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Silk Stories

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Silk Stories by Pam Kaplan

The Silkworm Video

I hope that you enjoy watching this silkworm's amazing journey as she spins her cocoon home - from the inside out! She belongs to the Bombyx Mori species of the silkworm family - the creators of luxurious, mulberry silk. An average cocoon weighs between 1.1 to 1.5 grams and contains one long contiguous strand of raw silk filament that measures about 1,000 yards!

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The Silkworm

Silk - The Textile of Moghuls, Rajs and Religion

According to legend, silk fiber was first discovered in China by Queen Xi Ling Shi, wife of emperor Huang-Ti when a silkworm cocoon fell from a mulberry tree into her cup of hot tea and started to unravel.

Since that time, silk has captured the imagination of the world. Known as the queen of textiles, silk has long been associated with beauty, sensuality and elegance. It has been woven into textiles, tapestries, stockings and rugs for thousands of years. It has been the traditional fabric of royalty and religion. In India, silk remains been an integral part of daily life and culture.

Below is a brief timeline of silk and its importance in history.

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A Brief History of Silk

2640 BC According to legend, a fiber from the Bombx mori species of silk moth was first discovered in China by Queen Xi Ling Shi, wife of emperor Huang-Ti when a silkworm cocoon fell from a mulberry tree into her cup of hot tea and started to unravel. Bombx mori silk is often referred to as “mulberry silk”.

2450 - 2000 BC Archeological excavations in the city of Harappa in 1999 uncovered evidence of silk from a species of Antheraea moths indigenous to south Asia. Harappa is deemed as the hub of the Indus civilization. This is the oldest incidence of silk recorded to date.

3rd Century BC Chinese silk fabrics were found throughout Asia and were transported by land to

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3rd Century BC Chinese silk fabrics were found throughout Asia and were transported by land to the west, and by sea to Japan. These routes later became known as the Silk Routes.

552 AD Byzantine Emperor Justinian sent two monks on a mission to Asia. They came back to Byzantium with silkworm eggs hidden inside their bamboo walking sticks. From then on, sericulture spread throughout Asia Minor.

7th Century AD The Arabs conquered the Persions and captured their silks in the process. Their campaigns swept through Africa, Sicily and Spain.

1271 Marco Polo traveled to China for development exchanges between East and West leading to an increased demand and use for silk.

1466 Louis XI declared his intention to introduce the art and craft of making gold and silk fabrics in the city of Lyon.

1609 Sericulture was introduced to the American colonies when James, I of England encouraged it to discourage tobacco planting and to fill English looms. In 1732, mulberry plantations were started in Georgia and extended into South Carolina.

1685 Louis XIV declared the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in France. The Huguenots, many of whom were expert weavers, fled the country in large numbers and later became major contributors to the development of the silk industry in Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Switzerland.

1785 Tipu Sultan, the Indian ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore established India's first sericulture development project in hope of establishing market leadership. He procured silkworms from China and established plantations of Mulberry trees in southern India.

1776 The American Revolution brought an end to British-imposed edicts on the American colonies to produce and export silk to England.

1789 The French Revolution brought hard times to France and the silk industry was nearly destroyed from reduced demand.

1804 Joseph-Marie Jacquard introduced a punch-card mechanism in France that permitted a weaver to produce complex patterns with increased speed and accuracy.

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1854 A deadly plague started killing silkworms in France, puzzling scientists who at the time, who knew nothing of microbes. Louis Pasteur was brought to study the problem. His discoveries and correlations led to his important findings on infectious diseases. Despite Pasteur's discoveries, silkworm diseases spread throughout Europe and the Middle East. The Far East became a dominant market for raw silk.

1869 The Suez Canal opened the opportunity for increased international trade. Japan became a competitive player in the world market. The first man-made fibers where introduced as a substitute for silk.

1898 Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata established a silk farm at Basvanagudi in Bangalore, India. In an earlier visit to Japan, Tata was impressed with the scientific development of sericulture and believed that through Japanese instruction and mentoring, India would obtain a thorough knowledge of the trade. He revived the sericulture industry in Mysore with a focus on the silk industry's valuable potential for India and its poorer classes.

1939 World War II became a major acceleration point in the decline of the European and US sericulture markets. Raw-silk supplies from Japan were cut off, and new synthetic fibers provided substitutes for products like stockings and parachutes. After the war, Japan restored its silk production with improved technology.

1970s China recaptured its historic position as the world's largest producer and exporter of raw silk.

