

GENDER IN SILK INDUSTRY

A STUDY OF WOMEN SILK WEAVERS IN SUALKUCHI, ASSAM

BY,

MAHUA BHATTACHARJEE

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

THESIS, SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR

THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY

TO,

NORTH EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY, SHILLONG

2009

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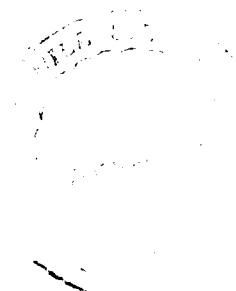
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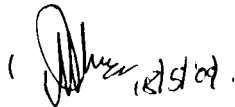
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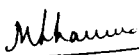
**DECLARATION**

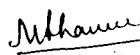
I, Ms. Mahua Bhattacharjee, hereby declare that the subject of this thesis, is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis does not form the basis of any award of any previous degree to me, or to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University or Institution.

This is being submitted to the North Eastern Hill University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History.



Mahua Bhattacharjee

  
18/5/09  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my heart felt gratitude and deep sense of indebtedness to my guide, Prof. Manorama Sharma whose own commitment to the cause of 'writing women back into history' inspired me to take up work on a feminist theme. More importantly, her confidence in my abilities and encouragement provided strength to my resolve and helped to complete my work.

I am also grateful to all the teachers of the Department of History, NEHU for encouraging and supporting me in my endeavour.

I also wish to express my thankfulness to The Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) for awarding me a fellowship for two years which helped me to meet expenditure related to my work.

My search for data took me to various libraries and archives in New Delhi, Kolkata and Guwahati and I wish to place on record my sincere thanks for the help and co-operation extended to me by the librarians, archivists and officials and staff of each of these institutions I visited---namely, The North Eastern Hill University Library, The North Eastern Council Library and the Indian Council of Social Science Research Library in Shillong; The Assam Archives, the Assam Legislative Assembly Library, the NEIBM Library, the NEDfi Library and the

Assam Census office in Guwahati; The Women's Studies Centre Jadavpur, and the National Library in kolkatta; the National Archives, and the Women's Studies Centre in New Delhi.

I owe a special word of thanks to Mr. Baishya and Mrs. Nupur Borpatra Gohain, Archivist, of the Assam State Archives, Mr. A. Borthakur of the Census Office in Guwahati for going out of their way to help me. I am also thankful to the officials of the Handoom Department especially, Mr. Rana Patgiri and Mr. P. Bharali who took time to reply to my queries despite their very busy schedule.

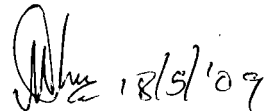
I am also grateful to Mr. Tankeshwar who helped to establish my first contact in Sualkuchi, and Mr. Ashok Talukdar who showed me around when I first went to Sualkuchi but who unfortunately became terminally ill soon after and Mr Probin Das correspondent of *Ajir Ahom*, who despite his busy schedule, took time off to accompany me around households.

I also remember with gratitude the warm hospitality extended to me by the people of Sualkuchi, who opened up their doors to me at all hours, allowed me to look around their factories and shared their lives and experiences and answered my queries over endless cups of tea and *pitha*.

My gratitude is also due to Tad, my best friend, who accompanied me on my field trips, acted as my interpreter and helped me with my typing and printing works. His infectious enthusiasm and solid support made my task definitely lighter.

I thank my parents for encouraging me and for giving me my space to do the work, my little nephew, who kept asking when I would finish my work and in his own endearing ways who kept me going.

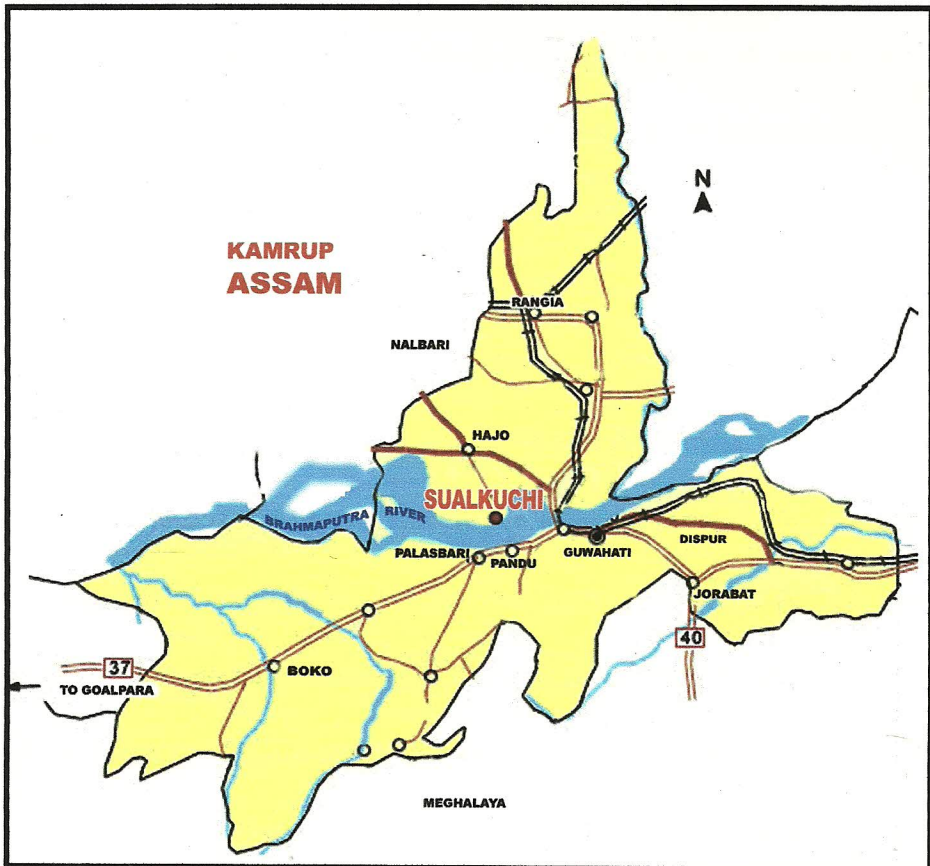
Last but not the least, I remember with gratitude that very dear friend who always took great pride in my work. Today he is a billion light years away, but still continues to inspire me to follow my heart and dreams. This work is, in a way, a humble tribute to his abiding spirit.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mahua' followed by the date '18/5/09'.

**MAHUA BHATTACHARJEE**

## CHAPTER I

### PROLOGUE



Source : [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

Sualkuchi is a small census town on the Northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. It consists of two revenue villages, namely, Sualkuchi and

Bamun Sualkuchi. These two combined revenue villages or census towns together with Sualkuchi *Parbat* (hill) and *Bamun* (low lying area) Sualkuchi were grouped in 1961 to form the township of Sualkuchi.<sup>1</sup> The village covers an area of 12km, 4km from east to west and 3 km from north to south. It provides residence to 21252 local people excluding the migrants, that is, migrant weavers and other labourers as per 2001 census.<sup>2</sup> It consists of about 48 paras or localities. The town lies about 29 miles from Guwahati in a North-West direction, and is connected with the latter by a good motorable road. It is not served by any railway. A traveler who approaches this small town finds herself entering into a series of factories scattered throughout the town. As she moves on, the click-clack sound of the fly shuttle also moves along with her from house to house. Hardly can a single house be found without a loom. The rattle of the fly shuttle starts at 8am and continues till 10pm with a lunch break from 12 noon to 2pm. The market of the silk fabrics determines the fate not only of the loom owners but also of the wage weavers and their helpers, yarn winders etc. This town is undoubtedly one of the most important silk fabric producing centers of Assam. Silk weaving is not uncommon in other parts of Assam, but Sualkuchi claims a technique, quality and reputation of its own which are unique in so far as *muga* and *pat* silk

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<sup>1</sup> Sourced from *Census of India, 1961*, Vol iii, Assam, *Selected Handicraft of Assam*

<sup>2</sup> *Census of India, Assam, 2001*

fabrics are concerned.<sup>3</sup>

Our study is set in this quaint town where silk manufacturing is a way of life for most of the population, mostly the women folk. Having said that, however, it is also important to remember that a study such as this, poses unique challenges. While gender studies is no longer an unknown field of study, yet the fact remains that a lot more remains to be done to write back women into History. The most important task in this direction perhaps is the refinement of concepts and categories so as to develop new tools of analysis that will help study and locate women in the production process. Towards this end, this first chapter of the study seeks to review existing secondary data on conceptual themes like gender and work, in the Indian as well as in the western context, besides critiquing books on the North East in order to understand women in the production process and also to aid in the construction of the study's ideas and concepts.

Over the past 25 years, the expansion of research on feminist themes has been nothing less than explosive. Whether in the west or in India, no one could have failed to notice the sheer quantitative growth of the number of studies

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<sup>3</sup> *Census of India, 1961, op.cit.*

offering new and fresh insights about women's lives and how gender shapes and is shaped by the wider social and political context.

For anyone attempting to work on women's history, it becomes very essential to be informed with a feminist perspective and sensitivity to deal with some of the glaring injustices that the existing theories neglect. Reading and understanding of texts which deal with the theories of the feminist movement becomes necessary for developing conceptual clarity and setting the mode of future study.

Important in the above context is Chris Beasley's work, *What is Feminism?*<sup>4</sup> which studies theories associated with western feminist movements. Susan Gubbar's edited work, *Critical Condition: Feminism at the turn of the Century*<sup>5</sup> expresses "fears and hopes for the future of women" and whether the feminist movement has been able to change the patriarchal system or has been more changed by it. Shumalit Reinharz's work, *Feminist Methods in Social Science Research*,<sup>6</sup> argues that feminist methodology is the sum of feminist research methods and outlines some of the aims and objectives and methods of feminist research. These works have been important for developing the

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Beasley., *What is Feminism? An Introduction to Feminism* (London, 1999)

<sup>5</sup>Susan, Gubbar., *Critical condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century* ( New York, 2000)

<sup>6</sup> Shumalit Reinharz., *Feminist Methods in Social science Research* (New York, 1992)

theoretical framework for the present study which is being discussed in the next chapter.

The interface between women's subordination and establishment of patriarchal domination has been studied by many feminists who help us to locate women in the historical process. For instance, Gerda Lerner in, *The Creation of Patriarchy*,<sup>7</sup> has presented the interesting hypotheses that it is the relation of women to history that explains the nature of female subordination, the condition for their opposition to it and the rise of feminist consciousness. Mary Wollstonecraft - the forerunner of feminism in the English speaking world in, *A Vindication of the Right of Women*<sup>8</sup> has studied the status of women and opined that patriarchy is man made and is the cause for the subordination of women. Mary R. Beard's work *Women as Force in History*<sup>9</sup> has studied women's participation in all the events of history and upholds the view that women have always been a force in history. Others like Alice Clarke in, *The Working Life of Women in the 17<sup>th</sup> century*<sup>10</sup> have examined the nature of women's productive activity and her discrimination in the period when the capitalist division of labour was beginning. In, *Women: the last Colony*,<sup>11</sup> Maria Mies argues that the human

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<sup>7</sup> Gerda Lerner., *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York,1986)

<sup>8</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft. ,*A Vindication of the Right of Women*, cited in, Vidyut Bhagawat., *Feminist Social Thought: An Introduction to Six Key Thinkers* (Jaipur, 2004)

<sup>9</sup> Mary R. Beard., *Women as Force in History*(New York, 1962)

<sup>10</sup> Alice Clarke., *The Working life of Women in the 17<sup>th</sup> century* (London,1968)

<sup>11</sup> Maria Mies Veronika Thomsen, et. al (eds),*Women: The Last Colony* (London, 1988),

nature is not a given fact. It evolved in History and cannot be reduced to its biological aspects, but the psychological dimension of this nature is always linked to its social dimensions. Human nature therefore cannot be understood if we separate its psychology from its History. Sheila Rowbotham, considered one of the key figures in the British feminist movement, has contributed a lot through her works in understanding women in the historical process. Her major works include, *Hidden from History*<sup>12</sup> where she examines the situation of women in contemporary capitalism and opines that the women's movement and women's representation in history are inextricably linked. In yet another immensely popular book, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*,<sup>13</sup> Rowbotham, makes a critique of women's condition under capitalism. Her most relevant argument for the study is her conviction that all conceptions of female "nature" are formed in cultures dominated by men, and like all abstract ideas of human nature are invariably used to deter the oppressed from organizing effectively. She convincingly argues that our ideas of what is 'feminine' is a patriarchal idea and is a convenient means of making us believe that submission is somehow natural. In 1972, Shiela Rowbotham wrote *Women, Resistance and Revolution*.<sup>14</sup> In the preface to this popular work, she wrote, 'women have come to revolutionary

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<sup>12</sup> Sheila Rowbotham., *Hidden From History* (New York, 1974)

<sup>13</sup> ....., *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* (Harmondsworth, Reprint,1976)

<sup>14</sup> ....., *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (London, 1972)

consciousness by means of ideas, actions and organizations which have been made predominantly by men, .....the language that makes us invisible to History is not co-incidence, but part of our real situation in a society that we do not control'. Rendering our History visible then, was crucial to the struggle to achieve greater control over our destinies. Her works were to greatly inspire the contemporary feminist movement. Important among contemporary feminist writers is Mary Evans's whose edited work, *Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, in four Volumes<sup>15</sup>, contains articles by scholars like Hilary Land (Volume iii) who seeks to dismiss the myth of the "male breadwinner". Others like, Selma James's "Women's Unwaged Work-the Heart of the Informal sector"(Volume ii) and Irene Bruegel's "Sex and Race in the Labour Market"(Volume ii) explore the concept of gender difference, the impact on women and its representation in culture. The discussion encompasses both theoretical issues of identity and the economic and political status of women. It demonstrates the impact of gender not only on how the social world is organized but on how we understand and interpret that world.

All these works helps us to understand how women are marginalized and also demonstrate that large questions can be asked of history from the women's perspective and to that extent have helped the study to develop many of its insights.

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Evans.,(ed),*Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volumes, i, ii iii and iv ( London and New York,2001)

The different strains of feminism, i.e Liberal, Radical, Marxist and Socialist have each contributed in a large measure to understanding women in history and critical enquiries into works by leading feminist scholars are essential readings in order to understand which feminist approach can best capture the complexities of women's position. A very important work in this regard, is Alison Jagger's work, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*<sup>16</sup> which contains a discussion of all the strains of the Feminist Movement as well as reference to the works of prominent feminist writers of each strain. Vidyut Bhagwat's, *Feminist Social thought: An Introduction*<sup>17</sup> to six key Thinkers, seeks to review the life and thought of some of the leading feminists in the West, including Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, Shiela Rowbotham and Juliet Mitchell. The study has also referred to works of prominent liberal philosophers like, *John Stuart*<sup>18</sup> Mill and *Betty Friedan*<sup>19</sup>. Among the radical feminists, the writings of Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic Of sex: the case for Feminist Revolution*<sup>20</sup>, and Susan Brownmiller's work, *Against our will*<sup>21</sup> made for essential reading. Among the most important Marxist writings is of course that

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<sup>16</sup> Alison Jagger., *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Sussex,1983)

<sup>17</sup> Vidyut Bhagwat., *op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> John Stuart Mill., *The Subjection of women*(London, Reprint,1966)

<sup>19</sup> Betty Friedan., *The Feminine Mystique*.(Harmondsworth,1979)

<sup>20</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic Of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution*, (Frogmore, Reprint, 1973)

<sup>21</sup> Susan Brownmiller., *Against our will Men, Women and Rape*(New York, 1975)

of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology*<sup>22</sup>. It was in this work that for the first time the materialist way of understanding history became an integral conception of the structure of society and of historical periodisation. It is also in this context that Marx's view of history becomes relevant and useful for studying women in History, because it gives us a methodology to relate women to production, to social relations, to men and to the cultural domination by men. and Fredrick Engels, famous work, *the Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*<sup>23</sup> where in he tried to lay a basis for theorizing the specific oppressions of women in his brief assertion that a fully materialist analysis of production and reproduction of immediate life reveals a two fold character: the production of the means of existence and 'the production of human beings themselves'. Among the contemporary Marxist writers is Ruby Rorlich Levite's edited work, *Women Cross Culturally Change and Challenge*<sup>24</sup> amongst others, contains articles by professional women anthropologists describing the condition of women throughout the world. In this work, Levitte also echoes a view similar to that of Fredrick Engels when she argues that male pre- dominance is a logical culmination of class exploitation. One of the key Socialist Feminist is Juliet Mitchell. In, *Woman's Estate*,<sup>25</sup> Mitchell notes that the family and the definition of feminity are crucial in considering the specific features of woman's situation

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<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow,1976)

<sup>23</sup> Fredrick Engels, *the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow, 1968)

<sup>24</sup> Ruby R. Levitee., (ed), *Women Cross Culturally, Change and Challenge* (New York, 1986)

<sup>25</sup> Juliet Mitchell., *Women's Estate* (Harmondsworth,1981)

and oppression in contemporary capitalist society. It is within the development of her feminine psyche and her ideological and socio-economic role as mother and housewife, that woman finds the oppression which is hers alone. As woman's specific oppression defines her, the author contends that any movement for her liberation must analyze changing this position. Besides works dealing with feminist approaches to studying women in History, many scholars, have, in recent years tried to explore and understand the intersection of gender and work. But the most path breaking work in this context is, Ester Boserup's, *Women's role in Economic Development*<sup>26</sup>, which was first published in 1970. It was a seminal work which set out to make good a serious omission in the literature on economic development, where "*reflections on the particular problems of women are few and far between*"<sup>27</sup> Boserup highlighted, for the first time, the contribution women make in the sphere of productive work and set the trend for future historians and economists to focus on women in the labour process. In the contemporary period, a very important attempt in understanding women and work has been Gary N. Powell (ed), *The Handbook of Gender and Work*<sup>28</sup>. The book deals with the seeming contradiction that on

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<sup>26</sup> Ester Boserup., *Women's Role in Economic Development* (Great Britain, 1989)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>28</sup> Garry N. Powell., *Handbook of Gender and Work* (London,1999)

the one hand, the role of women in the work place has been expanding steadily and at the same time the economic status of women in the workplace remains much lower than that of men. Francine Blau and Marianne A.Ferber in, *The Economics of Men Women and Work*<sup>29</sup> argue that although women in ever greater numbers are spending an increasing proportion of their time working for pay, yet their lives and their world continue to be significantly different from those of men and much of their time continues to be spent in non- household market activities or in unpaid services. Richard Anker in *Gender and Jobs: Sex Segregation of Occupations in the World*<sup>30</sup>, makes a study of the form and extent of sex segregation in all the occupations outside agriculture in the present day world.

The result of his findings suggests that labour markets everywhere are characterized by acute discrimination against the female working force. Marilyn Carr et.al edited work, *Speaking out: Women's Economic Empowerment in South Asia*<sup>31</sup> presents eight case studies which tries to understand the co-relation between women's economic empowerment and their over all well being

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<sup>29</sup> Francine D. Blau and A. Ferber., *Economics of Women, Men and Work.*,(New Jersey, 1992)

<sup>30</sup> Richard Anker ., *Gender and Jobs: Sex Segregation of Occupations in the World* (Geneva, 1997)

<sup>31</sup> Marilyn Carr et.al (ed)., *Speaking Out: Women's Economic Empowerment in South Asia* (Bombay, 1998)

the labour process is Marylyn Waring's., *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*.<sup>32</sup> Nancy Folbre's, (et,al.) edited work, *Women's work in the world Economy*<sup>33</sup> examines the role of the women in the economy. The diverse chapters share a common concern for the effect of public policies on women's work both in the market place and in the home. Articles on women both in developing and advanced countries explore specific topics such as hours spent in housework, tax disincentives to female labour force participation, and the penalties of part time work and the feminization of poverty. Another very important work is, Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds), *Gender and Development: Theoretical, Empirical and Practical Approaches*<sup>34</sup> in two volumes which present by theme a selection of the most important articles across the entire spectrum of feminist economics. Peter Custers in, *Capital Accumulation and Women's Labour in Asian Economies*<sup>35</sup> argues that the contradiction between the rich and the poor, 'haves and have nots and owners and non owners of capital have not only stayed put, but the disparities have been actually enhanced over the past decades on a world wide scale as well as locally. His exposition of contemporary production processes also helps to highlight the

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<sup>32</sup> Maryln Waring., *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (San Fransisco, 1988)

<sup>33</sup> Nancy Folbre, Barbara Bergmann, et.al(eds), *Women's Work in the World Economy*(London, 1992)

<sup>34</sup> Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds), *Gender and Development: Theoretical, Empirical and Practical Approaches* ( London, 2001)

<sup>35</sup> Peter Custers., *Capital Accumulation and Women's Labour in Asian Economies*(Delhi,1997)

inadequacy of Marx's economic thinking as reflected in his labour theory of value in capturing the sexual division of labour within and outside the household.

Although the above discussion may seem like a bibliographic reference to works on feminist theories or the feminist approach to labour and development, yet a brief mention of the works is necessary here to indicate that a reading of such works has provided the basic groundwork for clarifying a number of issues on the question of feminization of the concept of labour in the context of the area of our study.

In the Indian context, since the 1970's and the 1980's there has been a veritable outcrop of writing on feminists themes which opened up new interpretations and theoretical approaches bearing on a wide range of social science disciplines. Important in this regard are Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman's, *Subversive Sites: Feminist Engagements with Law in India*.<sup>36</sup> By probing the role of familial ideology in the legal regulations of women, the authors explore the extent to which assumptions about women's identities as wives and mothers limit the promise of legal-social and economic equality. Martha Nussbaum in *Women and Human Development*<sup>37</sup> propagates the use of the human capabilities approach which measures an individual 's well being

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<sup>36</sup> Ratna Kapur, and Brenda Cossman., *Subversive Sites, Feminist Engagements with Law in India*, ( Delhi, 1996)

<sup>37</sup> Martha Nussbaum., *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, (New Delhi, 2000)

through indices not just of income but also the ability to be well nourished, enjoy proper recreation and so on. The above works have tried to move beyond promises of “legal equality” and assumptions of utilitarian economics to provide a new framework of analysis to understand the real status of women in the society as distinct from the apparent. These works have been useful in providing a methodology to understand the real status of women weavers in the Assamese society.

Other than works providing theoretical formulations, there are also works which focus specifically on women in India. J Krishnamurthy’s edited work, *Women in Colonial India*<sup>38</sup> studies the experience of women workers in the colonial period. Geraldine Forbes, in *Women in Modern India*<sup>39</sup> also makes a study of Indian women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and also their achievements in these past centuries. Nirmala Bannerjee, in *Women workers in the Unorganized sector- the Calcutta Experience*<sup>40</sup> draws exclusively upon a survey of 400 women working in Calcutta and focuses attention on their low wages, poor working conditions and lack of institutional support for workers in the unorganized sector. This study of Bannerjee has highlighted issues which are in many ways very close to problems faced by women weavers of Sualkuchi. In

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<sup>38</sup> J Krishnamurthy., (ed), *Women in Colonial India* (Delhi, 2000)

<sup>39</sup> Geraldine Forbes., *Women in Modern India*(New York, 1999)

<sup>40</sup> Nirmala Bannerjee., *Women Workers in the Unorganised Sector – The Calcutta Experience* (Hyderabad, 1985)

Shiela Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter (ed), *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organising in the Third World and the First*<sup>41</sup>, the authors, present case studies which critically examine how economic restructuring and the emergence of new paradigms in economic analysis affect women. The specific accounts also contribute to the equally necessary task of nurturing theoretical alternatives. The articles included in Maitheryi Krishnaraj and Alice Thorner's edited work *Ideals, Images and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History*<sup>42</sup> have tried to convey the idea of the ways in which feminist historiography and literary criticism in the 1980's contributed to the recovery and reconstruction of Indian Women's lived experiences. P.R. Reddy and P. Sumangla in *Women and Development: Perspectives from Selected States in India*<sup>43</sup> try to bring the long forgotten movers and shakers of history back into focus. Rehana Ghadially(ed) *Women in Indian Society, A Reader*<sup>44</sup> contains essays by various authors including Susan Wadly, Sudhir Kakkar and others who discuss a wide range of themes. Susie Tharu and K, Lalita's *Women Writing in India*<sup>45</sup> gives us an insight into women's perception of society and about themselves and raises our awareness

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<sup>41</sup> Shiela Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter (ed), *Dignity and Daily Bread* (London,1994)

<sup>42</sup> Maitheryi Krishnaraj and Alice Thorner's (ed), *Ideals, Images and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History*(New Delhi,1998)

<sup>43</sup> P.R. Reddy and P. Sumangla.,*Women and Development: Perspectives from Selected States in India*( Delhi ,1998)

<sup>44</sup> Rehana Ghadially(ed)., *Women in Indian Society, A Reader* (New Delhi, 1988)

<sup>45</sup> Susie Tharu and K, Lalita.,*Women Writing in India* ( New Delhi,1997)



of the fact that if narratives by women on women are analyzed, they provide us with almost a parallel picture of social developments which incorporate the lived experiences of women. This awareness has greatly helped in viewing narratives collected from women during the course of our field work in Sualkuchi. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's edited work *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post Independence India*<sup>46</sup>, is a collection of 11 essays which seeks to examine gender at the intersection of critical historical moments in the post colonial context and in the popular representations and cultural imagery of Indian society. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in, *Recasting women: Essays in colonial India*,<sup>47</sup> address questions of women's role in Indian History. Bharati Ray's, *From the Seams of History*,<sup>48</sup> contains articles by people like Shekar Bandhyapadhyaya, Prem Choudhury and Sonia Nishat Amin who argue that women have long been pushed to the seams of History and hence the traditional criteria for historical attention needs to be changed. Moreover there are events that are specific to women and there are some things that concern them particularly. Hence a central objective of this volume is to examine the roles played by structure and agency in women's lives.

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<sup>46</sup> Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan., *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post Independence India*(New Delhi, 1999)

<sup>47</sup> Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid.,*Recasting Women: Essays in colonial India*, (New Delhi, 1989)

<sup>48</sup> Bharati Ray., *From the seams of History*(Delhi, 1995)

The above mentioned works, both descriptive and analytical helps us to understand women's lives in the past. This understanding is important before any work on women in contemporary society can be taken up.

Other than works with feminist themes, there are also works which provide a conceptual framework for studying women especially in relation to the economy. For instance, Peter Custers in, *Capital Accumulation and Women's Labour in Asian Economies*<sup>49</sup> studies women's industrial work in India (among other countries) and tries to demonstrate the structures of exploitation that renders women's work invisible. Shoma, A, Chatterjee's work, *The Indian Woman in Perspective*,<sup>50</sup> studies the economic dimensions of women's work in various industries like, the tobacco processing industry, nursing, textiles. Other works like those of Nitya Rao's and Luise Rurup's edited work, *A Just Right: Women's Ownership of Natural Resources and Livelihood Security*<sup>51</sup> raises, amongst others, the issue of land reforms. The book attempts to discuss every aspect of women's access and control over resources, both privately owned as well as in common. A set of 20 essays review conceptual and legal issues and recount people's movements, especially women's that have successfully tackled the issue of their rights over resources. The authors seek to convey the message that all other types of policies and change with regard to women can only be

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Custers., *Capital Accumulation and Women's Labour in Asian Economies* (Delhi, 1997)

<sup>50</sup> Shoma, A, Chatterjee., *The Indian Woman in Perspective*(Delhi, 1993)

<sup>51</sup> Nitya Rao and Luise Rurup( ed), *A Just Right: Women's Ownership of Natural Resources and Livelihood security*,(New Delhi, 1997)

marginal unless women are given control over production resources. Maitheryi Krishnaraj et.al in, *Gender, Population and Development*<sup>52</sup> raises the issue of gender blindness of development politics which has an adverse effect on women's well being. Sumi Krishna's work, *Women's Livelihood Rights: Recasting Citizenship for Development*,<sup>53</sup> unravels the patriarchal structure of Government policies in India and argues for restructuring of institutional systems so that women can take their legitimate place as productive human beings.

Thus works situated in the larger Indian context has also helped to prepare the background for undertaking the proposed study.

There are a few general works which have tried to probe women's labour in the colonial and post colonial period and are important to understand the dynamics of female work participation. The works like D.R. Gadgil's, *Women in the Working Force in India*,<sup>54</sup> J.H Kelman's, *Labour in India*,<sup>55</sup> T.S Papola and A.N.Sharma (ed), *Gender and Employment in India*<sup>56</sup> fall into this genre. An interesting study made by Sharit Bhowmick in, *Class Formation in the Plantation System*<sup>57</sup> brings to light the different aspects of class formation among tribal

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<sup>52</sup> Maitheryi Krishnaraj et.al., *Gender, Population and Development*(New Delhi,1994)

<sup>53</sup> Sumi Krishna., *Women's Livelihood Rights: Recasting Citizenship for Development* (New Delhi, 2007)

<sup>54</sup> D.R. Gadgil's *Women in the Working Force in India*(Bombay, 1965)

<sup>55</sup> J.H Kelman., *Labour in India* (New York, 2000)

<sup>56</sup> T.S Papola and A.N.Sharma (ed), *Gender and Employment in India* (New Delhi, 1999)

<sup>57</sup> Sharit Bhowmick., *Class Formation in the Plantation System*(New Delhi, 1981)

workers engaged in the tea plantations of West Bengal and also gives us valuable insights into the work of the female coolies in the tea plantations. Another important work is that of Tirthankar Roy's, *The Economic History of India 1857-1947*<sup>58</sup> which studies the economic History of colonial India and presents an account of the factors that shaped economic change in the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In recent times some Indian scholars have undertaken specific case studies on women's labour in particular sectors of the economy during the colonial and post colonial period which have opened up new dimensions of understanding women's work in the society. For instance, *Mukul Mukherjee*<sup>59</sup>, has studied the rice husking industry of Bengal in colonial India and points out that the female oriented rice hushing industry was disrupted due to the introduction of modern threshing machines with obvious changes in the economic and social condition of the women concerned. *Kuntala Lahiri Dutta*<sup>60</sup> in another case study of the Raniganj collieries says that the introduction of heavy capital underground equipment has resulted in the marginalization of women in the mines since there was no attempt to impart training skills to women to

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<sup>58</sup> Tirthankar Roy., *The Economic History of India 1857-1947*(New Delhi, 2006)

<sup>59</sup> Mukul Mukherjee., "Impact of Modernization on Women's Work" in J. Krishnamurty (ed), *Women in Colonial India:Essays on Survival, Work and the State*(Delhi, 1989)

<sup>60</sup>Kuntala Lahiri Dutta., "Gendered Exclusion : Women in Raniganj collieries" in, *The Journal Of Indian Association of Women's Studies* (New Delhi, 2000)

adjust to the re-organization of work. Samita Sen<sup>61</sup> in a study of the labour force in Calcutta's jute mills in the colonial era argues that it was the women folk who sustained the agricultural cycles when the men folk migrated to the cities to work in the mills. According to Sen. Women's role was indispensable to ensure stability and continuance of the entire system of social and economic production in the villages. These studies are important for the methodology adopted by the authors. Neither Mukul Mukherjee, nor Samita Sen, or Kuntala Lahiri was likely to find written records of the voices of the largely illiterate subjects of their study. However while using the standard sources, Government Gazetteers etc, the authors have also used folk tales, popular adages etc to extract useful historical information. Mukul Mukherjee has, for instance, used popular idioms like "women folk are in a sorry –plight in the house that has no *dhenki*" (pestle and mortar) to understand how introduction of modern threshing machines must have disrupted women's lives in Bengal in the colonial period. By Utilizing folk sayings etc and tempering their sources with a feminist sensitivity, the authors have demonstrated that with determination and a fresh approach, the same sources can be made to yield many more insights regarding women's experiences and very perceptive insights at that.

Besides providing a new methodology to understanding women' works. Mukul Mukherjee and Kuntala Lahiri have also indirectly challenged the

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<sup>61</sup> Samita Sen., *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1999)

assumption that the position of women automatically improves as the economy modernizes. The modernization and the impact of structural adjustment on women have also been questioned in the works of Diane Elson, *The Impact of Structural Adjustment on women*<sup>62</sup> and in Jayati Ghosh's, *Gender Concerns in Macro Economic Policy*<sup>63</sup>. Maitheryi Krishnaraj, (ed) *The New Economic Policy and Women, A Collection of Background papers*,<sup>64</sup> contains articles which focus attention on what really are the policy shifts in the wake of the Government's decision to liberalize the economy and how they will affect different sections of the society. Raj Mohini Sethi's edited work, *Globalization, Culture and Women's Development*<sup>65</sup> also evaluates the likely impact of globalization on third world societies

These works become especially relevant in the context of the study to be undertaken, keeping in mind the Pro liberalization stance of the Indian Government and have helped understand the gendered impact of the Government's economic policy.

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<sup>62</sup> Diane Elson., "The Impact of Structural Adjustment on Women" in Bade Onimode (ed), *The IMF, the World Bank and Africa, Vol 2*(London, 1989)

<sup>63</sup> Jayati Ghosh., *Gender Concerns in Macro Economic Policy*" Keynote address- Sixth National Conference on Women (Delhi, 1993)

<sup>64</sup> Maitheryi Krishnaraj., (ed), *The New Economic Policy and Women, A Collection of Background papers*, to the 6th National Conference (Bombay, 1993)

<sup>65</sup> Raj Mohini Sethi.,(ed) *Globalization, Culture and Women's Development*(Jaipur, 1999)

Since an important methodology that the study seeks to utilize is that of oral History, a reading and understanding of the works of scholars who have utilized the methodology in constructing the past becomes important. Relevant in this connection is Paul Thompson's, *The Voice of the Past*<sup>66</sup> where he traces oral History through its past and into its future, showing with practical examples, how historians can develop the method. Thompson demonstrates how the new material it yields can be evaluated alongside the traditional sources of history to construct a more democratic record of the past. Another very important work on oral tradition is Jan Vansina's, *Oral Tradition: A study in Historical Methodology*<sup>67</sup> which was based on the author's historical field work in Africa. Soumen Sen's edited work, *Folk Lore in North East India*<sup>68</sup> contains works of Folklorists and Historians who have used the oral tradition (including ballads, proverbs and superstitions) to understand societies and cultures in the North East.

There are works albeit few and far between which focus on the economy of Assam. Important in this connection is P.C. Goswami's pioneering work on the Assam economy, *The Economic Development of Assam*.<sup>69</sup> This work includes a

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<sup>66</sup> Paul Thompson., *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1978)

<sup>67</sup> Jan Vansina. , *Oral Tradition:A study in Historical Methodology* (London, 1969)

<sup>68</sup> Soumen Sen(ed), *Folk Lore in North East India*(New Delhi, 1985)

<sup>69</sup> P.C. Goswami, *The Economic Development of Assam*(Guwahati,1969)

discussion of all the sectors of the Assam economy including the cottage silk industry of Assam. Other works include Priyam Goswami's *Assam In the Nineteenth century*<sup>70</sup>, Chitrarekha Gupta's, *Trade and Market in the North Eastern India*<sup>71</sup> and J. B Bhattacharjee (ed,) *Studies in the Economic History Of North East*<sup>72</sup> which give descriptive accounts of the Assam economy under colonial rule. K.L. Chattopadhyay's compiled work, *slavery in British Dominion*,<sup>73</sup> contains an interesting account relating to the conditions of coolie life in the tea plantations and gives us useful information regarding the sexual exploitation of the female tea garden workers by the European planters and managers. Other prominent writings on the socio-economic and cultural life of Assam includes, H.K. Barpujari's, *Comprehensive History of Assam*<sup>74</sup> spread over 5 volumes. These works contain important references to the silk industry of Assam as it was during the pre-Ahom and Ahom period. However as it is to be expected from works of conventional historical accounts, the gender equations in the organization of labour in any of the areas, find scant discussion. Other works on Assam include, S.N. Sarma's work, *A Socio and Cultural History of Medieval Assam (1200-1800*

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<sup>70</sup>Priyam Goswami., *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration* (Guwahati,1999)

<sup>71</sup>Chitrarekha Gupta., *Trade and Market in the North Eastern India* (Guwahati, 2000)

<sup>72</sup>J.B., Bhattacharjee., (ed) *Studies in the Economic History of the North East India* (New Delhi, 1994)

<sup>73</sup>K.L. Chattopadhyay (comp)., *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta,1972)

<sup>74</sup>H.K Barpujari., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol iii (Guwahati, 1994).

