ACTION RESEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF WOMEN AGRICULTURAL AND SUBSISTENCE WORKERS IN AXOM

by

Joylaxmi Saikia Borah

A Thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counselling Psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

©Copyright by Joylaxmi Saikia Borah 1999
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.
ABSTRACT

Action Research For Alternative Development: A Study Of Women Agricultural And Subsistence Workers In Axom

Joylaxmi Saikia Borah
Ph.D. 1999., Department of Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

Although farming is traditionally considered to be a male activity, the role of women has never been limited to the household and the family. In rural areas, women engage in a wide variety of economic activities, including the construction of housing, land cultivation, wage labor, harvesting, food storage and marketing, depending on culture, traditions, geographic locations, changing economic structures, and other factors. In my study, I attempt to capture, as far as possible, the ignored aspects of women's lives - their work and contribution to home and society in Axom, a major rice growing region of India.

This study, based on the methodological principles of Feminist, Action and Participatory research, is marked as unusual by virtue of the researcher's subject-position as a woman, and a native of the Axomiya community analyzed in the study. In Axom, as in many rural regions, the processes of agricultural development have proletarianized rural women, drawing them into wage labor in commercial agriculture when their households lose access to land, undermining and often destroying their self-sufficiency, and resulting in the overall deterioration in quality of their lives.

The thesis suggests an alternative approach where development is not just about economic growth, but an overall improvement, not just in material conditions, but also social and cultural conditions for the vast majority of the people. This means equality for women; it means political freedoms, it means the rights of people to develop and express their own culture, to use their language, to celebrate their own religion.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped me tremendously during the writing of this thesis. I wish to thank Professors Angela Miles, Edmund Sullivan and Budd Hall, members of my dissertation committee, for their consistent support and encouragement over the years. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Angela Miles for her inspiration and enthusiasm, and for closely guiding an exacting process of revisions with valued insights and infinite patience. I would also like to thank Dr. Nora Cebotarev for her inspiration, support and wisdom. To them all, I am grateful for being role models of a just, more humanistic society.

Special thanks are owed to Tankeswar Borah for his encouragement and also to the following: Hemoprova Borah, Ranju Borah, President, Kekuri Mahila Mandal, Anjali Das, Extension Officer, Abhinash Hazarika, Block Development Officer, Ganesh Lahon, Agricultural Extension Officer, Madhurya Gogoi, Co-ordinator, Tingkhong Development Block, Durlabh Chetia, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, and the University of Dibrugarh library.

I am greatly indebted to the women and men in Kekuri who shared their lives with me, for accepting me as part of their extended family, and for re-educating me in new ways through which to view the world.

I would like to offer my affection and respects to the memory of my mother, Dr. Devika Saikia (1936-1997), my constant source of inspiration. I would like to thank my father D. N. Saikia and my brother Dr. D.J. Saikia, for giving me a vision of the good society. I would like to thank my family, Santanu Borah and our son Rohit, for bearing with me and sustaining me through the years of carrying out my research.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................... iii

1. **Introduction** ............................................................................................. 1
   1. Statement of the Problem .............................................................................. 1
   2. Purpose and Objectives of the Study .......................................................... 3
   3. Significance of the Study ............................................................................. 6
   4. Organization of the Study ........................................................................... 9
   5. Note on Usage ............................................................................................ 12

2. **Conceptual Framework of the Study** ....................................................... 15
   Introduction .................................................................................................... 15
   1. Theoretical Approaches to Women's Work .................................................... 16
      (i). The Value of Labor as an Economic Category ......................................... 16
      (ii). Analysis of Rural Women's Work ............................................................ 19
      (iii). Feminist Perspective: The Call for "Integrative Feminisms" .................. 22
   2. Socio-economic Studies on Rural Women with Special Reference to India ..... 28
      (i). Ethnographic Studies of Women and Villages ....................................... 36
      (ii). Recent Research on Women, Work and Economic Policy in India38
         (a). Gender-Sensitive Household Studies .................................................. 38
         (b). Women and Work and the Feminization of Poverty ......................... 40
   3. The Development Paradigm ......................................................................... 43
      (i). The Ideology of Development ................................................................... 43
      (ii). Development Approaches ....................................................................... 46
         (a). Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth ................................................. 47
         (b). Dependency Theory ............................................................................ 49
         (c). Structural Adjustment Programs of WB and IMF 51
      (iii). The New International Economic Order and Marginalization .......... 53
      (iv). Impact of Development on Women ......................................................... 57
      (v). Problems of Integrating Women into Development ............................. 60
      (vi). Alternative Economies: Community Based Strategies and Action ..... 65
         (a). International Movement Against Free Trade ..................................... 73
         (b). Democratic Structures ....................................................................... 74
      (vii). My Definition of Alternative Development ......................................... 78

3. **Research Methodology** .............................................................................. 84
   Introduction .................................................................................................... 84
   1. Feminist Action and Participatory Research ................................................. 86
   2. The Field Situation ...................................................................................... 89
      (i). Consciousness-Raising Collective Interviews ....................................... 93

iv
3. The Universe of the Researcher ................................................................. 98
   (i). The Village ......................................................................................... 98
   (ii). I Find A Home .................................................................................. 101
   (iii). The Universe of Village Life .............................................................. 102
   (iv). Rhythm of Changing Seasons ........................................................... 104
   (v). Community Organizing ...................................................................... 108
4. Conclusion .................................................................................................. 109

4. India: Political History and Economic Background ..................................... 111
   Introduction ............................................................................................... 111
   1. India: Political History and Economic Background ................................ 113
      (i). Pre-Colonial India: An Overview ....................................................... 114
      (ii). Colonial Period .............................................................................. 117
         (a). Land Policy of the British .............................................................. 118
         (b). British Agricultural and Rural Development Policies .................. 121
   3. Position of Women in India .................................................................... 126
   4. Conclusion ............................................................................................... 132

5. Axom: Political History and Economic Background ..................................... 133
   Introduction ............................................................................................... 133
   1. India's North-East .................................................................................. 133
   2. Axom: Ecology and Demography ........................................................... 135
      (i). The Golden Land ............................................................................ 137
      (ii). Cultural Landscape ........................................................................ 140
   3. Kinship Structure .................................................................................... 142
   4. Axom's Economy .................................................................................... 143
      (i). The Traditional Agrarian Economy ............................................... 144
      (ii). Women's Role in the Traditional Economy .................................... 145
   5. Traditional Land Rights of the Kosari Community .................................. 146
      (i). Land Rights of Kosari Women ......................................................... 148
   6. State Development Plans and Market Integration .................................... 154
   7. Conclusion ............................................................................................... 156

6. The Study Area and Farm Household Types .............................................. 157
   Introduction ............................................................................................... 157
   1. The Study Area ...................................................................................... 157
   2. The Village Under Study ....................................................................... 159
   3. Farm Household Types ......................................................................... 165
      (i). Landless Agricultural Households ............................................... 166
      (ii). Marginally Landless Households .................................................... 167
      (iii). Small Cultivator Households ....................................................... 167
      (iv). Landowning Households ............................................................. 168
7. Household and Farm Labor ........................................... 173
   1. Obtaining data on Gender and Intra-Household Issues ............... 174
      (i). Gender-Specific Labor Tasks .................................. 174
      (ii). Access to Factors of Production ............................ 175
      (iii). Access to Income-Generating Activities .................. 175
   2. Women's Farm and Household Work .................................. 176
      (i). Ploughing ....................................................... 179
      (ii). Work with Animals ............................................ 180
      (iii). Irrigation ..................................................... 180
      (iv). Transplanting and Weeding .................................. 180
      (v). Harvesting ..................................................... 181
      (vi). Post-Harvest Farm Related Work ................................ 181
      (vii). Other Manual Tasks in Rice Cultivation .................... 182
      (viii). Major Household Activities ................................ 182
      (ix). Fuel Collection: A Major Household Chore .................. 186
      (x). Marketing ...................................................... 188
   3. Women and the Struggle for Survival ................................ 190

8. Agricultural Wage Labor ............................................. 192
   1. Gender Differentiated Wage Levels ................................ 194
   2. Determinants of Women's Income ................................... 199
   3. Income Control .................................................... 204
   4. The Invisibility of Women's Work .................................. 208

9. Socioeconomic Consequences of "Development" ......................... 211
   1. Rural Planning and Development Projects-Dibrugarh District ........ 214
   2. Government Policies and their Effect on Women .................... 216
      (i). Rural Development Schemes ................................... 219
   3. Anti-Participatory Technology ..................................... 223
   4. Pauperization and Marginalization of Women Farmers ............... 227

10. Patriarchal Socio-Cultural Arrangements ............................ 232
    1. Marriage .......................................................... 232
    2. Reproduction ...................................................... 234
    3. Education ......................................................... 237
    4. Food and Health-Care ............................................. 239
    5. Control of Women .................................................. 241
    6. Sex Roles .......................................................... 247

11. Political Awareness and Women's Response .......................... 252
    1. Women's Resistance ............................................... 252
    2. Women's Response .................................................. 256
12. Conclusion: In Sum and Looking Beyond .................................................. 263
1. Implications .................................................................................................. 263
2. Towards Alternative Development ............................................................ 276
3. Recommendations: Towards Increased Autonomy .................................... 279
4. Conclusion .................................................................................................. 286

Bibliography ..................................................................................................... 291

Appendix
- Map 1: Map of India ...................................................................................... 314
- Map 2: Map of Axom .................................................................................... 315
Tables

Table 5.1. Demographic Facts of Axom .................................................. 136
Table 7.1. Relation between women working in the fields and land owned by their families . 176
Table 7.2. Activity Profile: Agricultural Production, Processing and Marketing .............. 178
Table 7.3. Activity Profile: Household Maintenance and Reproduction ....................... 185
Table 8.1. Agricultural Labor in Kekuri ................................................. 196
Table 8.2. Agricultural Wage Labor ....................................................... 197
Table 8.3. Average Monthly Earnings from Alternative Employment ......................... 201
Table 9.1. Access to and Control over Resources and Benefits in Kekuri .................... 228
Agriculture constitutes the main source of livelihood for most people in the developing countries. However, although women have been major participants in agricultural production from time immemorial, relatively little has been written or understood about their role in the agricultural process. Ester Boserup's seminal study (1970) on the effects of the development process on women argued that the overwhelming trend of capitalist development and Western modes led to a displacement of women from sources of power and influence in all sectors of society. Boserup's formulation based on African material is equally relevant to Axom. An important feature of capitalist development is its tendency to undermine community sustainability and women's traditional spheres of power and influence while creating new conditions for further dependence on men.

1. Statement of the Problem

Although farming is traditionally considered to be a male activity, the role of women has never been limited to the household and the family. It is documented that all over the world women have historically played a predominant role in agriculture. Women are engaged in cash cropping, marketing, and wage labor to varying degrees throughout the Third World, depending on culture, traditions, geographic location, changing economic structures, and other factors. In rural areas, women engage in a wide variety of economic activities, including the construction of housing, land cultivation, and harvesting, food storage and marketing. In rice cultivation, Boserup (1970) notes the important role of women, and observes that rice agriculture is labor-intensive, while other forms of agriculture are more responsive to intensification by mechanization. In India, even when there is a relatively large surplus labor population of underemployed and unemployed males, women have
continued to play a major role in rice cultivation.

The institutionalized "invisibility" of women's roles and contributions, their goals and priorities conceal the important structures that perpetuate the almost universal "underdevelopment" of rural women. National statistics on agriculture are gender-blind, making it difficult to document women's specific role and contribution to agriculture. Development projects which are often Euro-centric and male-biased treat women as housewives in a family unit in which the most important protagonist is the male "head of the household". This distortion and non-recognition of the high participation of women in agriculture is not only detrimental to the women but poses a serious obstacle in realistically understanding agricultural processes and the changes taking place under the impact of development, modernization and commercialization. For poor rural women, the process of "development", usually taking place in the context of fundamental inequalities and multiple crises has generally meant little more than "commercialization", and "modernization" of agriculture, and has resulted in landlessness, decreasing access to vital resources, and an overall deterioration in quality of their lives (Sen and Grown, 1987: 14-15). In many rural regions, the processes of agricultural development have proletarianized rural women, drawing them into wage labor in commercial agriculture when their households lose access to land, undermining and often destroying their self-sufficiency. Women now do wage work in all forms of agricultural production from plantation agriculture, large scale agricultural cash crop production and smaller scale peasant production for the market, to collective forms of agricultural production in planned economies. While millions of women throughout the Third World have sought to improve their lot by migrating to the cities, millions more remain in the rural areas, subject to this process of proletarianization. It is the situation of this growing mass of rural women agricultural workers which is the concern of this study.
In recent years, there has been a growing interest in making visible the lives and activities of women in agriculture. My research is a part of this new project and is devoted to that category of women workers who have performed the bulk of agricultural work in North-east India, namely, the casual agricultural laborers and poor peasant women. In my study, I attempt to capture, as far as possible, the ignored aspects of women's lives - their work and contribution to home and society in Assam, a major rice growing region of India. Looking at society from the perspective of these women's lives means fundamental changes in our understanding of society and what women and men do in its sustenance and a major redefinition of concepts, data-collecting methods and tools of analysis. In effect this work suggests new ways of looking at ourselves and the world around us. My research arises from the recognition that we need to direct our energy and resources into lending strength to the everyday struggles of the women who live in our villages. The need to do this comes from my understanding that no meaningful and sustained changes can be brought about in our society without each one's active involvement and initiative. I see my research as an effort in this direction. I believe that women have important resources that can be called on in the creation of an alternative paradigm for a socially just and environmentally sustainable future through their own will and collective determination. In a number of important ways, the social context and labor process of women's work in agriculture creates fertile ground for the development of a collective consciousness and collective action.

2. Purpose and Objectives of the Study

Women have lived and worked in rural areas as farmers, farmers' wives, slaves, landowners, agricultural workers, mothers and healers. In many parts of the world, rural women work harder, suffer greater deprivation, and have less access to income-earning and employment opportunities than
urban or rural men, or urban women. Although sometimes oppressed and exploited, rural women also create and shape rural life.

The main purpose of this exploratory, micro-level study is to gain fresh perspectives on the lives of poor farm women at the grassroots. It seeks to understand the impact of macro-factors such as modernization, government policy, and male dominance from the women's subjective point of view. The study attempts to explain not just the general patterns but also the diversities in people's lives, and not only the power of cultures and social structures to constrain individuals but also how people use social arrangements creatively to carve out spaces for themselves. I hope the data generated in this study will be of use to both women themselves - to become aware of their contribution and situation, and to policy-makers in making decisions regarding women's work, wages, health, child care and other measures. I also hope it will influence general policy and theory of "development" and "modernization".

There are several ways in which village studies, if properly carried out, can directly serve men and women in the countryside. My research, based on the methodological principles of Feminist, Action and Participatory Research, has the inherent political aim of women's liberation and thereby the radical transformation of society through dialogue, action and critical reflection. I use feminist theory to explore the commonalities and differences in rural women's experiences. I also attempt to infuse feminist theory with rural women's strategies for coping, surviving and changing their daily lives, as I believe that rural women's lives are of consequence to feminist theory and practice. To this end, I explore five questions that are particularly important for understanding rural women's lives:

- What are women's relationships to the natural environment?
- What is the nature and relationship of women's agricultural work and economic contribution to household maintenance and income?
○ What are the forms of patriarchal relations in the countryside?
○ How does global economic restructuring affect rural women?
○ What strategies do rural women utilize for shaping their lives?

I examine agricultural policy through the lens of women's experience. This vantage point allows me to ground my judgements in some referent points outside those employed by the government and elucidates the tensions between the "policy" and "people". Thus what constitutes a "progressive" measure becomes a good deal more complicated when gender is given a more serious consideration. I regard investigation into these issues as crucial for promoting the economic and social status of the poorest rural women.

My research will attempt to explore the above theoretical issues in analyzing the consequences of global economic restructuring, agricultural transformation and the changing roles of women in agriculture within the household and the rural community of Kekuri. Capitalist development everywhere, most recently in the Third World, has involved the undermining of sustainable forms of local production for use, the separation of large numbers of people from access to resources and means of production, and the enrichment of a few at the expense of the many. This process aggravates inequalities among men and between men and women. The shift to production for the market and increased capitalization tends to undermine women's spheres of power and influence. Political, social, economic and legal changes are introduced in ways which create new conditions for women's dependence on men. In analyzing the changing roles of women in agriculture, the study will focus on the sexual division of labor and the social evaluation of women's as against men's work, the ideological, social and economic factors that affect the position of women in agriculture, forms of women's resistance to their oppression and the ongoing problems and ways in which household, farm
and off-farm work are combined to build a livelihood. I will also discuss the changing occupational structure of the community and the ways in which rural women are increasingly seeking to create independent status for themselves.

3. Significance of the Study

A set of questions that may arise while discussing the significance of my study are "Why am I concentrating primarily on indigenous women?", "Why restrict my study to agriculture?", "Why study the state of Axom?", "Why organize?". The answers to these questions are inter-related in that women in Axom, as elsewhere, have always played an important role in agricultural production, but with the onset of "development" and "modernization", are being displaced from their traditional occupations leading to their large scale pauperization.

Women's role in social production has been the subject matter of intensive research in the recent period. As pointed out by Cebotarev (1983), although the historical role of women farmers as participants in various aspects of farm production has recently begun to be recognized, the nature of their involvement remains largely undocumented. Despite the overwhelming importance of the agricultural sector for female employment, research on women in agriculture is a relatively new area of concern. A review of the existing literature on peasant women in India portrays the significant contributions of women to agricultural production (Agarwal, 1979; Mazumdar, 1991; Krishnaraj, 1993). Most of these studies, however, fail to show how peasant women, and men, are exploited by rich peasants, capitalist farmers, state policies and international agencies like the World Bank which dictate crop choice, farming systems and "modernization" in general. Most of these studies have neglected to examine the working conditions of hired landless labourers and subsistence workers who are primarily women. Moreover, there is a dearth of studies on the concrete struggles of
peasant women in the different classes and regions of India. This class and regional bias in research is evident from the fact that there are very few studies on indigenous women; moreover, studies on women from the more geographically isolated areas of North-east India like Axom which has suffered a history of neglect and exploitation from the rest of the country, continue to be practically non-existent. Because the needs and opinions of these groups are not known, their views have less influence on the conditions under which they live. Some researchers believe that the very act of obtaining knowledge creates the potential for change because the paucity of research about certain groups accentuates and perpetuates their powerlessness. Thus, the study of certain groups is political as it demystifies and raises consciousness, by challenging vested interests, and exposing the contradictions and manipulations within a patriarchal, bureaucratic society. I see my research as a crucial step in this direction by documenting the life and struggles of this group of women who have hitherto remained confined to the footnotes of history. I believe that the knowledge of these women's contribution and situation can transform theory and add to the wider knowledge of women's lives.

