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. 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. 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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1 Sourced from Census of India, 1961, Vol iii, Assam, Selected Handicraft of Assam
2 Census of India, Assam, 2001
fabrics are concerned.3

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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3 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?*⁴ which studies theories associated with western feminist movements. Susan Gubbar’s edited work, *Critical Condition: Feminism at the turn of the Century*⁵ 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,*⁶ 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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⁵ Susan, Gubbar, *Critical condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 2000)
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, 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 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 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 17th century 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, Maria Mies argues that the human

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7 Gerda Lerner., The Creation of Patriarchy (New York, 1986)
8 Mary Wollstonecraft., A Vindication of the Right of Women, cited in, Vidyut Bhagawat., Feminist Social Thought: An Introduction to Six KeyThinkers (Jaipur, 2004)
9 Mary R. Beard., Women as Force in History (New York, 1962)
11 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*\(^{12}\) 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*,\(^{13}\) 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, Sheila Rowbotham wrote *Women, Resistance and Revolution*.\(^{14}\) In the preface to this popular work, she wrote, ‘women have come to revolutionary

\(^{12}\) Sheila Rowbotham., *Hidden From History* (New York, 1974)

\(^{13}\) ".........................., *Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (Harmondsworth, Reprint, 1976)

\(^{14}\) ".........................., *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 Evan’s whose edited work, *Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, in four Volumes\textsuperscript{15}, 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.

\textsuperscript{15} 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*¹⁶ 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*¹⁷ 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 Mill and Betty Friedan. Among the radical feminists, the writings of Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic Of sex: the case for Feminist Revolution*²⁰, and Susan Brownmiller's work, *Against our will*²¹ made for essential reading. Among the most important Marxist writings is of course that

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¹⁷ Vidyut Bhagwat., *op. cit.*
¹⁹ Betty Friedan., *The Feminine Mystique.*(Harmondsworth,1979)
²¹ Susan Brownmiller., *Against our will* Men, *Women and Rape*(New York, 1975)
of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology*. 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* 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* 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*, 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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22 Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow, 1976)
23 Fedrick Engels, the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (Moscow, 1968)
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*[^26], 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*"[^27] 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*[^28]. The book deals with the seeming contradiction that on

[^26]: Ester Boserup., *Women's Role in Economic Development* (Great Britain, 1989)
[^27]: Ibid., p. 5
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* argues 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*, 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* presents eight case studies which tries to understand the co-relation
between women’s economic empowerment and their overall well being

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29 Francine D. Blau and A. Ferber, *Economics of Women, Men and Work*,(New Jersey, 1992)
30 Richard Anker, *Gender and Jobs: Sex Segregation of Occupations in the World*
(Geneva, 1997)
31 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*.\textsuperscript{32} Nancy Folbre's, (et.al.) edited work, *Women's work in the world Economy*\textsuperscript{33} 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*\textsuperscript{34} 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*\textsuperscript{35} 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

\textsuperscript{32} Marylyn Waring., *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (San Fransisco, 1988)

\textsuperscript{33} Nancy Folbre, Barbara Bergmann, et.al(eds), *Women's Work in the World Economy*(London, 1992)

\textsuperscript{34} Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds), *Gender and Development: Theoretical, Empirical and Practical Approaches* (London, 2001)

\textsuperscript{35} 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*. 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* propagates the use of the human capabilities approach which measures an individual 's well being

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36 Ratna Kapur, and Brenda Cossman., *Subversive Sites, Feminist Engagements with Law in India*, (Delhi, 1996)
37 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*\(^{38}\) studies the experience of women workers in the colonial period. Geraldine Forbes, in *Women in Modern India*\(^{39}\) also makes a study of Indian women in the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries and also their achievements in these past centuries. Nirmala Bannerjee, *in Women workers in the Unorganized sector- the Calcutta Experience*\(^{40}\) 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

\(^{38}\) J Krishnamurthy, (ed), *Women in Colonial India* (Delhi, 2000)

\(^{39}\) Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (New York, 1999)

\(^{40}\) Nirmala Bannerjee, *Women Workers in the Unorganised Sector – The Calcutta Experience* (Hyderabad, 1985)

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Shiela Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter (ed), *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organising in the Third World and the First*[^1], 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*[^2] 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*[^3] try to bring the long forgotten movers and shakers of history back into focus. Rehana Ghadially (ed) *Women in Indian Society, A Reader*[^4] 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*[^5] gives us an insight into women’s perception of society and about themselves and raises our awareness

[^3]: P.R. Reddy and P. Sumangla, *Women and Development: Perspectives from Selected States in India* (Delhi, 1998)
[^4]: Rehana Ghadially (ed), *Women in Indian Society, A Reader* (New Delhi, 1988)
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, 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, address questions of women’s role in Indian History. Bharati Ray’s, From the Seams of History, contains articles by people like Shekar Bandhyapadhya, 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.

