

## **Kashmir's Silk Industry Dying a Silent Death**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The rearing of silk-worms on mulberry trees for the production of raw silk is known as Sericulture. Once a major support to state economy, the famed silk industry of Kashmir has faced severe decay over the years. Sericulture is one of the traditional occupations of Jammu and Kashmir. It is the only traditional univoltine belt in India capable of producing silk comparable to the fine qualities of raw-silk imported in the international market. Kashmir introduced far better silk, both in quality and quantity than Japan and Italy, 60 years ago. The climate of Kashmir is temperate and congenial for rearing both univoltine and bivoltine silkworm species for cocoon production. These cocoons are far superior to the multivoltine ones produced in the rest of the country (Tazima, 1958). It is disheartening that the silk industry of Jammu and Kashmir which has seen a glorious past, is on decline, still a large section of population is dependent on sericulture. Inadequacy of mulberry leaves and damage caused by insects and pests are the major problem in the development and expansion of mulberry trees. The sericulture development department is laying stress on raising dwarf mulberry trees to supplement and replenish the traditional tall mulberry trees.

**Key Words :** Sericulture, Univoltine, Bivoltine, Multivoltine, Cocoons, Shawl

### **INTRODUCTION**

The mulberry which forms the main food of the silk worms had been in existence in Kashmir since Vedic time. Under the Mughals, the silk industry of Kashmir received due state patronage and many steps were taken for the development of the silk industry. Keeping in view the importance of the mulberry tree, as being the only food for feeding the silk-worms, its cultivation received great impetus. The preservation of mulberry trees became the concern of almost everyone and it is curious to note that cattle was not allowed to eat this precious leaf (Ain-i-Akbari). According to Jehangir mulberry trees were found everywhere in the valley meant only for feeding the silk-worms (Jehangir). In order to conduct silk-worm rearing operations, silk-worm seed was imported from Gilgit and Tibet (Ibid). The silk industry showed decline at the end of Mughal rule as such it did not attract the attention of various foreign travellers during the Mughal rule (Travels in the Mughal Empire). The Mughal rule ended in 1753,

when Kashmir became part of Afghan kingdom. This period witnessed political instability and economic devastation. The silk industry of Kashmir could make no progress under this rule. The Afghan governors proved quite disinterested in the development of this industry and had no interest in the cultivation and preservation of mulberry trees. This is substantiated by the fact that under the orders of Afghan governor Haji-Karim Dad Khan (1776-1783AD) a large number of mulberry trees were cut-off in Maisuma (Srinagar) to clear the field for horse-racing (Tarikh-i-Kashmir). The Sikhs who occupied Kashmir in 1819 paid great attention towards the development of the silk industry, as a result of which the production of silk increased. About 2/3 of the silk produce in Kashmir was exported to Punjab (Vigne G.T "Tragels in Kashmir, Ladakh and Iskardu). Thus it is clear with the advent of the Sikhs in Kashmir, the silk industry had progressed by leaps and bounds. The progress continued upto the end of the Sikh rule in 1846 and by that time silk had become an important article of trade. It was also

backbone of the economy of the people of Kashmir at that time. The silk industry under Dogras saw a turning point in the history of the silk industry of Kashmir. On the one-hand the period witnessed the foundation of Jammu and Kashmir state and thus the scope of the silk industry exceeded the boundaries of Kashmir and the scope of the new born state of Jammu and Kashmir obviously extended to include Jammu too, and on the otherhand far-reaching measures were adopted by the state to streamline and develop the industry. It seems that Maharaja Gulab Singh was successful in maintaining the progress already achieved during the sikh rule. However the paucity of of statistical data prevents us to determine the actual quantity of seed production, rearing out-put and reeling out-put. But it is certain that every branch of the industry had developed a good deal during his rule especially the seed production. The progress made in this branch of the country can be judged by the fact that in 1855 there appeared a horrible silk-worm disease in Europe and all the worms died (Maxwell Lefroy, 1916). European countries sent delegations to all the parts of the world and under this mission two Italian experts (M.M.Orio and Consono) came to Kashmir and according to a report obtained 25000 ounces of the silk-worm seed, after examination seed was declared to be disease free. It will not be out of place to mention here what a Frenchman DESUIGNOUR KELBER, an eminent sericulturist has recorded in his book “Le Cocon de Soie” about this event ; In april 1860 MM Orio and Consono, Italian silkworm seed producers, embark for India. In May, they arrived at Calcutta, where through the good offices of the British government, they are able to go to Kashmir and get from a very important grainage 25000 ounces of seed. This seed was packed in thick wooden boxes for transport and is aerated only during the nights. It reached Italy towards the end of November in a very good condition “(Report on an Inquiry into the Silk Industry in India” 1916). Thus it is clear that a country which could spare 25000 ounces of seed for foreigners must have reserved a substantial quantity for local consumption also. Under Gulab Singh’s rule, silk became an important article of trade and was exported to other parts of India in large quantities. The government derived an income of one lakh rupees (Ganesh Lai) in tax from silk trade alone during the early years of Maharaja Gulab Singh’s rule. Thus the silk industry had assumed an important position in the state revenue. It may not be out of place to mention here that the development and the