AD).<sup>75</sup> Using official sources like *Buranjis*, *Rajavamsavalis* and the *Sattra – Vamsavalis*, Sarma, has sought to provide a comprehensive view of the socio-economic and cultural life of medieval Assam during a long period of six hundred years. While the author's overt dependence on official sources means that women's labour is given only a cursory reference, nonetheless the work provides important insights into the socio-cultural life of medieval Assam. Another book in this genre includes, N.K. Basu's, *Assam in the Ahom Age*.<sup>76</sup> An important work dealing with the socio-economic development of Assam is Rajen Saikia's *Social and Economic history of Assam*,<sup>77</sup> where he makes important observations regarding the survival of the cottage silk industry despite the colonial negligence. For an insight into the workings of the Ahom Economy, Sanjeeb Kakoty's work, *Technology, Production and Social Formation in the Evolution of the evolution of the Ahom State*<sup>78</sup> provides a valuable guide. However, neither this work, nor the afore mentioned works on the Assam economy try to assess women's role in any particular section of the economy especially the silk weaving industry. B.K. Baruah's, *A Cultural History of Assam*,<sup>79</sup> provides valuable references to the production of silk in Assam in the early period. The colonial attitude towards the silk industry in Assam can be partly gauged from, Nirode Barooah's work, *David*

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<sup>75</sup>S.N. Sarma., *A Socio and Cultural History of Medieval Assam -1200-1800 AD*(Guwahati, 1989)

<sup>76</sup> Nirmal Kumar Basu.,*Assam in the Ahom Age*,1228-1826 (Calcutta, 1970)

<sup>77</sup>Rajen Saikia., *Social and Economic history of Assam* (Delhi, 2000)

<sup>78</sup> Sanjeeb Kakoty.,*Technology, Production and Social Formation in the Evolution of the Ahom State*(New Delhi,2003)

<sup>79</sup> B.K. Baruah., *A cultural History of Assam: Early Period* (Guwahati, second edition, 1969)

*Scott in North East India, 1802-1831.*<sup>80</sup> Other works like, Sudeshna Purakayastha's, *Indigeneous Industries of Assam*<sup>81</sup> (1870-1925) covers the socio economic structure of pre colonial Assamese society and its co-relation with the artisanal population and production, the dynamics of change in mode of production and technology during the colonial era. Priyam Goswami's, *Indigenous Industries of Assam, Retrospect and Prospect*,<sup>82</sup> provides a historical background of the indigenous crafts and industries of the region and discusses the prospects of sericulture, handloom, cane and bamboo, horticulture, floriculture, masks industries in national and international market. An important case study done on the Sualkuchi silk industry by Prabin Baishya<sup>83</sup> provides valuable insights into the workings of the silk industry in Sualkuchi, but does not contain any details of the gender dimensions of the workings of this industry.

There have been some attempts to study the place and status of Assamese women in the society. S.L. Baruah,<sup>84</sup> has studied the status of Assamese women in different fields like family, society, economy, Law, etc.

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<sup>80</sup> Nirode Barooah., *David Scott in North East India , 1802-1831*(New Delhi, 1970)

<sup>81</sup> Sudeshna Purakayastha, *Indigeneous Industries of Assam 1870-1925*(Kolkatta, 2005)

<sup>82</sup> Priyam Goswami., *Indigenous Industries of Assam, Retrospect and Prospect*(Kolkatta, 2005)

<sup>83</sup> Prabin Baishya.,*The Silk Industry of Assam: A Case Study in the Sualkuchi Cluster*(Guwahati, 2003)

<sup>84</sup> S.L Baruah., *Status of Women in Assam* (New Delhi, 1999)

Deepti Sharma in, *Assamese Women in Freedom Struggle*<sup>85</sup> has studied the role played by women in different phases of the freedom movement from 1921-1947. Renu Debi's edited work, *Women of Assam*,<sup>86</sup> contains an article by N.C. Das who has studied the handloom weaving in Assam. These works though scholarly texts in their own right gives us only a fragmented picture of the real role and status of women in Assam and most of them have much to be desired in terms of a gender sensitive analysis.

To work on the silk manufacturing, one needs to have a basic technical knowledge of the processes involved in silk production in the first place. Works that proved useful in this connection include M.G. Hanumappa's, *Sericulture for Rural Development*,<sup>87</sup> J.Sulochana Chetty's, *An Introduction to Sericulture*<sup>88</sup> and P. Venkatanarasaih's work, *Sericulture in India*.<sup>89</sup> Other general works on sericulture, include, M. Laxmi Narasiah and G. Jaya Raju's *Development of Sericulture*,<sup>90</sup> S.N Choudhury's compiled work, *Sericulture in Assam: Non Mulberry slid*<sup>91</sup> Specific works on women in sericulture and weaving is absent either in the general Indian context or in the context of Assam. A few works like

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<sup>85</sup> Deepti Sharma., *Assamese Women in Freedom Struggle*(Guwahati, 2000)

<sup>86</sup> Renu Debi., (ed), *Women of Assam* (New Delhi, 1994)

<sup>87</sup> M.G. Hanumappa, (Bombay, 1986)

<sup>88</sup> J.Sulochana Chetty., *An Introduction to Sericulture* (New Delhi, 1882)

<sup>89</sup> P. Venkatanarasaih., *Sericulture in India* (Delhi,1992)

<sup>90</sup> M.Laxmi Narasiah and G.Jaya Rajus., *Development of Sericulture*(Delhi,1993)

<sup>91</sup> S.N. Choudhury (Compiled)., *Sericulture in Assam: Non Mulberry Slid* (Shillong,1968)

those of P.C. Choudhury<sup>92</sup>, and S.N. Choudhury<sup>93</sup> mention in passing that women play an important role in this industry but go no further in depicting that importance. However in neighbouring Bengal, we see an awareness regarding women's labour and an important case study on women in sericulture in Bengal by Nupur Dasgupta<sup>94</sup> suggests that the contributory role of women in the industry is responsible for the flourishing of his industry till date. The Findings of Dasgupta could be tested in Sualkuchi to analyze how and why sericulture and silk weaving in Assam has flourished till today and what kind of changes has taken place in this sector over time.

The survey of literature on Assam reveals that works on feminist themes is negligent. While a few works try to study women in society and politics, they address women's problems only tangentially. Economic studies on Assam have been undertaken but very little has been done on the economic status of women. The presence of women in one of the largest unorganized sectors of the Assam economy is acknowledged only occasionally though inconsequentially through some lines like –“All Assamese women know how to weave.” Casual statements apart; there have been practically no attempt to study the women weavers of Assam, particularly the silk workers of Sualkuchi.

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<sup>92</sup> P.C.Choudhury., *The History of the Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century* A.D.(Guwahati, 1959)

<sup>93</sup> S.N. Choudhury., *Mulberry Silk Industry* (Shillong, 1984)

<sup>94</sup> Nupur Dasgupta., “Continuing Gender Patterns : The Case of Sericulture” in, *The Journal of Indian Association of Women's Studies*(Delhi, 2000)

While seeking to fill in this gap in information, the study, draws on insights provided by feminist writings and empirical data provided by the Historians of the region, to draw up a more comprehensive and conclusive, socio-economic picture of the region.

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## CHAPTER II

### **Labour, Sexual Division and Work: Towards A Conceptual Framework**

One day, towards the end of his rather miserable life, Oedipus, the old blind hero of the Greek tragedy sensed the presence of the Sphinx. He asked her why things had turned out so badly for him. "Well", the Sphinx explained, 'your answer to the riddle was only partially correct. "Wait a minute", he said, 'you asked me, "What walks on four legs in morning, two at noon and three in the evening?" I answered Man - who crawls as a child, walks upright as an adult but upon reaching old age must use a cane.' That's a perfectly good answer. "Well" said the Sphinx "what about woman?" 'Come on' said Oedipus "when you say man, of course that implies women too. Everyone knows that". The sphinx smiled and replied, "That's what you think,"<sup>1</sup>

The Greek poem has been paraphrased here to draw attention to the fact that like Oedipus, Our collective social psyche has been dominated by assumptions of male superiority as a social constant, a universal fact of psychological and biological life. These andro-centric assumptions also mean that women's role in socio-economic production (in the past as well as in the contemporary context) is invariably considered supportive and secondary.

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in Nancy Folbre, Barbara Bergmann et.al (ed), *Women's Work in the World Economy*(London, 1972) P.xxiii

Myths don't die easily and persist in fact against evidence and in contradiction to the rules of logic. It is therefore hardly surprising then that the experiences of one half of the human population has been sought to be subsumed under the general heading of 'mankind'<sup>2</sup>

According to the United Nations Organization, women do two-thirds of the world's work. In exchange; they receive 10% of all income and own a mere 1% of the world's means of production. Since by implication men perform one-third of the world's work and are rewarded with 90% of the income and 99% of the means of production, this would be the start of a search for an explanation of the glaring inequality between men and women.<sup>3</sup>

As the above statistics indicate, only some everyday experiences are recognized, recorded and rewarded. Overwhelmingly those activities that are economically visible can be summarized as "what men do." Remarkably this fact holds firm across time and space. The belief that value results only when (predominantly) men interact with the market place means that few attempts are made to disguise this myopic approach.<sup>4</sup>

A feminist engagement with socio-economic issues thus becomes imperative because a feminist economic theory provides more than some new insights into women's work - it provides us a Sphinx's perspective for

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance, Shiela Rowbotham's arguments in, *Women's consciousness, Man's world* (Great Britain, 1973)p.117

<sup>3</sup> Cited in, Maria Mies, Veronika Thomsen, et.al (eds)., *Women: the Last Colony*, (New Delhi, 1988), p.159

<sup>4</sup> Maryln Waring., *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (San Francisco, 1988) p.17

re-imagining the story of women's engagement in this world and in so doing, feminist economic theory affects the answer to some of the basic riddles of political economy.

A feminist engagement with socio-economic issues should begin with an examination of women's labour in all its forms - in the farm, factory and in the household.

The extent of women's contribution to agriculture for instance, is highlighted by a micro study conducted in the Himalayan region which found that on a one hectare farm, a pair of bullocks worked for, 1,064 hrs, a man for 12 hrs and women for 3485 hrs in a year. In Andhra Pradesh, Maria Mies (1986) found that the work day of a woman agricultural labourer during the agricultural season lasts for 15 hrs with an hour's rest in between. Her male counterpart works for 7-8 hrs with 4 hrs rest in between.<sup>5</sup>

Not only do women perform more tasks, their work is more arduous than that undertaken by men. In *Muddy Feet Dirty Hands*, Mencher and Sardamoni refer to the second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Report which notes that the agricultural operations in which women are mostly employed were weeding, and that they were seldom employed in strenuous operations like ploughing. Questioning the assumption that all female jobs require lesser strength the authors quote a comment by a male anthropologist who reported

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<sup>5</sup> Carol S. Conrod., "Chronic Hunger and the status of women in India", (June 1998), article accessed through [www.thp.org](http://www.thp.org)

that when asked a man why males did not do transplanting and weeding work, he was told “no man can keep standing bent over all day long in the mud and in the rain. It is much too difficult and our backs would hurt too much”<sup>6</sup>

A study in Uttar Pradesh report that men only reluctantly conceded that the women folk really work. The researchers in the area were repeatedly told that women, like children simply eat food and do nothing. Again, in a report of the National Commission on self employed women and women in the informal sector, the Director of Social Welfare in the state in Uttar Pradesh, said, “There are no women in any unorganized sector in the state.” When the Commission probed and asked, “Are there any women who go to the forest and collect firewood? Do any of the women in rural areas have cattle? The Director responded with, “of course, there are many women doing that type of work”<sup>7</sup>

There thus seems to be a total disconnect between the work women do and popular perceptions about their labour.

Not only are working women invisible to academics and policy makers, even when they are seen as gainfully employed, their situation is under-cut by a gender biased wage policy which obviously works against them. One can refer for instance to the data released by the country's Rural Labour Ministry.

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<sup>6</sup>J.P. Mencher and K, Sardamoni., “Muddy Feet, Dirty Hands,” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 1982,p.151 quoted by Asha Kapur Mehta., ‘The Invisible Workers’, in Madhu Kishwar (ed) *Manushi-A Monthly Magazine* Vol 1. 121. (New Delhi, 2000) p.28

<sup>7</sup> Carol S. Conrod., *op.cit.*

According to it, while transplanting fetches women most wages in the farm sector, for men the most lucrative activity is well-digging. However, there is a huge difference in the amounts paid out to men and women for the work they do. While the all India average daily wage rate for women doing transplanting work ranged between Rs 46.54 in Sept 2002 and Rs 49.77 in June 2003, the average daily wage rate for digging a well varied between 81.14 in July 2002 and Rs 85 in Feb 2003, that is, a Rs 35 gender gap. Amongst the lowest paid occupations is herd keeping. The annual average daily wage rate for men and women in this sector was Rs 40.36 and Rs 31.60 respectively, during 2002-03. Again there is a notable gender bias, especially as the work involved is exactly the same. Overall it was found that the average daily wage rates for women were lower than those for men in most occupations during 2001-02 and 2002-2003<sup>8</sup>. This deep seated gender bias against female labour is even more starkly revealed by the fact that in many other sectors of the economy specially the unorganized sector the concept of labour itself continues to be expressed in a gender biased terminology i.e. "man days". Women's labour is mentioned only as the derivate of male labour. For instance the Madras Farm management studies equates one man day to 0.54 day's work put in by the woman, i.e. roughly half of the labour of man and treats one woman earner to half a unit of

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<sup>8</sup> Sanjay Baru (ed), *The Financial Express*, October, 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004

man. In Uttar Pradesh, one man day is said to be equal to 0.66 day's work put in by the women.<sup>9</sup>

Another category of tasks that women perform are tasks that are contributive to "family" occupations like agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving and cottage industries, where the contribution of women gets merged with that of the family and becomes invisible. These are also tasks that are traditionally perceived as "women's work" or roles within the home, i.e. women engaged in these tasks are reported as "not working."<sup>10</sup> Any income generated from such tasks is usually controlled by the men. Not only this, her contribution as active employees in the household escapes recognition not just within the household itself, but also from Government enumerators and agencies. We have the classic example of the women lace workers of Narasapur in Andhra Pradesh who account for 90% of the foreign exchange earned from export of Andhra Handicrafts but are not found anywhere in the world of official statistics.<sup>11</sup>

Even in the highly organized scientific and technical labour market in India, there is a substantial gender gap in earnings. Surveys indicate that while 34% of the earning differential between women and men was due to

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Mukul Mukherjee in., "Women's Work: Perspective from the Past and Present" in, *The Journal of Indian Association of Women's Studies* (New Delhi, 2000) p.46

<sup>10</sup> Asha Kapur Mehta., *op.cit.*, p.28

<sup>11</sup> Maria Mies., "The Dynamics of the Sexual Division of Labour and Integration of Rural Women into the World Market" in Maria Mies, et.al (ed) *,op.cit.*, p.122

dissimilarity in the field of specialization, 70% of the wage gap could be due to discrimination<sup>12</sup>.

However it is perhaps in the household that a woman's labour gets most certainly camouflaged. The housewife is usually thought of as outside the economy. Given that the market is generally considered to be the core focus of economic activity, the statistical concept of being "at work" is (and has been historically) defined as a subset of employment in terms of engagement in work "for pay of profit."<sup>13</sup> Housewives then clearly do not work. Mothers taking care of children, cooking, cleaning, are not working since no money changes hands. The story of the decrease in GNP when a man marries his housekeeper is well known to all readers of introductory economics textbooks. The decrease occurs because, although the household activities of the housekeeper-turned-wife are unchanged or possibly increased - the wife is not paid a wage and so, as her work is not for the market, it is not considered economically significant.<sup>14</sup>

The underestimation of women's work in contemporary society reflects the complex exploitative and inequitable socio-economic system in which we live. Accounting for women's work thus involves efforts on two fronts from the start. First it requires the refinement of categories and the improvement of data collection in those areas of paid work that are in theory at least included in

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<sup>12</sup> Malathy Duraisamy., "Employment and Earnings of men and Women in the Scientific and Technical Labour Market in India" in, *The Manpower Journal* (April-June 1999), p.13

<sup>13</sup> See, Report of the *Eighth International Conference of Labour Statisticians*, (Geneva, 1955) p.43

<sup>14</sup> Lourdes Beneria., "The Enduring Debate over Unpaid Labour" in, L. Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed)., *Gender and Development: Theoretical, Empirical and Practical Approaches*, Vol I, pp.288-294

conventional statistics. Second, we need to rethink and re-define the concept of work and to develop ways of measuring unpaid work mostly involving domestic work or any other productive work taking place within the household.

In other words what is needed is a feminist de-construction of labour, a shift in focus from the masculine constant towards re-vamping, re-assessment and re-evaluation of women's status, roles, experiences and outlook in particular sectors of an economy.

Since we live in a society in which men have more power than women, feminist theorizing requires both compensatory as well as critical aspects. That is, we need to recover and explore the aspects of social relations that have been suppressed, unarticulated or denied within dominant (male) view-points. We need to recover and write the histories of women and their activities into the accounts and stories that cultures tell about themselves. Yet we also need to think about how so called women's activities are partially constituted by and through their location within the web of social relations that make up any society. That is, we need to know how these activities are affected but also how they effect, enable or compensate for the consequences of men's activities<sup>15</sup>.

Clearly, the history of women is not an exclusionist history but a relational history. A fundamental goal of feminist theory therefore is to analyze gender relations. 'Gender Relations' as Jane Flax puts it, "is a category meant to

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Flax., " Modernism, Post Modernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" in Linda Nicholson (ed), *Feminism/ Post Modernism*, (London, 1989) p.54

capture a complex set of social processes. Gender relations are differentiated and (so far) asymmetric divisions and distributions of human traits and capacities.”<sup>16</sup> In 1988, a post-structuralist theorist Denise Riley in her controversial *'Am I that Name?: Feminism and the Category of Women in History* 'argued that 'woman' was a product of cultural linguistic convention rather than psychology or biology<sup>17</sup>. This stimulated debates which still go on but what is reflected was the growing recognition that women's history could not be understood outside the milieu in which sexual differences acquire social meaning. As a result gender became an important tool of analysis to understand women in a given society. Advances in the socialization theory farther reinforced the belief that women were not discriminated in society due to the biological differences of their sex but due to socialization into sex-specific roles<sup>18</sup>. At the economic level, gender appears as a sexual division of labour in which some types of work are strongly associated with women and some types with men. The costs and benefits of the sexual division of labour are unequally shared between men and women to the disadvantages of the latter<sup>19</sup>.

The study of gender relations thus includes, but is not limited to, what are often considered the distinctively feminist issues, the situation of women

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44

<sup>17</sup> Denise Riley., *Am I that Name ? :Feminism and the Category of Women in History*, (London, 1988)

<sup>18</sup> Rainuka Dagar., “Intervening for Gender Justice” in *The Indian Journal of Social Work* (Bombay, 1998)p.935

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of this point, see M. Mackintosh, “The Sexual Division of Labour and the Subordination of Women”, in , K.Young , C wolkoitz and R. Mc Cullag(eds), *Of Marriage and the Market*(London, 1981)

and the analysis of male domination. Feminist theory includes a prescriptive element as well. By including gender into studies of economy and society one hopes to gain a critical distance on existing gender arrangements. This critical distance can help clear a space in which re-evaluating and altering our existing gender arrangements may become more possible.<sup>20</sup>

However, empirical feminist research by itself cannot clear such a space. Unless feminist research is located within and draws upon the wider Philosophical contents of the various strains of the feminist movement, feminist theorizing will remain inadequate and ineffectual.

Each of the strains of the Feminist Movement, Liberal, Marxist, Radical and Socialist represent varied frameworks regarding the approach and strategies advocated for understanding and combating women's unfavourable placement in society. These strains are important moreover because they provide us with a methodology to study women in history and it is important to understand each of these theories to examine their relevance in explaining and situating women's role in their specific socio-economic contexts.<sup>21</sup>

The philosophical tradition of liberalism grew out of the major social political and economic transformation of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18th Century. Liberal philosophers and politicians extended the natural laws to human society and concluded that every individual has certain inherent natural rights, such as those

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<sup>20</sup> Jane Flax., *op.cit.*, p.400

<sup>21</sup> For details of the philosophies of the different Feminist Movements, See, Alison Jaggar., *Feminist Politics and Human Nature.*(Sussex,1983)

to life, liberty and the pursuits of happiness, upon which the state may not intrude<sup>22</sup>. In this approach the explanation for women's position in society is seen in terms of unequal rights or 'artificial' barriers to women's participation in the public world beyond the family and the household. Liberal feminists assert that women are not fundamentally different from men and yet are denied equal opportunities due to prejudiced behaviours and subjugative customs against the female sex<sup>23</sup>. This view is obviously connected with the liberal conception of human beings as essentially rational agents. In order to rectify women's restricted access and to enhance their participation facilities vis-a vis men, this strategy is aimed at promoting and protecting individual women by checking discriminatory practices. Believing that laws should not grant to women fewer rights than they allow men, Liberal Feminists have fought against laws which do this. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century they have opposed laws like those that give more rights to husbands than wives within marriage.<sup>24</sup>

Early feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft<sup>25</sup> and John Stuart Mill<sup>26</sup> pointed out that women are human beings capable of rational thought and deserving of the same natural rights granted to men. The first wave feminism not only gained women some legal political and economic rights, but importantly brought into focus women's impoverished conditions and the need to improve it.

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<sup>22</sup> Nancy Mandell., *Feminist Issues: Race, Class and Sexuality* (Canada,1995) p.5

<sup>23</sup> Chris Beasley., *What is Feminism? An Introduction to Feminist Theory* (London, 1999)p.51

<sup>24</sup> See Alison Jaggar., *op.cit.*,pp.47-48

<sup>25</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft., *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* ( London, reprint, 1978)

<sup>26</sup> John Stuart Mill., *The Subjection of Women*( Oxford, 1851)

Liberal feminists continue to assume that the inequality of women stems from the denial to them of equal rights and from their learned reluctance to exercise such rights. They identify socialization and education in shaping individuals as central in constituting gender differences in attitudes, expectations and behaviours<sup>27</sup>. Within contemporary society for instance, there are strong expectations shared even by women themselves that women should take primary responsibility for the work involved in raising children and in running a house. Within the paid labour force they are expected to perform similar sorts of nurturing services to men, women and children.<sup>28</sup>

In this context one can point to a new study conducted by the U.K. Research Agency, Trade Union Congress (TUC) which says that the entrenched split between traditionally "male" and "female" careers is just as glaring among today's teenagers as among the elder generation. It shows that 14% of young men work in manufacturing compared with just 6% of women. A lot of this imbalance has of course to do about the images of jobs for the boys and jobs for the girls.<sup>29</sup>

Liberal feminists would further assume that this sexual division of labour is not chosen and that women congregate in the clerical and service occupations like nursing because discrimination denies them access to the prestigious, powerful and well- paying positions that are held predominantly by men.

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy Mandell (ed), *op.cit* p.6

<sup>28</sup> Alison Jaggar., *op.cit*, p.177

<sup>29</sup> "Girls will be Girls" News Item appearing in the *Telegraph* on 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2004

Women's relegation to certain kinds of work degrades them not only while they are performing that work, but, according to Liberal Feminists, the conditions of women's work also diminish their liberty and autonomy in the rest of their lives, since women's work is invariably considered low skilled and hence underpaid.<sup>30</sup> The situation is even worse for women who do unpaid child care and maintenance work in the home. This not only places women on economic dependence on the husbands, it also makes it difficult for housewives to exercise their autonomy. Liberal Feminists like John Stuart Mill<sup>31</sup> and later Betty Freidan<sup>32</sup> felt that equality and human dignity are not possible for women if they do not have economic independence. Women's lack of equality in public life thus remains the major focus of Liberal Feminism.<sup>33</sup>

Liberal feminist political strategies reflect a concept of a fundamentally sexually undifferentiated human nature that is, since women are much the same as men, women should be able to do what men do. Given an assumed commonality between the sexes and focus on access to what men have in society, Liberal feminists do not perceive the sexes to be at 'war' or dismiss that which has been associated with men<sup>34</sup>. An important reflection of this view point can be found in the work of Naomi Wolf who advocates what she calls 'Power

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft., *op.cit.*

<sup>31</sup> John Stuart Mill., *op.cit.*

<sup>32</sup> See Betty Friedan., *The Feminine Mystique*(New York, 1974)

<sup>33</sup> Alison Jaggar., *op.cit.*, pp.177-178

<sup>34</sup> Chris Beasley., *op.cit.*, p.52

feminism' a feminism based on a sense of entitlement and which embraces monetary and other forms of 'success' in existing society.<sup>35</sup>

In this setting Liberal Feminism provides a framework for the development of 'moderate' feminist policies and practices which can be employed, for example by Government agencies. In fact, liberal reforms have resulted in increased opportunities for women and increased public consciousness of women's rights making liberal feminism the most mainstream or popular feminist perspective.<sup>36</sup> It is also likely that history would judge the progress of this century on one major yardstick and that would be the issue of equity. According to the 1993 UN Human Development Report, there is no country in the world where women's conditions in terms of access to resources, education, health etc are equal to men.<sup>37</sup> So long as such statistics continue to get revealed, the ideas of liberal Feminism will remain relevant for the feminist movement.

Yet critics suggest that liberal reforms (equality in inheritance, improving women's legal position in child custody case and ensuring women's access to higher education, wage labour and profession) have not been shared equally by all women because changes have not addressed issues of socially structured inequality. Liberal Feminists fail to recognize the fact that the existence of

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<sup>35</sup> Naomi Wolf., *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and how it will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London 1993) pp. xvii and xix

<sup>36</sup> Nancy Mandell., *op cit* p.8

<sup>37</sup> United Nations Development Program, UNDP, 1993, quoted, in Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (ed) *Women culture and Development* (New York, 1995)p.2

discrimination necessitates a bias, differentiation and hierarchy. As long as the underlying subordinating structures that give rise to and promote differentiation on basis of the biological category of sex remain unattended, discrimination will persist.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the assumption of providing equality in a context of inequality would restrict the exercise of equality. For instance, equal work opportunities may not allow women to exercise the option of night shifts for fear of sexual abuse and if they do exercise the option they may be violated in a society that lays restrictions and codes of conduct in women's movement.<sup>39</sup>

Liberal feminists assume that most individuals are likely to discover fulfillment through the exercise of their rational capacities in the public world and consequently these feminists emphasize the importance of equality in that world. Liberal feminists do not challenge the contemporary structuring of work by the mental/ manual distinction. Instead they accept conventional definitions and valuations of existing jobs categories and seek opportunities for women to enter intellectual, "professional" or supervisory occupations. Liberal feminist assumption rest on devaluation of women's traditional work and indeed of the labour of most working people.<sup>40</sup>

A related problem with the equality of opportunity framework is that it

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<sup>38</sup> Rainuka Dagar., *op.cit.*, p.935

<sup>39</sup> Alison Jagger., "Human Biology in Feminist Theory: Sexual Equality Reconsidered" in Carol C. Gould(ed), *Beyond Domination* (New Jersey,1984) pp.21-42

<sup>40</sup> Alison Jagger., *op.cit.*, p.181

focuses on extending to women the rights provided by the state to the men, hence spheres where the state did not intervene (such as the family which is one area where the patriarchal control over women is most likely to be exercised) were left unattended.<sup>41</sup> In other words, Liberal Feminism exhorts women to apply for good jobs while treating babies as their private affair, it offers them equality with one hand and takes it away with the other.<sup>42</sup>

These discrepancies, conflicts and contradictions in the liberal feminist agenda meant that it remains an inadequate theory (both from an analytical and prescriptive point of view) to understand and place women's role in their specific socio economic contexts.

The Radical Feminist Movement which began in the late 1960's, as Alison Jaggar puts it, was sparked off by the special experiences of a relatively small group of predominantly white middle class college educated American Women<sup>43</sup> and hence unlike Liberal feminism, Radical Feminism is not drawn directly from previous bodies of 'male stream' thought. This approach views women's oppression as caused by men, concerns of which revolve around delineating women from male structures of dominance. For the Radical Feminists, the distinguishing character of women's oppression is their oppression as women, not as members of other groups such as their social class. Hence the explanation for women's oppression is seen as lying in sexual

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<sup>41</sup> Rainuka Dagar., *op.cit.*, pp.935-940

<sup>42</sup> See A. Phillip's, *Critique of Liberal Feminism in, Feminism and Equality* (Oxford, 1987)

<sup>43</sup> Alison Jaggar., *op.cit.*, p.83

oppression.<sup>44</sup> This group of feminists often views other forms of power for instance, unequal power relations within capitalism as derived from patriarchy - a system through which men appropriate all superior social roles and keep women in subordinate and exploited positions. Feminists like Shulamith Firestone<sup>45</sup> insisted that biological inequality between the sexes and hence reproduction or making babies was the cause of women's oppression. Describing women as out of control of their own destinies led Radical Feminists to question mothering under patriarchy. According to patriarchal ideology, motherhood is the only way in which a woman can discover true fulfillment. Mothers are expected to sacrifice their own interests completely to those of their husband and children. In short, under patriarchy, women don't experience child bearing and Child rearing on their own terms. Socially constructed gender and reproductive roles restrict women's identity to develop their own sexual desires and needs. Thus for Radical Feminists sexual relations are political acts, emblematic of male/female power relationships and as long as women's sexuality is interpreted in terms of men's sexuality, women will never be men's full political, economic or social equals and hetero-sexual relations will not be equal.

Radical Feminists also point out that through socialization in the family, the church and so on, men secure consent of the very women they oppress. Such

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<sup>44</sup> Chris Beasley., *op.cit.*, pp.53-54

<sup>45</sup> Shulamith Firestone., *The Dialectic of Sex: The case for Feminist Revolution* (New York,1970)

institutions justify and reinforce women's subordination to men with the result that most women internalize a sense of inferiority to men. Men use coercion to accomplish what conditioning fails to achieve.<sup>46</sup> In Susan Brownmiller's analysis, social control of women through male violence is essential to women's subordination. All over the world, patriarchy is established, supported and maintained through sexually violent and misogynist practices like, rape, incest, pornography etc.<sup>47</sup> since men's control over female biology and procreation functions leads to women's oppression, the strategy advocated by the Radical Feminists is focused on female control over their own bodies. Women are seen as controlling their own bodies when they determine their own mode of sexual expression and when their decisions about whether or not to bear children are based on their own desires and needs. Modern medicine and technology are adopted to promote this view. Reproductive techniques such as contraception, sterilization, in - vitro - fertilization, abortion, contract and surrogate motherhood are methods advocated to divest women from men's control.<sup>48</sup>

Radical Feminists further argue that due to social inequality between women and men. It is impossible for women to take control of their bodies as long as they remain in intimate relationship with men. Such an agenda encourages some degree of 'separation' from men. Furthermore, this

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<sup>46</sup> Nancy Mandell., *op. cit.*, pp.15-16

<sup>47</sup> See Susan Brownmiller., *Against our Will. Men, Women and Rape.*( New York, 1975), pp.x1-x111(London, 1975)

<sup>48</sup> Rainuka Dagar., *op.cit.*, pp.941-942

identification with women and rejection of male dominance involves both a critique of the existing order of heterosexuality as prioritizing men and recognition of lesbianism as a challenge to that priority.<sup>49</sup>

There is no doubt that, despite all differences one may have, Radical Feminists have brought immensely valuable insights to feminist theory. Identifying the ways, in which male practices construct women as passive and submissive, allows women to make their personal experiences political and to figure out strategies of resistance. Celebrating women as actors, not victims, empowers women to act on their own behalf to reverse or eliminate negative acts. The Radical Feminist conception of woman's control over their own bodies is also revolutionary in so far as it asserts that women's bodies can no longer be viewed as territory to be colonized by male culture.<sup>50</sup>

Critics however charge Radical Feminism with essentialism, ethnocentrism and a- historicism. Most feminist theorists now find Radical Feminists explanations of patriarchy and women's experience as essentialist and analytically unhelpful. As Rainuka Dagar puts it, "Radical Feminists lay claim to biology as the irreversible cause of male female contra position. By contention, it made natural and unchangeable the structural ranking between the sexes within which patriarchy was detrimental to women. The clubbing of an all women's interest not only ignored the causal connotation of socio-cultural specificities such

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<sup>49</sup> Chris Beasley., *op.cit.*, p.54

<sup>50</sup> Nancy Mandell., *op cit.*, p.17

as race, class, caste and ethnicity, but perceives all women as oppressed by forms that withstood the changes of time and social context..”<sup>51</sup>.

The proposition that physical anatomy is a detrimental factor for women’s subordinate placement means that Radical Feminist theorizing falls into the trap of essentialism. Agreeing for example, that women are by nature compassionate and nurturing and that men are aggressive and competitive suggests that Radical Feminists accept and promulgate the very stereotypes they are trying to avoid. Women are trapped inside their bodies and biology becomes their destiny.<sup>52</sup> Radical Feminists feel that freeing women from the tyranny of reproduction is emancipatory. Technology is seen as liberating women.

However critics suggest that technology such as artificial insemination, sex-pre-selection, embryo transplantation, monitoring, make the womb the province not of women but of scientists and doctors who can choose to control it. Moreover the argument that women should be able to control their own sexual and reproductive organs ignores the fact that women's body does not only consist of a reproductive organ. As Alison Jaggar puts it, under patriarchy men control women’s bodies in many other ways. Moreover women are exposed not only to rape; they are also exposed to pollution and industrial hazards. They are exploited not just in the home but also in the workplace. By taking recourse to biological determinism, the Radical Feminists do not make a

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<sup>51</sup> Rainuka Dagar., *op.cit.*, p.54

<sup>52</sup> Nancy Mandell., *op.cit.*, p.17

clear deviation from traditional political theory which assumes that women are biologically determined to continue performing work in the private realm. In a way, Radical Feminists essentialises women's subordinate position and hence remains an incomplete political theory to assess women's subordination in society.

An adequate feminist theory must evaluate traditional sexual, child-bearing and child-rearing practices and consider more liberatory alternatives.

