



***Left*, a mulberry tree laden with berries, whose leaves silkworms feed on for 25 to 30 days before spinning yellow or white cocoons. Silk filaments are extracted from the cocoons to produce yarn and fabric. *Right*, silkworm cocoons on display at the Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board.**

PHOTOS: **AZAHAR UDDIN**

Silk City tangled in Chinese yarn

Chinese yarn dominates the market, squeezing local producers, driving farmers away from sericulture and leaving Rajshahi's centuries-old silk industry fighting for survival

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What comes to mind when one hears "Rajshahi"? Its clean streets, famous mangoes and, of course, silk. For generations, visitors have taken home the city's famed fabric, prized for its soft texture, natural sheen and fine craftsmanship.

But behind its appeal lies a struggling industry. Bangladesh produces only a fraction of the silk yarn it needs, while imported yarn, mainly from China, dominates the market. Easier to weave and less costly to process, imported yarn has weakened local production, driven farmers away from sericulture and left the historic industry fighting for survival.

A RICH HERITAGE UNDER PRESSURE

Rajshahi's fertile soil, warm, humid climate and access to water from the Padma River made it ideal for growing mulberry trees and raising silkworms. Its location along historic trade routes also helped local silk reach markets beyond Bengal.

Historical records trace silk production to the 13th century, when the fabric was known as Bengal silk or Ganges silk. Fine textiles from Bengal were traded with China and Central Asia under Hindu and Buddhist dynasties. Production continued during the Islamic sultanate and British periods, when colonial administrators recognised Rajshahi silk's quality and promoted it for export.

Over generations, weavers developed distinctive fabrics and refined their craftsmanship, earning Rajshahi the nickname Silk City.

Modern silk production in the city began in 1952, during the Pakistan period. The state-owned Rajshahi Silk Factory was established in 1961 and began production in 1962, while the Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board was established in 1978, according to board sources. In 2021, Rajshahi silk received geographical indication (GI) status, recognising its distinct identity and heritage.

Silk production involves growing mulberry trees, feeding their leaves to silkworms, extracting filaments from cocoons, preparing and dyeing the yarn, and weaving it into fabric.

Locally known as polu poka, silkworms feed on mulberry leaves for 25 to 30 days before spinning yellow or white cocoons. Workers treat the cocoons with heat or steam and boil them to soften the protein binding the filaments before unwinding the strands into yarn. The yarn is then twisted, cleaned and dyed before being woven into fabric, sometimes decorated with traditional block printing or wax-resist designs.

The fabric is washed, stretched and pressed before being made into sarees, panjabis and other garments priced from around Tk 2,100 to more than Tk 25,000. Making a tie requires more than 250 silkworms, a shirt around 2,500 and a sari about 5,000.

LOCAL PRODUCTION FALLS FAR BEHIND DEMAND

As silkworms depend entirely on mulberry leaves, nurseries are essential to silk production. However, competition from imported yarn has reduced demand for locally produced silk, forcing private nurseries to close and thousands of farmers to switch to other crops. Only 11 government-run mulberry nurseries remain operational nationwide.

"Cash crops, including mangoes, have become more profitable in many areas, prompting many mulberry farmers to switch to other crops or occupations. As a result, areas that once produced large quantities of cocoons now produce little or none," said Md Mahbubul Haque, deputy director of the Regional Sericulture Extension Office in Rangpur.

He said falling cocoon production had left domestic producers able to meet only a small share of the country's silk-yarn demand.

Bangladesh needs around 400 tonnes of silk yarn annually but produces only 41 tonnes locally, including just 1.5 tonnes from the government sector, said Abul Kalam Azad, a former technical officer of Rajshahi Silk Factory who now works at its only remaining display centre. Imports, mainly from China, meet the rest of the demand.

Liakat Ali, president of the Bangladesh Silk Industry Owners' Association, said annual demand had doubled from 200 tonnes in 1991 to around 400 tonnes, while domestic production had failed to keep pace. He said Chinese yarn dominated the market partly because of lower tariffs.

"There is an international conspiracy behind this," said Mahbubul, referring to the duty-free entry of imported yarn in the 1990s.

"When imported yarn entered the country without taxes, rural producers with limited capital were hit hard. Since then, the domestic silk industry has been in this condition. For various reasons, factories began to shut down, while private producers started buying Chinese yarn. As a result, locally produced yarn gradually disappeared. Chinese yarn now dominates the market," he said.

"Since 1991, production using foreign yarn has increased. Before that, imports were limited, and not everyone could import yarn. Now, much larger quantities enter the country through various channels," said Sazzad Ali, managing director of Sopura Silk Mills Ltd.

