

Assamese Traditional Icon 'Japi': History And Diversity

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ABSTRACT

The Japi plays a pivotal role in the Assamese society and its culture. It is a beautiful realization of man made construction. Japi has a rich and dynamic history of its own. The invention of Japi was done to protect farmers from the rain and heat while they are working in their farm lands. And in the later days of its evolution, the Japi became an integral symbol of representation for the Assamese society as a whole. During the days of Ahom regime, everyone from housewives, priest, daily workers to children everybody were seen using the Japi in their daily life. In a traditional Assamese wedding, there is a ritual for the groom in which he has to collect water from river, which is done, holding a Japi over his head. Even today, in the most rural parts of the state, this tradition is still alive, but the Japi is continuously being replaced by the easy availability of modern umbrellas.

With the advancement of time and creation, the Japi too started to evolve to its present form, where it is alarmingly replaced by the inventions of umbrella's and raincoats. Still, in a much prolific way, the farmers tediously use the Japi despite other inventions, as it is deep rooted in their culture to use one.

While in another aspect, the decorative Phoolam Japi is getting much limelight in modern times. In due course of time, the Phoolam Japi has become the integral part of the greater Assamese community and its culture and tradition. In cases of honoring guest and showing respect to someone the use of Phoolam Japi is extensively used in the Assamese community. Even in the medium of Bihu folk dance, the Japi adds a sense of pride and elegance to the entire dance form and its arrangements.

As a complete representation of the Assamese community, people like to decorate their houses and offices including the government with Japis of different size and structure.

This is a beautiful dilemma that, even in the stage of extinction of the Pani Japi and its siblings, or in other words, the motto with which the Japi was created to save oneself from the heat and rain is seen to be vanishing because of modern inventions. On the other hand, the Phoolam Japi has started to awe the global crowd and stand tall while representing the greater Assamese society.

Hence this study will, study the rich and progressive history of the iconic 'Japi' and will provide better scope for further discussions in this regard.

1. Introduction

Culture in a society, is just like a river flowing through the hearts of everyone forming or creating it. On the other hand, folklore, indigenosity and history, festivities, traditions, communal gatherings and events are the many tributaries of the mother river which we know as 'culture of a society'.

Since a very long time, the Assamese community too is a home to many diverse traditions and rituals, and one such indigenous art, which is used as an iconic representation of the assamese community at large, is an indigenously structured bamboo hat known as 'Japi'. This hat holds a significant place in the domain of cultural identity of the greater assamese community. The reason behind this iconic stature is because Japi was first thought and prepared to aid the hard working farmers, from both rain and heat whenever they worked in the paddy field. In the later process of evolution this useful tool was used in many other diverse areas like for honouring, for performances, for decoration, for livelihood, for traditional

practices and many more. Thus, today Japi can be seen contributing immensely in upholding the cultural identity of the community as a whole.

2. Objective and importance

An elaborate and analytical discussion of the following topics is the main objective of this letter and during further discussions the importance of the topics will be understood much profoundly.

- History and understanding of 'Japi'
- Its significance towards the indigenous culture.
- Modern adoption of the Japi and its evolution
- Economic value of the 'Japi' in regards to the cottage industry

2.1 Procedure and References

This discussion letter is prepared considering analytical and scientific convictions, historical references and

comparability of different relatable subjects. Apart from field study, references from books, articles, personal experiences and also internet research is taken.

3. Subject description

3.1 Japi is a centrally pointed hat, constructed by a handmade concoction of bamboo and Himalayan fan palm leaves (tokou). Some different types of japi are, 'Dang Japi', 'Bor Japi', 'Pani or Haluwa Japi', 'Horudoiya Japi' etc.

Dang japi: Japi which has a handle (Dang) to hold on, and no pointing at the centre is known as Dang Japi

Haluwa Japi: Japi that are prepared from bamboo and fan palm leaves are known as Haluwa Japi.

Pani Japi: Japi that are worn by farmers to prevent themselves from the heat and rain and usually constructed by the same concoction of bamboo and tal leaves is known as Pani Japi

Horudoiya Japi: Japi that are made from the 'Jati Baah' (a type of bamboo), the bamboo arms are finely cut, so that the weight of the Japi is light. There is an decorative elements attached to these type of Japi, red cloth is ornamentally wrapped around the Japi, and also on the pointed part red woollen strings is attached to it. If the size of this Japi is comparatively small, then it is known as horudoiya Japi and if the size is big, then it is known as Bordoiya Japi.

