

# THE SILK INDUSTRY OF ASSAM ITS ORIGIN, GROWTH AND IMPORTANCE IN THE ECONOMY OF ASSAM

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**Abstract:** Silk has been recognised as a textile fibre. 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. Assam is the only place where muga silk is produced and is well known for silk textiles both mulberry, muga and endi textiles. The silk weavers 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.

**Keyword:** Sericulture, Assam silk.

## INTRODUCTION

The sericulture industry constitutes an important aspect and holds a unique position in the economy of Assam. History as well as tradition is silent as to the origin and date of introduction of the culture of the eri and muga silk worms in the Assam valley.<sup>1</sup> The native of Assam had a long tradition in rearing muga and mulberry silk. Both are very probably of indigenous.

Assam's history of silk production can be traced back to the 4th Century B.C. i.e. to the days of Kautilya. In his famous work Arthashastra (321 and 300 B.C.), he referred some principalities. According to him several varieties of fabrics were produced in the countries of India and which was the product of SuvarnaKundya was the best.<sup>2</sup> Harsacarita mentions 'Khauma', which identifies as 'eri' by P.C. Choudhury is also produced in Assam.

The English writers of the nineteenth Century had also made references to several types of silk fabrics of Assam. Francis Hamilton has given a good description of the silk products of Assam in his work. He writes, "The native women of all castes from the Queen downward weave the four kinds of silk that are produced in the country and with which three fourths of the people are clothed..."<sup>4</sup>

As weaving forms a part of cultural heritage of Assam, people belonging to every caste or faith living in Assam were engaged in weaving. Unlike the tanti, jugi and jalahs of Bengal, a unique feature of Assamese society was the absence of any particular caste reserved for weaving.<sup>5</sup> The loomshed was as common to every family as the kitchen. W.W. Hunter described that every household possessed a loom and weaving was carried on by women of the family principally for domestic use.<sup>6</sup> According to B.C. Allen, this description was true for all the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley<sup>7</sup> and there was hardly any woman who does not know the art of weaving. The weaving style of Assam is so unique that everyone falls in love with it. Weaving talents of the Assamese women received due recognition. Gandhiji's comment on it in Young India in 1921, after his first visit to Assam may be repeated here. He

said, "Every women of Assam is a born weaver ... and she weaves fairy tales in cloth".<sup>8</sup> For the Assamese women folk weaving, by and large, is a pastime; rather than a professional occupation. Women mostly use throw-shuttle loom in non-tribal low lands however, in tribal areas loin-loom, fly-shuttle loom etc. are common.

According to Surjya Kumar Bhuyan it was due mainly to the efforts of the enterprising Ahom official MomaitamuliBarbarua, during the reign of the Ahom King PratapSingha, that weaving became a household craft. It is held that the industry was carried on both for domestic consumption as well as for supply to the nobility and royal house during the Ahom rule.<sup>9</sup>

The silk culture was one of the most prominent industries prevalent in Assam during the pre-colonial period and the Ahoms greatly encouraged the industry. They conferred grants of land upon the jogis or weavers.<sup>10</sup> It is said that during the Ahom dynasty it was a common practice that a soldier was sent off for battle with a dress made overnight. This dress was considered as important as his weapon.<sup>11</sup> However, under the Ahom ruler there were few khels (production guild), which were attached to some particular craft or artisanal industry. From the previous government Scott inherited the khel system on which he laid the foundation of the British rule.<sup>12</sup> However, as a sequence, slowly and gradually the khel system was abolished and it brought about a major change in the economic field. Before the British rule, some industrial and agricultural product had been used to meet the requirement of the king and the nobility, but the abandon of the khel system had weakened the base of the industries.<sup>13</sup> As the khels dominated the socio-economic life of the people of Assam, its abolishment resulted no more compulsion among the members to stick to it.<sup>15</sup>

