Chapter-2

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The history of ericulture in India, particularly in North-East India is as old as Indian culture per-se. Former Assam, the undivided North-East region of today, is supposed to be the original home of eri silk from time immemorial (Devi, 1999). The art of sericulture was known in the ancient Kamrupa as early as the Vedic age (Chowdhury, 1981). Through the passage of history, it had been popularly identified as “Assam silk”. Only the British people called it as “Palma Christie” silk (Sarkar, 1988).

Till today no detailed study, covering all the aspects of silk culture (sericulture) especially, on ericulture of Assam has been made. Of course, references of the practice of ericulture as well as sericulture in ancient Assam have been found in the Valmiki’s “Ramayana” (Das, 2000); Veda Vyasa’s “Mahabharata” (Nanavaty, 1965); Kalika Puran (Barua, 1986); Kautilya’s “Arthasastra” (Baishaya, 1999); Banbhatta’s “Harshacharitra”; Francis Hamilton’s “An Account of Assam”; William Robinson’s “Descriptive Account of Assam”; Edward Gait’s “A History of Assam” etc that proves the existence of sericulture in Assam since ancient time.

The Sericulture and Weaving Department of Government of Assam conducted a survey during 1975-76 in 598 Gaon Panchayats of the plain districts of Assam to assess the position of the silk industry relating to production, employment etc. The survey report reveals that the people pursuing silk culture in Assam belong to both General and
Scheduled Castes and Tribes though majority of them belong to Schedule Tribes. Large number of families was found to carry on these activities as leisure time occupations.

Dutta (1983) conducted a study entitled “Economics of Silk Production in Assam”, which provides a brief note about the silk production and its related aspects in Assam. He gave an in depth analysis and tried to find out the prospects of it through the assessment of the net income per family of silkworm rearer with the help of primary data. But the sample used in his study was inadequate, which he himself admitted later (Dutta, 1988). In his Ph. D. thesis entitled “Problems and Prospects of Silk Production in Assam with Special Reference to Sibsagar District”, Dutta (op. cit.) also discussed the problems and future prospects of eri, muga and mulberry silk industry in Assam with special reference to Sibsagar district. However, the most important drawback of that study was that he did not take into account transport cost associated with the collection of leaves in case of ericulture and imputed labour cost in the estimation of income and profit while explaining the prospects of it.

Dookia (1984) in his study entitled “Studies on Ericulture for Exploitation as a Cottage Industry” analysed the position of eri silk industry in Indian economy as a cottage industry and discussed its role in the generation of employment and income in the rural economy. He concluded that agro-based endi textile industry could be used as a remedy to remove unemployment from the rural economy, as it is highly labour intensive.

Choudhury (1984) attempted to assess the economic importance of each variety of silk by drawing out gross and net return per hectare of land under host plant and per family of silkworm rearers. This assessment seems to be based on mere experiment rather than field study. Borthakur (1986) discussed the importance of handloom

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1As there is disguised unemployment in agriculture, the rural people, especially the women folk have been engaged in such occupation. Also the male people during the lean agricultural season take part in such activities for raising a part of their family earning.
industries including endi textile in the economy of Assam, especially in the rural

economy of Goalpara district. Here he focused on the marketing and financial problems

of the handloom weaving in Assam. But he remained silent about the other problems

faces by these industries.

Das (2000) also analysed the importance of ericulture in the economy of Assam

and its related problems in his study “Problems and Prospects of Ericulture in Assam:

A case study in Barpeta district”. But he did not examine it through any field study and

thus the study is a superficial one. His analysis was completely based on secondary data

that suffers from the limitation of incompleteness. Later, Das (2006) in his paper

entitled “Empowerment of Women through Ericulture: A case study in Sarukhetry

Community Development Block”, studied the importance of ericulture as a means of

women empowerment in rural areas dominated by the tribal Bodo population. In his

study, he found that literacy rate as well as social status of women was relatively higher

among the women who have been practising ericulture than those who do not practice

ericulture.

Siddique (2000) also discussed about the potentialities of sericulture (mulberry,
eri and muga) in the employment and income generation in Assam. But he has not

discussed the various problems that the sericulture has to face, like technological

problem, marketing problem etc and thus he has not given any suggestion for the

solution of these problems. Again, in his discussion he used only the secondary data

and completely overlooked the primary data.

Thereafter “A Study of Muga-culture with Reference to Income and

Employment Generation in Kamrup District” by Paresh Chandra Das (2002) may be

mentioned, where he discussed the problems of muga-culture in Kamrup district of

Assam and means to revive the thousand years old industry. He also tried to find out

the share of muga-culture in employment generation through the analysis of data
collected from a sample of 736 families in Kamrup district during January 1999 to December 2002. Out of 736 families, 26.87 per cent of the respondent households were found to adopt muga-culture as a source of livelihood in his study. But, he did not estimate the capacity of muga-culture to generate employment per unit of output or area under the growth of host plant i.e., the efficiency of muga-culture in the generation of employment and income has not been checked.