He said the exact volume of imported yarn was difficult to determine because it entered through different channels, with some imports classified as products subject to lower tariffs.

Sopura's showroom is in Rajshahi's BSCIC industrial area, where several private silk mills operate retail outlets alongside their production units, attracting visitors from outside the city.

Sazzad said demand for foreign-yarn products was higher because the fabric was softer and lighter. His factory imports cocoons and yarn but also produces some fabric using locally produced yarn.

Manufacturers and weavers say Chinese yarn is easier to process, generates less waste and improves production efficiency.

MA Mannan, director (Finance and Planning) of the Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board, said local yarn often broke during weaving, raising production costs.

Md Sanwar Hossain, a weaver at Rajshahi Silk Factory, said Chinese yarn was finer, smoother and more uniform than local yarn, whose quality varied from season to season.

"Chinese yarn is easier to weave, breaks less often and generates less heat. Local yarn requires more care and cleaning during weaving. One local cocoon produces around 500 yards of yarn, compared with around 2,000 yards from a Chinese cocoon," he said.

However, Sanwar said local yarn was more durable and of better quality. It costs around Tk 5,000 per kilogramme, compared with Tk 8,000 for Chinese yarn.

"Although Chinese yarn is more expensive per kilogramme, fabric made from local yarn costs more to produce because it generates more waste and requires additional processing," he said.

STATE-OWNED FACTORY STRUGGLES TO RECOVER

Rajshahi Silk Factory, once a major supplier of the country's silk yarn and fabric, reflects the industry's decline.

At its peak, the factory operated 63 looms and produced around 106,070 metres of fabric annually. Mounting losses and a lack of capital forced it to close in November 2002. It reopened in 2018 but has yet to resume commercial-scale production.

Since reopening, it has produced around 60,000 metres of fabric through June this year. It now operates seven looms, with another eight expected to become operational soon. All its products use locally produced yarn.

Staff shortages and outdated designs remain major obstacles. The board had 581 approved posts when the factory was fully operational, but only 139 people now work across the board and its facilities.

Mannan said the factory remained operational to encourage local silk production but had yet to return to its former commercial scale.

"The vacant posts at the factory need to be filled. Staff shortages mean we cannot update our designs, which remain old-fashioned. As a result, many people prefer fabrics made from Chinese yarn to those made from local yarn," he said.

Azad said some factory-produced yarn was used to make fabric for its only remaining display centre, while the rest was reserved or sold to private institutions. The centre recorded sales of around Tk 50 lakh in the last financial year. The factory once had showrooms in several divisional cities.

Factory supervisor Ashraful Islam Tutul said its fabric used only local yarn, unlike products from private manufacturers, which relied mainly on imported or mixed yarn.

BUYERS STRUGGLE TO IDENTIFY LOCAL SILK

Consumers often cannot distinguish genuine Rajshahi silk from products made with imported yarn, Tutul said.

Saidur Rahman, manager of Sopura Silk Mills Ltd, said buyers often could not identify the yarn used, particularly when different types were mixed.

"Almost everything in the market is now made with Chinese yarn, while local yarn is rarely used. Customers mainly want a good-quality garment, and we try to provide that," he said.

Regular silk buyer Tasnia Hosne Afrin said comfort guided her choices.

"I cannot tell whether a product is made from local or foreign yarn. I buy whichever feels more comfortable," she said.

For local producers, heritage alone is difficult to sell when buyers prioritise comfort and appearance.

RURAL LIVELIHOODS AND REVIVAL EFFORTS

The decline threatens rural jobs and incomes. Mannan said sericulture could support rural livelihoods, particularly for women, who account for 70 to 80 percent of silk workers.

The Sericulture Board provides subsidies, mulberry saplings and silkworm eggs free to farmers in sericulture areas. Farmers raise the silkworms for 25 days before selling the cocoons to the board.

According to Mannan, 100 silkworm eggs can yield 50 to 60kg of cocoons in 25 days. At Tk 400 to Tk 500 per kilogramme, four production cycles a year could generate an annual income of around Tk 1 lakh.

"We want domestic production to increase. We will provide whatever support is needed from the board," he said.

Cooperation with China is also part of efforts to modernise the industry. On August 18 this year, Bangladesh and China held a joint conference on strategic cooperation in silk research and development, focusing on research, technological innovation, skills development and bilateral cooperation.

Rajshahi silk's challenge is to preserve its centuries-old tradition, restore local yarn production, bring farmers back to sericulture and make domestic fabric competitive in a market dominated by imports.









***Clockwise from top left*, workers wash silk fabric to remove impurities at Rajshahi Silk Factory; golden silk yarn hangs to dry; workers reel silk threads onto a large machine; and finished white and golden silk yarn is displayed at the Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board.**





