

SUALKUCHI: The Manchester of Assam and its uncertain future

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Abstract: It is truly the God's gift and definitely the human creation which helps to turn leaves into silk which contribute to one of the basic necessity of human being that is cloth. Sericulture has vast potentiality for employment generation in rural areas. Sericulture has been practiced in Assam from ancient time. Sualkuchi is known as Manchester of Assam as it has large number of cottage industry engaged in handloom. This paper deals with sericulture tradition of Assam and the importance of Sualkuchi as a producer of silk. Silk producing activities are mostly home-based. These practices originated from rural families where weaving and silk production was a tradition. Assam generally produces three types of silk—Pat silk, Muga silk and Eri silk. The demand for muga, a monopoly of Assam, has been growing with its increasing popularity in India and abroad. The market for Eri is another exclusive silk of Assam. The demand for Paat is also high due to its unique texture. Here, we are going to discuss the brief description of all the three types of silk. Despite all these distinct advantages, the indigenous silk industry of Assam is struggling a lot to survive in the present world. This paper explains how the cheap alternatives of local silk products of Assam capture the local market. It also discusses the impact of these disturbances on the life of weavers of Sualkuchi.

Keywords: Sualkuchi, Assam, Sericulture, Muga silk, Pat silk, Eri silk

INTRODUCTION

Silk production has now dominated the fashion world. Sericulture is also known as silk farming which is the process of breeding silkworms for producing silk. Silk is a natural fiber. Assam is the gateway of north-east with a beautiful scenic beauty, mighty waterways, different types of festivals, cultures etc. Sericulture has been practiced in the state from time immemorial. Assam is well-known for its handloom industries. Assam is one of the unique silk producers of the India. Rearing and weaving silk is an integral part of Assam's culture. Assam is the producer of mainly three types of silk---golden muga, white pat, and warm eri silk. Silk production and weaving are an intrinsic part of Assamese culture. With the highest percentage of handloom weaving household (Ministry of Textiles, 2010) amongst the north eastern states (44.58 per cent), the households carry the tradition of the golden muga and eri silk.

Sualkuchi is one of the world's largest weaving villages where entire population is engaged in weaving exquisite silk fabrics. Sualkuchi town in Assam is located on the banks of the Brahmaputra, about 35 km from the state capital Guwahati. It is known for its silk weaving culture. Sualkuchi fabrics are hand wooden frame looms, using both indigenous silks and also other yarns. Each indigenous tribe has its distinct style of weaving. Both men and women are engaged in this weaving fabrics culture. Sualkuchi is referred as the "Manchester of the East".

But like other artisan community, Sualkuchi also has to face the strong winds of free market economics. The all produced item of silk of Sualkuchi have inevitably been affected by cheap substitutes. There are numerous cottage industries and units in Sualkuchi which are constantly engaged in the weaving silk. These industries are affected by the cheap alternatives which are available in the market. The machine made imported silk cloths are captured the market as they are available at low price. The traditional Assamese silks are now in grave of danger. The weaver and owners of silk weaving looms in Sualkuchi are struggling to keep the tradition alive.

Sericulture and Assam

Sericulture and weaving always have been traditional pursuits for the rural Assamese people. Assam is a leading producer of the non-mulberry silk and produces about two-thirds of India's total output. In case of muga silk production, Assam holds a monopoly power. P.C. Choudhury in his book, "The History of Civilization of the people of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D." observes, 'The art of sericulture rearing of cocoons for the manufacture of various silk cloths were known to the Assamese as early as the Ramayana and the Arthasastra.' In the era of Ahom denesty, the silk production of Assam reached its high perfection point. Muga silk culture is as old as Assamese culture.

The magnificent creation of silk has enthralled the trend followers in today's fashion world. Traditionally, Assam has been famous for its cottage industries specially spinning and weaving. Assam has got a suitable climate and environment for practicing sericulture. Sericulture is one of the significant factors for uplifting the socio-economic standards of a region. This could be an answer solving factor for the problem of unemployment. Women play a notable involvement in sericulture activity. So it can reduce the gender gap issue in working sector somehow. Assam is substantial producer of different kinds of silk and produces about 10% of the total natural silk produced in India.

Sualkuchi--The silk village of Assam

Sualkuchi town in Assam is located on the banks of the Brahmaputra, about 35 km from the state capital Guwahati. It is known for its silk weaving culture. Sualkuchi is known as Silk village of Assam. As per the papers, Sualkuchi was established by Momai Tamuli Barbarua in order to fulfill the clothing needs for the royalty of Ahom Kingdom. Sualkuchi developed as a weaving village over the years. The fabrics are rooted in Assam's traditional heritage.

The historians believe that the silk weaving tradition began in Sualkuchi in 11th century. Later, the cottage industry took shape in the mid 17th century. The weaving industry of Sualkuchi experienced a high boost during the period of Second World War. Today, every house has a loom. The weaver of Sualkuchi is known as 'Silk Manufacturers King' of India as these weavers are highly accomplished and dedicated to their traditional craft. More than 25000 people are directly or indirectly employed under the silk industry in Sualkuchi. However, Sualkuchi is well known for silk textiles both mulberry and muga silk. "The golden fiber" (muga) is produced only in Assam. The fabrics are hand woven on wooden frame looms, using both indigenous silks and different kinds of yarns. It has tremendous export potentiality. Now in 21st century the local weavers and artisans of sualkuchi are using digital platform to promote their products globally.

