

The Origins of Silk's Hefty Expensiveness

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INTRODUCTION

Textiles are an integral part of our livelihood, which indirectly represents our status and dignity in our society. It has played an important role in trade and business. The people use both man-made *synthetic, regenerated fibres* and natural fibres such as *cotton, wool, cashmere, hemp, linen, silk, or organic fabrics* for weaving their garments. The economic viability of synthetic fibres ushered in a new era in the textile industries, displacing a large portion of natural fibres in markets. However, their inherent limitations, such as health hazards, high flammability, non-biodegradability, and so on, gave natural fibres a new lease on life in the markets. People all over the world are intended to reduce their toxic load and avoid health problems by wearing clothing made of natural fibres such as cotton, wool, cashmere, hemp, linen, silk, or organic fabrics. India is considered the epitome of distinctiveness for its linguistic, geographical, climatic, racial, religious, social, and cultural diversity. Along with vast diverse nature, the Indian Silk diversity attracts the consumer from each corner of the world by being one of the potential producers of Silk textile fiber – 35821 MT. Among various natural textile fibres cotton, wool, silk, etc., Silk being one of versatile natural biopolymer due to its eye catching and heart snatching quality, it has attracted by women in each corner of the world. Despite the fact that fashion is one of the most important aspects of many countries' traditional customs, consumer acceptance is limited due to its high cost. So, in this article, it is discussed why silk is so much more expensive in India than other fabrics.

Why is silk so expensive?

1. *Involvement of a large number of stakeholder*

Sericulture stakeholders are divided into two categories: farm and industrial sectors. The farm sector involves cocoon growers for the cultivation of silkworm's food plants and rearing silkworm for the production of cocoons.

Similarly, reelers-unwinding silk filament, twisters—twisting the silk; weavers—dyeing, knitting, printing, and finishing of fabrics; and, at last, traders for marketing are present in the industry sector (Srivastav et al., 2005). The gross value of fabric is shared among them as follows: 56.8% by the cocoon grower, 6.8% by the reeler, 9.1% by the twister, 10.7% by the weaver, and 16.6% by the trader (Mahanta and Komal, 2022). Because the enterprise has many stakeholder groups, each of these groups is intended to earn profits in its sector. As a result, the presence of numerous stakeholders is one reason why silk fabric is so expensive.

2. *Inflation in domestic silk demand*

Apart from the involvement of stakeholders the domestic demand of the silk is growing year after the year which is unable to suffice by our country silk production (Bhat et al., 2014). Therefore, less production of silk and its products than the required amount will increase the demand for that material, which will ultimately increase the price of the silk.

3. *Overseas demand for silk*

The country exports to more than 30 countries in the world, some of the top importers are the USA, UAE, China, UK, Australia, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Malaysia, Nepal, Japan, Belgium, Canada, South Africa, and Singapore. USA is the top importer of silk products from India with a share of 29% as of 2020-21. UAE was the second largest importer of Indian silk after USA, with a share of 10%. These countries are followed by China, the UK, and Australia, which have 8%, 4%, and 4% of the total export share, respectively. During 2021-22, the country's silk and silk products exports were valued at US\$ 248.56 million (Anonymous 2022). This is an increase of 25.3% over the previous year. Despite a lack of domestic demand, the yearly export of silk increased, resulting in shortages for countries' demand and making the marketable product more expensive (Bhat et al., 2014). Because of the increase in demand over the years, silk has become more expensive than other fabrics.

4. *Environmental impact on silk production*

Concomitantly, the changing climatic conditions, disease, and pest incidence often have an impact on cocoon production, reducing the availability in the cocoon markets, so there will be an increase in the cocoon price, which ultimately will increase the price of the silk.

5. *A labor-intensive business*

Sericulture is one of high labour intensity enterprise, about 65–70% of the cost of cocoon production accounts for labour wages for different activities. At the same time, the ratio of agricultural labour to the total workforce has declined from 55 percent in 2011 to 41 percent by 2020, which is further predicted to decrease by 26 percent in 2030 (FICCI, 2020). This decline in the workforce will directly increase the demand for labor, which will ultimately increase the cost of production. These increases in production costs have a positive correlation with the cost of silk.

6. *High production costs*

Since the production cost of silk is more compared to other textile it enables silk to be the costlier than other fabric. The cost for production of one kg dry cocoons was in the range of 450 to 600/kg dry cocoons. Whereas the cost of production of 1 kg of wool of ≥ 19 micron was \$3.50 to \$6.00/kg, i.e., 287.96 to 493.64. And the cost of producing 1 kilogramme of cotton was 126–130 rupees (Jagdish, 2021), which is 3–4 times less than the cocoon production. Because it takes 6.5 kg of cocoons to produce 1 kg of silk, the price of 1 kg of raw silk ranges between 3500 and 4000 Rs. Therefore, silk fabrics are expensive compared to other fabrics.

7. *Taxation of silk*

As per the Ministry of Finance and Department of Revenue 2022, the goods and services tax for woven textile fabrics made of silk is similar to that for cotton and wool, i.e., 2.5% for CGST, 2.5% for SGST, and 5% for

IGST. But the silk textile is one of the highly value added textile compared to the other textile i.e., Zari borders. These Zari border fabrics increase the tax by 6% for CGST, 6% for SGST, and 12% for IGST which makes silks costlier than other fabrics (Anonymous, 2022). Furthermore, the additional gst of 18% are imposed for silk expose like Events, Exhibitions, Conventions and trade shows organization also make the silk costlier.

8. *Superiour quality*

Silk is distnct fabrics from others which has warmer property in winter and super cooling effects in summer, these superior qvality make its more valuable fabrics (Babu 2015). Along with these properties, it is free of the limitations of man-made fibres, i.e., health hazards, high inflammability, non-biodegradability, etc. Furthermore, the properties like shine, strength, luster, and durability add elegance to the appearance and give it a royal feel, and its naturalness makes it one of the most valuable fabrics in the world (Savithri, 2013). Mulberry silk has antibacterial and hypoallergenic properties and can treat skin conditions like atopic dermatitis. Owing to such unique features, there is a huge demand for mulberry silk, in the global market which will increase the silk price ultimately.

9. *Long association with luxury and wealth*

Since silk has a long history of being luxurious and is associated with legasy and a reputation of worth with richer communities from the time of immemorial (Liu, 1998). These long association with the richer people continues over the yers may also become one of cause for the costlier nature of silk.

10. *Less global production*

Since, silk has a small percentage share of the global textile market, i.e., less than 0.2% its production base is found in over 60 countries in the world (Czaplicki, 2022). These decreased silk productions across the world increase competition among consumers, which will also increase the cost of silk.

Conclusion

Silk has a reputation for richness from the time of immemorial and is intermingled with our tradition and customs across the world. Their recognised sheen, lustre, strength, durability, incredible soft hand, colour fastness, and thermoregulating qualities add to their richness. Because the translation from cocoon to fabric is a labor-intensive, time-consuming, and resource-intensive process, therefore they are one among the most expensive fabrics on the market.

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