Marxist theory was formulated in the mid 19th Century and was designed as a deliberate refutation of Liberal Political Theory. Marxist theory is guided by its commitment to historical materialism. In Marxist feminism, hierarchal class relations are seen as the source of coercive power and oppression, of all inequalities ultimately. Social oppression is seen as a dimension of class power<sup>53</sup>. Traditional Marxist also assumes that every society has been characterized by a sexual division of labour which was originally nothing but the division of labour between women and men that was required for conceiving children - the division of labour in the sexual act.<sup>54</sup> Apart from the division of labour in the sexual act, traditional Marxist theory believe that from earliest times, there was a "natural" division of labour with men specializing in producing the means of subsistence while women worked in the household. Each was dominant in his/her spheres of activity.<sup>55</sup> Marxists maintain that "male

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<sup>53</sup> Chris Beasley., *op.cit.*, p.60

<sup>54</sup> Alison Jaggar., *op.cit.*, pp.112-113

<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels., *The German Ideology* (Moscow, 1976) pp.50-51

supremacy" is a relatively modern phenomena and one that is an outgrowth of western capitalist social structure in which antagonism between men and women and between parents and children in the family reflect antagonism in the class hierarchy and the exploitation of women is a logical extension of class exploitation. Marxists contend that capitalism has an inherent division of labour by sex; women who work in the home tend to be responsible for the production of goods and services that have no exchange value. Women's housework and child-care work is not considered 'real work' since they do not produce money - Men who work in the public sector are directly engaged in commodity production, for exchange in the market. Second the association of women with the private home relegates their public labour to a secondary status. The cultural prescription that women belong in the home situates women as a "reserve army of labour." Women will be paid less, be first fired or laid off, and returned to the home when the economy no longer needs their paid labour.

The family under capitalism becomes a microcosm of society's larger class relations. Wives resemble the proletariat, monogamous marriage develops as part of the formation of private property and division of private and public labour becomes gendered. All wives, regardless of their paid labour commitments are responsible for household management child care, the emotional nurturing of dependants and the general well-being of the family. The work of housewives, their domestic slavery, represents both a private service to the male head of the household and an unpaid economic service to society as a

whole. Gender inequality according to the Marxist contention will disappear when women enter into paid labour in a classless society<sup>56</sup>.

Since labour is viewed as fundamental to all economic activity, (historically specific) analysis of the organization of labour and the tools/technologies associated with labour are perceived in concert as constituting the underlying economic structure or system of society. Relying on Marx's research on ethnographic writings, Engel's *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* systematized Marx's views about the linked transitions of family, forms of property, the organization of the division of labour and the state. Engels tried to lay a basis for theorizing the specific oppressions of women in his brief assertion that a fully materialist analysis of the production and reproduction of immediate life reveals a two-fold character: the production of the means of existence and the 'production of human beings themselves.'<sup>57</sup> Engels's *Comments* has been accepted as the classic statement on women by generations of Marxists. He states, "...with the patriarchal family, and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management .... became a private service; the wife became the head servant excluded from all participation in social production...."<sup>58</sup>

The concept of mode of production in Marxist methodology relates not

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<sup>56</sup> Nancy Mandell., *op.cit.*, pp.9-10

<sup>57</sup> Fredrick Engels., *The Origins of the Family Private Property and the State* (Moscow,1968) pp.61-62

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86

only to the actual process of material production but the entire gamut of social relations that are connected with a system of production be it capitalist or pre-capitalist. The Marxist view of history thus gives us a powerful methodology to relate women to production, to social relations, to men and to the cultural domination by men. It also provides us with a method to assess the role of the family and thus of women's labour in the evolution of social institutions.<sup>59</sup>

Nonetheless there are significant gaps and flaws in Marxist theory. It is pointed out the traditional Marxist approaches did not lead to a political concept of gender for two major reasons. For one, women, existed unstably at the boundary of the natural and social in the seminal writings of Marx and Engels. Their efforts to account for the subordinate position of women were undercut by the category of the natural sexual division of labour, with its ground in an un-examinable natural heterosexuality. The *German Ideology* is the major locus for Marx and Engel's naturalization of the sexual division of labour in their assumption of a pre-social division of labour in the sex act (heterosexual intercourse) and it's supposed natural corollaries in the reproductive activities of men and women in the family. In other words, it implies that no matter how much society may seek to abolish the division of labour, such division is always likely to re-emerge so long as the division of labour in the sex-act remains. It does also seem at least plausible that a division of labour in sexual activity will always encourage a regeneration of the more extensive sexual division of labour

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<sup>59</sup> Manorama Sharma., *History and History Writing in the North East* (New Delhi, 1998), p.58

that institutes the institution of gender. Another problem with Marxist theorizing is that they never really explain just what the sexual division of labour is, why it occurs nor whether it can be overcome in future forms of the family. Despite their insistence on the historical variability of family forms and the importance of the question of the subordination of women, Marx and Engels could not historicize sex and gender from a base of natural heterosexuality.<sup>60</sup> The historical reasons advanced by traditional Marxism to explain the sexual division of labour that Marxists claim to have characterized even the earliest societies remains at best obscure. In primitive hunting and gathering societies of the type that Engels considers in his *Origins of the Family Private property and the State*, women as well as men seem to be concerned with food collection. While men did the big game hunting, women concentrated on the collection of vegetable food. There is even considerable anthropological evidence to support the claim that women rather than men developed horticulture and that it was with them that the initial development of a productive surplus occurred. If this is so, the question arises as to why women did not come to dominate men rather than the other way round.<sup>61</sup>

Another problem with Marxist theorizing is that the sexual division of labour under capitalism is defined characteristically by two spheres, the public

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<sup>60</sup> Donna Haraway, "Gender for a Marxist Dictionary: Sexual Politics of a word" in Mary Evans (ed), *Feminism, Critical Concepts*, Vol iii, (London and New York, 2001) pp.439-440

<sup>61</sup> See, Ruby R. Leavitt, Barbara Skkes et.al, "Aboriginal Women: Male and Female Anthropological Perspectives" in, Rayna R. Reiter, (ed), *Towards an Anthropology of Women* , (New York, 1975) pp.110-126 which challenges conventional and male biased anthropological assumptions.

sphere of the market and the private sphere of the family. The former is defined as the sphere of the men, the latter as the sphere of women<sup>62</sup>. Marxism tends to universalize the modern separation between family and economy. The difficulty with such a position is that it assumes that one can cross-culturally separate claim of about the family from claims about the economy. Yet not until the establishment of a market economy in the modern period did activities concerned with the production and distribution of food and objects become organized on any significant scale, separate from activities considered the province of the family. By emphasizing the separation of family and economy we also lose sight of the kinds of connection that have existed between the separated spheres. The Marxist feminist approach tends like liberal feminism to be oriented towards the public sphere and given its concern with the organization of labour, generally pays particular attention to wage labour. The significance of unpaid labour undertaken in the private realm, which is very much associated with women, is controversial in Marxist feminism because Marxism largely equates 'the economy' with the capitalist market place. The traditional Marxist way of formulating the "woman question" assumes that women are oppressed primarily as a result of their exclusion from public production. In contemporary times, this exclusion is disappearing. Yet it is far from clear that women's oppression is diminishing. Thus as many feminists have pointed out, even when women have left the home for wage earning activities

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<sup>62</sup> Alison Jaggar., *op.cit*, pp.69-70

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the social relations of their paid jobs often replicate the social relations of the homes they have left. This transference of gender roles from the home to the work world has been described by some feminists as the rise of public patriarchy. The traditional Marxist cure for ending women's oppression through their participation in the public sphere illustrates one weakness of a theoretical framework that fails to understand the separation of family and economy as historical rather than as an ontological given.<sup>63</sup>

Marxist feminism shares with liberal feminism an assumption that there is an underlying sameness between men and women. While women seem to be oppressed by the men around them, they like men are ultimately oppressed by capitalism and hence the interests of men and women are not crucially different. Marxists' obsession with class means that for them the notion of class is the key to understanding all social phenomena, including the phenomena of women's oppression. The good society is a classless society.<sup>64</sup> This argument subsumed any separate consideration of the division of the sexes as an antagonistic division. Since power is not primarily associated with sex but with the imperatives of class, private wealth, property and profit, this theoretical framework fails to analyze men's involvement in power or the benefits for men of unequal power relations.<sup>65</sup> Moreover seeing women simply in terms of the

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<sup>63</sup> Linda Nicholson., "Feminist Theory: the Private and the Public" in Mary Evans (ed), *op.cit.*, pp. 1-3

<sup>64</sup> Alison Jaggar., *op.cit.*, p.51

<sup>65</sup> Chris Beasley., *op.cit.*, p.62

pull of capital denies their own resistance and struggles (while clearly subject to significant constraints due to their subordination in society) derives from a strategy of their own.<sup>66</sup>

While Marxist theory is inadequate to explain gender subordination (even though it was the first to pay attention to it), there is no reason why one cannot use categories and tools from the Marxist tool box to build up a more complete analysis of women's position in society.

Advances in this direction were first made by 'Socialist Feminists' who began to focus on non-economic factors and took the issue of patriarchy beyond capitalism. While the socialist feminist strain is committed to the basic Marxist conception of human nature in so far as it utilizes the method of historical materialism, they criticize traditional Marxist feminists as putting too much emphasis on the economic origins of gender inequality noting that female subordination also occurs in the pre-capitalist and socialist systems. In fact, socialist feminists accuse Marxist feminists of being "sex blind" of only adding women into their existing critique of capitalism.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, they suggest that Marxist feminists have stagnated the debate about women by focusing endlessly on the connection between the economy and gender relations. One way to advance theory about women's oppression lies in enlarging traditional

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<sup>66</sup> Shiela Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter., *Dignity and Daily Bread* (London, 1994)p.4

<sup>67</sup> See Heidi Hartmann., "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union" in Lydia Sargent (ed) *Women and Revolution* (Boston, 1988)

Marxism by expanding our understanding of the mode of production. This includes not only providing for our basic material needs of food, clothing and shelter, but also incorporating all the ways in which individuals organize to produce and distribute the means of satisfying their needs - for reproduction, nurturance and babies.

Another way socialist feminists have advanced theoretical boundaries is by analyzing the ways class and gender relations intersect. Economic class relations are important in determining women's status but gender relations may be equally significant. Eradicating social class inequality alone will not necessary eliminate sexism. Patriarchy existed prior to capitalism and continues to exist in both capitalist and non capitalist political-economic systems.<sup>68</sup>

Given that its methodological commitment is basically Marxist, Socialist Feminism seeks to develop an adequate theoretical understanding of the difference between women and men through an examination of what it calls the sexual division of labour. Socialist feminists focus on the social and economic organization of work in capitalist systems, on the relations between paid and unpaid labour and the interconnection between production and reproduction, the private and the public in order to develop a fully historical materialist account of the social construction of sex and gender.

Socialist Feminists today tend to focus their analysis on five central concerns. The first involves examining the physical and psychological aspects of

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<sup>68</sup> Nancy Mandell., *op.cit.*, pp.10-11

male-female differences. They focus on the dialectical relationship between sex and society as it emerges through activity organized by gender norms.<sup>69</sup> Some socialist feminists have for instance studied variations in menstruation and menopause and have discovered that often these variations are socially determined.<sup>70</sup> Interesting work has also been done on women's body language. The methodological approach makes it clear that the Socialist Feminists reject the view of biological determinism and view human biology as being in part socially constructed. Socialist feminists claim that our "inner lives" as well as our bodies and behavior are structured by gender; that this gender structuring is not innate but socially imposed; and that the specific characteristics that are imposed are related systematically to the historically prevailing system of organizing social production; that the gender structuring of our "inner" lives occurs when we are very young and is reinforced throughout our lives in a variety of different spheres.<sup>71</sup> The role of the family in the ideological socialization of women men and children represents an important area of concentration. More than any other group of theorists, socialist feminists have dissected the strategies families employ in inculcating traditional values and behaviours. The stereotypical behaviour expected of women and men is functional to the capitalist system.

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<sup>69</sup> Alison Jaggar., *op.cit.*, p.126

<sup>70</sup> Marian Lowe., The Biology of Exploitation and the Exploitation of Biology paper, read to the National Women's' Studies Association Second National Conference, Indiana University, Bloomington, May 16<sup>th</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> 1976

<sup>71</sup> See for instance, Zillah Eisenstein., "Some Notes on the Relations of Capitalist Patriarchy" in Zillah Eisenstein, (ed)., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the case for Socialist Feminism* (New York, 1979) p.47

Men are socialized into competitiveness, aggressiveness, rationality and independence. In contrast women are socialized into relational, contextual, and integrative and life affirming relationships presumably suited to their main chores of child-rearing and kin-keeping. These relatively rigid masculine and feminine character structures are a very important element in maintaining male dominance.

Socialist feminists also examine the role of the household in propping up the entire capitalist system by reproducing gender, race, sexual and class relations. In 1969, Margaret Benston, in, *The Political Economy of Women's Liberation*<sup>72</sup>, exposed domestic labour as a crucial form of women's work, unpaid, undervalued, and rendered invisible within the home. Numerous Canadian and international studies emanated from Benston's work and aimed at recognizing and legitimating women's ongoing domestic responsibilities. Domestic labour studies have been enormously influential in gaining public recognition for unpaid labour and for the ways in which this added responsibility constraints women's paid work, limits their leisure time and increases their likelihood of facing poverty.<sup>73</sup>

Another area of concentration discusses the relation of women as wage earners to modes of production. Far from being liberated by their entrance into

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<sup>72</sup> Margaret Benston., *The Political Economy of Women's Liberation*(Toronto, 1973)

<sup>73</sup> See for instance, Anderson Bridget., *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour*, (London and New York, 2000)and Lourdes Beneria., *op.cit.*, pp.288-294

paid labour as Engels predicted, women are confined to a double day of paid and unpaid labour. Moreover, cultural definitions of femininity are closely linked to definition of good mothering, making it difficult for women to escape feelings of obligation, guilt and anxiety when their time and attention is diverted from caring for dependents. The role of women as wage earners has also sparked concern with female job segregation. At every level there are "women's" specialties. Within the contemporary labour force, moreover, women's work is invariably less prestigious, lower paid and defined as less skilled than men's even with it involves such socially valuable and complex skills as dealing with children and sick people. Studies have further shown how definitions of women as primarily wives and mothers attribute a secondary status to their roles as paid labourers. Investigations into the origins of wage differentials and occupational segregation have led to critiques of the "family wage" ideology in which men are seen to be breadwinners who need to be paid a wage sufficient to support their dependent wives and children.<sup>74</sup>

Socialist Feminists therefore view the sexual division of labour as not just a division between "procreation" and "production" but also as a division within "procreation" and within "production". Consequently, Socialist Feminism does not view contemporary masculinity and femininity as constructed entirely through the social organization of procreative labour. These constructs are elaborated

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<sup>74</sup> Nancy Mandell., *op.cit.*, pp.1-2 See also Hillary Land, "The Myth of the Male Breadwinner", in Mary Evans (ed) *op.cit.*, p.129

and re-enforced in non-procreative labour as well. Since Socialist Feminists views women as constituted essentially by the social relations they inhabit which also define the particular activity a woman engages in at a given moment, the goal of socialist Feminism is to abolish the social relations (the elimination of the sexual division of labour in every area of life) that constitutes humans not only as workers and capitalists but also as women and men<sup>75</sup>.

The most important contention of socialist feminists is that a primary condition for the adequacy of feminist theory, indeed for the adequacy of any theory is that it should represent the world for the stand point of women. The concept of women's standpoint asserts that women's social position offers them access to aspects of reality that are not easily accessible to men. For instance it is only from the standpoint of women that household labour becomes visible as work rather than as a labour of love. Thus the standpoint of women provides the basis for a more comprehensive representation of reality than the standpoint of men. However, Socialist Feminists recognize that women's perceptions of reality are distorted both by the male-dominated ideology and by the male dominated structure, of every-day life. The stand-point of women is discovered through the distinctive social experience of women. The epistemological superiority of women's standpoint will be demonstrated conclusively only through a distinctively feminist reconstruction of reality in which women's interests are not

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<sup>75</sup> Alison Jaggar, *op.cit.*, pp.126-132

subordinated to those of men. This reconstruction must be practical as well as theoretical.<sup>76</sup>

The concept of women's standpoint is complex and is still being developed. It does not offer a one-dimensional yardstick against which the adequacy of competing claims to knowledge can be measured mechanically. Even though it provides fairly specific interpretations of the generally accepted criteria of theoretical adequacy, there is still room for discretion and disagreement over how these interpretations should be applied - nonetheless the socialist feminist methodology offers us the vision of a new society based on a much more comprehensive and less biased conception of what constitutes fully human activity.<sup>77</sup>

Since the major thrust of this study is on understanding in a historically specific way, the lives and experiences and contribution of women to socio-economic production, in a specific regional context, (Namely Sualkuchi) the study will use the Socialist Feminist Methodology as it offers the best available representation of reality from the standpoint of women. Its ideals and categories are designed to overcome the narrowness and masculine bias of prevailing theory by drawing directly on women's experience of their lives and labour.

In this context, one has to note that a significant part of the immediate business of living in which women are engaged as also the clearly visible aspects

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.383-384

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 387-388

of the division of labour by gender is most often in the household. Existing not only as a unit of co-residence, consumption and reproduction, the household (as will be subsequently discussed) is often a production/economic unit as well. Hence one needs to explore the two themes central to the understanding of gender - Family structure and intra-household relations on the one hand and work and production on the other.<sup>78</sup> Feminists have already cut through romantic assumptions about family and household unity, arguing that here exist instead multiple voices, gendered interests and an unequal distribution of resources within families and household.<sup>79</sup>

Most feminists would take as their starting point a criticism of Gary Becker's "Unitary" Household Model or the New Home Economics Approach.<sup>80</sup> This model treats the household as a single entity in relation to both consumption and production. It assumes that all household resources and incomes are pooled and their resources are allocated by an altruistic household head (presumably male) who represents the household's tastes and preferences and seeks to maximize household utility subject to a common budget constraint. Asymmetries in the division of labour and inequalities in the distribution of domestic work are similarly explained through individual choices made under the assumptions of utility maximization and a harmonious household.

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<sup>78</sup> Rajni Palriwala and Leela Dube (eds), *Structures and Strategies, Women Work and Family* (Delhi 1990) p.7

<sup>79</sup> Diane L. Wolf, "Daughters Decisions and Domination : An Empirical and Conceptual Critique of Household Strategies" in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed) *op.cit.*, Vol 1, pp.367-368

<sup>80</sup> Gary Beker., *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, 1981)pp.253-254

This model however fails to analyze questions about gender and asymmetric power relations that the women's movement had generated. The assumptions of joint utility maximization requiring the aggregation of individual tastes and preferences among family members was problematic. Similarly the theory of the comparative advantage and of human capital models to the analysis of resources among household members, such as the gendered skills whose acquisition and distribution can be questioned. It also neglects the process by which this allocation of resources takes place and does not problematize the resulting difference in autonomy, power and ability to maximize the individual well being of different household members.<sup>81</sup> Feminist economists point out that there is a wealth of evidence which shows that household income is not fully pooled or shared. A general finding from studies from major regions of the third world points to the fact that women typically bear the responsibility for managing household income and expenditure so as to meet the day-to-day needs of household members but they do not control access to resources they require to discharge these responsibilities and are thus dependent on transfers from male household members<sup>82</sup>.

The other major paradigm of economics, the Marxian Economic theory, makes similar assumptions of household unity. The Marxian pre-occupation with

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<sup>81</sup> Lourdes Beneria., "Towards A Greater Integration of Gender in Economics" in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed) *op.cit.*, Vol 1, p.103

<sup>82</sup> See J. Bruce and D. Dwyer (ed) *A Home Divided: Women and Income in the Third world* (Stanford, 1988)

capitalism as a mode of production has shaped the application of Marxian theory to the household. Marxian theory aggregates the economic objectives of individuals within economic classes. Worker's primary goal is to survive, to subsist, to struggle to claim the product of their labour. Household production described as production for use motivated by basic needs is often counter posed to production for exchange, motivated by an insatiable desire for gain. As a result, production for use is often placed outside the realm of economic analysis. Conventional Marxian conceptualizations of relations within the household seem to suggest that altruism rules, particularly within the working class family and that women choose to relinquish the economic independence that wage work might afford them in order to enhance their family's welfare. However the suggestion that women and female children voluntarily relinquish leisure, education, food and even jobs would be somewhat more convincing if they were in a position to demand their fair share. The evidence of structural inequalities based on gender and age casts considerable doubt on approaches that treat the household as a purely altruistic unit.

In short, the conventional neo-classical and Marxian paradigms present a view of the household that is shaped by expectations of equality and harmony within the household. These respective expectations have pre disposed both theories against any empirical exploration of inequalities within the family.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Nancy Folbre., "The Black Four of Hearts: Towards a New Paradigm of Household Economics", in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed) *op.cit.*, Vol 1 pp.253-255

How we characterize the household impinges not just on academic analysis but also critically on policy. Policy makers in many countries assuming a unitary model have typically directed resources to male household heads, assuming equitable intra-household `sharing of resources or benefits thereof.<sup>84</sup>

Highlighting the problems posed by a unitary conceptualization of the household a number of economists have in recent years proposed alternative models which use the game theoretic approach to incorporate a more complex understanding of how family decision making occurs, variously allowing for individual differences in preference in budget constraints and in control over resource use. Most of these models characterized intra household dynamics as a form of "bargaining". Household bargaining models contend that the influence of any given individual in the so called 'Bargaining' process which formulates household decisions (division of labour or time and distribution of consumption goods and services) is determined by the individual's fall back position. The fall back is the maximum attainable levels of well-being outside the relationship. The determinants of fall back position could be women's skill – level, other assets, wage incentives etc. The advantage of the model is that it focuses attention on external structural factors which produces unequal opportunity.<sup>85</sup>

While the 'Bargaining' theory of household decision making certainly has

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<sup>84</sup> Bina Agarwall., "Bargaining and Gender Relations within and Beyond the Household", in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed)., *op.cit.*, Vol 1 pp.253-255

<sup>85</sup> Maithreyi Krishnaraj., "How Gender figures in Economic Theorizing and Philosophy" in *The Economic and Political Weekly.*,Vol p.1429

some advantages over the New Home Economics it is insufficient for a complete feminist alternative to the dominant paradigm. Its most significant weakness is that individual household members are treated as a priori-equal and that it is only access to economic resources that distinguishes their relative bargaining power. Moreover this model fails to contend that some things may not be bargained over, for example the obligatory nature of women's responsibilities like child care or domestic tasks.

This view thus fails to recognize the relevance of gender to the household. Moreover one cannot expect perfect co-relation between an individual's economic contribution to the household and her decision making power. Studies show even when women devote a far larger share of their income to the household than men they seldom have an equivalent claim on leisure time. Gender based differences in the allocation of household resources are manifest in continuing gender differentials in nutritional and educational levels.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly a gender neutral specification of labour allocation fails to recognize that a socially defined gender division of labour may persist in spite of women's greater economic independence. Feminists contend that gender 'impinges' on household in such a way as to limit the bargaining power that women in particular can derive from access to resources outside the family.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Nancy Folbre., *op.cit.*, p.255

<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Katz., *Breaking the Myth of Harmony: Theoretical and Methodological Guidelines to the study of Rural Third World Households* in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath., *op.cit.*, p.42

There has to be a clearer analysis of the existence of both co-operative and conflicting elements in family relations. Amartya Sen has developed an important critique and extension of the household bargaining model to emphasize the dual nature of household partnership, that is, co-operative conflicts. While Sen agrees that in a household women and men might gain from co-operating with one another because this increases the capabilities of the household as a whole, the division of the fruits of co-operation is a source of conflict, women are at a disadvantage in bargaining because their fall back position tends to be worse, that is, if they try to live independently of men, women tend to experience poverty and social disapproval.<sup>88</sup>

The other major approach to studying women's status is the Capabilities Approach. Pioneered by Amartya Sen and widely popularized by Martha Nussbaum, this approach measures an individual's well-being through indices not just of income but a host of other factors. Nussbaum starts with human dignity and the idea it incorporates equal worth of rich and poor, rural and urban, female and male. The freedom and opportunity that equal worth implies are widely violated on grounds of sex, and many existing value systems deny liberty of choice let alone access to resources that would make choice possible. She sets out to define a cross-cultural norm that is relevant and appropriate for all persons. A list of the elements necessary for "truly human functioning" across

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<sup>88</sup> Amartya Sen., "Gender and Co-operative Conflicts" in Irene Tinker (ed) *Persistent Inequalities women and world Development* (New York, 1990)

cultures can be constructed. Nussbaum suggests that it include life) bodily health and integrity, human senses, emotion reason, affiliation, play etc. Nussbaum claims that a life that lacks anyone of the capabilities no matter what else it has, will fall short of being a good human life, hence it would be reasonable to take these things as a focus of concern in assessing the role of public policy in meeting human needs.<sup>89</sup>

In the context of articulating a development ethic, this appreciation of the physical and psychological needs and capabilities of human beings is perhaps especially important. However Nussbaum's approach is in her own words universalistic and essentialist. That is, it asks us to focus on what is common to all, rather than on differences. Her list of basic human functional capabilities seem basic to women and men alike, suggesting, at the level of abstraction a single conception of the criteria for a good life that will apply to all humans. However even if at the abstract level, the list of basic human needs and functions is held in common, more specific descriptions of how these needs can be met and how these functions can be realized may bring out differences between men and women. Thus while human beings need to be adequately nourished, men's nutritional needs differ somewhat from women's (and pregnant women's from non-pregnant women's). It is an open question whether the specification of any emotional, intellectual or other psychological needs may

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<sup>89</sup> Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (ed) *Women culture and Development* (Oxford, 1995)

also vary in accordance with sex<sup>90</sup>. What is certain however is that the Capabilities Approach fails to recognize women as gendered beings with their own specific needs and concerns.

The three approaches to studying women discussed above are restricted in their ability to incorporate the full complexity of gender interactions within the households, and the simultaneity of various forms of decision making. In addition most say little about gender. If none of these three special assumptions offer a good way to studying gender relations (while they offer interesting insights, which may be useful in particular problems) the question that remains is which formalized model does one use to study third world women. But then again, one need not necessarily be restricted in the use of one formalized model or the other. But before elaborating on this point it is important to note the context in which the study is being undertaken.

The study takes up for special focus the case of women silk weavers of Sualkuchi, Assam<sup>91</sup>. In this handloom heritage village, women weavers have been for decades producing exquisite *muga* and *pat*<sup>92</sup> handloom which earn for the state exchequer about 150 crores annually. This huge unorganized sector consists of household production units which by and large have a low technology base that is labour intensive. Women workers account for a large composition of

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<sup>90</sup> Susan wolf., "comments on Nussbaum in Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (eds) *op.cit.*, p.114

<sup>91</sup> The Historical Details and Geographical location of Sualkuchi has been discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>92</sup> *Muga* (*Atheroea Assameoa*) derived from a worm of the same and *pat* (*patta*) are the varieties of silk manufactured in Sualkuchi. Further details have been mentioned in the next chapter.

the workforce in the units. Of the 5000 looms in Sualkuchi, more than 4000 are operated by women.<sup>93</sup>

That weaving is intrinsically linked to the social life of the Assamese woman is revealed in folk songs which talk about weaving being a part of the rural Assamese women's daily chore as ploughing and hoeing are the men's. A *Bihu* song illustrates this point "... you could go on with your ploughing and reaping .... I would set about weaving the *Bihu* towel ... for you I set up the loom....."<sup>94</sup>

The importance of weaving as an industrial craft is alluded to in statements of national leaders also. Gandhi after visiting Sualkuchi wrote in young India in 1921. 'No Assamese girl who does not weave can expect to become a wife. The Brahmo Scholar Sivanath Sashtri is said to have remarked during his visit to Assam in the 19th century that it was only in Assam that he found a justification of the alleged derivation of the word "Wife" from "weave"<sup>95</sup>. In fact in traditional Assamese society a woman who did not acquire

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<sup>93</sup> Nani Mahanta and Deba. K. Sonowal., "Market Economy and Marginalization of women in Raj Mohini Sethi (eds), *Globalization, Culture and Women's Development* (Jaipur, 1999)p.157

<sup>94</sup> Birendranath Datta et.al., *A Handbook of Folklore Material of the North East* (Guwahati 1994)p.64

It is to be noted that among the three *Bihus* celebrated by the Assamese people, *Bohag Bihu* is the most important. This festival is celebrated in spring with the advent of the planting season during mid April and by virtue of its composite character combining rituals and festivities, have long shaped the Assamese psyche. Moreover *Bihu* songs reveal the overwhelming importance of weaving in the life of women in traditional Assamese Society. See Appendix ii

<sup>95</sup> Rajen Saikia., *Social and Economic History of Assam* (New Delhi, 2000)p.74

proficiency in weaving was derisively called *Thupuri*<sup>96</sup> meaning ignorant of weaving hence worthless.

The point that is being sought to be made here is that weaving in Sualkuchi was not just a means of livelihood, it was seen as a women's 'natural' skill, deviance from which meant social censure.

In order to view women's work from their own perspective, one first has to discount the idea that the work women do in a particular economy are in any way 'natural' or biologically given. A socialist Feminist perspective allows us to understand that the kind of work women do or are expected to do in a particular economy/and the characteristics that are usually associated with women's work there are very much a social construct that fits in with the general image of women that is sanctioned by the ideology there. Viewing the weavers work from this kind of perspective would allow us to find answers to more complex questions like were women, in traditional Assamese society expected to weave? Was it a sort of ideological compulsion, a household imperative? But then again, if a household imperative to weave existed in Sualkuchi was it only because the lack of the particular skill was looked down upon or was weaving given so much importance because female labour was advantageous in other ways? In what ways was the worker women in Assam constructed? Did the weavers' skills, her labour contributions allow her to play

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<sup>96</sup> J.N. Phukan., Products Agricultural and non Agricultural in H.K. Barpujari (ed), *The Comprehensive History of Assam* Volume 3, (Guwahati, 1994) p.114

an effective role in the family's decision making process? Could she stake her claim to a share in their family's income by virtue of her actual contributions to it? Or was her work merely viewed as a qualification for bride hood?

These are complex questions that have to be resolved, before one can even begin to understand the weaver's actual status in contemporary society and her role in this sector through the decades. One needs to concentrate on two aspects then-gender relations as we observe them and the need to go back in time to see how far they were already there and how far they can explain what happened in the past. It is a kind of an experiment in trying to understand the past of a particular industry in terms of the gender relations that existed in it then and what we see of those gender relations at present.

While trying to view the weaver's labour from a feminist perspective, one fact that becomes clear is that a strictly economic approach cannot capture the reality of her actual contribution to socio-economic production or the complexity of her actual position. Hence it is important to move beyond the quantitative and integrate economic theory and empirical analysis on a gender basis in order to do justice to the women's role to their society and economy. The study hence will use an analytical description for capturing the complexity and historical variability of gender relations in intra and extra-household dynamics. By analytical description is meant a formulation that seeks to comprehensively spell out both quantitative and qualitative factors that might impinge on gender relations without one being pre-constrained by the structure that formal

modeling imposes or by data limitations. An analytical description and an empirical analysis with a socialist feminist perspective can in different ways extend an understanding about how gender relations get constructed within and outside the household.

As far as a specific approach to studying women's labour in the silk industry is concerned, the study has already contented that one need not be restricted to a single formalized model. Nonetheless a critique of the above approaches suggests that the notion that the family is a unit of Co-operative conflict (initially introduced by Amartya Sen as a critique of the formalized Bargaining theory of the Household) represents an important theoretical and practical step which can lead to a better understanding of household dynamics. Again, the indices suggested in the Capabilities Approach can also aid in understanding the condition and well being of individuals.(in this case that of the weavers.) The study will therefore utilize these two approaches and theories in an attempt to better understand household dynamics and the position of women silk workers in Sualkuchi.

The task thus, is to address fundamental issues in feminist thought. In what ways are social relations gendered, problematized and interwoven with other systems of inequity? What errors and myths exist about women's natural abilities and accomplishments? While it may be unsettling to have long held ideas challenged, the process of re-thinking women's lives is essential, for the dynamics quality of social life responding as it does to material, historical and

### Chapter – III

#### SERICULTURE AND SILK WEAVING IN ASSAM: PRE-COLONIAL TO END OF BRITISH RULE.

The art of sericulture and silk weaving has a long history in the world. As far as evidence goes, silk culture seems to have originated in China. The Chinese historians trace back the use of the product of the silk worm to the period of the myths. Silk is mentioned as being used in the making of sounding chords for the musical instruments called *kin* which was a sort of lyre with 27 chords.<sup>1</sup> Many fascinating legends are woven around the discovery of silk, but none is as widely accepted as the story of the Chinese queen his-ling shih or Silingihi, wife of the emperor W'hang, who ruled over China about 2,500 B.C. According to the legend, the Empress was moving in her garden one day when she saw some tiny insects feeding on mulberry leaves. A few days later the worms had grown very big. She continued watching the process until the cocoons were spun by the silkworms. The 14 year old queen carried the cocoons to the palace where she preserved them until moths emerged. One day she accidentally dropped pierced cocoons into a hot -water bath. When she tried to retrieve them, a shimmering white mass of yarn emerged. The Empress had discovered silk.<sup>2</sup> According to another legend, narrated by Leotard,<sup>3</sup> silk was discovered earlier by Seling-chi

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<sup>1</sup> L.Leotard., *Memorandum on silk in India.*, (Assam,1916)., p.1

<sup>2</sup> P.Venkatanarasaih., *Sericulture in India*, (New Delhi, 1992)p.4

<sup>3</sup> L.Leotard., *op. cit.*, p.1

the wife of the celebrated Emperor Huang Ti. The Empress is credited to have invented the loom by 2640 B.C. The deep devotion of the Empress to the development of the silk industry had such a wide impact on the masses that after her death, altars were raised to her memory and she was worshipped as the 'Goddess of the silkworms". According to Cicilia Ng, from this time onward, silk is frequently mentioned in Chinese ancient literary texts. It is mentioned in an ancient literary text, the *classic of Odes* and quotes, "... Warp and weft are empty..." and Zhu yi's annotation explains that 'warp holds the horizontal line and Weft the vertical one'. Besides the loom is alluded to in numerous poems of different dynasties. The most famous one is a long poem describing the story of Mulan who joins the army in her father's name. The poem starts with a scene where Mulan is working at the loom. Mulan is weaving a cloth, the sound of the warp cannot be heard instead there is only Mulan sighing... .."

An interesting observation that Cicilia Ng makes in this context is that all spinsters (from which the word spinner is derived,) are women in all mythologies. Incidentally, the word spinster is used to refer to a single unmarried woman, which goes to show the involvement of women in the craft. The technology of spinning and weaving is always created by a goddess, for example *Arachne* in Greek mythology, *chih Niu* in Chinese mythology, *Nert* in Egyptian mythology etc. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the word techne can

be traced back to the Indo-European root *teks*, which means “to weave”. In fact weaving is the only technology that man admits has been created by women<sup>4</sup>.