1985 The world production of raw silk was about 56,000 tons, of which over 50% were produced in China.

2014 - 2015 The total world production of raw silk was 159,718 metric tons, contributed by China, India, Uzbekistan, Thailand, Brazil, Vietnam, North Korea, Iran, Japan, Turkey and Indonesia (in that order).

How Silk Becomes Silk

Science Lesson: A silkworm's life can be divided into four distinct stages of development: Egg, Larva, Pupa and Moth. The practice of sericulture actually begins at the moth stage. After mating, the female silkworm moth lays about 300-500 eggs that are each about the size of a sesame seed. The newborn silkworm is black, hairy and very small. It constantly feeds on mulberry leaves for 4-5 days without sleeping. It then rests for 18-20 hours and sheds its skin. This process is called an instar. Over the course of 25-27 days, the silkworm larva will go through a period of five instars and will increase its weight over 10,000 times. In the final 3 days of its life, the silkworm spins one contiguous strand of silk, moving from side to side and top to bottom until it is totally encased in a cocoon. This cocoon house is the basis of silk!

It takes about two weeks for the pupa to change into a moth. The adult Bombx mori silk moth is hairy, with large eyes and four wings. On its head are two antennae. Because the breed has been genetically domesticated and has no predators, the silk moth cannot fly. In addition, it does not eat or drink anything. Once the adult silk moth emerges from its cocoon, its sole mission is to find a member of the opposite sex and mate. This process often starts within an hour after hatching. After mating, the male and female moths will die in a few days, after the female has laid her eggs.

On domesticated silk farms, the pupas will never change into silk moths. Their commercial value is in the silk cocoon. The silk cocoons must be taken to market during the critical time before the moths can emerge. If they are not sold during this window, the pupa will go through their final transformation and rip a hole through the cocoon wall as they enter into the moth state. Once the threads are broken, the silk cannot be used in the traditional reeling and weaving processes.

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The Silk Farmers

India is the largest consumer of silk in the world and the second largest producer of silk next to China. Nearly 500,000 acres of mulberry plants are currently under cultivation, supporting the annual production of approximately 23, 529 tons of raw silk. Domesticated silk farming, or sericulture is highly concentrated across 60,000 villages in the southern part of India. Nearly 90 percent of the country's mulberry silk is produced in this region.

Mulberry farmers in India are currently facing economic challenges caused by water shortages and increased competition in raw silk imports from China.

This video, called "The Lake" chronicles some of these recent struggles through the story of a silk farmer named Shivaya from Singarajapura Village in the Indian state of Karnataka.

~ In Kannada with English subtitles.

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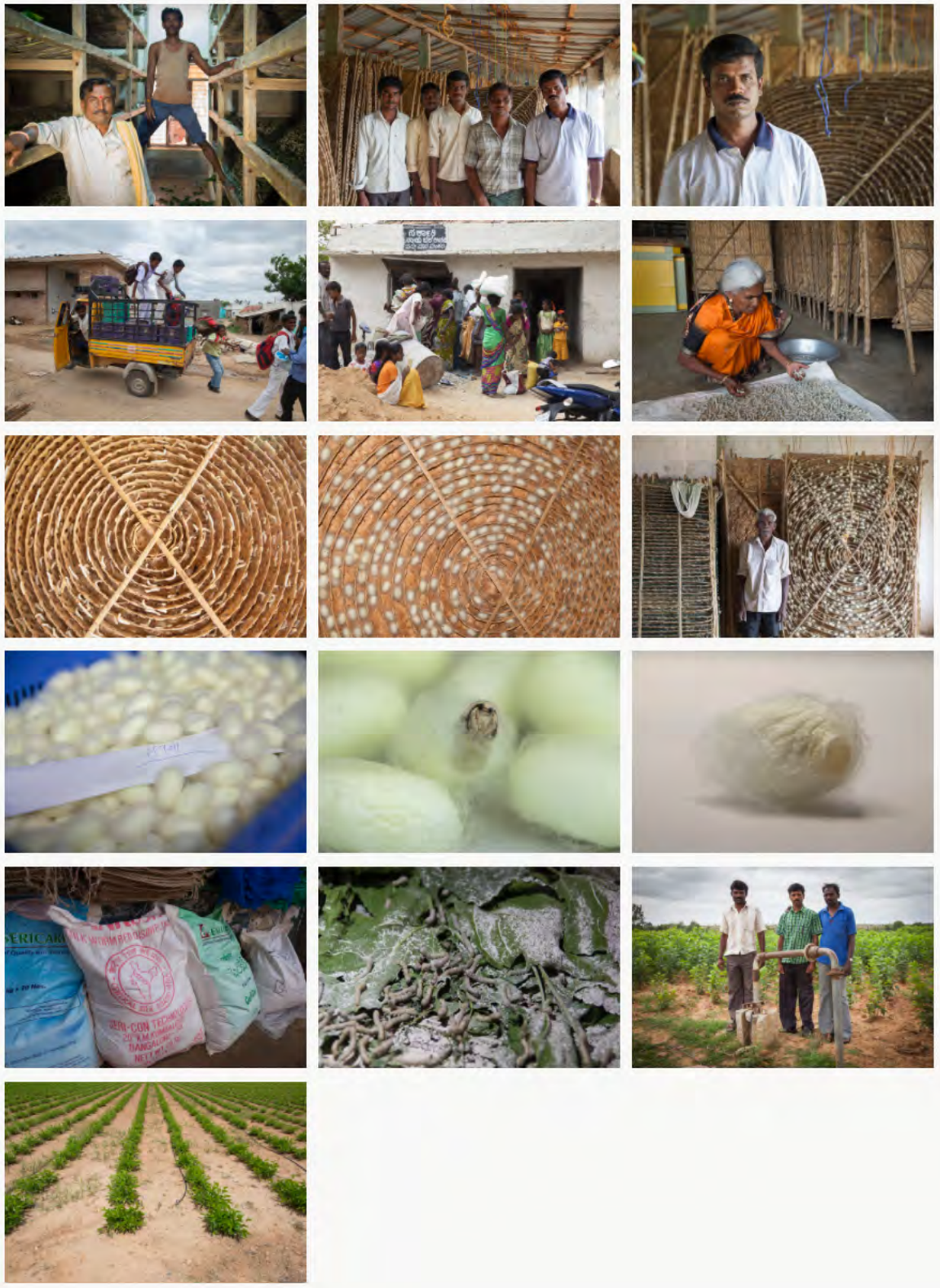

