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Muga Silk Industry of Assam in Historical Perspectives

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Abstract - The muga silk industry of Assam has been in existence since time immemorial. In Assam, muga silk weaving is an ancient craft, though there is no definite and precise mention of the time of its origin. Due to lack of definite and authentic contemporary historical accounts, different Scholars have drawn different opinions and conclusions regarding the origin of muga culture. Ahom regime (1228-1828) can be considered as the golden period for muga culture of Assam, which prospered and thrived and had become a part of social and economic life of the Assamese people. Due to immense co-operation and initiative from Ahom kings, the rearers, reelers & weavers became skillful and the industry grew rapidly. An attempt has been made to study the historical perspectives of muga silk industry in Assam and its present status.

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The muga silk cloth which is closely associated with the socio-economic and cultural life of Assamese people is considered as the queen of all fabric due to its durability and elegant lustrous natural colour. There is a bright prospect of muga silk industry in the North Eastern part of India as the climate of the region suits its growth & development. The industry can reshape the rural economy of Assam to a great extent and make this region a big earner of foreign exchange. The industry is well known as highly employment oriented and low capital-intensive. There is lot of scope for part time and full time employment of labour in the industry as the manufacture of muga silk final product requires division of labour in distinct activities. In this article an attempt has been made to highlight the historical perspectives of muga silk industry in Assam.

The muga silk industry of Assam has been in existence since time immemorial. In Assam, muga silk weaving is an ancient craft, though there is no definite and precise mention of the time of its origin. It is one of the most important cottage industries that have flourished from time immemorial. The manufacture of muga silk has been confined to Assam alone, which had worldwide reputation for manufacture of varieties of silk cloth and had a profitable foreign trade. Francis Hamilton remarks that Assamese women of all castes from the queen downwards wove four kinds of silk that are produced in the country, and with which three fourths of the people were clothed.

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Kautilya mentioned the production of 'Dukula', a kind of Silk fabric, produced from Cocoons of certain species of insects, in the ancient Assam. This 'Dukula' had three varieties. The first variety, which was white in colour and very soft in texture, was popular in 'Vangaka' (lower Bengal), the second variety which was bright blue in colour and also soft in texture was popular in 'Paundraka' (North Bengal) and the third variety which was of golden colour and also soft was popular in 'Suvarnakudya' (Present Assam). There are various species of insect found in Northern Myanmar to South of Tripura and from Eastern India to Kumaon Hills (both domesticated & wild), which produce different varieties of silk. But, the variety of worm found in Assam only produce golden coloured yarn, from which the pure muga fabric is produced.

Due to lack of definite and authentic contemporary historical accounts, different Scholars have drawn different opinions and conclusions regarding the origin of muga culture. Some of the archaeologists and Historians claim that the Indians knew the art of silk rearing from the migrants from China. As the industry was mainly confined in the past to the Tibeto-Burman elements in Assam, it is not unlikely that along with their migration to Assam the Chinese introduced certain art & craft of Chinese origin. The Inhabitants of North East India, particularly those belonging to Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Mongoloid Tribe, who are well acquainted with the art of producing silk, have successfully domesticated muga worms possibly to get Proteinous dishes from the Larvae and Pupae on one hand and for fabrics on the other.

The silk industry of Assam has flourished and progressed during the Ahom regime (1228-1828) due to the care and keen interest taken by the ruling kings. The Tai-Ahoms had invaded Assam in 1228 A.D. and sericulture was an integral part of their culture.

During the Supremacy of Ahom dynasty, the silk industry was greatly encouraged and this is particularly true in case of muga silk industry. Ahom kings patronized muga-culture by favouring muga silk for Royal robes. It was the prescribed attire of all the high officers of the Govt. The garments made of 'muga' and other garments embroidered with 'muga' were the prerogative for the noblemen. Distinction in wearing dresses and garments had been maintained between the high and the lower classes. Headgear or turban,

called 'Phachau' or 'Pag', 'Chapkon', 'Kinkhwab', wrapper called 'Cheleng' (muga gutidia cheleng) & 'Khania' (muga phular khania), 'Churia' or 'Dhoti', female garments 'Mekhela', 'Riha' etc. made of muga were used by the Royal aristocratic or high ranking families. Common people were allowed to wear garments made of cotton and coarse variety silk. In some specific occasions and with due permission from the kings, they could also wear muga fabrics.

The fabrics made of the best quality muga silk, i.e., when muga silkworms are fed on Mejankari or Adakuri trees (called mejankari silk) and on Chapa or Champa trees (called chapapatia muga silk) were exclusively worn by the Royal families. F.Hamilton mentioned about Mejankari silk, which was reared in Assam proper on a tree that was cultivated, and said that it was generally considered as better quality and constituted the dress of the higher ranks. These 'Mejankari' and 'Chapapatia' silks were costlier than common muga silk fed on 'Som', 'Sualu' and 'Dighlati' trees. The practice of rearing silkworm on 'Mejankari' & 'Chapa' tree is completely abandoned by the people due to non-availability of feed plants and high mortality rate of muga silkworm on these plants.

