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Gosain Gamusa of Assam

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Abstract

Gamusa or Gamosa is a unique identity of Assamese society and culture. It is an article of great significance for the people of Assam. A gamusa is a handwoven textile (preferably in cotton), mostly in combination of white and red. The lower end borders are beautifully ornamented with different motifs and designs. In different parts of Assam, different sizes of gamusa are used and their functions also differ from one another. Among all the gamusa produced in Assam, the one that is mainly kept at thapana (a sacred book set-up as an object of worship) of a 'namghar' and used for spiritual uses, is the Gosain Gamusa or in the local language, it is 'Gokhai Kapoor'. Gosain gamusa is not for domestic uses. Derived from the word 'Goswami', Gosain is the commonly used word. It is believed that the tradition of Vrindavani Vastra has survived with the cotton gamusa, known as the Gosain Gamusa but it could have been of silk, and more elaborately decorated, at an early period. The gamusas are woven mainly in places like Barpeta, Bardeo, Nagaon, Majuli etc. for the weaving of Gosain gamusa, sipinis need to take special care, as these are used for spiritual purposes only. The gosain gamusa is larger in length and width. The main feature that differs gosain gamusa from other gamusas is the use of scripts. The scripts like Ramkrishna, Hare krishna, Sri Sri Govinda, Sitaram, Bhagavata are woven in Assamese scripts uniformly in the body or in the two end borders of the gamusas. Sometimes lines or phrases of holy 'Bhagavata' or 'Kirtan Dasam' are also woven in these gamusas. The Assamese people are still continuing the tradition of weaving these beautiful gamusas, as the demand of such fabrics never faded away.

Keywords: Gosain Gamusa, Assam, textile, tradition, spiritual, scripts.

Gamusa or Gamosa is a unique identity of Assamese society and culture. It is an article of great significance for the people of Assam. Gamusa is an inevitable part of all ceremonies or rituals whether religious, weddings, meetings or welcoming respected persons and guests. No important work can be completed without using Gamusa. It unites the whole community of the people of Assam. It carries the symbol of feeling & belongingness, welcoming people, respecting elders, love and care to loved ones. Hemchandra Baruah explained, "the origin of the word "Gamusa" had come from the Sanskrit word "Gatro Marjoni" meaning the piece of fabric used to absorb water or to wipe

the body after taking a bath, the piece of fabric to keep betel nut, the piece of fabric used as headgear”¹. A gamusa is a handwoven textile (preferably in cotton), mostly in combination of white and red. The lower end borders are beautifully ornamented with different motifs and designs. On festive and ceremonial occasions, a gamusa is hung around the neck of the Assamese men, and often used as turban cloth also. In different parts of Assam, different sizes of gamusa are used and their functions also differ from one another. The approximate length of the gamusa varies from 130 cm to 185 cm and width varies from 60 cm to 85 cm². Ukagamusa, Phulamgamusa, Bihuwan, Tiyoni, Panigamusa, Anakatagamusa, Teloshgamusa, Jurgamosa are the different types of gamusa produced in different regions of Assam³. The beautiful Gamusa, produced in Assam, could not be seen in other parts of India as there is no such article used anywhere else in India. So, it can be said that Gamusa is a great innovation of the weavers of Assam and it's their credit of keeping the tradition intact, though complex weaving techniques are not usually associated with this region. The actual origin of Gamusa is still unknown to the historians. It is doubtful fact whether the gamusa originated in Assam or came from the countries of far-east like Thailand, where small clothes like Gamusa are in use.

Among all the gamusa, mentioned above, the one that is mainly kept at *thapana* (a sacred book set-up as an object of worship) of a '*namghar*' and used for spiritual uses is the Gosain Gamusa or in the local language, it is 'Gokhai Kapoor'. Namghar is the prayer houses for the Vaishnavite Assamese people where devotees, present as the congregation, sing the Names of God. A namghar has two major spaces, the manikuta and the prayer hall. The famous saint Srimanta Sankaradeva introduced the concept of namghar in Assam. Other than being only a place of prayers by the devotees, a namghar serve many other purposes also. In spite of being a religious and cultural institution, it functions as theatre for dramatic performances also. Namghars could be independent halls or it could be a part of a Sattras (Vaishnavite monasteries). In several sattras, gosaingamusa is wrapped upon some architectural pillars, even on the figures of Garuda. Garuda is a bird like creature in Hindu mythology with a mix feature of an eagle and a human. He is the vehicle of Lord Vishnu. In some of the sattras the figure of Lord Vishnu is adorned with a gosaingamusa, though worship of images is strictly prohibited among the Vaishnavite Assamese people.