The Ancient Practice of Reeling Silk

Science Lesson: Silk is comprised of a gummy protein called sericin which forms the hardened shell of the cocoon and filament protein called fibroin. The most perfectly formed cocoons are used to make high quality silk yarn – but the challenge is to extract the threads before the silk moth breaks through the cocoon during the final stage of metamorphosis.

In the process of reeling, the cocoons are first soaked in very hot or boiling water to soften the sericin, which enables the ends of the threads to be discovered and pulled. As the cocoons are unraveled, the threads are plied together, a few strands at a time, and then wound around a reel. The diameter of the yarn must remain consistent for weaving purposes.

The video, "Reeling Silk Cocoons" illustrates the work of the reeler.

Scroll down to read an excerpt from a recent conversation with Mr. Syed Mehboob Pasha, a reeler from Nandi Village, India discussing his perspective on the reeling business today.

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Reeling Silk Cocoons

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In May, 2015, I met with silk reeler, Syed Mehboob Pasha in his home of Nandi Village, on the outskirts of Bangalore. Here is an excerpt of our conversation:

Q : Can you describe the work you are doing here?

A : I do reeling –I produce silk thread and sell it in Bangalore. I've been going to the market every day, from 1975.

Q: How did you learn this work?

A : This was a business in the village from my father's time. I learned from him and then opened my own business.

Q : What is the most difficult part of the job?

A : Extracting silk threads from the hot water is the difficult part of this business. Earlier we used to make profits, but now we do not. Laborers are scarce. They are going to Bangalore and selling vegetables or driving vehicles. 80% of this work has washed away and is happening outside of our region, in countries like China, Japan, Vietnam and South Africa. 20% is going on, but there is no guarantee for this 20% too – it will slowly fade away. This work will no longer be here 10 years from now. We are in difficult times.

Q : What do villagers do in the evening?

A : They sleep early by 7 or 7:30pm. There are people who watch TV, some have computers at home.

Q : How many children do you have? Will they do this work?

A : I have five children. All of them are educated and married. I do not want them to get into this business. This job is not like it was before. Earlier, this work was considered to be higher than gold trading! We were so happy to sell these silk threads to people before.

Q : What is different now?

A : In earlier times, for a wedding, people used to buy 20-30 silk sarees. But now, they don't buy so much. The trend has changed with the the evolution of other clothing like jeans, salwars and chudidhars. Times are difficult. This work is dying slowly and is at the end of it's journey.