The Ahom kings also kept many costly muga sets in the Royal storehouse for presenting them to distinguished visitors to the Royal court. There were many looms under the supervision of Royal house, called Royal or 'Rajagharia looms' for producing special types of silk fabrics for the use of the members of the Royal family. Expert female weavers drawn from various places of Assam proper operated such Royal looms. Such weavers received grant of rent-free land and other favours in return for their services. These Royal looms were not sufficient enough to fulfill the requirements of the Royal family; therefore, skilled weavers from outside the palace were appreciated for supplying good quality silk fabrics to the Royal house. It is learnt from the historical records that for supplying silk fabric to the Royal Family, grants of lands were conferred upon the weavers. They were also exempted from the personal labour exacted by the state from all other classes. Moreover, some of the 'Sumonis' (muga silkworm foe plants area) were favoured as Royal or 'Rajagharia Sumonis' for rearing silkworm exclusively for the Royal looms.

The Ahom kings created separate administrative machinery to look after the silkworm feed plants, silkworm rearing, reeling of silk yarn & weaving of silk fabrics. During the reign of 'Dihingia Raja' alias 'Shuhungmung' (1497-1539), the mother of 'Bhawanipuria Gopal Ata', who was very expert in weaving, was entrusted with the charge of superintending the twelve score of royal looms. During the reign of King Pratap Singha (1603-1641) one 'Mumai Tamuli Barbarua', was famous for popularising silk culture in Assam.

From the historical records it is learnt that, some of the Ahom Queens were also personally involved in patronising silk industry in Assam. King Siva singha's (1714-1744) consort queen 'Phuleswari' alias 'Prametheswari', 'Ambika' alias 'Draupadi' and 'Sarbeswari' alias 'Anadari' were personally in charge of training the young girls on the art of weaving, as well as looking after the activities of the royal looms in the palace.

A class of people called 'Katonni' or 'Jogis' was famous for spinning and weaving during the Ahom period. It was also found that weavers known as 'Tantis' and 'Jholas' (Mohammedan weavers) who migrated from other places of India had started weaving silk fabrics in Assam. During the Reign of 'Jayadhva singha' (1648-1663), Mohammedan experts in embroidery work were brought from Delhi and were established in Assam, which encouraged Assamese people to learn the art of embroidery for the upliftment of indigenous crafts in Assam. King Rudra singha (1696-1714) also brought new ideas, techniques & design of the art of weaving from other parts of contemporary India through his envoys and encouraged the Assamese weavers to practice those ideas. This types of encouragement made by the Ahom king gave a boost to the silk industry of Assam.

Ahom kings also encouraged the sale of silk thread & fabrics of Assam at various markets located in Assam proper and border areas of Assam. Muga silk was one of the chief articles of export to Bengal, Bhutan and neighboring hill districts of 'Khasi' & 'Garos'. According to Captain Welsh Report on Assam in 1794, the British Govt. concluded a treaty for trade and commerce with king Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795) in 1793, which envisaged the expansion of trade and commerce between Assam and Bengal. The report also mentioned about the export of muga silk to Bengal, which was small in quantity. In 1809, during the Reign of 'Kamaleswar Singha', Assam exported 65 maunds of muga raw silk and 75 maunds of muga fabrics to Bengal, the value of which was placed at Rs.11,350/- and Rs.17,500/- respectively. During the early nineteenth century 'muga dhotis' were sold at Rs 2.50 to Rs. 6.00, 'muga rihars' from Rs.1.00 to Rs. 4.00 and 'muga mekhehas' from Rs. 1.00 to Rs. 3.00. Ahom kings appointed officials to look after the trade and realised duties on all exports and imports. Duaria Baruah was exclusively in charge of such duties.

There are ample evidence of Royal encouragement and patronage to promote silk industry in Assam. The spinning & weaving had become indispensable profession of every Assamese household. The social status of muga silk culture was very high and the practice of silkworm rearing, reeling & weaving of muga silk was most common than other silk. There were one loom for every two women and in joint families there were eight to ten looms. No women were considered

accomplished unless she had attained proficiency in spinning and weaving. The good weavers received special appreciation as well as Royal patronage. On the other hand, a girl having no knowledge of weaving was called 'Thupuri', 'a girl misfit for marriage'. Both male and female, irrespective of sexes operated looms and it is related how in the Reign of 'Purandar Singha' (1818-1819), 'Madhuram Tanti', a male weaver granted land rent-free by the King for his skill in weaving. Almost all Ahom women were skilled in hand spinning, weaving & dyeing of silk fabrics. Even the Brahmins and lower castes, irrespective of their social status, practiced it.

