

Lives in Eri: A Photo Essay

Uttamasha Dutta

PhD Student, Department of Anthropology  
The New School for Social Research



*What does nonviolence mean in the life of a silkworm and its rearers?*

I carried this question through Nagaon, Morigaon, and West Karbi Anglong in Assam during the summer of 2026, following the lives of eri silkworms and the people who rear, tend to, consume, and make silk from them.

Produced from the cocoons of *Samia ricini*, eri silk has long been reared, spun, and woven by communities across North Eastern India. The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in India, together with the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh, has long been described as the home of eri silk. Eri silkworms were domesticated from the Himalayan wild ancestor *Samia cannigi* at least several centuries ago. Yet the fiber has never been only a

commodity. For the communities who rear it, eri is bound up with household economy, women's labor, and generationally inherited skills.

In the twenty-first century, this old fiber has acquired a new name. Marketed to global and domestic consumers as “ahimsa (non-violent) silk” or “peace silk,” vegan, cruelty-free, and cast in a Gandhian idiom, eri has been folded into an ethical vocabulary whose language of non-violence sits uneasily with the material facts of its production and the meanings it holds for the communities who rear it. Eri's appeal rests on a particular feature of eri production whereby it can be spun from cocoons after the moth has emerged. This is set against the backdrop of conventional mulberry silk production, which requires killing the silkworm in the pupa stage to preserve the cocoon's continuous filament. In ethical fashion markets, the possibility of producing eri silk without killing the pupa has become central to how the textile is represented in the language of cruelty-free or peace silk. However, at the level of production—as my fieldwork revealed—in Assam, rearers remove the pupae from their cocoons for consumption before the moth has emerged.

*But the silkworm's life does not always follow the story told about the silk.*

Eri worms spend most of their lives eating castor leaves. They eat, molt, and eat again. Then they stop and wind themselves into white cocoons. Later, spinners unwind the shelter the worm makes for itself into thread.

The worms' hunger becomes the rearers' work. Women cut castor and any other leaves the worms accept from their own compounds, along fences and paths and the corners of kitchen gardens. Under a government livelihood scheme, women feed thousands of worms at a time. Elsewhere, the work slots into the gaps around household chores and the rest of the day.

Once the pupae are pulled out of their cocoons, the empty cocoons take another route, toward a market of many possibilities. Cloth has several futures once it leaves a household—heritage handloom, certified craft, ahimsa silk. But before any of that, rearers degum the cocoons, press them into flat cakes, and dry them in the sun on woven bamboo trays, waiting for the spindle.

At the weekly market in Amsoi, Nagaon, I went looking for cocoons and found none. Vendors weighed out silkworms by the kilogram, beside greens from kitchen gardens, poultry, and other household produce. Buyers picked them out the way one buys any familiar protein. Buyers picked them out the way one buys any familiar protein.

In the kitchen, the pupae went into a hot pan with oil, chillies, and salt.

In a village in Umswai, West Karbi Anglong, most households had stopped weaving. In one house, a loom lay in pieces. The family had not stopped rearing.

*What is a household rearing when no thread comes of it? Who decides that a meal counts as an exception to the story, and who gets to call it the story? Why does one kind of eating read as a stain on an ethical fabric, while another kind goes unmarked? When a word travels far from the yard where the worms are fed, what does it owe the people who feed them every day? Which eating practices need defending, and who decides?*

















