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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SERICULTURE INDUSTRY OF INDIA AS A MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD

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### Abstract:

*Industry is the pace- setter of modern life and industrialization is the way to solve the problems of poverty, unemployment and under employment in the developing countries like India. It is glorious to think that the sericulture industry can be a source of self- employment as well as wage employment in the rural areas. The importance of any industry lies not in production alone, but also in creating employment and generating income among the population. Though sericulture was known to the people since long, yet, no particular attempt ever directed to develop it into a distinct branch of cultivation. However inspite its limitations, the silk industry is still flourishing since long and definitely we can assume that it will be able to cross the other limitations also in near future. Therefore the sericulture industry required such urgent steps which would preserve its own unique traditional features and qualities as well as can give the industry a new viable look.*

### KEYWORDS:

sericulture, silk industry, Indian silk.

### INTRODUCTION

Silk has been recognized as a textile fiber. For its superiority, it is said 'as a perennial queen' of textiles and even today no other fabric can match its luster and elegance.<sup>1</sup> The history of silk is as old as that of civilization itself. In India, sericulture was introduced about 2000 years ago. The oldest known writings on silk are found in the Ramayana. Over thousands of years, it has become an inseparable part of Indian culture and tradition. In the cultural heritage of the Indians, silk also has a sacred place.

There are two distinct branches of the silk industry, one is concerned with the rearing of the silk worm and includes the reeling and spinning of silk; the other with the weaving of silk. Sericulture, on which the silk industry survives, is an agro-industry, the end product of which is 'silk'. It provides jobs and generates income in the rural areas. There are four different types of silk, each of which is produced by different silk worms which also feed different host plants. There are – Muga silk (*Antheraea assamensis*), Eri silk (*Philosamia ricini*), Mulberry silk (*Bombyx mori*L) and Tasar silk (*Antheraea Mytilta*).

India is the second largest silk producing country in the World after China. While China produces superior power loom fabrics, Indian Silks are unique in designs using the traditional handloom weaving technique. Indian silk thus has established a prominent position in the rich western markets facing hard competition from China.<sup>2</sup>

In almost all states of India, a variety of silks are produced. It is produced from Kerala to Kashmir, Maharashtra to Manipur. Reeling cocoons are produced in places like – Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Punjab, West Bengal, Manipur, Assam etc. India is the only country where Tropical Tasar silk is produced.<sup>3</sup> Out of the 576 lakhs Indian villages, about 45000 villages have adopted sericulture as a means of livelihood, providing gainful employment to 50 lakhs people, mostly the economically weaker section.<sup>4</sup> In India, sericulture is practiced as an indigenous industry with the most labour intensive sectors of agriculture

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and industry. All the sections of the industry i.e. mulberry cultivation, silkworm, seed production, silkworm rearing, cocoon reeling, raw silk throwing, silk weaving, collection of by products and its processing etc. provide large scale employment to the rural mass. For this peculiar nature of this industry, the Indian planners have regarded it best suits for the ideal growth of rural India.

Assam, the only place where muga silk is produced is well known for silk textiles both mulberry, muga as well as endi textiles. Infact, Assam is the largest producer of muga silk, 'the golden fibre'.<sup>5</sup> Assam produces about 10% of the total natural silk produced in India. There are 9173 sericulture villages in Assam. In the Silk Industry Report, H. Maxwell and E.C. Anson had reported that as a mulberry silk producing area, Assam is distinct. Its production used locally and its production is one of the many activities that families practice in addition to many other occupations. They also argued that it was extremely difficult to estimate the extent and possibilities of such an industry.<sup>6</sup> Among all the villages of Assam, Sualkuchi is the main weaving centre, where weaving is done purely on commercial basis. According to the Report of I. Majid it was the only village where professional weavers inhabited.<sup>7</sup> RaiBhupal Chandra BasuBahadur also supported this view and opined that in Sualkuchi weaving was done by both men and women.<sup>8</sup> According to B.C. Basu at Sualkuchi some 40 to 50 maunds of Chinese silk was annually used by the weavers of that place.<sup>9</sup> Sualkuchi is often locally called as the "Manchester of the East". As a matter of fact, silk weaving in the fly-shuttle handloom and its associated activities are the occupation of 75% of the household of the locality.<sup>10</sup>

