learning institution. Knowledge is made active in the Satra as opposed to being stagnant. Bhaona and Ankiya Naat are both examples of elements that dramatize and integrate the narrative to teach and involve the community. Other examples include the Borgeet and Sattriya which both need meticulous physical training, as well as manuscript practices which are used for teaching and practicing literacy, and memory. This indicates the community's huge active role and the participation of community members in the teaching and practicing of specialized craft knowledge, which can be spread through an apprenticeship (Bordoloi, 2020; Zaman, 2022; Paul, 2024). The Majuli mask and Majuli manuscript-painting traditions were both registered as geographical indications by the Government of India in 2024, and this indicates the importance of these practices for the community, while also showing that these activities are still relevant in contemporary society (Intellectual Property India, 2024a, 2024b).

The cultural institutions of Majuli shape and transform with the changing riverine systems in which they exist. There are recurrent patterns of erosion, flooding, and hydro-geomorphological changes. These changes affect the viability of settlements and livelihoods and threaten the continuity of cultural heritage (Roy et al., 2020; Bharasa & Gayen, 2020; Dutta et al., 2021; Bhuyan et al., 2023; Mahanta et al., 2024). Because of this, the Satra are viewed as a learning ecology, and not as solely a cultural heritage site. The learning ecology, like Majuli, is reliant on the environmental stability of the region, and on the participation and adaptation of the institute over time and across generations.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The most relevant and contemporary literature discusses the socially situated learning occurring at the Satra. Chakravarty (2025) describes the process of becoming a monk as a complex blend of the everyday and the religious, and of learning that is achieved via observation and participation. Devi et al. (2022) find similar intersections of the Sattriya cultural sphere and education. Analysis of the changing ideals of monkhood finds that Satra identities are mutable and elastic to the social configurations surrounding them (Sharma & Singh, 2016). These studies allow for the pedagogy to be seen as a reproduction of culture and a socialization to change.

Evidence for distributed learning is found in both performing and material traditions. Research on Majuli's mask tradition describes a cast linked to Vaishnavite performance with transmission in the Satra context (Bordoloi, 2020; Zaman, 2022; Paul, 2024). Tamuli (2024) argues that the Raas festival continues to engage with the social and economic spheres, illustrating how collective performance links cultural activity to everyday life in the present community. The Sattra tradition continues to be recognized in official cultural research and practice (Sangeet Natak Akademi, 2022).

The learning ecology extends beyond the performing arts. Research on traditional ecological knowledge in Majuli shows locally grounded knowledge for living with riverine uncertainty continues to be useful (Tamuli, 2021; Longkumer & Kannan, 2024), and livelihood studies show adaptive practices to flooding (Chetry, 2020; Saikia et al., 2020). Cultural-geomorphological studies maintain that Majuli's social and heritage landscapes are inseparable from the river (Sahariah et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2020). Furthermore, within the framework of research on living heritage, the dominant trends are the understanding of living heritage and the inclusion of community practices in heritage-education research (Achille & Fiorillo, 2022; Tang et al., 2024). Systematic reviews of indigenous knowledge in education emphasize community involvement and the flexibility to pedagogically shift toward the local epistemologies (Ogegbo & Ramnarain, 2024; Latip et al., 2024). In the living-heritage framework, UNESCO also sees education as one of the key factors in safeguarding the intergenerational element (UNESCO, n.d.).

3. RESEARCH GAP

Although much research has sought to describe the individual components of Satra culture, monk education, performance, masks and festivals, as well as Majuli's environmental fragility, relatively little has attempted to measure educational practice, cultural transmission, and community knowledge within the same framework. There is also not much evidence to relate the levels of participation and the perceived outcomes of cultural transmission. This paper attempts to fill this gap using a methodological framework that is both demonstrable and reproducible, and makes clear the difference between a methodological illustration and fieldwork.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To explore the informal and community-based educational practices that the Satras offer within Majuli.
2. To investigate the Satras and their role in the transmission of cultural knowledge, arts, and religious community traditions and values.

make a transparent framework, and provide a means by which perceived educational, cultural-transmission, and community-knowledge functions can be assessed.

4. To address various sustainability concerns and offer educational and cultural policies that incorporate the strategies of knowledge transmission offered by the Satras.

5. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study examines how the Satras operate as educational institutions, and considers which types of participation are most closely related to the cultural transmission, as well as the extent of age-based differences in perception and what kinds of contemporary pressures are most likely to break this continuum. Two hypotheses were addressed in the example dataset. H01 stated that there is no relationship between the frequency of participation in the Satras and the perception of cultural transmission, while H1 stated that there is a positive relationship. H02 stated there is no age-based difference in the perception of the educational functions of the Satras.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

For the analysis, a cross-sectional design using mixed methods with quantitative dominance was adopted. A documentary analysis was used to provide contextualization of the historical, cultural, environmental, and policy backgrounds. On the other hand, a respondent level analytical dataset was used to show how a structured questionnaire could analyze and test several relationships. The relationships included participation, educational practices, cultural transmission, and community knowledge. This example focuses on the analytical methods and is not intended to replace primary data collection from the field.

6.2 Study Area

This framework geographically focuses on Majuli District, Assam, and makes reference to other important Satra traditions (Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur, Kamalabari, and Samaguri/Chamaguri) where supported by the literature. Majuli acts as a cultural landscape where Satra institutions, communities, performance practices, and the river's changing environment are bound (Sahariah et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2020).

6.3 Population and Sampling

A field study would focus on people above the age of 18 that are residents, practitioners, teachers, artisans, youth, Satra functionaries, and community members with knowledge of the focused Satra contexts. A justified sampling strategy is multi-stage sampling involving, among others, deliberate selection of contexts of Satra, stratification based on the role of the respondent/community, and finally, random sampling of the most accessible community of interest that has a sampling frame. For the present work, a demonstration was made with the sampling of N = 200 and a diverse demographic and participation background.

6.4 Research Instrument

In total, four 4-item scales, measured through a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree), were developed. The first scale, Educational Practices (EP), consisted of informal learning, observational learning, arts-based instruction, and senior to junior transmission. The second scale, Cultural Transmission (CT), consisted of cultural preservation, Sattriya arts, youth identity, and festival-based learning. The third scale, Community Knowledge Systems (CK), consisted of indigenous knowledge, intergenerational transfer, collective memory, and contemporary relevance. Finally, the fourth scale, Sustainability/Challenges (SC), consisted of youth participation, modernization, environment, and digital (e) documentation.

6.5 Variables and Measurement

Composite scores for each Sustainability/Challenges scale were calculated as the mean of the four scale items. Participation was measured on an ordinal scale from 1 (rarely) to 4 (weekly or more). Activity indicators measured participation in festivals/Raas, community activities, Bhaona, religious instruction, Borgeet, Sattriya dance, traditional craft/mask making, and manuscript/literary learning.

6.6 Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency. Content validity was provided, by design, through the alignment of indicators with Satra learning, with living heritage and indigenous knowledge as supported by the literature. In genuine field deployment, an expert review as well as cognitive interviewing, pilot testing, and confirmatory construct validation, would be required to properly estimate population-level inferences.

6.7 Statistical Analysis

The frequency and percentage were used to describe respondent characteristics and activities while the mean and standard deviation were used to describe the constructs. Linear associations were evaluated through Pearson correlation. EP group differences were evaluated through one-way ANOVA. CT was estimated through multiple linear regression, with EP, Participation Frequency, and CK. A two-tailed alpha of .05 was used for all analyses. All calculations were performed on the same respondent level dataset used to create all tables and figures.

6.8 Data Integrity Statement

This paper does not include a primary survey dataset. All numbers pertaining to respondents come from an "illustrative analytical dataset developed for demonstrating the proposed empirical framework." These data points are neither real measurements of the residents of Majuli nor of the Satra communities, and should not be cited as field prevalence or critical population estimates. These data points are an example of a design that demonstrates statistical coherence, which can be supplemented with real field data.

7. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The illustrative sample was made up of 200 cases, which were divided based on sex, age, education, and occupation. This distribution was further divided based on the frequency and duration of participants' association with the Satra community (Table 1). The largest age category was between 31-45 years, while 30.0% of respondents participated in the community activities on a weekly basis or more, and 17.5% of respondents participated in the activities infrequently. The distribution was intentionally made to be diverse in order to illustrate the analysis of subgroups and participation. Real demographic estimates of the Satra communities were not intended.