In an Assamese pamphlet entitled Jugibakatoni Jatir Iti hash the author, Madhavram Das claims that the katonis of Assam are the descendents of jogis, who were driven out of Bengal. It is said that the ancestors of the jugis belonged to a priestly caste, but having seceded from

orthodoxy and denied the supremacy of the Brahmins; they incurred the displeasure of the king and were denounced as out castes. Many fled from Bengal and sought refuge elsewhere and some of them came to Assam and brought with them the knowledge of the mulberry silk worm from Bengal.<sup>16</sup>

It needs no over emphasis to note that neither other state in India nor even any country in the World produces all the varieties of silk. As a matter of fact Assam is the original home of eri silk, while in muga silk production Assam holds monopoly in the World.<sup>17</sup>The mulberry silk worm culture is practiced on a large scale in the districts of upper Assam. Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Jorhat districts are the important producers of mulberry silk. It is however more valuable than eri and muga. Sualkuchi and Jorhat are the principal centers of this culture.

On the other hand, muga silk is the most prestigious silk of Assam. Assam is the largest producer of this 'Golden thread' in the World. It is because muga silk worms cannot survive in any climate other than that of Assam or North-East.<sup>18</sup> According to E. Stack, muga silk was too dear for the English market. Muga silk is very fine in texture and quality, which witnessed the longest period of stagnation. As early in 1872 A.D., the muga silk was kept partly for home consumption and partly exported to Dacca and Calcutta in the form of thread and from Calcutta to Bhagalpur and Bombay. After nearly a decade its market became limited to only Calcutta and a small amount went to the Persian Gulf.<sup>19</sup> However, according to the official reports the cultivation of muga silk had declined greatly. In places like North Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgang and even in Jorhat and Golaghat people were less interested in cultivation of muga silk.<sup>20</sup> It was also held that in some some growing areas, people began tea plantation.<sup>21</sup>

Now muga cocoons are produce in places like – Boko, Garohills, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Dhakuakhana. Guwahati, Palashbari, Sibsagar, Nazira and Dibrugarh are the principal places in Assam from which muga silk is exported. Commercial looms are having in places like Sualkuchi, Silchar and Karimganj. The production of muga yarn is a household industry in the state and though the demand and value of muga yarn had increased over the years, still the technology used is traditional. In the meantime, the tasar silk is posing serious threat to muga silk due to high cost of muga yarn and time consuming method of its production.

Eri fabrics, namely borkaporor wrapper, mekhehas, rihasantchurias were woven mainly by the tribes, particularly by the Kacharis, while women of respectable families had rarely engaged themselves either in rearing or weaving. Eri fabrics are woven in places like Palashbari, Mirza and the best eri fabrics were woven in Mangaldoi, Nalbari, Tamulpur, Rangia and Palashbari areas.

Assam has got a suitable climate and environment for practicing sericulture. The food of the worm is almost a weed in many parts of the province. The worm is exceedingly prolific and the labour required for rearing it is such as can be given by the decrepit and infirm members of the community. According to the Census Report of 1881 and 1901, the number of people connected with the silk industry had increased.<sup>22</sup> However; silk industry in Assam has been in the

dock with 1.72 million weavers producing 167 million meters of fabrics against a demand of 370 million meters in 2003.<sup>23</sup> Sericulture industries provides an additional income to 1.87 lakhs families.

The commercial importance of eri, muga, and pat was well known to some British traders long before their rule in Assam. They could appreciate the essential value of muga and pat and adopted a policy to encourage production. They visualized a good future for the industry, because Assamese silk cloth had reputation for consistent quality and competitive price.

