

## VANYA SILK: THE GOLDEN THREAD OF FOREST LIVELIHOODS

Nandha Kumar R<sup>1\*</sup>, R Moulidharshan<sup>1</sup> and M Akash<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sericulture, Forest College and Research Institute, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Mettupalayam – 641 301.

<sup>2</sup>College of Cooperation, Banking and Management, Kerala Agricultural University, Vellanikkara, Thrissur, Kerala - 680656

\*Corresponding Author Mail ID: [nandhakumar300702@gmail.com](mailto:nandhakumar300702@gmail.com)

### Introduction: From Forest to Fabric

In the quiet forests of India, far from industrial textile hubs, a unique story of silk unfolds. Tribal communities, living in close harmony with nature, have practiced a traditional craft for generations, rearing wild silkworms and producing what is now known as *Vanya* silk. Unlike conventional silk, this is not just a textile; it is a symbol of sustainability, culture, and rural resilience. Derived from the Sanskrit word “*Vanya*”, meaning *wild* or *forest-based*, *Vanya* silk represents an eco-friendly and livelihood-oriented sector deeply rooted in India’s biodiversity. Produced mainly by tribal communities across central and northeastern India, it plays a vital role in supporting rural economies while conserving natural ecosystems.

### What is Vanya Silk?

Vanya silk refers to non-mulberry silks produced by wild or semi-domesticated silkworms that feed on forest trees rather than cultivated mulberry plants. India is uniquely positioned as the only country producing all major types of natural silk, including both mulberry and non-mulberry varieties.

The three major types of Vanya silk are:

- **Tasar Silk** - Often called forest silk, known for its coppery texture and durability.

- **Eri Silk** - Popularly known as Ahimsa silk, produced without killing the silkworm.

- **Muga Silk** - The rare golden silk of Assam, famous for its natural sheen.

Each type reflects a distinct ecological niche, cultural tradition, and economic significance.



Figure 1: Vanya Sericulture Process

### A Glimpse into History

The history of Vanya silk in India dates back thousands of years. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization

suggests the use of wild silk as early as 2000 BCE. Ancient texts and historical records also highlight the cultural and economic importance of silk in early Indian societies. For centuries, Vanya sericulture remained confined to tribal and forest communities in regions such as central India and the northeastern states. However, during the 19th century, when silkworm diseases affected European silk industries, global demand for wild silks increased, bringing Indian Vanya silk into international focus. Despite its long history, this sector gained organized recognition and policy support only in recent decades.

### Diversity of Vanya Silks

#### Tasar Silk - The Forest Fabric

Tasar silk is produced by silkworms that feed on trees like Arjun and Asan. It is coarse yet strong, making it suitable for furnishings and ethnic wear. Tasar culture is widely practiced in states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh, where it serves as a primary livelihood for tribal communities.

#### Eri Silk - The Silk of Peace

Eri silk stands out for its ethical production process. Since the cocoons are open-ended, the moth emerges naturally, making it a preferred choice for those who advocate non-violence, hence the name *Ahimsa silk*. It is soft, warm, and ideal for shawls and winter garments. Eri culture is prominent in Assam and other northeastern states and is gradually expanding to other parts of India.

#### Muga Silk - The Golden Treasure

Exclusive to Assam, muga silk is renowned for its natural golden color and exceptional durability. It is often used in traditional garments like *mekhela chador*. The

production of muga silk is deeply intertwined with the culture and identity of Assamese society, making it both an economic and cultural asset.

### Livelihood Support and Tribal Empowerment

One of the most significant aspects of Vanya sericulture is its contribution to rural and tribal livelihoods. It provides:

- Seasonal employment during agricultural lean periods.
- Income generation with relatively low investment.
- Women empowerment, as many activities are carried out by women.
- Skill-based livelihood opportunities in remote forest areas.

Unlike many agricultural practices, Vanya sericulture relies on naturally available forest resources, reducing dependency on external inputs.

### Ecological and Environmental Importance

Vanya sericulture is inherently eco-friendly and sustainable. It promotes:

- **Forest conservation**, as host trees are protected and maintained.
- **Biodiversity preservation**, supporting multiple plant and insect species.
- **Low carbon footprint**, due to minimal use of chemicals and machinery.

In an era of increasing environmental concerns, Vanya silk stands out as a model for nature-based production systems.

### Current Status and Challenges

Over the years, Vanya silk production in India has shown steady growth. However, the sector faces several challenges:

**Climate change impacts** affecting host plants and silkworm survival

**Market exploitation** due to middlemen dominance

**Lack of modern technology** and scientific interventions

**Limited awareness and branding** in global markets

Addressing these challenges is essential to unlock the full potential of this sector.

### Marketing and Value Addition

The marketing of Vanya silk products has improved with the involvement of various government and institutional agencies. Organizations such as the Central Silk Board, TRIFED, and KVIC have contributed to better market access and fair pricing.

Value addition through:

- Handloom weaving
- Natural dyeing
- Designer products

Has increased the appeal of Vanya silk in both domestic and international markets.

### Future Potential: A Sustainable Textile Revolution

With the rising global demand for eco-friendly and ethical fashion, Vanya silk is gaining renewed attention. It holds immense potential in:

- Sustainable fashion industry
- Export markets for organic textiles
- Climate-resilient livelihood models

Integrating modern technology with traditional knowledge can further enhance productivity and quality, ensuring long-term sustainability.

### Conclusion

Vanya silk is more than just a fabric, it is a bridge between nature, culture, and livelihood. Rooted in the forests and nurtured by tribal communities, it represents a sustainable path forward in a world increasingly concerned about environmental and social well-being.

By supporting Vanya sericulture, we not only preserve an ancient tradition but also empower rural communities and promote ecological balance. As the world moves towards greener alternatives, the golden threads of Vanya silk may well weave the future of sustainable textiles.

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