Women have proven abilities as farmers and farm managers even in the face of discrimination and restrictive laws and customs. Documenting the lives and activities of women removes androcentric biases and enables the researcher to see women as full members of their social, economic, and political worlds.

Axom is a primarily rice growing region and traditionally most of the manual work in rice production is done by women. Rice cultivation is very labour intensive and some of the most arduous tasks include ploughing, often knee-deep in mud, transplanting, weeding, fixing bunds, harvesting, and processing the harvested paddy. It is not clear if women were traditionally involved in rice cultivation due to its arduous nature or because of the fact that women were food gatherers in neolithic times and were the first to domesticate rice (Bardhan, 1979). However, although the actual
ploughing is done by males, the introduction of animal drawn ploughs did not displace women in the rice regions. When one ponders how Axomiya women fulfill their roles as providers of water, firewood, and food for the families, it becomes obvious why it is imperative to seek solutions to the problems that these women are facing.

The problems are made worse by the seemingly emerging breakdown of the traditional rural families with the onset of "development" and "modernization" resulting in rural-urban migration, poor economy, corruption, political turmoil, lack of leadership, and foreign influence. The disruption of rural societies displaces women, and by implication, destroys the agricultural base. Women's pivotal role in agriculture needs to be recognized and supported with assistance and aggressive policy to improve their lives.

Thus the link between women and agriculture is sufficiently strong to call for a detailed study. Apart from this, women's dual roles constitute a special case in development studies: they are responsible for the reproduction and maintenance of the future labour force and at the same time are participants in the production process. There is a direct connection between a woman's ability to earn and the extent of pauperization of her family. Thus an important goal of my research is to examine the ways in which women combine these two roles, and find ways to resist the structures of "social and development patriarchy" that serves to undermine their contribution to society. My study is an attempt to understand the lives of Axomiya women in order that we might change our condition of subordination.

The present study is marked as unusual by virtue of the researcher's subject-position: a native of the Axomiya community analyzed in the study. I have refused the compartmentalization in terms of which women's position is usually analyzed: either in terms of economics and politics or in terms of religious values and sexuality. Instead the study pursues the complex linkages between all of these
terms. Moreover, while women's studies in India as a whole so far have been essentially concerned with urban women, this study focuses on a small group of rural indigenous women. Yet this is not exclusively a study of indigenous women; rather it is a study of the status of rural women in the changing socioeconomic situation of India. It shows how patriarchal structures affect all women, regardless of their socioeconomic and religious background. The study attempts to throw light on the practice of women's subordination. Thus the conclusion of this study has significance not only for Axomiya women, but for women in India as a whole and beyond.

Moreover, this study has theoretical implications for gender studies in general. Within Western feminism there is a growing recognition that women's subordination cannot be understood in isolation from other social divisions. Linking women's productive and reproductive work, development policies and global structures, I raise questions regarding the position of women in agriculture in India generally as well as in other cultures.

4. Organization of the Study

The thesis consists of twelve chapters. Chapter One presents the introduction to the research problem. It includes the objectives of the study, the significance of the study, its limitations, and a note on the usage of terms.

Chapter 2 consists of a review of relevant literature on women and work, with special reference to women in agriculture, the various development paradigms, the impact of development on women, and the failure of development strategies to achieve the desired success in improving people's lives. The chapter attempts to provide a basis for the analysis of the nature of rural women's work in Axom, India. To this end, it deals with some of the theoretical problems encountered in adequately accounting for and understanding rural women's work. By combining several theoretical
insights, the chapter attempts to develop a conceptual framework that allows a comprehensive understanding of the role of women in agriculture. Grounded in feminist perspectives, it attempts to describe the consequences of global economic restructuring and outlines alternative approaches to the development paradigm as essential for achieving human dignity, justice and equality.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in the study, my selection of the research site, and my personal experience of field research. My methodology is based on the principles of Feminist action and participatory research where participation, action and evaluation proceed simultaneously to create change in the status quo. The everyday life-experience and feelings of participants are a major source of knowledge.

Chapter 4 attempts to outline the position of women in agriculture in India by showing the importance of historical shifts and their significance in the National economy. I discuss the major landmarks in Indian history with a view to comprehend the distinctive nature of the Indian traditional culture and its interaction with the forces of Western domination and imperialism. The impact of government policies on the situation of rural women is also examined.

In Chapter 5, I present a brief account of the traditional economy and society of the north-eastern region of India, with particular focus on the agrarian system. It provides a brief political and economic history of Axom and its people along with a history of Hinduism in the region. I examine how agriculture has come to play a predominant role in determining the social, political and economic structure of the village. I then proceed to examine the impact of socioeconomic changes on women since Independence. This historical background helps us in understanding the present economic, cultural, social and political situation of Kekuri. I show that the preoccupation with economic growth, often disregarding ecological and distributional considerations has exacerbated political power balances, gender, class and regional inequalities.
Chapter 6 presents the findings of my study. I begin with a description of the village of Kekuri, its people, the different types of agricultural households in the village, settlement pattern, land and cropping pattern, transport and communication, markets, and the bazaar which occupies an important role in the people's day-to-day lives. I analyze how women's social and economic status is linked to and affected by the nature of wider class relationships within and outside the village.

Chapter 7 shows that women's share in household maintenance and farm production is significant and crucial and cannot be ignored. The discussion and the data presented give the variety of work which women seek out to support the family. Their contribution upholds the sustenance of their household - regardless of whether it can be measured or not, or however high or low it may be. They also continue to be excluded from the currently accepted data systems. My data on the prominence of women as agricultural laborers bears out Boserup's (1970) finding that in areas of intensive plough cultivation of irrigated land both men and women must work to support a family.

Chapter 8 shows that agricultural laborers, who are numerically greater in number than the cultivators, have always included women and men. In spite of this, women's work in Assam is "invisible". The chapter reveals marked wage differentials between male and female laborers, as well as a tendency to pay less for tasks performed exclusively by women.

Chapter 9 describes the socio-economic consequences of modernization and development in Kekuri. It shows that the preoccupation with economic growth, with its total disregard for subsistence, ecological and distributional considerations has led to increased gender, class and regional inequalities, unemployment, and ecological destruction, and impoverishment for many, particularly women.

Chapter 10 shows that patriarchal socio-cultural relations continue to be one of the most important obstacles in women's access to education, wage labor, health services, decision-making
powers, and ultimately to an egalitarian relationship within the household in Kekuri.

In Chapter 11, I attempt to outline the extent of women's political participation, awareness and their response and resistance through informal networks.

Chapter 12 recapitulates the main arguments of the study, and integrates the major points by linking religious and cultural values to socioeconomic and political structures in understanding the position of women in Kekuri and India in general. The study concludes by proposing alternative definitions and understandings of women as active change agents by providing new approaches to data collection, definitions of work, analyses of relations between home work and farm work, resource control and allocation, and women's opportunities for training. It reiterates the necessity of bringing women together through collective action and networking at the local, state, national, and international levels.

5. Note on Usage

In this study, I use the term indigenous in preference to the more frequently used term tribal. The term tribal has been rightly criticized for its racist, evolutionary implications; its tendency to group together people thus defined, even though they live in different parts of the world; and its assumption that tribals are autochthonous, isolated groups that avoid settled agricultural production in favor of slash-and-burn agriculture. In my view, it is a racist term that lumps together diverse groups under a particular form of economic production, religious belief and racial origin. While the term indigenous suffers from some of the same misleading assumptions, it does not carry the pejorative connotations of the term tribal.

I have preferred to use the local dialect and words to reflect the language as it is used in Kekuri. For instance, I use "Kosari" and not the colonial "Kachari" for the people, "Axom" and not
"Assam" for the state, "Axomiya" and not "Assamese" for the language. Renate Klein suggests that we cannot speak for others, but that we can, and must speak out for others. In my study, I try not to speak for rural women. Rather I present their voices and include my own whenever I have personal experience. Stylistic choices also express my feminist stance. For example, I use the spelling "women" rather than 'womyn", "her" as the generic pronoun rather than "him", nonmilitary language and female metaphors when referring to action, and the pronoun "we" rather than "they" when referring to researcher and researched.

In my study, I use the expression "Third World". The term has, justifiably, been criticized. In the first place, one ought to speak of 'Third Worlds', so diverse are the countries of the Southern hemisphere in terms of geographic location, economic conditions and specific socio-cultural characters. Added to this diversity between countries is the fundamental differences that exist among the people themselves. Depending on their social class and gender, they find themselves very differently affected by problems from which some benefit rather than suffer. The term "Third World" must also be questioned on the grounds that three quarters of humanity continue to be diminished by this misleading mathematical term. So why use the term here: because it is brief and understood by everyone. But also because it has the advantage of calling to mind the injustice denounced by the French revolutionaries of 1789: the Third Estate represented the majority of the French people although the Ancien Regime accorded them no power. Similarly, there is no common measure, if only on a numerical basis, between the population of the Third World and the influence it wields. The impact of the peoples of the South on the Western world remains very much less than it might and should be. Ethnocentrism, at once engendered and reinforced by economic dominance, has impeded the process of mutual enrichment which normally accompanies contact between peoples. Today, however, international networks are gradually developing, with committed feminists,
environmentalists, indigenous, Third World, development and other activists and academics engaged in intercultural dialogue which is both productive and full of promise.

If this study is the result of data collection as a researcher in the field, actively involved with the women, amidst the hubbub of daily activities and in the face of human suffering and hope, it is also the result of a personal commitment, growing out of a set of experiences and convictions, sometimes giving to the people, and in my turn, learning from them in a million ways, nourished by their spirituality and comforted by their life-enhancing hope in a common human community.
Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Introduction

This chapter attempts to provide a basis for the analysis of the nature of rural women's work in Assam, India. To this end, it will deal with some of the theoretical problems encountered in adequately accounting for and understanding rural women's work. By combining several theoretical insights, the chapter attempts to develop a conceptual framework that allows a comprehensive understanding of the role of women in agriculture. Grounded in feminist perspectives, it attempts to describe the consequences of global economic restructuring and agrarian transformations on rural women.

This chapter is divided into three parts:

1. The first part of the chapter analyzes the work of women in agriculture and subsistence labor, their problems and their struggles within the context of global economic restructuring and agrarian transformation.

2. The second part reviews literature on women and agriculture and the impact of economic policies on women, with special reference to India.

3. The third part of the chapter examines the development paradigm and suggests alternative approaches to mainstream development in order to provide an adequate frame to assess the desired success in improving people's lives.
1. **Theoretical Approaches to Women's Work**

This section draws on several strands of literature concerning the modernization of agriculture, the theoretical treatment of women and domestic work, the household as a productive unit, the interdependence between the economic and social dimensions within the household and gender as a social variable. These literatures together are drawn on to contextualize and analyze the work of women in agriculture, their problems and their struggles. The first section deals with the value of labor as an economic category and problems of analyzing domestic production as related to women's work. The second section looks at rural women's work and the importance of the household as an economic unit in understanding the transformations in agriculture today. The third section, flowing from this, deals with the importance of a feminist perspective in addressing the limitations of classical modes of analysis in understanding the complexities and interlinkages of women's roles in agriculture.

(i). **The Value of Labor as an Economic Category**

Women's role in agricultural wage labor is closely tied to the place of the household in the overall political economy of a society and to gender relations within the household. A study of Nicaraguan women in the agro-export industries published by the Nicaraguan Women's Institute adopts the terminology of a "primary and secondary labor force" to describe the labor force in the national agricultural sector. The primary workforce, the "male" workforce occupies positions which are often permanent, better paying, may require training and experience, and carry more status. The secondary workforce, the "female" workforce, is concentrated in the more temporary, lower paying, lower status jobs (CIERRA, 1987).

The notion of a primary and secondary workforce captures well the fact that women's labor is crucial to agricultural production and women in the agricultural labor force are integrated into a
sector within which there exists a hierarchical internal gender division of labor. Almost universally, rural women workers are more likely to be hired as temporary and casual laborers and earn less than male workers. Often, they are considered to be "helping" their husbands and do not directly receive any wages at all. They are subject to discrimination, harassment, and violence. And, despite long hours in the field, they continue to be burdened, almost without exception, with the full responsibility for the maintenance of their households, the care of their children, and the overall management of scarce resources for the survival of their families (Afshar, 1981; Jayawardene, 1986).

The classical economist Adam Smith first introduced Value as a double concept - use value and exchange value, later developed by Karl Marx (1967). With the development of capitalism, production for use is increasingly replaced by production for exchange and profit. The danger inherent in this process particularly manifests itself in relation to subsistence, non-commodified and women's institutionalized unpaid domestic work. The most pressing danger of a shift from subsistence to market production is that the poor lose the ability to provide for themselves without gaining the means to satisfy their needs in the market. This is in fact what happens as capitalism and the market expand through "development", thereby impoverishing whole communities.

Recent discussions have attempted to link non-wage labor in peasant and simple commodity forms of production to unpaid domestic work. Capital is dependent upon subsistence production since the goods and labor power it appropriates takes place within the household. Thus, as pointed out by Bennholdt-Thomsen, domestic production of housewives is subordinated to capital and to "capitalist valorization of their labor" (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1981: 17). It is in this sense that women's productivity and labor is under-valued as it is not seen as providing surplus value for the market.

Bennholdt-Thomsen (1981) shows how non-wage household labor contributes to capital accumulation through the reproduction and maintenance of a labor power for capitalist production.
However, in discussing the mechanisms that conceal the processes of Capitalist exploitation, she fails to examine strategies adopted by individual women or households to minimize the drudgery of domestic work and maximize income. Further, her analysis neglects the cultural dimensions associated with different forms of production and reproduction. As Mackintosh states, household labor must also be seen "in relation to cultural norms concerning the sexual division of labor, the obligations of marriage and the expectations of family and kin" (Mackintosh 1981: 12). Thus it is important to take cognizance of the cultural and ideological dimensions of domestic labor. Arguing for the integration of social ideology and class analysis in studying sexual subordination, Bourque and Warren state that

In order to specify the mechanisms that perpetuate sexual hierarchy ... we need to examine links between the sexual division of labor, rural institutions which regulate the allocation of resources and define values for the community, and social ideologies which give cultural meanings to sex differences ... The social ideology approach, with its focus on the interconnections of sex role stereotyping, sexual divisions of labor, and institutionally structured access to crucial resources, is particularly well suited for documenting the ways sexual hierarchy is perpetuated (Bourque, Warren, 1981: 82).

Whitehead (1981) also asserts the importance of considering socio-cultural and historical factors in analyzing the sexual division of labor within the household. In her study on domestic budgeting in West Africa and Britain, she shows how differences in the allocation of goods, services and income lead to inequalities of power between husband and wife. While men have more control over resources and their own consumption, women bear the major responsibility for the collective consumption of the household. However, it is important to mention that these differences are not only culturally determined but are based in the everyday life experiences and material reality of men and women. Further the definition of work differs culturally and situationally. Many tasks or non-wage labor are based on kinship, familial and community ties or relate to social status and therefore cannot be assigned a monetary value. Thus it is important to emphasize the social and cultural
frameworks in examining the impact of the sexual division of labor, marriage contract and power relations on production and reproduction. Dixon-Mueller (1985) has assessed many issues on sex-based task specialization and access to agricultural resources, showing intervention strategies which would help improve women's participation.

(ii). Analysis of Rural Women's Work

An analysis of the nature of women's participation in wage labor, and its implications for political action and organization requires an understanding of both the place of the household and organization in the overall processes of the agricultural economy, and the dynamics of gender and the sexual division of labor in defining women's roles in the household. On an international level, women's triple day burden has been brought to light (Cebotarev, 1982; 1983; Collins, 1993). In her book Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale, Mies argues that in development strategies the goals are modernization and accumulation:

...the social division of labor between the sphere of productive labor and private non-productive labor, and the sexual division of labor cannot be abolished because these divisions guarantee that workers and peasants subsistence and commodity production remain socially invisible. Their labor can thus be tapped in a process of ongoing primitive accumulation of capital which can be fed into the building of a modern economy and state (Mies, 1986: 198).

The process of accumulation is reliant on the subsistence production by workers' households to subsidize their survival and reproduction, and thus to hold the level of wages to a bare minimum. As Mies argues,

the modernization and commercialization of agriculture in developing countries cannot take place unless it is linked to continued subsistence production and the availability of a large labor pool of subsistence producers... these subsistence producers are typically women (Mies, 1986: 3).
The subsidy provided by women's labor is in the form not only of food produced by the workers for their own consumption, or of non-wage income earned through production for exchange, but also in the form of the day to day tasks necessary for the reproduction of life - water and food gathering, food preparation, clothes washing and mending, and especially childcare (Eviota, 1986; Spindel, 1987; Brydon, 1989; Brydon and Chant, 1989). All of these activities are very time and energy consuming for women in rural areas where there is little or no socially subsidized infrastructure to lessen the workload. As Beneria and Roldan have argued, the individual workers' relationship to the means of production is mediated by gender, as the workplace is "a locus in which gender can be used and recreated" (Beneria and Roldan, 1987: 14).

