

THE GOLDEN SILK INDUSTRY OF ASSAM, INDIA: A LIVELIHOOD OPTION FOR THE YOUTHS

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Abstract

The golden silk of Assam- Muga acquired the GI tag in the year 2007 for the first time and still having the status in the world. In India, Assam is one of the North-Eastern regions' parts which is particularly the natural abode of sericulture-based activities especially the golden Muga silk, Eri silk, and mulberry silk. The Sericulture industry constitutes an important aspect and holds a unique position in the economy of Assam. In Assam, sericulture is an Agro-based activity as well as a commercial activity that plays a significant part in the cultural heritage of the Assamese people. About 30,000 Assamese households are related to Muga Silk production, Due to the region having a traditional and strong base of weaving on handlooms and also to support the silk sector. The present study will highlight the status of muga silk industry along with problems and prospects and hence provide a way of livelihood to the youth of Assam.

Key words: Muga silk, income & employment, industrial potentiality.

1. Introduction:

Weaving is one of the largest and oldest industries in Assam which is a way of life in Assam since time immemorial. With 95 percent of the silk output in the world Asia remains the top producer of silk while India occupies second rank in the production off silk and first rank in the consumption of the same out of 58 silk producing countries in the world (Dewangan, 2013; Nagaraju, 2008; FAO, 2019). Though Assam contributes about one-tenth of India's overall silk production, it contributes about 97 per cent of Eri silk and more significantly 100 per cent of Muga silk production in the country. At a temperature between 24°C and 28°C with humidity ranges within 85 to 90 percent and wildy growing host plants are some of the favorable factors for sericulture in Assam (De and Das, 2010). There are four varieties of silk; mulberry, Eri, Muga and Tasar. Although Eri, Muga and Mulberry culture have been practiced by the rural Assamese people for a long period, tasar culture is a recent addition in the silk culture of Assam.

Muga- the golden silk of Assam is made known to the world way back in 1662 by a French traveler Jean Joseph Tavernier. The silk was the royal fabric of Ahom kings who ruled Assam for six centuries till 1826. Assam kings and other higher ranks people wore apparels made of a special variety of Muga

Silk known as “Mejankari silk” which was reared in a special tree and was generally adored as a better quality silk than the common golden muga. Since ages people’s attraction towards silk and silk fabrics have been able to secure an important place among the most elegant and valued fabrics (Patil et al, 2009). Phukan (2012) highlighted the importance of *Muga* silk in the socio-economic life of people of Assam and its existence in Assam from the time immemorial and the importance of silk industry of Assam as a rural cottage industry in the generation of income and self-employment. He further opined that during the reign of Ahom kings the weavers were rewarded with exclusive gifts for muga weaving and for their royal patronage towards the kings.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (1990), evidences are found regarding the starting of sericulture about 5000 years ago. An eco-friendly enterprise, sericulture has a high potential in reducing poverty in the rural economies and preventing rural-urban migration by providing scope for improvement of people’s quality of life, generation of employment and economic development (Kaur and Pabba, 2021). Through an effective utilization of natural resources, sericulture has a great scope of raising the status of the farming community (Thapa and Shrestha, 1999; Dewangan, 2013). The quick and high return through low level of investment and shorter gestation period makes this industry an ideal one to fit well in the socio-economic structure of a country like India (Brahma et al, 2019). Including both agricultural as well as industrial activities, sericulture is known as an agro-based industry; involving the activities such as raising the food plants for silkworm, rearing the silkworms and cocoon production from them, spinning or reeling cocoons and the production of silk at the final stage (Shrivastav, 2005; Ahmed and Rajan, 2011; Brahma et al, 2019).

Sericulture industry is the way of development for the people of Assam. In the present days this sector is providing employment to a large number of people particularly in the rural area. In fact, sericulture has become a livelihood option for the youths of this region.

2. Objectives:

The present study has following objectives:

- I. To highlight the trend and status of muga silk production of Assam.
- II. To find out the problems and prospects of muga silk industry of Assam.
- III. To find out the employment opportunity and income of the people associated with muga silk industry.

3. Methods and Materials:

Data sources are secondary and the data are collected from the reports published by the Statistical Hand Books of Assam, Economic surveys of various years and different authentic reports. Results are discussed and presented with the help of tables, and diagrams.