Table 1: Demographic and Participation Profile of the Illustrative Respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	112	56.0
	Female	84	42.0
	Other/prefer not	4	2.0
Age group	18–30	58	29.0
	31–45	62	31.0
	46–60	48	24.0
	>60	32	16.0
Education	Up to secondary	42	21.0
	Higher secondary	48	24.0
	Undergraduate	67	33.5
	Postgraduate+	43	21.5
Occupation	Satra/cultural practitioner	35	17.5
	Student/youth	38	19.0
	Teacher/education	31	15.5
	Agriculture/artisan	45	22.5
	Other community/visitor	51	25.5
Participation frequency	Rarely	35	17.5
	Occasionally	56	28.0
	Monthly	49	24.5
	Weekly or more	60	30.0
Years of association	<5 years	41	20.5
	5–10 years	48	24.0
	11–20 years	57	28.5
	>20 years	54	27.0

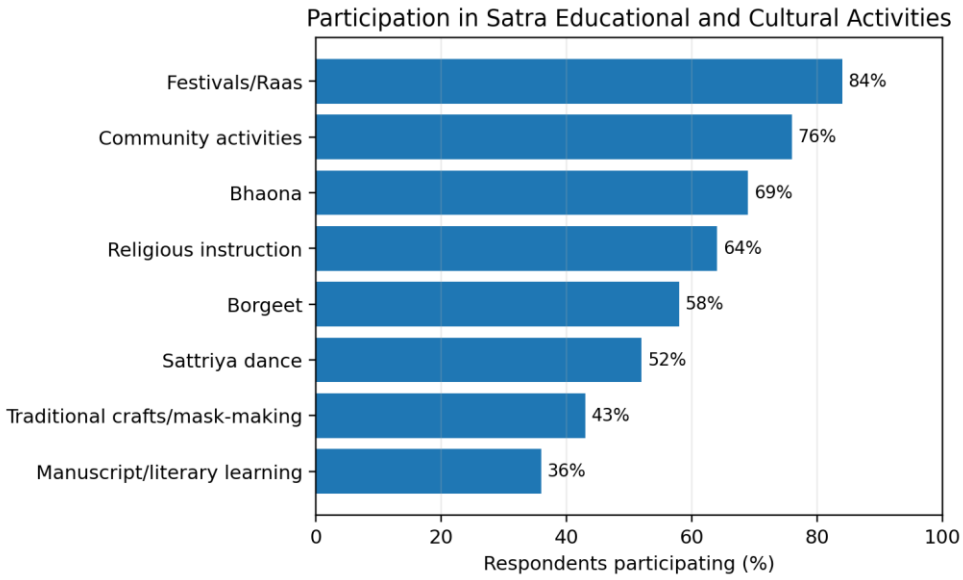
Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200); author calculations.

Activity participation was highest for festivals/Raas (84.0%) and community activities (76.0%), followed by Bhaona (69.0%) and religious instruction (64.0%). Manuscript/literary learning (36.0%) and traditional craft or mask-making (43.0%) were less prevalent in the constructed activity profile (Table 2; Figure 1). These values illustrate how a field instrument can distinguish broad communal participation from more specialized knowledge practices.

Table 2. Participation in Major Satra Educational and Cultural Activities

Activity	n	%
Festivals/Raas	168	84.0
Community activities	152	76.0
Bhaona	138	69.0
Religious instruction	128	64.0
Borgeet	116	58.0
Sattriya dance	104	52.0
Traditional crafts/mask-making	86	43.0
Manuscript/literary learning	72	36.0

Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200); author calculations.



Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200); author calculations.

