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Sustainable Development and Traditional Industries: Embracing Epistemic Syncretism in Silk Industry for Success

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Abstract

Sustainable development has emerged as a pressing imperative in the modern world, necessitating a departure from unsustainable development models of the past. Traditional industries, with their deep-rooted practices and local connections, hold immense potential as vital instruments for fostering economic growth, social empowerment, and environmental stewardship in this pursuit. However, the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems poses a significant threat to the achievement of sustainable development goals. This paper explores the critical role of traditional industries in sustainable development, with a specific focus on the case of silk Industry. It emphasizes the necessity of preserving and integrating indigenous knowledge through the concept of 'epistemic syncretism' to ensure sustainable development. By fostering cognitive justice and embracing a pluralistic approach to development model, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future that upholds both human well-being and ecological balance.

Keywords
Epistemic Syncretism, Politics of Knowledge, Silk, Sericulture, Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals, Traditional Knowledge,

Introduction

The imperfections and un-sustainability of the prevailing 21st-century development model are becoming increasingly evident. To address these shortcomings, the need for a viable alternative to the dominant and unsustainable development paradigm has become apparent. Scholars like Federico and Kothari (2017) emphasize the importance of moving beyond mere critique and exploring alternative approaches to development. It is essential to deconstruct the homogenizing forces of development while also acknowledging and respecting the diverse knowledge systems and worldviews, both old and new.

Traditional industries offer promising solutions, contributing to economic prosperity, social empowerment, and environmental preservation. However, the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems poses a significant threat to the success of these endeavors. This work focuses on the case of sericulture as an example of a traditional industry with the potential for sustainable development. By delving into the consequences of neglecting indigenous knowledge and advocating for 'epistemic syncretism' as a solution to this problem, this research aims to underscore the need for embracing diverse knowledge systems to achieve sustainable development goals. Epistemic syncretism is a concept that refers to the blending, merging, or integration of different knowledge systems or epistemologies into a coherent whole. It involves the combination of diverse sources of knowledge, often from different cultural, social, or disciplinary backgrounds, to create a comprehensive understanding or approach to a particular subject or problem. In the context of sustainable development and traditional industries, epistemic syncretism would entail bringing together traditional knowledge, modern scientific knowledge, and other forms of knowledge, to find innovative and sustainable solutions to challenges faced by traditional industries and communities. Through a comprehensive analysis of prospects and obstacles of silk industry, this paper advocates for the holistic integration of indigenous wisdom in the pursuit of a sustainable future.

In this context, the paper focuses on the case study of sericulture, a traditional knowledge of silk production, to demonstrate how traditional industries can be instrumental in achieving sustainable development. By analyzing the elements of sustainable development and their alignment with sericulture, we can explore the potential patterns of linkage between traditional industries and sustainable development, leading to significant benefits for communities and the environment.

Objective

The primary objective of this paper is to emphasize the critical role of traditional industries in sustainable development and highlight the risks posed by marginalizing indigenous knowledge. By examining the case of sericulture, we aim to demonstrate how epistemic syncretism, which involves the integration of diverse knowledge systems, can pave the way for a more sustainable and inclusive development paradigm.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory approach to investigate sericulture as an indigenous knowledge system. The research design is qualitative, allowing for an in-depth exploration of

the topic. Fieldwork serves as a crucial component of data collection, involving visit to Rajouri, Jammu and Srinagar districts of Jammu and Kashmir, one of the top silk producing states of India, to gain comprehensive insights into the process of silk production. Data is gathered through various qualitative research methods, including detailed semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and informal conversations. The research focuses on all the stages of silk production: moriculture, silkworm rearing, cocoon marketing, silk reeling and weaving. The data collected during fieldwork is subject to meticulous analysis. This research utilizes both primary sources, including semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation, and secondary sources, such as relevant academic literature, to comprehensively explore the indigenous knowledge system of sericulture.