From china as a centre, the industry is said to have radiated to other parts of the world including India via Tibet by about 140 B.C.through the famous silk route or Silk Road. This was the name given to the numerous mountain passes and ways, known as *Duars which* exist between Assam and Tibet through Bhutan. Across this route, a considerable amount of trade was carried on from early times. While the exports from Assam consisted of lac, *muga* silk, *endi* cloth among other articles, the Assamese used to receive woolen cloths gold dust, rock salt, Chinese silk and Tibetan smoking pipes.<sup>5</sup>The other view is that mulberry and silk culture had originated in the lower slopes of the Himalayas and as such they might have originated either in China or India or in both the countries at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

The date of introduction of silk manufacture in Assam or the tradition of silk weaving in Sualkuchi cannot definitely be ascertained. However historical records point to the fact that the *Katonis* or the rearers of the *Pat* silk entered Assam in the 12<sup>c</sup> A.D. It appears then that this craft flourished under

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<sup>4</sup> Cecelia Ng., “When Cyberfeminism Meets Chinese Philosophy, Computer, Weaving and Women”, in Cecelia Ng et al. (ed)., *Gender, Technology and Development*, September –December 2003, Vol 7, No.3 (New Delhi, 2003)p.281

<sup>5</sup> See, S.K. Bhuyan., *Anglo Assamese Relations*, (New Delhi, 1985)pp.54-55 and B.K. Baruah., *A Cultural History of Assam.*, (Guwahati,1969) pp.112-113

<sup>6</sup> Prabin Baishya., *The silk Industry of Assam:A case Study in the Sualkuchi Cluster*, NEDfi, 2003 See also, P. Venkatanarasaih.,*op.cit.*,p.4

the Pala kings. During the time of the Assamese poet, Sri Chandra Bharati, a contemporary of King Nara Narayan of Cooch Behar, weaving of *pat* silk was an established practice in Sualkuchi.<sup>7</sup>

It is evident that Assam had a high reputation for silk production in the world. According to B, K. Baruah, "The Mohammadan historians noticed that the silks of Assam were excellent and resembled those of China. Tavernier writes of Assam silk "produced on trees" The royal presents which Hamsavega carried as gifts from Bhaskaravarman to Harsha included "silken cloths (*ksaumani*) pure as the moon's light. *Dukula* (broad cloth) was the usual name for the finest *Ksauma* and it is referred to in the Bargaon Grant as being used for flags. Bana too mentions that the *Abhoga* umbrella sent to Harsha by Bhaskarvarmana was wrapped in *Dukula*. The Arthashastra in the chapter on royal treasury mentions the places of manufacture of the best kinds of *dukula*. Kautilya also refers to the varieties of fibrous garments known as *patrona* and remarked that which is produced in the country of Suvarnakundya (Assam)<sup>8</sup> was "red as the sun, as soft as the surface of the gem, woven while the threads were very wet and of uniform or mixed texture and was considered the best. It is therefore evident

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<sup>7</sup> Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur., "The Weaving Master", Letter, to the second secretary Government of Assam, Shillong, March no 13.,(Assam,1914)

<sup>8</sup> B.K. Baruah citing literary evidence from the *Arthashastra* has identified Suvarnakundya as Assam, See B.K. Baruah., *op.cit.*, p.104

that Assam even in the 4<sup>th</sup> century was celebrated for *dukula* fit to be kept in the royal treasury.”<sup>9</sup>

Aside from historical references, an interesting Assamese legend relates that a poor Brahmin widow gave birth to three sons after the death of her husband and was excommunicated by the society for her alleged unchastity. In her distress, she sought help from a holy hermit, who taking pity on her, changed her three sons into three silk worms, viz, *eri*, *muga* and *pat*<sup>10</sup>. This could perhaps be interpreted to mean that only women of the lower castes/classes took to weaving, or that the social status of the women who took to weaving were considered lowly by the society at that pointy of time.

The characteristics of the *eri*, *muga* and *pat* silk and their rearing methods have been elaborately described in British records. According to H.Z.Darrah’s account, “*Eri* also called *endi* silk is obtained from a silkworm known as *Attacusricini*. The vernacular as well as the scientific name of the insect denotes its connection with the *era* or the castor plant which is its principal food plant. The *eri* is a multivoltine and produces 6 or 7 broods in a year. It is reared entirely indoors. The spun *eri* thread is devoid of luster but is soft to the touch and remarkably durable, qualities that make *eri* cloth particularly suitable for

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* See also, P. C. Choudhury., *The History of the Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth century A.D.* (Guwahati, 1959)

<sup>10</sup> B.C.Allen., *Monograph on the Silk Cloths of Assam* (Shillong, April 1900) pp.166-180

rough wear. The *eri* silk is light but warm; the ordinary cold season wear of the Assamese villager was generally made of this cloth.<sup>11</sup>

Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur's account contain the following information on the *pat* and the *muga* silk.

The *pat* worm is a *Bombyx* and is akin to the common silkworm of Europe, China, Japan and Bengal. The *pat* worm feeds exclusively on the leaves of the mulberry tree. The cultivation of this crop was practically confined to a section of the *Katonis* or *Jugi* caste- the *polupohas*. Of the three varieties of silk grown in Assam the *pat* silk was the most valuable and only the well-to-do could afford to wear the *pat* cloth.

*Muga* silk is produced by an insect known to science as *Antheraea Assamea*. The silkworm is not known to be cultivated outside of Assam, a fact which gives relevance to its scientific name. The silk yielded by the *Muga* is of a golden yellow colour. The *Muga* insect is a polyvoltine and produces 5 broods in a year. The chief food plants of the worm are the *som* and the *halau* tree. The *muga* worm assumed two varieties when it was fed on the *champa* (*chapa*) and the *tetranthera polyantha* (*mezankuri adakuri*) plant. *Champa* silk is described as very fine white silk which used to be worn only by the Ahom kings and their

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<sup>11</sup> See H.Z.Darrah., *Notes on some industries of Assam.,1884-1895* pp.77-78. See also, E.Stack., *Notes on Some Industries of Assam, 1884-1885*((Shillong 1896)

nobles. Similarly the *mezankuri* silk as reported by Hamilton constituted the dress of the higher ranks, most of it being dyed with lac.<sup>12</sup>

While History as well as tradition are silent as to the origin and date of the introduction of the culture of the *eri* and *muga* silk worms in the Assam valley, according to British sources, "both are very probably of indigenous origin, since neither of them is known to be cultivated outside the province or at any greater distance than the neighbouring district of Bengal. The *Eri* silkworm has never been found in the wild state, but a very near congener *Attacus Cynthia* occurs wild in Assam and may have been the progenitor of the domesticated *eri*."<sup>13</sup>

The history of the *pat* silk also is uncertain. The cultivation of this silk was practically confined to a section of the *Katoni* or *Jugi* caste, the *poluphoas*. It is said that the ancestors of the *jugis* belonged to a priestly class, but having seceded from orthodoxy and denied the supremacy of the Brahmins, they incurred the displeasure of their king Ballal Sen of Bengal and his Brahmin advisors and were denounced by them as outcastes. All social intercourse with the *jogis* (or *jugis* as they were contemptuously called) was prohibited and they were compelled to flee Bengal. Some of them came to Assam with their knowledge of mulberry silk worm from Bengal. The evil reputation which the

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<sup>12</sup> Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., *The silk industry of Assam*, Agriculture B, Sept 1915, Nos,16-45, File A-25, pp.39-41

<sup>13</sup> H.Z.,Darrah., *op.cit.*, pp.77-78

*jugis* had acquired in Bengal followed them to Assam and attached also to the occupation of *pat* rearing by which they lived and *Pat* rearing continued to be regarded with contempt by the rest of the population.<sup>14</sup> One can here refer back to the earlier mentioned popular Assamese legend regarding the origin of silk weaving.

With the coming of the Ahoms we get a clearer picture of the importance of silk manufacturing among the Assamese rural folk and the role of women in it. The Ahoms made their appearance in North East Assam in 1228 A.D. and gradually extended their domain over different parts of Assam. Under the Ahoms, manufacturing of silk cloth was extended to all sections including those of the upper castes in the valley. Queen Sarveswari, the wife of Siva Simha (1714-44) is said to have greatly encouraged spinning and weaving by the ladies, and also imported designs and patterns from other parts of India.<sup>15</sup> The Ahom Kings established a Department of Weaving and maintained skilled weavers to supply the royal wardrobe with clothes. The weavers received rent-free lands and other favours in return for their services.<sup>16</sup> Elaborate arrangements were made for keeping in the Royal store sufficient quantity of cloths of different varieties for presentation to foreign courts and dignitaries<sup>17</sup>. Although spinning and weaving were kept out of the *khel* system nevertheless it appears that the

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<sup>14</sup> Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., *op.cit.* p.4

<sup>15</sup> S.K. Bhuyan ., *Studies in the History of Assam*, (New Delhi, 1985) p.70

<sup>16</sup> B.K. Baruah., *op.cit.*, p.105.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Gait., *History of Assam.*, (Calcutta 1933), p.271

state sought to establish some regulation on this economic activity also. An interesting fact that emerges from the records is that Momai Tamuli Borboruah, a minister of the Ahom monarch, Raja Pratap Singha (1603-1614) made it compulsory for every able bodied adult male to make a bamboo basket and every able bodied female to spin a certain quantity of cloth every evening. It is perhaps from this point that weaving among the Assamese became a part of women's ordinary household duties. No woman was considered accomplished unless she had attained proficiency in weaving. When a proposal of marriage was made, the first question asked related to the bride's proficiency in *bowa-kata*, i.e whether she is skilled in spinning and weaving.<sup>18</sup> This, then also perhaps was the starting point of the creation of a myth of a woman's natural skill. Female labour thus given a compulsory character was advantageous in many ways. On the one hand it helped households to fulfill their cloth requirement and also fulfill the state demand and on the other hand it helped to keep in the Royal Store a sufficient quantity of cloths of different varieties for presentation to foreign courts and dignitaries.

The encouragement given to spinning and weaving resulted in the concentration of silk production centers. In Medieval biographies of Vaishnavite preachers, one comes across certain areas or villages known for producing silk. Budha Ata, one of the foremost disciples of Madhabdeva hailed from Tantikuchi

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<sup>18</sup> B.K.Baruah., *op.cit.*, p.105

where silk cloths were produced. Ananta Kandali, one of the junior contemporaries of Sankardeva, in his autobiographical reference to his ancestry gives an interesting description of the locality in which silk was produced in abundance. He refers to Hajo which probably included Sualkuchi as well<sup>19</sup>. Medieval records viz, the *Guru Charit Katha* mentions almost every women in connection with spinning and weaving. It is interesting to note that sometimes even handicapped women too busied themselves in spinning and weaving. The family loom was so essential that if any family somehow did not have its own loom it used to borrow one from others even on share-clothing basis or by selling or mortgaging gold or valuable ornaments- in both cases the women of the family taking the initiative. It is recorded that in times of need some families could supply as much clothes as the situation demanded. For example Ai Dayal Hari prasha, wife of one Hazara Atai could provide at a time 80 *bhakats* (disciples of Shankardeva) each with two pieces of cloth. This shows how a society depended on women in the loom for its entire clothing needs. The medieval records, viz, the *guru charit katha* mention that the daily life of the women started with rising from bed in the morning and taking bath in the river, washing clothes, husking and boiling rice, cooking food, weaving cloth, taking care of children etc. The domestic cloth requirement was entirely met by women. Almost every woman referred to in the work is mentioned in connection

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<sup>19</sup> J.N. Pukhan., "Products, Agricultural and Non Agricultural" in H.K. Barpujari., (ed) *The Comprehensive History of Assam.*, Vol 3(Guwahati 1994) pp. 202-203

with weaving and spinning indicating clearly that it was they who had the responsibility of supplying the household with necessary clothing.<sup>20</sup>

Thus women were an indispensable partner of men in the socio-economic processes of the period. Despite this, contemporary sources contain hardly any record of women taking part in socio-economic production and this despite volumes of records kept and preserved by the Ahom state (*The buranjis*) and biographical and genealogical records of medieval Assam. Once the skill became identified with women, it simply became part of her daily routine and ceased to be even valued economically or acknowledged as labour even though it was the women's skill that helped sustain the industry throughout the Ahom period. Female weavers were awarded only a peripheral status. This is evidenced from the fact that, the state department of weaving was headed by men and King Naranarayan (1540-1587) appointed Sankardeva as the chief of the weaver's guild, at Tantikuchi in Kamrup.<sup>21</sup> Women seem to have been kept away from acquiring economic strength through participation in the production system. Training and engagement in weaving, for female silk weavers was part and parcel of the period of maintenance and general training before marriage expected of all girls.

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<sup>20</sup> Guru Charit Katha., as cited by Jahnabi Gogoi Nath., "Women and Work in Medieval Assam; Reflections from the Guru Charit Katha, in Manorama Sharma and David Syiemlieh (eds) ., *Proceedings of the North East India History Association.*.(Guwahati, 2003) p.352

<sup>21</sup> Quoted, in BK. Baruah., *op.cit.*, p.108

It was this structure based on the exploitation of women's labour which laid the foundation for future hierarchical divisions in the industry.

The real test of the silk industry's resilience began with the entry of the British into Assam in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. British traders had established commercial contact with Assam even before the East India Company assumed power in Bengal in 1757. Business documents show that traders from Bengal in the early years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century bought betel nut and tobacco. They received in exchange for their goods, silk, lac, *mugadhotis*, ivory and timber from Assam.<sup>22</sup> The East India Company did not take long to understand where its best interests lay. In 1786, it resolved to open trade with Assam. It was a sort of a calculated march on the part of the company, from commerce to political control of the situation which passed off at a dramatic speed. From the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Ahom monarchy was tottering under the impact of a series of internecine power struggles. The crisis was all embracing. Ultimately it gave a chance to the East India Company an opportunity to interfere and project its image as the savior of the people of Assam from the Burmese inroads and the internal threat posed by the Moamariya rebellion. By 1826, the whole of Assam had passed into the hands of the East India Company<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> *Fort William India House Correspondence, (Public)*, Vol.1.(1748-1756) p.11

<sup>23</sup> Rajen Sakia., *Social and Economic History of Assam 1853-1921* (New Delhi, 2000)

For details on the British annexation of Assam, see also, S.K. Bhuyan., *op.cit.* and H.K. Barpujari., *Assam in the Days of the Company*, (Shillong ,1996 )

Historical literature has little to say about what the change from native to foreign rule meant for rural women weavers and silk producers. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans usually dealt with silk traders in Assam, rather than the peasant producers of silk cocoon or raw silk and hence much of the works deal with the complicated technical aspects of silk weaving. Nonetheless even casual observation made by British administrators and a feminist scrutiny of the contemporary records reveal how important women's labour was for the sustenance of the silk industry. For instance, "weaving" says Samman, 'among the Assamese forms a part of a girl's education and a part of a woman's ordinary household duties. The women of the family are expected to make their own cloths and those of the men as well'.<sup>24</sup> The weaving of cloth of every kind says Hannay, as well as, the process of dyeing is carried on exclusively by the female and all, engaged from the *Gohain's* family to the poorest in the villages.<sup>25</sup> B.C Allen notes, "An Assamese woman is a house keeper, weaver and cook as well as a wife, and in many cases a farm labourer as well, and parents and guardians do not always see why a young man should be given such a valuable help-mate"<sup>26</sup>. This shows the crucial role played by women in the socio- economic process especially through their traditional handloom activity of silk processing and weaving.

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<sup>24</sup> H.F. Samman., *Monograph on the Cotton Fabrics of Assam*, Calcutta 1897, Quoted in B.K.Baruah. *op.cit.*, p.105

<sup>25</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p.106

<sup>26</sup> B.C Allen., *op.cit.*, p.104

The indispensability of women's labour is further evidenced by British records which contain details about the different stages of silk manufacture. The following account by Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur, written in the early years of the 20th century, gives us a clear idea of the involvement of women in the craft. According to the report, the fibre of the silk cocoon was extracted either by reeling or by spinning. Reeling consists in drawing out the natural single filaments of a number of cocoons and uniting them into a single thread which was taken up and wound around a wooden roller which was made to revolve like a reel. The Assamese reeling apparatus known as the *hal* or *bheer* was a simple contrivance. Two women were apparently required for working the reeling apparatus, one to draw the silk from the cocoons, the other to wind it on the reel.

As soon as reeling was over, the wooden roller on which the silk was wound was detached from the reeling apparatus, and the thread was transferred with the help of a spinning wheel to *natai* or bamboo reel. The re-reeling was done as a rule by the woman herself and generally as soon as the reeling of the cocoons was over.

The spinning of silk was usually the task of the females. It was a very slow and tedious process and usually a woman, in addition to her household tasks could spin only 2 *tolas* (1kg: 85.73 *tolas*) of thread in a day.<sup>27</sup>

During the long history of silk production in Sualkuchi, rural women took part in all the four stages of silk production. While weaving was an almost exclusive preserve of females, It may be mentioned at this point that in Sualkuchi, it was not unusual to find both men and women weaving but this may be because under the Ahoms, silk weaving had become a specialized craft in Sualkuchi undertaken by professional weavers catering to the demands of the state. Early British records too point out that in some parts of the districts of Kamrup (which included Sualkuchi) and Darrang, professional weavers manufacture the silks but the chief manufacturers were women, that finer cloths were generally prepared by women of respectability and position.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to note that the manufacture of silk was purely domestic. There were no large filatures, nor was there any system of breeding the worms on a large scale. The weaver produced just enough for domestic consumption and disposed the thread at the village fair. There was no regular trade in silk

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<sup>27</sup>Rai Bhupen Chandra Basu Bahadur., *The Silk Industry of Assam*, Agriculture B, Sept 1915, Nos 16-45, File A-25, pp.39-41

<sup>28</sup> *Report on the Industries of Assam.*, 1884-1885.

yarns or fabrics, nor any stated market where they could be purchased in large quantities.<sup>29</sup>

From the British records, thus it becomes clear that this industry was the most important cottage industry which kept the rural household going for whatever supplementary income it could earn during lean agricultural season.

Apart from noting the women's role in silk manufacturing one also has to understand the kind of steps the British took to encourage the industry that was almost a life line of the rural Assamese people.

One of the first British officers to understand the economic potential of extension of sericultural and handloom operations in Assam was David Scott, the Governor General's Agent on the North East Frontier. Scott noted that Assam was an agricultural not a manufacturing country and that there could be no great market for rice and such crops, Scott therefore argued forcefully that unless means were immediately adopted by the government to encourage the production of more costly articles of export such as raw silk and *muga* in particular, it would become necessary either to reduce materially the amount of scanty revenue at present derived from the districts or to revert to the former system of compulsory labour. In 1831, Scott, introduced from Rangpur reelers, reels and plants of the *Morus Alba* and established a factory at Darrang in upper Assam with the object of extending the cultivation of the *pat* or mulberry-reared

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<sup>29</sup> W.W.Ward., *Report on the Administration of Assam, 1880-1881*

silk worm and of improving the reeling of the *muga* silk worm. The practical results of the experiment were slight and nothing more was done to encourage sericulture in Darrang. Between 1834 and 1840, cocoons and thread of the *muga* worm with specimens of the woven cloth were submitted to the sub committee of the Agriculture and Horticulture society for approval but though the products were reported upon favourably, the silk trade does not seem to have in any way been stimulated and no attempt was made to invest capital in the industry for a long time<sup>30</sup>. In 1873, a gentleman by the name of Mr. Lepper was commissioned by Messer's Lister and Company to endeavour to introduce silk on a commercial basis in the district of Lakhimpur. Lepper found the climatic conditions to be exceptionally favourable, but the difficulty and expense of procuring the labour required was apparently so great that he was advised to abandon the enterprise and no attempts were since made to extend the industry in this district.<sup>31</sup> Between 1868 and 1888 attempts were made by several tea planters and by Mr A.C. Campbell. D.C. Kamrup to rear the *eri* worm on a commercial scale but the results was disappointing and in 1887 lakhs of worms carried off entire crops. Since that time no attempt was made to practice sericulture on a commercial scale in Assam. Subsequent British efforts to put silk on the commercial map of the country failed.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Nirodh k. Baruah., *David Scott in North East India.*,(New Delhi 1970),pp.88-105  
See also, *The Assam and East Bengal Administrative Report.*,1907-1908, pp.24-29

<sup>31</sup> E.Stack., *op.cit.*,p.4

<sup>32</sup> Rajen Sakia., *op.cit.*, P.68

In all these cases failure was said to be due to the spread of diseases amongst the worms, or the destruction of castor plants by caterpillars. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, entire crops and broods of worms fell prey to “flacherie”(denoting bacterial fermentation of undigested food) a deadly silk worm disease and pebrine<sup>33</sup>. Pebrine first hit European silkworms during the mid 1840’s and a soon spread to other silk regions whose governments tried to protect local production. The disease itself was not brought under control till the mid 1880’s when hygienic methods developed by Pasteur and his associates were put to use by European silk worm rearers. By that time however European cocoon production had been almost halved. Sericulture in Europe survived only because of enormous annual imports of silkworm eggs from Japan. The Japanese Government intervened at various levels to protect and support and restructure its domestic silk production, setting up strict controls which enabled Japan to take advantage of the collapse of European sericulture and develop both a thriving export trade of silkworm eggs to Europe and a large export of silk yarn to the United States.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See, A.Pringle Jameson.,(D.Sc)., *Report on the Diseases of Silkworms in India*, (New Delhi, Reprint, 1984) Although from the designation of the author, it is apparent that the report was filed by a British Officer, unfortunately the reference to the book does not indicate the year in which the Report was filed and only the re-printed version of the Report is available from the North Eastern Council Library, Shillong.

<sup>34</sup> William Van Schendel., *Reviving A Rural Industry: Silk Producers and Officials in India and Bangladesh, 1880’s to 1980’s* (New Delhi 1995)., pp.44-45

In Assam, the situation was very different. Not only was the opportunity to export silkworm eggs to Europe lost, but the Government looked on impassively when whole broods of silkworm was ravaged by disease.

It would be unreasonable, however to attach too much importance to the failure of the European attempts to cultivate the silkworm. It is difficult to believe that a plant that thrived in such luxuriance around the cottages of villagers could not be cultivated on a large scale when the proper method of treatment of disease had been ascertained. The real cause of failure in all these cases was the absence of expert knowledge on sericulture. The outbreak of disease amongst silkworms was not peculiar to Assam. With scientific culture of the worm, dangers from disease had been greatly reduced in Bengal and elsewhere and there is no reason why scientific sericulture should not have proved successful in Assam.<sup>35</sup> Moreover as in the case of tea and other plantation work elsewhere, the British could have easily overcome the shortage of labour with migrant labour.<sup>36</sup>

The Report on the industries of Assam, 1884-1885 noted that Assam cocoon growers (both *eri* and *muga*) were in a much better position to supply cocoons to the English silk-spinner than the principal *tussar* producing areas of

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<sup>35</sup> See, observations made by G.N. Gupta(ICS) ., *Survey of Industries and Resources of Eastern Bengal and Assam*, 1907-1908, p.24

also E. Z Darrah remarks about plant disease, op. cit., p .78

<sup>36</sup> Rajen Sakia., *op.cit.*, p.72

Bengal.<sup>37</sup> Some British officers, like the Imperial Silk Specialist, Maxwell Lefroy, noted that the silk sector, especially the *muga* industry is a considerable one, of peculiar character and concerned with a class of silk not known from any other area and that it was probably well worth making an effort to put the industry on a good footing and to develop it. Despite such positive recommendations, no attempt seems to have ever been made to develop the cultivation of *muga* for the English market. The *muga* silk worm was never biologically investigated by an entomologist. Interestingly, while advocating steps for the extension of *Muga* and *Eri* silk, "Lefroy squarely blamed the Assamese rearer for being "lazy and unenterprising, superstitious and unaware of hygienic practices to prevent disease among the silk worms." <sup>38</sup>. Even Indian officials seem to have pre judged the native rearer even before introducing steps for improvement of sericulture. For instance, Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur termed the Indian cultivator as conservative and un-enterprising<sup>39</sup>.At this point, It would be worthwhile to note the rearing practices of the indigenous population. Rearing of silk worms was mostly carried out by the women folk. Men took a very minor part in the rearing of *Eri* and *Pat* worm which were reared indoors. Their chief function was to fetch castor and mulberry leaf from a distance when the home supply of leaf fell short. In the case of *muga*, which was reared outdoors at a distance from the rearers

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<sup>37</sup> E.Stack., *op.cit.*, p.4

<sup>38</sup> Maxwell Lefroy., *Report on the Indian Silk Industry*, Revenue Department Agri, A, June, 1920, Nos. 1-64

<sup>39</sup> Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., *op. cit.*, p.54

home, men took a greater part in the rearing of the worm. All silk worms especially the *muga* and *pat* were regarded as sacred beings (*doyang bostu*) which was required to be handled with care and reverence and which must not be touched or even looked at by the rearers themselves. The rearer herself was not allowed to touch the worms till she had washed and put on a clean cloth. Rearers believed that a single touch of impure body was enough to finish the entire crop in a week.<sup>40</sup> It is therefore difficult to accept the British argument that the rearer's lack of personal hygiene led to disease among the worms. The real reason was the lack of information on scientific methods of rearing the worms. The art of sericulture and weaving was a peculiar skill and every hand just could not be good enough. Traditions have it that personal cleanliness of the men or women who are supposed to rear *eri*, *muga* or *pat* worms is the secret of success. Such absolute cleanliness could not be expected from hired hands more so when their number became numerous. It may have been that as long as women supervised sericulture and rearing operations, under strict traditions of cleanliness, the worms survived; while British efforts to rear the worm on a commercial scale through hired help failed. Moreover as noted above, the British seem to have very easily given up their plans for commercialization of silk rearing operations because of the expenditure and effort involved in training the local population in rearing practices. The second equally likely reason could be that

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<sup>40</sup> See, *Report of the Sixth Industries Conference*, March 1937., Industries A., Nos., 53-127

since sericulture operations were carried out by the women, plans for commercialization would have necessitated their involvement too and the colonial Government was either worried that, the “native” population which considered sericulture and weaving as household practices of the female folk, would resist this move or maybe, the administrators own conservatism prevented them from undertaking expansion schemes which would have required the skill, advise and participation of women.

Though records are silent on the impact of the ruin of crops on the rural producers, one can surmise that the supply of yarn to the weaver must have been disrupted thus causing them hardship. We do however have definitive evidence of the elimination of two varieties of silkworm due to the extension of the colonial rule in Assam. These were the two most expensive varieties of silk- the *mezankuri* and the *champa*- silk that was worn only by the Ahom kings and their nobles. By 1889, the *Mezankuri* variety of silk had also totally disappeared. One of the reasons for this falling off is that the new rules restricting clearances in the forests were unfavourable to the growth of the *mezankuri* tree. The tree sprang up spontaneously in abandoned clearances and it is in this early shrub - like stage that it is fit for the worms to feed on. In the second year the silk is hardly distinguishable from the common *muga*. Thus the mature tree was quite out the question and as the *mezankuri* was never cultivated, forests clearances were the only places where breeders could look for young worms. By 1881,

there does not seem to have been a single piece obtainable in Jorhat.<sup>41</sup> The collapse of the Ahom monarchy saw the decline of the *pat* or mulberry silk as it was more largely in vogue under the native rule. After the annexation of Assam, *pat* was supplanted by the cheaper *Tussar* of Bengal. All the three varieties of silk mentioned above which were earlier, exclusively manufactured by the weavers of Sualkuchi, as traditional means of livelihood must have suffered a set back. How rural women coped with this crisis is of course open to debate. Not just the luxury varieties, even the daily wear of the Assamese of the rural folk, felt the impact of the British regime. Partly due to the influx of money into the province, the price of *muga* and *eri* silks rose four fold within fifty years that is, between 1826-1892 making it out of reach of many common people.<sup>42</sup>

By 1907-08, the silk industry was again contending with unfavourable market conditions. Exporting shops in Kamrup and Calcutta were reported to be holding stock which they were not being able to dispose off. The East Bengal and Assam Administrative report of that year noted that reported that the condition of the silk weavers was depressed and much of the profit earned was being taken by the *kyan Mahajans* who advanced cocoons to the weavers. For 6 months of labour to spin and weave a *than* of *endi* cloth, the weaver earned only 5-6 rupees. The weavers in Sualkuchi were relatively fortunate. Here (maybe because it had a long tradition of silk weaving by professional weavers)

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<sup>41</sup> *Report on the Industries of Assam, 1884-85* p.21

<sup>42</sup> *Report on the Industries of Assam, 1904-1905.*

the weavers were independent of the *mahajans* or middle men and bought their own cocoons and were able to sell their cloths at a much greater profit. However the entire export business was in the hands of the *marwaris*, who had no interest either in the welfare of the weavers, or in the introduction of any improvements in the weaving industry. The report further noted that the cultivation of *pat* had been practically given up in Assam and the fabrics which were supposed to be manufactured from *pat* began to be replaced by foreign yarn from China.<sup>43</sup> According to some officials, the decay of the *pat* silk industry was due to the fact that the *jugis* or *katonis* who used to be the only caste engaged in the industry were giving it up, because they wished to rise in the social scale by giving up what was considered a degrading profession.<sup>44</sup> But as Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur argued, "people seldom give up a lucrative hereditary occupation for the sake of mere vanity. After all, it is the economic question that tells and if sericulture as an industry really pays, we can be sure that it will not be discarded for the sake of doubtful social advancement."<sup>45</sup> The real cause of the decadence of the *pat* silk industry is due to the import of cheap silk from Bengal and china. Added to this was the fact that cheap machine made cotton and silk clothes which were imported from China and Japan were increasingly challenging the sale of the more expensive *muga* and *pat*. By 1908, in fact, the

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<sup>43</sup> *East Bengal and Assam Administrative Report.*, 1907-1908

<sup>44</sup> Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur, *op.cit.*, p.23

<sup>45</sup> Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur., *op.cit.*,p.44

cultivation of both *muga* and *pat* had considerably declined.<sup>46</sup> Government apathy is revealed in a letter posted by Colonel Keatinge to the Government of India in 1877 where he observed that “the question of extending the *pat* silk industry in Assam need not be seriously considered.”<sup>47</sup>

Once again, the reasons for Government apathy towards silk extension in Assam seem to be the result of a deep seated gender bias. Labour, even in the Western world then, was a male concept- it was something that men did for a wage. It was probably difficult for the British administrators to view Women’s work in the silk industry as productive labour. The silk industry, because of its high concentration of females was thought of as a private affair and women’s work there was viewed as something that was done in their leisure time and hence no special measures were deemed necessary by the Government to foster the industry or work out positive plans for its expansion.

At this point it is important to see whether this largely female dominated industry witnessed a noticeable shift in the number of women involved in this craft to any other handicraft or agriculture sector. The tables given in the next page reveal the workforce participation of women in three major sectors of the economy from 1911 down to 1931.

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<sup>46</sup> See *East Bengal and Assam Administrative Report 1907-1908*. see also G.N. Gupta., *op.cit.*, p.27

<sup>47</sup> *Report on the Industries of Assam, 1884-1895*

**KAMRUP DISTRICT  
OCCUPATION (OR MEANS OF LIVLIHOOD) CENSUS TABLES**

OCCUPATION	1911			1921			1931		
	TOTAL	M	F	TOTAL	M	F	TOTAL	M	F
SILK SPINNING AND WEAVING	402	79	481	243	42	201	246	98	148
WORKERS IN SKIN LEATHER FURS AND FEATHERS	202	187	15	49	43	06	220	215	05
WORKERS IN BRASS, COPPER, BELL METAL AND PRECIOUS METALS	938	887	51	276	276	0	1143	1109	34

Source: *Census of India, Assam*. 1911, 1921 and 1931

Note: (i) Figures are for workers who reported these occupations as their 'main' or principal occupation.

(ii) M=Males, F= Females

(iii) Figures for the third category of workers in 1931 are for workers in precious metals.

There is thus no evidence, general or particular, to say that women gave up their traditional activity of weaving and worm rearing and crowded into agriculture. What we witness in the silk industry is a consistent pattern of gender relations. There is no evidence to suggest that that there was any major re-allocation of gender roles in this sector. Women by far outnumbered men in this sector-almost 1:9

In other words despite unfavourable market forces and Government apathy, silk manufacturing remained a very important occupation for the Assamese women. From a feminist point of view, it is necessary to understand the conditions under which the rural producers survived even as international capitalism expanded.



Before one delves into the issue, it would perhaps be more appropriate to fully understand the circumstances against which the rural women were holding on to their ancestral craft. For one, the lack of credit to the sericulturalists and weavers was a major bottleneck to the development of silk industry. The first of the co-operative societies was set up in 1917, largely through the efforts of an Indian Officer, Kanak Lal Baruah, Director Of Industries, Assam. But the co- operative movement was hardly a success. In fact Kanak Lal Baruah's Plea to allow him to set up more co-operative societies in Assam was rejected.<sup>48</sup> Again, nothing in the administrative records consulted, tell us that the co- operative schemes were designed to advance loans and credit benefits to the women weaver, reelers or spinners to help them set up their own production units. The few people who were lucky to receive the British benevolence were some students of the Guwahati Weaving School, in the form of stipends. But the number of stipendiary students even as late as 1938 was only four. From the Report of the Department of Industries of that year, it is evident that students were male since these stipendiary students were admitted to the advanced course of the Institute and in that year no female students entered the advanced course.<sup>49</sup>

The colonial gender bias with regard to the silk industry is revealed in a very interesting report submitted to the Government of Assam in 1924. It says, “

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<sup>48</sup> Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur.,*op. cit.* p.64

<sup>49</sup> See *Reports of the Industries Department, 1938*

...the Bengal reeling apparatus introduced by the East India Company is decidedly superior to the crude apparatus used in Assam for it could turn out twice the quantity as the Assamese reel. But it must however be remembered that in Bengal, the reelers are professional men who work for a wage, while in Assam reeling, rearing and weaving is for the most part a domestic occupation in which the workers are mostly women working during leisure hours...<sup>50</sup> This point takes on added significance when we remember that the reeling of yarn was a very painful process which left the hands of the women rough and calloused. The report however did recommend the introduction of an improved reeling machine in Sualkuchi as it would help the professional *muga* reelers.<sup>51</sup> As noted earlier, Sualkuchi was the only village in Assam where male weavers took active part in weaving and hence the fact that the report recommends the setting up of a reeling machine here, once again reveals that the colonial attitude towards the silk industry was coloured by its gender bias—its perception that steps for the improvement of silk manufacture should be taken only if male labour was involved.

In 1918 a separate Department of Industries was created and certain subjects were transferred from other Departments to the control of the Department of Industries, the chief of them being the development of the weaving industry, sericulture, and the compilation and collection of trade

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<sup>50</sup> Rai, Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., *op.cit.*, p.77

<sup>51</sup> *Loc.cit.*

statistics.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless the policies that the Department devised were far from robust enough to tackle the problems of the silk industry effectively. The British interest in the silk industry was usually restricted to a managerial point of view. The major issues that the Department sought to address, were, how to boost production, how to improve the quality of the silk, how to get potential producers to take up silk production, and how to prevent losses resulting from silkworm disease and other technical bottlenecks. For instance, the Report of the Department of Industries, 1920-1921, by way of its achievements in that year notes that “....*pat* seeds were distributed to rearers in Sibsagar and Nowgong districts, study of life history of the *muga* ...”<sup>53</sup> was made. Again the Assam Administrative Report of 1926-1927, notes, “.....5000 layings of disease free *pat* and 3000 layings were distributed.... and a considerable quantity of *eri* and *muga* seeds were sold both locally and outside the province.”<sup>54</sup> While these were important issues, they did not get translated into practical policies and in no way seems to have helped the women weavers and silk manufacturers.