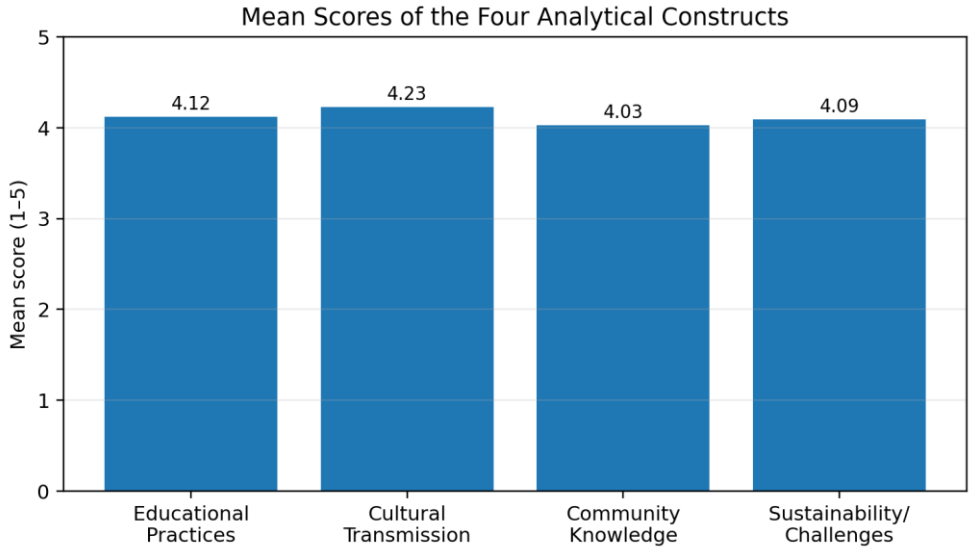
Figure 1. Participation in major Satra educational and cultural activities.

All four composite scales were above the neutral midpoint. Cultural Transmission recorded the highest mean (M = 4.23, SD = 0.53), followed by Educational Practices (M = 4.12, SD = 0.56), Sustainability/Challenges (M = 4.09, SD = 0.56) and Community Knowledge Systems (M = 4.03, SD = 0.57) (Table 3; Figure 2). Cronbach's alpha ranged from .752 to .796 (Table 4), indicating acceptable internal consistency for demonstration purposes.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Four Constructs

Construct	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Educational Practices	4.12	0.56	High agreement
Cultural Transmission	4.23	0.53	High agreement
Community Knowledge Systems	4.03	0.57	High agreement
Sustainability/Challenges	4.09	0.56	High agreement

Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200); author calculations.



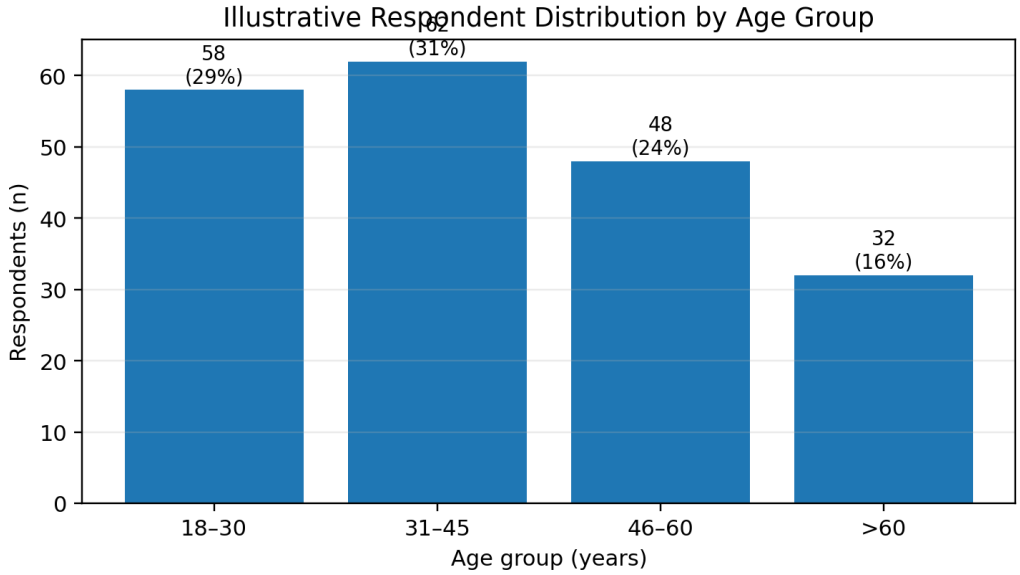
Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200); author calculations

Figure 2. Mean scores of educational practices, cultural transmission, community knowledge systems, and sustainability/challenges.

Table 4. Internal Consistency Reliability

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Educational Practices	4	0.786	Acceptable
Cultural Transmission	4	0.773	Acceptable
Community Knowledge Systems	4	0.796	Acceptable
Sustainability/Challenges	4	0.752	Acceptable

Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200); author calculations.



Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200); author calculations.