Elise Boulding (1983) identifies six different categories that constitute "women's special knowledge stock": life-span, health maintenance, including care of children and elderly; food production, storage, short and long term processing; utilization of water and fuel resources; production of household equipment, often including housing construction; maintenance of interhousehold barter systems; and maintenance of kin networks and ceremonials for meeting regularly recurring life crisis events. While there are cultural and geographical variations, the majority of household subsistence labor is done by women and girls. Although there appears to be some gender flexibility as far as the tasks of wood and water gathering, and in food production - referred to as "subsistence farming" when done primarily by men and "kitchen gardening" when done primarily by women - the gender division of labor appears to be almost universal as far as childcare is concerned. Women's biological reproductive role translates into full responsibility for all aspects of child and family care, "family" often meaning an extended kin group. This caregiving and family maintenance work is ideologically defined as women's "natural" and primary sphere of activity. This basis for the patriarchal gender division of labor and the overall patriarchal gender relations of the
household may include: patrilocal kinship systems in which daughters are "transferred" from the households of their fathers to the households of their husbands, male property and inheritance systems in which women do not own or inherit land, land reforms in which women are not recognized as beneficiaries, and male control over income. While there is considerable variation in these kinds of material and cultural factors, in most situations these arrangements are viewed through the norm of the "ideal type" housewife/breadwinner roles of the industrialized North which, as Mies argues, form the ideological basis for models of economic development and state policies which rely on women's unpaid labor. Women's wage is regarded as supplementary to the income earned by the male head of the household (where there is one). As Mies points out, this "housewifisation" means that women's work, whether in use value or commodity production is obscured, and can thus be exploited as an unpaid subsidy to the process of accumulation or be bought at a much cheaper rate than men's labor. Thus, what has come to be dubbed as the "double" - double day, double shift, double burden - is the common situation of women who are both wage and non-wage workers. While neither the devaluation of women's work nor the double workload are unique to the third world or to the agrarian sector, the implications are clearly more exaggerated where household production still plays a key role and where the day to day tasks are extremely arduous and time consuming. Rubin (1975) and Hartmann (1976) provide important theoretical perspectives on how the work of men and women - both in and outside the household - are linked to the broader economic system. They show that the gender-based division of labor, involving women's domestic labor and men's labor force activity, is essential to the economic production and reproduction of the workforce.
(iii). The Feminist Perspective: the call for "Integrative Feminisms"

Hierarchical gender relations of domination and subordination, specifically patriarchal relations, condition the experience of working class women as household members, wage workers, or in any other sphere of social and economic relations. Thus the insertion of men and women into wage labor relations is mediated by gendered social and economic relations of the family and household and by the interaction of these reproductive and productive spheres. While the dualities of workplace and household, production and reproduction may be convenient analytical categories, they are not so easily separated in reality. They are experienced as integrated aspects of each individual's reality and are, in fact, aspects of a single system separated by little more than the spatial fact that they may take place at different locations (Beneria and Roldan, 1987). However, in day to day life in rural agricultural economies, the dividing line between home and workplace, between "productive" and "reproductive" work is much less obvious and less significant than it is in urban industrial settings (Mies, 1986: 58). As Maria Mies has aptly observed

For the poor women themselves, all work is subsistence or survival production, according to our definitions, whether it is wage work or non-wage work, work in the fields or work in the house ... These women are too poor to have their private lives separated from the public life (Mies, 1986: 129).

The concept of gender has long been understood to refer to the historical organization of economic activity (Boserup 1970; Leacock and Safà, 1986). No society has yet achieved a non-gendered division of labor (Illich 1982). However, gender conflict has not received full recognition although its implications are as significant as those of class relations in the exploitation of women's labor. This is particularly true of Marxist interpretations which recognize capitalist exploitation of labor but fail to adequately recognize exploitation arising out of gender constructs. Early Marxists like Engels, Kautsky and Lenin saw women as pushed into the waged labor force through Capitalism.
Some contemporary Marxist feminists hold that housework produces surplus value and is therefore directly related to Capitalism. In "Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State", Engels (1972) attributes the inferior position of women to private property. He believed that the incorporation of women into the waged labor force would gradually erode patriarchal relations. Economic independence would enable women to participate on an equal basis with men, leading eventually to the abolition of private property and the emancipation of women from both capital and men.

According to Marx and Engels, Capitalism is the process of commodity production from which arises alienation and exploitation. In Marx's analysis of class conflict, power relations are grounded in a person's class position. The class structure, based on economic forces, divides society into the bourgeoisie and the proletariat on the basis of their relation to the mode of production. Thus the exploitation of the proletariat by the extraction of the surplus value of their productive labor by the capitalist leads to their oppression. Marx sees women's oppression as her exploitation in a class society through the bourgeois family which he defines as "an instrument of capitalist society":

The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family based? On capital, on private gain.... The bourgeois claptrap about the family and education becomes all the more disgusting... by the action of modern industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and then children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labor (Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto, 1962: p.27).

While recognizing the double burden of women as houseworkers and wage-earners, Marxists paid more attention to Capitalism than to the continued gender subordination of women. In attributing women's oppression to Capital and private property, Marxists fail to point out the particular nature of women's experiences as distinct from men's. As Gayle Rubin points out with regard to Marx's analysis of women's position, "... the briefness of Marx's comment only serves to emphasize the vast area of social life which it covers and leaves unexamined" (Rubin 1984: 157). It
fails to acknowledge that men have vested interests in the continued subordination of women by not having to do housework, by being served by wives and daughters and enjoying better positions in the labor market. By claiming that women are simply victims of a class structure, Marx fails to elaborate on the sexual division of labor. Men and their wives are presumed to share a class position and the conflict between their interests is disguised. Thus, the relations of reproduction are subsumed under the relations of production. The Marxist stand of taking class as the central category of analysis cannot provide an adequate analysis of women's specific oppression. The concept of class, being gender blind, cannot reveal the particular situation of women. Women's exploitation must be explained on the basis of gender in economic and social relations. However, by recognizing exploitative relations of production, Marxist thought has provided useful analytical tools for feminist analysis. The application of such Marxist concepts as "alienation" and the "division of labor" have been adapted to the specificity of women's exploitation simultaneously by class and gender constructs (Tong: 1998).

The universal and primary nature of patriarchal oppression and the persistence of gender subordination in a diversity of social formations points to the need for a feminist theory of social relations of production which centres on the premise that gender relations are a central element of any social and economic system. Iris Young, in her critique of "dual systems" theories of class and gender, presents an outline for such a feminist materialism:

Our historical research, coupled with our feminist intuition, tells us that the labor of women occupies a central place in any system of production and that sexual hierarchy is a crucial element of any system of domination. To correspond to these intuitions, we need a theory of relations of production and the social relations which derive from and reinforce those relations which takes gender relations and the situation of women as core elements ... We must develop an analytical framework which regards the material social formation as one system in which gender differentiation is a core attribute (Young, 1981: 50).
By Young's definition, the gender division of labor refers to all structured gender differentiation of labor in a society, labor being defined as any task or activity which the society deems necessary (Young, 1981: 52). This, then, includes labor carried out in both the so-called "domestic" or "reproductive" and "public" or "productive" spheres.

The gender division of labor, transformed through the capitalist mode of production and patriarchal structure of society, becomes particularly oppressive for women who are burdened with a range of agricultural chores as well as domestic tasks in the reproductive sphere. The position of agricultural women has to be understood within the context of male domination in society and in the family. A major obstacle to women's participation in agriculture is the patriarchal nature of society. While sons are subject to the father's control in the early years of their lives, women and daughters are usually bound by patriarchal authority throughout their lives (Folbre, 1986; 1992).

In order to comprehend the true nature of women's oppression and exploitation, therefore, a study of both sexual and economic material conditions within micro-settings such as the household and the community, is necessary. A Feminist mode of analysis is best suited to explain the everyday life experiences of women in agriculture, and their subordination both within and outside the household. A Feminist approach emphasizes the material basis as well as the psychological and ideological issues of women's oppression. It works on the assumption that the status of women and the mode of production are intimately connected. It emphasizes not only women's double relation to wage labor, as paid and unpaid workers, but also recognizes women's struggle for change in their efforts to evolve strategies to organize and fight the forces of their common oppression.

Feminist theory aids our understanding of global restructuring by offering alternative definitions of development, by redefining what counts as work and challenging the dichotomies of paid and unpaid work, subsistence and market production, and productive versus reproductive work.
One of the massive early efforts to compile information about women is Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global* (1984), the result of an extensive feminist network's effort to compile data about the status of women in every country in the world. A major theoretical concern for many feminists doing cross-cultural research is whether, and how, economic development alters the preexisting sexual division of labor. To answer the question of whether development is good for women, cross-cultural feminist studies are necessary. An example is the framework presented by Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena leon de Leal who demonstrate the importance of ... material conditions in analyzing the sexual division of labor in productive activities. We analyze the variations in the sexual division of labor in peasant agricultural production and in wage employment as it relates to the uneven development of capitalism among [three Andean] regions. Our analysis tends to build upon women's subordinated position within agrarian societies (Deere and Leal, 1981: 340).

Vandana Shiva (1989) moves this concern one step further by questioning the link between women and economic development, and then extending this concern to the impact of development on nature. Her term "maldevelopment" refers to patriarchal modern science, which has depleted the soils and forests of India with particular hardship for women.

In recent years, Feminist theorists have moved beyond liberal, socialist and radical categories of analysis to develop new feminist epistemologies that acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences. Now feminist analysts and practitioners recognize the need for decentering the "universal woman" - the white, upper-middle-class, heterosexual, Western woman as representing all women. Chandra Mohanty warns against some Western feminist analysts' ignorance of global power relations and homogenization of Third World women as an "... undifferentiated group leading truncated lives, victimized by the combined weight of 'their' traditions, cultures, and beliefs and 'our' (Eurocentric) history" (Mohanty and Mohanty, 1990: 180). Similarly, Barbara Hill Collins (1990) cautions that "portraying Black women solely as passive, unfortunate recipients of racial and sexual abuse stifles
notions that Black women can actively work to change our circumstances and bring about changes in our lives" (1990: 237).

Angela Miles (1996) argues that while women differ by race, class, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality, they share experiences that can result in common actions or strategies of resistance to patriarchal practices and ideologies. In her book Integrative Feminisms (1996), Miles makes a proposition for "integrative feminisms" based on a "transformative approach" to feminist politics in which women's diversity, specificity and equality are resources to be celebrated and used in the creation of a truly Global feminist sisterhood. Miles describes "integrative feminist politics " as a project in which

the integration of means and ends, of the personal and the political become an important aspect of a politics that seeks ultimately to integrate the productive and reproductive, the public and private realms of society in a world organized around the central value of life lived fully and equally in autonomy and harmony. Affirming women, is thus, a key aspect of the struggle against sexual and all other dualisms, and recognizing women's particularity is the basis of a general politics (Miles, 1996: 30).

Recognizing that there are no simple ways of representing the immense diversities, social hierarchies and histories of women, integrative feminisms nevertheless affirm the possibility of creating a movement reflective of the concerns of all women, through global dialogue, networking and solidarity. Miles' concept of integrative feminisms proves particularly helpful in the context of my study on rural women, whose lives provide a strong basis for transformative politics, from their connections to the environment, from their work in subsistence, reproductive and productive realms, and from the patriarchal nature of rural families. Their experiences provide particular angles of vision to global resistance strategies and the possibilities they hold for challenging patriarchal forms of organization. However, as a result of their subjugated positions, patriarchal domination and traditional values, rural women's knowledge is rarely adequately recognized and drawn upon in feminist defined politics and activism. Likewise, rural women's knowledge and resistance to
domination rarely benefits as it might from feminist insights and experience. The vast majority of feminist movements are centered in urban areas. Thus Miles' call for Integrative feminism is particularly relevant for rural women, whose experiences, whether in India, Tanzania or North America, can provide fresh insights in understanding opportunities and strategies for resistance available to women. Thus, as Miles reiterates, integrative feminisms have the potential to speak to and unite women across divisions of race, class, and sexual orientation. They provide the necessary basis for a multi-centered women's movement in which all diverse women in their particularity are equally central and in which the particular conditions of all women's lives are equally representative of the general condition of women - a movement in which diversity is truly is a resource (Miles, 1996: xiii).

Miles discusses the importance of charting the effects of the dominant development paradigm, as well as national and international policies and processes on women and the environment at the local level, and shows that the heaviest burden of the world economic crisis lies on poor women, who earn less, own less, and control less. The following section will examine literature concerning perspectives on global economic restructuring, agrarian transformation, and women and work in order to situate rural women's labor within the context of their daily lives.

2. Socioeconomic Studies on Rural Women with special reference to India

Women in India have a history of neglect in rural development programmes (Hale, 1977; Mehra, 1983). Women's role in social production has been the subject matter of intensive research in the recent period. In India, a significant landmark in the field of women's studies was the publication in 1974 of Towards Equality, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. The alarming decline in women's labor force participation highlighted in the report focussed attention on female employment based on a countrywide investigation. The most shocking finding was the steady decline in the ratio of females to the male population over the decades. This indicated
that maternal deaths and female mortality for infants was very high, often caused by severe malnourishment. It concluded that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India had not translated into reality for the large masses of women and drew the attention of scholars to the neglect in the social sciences of women's roles and inputs.

Despite the overwhelming importance of the agricultural sector for female employment, research on women in agriculture in India is a relatively new area of concern. The relationship of women to the economy is a special problem as little work has been done on women in the ancient and medieval period. Data for the ancient period is not easy to find and one has to rely on inscriptions and literary texts. Vijaya Ramaswamy (1989) has written a paper on women and work, based on Sangam literature which essentially consists of two major collections of songs composed between the first century BC and sixth to seventh centuries AD. She examines the various occupations in which women played a role, including agriculture, dairy farming, and handloom industry. She finds that rural rather than urban women shared economic activities with men.

While the role of unequal land rights in determining the status of different class and caste groups has received much attention, the impact of land rights on women has seldom been given much notice. The first records come from traveller's accounts, administrative reports and official documents and the Census. The Census reports give rough quantitative estimates of the range and degree of the economic involvement of women. The records of the colonial period are subject to many biases but are nevertheless useful as source material. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the British introduced new systems of land tenure in India. Women's rights were substantially diminished by the development of the British legal system with its new concepts and definitions of property and patterns of landholding. A 1983 study on land tenure in Kerala by Saradamoni traces the impact on women of historical changes in land rights in the colonial period and land reform
legislation after Independence.

In her paper on women agricultural workers published in 1976, Rama Joshi observed that 'there is almost no study conducted exclusively on women agricultural workers'. Her paper was based on a survey on the then existing literature and field data. The study was conducted in different parts of the country including Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and followed the Agricultural Labor Enquiry line of analysis. These studies confirmed the findings in the Rural Labor Enquiry Committee Report 1964-65 that women had fewer days of paid employment in a year than men. Rama Joshi, however, made the following observation.

However, in a particular agricultural season, sometimes, the women may work for a greater number of days in farm operations. For example, in their repeat survey done in 1972, Johri and Pandey found that in the slack season following the rabi harvesting, the female workers worked for more days in a week than their male counterparts (6.5 days in a week for women as compared to 5.8 days for male workers). (Joshi, 1976: 184)

She further points out:

In Johri and Pandey's two studies it was revealed that the working hours of female casual workers were shorter than those of men. It is interesting to note, however, that in the slack season the daily hours of work of female workers increased when compared to their hours of work in the busy season. In the case of men the working hours decreased in the slack season as compared to the busy one. One possible reason could be that this was the season when the major agricultural operations were performed mostly by women. For example, in the same study it was revealed that in this season threshing and winnowing accounted for over one-fifth of the days worked respectively. Threshing and winnowing are the operations in which more women than men are employed. In the two studies reported above, the rest periods of female workers were found to be shorter when compared to those of men. Since the rest periods were found to be related to the working hours this finding was in the expected direction. Those who worked for greater number of hours got the longer rest periods. (Joshi, 1976: 185)

These studies support my finding that during the slack season, or when men have less or no work, women always try to find work. Rama Joshi also notes the fact that in three agricultural operations, transplanting, weeding and harvesting - women get more employment than men. Her study, however, fails to mention women's non-agricultural and domestic work.
A review of the existing literature on peasant women in India portrays the significant contributions of women to agricultural production (Dasgupta, 1977; Gulati, 1980; Agarwal and Anand, 1982; Mazumdar, 1983; Agarwal, 1986; Krishnaraj, 1990). The sexual division of labor in production for the market and for home consumption, as well as non-commodity production such as cooking and fetching water and fuelwood, and childcare, has been documented. Intra-household relations of distribution of food, education, medical treatment to females as compared to males has been shown to be related to this sexual division of labor (Reddy, 1979; Miller, 1982; Majumdar, 1983; Krishnaraj, 1990; Bennett, 1992). Of particular relevance are the studies dealing with important issues concerning rural women, especially regarding the status of women in rice agriculture (Chakravarty 1975; Omvedt 1978; Mencher et al 1979; Mencher 1993; Miller 1982; Sen 1982; Mies et al 1983; Gulati 1983; Krishnaraj and Ranadive 1984; Agarwal 1984; Bardhan 1984). The researchers generally agree that women, and not men, are the mainstay of subsistence agriculture in paddy cultivation areas. Women constitute a vast pool of agricultural labor, work longer hours at more tedious, low skilled and underpaid jobs. They also contribute a greater proportion to household consumption needs. Many of the studies highlight the rise in female-headed households in rural areas, often accompanied by a significant increase in poverty in these households. The introduction of capitalist farming in rural areas witnessed the large-scale marginalization of women in agriculture and their consequent pauperization. The researchers warn that neglecting women's role in development planning would lead to an increase in rural poverty.

Asok Mitra's detailed analysis of census data (1980) reported a sharp decline in labor force participation of women in India, particularly in agriculture, with a corresponding rise in female unemployment over several decades up to 1971. Several issues such as including women's work in a subsistence economy, the grey area between domestic and farm work, whether and how to include
women's part-time or seasonal work in agriculture and in the unorganized sectors of the economy have been addressed in his study.

