

Weaving Identity: Uttariya, Gamcha, and the Cultural Politics of the Rajbanshi Community in North Bengal

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Abstract

Textiles are not merely objects of daily life, in many cases, they also carry a community's identity, tradition, social memory, and cultural identity. Specific textiles, their colours, designs, and ways of use visually express the history, social experience, and collective self-identity of a community. This paper analyses the cultural significance and political symbolism of the Gerua Uttariya (Saffron ceremonial stole) and the Haldiya or Holud Gamcha (Yellow ceremonial stole) in the Rajbanshi society. The research relies on personal interviews, observations of how the two colours are used, and an examination of related documents and news reports. The analysis indicates that the Gerua Uttariya symbolises Panchanan Barma's leadership, Kshatriya status, and the tradition of Kshatriya Samiti, while the Haldiya Gamcha symbolises hospitality, auspiciousness, cultural awakening, and political presence. Drawing on the concepts of Igor Kopytoff's "cultural biography of things", Maurice Halbwachs's "collective memory", and Pierre Bourdieu's "symbolic power", the study examines that the two colours are not interchangeable alternatives; rather, they signify distinct layers of Rajbanshi identity within different sociocultural and political contexts. The Gerua Uttariya preserves historical continuity, whereas Haldiya Gamcha fosters a language of unity, dignity, and collective identity among the wider masses.

Keywords: Rajbanshi, Gerua Uttariya, Haldiya Gamcha, Cultural Identity, Politics

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I. Introduction

The Rajbanshis, also known as Koch-Rajbanshis, are indigenous people in various parts of South Asia. Peaceful coexistence, a Kshatriya identity, and an agrarian lifestyle are notable features of their society. The Uttariya and Gamcha have long been essential handwoven textiles in Rajbanshi society. Beyond their everyday use, when draped over a guest's shoulders, they become symbols of honour, group identity at social events, and collective presence at movements or political meetings. This multidimensional function of the same cloth unites the social intimacy, hospitality, self-respect, and cultural nostalgia of this society. While ceremonial stole may be considered the nearest English equivalent of its honorific use, the terms Gamcha and Uttariya are retained here because they more accurately convey its indigenous history and social meaning.

This study asks how the Gerua Uttariya has become a living symbol of Panchanan Barma, the Kshatriya movement, and Rajbanshi Identity, and how the Haldiya Gamcha, beyond everyday use and hospitality, has evolved into a symbol of broader cultural awakening and the public sphere. The purpose of the article is not to prove the supremacy or originality of either of these two colours; rather, it explains how Rajbanshi society has imbued the Uttariya and Gamcha with symbolic and political meaning across various historical contexts, and how they continue to carry that meaning today.

In this study, cultural politics refers to the process through which a cultural symbol becomes associated with identity, recognition, and power in the public sphere. A textile is not political only when it is used in meetings or processions; When a group expresses its identity and demands through it, it gains political significance. Therefore, the Gerua Uttariya and Haldiya Gamcha have been analysed as cultural-political symbols developed through memory, rituals, organisations, and movements.

Existing studies on the Rajbanshi society and the Kshatriya movement have emphasised upanayana, social reform, education, caste politics, organisational development, political representation, regional movements (Kamtapur movement and Greater Cooch Behar movement), and identity-based politics (Basu, 2003; Basistha, 2017; Barman, 2007; Barman, 2025; Bahadur, 2019; Sanyal, 1965). Basria (2026) also discusses changes in dress

and cultural continuity. However, the transformation of the Gamcha into the Uttariya, the association of collective memory with colour, and the ways Gerua and Haldiya enrich a unified Rajbanshi identity from a different sphere have not received sufficient attention individually. This paper attempts to fill this gap. Here, the Uttariya and Gamcha are analysed not only as symbols of Rajbanshi culture and dignity but also as means of publicly expressing the Rajbanshis' identity, unity, and political demands.

The study employed qualitative and interpretive methods, based on primary and secondary sources. As a field source, it draws on personal interviews with 70 participants from the Rajbanshi community, including intellectuals and older people. Of the eight districts of North Bengal, Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, and Jalpaiguri were selected as key areas of the Rajbanshi movement. The researcher conducted interviews on the social, cultural and political significance of Gamcha and Uttariya in these three districts in June-July 2026 through snowball sampling. The study provides insights into the history, social significance, usage, and contemporary relevance of Gerua and Haldiya stoles. The researchers also observed the use of the two-colour Uttariya in Rajbanshi ceremonies and in larger social, cultural, and political events, as well as on social media platforms. This qualitative study does not claim statistical representativeness; it identifies recurring meanings through thematic analysis. Although the Gerua Uttariya and the Haldiya Gamcha are distinct textiles, this article refers to both as Uttariya because they are similarly draped around the neck or shoulders. As a member of the Rajbanshi community, the scholar's lived experience helped them understand the cultural meaning in this regard more deeply. The researchers cross-checked interviews, direct observations, and written sources to minimise potential bias. The study ensured reliability by verifying the evidence's consistency.

