

Gamosa: Unique symbol of Assamese culture

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Gamosa woven with the aspirations of Assamese folk women, stands as a significant traditional textile item among the Assamese people. The original Assamese Gamosa is the special one with red colour border, white background and a horizontally placed floral design in one end and another end is woven with red colour stripes. While the origin of this age-old textile item of Assamese culture remains untraceable to date, it has deep roots in the local heritage. Now-a-days, its popularity is highly increased due to its utility and attractive colour combination. It enters the fashion market with its diversified application in both apparel and household sectors. This paper delves into various traditional Gamosa types, highlighting the importance of preserving their cultural essence and exploring future prospects and explores the pivotal significance of Geographical Indication (GI) tagging in safeguarding and promoting the cultural heritage of Assamese Gamosa, shedding light on the unique characteristics and historical resonance encapsulated in this traditional textile.

Keywords: Assamese culture, Gamosa, Pakharutang, Weaving

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Gamosa, a cherished textile in Assamese culture, is far more than a mere piece of fabric; it is a living embodiment of tradition, dreams, and the vibrant spirit of the Assamese people. Woven with precision and cultural significance, Gamosa stands as a symbol of identity, reflecting the rich heritage and aspirations of this northeastern region of India. In its intricate patterns and vibrant colours, Gamosa tells a tale of the land, its people, and the timeless threads that connect them through generations¹. Assamese culture of weaving was once appraised by Mahatma Gandhi-The Father of the Nation. Production of handloom textile through different cottage industry plays an important role in the upliftment of socio-economic life of Assamese people, particularly in rural areas of Assam². This specially designed handloom product of the state is the symbolic representation of rich art and cultural practice of Assamese society. Typically, Gamosa the paramount cultural fabric of Assam, is crafted with a white backdrop adorned by a red border on three sides, while in the fourth side exquisite floral or geometrical motifs are seen. Additionally, the art of Gamosa weaving incorporates various colours beyond red, adding to the vibrancy of this traditional textile.

Basically, it is a rectangular piece of cloth woven with cotton yarn of different counts according to its use but sometime it is woven with mulberry silk, tussar silk or pride of Assam-muga silk yarn for special occasion^{3,4}. However blended yarns are also used to sustain present day competition. It is around 2 (two) feet in width and (five) feet in length but sometime its size may vary according to the purpose of its use^{5,6}. The traditional Assamese Gamosa is a hand woven textile entirely crafted through the indigenous processes of the Assamese people. The techniques of Gamosa weaving have been handed down over generations, allusions to which are available in Assamese scriptures and literature, with very little change. Literally, the word Gamosa means 'something to wipe the body with' (*Ga*=body, *musa* =to wipe) however, interpreting the word *Gamosa* as the body-wiping towel, traditionally used by Assamese people². For the Assamese people, it holds significance as more than just a textile; the Gamosa is their symbolic identity, a cultural emblem representing dignity, love, and respect. It stands at the core of their beautiful Assamese culture, embodying a source of pride and prestige⁷.

The primary aim of this paper is to delve into the various types of Gamosa employed within Assamese communities. It endeavours to provide a

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comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance and diverse applications of Gamosa in the region.

Additionally, the paper sheds light on contemporary practices, exploring the current landscape of transforming Gamosa into a range of diversified products.

By examining these transformations, the research aims to contribute insights into the evolving role and adaptability of Gamosa within the Assamese cultural milieu, reflecting the dynamic intersections between tradition and innovation.

Origin history of Gamosa

According to legend, the origin of the Gamosa in Assam can be traced back to the arrival of Alpine people, believed to have occurred before the 12th century. King Bhagadutta utilized a special cloth or headgear, bearing resemblance to the contemporary Gamosa of Assam. Similarly, Chaolung Siu-ka-pha, the renowned Ahom king, adorned a distinctive narrow-width cloth woven in white with a red border, wrapping it around his waist. These instances reflect the historical roots and cultural echoes embedded in the evolution of the traditional Gamosa^{1,6}.

