



SILK OF BENGAL

'With time, dedication and passion the mulberry leaves become a stunning silk gown' - Chinese Proverb. Silk has been a material of sophistication since the medieval ages. Kings and queens have adorned themselves with the garb considering it as one of their finest possession along with shimmering gold and luxurious stones.

LEGEND OF THE SILK

The tale of silk is as marvellous as the product itself. Legend has it that a young Chinese empress by the name of Leizu was sipping tea in her balcony when a cocoon fell into her teacup. In the process of trying to get the little blob out of her afternoon drink, she noticed how the cocoon unravelled to give out a long thread. This gave her an instant idea to weave the thread and the rest is history.

It was not long later that China became the sole country with the knowledge of creating and weaving silk. For many centuries, they made it a point to guard the secret so that others could not get a hold of the process.

The Japanese later came to know about the secret on sericulture as they abducted three girls from China who knew all the details. The Japanese finally became familiar with all there was to know about silk making and the secret was thus no longer the sole property of the Chinese.

Later the Silk Road was developed that extended far and beyond China towards Persia and Eastern Europe crossing India and the Mediterranean sea. Trade persisted along the route, the predominant item being silk. People from different countries became familiar with the Chinese culture and the art of silk making.

THE BANGLADESHI PERSPECTIVE

Bangladesh eventually inherited the art of sericulture because of its proximity to India and China. Rajshahi Silk is a pride for Bangladesh

similar to Muslin and Jamdani.

Bengal Silk was always very famous all over the world. Italians particularly favoured this type of silk during the 13th Century and called it the 'Ganges Silk'.

With the course of time, the British East-India Corporation entered the region and took part in the silk manufacturing and export process. Some time later during the early 20th century Bengal Silk was pushed out of the South Asian Markets due to technological stagnation and the epidemic silk worm disease.

The Separation of India and Pakistan in 1947 brought a disaster for Bengal Silk as more than 90 percent Bengal silk cultivation area fell into West Bengal, India. After the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, a grand sericulture development program was incorporated in Rajshahi, a region particularly selected for the silk cultivation because the weather in that area was found to be perfect for growing mulberry trees and rearing the silk worms that only feed on these trees.

TYPES OF BANGLADESHI SILK

Mulberry Silk

This is the finest quality silk that is available for purchase. It is also called reeled silk or soft silk. The reason why Mulberry Silk is the most superior and expensive silk in the world is because these silks are made from silkworms that have been raised in captivity and that too under exacting conditions. The most interesting fact about these specific types of silkworms is that they have no other job but to feed on the mulberry leaves twenty-four hours a day, seven days

a week. They live a pampered life before spinning their cocoon and getting inside it to relax.

After the hibernation process begins, it is a heart-rending story because they are not allowed to hatch into full grown moths. The cocoons are placed into warm water to soften the filament and in the process the silkworms die. The silk worms may have a very short life but the aftermath is surely worthy. The Mulberry Silk is best suited for beddings, sari, panjabis and any sort of exotic clothing.

Eri (endi Silk)

Eri Silk is derived from the Assamese word Era which means castor leaves. The worm that produces this type of silk feeds on castor leaves rather than mulberry leaves; Eri Silk is also known as Endi Silk in India and Bangladesh.

In the case of Endi Silk, the threads from the cocoon are spun only when the moths have left. So the entire process is very peaceful and does not involve the untimely killing of the moths.

Endi Silk is not as soft as the Mulberry Silk. The Endi Silk is best suited for shalwar kameez and any produce that requires the sewing of intricate designs on the apparel. The Endi Silk material is slightly heavier than the Mulberry Silk and thus intense designs can be easily stitched onto it.

Tassar Silk

Also known as Tassar silk, this fabric is made from silkworms that live in the wild forest feeding on many different plants like Arjun, Oak, Jamun etc. The fibres of this type of silk are slightly short thus making the thread stronger and jagged.

The Tassar Silk can be woven into many things including saris and shawls. However, they are best suited as upholstery, home decoration items, suits and jackets. Tassar is valued for its rich texture and the natural warm honey beige colour, which is later dyed into many different colours.

SILK PRODUCTS

When one goes to a fabric market in Bangladesh, they are bound to hear many names in the silk category namely Noil, Balaka, Doopiyan, Motka etc. All these are different types of products that are woven from silk threads. Doopiyan, for instance, contains two different threads that are used to give the material a double-edged shine. The price ranges of each of these products vary but will be no less than Tk500 per yard.

Companies like Sopura Silk Mills have showrooms and outlets all over the country revealing all types of silk merchandise produced within the country. Brac Aarong similarly sources silk from Rajshahi and then weaves beautiful clothing and home décor items with the help of silk weaving artisans of Bangladesh.

By Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed

Model: Akhee and Mithela

Wardrobe: Doyel Silk

Location: Heritage

Styling: Azra Mahmood

SILK FUN FACTS

India is the largest consumer of silk and the second largest producer of silk. Silk is the strongest natural fibre known to man. Sometimes a silk material will outlive its owner by many years.

SILK NECESSARY INFORMATION

The more the thread count in a silk material, the softer it is. When buying silk material one needs to look at the momme weight of the silk fabric. The lesser the weight the better is the product.

