

## Eri Culture for the Sustainable Livelihood of Tribal People of Assam

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### SUMMARY

Rearing of silkworm is a part and parcel of tribal people of Assam. It has been the primary source of livelihood to the majority of tribal inhabitants. The production of commercially important product i.e. eri cocoon and silk demands many steps which requires less capital and more labour. Moreover, this process give rise to many value added products which helps in adding extra revenue to them. The income can be generated year round which assists the rural tribal for sustaining a proper livelihood. Rural people are advantageous in this sector naturally as the land is blessed with immense resources requisite for the purpose as well as the congenial environment. The participation of women is significantly more as compared to men in rearing as well as post cocoon activities. The increasing demand for eri products is boosting the growth of this industry and expected to raise the income and lifestyle of tribal population by reducing poverty.

### INTRODUCTION

The tribal population of Assam is 3,884,371, which is 12.45% of the total population of the state and Assam constitutes 3.72% of the total tribal population of the country (Anon., 2022a). Most of the tribes of Assam have unique culture, language, traditional and customary ways of living, legal system, definite creed and practices. There are more than twenty tribes in the state. Among the tribes, *Boro/Bodo/Boro Kachari* represents almost half of the total ST population of the state. *Mising, Karbi, Deori, Rabha, Dimasa, Kachari* (i.e. *Sonowal Kachari*) and *Lalung* are the other major tribes of Assam. The Scheduled Tribes of Assam are predominantly cultivators as 70.6 per cent of the total ST main workers have been recorded as cultivators, while merely 6.1 per cent as agricultural labourer (Anon., 2022b). Sericulture, more particularly eri culture is an antique culture of the tribal people of Assam which is associated to their life, culture and socio-economic conditions and the people are considering it as an ancillary occupational venture since time immemorial.

In Assam, ericulture is mainly practiced by the different tribal people viz., *Bodo, Kachari, Rabha, Mising, Deori, and Karbi etc.* Among the *vanya* or wild silks of India, eri silk holds the first position by producing 7204 MT raw silk. Of the total production of 5,315.60 MT raw silk in Assam, during 2019-20, eri silk shares the major portion i.e. 5,049.30 MT (Anon., 2020a). Presently, number of sericulture families engaged in eri culture in Assam is alone 249,615 nos. with a food plant area of 30319.46 hectare (Anon., 2021a). Eri culture is a rural agriculture based cottage industry and rearing of eri silkworm, *Samia ricini* Donovan (Lepidoptera: Saturniidae) is conducted not to gain only income, but as a heritage - a situation followed by past generations. The favourable climate, availability of host plants in nature and traditional skills have made the eri culture practice a sustainable livelihood mean for the tribal people. Like any other silkworm culture, eri culture also involves host plant cultivation, silkworm rearing, silkworm seed production and processing of cocoon to produce spun silk. Various indigenous practices and beliefs are deep rooted among the eri silkworm rearers of different ethnic groups of Assam.

### Eri culture:

In recent times, eri culture has emerged as a new hope towards sustainable livelihood for the tribal people of Assam. The high return with minimum investment in this industry has attracted the tribal people to engage in this venture from aeons ago. It also acts as a tool for socio-economic development of tribal population of Assam. Although the final output is a textile product but many more useful products are produced in the value added chain. The culture initiates from planting of food plants, rearing, seed production and post cocoon activities. To generate a sustainable livelihood the resources need to be utilized properly to generate income.



**Eri cocoon and pre-pupa**

**On farm activities:**

Proper conservation and utilization of eri host plants are the most important aspects of this industry. Raising the host plants to feed the worms is the primary requisite. The plants are propagated mainly through seeds with proper maintenance. The tradition of eri culture is quintessentially an environment friendly that is apparently more popular among the rural tribal households. Ericulture besides providing the subsistence living of the indigenous people also works positively towards the conservation of the natural environment they live in. It is thus becoming an integral element to strengthen and redefine man-environment relationship. It also checks migration of people from rural to urban areas. Tribal people mostly live in rural areas, hills and remote places

wherein the host plants are found naturally and commonly. The abundant availability of such resources are primarily attributed to the Assam's favourable geographical factors.

