

## Potentiality of Ericulture in Assam

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### SUMMARY

Ericulture is a unique component of agriculture in Northeast India and holds a significant place in the cultural heritage of Assam. Ericulture is a cottage industry and Assam being an abode of abundant natural resources and its geographical location and tropical monsoon climate permits great success for Ericulture that would generate income and employment in rural Assam.

### INTRODUCTION

Ericulture by definition is the rearing of Eri Silkworm (*Philosamia ricini*) and spinning of its open ended cocoon as well as weaving of Eri clothes. It also includes maintenance of its food plants. The Eri silk worm is a multivoltine, polyphagous insect feeding on a range of food plants. Primary food plants are the Castor (*Ricinus communis*) and the Kesseru (*Heteropanax fragrans*). The secondary food plants are Tapioca (*Manihot utilissima*), Payam (*Evedie flaxinitala*), Papaya (*Carica papaya*) etc. The Eri silkworm can be reared indoor 5-6 times a year. Optimum conditions required during its rearing are 24-28°C temperature and 85 to 90% humidity. Looking into its distribution, the Eri silkworm is mainly confined to the North Eastern region of India and the bordering districts of West Bengal. In Assam, Ericulture is practiced in almost all the districts, but mostly concentrated in the districts of Karbi Anglong, NC Hills, North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Barpeta, Kokrajhar, Sivasagar and Darrang. Over 18 eco races are found in the North East India. Ericulture has been an integral part of the rural people of Assam. The total Eri silk production for the state of Assam for the year 2022-23 was 5004 MT. It is a traditional agro-based industry, primarily practiced to cater the need of warm clothes. It is termed as "Poor man's Silk" and also branded as "Ahimsa Silk" with its usage becoming a global trend of late.

### Potentiality of Ericulture

The rural economy of Assam mainly the agro and plantation based rural economy has been suffering from slow growth rate, higher unemployment, grim industrialization and higher incidence of poverty. With the average size of land holding reducing year after year, Ericulture is a viable solution for uplifting the rural economy. Eri silkworm yields a bountiful harvest as compared to other non mulberry silkworms. There is a huge scope for enhancing the productivity by establishing systematic plantation and scientific rearing of silkworm. Its primary host plant, castor can be taken up for the seed from which oil is extracted and has been reported beneficial in lipid metabolism, uterine contraction and antimicrobial activity. Similarly tapioca plantation used for tuber production (good source of Carbohydrates and key vitamins and minerals), if utilized in Ericulture will only add to the total income. In Assam, the Eri silk cocoon is considered a by-product while the pupa is treasured as entomophagy is quite common. The Eri pupae is a delicacy and a rich source of protein (over 55-60%.) and has contributed to fight malnutrition among tribals. Both pre pupa and pupa are consumed in Assam. Ericulture is most suitable for an integrated farming system in Assam.

### CONCLUSION

Ericulture is a labour intensive activity, acts as an antidote to the problem of unemployment. Studies have shown a large number of families coming out of poverty due to their engagement in Eri rearing and weaving activities. Though ericulture has been carried out since time immemorial, its growth is not as fast as it ought to be due to lack of capital of Eri rearers, lack of organisation of the rearers and weavers and poor bargaining power. Nevertheless, it is a "low investment and high output occupation (Benjamin and Jolly, 1987) and a better option where the technology is simple and easily acceptable. The silkworm itself is very hardy and tolerable to wide range of fluctuations and the effective utilization of surroundings for food plant growth are all positive attributes adding to the potentiality of ericulture in Assam. Streamlining the marketing structure, proper training to the rural masses mainly to take up the activity as an occupation will add up to its prospect.

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