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Origin, History and Route of Silk

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ORIGIN

Silk fibre produced by insects silkworm. It is a natural protein fibre, some forms of which can be woven into textiles. The protein fiber of silk is composed mainly of fibroin and is produced by certain insect larvae to form cocoons. The best-known silk is obtained from the cocoons of the larvae of the Mulberry silkworm *Bombyx mori* reared in captivity (sericulture). The shimmering appearance of silk is due to the triangular prism-like structure of the silk fibre, which allows silk cloth to refract incoming light at different angles, thus producing different colours. Several kinds of wild silk, produced by caterpillars other than the mulberry silkworm, have been known and spun in China, South Asia, and Europe since ancient times. However, the scale of production was always far smaller than for cultivated silks. There are several reasons for this: first, they differ from the domesticated varieties in colour and texture and are therefore less uniform; second, cocoons gathered in the wild have usually had the pupa emerge from them before being discovered so the silk thread that makes up the cocoon has been torn into shorter lengths;

and third, many wild cocoons are covered in a mineral layer that prevents attempts to reel from them long strands of silk. Thus, the only way to obtain silk suitable for spinning into textiles in areas where commercial silks are not cultivated was by tedious and labour-intensive carding.

HISTORY

The discovery of silk has a romantic history. According to the ancient literature, silk industry originated in china about 3000 B.C. The first authentic reference to silk is found in the chronicles of Chou king of China. The king is reported to have pointed out Empress XI Ling Shi, the worms destroying the mulberry trees in his garden. As she tried to gather the cocoons, she accidentally dropped one of them into a bowl of hot tea. While trying to recover the cocoon from the hot liquid with a spoon, she discovered that a very fine and long lustrous thread unwound itself from the cocoon. The art of silk preparation was kept as secret as the National Policy and any one, who attempted to send the eggs of Silk worms out of the country, was hanged to deaths. This art later on spread to the rest of the world through several agencies, like Civil war refugees, was prisoners, marriage of royal families etc.

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ROUTE

Chinese used the silk- industry, not only as a new means of employment, but also as the most valuable commodity in the world trade. Throughout, the world caravans were bartered for this precious and valuable fabric. The whole world was mad after this fiber "Queen of Textiles", as it was also exchanged for gold. Innumerable caravans made their route (known as Silk route) across Asia, bringing silk from China to Damascus. Damascus was the centre of the world market business. When China was the source of silk, east and west exchanged their goods. The Persians took the lead of bringing silk from China. As a result they occupied high position in this trade and began to regulate all the silk coming from China. The fabric was sold at such an attractive price that it becomes a legend. But the Romans were the real sufferers, who paid much. The Roman emperor objected to paying but in vein. He tried to find out a trade to China via Constantinople neglecting Persia, but in vein. Then he sent two Nestorian monks to China to smuggle the secret of "Silk -making." The monks got success and they brought the Silk worms, Mulberry seeds as well as the secret of silk in their hollow clubs. This ended the monopoly and supremacy of both China and Persia as producer and trade of silk. But now it has become extremely popular in Spain, Sicily, France and England.

There is a very complicated story of the origin of silk in Japan. Sericulture made its way towards Japan through Korea. But here the Japanese were not familiar with the secret of its production. So, four Chinese concubines were brought to Japan to teach them the making of woven silk. Today Japan is considered to have second position in the world in silk- production.

So far the origin of silk in India is concerned; people say that during 400 A.D., a Chinese Princess brought a cocoon of Silk worm with her, hiding it in her headgear. The princess was married to an India prince.

Sericulture was first established in the tract, which lies between the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. Our epics like the famous Ramayana and Mahabharata also deal with the origin of silk. Anyway sericulture has been a part and parcel of Indian tradition and culture.

HISTORY

Silk has a long history in India. It is known as Resham in eastern and north India, and Pattu in southern parts of

India. Recent Archaeological discoveries in Harappa and Chanhu-daro suggest that sericulture, employing wild silk threads from native silkworm species, existed in South Asia during the time of the Indus Valley Civilization (now in Pakistan) dating between 2450 BC and 2000 BC, while "hard and fast evidence" for silk production in China dates back to around 2570 BC. Shelagh Vainker, a silk expert at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, who sees evidence for silk production in China "significantly earlier" than 2500-2000 BC, suggests, "people of the Indus civilization either harvested silkworm cocoons or traded with people who did, and that they knew a considerable amount about silk". India is the second largest producer of silk in the world after China. About 97% of the raw mulberry silk comes from six Indian states, namely, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and West Bengal. North Bangalore, the upcoming site of a \$20 million "Silk City" Ramanagara and Mysore, contribute to a majority of silk production in Karnataka. In India first of all Lefroy (1905=1906) started investigation on the silkworm and sericulture at Pusa institute, New Delhi.