#### Off farm activities:

The rearing of eri silkworm is mainly done by following age old traditional practices. Eri silkworm completes its life cycle within 45-85 days. In each stage, it requires specific care, environment and equipments. Eggs are allowed to lay on a grass device 'kharika' which is cheap and ecofriendly. Bunch method of rearing is popular among tribal population which has many advantages. Tray rearing is also prevalent in some rural areas. After attaining maturity, the worms form cocoon in bunch of dried leaves. The cocoon is the ultimate commercial product from which silk is extracted. Eri silk is also called 'Ahimsa silk' or poor man's silk. It has got its name because of the eco-friendly process of extraction. To obtain eri silk, the silkworms need not to be killed or harmed. The cocoon can be utilized after moth emergence since the filament is not continuous. Some amount of cocoon is utilized for domestic purpose i.e. to prepare household garments. Eri pupa is a delicacy for tribal population. The silk is spun by the process of spinning. Earlier hand spinning was common but now a days machine spinning is adopted by people to get high quality eri silk. Eri silk is utilized and processed to make fabric and garments. For eg. *Eria chadar*, muffler, socks etc. The eri products are an integral part of tribal society. It is the identity of tribal population and worn with pride.

#### Women participation:

Tribal people have always been independent in household chores and in other activities. Women have been playing a major role ranging from farm related activities, weaving to marketing of the produce. According to Buragohain and Saikia (2020), the involvement of *kachari* tribe women was higher compared to men in eri culture activities. Rearing of silkworm alone does not contribute to family income, the spinning and weaving activities have significant contribution to employment and income (De and Das, 2007). There is a popular saying by Mahatma Gandhi "Assamese women is a born weaver and weaves fairy tales in her clothes". It is an age-old activity and mostly common among women folk of tribal population which is coming up as a great source of livelihood.



Tribal women ready to sell eri cocoon



**Tribal women busy in eri silk spinning**

#### **Income generation:**

Tribal people have become self-sufficient and self-reliant by practicing this culture. It has turned into one of the promising and suitable rural income generating sector to eliminate rising poverty with maximum employment potential. It provides employment to people of all generation irrespective of age and gender with less skill and knowledge. As the silkworm is multivoltine in nature so production of cocoon can be expected all year round. The whole process of eri culture involves many operations and produces value added products which helps in generating additional income to the rearers. The maximum production of eri cocoon and silk of Assam is from tribal dominant areas. About 8-10 kg cut cocoons can be harvested by rearing 100 dfls of eri silkworm. The quantity of cocoons required to produce 1 kg of eri spun yarn is 1.3 kg. Rearers sell the cut cocoon and spun silk at Rs. 750-950 and Rs. 2500-2900 per kg, respectively. They also earn additional income of Rs. 350-400 rupees per kg by selling pupa. Moreover, rearers are emphasizing on producing diversified products which will pave a new platform for eri rearers towards sustainable development.

#### **Government Assistance:**

Government has adopted certain steps and implemented various schemes to upgrade tribal population of Assam and entire North-East India. The ongoing projects that have been approved by Central Silk Board in Assam for development of eri culture under NERTPS are Integrated Sericulture Development Project (ISDP), construction of eri spun mill and development of aspirational districts (Anon., 2020b). Introduction of tapioca plant, a tertiary host plant under Tapioca project (NERTPS) for sustainable livelihood of poor eri growers has been initiated in Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) with a target of 120 eri rearers (Anon., 2021b).

## CONCLUSION

Eri culture has vast possibilities in generating sustainable livelihood for the tribal and rural people of Assam. The tribal population still sticks to the traditional practices and have negative attitude towards new technologies. There exists wide gap between sericulture technology and adoption of the same by the rearers. Technology intervention and proper adoption play major role to achieve desirable production. The increasing trend of production in the recent years indicates that there lies huge scope in this sector. So people as well as government must step forward to explore all possible ways to maximize the output and to create employment for overall uplift of the tribal community of Assam.

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