The Buyers and Sellers: The Cocoon Markets

Approximately 21.4K metric tons of mulberry silk cocoons are exchanged each year in Indian markets. The Indian government plays an oversight role in regulating the silk trade by setting the floor and ceiling price for raw silk. Much is at stake for the sellers. Silk farmers in India are currently facing economic challenges caused by water shortages and increased competition in raw silk imports from China. A "30- ton day" in a large cocoon auction - like in the village of Sidlaghatta or Ramanagaram equates to the sale of about 10.8 million cocoons. Each cocoon weighs between 1.0 – 2.5 grams and contains approximately 1,000 yards of silk filament – or raw silk. If each strand were laid end on end, there would be enough silk to circle the earth 247 times or make 12.5 round trip journeys to the moon.

I frequently visited several cocoon markets during my stay in India. Below is an essay called, **"Destination: Siddlaghatta"** that describes my impressions.

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Destination: Sidlaghatta

Essay and photos by Pam Kaplan

It is often said that many great adventures begin in your own backyard.

On this Friday morning I'm energized with the prospect of a road trip. Perhaps it is the desire to combat jet lag from the previous week's 22-hour journey in the back of a not so state-of-the-art 777 plane or weariness from the constant din of car

Underneath the Silken Threads

This is the story of a handloom weaver in Bangalore named Mr. B. Ganganna. Although to some, handloom weaving is seen as an art, to Mr. Ganganna, it is a livelihood that he started nearly 40 years ago when he was just 15 years old. Weaving has afforded a basic income that has supported his family. In the early years, the money was good so education for his five children was not a priority. These days however, it is harder to make ends meet. Although all of his children know how to weave, only one son is in the business today.

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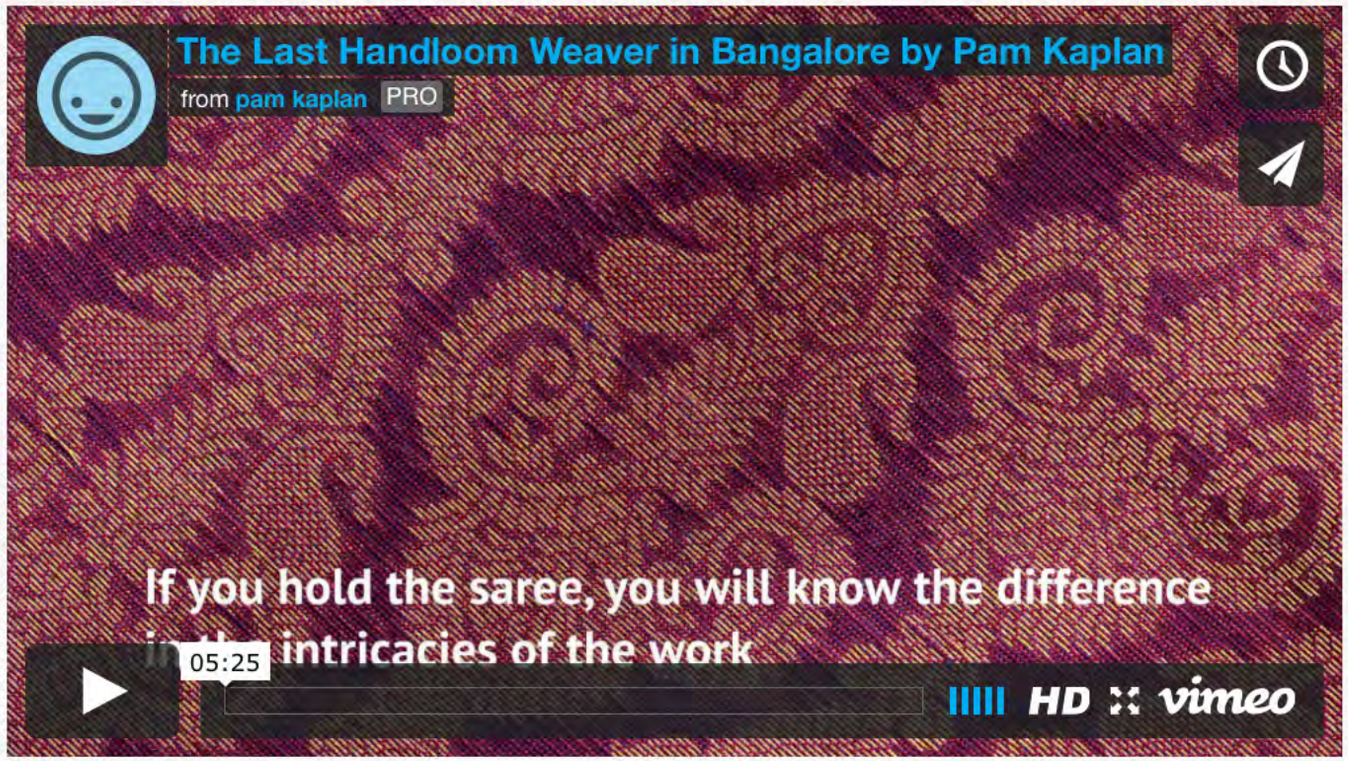
The Last Handloom Weaver in Bangalore



Story of Mr. B Ganganna

"Handloom weaving is better than power loom weaving" said Mr. Ganganna, "but it is hard work and often tedious. Getting laborers and weavers is difficult, even if he is ready to pay their wages in advance."