re-organisation of the silk industry was the need of the hour, as the famous Shawl industry of Kashmir which had provided means of livelihood to a sizeable section of the population, had started to decline. In order to compensate the decline in the shawl trade, the Maharaja took several measures for the development of silk industry. He after constructing the rearing houses, imported reeling appliances and machinery from Europe, as a result Kashmir became familiar with the technique of reeling prevalent in Europe which was highly developed. In order to induce more and more people to sericulture operations, the Maharaja provided some facilities and incentives to the people to take to sericulture. The rearers were exempted from beggar (forced labour) which was a great relief to the people. Many new techniques were introduced in reeling and other branches of the industry. As a result of such efforts the quality of raw silk industry improved, which was testified by the appreciation received from the agricultural experts of Europe, who spoke highly of the quality of fibre. According to many scholars, the silk factory at Srinagar provided employment to about 400 people for the whole year round. As a result of the state incentive the number of rearers and the rearing out-put increased greatly, adding to the income of the poor peasants of the state.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study intends to examine the importance of silk industry in the state of Jammu and Kashmir in the early years and its decline. The present study is based on both primary and secondary data. For the primary data I went to the department of sericulture Jammu and Kashmir and for the secondary data I went through many articles and websites and some books of the local authors of the said industry.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The silk industry which had emerged as a great concern did not flourish after 1878, when it began to deteriorate. Because measures taken by the Maharaja, which had earlier contributed to the development of the industry, had now been abused by the rearers according to Lawrence the revival scheme of the Maharaja was not wise. Kiram-Kashas had become a privileged class of the society as they were exempted from beggar (Ibid). They could use the houses of other villagers for the purpose of breeding the silk-worms and they were allowed