Assam produces three unique varieties of silks, the Golden Muga, the White Pat and the warm Eri. Mekhela chadors and Gamosas made from this indigenous material are in demand throughout Assam as well as other parts of India. The contribution of Sualkuchi silk town to the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people is another source of significance. It accounts for the country's entire production of Muga silk and 98 per cent of Eri silk.

Assam Tourism Development Corporation is giving special emphasis on this place as this place as it is the only producer of muga silk in Northeast. Government of Assam has made Silk Yarn Centre so that tourists from different place can come and see the process. People of Assam should have to give more importance to promote this unique identity in the stage of world business.

Now we go for a short description of all three types of silk which are produce in Assam as each of them has distinctive characteristics which makes one unique from the other.

Muga silk

Muga silk is rare non-mulberry silk which is received from muga silkworms, scientifically known as *Antheraea assamensis*. A golden colour silk thread is extracted from the worm. The silk produced is known for its glossy, fine texture and durability. It is the queen of Assamese silks. Assam is only state to produce muga silk. The variety of muga worm has the same life cycle as a silkworm and is native to Assam. Another unique characteristic of muga silk is that the shine of the fabric improves after every wash. It is considered one of the costlier silks in the world. Muga silk is a protected geographical indication (GI) to Assam.

Pat Silk

Pat silk is a mulberry silk. It is received from *Bombyx textor* worm which is usually brilliant white or off-white in colour. It is known for its brightness and quality. Mekhela sador is often made from pat silk. Its cloth can dry in shadow. They are last longer. The larvae feeds on white mulberry plant leaves, locally called Nuni, hence it is also referred to as Nuni Paat. Pat silk is produced in limited quantities compared to the other two varieties of silk because few mulberry worms are reared in Assam and usually sourced from other states.

Eri silk

Eri silk is made by *Samia Cynthia ricini*. Eri silk is also known as Endi silk. Because manufacturing process of eri allows the pupae to develop into adults and only the open ended cocoons are used for turning into silk. This silk is soft and warm which is popular for the use as shawls and quilts. Since the silk worm is not boiled to obtain a continuous filament, this silk is also known as ahimsa or non-violent silk. It falls under non-mulberry silk group. Because of durable, strong, soft texture and moisture absorbent, these qualities make eri silk a preferred choice for traditional Assamese saris, curtains, bed covers and even clothes for babies. So we can say that this is one versatile fabric. Eri silk is not only a warm and soft fabric, but also has excellent characteristics such as anti-fungal, non-toxic, bio-degradable and most sustainable textile. Recently, Assam is also trading Tassar silk and many other types of silks too.

Assam Silk: Losing its Glory

Sericulture and weaving always have been traditional pursuits for the rural Assamese people. It is a source of their income. Assam is only one place which is environmentally suitable for producing all these types of indigenous silks –eri, muga, pat and tussar. Assam has many silk weaving centers but the reputation Sualkuchi has earned over the years. Despite all these advantages, today Assam is struggling to survive.

The popularity of Assam silk is gradually diminishing day by day. The silks in Assam are mainly limited to making traditional dresses, though slight diversifications can be seen nowadays. There is still a lot to be done by the entrepreneurs and policy makers. The demand for Assam silk is falling due to high price in comparison to the other silks from outside the State. The easy availability of other alternative varieties of artificial silks at cheaper cost from other areas is the main reason behind the fall in demand of these natural silks. Taking undue advantage of this cost difference and the customers' ignorance unscrupulous traders have been indulging in profiteering by passing off blended products as pure silk fabrics. The worst impact of this duplicity is fall on the weavers. They are bound to make distress sale and have to face huge losses. Rise in prices of silk yarns with flooding of cheaper polyester clothes in the market has hit hard the silk industry of Sualkuchi. It is to be noted that Assam silks are sustainable textiles and have a negative impact on the environment. But if it is used in a proper manner, they can be a powerful growth propeller for the rural region.

It is the high time to take effective measures by the government, traders and entrepreneurs to make Assam silk a larger global brand. Otherwise, the state will lose its dignity of being an indigenous silk producer of the country.

Conclusion

Sericulture is a tradition of Assam. Development of sericulture industry helps to uplift the region's economy as a whole. The sericulture activity plays a significant role in cultural heritage of Assamese people and Sualkuchi is famous for its silk weaving in Assam. The golden muga silk is one of the prides of Assam. The demand for muga silk is not only from inside the region but also from all over the world. Due to high demand and shortage of silk yarn production, local tasar silk, Chinese tasar like polyester silk is being mixed while weaving. The quality for the authentic silk is degrading for commercial purpose. Such practices are being checked by Central Silk Board under Ministry of Textiles. Hence with further support and cooperation of the government and non-governmental organizations, the textile industries in Assam can achieve the desired results. Taking proper measures for the difficulties confronted but the farmers and weavers will enhance the production of silk in future.

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