



Socio-Economic Role of Eri (Indi) Sericulture in Assam (with special reference to Bodos)

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ABSTRACT:

Eri (locally “Indi”) sericulture is a long-standing, household-level practice among the Bodo people of Assam. Beyond producing fabric and food, Eri rearing supplies seasonal income, nutritional protein (pupae), employment for women, and sustains traditional weaving and craft knowledge. This article synthesises government statistics and recent studies to describe the economic, social and cultural importance of Eri sericulture in Bodo areas, the main challenges it faces, and pragmatic recommendations to strengthen livelihoods and value addition.

Keywords: Eri, Sericulture, Bodo, Women empowerment

1. Introduction

Eri is a “domesticated” silk produced mainly from *Samia ricini* and related species. Unlike mulberry (Pat) or Muga, Eri cocoons are usually spun (not reeled) and produce a wool-like yarn valued for its warmth and easy care. In Bodo households the practice is traditionally integrated with food-plant cultivation, hand spinning and weaving, and domestic consumption (pupae as protein). (Boro, 2024).

2 Scale in Assam (why Eri matters economically)

Eri sericulture stands as the dominant silk activity in Assam, both in terms of participation and the area dedicated to its cultivation. According to the NEDFi's 2023–24 statistics, the state has 8,722 sericulture villages, with a total of 301,176 families engaged in various forms of sericulture. Among these, 32,353 families are involved in Eri culture, highlighting its significance in rural livelihoods.

This large-scale cultivation ensures a stable supply of raw material for hand-spinning and weaving, forming the backbone of traditional textile production in Bodo-majority districts such as Kokrajhar, Baksa, and Chirang.

Eri sericulture provides seasonal employment for both men and women, with women predominantly involved in rearing, spinning, and weaving. The activity is closely tied to household economies, as families earn income by selling cocoons, pupae, and yarn in local markets. Additionally, pupae serve as a nutritional protein source, contributing to household food security.

From a production standpoint, Eri accounts for the bulk of cocoon production among Vanya silks in Assam, surpassing other non-mulberry silks such as Muga and Tasar in terms of volume and participation. Its resilience to climatic variations compared to Muga and its adaptability to home gardens make Eri a practical and sustainable livelihood option

3. Socio-economic benefits

a) Direct income

Eri cocoons, pupae and spun yarn are marketable at village and district levels. Multiple small sales (cocoons, pupae, yarn) spread income across the year, providing working capital and smoothing seasonal household cash needs. Studies in Kokrajhar and surrounding BTR villages report that sale of cocoons and yarn contributes meaningfully to household income, especially for women-headed and small farming families. (Brahma & Brahma, 2024)

b) Nutrition

Eri pupae are commonly consumed as a protein source in many Northeast communities, including in Bodos. This dual role, both market commodity and household nutrition increases the resilience of small households to food and income shocks.

c) Women's employment

Eri rearing, spinning and weaving are often carried out by women in the household, creating home-based livelihoods that fit with domestic responsibilities. Several field studies document improved female participation in income generation, decision making and savings when Eri sericulture is strong locally.

d) Cultural significance

Eri fibre underpins traditional Bodo textiles and motifs. The practice preserves skills (rearing, spinning, weaving, local dyeing) that are culturally significant and that feed into small-scale enterprises (weavers' cooperatives, local markets, tourist crafts). This intangible cultural heritage has potential for premium branding (origin-based or craft labeling).

4. Challenges

- **Market & price volatility:** Smallholders often lack direct market access and face middlemen margins; demand for raw cocoons or unprocessed yarn is unstable.
- **Limited value addition infrastructure:** Few decentralized facilities for spinning, processing or finishing limit returns to producers; much value is added downstream outside producer communities.
- **Host plant availability & land use:** While Eri food plants (castor, tapioca, etc.) are widely used, land constraints, degraded host plant stands and competition with other crops can reduce productivity. State drives for host-plant cultivation are ongoing but need scaling.
- **Climate and pests:** Changing weather patterns and pest outbreaks affect cocoon yields; adaptive rearing practices and access to technical extension are uneven.

5. Policy actions, programs & successes

Several government schemes (central and state sericulture programmes) provide training, seed/inputs, and small infrastructure (rearing houses, trays, linkage to seed-production units). Local successes small farmer groups selling cocoons to govt seed centers, or district initiatives to plant host trees show that targeted support increases incomes and continuity of practice. Case reports from BTR districts document how training + institutional purchases stabilize returns for small rearers.

6. Recommendations (practical & community-centred)

1. **Strengthen producer cooperatives and direct market linkages**, reduce middlemen margins and capture more value locally (collective marketing, e-market linkages).
2. **Invest in decentralized value-addition units** small spinning/stretching and dyeing units near producer clusters increase earnings per cocoon.
3. **Host-plant restoration & agroforestry integration** encourage Som/Soalu (for Muga) and suitable food plants for Eri within homestead agroforestry to secure leaf supply and biodiversity benefits.
4. **Women-led training & microcredit** targeted skill programs in improved rearing, quality control, and entrepreneurship for Bodo women.
5. **Climate-resilient rearing protocols and extension services**, simple guides and local demonstration plots to reduce losses from weather and pests.

7. Conclusion

Eri (Indi) sericulture is not merely a textile activity for the Bodo community: it's an integrated socio-economic system that supplies income, nutrition, cultural continuity and women's livelihoods. Strengthening local value chains, improving host-plant management, and empowering producer groups, particularly women, will convert Assam's large Eri participation into higher, more resilient incomes for Bodo households. The available state statistics and field studies make a compelling case for targeted, culturally informed interventions that build on traditional knowledge while adding modern value-chain support.

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