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In addition, making a saree is time-consuming. In Mr. Ganganna's business, a saree takes 3 days to build and consists of approximately 8,000 to 10,000 strands of silk. Each individual thread is literally glued together to support the creation of the six-meter fabric by one woman, Mrs. Shankaramma.

Most weavers work morning to night and work in very close quarters. Eye strain, hand and body pain are the norm. Mr. Ganganna still runs the family business but has given up weaving because he can no longer see the details.

"At one time, I felt very proud to do this work, but now when we take our sarees to market, there is no value for what we have done" said Mr. Ganganna. "It makes me feel bad."

As the consumer demand for new designs has increased, the market advantage goes to the power loom businesses where computers help weavers to create new patterns and variety. According to Mr. Ganganna, "In hand loom, there aren't any new designs that will come in the future".

Mr. Ganganna's dream? "We want our grandchildren to study. We won't teach them this work." Mr. Ganganna is close to retiring and wants his children to do something else. "I taught them this work but there isn't much value for this job.

"For marriage, no one will give their girl to a weaver because there isn't a proper income. There is no future in this work; maybe it will last 30-50 years – but even now there are no weavers to do it."

For marriage, no one will give their girl to a weaver because there isn't a proper income. There is no future in this work; maybe it will last 30-50 years – but even now there are no weavers to do it. Prosperity only comes to the middle men. They sell for much higher than what they pay the weaver. I charge 500 rupees for a plain saree and it takes me three days. At the most, we can weave two sarees in a week. Only the wholesaler and the retailer make good money. A middle man sells our saree for 2,500 rupees – if it is first quality. No benefit comes to the weaver."

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The Coveted Saree

The silk saree is one of the most iconic symbols of Indian culture. The word Saree or Sari is derived from Sanskrit and means, “strip of fabric”. A saree typically ranges from six to nine yards in length and can be draped in several ways, depending on the region of India and the wearer’s preference. The origin of the saree has been traced back to the Indus Valley civilization which existed during 2800-1800 BC. In addition, there are references to the saree in the oldest scriptures of the Hindu religion called the vedas.

From simple designs at the lower level to elaborate, hand-woven designs with thread wrapped in gold at the higher level, the structure of the saree has remained the same for hundreds of years – six yards of unstitched cloth.

The video, ***"The 100 Saree Pact"*** tells the story of an agreement between two friends to wear their sarees one hundred times in 2015 and to blog about the story of each saree. Their promise turned into an international movement with an agenda to spread and preserve the love for sarees.

The video, ***“The Saree”*** illustrates a popular Indian draping style, where one end of the saree is tucked into a petticoat and then wrapped and pleated around the body.

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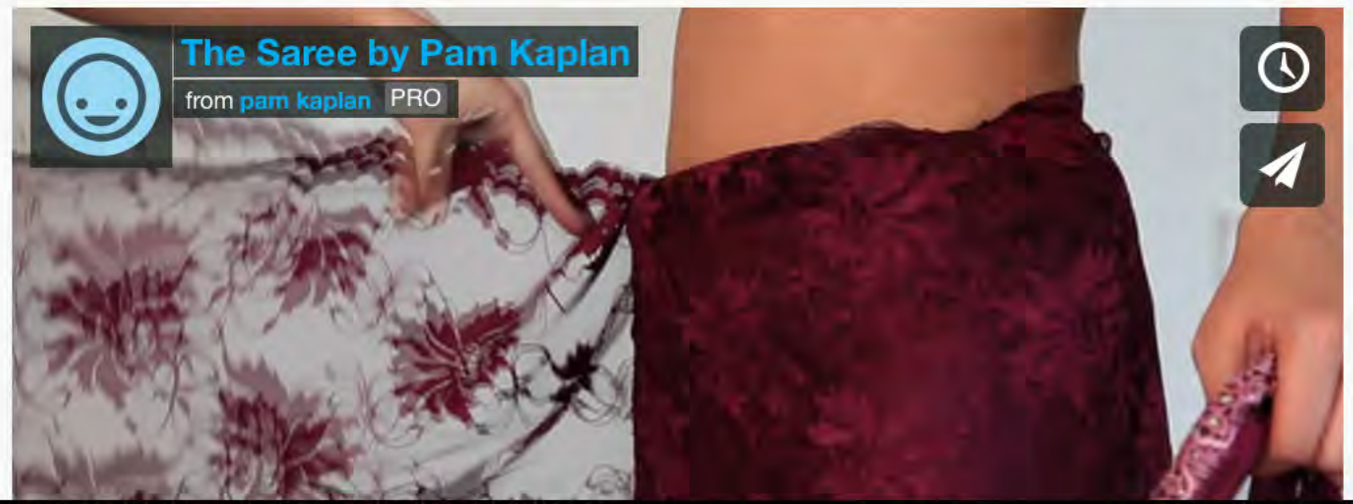
The 100 Saree Pact

