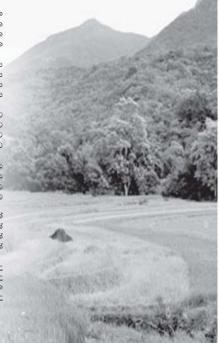
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Medhavi Weerasinghe

Today silk is deemed one of the most luxurious materials worn by the upper class or those who are experiencing economic prosperity. All I know about silk is that it is made by the silk worm, however that was all that I was aware of about the beautiful material. Therefore I decided to do a bit of research into how silk is formed in order to appreciate its fine quality even more.

Silk is made by the silk worm (Bombyx mori), which is a caterpillar and is the offspring of the silk moth. The silk worms take about a month to get big enough to spin a cocoon. The caterpillars like to spin cocoons in toilet paper tubes, paper towel tubes, or in egg carton bottoms. You can tell that they are ready to spin when they stop eating and turn yellowish. Silk worms make silk by secreting

the silky substance from its back. No one knows how long Silk worms had been on earth but the Chines discovered about 5000 years ago and they started

domesticating them. Silk had been the clothing of Chi-

nese royalty ever since. Silkworms produce silk by spewing out thread from tiny holes in their jaws, which they use to spin into their cocoons. This entire production takes about 72 hours, during which time they produce between 500-1200 silken threads.

Farmers place the 500 plus eggs that the moth lays on strips of paper or cloth, until the following spring when the eggs hatch and the silkworms emerge. Once hatched, workers place the worms on trays full of finely chopped, white mulberry leaves. After approximately 6

weeks, the full worms begin slowly to sway their heads back and forth to signal that they are ready to spin their cocoon.

Once the silkworm completes its cocoon, the farmer unwraps the cocoon from around the silkworm to prevent chrysalis inside from hatching into a moth in 12 days.

The famers bathe the now-empty cocoons in troughs of warm water, which softens the gum binding the silken filaments to-gether. Afterwards the farmers carefully unravel the cocoons making sure not to break the threads of silk. Then they wind the filaments onto a reel that twists 10-12 filaments together into a single thread of silk. The end product is a ball of raw silk, which the farmer profits from by selling to the highest bidder.

Cloth and clothing manufacturers, use the trade terminology, in labelling their prod-uct depending on the number of threads woven into the clothe since the discovery of the silk worms.

The history of silk began in the 27th century BCE. Its use was confined to China until the Silk Road opened at some point during the second half of the first millen nium BCE. Starting in the 4th century BCE silk began to reach the West by merchants who would exchange it for gold, ivory, horses or precious stones. Up to the borders of the Roman Empire, silk became a financial standard for estimating the value of different products. The Greek wanted to copy the Chinese and farm silk worms themselves so they made efforts to plant mulberry trees and breed silkworms in the Mediterranean basin. Persia controlled the trade of silk intended for Europe and Byzantium.

So now you read this, don't you appreciate silk more? The beautifully crafted material takes days to make and is made from the finest natural thread from a silk worm. With a history that dates back thousands of years and through its link to rovalty, silk today is one of the most high profile and desired materials to wear