However, the silk industry had passed through several phases of prosperity and depression. There are different opinions regarding the conditions of the silk in the colonial period and the efforts of the Government towards it. R.C. Dutta hold that "Silk manufacture had declined from the days of East India Company and their export was insignificant..."<sup>11</sup> Though historical records are not available, we can trace that Indian handloom products are exported to London. "Almost all the cotton stuff sold in London..." and this import of Indian calicoes to England continued during the seventeenth century till an Act was passed in 1700 A.D., forbidding the import of printed fabrics from India, Persia and China.<sup>12</sup> In the Trade Report of 1907 – 08A.D., it was hold that cocoons were exported from places like Malda and Rajshahi which were reeled in Murshidabad and other Bengal districts were escape from registration as they were generally carried by country boats.<sup>13</sup> It was also supported Basu's argument of 1915A.D. He mentioned that a great part of the silk exported from Assam, also escaped registration, which was evident from statistics of export of manufactured silk during its past seven years.<sup>14</sup> He hold that it was only because almost the whole of the manufactured silk sent out of Assam were carried by post and passenger train, both of which were outside the scope of the Government's system of trade registration.<sup>15</sup>

P.N. Banerjee, an economist, had maintained that sericulture, once a profitable industry had declined towards the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> However, others hold that the rich silk trade had attracted European traders. According to Morris D- Morris, the low priced imported machine made yarn had much strengthened the competitive position of the handloom sector and because of big fall in price and changes in custom had also helped in increasing the demand for the products of the indigenous handloom industry. In spite of the vast expansion of British imported cloths, the indigenous handloom industry did not decline. Infact, they viewed that during the colonial period the handloom weavers were "no fewer in number and no worse off economically at the end of the period than at the beginning."<sup>17</sup>

However, Bipan Chandra viewed that the price of the yarn were though low, it could not benefit the Indian weavers due to stationary in productivity<sup>18</sup> and also because of the fall of the price of the cloths in per piece.<sup>19</sup> Damial and Alice Thormeron the other hand were against it. They viewed that though India's traditional handicrafts had declined from their prestigious glory, 'the ruins of the old style craftsman was an integral part of the Industrial Revolution as the coming of the factory system.'<sup>20</sup> RaiBahadurBhupal Chandra Basu wrote that during the colonial age no attempts had been made by the Government to develop the culture of the mulberry silkworm in Assam. Writing to the Government of India in 1877A.D., Colonel Keatinge observed that the question of extending the pat silk industry need not be seriously discussed.<sup>21</sup> Though the commercial importance of eri, muga, pat was well known to some British traders, yet they did not get the Government support. Some British officials like David Scott, Jenkins, Lepper made their efforts privately for development of the industry. They could visualize a good future for the Industry.<sup>22</sup> C.H. Lepper had made the earliest attempt at growing eri silk on a commercial scale in 1873A.D. He was an agent of 'Messrs Lister and Company' of Brads ford. His first experiment for growing eri worm were significant but due to scarcity of labour the experiment was closed.<sup>23</sup> According to B.C. Basu between the years 1884 and 1889A.D., many experiments were made by the European traders for growing the eri silk on a commercial scale but none of these were successful.<sup>24</sup>

Mr. Crowe of Pathalipam in the North Lakhimpur sub-division also had started eri cultivation, but the plantation was washed away by the Subansiri river.<sup>25</sup> An experiment undertaken by A.C. Campbell, in

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the same year, though first was successful, but ultimately failed.<sup>26</sup> In the year 1889 an experiment was made by F. Mackenzie, a tea planter of Cachar which was regarded as the most important experiment which was also a failure.<sup>27</sup>

However, with the unfavorable opinion of the Board of Trade, all experiments were closed. In the Industrial Reports, though Sualkuchi had mentioned as an important commercial place for silk industry, yet we don't notice any effort by the Government for the improvement of the industry. In fact, keeping in tune with the general policy of deindustrialization, they conceived the trade in silk in two forms: export of thread and export of cocoons.<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, however, unlike many other industries, this industry stagnated but did not die out altogether. A brief account of the different uses of all the three varieties of handloom products would reveal why the best of Manchester products even could not hold down the native industry. First of all, it was a local production and there is no question of success. Secondly, there were no matching substitutes for these products and where is no need of extra labour for payment. Thirdly, in the first phase of the work, the ladies of one family, help their neighbour and they got their neighbours' assistance in turn. Next, in a single process of the loom, the weavers could produce diverse wears like chador, mekhela, dhoti, shirt piece etc. This advantage of diverse production kept a balance between demand and supply and satisfied the needs of the male as well as the female members of the family.<sup>29</sup>