The gamusa is normally used to wipe face or body, just like a towel. But gosain gamusa is not for domestic uses. It is only used for spiritual purposes. Derived from the word 'Goswami', Gosain is the commonly used word. Goswami is a Sanskrit compound, which means 'lord of the senses' or 'lord of cows'. 'Gosain' means the supreme lord, to the Vaishnavite Assamese people He is Lord Vishnu. It is believed that the tradition of Vrindavani Vastra has survived with the cotton gamusa, known as the Gosain Gamusa but it could have been of silk, and more elaborately decorated, at an early period⁴. Vrindavani Vastra, or the cloth of Vrindavan, was large textile pieces arranged with strips of silks woven in Assam. From a historical point of view, the production of these textiles seems to cover about two hundred years, possibly from just before the death of the Assamese saint Sankaradeva in 1568. It is believed that he may have instituted their creation. Indeed, there

is record of Sankaradeva arranging for the weaving of a lengthy cloth at the request of Chiralai, the brother of the king of Coochbihar, Naranarayana (c. 1540-87): it is actually referred to in a later life of Sankaradeva, as 'Vrindavani Vastra'⁵. The textiles of these group are characterized by designs depicting scenes from the life of Krishna. Most of these relate to his exploits as a killer of demons in various animal forms (the crane, the snake and others) or as a lover of the cowherdresses (gopis) with whom he passed his youth in the forests of Vrindavan. Several of these pieces also show scenes from the *Ramayana*, which of course concerns another incarnation of Vishnu- Rama, and some include depictions of other avatars, such as Matsya the fish, Kurma the tortoise and Narasimha the man-lion. In several of the more complex pieces, Garuda, Vishnu's man-bird vehicle also shown⁶. The original vastra disappeared from Coochbihar, but Assamese texts describing it point directly to the pieces illustrated here: the episodes of Krishna's life are said to have been woven "in large variety of coloured threads such as red, white, black, yellow, and green. Each scene had its caption below it and these too were loom embroidered". Its great length is also testified to, being variously described as 40 yards long, 180 feet long, and 120 cubits long, and all the sources agree that it took a year to weave, reaching completion "only a little before the expiry of Sankaradeva" in 1569⁷. The drawing of the figures is fine and well-conceived, with an interesting variation of scale between rows. The only poorly woven sections are the inscriptions, which are barely decipherable as the names of the figures, and in some cases are reversed⁸. The Thapona Kapur also has a religious connotation. These are used for covering the altar⁹.

In the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the famous saint Srimanta Sankaradeva and his followers instituted the Vaishnavite practice in Assam. He insisted upon the primacy of "Bhagavata Purana" (translated in Assamese). This became the focus of devotional attention, and the namghar, as the location for worship needed to accommodate this. In this new situation, images may or may not have been important but unquestionably, the position of the text, actualized in the form of a manuscript, took center stage. Therefore, in a namghar, an enthroned copy of the Bhagavata Purana and the means of reciting it and for congregation to sing of it, and to call on the name of Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, were the most important elements for worship. Thus the namghar developed as a large congregational hall, with towards the back of an apsidal area, the *manikuta*, where a stepped wooden throne of between one and seven tiers, the *simhasana* (literary, the lion throne, the corners are usually elaborated with carved wooden lion figures), could hold, elevated above the congregation, a copy of the manuscript. Here was a very clear and obvious difference from a traditional temple with its shrine room where the deity was housed in image form, and access to which was denied to all but Brahmins. These altar/thrones today are often covered with strips of cloth that have been offered by devotees. This may have been the original use for the strips of cloth that make up the 'Vrindavani Vastra'. A second possibility is that they were used to wrap the copies of the Bhagavata Purana that were enshrined on the altar¹⁰. In India, normally an object of reverence is never placed on the bare ground. There is also a long tradition of protecting precious manuscripts in specially prepared cloth in India. This may be another use, to which these cloths were

put, and perhaps both could be invoked, they need not be mutually exclusive¹¹. The sacred Bhagavat Purana can be substituted by Kirtan Dasham or Gunmala (the concise form of Bhagavata Purana) or similar texts in the Assamese. Instead of VrindavaniVastra presently the Thapana Kapur is used for wrapping these holy books in namghars and Sattras (Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam). The earliest surviving examples are the intricately woven altar clothes of Assam, which found their way to Tibet and were presented in the monasteries there. These were preserved as they were used as backing on the *thangkas*¹².