During the 14th century, the renowned Assamese saint, Srimanta Sankardev, witnessed the widespread usage of red-bordered Gamosa among the male population during various occasions and functions. Moving forward to the 16th century, adherents of the Naba-Boishnaba religion adopted the practice of wrapping Gamosa around the neck instead of the traditional cheleng chaddar (a specially designed cloth used in ritual functions). The historical origins of Gamosa remain unclear and somewhat elusive, with ongoing controversies surrounding its genesis. Certain groups assert that Gamosa was initially crafted in Thailand because some of the 'Thai' cloths have very close similarities with Assamese Gamosa. Thai people also use similar type of cloth for similar purposes as Gamosa. Conversely, individuals in other Indian states such as Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha also incorporate same fabric resembling the Gamosa into their daily attire. However, their utilization is primarily confined to everyday life, lacking the profound cultural reverence accorded to the cloth in Assamese culture⁷.

Traditionally, the border design of Gamosa exclusively featured the natural red colour, with the plain-woven segment crafted from materials like cotton, silk such as mulberry and Muga. Natural dyes derived from various indigenous plant sources in Assam were used, including the roots and barks of the

Achu tree (*Morianda angustifolia*) for obtaining the red hue. Additionally, guava plant leaves were utilized as a mordant in the colouring process⁸. The term "achu" in Assamese, referring to the border line, is likely derived from the colour-imparting Achu plant native to Assam.

Beyond mere decoration, the red colour in Gamosa carries symbolic significance, representing the vitality, courage, and boldness of the Assamese people, while the white portion signifies purity. As a result, Gamosa from Assam has earned global renown as a textile masterpiece and stands as a crucial element of the cultural identity for the Assamese people⁹.

Significance of Gamosa in assamese society

A sign of respect

Gamosa is used as means to convey respect and gratitude to the respectable people of a society. Gamosa being presented to important individuals in a public ceremony or to felicitate a person for his/her achievement in different field like educational life, service life, business organization, socio-cultural and political background. It is said that the cloth, is a devotional submission to God and to people. It indicates devotion when present it in a *Naamghar* or worship hall.

A conveyer of love

A Gamosa can be a sign of love for Assamese people. A newly wed bride presents her husband with Phulam Gamosa. Girls offer a Gamosa to their dear ones especially on Rongali (Bohag) Bihu as a token of their bonding to each other. In Assamese society there is no greater gift than a hand-woven Gamosa for a loved one.

Purposeful utilization as a towel

In our daily routines, various types of Gamosa serve as versatile wiping cloths for activities such as bathing, face and hand washing after meals, head wraps during work, covering food items while carrying food to farm, swaddling newborns, shielding heads during agricultural endeavors, and as head gear, waist and neck wrap while participating in diverse ritual functions in Assam.

As an important gift item

It is used as a highly valuable gift for guest mainly respectable person of every society as well as for the distinguished persons coming from other states. It also functions as an honorary cloth presented to accomplished personalities.

Symbol of the assamese identity

During significant ceremonial events in Assamese society, both men and women adorn themselves with a phulam Gamosa draped around their neck, underscoring its pivotal role as a cultural garment. The Gamosa, distinguished by its iconic red border and adorned with floral motifs, serves as a quintessential symbol of Assamese culture. Its prominence traces back to the founding years of key institutions in 1916 and 1917 the Asom Chatra Sanmillan, the inaugural student organization, and the Asom Sahitya Sabha, the premier literary organization. This period marks a profound chapter in the cultural legacy of the nation.

Weaving techniques of Gamosa

Gamosa is meticulously crafted on traditional hand looms. The distinction between the traditional hand loom and machine-made versions becomes evident in their size and the feel of the yarns. Despite its seemingly simple appearance, a Gamosa showcases the artistic prowess of weavers, who intricately design motifs that make each piece unique. Serving as a beautifully woven textile, Gamosa features captivating graphic designs and finds utility among various cultural sub-systems and ethnocultural groups in Assam. The embroidered red patterns draw inspiration from nature, portraying scenes of jungles, peacock motifs, and flowers, while occasionally depicting cultural elements like Bihu dancers or symbols such as the 'japi.' Additionally, traditional designs like lion, dragon, jumping lion, etc. carry symbolic significance for various purposes and occasions^{10,11}.