The Saree



A Day in a Weaving Village

Ayyangarkulum is a small village outside of the city of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, India. The word Ayyangar is derived from the term ayya or arya. It means “noble” in the Sanskrit language. This silk story takes place on a small street called Subramaniyar Koli. The close-knit, spiritual neighborhood has produced generations of master handloom weavers dedicated to the art and craft of creating the revered Kanchipuram saree. Like other small rural villages in Tamil Nadu, things are rapidly changing. Aggressive government programs are in full swing to improve the standard of living through education and technology. Children have access to computers in schools and many of them have been given laptops to use at home for their studies. Most homes, however modest, have a television with cable TV and smart phones are becoming increasingly ubiquitous.

About 70% of the inhabitants living on Subramaniyar Koli street are still engaged in the business of handloom weaving. In December, 2015 I photographed each home, from the outside and from the inside over the course of two days to better understand the impact of change. There were striking differences between how the handloom weavers live and the rest of the community. Most families are now educating their children and want a better life for them, outside of the weaving business.

The video, **"A Day on Subramaniyar Street"** chronicles the daily rhythm of this area.

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“I was born here and learned silk weaving from my father thirty five years ago when I was fifteen. This village is good and I like weaving. My children have finished their studies. They do not need to come into this work because they are educated. I think this work will finish with our generation. The earnings are too low and it will diminish.”

Natarajan, Weaver

“Iyangar Kulam is a spiritual village. There is a temple on almost every

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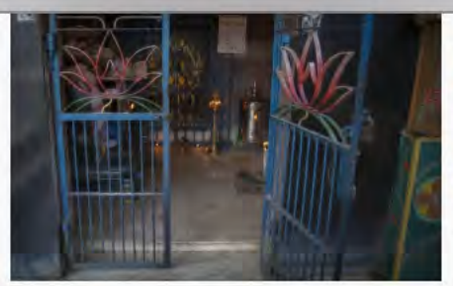
street. The main deity in this village is Sanjeevaraar. In 10 months out of 12, we have deity celebrations. When we start new work, we remember Lord Ganesha and we pray to Sanjeevarayar."

Venkatesan, Weaver

"This work of weaving has been passed on to me from my forefathers' generation as an art. It is just like being artists. We worship this work and start doing it just like we do Surya Namaskara in the mornings."

Kannan, Weaver



"I've lived here for the past fifteen years. The village is good. Expenses are low here and children can be raised in a good environment, free from bad habits. Our house was dripping with water, so eventually we needed to shift to a better house. The silk business is good work, but it will not give us sufficient income. My husband is also doing a catering business along with weaving to sustain our income."

Vijaylakshmi, Village Resident

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"Earlier, people used to buy a lot of silk sarees, but it is diminishing now with the advent of apoorva (artificial) silk. People feel that real silk sarees cost more. And we get only 75-100 rupees (about $1.50) a day for our labor."

"I do not want my children to come into this work. Our children need to see better days, hence we are educating them."

Venkatesan, Weaver

"I've been in this village for 20 years. The people here are friendly but our generation doesn't like village life that much. I hang around with my friends in the evening, look at the internet and browse Flipkart. I also spend time with friends playing cricket. I do not know about weaving."

Vignesh, Resident

"Weaving is the lifeline of this town. If not for weaving, we would not have our livelihoods here. I am from a weaving family, but earnings are less in the weaving business. Hence, people are slowly moving toward educating their children. They are taking up studies and going for work at corporate companies."