Research on women's involvement in wage labor has been extensive. Most research on working women or women with access to an income, links employment to a higher status in terms of female welfare and autonomy. The underlying assumption is that since women have an income, they have control over certain economic resources which they may then use to negotiate their socioeconomic status within the household. Bennett assumes this in her report on women's work in India's agricultural labor force:

Whether one views the increase in female agricultural laborers as an indicator of growing rural poverty or as a positive sign that more agricultural work is available for women, its effect in terms of our third criterion (i.e., decision-making) should be examined separately. Evidence suggests that increased paid employment outside the home may actually improve women's bargaining position within the family (Bennett 1989: 40).

This may not, however, be necessarily true in all classes, especially in poor households where, despite women's employment, resources may be so limited that equitable allocation and control over them is not an issue. Moreover, the kind of employment available to rural women is so low in the hierarchy of occupations that women and men engage in it only out of dire economic necessity. According to Raju (1987), in a conducive social atmosphere higher labor input by females in rice-growing areas reflects an enhanced response to labor market conditions. She further maintains that, other things being equal, region-specific cultural or societal norms remain vital in defining female roles in agriculture. Female wage work, especially in the fields, is also seen as weakening their social status since it is a reflection of the household's poverty, and women will withdraw as soon as the household's economic situation permits. Further, gender hierarchy is so rigid within the household that mere wage labor does not guarantee a shift or balance in power relations between genders. As
Sharma appropriately points out:

In theory we might certainly expect to find that women who work for wages (and even women who work as family laborers) have a greater say in household matters than women who perform domestic work only, and this is an assumption that has often been made both by anthropologists and others. But the female laborer usually earns wages which are too small and sporadic to lend her any special leverage in household politics, and the work of female family laborers does not give women any particular control over the products of their labor. (Sharma 1980: 196).

Within the wider social structure, gender relations in India continue to be defined by the dominant patriarchal system, which undergirds the pervasive ideology of caste, class and gender hierarchy. This ideology has successfully permeated to the lower castes and classes and is even apparent at the household level, and justifies women's subordinate position.

Women's roles in society continue to be defined as childbearing, childrearing and household duties. A World Bank report claims that:

It is part of a pervasive gender ideology which affects the kind of work women seek and the kind they are considered suitable for. It affects inheritance patterns and, thus, the kind of productive assets available to support self-employment. It also affects families willingness to invest in educating their daughters to prepare them for the job market and, more generally to endow them with the 'bureaucratic know-how' they need to cope with the increasingly complicated administrative structures involved in gaining access to social services and economic opportunity on the 'outside'. (World Bank 1989: 3).

This is not to suggest that men's work, worklessness and contribution are realistically reflected. Male agricultural laborers also face seasonableness and intermittency in their employment situation. Leela Gulati in her poignant profile of a female agricultural laborer observes how men become helpless and show inability to cope with crisis situations caused by lack of work and income:

Unlike Kalyani, who is on the look out for some work or the other, however ill-paid, if Mosha (her husband) does not get the regular job on the truck, he is content whiling away his time in the house or at the street corners (Gulati, 1978).
This has also been observed in other countries. Writing about division of labor in farm production in rural Phillipines, Linda Res says:

Men engage in non-rice growing activities, especially in the first phase of the household life-cycle, possibly because it is a relatively new and still expanding opportunity open to young men. Women, however, grow vegetables at any phase of the life-cycle and at any income level. Their labor input in non-rice crops is spread throughout the year. Small areas of vegetables are grown under continuous care for a few hours per week, allowing a steady market income (Res, 1985).

This refers to households owning some land, and not agricultural laborers. However, many acknowledged authorities on rural labor fail to see these realities. According to Biplab Dasgupta,

It is clear from these tables that the overall level of participation in a village is largely determined by the degree to which women and children participate in the work force. These two groups, and to a lesser extent also the old, can be described as 'intermittent' workers, who supplement the contribution to work of adult males who are a regular component of the work force (Dasgupta, 1977: 23).

Again, Connell and Lipton write:

The participation of females in the productive economy is usually less than that of men. This may be because of inability to work at times of pregnancy or lactation, especially where the child-woman ratio and the infant mortality rate are high, because of particular religious requirements (though adherence to these is often overstated by respondents, making it especially important to check questionnaire responses by observation) or, more generally, because of women's preoccupation with domestic work (Connell and Lipton, 1977: 49).

This distortion of reality is detrimental for agricultural labor and the rural poor. There is thus the urgent need for the recognition of women's contribution and the fact that men are not able to maintain the family alone.

In his study on the rice-husking industry of Bengal, Mukul Mukherjee (1983) observes that in Bengal, the job of husking the paddy rice was reserved for women. Women husked the rice in one of two ways: by hand pounding or by dhenki. Husking rice was one of the few means women had of earning income outside of the household. Although they were normally paid in rice, the addition to family incomes was substantial. When rice mills took over the manufacture of milled rice, women
lost their major source of outside employment, family incomes declined, and the nutritive value of the rice was impaired.

Agarwal (1986; 1988) links the important issue of depletion of natural resources, and the increasing appropriation of what remains, questioning the long-term viability of agricultural yields under the present agricultural policy.

Jain (1978) and Dixon (1978) present case studies of existing innovative programs for organizing and employing rural women in India. These programs include dairy cooperatives, women's cooperative banks, self-employed women's union, and organized militancy by women on social issues such as prohibition of liquor sales. In Women and Rural Revolt in India, Gail Omvedt (1978) asserts that women's major productive role (outside of the home) in agriculture and the crucial part which women play in peasant revolts have been more or less ignored by social scientists. In her paper, she analyzes the interconnections between class and sexual oppression, and between women's movements and class struggle in rural India: with class structure, the nature of society, and the development of social movements looked at from the viewpoint of women themselves. With the use of two key concepts, work participation and mode of production, she argues that in India, increasingly during the last decade, capitalism has developed in the countryside, and that, with the changing social relations of production, there has emerged a mass-based and militant women's movement, whose objective basis has been the militancy of women of the rural poor. This is illustrated for the state of Maharashtra.

In the north-eastern region of India, the indigenous people have been disturbed in a great variety of ways from their land since 1947 - notwithstanding government policies and programmes to the contrary. The process commenced in and around Shillong, the headquarters of greater Axom administration and now capital of the state of Meghalaya, where land was released liberally after
1947. In the process, the indigenous people completely lost their ancestral villages, paddy fields and traditional places of worship. This land alienation was largely caused by machinations of vested interests as a result of which the indigenous people left their ancestral land and were pushed away deeper into remote areas. Axom is a classic case where the indigenous communities have lost their land and the future of social cohesiveness and maintenance of peace will greatly depend upon the way the land problem of the indigenous people is tackled in coming years.

Despite the importance of land in the economy of the indigenous society and way of life, no empirical research was done in Axom until the 1970s when three studies were done: (1) a study made by the Tribal Research Institute of Axom in 1974 captioned "The Problems of Transfer and Alienation of Tribal Land in Axom" (unpublished); (2) Report of the sub-committee of Advisory Council for Welfare of Scheduled Tribes (Plains) on Settlement of Land in "Tribal Belts and Blocks of Forest Land, 1976 (published); and (3) Report of the Committee on Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Relating to Land and Revenue, 1979 presented to Axom Legislative Assembly on 5 April 1979 (Bordoloi, 1987).

These studies have revealed that the "alienation of land from the hands of the tribal to the non-tribal is increasing at a very alarming rate" (Bordoloi, 1987: 24). They go on to warn that "within the next few years this alienation of land might lead to complete distortion of the tribal economy if it is not nipped in the bud". The 1979 report also highlighted "some very clever devices of depriving the tribals of their lands" (Bordoloi, 1987: 30-34).

(i). Ethnographic Studies on Women and Villages

Among earlier studies, Wiser and Wiser (1971) describe life in Karimpur, a village east of Agra, and outline the process of change in a study that portrays the lives of villagers they encountered
and interacted with as missionaries. Marriott (1955) raises the question of the interrelation of an Indian village with the larger society and with the civilization of which it is a small part. Beteille (1965) describes the process of contemporary change in a multi-caste village in South India. A later book (1974) discusses significant aspects of interdisciplinary research in village India. Rosenthal (1977) shows the evolution of the present political leadership from the capitalist agricultural lobbies of western Maharashtra. In his classic memoirs of research in a South Indian village, Srinivas (1976) describes a sensitive journey through a typical multi-caste, traditional village, as a young Brahmin ethnographer, a bachelor, living as a guest of the village headman. Srinivas and others (1979) present a collection of papers on the trials and tribulations of field research, which I found particularly insightful in view of my own experiences in Kekuri.

However, while reading a majority of these earlier studies on village India, one wonders if women are at all important to the village structure. As Boserup pointed out so emphatically, descriptions of economic organization leave out women altogether, without any admission of limitations inherent to the study. This is a serious omission particularly in regions where women are critical for the survival of their households. Specially addressing these issues Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) and Reiter (1975) in their edited collections of papers by women anthropologists provide the necessary boost to women's studies, with valuable insights in the field of cross-cultural studies of women. In an unconventional ethnography, Burgos-Debray (1984) introduces Rigoberta Menchu, a young Guatemalan woman and national leader, recreating the ethos of the struggles of the Guatemalan Indian community through her life story. Another valuable book in this regard is the study by Murphy and Murphy (1985) on the Mundurucu Indians in Brazil with its detailed description of women's activities within and outside the household.
Jeffery (1979) portrays the concerns and aspirations of secluded Muslim women from a Pirazda community in North India. Ursula Sharma (1980) presents an ethnographic study of two North Indian villages, looking at women's role in agricultural production and its effect on their overall status. She discusses the interaction of cultural norms, economic constraints and kinship roles and obligations in controlling women's behavior. She found that economic change did not lead to any significant improvement in the relationship between men and women within the household, as women continue to be dependent on men who are the owners of property and cash.

Islam (1982) presents an interesting collection of papers by women researchers describing their experiences of field work in Bangladesh, raising important methodological and practical issues in field research on and by women in a traditional setting. Gold (1986) presents an excellent compilation of personal reminiscences of several renowned women anthropologists.

(ii). Recent Research on Women, Work and Economic Policy in India

In recent years, there has been a growing body of material in gender studies. Some selected titles relevant to my research are discussed below.

(a). Gender-Sensitive Household Studies: Borooah and others (1994) have offered critical insights in the matter of gender-sensitive research. Their central argument is that special research methods are necessary for obtaining quantitative and qualitative data on women, emphasizing the need for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teams of researchers to undertake gender-sensitive and policy relevant studies. They also emphasize that household studies can significantly capture the factors that affect individual behavior and choice, and are therefore critical for the formulation of more efficient programs and policies.
Bagchi (1993) uses a conceptual diagrammatic model of "Chakra" to depict the household work sphere of women. "Chakra" is a Sanskrit word that conveys a sense of a wheel in motion. The household economy is viewed as symbolizing one of the wheels of society, balancing with the other wheel which signifies the market economy. The pre-industrial economies were fully cognizant of the need for balance between these two wheels that sustained the society. The post-industrial devaluation of the household has occurred at the risk of disturbing the balance between these two wheels. Market incentives have led to a weakening of the household economy eventually forcing members to enter the labor market as wage earners. The circular nature of the "Chakra" also symbolizes a continuum - work without beginning or end. While the market economy offers services at specific timings, household services must be made available at any hour of the day dependent on the needs of the individual at different stages of the life cycle. Specific household services such as serving meals to children and the elderly must be provided at specific hours, creating a rigid schedule that constrains women in their choice of work. More importantly, the nature of goods and services in the household sector are non-substitutable by the market economy. Thus, while women are positioned at the center of the "Chakra", signifying their central role in the household economy, the position also has a negative symbolic connotation: women are trapped by tradition and culture within the confines of the household space.

Sinha (1992) explores gender roles in India with the help of two case studies of a Muslim community in a village and a predominantly Hindu community in a newly constructed housing project in North India. She finds that spatial organization is instrumental in communicating social norms.

Allen and Mukherjee (1990) present an interdisciplinary collection of papers in an attempt to understand the social life of women in India and Nepal as expressed in rites and rituals. Krygier (1990) discusses menstrual seclusion, pointing to the cultural practice of lumping together women
and Shudras, the untouchable caste, as the prime pollutants of society. In his analysis of Chetri women in Nepal, Gray (1990) confesses to the ethnographic bias in his study since he talked only with men about women and men in the domestic sphere. Gray investigates the patrilineal joint family and points to the overt and formal attribution to the superior status of men in both the public and domestic domains. Allen (1990) describes the rites performed by the Newars of Nepal, comparing them with the rites of the Nayars in South India. He maintains that a strong emphasis is placed on male control of female sexuality by those castes that are totally committed to the ideology of "purity".

Kumar (1994) presents an interdisciplinary cross-cultural collection discussing methodologies for conceptualizing women. In her essay, Raheja (1994) examines several aspects of oral speech of rural North Indian women and maintains that women's ritual songs and proverbs are often a form of protest of the patrilineal kinship within which women create new spaces for themselves.

(b). Women and Work and the Feminization of Poverty

Papa (1992) has presented nine case studies across various caste groups of the rural population in an Andhra village. She found that female participation in agriculture is higher than male participation in all farm sizes. Women's work roles include agricultural roles and their contribution is not recognized. Papa stresses the need for developing the cultural and social reform base for improving the lives of women, especially through education.

Lingam (1994) argues that although marital dissolution by death of spouse, divorce, separation and desertion are the most common reasons why women become heads of households, there is growing evidence of wider causes including agricultural policies, landholding patterns and changes in the occupational base along with population growth. She highlights the constraints faced by women in their status as heads of households due to their low literacy, lower productivity of lands,
low assets, low government assistance, lesser access to income earning opportunities and declining community support systems. Ganesh and Risseeuw (1993) provide valuable insights into the dissolution of kinship systems due to macro-political and economic processes, further excluding women and other vulnerable groups from the security of the kinship net.

Gothoskar (1992) presents a collection of essays by scholars and activists on women's participation in ongoing struggles, both on an individual level and on a collective basis. The basic struggle for women revolves around trying to get enough for their families and for procuring the most basic necessities of life such as food, fuel, water, fodder and shelter. The wider struggles are often based on the day-to-day ongoing struggles of women, usually alone and sometimes in smaller and bigger groups. Their struggle is made even more grim because as women they have very little control over the conditions and products of their labor.

Kulkarni (1994) provides the background for understanding the rural economy by conducting a statistical comparison among the major states in India, based on the figures available from the 1981 and 1991 Census surveys. Her study indicates an aggregate increase of rural workers on agriculture with the increase in female work being as high as 94 per cent.

Gail Omvedt (1992) talks about "ecofeminism in action", describing the struggles for democracy and environmental sustainability of Indian women who suffer the triple oppression of caste, class and gender. She sketches the difference between urban and rural activists. Urban feminist groups have provided a theoretical basis for fights against the specific exploitation of women, dealing with issues like violence against women. Rural women focus more on political and economic issues such as women's land rights. They demand an alternative "people's" brand of development, that must be ecologically sustainable and committed to a rural-centered agroindustrial society. Such turns to alternative production are feminist responses to and interpretations of Indian traditions. Culture thus
is an integral part of the economic and ecological struggles by rural women. Women's most effective radius of action can be captured with the famous formula "Think Globally, Act Locally" (Shallat, 1996).

Presenting her paper from an ecological perspective, Kumud Sharma (1994) asserts that the effect of fiscal and monetary policies on women is determined by social and gendered patterns of resource use. Implementation of Structural Adjustment programs (SAP) sharpens the conflict between the use of land and other resources for food production and subsistence needs and use for commercial exploitation. Women make significant contributions to maintaining biodiversity, sustainable agro-forestry systems, water management and innovative management of community resources. They play a critical role in providing their households with food security. They are also hit harder than men by environmental degradation and can be helped by changes in the public distribution system of food grains, provision of drinking water, fuel, fodder, health care and education. As farming becomes more integrated into the world market system, women often have to do tasks traditionally assigned to men, but men do not commonly assume the tasks of women in regard to household duties (Judd 1994; Young 1993).

The inherent male bias in fiscal policies is evident in the fact that they do not take into consideration the investment of time and effort on the part of women in the production and maintenance of human resources. Unless women's needs are taken into consideration, and the unit of the household opened up for investigation, the true impact of policies such as SAP and APP cannot be identified.
3. The Development Paradigm

The following sections attempt to outline the position of women in agriculture by showing that the goals of modernization and accumulation as pursued by modern development strategies have further led to the marginalization of women. It examines the ideology of development, the various development approaches, the negative affects of development on women, marginalized communities and the environment, and the problems of integrating women into development. Finally, it outlines alternative approaches to the development paradigm as essential for achieving human dignity, justice and equality.

(i). The Ideology of Development

After the end of World War II, global production and marketing by corporations based in the United States and western Europe, expanded in countries that had not been industrialized. To facilitate "development", defined as increasing industrialization and commerce, the markets of many nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia were opened to penetration by transnational corporations based in the United States seeking to exploit the cheap labor of the Global South (Escobar, 1985, Mies, 1986; Sachs, 1992; Goulet, 1992). That process was facilitated by two international banking institutions founded by the United States and the United Kingdom in Bretton Woods in 1944.

Edward Goldsmith examined the objectives of Bretton Woods:

The massive efforts to develop the Global South in the years since World War II were not motivated by purely philanthropic considerations but by the need to bring the Global South into the orbit of the Western trading system in order to create an ever-expanding market for goods and services and a source of cheap labor and raw materials for our industries. This has also been the goal of colonialism especially during its last phase, which started in the 1870s. For that reason, there is a striking continuity between the colonial era and the era of development, both in the methods used to achieve their common goal and in the social and ecological consequences of applying them (Mander & Goldsmith, 1996, p. 253).
The World Bank was established to make postwar development loans for infrastructure projects such as roads and utilities that were unlikely to be initiated by private capital because they were not likely to be profitable. The International Monetary Fund was created to promote world commerce by stabilizing foreign exchange, fostered international trade agreements and served the interests of expanding transnational corporations. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were the lending institutions that promoted "developmental" loans that bankrupted nations; later they designed mandatory austerity programs of indebted governments seeking new loans to refinance interest payments, significantly increasing the indebtedness and increasing poverty of these nations. Discourses of development weighed heavily on wealth creation without acknowledging the longing for dignity and identity in the Third World. Globalization of production has weakened the bargaining power of workers, particularly unprotected workers such as women, temporary, seasonal and other migrant laborers.