According to its use and tribes of people residing in Assam several types of Gamosa are found. Nineteen different types of Gamosa available in Assam are discussed.

Ukka Gamosa

This type of Gamosa had a very functional beginning. It is woven in raw yarn with high count. Length of this Gamosa is 1.50 meter and breadth is 70 cm only shown in (Fig. 1). The width of the red boarder is 1.5-2/3 cm. These are un-embellished plain Gamosa never gifted, but kept at home. It is used for different household purpose like wiping our body at the time of need or while they work in the field to wipe sweat, to cover our head while performing household work or in the farmer's field.

Tioni Gamosa

This is the one type of bath towel, made with yarn count 40-60. Length and width of the Gamosa is 2.5

metre and width are 1 metre, but sometimes the length and width may vary as per the wearer need. This oversized Gamosa is intricately woven using specially coloured yarns, designed primarily for bathing purposes illustrated in (Fig. 1).

Pani Gamosa

This type of Gamosa was introduced at the time of Ahom king from 1228-1826. During that period, the officials of Ahom kingdom wore large sized Gamosa (280 cm length and 160 cm width) below the knee level which is presently used by the people of lower Assam during working.

Talos Gamosa

This type of Gamosa is woven with square line of different colours. The specially designed cloth was used by bridegroom at the time of bathing with oil and turmeric on his marriage day. In the tribal community, mothers craft beautiful Telos Gamosa for their daughters, reserving these intricately woven pieces as cherished heirlooms for their weddings, akin to the tradition of preserving phulkari in other cultural contexts shown in (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 — Ukka Gamus and Tioni Gamosa

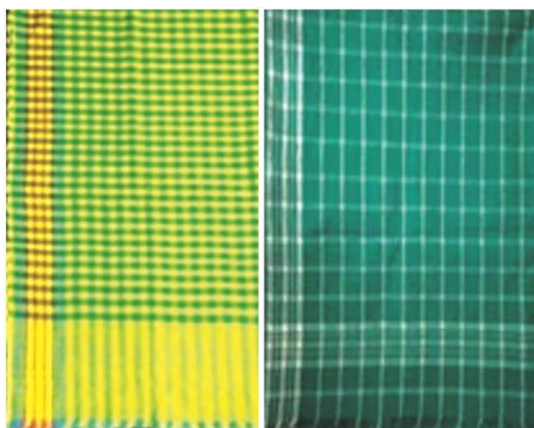


Fig. 2 — Telos Gamosa

Anakota Gamosa

A remarkable characteristic of this distinct Gamosa is that the cloth is woven seamlessly without any interruption or cutting during the weaving process. Assamese people of lower Assam used *Anakota Gamosa* on important religious occasions such as marriage ceremony, welcoming the new born baby, at the ceremony of giving solid food to the baby annaprashan, churakaran of boys, puberty ceremony of girls and birthday, etc. This unique form of Gamosa had great value in ritual functions while work with priest. The length of the Anakota Gamosa is 200 cm and width 70 cm and both the ends are tied with knots shown in (Fig. 3). In this context, the threads of the Gamosa symbolize the unbreakable bonds in one's life, emphasizing the significance of not cutting this particular type of Gamosa once the weaving process is finished. While Anakota holds historical importance in various ritual functions for the Assamese people, it is now facing the threat of extinction within the state and beyond⁷.

Hasati/Tamul Gamosa

Hasati serves a function like a handkerchief among the Assamese people, used for carrying betel leaves and nuts when individuals travel or work outside their homes. It was also called 'Tamul bandha Gamosa'. Tamul is the Assamese word for betel nut, which is served along with paan to guests when they visit an Assamese household. The paan and Tamul are served on the *gamosa* which is placed on the *xorai*, (an Assamese stand tray made from bell metal) shown in (Fig. 4). The tamul *gamosa* is also used to cover holy scripture in the prayer halls known as 'Naamghors' which have an additional structure



Fig. 3 — Anakota Gamosa

inside known as the 'monikut, 'the jewelled hut' This type of *Gamosa* is used in Namghar as a symbol of respect.