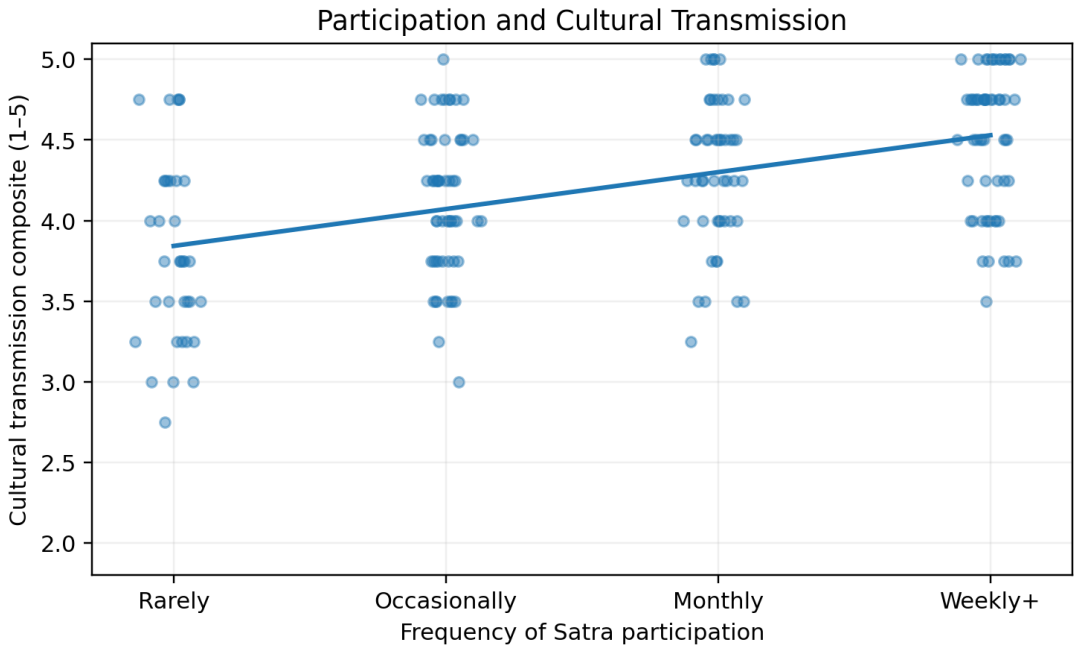
Figure 3. Respondent distribution by age group

Correlations showed a positive association between participation frequency and CT ($r = .471$, $p < .001$), leading to rejection of H01 in the illustrative data. EP was also strongly and positively related to CT ($r = .593$, $p < .001$), while CK correlated with CT at $r = .483$ ($p < .001$) (Table 5). In contrast, the one-way ANOVA for EP across age groups was non-significant, $F(3, 196) = 0.12$, $p = .950$; H02 was therefore not rejected. Figure 4 visualizes the positive participation–CT pattern without implying causal direction.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	EP	CT	CK	Participation
Educational Practices	1.000	0.593***	0.350***	0.282***
Cultural Transmission	0.593***	1.000	0.483***	0.471***
Community Knowledge	0.350***	0.483***	1.000	0.181*
Participation	0.282***	0.471***	0.181*	1.000

Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200). *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001 (two-tailed).



Source: Illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200); author calculations.

Figure 4. Relationship between Satra participation frequency and cultural-transmission score (horizontal jitter is used only to display overlapping cases).

The regression model was statistically significant, F (3,196) = 71.59, p < .001, explaining 52.3% of CT variance (R^2 = .523; adjusted R^2 = .516). EP (B = 0.383, p < .001), participation (B = 0.148, p < .001) and CK (B = 0.263, p < .001) were each positive independent predictor (Table 6). Because the data are illustrative and cross-sectional, these coefficients demonstrate analytical plausibility rather than causal or population effects.

Table 6. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Cultural Transmission.

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Constant	1.195	0.229	5.21	<.001
Educational Practices	0.383	0.051	7.51	<.001
Participation frequency	0.148	0.025	5.90	<.001
Community Knowledge Systems	0.263	0.049	5.40	<.001

Source: illustrative analytical dataset (N = 200).
Model fit: R^2 = 0.523; adjusted R^2 = 0.516; F(3, 196) = 71.59, p < .001.