In 1930, the Industries Department appointed a weaving master to demonstrate the working of the fly shuttle handloom. No appreciable result was however achieved specially in the Assam valley in many places of which even the existence of a weaving inspector was unknown. The first weaving inspector was a Bengali male who found it difficult to interact with the Assamese weavers most

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<sup>52</sup> *Report on the Administration of Assam 1919-1920.*, P.20

<sup>53</sup> See, *Report on the Department of Industries., 1920-1921.*

<sup>54</sup> See, *Report on the Department of Industries, 1926-1927*

of whom were women. Moreover, no suitable arrangements were made to teach those women weavers who did not appear in public. While it was argued that steps should be taken to train a class of women instructors to work in conjunction with the male demonstrators, nothing much was done in this direction.<sup>55</sup> It is interesting to note that while male students of the Government weaving institute at Guwahati who passed the annual examination, either went for further technical studies outside the province, or were in paid employment in Bengal and elsewhere, female students who passed in the annual examination were engaged in weaving in their own homes.<sup>56</sup> For instance, the Report of the Industries Department of 1935-1936, notes " .....Of the 13 students who passed the elementary course, 12 got themselves admitted to the advanced course and one has joined a cotton mill. Besides these, 7 girls passed the annual examination, of whom one died and the rest are doing weaving at home..."<sup>57</sup> In other words, while the acquisition of improved technical skills by women did not fetch them paid jobs, perhaps due to lack of equal opportunities in the public space, the fact that they continued to weave in their home helped the industry to survive in the rural areas.

A part of the British policy was to engage Weaving parties in selected centers to popularize improved methods of weaving. The peripatetic

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<sup>55</sup> See, *Report on the Department of Industries.*, 1938-39

<sup>56</sup> See, *Reports on the Department of Industries for the years.*, 1930-1939

<sup>57</sup> See, *Report on the Department of Industries, 1936-1937.* See also *Report on the Department of Industries 1940-1941.*, pp.12-13

Demonstration parties started work in the 1920's. Till 1926, there were three weaving parties at work but to meet the "growing demand of the public for demonstrations, a fourth party was sanctioned..."<sup>58</sup> In Sualkuchi by 1938-1939, 1000 fly shuttle slays, 100 jacquards, 1 warping mill and large quantities of accessories were introduced. Even this limited activity was hampered by the lack of funds and an inadequate staff which could not pay proper attention in all matters even in this very important centre<sup>59</sup>. The chief activities of the Department were crippled by the prevailing trade depression.<sup>60</sup>

The Government's policy throughout the 1930's remained restricted to demonstration, encouragement and experimentation. Sericultural works were restricted to the production of improved seeds and demonstrations in different localities of the province among the village rearers.<sup>61</sup>

A constant refrain of official records was the lack of funds for the Industries Department.<sup>62</sup> As has been previously argued, perhaps a female dominated industry did not deserve too much attention in the eyes of the colonial masters. and its activities down to the 1940's remained confined to engaging peripatetic demonstration Parties to demonstrate improved methods

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<sup>58</sup> *Report on the Department of Industries, 1926-1927*

<sup>59</sup> S.L.Mehta., *Report on the Industries of Assam, 1938-1939* p8-10 ;See also, Assam Administrative Report 1931-1932., p.27

<sup>60</sup> See, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam for the year 1930-1931*

<sup>61</sup> *Assam Administrative Report-1933-1934.*, p.25

<sup>62</sup> See for instance, report of the Department of Industries, Assam, 1923-1924

of weaving in the villages of Palasbari, Sualkuchi and inspection of the Government Emporium and weaving institute at Guwahati.<sup>63</sup>

On the whole thus, this period was one of discussion and orientation rather than purposeful Government action. The Government saw its own role as restricted to demonstration of improved methods of weaving through peripatetic weaving parties, encouragement and experimentation. There was no change in the Policy of the Department outlined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the activities of the Department were still confined to the encouragement of the two main cottage industries of the two main cottage industries of the province, viz handloom weaving and sericulture and to the control of technical and industrial education.<sup>64</sup> Well into the 1940's, while authorities maintained that handloom weaving is the most important cottage industry of the province, did nothing to augment this industry. The Department continued to maintain two regular schools for imparting training to a number of students annually with a view to turn out some practical weavers in addition to four peripatetic weaving parties for propaganda and demonstration for the improvement of the industry. There were also two parties for giving practical demonstrations and imparting instruction in dyeing and printing.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam for the year, 1938-1939*

<sup>64</sup> See, *Report of the department of industries 1924-1925*, p. 23 and *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, for 1925-26*, p.1

<sup>65</sup> *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, 1940-1941*

The above overview has shown that the colonial State largely neglected the female dominated silk industry of Assam despite occasional episodes of bureaucratic favour. The Government of Assam began to show some interest in the silk industry in the mid 1880s but it never contemplated an integrated policy let alone a state-controlled leap forward on Japanese lines. Low profile state support through the weaving demonstrations etc had no marked impact on the silk industry. Assam's silk policy was inadequate: it was far from consistent and lacked a clear plan. The Government's main instrument of policy, The Industries Department, remained weak, isolated and ineffectual. This resulted from it being starved of funds, personnel and planning-all indications of lack of top level support.

The positive recommendations of British officers and extension staff (that was entrusted with educating the rearers and reelers in modern technologies) had very little influence in matters of policy. Even the practical knowledge and advise of British Indian Officers were not taken into account as is evident from the fact mentioned earlier that Kanak Lal Baruah Bahadur's plea to establish more co-operative societies for the weavers was rejected. In fact the co-operative support to the weavers throughout Assam, especially Kamrup was totally inadequate as is evident from observations made by the Assam Provincial Banking enquiry committee between 1929-1930.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See, *The Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-1930, Vol. ii, Evidence.*

In 1915 the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, referring to the proceedings of the Assam Industries Conference held the previous year, recommended that eri and muga silk were indigenous to Assam and hence the Government should "...concentrate our attention on the improvement of the silk industry in the province, in particular the improvement of the ..... spinning, reeling and weaving of the *muga* and the *eri* silk...".<sup>67</sup> But throughout our period of discussion, as we have noted, positive recommendations for the regeneration of the silk industry in Assam did not find favour with the Government. Even as late as 1942, schemes submitted by Babu Sushil kumar Deb regarding the regeneration of the silk industry in Assam was not approved.<sup>68</sup>

All silk development programs suffered from a marked gender bias. The fact that British records note the visible female involvement in the silk industry means that Policy makers were aware of the fact that female labour was the backbone of silk production. Nonetheless development efforts were not directed towards the women. Silk extension workers were male. The Guwahati Weaving School which was set up in 1920, with the aim to imparting weaving skills to the local population, was composed of male faculty. The Head Teacher and the Assistant teacher were almost always all male and provisions were made from

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<sup>67</sup> Letter from the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, to the Second Secretary, Chief Commissioner of Assam, Letterno.560-rev,20<sup>th</sup>/21/October 1915

<sup>68</sup> Industry, B. file No lin of 1942. Apparently this gentleman was a prominent person of Assam. Unfortunately this file has been destroyed and only the reference to the contents of the file remains which can be accessed in the Assam State Archives, Guwahati.

time to time for appointment of a 'weaving Master'.<sup>69</sup> While in, 1926, it was decided to add a female weaving section to the Guwahati weaving Institute,<sup>70</sup> the faculty continued to be male appointees. Interestingly, it appears from a letter sent by the Director of Industries to the Second Secretary, that the Guwahati weaving School was in dearth of qualified staff. In fact to quote from the letter, "..... Not a single candidate applied for the posts of Weaving Assistants...." and recommends that the pay of the teachers be raised to attract qualified candidates. From a feminist point of view it can be argued that since weaving was associated with the Assamese women's traditional skill, little wonder than, that the British could not get qualified teachers to run the school. But clearly, the British made no provision for reserving faculty positions for women to teach even in the female section.<sup>71</sup> It was only as late as 1934 and again in 1941 that we come across an instance when a female instructress was appointed to the school. <sup>72</sup>This point reveals the Colonial silk policy never came to grips with the fact that even in male-headed households; the silk manager was usually a woman. The British showed little inclination to invest in or modernize the vast bulk of traditional industries. However, despite lack of Government support and unfavourable market forces, the silk industry, though it

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<sup>69</sup> see for instance, *Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, file 111-1-68m of 1913 and, Agri., B, May 1914, Nos 17-19*

<sup>70</sup> Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, 1926-27

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Rai Bahadur Kanak Lal Barua, Director of Industries, Assam, to the Second Secretary, Government of Assam, Shillong, March, 1922. LSG Department, Industries Branch, May 1922, 14-15

<sup>72</sup> See, SL. Mehta., *op.cit*, and *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, 1940-41.*

did lose its vitality for some time, did not completely die out. In South Asia industrial decline in the early colonial period is usually seen as a result of the world wide re structuring of industries under emergent international capitalism. Similarly a mature capitalist world economy is often held responsible for post colonial troubles in re-industrializing the sub continent. There can be no doubt that global forces impinge on local social processes but it is important also to emphasize that they do so in historically specific ways. Clearly, a mechanical application of grand theory concepts is not very helpful in understanding local historical developments.<sup>73</sup> While the entire Indian sub- continent was reeling under the phenomenon of de-industrialization, in Assam, although the use of silk was largely superseded by imported cotton by 1908, the industry did not die out. It survived. The tradition of producing cocoons and winding some silk and selling it locally continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It still formed an integral part of the national dress of the Assamese.<sup>74</sup> Capitalism never totally destroyed silk production from its original regions.

Nupur Dasgupta in a study of the silk industry in the neighbouring province of Bengal contends that it was the contributory labour of women that helped the industry to survive through 300 years of challenge and crisis.<sup>75</sup> This is probably true of Assam as well. For the rural women in Assam, silk weaving was

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<sup>73</sup> William Van Schendel., *op.cit.*, p.40

<sup>74</sup> Rai Bhupal Chandra Basu Bahadur., *op.cit.*, p.1

<sup>75</sup> Nupur Dasgupta., "Coninuing Gender Patterns. The case of Sericulture" in, *The Journal of Indian Association of Women's Studies* (New Delhi 2000).,p.40

not so much an industry, as a part of the tradition of every female in the Assam Valley.<sup>76</sup> It is probable that because weaving, being almost a way of life of the women folk of Assam, this craft survived. As in the case of Bengal, the households in Assam were able to utilize Women's unpaid labour whenever required. They could always keep the silk industry going for whatever supplementary income the household could earn. This is also probably why the even the inroads of a mature capitalist economy could not dislodge silk from its traditional centre of production in Sualkuchi. Moreover even when men abandoned silk in favour of cheaper mill imported cotton cloth, women still continued to use home spun silk as an article of clothing. As the Assam and East Bengal Administrative Report of 1907-1908 noted,' "All the higher classes females in the Assam Valley still dress themselves very largely in silk, and even the poor women always have one or two silk *mekhalas* for special occasions. Assamese mothers teach the art of weaving and embroidery to their daughters from a very tender age."<sup>77</sup> The households could carry on these activities because their labour was exceptionally cheap as a result of the home based character of silk production.

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<sup>76</sup> *East Bengal and Assam Administrative Report, 1907-1908.* See also, G.N. Gupta(ICS), *op.cit.*, p.24

<sup>77</sup> *Administration of Assam Valley Districts, 1899-1900*

Thus the silk industry remained interlocked with the women's labour relying on her spare time and unmarketable labour to form a crutch that could act as a spring- board for later industrialization. It remains to be seen whether the Government of Independent India in collaboration with the state Government recognized this crucial labour of women in the survival of the silk industry and worked out a policy that would help focus attention and priority on rural producers and manufacturers.

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## CHAPTER IV

### WOMEN WORKERS OF SUALKUCHI IN A CHANGING SCENARIO-POST 1947 DEVELOPMENTS

The previous chapter had noted that throughout a long period of the silk industry, stretching at least from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C, the labour of women has been crucial in sustaining this craft through the rise and fall of the Ahom monarchy and the rise and decline of the colonial rule. The study now seeks to analyze and understand female labour in the silk industry during the contemporary period. An important fact to be taken into account in this regard is that the task of writing women back into History is a complex one, and in many instances, the empirical data has proved to be fragmented, cursory and even silent with regards to particular aspects of her labour. Therefore the chapter has sought to tap, re-interpret and analyze family narratives, popular adages, which have been blended with a feminist sensitivity to yield new information on women in Sualkuchi. This chapter has been largely structured from information (based on conversations with a cross section of weavers, loom owners and Government officials) gathered during field trips to Sualkuchi between January 2007 and August 2008. Using the methodology of oral history sources and family narratives, the chapter seeks to highlight the vulnerability of the women silk workers in the changing market conditions and the exploitation of her labour within the household as well as in the factory.

It must be remembered that the method of silk manufacturing has changed very little since the colonial times. Modernization as it came to Assam's silk industry was a limited process, It did not mean a definitive shift in technology or tools. The fly shuttle loom introduced during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World war is still in vogue in the village.<sup>1</sup> However, since the 1980's, new structures in the organization of production seem to have appeared in Sualkuchi. Our conversations with loom owners who have been in the silk manufacturing business over several decades, brought to light many interesting facts. Luhit Kakoty of S. M. Road<sup>2</sup> told us that his family has been in the silk manufacturing business since 1965. Initially the family had four looms which was worked on by his mother and his four sisters. His Father was a carpenter and it was his mother and his sisters who looked after all tasks relating to weaving. Since the late 1970's and early 1980's the family has been able to plough back the profits in setting up more looms so that today they have 10 looms. However as his sisters got married and left home, he started hiring migrant labour to work the looms while he himself looks after the marketing aspect. Expansion was aided by the fact that migrant labour has been readily available since the past 15yrs. A similar story was narrated by Bhuben

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<sup>1</sup> This was discovered from my field trips as well as well as from Prabin Baishya's work, *The Silk Industry of Assam: A Case Study in the Sualkuchi Cluster*, NEDfi, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with the respondent on August, 18<sup>th</sup> 2008, in the presence of Mr. Ranjit Das who accompanied me to Sualkuchi and Mr. Probin Das, a local contact and the Journalist of the Assamese Daily, *Ajir Ahom*.

Baishya and his mother Niraja Baishya of Naktola<sup>3</sup> who informed us that weaving was a family enterprise and that earlier they managed the work themselves with occasional help during festive seasons from hired labourers, but over the past 15 years or so, as their business expanded, they have had to recruit migrant labour. Today, Niraja no longer weaves but still supervises the weavers. In fact this seems to have been the general trend in Sualkuchi. It can be gauged that since the 1980's, new structures in the organization of production appeared in Sualkuchi. Consumerism and increased demand in its wake did manage to change the traditional economy in a material way. Families which perhaps till then were mostly producing for domestic consumption now began investing their resources in setting up more looms to cater to commercial demand. Commercialization meant that there was now an increased demand of labour-weavers, spinners, etc. as the labour of the women folk in the household was no longer enough to operate the looms. For women thus, their traditional role in the economy slowly became redundant. As far as men were concerned, they simply shifted to the more visible public space, employing and hiring labourers and marketing the products. Nirmala Bannerjee in a study of working women in colonial Bengal, has observed that while traditional livelihoods for women lost their viability after the intervention of the modern sector into the village (around the 1930's), at the same time, women were not in a position to take advantage

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<sup>3</sup> Conversation with the respondents on Sept 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008

of the intervention of the modern sector into the village economy because they could not abrogate their family responsibilities to take part in the market economy and be counted as workers. Therefore the mere fact that more jobs were available (in the factories and mills) did not bring forth an immediate response from the local female population. Instead they found themselves pushed out of the labour market. The traditional society had always imposed stringent restrictions on women's mobility between regions and occupations. The same kind of a situation seems to have prevailed in neighboring Assam. Traditional Assamese society has been and is a patriarchal one and hence while the fresh increase in labour demand was quickly met by more and more needy workers pouring into Sualkuchi from the adjacent areas, women who were hitherto engaged in weaving and responsible for cloth requirement of the family, found their role slowly becoming redundant. In fact, the only difference of the pre colonial and colonial periods with the present situation is that in the earlier period, since silk weaving was not directly involved with the market economy, women had some amount of importance in its organization but once it became commercialized and market oriented, the women ceased to have any decision making powers. For women thus, this process meant a permanent shift towards the periphery of the economy. In fact, a look at the migrant population figures between two

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<sup>1</sup> Nirmala Bannerjee., "Working Women in Colonial Bengal" in, Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid., *Recasting Women.*, (New Delhi,1989)p.254

decades reveals this increase and indicates the role shift for women of the weaving households.

MIGRANT POPULATION	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
1991	12682	00315	12997
2001	36,767	91, 905	128672

Source: *Census of India*, 1991, Series 4, Assam, Part VA and VB, D Series and *Census of India*, 2001, D, Series; Table 8.

Note: The above figures are inclusive for the whole of Kamrup District.

The census categorizes these workers as “migrant workers reporting employment as reason for migration”. Most of these were poor women from areas like Palasbari, Karbianglong, Mangoldoi, Barpeta etc.<sup>5</sup>

Having said that, from a feminist point of view, what is important is to understand what happened to the vast majority of the Assamese women once their traditional role in weaving was replaced by hired labour. At this point, what has to be kept in mind (and as has been observed in an earlier chapter) is that silk manufacturing is a home-based industry in Sualkuchi. When the family is

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<sup>5</sup> This information was further confirmed from visits to the factories in Sualkuchi where we met a large number of women from the adjoining areas who had migrated to Sualkuchi over the past 5-15 years looking for better means of livelihood.

functioning as a home based production unit, each member is a worker. Silk manufacturing goes through several stages (which has been elaborated in the third chapter) before it reaches the consumers and it has to be borne in mind that weaving is only a part of the entire process. The areas and households where we visited during our field study in Sualkuchi, we saw women of weaving households, involved in various preparatory processes for weaving, i.e. twisting, spinning, reeling, alongside a multitude of other activities because even though weaving is now done by hired help, the various preparatory processes still remain their chore. This is popularly known as *jugar dhara* or providing assistance. But often the family members themselves do not take cognizance of the contribution of women.<sup>6</sup> Male members told us that *jugar dhara* is something which all ladies do. In fact when asked if the women were ever remunerated for their assistance, most respondents merely laughed saying that one cannot expect to be rewarded for doing own work within one's own home. In other words, women's help in the various preparatory processes are treated virtually as extensions of housework and the dividing line between domestic work for family's own consumption and 'economic' work is often blurred. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that women themselves often fail to report their productive work as such, and include all these among their domestic chores. Second, the male respondents often fail to see many of the duties performed by the women as economic activities and may, therefore, claim that

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<sup>6</sup> This was gleaned from conversation with Rita Das, Laxminath Nagar, Sualkuchi on Aug 18<sup>th</sup> 2008

the women do nothing other than domestic work. As an example of this, we can refer to this narrative provided by Mr. Indra Mohan Baishya. He has 6 looms devoted exclusively to *muga* silk production. Though migrant workers are employed on the looms, women in the household (which includes his mother and wife) supervise weaving and oversee production. They also participate in preparatory processes like twisting and spinning. Reeling (a tedious process which often leaves hands calloused) is also done by the women folk themselves. And yet even after repeated questioning, we were told, "Women do not work". When we spoke to the women themselves, they shyly told us that they do not contribute anything to the economy of the household but merely do the weaving in their leisure time and that they considered it part of their house hold routine.<sup>7</sup>

Bhuben Baisya (to whom we have earlier referred) owns a medium sized enterprise comprising of 13 looms. We spoke to his wife who initially told us that weaving was done by migrant labour and that she did not weave or sit at the loom. But when asked who filled in if a labourer was absent, her reply was that she herself sat at the loom. Besides when she had free time, she wove *gamosas* (traditional towels) etc. Moreover, when her husband was away on business, she also took business orders.<sup>8</sup>

In another area of the locality known as Bhanga Nagar Road, we visited

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Indra Mohan Baishya, Noapara Sector C, on the 17th August, 2008

<sup>8</sup> Information gleaned from conversations with Kabita Baishya, Naktola sector 1, on the 23 sept 2008

one of the oldest household's engaged in weaving. Ram Saran Baishya manages the factory which was originally set up by his father almost a century ago. He too informed that women help in the preparatory processes in their leisure time. Women of the household wove till the 1970's when it was a small enterprise with only 4 looms. Today because production has expanded, women of the household no longer sit at the loom which is worked on by migrant labour. The women are now engaged in helping in the preparatory processes and making food for the labourers. The women also supervise production etc. Women who were questioned told us that housework was their 'main' occupation and that weaving and *jugar dhara* were done only in their leisure time.<sup>9</sup>

Padmaja Das of Rajgarh told us that she wove for 'only' four hours a day. The end produce was marketed by her husband.<sup>10</sup>

The household of Digambar Kalita employs 9 weavers all of whom are incidentally male. His wife does all the spinning work which of course is not paid for.<sup>11</sup>

We met Kumar Pradip, secretary of a local Citizen's Forum which is engaged in welfare activities in the neighbourhood. When he did not secure a government job even at the age of 32, he decided to set up his own weaving

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<sup>9</sup> In fact almost all the female respondents we spoke to and are mentioned here, held the same opinion.

<sup>10</sup> Conversation with Padmaja Das and other family members, Rajgorh, January 2007,

<sup>11</sup> Interview with the respondent on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007

enterprise. But the problem was that he did not know how to weave so he married someone who did. Today his wife besides helping out at the loom and helping with the various preparatory processes has also taught him to weave and he acknowledges that without his wife his business wouldn't work and yet, he reports her as a housewife at the time of census recording.<sup>12</sup>At this point, a look at the last two decades census data on occupation for the Kamrup district reveals the following.

	1991		2001	
	MALE	FEMALES	MALE	FEMALES
Persons engaged in Spinning, Weaving and finishing of silk textiles.	1636	1314	818	10479

Source: *Census of India, 1991, Economic Tables, part iii B- B Series, Vol, 2 and, Census of India, 2001, Economic Tables, B Series, Table 18*<sup>13</sup>

While a casual glance at the above table would seem to indicate the overwhelming participation of women in the industry, however, the systematic under-reporting of women's labour within the household means that the official figures for the number of spinners, weavers reveal only part of the picture. Again, even these figures would seem to be a gross under-estimation when one takes into account the fact that the census does not mention reelers, twisters

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the respondent on the 17<sup>th</sup> -18th August 2008

<sup>13</sup> The Census of 2001 lists spinning and weaving of cotton/silk/wool/animal hair/man made fibers/jute under the same occupation table. Nonetheless, since silk weaving and rearing is the occupation of the majority of the people in the district, this study has listed the occupational category only as spinners and weavers.

and dyers as occupational categories. These are tasks in which a vast number of women in the household are engaged. Moreover these figures are for the Kamrup district as a whole and hence it is difficult to gauge through official statistics how many women are actually involved in the craft in Sualkuchi.

Most of the people interviewed both male and female opined that weaving was a family business and hence both men and women pitched in with their labour. Male members insisted that they or the women had no time to sit at the loom as they were busy in procuring raw materials, reeling etc to get the yarn ready for weaving conveniently ignoring the fact that if the same work that was done by women had to be performed by hired labour, then it would have to be paid for and their work counted as economic activity. Thus women's work at the loom is taken as voluntary labour, and whether she is spinning or reeling, it is considered as part of her daily household responsibilities. What is even more ironic is that, we were informed that the labour cost of the woman was simply added to the finished product. For instance, we found out that since the preparatory process in *muga* production is charged at Rs 100 by migrant workers, loom owners who wish to cut down on the production cost simply get it done by their women folk and the charges are simply added on the finished product-the burden being passed on to the consumer while the critical work that women perform remaining invisible and unremunerated. Even the Census, records weaving as work, perhaps because it is the most visible part of silk manufacturing and because it is performed by hired help for which a payment

has to be made. While describing themselves as economically not active, women told us that even while watching television they were constantly reeling- a very important part of the process of silk manufacturing. They also did what is known as "*Bati Kada*"( a process by which the vertical end of the thread known as *digh* which stretches to several meters, is looped in the loom and its end wrapped around a drum placed adjacent or behind the loom. The weaver then weaves the thread horizontally, making as many garments as the length of the thread permits.) Most women also supervised the work performed by the weavers constantly guiding them.<sup>14</sup> Women in Sualkuchi seem to have firmly internalized the belief that their work is not as important as the men's. The extent of women's labour in the household can be gauged from some of the answers to our queries. For instance when we asked Rinku Moni Das,<sup>15</sup> (mentioned previously) to describe her daily routine, she replied that it was the same as that of any other women in Sualkuchi. When coaxed, she said that she woke up at 4 am, inspected the previous night's work done by the hired help, bathed, cooked, prepared the children for school, finished her chores by noon, and then sat reeling which continues till late at night. In between, she attends to other household chores as well. Moreover if a labourer reports ill, she sits in her place because she knows her husband has to meet delivery deadlines. She also

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<sup>14</sup> This information was gathered from conversations with Mrs. Bonita Kalita and Mrs. Kabita Das, Laxminath Nagar, Jan 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2007

<sup>15</sup> In conversation with Mrs. Rinku Moni Das of Haripur, between August 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 2008

ensures that the helpers have completed their share of work before they retire for the night.

In fact the work schedule of the women in the household reveals that it is as long if not longer than that of a hired helper. But women in the household remain invisible both officially and literally, because they are considered as mere helpers. One cannot imagine a bigger injustice than this lack of recognition for work that is helping to sustain a historic craft.

According to Carolyn Shaw Bell, to serve users, labour statistics need to reflect reality as closely as possible. However since statistical categories reflect what are perceived to be the "core " employment situations, in which men dominate and women are found to be in "other " work situations, the neglect of women's work is pernicious. The systematic under-reporting and misinterpretation of women's contribution to the economy perpetuate a vicious circle of inequality between men and women.<sup>16</sup> In fact, few people realize how critical statistics are to the allocation of resources, policy formulating and legislation. Phenomena and people that are not counted or measured are quite easily ignored. Data on individual and group characteristics are the preconditions for supportive policies. When plans for national censuses are set, there sometimes is a debate on labels and categories, precisely because of their

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<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Shaw Bell in "Data on Race, Ethnicity and Gender: Caveats for the User", *International Labour Review*, Vol 135 (1996)no.5, pp. 583-602

importance in the subsequent formulation of national policy- but the attention wanes and those not covered are forgotten.

In the case of Sualkuchi, this contention becomes very relevant, because (as will be elaborated in the next chapter,) the failure to acknowledge women as contributors to the silk industry means that there is no policy in place for them. What is of further concern is that although women's labour in reeling and spinning is vital in silk production, these tasks are not neutral: they are hierarchical and confine women to a subordinate position. Female kin and their work in the weaving household are accorded only a peripheral status. Respondents told us that while both sons and daughters knew weaving, the sons preferred working outside the home, looking after marketing of the products and willing to even work as shop assistants as they did not like being confined to their homes. Daughters continued to help their parents in the preparatory processes and filling in at the loom if a labourer was absent. But it is only the male members who are considered as economically active.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Jamuna Kalita<sup>18</sup> aged about 55yrs is a "master weaver". She learnt weaving from her Grandmother and mother but most of it after marriage and since the death of her husband in 1980, she has been handling all the works relating to weaving. While she has hired 4-5 weavers, her three daughters often help with the

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<sup>17</sup> conversation with Renu Baishya of Tilakchand Pahar and Karuna Kalita of S. M. Road, between September 21<sup>st</sup> -23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the respondent on August 18<sup>th</sup> 2008

weaving especially when a weaver is on leave or when there is an increase in demand especially during the festive season like *Bihu* or during the marriage season, besides assisting the weavers in the various preparatory processes like dyeing, reeling and *Bati Kada*. Her son works in Guwahati and though he knows weaving, he does not sit at the loom. She said she misses him but she also understands that it is difficult for a male to “simply sit at home, weaving”. Ironically, even though the labour of the daughters is crucial in the economic sustenance of the household, their work is viewed only as extensions of housework and their work does not form an economic category in census assessments. On the other hand, since the son is in paid employment, he is considered as a crucial earning member of the household.

The fact that their work takes place in the private space, also explains why women despite their skill are not entrepreneurs themselves. We came across only a couple of women “master” Weavers, but that is not to say that they have been accorded the same craft status as the men. Of those engaged in trading or running production units independently, two are widows and the third is the wife of the secretary of a government sponsored co-operative. The first is Jamuna Kalita whose narrative has been mentioned above. The second is Reena Kakoty<sup>19</sup> who after the death of her husband has taken over and also slowly expanded her family enterprise. At present she owns 10 looms. Some of the

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<sup>19</sup> Conversation with the respondent, Kalita Para, Sualkuchi, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007

work is delegated to a manager. She sells her produce to *The Assam Samabay Rasham Pratishtan Samiti*, a Government sponsored co-operative, because she feels that shopkeepers take advantage of the fact that she is a woman. She narrated that the co-operative is often slow to release her money but that it is “safe” since they are a registered society and she can rest assured that she will not be cheated of her dues. None the less, many times when she needed immediate cash, she has had to dispose off her produce to shops and she feels that they have paid her less than what her product was worth. Interestingly the third woman, Reena kalita<sup>20</sup> told us that she supervises and manages the looms at home which is worked by hired help because her husband remains very busy with the work of the co-operative, *The Assam Samabay Rasham Pratishtan Samiti*. When we visited her in August 2008, her daughter’s marriage had been finalized and although not keeping very good health, she was still doing the crucial task of supervision of the weavers,’ work, constantly guiding them and suggesting designs for her daughter’s bridal attire. She also said that she is slowly delegating her work to hired male help partly because she does not keep good health and partly because traders took advantage of the fact that being a woman she could not bargain with them and they paid her less by “sweet talking” to her.

In other words, what these few instances have revealed is that these women have become “master” weavers by default and by compulsions of

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<sup>21</sup> Information gathered from Reena Kalita, Mini Bus Stand, Sualkuchi, between 1<sup>st</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> January 2007

circumstance and not because the market or society has offered them a level playing field to showcase their entrepreneurial skills.

In Sualkuchi thus, marriage and kin ties seem to be so intertwined with economic activities so as to produce a structure in which the role of the male as head of the household as well as the economy is inseparable. So, a household might reflect a division of labour based firmly upon a hierarchy with the husband/ father, heading the domestic economy as a supervisor, the wife/mother engaging in various preparatory processes and the hired labour engaged in actual weaving.

While at one level, we have the women of the weaving households, whose role in the economy is not acknowledged, one must not forget the migrant weavers, most of whom are women. In fact, according to one source, of the approximately 5000 looms in Sualkuchi, more than 4000 are operated by women weavers.<sup>21</sup> Feminists contend that economic space is a very important factor in women's autonomy and improvement in status<sup>22</sup> but unless placed in specific historical and regional context, such a contention appears almost simplistic because as contended in the earlier chapter, mere numerical preponderance of women weavers does not suggest their economic well being

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<sup>21</sup> Nani Mahanta and Deba k. Sonowal. "Market Economy and Marginalisation of Women : An Exploratory Study of Women Weavers" in, Raj Mohini Sethi (ed), *Globalisation, Culture and Women's Development* (Jaipur,2000),p.165.Incidentally there are no official figures available on the number of women engaged in the loom enterprises in Sualkuchi.

<sup>22</sup>See, Bharati Ray., *From the Seams of History* (Delhi, 1995) p.294

also. It might only mean that even larger numbers of women are exposed to the vagaries of the market forces.

To the world outside, Sualkuchi is of course, a cottage industry success story. "Weaving dreams and fairy tales in silk," the weavers of Sualkuchi earn for the state exchequer about 150 cores annually.<sup>23</sup> In fact Government earnings through silk exports have been steadily increasing. In 1997-1998 it was Rs. 1060 crore, in 1998-1999 it stood at Rs 1250 cores, in 1999-2000, it was Rs.1501 crore and in 2000-2001, it stood at Rs. 1163 crore.<sup>24</sup> According to another source, the value of *muga* exports alone in the year of 2005-06 was 235.62 Lakhs which in 2006-2007. The main countries to which these were exported are Japan, USA, and the European Union.<sup>25</sup>

At the ground level, despite its supremacy in the market however, the silk industry at this time is wracked by hardship and resentment among both the loom owners and the weavers. This mainly resulted from re-structuring along capitalist lines. In 1991 India opted for a paradigm shift in her economy through the New Economic Policy which announced the move towards a liberalized market economy. The New Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) envisioned a more

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<sup>23</sup> Information taken from an article by Roopak Goswami, published in the *Telegraph*, Sept 6<sup>th</sup>, 2004. While the author does not quote his source, Journalists like researchers are expected to be particular in their use of source material and hence the study has used the information provided by Goswami.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Textiles-Annual Report 00-01 accessed through <http://apparel.indiamart.com/annual-report/sericulture.html>

<sup>25</sup> Krishna Sarma,. Panel discussion 3, *GIs for Market Differentiation, Reputation and Quality –An Insight* ,Sept 18<sup>th</sup> , 2008, New Delhi accessed through, [www.clgindia.com/presentations.html](http://www.clgindia.com/presentations.html).

dynamic role for the small Scale Industries sector also to enable it to contribute its mite more fully to the country's economy. It may be noted at this point that, SAP refers to those economic reforms undertaken in countries with heavy burdens of traditional debt. Typically they involve lifting of subsidies on food and other basic commodities, deregulation of local currencies, decreased investment in social services like health and education de nationalization of state sponsored production activities and shifting from production for domestic use to production for the market.<sup>26</sup> Regarding that an export led growth is the only viable development strategy, the SAP places an overwhelming importance on trade liberalization.<sup>27</sup> As parts of these re-structuring, weavers are being encouraged to diversify production and produce cushions, quilts etc. for export to Japan and the U.S.

When liberalization and structural adjustment policies were first introduced in India in 1991, there was a great deal of concern about their likely impact on social sectors (The term social sectors has not been formally defined in terms of economic literature and is generally used to refer to education, health and nutrition sectors.) in general and poverty in particular so that the Government promised to pay special attention on the slogan that here it is going

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<sup>26</sup> Shobna Sonpar, Ravi Kapur. "Non Conventional Indicators: Gender Disparities under Structural Reforms" in, *The Economic and Political Weekly.*, January, 6<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Vol xxxvi, No1

<sup>27</sup> Ratna Sudarshan., "Report of the Round Table UNDP/OSST Meeting on the New Economic Policy and Women-7-8 February, 1992,in Maitheryi Krishnaraj, (ed) *The New Economic Policy and Women- A collection of Background Papers to the 6<sup>TH</sup> National Conference,1993*(Bombay, 1993)., p.81

to be reform with a “human face.”<sup>28</sup> How far this claim has been met will be analyzed in the context of Sualkuchi.

