

FASHION

Did you know about Ahimsa silk, the eco-friendly fabric created without killing any silkworms?

The cruelty-free yarn was first patented in India in 2006, and has now been used in designer collections showcased all over the world

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13 September 2019



Mention the word silk and people automatically have mental associations of luxury and occasion wear, textiles with shimmery surfaces and a soft, rich hand feels. For Indians especially, silks belong in our trousseaus, are worn on happy festivals, and are even passed down generations as family heirlooms. Even though the yarn originated in China in the Neolithic age, it has been popular in India for centuries (and until recently, India was the largest consumer of silk in the world). Silk travelled to the Indian subcontinent via the silk route traders and became a favourite with emperors and aristocracy, who encouraged the industry within India itself.

Why traditional silk production needed an eco-friendly update

As much as we love this fine fabric, in the age of conscious fashion, it's important to understand the production practices behind our choices. While it's no secret that the production of silk kills the very organism that produces it, did you know that 30,000-50,000 silkworms are killed to make one six-yard sari? Sericulture is the cultivation of silkworms or the Bombyx mori moths, where they feed on mulberry leaves until they grow to three inches (ten thousand times their original size), and are then ready to be harvested. As they grow, the caterpillars secrete liquid protein to construct their cocoons, which is eventually extracted as raw silk. The worms are boiled or blasted with steam by manufacturers to collect the cocoons, and this process kills the pupae. However, in the last decade, an Indian man from Hyderabad has been able to develop commercially viable Ahimsa or non-violent silk.

What is Ahimsa silk, and how is it produced?

Kusuma Rajaiah, who hails from a weaver's family, studied fibres and filaments at Indian institute of Handloom Technology for three years. He was working in Andhra Pradesh's handloom department in the early 1990s when ex-president R Venkatarman's wife, Janaki, who was on a state visit to the silk manufacturing facilities, asked Rajaiah if silk could be made without killing the caterpillars. This set

him on a decade-long journey that ended in the production of Ahimsa silk; he created his first sample sarees in 1991 and then made Ahimsa silk a commercial product in 2001. “We dispensed with the conventional method of boiling live silk worms in their cocoons to extract the requisite filament/thread,” says Rajaiah. “Instead, we allow the silk moths to pierce their cocoons naturally and come out from their metamorphosis and live their fullest life peacefully. We then use the pierced cocoons to extract the required yarn, spin the silk fibre and make fabric out of it. This is how we are spreading the concept of Ahimsa to the world,” he explains.

Ahimsa silk has a soft texture and hand feel and is as durable as regular silk. Rajaiah is heavily influenced by Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent philosophy. His company makes everything from clothing to baby linen to eye masks using this fabric. Even though Ahimsa silk is costlier and more time-consuming to produce than regular silk, Rajaiah’s product has domestic and well as international demand. “Hollywood celebrities like Courtney Cox have been spotted in it, the Duchess of Cornwall ordered Ahimsa silk to make pyjamas for Prince Charles, and I’ve also presented an Ahimsa silk garment to the Pope at the Vatican in 2017,” says Rajaiah.

Fashion and the future

Other Indian designers like Wendell Rodricks, Divya Ahluwalia (founder of label, Akira Ming) and Priyanka Ella Lorena Lama have embraced ahimsa silk and used it in their stylish collections. Archana Kochhar took the vegan textile to the runways of New York with her spring/summer 2016 collection. Earlier this year, UK label, Mother of Pearl, also released a capsule, peace silk collection sold exclusively on Net-A-Porter. The brand’s founder, Amy Powney collaborated with TV channel, BBC Earth on a sustainability project including a panel series at London Fashion Week, a short film and this remarkable collection, which proves that sustainable clothes can go beyond their earthy, hippie stereotypical aesthetic to look truly luxurious.

Meanwhile, the government of India granted Rajaiah a patent and trade marks for Ahimsa silk in 2006, since he was the first man to create it. The innovative entrepreneur has also been able to make jersey out of Ahimsa silk, which they now use to make T-shirts and lingerie. He is very bullish about the growth of the vegan