Pakharutang

Pakharutang was a highly ornamented handkerchief used for similar purpose as general handkerchief. It is a square piece of cloth with eight pointed star and bar designs with red colour against off white background shown in (Fig. 5). The textile piece of cloth is traditionally used in puberty ceremony.

Phulam Gamosa

Phulam Gamosa is a highly decorated Gamosa which have floral design in one side (nowadays on both sides) and the motif distributed all over the cloth. These particular Gamosas hold a special significance as they are bestowed upon respected and beloved individuals. Their dimensions mirror that of the uka Gamosa, measuring at 1.50 cm in length and 70 cm in

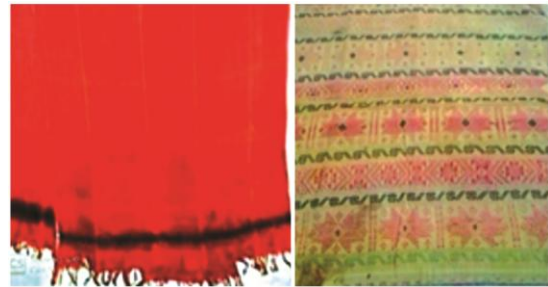


Fig. 4 — Hasati



Fig. 5 — Pakharutang

breadth illustrated in (Fig. 6). This special piece of cloth is woven either in fine cotton or silk yarn with great care and used as important item of men's dress in various social functions. Over the years, as the red-and-white *phulam* Gamosa has become the indisputable cultural motif of Assam, there are many such stories that get lost between its folds. But "halo of the 'authentic red Gamosa' should be treated with caution. The red *phulam* Gamosa, in particular, has started to connote a cultural permanence and a fixed sense of identity in the region.

Dara baranar Gamosa

Among all other type of Gamosa it is consider as a most valuable one. This special type of Gamosa is a highly decorated one, woven either with mulberry or tussar silk or with muga silk according to the status of the family. The beautiful floral design in both the ends and buti designs in the middle portion is the main characteristic of this type of Gamosa. The design used on the right end of the Gamosa indicates bridegroom and left side design indicate bride. In some places it is known as Joria Gamosa, a main item of dress gifted to the bridegroom from bride. Apart from Cotton, silk is also used to make this special Gamosa shown in (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6 — Different types of Phulam Gamosa



Fig. 7 — Dara Baranar Gamosa

Bihuwan

Bihuwan is a type of Gamosa which is used as a symbol of love to the beloved one and to pay respect to elders during Bihu festival of Assam. In Assamese society guests are always welcomed with a Gamosa. 'Bohag Bihu' is a celebration to mark the beginning of the Assamese New Year on the 14th of April every year. Bihuwan is wrapping around the heads while performing Bihu dance in Huchari of Rangali Bihu. It serves as a symbol of affection, intricately weaving Assamese weavers' dreams into various attractive motifs on the textile. When an Assamese woman presents a Gamosa to a man, it signifies her profound respect for that individual. The people of Assam harbor deep emotions and reverence in their hearts for this vibrant cultural emblem, considering it more than just a colorful accessory⁸.

Gosai Gamosa

It is used to cover the altar of the Namghar and to cover the Holy Scriptures. An object of reverence is never placed on the bare ground, but always on a Gamosa. The cloth used to cover the holy book *Bhagavad Purana* at the altar. The length of the Gamosa is 150 cm and width is 70 cm. Floral motifs used on this particular type of Gamosa are mainly sarai or bata design, japi design, burning light, earthen light, lotus etc, shown in (Fig. 8). Assamese weavers weave this type of Gamosa with great care maintaining the purity of the day to day life or by fasting on at the time of weaving. After completion of weaving process the Gamosa is offered to the Almighty by a ritual function⁸.