Our field work, corroborated by official sources revealed that two broad groups of loom owners can be distinguished in Sualkuchi. The first groups of loom owners are the ones who work under the co-operative fold. According to official sources, about 29 co-operatives<sup>29</sup> dealing with marketing and production under the Directorate of Handloom and Weaving are in operation in Sualkuchi. (Their main task is to implement the export schemes of the Government by encouraging products for the global market. These are further marketed through showrooms in the city of Guwahati.) The weavers collect *muga* cocoons or *pat* yarn from their respective societies, and in the case of *muga* cocoons they themselves (or more precisely their women folk) spin the yarn and weave the particular cloth as ordered by the societies. On delivery of the finished products to the societies, they are paid specific rates on different cloths. Most of the weavers of this group work in their own homes with the help of migrant labour. A second group of weavers and loom owners work independently in their individual homes. They procure the raw materials from the local merchants either on cash or credit. The weavers in this group generally cannot afford to

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<sup>28</sup> See the opinions voiced in Maithreyi Krishnaraj (ed.), *The New Economic Policy, A Collection Of Background Papers* ( New Delhi, 1992), see also K.Seeta Prabhu, *Economic Reform and Social Sector Development, A Study of Two Indian States* (Delhi 2001)

<sup>29</sup> Information provided by Mr. Prafulla Bharali, Joint Director, Department of Textile and Weaving, Government of Assam, on, 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 2007

engage hired help and do the work themselves. Their products are also sold to the local merchants with a very low margin of profit.

Other than these two groups, there are of course the *sipinis* or migrant weavers who work in some factories within the town itself. They are provided with looms in the factory and the raw material is also supplied by the proprietor. They are paid on piece basis and are contractual workers.

At Sualkuchi, *muga* and *pat* cloths are generally woven. Weaving of *endi* cloth is almost absent here as the craft today has dispersed to other areas surrounding Sualkuchi. The chief raw materials required for *muga* and *pat* cloths are yarns of the respective varieties. The weavers procure *muga* cocoons from Garo hills in the neighbouring state of Meghalaya, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar, in upper Assam and spin the yarn themselves. But as regards *pat*, they import yarn of this variety exclusively from Mysore, (which is very famous for its *pat* silk production), Karnataka and West Bengal. However mulberry rearing also has been in practice in Assam traditionally at least in certain localities and among some specific communities. But the production of raw mulberry is wholly insufficient to meet the demand. In 2004-2005, the number of families engaged in mulberry cultivation was only 461 in Assam.<sup>30</sup> It is also gathered that for the purpose of embroidery and designs, they require a small quantity of dyed yarn

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<sup>30</sup> Directorate of Sericulture, Government of Assam, cited in the NEDfi *Data bank Quarterly Journal on North East States, Economy, Sericulture and Animal Husbandry*, Vol 5, Issue, ii, iii and iv, p27, 2007

which they generally procure from the local market. The census of 1961 had noted," It is rather astonishing that while the silk weaving industry of Sualkuchi consumes a great quantity of *muga* cocoons and *pat* silk yarn, there is neither cocoon rearing industry nor any organized market for cocoon within its boundary or the neighbouring villages. It has to procure raw material from other parts of the state and sometimes from outside the state, resulting in high cost of raw materials."<sup>31</sup> Ironically little seems to have changed since that date. Even today, the non supply of regular yarn is a stumbling bloc for the weavers. Excepting for a very few, most loom owners are facing a sharp fall in their profit.<sup>32</sup> While the Government is putting its effort in creating an international market and demand for Assam silk, the neglect of the sericulture industry means that the even the fringe benefits of liberalization has not been received by the weavers. Since there is no organized marketing system, trade at different stages- seed, cocoon, post harvest yarn and woven cloth is dominated by intermediaries who earn the major share of the income. These middlemen exploit the entrepreneurs at every step, from the supply of raw material to the supply of yarn. Loom owners complained that they were not getting true value for their cloth as Marwari businessmen sometimes take the cloth from them but give only half of the value of their cloth. We were told that for cloth that is worth Rs2000, they were sometimes paid only Rs.1200 by the middleman. Many looms are lying

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<sup>31</sup> See, *Census of India 1961, Selected Handicraft of Assam*, vol iii, Part, vii-A, p47

<sup>32</sup> This was an often repeated complaint of loom owners like Tapan Kakoty, of Rajgarh, and Bokul Das of Laxminath Nagar to name a few.

idle in the village because it was not profitable to operate them. Weavers told us that Government schemes for the welfare of weavers were ineffective and that in dire situations they would prefer to borrow money from money lenders.<sup>33</sup> While money lending as an occupational category does not find mention in the census and hence the study cannot give any official statistics to back its claims, residents told us that “these days” money was available from the Marwari money lenders which goes to indicate that money lending is steadily increasing in Sualkuchi, which further goes to show that Government has failed to intervene in the crucial area of credit through soft loans to the weavers.

Another issue of concern is that the price of muga yarn has steadily risen over the past years forcing many producers to shift to cheaper *Tussar*. In fact, *muga* growers in upper Assam have started to shift to other commercial crops like tea; hence the supply of *muga* yarn has been further disrupted. We were told that while 1kg of *tussar* yarn was available at Rs 1300, a kg of *muga* yarn was as expensive as Rs5000. According to official sources, the price of muga yarn has a tendency to increase between Rs 50- Rs. 100 per kg. every year.<sup>34</sup> A rough table of comparative market prices for *muga* and *tussar*

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<sup>33</sup> Tarun Kakoty, S.M. Para, Sualkuchi, August 18<sup>th</sup> 2008

<sup>34</sup> Information provided by the Joint Director of Textile and Handloom, Government of Assam, P. Bharali, on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2009. The same official had also informed us in January 2007, that the prevailing price of *muga* and *tussar* was Rs 4500 and Rs 1000-1200 respectively. Moreover, this information was cross checked with a cross section of loom owners particularly from a gentleman by the name of Luhit Kakoty, S.M. Road, Sualkuchi, on August 17<sup>th</sup> 2008 and also the Secretary of the *Assam Samabay Rasham Pratishtan Samiti*, Mr. Mahendra Kalita.

reveal the following.<sup>35</sup>

PRODUCT	PRICE (PER KG.) 2004-2005	PRICE (PER KG.) 2005-2008
MUGA	RS 3500-4500	RS 5000-6500
TUSSAR	RS 1000-1200	RS 1600-1800

In the busy Rajgarh area of Sualkuchi, we met Tapan Kakoty, whose family has been in the silk business over several decades. He informed us that over the past two years, he has not woven any Muga cloth due the difficulty in procuring the yarn and its high price. He has now started to use *tussar*. He told us that he personally does not like *tussar* since he has seen his people traditionally working with *muga* and *pat* but he has been forced to do so in order to survive in the market. Kakoty told us that the rate at which muga is disappearing from the market, the next generation might not even know what muga is.<sup>36</sup> This point takes on added significance when one takes into account the fact that *muga* weaving is not just a craft but a repository of a community's skill. A rough estimate shows that now only about 50-100 households are engaged in *muga* silk production in Sualkuchi. House hold after household surveyed had each the same old sad story to relate, that cheaper *tosh* had almost killed *muga*. Some have even been forced to close loom since the price of *muga* has increased. Silk Board officials are themselves aware of the problem

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<sup>35</sup> This information was gathered from a cross section of loom owners, particularly from a gentleman by the name of Luhit Kakoty, S.M. Road, Sualkuchi, on August 17th, 2008

<sup>36</sup> Conversation with Tapan Kakoty on 1<sup>st</sup> Jan, 2007

but feel that this practice cannot be prohibited abruptly since such steps are feared to spell disaster for the people engaged in these looms.<sup>37</sup> Studies indicate that while Assam produces 92MT of Muga Silk, but still there is a shortage of around 100MT in the state.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly for reasons of prestige, some *muga* producers have refused to shift to *tussar* production. In Rajgarh, we found a septuagenarian gentleman engaged exclusively in *muga* production. Most of the work carried out on 4 looms is done by his family members – his daughters and wife. He had learnt weaving from his mother even before the 1942 movement. Today he says the price of *muga* has risen so much that he is finding it hard to make ends meet. Three pairs of *Mekhala Chaddar*<sup>39</sup>(traditional wear of the Assamese women) are still lying in his house because of lack of customers. Unlike what others have done, he is reluctant to shift to cheaper *tosh* (the local word for *tussar*) production as he feels that it is against his tradition.<sup>40</sup> Many complained that the Government was turning a blind eye at their plight by exporting *muga* yarn outside the state like Bhagalpur, Kolkata leading to a scarcity of yarn in Sualkuchi. While even a few years back, traders from upper Assam would come to Sualkuchi with supplies of raw cocoons, but recently, they have started supplying to the neighbouring area of Palasbari where the yarn is

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<sup>37</sup> Assistant director of the Central Silk Board, quoted by Pradip Kumar Datta, in an article, "Muga yarn shortage makes way for Tassar" Sun, 15 Jul 2007, which can be accessed through [http://assamnet.org/mailman/listinfo/assam\\_assamnet.org](http://assamnet.org/mailman/listinfo/assam_assamnet.org).

<sup>38</sup> P.K Das, (2000) Workshop Paper " Base Paper on Muga Silk Industry in Assam", North Lakhimpur, Assam p.3

<sup>39</sup> *Mekhla*- A type of petticoat. It is really an elongated sack, open at both ends and is adjusted the round the waist , the other end reaching nearly to the ground.

<sup>40</sup> Gleaned from conversation with, Hemchandra Das, Rajgorh. October, 18<sup>th</sup> 2007

prepared and sold outside the state at a greater profit. Another factor adding to the cost is the seasonal availability of *muga* yarn. It is available only twice a year so a full year's stock would mean a huge investment which everyone cannot afford.<sup>41</sup>

Most entrepreneurs were either ignorant regarding the existence of co-operative societies or were cynical about their role. In fact, as they pointed out, the co-operatives could not help solve the supply problem as the co-operatives task, was limited only to marketing the finished products and not production. Moreover, working for the Co-operatives mean they cannot take advantage of an increase in consumer demand as they would be busy in meeting deadlines set by the co-operatives. One loom owner recalled that during the Previous Government's time in the late 1990's, a few buildings by way of co-operatives came up but the projects did not take off.<sup>42</sup> Most of the weavers and entrepreneurs took money from private money lenders though none of them was willing to name any money lender from whom they had borrowed money. Since the price of raw materials are all based on the supply, going by the current trend, the price of cocoons and yarns is very likely to continue to rise, resulting in further distress for the weaving community.

As far as the migrant weavers- the ones who are helping to keep alive the rich tradition of silk in this village are concerned, their situation can at best be

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<sup>41</sup> Gathered from conversation with Kishore Kalita, S. M. Road, Sualkuchi, August 18th, 2008

<sup>42</sup> Indra Mohan Baishya, September, 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007

described as pathetic. Their work conditions are mostly cramped and unhygienic. Most factories do not even have fans to help ease the suffocating summer heat. In a weaving household in Haripur, two weavers died in 2007 due to the heat. All weavers are piece rate workers who work on a contract basis.<sup>43</sup> Working hours are long. Weavers start work at 7am with a couple of hours of rest in between, and continue working till 10 pm at night. The maximum wage that they can expect to earn is not more than 3000-3500 rupees. They pay their own rent and food. Sometimes the work place doubles up as their living quarters of the weavers if they cannot afford to pay rent and provide for their own accommodation. To add to the weavers woes, the village does not even have proper infrastructure or basic amenities of life. Load shedding is a common phenomenon for most parts of the day and weavers work at night on their intrinsic design with only a lantern as a source of light. Inflationary pressures make it difficult for them to meet the expenses on essential items such as milk bread or Kerosene. Whereas the expense of day to day living has gone up, the real income of these workers have gone down as a result of the increased pressure on the job market. The situation is even more pathetic for females because they are a majority in Sualkuchi. Most of them had migrated to Sualkuchi due to poor economic conditions of their household but even here, they are faced with hardships. From their meager resources, they send money at

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<sup>43</sup> Information gathered from conversation with Rinku Moni Das, and Kumar Pradip Das, Haripur Sualkuchi between August, 17<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup>, 2007

least twice a year to their homes.<sup>44</sup> Most of the Employers told us that they prefer to hire female help as they are “more sincere and take shorter breaks”.<sup>45</sup> Unmarried females are preferred as after marriage most of them return to their villages or even if they remain in Sualkuchi, they remain busy in their own household. Most of the weavers we saw were females between 16-30 years of age. They were initiated into this craft either by a marketing agent or by a relative who had earlier migrated to Sualkuchi. Working hours are long and all work on a no work- no pay basis.

Despite all the rhetoric about the importance of silk in the life and tradition of the people of Assam, categorizing the silk industry as private home based industry, allows the Government to extricate itself from any kind of social responsibility for the weavers or even the loom owners. Piece rate workers are not included as workers in the Factories Act and so are not covered by most labour laws. The fact that this industry is deemed as private and un-organized also means It also means that the workers are automatically deprived of other benefits, like minimum wages, maternity benefits, child care services, compensation rights, housing as well as other welfare measures. In Sualkuchi, there is no union worth the name and the industry since its inception has never been affected by any form of collective action by the workers. Any attempt at unionization is frowned upon. We found only one attempt at work place

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<sup>44</sup> Gathered from interviews with a cross section of female weavers between January 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> January and September 18<sup>th</sup> -23<sup>rd</sup> 2007. See appendix (iii)

<sup>45</sup> Bokul Das, Laxminath Nagar, Sualkuchi, September,23<sup>rd</sup>,2007

unionizing in Sualkuchi. At sonari para a gentleman by the name of Tirtha Kakoty has established a weavers guild known as *Tat Silpi Sanstha* (which is affiliated to CITU) or handloom workers union. He attempts to register the migrant weavers and to see that the women are not exploited. Members can register themselves by paying a nominal amount of Rs 1<sup>46</sup>. But the trade union movement if it can be called that, is hardly a success considering the fact that loom owners themselves told us that they fire influential weavers, the ones who are a little demanding and likely to attempt to organize the other weavers.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, a repeated complaint from loom owners was that the skilled migrant labourers seeking work, ask for advance but some of them never return for work the next day. It becomes very difficult for the owners to track them down since most of them give false addresses. An effective trade union movement, involving both the owners and migrant workers could perhaps help arrest this problem.

Given this above stark ground reality, the issue of any kind of economic re-structuring, gains special salience for Sualkuchi weavers, in order to determine whether or not the new policies, theories, favour the integration of women and men into the economic system. At a time when the government is crying itself hoarse about how important silk weaving and sericulture is to the

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<sup>46</sup> Information gathered from Tirtha Kakoty of Sonari Para, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2008

<sup>47</sup> This was shared by Kumar Pradip who has himself dismissed many such workers. Paradoxically, this gentleman is also the Secretary of a Citizen's Forum which is trying to register the names and addresses of migrant workers to enable loom owners to locate weavers in case of need.

economy and tradition of Assam,<sup>48</sup> one would expect that it is taking every possible step that it probably can to encourage this industry. However the main thrust of its policy is an emphasis on exports which means that the weavers need to be attuned with market developments and hence constantly re-invent herself by developing her product and skills accordingly. While there is nothing wrong in this, there is a danger that when made to gear pre -dominantly to a global market, due to the latter's extremely fickle nature and advertisement induced behavior, the handloom production may not only go into the control of exporters (leading to the decline of the co-operative and weaver initiative) but also prove suicidal to the weaver community given the fact that the weavers are an already marginalized group and the fact that they do not have adequate marketing skills.

Development efforts of the Government (as will be elaborated in the next chapter) have rarely addressed the problems of the silk industry at the ground level nor has it ever challenged the idea that women's labour is at best supportive and secondary in nature. This is apparent from the fact that, for one, it has made no attempt till date to include the women's crucial labour in the silk manufacturing process within the household in estimates of work. Secondly, the labour of the women in the more visible public realm has not translated into

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<sup>48</sup> For instance, see Budget Speech of the State Finance Minister accessed through [http://assamgovt.nic.in/budget\\_speech2008-09.asp](http://assamgovt.nic.in/budget_speech2008-09.asp).

The importance of handloom and sericulture and the involvement of women in this industry is always mentioned, albeit in a line or two in each the annual reports of the Ministry of Textiles. See the latest report which can be accessed through, <http://texmin.nic.in/annualrep/arch08.htm>

anything positive for them. There is no scope for promotion or rewards in the industry. But as we have observed, as far as the Government is concerned, its entire focus is on gearing the silk industry for the international market. No concrete steps have been taken to ensure an uninterrupted supply of yarn and cocoon at subsidized rates. The silk workers, both male and female seem to be left with a vacuum in which the arbitrary criteria of the market and the interests of the multinational capital predominate. Bereft of any universalizing design, the social and economic protests of poor women and men still confront the denial of their needs, while the power and resources concentrated in the public sphere continue to be crucial to their daily lives.<sup>49</sup>The Government itself is a major buyer and seller of goods and services and is also an agent that regulates and otherwise influences the economy. But, macro economic policies are intentionally or unintentionally imbued with male bias. Concepts like national income, trade balance, investment, money supply relate only to the market relationships and bypass the private or the domestic sphere. Since the power relations and workloads within the family are tilted against the woman, concepts that relate only to the public sphere will never capture the impact of such inequities that persist outside it. A second dimension of the argument in the context of Sualkuchi could be that within the market sector, especially in the labour market, the cards are stacked against women. They are crowded into the

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<sup>49</sup>Shiela Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter., *Dignity and Daily Bread* (London, 1994) p.5

lowest positions in job hierarchies having a lion's share of the most vulnerable, unprotected and irregular jobs.

The question of how to meet women's specific needs raises a prior question -that of the need of a clear cut framework by which to identify, assess and prioritize needs. As pointed out in the second chapter, three household theory models and approaches have significantly helped to understand two themes central to the understanding of gender- Family structure and intra-household relations on the one hand and work and production on the other. The first of these theories is that of the Household bargaining model which contend that the influence of any given individual in the so called bargaining processes which formulates house hold decisions is determined by the individual's fall – back option.<sup>50</sup> The second theoretical approach is an extension of the Bargaining theory to include co-operative conflict within the household. This has been formulated by the noted economist Amartya Sen who contends that within the household women are invariably at a disadvantageous position because if they do not co-operate, their fall back option tends to be worse, that is, if they try to live independently of men, they tend to experience poverty and social disapproval<sup>51</sup>. The third approach to studying women is Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach who argues that a life which lacks any of a wide range of

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<sup>50</sup> Maitreyi Krishnaraj., "How Gender Figures in Economic Theorising and philosophy" in, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol xxxII (New Delhi, 2001) p.1429

<sup>51</sup> Amartya Sen., "Gender and Co-operative Conflicts" in Irene Tinker (ed), *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development* (New York, 1990) pp.123-149

elements which among others, includes life, bodily health and integrity, human senses, emotion reason affiliation etc will fall short of being a good human life.<sup>52</sup>

In the attempt to better understand the unequal gender relations imbedded in family arrangements in Sualkuchi, the use of the bargaining models represents an important theoretical and practical step towards a better understanding of household dynamics. Initially introduced by Amartya Sen with the notion that the family is a unit of ~~Co-operative~~ conflict, this theoretical approach, with addition of a stronger feminist component and specificity with regards to the factors affecting bargaining power can yield important insights.

“My husband permits me to decide on the household budgeting”, “But that does not mean that she can indulge in useless expenditure”<sup>53</sup> quipped in the husband. “My husband does not force me to help in the preparatory processes”. “My wife does not expect to be remunerated for her work” are statements that we come across frequently. The words used are allowed, not objected to and the like, which implies that it is not a right of every woman but granted to her as a matter of condescension. The control over the income is not necessarily in the women’s hands, nor does it always improve the women’s position with respect to authority within the family. Most of the women of the household said that she had to maintain accounts and show them to her husband. The bargaining theory

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<sup>52</sup> Martha Nussbaum., *Women and Human Development :The Capabilities Approach* (New Delhi, 2000)

<sup>53</sup> Tirtha Kakoty, Sonari Para, 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2007

of co-operative conflict helps us to understand that despite the fact that her labour in the preparatory processes effectively cuts down on the production costs, the socialization process into this craft is so strong that none of the women felt that they could or should use their skill to bargain for more spending power. Moreover, because production in the family differs from production in the market, women learn to feel that it is not quite work. Thus it becomes very difficult to distinguish between a gift freely given and a service extracted. The fact that women in weaving households have internalized the fact that their role in the silk industry is at best secondary and supportive also undermines their resentment and makes it almost inconceivable that it should be resisted. The model of co-operative conflict also helps us to take into account the fact that cultural construction of femininity, functions as a sort of cultural disarmament to women's fighting potential.

While Martha Nussbaum Capabilities Approach, does help us to understand that the weavers fall short of the capabilities requirements given the fact that they get hardly any leisure or adequate nutrition or housing, this model is too universalistic because it does not help us to understand the specific deprivations that women in poor households suffer from because in the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, men too are likely to suffer from the same disabilities.

While we do not have an integrated theory of women and the economy, what is evident, is the way the cultural definitions and patriarchal ideology induce a different set of parameters for women and prevent equality. Formalized models, can, only to an extent help us understand women's position in the household. However the incorporation of the idea of co-operative conflicts within the household and a drawing up of a set of indices as outlined in the Capabilities approach, (albeit with a more gender sensitive approach) in any kind of development approach will help to not just bring women's labour in the household into focus , but will also help to formulate social policies which will at least to some extent, help to offset the disadvantages that women in the household and those directly involved in market activities face.

Going by the market trends discussed above, what is apparent is that we are in the midst of a transformation in which the character of production, the composition of the workforce the relation between the state and economy, in fact the whole interaction between economic and social spheres, is dramatically altering. These shifts throw into question, earlier assumptions about how to develop policy, plan economies and even about the process of how and by whom knowledge is constituted and defined. More importantly, these changes, in the organization of production and distribution have been constantly transforming the lives of a vast majority of women in the country. What is also evident from the discussion above is that, in this rapidly emerging liberalized market economy, too often the vulnerabilities, sufferings and exploitation of

women workers that is likely to arise or take place out of their interaction with the market forces is easily masked by the family, explained away by the state and ignored within the market place.

Globalization today perhaps is not an option but an indisputable fact of life. Hence this study does not wish to comment on its feasibility. Restructuring of the economy may or may not be necessary. But what kind of development are we seeking? Are all so called development programs necessary? Are they gender neutral? What are the implications of liberalization and the introduction of a new market economy on women's work especially those engaged in the informal sector and home based production? These questions are relevant because as far as women in Sualkuchi are concerned, the impact of so called development policies on them has been anything but positive.

The presence of gender bias in the household, the vulnerabilities of the migrant labourer or the problems now being faced by the loom owners are not things that can be eliminated by following an export policy that ignores all ground reality. Both weavers and loom owners are victims of an exploitative and indifferent system, the main objective of which is only commercial gain. An export policy can be functional for the achievement of commercial objectives but at the same time dysfunctional for the achievement of development objectives for society as a whole. The ability of men and women to respond to, and benefit from new market opportunities could be enhanced by changing the ways, in

which a commercial policy is integrated with a set of social criteria that helps to take into account the needs and expectations of both men and women. A development economics constituted on this basis would be capable of contributing more effectively to both the reduction of gender inequality and the achievement of other, more specifically economic, objectives.<sup>54</sup> More importantly, unless women, who have all this while been at the margin of development theory and practice are brought to the centre, these concerns and doubts will not be addressed, and unless they are, the present model of growth by ignoring the crucial structural category of gender will continue to interact with existing gender asymmetries to affect women in negative ways.

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<sup>54</sup> Daine Elson., *Gender Aware Analysis and Development Economics.*, in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath, (eds) *op.cit* pp.245-246

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## CHAPTER V

### THE STATUS OF GENDER RELATIONS IN SUALKUCHI

Using the methodology of oral history sources and family narratives, the previous chapter had highlighted the vulnerability of the women weavers in the development of the silk industry and the silk workers in the decades since independence and tries to understand the gender implications of such policies.

One of the first steps that the Government of Independent India took to develop the silk industry in the country, was the establishment of the Central Silk Board (CSB) in 1949. Headquartered at Bangalore, The Board's works are in the three broad areas of Research and Technology Development, Seed Maintenance, and Development of sericulture and silk industry, to support, supplement and facilitate the efforts of the State Governments.<sup>1</sup>

Another important early step that the Government took was the establishment of an all India Handloom Board in 1952 with the objective of providing encouragement to the Handloom sector.

However as far as the silk sector in Assam is concerned, for several years, in fact, for several decades, after independence, the Assam silk handloom industry was in a way, left to fend for itself.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Venkatanarasaiah., *Sericulture in India*(New Delhi, 1992) p.8

Well into the 1950's, the various Government reports monotonously noted the fact, that, weaving and sericulture are age old activities and that silk occupied an importance in the life of the people second only to agriculture.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the 1953 official report of the Assam Legislative Assembly Debates notes that, ".....*endi* and *muga* silk are the potential assets of the state and the Government has been trying to help the industry for increased production..."<sup>3</sup> Despite such assertions, the Government shied away from introducing a pro-active state handloom policy for the development of the silk industry in the state. In fact, the role of the Independent Government in the silk industry in the first two to three decades was merely a series of half hearted and halting measures which will be elaborated below. In the decade following independence, policy makers while acknowledging that *eri* and *muga* silk were traditions of the state, cited post-war inflationary pressures and lack of funds as hurdles in extending sericulture operations in the state. To quote an example from the budget speech of the Governor in 1956, "... a Sericulture farm at North Lakhimpur was sanctioned under the post war reconstruction scheme .... But mid 1948, restrictions of expenditures was necessitated as an anti inflationary measure and by 1949, all central Government grants for post war reconstruction

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance, *The official Report of the 11<sup>th</sup> session of the Assam Legislative Assembly*, Dec, 1956, vol iii, No, 23

<sup>3</sup> See, *The official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly Debates*, March April, part 1, 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1953

schemes were totally stopped..."<sup>4</sup> Abandoning of sericultural schemes which was already affected by the War, means that the supply of yarn to the rural populace must have been further disrupted. In such a scenario, it follows that rural weavers, most of whom were women, faced hardships.

The most important task that the Government apparently set before itself for the development of the silk industry, comprised of schemes which included the supply of disease free seed and mulberry cuttings, cocoons and examination of the laying under Pasteur's method for elimination of disease moths, provision of training facilities to improve techniques, demonstrations in improved methods of sericulture, grant of subsidies to mulberry growers and schemes generally calculated to develop the silk industry in the state.<sup>5</sup> It may be noted at this point that all these were merely a carry-over of the ineffectual colonial policy to develop the silk industry in Assam.

The 1956, Assam Legislative Assembly official Report proudly noted, "The development of cottage industry and sericulture and handloom which hold enough importance especially for the rural areas has made substantial progress". This claim was based on the fact that 136 peripatetic weaving demonstration units had gone around the state and imparted instruction on

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<sup>4</sup> Budget speech of Shri Motiram Barua , Dec 1956, *official report of the 11th session of Assam Legislative Assembly, Vol iii, No 23.*

<sup>5</sup> *Official Report of the Assam Assembly Debates, 10<sup>th</sup> session, Aug-Sept, Vol ii, No. 18, 30<sup>th</sup> Aug 1956.* See also, K.C. Baruah., Secretary and Director of Sericulture and Weaving, Assam, *Annual Report of the Department of Sericulture and Weaving, Assam for the year 1952-53* (Shillong, 1957)

improved methods of handloom weaving both in the hills and the plains districts. Once again, it must be noted that there was nothing novel in such a scheme as the colonial Government had followed the same policy. Moreover to what extent the scheme succeeded is open to debate. The same report informs us that, subsidies were liberally granted and looms were supplied at 50% of their cost price to the weavers. To bring them under the co-operative fold, share capital of the weavers and working capital of the co-operative weaving societies were granted as interest free loans. A cottage industry training institute was also started.<sup>6</sup>

As far as women weavers are concerned, the decade witnessed no attempt to work out any scheme or accept women's development as a separate economic agenda. The national (and state) level Five year plans ignored their needs and concerns. Moreover it failed to take into account the contributions of women and treated them as supplementary earners and there was no attempt to work out any scheme that would integrate the rural women workers into the development program at the grass root level.

This gender blind attitude continued to define all Government policies. A change in planning attitude was visible only in the 1975. The Fifth plan (1974-1978) marked a major shift in the approach towards women, from welfare to development. It acknowledged the fact of marginalization of women from the

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<sup>6</sup> *Official Report of the Assam Assembly Debates 10<sup>th</sup> Session., op.cit.*

economy and also accepted the need for special employment generation program for women in the poverty groups.<sup>7</sup>

Even this limited acknowledgement did not however, change the situation for the women in the silk industry. While viewing the Assam Government's attempts to develop the silk industry in the state, we come across production targets set by the Government or an emphasis on the need to increase the acreage under sericulture with a casual remark or two thrown in, about the fact that sericulture and weaving are the age old skills of the people but there was no mention of women or their vital contribution which helped maintain a historical craft. For instance, one comes across records which gives information that, in 1973, The sericulture and weaving department took up a scheme for covering a total area of 2770 acres in village grazing resources under *muga* plantation<sup>8</sup>, or that in 1975, it was decided to increase the production of *eri* and *muga* silk with a view to procuring blended yarn or that the Government was considering improvement in quality and quantity of raw silk products;<sup>9</sup> Official reports even in the late 1980's continue to give us only dry statistics (punctuated with the assertion that "Assam is well known for its rich Heritage of Handloom Weaving"<sup>10</sup> For instance, the target of production of handloom cloth

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<sup>7</sup> Vibhuti Patel, "Gender and Development Debates: A case study of India" in, *Samukhya, a journal of Women's studies*, Vol, V, No.1(Delhi, January, 2005) p.15

<sup>8</sup> Official report of the Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol I, No. 1, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1973

<sup>9</sup> Official Report of Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Session Vol I, No. 15, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1975. See also the Annual Financial budget statement of the same year

<sup>10</sup> See, Official Report of Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Budget Session, Vol 1, No. 1, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1984

during 1988-1989, was fixed at 70 million meters.<sup>11</sup> As late as 1993, the Governor's address during the budget session once again notes, "Handloom industry is playing a great role in giving self employment to the rural folks.....In 1993-1994 it is expected that the production of handloom fabrics in the state will go up to 129 sq million meters.<sup>12</sup>

However, as some of these annual reports clearly prove, the various Governments were perhaps not really interested perhaps in the development of the silk sector being satisfied with passing references about the importance of the development of this sector and setting production targets by way of developing the industry. Government sources contain hardly any information regarding rural producers and manufacturers especially the women who accounted for a majority of the workforce in the silk industry. This silence is telling for it reveals more than actual statistics could have done, not only the Government's gender insensitivity, but also its lack of concern for the socio-economic development of the workers of an industry, which according to its own calculations was the second most important industry after agriculture in the state.

Not only the Government officials, but even Assembly members seem to have adopted a complacent attitude about the progress of sericulture and

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<sup>11</sup> *Official Report of Assam Legislative Assembly Debates*, 8<sup>th</sup> budget session, Vol I, no I, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1988

<sup>12</sup> Governor's Address at the Budget session of the Assam Assembly, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1993

weaving in the state. The issue of silk industry was hardly raised in the Assembly and members seem to have been satisfied with occasional demands to the Government members to take special care to extend sericulture and weaving in the state.<sup>13</sup> To understand the situation in its full perspective, a table of the composition of the State Assembly down to 1991, has been drawn up.<sup>14</sup>

### Members of the Legislative Assembly

YEAR	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
1951	01	93	94
1957	05	94	99
1962	04	101	105
1967	04	121	125
1972	0	114	114
1978	01	125	126
1983	02	107	109
1985	05	121	126
1991	05	121	126

A glance at the above table reveals that the Assembly in any given session had an average of at least 100 members, an overwhelming number of whom were male. It would perhaps not be incorrect to assume that fact will partly explain

<sup>13</sup> See for instance, *The official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly*, winter Session, vol ii 27<sup>th</sup> Nov 1978

<sup>14</sup> Compiled from Key Highlights of General Elections 1953-2001, to the Legislative Assembly of Assam. Details can be accessed through, [http://eci.nic.in/sr\\_keyhighlights/key\\_highlights.asp](http://eci.nic.in/sr_keyhighlights/key_highlights.asp)

the apathy towards a female dominated industry and the absence of demands for schemes for the development of the weaving community. The number of women Legislators was low, averaging around four, in each Session. No demands seem to have been made either by the male or the female Legislators for protective laws or grant of minimum wages for women weavers to guard them against exploitation. We come across only one instance of a female legislator, Namely, Mrs. Usha Borthakur, asking the government about the appointment of female development officers in the rural areas. Her question was evaded.<sup>15</sup> Between 1976 and 1993, we come across only one other instance when any member demanded schemes for improvement of women in the handloom sector. To quote, “..... we talk about justice to women. More than 50% of the populations are women. This industry(handloom weaving) can be done at home when agriculturists remain idle for over 7 months in a year....”<sup>16</sup> The information on how far this type of demands got translated into actual schemes for the women folk is not however available.

Going by official records however, the silk industry seems to have made good progress through the decades. The 1976 official report states that, “sericulture and weaving which is an employment intensive industry continues to make steady progress in Assam ...”and that, “steps were also being undertaken

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<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Usha Borthakur to Minister Mahendra Mohan Choudhury., Budget Session, of the Assam, Legislative Assembly, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1953

<sup>16</sup> Mr. Harendra Nath Talukdar, (representing the Palasbari constituency) during the debate on the Governor’s Address, *Official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly Debates*, Budget session, vol xiv, No.18, 18<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1976

to help weavers market their products and to further develop the silk industry in the state by opening training centers for handloom weaving<sup>17</sup>. Ironically, there seems to have been no scheme for the supply of yarn and other implements to such centers.<sup>18</sup> In the absence of a steady source of yarn supply, how these centers functioned, is open to debate

Perhaps, the first major attempt to infuse life in the silk industry of Assam and to work out strategies to help the weavers was the establishment of co-operative societies. The Assam Apex Weavers and Artisans Co-operative Federation Ltd. (ARTFED) was formed on 27th July 1977 by reorganizing the Assam Apex Weavers Co-operative Society Ltd. with the aims and objects that “the Apex Society shall organize Handloom Weaving and other Cottage Industries in the state on Co-operative basis.”<sup>19</sup>

A major boost towards improving handloom production in the country came in the form of a Textile policy announced by the central Government in June 1985. This envisaged that “in the weaving sector the distinct and unique role of the handloom sector would be preserved and that the growth and development of this sector will receive priority”. Following this resolution, emphasis was laid by the central Government on corporatization of handlooms

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<sup>17</sup> *Official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly, Budget Session, Vol, xiv, No.1, 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1976*

<sup>18</sup> *Official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly, Vol ii, no 6, 27<sup>th</sup> Nov, 1978*

<sup>19</sup> Information accessed through, <http://artfed.org/>

and on measures to ensure adequate availability of yarn and other raw materials and to improve marketing facilities and infrastructural support.<sup>20</sup>

As per the textile policy of the Government of India, the Assam Government continued to fix its targets and achievements. Emphasis was given to development of the handloom industry through co-operatives. One handloom production centre, 4 weaver's extension service units and 6 handloom training centers were proposed to be established in the general area while 2 weaver extension centers were planned under tribal sub plan and scheduled caste component plan. Once again the annual report contains general directions but there is no mention of the workers at whom the schemes were being directed. Nor is there any specific program envisaged for the hub of silk production, Sualkuchi.<sup>21</sup> The 1989 report notes that "Assam is well known for its rich heritage in handloom weaving. The state government has given a positive and systematic policy thrust to improve the economic condition of the weavers and steps have been taken to extend infrastructural and financial support. The state has about 14 lakhs looms of different varieties with 16 lakhs people engaged in weaving and a sizeable number of people involved in service and commercial activities. Major emphasis in this sector has been to increase

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<sup>20</sup> K. Srinivasulu., "High Powered Committee, Low Voltage Report" in , *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol xxxii, No. 24, June 14-20, 1997, Mumbai, 1997, p.1381

<sup>21</sup> *Official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly*, 1988, 8<sup>th</sup> Budget session, Vol I, No 1, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1988

the level of production of handloom fabrics to the special benefit to Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes.”<sup>22</sup>

An important point in this context is that, all these are general policy announcements and no specific scheme for Sualkuchi was envisaged. This can only be termed as a policy lacunae because considering the fact that Sualkuchi was and is the most important center of silk production in Assam, it is surprising that there is no clear policy to help silk production and producers in that area. This also shows the Government’s indifference towards what can be called epicenter of traditional Assamese handloom production.

