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Taking the Violence Out of Silk

Do you know how many silkworms are normally killed to make a silk sari? Kusuma Rajaiah, a 55-year old government officer from India's Andhra Pradesh state, does: "Around 10,000."

Mr. Rajaiah estimates that around 15 silkworms are normally sacrificed to produce a gram of silk yarn. For years, he's been battling against what he describes as the "cruel killing of millions of innocent worms."

But there's no need to give up silk: Mr. Rajaiah has long come up with an alternative. He realized the lure of silk was too strong to persuade people to give it up altogether so he came up with a technique that spares the life of the silkworm.



Courtesy of Kusuma Rajaiah

Kusuma Rajaiah displayed a fabric woven from nonviolent silk yarn.

He's the man who invented "Ahimsa" – or "nonviolent" – mulberry silk, a fabric which has since reached temples in Tamil Nadu and red carpets in Hollywood.

India prides itself on its varieties of silk – the most popular of which is made from cocoons whose worms feed on mulberry leaves. Mulberry silk accounts for over 80% of the country's total silk output, according to India's Central Silk Board.

The board showcases India's various types of silk through a series of [government-sponsored expos](#) in silk-producing states, including one starting in Hyderabad, in Mr. Rajaiah's state Tuesday.

Mr. Rajaiah, who holds the patent for eco-friendly mulberry silk, will not be participating this time, and in general only makes the special silk to order. He says he was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi – a proponent of Ahimsa, a principle which opposes harm to all living things.

"Why should we torture and boil worms just for a luxury fabric?" said Mr. Rajaiah in a recent phone interview.

In normal silk production silkworms are poured in boiling water inside their cocoons – at a stage believed to be best for silk production. Nonviolent silk – also known as "peace silk" – involves no such brutality: Silkworms first break out of their cocoons, which are then spun.

Mr. Rajaiah reckons he has saved "billions" of silkworms since he first started weaving peace silk back in 1990. [His company's website](#) shows animated pictures of moths fluttering their wings and "Free to Live" pop-out signs.



Worms – unlike cuddly minks, ermines or chinchillas whose furs are coveted for coats and stoles – rarely make it on animal rights agendas. But "those who care about animals should care about worms too," said Mr. Rajaiah.

But can people really be swayed by worm rights? Some more easily than others, said Mr. Rajaiah.

Nonviolent mulberry silk, which makes up a tiny

Can people really be swayed by worm rights?

Getty Images

percentage of overall silk output, occupies a niche in the market for eco-friendly but high quality silk, said M. Saatyawati, head of India's Central Silk

Board.

It's the sort of silk that's starting to appeal to the eco-friendly glitterati globally. Among them Suzy Amis, wife of Avatar's James Cameron. The [blue gown donned by Ms. Amis](#) at the 2010 Oscars ceremony, says Mr. Rajaiah, was made from worm-friendly fabric originally supplied by him.

Peace silk requires waiting around 10 days for the larvae to grow into moths and to make their way out of their cocoon – compared to the 15 minutes it usually takes to boil them alive. At this later stage the cocoon yields six times less filament. This inflates the cost of nonviolent silk, which is priced at roughly 6,000 rupees (\$ 134) per kilogram – about twice the price of the regular kind. Once woven, nonviolent silk is hard to distinguish from normal mulberry silk.

Mr. Rajaiah is quick to point out that the higher price “is nothing compared to the lives of thousands of moths” that are spared.

Another variety of silk known as “eri” silk – which accounts for about 12% of silk production in India – also spares the life of silkworms. But the quality is not as good as the mulberry sort, which is more expensive but shinier.

Mr. Rajaiah's regular customers include devotees from the temple town of Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, who gave up regular silk after their local priest urged them to. Peace silk is also popular among Jainists, firm believers of the principle of non-violence. Among many VIPs, Mr. Rajaiah heard rumors Congress Party Chief Sonia Gandhi and Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit also own peace silk saris.

Although revenues have been steadily increasing since he first started selling peace silk about a decade ago, his business made just over \$67,000 last year. But Mr. Rajaiah says he's not in it for the money.

“I am not a business person,” he said. “I do it for passion.”

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