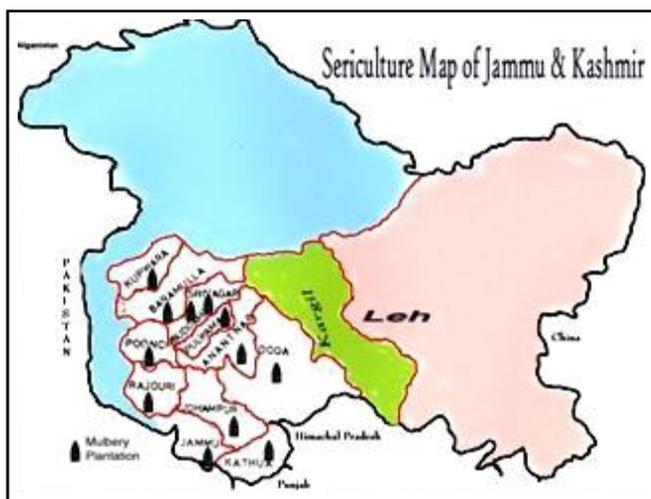
to keep a watch over the mulberry trees. With the spirits of the time these people abused their power and the result was that the common people looked upon the industry with hatred and even the name Kiram-Kash itself became hateful to the villagers not involved in the industry. Moreover, the organisation of the industry was not done in scientific basis. The rearing houses being scattered all over the valley could not be supervised properly and the cost of buildings and machinery was enormous. Those who were not interested in the silk-worm rearing were forced to do so, the consequence being the loss of seed. However, the immediate cause of the decay in the industry in the state, was the disease of the silk-worms known as Pebrine (Pebrine is the most dreadful of all the silk-worm diseases), which started in India in 1875 and reached Kashmir in 1878, due to which the industry was almost wiped out (I.T.B., 1933). According to N.C Mukerji, the disease broke out in Kashmir because some of the seed imported from Europe was diseased (Maxwell Lefroy). Unfortunately, there was none possessing any technical knowledge of the industry who could control the disease which befell the industry. Thus the epidemic destroyed the whole crop of the worms and the Industry was virtually closed in the State. Out of 127 rearing houses built in 1869 only two survived, one Raghunathpura (Srinagar) and the other at Sherpura (Anantnag) (Ibid). In 1881, Government thought of reviving the silk industry and fresh eggs were imported from Japan. But again the worms died, with the result all the efforts of reviving the industry ended and the industry could not be re-started. After such a loss it was thought unwise to give a new start to the industry without proper planning. So from 1882 to 1890, the State left this industry to the care of silk-worm rearers with the result the quantity of seed rapidly diminished. Due to the virtual closure of the industry a large number of mulberry trees were cut off in the city during this period. The losses would have been minimised to a great extent if an eye had been kept by the Government over the industry, especially when the Government had not given up the idea of re-establishing the industry in the State. In 1889, the Government came to the conclusion that the revival of the Industry can be of great economic benefit to the State, because the shawl Industry had by now declined completely, due to the defeat of France in the Franco-German war of 1870, which was the chief buyer of Kashmir shawls at that time. The labour was thrown out of employment followed by the severe famine of 1877 which dashed the hopes of the revival of

the shawl industry. Thus the Government thought of re-organizing the silk industry. The beginning was made in 1890, when Sir Thomas Wardle of Leek (England) involved himself in the future of the silk industry in Kashmir (Wardle S.T, "Kashmir and its New Silk Industry). Thomas Wardle was himself an eminent sericulturist and the President of the Silk Association of Great Britain and Ireland. He entered into correspondence with the British Resident and in a letter dated 6th January, 1890 addressed to Kashmir Resident, Wardle suggested to him to make an inquiry into the silk producing capabilities of Kashmir and a possibility of establishing here such sericulture institutions as those of Pauda (A Silk Institution in France) and Montipelleer (Another silk Institution in Italy). In another letter dated 24th of June, 1890 Wardle showed keen interest in the future of Kashmir silk industry as he was quite sure from its physical features and beautiful climate that Kashmir could produce best silk. Yet in another letter dated 5th of December, 1890 Wardle wrote of the benefits, which his industry could afford to India. Thus as a result of the efforts of Sir Thomas Wardle Sericulture Development Department was established In Kashmir in about 1892 A.D, and the operations of the industry were kept under the charge of B.R. Mukerji. The services of a trained Bengali were secured for microscopical examination of the seed and at the same time the Department was successful in producing disease free local seed. However, the balance sheet of the industry from April 1698 to April 1903 had shown a capital expenditure of Rs. 516320 and a profit of no-less than Rs. 603308 which meant a huge return of 117 per cent over the whole period (Ganju, op.cit. p.163). The Government also made a thorough enquiry in the matter and it was found that the statement made by the Accountant General did not include the cost of silk which had remained unsold in Europe and was with the agents there (Maxwell Lefroy, op.cit.. Vol.III, p.40). Thus after adding that amount to the credits of the industry this misconception was cleared. By the year 1907, the silk industry in Kashmir had developed to the extent that it was considered to be one of the largest concerns of its kind in the world providing employment to no fewer than 5000 people (Younghusband Francis "Kashmir"). Moreover Kashmir silk had a ready market in Europe and was praised and liked almost everywhere. Under these conditions the demand of Kashmir silk rose to the Highest opteems, and as such measures for the extention of the sericultural operations were undertaken.

