

Gamocha: A Unique Identity of The Assamese

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Abstract : The Assamese women are well-versed in the craft of making clothes at their looms. Seeing their expertise over their craft, Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, eulogised them. The Assamese women use to wave a small cloth at their looms which is known as 'Gamocha'. It is very dear to the Assamese people. It represents the Assamese society and culture in India and abroad. Besides, it is a symbol of love, regards, friendship and hospitality. Generally there are two types of 'Gamocha', one is 'Uka' (plain) and the another is 'Phulam' (floral motif) but from the point of its practical usages it is known by different names. Gamocha plays a very significant role in the Rangali Bihu. The Bihu will be incomplete without the 'Bihuwan'. This fact is suitable not only for Bihu but also for the other festivals. In fact, no other festivals in the Assamese Society can be imagined without the Gamocha. It may be merely a piece of cloth but for the Assamese people it is the symbol of their identity and self-respect. Every Assamese people irrespective of their caste, creed and religion uses it without any hesitation. Now, a threat has come to this dearly Gamocha from outside Assam, because some cheap and filthy article has entered into the market, which has endangered the profession of the Assamese weaver. Besides, many of the Assamese women are also not interested to learn the art of weaving. Therefore, Government should look into the whole matter and take some concrete step in this regard. Moreover, Gamocha is the symbol of life and culture of the Assamese people, without it no one can imagine about the Assamese culture and society.

Key words : Gamocha, Mahatma Gandhi, Assamese culture and Society, Rangali Bihu.

Introduction : Handloom and textile is an integral part of the Assamese society. Most of the Assamese women know how to weave clothes with their own hands at their looms. Therefore, Mahatma Gandhi once said " Assamese women are born weavers, they can weave fairy- tales in their cloth ." Since the time immemorial the tradition of weaving has been prevailing in Assam. Some scholars are of the opinion that the craft of making clothes is the Mongoloid contribution to the Assamese society.

The Assamese women weave different types of cloth at their looms but among these clothes the most unique one is the Gamocha. Generally, it is a rectangular piece of cloth with primarily one end is ornamented with a cross border of floral design and the other end is finished with a plain borders of the same colour. Traditionally, though it is used just like that of a towel, it is much more than that. From religious rituals to various festivals and even in general household affairs where aren't it used.

No one really knows about the beginning of its usages. Even, in the writings of the great vaishnavate saint of Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva also, neither its name nor its usages found anywhere else. It is a folk belief that Madhabdeva, the favourite disciple of Sankardeva came to know the demise of his Guru from the turban that was tied by Ramananda (Sankardeva's son) on his head. Now people believe that the turban was made of none other than a Gamocha. The word Gamocha was for the first time appeared in the 'Katha Guru Charit ' of Ramcharan Thakur. Edward Gaites " A History of Assam" also mentions about Gamocha. According to it in 1737 a Gamocha cost 6 psise. Probably, except these no references of Gamocha is found anywhere else.

Though, its first usages still remain vague, no one can deny its social value. It represents the Assamese culture and society in India and abroad. Without it the socio – cultural life of the Assamese society will be stand still. In the daily life of every Assamese people, it is used in every usual household work to very high esteem works. It has a special connection with the Bahag Bihu or the Rangali Bihu. Every Assamese tribe has it's own Gamocha and it is known among them in various names like :

Tribes	Gamocha known as
Bodos	Aarnai
Rabhas	Pajar
Koch Rajbangshi	Aaosai
Karbi	Paho
Saraniya Kachari	Mukcha
Dimacha	Richa
Mishing	Dumour
Kachari	Alan

The Assamese Tribal women are also well-versed in the art of weaving. These women weave distinct Gamocha of their own tribes with various colourful motifs at their looms.

Gamocha bears the identity of the Assamese people. Every Assamese people like it very much. It symbolizes the life and culture of the Assamese people.

Objectives of the study : keeping the following objectives in forefront this article is prepared:

1. To acquire knowledge about the practical use of Gamocha.
2. To know it's different names.
3. To acquire a little knowledge about the Assamese culture and society.
4. Its importance in Rangali Bihu.

Methodology : To discuss the selected topic, here, we have used the descriptive method

Discussion : Generally, the name Gamocha itself tells about its utility. In Assamese it is consisted of two words – 'Ga' (means body) and ' Mocha ' (means wipe). Hence, it can be said that it is a piece of cloth that is used to wipe the body dry. Literary, it is akin to that of towel but multifunctional in practice. Its utility extends far beyond the body into the sphere of mind and soul. It is a symbol of Assamese culture and society.

It has become an essential item in the daily lives of the Assamese. From morning to night, in every spheres of the Assamese lives, its extensive usages is seen. The Gamocha, which is commonly used while taking a bath or to wipe out water from the body, is known as ' paani Gamocha ' Besides there are several other types of Gamocha, that are named after according to their usages. A detailed description is tried to include below.