Sustainable Development and Need for Change

The concept of the 'underdeveloped' gained prominence in the postwar era, significantly influencing the development discourse. The modernization approach perceived development as an evolutionary process in which countries, particularly those from the third world, progressed through specific stages to attain modernity. This perspective assumed that industrialization was the sole means of achieving economic growth (Sen, 1988). However, an alternative view emerged in the form of Dependency theory, which challenged the idea that all societies follow the same linear path of development. It emphasized that development trajectories differed significantly among countries. Initially, development was perceived as a primarily unilateral concept, with excessive focus on economic progress and Gross National Product (GNP). As time passed, there arose a need to expand the definition of development to encompass the overall well-being of a nation's actual assets, including its population (Deb, 2009; Sanyal, 2014). In the 1990s, the Post-development theory gained prominence as a reaction to the criticisms directed at the one-dimensional approach to development. Scholars in this field challenged the conventional idea of development, which solely focused on economic growth measured by GDP. The concept of development that emerged after the postwar era is no longer considered relevant in the intellectual sphere and is now seen as outdated (Kothari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria & Acosta, 2019). Sachs (1997) argues that it is time to say goodbye to this notion of development and acknowledge that its original foundations no longer hold true. There is an increasing realization that this particular development model is neither sustainable nor desirable. Vandana Shiva (2019) highlighted that this approach disregarded societal and environmental limits, leading to the destruction of

societies and the concentration of livelihood resources and wealth within the hands of a privileged ‘one per cent’ of the global population, while the rest of the population struggled.

As flaws in the conventional development model became evident, there was a growing recognition of the urgent need for a more comprehensive and balanced approach to development. This led to the emergence of sustainable development as a transformative paradigm, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental factors. Sustainable development is defined as a form of growth that meets the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, using the available resources responsibly (Brundtland Commission, 1987). It consists of two essential components: ecological sustainability and equitable development across generations. The concept of sustainable development was initially introduced by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 1980 and further elaborated upon in the Brundtland Report in 1987. The report emphasized socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic growth. The idea was fully articulated during the 1992 Earth Summit, where the fundamental principles of sustainable development were properly defined. To achieve such a form of growth, goals were established, initially in the form of Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and later as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In September 2015, all United Nations Member States as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted 17 SDGs United Nation, 2015). They represent a comprehensive and interconnected framework to address global challenges and create a more sustainable and equitable world for present and future generations. These 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are as follows:

1. No Poverty: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2. Zero Hunger: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. Good Health and Well-being: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4. Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5. Gender Equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. Clean Water and Sanitation: Ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. Affordable and Clean Energy: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.

8. Decent Work and Economic Growth: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
10. Reduced Inequality: Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
12. Responsible Consumption and Production: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. Climate Action: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. Life below Water: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. Life on Land: Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, manage forests sustainably, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss.
16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. Partnerships for the Goals: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

The Case of Silk Industry and its Potential for Sustainable Development

The silk industry in India has a rich and extensive history, dating back centuries, making it one of the oldest and integral sectors within the country's textile industry. It transcends the mere notion of being an industry or fabric, as it is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric and way of life in India. Silk plays a significant role in various traditional rituals, and its presence is considered essential in most of ceremonies, whether it's in the form of a sari, dhoti, or shawl. The origins of silk in India can be traced to historical references in ancient texts, and the industry's roots can be dated back to around the second century BC (Narasaiah and Jaya Raju, 1999). Despite debates on the origin of silk in India, its prominence and significance in Indian culture and commerce have remained consistent since pre-Vedic times (Ganga & Chetty, 1997). As a traditional sericultural country, India holds a unique position globally due to its rich and vibrant silk heritage, which continues to thrive and evolve in the modern era.

India is the second-largest silk-producing country in the world after China and enjoys the unique distinction of producing all four kinds of Silk (International Sericulture Commission, 2013). In India, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) are the top five producers, collectively accounting for 98% of India's total mulberry raw silk production (Rani, 2011). The main variety is Mulberry silk, primarily cultivated in southern states like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana. Additionally, non-mulberry silks like Tussar are produced in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal. Each state has its specific silk variety, such as Muga silk in Assam and Eri silk in Meghalaya and Nagaland. Mulberry silk accounts for about 70% of India's total silk production, with Karnataka being a leading producer. The silk industry has become integral to the socio-economic development of rural and semi-urban areas, offering livelihood opportunities to approximately 9.4 million people through on-farm and off-farm activities (Vishwanath, 2021).

Silk production in India represents an indigenous knowledge system that inherently incorporates sustainable development principles. Rooted in local traditions, it exemplifies ecological harmony, cultural sustainability, and offers employment opportunities. Sericulture is a historical practice which falls within the realm of sustainable development. To understand the potential of silk industry as an instrumental tool in achieving the goals of sustainable development, it is imperative to first understand the whole process of silk production. The cycle of silk production consists of mulberry cultivation in case of mulberry silk, silk worm rearing, disposal of cocoons, egg production, incubation, reeling, weaving etc. The duration of this cycle, spanning from egg hatching to cocoon formation, typically ranges from 40 to 50 days, contingent upon climatic conditions and the silk worm race (Singh, 2012; Narsaiah, 2019). The paper shall further discuss the elements of sustainable development and the juxtaposition of these elements within the silk industry. It shall also delineate the prospective patterns of linkage between silk industry and sustainable development, and the consequential benefits to follow.