46 Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan., Signposts: Gender Issues in Post Independence India(New Delhi, 1999)
48 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*\(^49\) 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*,\(^50\) 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*\(^51\) 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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49 Peter Custers, *Capital Accumulation and Women's Labour in Asian Economies* (Delhi, 1997)
50 Shoma, A, Chatterjee, *The Indian Woman in Perspective* (Delhi, 1993)
51 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*\(^52\) 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*,\(^53\) 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*,\(^54\) J.H Kelman's, *Labour in India*,\(^55\) T.S Papola and A.N.Sharma (ed), *Gender and Employment in India*\(^56\) fall into this genre. An interesting study made by Sharit Bhowmick in, *Class Formation in the Plantation System*\(^57\) brings to light the different aspects of class formation among tribal

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52 Maitheryi Krishnaraj et.al., *Gender, Population and Development* (New Delhi, 1994)
53 Sumi Krishna., *Women’s Livelihood Rights: Recasting Citizenship for Development* (New Delhi, 2007)
54 D.R. Gadgil’s *Women in the Working Force in India* (Bombay, 1965)
55 J.H Kelman., *Labour in India* (New York, 2000)
56 T.S Papola and A.N.Sharma (ed), *Gender and Employment in India* (New Delhi, 1999)
57 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* 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*, has studied the rice husking industry of Bengal in colonial India and points out that the female oriented rice husking 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* in another case study of the Ranigang 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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58 Tirthankar Roy., *The Economic History of India 1857-1947* (New Delhi, 2006)
adjust to the re-organization of work. Samita Sen⁶¹ 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’s works. Mukul Mukherjee and Kuntala Lahiri have also indirectly challenged the

⁶¹Samita 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* and in Jayati Ghosh’s, *Gender Concerns in Macroeconomic Policy*. Maitheryi Krishnaraj, (ed) *The New Economic Policy and Women, A Collection of Background papers*, 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* 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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63 Jayati Ghosh., *Gender Concerns in Macroeconomic Policy* Keynote address- Sixth National Conference on Women (Delhi, 1993)
65 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*\(^{66}\) 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*\(^{67}\) which was based on the author’s historical field work in Africa. Soumen Sen’s edited work, *Folk Lore in North East India*\(^{68}\) 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*\(^{69}\). This work includes a

\(^{68}\) Soumen Sen(ed), *Folk Lore in North East India* (New Delhi, 1985)  
\(^{69}\) 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*\(^7\), Chitrarekha Gupta’s, *Trade and Market in the North Eastern India*\(^7\) and J. B Bhattacharjee (ed,) *Studies in the Economic History Of North East*\(^7\) which give descriptive accounts of the Assam economy under colonial rule. K.L. Chattopadhay’s compiled work, *slavery in British Dominion*,\(^7\) 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*\(^7\) 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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\(^7\)Priyam Goswami., *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration* (Guwahati,1999)
\(^7\)Chitrarekha Gupta., *Trade and Market in the North Eastern India* (Guwahati, 2000)
\(^7\)J.B., Bhattacharjee., (ed) *Studies in the Economic History of the North East India* (New Delhi, 1994)
\(^7\)K.L. Chattopadhay (comp), *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta,1972)
\(^7\)H.K Barpujari., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol iii (Guwahati, 1994).
For an insight into the workings of the Ahom Economy, Sanjeeb Kakoty’s work, *Technology, Production and Social Formation in the Evolution of the Ahom State* 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*, 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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76 Nirmal Kumar Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age, 1228-1826* (Calcutta, 1970)
77 Rajen Saikia, *Social and Economic history of Assam* (Delhi, 2000)
Other works like, Sudeshna Purakayastha’s, *Indigenous Industries of Assam* (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,* 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 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, has studied the status of Assamese women in different fields like family, society, economy, Law, etc.

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80 Nirote Barooah, *David Scott in North East India, 1802-1831* (New Delhi, 1970)
82 Priyam Goswami, *Indigenous Industries of Assam, Retrospect and Prospect* (Kolkata, 2005)
83 Prabin Baishya, *The Silk Industry of Assam: A Case Study in the Sualkuchi Cluster* (Guwahati, 2003)
84 S.L. Baruah, *Status of Women in Assam* (New Delhi, 1999)
Deepti Sharma in, *Assamese Women in Freedom Struggle*\(^\text{85}\) 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*,\(^\text{86}\) 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*,\(^\text{87}\) J.Sulochana Chetty's, *An Introduction to Sericulture*\(^\text{88}\) and P. Venkatanarasaih's work, *Sericulture in India*.\(^\text{89}\) Other general works on sericulture, include, M. Laxmi Narasiah and G. Jaya Raju's *Development of Sericulture*,\(^\text{90}\) S.N Choudhury's compiled work, *Sericulture in Assam: Non Mulberry slid*\(^\text{91}\) 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

\(^{85}\) Deepti Sharma., *Assamese Women in Freedom Struggle* (Guwahati, 2000)
\(^{86}\) Renu Debi., (ed), *Women of Assam* (New Delhi, 1994)
\(^{87}\) M.G. Hanumappa, (Bombay, 1986)
\(^{88}\) J.Sulochana Chetty., *An Introduction to Sericulture* (New Delhi, 1882)
\(^{89}\) P. Venkatanarasaih., *Sericulture in India* (Delhi, 1992)
\(^{90}\) M.Laxmi Narasiah and G.Jaya Rajus., *Development of Sericulture* (Delhi, 1993)
\(^{91}\) S.N. Choudhury (Complied), *Sericulture in Assam: Non Mulberry Slid* (Shillong, 1968)

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those of P.C. Choudhury\textsuperscript{92}, and S.N. Choudhury\textsuperscript{93} 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\textsuperscript{94} 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.

\textsuperscript{92} P.C. Choudhury., \textit{The History of the Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.} (Guwahati, 1959)
\textsuperscript{93} S.N. Choudhury., \textit{Mulberry Silk Industry} (Shillong, 1984)
\textsuperscript{94} Nupur Dasgupta., "Continuing Gender Patterns : The Case of Sericulture" in, \textit{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.