In every Assamese family and even in the Naamghars (the community prayer hall), it is often seen that the holy scriptures are kept in Thapana (the alter) wrapping with a Gamocha, this Gamocha is different from other types of Gamocha. It is ornamented with some floral motifs of Xarai (A tray having stand and also a cover on top), Bartaal (big cymbal) and several other floral design. Besides, sometimes, some Gamocha are designed with some Naams (Names of God), just like – ' Hare Ram Hare Krishna', ' Ram Krishna Narayan Narayan' etc. Every Assamese people look on it with utmost reverence. If we look on it from practical point of view then it will be really apt to call it ' Dharma Bastra'. While

going to the Naamghar (the community prayer Hall) it is a custom to hang a Gamocha around the neck, without it, we the Assamese people don't bow our head in front of our deity. Moreover, it is the ultimate sign of respect.

Another significant Gamocha is – ‘ Anakata Gamocha'.this Gamocha is very special because unlike the other type of Gamocha, it is woven only one piece at a time and brought out from the loom without cutting the yarn at both ends by loosening the knots from the Reed and other accessories of the loom. In the Assamese socio-cultural life it has a greater significance. On the day of wedding, both the Assamese bride and groom have to wrap an ‘ anakata' around his or her body. This is known as ‘ Tel Patani'. Besides, it is used in every festival s relating to ones life like --- Annaprasanna (the act of offering first meal of rice to a child), Kaanbindhani (the ear piercing activity of an Assamese girl), Surakarahan (the act of tonsure) etc.

In the Assamese social life the ‘ phulaam Gamocha’ plays a pivotal role. The ‘red phulaam Gamocha' (phulaam means floral motif) in particular represent the Assamese society and culture as a whole. It is the symbol of love, regards, friendship and hospitality etc. It is a custom in the Assamese society to welcome the dignitaries with a ‘ phulaam Gamocha' even the distinguished guest invited to a meeting is felicitated with it. This Gamocha not only make him enthusiastic but also heighten his social status. In every Assamese feast and festivals and even in the religious rituals where aren't it used ?

During the Bohag Bihu or the Rangali Bihu the Bihuwa deka (the boy who perform bihu dance) use to wrap it around the head with a fluffy knot. Besides, he is also accustomed to wrap a Gamocha around his waist and it is known as tongali. During this festival it is a tradition to give Gamocha to the elders as a mark of respect and to the younger as a mark of love, this kind of Gamocha is known as Bihuwaan. To the Assamese, the Gamocha, and Bihu are so intricately intertwined that Bihu is incomplete without the Bihuwaan (Gamocha) .

In the Assamese social life there is a tradition to carry the betel nut in a Gamocha wherever one use to go but this scene is very rare at the present scenario. The Gamocha that is used to carry Tamol Paan (bettel nut) is known as Hachoti . At present, the use of Hachoti is only seen in Bihu dance. Where the Bihuwati(the girl who perform Bihu dance) use to hang it from the knot of the Mekhela (the loin cloth for women) at the belly button along with Bettel nut and a Temi Katari (a small knife).

Before the onset of the Bohag Bihu, from the Assamese month of Fagun to Chat (the last fortnight of the month of February to the first fortnight of April) onwards the

Assamese women are busy in weaving the lovely Gamocha at their looms. Thereby, with the sound of the Mako (shuttle) of the loom creates a joyful atmosphere in the rural areas of Assam. The Gamocha that become lively, at the beautiful hands of the weavers is used to give as a memento of love, respect, friendship and hospitality during the Bohag Bihu and even in the Bihu songs also the references of Gamocha is found in the following ways :

“ Bihure Olag Loi Gamocha Khanire
Lakhimi Hatere Bowa
Senehar Asure Phulake Baachilo
Hiyare Adori Lowa “

Here, in the above extract a girl requests her beloved to accept the Gamocha that she has woven out with greatest love.

Again, the young boys also expect to get a Gamocha from his beloved but if somehow, he does not get it, he expresses his distraction in the following ways :

“Hate meli Hachoti Bola oi Aideu
Bhori meli Hachoti Bola
Dibare Samayat Akhani Nidila
Kalo Samori Thala “

Here, in the above extract, the boy asked his beloved that he had seen her weaving Hachoti / Gamocha at her loom but why she hadn't given him any. He repented that if she had keep it for any one else.

Thus, the references of Gamocha is found in the Bihu song also.

Conclusion : Gamocha is the unique identity of the Assamese Society. No where in rest of India something like Gamocha is found. Though it is a small piece of cloth, it is used in every sphere of the Assamese life. From very ordinary household jobs to very high esteem jobs, Gamocha is used extensively. Besides, it is the token of love, respect, hospitality and friendship. Though the origin of Gamocha is still vague to the historians, its popularity has not fallen short. But a threat has come from some clothes that are looked like Gamocha but originally they are woven in machine and in quality these are very filthy, again in price also they are cheaper than the original hand woven cotton Gamocha. Another threat has come from the part of weavers because the new generation are not so much interested in learning the craft of weaving . Therefore, the number of weavers has been coming down.

So, Government should give keen interest on these matter and take concrete steps so that the import of duplicate Gamocha can be stopped strictly and encourage the new generation to learn the art of weaving. Gamocha is the symbol of unity. Every Assamese people irrespective of their caste, creed and religion uses it. It is the symbol of the greater Assamese society. If some one disrespect it, it is the disrespect for the whole Assamese society and culture. Moreover, the Assamese society and culture can not be imagined without Gamocha. It is an article of great significance for each and every Assamese people.

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