In World bank parlance, the Third World comprises of low-income countries. These may be subdivided according to gross national product (GNP) per person. But this definition is replete with contradictions. Kuwait has a higher per capita income than does the USA (UNDP, 1996) and there is greater incidence of poverty in Harlem than in many parts of the Third World.

In common usage, the Third World encapsulates all countries not included in the First World and Second World. The First World alludes to the western capitalist countries including Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Until the demise of the Soviet Union and its allies in Europe, the Second World consisted of the socialist countries of the East, also sometimes called the Soviet bloc. The Third World encompasses the nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America, most of them former colonies which, to varying degrees, lack power in the global political economy.
The ambiguities with the term "Third World" are manifold. It shrouds the differences between and within the three continents. Another complication is the role of oppressed peoples elsewhere in the world. Are African-Americans part of the Third World? Native Americans? Australian aborigines? The Third world would be first if the criteria were the chronology of the human species (which begins with Africa) or total population.

For a very long time, the "Third World" has appeared to Western observers as a bundle of problems, with violence and suffering being its natural state. Images of gun-toting religious fundamentalists in the Middle East, bloody civil wars in Africa, Mother Teresa's orphans in slums in India, and drug traffickers in Latin America regularly fill the television screens. In this representation, the Third World is a world to be analyzed, controlled, managed, even salvaged all in the name of "development" which is imbued with, as Ashis Nandy calls "a secular theory of salvation" (in Marglin and Marglin, 1990, p.30, n. 4). From poverty alleviation to democratization, from building new institutions of capitalism to helping save the environment, the list of solutions is unending, policies implying that the Third World cannot cope with its own problems. A laboratory for endless social engineering, the West meets the Third World, as Edward Said (1978) has brilliantly analyzed in Orientalism, only to further existing hierarchies.

The Third World is characterized by labor intensive economies, mixed with some capital intensive sectors. Typically, a large part of the population is engaged in agriculture, marked by low levels of "productivity", and failing to meet the needs of the domestic economy. For centuries, production and consumption had been in harmony as local peoples produced what they consumed and consumed what they produced. With the injection of imperialism, production and consumption were disjoined. Today local peoples largely produce what they do not consume and consume what they do not produce. The economies are oriented to the needs of external markets, namely those of
the advanced countries. Hence priority is given to the production of cash crops - not food crops - and the extraction of raw materials for export. Changes in global production and politics are reflected in the ideology of international organizations that favor market based solutions for both accumulation and distribution. Equally important are the social elements. In most parts of the Third World, Western parliamentary institutions have been grafted on to indigenous cultures by receding colonial powers, aggravating existing class and ethnic rivalries. This has often resulted in repression of popular discontent vented in the form of riots, insurgency, secessionist movements and civil wars.

Today the world economy is characterized by an international division of labor and the intensification of trade, in which Third World countries provide cheap labor and raw materials. It has the capitalist feature of "externalizing costs" to the South, to the poor, to women, to the environment and to the future, while the benefits end up with the powerful. There is an increasing recognition of the relationship between global, national, and regional policies and local processes in determining the context of women's lives. It is now widely acknowledged that poor communities have suffered under fast-paced global economic restructuring, as it undermines production for local use, and access to health, education and welfare. The current system of net income accounting measures the value of all market exchanges which is believed to be an indicator of economic development. This system leaves invisible and unvalued all women's work and the natural wealth that is not exchanged at the market (Waring 1988; Shiva, 1993).

(ii). Development Approaches

Development assistance to Third World countries has gone through a number of phases: the modernization approach of planned economic growth through infrastructure development (Rostow, 1971), dependency theory (Andre Gunder Frank, Raul Prebisch, and Samir Amin), and in the 1980s
and 1990s, Structural Adjustment Programs (World Bank and IMF). Each of these development programs, policies and strategies is based on a notion of development as grounded in economic growth. These development theories and policies are chiefly the domain of Western elite males and are manifest through the major power structures of the "development industry" - World Bank, International Monetary Fund, USAID, OECD and key UN development agencies.

a. Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth

An architect of the modernization school, W.W. Rostow (1960) proposed a five-stage model of economic growth in the mid-1950s in a book subtitled A Non-Communist Manifesto. He argues that countries can expect to go through five stages of economic growth, beginning with the traditional economy and progressing through the stages of pre-conditioning, economic take-off and drive to maturity, before reaching the fifth and final stage of maturity.

The principal characteristics of the traditional economy, which Rostow defined as "backward" are first, an agricultural economic base which employs 70-80 per cent of the population in low-productivity farming with little surplus, if any, for sale. Traditional society is said to be one with limited production functions. A second feature of the traditional economy is a highly feudalistic social order in which the basic unit of organization is the village. The second, pre-conditioning stage of development, sees the emergence of a strong central government, able to establish law and order and to guarantee the safety of merchants to trade. The second stage of growth satisfies the preconditions for the take-off to a modern economy: in the face of expansion of world markets and international competition, this is translated into increased production both in agriculture and in industry. Then in the third stage comes the take-off, a period where the obstacles to growth are transcended; the new technology becomes predominant in society and growth becomes self-generating. In this drive, the
economy converts to more "refined" processes: for instance, from coal and iron to machine tools, and electrical equipment, moving beyond the original industries which propelled the take off. Finally society reaches the stage of high mass consumption and the economy now produces durable goods and services. According to this theory, all societies have to go through these stages of growth on the road to modernization. The proponents of modernization believed in a dichotomy between traditional society as "backward" and modern society as vigorous and creative. The fundamental premise of modernization and development is the commitment to economic growth, market expansion, increase in wage labor resulting in extensive pauperization, exploitation and violence.

Rostow's conception was based on a unilinear view of history, according to which the modern West is at once the goal to be reached and the example to be followed. This view, which gave rise to the "ideology of development", stems from the simplistic perspective of Social Darwinism that serves to justify the notion of hierarchies of cultures, which in turn legitimizes the hierarchization of societies, and hence colonialism. The ideology of development shares the same logic and thus facilitates neo-colonialism. The division of the world into traditional and modern not only obscures the differences among peoples but also denies the unfolding history of peoples in the premodern, or precapitalist era. The notion of modernization also gives the impression that these countries are autonomous, and that their leaders can really make fundamental decisions about their own destiny. This obscures external constraints on leadership and the forces of globalization; it is blind to the ways that Third World economies are tethered to the world market. This model of development defines western values as universal values, deflecting attention from the links between the third world countries and the mature capitalist countries, links that are deeply rooted, going back to slavery, plunder and forced trade. In India, the early Western explorers found highly advanced skills among artisans. The colonizers introduced manufactured goods, destroyed rural home industries, wielded
superior military technology, and practiced divide and rule tactics, pitting ethnic groups against each other. While some peoples submitted to the indignities of imperialism, others actively collaborated and still others waged fierce struggles. The drain of resources from what is now called the third world has fuelled the engines of capital accumulation in the advanced countries. In the final analysis, modernization theory is an ideology of capitalist accumulation. What makes this world tick is not the need for survival but the drive for profit. The primary target for the ideas and symbols of modernization are the working class and peasant producers in the Third world. These ideas are transmitted by government programs, bilateral aid projects and international lending agencies. Rationalized as the doctrine of development and modernization, government policies reinforce and extend inequalities, promoting a way of life in which certain groups, mainly the ruling elite, dominate and are deemed to act on behalf of the masses. The drive to modernize has been converted into opening of markets, liberalization, and privatization.

b. Dependency Theory

The failure of the modernization theory brought with it the search for other modes of inquiry. If Western thought was marred by ethnocentrism, why not turn to the Third World itself for direction? In the 1950s and 1960s, a new outlook known as the dependency school emanated from Latin America, led by progressive economists such as Andre Gunder Frank, Raul Prebisch, and Samir Amin. The dependency perspective initially drew its inspiration from a UN Agency, the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) established in Santiago, Chile, in 1948. The intellectuals staffing ECLA criticized mainstream economics, arguing that its emphasis on the theory of prices and general equilibrium failed to recognize the features of the global economy which disadvantaged the third world countries. In particular, it highlighted the unequal terms of trade between the exporters.
of raw material and the exporters of manufactured goods, resulting in chronic balance of payment problems. The first general secretary of ECLA, an Argentine economist named Raul Prebisch held that Latin America needs to industrialize behind high protective barriers. He called for state planning and a common market to achieve economies of scale. He proposed an inward oriented development path known as import-substitution industrialization, which is based on manufacture to satisfy demand previously met by imports.

The dependency approach denotes the effects of imperialism on third world countries as one of economic expansion and political domination. Under imperialism, capital accumulation is based on the export of capital from the advanced countries to underdeveloped areas. External forces, the economies of the "center" (advanced capitalist nations), "condition" the responses of the "periphery" (third world countries), narrowing the options for independent development. The center/periphery model attributes the inequality in global income distribution to the exploitation of a backward developing country "periphery" (which exports primary products) by a politically powerful industrial "center". Basically, the center/periphery model argues that the core region engages in unequal trade with the periphery so that it accumulates capital at the expense of the periphery. The groups holding the reins of power are the chief beneficiaries of their ties to the center.

Clearly the dependency approach differs in essential ways from modernization thinking. It takes the dynamics of capitalism to be the key to understanding development. The major contribution of the dependency approach is to show the process whereby imperialism has incorporated Third World countries into global capitalism, thereby undermining the internal socio-economic structures within these countries. The dependency theory has debunked the dualist thesis which holds that third world economies are divided into a capitalist sector and a subsistence sector. It has shown that commercialization and accumulation also occur in peasant enterprises and rural areas are yoked to
The Dependency approach, however, fails to address the question of class conflict while holding that the center-periphery distinction is based on existing market imbalances. Moreover, like Rostow's modernization theory, the approach shares a core commitment to economic growth and market expansion. The approach also does not explain how to eliminate dependency relations. Seemingly the choices are either continued dependence or revolution; some also call for an attempt to de-link from the world economy and to follow a path of national autonomous development, a strategy which engenders its own set of problems. The national elite represents an economic and political centre which marginalizes the peasant and urban masses. The latter are therefore doubly exploited, on an international level and within their own country. Mention should also be made here of "community development" projects, centered on mobilization and mutual aid. This method tried to heed local aspirations and claimed to respect indigenous socio-political structures.

**c. Structural Adjustment Programs of the World Bank and the IMF**

Designed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and 1990s, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) require debtor nations requesting financing to foster trade by the elimination of restrictions of imports and exports; to privatize national resources and public utilities; and to cut back public services in health, education, housing and public assistance, often to devalue their currency and to make loan repayment the national priority, all in order to maintain credit and international acceptance of their currency. Significantly, borrowing governments are not pressured to refrain from purchase of military equipment, an expense item and major source of national indebtedness and political repression. The underlying principle of structural adjustment is that the 'market', if freed of government interference and inhibiting regulations, would operate
efficiently, ensure economic growth and build a fully-integrated global economy. The emphasis is on maximizing economic growth in the GNP rather than fostering an economy to meet people's needs. These measures, often forced upon debtor countries, have resulted in large scale pauperization of the peasantry, aggravated natural disasters such as flood, famine, drought and desertification, resulting in a crisis in human survival. Currency devaluation has caused sharp falls in real wages, while inflation and the removal of subsidies has pushed up the cost of food and other basic commodities.

The impact of SAPs has sharply intensified stratification of wealth and income within nations and on a global level. Critical policy studies on SAPs and their outcomes are now in circulation (Greider, 1997; Mander and Goldsmith, 1996; Danaher, 1994, 1996; George, 1990; Bello, 1994; Dei, 1992; and more). Urban centers and rural districts within technological nations are showing visible symptoms of social and environmental degradation (MacEwan, 1990). SAPs are truly genocidal for indigenous and other subsistence cultures whose identity and way of life are based on relationship with the land. The 1994 uprising in Mexico, led by the Zapatistas in Chiapas, was a historic example of resistance to extermination (Barry, 1990).

One of the strongest indictments of the International Monetary Fund was expressed by Davison Budhoo, former senior economist of the IMF from Guyana, who publicly resigned in May 1988:

Today I resign from the staff of the International Monetary Fund after over 12 years, and after 1,000 days of official Fund work in the field, hawking your medicine and your bag of tricks to governments and the peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa. To me resignation is a priceless liberation, for with it I have taken the first step to that place where I may hope to wash my hands of what in my mind's eye is the blood of millions of poor and starving peoples. (Danaher, 1994, pp.20-23).
In the early 1990s, experts from less industrialized nations testified before the European Parliament on the urgent need to replace SAPs with alternative development models. The testified facts referred to the continuing high mortality rates of children under age 5 (6 million yearly) in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the failure of the IMF and the World Bank SAPs. Further, according to the UNDP (1996), 1.2 billion people in the Global South now live in absolute poverty (almost twice the number in the early 1980s). According to the World Bank (1998), the number of people worldwide living in "absolute poverty" has gone from 800 million in 1972 to 1.3 billion in 1998. Also, 1.6 billion in the Third World are without potable water and healthy environments in which children can grow (UNDP, 1996). As Danaher says, "It is now generally recognized that the environmental impact of the IMF-World Bank on the south has been as devastating as the economic and social impact on peoples and societies (1994, p.22).

(iii). The New International Economic Order and Increasing Economic Marginalization

All development approaches, thus, embody the inner logic of the capitalist enterprise: it is an expression of the globalization of production, a worldwide phenomenon which allows the politics, culture and ideology of one country to penetrate another. The dynamic is one of amassing capital, not of creating equality, and the benefits accrue unevenly. The dominant development ideology is built on the fundamental premise that the persistent and mounting problems in the global political economy can only be solved by economic growth: a transfer of wealth from the needy to the well-to-do would power the engines of capital accumulation.

The ideology of the new international economic order (NIEO), promulgated by the UN General Assembly in 1974 and 1975, is aimed at the full consolidation of a global, unified market economy essentially owned and managed by transnational corporations and the international financial
The global marketplace is, in fact, a market economy. Goals for distribution of income, goods and services are now determined by corporate leaders and selected friends in government, finance, education and the military, a group that does not include nor represent the vast majority of the earth's population. The new world order's aim is not to ensure basic human and democratic rights, but the protection of the rights and freedoms of transnational capital.

United Nations data indicate that the worlds of rich and poor continue to be ever more polarized:

Of the $23 trillion global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1993, $18 trillion is in the industrial countries - only $5 trillion in the developing countries, even though they have nearly 80% of the world's people. The poorest 20% of the world's saw their share of global income decline from 2.3% to 1.4% in the past 30 years. Meanwhile, the share of the richest 20% rose from 70% to 85%. That doubled the ratio of the shares of the richest and the poorest - from 30:1 to 61:1. The assets of the world's 358 billionaires exceed the combined annual incomes of countries with 45% of the world's people. (UNDP, 1996, p.2).

The State of the World: 1997 report describes worsening condition of life for people who are poor:

Those at the bottom of the economic heap have to contend with meager and unpredictable incomes despite long hours of backbreaking work, insufficient amounts of food and poor diets, lack of access to safe drinking water, susceptibility to preventable diseases, housing that provides few comforts and scant shelter, and the absence of social services that the better-off take for granted. Rich-poor disparities are about much more than the lack of access to modern conveniences or the inability to accumulate material wealth: they are often a matter of life and death. (Brown et al., 1997, p.121).

Jeremy Rifkin, president of the Foundation of Economic Trends in Washington D.C., is a leading analyst on economic changes that threaten workers. Drawing on economic data from government and corporate sources reported by policy institutes and by the media, Rifkin (1995) reports that millions of workers have been permanently eliminated from the economic process, and whole work categories have largely or totally disappeared. In the United States, Fortune magazine (Sept.20, 1992) found that corporations are eliminating more than two million jobs annually. While some new jobs are now being created in the U.S. economy, they are in the low paying sectors and
are usually temporary. In all three basic sectors of economic employment and activity - agriculture, manufacturing and services - machines are quickly replacing human labor, with devastating social impact as workers become expendable and irrelevant (Rifkin, 1995).

The neglect and abuse of the natural environment in commercial production, including dumping of hazardous and toxic wastes, continue to erode the quality of life of communities in many regions of the world. Nature is valued only when it becomes a property, a commodity that may be bought and sold. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) supposedly measures the value of the goods and services produced in a nation. But the most valuable goods and services - the ones provided by nature, are valued, measured and protected poorly, or not at all. For example, the profit from deforesting land is counted as additions to the national economy, but depletions of timber, watershed and fisheries are not subtracted from the nation's GDP. By this reasoning, it is more profitable to consume a resource than to save it for tomorrow. Corporate and financial interests favor this exploitative system of accounting and often succeed in avoiding regulatory measures for environmental protection through their corruption of political processes. Economic globalization and technology are now opening up more remote regions to environmentally abusive economic development. Governments in many countries continue to subsidize corporations to engage in activities that result in environmental degradation. The degree to which corporate rights, established through international trade agreements, now supersede the rights of human communities is most apparent in the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) treaty, incorporated in the final Act of GATT.

The growing penetration by transnational corporations into local markets of vulnerable, less developed nations, has resulted in increasing violence, imbedded in the processes and outcomes of economic globalization, and other abusive and exploitative systems. Herman E.Daly, a former
economist at the World Bank suggests that a more accurate term for "free trade" for economic globalization would be "deregulated international commerce". Daly (1994) observes that corporations seek to maximize profits and production without consideration for hidden social and environmental costs, which are rising faster than benefits, thereby making the world poorer, not richer. The terms "free trade" and "trade liberalization" are echoed by politicians and media, conceal destructive aspects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Although GATT policies encourage free trade, in reality they legitimize transnational corporations' displacement of local small agricultural producers (Mies and Shiva, 1993).

Facilitated by trade agreements, penetration of agricultural regions by transnational corporations results in their capture of local markets and the marginalization of local producers. While wealthy national elites may benefit from foreign investments, working-class and peasant families, as well as indigenous and poor communities, lose economic roles and natural resources that are traditional bases of survival (Barner & Cavanagh, 1994; Mies & Shiva, 1993).