- **No Poverty And Zero Hunger**

At the core of sustainable development lies the foremost objective of poverty reduction. In this context, sericulture emerges as a potent instrument, offering significant employment potential. Notably, sericulture is projected to generate eleven man-days of work per kilogram of raw silk output throughout the year, encompassing on-farm and off-farm activities (Mukherjee & Ghosh, 2012). Sericulture's remarkable potential makes it a promising

approach for rural development, particularly in remote regions, outshining other industries in its ability to generate employment opportunities. As a labor-intensive activity, sericulture assumes a vital role in empowering rural communities. It employs around 60 lakh individuals in rural India, providing a significant source of livelihood for them (Mukherjee & Ghosh, 2012). Beyond its economic impact, sericulture uplifts marginalized sections of society, making a profound contribution to poverty reduction (Mukherjee & Ghosh, 2012). The industry predominantly employs people from the country's remote corners, offering them newfound opportunities for social and economic advancement. Given its indigenous knowledge background, sericulture holds inherent potential for driving rural reconstruction efforts. By providing further impetus to this time-honored practice, policymakers can harness its capabilities to combat poverty and promote sustainable development (Mukherjee & Ghosh, 2012). With continued support, sericulture can persist in uplifting vulnerable segments of society and contribute significantly to rural development.

- **Gender Equality**

According to the 2011 census, India's population stands at 1.21 billion, with women constituting 49 percent of this proportion. In the pursuit of bolstering the economy and addressing gender-based inequalities, empowering women becomes a critical aspect of sustainable development, with a strong focus on achieving gender equality. The silk industry offers a viable solution in this regard. Data from the Central Silk Board reveals that approximately 60 percent of individuals engaged in activities related to silk production are women (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2018). The activities, such as silk worm rearing, mulberry garden management, and reeling are significantly driven by women's participation. Consequently, sericulture serves as a powerful means to enhance gender equality. One significant challenge in many village societies is the prevalence of parochial tendencies, often leading to women being confined to household chores exclusively. However, the widespread development of sericulture can serve as a catalyst for empowering women in these communities (Kasi, 2013). By focusing on sericulture and providing equal opportunities to women, India can make substantial progress in advancing the Gender Equality Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Embracing this approach will not only strengthen the economy but also foster a more inclusive and equitable society.

- **Reduced Inequality**

The issue of social inequality has deep-rooted implications globally, posing a significant impediment to peace and harmony within societies. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advocate for socially inclusive growth on a global scale to alleviate societal tensions. Unfortunately, the Indian society is not immune to such divisions. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) highlights a yearly increase in crimes against weaker sections, ranging from 8 to 16 percent. In this context, the practice of sericulture emerges as a promising solution. Firstly, sericulture can be adopted on small land holdings, making it an accessible and empowering opportunity for individuals from diverse backgrounds. Secondly, the cultivation of silkworms on just one acre of land can sustain a family of three throughout the year, offering economic stability and social well-being (Central Silk Board, 2021). By promoting sustainable sericulture practices, India can make significant progress in addressing the SDG of reducing social inequality. Embracing sericulture not only opens avenues for women empowerment but also provides economic opportunities for marginalized sections of society, thereby fostering a more inclusive and harmonious social fabric.

- **Decent Work and Economic Growth**

The principle of responsible consumption within sustainable development revolves around utilizing resources in a manner that maximizes benefits while minimizing the impact on nature. It emphasizes the concept of achieving high returns with low investment. In this pursuit, indigenous knowledge systems like sericulture emerge as a viable solution, offering a panacea to these goals. As per the Central Silk Board's data, sustaining mulberry cultivation in an acre of irrigated land requires an estimated spending of ₹12,000-₹15,000. This relatively modest investment opens doors to high returns with a short gestation period, especially in tropical climates where up to five crops can be cultivated in a single year. This unique advantage allows farmers to earn an average of ₹30,000 annually from farming on just one acre of land. Thus, sericulture presents itself as a novel and effective approach to bolster rural economies. By harnessing the potential of this traditional practice, communities can not only improve their economic prospects but also contribute to responsible consumption of resources and the sustainability of nature. The term sustainability implies the longevity of an activity imbued with the ability to sustain at the same pace in the near future. The practice of sericulture serves as an exemplary embodiment of such sustainability. With well-maintained inputs and efforts, a mulberry crop grown within a span of 6 months can continue to support silkworm rearing for an impressive duration of 15-20 years prospectively. This remarkable feature highlights sericulture's capacity to create a sustainable income source for numerous