A decade after the announcement of the national textile policy, i.e. in July 1995, a high powered committee was appointed by the Government of India to review the performance of the handloom sector in the decade since the New Textile Policy came into existence. Its main task were to, (a) assess the extent to which the objectives set for the handloom sector by the 1985 policy had been achieved. (b) To assess the impact of the various schemes on handlooms., (c) to assess the threats facing and opportunities opened up to the handloom sector and particularly recommend comprehensive support necessary to achieve a quantum jump in exports, (e) to make a comprehensive assessment of the bottlenecks in the way of development of the sector and recommend measures to promote its rapid development in an economically viable manner.

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<sup>22</sup> *Official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly*, Budget session, Vol I, no 1, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1989

Though there is no explicit statement on the aspect of methodological approach adopted by the committee for the assessment of the status of handloom, the bottlenecks in, and opportunities opened up for the development of the handlooms following the 1985 policy, it may be inferred from what is hinted at in the report, that the committee visited the states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh 'for assessing the ground realities and 'also held discussions and officials of the state government., weavers service centers and representatives of apex/ primary co-operative societies and handloom corporations, exporters , designers and all concerned. Nothing in the objectives reveal any gender concern or any directives to the state Governments to work out measures for the welfare of the women weavers.

However, an important point that the committee had made was to lay an emphasis on exports and trade liberalization- a point, which seemed to have appealed both to the central and the state Governments alike.

A gradual shift to a more liberal economic regime had already been initiated in India in the early eighties through changes in the industrial licensing policy to step up industrial growth. But the most momentous change came about in 1991, when a new Liberalization policy with structural reforms was introduced in the country. And, while lacking the dramatic flavor of the economic policy reforms of 1991, reforms continued to be enacted through much of the 1990's and that too under different Governments composed of

various political parties. The intent was, apart from de-regulation of the internal economy, to increasingly integrate the Indian economy with the world economy that is, to globalize the Indian economy. The Assam Government felt that the handloom sector should strive to develop new designs, new fabrics and new products having commercial viability.<sup>23</sup> The Government suddenly woke up to the fact that *muga* and *eri* could be state income earners. A vigorous policy of commercialization of the silk industry followed- on orienting the handloom sector to the globalization process as a principal strategy for its survival. Thus considering globalization as inevitable, proceeds to suggest policy support like modernization of looms, achievement of BIS -14000/ISO 9000 standards to tune this sector to the changing global market. The Government's emphasis on the training of weavers through Weavers Training Centers (WSCs) in computer aided designing (CAD) and computer colour matching (CCM) is in a big way a part of the strategy to meet the challenges of globalization<sup>24</sup> and its matter of fact insistence on production of designs that have market acceptance and viability in fact reveals a deep seated bias towards the handlooms. Implicit in this, is the perception that the handloom products have certain obsolescence and therefore lag behind the mill and the power loom products in the textile market; that they sell only when rebate is given, that the handlooms cannot

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<sup>23</sup>This is evident from the ARTFED's priority of diversifying products for the global market and the introduction of embroidery, beadwork and crystals into the weaving process in order to make the products more acceptable internationally.

<sup>24</sup> N. N. Rana Patgiri, in written reply to the readers queries in, *The Telegraph*, 15<sup>th</sup> Oct 2002

survive without subsidies, etc. This perception so widely shared by not only the officialdom of the textile establishment responsible for handloom development and the handloom committees but unfortunately even by the handloom weavers' organizations, had done enough harm by misplacing the emphasis.<sup>25</sup> The Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) puts overwhelming importance on trade liberalization. Since export led growth is regarded as the only viable development strategy, it follows that domestic production would have to be diverted to export industries. The export sector firms often employ women because they are prepared to accept low wages. Experience shows that these firms adopted new technology and low cost methods to increase their competitiveness in the international market. Governments in India and elsewhere have responded to the situation by either exempting industries in the export sector from labour protective legislation or by creating export zones where workers employed lie beyond the purview of labour and social rights. This type of insecure low paid female employment is expected to increase as liberalization releases new market forces in the hitherto pre-capitalist enclaves.<sup>26</sup>

As far as Sualkuchi is concerned, the focus now is on catering to a global market (The major buyers are USA and Japan) through non-traditional items like curtains, cushion and bed covers, *Kimonos* (traditional Japanese silk attire),

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<sup>25</sup> K.Srinivasalu., *op.cit.*, p.1383

<sup>26</sup> Sudha Deshpande., "Feminization through flexible labour in India: Evidence and future prospects" in Maitheryi Krishnaraj (ed)*The New Economic Policy and Women, a Collection of Background papers* (Bombay, 1993)pp.81-82

place mats and upholstery in order to cater to changing tastes. What in the process is lost sight of is the strength of the handloom sectors, which lies in the acceptance of and demands for its products in the local market. This specificity and specialty of handloom products is largely determined by local needs and customs. For this reason the handloom production is characterized by its region specific diversity. Thus it cannot be reduced or understood only in terms of abstract demand and supply principle of the market. As K. Srinivasalu notes that the ability to commercially produce the goods in small volumes, quick switchover to new designs and creation of exquisite designs which cannot be made on the power looms are seen as the strength of handlooms. However, there is a danger of an exclusively market led strategy. The SAP puts an overwhelming importance on trade liberalization. Since export led growth is regarded as the only viable development strategy, it follows that domestic production would need to be attuned with market developments and develop their products and skills accordingly. But there is in fact an inherent danger of homogenization in this path of development oriented to the elite domestic and export market, when the strength of handlooms lies in their region specific skills and designs, local initiative and product diversity. Needless to say, the chief characteristics of globalization are centralization of decision making and concentration of the conditions of production. When made to gear to a predominantly global market, due to the latter's extremely fickle nature and advertisement induced behavior, the handloom production may not only go into

the control of exporters leading to the further decline of the co-operative and even master weaver initiative but also prove suicidal to the weaver community<sup>27</sup> . At the most a small section of the master-weaver trader segment may survive, perhaps even prosper. In fact in Sualkuchi, as has been noted in the previous chapter, a process of marginalization of the weaving community has already begun. A small number of weavers who are being supplied with the necessary raw materials and have been "adopted" by ARTFED are enjoying a steady income. But their numbers are small and only about 400<sup>28</sup>. For the vast majority of weavers who run small enterprises, they are facing a yarn shortage and are in no position to compete with non-traditional items. This has been shown through the field work discussed in the previous chapter. Their produce does not make its way into the fashion ramps of the world nor are they represented in fairs and exhibitions organized by the ARTFED. What is also of serious concern is that this perception is premised on the 'givenness' of market demand and myth of consumer preference and the success or failure of handlooms is viewed in terms of the latter's adaptability to the market demand when the strategy should be one of actively intervening and influencing the market. In the context of globalization where high investment campaign wars between the multinational corporations have become the order of the day and

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<sup>27</sup>Paraphrased from Harjeet Ahluwalia., "Need for a larger Participatory Role" in Subhas Sethi, (ed)*Yojana, A Development Monthly*(New Delhi, August 2001) p.24

<sup>28</sup> According to the Managing Director of ARTFED, Mr. R. Patgiri, over the past 5-6 years, some 50-60 households in Sualkuchi, have been roped in to produce products for the global market.

the consumer is targeted by well worked out market strategies and persuaded to realize his/her 'needs' to talk of an autonomous consumer becomes fallacious.<sup>29</sup> One other point to be noted is that for the thousands of women in Sualkuchi, silk weaving is not only a source of their livelihood but also a repository of their skills. The community skills, techniques involved in different stages of production are historically evolved, owned and imparted communally, thus it cannot be understood only in terms of abstract demand and supply principle of the market. An over emphasis on exports and manufacture of non traditional items is having the serious consequences of de-skilling the handloom weavers engaged in such enterprises.

On the other hand, The Ministry of Textiles, annual Report for 2000-2001 notes, " ....the importance of the handloom sector in the national economy cannot be over emphasized. On account of having the advantage of flexibility of small production, run, uniqueness, innovation, and adaptability, this sector can contribute towards export earnings in a big way, Export of Handloom has therefore been identified as a "thrust Area" for the overall development of this sector. The Government is exploring the possibility of making optimal use of the resources to enhance production capabilities of exportable products....."<sup>30</sup> As part of this "development" program, the Assam Government too as noted, is encouraging the export of handlooms. At this point, the question that can be

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<sup>29</sup> K.Sirinivasalu., *op.cit.*, pp.1382-1383

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of Textiles-Annual Report 00-01 accessed through, <http://apparel.indiamart.com/annual-report/handloom.html>

asked is what happens, if the major buyers of Assam silk undergo a period of economic recession. In fact, countries which are the major buyers of Assam silk are facing a global recession. If the global crisis continues, Assam handloom sector will continue to suffer with the consequent adverse affects for the handlooms. On the other hand, the Government aims to develop Sibsagar, in Assam “known for production of *Muga* silk.”<sup>31</sup> At this point one may question the basic approach of the Government towards the silk industry in the state. First, there is no—pre defined handloom policy for the state. Schemes are launched from time to time according to the needs of the time. But none of these schemes as we shall observe, are women- centric and very few of them make the weaver a part of development planning. Moreover none of these schemes are specifically aimed at turning Sualkuchi into the hub of silk production. Instead of strengthening the silk industry, the government is shifting its focus to the development of this industry in places in upper Assam.

It must be noted at this point that the Assam Government has a complex and impressive organizational set-up to implement various schemes for the promotion and development of the handloom sector. The Directorate of Handloom and Textiles was formed in 1983, separating the weaving section from the original ‘sericulture and weaving Department’. The Directorate has a three tier system of co-operatives functioning under it. These are the Apex/state level society, district level co-operative society and primary Weavers co

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<sup>31</sup> [Planning Commission.gov.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/8<sup>th</sup>/vol2/8v2ch6.htm](http://Planning Commission.gov.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/8<sup>th</sup>/vol2/8v2ch6.htm)

operative society. As far as Sualkuchi is concerned, 29 co-operatives are in operation here at present.<sup>32</sup> Several bodies set up under the Directorate of Handloom weaving also function with their own administrative set up and by laws under the administrative control of The Directorate of Handloom and Textiles, Assam. They are-

- (1) ARTFED (Assam weavers and artisans co operative federation limited)
- (2) AGMC Ltd. (Assam Govt. Marketing Corp Ltd)
- (3) Assam Khadi and Village Industries Board.

These co-operative societies provide assistance to the weavers with the objectives of boosting up production to capture national and international markets, and all round and general welfare of the weavers. ARTFED has also opened showrooms in the metros with the aims to procure and market the finished product produced by primary societies in return for yarn provided by the apex society to them. ARTFED also organizes Expos in district level, National level and special handloom expos. ARTFED is a member of the Handloom export promotion council, the export promotion council for handicrafts and the all India federation of co-operative spinning mills. It has been inducted into the international business forum of the indo-German chamber of commerce too. It has created a demand for hand woven *muga* and *eri* silk products in the global market by participating in various international fairs. The main buyers are from

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<sup>32</sup> Information provided by M.R. N.N. Rana Patgiri., Director of ARTFED, on Jan, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007

the US and in 2001, ARTFED was conferred the Arch of Europe, an international award for quality and use of technology in silk weaving. It has successfully created a demand for hand woven *muga* and *eri* silk products in the global market by participating in various international fairs.<sup>33</sup>

The AGMC is the state level handloom development corporation which is marketing the products of the state's unorganized sector through its network of emporiums within and outside the state. The two most important aims of the AGMC policy outlined are to, "improve the socio-economic condition of the handloom weavers and enhancement of per capita income of the handloom weavers."<sup>34</sup> How far this claim has been met remains to be seen.

Between 1995 and 2004, various centrally sponsored and central sector schemes were launched in Assam with the expressed objective of the welfare of the weaving community. Some of the more important of them are, (1) margin money for destitute handloom weavers. Under this, Needy weavers are given a loan amount of 25000 rupees to set up their own looms. We met Kishore Kalita in Sualkuchi, an impoverished loom owner who owns only two looms. When we asked why he has not availed of the loan facility he replied that he did not even know such a scheme existed and even if he had been aware, he would not take a loan from the bank as he would have to engage hired help and pay them and he

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<sup>33</sup> N.N.Rana Patgiri, quoted in an article, "Silk Exotica for foreign Buyers", in, *The Telegraph*, 16<sup>th</sup> Aug, 2004, Also see information also on the ARTFED website, <http://artfed.org/>

<sup>34</sup> [http://assamgovt.nic.in/departments/handloom\\_dept.asp](http://assamgovt.nic.in/departments/handloom_dept.asp)

was not sure he would be able to return the amount back to the Bank. His only contact with the market is through the local shops in Sualkuchi which even advance him loans to help meet his orders. He expressed doubts that if he expanded his business, he might not be able to dispose off his products.<sup>35</sup>

(2) Integrated Handloom development scheme, (3) setting up of handloom development centers, (4) Project package scheme for handloom weavers, (6) Health package schemes for handloom weavers. Under this scheme, the Government on paper has implemented a centrally sponsored Health package scheme since 1992-1993 under which treatment of diseases, testing of eyes, cost of spectacles maternity benefits, supply of drinking water etc are provided.<sup>36</sup> But residents of the town complain that they preferred to go to Guwahati for treatment as there were no "good" doctors in their Noapara Civil Hospital Hospital <sup>37</sup> (7) Work shed cum Housing scheme for handloom weavers. Under this scheme, , the Government adopted a new scheme under the central sector on the provision of dwelling houses with work sheds to the poor weavers of the state. A scheme known as the work shed cum housing scheme has supposedly been in operation since 1995. But throughout Sualkuchi, we did not come across a single worker's shed erected by the Government. The situation is best summed up in Rakhee Coudhury's, (who teaches design and weaving for

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<sup>35</sup> Conversation with Kishore Kalita, S.M. Road., August, 18<sup>th</sup> 2008

<sup>36</sup> See Government of Assam, viii-x Five year plans between 1995-2004

<sup>37</sup> Information gathered from Gajen Bharali, a Banker who regularly commutes between Guwahati and Sualkuchi as well as well as other residents

the Government run State Institute of Rural Development), words, “..The sad state of affairs is most visible in the empty, decaying work sheds of the government run weaver service centers all over the state. Citizen organizations are promoting weaving but mostly as an income generating activity for micro credit groups. With multiple agendas, no market focus, and little expertise, most citizen groups are project driven and lack the singular dedication and discipline to turn weaving into a sustainable growing industry. Thus most citizen based weaving programs either stagnate after a period of initial enthusiasm or flounder after the project money runs out....”<sup>38</sup> A Scheme known as Project Golden Thread was launched in 2003 and was conceived as a rural development project through sericultural activity<sup>39</sup> but it is yet to function in its proper perspective in Sualkuchi. Other schemes include, Special rebate on the sale of handloom cloth, (9) market development assistance for handloom cloth, (10) extension of co-operative coverage in the handloom sector. This scheme was conceived of in 1997, but as my field study clearly revealed, the vast majority of the loom owners and weavers in Sualkuchi, are outside the co-operative fold. As part of the welfare schemes for the weavers, a group insurance scheme (9<sup>th</sup> v year plan)

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<sup>38</sup> [Http://www.ashoka.org/fellows/viewprofile3.cfm](http://www.ashoka.org/fellows/viewprofile3.cfm)

According to the Reserve Bank of India,([www.rbi.org](http://www.rbi.org)) Micro Credit, is defined as provision of thrift, credit and other financial services and products of very small amount to the poor in rural, semi-urban and urban areas for enabling them to raise their income levels and improve living standards. Micro Credit Institutions are those which provide these facilities According to critics, Microcredit is quickly spreading in India, but the loans don't always lead to businesses; in some cases they are even used to pay off previous debts. Micro credit's other goal--to empower women in highly patriarchal societies--isn't always achieved, either. For further details view, article “why India is failing” through [www.rediff.com/money/2006/nov/10spec.htm](http://www.rediff.com/money/2006/nov/10spec.htm) and [www.assam.org/node/2322](http://www.assam.org/node/2322)

<sup>39</sup> <http://rural.nic.in>

has been introduced for handloom weavers "in order to help the weaver's to meet his socio-economic obligation towards his family and to act as a support system against the uncertainty of his working capacity in old age."<sup>40</sup> The fact that the Government still views men as breadwinners and women as supplementary earners possibly explains why there are no women weaver specific schemes in the state till date.

Acknowledging the fact that," the handloom industry in the state of Assam has a long tradition in the socio-economic life of the people for supplementing the family income to a great extent and providing self employment opportunities to lakhs of people of poor and downtrodden sections of the society", The Directorate of Handloom and Textiles, Assam, began implementing the centrally sponsored scheme viz. the Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana. "It was introduced in the year 2000-2001 by the Government of India in place of project scheme throughout the state to take care of a wide gamut of activities such as product development, Infrastructure support, training to the weavers, supply of equipments and marketing support etc. both at the macro and micro level in an integrated and coordinated manner." Other schemes such as those for marketing handloom products through Exhibitions and fairs, development of exportable products and their marketing scheme sponsored by the Government of India to increase production marketing

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<sup>40</sup> <http://apparel.indiamart.com/annual-report/handloom.html>

employment earning etc also continue to be in operation. The Directorate is also implementing State sectoral scheme for production of handloom fabrics, training program, district development scheme, regional development scheme, publicity and advertisement, development scheme of co operative societies and assistance to 4 no's Autonomous Councils.<sup>41</sup>

The list of these schemes is impressive and if the desired target is met then the weavers would be greatly benefitted. But if one looks at the Government's own data about the physical and financial achievements (Table in next page) made by the Directorate of Handloom and Textiles, Assam during 2001-2003 and 2006-2007, the target has been far from achieved.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See, *Ministry of Textiles- Annual Report 00-01, op.cit*

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.assamgov.org/ecosurvey/Industry.htm#seri>. and, <http://db.nedfi.com/content/handloom-textile-assam>.

Centrally Sponsored Scheme	Physical Achievement 2001-2003	Physical Achievement 2006-2007
Health Package Scheme	1285	N.A.
Work Shed Cum Housing	500 Nos of worksheds	1966 nos of worksheds
Integrated Handloom Village Development Program	300 Nos of weavers	N.A.
Margin money to destitute weavers	250 Nos of weavers	N.A
Scheme for support and training and Employment program (STEP)	20,000.Women Weavers	N.A
Deen Dayal Hathkargha	16600	16400
Project Package Scheme	11800	2552

There is no district wise breakup of the implementation or impact of these schemes which means that as far as Sualkuchi is concerned, in all likelihood, the impact of these schemes (as is evident from my field study also) has been marginal. As the above statistics show, by 2007, half the schemes had run out of steam. In fact when I spoke to a senior official of the Textile and Handloom Department, about the number of schemes currently operational in Sualkuchi, (March 2009), I was informed that currently there is only one scheme in operation here, that is The Integrated Handloom Development Scheme under

which 300-400 weavers in a cluster were being covered under the components of the scheme. He however could give me no further details of the scheme.<sup>43</sup> While The National Textile Policy of 2002 advocates the development of the handloom sector with effective support to the poor weavers in every field, yet, the handloom production centers and other training institutes are facing difficulties for want of working capital and required looms and accessories. The proper functioning of these institutions is very essential for economic upliftment of the weavers as well as for the development of the weaving industry in the state.

Moreover, as previously noted in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, the marketing and development support for weavers is woefully inadequate. In order to bring as many weavers as possible under the commercial fold, the State and Central Government have been implementing schemes whereby the costs of the schemes are borne by the Central Government and the Assam Government in the ratio varying from 50:50 and 90:10. But due to inadequate budget provision, the state matching share could not be provided in due proportion on time. As such, there is a huge backlog piled up against the state matching share for the schemes already provided by the Government of India.<sup>44</sup> As far as women are concerned, no conscious effort has been made to reach out to them through the co-operative movement. If the wife of the secretary of a prestigious co-

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<sup>43</sup> Information gathered from Mr P. Bharali., March 31<sup>st</sup> 2009. Also see, Appendix iv

<sup>44</sup> Information gathered from Mr. P. Bharali (Joint Director, Handloom and Textiles, Assam, Government), and MR N.N. Rana, Patgiri on Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> and in September, 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007

operative society (Her narrative has been provided in the previous chapter) complains of being exploited by middlemen,<sup>45</sup> one can easily imagine the plight of the migrant women weavers who have no organizational or marketing skills.

For the weaving community in general, one of the most important problems is disruption in the supply of yarn, especially muga cocoon, resulting in a steep increase in price of raw silk. Telling evidence of the exploitation of the weaving community is provided by the 1995 Assam Assembly Report which states that “.... It is reported that some vested interest are receiving yarn for the weavers but instead of supplying it to the weavers, they are selling it to the market....”<sup>46</sup> While, during the 10<sup>th</sup> Five year plan, the Directorate of Sericulture has implemented various schemes under the State plan for development and expansion of sericulture in the state, and even established an Advisory Committee under the Central Silk Board in Sibsagar for fixing the price of cocoons and yarn for supply to the silk weaving centre’s like Sualkuchi,<sup>47</sup> the weavers as noted in the previous chapter, continue to complain about the steep increase in price of *muga* yarn, forcing many of them to shift to cheaper *tussar*. The Government’s failure to note this significant macro economic policy shift obviously leads to failure to diagnose the nature and causes for the survival crisis of the handloom weavers. While Countries like Japan have shown interest in importing the product the limiting factor is the availability of *muga* cocoons

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<sup>45</sup> Mrs Reena Kalita, wife of Mr. Mahendra kalita, secretary of the Assam Samabay Resham Prasthan on jan 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007

<sup>46</sup>Official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 1995

and unless *som* plantations are established, the crisis in the supply of *muga* cocoons will not be addressed and unless that happens, the weavers will continue to face hardships. Moreover, as Kishore Kalita's example provided earlier proves, the lack of awareness amongst the weavers about the various central and state Government schemes is a very important problem. During our field study, we found no poster campaigns launched by the Government advertising its development schemes nor do Government agents ever visit the silk town to educate the weavers on the health package or pension schemes introduced by the Government. There is no supervisory body at the bloc level to ensure that the benefits of the schemes reach the people for whom it is meant. The limited handloom policy of the Government continues to be weak and ineffectual. At the receiving end of the Government inefficiency continue to be the poor weavers. Ironically, the lack of farsightedness, has also affected the very silk which the Government is trying to promote, *muga* the golden yellow silk. *Muga* has been accorded the coveted Geographical Indications (GI) status, equivalent to a status from the office of the GI Registry in Chennai. Geographical Indications are used to identify agricultural, natural or manufactured goods originating in a particular place. These goods should have special quality or characteristics or reputation based upon the climatic or production characteristics unique to the geographical location. The GI status provides legal

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<sup>47</sup> Information provided by Mr. N.N.Rana Patgiri on 5<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2007

<sup>48</sup> *District potential survey of rural non-farm sector- Kamrup Dist*, NEIBM, Submitted to the Bankers Institute of Rural development, (Guwahati, 2000)

protection to a product produced in a geographical territory.<sup>49</sup> Yet, *muga* seems to have lost its luster. When I spoke to the Joint Director, textile and Handloom Weaving, and tried to question him about the sharp decline in the production of *muga* cocoons and the consequent rise in prices of raw cocoons, officials were at their complacent best. Though he was well aware of the fact, I was told that the manufacturers had found a way out of their difficulties by mixing *muga* with *tussar*!<sup>50</sup> This callous attitude towards a product which is indigenous to the state and is closely connected with the lives, culture and livelihood of the people and which the Government after long efforts has patented, is not just surprising but painful too. The Handloom mark introduced by the Government of India to ensure product quality has not been introduced in Sualkuchi till now.

It is impossible to accept that the Government is unaware of the weaving community's plight or the loom owner's discontent. None the less policy makers continue to be reckless in their attitude towards the handloom silk sector.

Feminists point out that the state cannot necessarily be relied upon to mitigate the harsh effects of the market. A major difficulty of state regulation is that the state policies tend to rigidify in ways which can have effects that are contrary to their original purpose. In addition, the state too can have an ambiguity of intention. Not only can it protect the weak, but it can itself contribute to the erosion of workers legal rights and social gains. It is also

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<sup>49</sup> *Muga Gets Gilt Status*, *The Telegraph*, Guwahati, 25<sup>th</sup> Aug, 2007

<sup>50</sup> Mr P. Bharali ., Jan, 2007

misleading to simply pose the state against the market.<sup>51</sup> By attempting to co-opt Sualkuchi into the globalization process without at first having a firm policy in place for the weaving community, by neglecting the vast numbers of migrant labour, especially women, the Government has unwittingly further marginalized the weaving community. Today,(as shown in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter) in Sualkuchi, for the vast majority of weavers, their incomes bear no relationship to the hours they work, to market prices and to goods and services or to the value of the output and profits they help to produce. As previously mentioned, working hours for the weavers are long. In fact loom owners told us that it was up to the weavers to work for as long as they desired as the sooner they delivered one product they could take up orders for another article. They do not have the protection of labour legislation, representative organizations or employee benefits like leave, provident fund, legal aid or credit. They have no direct links with organized industry modern technology or facilities. They are merely piece rate workers and all know are the skills and knowledge of their trade. All they have is their own physical labour. The village does not have proper infrastructure. Electricity plays truant for most parts of the day and women workers work by the light of a flickering lantern on their intricate design at night. In fact each time that we went to Sualkuchi, we experienced power cuts. If that was not all, the river Brahmaputra which annually inundates its banks has eroded a large part of the village area forcing many skilled weavers to abandon

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<sup>51</sup> Shoma A.Chatterjee, *Dignity and Daily Bread*, (Delhi, 1993)p.220

their work and move to a safer place.<sup>52</sup> While the Government in 2003, has declared Sualkuchi as a Handloom heritage village, in the absence of any concrete institutional support from the state the weavers seem to be caught in a web of neglect. For women, the deal is even worse. Repeated questions about women specific schemes yielded negative answers from Government officials. In fact, the Joint Director of the handloom and Textile Development even told me that there was no need for women specific scheme, because "women and men are all same." This brings to mind a comment made by Minister Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, way back, in 1954, when he pointed out in the state Assembly that "The rural Development Scheme as a whole aims for the upliftment of all the people in the rural areas irrespective of their sex (emphasis mine)and hence no separate scheme for the upliftment of women in rural areas is considered necessary. Hence no women development officers will be appointed and the Government had no proposals to create a women cadre in the said development department (rural development department) to work"<sup>53</sup>. Between 1954 and 2008, a lot has changed in the rural scene but apparently not the Government's narrow perspective on women. Government officials and

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<sup>52</sup> Facts collected through my field work between January 2007 and August 2008) and also from Alok Das, resident of Sualkuchi, quoted in an article, "Silk town stares at watery future" in *The Telegraph*, 29<sup>th</sup> July, 2004

<sup>53</sup> *Official Report of the Assam Legislative Assembly Debates*, March -April Session, volume No 1, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1954

agencies fail to understand that the inclusion in the process of socio-economic change does not happen automatically. At a minimum, it requires state attention to the legal and structural barriers that preclude female participation.

Despite decades of planning and assembly debates on the importance of the silk industry in Assam and rhetoric about the importance of the craft in the life of the rural Assamese women, nothing like a state policy for silk, nor any specific schemes for women in the industry exist. Feminists have argued that the responsibility of all rural development programs is to integrate women into the mainstream of economic activity not to segregate them into a mass that is forever dependent on the benevolence of their men.<sup>54</sup> But apparently till date, Gender is not seen as core of development politics.

It can be argued that attention to women's domestic responsibilities and making these compatible with productive work are important components of both the incentive and support structure if the women are to be integrated into any process of socio-economic development. Moreover it cannot be presumed that state policies designed to benefit rural households will automatically benefit women. In a study on the impact of agrarian reforms in faraway Latin America, Carmen Deere has shown that these reforms have benefitted only men largely because of the common designation of 'households' as the beneficiaries of an agrarian reform and the subsequent incorporation of only male household

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<sup>54</sup> Shoma A. Chatterjee *,op.cit.*, p.165

heads into the new agrarian reform structure. She has shown that a necessary but sufficient condition for rural women to benefit at par with men is that they too be designated as beneficiaries.<sup>55</sup> The Latin American experience serves a few vital lessons in the case of Sualkuchi too and that is, unless schemes for empowering women in the implementation of programs at the district and block levels, monitoring, and setting targets for women's development at the local level are worked out, and unless the Government helps maintain and initiates a network of grass roots-level organizations like the village level women's groups to look into the weavers problems, the various schemes however well intended they might be will not reach their desired goal. Other policies that enable women to participate more effectively in the new economic reforms include adult literacy programs and technical and leadership training courses specifically for women. Our options are indeed limited but there are four critical areas of action-enabling legislation, promoting modes of organization that are participatory and under peoples control, evolving projects and schemes at grassroots level and safeguarding minimum needs of the poor (including women) through regulatory macro policies on prices and subsidies. For the moment, none of such positive action is visible in Sualkuchi and women's labour here, both in the household and in the factory continue to be exploited.

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<sup>55</sup> Carmen Diana Deere., "Rural Women and State Policy: The Latin American Experience " in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds), *Gender and Development: Theoretical, Empirical and Practical Approaches*, Vol ii,(Massachusetts, 2001)p.491

Very recently, the Government of India in collaboration with the North Eastern Council has released a grand policy document running into a massive 633 pages, Vision 2020, which contains important guidelines regarding the development of the North Eastern region.

The most important point in the context of this study that the document speaks of is “inclusive growth.” The document notes that, “the major concerns relating to women are the feminization of poverty and exploitation of women in low paid, hazardous and insecure jobs in the unorganized sector. These issues require sensitive approach which cuts across all projects, programs and schemes. Gender commitment must be translated into budgetary commitments. For re-prioritizing public spending we must prepare our ‘bottom-up budgets’ and work for its realization in collaboration with the elected representatives. As Ela Bhatt puts it, “... when this happens, our policies and laws will be different, national and local priorities will be different: it will be more just and more humane. It is a long struggle, but it must be fought ...”<sup>56</sup> Gender Economists must lift the veil of statistical invisibility of the unpaid ‘care economy’ managed by poor women and highlight the equality and efficiency dimension and

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<sup>56</sup> Ela Bhatt, “Towards Empowerment” in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath .,(eds), *op.cit.*, Vol I (Massachusetts,2001)PP.516-517

transform macro policies so that they become women friendly.”<sup>57</sup> One hopes that this will call attention to the existence of the massive numbers of unprotected employed weavers in the factories in Sualkuchi as well as the women of the weaving households and their contributions to the national economy and family income. Without political visibility, the Government will not act in their favour. Women weavers and spinners and reelers and dyers need to be recognized as central to the silk economy, and to be in the mainstream of any development thought and practice.

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<sup>57</sup> *Northeast Region, Vision 2020, Volume 1*, accessed through <http://mdoner.gov.in/>.

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## CHAPTER VI

### EPILOGUE- THE ECONOMICS OF WOMEN, MEN AND WORK: NEED FOR NEW TROPES TO ENCODE HISTORY

Our study, through the previous chapters had taken the story of the skill, resilience, strength and vulnerability of the women weaver through a long period of History, from the pre- colonial to contemporary times. In the process, the study has also sought to graph the challenges that the women in this industry have had to grapple with in the past, the kind of changes that they are currently facing and the Government response to their position and role in the industry.

From the chapters, earlier discussed, four interconnected analytical issues suggest themselves. Firstly, that, there is a deep (and biased) gender construction of women's labour *vis-a-vis* her actual contribution to the silk industry. Secondly, for women in Sualkuchi, market relations appear to be an important site of material subordination. What follows, is therefore, the need firstly, for a feminist politics that allows us to view women's labour from their own perspective and secondly the need for measures to engender Government policies and academic research.

This chapter presents the major findings and conclusions of the study based on a discussion and critique of the issues mentioned above.

From the evidences discussed and presented in the third chapter, the study has shown that, throughout a long period of the silk industry, stretching at least from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C, the labour of women has been crucial in sustaining this industry through the vicissitudes of several centuries. One of the most important contentions and conclusions that the study draws is that, firstly, the notion of the Assamese women's natural weaving skill is a patriarchal construction-a myth, which can be traced back to the Ahom period. The fact that a girl could not be given in marriage unless she had attained proficiency in weaving shows that an ideological compulsion to weave existed in traditional Assamese society. This, in turn, acted as a kind of subtle mechanism to harness more effectively the unpaid labour of the womenfolk in the production process. When the British arrived in Assam in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they found a valley self sufficient and rich in silk, where every woman was a "born weaver". The colonial masters however did not do much to promote or encourage this industry. Perhaps because by that time the notion that silk weaving was something that the women folk performed during their leisure had become so strongly entrenched, the British thought of silk weaving as a private affair. Hence, despite occasional episodes of bureaucratic favour, the silk industry was left to its own fate. The colonial Government of Assam began to show some interest in the silk industry in the mid 1880s but on the whole, Assam's silk policy was inadequate: it was far from consistent and lacked a clear plan. The Government's main instrument of policy, The Industries Department,

remained a weak and ineffectual body perpetually starved of funds.<sup>1</sup> Policies that the British took to develop this industry consisted of a series of slow and half hearted measures that do not seem to have benefitted the women weavers of Sualkuchi in any way. The study has reasoned that, the colonial attitude towards the silk industry, in fact reveals a deep seated gender bias. This is evidenced from the fact that development efforts were not directed towards the women. Silk extension workers were male, the staff of the Guwahati Weaving School were almost always all male and the few stipendiary of the institute also appear to be male.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, despite gross neglect, Assam's female dominated silk industry did not die out. This was an amazing feat and the study has tried to show that it was the labour of the women folk, and the fact that it was so intrinsically linked to their lives that despite severe odds, the silk industry survived the colonial onslaught. In the contemporary period, the labour of the women continues to be crucial for the survival of this craft. Other than the large numbers of paid migrant labour who have found employment in the loom enterprises in Sualkuchi, there is another category of women workers whose labour is equally important in the sustenance of this craft. These are the women of the weaving households who do almost all the preparatory process leading up

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<sup>1</sup> See, *Reports of the Industries Department-1929, 1930, 1938-1939*

<sup>2</sup> See, *Reports of the Industries Department., 1938.* See also, *Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, File 111-1-68M of 1913 and, Agri, B, May, 1814, Nos. 17-19*

to weaving. Their labour is taken as voluntary and what is worse, their contribution is not even acknowledged. The division of labour in production and marketing is everywhere very close to ideological norms about the gendering of tasks and appropriate behavior. If anything the measured input of women in the process of silk weaving is underestimated in normative statements. Women's labour or *jugar dhara* is calculated and included in the final pricing of the product. The rate is calculated as the same which would have to be paid to a skilled migrant or paid employee. But the returns were never paid to the women in the household.<sup>3</sup> It may be mentioned here that *jugar dhara* only means providing assistance to the final task of weaving, so women's labour is not seen as productive labour. This free labour is expected of her. We spoke to Digambar Kalita who told us that the women in his household helped with all aspects of the preparatory processes. When we asked him if he had ever thought of sharing the cash profits with his wife since her assistance was so vital for his business, Kalita replied that he gave his wife a *mekhala chaddar* on every festive occasion.<sup>4</sup> Women in Sualkuchi are not only home makers- they are reelers and winders and dyers and supervisors too. But standard categorization of occupations means that these women will always remain invisible.