Surender, Logistics Company Employee

Pam Kaplan

Welcome to Silk Stories! My love affair with silk started two years ago while living abroad in India. While there, I had the opportunity to go deep into the lives and work of the mulberry silk farmers, producers and weavers. I was fascinated to explore an ancient and colorful craft that is still practiced the same way today as it was a hundred years ago. I am excited to share these stories through this website. In addition to photography, I enjoy travel, art, music and living in Washington, DC.

Contact Me

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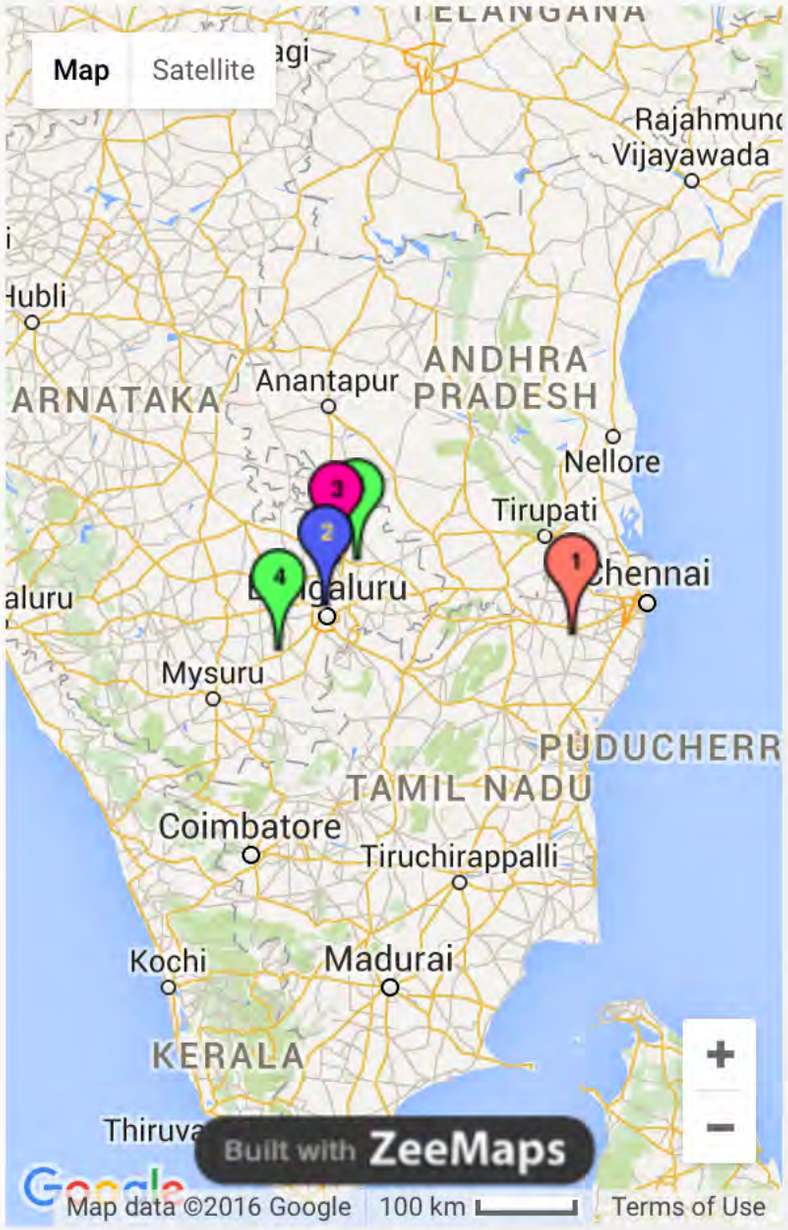

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1 Ayyangarkulam Village
2 Mr. Ganganna, Handloom Weaver
3 Mr. Pasha, Reeler, Nandi Hills Village
4 Shivaya, Silk Farmer
5 Sidlaghatta Cocoon Market

Page 1 of 1

My Journey

Silk Stories is a multimedia documentary project that provides a behind the scenes view into the silk production process and the impact of globalization and technology in the lives of the silk farmers, reelers, weavers and consumers in southern India. The markers on this map represent my journey between 2013-2015 as I visited several cities and villages across the region to understand the implications of this change.