Like foreign aid, technology is a cornerstone of the ideology of modernization and development and increasing attention is given to the transfer of technology, often ignoring the social, economic and ecological context of such transfer. Too much emphasis is given to high-powered goods and services while the bulk of the population needs plain conveniences, such as pulleys for drawing water and simple stoves. In India, for example, industries initiate the consumer patterns of Western societies. Locally generated technology in the villages has been outstripped by Indian and foreign large-scale producers in such industries as soap, cooking oil, tyres. The great bulk of the technological system is not immediately relevant to the needs of most Indians. Another facet of technology transfer has been the dumping of old and obsolescent equipment on the Third World.
Moreover, most of the knowledge of technology transfer remains within the transnational corporations themselves. These corporations embody the inner logic of the capitalist enterprise: amassing capital, not of creating equality.

The greater part of humanity is currently experiencing a deterioration in the quality of life, on the social and political as much as the economic level. These situations are likely to multiply unless processes of healing and recovery take place on local and global levels that result in basic changes in a global system that is not only unsustainable but toxic for humanity and global life systems.

(iv). Impact of Development on Women

The interest in social relations of production, particularly in the gender aspect, is a recent development, following the publication of Ester Boserup's work on women in economic development (Boserup, 1970). To the extent development is meant to generate a process of accumulation, it has depended on exploitation - of nature, of women, of the agrarian base of the economy, of the laboring classes. The negative effects of development processes have been most acutely felt by rural women because of gender based hierarchies which, on the one hand, limit women's access to resources and participation and, on the other, impose sexual divisions of labor which allocate to women the most tedious, labor intensive and poorly rewarded work (Charlton, 1984; Bourque and Warren 1990; Creevey, 1996). Women, particularly in cultures where they already have a "separate" space, are especially disadvantaged by being excluded from the decision-making and policy-planning stages of an operation. They suffer doubly, first from exploitation by the development agents, and then in the hands of their own men. Maria Mies concludes

Through the provision of credits, their work (note: Third world women's work) is tied to the requirements of the World Market, not to the satisfaction of their own needs. To repay these credits - which they obtained through various development programmes - they are forced to sell the items they produce which might be necessary
for their own consumption, or they are forced to produce items which are of no value
to themselves, but are often luxury items for an international market (Mies, 1986: 123).

More than anyone, it is the "invisible majority" in the Third World, the poor, especially women, who
produce for the consumption of the First World. Although culture and class determine what is
actually done, a monetary economy disadvantages women. Whether it is producing handicrafts in the
home which are then marketed by men in most societies, or making components in the electronic
industry for export, as in Malaysia, or by freeing men to enter the market economy by growing food
for the family, women's labor is tied to the world market (Mies, 1986).

Because of the extremely negative impact on women in Africa, Asia and Latin America of the
Structural Adjustment Programs, issues of economic development policy have become critical issues
for the global women's movement (Braidotti, Charkiewicz, Hausler, & Weiringa, 1994; Enloe, 1990;
Grant & Newland, 1991; Miller, 1991; Sen & Grown, 1987; Thomoas-Meagwali, 1995; Wignaraja,
1990; Young, Wolkowitz & McCullagh, 1991). Together with the introduction of changes for health
care and education, the result has been a dramatic decline in household income and living standards
(Elson, 1989; Dei, 1992). The debt crisis has particularly put enormous strains on women's resources,
ergy, time and good will. The concept and implementation of structural adjustment programs
exacerbate the existing unequal division of rights, roles and responsibilities between women and men,
and presume the continuation of women's unwaged work in the home, community, and economy.
SAPS remove, or severely restrict, the means by which women can attain equality, namely, education,
training and employment, as day-to-day survival takes precedence over all else.
The failures and fallacies of development assistance are summarized by the World Survey on the Role of Women by Pietila and Vickers (1996):

- Women's work overload was not taken into consideration, and no labor saving technology was introduced to alleviate the workload.
- Women's performance of particular agricultural tasks was overlooked, and agricultural information and training was not directed to women.
- Women's involvement as independent farmers or livestock keepers was overlooked, and women were largely left out of integrated rural development and other agricultural programs.
- Women's labor was considered free family labor to be used interchangeably in women's or men's fields for men's crops, curtailing economic and other types of incentives for women.
- Women's special needs and constraints as mothers and wives, as small independent farmers, and as heads of household were not considered in their access to credit and other services. (Pietila and Vickers, 1996: 16).

Dixon (1982) and Beneria (1982) address the issue of the invisibility of the woman worker in third world agriculture. They raise questions regarding problems of definition and procedure in data collection that lead to undercounting of women's work in labor force statistics. Developers scorn women's farming knowledge, even though their practices are well suited to the soil conditions of the area (Dixon-Mueller and Anker, 1988). Women's knowledge and women's lives are thus delegitimated and their voices silenced. In this way, development agents and experts construct a duality of traditional (which is taken to be backward) and modern (which is understood to be progressive, Western, and therefore, desirable). This process of growth focused development mirrors elements of modernization and dependency theory. The more recent neo-liberal emphasis on integration into the world economy at any cost, represented by SAP and other reforms, even further
undermines women's traditional practices, production for local needs and subsistence, resulting in poverty and loss of livelihood.

(v). Problems of Integrating Women Into Development

Examining outcomes of free trade economics and corporate policy perspectives imposed by the World Bank and the IMF on poor nations, Wee and Heyzer note that:

Women have become steadily poorer in the context of an increasingly merciless struggle for scarce resources and a denser concentration of wealth at the top of a steep pyramid. In the global estate, women are the workers and the landless squatters. They produce half the world's food, yet constitute 70 percent of the world's working hours, but own less than 1 percent of the world's property (1995, p.36).

According to United Nations data, examined by these authors, these policies are resulting in increasing global economic stratification, with severe cuts in public subsidies for food, education, health care, housing and transport. They conclude that inequality is rationalized by the false assumption that free trade is fair trade:

...the underlying assumption is that without state intervention, a profit-driven market, by itself, can and will supply all needs. Therefore, structural adjustments are put in place to reduce the role of the state and to expand the role of the market. (Peggy Antrobus at UNIFEM panel, New York, January 16, 1995, in Wee and Heyzer, 95).

The market is not a level playing field. As noted by Antrobus (1995): "because the market only responds to those who have the capacity to participate in it, it cannot, then, respond to the poor. This is true for individuals, families, communities and countries. Poor people and poor countries end up having to sell all they have. . . . For many poor countries, a chain of consequences is thus set up" (Wee & Heyser, 1995).

The problem of the deteriorating status of women in the third world cannot be resolved by the integration of women's needs in development assistance programs as these very programs foster
economic and political dependencies that serve capital accumulation, and because deterioration of women's status is inherent in capitalist development which undermines non-market provision of hunger needs. The roots of female marginalization are structurally embedded in the capitalization of third world economies and women's lives can only be improved by the radical transformation of Capitalist Patriarchy (Mies, 1976; Beneria, 1982; Anker, 1994). Women are involved in all phases of food production - tending crops, harvesting, processing, and marketing - but receive little support from government policies that have marginalized their efforts. Mainstream "development" has served to wipe out peasants as a productive class. In doing so, it has been hardest on the poorest element among them, the women (Illich, 1982; Mies, 1986; Antrobus, 1991, 1992).

Recent research (Boroohah, 1994; Ganesh and Risseueuw, 1993) has shown the high level of productivity of women's domestic labor in the farming sector. Women have been historically involved in all phases of agricultural production including ploughing, planting, harvesting, weeding, bookkeeping and house-repairs. Field and domestic labor are closely linked, showing the direct relations between production and reproduction on the farm (Beneria, 1982). To devalue the importance of use-value as "unproductive" in the survival of simple commodity production leads to the devaluation of women's labor itself and to its subsequent invisibility (Smith, 1982: 37). Therefore, to separate the "private" sphere of women's domestic labor and the "public" sphere of field work in which the majority of women participate would lead to a distorted analysis of the agricultural family. Tied to Rostow's notions of "backwardness", within development discourse women are seen as "traditional" and therefore defined as the problem: they cling to obsolete farming methods, fail to cooperate with project administrators; they have too many children. As stated by Saffioti, "given the basic operating requirements of the capitalist mode of production, certain human contingents are necessarily relegated to an inferior condition in order to permit more intense exploitation" (Saffioti,
Highlighting the negative effects of development on rural women, Boserup showed how the introduction of cash crops, modern technology and land reforms by Western development planners, led to the subordination of women by ignoring their productivity and relegating them to the subsistence sector of food production (Boserup, 1970: 50-68). She also pointed to the inherent flaws in statistical methods for estimating women's agricultural participation. She asserted that the biases and misunderstandings related to women's labor force participation had eroded the economic base of the household thus contributing to its further impoverishment. Thus, she held that women's integration into the process of socio-economic development and support for household production and production for use is imperative in order to achieve overall "development". Her thesis that the lack of understanding and consequent neglect of women's roles by economists and planners had itself led to the marginalization and pauperization of women and their families drew the attention of scholars and governments around the world. Her revelations on widespread negative impacts of development on women was a factor in the declaration by the United Nations of the International Women's Year (1975) and the International Women's Decade (1975-85). Subsequently, in almost all disciplinary fields in the social sciences interest has surged in the revaluation of societal processes in the context of gender.

Rogers (1980) has documented the extent to which sexist biases of planners distort women's economic participation in planning for development. As she comments,

A review of the situation by SIDA concludes that any planned innovations involving new techniques are always introduced to men, and that this demotes women from independent producers to laborers with no rights... (Rogers, 1980: 142)

She too calls for the integration of women into development projects, change in the perception of development planners and experts regarding women's position and an improved system of data
collection to record women's work. However, Rogers' argument that women will be liberated by moving out from the domestic sphere suffers from the inherent flaw of separating the private from the public sphere, within which the structures of power are defined to the exclusion of women.

Noeleen Heyser (1991) also presents a historical overview of approaches but classifies them under the heading "integration approach". The idea of the integration approach is that women should have a fair share in the benefits of development. The failure of this approach, according to Peggy Antrobus, is the premise that women have to be "integrated into development" ... as if they "could possibly exist outside the process" (Antrobus, 1991).

The call for the integration of women into development as a way of bringing to women the benefits of development is problematic as it denies the interlinkages between women's productive and reproductive activities and thereby accepts Capitalism's distinction between domestic production for use value, which is undervalued, and public production for exchange value, which is accorded high value. It also fails to critique the overall concept of development or to reject the aims of economic growth.

Criticizing the integration of women into development, Elise Boulding states:

To cooperate with being integrated into the present international economic order is to destroy all hopes for a different future... It only offers the opportunity for more Third World women to become marginalized labor in the modern sectors of their world economies; or continue as rural landless laborers with slightly higher wages" (Boulding, 1983: 17-19).

The integration of women into development relegates women's contributions to non-productive categories of economic activities by separating women's reproductive and productive labor (Papanek, 1977; Denich, 1977; Harris, 1990; Antrobus, 1992).

Development discourse ignores the human, or cultural component that I will describe in my research. The term "women-headed households" used in "development" literature conceals the reality of old people, women and children. When women are left in charge of households, they do the work
of both genders. Rogers (1980) comments that whereas women do men's work, men generally do not do the reverse. As heads of households, women do not get the support of the community and government that men receive, but are left to struggle alone with their dependents. This is because women's problems are "invisible" to most men and especially to outsiders.

The rural poor, the poorest and most invisible of whom are women, are seldom consulted about their needs. Yet it is women in rural or pre-industrial societies who are responsible for vital areas of work, outside as well as in the household, and in the area of study, are the primary food producers. Sylvia Forman who has researched the effects of development on Andean farmers, feels that peasants generally, and women in particular, are viewed as "ignorant and irrationally conservative" and resistant to change by development agents. Yet, she concludes, there is evidence that although they are cautious because of the limitations imposed by their environment, when the change is shown to be to their advantage, they are "open and creative" (Forman, 1988: 140). Women and peasant resistance is never read as a rational response to changes which will have negative consequences for them. And yet research shows again and again that this is the case. Even when "Development" has "targeted" women, as it has done, for example in "Women in Development", it has aimed family related projects at women - birth control, child care, nutrition, kitchen gardens, poultry rearing, food processing. Farming technology, education and banking knowledge are given to men.

In her study of women lace-makers, Mies (1981) highlights the conflict of interests between men and women within the household, particularly in terms of utilization of money and joint resources. In the business of lace-making, where the producers are all overworked housewives, it is the men in the household who profit from the enterprise by acting as middlemen, local traders and international entrepreneurs. This is made possible by the displacement of women from agriculture.
brought about by the capitalization of farming and their subsequent "housewifization". The effect on
the women themselves is lowered autonomy, health and overall status and sometimes, even
destitution. Amartya Sen has proposed that:

Conflicts of interest between men and women are unlike other conflicts, such as class conflicts. A worker and a capitalist do not typically live together under the same roof
- sharing concerns and experiences and acting jointly. This aspect of "togetherness"
gives the gender conflict some very special characteristics (Sen, 1990: 147).

He is referring to the biases and disadvantages females suffer relative to men within the household.
The approach and focus of my research will be developed with these concerns in mind. I will focus
on the significance of outside-directed change, and of relationships within the family, where there is
both conflict and co-operation, altruism and exploitation. This approach seems proper in general but
essential as a means to know the lives, needs and concerns of women which are impossible to
discover with either the usual economic statistics or conventional methods of research based on non-
participation, and hierarchical principles between researcher and researched.

(vi). Alternative Economies: Community-Based Strategies and Actions

In recent years, the borrowed enterprise of modernization and the ideas of "catching-up" is
being challenged. In diverse parts of the Third World, people have begun to speak out: in writings
on culture and development, in alternative constructions of modernity, and above all, through practice
of new social movements: the Zapatista uprising in Mexico, resurgent movements in many parts of
the Islamic world, and women's self-help organizations in India. Less visible, but significant to the
creation of an alternative, many aspects of everyday life in the Third World recognize an indigenous
consciousness, notwithstanding MTV and the growing CNNization of the Third World. Growing
numbers of nongovernmental organizations are engaged locally and globally in specific projects to
heal the wounds of traumatized populations through programs for social and economic justice. The
resourcefulness of Third World societies reveals itself in the resistance to a globalizing economy. In India, this awareness has found expression in various forms of action and struggle extending from local issue-based campaigns to nation-wide mobilization against multinational companies such as Monsanto to quit India, and opposition to large, centralised water projects such as the Narmada Dam. This however, does not imply an uncritical celebration of all "native" expressions, as many Third World movements foreclose gender equality, religious tolerance, and democratic politics. It does however recognize that these movements yield new and alternative opportunities to reconstruct development.

More and more people are beginning to realize that the contemporary human dilemma and planetary crisis and its interrelated problems of environmental destruction, militarism and poverty cannot be resolved without an ecospiritual revolution (Sullivan, forthcoming). Feminism is at the forefront of emerging alternatives which challenge the basic market and growth premises of the dominant development ideology. Buddhism, Native American wisdom and other earth based forms of spirituality are helping to produce a radically different concept of power based, not on domination and aggression, but co-operation and compassion (Berry, 1988). In Small is Beautiful, a Study of Economics as if People Mattered, the British economist E.F.Schumacher (1975) writes that a Buddhist life-style demands a Buddhist economy, just as the materialist conception of life accompanies a modern economy. Traditional Buddhism sees the essence of civilization not as a multiplication of needs, but as the purification of man's and woman's personality. There are people's movements in Asia that practice the teachings of traditional religion. The Sarvodaya Movement, founded in 1958 by A.T.Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka, is rooted in the concept of Shramadana, the sharing of one's time, thought and energy to create a social and economic infrastructure based on a strong sense of community.
In 1991, under the leadership of Davison Budhoo, the Bretton Woods Reform Organization (BWRO) was formed to launch a global campaign for accountability by the World Bank and IMF. Later, nongovernmental organizations, including the American Indian Movement, Greenpeace International, Global Exchange, have united in the "Fifty Years is Enough!" campaign that calls for dismantling the institutions established at Bretton Woods. That campaign was visible in Denver, Colorado in July 1997, at "The Other Economic Summit" or the TOES Conference, which protested the G-8 Summit's agenda of the further expansion of "free trade" (Multinational Monitor, 1998).

Meanwhile, in 1996, an international group of economists, researchers, scholars and writers founded the International Forum on Globalization (IFG) to monitor the impact of economic globalization on nations, communities, families and environments and to educate the public on these issues. In its mission statement, IFG presents its analytical framework:

IFG views current international trade and investment agreements, including the GATT, the WTO, Maastricht, and NAFTA, combined with the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to be direct stimulants to the processes that weaken democracy, create a world order in the control of transnational corporations, and devastate the natural world (Clarke, 1996, back cover).

David Korten of IFG notes that the system of economic development constructed at Bretton Woods contain flawed concepts: "The first erroneous assumption is that economic growth and enhanced world trade would benefit everyone. The second is that economic growth would not be constrained by the limits of the planet" (Mander & Goldsmith, 1996, p.21).

In November 1997, over 500 women from Asia-Pacific countries and others attended the Second International Women's Conference Against Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Vancouver, Canada to send a message to the 18 heads of government negotiating the APEC free trade and investment agreement. The women unanimously rejected APEC and the free market agenda of privatization, deregulation and trade liberalization that is its driving force (www.
The International Conference on Alternatives to Globalization was held on November 7-10, 1998 in Tagaytay city, Philippines, with a view to provide a forum for developing a critique of global economic crises and globalization, exchange experiences and viewpoints, and to explore alternative strategies to develop linkages for greater cooperation.

Some of the most articulate and vibrant resistance to globalization's effects come from India, where a wide range of movements exist aimed at contributing to bringing justice. Villagers in different parts of India are trying to save their common natural resources like forests and pastures from privatization and exploitation. Pattuvan, a village in North Kerala, recently created history by declaring its absolute ownership over all genetic materials currently in its jurisdiction (Indian Express, September 12, 1998). One of the most formidable opponents of globalization, Medha Patkar, a key leader of the Save Narmada Movement, is the convener of the National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM), a coalition of citizen organizations united by their opposition to global policies. One of the slogans of NAPM is "Not Pepsi, we need Water"!