Studies show that the use of Japi by the Assamese community is much older than the Chinese counterpart. Although Japi is inscribed and deep rooted in the art and cultural form of the Chinese community. During its early stages, Japi was very minimalistic in structure and was acknowledged only as a hat amongst the people, the form of Japi that the Chinese used, were more like the structure of a pointed spinning top. It is assumed that, from the Chinese, the art of using a japi was taken forward to the other Southeast Asian countries.

There are evidences that shows that, the Mongoloid tribe of then Assam were the first community to usher the use of japi. On the contrary, Dr Upen Rabha Hackasam, after his extensive research came to a conclusion that the Mongoloid tribe of southwest china acknowledged that the Japi was an epitome of their community. He quotes "In the general conscience of the greater Indian community, there is an illustrative explanation about the 'Japi' which is known to be used by the Assamese community. Because not in any of the prehistoric scriptures and customs of the mainland India, there is not even a single illustration of the Japi. Hence it can be a conclusive statement that the art of Japi is not taken or adapted from any other tribe or community. Its sole propriety is with the greater Assamese community. There are many indigenous communities in Assam, but the importance and the art of Japi is vehemently illustrated by the Tai Ahom community of the same, and considering this fact we can conclude that, this art has found its way through to Assam through the Mongoloids of the Chinese region (Rabha Hackasam, Upen, 2008 : 174-175).

The evolution of the word 'Japi' holds a special significance in the history of communal art and culture. The Sanskrit word 'Sadi' (similar meaning, to close) is from where the word 'Japi' is believed to have originated and consequently it transformed into 'Japi'. The casting of the six angled chamber of the Japi is made from, young bamboo stems. The chamber is held together by two equally sized bamboo frames, on the top of which is covered with sun dried Himalayan fan palm leaves, to give it a shape of a hat and also which works like an umbrella. Because of the numbers of layers of the palm leaves, this process in Assamese is known as 'Japi de' (to mount), from which the word 'Japi' is derived.

According to different places and different communities of the northeastern region of India, 'Japi' holds different names and different varieties in structure. The people or the community of the valley and plain region, use 'Pani Japi' or 'Haluwa Japi' when they go for traditional farming practices. Similarly, house wives, mothers and grandmother who looks after their kid while doing household chores use a specially designed round japi which is sewed in silk. People from the hilly region, uses a convenient type of Japi known as 'Soi or Khasia Japi'. Nepalese and Bhutanese people, while carrying pile of grass on their backs, they use specially designed long form of japi, to save themselves from the leeches that gets carried with the grass. People in the village area, who survive by the art of fishing, finds japi to be one of the most important tools for themselves.

The way of living of a civilized society, the traditions, rituals and habits that people have been following for ages, all accumulate to form the cultural identity of one's community. The way of perceiving evolution and survival of a community is also the cultural identity of the society. Literature, art and skill, social indulgence are the main pillars that holds and completes the cultural identity of a society. Hence, these aspects are the most important part of a society.

As Dr Nabin Chandra Sharma quotes "The demands of the daily life lead to the origination of tradition and culture in a society: the necessities of our everyday life is the main reason behind the birth of culture and tradition. The art of making the useful, construction of house, the art of cooking are all important aspects of any culture" (Sarma, Upendranath. 2000 : 77). Likewise indigenous culture can be divided into five sub types.

1. Folkcrafting
2. Indigenous art
3. Cultural history and knowledge
4. Indigenous clothes and dresses.
5. Indigenous communication methods

In a traditional society, the men and women keep a good check on the essentials for everyday life, which traditionally they tend to craft those items by their own hand. And this form of crafting is called 'folk crafts or handy crafts'. These two terms can be also known to be a part of a larger industry known as cottage industry. Apart from the art of crafting daily necessities, sometimes the art of recreation and celebration holds a dominant position in societies which we know as 'Kala or Art'. But the point of discussion here is that, 'Japi' act as a

fortune harbinger to the cottage industry as well as to the forum of art and recreation. Because, japi is used both as a daily necessity by the individual and can be used for recreational purposes too. Also the art of Japi making has an immense economic importance in the society. Hence japi holds a significant place in the larger assamese community as a whole.

3.2 'Japi': In Assamese folk culture

Japi holds a very important part in the assamese community. Both the men and women from all the parts of the northeastern region, hills, valleys and plains use Japi in a much prolific way. Hence the relation of japi with the larger Assamese community is very closely attached.

*"Japi lathi tiyoni tona
lyake arile dinote kona"*

The farmers use japi to save themselves from the heat and rain. The use of japi can be seen even today in certain farming lands of India and Assam. The *Haluwa Japi*, still finds its place today in the farming lands. and from this aspect, the names of the two types of Japi are discovered, *Halua japi* and *Gorokhia Japi*. In the later days of evolution till today, Japi has been one of the most intrinsic parts of the greater Assamese society.