Tangali

Tanagli is a type of narrow but long waist cloth woven in red coloured yarns and engraved floral motif with white or yellow colour. While celebrating the most important festival Bihu the young one tie this cloth as waist band shown in (Fig. 9). It is one of the basic part of male dress while celebrating Rangali bihu. Assamese farmers used the Gamosa as a waist cloth during heavy work is also known as tongali. Now-a-days weaver used loin loom for Tangali weaving.

The Gamosa is undoubtedly the symbol of life and culture of Assamese. It is used equally by all irrespective of religious and ethnic backgrounds. All tribes have their own Gamosa with a minor modification in colour and motifs. Some tribal communities of Assam weave their Gamosa with green colour which indicate nature.



Fig. 8 — Gosai Gamosa

There were various other symbolic elements and designs traditionally used on Gamosa weaving, which are found in literature, art, sculpture, architecture, etc. or used for only religious purposes (occasions only). The motifs used on typical Assamese designs are mainly derived from nature such as tree, climbers, flowers animal like deer, Rhinoceros, lion, dragon, flying-lion, bird like peacock, etc.

Rajbansi Gamosa

This type of Gamosa is similar to simple Assamese Ukka Gamosa one and half metre in length and



Fig. 9 — Tanagli

half metre breadth, The surface of the Gamosa is yellow coloured and the boarder is woven in green coloured yarns. Now-a- days Rajbanshi people weave their Gamosa with floral motif in one end of the Gamosa and other end is woven with coloured green coloured yarns.

Maran Gamosa

This type of Gamosa is one and half metre in length and half metre breadth, the surface of the Gamosa is white and the boarder is woven in golden coloured threads. One end of the Gamosa is woven with floral motif and other end is woven with coloured thread. This type of Gamosa is somewhat similar to the Gamosa of Motok people.

Motok Gamosa

Gamosa used by Motok people is one and half metre in length and half metre breadth, The surface of the Gamosa is white and the boarder is woven in golden coloured threads. One end of the Gamosa is woven with floral motif and other end is woven with coloured thread. The width of the floral motifs is 3-8 cm. Motifs are known as cat legs flower, xarai motif, creeper etc. They always used *kesh* on the both side of the main flower. Mostly they used geometrics design. Originally Motok people used muga silk yarn on the boarder of the Gamosa but nowadays, yarn dyed with natural colour with the bark of Ber tree were used. They mostly used this type of Gamosa in their ritual functions and as a gift item¹².

Boro Gamosa

Boro Gamosa is similar to Assamese Gamosa with yellow colour in the body and border with green and white colour. It is known as Gamsha. It is about 5 feet in length and 3.5 feet in width. It is the sign of their tradition and used to felicitate people with honour and in all Bodo dances. In ceremonial functions, men commonly don yellow and green-hued Gamosas, crafted by Boro weavers who skillfully produce varied colours for specific occasions. The standard dimensions of these Gamosas are one and a half meters in length and six inches in width¹³.

Missing Gamosa

The Gamosa of Missing people is known as Dumer. The dumer is basically white in colour with the border in red. Beautiful geometrical and floral motifs are worked as cross border at one or both the ends. It has multiple uses such as hang around the shoulder in special occasions and used in day-to-day life as turban cloth. It is woven out of 40s or 2/80s cotton.

Another type of dumer is a Gamosa like cloth, length of which is 74 inch and its width is 7.6 inches. It is mainly woven with wool yarn. The surface of the cloth is either white or red. It is used in ceremonial occasion and used to hang it from neck to the chest¹⁴.

Rabha Gamosa

Rabha Gamosa is similar with traditional Assamese Gamosa, generally used for day to day uses and also in festivals. Size of the Gamosa is 60 inch x 72 inch made of pure cotton. Different colour stripes and designs are used for the Gamosa.

Tiwa Gamosa

Tiwa Gamosa, characterized by its vibrant orange background and adorned with a distinctive green border, holds a special place in the cultural tapestry of Assam. This traditional textile is intricately woven with floral motifs, reflecting the rich heritage and artistic finesse of the Tiwa community. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, Tiwa Gamosa plays a pivotal role in cultural celebrations, notably during traditional festivals such as Bihu. Moreover, the Gamosa serves as a symbol of respect and reverence, often presented to elders as a heartfelt gesture. The combination of its unique design and cultural significance underscores the importance of Tiwa Gamosa in both festive rituals and expressions of honor within the community.