This study applies three concepts. Kopytoff's "cultural biography of things" explains how an object's social meaning changes with its context of use (Kopytoff, 1986); thus, the Gamcha can shift from an everyday object to a symbol of honour and identity. Halbwachs's "collective memory" explains the memory-based meanings of the Gerua Uttariya and Haldiya Gamcha (Halbwachs, 1992). Bourdieu's "symbolic power" shows who can establish these meanings as legitimate and acceptable in the public sphere (Bourdieu, 1991). Together, these concepts distinguish community self-representation from political parties' electoral use of these symbols.

II. From Gamcha to Uttariya: Honour and Social Relations

In Rajbanshi society, the Gamcha has acquired cultural significance as a symbol of identity through its regular use in agriculture and for family needs. Because it is easy to wash and carry, people wear it on the head or shoulders, and around the waist. The Gamcha is a rectangular cotton cloth woven on handlooms, and it has been associated with the prevalent behaviour and status of the Rajbanshi society (Koch Rajbongshi Cultural Society, 2015). Therefore, its practical role and cultural value are inseparable. Over time, it has become a part of labour, family memories, and social intimacy.

The distinction between Gamcha, Angcha, and Uttariya also needs clarification. In community sources, the Angcha is identified as a long traditional men's cloth and the Gamcha as a separate rectangular cotton cloth. The same source also mentions other cloths, including Dagla, Parna, Kheta and Jol-Gamcha (Basria, 2026; Koch Rajbongshi Cultural Society, 2015). In this study, the term Uttariya refers to an honorific Gamcha worn around the neck or over the shoulders. When guests, elders, teachers, artists, or political representatives carry Gamchas, the textile becomes a symbol of honour and social recognition. This transformation happens primarily by welcoming someone and draping a Gamcha over them. Bhakat (2026) has documented the household use of the Haldiya Gamcha, as well as its presence at weddings, religious rituals, fairs, and gatherings. As a result, the use of the Gamcha in political meetings and movements is not accidental; its former honorific connotation has made it an acceptable symbol of identity in the public sphere.

The yellow and green colours of the Haldiya Gamcha further expand its cultural meaning. In the interview, most participants explained that Haldiya evokes the golden hue of ripe paddy and signifies agricultural prosperity, dignity, and auspiciousness in Rajbanshi cultural life. At the same time, green symbolises fertile agricultural land, nature-based life, vitality, and cultural continuity. Roy (2025) associates the popular yellow Patani with royal lineage and the auspicious colour of marriage. Basria (2026) mentions the use of red and yellow colours in festive costumes. These facts do not directly trace the history of the Haldiya Gamcha; however, they help explain Haldiya's positive cultural meaning in Rajbanshi society. According to the researchers' direct observation, the use of yellow-green clothes and different coloured Patanis, along with the Haldiya Gamcha, in contemporary social, cultural, and political events reflects Rajbanshi identity and political footprint. Thus, the combination of yellow and green represents Rajbanshi agricultural life, a sense of nature, social respect, and collective identity in the Haldiya Gamcha.

Kopytoff's idea of the "cultural biography of things" helps interpret the Gamcha's significance as fluid rather than static, changing with its use. The same textile, employed in household chores and farming, becomes a mark of respect when placed over a guest's shoulder, or a symbol of shared identity during meetings or protests.

III. Gerua Uttariya: Kshatriya Dignity and Panchanan Barma's Legacy

The fieldwork revealed a memoir about the Gerua Uttariya. Many participants interpreted it as an earlier identity of the Rajbanshi Kshatriyas and as an organisational tradition prevalent around 1910, initiated by Panchanan Barma. They revealed that he introduced the “shield, sword, and plough”, these three symbols, as the primary emblem of the Kshatriya Samiti, which are imprinted on the Gerua Uttariya. Its use is also evident in present Kshatriya Samiti ceremonies. As a result, Gerua is not just a reminder of the past; it is a living practice of the present. In respondents' statements, this colour is associated with Kshatriya status, Panchanan Barma's leadership, social discipline, and the association's continuity.