families. Moreover, with increased support and promotion, sericulture has the potential to significantly augment the income of a larger number of households (Okhandiar, 2019). By fostering this traditional practice and providing the necessary resources and encouragement, a sustainable sericulture industry can flourish, positively impacting rural economies and ensuring stable livelihoods for generations to come.

Sericulture plays a pivotal role in promoting inclusive growth, a core principle of sustainable development. The benefits of sericulture's value addition trickle down to rural households, where the money flows from high-end users to the economically disadvantaged, addressing equity concerns effectively. This ensures that the benefits of development are shared by everyone, further reinforcing sericulture's significance in promoting true development in the Indian context. Thus, as a traditional practice with immense potential, sericulture not only bolsters rural economies but also ensures equitable benefits for all stakeholders.

- **Life On Land**

Indigenous knowledge systems hold a crucial attribute of cultural sustainability, as their practices are passed down from generation to generation. Sustainable development recognizes the historical significance and harmonious relationship of these ancient practices with nature. Sericulture is one such culturally sustainable practice in India, deeply rooted in tribal communities. However, with industrialization and resource exploitation, many tribes had to abandon their traditional occupations. Nevertheless, there is now an opportunity for redemption. Vast tracts of forest-based food plantations in the country can be utilized by tribal communities for rearing tsar silkworms. This approach would not only preserve indigenous knowledge systems but also improve the livelihoods of the tribals (Setty, Gopal & Chinnaswamy, 2019). Hence, sericulture aligns with the SDG Goal 15 (Life on Land), which aims to protect, restore, and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. By preserving indigenous knowledge and promoting eco-friendly practices, sericulture contributes to fostering a harmonious coexistence between human communities and nature.

- **Climate Action and Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure**

In addition to cultural sustainability, ecological sustainability is an integral aspect of the sustainable development agenda. It emphasizes minimizing damage to the ecological balance and promoting growth that respects the limits of the earth. Sericulture aligns with this goal of sustainable development as it is an agro-based practice that is eco-friendly and adheres to the principles of ecological sustainability. Sericulture, as a perennial crop, aids in soil conservation. The mulberry plants provide a protective green cover throughout the year,

reducing soil erosion and promoting soil health. This aspect is vital in maintaining the ecological balance and preventing soil degradation. Sericulture generates minimal waste. The by-products, such as dead silkworms, can be utilized effectively, promoting a circular economy. For example, the dead worms can be used as a valuable feed source in poultry or fishing farms, reducing waste and contributing to the sustainable use of resources. Moreover, sericulture exemplifies innovativeness, as it integrates seamlessly with other crops through intercropping. This practice optimizes land usage and yield per unit area while maintaining soil texture, showcasing the ingenious and efficient nature of this indigenous knowledge system.

Wasteland management is a crucial mission of the United Nations under the ambit of sustainable development targets. In India, approximately 16.96 percent of the geographical area is characterized as wasteland, rendering it unsuitable for conventional agricultural purposes (Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2019). Sericulture offers a solution to this challenge, as it can be cultivated in upland areas with less fertile soil, vacant lands, hill slopes, and watershed areas, reclaiming and utilizing such lands effectively.

As per IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report, the global carbon dioxide levels have crossed alarming thresholds due to increasing industrial activity and unsustainable practices, it is imperative to address climate change. Sustainable Development Goal 13 (Climate Action) calls for advocating practices that prevent further deterioration of the global climate. Sericulture, being a low-emission and labor-intensive agro-based activity, aligns with this goal. Its minimal involvement of smoke-emitting machinery and negligible adverse impact on climate make it an ideal candidate for promotion in the context of climate change mitigation.

The synergy between the Silk Industry and the SDGs exemplifies how traditional practices can be harnessed to pave the way for a more equitable and sustainable world.

Epistemic Syncretism: Unleashing the Silk Industry's Sustainable Potential

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emerged as a response to the shortcomings of previous development models and represent a comprehensive framework for achieving a more sustainable and equitable future. However, if the silk industry were to adhere strictly to the neo-liberal capitalist model of development, despite potential synergies with the SDGs, it would fail to realize inclusive and sustainable growth for the industry and its stakeholders.