The English, however, entered Assam at a time when the British manufacturer stood against the East India Company's trade monopoly. Therefore, the policy of the British administration under the guidance of David Scott (1825-32) and Francis Jenkins (1834-66) were directed towards making the economy of Assam a producer of commercial-cum-industrial crops like Sericulture.<sup>24</sup> In the Report on Rail and River trade, it is mentioned that silk cloth exported from Assam was generally packed in par eels, the content of which were not declared.<sup>25</sup> During 1906 – 1907, silk in raw exported from Eastern Bengal and Assam was in quantity 5 maunds.<sup>26</sup> According to the Report of 1903, silk piece goods were only exported from the Assam valley.<sup>27</sup>

In 1831, David Scott, established a factory at Darrang. He introduced reels, reelers and plants from Rangpur to expand cultivation and production. To the materials well-being of the people Scott found no other industry more suitable than sericulture and because the soil of Assam and the genius of here people both favored the production of the silk and silk manufactures. But in December, 1832, when the Board of Trade expressed an unfavorable opinion of the market value of the Assam silk, Robertson brought the experiment to a close.<sup>28</sup>

A private company called Lister and Co. made some effort in that direction and engaged an enterprising person named Lepper for the purpose. Lepper took up his residence at north Lakhimpur and developed a farm with the aim of manufacturing pat on a large scale. But in spite of their all efforts, sincerity and care the company had fell through.<sup>29</sup> However; the attitude of the Colonial Government can be followed through the remarks of E. Stack on Assam Silk. Realizing the possibilities of silk trade between Assam and Bengal, he suggested trade on in silk cocoons and not in silk threads. This attitude reveals the exploiting attitude of the Government and the attitude of the Government towards the native industries of Assam. The Government was not interested on developing the process of manufacture or in upgrading the standard of living of the artisans, but only filling their pockets by profits. <sup>30</sup> According to the Report of 1919 – 1925, the Industrial Policy of the Government only could see in the establishment of some factories in some places of Assam. 'The Daklangia Weaving Factory', 'Kharupetia Weaving Factory' is some of the factories established by the Colonial Government. At Guwahati, a Government weaving institution was set up. The school was equipped with 'Jacquard machine'. A muga reeling and twisting machine was made in the school in 1922.<sup>31</sup> There was other technical school at Kohima, Industrial School at Tura, Government School of Handicrafts

at Sylhet etc.<sup>32</sup> During 1931 – 32, the Shillong sericulture station was on temporary basis in which the staff consists of two temporary rearers and one chowkidar. However, from the account of William Robinson (published in 1841), we can revealed that during the mid-nineteenth Century, eri and muga silk production was quite extensive, but mulberry silk production was not widespread. The comprehensive History of Assam has cited some statistical data of 1876 A.D. which shows that 15,907 acres of land in upper Assam was under som plantation and it came down to 12,393 acres in 1881 A.D. During 1931 – 32 A.D., the total number of lying reared and the yield obtained from the three species of silk worms were showed below –

Table – 1

| Species | Laying Reared | Yield Obtained | Remarks |
|---------|---------------|----------------|---------|
| Muga    | 2,160         | 28,122 cocoons | ...     |
| Eri     | 294           | 24,073 ditto   | ...     |
| Pat     | 1,059         | 2,32,105 ditto | ...     |

(Source: Report of the Department of Industries 1931 – 32, P.16)

According to I. Majid, “compared with the figure of the previous year, the production in pat had increased while eri and muga had decreased. The drop in eri was due to the reduction of area under castor plants in favour of extension of mejankari, som and sualu plantations. The reduction of muga cocoons was due to the farm undertaking mostly the rearing of broads required by the villagers for seeds.<sup>33</sup>

Thus the industry has suffered. There had been little effort from the Government to improve the cottage industry. However, the failure of the efforts of the British entrepreneurs in setting up a silk industry on a commercial scale in Assam convinced the colonial Government of the necessity of viewing the silk trade from a different perspective. In 1877, Colonel Keatinge viewed that the pat silk industry need not be seriously discussed. And the industry has perhaps undergone a decline since then. New conditions had arisen which tend to depress the industry still further.<sup>34</sup> The nationalist and the leftist held that during the colonial period, the Indian industries witnessed a decline. In 1914, 90% of the population had joined in agriculture for support and employment<sup>35</sup> and thus the artisanal population saw a change in their occupational structure with the shifting to agriculture.