Figure 1: Gerua Uttariya with shield, sword, and plough motifs.

Note: Photograph by the author.

The self-esteem context of the Kshatriya movement is particularly important in realising the relevance of the Gerua Uttariya. Through this movement, Rajbanshi Kshatriyas asserted their Kshatriya identity and social status by adopting the sacred thread (Upavita) (Barman & Barman, 2025). This movement was not merely a change of conduct; it was an attempt to build dignity, education, organisation, and collective confidence against degradation (Basu, 2003; Basistha, 2013). The Gerua Uttariya has been preserved in the collective memory as part of the cultural language of that broader self-assertion.

The 1913 administrative report and the 1954 constitution of the Kshatriya Samiti did not mention the Gerua Uttariya or a specific dress code (Kshatriya Samiti, 1954; Roy, 1913). Although these two documents were not meant to record clothing style, that does not invalidate the Rajbanshis' collective memory and social uses associated with it. As interviews and current usage show, Rajbanshi history is preserved in written documents as well as in dress and customs.

Interviews and current Kshatriya practices suggest that the main meaning of the Gerua colour in Rajbanshi society did not develop from contemporary party politics; it carries memories of the Kshatriya movement, self-restraint, social reform, and Kshatriya status led by Panchanan Barma. Its use keeps the history of the Kshatriya Samiti and Rajbanshi self-respect visible to the new generation. Therefore, interpreting this symbol should prioritise the Rajbanshi society's own history and social memory.

Halbwachs's concept of “collective memory” is applied to analyse Panchanan Barma's relationship with the Gerua Uttariya; it is not based solely on written records. These memories also persist in contemporary Kshatriya rituals and recurring social discourses. The Rajbanshis remember the past through practices and discussions. However, this collective memory has not been used as direct historical evidence.

IV. Haldiya Gamcha: Auspiciousness and Political Recognition

As mentioned earlier, the Haldiya Gamcha symbolises goodwill, honour, and cultural identity in daily practice and ceremonies in Rajbanshi society. Interviewees linked the Haldiya Gamcha to three contexts: honouring guests at social ceremonies, expressing Rajbanshi identity at cultural events, and demonstrating collective presence at political gatherings. The researchers also observed how the Haldiya Gamcha functions in these settings. Its popularity therefore comes not merely from its visual appeal, but from its wider recognition as a symbol of Rajbanshi dignity and collective pride.



Figure 2: *Haldiya Gamcha with a yellow body and green borders.*
Note: Photograph by the author.

The field study also documented a popular oral narrative in which Mahabir Chila Rai performed a special ritual before setting out for battle, released a white pigeon coloured with turmeric, and followed the direction of its flight. This brought him military victory. Since then, the colour of raw turmeric has been regarded as auspicious, and this tradition is linked to the origin of the Haldiya flag, or Gamcha. The traditional use of the Haldiya Gamcha is documented in the Rajbanshi and Sonowal Kachari communities (Koch Rajbongshi Cultural Society, 2015; Duwarah, 2022; Deb, 2024). However, there is no evidence of which society used it first. Banshi Badan Barman, a leader of the Greater Cooch Behar movement, claims that his GCPA organisation introduced the Haldiya Gamcha in Cooch Behar in 1998 as a symbol of auspiciousness and change (Barman, 2024). That year did not mark the origin of the Gamcha, but rather a demand for its political expansion in North Bengal. However, while regional leaders in North Bengal trace the origin of the Haldiya Gamcha to movement politics in the late 1990s, several scholars note that it was first popularised as an emblem of distinct ethnic assertion by the All Koch Rajbanshi Students' Union (AKRSU) in Lower Assam. Today, in the Rajbanshi and Kurmi movements, the Haldiya Gamcha has become a living symbol of identity and demand (Barman, 2024). The Kurmi movement can be observed in West Bengal as well as Jharkhand and Odisha ("Rail roko", 2025).

Anyway, in the late 1990s, the politicisation of the Haldiya Gamcha increased in North Bengal. By using the Haldiya Gamcha during the movement, the Rajbanshis have publicly expressed their identity, demands, and unity. It is more reasonable to understand the practice of the Haldiya Gamcha in the Greater Cooch Behar movement as politicisation within the community rather than political appropriation. The organisers transformed a familiar cultural symbol of auspiciousness and honour into a visible language of unity and collective demands. The symbol was used in socio-political movements within the Rajbanshi society's own cultural practices, allowing the participants to present themselves as a distinct political community. At the same time, the Gamcha retained its earlier social and cultural meaning.