The inherent strength of the silk industry lies in its labor-intensive, agro-based, and eco-friendly nature. This unique combination of characteristics contributes to its sustainability

and ability to coexist harmoniously with the environment. However, if the industry were to prioritize mechanization driven solely by profit motives, assuming that benefits would eventually trickle down to lower levels, it would likely lead to detrimental consequences. Mechanization, while reducing labor dependency, may undermine the industry's core strengths, potentially causing environmental degradation and social inequities. The fundamental flaw in adopting a profit-driven mechanization approach is that it defeats the very purpose of sustainable development. By neglecting the eco-friendly and labor-intensive aspects of the industry, the potential for inclusive growth and sustainable practices is compromised. The neo-liberal capitalist model's emphasis on profit maximization may prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability, leading to environmental degradation and the marginalization of local communities dependent on the industry.

The proposed solution to this dilemma is epistemic syncretism, a combination of diverse sources of knowledge, often from different cultural, social, or disciplinary backgrounds. the silk industry's sustainable potential lies in embracing epistemic syncretism. This approach involves the amalgamation of traditional and modern knowledge and practices. By blending old and new elements, the industry can create context-specific innovations and solutions that harmonize with local needs, preserve eco-friendly practices, and foster inclusive development. Epistemic syncretism can pave the way for decentralized production methods, enabling smaller, community-based units rather than large-scale factories. This decentralized approach fosters inclusive growth by empowering local communities and promoting fair distribution of benefits. Moreover, it reduces the industry's carbon footprint, as large-scale mechanization and centralized production tend to have a more significant environmental impact. The traditional knowledge of silk production has been developed over generations in response to local needs and environmental conditions. It is time-tested and inherently sustainable, making it an invaluable asset in achieving the SDGs. By integrating this traditional wisdom with modern practices, the silk industry can thrive as a sustainable and economically viable sector. In conclusion, epistemic syncretism offers a path forward for the silk industry to unleash its sustainable potential while aligning with the SDGs. A holistic approach that preserves its labor-intensive, eco-friendly essence and respects traditional practices is essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. By promoting context-specific innovations and decentralized production, the silk industry can be a powerful driver of positive change, fostering prosperity for both the industry and the communities it serves. Embracing epistemic syncretism in the silk industry is a crucial step towards realizing a future characterized by sustainable development and shared prosperity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research substantiates the pivotal role of traditional industries, with the silk industry serving as an exemplary case, in driving sustainable development. By acknowledging the potential of indigenous knowledge systems through the lens of 'epistemic syncretism', this study emphasizes the necessity of synergizing diverse knowledge domains for the attainment of enduring economic, social, and ecological prosperity. The discernible limitations and un-sustainability of the existing development paradigm compel a reevaluation of conventional approaches. The illustration of sericulture as a traditional industry underscores its intrinsic harmony with the environment and local communities. However, the relegation of traditional industries in favor of profit-driven mechanization jeopardizes the intrinsic sustainability of such industries. 'Epistemic syncretism' emerges as a tenable solution to reconcile traditional wisdom with contemporary practices. Fusion of varied knowledge systems, encompassing traditional, scientific, and cultural insights, can lead to innovation of context-specific strategies that prioritize sustainable long-term objectives over myopic financial gains. The comprehensive assimilation of indigenous wisdom not only preserves the eco-friendly essence of traditional industries but also confers empowerment through decentralized production methodologies. This inclusive paradigm fosters equitable distribution of benefits and fortifies social cohesion, ensuring that societal segments do not suffer marginalization in the pursuit of sustainable development. Furthermore, the embrace of epistemic syncretism aligns the silk industry cohesively with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Against the backdrop of prevailing global challenges encompassing climate change, resource scarcity, and social inequity, traditional industries present a potent reservoir in advocating sustainable practices. Epistemic syncretism emerges as a compelling concept that appreciates the multifaceted nature of divergent knowledge systems, fostering a pluralistic approach to development. This study serves as an urgent call to policymakers, industry stakeholders, and scholars to discern the symbiotic relationship between traditional knowledge and sustainable development. It highlights the importance of 'epistemic syncretism', wherein heterogeneous knowledge systems are esteemed, acknowledged, and harmonized to forge an equitable and sustainable trajectory towards the future.

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