In the states of north-east of India, women are mainly involved in weaving works from long before. Women weavers of the state of Assam are called the 'sipinis'. They weave saree, mekhela-chador, gamusa etc. Among the various types of gamusas, woven in Assam, for the weaving of Gosaingamusa, sipinis need to take special care, as these are used for spiritual purposes only. The weavers follow certain rules for weaving these gamusas. Before starting weaving, they worship the loom. Without taking a bath, they don't indulge themselves in weaving of gosaingamusa. During menstruation the sipinis don't touch the loom. Though at present men also started weaving works in the Sualkuchi area. Some restrictions are also followed by them regarding these holy fabrics. The gamusas are woven mainly in places like Barpeta, Bardeo, Nagaon, Majuli etc. The weaving of gamusa, including gosaingamusa, continue throughout the year, but before the festivals of 'Bihu', the production increases, keeping in mind about the increased demand during the festivals. All the gamusas are woven in simple handlooms. Traditionally country loom is been used to produce (weave) a gamusa. Various tools made of bamboo were used as loom-accessories. The simple loom is fixed on four bamboo posts. Mainly of cotton, the gamusas are woven in Muga also, for special occasions. It is believed that the weaving of gamusa had started from the reign of the Ahom kings. Compared to Pat, muga or tassar silks, cotton gamusa is more acceptable as it is less expensive and easily available.

All the gamusas woven in Assam, carries similar features. They are mostly in combination of white and red, though sometimes green, coffee brown and other colours are also used for ornamentation. The body is always white, with side borders mostly in red, simply woven in stripes and end borders, also in red, with beautiful woven motifs. Red is the colour of purity, strength and love. In Hinduism the color red is often used in auspicious occasions. Possibly for this reason, gamusa is also ornamented with threads of red colour. The motifs include flowers, trees, assamese traditional 'jhaapi', 'singa' and many more. These motifs are typically unusual compared to the motifs used in other Indian textiles. In spite of many similarities with other gamusas, the gosaingamusa is larger in length and width. The main feature that differs gosaingamusa from other gamusas is the use of scripts. The scripts like Ramkrishna, Hare Krishna, Sri Sri Govinda, Sitaram, Bhagavata are woven in Assamese scripts uniformly in the body or in the two end borders of the gamusas. Sometimes lines or phrases of holy 'Bhagavata' or 'Kirtan Dasam' are woven in these gamusas. The weavers beautifully arrange the words of scripts throughout the body of the gamusa. Sometimes they place the words in horizontal lines, keeping certain distance within each word and sometimes they make a pyramid like form with the repeated words. Except

the scripts, many other motifs are also used in these gamusas. Sarai or Xorai, the traditional symbol of Assam, which is considered as an article of great respect by the people of Assam, is often represented through weaving in these gamusas. Other than sarai, articles used for worship in Hindu rituals, like an illuminated lamp, incense sticks with stands, the *dhundan* or *dhunachi*, etc. are also woven perfectly in the borders of the gamusa. Motifs of flowers, Assamese traditional *jhaapi* and *singa* are also used in these gamusas. It is undoubtedly the skill of the weavers that all motifs are beautifully combined, specially the scripts, as all completely woven words need to appear in the body of the gamusa leaving no space for any incomplete or irrelevant word.

There are a few examples of such textiles in the collection of Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra. The cotton gosaingamusa [Code No. 77(280)] with inscribed words of 'Sitaram' and 'Radhakrishna' is interesting to study in this regard. The scripts are woven in Assamese with yellow threads on a red background. It is 2.20 meter in length and 98 cm in width. Except scripts, small floral motifs are also woven in the gamusa. In the thapana kapur [Code No. 80(272)], scripts in Assamese are woven alongwith beautiful motifs of elephants and peacocks. The traditional motif of beautifully woven tree could also be seen here. This cotton fabric is 59 cm in length and 60 cm in width. There is another unique gosain gamusa [Code No. 27(106)] with woven as well as embroidery work. Except weaving traditional motifs, scripts are embroidered in favour of the divine lord.

The Assamese people are still continuing the tradition of weaving these beautiful gamusas, as the demand of such fabrics never faded away. They also maintain the sacred enclave regarding production and use of these holy fabrics till now, which is really appreciating. They still follow the rules for weaving gosaingamusas, which had been followed for decades. They are not interested to experiment much on these holy fabrics. As the Assamese Vaishnavite people are still supporter of Srimanta Sankardeva, so they still follow his directions. The future generation also need to be careful to carry on the tradition of weaving with love and respect, so that the spiritual aspect could not be hampered for these fabrics.

Notes:

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 9. Deva Sharma, Jayanta. Changing Perspectives of Textiles of Assam with Special Reference to Kamrup District (Unpublished PhD. thesis).p 145.
 10. Blurton, T. Richard.p 40.
 11. *ibid.* p 40.
 12. Dhamija, Jasleen (Ed.). The Woven Silks of India. Marg Publication. Bombay. 1995. p 6.