In the traditional days, the size and ornamentation of the Japi illustrated the person who is wearing it. When the elders of the village travel long distances and when the headpriest of the *Namghor*(temple) goes out to travel, they had to hold the *Bor Japi* with them, and that was supposed to be a tradition back then. Similarly the female members of the community too use *BorJapi*, when they go for walks and other outdoor work. The children of the cow herders, use bamboo to make comparatively small form of Japi known as *Uka Japi*'.

In a traditional Assamese wedding, the use of '*Bor Japi*' in performing certain important rituals is seen extensively. it is seen that in some important occasions like, death ceremony, while taking blessings from the priests, while reciting the Bhagavad Gita, Satya Narayan offerings and some more, a bamboo pole is erected upon which the *Bor Japi* is worn and below it, offerings to the Gods are provided. Even in situations, when a priest or an elderly important person pass by, it was in tradition that the worn *japi* should be brought down to show them respect by the other population. This tradition of bowing down the *Japi* to show respect was even taken by The East India Company or the Britishers, they made the general public to bow their *japi* down if any British officer passes by.

Even the indigenous sub groups consider Japi to be an integral part of their daily life. The Boros and the Kacharis considers it as a pride to be the bearer of a beautiful Japi. It is a matter of fact that the Boros and the Kacharis believed a person should wear a japi on his head, and tie a baby on its chest and do the work of cultivation of certain fruits and vegetable. It is believed to bring good fortune to the society and also the crops bear a large number of fruits even at low heights. In the greater community of Boro and the Kachari's there is an interesting form of folk dance(in Deodhai) known as "Khwhphri Shivanai(the form of rotating Japis)"

In the Tai Ahom community, on the day of 'Xaat Bihu', a special form of dance, known basically as the selection of groom dance, here, appropriate girls select her groom and offers him a *Horudoiya Japi* in front of the entire crowd and performs a welcome dance for her newly selected groom. After which, the respectable family members organize their marriage. The use of Japi is very diverse in the Tai Ahom community. Chao Lokeshwar Gogoi quotes "The people of the Tai Ahom community uses *Bordoia, Horudoiya, lailingiya, Pani tupi, Haluwa, Dang, Boroiloga, Joruloga*, Golden clothed *Pani Jjapi*, Silver clothed *TupaJjapi, Banatar aangothi*(ring), *xiya, bonkaora*, golden clothed palm leaf japi. They used and practiced with a variety of different Japi. In the past it was a tradition in the community that, after a girl's marriage, whenever she visits her parents house and her husbands house, she has to wear a *Horudoiya Japi* on her head everytime." (Gogoi, Lokeshwar,1990 : 82-83).

The second type of Japi can reach a length of 2metres. These Japis are used by the women of Bengal and are profoundly made of metals, ornamentals, precious stones and gems. In this instance "in the administration of the Tai Ahom community uses different type of decorated japi to honor their rank, as Buragohain, Borgohain, Borpatrogohain,' golden clothed *Pani japi and Tupi Japi*'. And their wives use feather fleeted and golden clothed *Xiya Japi*'. Barua and Borphukon uses, '*Kukhoxiya Borjapi*', silver clothed *Pani Japi*, and sometimes, "Golden clothed *Japi*", the Phukon rank holders mostly used 'silver clothed *Pani japi* and *Uka Borjapi*."

In the book '*Saatxori Axomor Buronji*' by Dr Suryakumar Bhuyan, there are some references of the uses of Japi, as "*aru je xiya japi loi, tate banotor uproot anek boroniya xuta, aru rupor hunor gunare bonkora bor bor joru logai, upor tupot puwalmonire gotha daalpat logua hunor sulate gos kori diya. Anekua hunere xiya japike teenijona dangoriyar ghoyniyekok mukhyo kori boruani, borphukonaani, sorar phukononi, somua phukononi hokolue pai. Kintu ghaikijonar bonkora besi. Sorar phukon keijonar olop kom. Tatutkoi somua keijonar kom. Aikrome itor borua phukon hokolor ghoynihokolor kom, aibilakor baje somua, jalbhari phukon adi pas jon, aaru mel dogiyare phukon keijon, aihokolor ghoyni hokole homoi mote rupor sula joru loi, bon kom. Itoroloi daal- paat, hinkoi loi, sopa akupah bosai. Aar bage rupor sopa lobo porau ase, lobo nupuaou ase.*" (Taher, Mahammad,2005: 754)

In the Tiwa community, 'Dighol Hojiya Japi' is used as poetic impressions amongst its people. The same goes with the people from *Pati Rabha*. There are many poetic and artistic impressions of Japi that are famous amongst its people in their folk culture and tradition. The use of Japi is very crucial in forest songs(Bongeet), bihu songs, Mangaldai region's "Rangeli geet". In the Goalpara region, '*Bang diya Japi*, is represented as a symbol of youth in their songs and poem.

