

## Silk Story being re-written

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Nestled between the mighty Chinars which reticently have witnessed the golden past of the Silk industry in Kashmir as well as several vicissitudes of time stands tall with pride the historical Govt. Silk Factory at Rajbagh. Spread over an area of 28 kanals of land in the amidst scenic locale the elegant looking heritage complex once used to abuzz with activity of silk yarn and fabric manufacturing full throttle. Established some 40 years ago, Filature at Rambagh to exclusively focus on the manufacturing of silk fabric which was in great demand globally during the decade of 1940-1950.

Now in the eighth decade of its existence the heritage industrial complex from outside may appear to be soulless and decrepit but immediately upon entering the complex you will be welcomed by the shrill of the industrial activity which will unveil before you a whole process of conversion of silk-yarn after going through the various meticulous stages of Winding- Doubling- Twisting- Re-Winding- Prin-Winding- Warping-Drafting to the final stage of Weaving which transforms the yarn into the lustrous and beautifully textured famed Kashmir silk.

The Rajbagh Silk factory has two major blocks, Throwing or Warping section -which primarily deals with the preparation of silk fabric and the Weaving section - which has more than 23 looms working and converting the Yarn into Fabric.

With around 120 skilled men and women working on the different machines, many of which are more than 80 years old and these men and women have mastered the skills of managing the tantrums that machines often throw owing to their old age. "Many a times I have to search for a spare part from the machines damaged during floods of 2014 to make the machine functional since the spare parts of these machines are no longer available in market," says Adeel (name changed) one of the few mechanics that are tasked with the responsibility of the upkeep and maintenance of machines at the factory. Adeel also reminisces the days post-2014 floods when he along with his other colleagues in a bid to minimise the damage to the machines inundated in flood waters uninstalled them, then placed them on the

wooden planks at any high place that was available to let them dry and it took several months to repair the machines and make the factory functional again.

Women which comprise around 25 per cent of the workforce in the factory can be seen involved in almost all the stages of silk production but are more in numbers in the Twisting (reeled silk is wound onto bobbins) and Prin-winding (bobbin is placed inside shuttle and placed in weaving machines).

"I started working in the factory 26 years back in the Winding section and over a period of time have now been elevated to a position of in charge Prin -Winding section," says Zarina (name changed). She added that working in the factory has been an immensely satisfying and empowering process but rued that the ageing machines which often breakdown are a cause of constant worry and leads to the frequent disruptions in the industrial activity.

Zarina's fear may not be totally misplaced keeping in view the fact that in 1976 around 450 workers were working on 124 looms and producing 30,000 meters of silk fibre every month which has now been reduced to 2,000- 3,000 meters of silk fabric per month with 23 weaving looms working. The floods of 2014 wreaked havoc on the factory and caused heavy loss to the infrastructure and machinery and it took months of hard work to make factory operational once again. The deluge damaged around 120 machines besides causing heavy damage to the octogenarian heritage industrial complex. "I visited the factory immediately after the floods and the experience was so harrowing that it brought tears to my eyes and I had given up the hope for the revival of the factory" said Muhammad Jamal (name changed) one of the workers at the factory.

However as part of the restoration of the heritage factory and revival of silk industry in the valley the Govt. of J&K chalked out a comprehensive plan for the upgradation of the Rajbagh silk factory. Massive push is being given to the infrastructural facilities and modernisation of the machinery under the World Bank funded JTFRP (Jhelum Tawi Flood Recovery Project). As an infrastructural stimulus a Composite Market Centre for the whole chain silk activity is under construction with 90 per cent work com-

pleted. The two storied sprawling building with a plinth area of 15,000 sft will have State of Art Showroom where the silk products manufactured in the factory will be showcased. The Throwing/Warping section will be shifted from the old heritage complex to the 1st floor of the Composite Market Centre and will be equipped with the latest textile machinery also to be provided under the World Bank funded JTFRP.

Under the modernisation plan latest state of art machinery is being procured with the financial assistance of World Bank. The machines being procured include the high capacity winding machines, 2 for 1 twister machines, sectional warping machines, rapier silk weaving looms etc. These machines will be vital to further improving quality of the silk fabric manufactured at the factory besides increasing quantity of fabric manufactured and providing ease of working as more than one machines can be operated by a single worker.

To preserve the heritage value of the Rajbagh Silk Factory the consultants have also been engaged under the World Bank funded JTFRP, who are working on devising of the comprehensive conservation plan for the old heritage complex.

The construction of the composite market centre along with the massive modernisation by providing latest textile machinery is bound to bring a vital role in the revival of the historical silk factory at Rajbagh which is the foremost consumer of the silk cocoon being reared by the thousands of the cultivators throughout Jammu & Kashmir and provides them with the assured market. The silk fabric manufactured at the factory is of the highest quality and depending on the number of twists the various varieties of the silk fabric produced are Crepe, Chiffon, Champion, Chinon, etc and owing to its superior quality and market credibility the demand for the silk fabric manufactured in the factory is immense with local businessmen, entrepreneurs and fashion designers using the silk fabric as raw material for manufacturing of various finished products which are exported and also used locally. Around 23,000 artisans households associated with the embroidery and printing sector will also be benefitted with the revival and modernization plan of the factory.