4. Analysis and Findings:

Traditionally, sericulture is a major cottage industry in the State. Non mulberry silk in general and muga silk in particular has been closely associated with the rituals and traditions of Assam and, thus, silk production and its usage has been an important household activity in the State over the years. Rearing of eri, muga and mulberry silk worm are playing an important role in the economic development of a large section of the rural population of the State. It is practiced in more than 10532 villages and provides employment to 2.6 lakh families. Assam accounts for the highest production of non-mulberry silk, muga

and eri in the country - for which it is well known and famed. In spite of having immense potentiality, stagnation in the sericulture industry is a common phenomenon in the State. The production as well as productivity in sericulture remains almost stagnant over the past few decades. During 1938- 2000, the muga production in Assam grew only at the exponential rate of 0.38 per cent per annum. Decade wise analysis reveals that there are wide fluctuations in muga production. During 1938-50 and 1971-80, the State experienced a negative growth rate. The maximum annual exponential growth was observed to be 4.18 per cent during 1961-70. The last decade of the twentieth century experienced a production growth rate of 2.53 per cent per annum. Globalization and the reduction in tariffs as per the WTO commitments have created new challenges for the silk economy of Assam (Das, 2003).

The commercial production of Muga silk is mainly confined to upper Assam while seed cocoon production is generally confined to lower Assam. Almost one third of the silk production of the State is contributed by two districts namely Dhemaji and Lakhimpur. On the other hand, Sualkuchi, which is popularly known as silk town of Assam, has developed into a busy commercial center of weaving of high quality Mulberry and Muga silk e.g. mekhala, riha, chadar having tremendous internal as well as external demand (Saikia et al. 2002). Because of regional concentration of seed production units, rearing and cocoon production units and reeling and weaving units, the middlemen play an important role in linking various sericulture activities in the State (Baishya, 2002).

5. Trends of Muga silk production in Assam:

The current status and trend of the production of silk in Assam can be understood as follows:

Table 1: Trend of Production of Silk in the recent years

Year	Family engaged in Muga silk	Total area under food plants (Govt. + pvt.) in hect. in Muga silk	Production of muga cocoons (In Lakh No.)	Production of muga silk yarn (in '000kg)
2010-11	39444	8908.00	6368.30	113.28
2014-15	32045	5994.98	6528.21	126
2015-16	32632	4383.08	6864.50	127
2016-17	20541	5931.58	6480.00	129.60
2017-18	27690	4368.78	7865.50	156.96
2018-19	30164	10389.88	6494.25	157
2019-20	30710	10762.49	9865.66	197.29

Source: Directorate of Sericulture, Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2011, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, Govt. of Assam

According to the Survey by the Directorate of Handloom and Textile, 2020, during the period of 2019-2020, there are 8642 no. of sericulture villages in private sector, families engaged in sericulture in 30710 no.s muga silk in Assam. There is a significant increase in the no. of families engaged in the muga silk production, production of the muga as well as a distinct rise in the production of muga silk yarn. From the table-1, the production of Muga silk yarn has increased by 74% from 2010-2011 to 2019-2020 with 55% increase in the production of Muga cocoons in the same period of time.

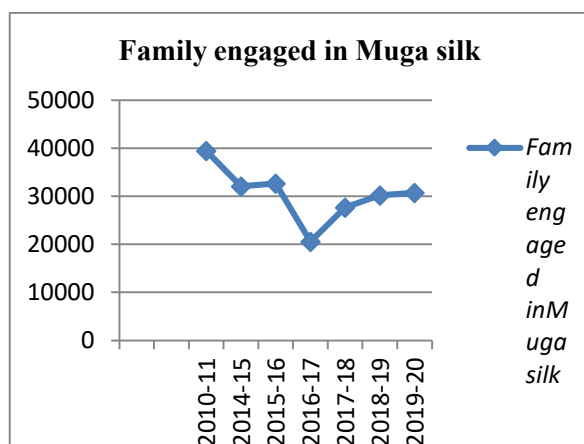


Fig (1)