With the passage of time the number of rearers, the rearing out-put increased and the industry in the State began to make rapid strides. The industry in the State of Jammu and Kashmir was progressing by leaps and bounds, on the other hand it was declining in other parts of India, It is strange to note that there was a downward trend in the export of raw-silk from other parts of India, For instance after deducting Kashmir’s share in the export trade of Indian raw silks from 1884-1914, there was a decline of 17 per cent, There were many causes responsible for this decline *viz.*, diseases, defective reelings, substitutes for silk, want of organisation, extention of industry in Japan and inferior breeds of worms used by the rearers used to other States of India. Since attempts had been made spasmodically to revive the industry, with no results except in Kashmir and Mysore, it was certain that if prompt steps in this direction were not taken, India’s position as a silk exporting country was in danger and could be lost anytime. After revising possible courses it was pointed out that it was unreasonable to rely on provincial efforts alone. “The revival throughout India of an industry which was formerly in a flourishing condition was a matter of more than merely local importance.

**Sericulture in Jammu and Kashmir :**

In Jammu and Kashmir (J & K) sericulture is practiced in 20 districts. The major silk production districts are Anantnag, Kupwara, Pulwama, Baramula, Gandarbal, Udhampur, Rajouri, Riasi and Kathua. The details are presented in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1 : Sericulture districts of Jammu and Kashmir**

Raw silk production in traditional states during 2014-15 : There are 5 traditional sericulture states. These states

are Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Jammu and Kashmir (Table 1).

Table 1 : Raw silk production during 2014-2015 in traditional states of India	
State	Raw silk production (MT)
Karnataka	9645
Andhra Pradesh	6485
West Bengal	2500
Tamil Nadu	1602
Jammu & Kashmir	138

Source : CSB 2016

From the above data it is clear that silk industry in Jammu and Kashmir once a major support to state economy and was known for better quality through-out world. In India the silk producing potential of Jammu and Kashmir particularly Kashmir was praised world-wide by many foreign travellers. At present, the famed silk industry of Kashmir had faced severe decay as is clear in the above mentioned data.

**Concluding remarks:**

Jammu and Kashmir is the only state which produces the best quality Bivoltine silk. But the irony is that less than 30 per cent of cocoons produced indigenously are used for silk production locally and the remaining is exported to outside states. Historians say a century ago Kashmir had dynamic silk trade. In 1940’s, the previous silk yarn produced in Kashmir was exported to entire Europe. A cursory look at statistics shows that during its heyday in 1980’s the cocoon production in Kashmir had reached more than 15 lakh kilograms. When the silk industry in France was almost wiped out by a disease to the silk-worm seed the country imported material from Kashmir to revive its industry. But then the time changed for the worse for the Kashmir silk industry, the cocoon production dropped to 60,000 Kgs in late 90’s. Government’s “negligence” towards protection and development of the silk industry and low market price weaned away the farmers.

Let me throw light on present emphasis of the industry (Table 2)

The data in Table 2 indicates that the silk industry is showing signs of improvement year after year, but the old glory of the industry is still far away. It is the duty of the administration of the state to put lot of efforts in bringing the old glory of the industry as the potential is enormous in the state in regards to the climate and also

Year	Cocoon Production (MT)	Income Generation (Lakh Rs.)	Av. Price For a Grade (Rs.)	Productivity per OZ (Kg)	Rearers Population No's
2008-09	738	455.57	192.00	31.00	19700
2009-10	810	800.00	300.00	32.00	22800
2010-11	860	1100.00	410.00	32.50	25500
2011-12	917	963.00	350.00	33.00	27000
2012-2013	901	1193.00	397.00	32.00	28000
2013-2014	1022	2226.00	650.00	34.23	29400
2014-2015 (Spring)	1105(P)	–	750.00(P)	42.00	31882

Source : Department of Sericulture Jammu and Kashmir

the past of the industry gives us the real picture.

- Measures must be taken for the introduction and development of region and season specific silkworm races and mulberry varieties

- Planting improved species of mulberry trees and bring large area under mulberry cultivation including hilly, border and backward areas and must be taken proper care of.

- Involvement of proper research work in breeding to obtain suitable Bivoltine races which is the type of silkworm race mostly prevalent from ancient decades in Jammu and Kashmir due to environmental conditions. The importance of research should also be implemented to find the diseases which affected the silkworm plant in the past and the present challenges regarding the various diseases which might affect the plant.

- Proper training to farmers which are dependent on this industry for their livelihood.

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