THE SILK ROAD

The fabulous silks from China and India were carried to European countries all along the 600 miles long road passing through Baghdad Tashkent, Damascus and Istanbul. The 6000 miles long road is historically called as "**The Silk Road**". The Silk Road was a prestigious network of trade routes linking the West represented by Rome. It was the route used by Buddhist priests and also the trades, who exchanged goods as well as ideas of the two great civilization of the time.

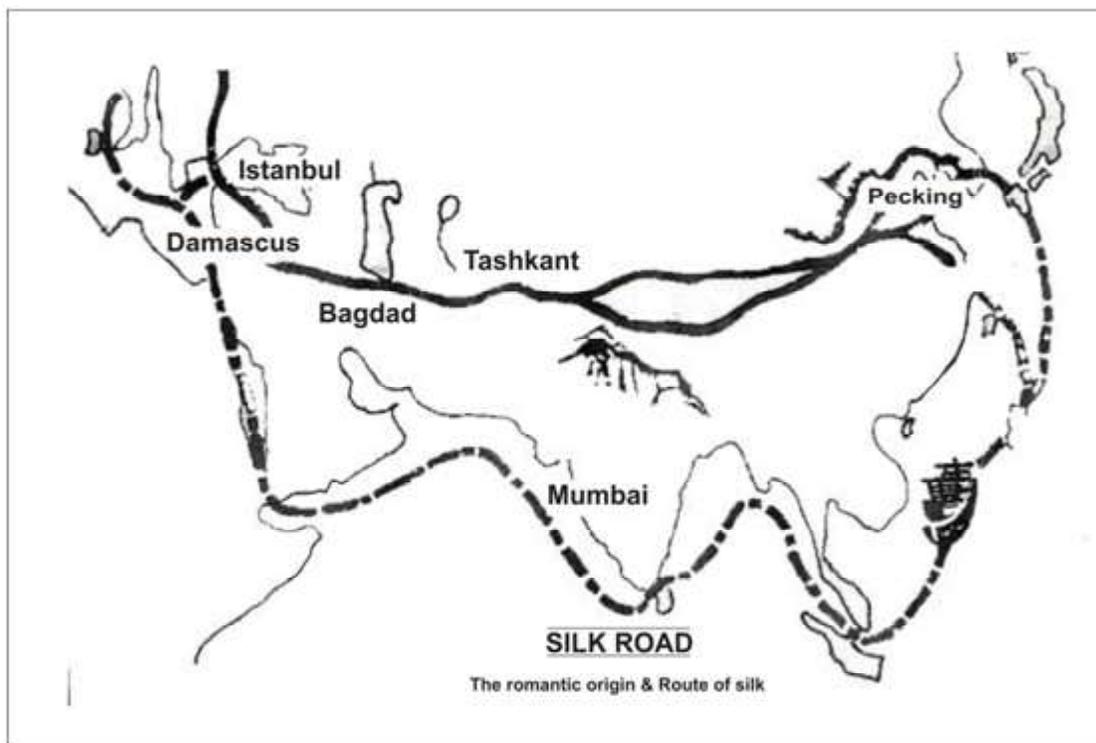
The silk route started in what is now Siam, followed by the Great wall of China to North -west across the Pamir mountains and the Takla Makan deserts to cross Afghanistan to Antioch in Syria, and from thence via Egypt and the Mediterranean ports to Europe. From Mediterranean, it spread to Spain. Latin American and North America. California seems to be the end point of this famous route.

Silk route was hazardous route. Few adventurous people travelled the entire route. The famous Venetian Marco Polo (1256-1323 A.D.) travelled by the Silk route and brought silk from China. Now a day's silk and silk making have become popular and up to date in the whole world. At present sericulture is playing a great role. India,

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Japan, China - all have international institution, but China is better than rest of the world, in respect of producing silk. The modern world should be highly obliged and

grateful to two unknown monks, who proved the truthfulness of Veni, vidi, vici. (I came. I saw, I conquered) in connection with the secret of silk.



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