This discrepancy between ideology and practice leads to men having greater- in fact, total control of the means of production, i.e. the looms

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<sup>3</sup> This was gleaned from conversations with Rita Das, Laxminath Nagar, Sualkuchi, on August 17-18<sup>th</sup> 2008, and from Kabita Baishya, Naktola, Sector, 1, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the Respondent, August, 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008

and yarn and cocoon than would be the case if women's tasks were actually recognized. In Sualkuchi thus, marriage and kin ties are so intertwined with economic activities so as to produce a structure in which the role of the male as head of the household as well as the economy are inseparable. Thus here, patriarchy is seen as more than a form of male dominant family structure. It is also an independent socio-economic system of production. In this basic unit of patriarchy, household production is organized and directed by the male head of the family in his name. Production is generally directed by the women only in the man's absence.

The material subordination of women in Sualkuchi has been researched in two institutional sites. The first is within the household, where intra household divisions of labour or gender divisions of tasks have been explained as one of a social process of decision making. This again, is in part influenced by patriarchal norms. The work has focused on some of the features of intra differentials of fall back and unequal conjugal contracts have been invoked to explain gender asymmetries in command not only over decision making but also over resources, autonomy and welfare which would partly explain why women in Sualkuchi, despite their skill are not in a position to demand control or at least a share in the resources.

In sum, what has been sought to be illustrated is that, economic self interest can penetrate even the most intimate domains of family life.

However, this does not imply that household decisions can be explained in purely economic terms. It merely suggests that the boundary between a service extracted and a gift freely given within the threshold of the household is indeed very narrow and likely to be camouflaged by the prevailing patriarchal norms which in all likelihood will work to the disadvantage of the women in the household. The fact that women in Sualkuchi have internalized the notion and belief that helping the men folk in the silk production is part of their daily chore further reinforces the feminist belief that the workings of patriarchy are complex and works in myriad and subtle ways, surviving, precisely by making allies of the exploited.

The second institutional site of material subordination appears to be the market. Women have always had an ambivalent relation to the markets. In their liberating aspect, markets create new opportunities for exchange and accumulation, break through existing social barriers and transform relationships that impede their expansion. But feminists also caution that commercialization often also takes the path of least resistance. Faced with intransigent social structures and rigid hierarchies such as those based on gender, race or caste, the expansion of commerce builds on these hierarchies, altering and reshaping them in the process and transforming the life experiences of those involved. Sometimes these processes lay the bases for transforming hierarchies over the longer run; at other times they deepen the hold of existing authority structure; and at still others they create new forms of authority and control, more subtle

and difficult to identify precisely because they work through the market.<sup>5</sup> In the context of Sualkuchi, the study has been able to show that the vast number of waged women weavers, are actually women who are stuck in the lower rungs of the economic hierarchy and hence, it must be understood that although women's economic participation may bring her a certain measure of economic independence as an individual, the overall pattern of women's work actually indicates that her work is not sufficient for autonomous economic development within the society. In fact, an analysis of the labour market and labour relations in Sualkuchi, reveal that here life cycle vulnerabilities, employment probabilities, skill acquisition and, income and their security (differentials not justified by productivity or by demand and supply) are stacked against women. Wages are low; there are no crèche, and few *pucca* toilets. There are no muster rolls; Provident fund, gratuities and lay off compensations are ignored. Women in an advanced stage of pregnancy simply have to leave their jobs. Also, the fact that these women see working as a temporary phase in their lives (till their marriage) means that they are less concerned than men about the intrinsic interest of their work and its long term prospects. Thus, in the more visible public arena, where vast numbers of migrant women are engaged, patriarchal notions work in covert ways. As the study has shown, the employer's belief in the relative docility and

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<sup>5</sup> Gita Sen., "Gender, Markets and States: A selective Review and Research Agenda" in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath., (ed), *Gender and Development: Theoretical, Empirical and Practical Approaches*, Vol ii, p.431.

Submissiveness of women as compared to the men is an important factor in their preference for women workers. Indra mohan Baishya, referred to earlier, told us that he preferred to hire female workers because they are more obedient and more adjusting. Mr. Bokul Das told us that weaving is a craft that is more suited for feminine hands and hence loom owners like himself preferred to hire female hands and that women were also more disciplined compared to the male weavers as the latter take regular breaks to smoke or simply laze. The expressions used by employers to describe this characteristic were diverse: “more hardworking’, ‘more submissive’, ‘less troublesome’.<sup>6</sup> Employer’s appreciation of women workers for their docility can also be related to the position of women within the family which socializes to patriarchal notions of docility and submissiveness. This also perhaps also explains that when women arrive at the labour market, they have already internalized patriarchal notions of “appropriate behavior” and hence, are more willing to take on a greater burden of work from their male employers with fewer complaints. So, in discussing women in Sualkuchi, we do so in a context which assumes an unequal and definitive bias against women’s labour. This would also partly explain the fact we do not come across any case of gendered resistance and struggle acted out in the theatre of the market place. The workers so called submissiveness can also be understood as emanating from the subordinate position they hold within

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<sup>6</sup> Information gathered from a cross section of loom owners, especially from from a gentleman by the name of Bokul Das, Laxminath Nagar, Sualkuchi, September, 21<sup>st</sup> 2007

their households. For the vast numbers of migrant labour, thus, the working women forming the foundation of 'male' marketing systems are caught in a pincer. Government apathy and the lack of a trade union movement, limit their capacity collectively to improve their working conditions.

In the course of this work, a search for gender empowering action in marketing systems revealed very little. The Government is of course, well aware of the fact that there is substantial involvement of women in the silk industry. For instance, the Government in its budget proposal of 2008-2009, noted that, ".... Handloom and sericulture is an important sector in the economy of Assam. It not only provides direct employment to the full-time workers but also provides supplementary income to lakhs of rural households for whom sericulture and handloom is a family tradition...." <sup>7</sup> The Ministry's of Textiles Annual Reports also notes the substantial involvement of women in the sericulture and handloom industry.<sup>8</sup> None the less till date, the state Government has not taken any initiative to bring the weavers under protective laws or to ensure their job security or even to ensure that minimum wages are paid to them. There are of course, any number of schemes under the Directorate of Textiles and Handloom Weaving and the Central Silk Board. (CSB) But has been noted in the Fifth chapter, the Government's own data about the physical and financial achievements made by the Directorate of Handloom and Textiles,

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<sup>7</sup> [http://assamgovt.nic.in/budget\\_speech2008-09.asp](http://assamgovt.nic.in/budget_speech2008-09.asp)

<sup>8</sup> <http://apparel.indiamart.com/annualreport/sericulture.html>. see also, <http://texnic.in/annualrep/arch08htm>

Assam during 2001-2002 to 2002-2003, and for 2006-2007, reveals that the development target for the silk industry in the state has been far from achieved.<sup>9</sup> More relevant for the study is the fact that none of the schemes are visible in Sualkuchi. The CSB, again, has its own development schemes and program, which include those which are fully funded by the Centre, those financed by Centre and State both, and those which are externally assisted. Some of the most important of these include the Catalytic Development Scheme "... targeted to motivate State efforts towards productivity, quality and market support...." Another scheme launched with the support of The United Nation's Development Programme (UNDP) for the development of Non-mulberry silk - tasar, muga and eri in states like Assam. The Central Silk Board is also supposed to be implementing "...the Sub-program which among others, aims to impart necessary training and skill up-gradation to the farmers **particularly women in good management practices**, (emphasis added) provide technological support in pre-cocoon and post cocoon processes including reeling, spinning and processing of silk through pilot initiatives and provide replicable models of entrepreneurship. Nearly, 10,000 beneficiaries are proposed to be covered with an estimated direct employment generation of 3.5 lakh **man years**. ..."<sup>10</sup> (emphasis added.)

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<sup>9</sup> [Planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/five/8<sup>th</sup>/vol2/8v2ch6.htm](http://Planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/five/8<sup>th</sup>/vol2/8v2ch6.htm). See also, Ministry of Textiles-Annual Report 00-01, and, <http://db.nedfi.com/content/handloom-textile-assam>

<sup>10</sup> Information accessed through, <http://apparel.indiamart.com/annual-report/index.html>.

The above schemes have been specially mentioned here to also highlight the fact that on the one hand, the Government talks of improving the socio-economic condition of women and on the other it continues to be fixated with gender biased terminologies like 'man years.' As far as women in Sualkuchi are concerned, the Central Silk Boards schemes have not affected the weavers here at all.

In fact, women of Sualkuchi are practically out of the direct focus of development programs. Policy errors have in fact resulted from a lack of analysis of rural patriarchy forces. One of the most crucial areas of policy shortsightedness has been in the area of rural credit. Credit, it is argued, delivers a range of particular benefits when targeted to low income women. It is seen as a critical input for increasing women's employment in small scale enterprises. Further as many studies show, increases in women's incomes improve the unique livelihood enhancement functions women perform for their households as brokers of the health, nutritional and educational status of other household members. It is also argued that credit represents a form of economic empowerment which can enhance women's self confidence and status within the family, as independent producers and providers of a valuable cash resource to the household economy. Whatever the reasons for targeting women, the tremendous increase of credit availability for women must be seen as a positive contribution to efforts to challenge gendered terms of access to productive

resources and opportunities.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Sualkuchi, as the study has observed, despite their skill in silk processing and weaving, very few women are entrepreneurs or "master" weavers themselves. One of the reasons is that marketing is a male bastion and women entrepreneurs have to work through middlemen. Co-operative societies like the *Assam Samaby Resham Pratishtan* do not help to solve the credit problem for the weavers since they advance yarn to the weavers but do not advance cash credit. Women like Rinku Moni Das who has been previously referred to, borrow money from relatives or money lenders in times of need.<sup>12</sup>

It may be mentioned here that one of the major sources of institutional Finance in the North East is the NEDfi or North East Development Finance Institution which was incorporated under the Company's Act 1950 on August 9th 1995. After the creation of the Ministry of DONER (Development of North Eastern Region) it has come under the control of the Ministry.<sup>13</sup> The NEDfi has provision for providing soft loans to women entrepreneurs, to set up their own production units. But the point of argument is that women in Sualkuchi have very little chances of being able to take advantage of these schemes because as noted, they are rarely entrepreneurs themselves, in fact, they do not

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Marie Goetz and Rina Sen Gupta., "Who Takes the Credit? Gender, Power and Control over Loan use in Rural credit Programs in Bangladesh", in, Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed), *op.cit.* vol ii, pp.95-96

<sup>12</sup> Rinku Moni Das, Haripur, Jan 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 2007 and again between, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> August 2007

<sup>13</sup> Information accessed through, [www.nedfi.com](http://www.nedfi.com)

even control the means of production. As far as the migrant workers are concerned, they do not have the means to invest the initial capital required for availing of the loan. In fact labourers with weaving skills are most likely to be employed by urban middle class women in the towns who have the initial capital to start their enterprise. We met Manti Baruah and her sister Shamalie Baruah at the NEDfi Hat (where exhibition of handloom products from the North East are regularly held) in Guwahati, who have taken advantage of the NEDfi loan scheme and have set up a handloom enterprise at their residence.<sup>14</sup> The workers are Bodo women who design and embroider shawls and *kurtas*. The wages paid to these workers are once again at piece rate.<sup>15</sup> The point that is constantly being reiterated, is, that programs for the welfare of the women are unlikely to attain their goal unless frameworks of development and urban social change are re thought and re-worked, from the point of view of needy women and unless their problems at the ground level are addressed. As is clear from the study in the case of Sualkuchi, this seems to be far from happening. In fact Sualkuchi is perhaps a living example of the pitfalls of micro-credit. If patriarchy and patriarchal factors in Sualkuchi explain structural factors that constrain the development of women, proximate causes that affect their economic status, includes economic policies and economic conditions. As we have seen, economic

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<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that urban women entrepreneurs do not require or should not be provided with assistance to become economically self sufficient but that Government focus more often than not misses its target and benefits of development schemes do not percolate down to the poor women who are in need of credit schemes the most. Here one must refer to the critique of micro credit discussed earlier. See also appendix v.

<sup>15</sup> Conversation with Manti and Shyamalie Baruah, on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2009

policies may hinder or facilitate the well being and advancement of women and economic conditions may be detrimental or conducive to improvements. Too often government policies aimed at the economic uplift of the women tends to be reduced to a set of compensatory measures for women taking them further away from the path of economic welfare that men might be trekking.

The Assam Government has of course, has an impressive hierarchical bureaucratic set up, and placed under the Department of Textile and Handloom Weaving ostensibly to promote the silk industry in the state. However, this does not in any way seem to have augured well for the silk industry or the vast numbers of women involved in it. Toeing the neo-liberalists line, the task of Government agencies are expressed in achieving profits through an increase in production, establishing niches, a regular clientele and product diversification so as to create a steady global demand. Already around a 100 households have been 'adopted 'by the Government to produce non-traditional items like quilts, curtains, cushion covers exclusively for a global clientele. Embroidery, beadwork and crystals have also been introduced in the weaving process to make the product more acceptable in the International market.<sup>16</sup> While there is nothing apparently wrong per se in such a policy, a cause for concern over the recent

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<sup>16</sup> Information provided by Mr. N.N Rana Patgiri, Director of ARTFED, in Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2007

months has been the world wide economic meltdown affecting the countries which are the main purchasers of Assam silk products. In fact the FIEO (Federation of Indian Exporters Organization), coordinator, Mr. Subash Mittal, has expressed fears that as western nations reel under the impact of an economic recession resulting in a compression of global demand for traditional items of import from countries like India, it is estimated that an estimated 5 lakh people are likely to be rendered jobless in the export oriented Indian handicraft sector (especially textiles) alone.<sup>17</sup> In Sualkuchi, there is every likelihood that in case downsizing measures are adopted, the migrant labourers who are currently working in the export oriented looms will be the first to be fired. If that happens, these women would find the ground shifted off their feet.

A main contention as well as concern of this study, thus, has been the fact that Sualkuchi has been co opted into this whole process of globalization, without having a firm policy and scheme for the welfare for the weaving community. In fact as suggested in the previous chapter, the basic approach of the Government towards the silk industry in the state seems to be flawed. For one, there is no-pre defined handloom policy for the state and the State Government appears to wake up to the needs of a policy when the Central Government details a Textile policy. Schemes are launched from time to time according to the needs of the time. But none of these schemes as noted are

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<sup>17</sup> Mr. Subhash Mittal, ND.TV,India,27<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2009

women-centric and very few of them make the weaver a part of development planning. Secondly, none of these schemes are specifically aimed at turning Sualkuchi into the hub of silk production. Instead of strengthening the silk industry, and taking concrete steps to stop the adulteration of *muga* with the cheaper *tosh*, the government is shifting its focus to the development of the silk industry to places in upper Assam.<sup>18</sup> But, to repeat a point, the most glaring defect in the Government attitude towards the silk industry is its gender blindness. In fact neo liberal policies are not simply gender blind, but gender biased, by virtue of that blindness. By failing to take into account the asymmetry of gender relations and women's subordination in economy and society, neo liberal policies in Sualkuchi, are guilty of three types of biases. As has been suggested in the previous chapters, first, the Government has conveniently ignored the implications of gender division of labour within the household and secondly, as a natural corollary to the first, has ignored women's unpaid work in the silk industry. Third, it has ignored women's intra household gender relations by focusing on the household as a micro unit of economic decision making. For instance, we find mention of families engaged in weaving and sericulture, but the data is not broken by sex and hence we have no way of knowing how many women are actually involved in the craft<sup>19</sup>. The result of these biases is that

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<sup>18</sup> Ministry of textiles-Annual Report 00-01<http://apparel.indiamart.com/annual-report/handloom.html>

<sup>19</sup> View the NEDfi Data bank and the tables showing number of families engaged in sericulture, accessed through, <http://db.nedfi.com/content/kamrup-district>

policies shifts the costs of adjustment from the paid to the unpaid economy, and, as a result, disproportionately on to women who are the primary workers in the unpaid economy, and subordinated by gender relations within the household.<sup>20</sup> The empirical evidence from Sualkuchi of the effect of neo liberal policies on women also has revealed a bleak picture. While the expansion of the silk industry here, has provided women with the opportunity to increase their participation in an important sector of the economy, yet the concentration of women in the industry does involve the exploitation of a weaker socio economic group. Moreover neo liberal policies have done little to bring the labour of the women of weaving households into focus. If anything, these women continue to be more or less shut out from any direct contact with the market since men handle the marketing arena. Women workers both in the market and the households, as mentioned do not control the looms nor has the Government envisaged or announced any plans to give women greater access to the means of production. As observed, Gender specific Government policies such as subsidies and cheap credit arrangements for women's enterprises that could aid women in developing their own non-subsistence enterprises are conspicuous by their absence.

More importantly, what has also followed from an acknowledgement of the diverse inequalities between men and women is the

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<sup>20</sup> Gita sen., "Gender, Markets and States: A selective Review and Research Agenda", in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed) *op.cit.*, vol ii, p.433

difficulty in developing a single feminist politics. While acknowledging the contributions of the various strains of feminism, the study has adopted a socialist feminist framework, as it best represents an ideology which can help in the development of analyses of women's work, waged and unwaged, in relation to men, to the working class and to capital. An important socialist feminist belief is that since women's world view and their life experiences are likely to be different from the men's, it is important to understand the daily experiences of women to represent the view point of the women from her own perspective rather than adding her in as an afterthought<sup>21</sup>. With this basic socialist feminist insight, the study has collected field data through conversations with members of the weaving households, both men and women, with the migrant workers and Government officials to piece together the story of the life and world of the silk worker.

Since conceptual biases regarding women's labour has impacted the development policies of the Government, there is thus, an urgent need to engender mainstream development frameworks, programs and projects which will better lead to policies which promote and sustain more equitable development along gender lines from the beginning. Towards that end, the Government of Assam in the current year, (2008-2009) has decided to introduce

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<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Nancy Mandell., (ed), *Feminist Issues: Race Class and Sexuality* (Canada 1995) pp10-11, See also, Alison Jagger., *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Sussex, 1983) p.63

Gender Budgeting with 100% funds earmarked for the benefit of women.<sup>22</sup> How far this translates into reality, Of course remains to be seen.

Given the Assam Government's Neo liberal stance, it is especially important that researchers and policy makers begin to address the gender dimensions of these processes in specific contexts in order to prevent further structural constraints and burdens for women and to integrate them into community development. The kind of strategies that can be supported and/or developed to foster these processes are gender analysis of neo-liberal policies and their impact on local communities, on households, and on production structures, to name a few examples. State policies are gender biased because they have failed policies to examine systematically the relationship between formal and informal economic development and the gender dimensions of these processes. As discussed throughout the study much needs to be done to examine empirically the hidden dimensions of neo liberal policies, and translate these ideas into practice, particularly in regard to local development and urban policy. As argued, much depends on how planning and political processes are defined and whether local power is understood to include power relations within the households or not. Household relations therefore provide a starting point for understanding both the diversity and the similarities in local women's approaches to mobilizing resources from the start. Social equity criteria would

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<sup>22</sup> See, [http://assamgovt.nic/budget\\_speech2008-09.asp](http://assamgovt.nic/budget_speech2008-09.asp)

require that, at the very least, if both men and women are weavers, both be entitled to become beneficiaries of any commercial reform. Moreover, it is imperative that State policy should be directed towards creating the incentive and support structures so that women would want to participate, would be able to overcome the possible resistance of men, and thus be able to participate effectively.<sup>23</sup>

As far as social science and historical research in the North East is concerned, the roles of women in the various sectors of the economy remain largely un-documented. Discussions in sociology and social anthropology<sup>24</sup> and economic history<sup>25</sup> have yet to incorporate analysis of both the collective work and the private household work of women in general. As we have endeavoured to show, where women are concerned, other factors, primarily patriarchy as it affects notions of labour and the earnings and control over resources of both men and women are at least as important in determining women's place in the labor market and must be taken into account while organizing empirical research. Moreover, it is important to move away from conventional categorization of occupations and standard approaches to gathering information especially through household surveys, as these present a false picture of the

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<sup>23</sup> Carmen Diana Deere., "Rural women and state policy: the Latin American Agrarian Reform Experience", "in, Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds), *op.cit.*, Vol ii, p.490

<sup>24</sup>See, Nikhlesh Kumar.(ed), *Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology in North East India, 1970-1990*,(New Delhi, 2000)

<sup>25</sup> See,David R. Syiemlieh (ed), *Survey of Research in History on North East India, 1970-1990* (New Delhi, 2000).

position of the women in relation to the men. Both groups are affected by discrimination in the labour market but women are also subject to patriarchal norms, much of which remains hidden by conventional approaches to the gathering and analysis of labour market information. Gender outcomes in the labour markets do not reflect natural or objective differences between men and women, but rather reflect the outcome of discrimination and disadvantage, and the behavioral reactions by workers and employers. Hence, there is a definite need to define a research agenda that will explore the relationships among gender, markets and states, taking account of the recent and continuing processes of market liberalization, regionalization and transformation of the relations between the Government and the civil societies. In order to understand what market liberalization or the formation of regional economic blocs might mean for women, one needs to look beyond market activity per se to non market activity and to women's well being more generally and point to new directions for empirical research.<sup>26</sup> Viewing the liberalization process in the North East through the lens of gender could lead to more equitable policies and could provide a different outcome, one more beneficial to women's organizations and to poor communities in general. What is needed, (and what is missing) in the North East are micro level studies which gather and review micro evidence on gender inequality and productivity for a particular community and attempt to synthesize their findings to produce some estimate of the

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<sup>26</sup> Gita sen., *op.cit.*, vol ii, p.431

implications of failure to reduce male bias for the country's sectoral and aggregate outcome. Gender awareness in macroeconomic analysis requires that we look at economic models from the standpoint of women's lives in which much time is devoted to unpaid work in social production as well as to paid work in production; and that we recognize unequal gender relations as an intervening variable that structures economic processes at macro, and micro levels. A gender perspective also means recognizing that women stand at the crossroads between production and reproduction, between economic activity and the care of human beings, and therefore between economic growth and human development. They are workers in both spheres-those most responsible and therefore with most at stake, those who suffer the most when the two spheres meet at cross purposes, and those most sensitive to the need to better integration between the two<sup>27</sup>. This conceptual framework rests on the argument that production and reproduction, market and non market activity are intrinsically linked and organized by relations of power. Factors affecting one tend to affect the other. The labour of women is critical to both; but women have relatively little autonomy to make decisions about either. Increased involvement in income earning activities rarely frees women from the tasks of reproduction, although tasks may alter and be performed to different rhythms. Major economic processes such as market liberalization and structural

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<sup>27</sup> Daine Elson., "Gender Awareness in modeling Structural Adjustment", in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath, (ed), *op.cit.*, vol ii, p.369

adjustment reforms alter the demand for women in markets, but also affect the resources available for household maintenance<sup>28</sup> and has to be kept in mind by policy makers and academics alike.

At this point, it has to be noted that while the organization of the institutional world remains one which is congruent only to the traditionally male patterns of social life, in the crucial area of public debates and discussions about development in the North East, the issue of gender has become central. In fact, over the last two decades or so, feminists have challenged many of the central assumptions of the field of economic history. Seminars on gender themes are regularly organized by the various Universities in the region. Gender analysis has also enriched the basic concept by demonstrating that attention to the different activities of men and women does make a difference. While it is largely mistaken to assume that the battles of feminism have been largely fought and won, what is heartening is that women's history or gender history is no longer an unknown area of historical studies, even though that may be still in the peripheries of the discipline. The literature on gender history is increasing by the day and there is a very definite attempt at taking the knowledge about history forward so that the invisibility of the woman can be removed as far as possible and a true assessment of the existing gender relations can be made in the pages of History.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gita sen., *op.cit*, vol ii, pp.431-433

<sup>29</sup> Manorama Sharma., " Locating the Women in History: the Need for an Imaginative and Sensitive Methodology" in , Amrendra Takhur(ed,) *Proceedings of North East India History Association, xxviii session*,(Goalpara, 2007), p.85

While the basic conceptual framework is in place, however, it needs amplification, and much empirical work still remains to be done. Gender as a conceptual framework has a great deal to offer that can enrich the debate about liberalization and the new political economy. By consistently focusing on the links between production and reproduction, by pointing to the important influence of noncompetitive structures and by drawing on a rich tradition of non-governmental program implementation and activism, a gendered analysis can direct research and policy analysis in directions where it would not otherwise go.<sup>30</sup> Women's roles are multifaceted, women's identities are multilinked. There is strength in gender diversity: there is also strength in women's shared culture and values.<sup>31</sup> As the study has demonstrated, redefining labour along feminist lines means that we also need to re-think the nexus of productivity, wages, and trade and labour standards. The non feminist approaches either ignore the gender biases historically embedded in some standards or the gender biases that are produced and reproduced by markets. It is in the contention of this study that neither a simple reliance on de-regulated markets nor on labour standard regulations defined in terms of "market related work", or mechanical trade linked schemes can bring about an improvement in the conditions of work. A feminist perspective fundamentally changes the meaning of labour and work,

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<sup>30</sup> Gita Sen., *op.cit.*, p.435

<sup>31</sup> Irene tinker., "The Making of a Field: Advocates, Practitioners, and Scholars" in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds)., *op.cit.*, vol i, p.96

helps us rethink the theoretical parameters of the debate and come up with new policies that can be more conducive to attaining upward harmonization for both genders across the development divide in the context of the changing world economy. If effective policies are undertaken to improve women's individual access to productivity enhancing technology and credit, women's incomes are likely to increase, possibly to the point at which many more women could rent or purchase looms on their own account. This type of change could have repercussions on the social relations of production in the patriarchal mode, strengthening women's ability to negotiate better terms of access to their husband's enterprises in patriarchal relations.

Thus, that economic analysis that is gender aware, in the sense of recognizing that all economic activity works through and within gender relationships has the potential to generate both a better understanding of the development processes and a better understanding of the policies required to diminish gender inequality. In order to organize empirical research, we need a major change in our view of reality, a major change in what needs to be measured, and a major change in our thinking about the way in which families and households participate in economic activity. The reality of the huge unpaid contribution of women in the households to economic value needs to be

accepted; adopted as a benchmark fact, it would change nearly all of our deliberations about economic and social policy.<sup>32</sup> It does not automatically follow that better research methods will help to improve the position of women. It is an open question as to whether the extensive monitoring of women in individual workplaces has done much over the last few years to radically improve their position, however, without an adequate baseline to measure differences, it is difficult to see where and how improvements can be identified. For this reason alone it is important to de-mystify existing analysis and to show how, and in what ways, they serve to obscure the real experience of women.<sup>33</sup>

This study, hopes to have cleared a little more of the mist veiling the lived experiences of the women silk weavers of Sualkuchi, both in the household and the labour market, and it has also sought to impress upon the need for a feminization of the concept of labour itself. So that women do not remain the invisible workers.

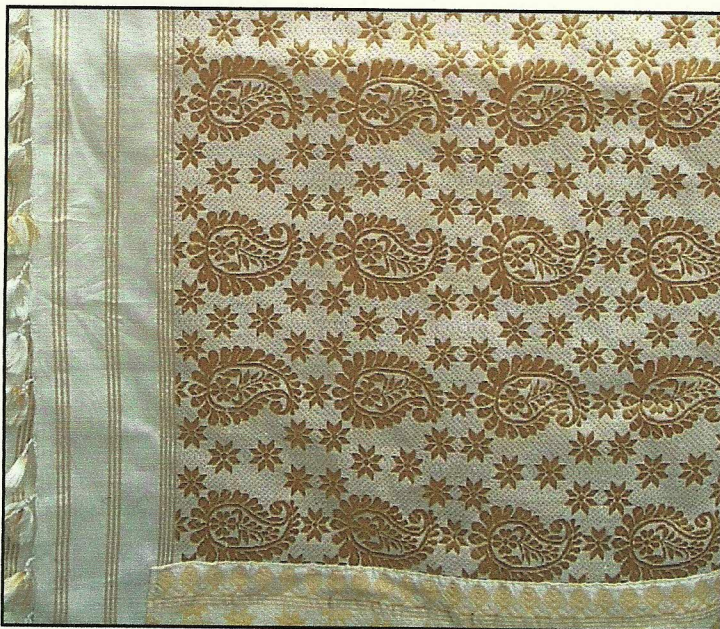
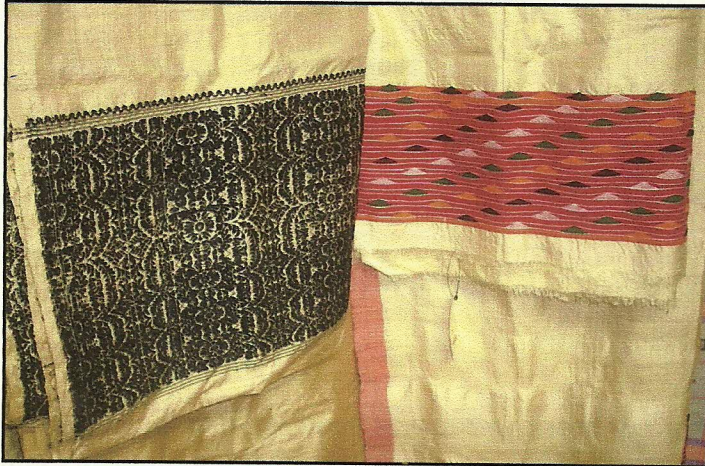
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<sup>32</sup> Duncan Ironmonger., "counting outputs, Capital Inputs and Caring Labour: Estimating Gross Household Product", in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds)., *op.cit.*, Vol I, p.320

<sup>33</sup> Paraphrased from, Irene Bruegel., "Sex and race in the Labour Market", in Mary Evans., (ed) *The Woman Question* (New Delhi, 1994) p.192

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APPENDIX I



Samples of traditional work in Muga (above) and Pat (below) silk woven by the women of Sualkuchi.

## APPENDIX ii

That skill in weaving gave the Assamese women a certain measure of self confidence is evidenced from the following *Bihu* song<sup>1</sup>:

Oh, let me go away in a boat,  
Why should I get myself trashed?  
Instead of staying with a co wife  
I would rather live on my weaving.

The handloom has been so closely related to the life and thought of the Assamese women that they have inevitably drawn upon this institution for imagery to express some of their deepest sentiment<sup>2</sup>

When I was a child, I tended to the cows,  
Being young I sit at my loom,  
Right and left I ply the shuttle,  
Come my love and give the call

Some *Bihu* songs mock at the lack of weaving skills of the housewife<sup>3</sup>

This calls her a Weaver that calls her a weaver  
She is a weaver indeed,  
She takes a month to set up her loom, she weaves for six months  
The weaver takes a full year.

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<sup>1</sup> Praphulladatta Goswami., *Bohag Bihu of Assam and other Bihu Songs*, (Guwahati 1988)p65

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* p63

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*,p76

### APPENDIX iii

Anima Rajbhonsi<sup>4</sup> around 20yrs of age hails from Barpeta. She works in the factory of Tapan Kakoty of Ragharh. She stays in what is described as a mess attached with the factory with 6 other co-workers. The room is dingy and dark. A 60 watt light bulb is their source of light. Behind the factory are their toilets. Their “bathroom” consists of bamboo *chatais* roughly sewn together. Anima told us that she had the freedom to spend the money as she likes. But when we enquired further, she told us she has to send money home three to four times a year and that her folks especially her younger sisters back home expect her to give them gifts during festive seasons. So she often has to work overtime so that she can complete her orders and take in new orders and earn a little more.

### APPENDIX IV

I went on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May to meet the Joint Director of the Textile and Handloom Department and to get the latest status of the working of welfare schemes in Sualkuchi. I was told to come back the next day. On the 31<sup>st</sup> May, in between numerous interruptions from staff eager to get their bills passed before the end of the financial year, and calls to and from the accounts Departments and a good one hour’s waiting, I was finally able to extract some relevant information. While he evaded my specific query on the working of the STEP or Scheme for Support and training and Employment program for women

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with the respondent on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2007

weavers in Sualkuchi, I was told that there was only one scheme in operation in Sualkuchi but that he had no further details of the working of the scheme. I was told that I could come back another day if I so desired.

## APPENDIX V

The popular perception of women's status in the region is revealed from the following advertisement pamphlet obtained from the NEDfi office in, Ulubari, Guwahati. Its financial schemes for women discussed earlier also does not seem to show any awareness of ground realities.

“Women have always played an important role in socio economic development of the society since ancient times. In the North East, they enjoy a special status in the society because of their entrepreneur desire and ability, hard working nature and matrilineal society in some areas of the region. **Moreover, women of the region enjoy a comparatively higher status in society because of the liberal outlook of the region.**(emphasis mine) They contribute significantly to the development of the society.

NEDfi, as a financial institution has been working for the economic upliftment of the women of the region by providing them training and financial assistance under Micro Finance Scheme North East Equity Fund Scheme.....AS NEDfi is committed to the development of the region, a special scheme has been prepared exclusively for women entrepreneurs in

liberal terms and conditions where financial assistance would be provided for any viable income generating activity. It is expected that the scheme will go along way in helping women for taking up business ventures and will lead to economic development of the region..... Skilled women entrepreneurs in the age group of 18-50yrs are eligible for soft loan at 7.35% rate of interest....”

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Between January, 2007 and August 2008, field trips were made to Sualkuchi and Guwahati. During the period, first hand information on Government schemes for the silk sector was gathered from Officials of the Directorate of Handloom Weaving, Government of Assam. Conversations, interviews and queries also revealed official perspective on women's labour in the industry. To corroborate and add to the data, oral history sources and family narratives along with conversations with cross sections of loom owners and weavers in Sualkuchi were utilized. The main areas and localities in Sualkuchi that were visited are, Rajgorh, S.M. Road, Sonari Para, Laxminath Nagar, Haripur, Naktola, Bhangnagar, Kumar Para, Kalita Para. The selection of households and localities was not done in a formal scientific pattern but was done on the basis of local contacts in the area, namely, Tankeshwar, Probin Das and Ashok Talukdar who helped select

households which, (1) had a tradition of silk weaving for two or more generations, (2) Households which earlier were producing for domestic consumption and which now are manufacturing silk with the help of emigrant labour, (3) Households with elderly members especially women folk, from whom family narratives were collated to understand their experiences and how they perceived their own world and work. (3) Moreover, care was taken to see that the two broad group of household manufacturing units were covered—those which were catering to co-operatives and those who operated through private merchants and middlemen to understand their specific problems. Around 30 individual loom owners were contacted including a few men who are the heads of co-operative societies and Citizen's forums. Each Factory employs on an average around 6-16 migrant labourers and queries were put to around roughly 4-8 of these workers in each manufacturing unit to get a broad perspective on their working conditions. Moreover, women and men of weaving households were interviewed together as well as separately to get their individual perspectives on women's labour in the household.

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