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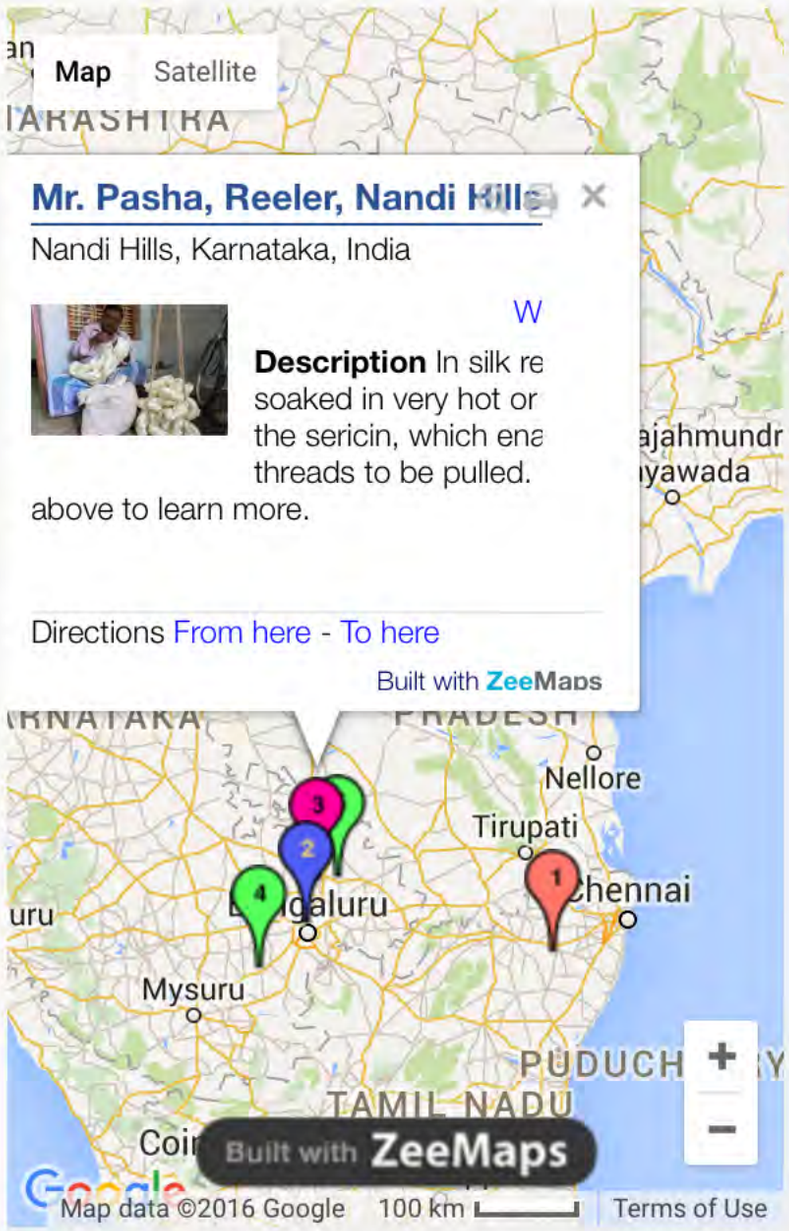

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The Central Silk Board

Visit Site

The Central Silk Board (CSB) is a Statutory Body that was established in 1948 by the Indian Parliament. It functions under the administrative control of the Ministry of Textiles in the Government of India. The Central Silk Board plays an important role in the Indian silk industry and offers an extensive set of resources that are available to the public via their website. This site contains key information on nearly every aspect of the sericulture including details of daily cocoon market volumes and prices, education and grants available for farmers. The primary interface to the information is called the Sericulture Information Linkages and Knowledge System or "SILKS" for short.

Source: The Central Silk Board, India

The College of Sericulture, University of Agriculture Science, Chintamani, India

Visit Site

The College of Sericulture was established in 1995 with the objective of serving the "maximum potential" for sericultural development and to expand the reach and ruralization of sericultural and agricultural education. Today, the College of Sericulture is the only educational institution in Asia to offer a four-year degree, specializing in sericulture. The College also offers extension programs to local farmers and is engaged with the Central Silk Board of India's Research and Technology division to disseminate current information to sericulturists.

Source: The College of Sericulture, UAG, India

The 100 Saree Pact Blog Site

Visit Site

The #100sareepact began as a pact between two friends to wear their sarees one hundred times in 2015 and to tell their saree stories. The blog is an open, crowd sourced platform for story telling and free from commercial advertising.

Source: 100 Saree Pact

The Crafts Council of India, Not-for-Profit Society

Visit Site

Founded in 1964 and inspired by the "commitment of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore to hand production as a catalyst for political and social emancipation", the Crafts Council's mission is to "help build awareness of the knowledge and skills of India's artisans, and to help address their needs within a rapidly changing environment". The Crafts Council works together with a network of nine state councils and is engaged in partnerships with the Government of India and other activists to ensure a national awareness of the economic, social, cultural and environmental importance of artisans and their crafts".

Source: The Crafts Council of India