It is a known fact that out of the existing cottage industries of the province, handloom weaving occupies the foremost place and the silk industry employs a large labour force next only to handloom industry. Although this traditional industry was basically known for its social and traditional values in the early days, but the gradual commercialization at present has made it economically significant. The post-colonial period, therefore has its importance in developing the silk culture in the province. Since mid-1970's sericulture has progressed in the developing countries. Realizing the importance of sericulture as an employment oriented cottage industry suitable for the development of rural economy, the Indian planners have identified it as one of the best suited occupation for the growth of rural India.

Right from the post-independence era, the Government has been giving sericulture industry a prominent place in its development plans. Just after independence, the Government of India took the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1948. As a result the Government of India has set up the 'Central Silk Board' in 1949A.D., the 'All India Handloom Board' in 1952A.D., and the 'All India Handicraft Board' in November, 1952A.D. All these Boards are pursuing their responsibilities in encouraging and developing the industry in their respective spheres. In Assam there are three development units running by the Central Silk Board. Thus, the Government of India has implemented a massive development scheme for the development of rural economy through sericulture. For example, in 1970A.D. in Sualkuchi a farm was established with a plantation of 320 som and 1430 soalu trees.<sup>30</sup> In the sericulture department also the Government has pursuing a training scheme presently for reeling and twisting cocoon and yarns.

Raw silk production also enjoys rapid growth mostly in the developing countries. This is largely due to their low level of economy, suitability of sericulture to family labour, favorable weather conditions and less investment. The potential to enter export market with cocoons, raw silk and finished goods also play a role in expansion of sericulture in these countries. India is making much headway in becoming a supplier of silk garments and furnished fabrics.<sup>31</sup> Indian silk, because of its aesthetic beauty and cottage industry nature is now in good demand in the world over.

Presently, this industry is influencing particularly the socio-economic life of the rural population by supplementing their family income as well as providing self-employment and wage employment to the poor and downtrodden people.<sup>32</sup> Higher income from the profession has attracted agriculture and cottage industries. The market of the silk fabrics determines the fate not only of the loom owners, but also of the wage weavers and their helpers, yarn winders etc. Traditionally, the handloom industry was a monopoly of the women folk. However, the gradual commercialization of this industry particularly during the recent years has encouraged the participation of the male weavers mostly in the silk handloom sector.<sup>33</sup>

It has an exception in Sualkuchi, where weaving was done by both men and women by a community of professional weavers from the early time.<sup>34</sup> Infact, it is recommended as the only village of professional weavers in Assam. It had the highest concentration of fly-shuttle looms of about 2,998.<sup>35</sup> Comparatively higher wages of weaving has presently attracted over 10,000 migrant weavers including more than 5,000 Bodo female weavers from different districts of Assam to the area between the periods of 1980's to 1990,s.

However, the age old weaving industry of Sualkuchi remained at the same technological level (replacement of the throw shuttle by the fly shuttle was done during 1930's) and it meets only a negligible fraction of the demand for various fabrics in Assam.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately the mass of the people are extremely conservative and slow to move and they are not ready to make any special exertion for the betterment of

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their material conditions. As a matter of fact the technical details of the silk rearing are important and necessary for the improvement of the industry. This will help the industry to grow in a faster pace with in the area and spread to non-traditional areas. It would have been quite viable to improve and extend the industry if the people will possess of the requisite intelligence and enterprise. To suggest any method for the improvement of this industry, the first requirement is a better understanding of the economic organization and condition of the weavers of this industry, because, sericulture development depends upon the socio-economic conditions of the society. The scientific and technical personal, consumer agencies are also the essential requirement for the development of the industry.<sup>37</sup>

It is an undeniable fact that this is the only industry, which can be developed without depending much on outside agencies and it is hoped that the development of this industry will strengthen the rural economy in particular and the province's economy in general if all the rearers, reelers, spinners, weavers, financial institutions, marketing agencies and Government work together with a co-operative attitude. In the words of R.C. Dutt: "... The silk weavers of India possess the very highest skill in their craft and it is probable that under competent and energetic direction with the assistance of capital, the industry could be revived and extended".<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to create an environment of awareness about the importance and value of the silk industry in the province.

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