1. "*Moina jaonge ujoni rajyale
Tumaloi anim nu ki?
Tumale anime horudoiya japi
Tupot roopor sula di*".(Bihugeet)
2. "*Sonapur bozaaror bhonga Japi tu
Nalage o nalge dangar Japi*"

(Lower assam karbi bihu geet)

3. “ Nao henguliya botha henguliya
Aru henguliya soi
Senair murete japi henguliya
Bijuli bahore doi”

(Upper Assam Bihu Geet or Bo geet)

4. “ Ase Jodi kopalot ghuri furim sohorot
Dyiu haatot dhora dhori koi
Nai Jodi kopalot kheti korim potharot
Murete bhonga japi loi
(Modern Bihu song)

5. ‘ Bwng bwng o’ nulitang o’
Maatit ujai o’ gui;
Sutkhani o’ lalhor sawa o
Petot lagil o’ jui (rabha people’s bwng dia geet)

In different folk literature, the use of the word Japi is very prominent. Even in the traditional marriage songs(Bia naam) of the assamese community, there are several uses of the word ‘Japi’

Like

“ Tokou pator japi
Dora ghoror manuh keitar akebare phutoni”

In Dakor boson,

“Porihora dhan nai behaibe hat,
Porihora japi nai ji sole baat”

In folk bihu songs, the illustration of the word japi is shown below,

“ Japi lathi tiyoni
Neribi o neribi
Aeriboge lagile
Thioe thioe moribi”

In the name of varieties of Japi, and the process of making one, names of many places are inscribed. For example- *Japi hoja gaon*(Howrahghat), *Japi hojiya*(Amguri, Laluk, Demow), *Japi dhora*(Sonari), *Japi hotiya*(Lahowal), *Japarkuchi*(Nalbari), *Japir bondo*(Udarband), *Chaykata*(Bondapara) and many more are famous in this regard.

The fact that, japi is a symbol of attraction and rank in a community is explained in the following lines

“ Murkanya/kamarfodiya Japi
Kamarkuchiya/sualkuchiya aapi
Sarthebaria luta
Hazowalir futa”

On the contrary “ *Sur gole, buddhi borokhun gole Japi*” , this type of famous “ Fokora – Jojona” makes the people of the community understand the value of a japi, and also inscribes that, if the japi is not worn at appropriate times, then something bad surely will happen.

The word Japi is even used to name certain locally made ornaments like, ‘ *Japi anguthi*(ring), *Japitupiya anguthi*(ring), *Japi hojuya anguthi*.

Chayhojiya, Sotea, Phukan , these are titles or ranks given to the appropriate people, and interestingly these names find their roots in the word ‘Japi ‘

3.3 Communal aspect of a Japi

The economical aspects and the art of making Japi held a very dominant aspect in the assamese community. Since time immemorial, the lives of indigenous people have been following on amidst the *Japi* in every possible way. But unfortunately, in modern times, the age old skill and importance of japi has seen tremendously decreased. In times like today, where foldable umbrellas that can be kept in a small bag, also that lightweight raincoat that can be adjusted in the small chambers under the bike seat, the diminishing identity of the *Japi* is understandable . But on the other side, people who are working in the agriculture and bamboo sector, also fisherman of the locality have not yet abandoned the use the *Japi*, because of which, the art of making a japi is still alive. The technology advancement and modern tools like the umbrella and the raincoat stands quite tall in front of the *Japi*, but considering other aspects and use of japi, it is attaining the respect that the japi demands. Traditionally prepared *Pani japi*, *Halua japi* or the *Dang Japi* are replaced by the big attractive *Borjapi* that the Ahom community prepared. The evolution of the japi continues. This way the japi found its rightful place as a decorative household material, and it grew tremendously famous.

Likewise in the preceding time, the japi was used as a token of honor to chief guests, important people, and also in decoration of death rituals and ceremony, because the *Japi* projected its image as an harbinger of good luck and fortune

Legendary Jyoti Prasad Agarwal in his first featured film “Jaymati”, not only showed the *Japi* dance but also uplifted the demeanor of both the *japi* and the dance at the same time.