The Haldiya Gamcha has become a visible symbol of Rajbanshi unity, identity, and strength in public meetings, processions, and mass gatherings. Over the past two years, the Haldiya Gamcha has emerged as a symbol of the Rajbanshis resurgence, as noted by Ratan Barma (Barman, 2021). A news report (2024) notes that leaders of the Trinamool Congress (TMC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and other political parties in North Bengal also drape this Gamcha (Barman, 2024).

This expansion illuminates the cultural politics of the Haldiya Gamcha. For the Rajbanshi community, it symbolises identity, unity, and collective socio-political strength. Political parties use the Gamcha in various programmes, including the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, to highlight cultural closeness to Rajbanshi voters and attract their support. Meanwhile, the Rajbanshi community uses it to assert its identity and political demands. These two ways of using it reflect the cultural politics of the Haldiya Gamcha, where the Rajbanshi community's self-representation intersects with political parties' strategies to garner public support. However, unless it is connected to the community's demands concerning language, education, livelihood, the handloom sector, and regional development, its use may remain limited to electoral symbolism.

Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic power", the study examines how the meaning of the Haldiya Gamcha may be rooted in power dynamics. Rajbanshi organisations use it as a symbol of self-identity and a means to articulate their demands. On the other hand, political parties such as the TMC and the BJP use the Haldiya Gamcha to express respect and closeness to the Rajbanshi community in electoral politics. However, if this usage is not grounded in the community's actual demands, it risks becoming political appropriation.

V. Gerua and Haldiya: Coexistence and Continuity

Interviews, observations, and written sources indicate that the Haldiya Gamcha has not replaced the Gerua Uttariya; the two-coloured textiles function side by side in different contexts. While the Gerua Uttariya is

mainly used to commemorate Panchanan Barma, the Kshatriya Samiti, and the social and religious ceremonies of Kshatriya society, the practice of the Haldiya Gamcha is quite extensive. It features in daily life, the welcoming of guests, weddings, cultural events, regional movements such as the Kamtapur movement and the Greater Cooch Behar movement, and political rallies. Its market demand is also rising. The same individual carries a Gerua Uttariya for Kshatriya rituals and a Haldiya Gamcha for cultural or political events. This context-specific usage reflects various facets of the Rajbanshi identity.

Viewing this coexistence as a conflict between tradition and modernity is absolutely inappropriate. The Gerua Uttariya embodies the legacy of the early 20th-century Kshatriya movement and the quest for self-respect. Equally importantly, the Haldiya Gamcha makes the Rajbanshi identity visible in the broader public sphere, spanning social honours, cultural events, and political rallies. The two colours side by side show that Rajbanshi society has adapted to new social and political circumstances while preserving its traditions.

Regional variations in the design, name, and use of the Gerua Uttariya and the Haldiya Gamcha exist across various Rajbanshi-inhabited areas. This variety is not division; It is the regional diversity of Rajbanshi culture. However, when an organisation or region establishes its own custom as the only “authentic” Rajbanshi identity, other customs lose significance. This is where cultural politics becomes clear- who will determine the meaning of the Rajbanshi tradition and which regional form will receive popular recognition. Therefore, cultural politics is not limited to the use of political party symbols; It is also related to the ability to identify and represent within the society. Therefore, it is important to give equal respect to all regional customs.

VI. Conclusion

This study shows that in Rajbanshi society, the Gamcha and Uttariya have moved beyond mere functional cloths to become symbols of honour, memory, cultural identity, and political influence. Across events of the contemporary Kshatriya Samiti and in participants’ memories, the Gerua Uttariya embodies the history of the Kshatriya movement led by Panchanan Barma, as well as the legacy of social reform and self-respect. At the same time, the Haldiya Gamcha is associated with daily use, auspicious occasions, the welcoming of guests, and cultural identity; its use in the movements and party politics of North Bengal has made the Rajbanshi presence even more visible. However, an all-party initiative becomes meaningful only when it is linked to demands concerning language, education, livelihood, the handloom industry, and regional development. Kopytoff’s concept helps explain the shifting social value of the Gamcha, Halbwachs’s concept helps account for the collective memory associated with the Gerua Uttariya, and Bourdieu’s concept helps elucidate the power to define the meaning of these symbols. The relationship between the Haldiya Uttariya and the Haldiya Gamcha is not one of replacement or mutual exclusion; rather, their coexistence embodies both the Rajbanshi community’s historical legacy and contemporary expression. In this way, the history and cultural significance of these textiles will remain alive for future generations.

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