It is a known fact that the industrial position of Assam was different from other parts of India. The manufactured articles were used for home consumption and a little amount was brought to the market for sell. Therefore, there was very little scope for the British Government to de-industrialize the region. But in spite of this, the contemporary official documents and papers reveal the exploiting attitude of the Colonial Government. In fact, after colonization, the decline of indigenous industries was the major features of Assam's economy and the signs of decline were most distinct in textile both cotton and silk.<sup>36</sup>

However, in regards to Krishnamurthy's definition of de-industrialization; Assam could not be de-industrialized. On the contrary, it can be regard that the decline of handicrafts was a feature of the economy of Assam

during the British rule. But the major aspect relating to the industrial backwardness, it is held to be the policy adopted by the Colonial Government towards the indigenous industries of Assam. British policy of exploitation of raw materials and imposition of extra taxes in some forest products acted as a stumbling block towards the industrial progress in Assam. Though some efforts were made by only some officials privately but the official documents and correspondences reveal that the Government did not take any direct step to develop the indigenous industries.<sup>37</sup> The swadeshi movement also had little impact on the development of domestic industries in Assam. The Report of 1916 shows that in Assam 4000 rearers were engaged in mulberry silk, whether in muga and eri rearing their number had been estimated at 35,000, they also viewed that the industry lacked organized co-operation of the workers and lack of capital etc. Thus, it can be seen that within half a century of British occupation, the silk industry of Assam suffered a severe setback.

Still, the survival of handloom is significant. According to the survey report of 1954-55 A.D., handloom weaving and silk rearing had preponderance over other industries with 12,800 establishments. Accordingly 52,945 families were engaged in eri (endi), 3,395 in muga and 19,420 in pat rearing, reeling and spinning in 1980-81.<sup>38</sup> Sericulture enjoys a preferential position in the Five Years Plans envisaged right from the beginning of the free India.

For development of sericulture in the state the Sericulture Research Station was established during 1953-54 at Titabor, near Jorhat. Rearing of tasar silkworm was also introduced since 1957. At Kokrajhar a tasar seed cocoon rearing farm was started in 1959 by the Government with a view to producing seed cocoons for the tasar growers. The Central Silk Board has also involved in the promotional activities of sericulture in Assam. Regional Development Office at Guwahati (1981), Muga Raw Material Bank at Sibsagar (1981), and a Demonstration cum Technical Service Centre at Sualkuchi (1996) are the three main development units of the CSB established in the state. With a view to supplying disease free seeds, the State Government after independence had set up 11 sericulture (mulberry) farms in different parts of the state although the Titabor Government Sericulture Farm was set up as early as 1919 and the Farms of Shillong and GauriSagar were set up respectively in 1925 and 1945. Likewise 3 Basic Muga Seed Farms at Khanapara, Kokrajhar and Narayanpur were established during 1954-57.<sup>39</sup> In order to provide support to the muga industry a Central eri and Muga Research Station at Titabor was established in 1978 A.D. Later on a separate Regional Research Station for muga was set up at Boko near Guwahati in 1982 A.D.

In sericulture viz. rearing of eri, muga and pat (mulberry) Kamrup occupies the third position with 830 villages having rearing activities as a subsidiary occupation out of 6910 villages in Assam in 1981-82 A.D., Lakhimpur and Sibsagar occupying the first and second position with 2210 and 1090 villages. According to the Census Report, Kamrup district has the distinction of having the highest number of households engaged in weaving activities for commercial purposes among all the districts of Assam.

According to Assam Government records, about 26 25 hectors of land are utilized for production of muga silk in Assam. About 30,000 Assamese households are related with muga silk production. About 1.28 lakhs families of Assam are engaged in the rearing and production of muga silk.