Ahom period can be considered as the golden period for muga culture of Assam, which prospered and thrived and had become a part of social and economic life of the Assamese people. Due to immense co-operation and initiative from Ahom kings, the rearers, reelers & weavers became skillful and the industry grew rapidly. Sivasagar, which was the capital of Ahom kingdom and its neighboring areas, became the centre of production of all varieties of silk and there was hardly a house without looms in Sibsagar District.

In the post Ahom period, though the compulsions on silk rearing & weaving were disappeared, these activities were still regarded as necessary accomplishments for every households. David Scott, an agent to the Governor General of Fort William, when he was in North East India during 1802-1831, had been pressing the British Govt. for the development of silk industry in Assam. He believed that muga silk, due to its durability & strength might capture the European market. The muga silk thread was either woven into garments for home use by the women of the house, or sold to the local Marwaris who readily purchased it for export to Calcutta or Sylhet. Muga silk formed the staple trade of the East India Company during the middle of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. During 1832-33 (Dec-April), 1833-34 (May-June) & 1834-35 (July-June), Assam exported 69, 291 & 224 maunds respectively of muga silk thread to Bengal, the value of which was placed at Rs. 13,973.00, Rs. 58,220.00 & Rs. 53,889.00 respectively. According to A.J.M.Mills, Goalpara, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts of Assam exported muga raw silk to Bengal during the middle of the 19th century. The total value of export of muga raw silk from Lakhimpur District during 1871-72 was about Rs. 60,900.00.

During 1882-83 & 1897-98, the total value of export of silk from Assam was Rs. 2,04,930.00 & Rs. 3,66,310.00 respectively. During 1890-91, 1900-01 and 1903-04, the total value of exported silk from Assam; only through land routes was Rs 3,000.00, Rs. 4, 000.00 and Rs. 3, 000.00 respectively.

During the early part of the British period, the Govt. diverted their attention towards the silk trade and in 1834 A.D., the Governor General's agent Mr. Scott in NEFA, established a factory at Darrang, with the

objective of extending the cultivation of mulberry, rearing of silkworms and improving the reeling system of muga. In 1870-71, the British Govt conducted a survey to about 58,401 bigha of muga host plant area throughout Assam. Out of these 82% of land was in Sivasagar District, followed by Goalpara (8%), Lakhimpur (5%), Nagaon (3%) & Darang (2%). During 1886 to 1888 A.D., the Govt. made several attempts to convert this traditional craft along commercial line, but all these efforts had not produced expected results. The Settlement Officer in Settlement Report of 1929 said that every household produced about half a 'seer' of silk each year in an average, the value of which was some 12 to 15 rupees.

The real picture of the silk industry under British regime was gloomy. During the British rule, there was no appreciable development in silk industry due to their colonial interest to open up Market for Lancashire products. W.W.Hunter also mentioned about the decrease of silk production during British period owing to the attraction of labour to Tea Gardens, increase supply of European cotton and woolen fabrics in the market. Even 'Som' plantation areas were assessed for taxation during the period. Expansion of Tea Gardens had considerably reduced the plantation areas of Muga feed plants and wild population of muga silkworms. The silk industry had to face stiff competition from mill made artificial cheap silk and cotton cloths during the British period. Even in such an un-favourable situation, Assam's silk industry had not lost its past glorious and unique position in respect of indigenous silk, muga. Muga Silk industry had a place of pride in the socio-economic and cultural life of the rural people of Assam. It is, therefore, needless to say that muga Silk industry played a very important role in the economy of Assam during the reign of Ahom and in latter period.

At present, the business of Muga, the golden silk, is worth of Rs 200 crore. With proper organization, the industry could grow up to 10 times of its current size. There are around 9500 sericulture villages producing muga, eri and mulberry silk in the state of Assam and Sualkuchi being the hub of the industry.

The export earnings of India from silk items during 2008-09 (April-May) have been around Rs.486.84 crore which was 429.88 crore in 2007-08 during the same period. The price per thousand of muga reeling cocoon, per KG of Muga Raw Silk (warf) and the weft has been Rs. 650.00, Rs. 5000.00 and Rs. 4500.00 respectively in the month of September, 2008 at Sualkuchi Market while the price of the same in the previous year was Rs.600.00, 3900.00 and Rs. 3250.00 respectively.

We are all aware that after Kancheepuram silk and Solapur terry towel, now Assam's Muga silk has been added to the list of products granted the protection of geographical indication (GI). It has become the 38th product that has got protection from the GI

Registry in Chennai. The Patent Information Centre, under the aegis of Assam Science Technology and Environment Council (PIC, ASTEC), had applied for the registration and done the scientific fact-finding work to get GI on muga silk. GI protection will bring in standardization of processes, which in turn would help commercialization and export of the product.

There is a bright prospect of muga silk industry of Assam as the demand for natural fibre has grown considerably in the global market. The durability and elegant lustrous natural colour is the strength of muga silk fibre. Therefore, there is every possibility to explore the national and international market by developing the production base of muga raw silk.

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