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A Study of the Growth of the Silk Industry under the Rule of the Principal Mysore State (1866–1947)

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Abstract

Mysore Silk is synonymous with the grandeur and splendor of the Royal Mysore State, and it has long been a symbol of the region's cultural and economic prosperity. Recognized as a Geographical Indication (GI) under Intellectual Property Rights, Mysore Silk boasts a history spanning over 215 years. By the close of the 19th century, Mysore was on the brink of significant industrial progress. Among the key industries that contributed to the state's advancement was sericulture, which followed agriculture as one of the most important sectors. The current study focuses on the development of the silk industry within the Mysore State from the late 18th century through the years leading to India's independence. The pioneering role of Tippu Sultan in introducing sericulture to the region and the contributions of various leaders and experts throughout history are discussed in detail. The efforts of the Maharajas and Dewans, as well as international influences from Italy and Japan, were instrumental in shaping the growth of the industry. Despite challenges like the global economic depression and competition from imported silk, the silk industry saw a revival in the second half of the 20th century, cementing Mysore's place as one of India's top producers of multivoltine silk.

Keywords: Silk, Sericulture, Mysore State, Cocoons, Reeling, Filatures, Weaving

Introduction

The silk industry in Mysore played an instrumental role in the state's economic growth, particularly under the leadership of Tippu Sultan. While the British struggled to introduce sericulture in their southern territories, Tippu Sultan succeeded in establishing the industry in Mysore, setting the stage for what would become a thriving sector by the 19th century. Sericulture in Mysore can be categorized into two key areas: the cultivation of mulberry, silkworm egg production, silkworm rearing, and the marketing of cocoons, and the subsequent stages of the silk industry, which include reeling, twisting, dyeing, weaving, and printing.

Throughout its development, high-quality silk in various varieties was produced in Mysore, elevating the region's prominence in the industry. The contributions of the Maharajas, Dewans, and foreign experts were vital in transforming Mysore into a model state for mulberry sericulture in India, taking advantage of its favorable geography and climate for mulberry cultivation.

Objectives

This study aims to:

- Examine the progress of the silk industry in Mysore State during the reign of Tippu Sultan.
- Explore the roles of key figures such as J.R.D. Tata, Sir M. Vishveshwaraiah, and Italian and Japanese sericulturists in developing the silk industry.
- Investigate the establishment of silk filatures and factories in Mysore State.

Scope

The study focuses on the evolution of the silk industry in Mysore from its inception during Tippu Sultan's rule, through the contributions of the Maharajas and Dewans, and continuing until the dawn of India's independence. It will trace the development of sericulture practices, the introduction of modern technologies, and the challenges the industry faced over time.

Methodology

This study uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include historical records and documents from archives and libraries, while secondary sources consist of books, journals, periodicals, and other references related to the silk industry and Mysore's industrial history.

Contributions Made by Tippu Sultan

The origins of sericulture in Mysore can be traced to the late 18th century during the rule of Tippu Sultan. Recognizing the potential of sericulture to boost the economy, Tippu sent emissaries to South China to procure silkworm eggs, introducing a yellow silk-producing breed suitable for Mysore's climate. This initiative laid the foundation for the silk industry in the region.

Area under Mulberry Cultivation

By the early 20th century, sericulture became a widely practiced subsidiary occupation for farmers in Mysore. In 1922-23, the area under mulberry cultivation in Bangalore alone reached about 7,700 acres, and by 1925-26, it had expanded to 9,000 acres. Channapatana emerged as the leading area for silk production, with Closepet coming next in importance.

Developments from 1841 to 1866

In 1800, the Mysore Royal Government set up a sericulture operation in Mogenahalli, near Channapatana. The quality of silk produced initially suffered due to poor processing methods. However, by 1842, a garden for mulberry cultivation was established in Bangalore, and eggs from various regions, including St. Helena, China, and the Philippines, were introduced. Over time, the quality of Mysore silk improved, though there were still challenges in ensuring the cultivation and rearing process were conducted effectively by local farmers.

Efforts of Signor De Vacehy (1866)

In 1866, Signor De Vacehy, an Italian expert, established the De Vacehy Silk Filature Company at Kengeri, near Bangalore, with government support. His company focused on improving mulberry cultivation techniques and experimented with silkworm races from Japan. Although attempts to acclimatize Japanese silkworm strains initially failed, silkworms directly imported from Japan thrived, marking a significant milestone in the region's sericulture development.

Efforts of J.R.D. Tata

The decline of sericulture in the late 19th century due to diseases and famines prompted efforts to revitalize the industry. J.R.D. Tata played a key role in this revival by establishing the Tata Silk Farm in Bangalore in 1896, with assistance from Dewan K. Sheshadri Ayyar. Tata introduced modern, Japanese-style sericulture techniques and provided training to local farmers, bringing scientific methods into sericulture. This initiative helped Mysore surpass Kashmir and Bengal in silk production by 1905.

Role of Sir M. Vishveshwaraiah

In 1911, Sir M. Vishveshwaraiah, the Dewan of Mysore, chaired a state-level conference that discussed sericulture as a vital industry. The conference set up committees

to address the challenges of silkworm rearing and to improve the quality of raw silk for the market. His leadership provided a strategic vision for the continued growth of sericulture in Mysore.

Hybridization of Silkworm Races

In 1914, Italian experts introduced new silkworm races to Mysore, including twelve European varieties and one Chinese variety. The hybridization efforts continued, leading to the development of disease-free silkworm seeds, which greatly improved the quality and yield of silk in the state. By 1917, about 35% of the total seed requirement for Mysore was disease-free, marking a significant achievement in sericulture.

Introduction of Fly Shuttle Looms

In 1921-22, Italian-style reeling basins were introduced, and primitive pit looms gave way to more efficient fly shuttle looms. This innovation allowed for the production of high-quality silk fabrics. Weavers, particularly in regions like Bangalore, Molakamuru, and Anekal, adopted these new looms to produce better-textured silk fabrics.

Effects of the Global Economic Depression

The global economic depression of the 1930s had a profound impact on the Mysore silk industry. The influx of cheap imported silk, including artificial silk from China, led to a decline in local mulberry cultivation and silk production. The volume of silk exports from Mysore dropped significantly, from 866,000 lbs in 1925-26 to 366,800 lbs in 1933. In response, the Mysore government took steps to protect the industry, including lobbying for higher tariffs on imported silk and initiating reforms to improve the quality of local silk production.

Establishment of the Mysore Silk Filatures Ltd

In 1921, the Mysore government established the Mysore Silk Filature, which became a joint-stock company in 1937. The company focused on reeling high-grade silk and supported local sericulturists in producing high-quality silk. A filature with 200 basins was set up at T-Narasipur, and government assistance helped boost production.

During World War II

During World War II, the silk industry experienced a temporary boom as demand for high-quality silk increased, particularly for military use, such as parachutes. The government established silk filature units in Kollegal and Kanakapura to meet the needs of the defense sector.

Conclusion

The development of the silk industry in Mysore was a multifaceted endeavor that spanned centuries and involved the concerted efforts of rulers, Dewans, and international experts. Under Tippu Sultan, the foundation for sericulture was laid, and subsequent efforts by figures like J.R.D. Tata, Sir M. Vishveshwaraiah, and Italian and Japanese experts played a significant role in transforming Mysore into a leading silk producer in India. Despite setbacks such as the global economic depression, the silk industry in Mysore regained its position in the second half of the 20th century, becoming synonymous with high-quality silk production. Today, Mysore Silk is renowned for its lustrous sheen, durability, and exceptional texture, continuing to be a symbol of the region's rich industrial heritage.

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