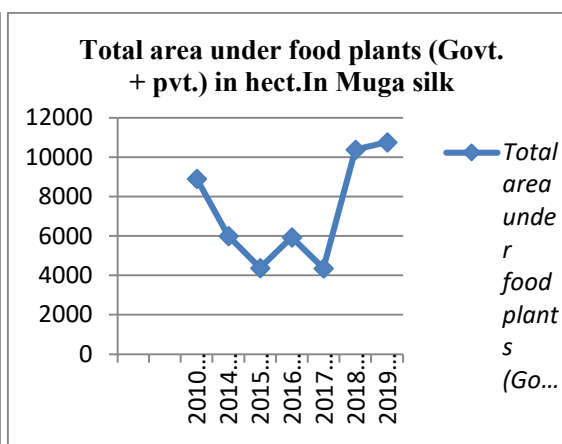


Fig (2)

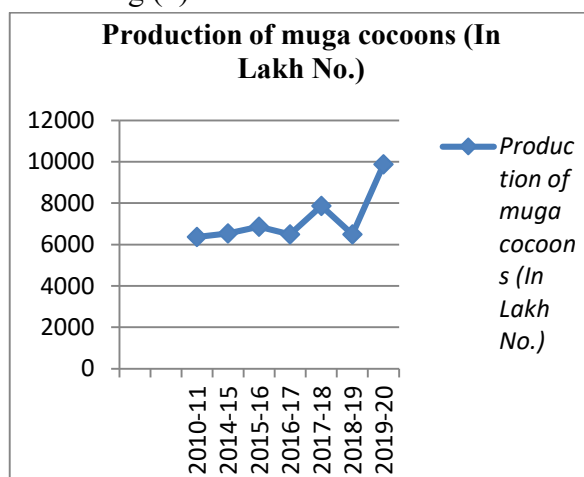


Fig (3)

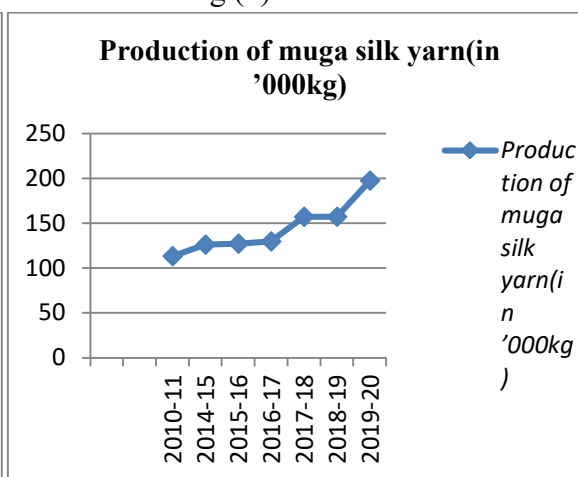


Fig (4)

On the basis of the productivity the silk industry sector a huge prospects and a lot of opportunities to grow. From the fig (1) it has been evident that the family engaged in the production of muga silk has a significant increase and production of muga cocoons as well as production of muga silk yarn has also shown a significant increase in fig (3) and fig (4) respectively.

6. Problems and Prospects of Muga Silk Industry of Assam:

The age old *muga* silk industry is deteriorating due to many factors. Different species of *muga* host plants and their various morph types are quickly depleting from the scene; some are endangered, and some others have already become extinct due to environmental degradations. It is evident that the production of tassar and eri raw silk is increasing and is satisfactory, but the production trend of unique *muga* silk is fluctuating and declining. It is unfortunate that despite remarkable scientific and technological developments, in the manufacture of raw mulberry silk in India for last two decades *muga* culture could not be fully supported to increase the production of raw silk to a reasonable height from what it was almost 50 years before (Chowdhury, 1984, 1992). The supreme *muga* silk fabric despite its unique natural golden colour and delicate nature remained confined to the State of Assam due to the lack of quality consciousness among the reelers and weavers of Assam, and there is a lack of systematically organized excellent marketing facility to encourage the buyers.