Baishya (1986) studied the role of various small and cottage industries including sericulture in the development of the economy of Assam especially in the district of Kamrup through employment and income generation. He also revealed that cottage industries were decaying and dying while the small-scale industries were developing in the Kamrup district during 1970-71 to 1980-81. It is because of increasing demand of eri product and shortage of alternative jobs for the fast growing rural people. Moreover, it could be carried on by the poor people with a very low investment. The study also tested the function and problem of small scale and cottage industries and suggested measures for improvement. But he paid very little attention to the endi textile industries. Baishya (2005) also analysed the nature of investment, employment and generation of income in various sericulture activities, especially muga and mulberry in the Sualkuchi village of Kamrup district. Apart from that, he focussed on the problems of silk industry from different angles like irregular supply of yarn, distress sale of fabrics by poor weavers during seasonal fall in demand, financial problems, space for workshop, shortage of labour, electricity; marketing problem etc. But, here also he paid very little attention on ericulture.

Ratnala et al (1990) studied the employment of human labour in sericulture across different size of the farms especially of the mulberry farms in Andhra Pradesh. In their study, they found that human labour utilisation was more in smaller farms where the attention on each activity was more than the bigger farms. They observed a
direct relationship between hired labour use and the size of land holding. Also there was an inverse relation between the human labour use and the size of land under cultivation, which is very common from the point of standard agricultural economic theory. They concluded that the higher employment potentialities of sericulture were well suited to exploit the abundant human resources in rural India. The presence of disguised unemployment was more in case of smallholdings but the big holdings were generating comparatively less employment in their sericulture farms. In order to engage the family labourer effectively and use the labour rationally, holding size of 1.01 to 1.5 acres was of optimum size for cultivation and silkworm rearing.

Shamachary, Laksmipathalah and Jolly (1985) tried to determine the best possible price for mulberry cocoon. In determining the price of cocoon, they included weight of cocoons in the lot; cocoon shell ratio of the lot; defective cocoon percentage of the lot; silk recovery percentage of cocoon shell; weight of cocoons unsuitable for reeling and weight of cocoons suitable for reeling.

Mattigatti et al (2000) tried to evaluate the share of different intermediaries in the value addition, market margins and price spread in the process of production of soft silk fabric. The value addition, market margin and price spread were worked out for 10 metres of soft silk fabric weighing 60 grams per metre produced in Mysore, Bangalore and Kolar of Karnataka. The wholesale market price of 10 metres of fabric was about Rs.1513.35 during the time of survey. They observed that the price was distributed to different intermediaries. Out of the total price, rearers used to get a share of 48.3 per cent followed by traders (21.6 per cent), weavers (11.2 per cent), reelers (9.6 per cent) and twisters (8.1 per cent). The dyers received a meagre share of 1.1 per cent of the total price. Therefore, the different producers of various stages from rearers to dyers together used to receive about 78.3 per cent of the total price, while the traders used to have a share of about 22 per cent.
Gogoi and Goswami (1998) in their paper entitled "Studies on Certain Aspects of Wild Eri Silk (Philosamia Cynthia Drury) With Special Reference to Its Rearing Performance" tried to find out the viability of digloxi as an alternative to castor food plant. They established digloxi as a new host plant of the wild eri silkworm. Digloxi can be raised in the same farm both for muga and ericulture for commercial and seed cocoon production as well as for maintaining various domesticated and wild silkworm races for the breeding programs. Philosamia Cynthia Drury can serve well as a resourceful material for breeding muga and eri to evolve ever-important disease resistant, genetically stable, improved bi-voltine silkworm races.

Kumaresan and Vijaya Prakash (2001) also found that the revenue generated from sericulture was comparatively higher than all other major crops like paddy, sorghum, pulse crops, groundnut, sugarcane, cotton, tobacco and chilly cultivated in the area except that of turmeric. The major reasons for practicing sericulture by the farmer were higher profitability and continuous income received from sericulture throughout the year.

Kariyappa, et al (2003) studied the efficiency of different spinning machines like Takli, Charkha, NR Das type2, Choudhury type3, Central Silk Technological Research Institute (CSTRI) pedal operated (old model) spinning machines as well as CSTRI motor cum pedal operated etc used by the spinner. He found that the CSTRI motor cum pedal operated spinning machine is the most efficient one. On an average, one can get only 50 grams of yarn in 8 hours by using Takli whereas the same individual can produce 200-250 grams of yarn by using CSTRI motor cum pedal operated machine during the same period of time.

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2N. R. Das type eri spinning charkha is built on a wooden frame and is operated by pedal. It is fitted with automatic traverse motion. In this machine, feeding of fibres can be controlled with ease.

3Choudhury type spinning charkha is pedal driven, durable and can be operated easily. The machine moves on ball bearing or still bushing and can be mended easily.
From the review of all available studies on sericulture or ericulture and different aspects of it in India or Assam it is clear that there are scarce studies on economic aspects of ericulture. Though ericulture has been a source of employment and income to the rural poor people, especially the women folk, it has so far not been able to attract much attention from the researchers. Therefore, an attempt is made here to analyse all the economic aspects of ericulture including employment, income, export, problems and its probable future prospects.

References