Vandana Shiva, eminent physicist, philosopher and ecofeminist, has been instrumental in challenging the globalization paradigm in international circles. She is the recipient of the Right to Livelihood Award, also called the Alternate Nobel Peace Prize. Shiva is the author of several celebrated publications, including Staying Alive (1988), The Violence of the Green Revolution (1992), Monocultures of the Mind (1993) and Biopiracy: the Plunder of Nature and Knowledge (1997) and the latest The Enclosure and Recovery of the Commons. A common thread that weaves all of Shiva's work is the fact that the development paradigm defined as "maldevelopment", and its attendant globalization, trade liberalization and the privatization of knowledge and biodiversity is a threat to the future of humanity. It involves the enclosure of the intellectual and biological commons.
which must be recovered in order for people and all other life-forms to be able to continue to live. She proposes the alternative of community rights as an alternative to the idea of intellectual property rights. This recognizes the intellectual contribution that communities - as collectivities, and not as individuals which is a Western idea - have made cumulatively over time. She calls this indigenous and traditional knowledge which supports 80% of the Indian population, the two-thirds economy. This issue underlies the redefinition of what it is to be human. In the dominant development paradigm, the Western corporate personality is the paradigm of being human, with greed being its principal trait. Shiva shows that over centuries, farmers have used their minds in breeding seeds, except that they have not used it for profit. A farmer who breeds a new seed does not claim royalties but shares it with the village community. Corporations, on the other hand, treat the seed as their private property, block its multiplication and flow through patents and other legal procedures, and actually create scarcity that deepens the universal crisis of survival.

Third World countries embraced the ideology of "catching up" with the industrialized world, pursuing material riches regardless of its human and ecological cost. In place of respect for the wisdom of centuries, technical reason took precedence. In her book, _Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development_ (1989), Shiva describes the existing dominant hierarchical and violent model of development as "maldevelopment" defined as the:

violation of the integrity, interconnected, and interdependent systems, that sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice and violence (Shiva, 1988:5).

With the women of India as an example, she tries to lay bare the roots of a maldevelopment that has been oppressive to both women and nature: Shiva argues that proponents of development falsely assume that Western-style progress is possible for all and that indigenous economies and techniques are "backward" and "unproductive". Thus nature's work in renewing herself and women's work in producing sustenance in the forms of basic, vital needs did not produce profits and capital, and
therefore were considered unproductive forms of work. Commodity production, seen as a cure for apparent backwardness, has only diverted resources toward short-term profits for the few while increasing hunger among the poor and devastating nature. "Maldevelopment" is thus synonymous with sexism, racism and ecological destruction and has resulted in the death of the feminine principle. Recovery of the feminine principle, by which Shiva means more tolerance for nature's diversity and more respect for indigenous knowledge systems, is synonymous with ecological recovery as well.

In contrast, commercial forestry (present day "social forestry" as well as the logging operations of the colonial times), the Green Revolution, the White Revolution, and contemporary irrigation schemes displace women from food production, deny them access to basic resources for their families, and by causing women's devaluation, lead to dowry deaths and female infanticide. The market economy excludes nature's ecological system and women's production, thereby creating new forms of poverty. By encouraging "growth", development politicians have produced destitution, bringing different cultures to ruin, reinforcing the rich-poor divide, and have created "the threat to survival". Irrelevant or costlier medicine displaced preventive medicine, as Vandana Shiva (1989; 1997) has convincingly shown. In Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge (1997), Vandana Shiva exposes the plunder of indigenous peoples, and forest dwellers, in particular by pharmaceutical corporations that are studying indigenous medicines, are granted patent rights for their manufacture, and thereby gain control over distribution and sources of the product, including land areas essential to indigenous survival.

Shiva has been criticized for leaving undiscussed such topics as the subjugation of indigenous peoples by mainstream Indian culture, or the conflicting interests of men and women in the village society (Nathan and Kelkar, 1991). Bina Agarwal (1988: 2), does not directly criticize Shiva, but analyzes the impact of patriarchy in India, which Shiva's work is lacking. Agarwal elaborates the
traditional inequalities in India, such as intrahousehold differences in distribution of basic necessities and women's disadvantaged labor position. She argues that women's militancy in grassroots resistance is much more linked to family survival, and connected with social and cultural improvement than men's ("their struggle is not just for bread, but also for dignity"). Their militancy is also thus an implicit attempt to create an alternative existence, based on equality and cooperation.

Many other Third World feminists have criticized the concept of development emerging from science. Especially noteworthy in this respect is the DAWN network (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). The group was formed by Third World women activists at the end of the Women's Decade (1975-1985), to consider what could be learned from that experience. *Development, crisis and alternative visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (Sen and Grown, 1987) gives an overview of their analysis. Like Shiva's book (1989), it argues for a clear assessment of the ideas behind development strategies from Third World women's views, experiences and actions, with which DAWN wants to arrive at a new development paradigm. Gender is linked with a general crisis of sustainability: DAWN interlinks the crises of debt, poverty, food shortage, environmental degradation, militarization, political conservatism and religious fundamentalism. It aims to be holistic, linking social, economic, cultural, political and environmental factors. DAWN promotes a people-centered approach, equitable development based on cooperation, resistance to hierarchies, sharing, accountability and commitment to peace. It is grounded in an alternative paradigm of social change; it is political, feminist, and attempts to link household level experiences of poor women to macroeconomic policies. DAWN coordinator Peggy Antrobus (1991) asserts that "the analysis should be one which attempts to relate experience at the microlevel of the sector, community project, or household, to that of macro-economic analysis".

71
Another writer proposing a radically different way of dealing with macroeconomics is Marilyn Waring (1988). Her book, *If Women Counted* (1988), expresses anger about the fallacy of neglecting nature in economic decision-making, and she criticizes the often hopeless efforts to put a monetary value on natural resources. She gives an example. A forest can be viewed as a an economic resource, as a socio-cultural amenity and as an ecosystem. These three dimensions would require different "measures". Neoclassical economics and national income accounting allow only one view of the world. The forest in this view is only an economic resource. Thus, national income accounting favours the monocrop forestry approach, which is undesirable from a socio-cultural and ecological point of view.

Hazel Henderson (1996) proposes Country Future Indicators to correct Gross National Product accounting as a measure of development. These include an account of the depletion of non-renewable resources, and the status of minorities, ethnic populations and women.

Wendy Harcourt (1991) makes an attempt to reconceptualize development away from economic development to human centered development, in which the environment and women are both accounted for.

UNDP has recommended the Human Development Index, in addition to the narrow GNP, in which factors such as education and health care are weighed.

The important role played by Education for global transformation needs no over emphasis. Educational systems in practice today cater largely towards maintaining the status quo by upholding rigid and hierarchical social systems. However, in the last two decades, there has been a greater realization of the need for alternative educational systems (Lyons and Sullivan, 1992).

Angela Miles asserts (personal note), "feminist consciousness-raising, dialogue and activism is supporting the emergence of new women's voices in defining the world. Women's Studies is
bringing these voices to the academy".

a. International Movement Against Free Trade

The existence of an international movement of organized opposition to the "free trade" system of globalization has been established through international forums and electronic communication. An important international gathering to oppose free trade policies was held in 1996 in Chiapas, Mexico. This event, titled "El Primer Encuentro contra el Neoliberalismo y por la Humanidad", was attended by about 3000 delegates from a variety of countries.

A second gathering was held in Spain in July 1997. In May 1998, another meeting was held in Geneva, Switzerland to coincide with meetings of the World Trade Organization (Multinational Monitor, August 1998). This movement brought together indigenous leaders, including representatives of the Zapatista organization that served as hosts of the initial event, with economists and community activists from Europe, North America and Asia.

Networking for exchange of communication is intense in both global and national circles. A prime example of the effectiveness of networking including electronic networking was evident prior to, during, and after the Fourth World Conference on women, Beijing, China, August-September 1995. Forum '95 participants, as representatives of non-governmental organizations, lobbied for approval by the United Nations General Assembly of a strong, united Platform of Action, a policy document in which governments made commitments to address areas of concern that impede the advancement of women worldwide (beijing95-1@netcom.com, 1995). Both Forum participants and Conference delegates demanded that local, regional, and national economic projects must include investment in human resources, with support for community child care, education, health services,
job training, public works, and participation in project governance by women, who will be accountable to ensure that a share of the project will benefit local community services. Goals of the campaign against free trade was to move the point of production from global to local. Recognizing the role of diversity in values, cultures, religion, and socialization, the Beijing Platform for Action states that "no true social transformation can occur until every society learns to adopt new values, forging relationships between women and men based on equality, equal responsibility, and mutual respect" (United Nations, 1996, p.73). However, while the Beijing document acknowledges the serious consequences of wars and armed conflict, some countries, like India and Pakistan, have shown total lack of commitment to the document by carrying on nuclear testing. Content with minimal gestures towards the "advancement" of women, the Indian government has shown no commitment towards resource allocation to women, let alone poor women. Moreover, the Plan document refers to particular cultural practices that are oppressive to women - infanticide, dowry, female genital mutilation - customs that are prevalent in "poor" regions and among people who have had to guard their identities against attacks from countries of the West. In contrast, the document is silent about the crisis in the "North" - the economic and environmental crises of unbridled "growth" which has produced poverty and misery in these affluent countries. Such slippages give the document the "Women and Development" approach which feminists abandoned twenty years ago. What is of immense value, however, is the co-operation and alliance between women from diverse backgrounds, which has helped to forge stronger North-South links, despite differing priorities.

b. Democratic Structures:

Common features of programs that are empowering for people emphasize mutual self-help and shared participation in decision-making circles. When decisions are made, it is essential that as
many representatives and members of community teams as possible have a place at the table. Open and participatory meetings build networks and egalitarian social structure. Exclusion is a form of violence that disempowers and discounts the humanity and worth of individuals and groups. Projects have to be aware of preventing unintended reproduction of past hierarchical social structures. Projects of community self-development, initiated by local cultural groups in many regions are transformational. Microcredit is an example of a democratic economic self-help strategy that loans money to people to create their own employment. Micro-enterprise initiatives have proved to be an effective alternative to asset accumulation which provide access to credit and savings for the poor, particularly women. Microlending approaches economic development and poverty on a personal level that has been much more successful in lifting people out of poverty and giving them the tools to regain control of their lives. Initiated by Mohammed Yunus in Bangladesh in the 1970s, the Grameen (rural) Bank has had a dramatic effect in generating income for poor women. Appalled by moneylenders exhorting exorbitant interest rates, Yunus decided to extend small individual loans from his own pocket to groups of poor women so that they could set up their business. Ignoring the three C's of banking - collateral, credit and character - his words summarize the thinking behind this remarkable project: "Credit is a fundamental human right... collateral is merely a device to deceive the poor" (Counts, 1996, xv). Each member of the group was held responsible for the other's project integrity and loan repayment. If any person defaulted, the entire group was debarred from further loans until the debt was settled. By 1996, the project had grown to include 2 million borrowers in 34,000 villages and a daily disbursement of US $1.5 million. It has resulted in improved status for women, and moved the thinking from women as passive beneficiaries to women as active change-agents. Yunus' project has become a model for cities around the world: from the Small Enterprise Foundation in South Africa, Banko Sol in La Paz, Bolivia, SEWA in India, to the Full Circle Fund
(FCF) project in Chicago, and the Women's Self-Employment project (WSEP) also in Chicago. The primary beneficiaries are women who, previously excluded from the labor market and from participating in the economy, become empowered both economically and personally, with far-reaching implications for individual families and for the role of women in society. When women become economically independent in a family, they have more options in avoiding abuse and violence and are in a better position to protect children. In families where violence is not an issue, family members live healthier lives through better diet and the ability to afford health care. Empowerment is thus a goal and a consequence of asset-building policies and practices. Along with empowerment comes increased self-esteem and the ability of people to improve their quality of life. Microlending is a strategy to revive, resuscitate and create real democracies and real participation, as small scale-producers promote sustainable economic growth, encourage democratic values and popular inclusion in the political process. This individual and human focus is imperative for establishing solid stable communities and sustainable environments. Microcredit enterprise has contributed to women's empowerment and helped extremely poor women survive economic crisis. However, a word of caution needs to be mentioned against the attempt of international financial institutions like the World Bank to co-opt what is essentially a grassroots institution, in an attempt to ignore structural issues such as agrarian reform, trade agreements in favor of TNCs, and programs favoring export production over subsistence crops, that are key to women's improvement. It is for reasons such as this that microlending enterprises like SEWA in India categorically refuse any external funding (Jhabvala, 1994).

Other examples of local and global solidarity such as establishing community cooperatives or replanting the forests negates the key maxim of the dominant paradigm which defines "human nature" as a drive for personal gain. Renewal of spiritual visions of indigenous cultures and of women are
vital for preservation of the earth's natural environment and for human wealth. Vandana Shiva identifies points of connection:

People, their environment and their society are not separable by rigid and insular boundaries. The boundaries between them are porous and flexible, allowing interchange and influence. The unity here ... rests on continuity of life and its interconnectedness; there are subtle and complex connections between diseases of the human body, the decay of the ecosystems and the breakdown of civil society, just as there are connections in the search for health at all these levels. The separation between production and reproduction, between innovation and regeneration, has been institutionalized to deny women and nature a productive role in the economic calculus. . . . conservation must happen in the factory or in the city if total destruction is to be avoided. (1994, pp.3-5)

Promoting the regeneration of nature as a goal of humanity does not imply a wish to return to a world without technology as we approach the advent of the 21st century. Networks of grassroots women's groups and indigenous peoples have discovered that several powerful tools that were formerly produced to achieve conquest of land and labor may now be used to construct a more caring world. Electronic communications, including the internet and World Wide Web, which were produced initially for military surveillance and which continue to serve as means to control populations, have also now become tools for liberation, and is ideally suited for networking by activists. People are using the Internet as a tool to send out messages of protest which are being heard around the world, and to organize. Because goals of transformation make access urgent, nonelite working people and youth may be empowered by world sources of liberating information. The new millennium has been designated as the information Age. "Information resources, which by nature are non-depleting, should be freely shared" (Korten, 1990, p.176). Indialink, a non-profit internet resource, has been linking campaigners, activists and the voluntary sector to the Internet, with a view to contributing to a less imbalanced global flow of information. Class stratification may be extinguished when all children on earth will be able to write and share their own views of reality.
(vii). My Definition of Alternative Development

Mainstream development is thus a core component of globalization. The word "development" is both constructed and also has a natural connotation. The natural connotation comes from biology: plants evolve, seeds grow into trees, embryos become human beings and that is a process of evolution. The word "development" harkens to this domain of biological evolution even as it defines an economic domain of engineered, imposed paradigms of what society's priorities should be. Just as globalization is made to look natural, development is also made to look natural. The implication is that Third World societies were somehow stunted societies because they had not reached their full development. "Development" thus reflects the designs of the Washington mindset which is not an evolutionary mindset regarding the future of multiple societies. It is an agenda of contemporary money lenders which, through its money lending institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF literally draws out the lifeblood from societies through their austerity programs, through their structural adjustment programs, where their highest objective is in the interest and the profit of a few, and not in the survival of people. Economic development programs seriously undermine women's needs, knowledge and women's interests in participation. These programs often have nothing ostensibly to do with women or do not see it as a major purpose to empower women, such as programs of agricultural development, fisheries, and other similar programs.

In the dominant model of development, societies also pay their price in terms of environmental degradation and its impact on people. There are a variety of cases worldwide where environmental pollution has resulted in the contamination of water supply which has severely affected the mental capabilities of low income children in poor urban neighborhoods. This cannot be defined as development. Broad indicators of economic progress such as the Gross Domestic Product do not represent human conditions in an accurate way. Economies that have pursued the dominant
development model and claim to have achieved the goals of export-oriented economic growth and high GDP, have done so on the backs of women who get pervasively lower wages, face gender discrimination in terms of hiring and training programs, have less educational opportunities, on the backs of workers who continue to be intimidated, often beaten and jailed, who work under harsh conditions, whose work experience is not a self-affirming experience, and paid the painful price of environmental degradation. Insofar that this model has failed to meet the human requirements of people, has promoted starvation and a crisis in survival, it has to be denounced as a failed model.

My understanding of development is entirely different from the mainstream. To me the true meaning of development is to enable all human beings reach their fullest potential individually and enable their communities have the resources they need. Thus I understand the term development to include a more comprehensive definition which seeks to transform the original notion of economic development into the idea of human development. In my definition, the development process is the process of participation in which inhabitants determine the direction that they want their economy to take, the type of goods they would like to produce, and how they would like to distribute that production.

Essential to this approach is the belief that women are not about development and even peace: they have their diverse histories, the right to those histories, and the right to find their own destinies from their own understanding of their past. Women play a crucial and powerful role in every important aspect of a country's economy: in agricultural production, in trade, in commerce, both inside the country and internationally as they produce for their families and local communities, and the world market. Shifting social priorities to value human and non-human life and women's work and knowledge will require a rapid increase in women's effective empowerment. This does not happen in mainstream development and is inimical to it. Unless women are benefitted and are part
of the decision making process, human development cannot take place. It is in this sense that I use the term "appropriate modernization" as a condition of development where women's work, both within and outside the household, and both wage and non-waged labor, is valued and recompensed in cash, kind, prestige and appreciation from the family and the community, where women have access to better educational and health facilities, and greater autonomy and decision-making within the household. Thus, women's knowledge and roles in the larger community must be built into the whole development process. It has been repeatedly seen that if we place income or help to generate income into the hands of women, children are taken care of. Women put the money where it is needed most: health care, food production for sustenance, clean water, education, housing, building roads. Wealth empowers women to solve their own problems, because they know what the solutions are. This model denounces patriarchy in every form and strives towards providing all basic human rights for women irrespective of caste, class and religion. It envisages gender-just civil laws to govern marriage including a woman's right to choose her own partner, divorce, property rights, inheritance, adoption, maintenance, free from discrimination on ground of religion. Women's labor, both within and outside the household, must be equitably valued and women's contribution in sustaining community and culture given full recognition. It must ensure women's empowerment and participation in all fields and in all decision, policy making and implementation in social, economic and political aspects.