In the context of industrial development sericulture as the best agro-industry has a role to play particularly in providing employment to and generating income among the rural population. The importance of any industry lies not in production alone, but also in creating employment and generating income among the population. According to a sample survey done during 1989-90A.D., net annual income of eri rearers came to Rs.35, while pat rearers had incurred a loss and muga rearers earned around Rs.1000 after taking into account cost of seed cocoons, labour charges and other supply expenditures.<sup>40</sup> As the cultivators in Assam engage themselves in cocoon rearing during agricultural off-season, therefore, the need of the day is to make cocoon rearing a regular profession of a section of the farmers, particularly small and landless cultivators as a principal source of income. Now a days, more and more traders are attracted towards silk exports. During the 1980-81A.D. survey 15 petty traders are found engage in Rampur (a village in South Kamrup) area, who were used to collect cocoons from the rearers of the foothills of Garo Hills and sold eri cocoons in the rural bazars.<sup>41</sup> Such traders also marketed the muga cocoons in Sualkuchi from the Boko area of South Kamrup and adjoining areas of Garo Hills (Meghalaya). Silk exports are profitable, lucrative and easy to handle. Silk is an item of less export controls and quota restrictions. This may, probable be the reason why more and more traders are attracted towards silk exports.<sup>42</sup> However, since 2000 A.D. muga traders cum reelers have emerged in the Mirja-Palashbari and Boko areas of South Kamrup, who collect the cocoons reel them by employing female reelers against a remuneration of Rs.80 per thousand cocoons reeled (one thousand cocoons yield about 200 grams of yarn).<sup>43</sup>

Like the Government or co-operative agencies, the private dealers both in the production and distributive channels are also playing a positive role by holding stocks of raw materials, finished products, arranging display of the products in their shops, mediating between the artisans and outside world, and what is more important they are also providing employment opportunity and a source of income to the workers.<sup>44</sup> Buchanan Hamilton also shared the same opinion. He observed that in Assam raw materials was seldom purchased and petty dealers purchased the woven fabrics for ready money.<sup>45</sup>

Though the rearers are so called exploited, yet the petty traders are providing a marketing channel to the rearers in the remote areas. The rearers now rear more than their domestic requirements. According to the Report of 1931 – 1932A.D., this daily occupation had enable thousands of rearers to pay a part of their land revenue and relief them from economic crisis.<sup>46</sup> H. Maxwell and E.C. Ansonge witnessed that the small industries like the muga, eri industries in Assam are capable of considerable extension with better races of seed, better plant and with expert advice.<sup>47</sup>

However, the silk industry is facing several

problems. 'The industry has suffered because it is a scattered one and because it has not been realized how much it is a cottage industry. H. Maxwell and E.C. Ansonge viewed that owing to being essentially a home industry practiced by a large number of scattered people and as it was not in any way an organized industry, the workers of the silk industry forgotten easily.<sup>48</sup> It had remarked by E. Stack that there had no large market where either the cocoons, the thread or the cloth can be purchased wholesale.<sup>49</sup> In spite of the efforts, still there is a slow march to modernization in the field. The age old tradition of silk rearing has not been preserved by the new generation due to mainly non-remunerative prices of silk cocoons, outdated methods of reeling and spinning. Institutional finance is needed by the small loom owners to expand their number of looms and the poor muga reelers and yarn winders also need finance to set up at least one loom. In Sualkuchi, the problem of space is faced mainly by the looms owners in setting up their workshops. Majid viewed that the villagers need to provide good muga seeds for improvement of the industry.<sup>50</sup> Post-cocoon technology is also an important subject to gear up the silk industry. Government officers may be sent to the fields rather than spending time in the office to change the mind of the new generation. However, the cost of living is so rapidly increasing everyday that unless new sources of income are discovered, there is very little chance of survival in the struggle for existence and in this regards, the silk culture can convince about its utility.

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