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 4th 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 2nd World war is still in vogue in the village.\(^1\) 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\(^2\) 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

\(^1\) 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

\(^2\) Conversation with the respondent on August, 18th 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 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

\(^3\) Conversation with the respondents on Sept 23\(^{rd}\), 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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decades reveals this increase and indicates the role shift for women of the weaving households.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MIGRANT POPULATION</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>12682</td>
<td>00315</td>
<td>12997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>36,767</td>
<td>91,905</td>
<td>128672</td>
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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.\(^5\)

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

\(^5\) 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. 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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6 This was gleaned from conversation with Rita Das, Laxminath Nagar, Sualkuchi on Aug 18th 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 household routine.7

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.8

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

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7 Interview with Indra Mohan Baishya, Noapara Sector C, on the 17th August, 2008
8 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.  

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

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. 

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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9 In fact almost all the female respondents we spoke to and are mentioned here, held the same opinion.
10 Conversation with Padmaja Das and other family members, Rajgorh, January 2007,
11 Interview with the respondent on July 21st, 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. At this point, a look at the last two decades census data on occupation for the Kamrup district reveals the following.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MALE</td>
<td>FEMALES</td>
<td>MALE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1636</td>
<td>1314</td>
<td>818</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*

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 reellers, twistors

12 Interview with the respondent on the 17th-18th August 2008
13 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.14 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,15 (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

14 This information was gathered from conversations with Mrs. Bonita Kalita and Mrs. Kabita Das,
Laxminath Nagar, Jan 1st and 7th 2007
15 In conversation with Mrs. Rinku Moni Das of Haripur, between August 17th and 21st 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. 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

\[16\] 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. For instance, Jamuna Kalita 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

\[126\]

\[^{17}\] Conversation with Renu Baishya of Tilakchand Pahar and Karuna Kalita of S. M. Road, between September 21\textsuperscript{st} -23\textsuperscript{rd}, 2008

\[^{18}\] Interview with the respondent on August 18\textsuperscript{th}, 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 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

19 Conversation with the respondent, Kalita Para, Sualkuchi, January 3rd, 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 kalita20 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 heath 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

21 Information gathered from Reena Kalita, Mini Bus Stand, Sualkuchi, between 1st -3rd 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. Feminists contend that economic space is a very important factor in women’s autonomy and improvement in status 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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22 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. 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. 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.

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

23 Information taken from an article by Roopak Goswami, published in the Telegraph, Sept 6th, 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.
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.\(^{26}\) Regarding that an export led growth is the only
viable development strategy, the SAP places an overwhelming importance on
trade liberalization.\(^{27}\) 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

\(^{26}\) Shobna Sonpar, Ravi Kapur. “Non Conventional Indicators: Gender Disparities under Structural
Reforms” in, *The Economic and Political Weekly.*, January, 6\(^{th}\)-12\(^{th}\), 2001, Vol xxxvi, No1

\(^{27}\) Ratna Sudarshan., “Report of the Round Table UNDP/OSST Meeting on the New Economic
Policy and Women-7-8 February, 1992, in Maiheryi Krisharaj, (ed) *The New Economic Policy and
Women- A collection of Background Papers to the 6\(^{th}\) National Conference,1993*(Bombay, 1993)., p.81

[131]
to be reform with a “human face.” 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 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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28 See the opinions voiced in Matthreyi 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)  
29 Information provided by Mr. Prafulla Bharali, Joint Director, Department of Textile and Weaving, Government of Assam, on, 2*rd* 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. It is also gathered that for the
purpose of embroidery and designs, they require a small quantity of dyed yarn

30 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.”

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. 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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31 See, Census of India 1961, Selected Handicraft of Assam, vol iii, Part, vii-A, p47
32 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.\(^{33}\) 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.\(^ {34}\) A rough table of comparative market prices for muga and tussar

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\(^{33}\) Tarun Kakoty. S.M. Para, Sualkuchi, August 18\(^{th}\) 2008

\(^{34}\) Information provided by the Joint Director of Textile and Handloom, Government of Assam, P. Bharali, on 31\(^{st}\) 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\(^{th}\) 2008 and also the Secretary of the Assam Samabay Rasham Pratishtan Samiti, Mr. Mahendra Kalita.
reveal the following.\textsuperscript{35}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>PRICE (PER KG.) 2004-2005</th>
<th>PRICE (PER KG.) 2005-2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MUGA</td>
<td>RS 3500-4500</td>
<td>RS 5000-6500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUSSAR</td>
<td>RS 1000-1200</td>
<td>RS 1600-1800</td>
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</tbody>
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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 to 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.\textsuperscript{36} 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.

\textsuperscript{35} 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
\textsuperscript{36} Conversation with Tapan Kakoty on 1\textsuperscript{st} 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. Studies indicate
that while Assam produces 92MT of Muga Silk, but still there is a shortage of
around 100MT in the state. 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 (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. 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

37 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
Lakhimpur, Assam p.3
39 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.
40 Gleaned from conversation with, Hemchandra Das, Rajgorh. October, 18th 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.41

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.42 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

41 Gathered from conversation with Kishore Kalita, S. M. Road, Sualkuchi, August 18th ,2008
42 Indra Mohan Baishya, September, 23rd 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. 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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43 Information gathered from conversation with Rinku Moni Das, and Kumar Pradip Das, Haripur Sualkuchi between August, 17th–18th, 2007
least twice a year to their homes. Most of the Employers told us that they prefer to hire female help as they are “more sincere and take shorter breaks”. 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

44 Gathered from interviews with a cross section of female weavers between January 1st and 7th January and September 18th-23rd 2007. See appendix (iii)
45 Bokul Das, Laxminath Nagar, Sualkuchi, September, 23rd, 2007 [140]
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. 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. 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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46 Information gathered from Tirtha Kakoty of Sonari Para, on January 1st 2008  
47 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, 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 predominantly 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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48 For instance, see Budget Speech of the State Finance Minister accessed through 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.\footnote{Shiela Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter., \textit{Dignity and Daily Bread} (London, 1994) p.5} 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
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. 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. 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

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.\(^{52}\)

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”\(^{53}\) 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

\(^{52}\) Martha Nussbaum., *Women and Human Development :The Capabilities Approach* (New Delhi, 2000)

\(^{53}\) Tirtha Kakoty, Sonari Para, 1\(^{st}\) 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 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. 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.