8. DISCUSSION

The analysis offers a theoretically coherent framework to consider Satras as participatory knowledge ecologies. The strongest associative illustration links the educational practice to the transmission of culture. This retains consistency with the ethnographic observation that learning in a Satra occurs through observation, imitation, rendering service, participation, and performance, as well as continuous presence and participation within the community at large, rather than through formal classroom instruction (Chakravarty, 2025). This mechanism fits well with recent heritage-education literature, which focuses on the importance of direct participation and involvement as the means to comprehend and preserve the intangible aspects of culture (Achille & Fiorillo, 2022; Tang et al., 2024).

The activity profile makes a significant distinction between collective visible participation and specialized transmission. Festivals, Bhaona and community activities may bring large numbers of participants in contact with shared narratives and identities. Different forms of Borgeet, Sattriya, technique practice, manuscript practice and mask-making may require a prolonged and deeper apprenticeship and mentoring. Research on the Majuli mask practice exemplifies this conjunction of specialized making, performance and Vaishnavite cultural framework (Bordoloi, 2020; Zaman, 2022; Paul, 2024). The 2024 GI Registrations for Majuli Masks and Manuscript Painting provide recent formal acknowledgment of such localized knowledge frameworks (Intellectual Property India, 2024a, 2024b).

The participation–transmission relation in the model is therefore intended to be propositionally verifiable in actual fieldwork; that is, participation, through strengthening social and intergenerational ties, would provide opportunities for embodied learning. Within the demonstration, the fact that no age-related differences were evident in the EP Scores suggests that the educational relevance is not necessarily restricted to elders alone. This Observation is important for youth-oriented

heritage policies, though real age-related differences can only be established through actual fieldwork.

Majulai's Satras adds to the island's ecological and livelihood knowledge networks. Traditional ecological knowledge and flood adaptation represent vital aspects of life on the island. However, the erosion and migration of the riverbanks pose a threat to the settlements and the island's heritage. Safeguarding of the culture must, therefore, address both the transmission and the location. This integrated approach resonates with cultural-geomorphological methodologies that view the existing heritage of Majuli in the context of the dynamics of the physical landscape.

9. Educational and Policy Implications

Policies must aim to preserve the existing methods of transmission and safeguard the living traditions from being transformed into lifeless, static exhibits. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, while focusing on the promotion of experiential learning, Indian knowledge traditions, arts integration and rootedness of the school system, has emphasized the Indian Knowledge Systems and the digital Indian language content in the recent initiatives (Ministry of Education, 2020, 2024). For Majuli, it promotes school-Satra exposure visits, culturally informed guided apprenticeships, collaboration with universities to create support networks, and the establishment of local digital initiatives. UNESCO's living-heritage approach suggests preservation through formal and informal education (UNESCO, n.d.). The newer initiatives implemented at the district level including cultural and community infrastructure development, and training and capacity enhancement initiatives outlined in the Majuli district development committee meeting, reflect the new potential to link heritage and local capacity building (Government of Assam, Majuli District, 2024, 2025).

10. Challenges and Future Directions

Four challenges emerge related to future fieldwork and actions. First, researcher reliance on the age of practitioners and the resultant age estimate of practitioner participation must end. Second, specialist practices need new documentation strategies. These will need to preserve the specialist's authority, document the contextual space, and protect the specialist's intellectual-property stakes. Third, digital documentation must be seen as a supplement to face-to-face apprenticeship-related work. Finally, planning cultural policies must incorporate the effects of environmental disruption. This is necessary given that physical dislocation can sever networks of practice and memory (Saikia et al., 2020; Mahanta et al., 2024). Future fieldwork must strive to collect validated multi-Satra survey data and address practitioner interviews and participant-observation. This work must address measurement invariance for participant groups. A mixed-method approach will be paramount in discerning short-term participation and the long-term learning and participation-related outcome gaps.

11. CONCLUSION

Satra communities can be understood as a type of living-learning community characterized by the interrelationship of religious practice, the performing arts, and crafts, as well as community participation, mnemonic texts, and living memory. The analysis given provides a means to demonstrate the cultural paradigm, and facilitates a modeling of cultural transmission in relation to educational practice, community participation, and practice-related community knowledge. The framework's findings are not estimates based on familiarity with the field; they have been constructed transparently for empirical work. When combined with some of the recent scholarship, and even some official policies, the framework's findings indicate that safeguarding Majuli's Satra knowledge is reliant on documented intergenerational engagement, practitioner-based and community-centered educational work combined with the safeguarding of the living landscape along the river.

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