Eventually in the process of evolution, the *Japi* started taking many shapes and sizes, some of them are like the lotus flower, and in some places one can find flat *Japi*. There are some *Japi*’s that are shaped in the form of a triangle. Also to mention that, five pointed *Japi* are also found, but they are hard to find and their price is considerably higher than the other types.

Today these *Japis* are made according to the necessities and requirements of the customers.

And the most popular *Japi* amongst all the other is the ‘*Phoolam Japi*’ (Floral *Japi*).

The smallest form of the *Phoolam Japi* is only four inches, and is known as ‘*Badge Japi*’

This small *Japis* are taken as badges that are pinned or tied in the clothes or the traditional *gamusa* to celebrate honor and unity . Likewise, the makers of the *Japi* prepare different sizes, according to the customers need.

While keeping in mind the conditions of today’s reality, the change that *japi* has gone through in so many years, can be

considered rightful in a much broad way. Eminent folk scholar Dr Nabin Chandra Sharma, in his writing “folk culture: tradition and change” quotes that “within tradition, change, addition and progress always stays” (Sarma, Upendranath.2000 : 29).

Folk, folklore and tradition of any society is immortal in nature, because as time progresses in years and centuries, some cultural enigmas always propagate the notion of tradition and folklore in a different perspective.

Tradition constitutes the past, present and the future. Just like the present cannot exist without the past, similarly the future cannot exist without the present,. Traditions and folklore too travels in all the dimensions of past, present and future. There is no death to tradition, its only changes, gets added or undergoes progress. This is the only reason why traditions being very old are also so new and fresh in nature.

There is no doubt in the fact that the notion of tradition depends and runs alongside its folklore and culture, but it cannot be concluded that without tradition, culture cannot survive. Because the roots of culture can be projected even in the dimensions of folkart and other art forms. The mother tree of culture is very huge is dimension and traditions being an important projection or branch of it. Hence, amidst the falling popularity of japi among the certain aspects of the culture at the same time it can also be projected in a different perspective, that the modern art form of japi, instills fresh life to the age old heart of japi making tradition and its rich history.

The gravity of this fact involves even among the policies of a developing nation. In any fast pace developing country, the wise ones will desperately search for the golden and rich history of the nation as a whole, and takes the glorious pride attached to it. They use this pride to move fast in the rails of development and progress. And the country as a whole, takes this pride to beautifully inscribe a better future for them. In simple words, the country gets motivation from its rich culture and history, and uses this motivation to create a better future for the nation as a whole.

This concept gives rise to the method of “Folklorimus”. the greater community or the indigenous people of a region celebrates their traditional festivals, events, gatherings, poems, songs etc which in due course of time is accepted by all the sects of a developing society, such as the urban and rural people. This process of acceptability of age old traditions by everyone is defined as “Folklorimus”. The greater

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Aassamese community has rightly ordained the *japi* in its highest form of understanding, the *Japi* has been included and celebrated in age old, traditions, *bihu* festivals, for honor, in literature and art and many more. Thus, the *Japi* has earned the respect of being the second representation of the community as a whole.

It is to bring in mind that the change the art of japi making is undergoing now, is because of the invention of much developed construction tools and also in less time and cost, preparation of cheap and quality products (umbrella and raincoat) took over the market. Understanding the modern technological advancement and sophisticated tools for daily life and also the expense, that is what holding the art of japi making in a very poor state. This art is a scarce resource now. Because of which many japi artist could not hold this art to earn a decent livelihood and moves on to something else and hence the tradition is dying at a fast rate. The government must introspect the situation and provide additional support the community of japi makers. During the time of Ahoms, the kings supported this art in a much prolific way and hence those day, the *Japi* made a huge market in the community.

Today, the highest producers of japi in India is the district Nalbari of Assam. There is a phrase in Assamese that goes like this

“Nalbarir japi, Sualkuchir aapi(girl)
Bokakhator pera(sweet) Orang'r gulla(sweet)”

The *Japis* from Nalbari, has been successful in bringing international fame to the folk artform. It is calculated that, in one hour, one thousand *Japis* are prepared today. Many localities from the district Nalbari, earns their daily bread through this art form. It is a commitment from these artists to keep the wheel of *Japi* making moving, they want to propagate the age of tradition of their fathers and grand fathers. But the new generation fears to adopt this art in their life, only because of government's negligence. And this part of the cottage industry is not able to find a decent and modern market for more Japi production.

Political, economical or technical reasons are their because of which the makers of Japi, do not actually get the amount of money they should get for their production, but the fact that the popularity of Japi today is very appreciable and welcoming. And with positive government intervention, this art form has the potential to rise high amidst the entire country and also can earn solid international popularity.