There is not just one kind of Gamosa in Assam, but there are several and in a plethora of colours and

patterns by different tribes of people living in Assam such as Moran, Motok, Misings, Tiwas, Rabhas, Koch Rajbongs, etc¹⁴. It is a way of reiterating their status and distinct cultural identity within the larger Assamese society. People never go to the *naamghar* without it, a bridegroom is still welcomed with Gamosa and on Bohagbihu festival cows are bathed and then wiped with Gamosa. It persisted as a metaphor symbolizing acceptance, respect, and reverence.

The Gamosa has a very expansive identity. It is present in every sphere of Assamese life from existential to spiritual to romantic. Assamese filmmaker and film academician Maulee Senapati said that "Bihu come into Assam, when a young woman weaves Phulam Gamosa for her lover, every thread she picks up, every pattern that takes shape carries a lot of romantic aspiration. This is something no other culture has been able to achieve."

Assamese Gamosa in abroad

In 2013, the Assamese silk Gamosa achieved global recognition by securing a place in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest handmade towel.

In the global fashion arena, Assamese Gamosa designs are gaining widespread attention. However, amid this trend, some individuals in Assam have embraced alternative colour choices for Gamosa, opting for green and orange borders instead of the traditional red. Despite these variations, there is a collective sentiment among Assamese people to preserve the authentic value of the Gamosa without diluting its essence through imitation. As Assamese, there is a shared commitment to safeguard the unique designs exclusive to Gamosa, ensuring they are not replicated on mekhela chadar and other garments. Upholding the moral responsibility to preserve the socio-cultural significance and symbolize the rich heritage of Assamese culture, it becomes imperative for every Assamese individual to use Gamosa in a manner that respects its traditional integrity. Its widespread popularity and functionality have spurred textile industries in various countries to replicate similar products, albeit with inferior quality and designs that cannot match the craftsmanship of Assamese handloom. Despite machine-made alternatives being more affordable and attractive to consumers, they fall short in comparison to the authentic artistry of Assamese Gamosa. This imitation trend poses a challenge to the integrity of the traditional Gamosa, as it raises concerns about the potential dilution of its cultural and artisanal significance.

Gamosa holds cultural significance in various aspects of Assamese life, including apologizing, seeking blessings, participating in religious ceremonies, agricultural or domestic festivals, and marriages. In different regions, Gamosas are categorized based on the yarn thread count used in weaving. For instance, an *Aaxi Xuta Gamosa* refers to one woven with eighty thread counts, while a *Xathi Xuta Gamosa* denotes a sixty-thread count variant^{15,16}. The GI (Geographical Indication) tagging of Assamese Gamosa marks a significant milestone in recognizing and preserving the cultural heritage of this traditional textile. The official acknowledgment emphasizes the unique and authentic nature of Gamosa originating from Assam. This recognition not only safeguards the craft's geographical identity but also ensures that the centuries-old art of Gamosa weaving is protected against imitation. Assamese Gamosa receiving GI tag on 13th December, 2022 is a testament to the historical and cultural value embedded in its every thread, solidifying its status as a distinctive and cherished cultural symbol.

Conclusion

Gamosa is considered as an identity of a community and every community of Assam has their emotional attachment with this textiles items. The women member of Assamese family are mainly engaged with the oldest and widely recognized handloom weaving culture they always weave this special types of cloth with great care by their own hands and like to give it as gift to the near and dear one. It indicates love and affections, grace, fame and blossoms into ceremonial expressions. Gamosa is considered as a marked characteristics of everybody's own culture. Gamosa can distinguish a person from geographical area which they belong. Moreover, it reflects their rich cultural history.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the information provided on Gamosa.

Author Contributions

M.G and N.G contributed to the design, collection and implementation of the research. M.G and S.B analyzed the information till the writing of the manuscript.

Data Availability

Data supporting the result and findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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