The problems associated with muga silk industry can be categorized in the following categories:

The problems related to the *procurement of finance* among the muga silk producers include poor

banking outreach, indifferent attitude of the banking personnel for loan, indifferent attitude of the government personnel for advancement of loan and implementation of technology, long duration taken for paperwork and documentation, demand security or mortgage of loan, delay in disbursement of loans, hidden charges like bribery in cash or kind etc. The problems related with *production and human resource* are- problem of land ownership, problems in procurement of raw materials, high cost in maintenance, shortage in supply of electricity, scarcity of labour, absence of advanced technique of production, lack of proper transportation system, import(inflow) of cheaper products similar in visibility from other states, inadequate water supply for production process, impact in productivity due to non feasibility gap of demand and supply along with wastage of raw materials during handling, impact in the production due to consumer preference also. Again the problems related to *marketing and risk taking* includes: absence of proper standardization, lower price of finished products, asymmetric distribution of share of profit due to long distributional channel, loss due to crop failure, insufficient receipt of revenue not meeting the costs, lack of storage and warehouse facility, lack of proper connectivity, loss due to poor packaging, damage of raw materials during transportation, negative attitude of future generation towards muga cultivation, negligence of government towards proper development of this sector, asymmetric information among the consumers, absence of stringent policies to tackle dumping from other countries.

The other problems in muga silk industry are as follows:

- i. Due to the lack of proper training people doesn't use the machinery things for weaving.
- ii. Due to the increase price of Assam silk people uses cheap imported Chinese silk or artificial/synthetic silk yarns.
- iii. Lack of proper market the weavers of Sualkuchi are forced to sell their genuine products at throw away prices to the bulk buyers who have a hold in the market.
- iv. Less education is one another problem of Sualkuchi people. Because of this people of here do not know, how to market their production systematically in the market.
- v. As Sualkuchi is situated on the north bank of Brahmaputra, landslide is common in there because of this here decrease the area of Sualkuchi.
- vi. As most of the customers are ignorant of the silk quality, some dishonest traders are taking advantage of this situation and earning huge profit by selling blended fabric as pure silk fabrics.
- vii. Urbanization and shortage of skilled agricultural labour is another reason for the shortage of Assam silk production.
- viii. Central and state govt. have a good number of schemes for the development of sericulture and weaving, however, people are yet to see a significant benefit of these schemes. Although a huge amount of money is spent, the result is pathetic. This is because of poor planning, poor implementation and corruption.
- ix. In Assam, Muga activities are not practiced as a whole-time occupation. Therefore, commercialization of Muga silk rearing and weaving activities will create immense scope for both full and part-time employment. Generally, no extensive, systematic and scientific plantation of food plants for silkworm is noticeable.
- x. Shortage of electricity is one of the problem that faced by the weavers of Sualkuchi. As it is known that weaving is an activity which requires sufficient lights. But inadequate light, due to

shortage of power and frequent power cuts has been seriously affecting the silk production in the town.

It is not an easy task to start and run an enterprise in rural areas. The development of rural entrepreneurship is an inherent hindrance by multiple factors. These factors are psychological, social cultural and economic in nature. Some common factors like poor infrastructural facility, poor banking outreach, lack of entrepreneurial spirit, lack of market, lack of quality consciousness, etc. are the multisided problems generally seen in rural areas. Though different problems have influenced the rural entrepreneurial scene, there are also multiple opportunities in rural which have been unexplored yet.

The prospects of muga silk industry are highlighted in the following points:

- i. The presence of natural environment (soil, inclination, rainfall, etc.) that is supportive for growth of *som* and *sualu* tress which is necessary for the *muga* silkworms to feed.
- ii. Availability of indigenous knowledge, expertise, and skill for *som* plantation and extraction of muga silk threads from the muga cocoon and the weaving.
- iii. Change in policy of the present Government in developing handloom sector and developing area-specific schemes for developing the *muga* silk weavers.
- iv. Easy availability of cheap labor with appropriate level of skill.
- v. *Muga* silk is a labour intensive industry, so does not require huge capital. So lower rate of investment and high rate of ROI and higher profitability can encourage unemployed youth with an area for a kitchen garden to start the venture.
- vi. High and growing demand of muga silk in national and international market.
- vii. *Muga* is associated with the cultural and religious life of the Assamese populous.

7. Conclusion:

Assam occupies a significant place due to its unique flora and fauna. The congenial climate and environment has made the region a natural abode of sericigenous insects and their host plants. Muga, being the indigenous product of Assam known for its golden hues, durability and eco-friendly nature. The rural rearers are well acquainted with production and practices of this special variety of golden silk. It can be used as an instrument for reshaping the rural economic foundation of Assam as it has immense potentiality for income and employment generation in the villages. Thousands of people in rural Assam have been engaged in silk industry and earn their livelihoods from the industry irrespective of age, sex and caste. The potentiality of the industry has not been flourishing much as expected during the past few decades.

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