This model of appropriate development calls for a reorientation of economic policy where priority is given to the protection of existing livelihood, generation of useful employment, production for people's needs, and ecologically sustainable harnessing and use of natural resources. The local population in all its diversity must be in full control of natural resources and decide their utilization and replenishment to ensure fulfilment of basic needs and freedom from want. Such an approach will
safeguard the values of simplicity in lifestyle, ensure biodiversity, and ensure full participation of women and all marginalized peoples in all decision-making of each village community. Committed to a people-oriented and ecologically sound economic policy, this approach requires the development of a people's democracy based on people's control over resources. This should be built from the local community following the basic principle that the first claim on the use of resources should be the satisfaction of basic needs and the protection of livelihood. A basic precondition is the right to information and the recognition of experience as expertise regarding the availability and sustainable use of resources. This model opposes the present process of globalization, liberalization, privatization and its attendant foreign imperialist intervention, because it excludes and marginalizes a vast majority of the people, exhausts resources of the nation, and leads to the accumulation of profit in the private hands of a minority at the national and international level. Such an approach calls for all third world countries to reject any conditions and structural adjustment programs imposed by IMF, WB and similar international institutions. These organizations should not be allowed to formulate or influence any policies in any sector, and particularly in the areas of health, education, public distribution system, biodiversity, environment, and labor legislation.

This approach opposes the integration of agriculture into the world market as it destroys the productive potential and livelihood of middle peasants and landless laborers. Priority should be given to food security, improvement of health status, equitable redistribution of land and water controlled by local communities with ecologically sustainable and non-destructive farming techniques. It also implies fair and equitable wages for agricultural labor and appropriate legislation regarding minimum wages, safety, health, and working hours. The underlying aim is the revitalization of the rural economy, including the resource base for forest dwellers, rural artisans, and rural industries with the help of old and new eco-friendly technologies. It calls for indigenous self-rule with their rights to
natural resources and their distinctive cultural identities. Any change in their life should be on their own terms and with their meaningful participation in the decision making about their life and society.

This approach values the preservation of our inherited plural cultures and values based on family and kinship of village community, its arts and literature. This recognition of diverse cultural traditions should go hand in hand with the affirmation of basic universal human rights. The United Nations systems should be fully democratized to reflect the plurality of our world's communities and cultures, and must be made accountable to the people. This model condemns violence in all its form both private and state. It calls for peace and peaceful resolution of all conflicts and a ban on testing and development of global, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

The emergence of solidarity movements, and people's initiatives at the grassroots, both locally and globally, reaffirm the vision of a humane, people-oriented, appropriate development model. The need remains for many more people to come together for deeper dialogue and discussion for creating a movement for fundamental change towards a society which ensures rights and opportunity for all its members to live with dignity and without fear. At the local level, community programs that expand opportunities for people who have been excluded from the labor force are healing to members of marginalized and oppressed groups. On a global level, some of the wounds of past inequities can be healed when North-South partnerships are established and the two partners invest their own uniquely distinct resources to produce shared experiences of mutual benefit.

Thus it is clear that development is not just about economic growth, not even about just, equitable, sustainable and well distributed economic growth. Development for me involves an improvement, not just in material conditions, but also social and cultural conditions for the vast majority of the people. This means equality for women; it means political freedoms, it means the right for people to develop and express their own culture, to use their language, to celebrate their
own religion. Counter to the idea of brutal integration of third world economies with the world economy, it means progressive integration of the local, the original, or the village economy. Thus I espouse an approach to development which is holistic, which includes qualitative as well as quantitative change, and above all, one that must be inclusive; it must be democratic; it must be tolerant and it must be something that addresses the real needs, in all their complexity and all their interconnectedness of the excluded, marginalized majority of the world's people.
Chapter 3
Research Methodology

Introduction

An exploratory micro-level study, my research attempts to portray the inner world of village women at the grassroots. Efforts have been made to study women not as an isolated category but to understand them in the socio-economic context in which they are placed, i.e., class and caste-oriented relations, sexual division of labor, social practices that limit their individual roles in the family and the community, the growing disparities between the sexes and increasing marginalization and pauperization of women in the subsistence sector. This study attempts to interpret women's behavior as shaped by the social context rather than as context free or rooted in anatomy or personality. The impact of modernization within a depressed economy unresponsive to the needs and concerns of poor villagers engaged in subsistence agriculture, ecological devastation of a once prosperous tropical forest region, and the forces of religion and ritual are vital factors that form a backdrop to this study.

I did my fieldwork in Kekuri, a village in the district of Dibrugarh in upper Assam, inhabited by the Sonowal Kosari indigenous community. The word "Kekuri", the real name of the village, means curved, signifying the curved road that runs through the middle of the village. The factors of caste and class are not central to the present study. Suffice it to mention that all the women belong to the Kosari community. As an indigenous group, they fall outside the Hindu caste system. However, due to the process of Sanskritization, the dominant religion is Hinduism which they practice in all its rituals and forms. Sanskritization, a process named and analyzed by M. N. Srinnivas (1956) is the process whereby people in the periphery of the Hindu caste system emulate the customs, rituals, and lifestyle of the higher castes to move up the caste hierarchy, thereby paving the way for
social mobility. This process of internalization of upper caste values begins with the richer indigenous families who have acquired land and other economic assets and want to be accepted as equals by the outsiders who have taken control of the economic and political life of the indigenous areas. In order to be equal to them, indigenous men adopt caste customs like dowry, seclusion and lower status of women, i.e., customs which they consider superior. Thus in many indigenous villages like Kekuri, all the caste values have been adopted especially by the richer families.

The core part of the research consists of an exploration of the world of women farmers, their work and their interactions with their families, community and the village, to experience their subjective view of their lives and struggles. It delineates their interactions and responses to oppressive male domination in the prevalent social system. They are all more or less from the same class category of poor farmers, owning less than five acres of cultivable land. Very subtle distinctions are made amongst themselves in terms of status, as described later.

I was almost totally unacquainted with the village, the people and the Dibrugarh area as a whole before I began my research. I was born in a town in Axom and am the product of an urban upbringing, where my parents pursued their lives as city professionals. When I began to delve deeper into cross-cultural gender studies in Canada, it became clear to me that very little material was available on this region for doctoral research. With strong roots in my culture and community, I decided to choose Kekuri, the ancestral village of my husband, for my research. His family had migrated to Dibrugarh but, through the years, continued to have contact with Kekuri where they own vast tracts of land. The kind of fieldwork that I carried out was thus influenced by my personal background, i.e., my Axomiya identity, my status as a woman married to a man from that village, and my Hindu upbringing. Although I had been away from Axom for over five years before my fieldwork began, these three aspects of my background were still very important to the people from Kekuri, and
to a certain extent to me, although owing to my long absence from the country I was able to distance myself from the traditional Axomiya values to a degree. Nevertheless, the villagers had to categorize me in terms of religion, because one cannot not have a religion, and in terms of gender and marital status, which are the most crucial identities in Axomiya culture. My cultural background also influenced the kind of data I collected. My knowledge of Axomiya and the dialect of the region meant that I could carry out my fieldwork without interpreters or assistants, but most of all, the cultural background that I shared with the people meant that I was perceptive of the daily happenings of the village. I wish to emphasize that I have made all reasonable efforts to restrict my own biases and judgements while presenting the women's lives.

1. Feminist Action and Participatory Research

In my methodology, I am largely inspired by the feminist goals of "starting with women's experiences", to which I add an action component. Many people have asserted that feminist research is closely associated with action:

"The integration of activism and scholarship is essential to the emerging feminist consciousness of the last decade" (Golden, Carla, 1981).

"analysis . . .must always accompany action for fundamental social change" (Reiter, Rayna, 1975).

"Possibly the one characteristic that most feminist scholars would agree upon is the need for social change" (Unger, Rhoda, 1983)

In the quotes above, Carla Golden, Rayna Reiter and Rhoda Unger argue that feminist scholarship is inherently linked to action. They concur with Sandra Harding who wrote that

the benefits of the new feminist learning are to be used . . . Feminism . . . sees inquiry as comprising not just the mechanical observation of nature and others but the intervention of political and moral illumination (Harding, 1986: 241-242).

British sociologist Liz Stanley wrote that "feminist research is absolutely and centrally 'research by
women' because I see a direct relationship between feminist consciousness' and feminism" (Stanley, 1982). Canadian political scientist Naomi Black wrote that feminist research "insists on the value of subjectivity and personal experience" (Black, 1989: 75). De Vault, a U.S. sociologist wrote that "the dilemma for the feminist scholar, always, is to find ways of working within some disciplinary tradition while aiming at an intellectual revolution that will transform the tradition" (De Vault, 1990: 701-721). The diverse nationalities of these feminist researchers illustrates the extent to which feminist research is global. In all its diversity, it also illustrates what feminist research seeks, to collect and analyze the multitude of women's voices. As Patricia Sexton wrote about her study of female hospital workers:

generalizations can be misleading, inadequate, and lacking in any flesh and blood reality, they can also fail to take account of the astonishing variations among women and the work they do. Women have not one but many voices. ... Both the themes and the variations, the individual and the collective voices need to be heard (Sexton, 1982: 4).

The same is true for feminist research. Feminist research practices must be recognized as a plurality (Miles, 1996). Rather than there being a "woman's way of knowing," or a "feminist way of doing research," there are "women's ways of knowing" (Belenky et al, 1986). That differences exist is fortunate as it allows for freedom of thought and action. Australian scholar Dale Spender put it this way:

at the core of feminist ideas is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge. This insight is as applicable to feminist knowledge as it is to patriarchal knowledge, but there is a significant difference between the two: feminist knowledge is based in the premise that the experience of all human beings is valid and must not be excluded from our understandings, whereas patriarchal knowledge is based on the premise that the experience of only half the human population needs to be taken into account and the resulting version can be imposed on the other hand. That is why patriarchal knowledge and the methods of producing it are a fundamental part of women's oppression, and why patriarchal knowledge must be challenged - and overruled (Spender, 1985).

In Patti Lather's (1988) view, feminist action research must be oriented to social and individual change because feminism represents a challenge to the status quo. Zeidenstein (1979) and others
discuss general methodological aspects of research on women in agricultural production in developing countries. They discuss the use of specific instruments for data collection and analysis, including charts for rural women's time use, individual and household labor and income. They emphasize the need for high quality microlevel data for a better understanding of rural women. For Roslyn Bologh (1985), the goal of feminist action research is not a particular set of arrangements but the process of continuous change, allowing us to be antipositivist, antipatriarchal, and open-ended. Change-oriented research allows for empowering, raising consciousness, liberating, and otherwise showing solidarity with specific groups of people (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Stanley, 1990). Like Action research, participatory or collaborative research, is the method where the people studied make decisions about the study format, therefore allowing for an egalitarian relation between researcher and researched (Hall, 1975, 1978; Maguire, 1987). As defined by Francesca Cancian, the three core features of participatory research are:

1. political action and individual consciousness-raising
2. relationships are democratic and participants share in making decisions and acquiring skills
3. the everyday life experience and feelings of participants are a major source of knowledge (Cancian, 1989).

The purpose of my study is to do research based on the principles of feminist action and participatory or collaborative research, particularly breaking down power differences between "researcher" and "researched". It is based on the tenet that the owners of information should be the people who are the subjects of the research rather than the researcher (Harding, 1987; Kirby and McKenna, 1989). As a researcher, I adopted an approach of openness, reciprocity and mutual disclosure. Throughout my fieldwork, three themes are evident: women discovering their own experience as they speak, women identifying with each other as they listen, and the potential of both
processes for feminist political action.

2. The Field Situation

Besides action research and focussed participant observation, the study draws on a number of research techniques, ranging from the study of relevant source material on women and development policies to individual and collective interviews of rural women, over a period of ten months in the village of Kekuri. I lived in the village for an extended period of close contact with the women and directly participated in their daily activities. An attempt was made to collect information on the following points: (a) changes in the work and living conditions of rural women, their perception of these changes and the possibilities of developing women's organizations to fight against their oppression and exploitation; (b) the marginalization of female labor due to agricultural modernization and their increasing involvement in the subsistence sector; (c) the perception of women's roles in the sphere of production and reproduction; (d) the extent of women's participation in community organizations, networking and decision-making. For the purpose of my study, it was also important to know the social stratification, the division of work between the sexes, and the contradictions existing in rural development policies. The nature of these problems was discussed in close dialogue with the people concerned, particularly with women in subsistence agriculture who generally are in the majority. Discussing these problems with the women was in itself a process of dynamic mobilization in the sense that it gave them a chance to articulate and to define their problems and thereby help them overcome their feelings of despair and helplessness. I spent many hours with an eighty-two year old village elder who was an expert on matters of ritual and myth. Whenever possible I spent time with the farm women as they went about their daily routines. In the process, I met and interacted with their families, friends, neighbors and acquaintances. Understanding the
experience of women from their own point of view counters a major bias of nonfeminist research that trivializes women's activities and thoughts, or interprets them from the standpoint of the men in the society or of the male researcher.

I use group discussions, participant observation, and semistructured or unstructured interviewing employing open-ended questions as a qualitative data-gathering technique. This technique involves free interaction between the researcher and researched, explores people's views of reality, and thereby takes full account of differences between people. This method is a particular asset for the study of women as it allows access to their ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words, and is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas or having men speak for women. Interviewing is also consistent with many women's interest in avoiding control over others and developing a sense of connectedness with people and avoiding "alienation of the researcher from the researched". The women were frank and forthcoming in their responses, a result of the trust and confidence built up during my stay in the village. I did not pressure them in any way. At each stage, a clear explanation was given about why a particular aspect of their life was being probed and how such information would contribute toward developing a greater understanding of the issues at hand. This included explaining the connection between research and policy formulation as it might influence their lives over a period of time. Such information was given in a simple, easily understood manner. It reaffirmed the purpose of this research in the context of gender studies.

Group discussions afforded participants a greater role in the project, consistent with the feminist aim of "developing more egalitarian research methods". Interviews were in the nature of discussions with certain key points in common that were adhered to, both in respect to the aims of the study and its dynamics, that is providing a context within which rural women can articulate or raise to consciousness their role and position in society, particularly in the face of agricultural
modernization in rural development.

Preferring the conversational method to the structural technique, I did not use any formal questionnaire. This created an environment in which rural women would speak with as little reservation as possible. As a researcher, I was successful in eliciting the participation of the village women by sharing their lives and coming to closely understand them and their habits, language, hopes and fears. However, a major advantage for me was that as a daughter-in-law of the village, Kekuri being the ancestral home of my in-laws, I had access to an "insider's point of view" which is vital in a study of this kind. Once the women got over the initial suspicion, i.e., our research situation, individual interviews and group conversations provided a forum for discussions and meetings. Women seemed to enjoy coming to the meetings, being together, sharing their lives and frankly relating their problems with the family members and the village elders.

Group interviews helped to clarify the commonalities and differences in their experiences and their attitudes. The women would spontaneously talk about their lives, work and problems and the longer we sat together, the more informative these talks became. I found that when one woman began talking about her life and work, others would join in and they would prompt and encourage one another, bringing to light an enormous amount of information. These sessions were sometimes painfully cathartic and at other times tinged with humor. This was often a two-way process, as the women did not hesitate to comment on my own life as they saw it, with a good amount of joking at my expense. These women became my friends who readily shared their lives with me during my stay in the village. The fact that I was allowed to become a part of the farmer's community, both women and men accepting me in their fold, was a valuable lesson to me.

Although my fieldwork is principally a microstudy of one particular village, I also collected data beyond Kekuri. The village of Bamunbari, about six kilometers away from Kekuri, is the site
of the local Panchayat (Village council), the market, schools, Rural Development Office, post office and health center. I often left the village to accompany women to these places. Men's socioeconomic and political interests have always taken them outside the village on a regular basis. Due to recent socioeconomic changes women's lives have also become linked with the outside world in numerous ways. Since the lives of the people of Kekuri are so integrally linked to the neighboring villages, much of my data has to do with the area as a whole.

Data collection for my research also included discussions about individual perceptions of various aspects of village life and its culture with other residents of the village, such as big landlords, trades-people, gram panchayat (village council) members, village level officials and the local police. I interviewed over twenty district and block-level government officials, agricultural officers and administrators, journalists, professionals, and socially committed organizers mostly from the district town of Dibrugarh. I also interviewed four city politicians who belonged to established political parties in the state. Among all of them, I found a great many misconceptions about life in the village and its people. When I reached the village, petty officials were surprised that I had chosen village women for my research on women and work. "You won't find working women here in the village," they patronizingly explained. "They are all in the cities. Village women don't do any work". They perceived me more or less as a person sharing their own middle-class status with similar values, in addition to being "educated" and "foreign-returned". They never failed to express astonishment over my commitment to living in the village. While I used a tape-recorder mainly for my interviews with government officials, I kept a daily journal in which I recorded dates, took notes, including a description of the setting, references of documents, informal conversations and observations, and my own reflections on the data gathering experience, usually immediately after the interview. My thesis evolved as a careful synthesis of salient points emerging from these discussions, interviews, group
activities and my own experiences both as a researcher and as a daughter-in-law of the village.

Interviews gave me the kind of insight into rural women's lives which the study of archival materials and statistical accounts would never have provided. It revolutionized the perspective of my study. My direct experience with the rural women made me even more aware of the stranglehold of patriarchy among other problems of rural women in India. Among women, there exist a variety of strategies including compromising with, yielding to, subverting or transcending the traditional system of male domination. Women have to deal with the traditional, ritualized, caste and kinship based patriarchy on one hand, and, on the other, modern capitalist patriarchy as it prevails in the increasing marginalization of the primarily female subsistence economy of the research village. Even while feminist scholars have disproved the myth of the male breadwinner and the dependent housewife model across all cultures, patriarchal oppression marks the everyday reality of women all over the world. It prevails at its harshest terms in the denial of basic human rights and protection to the largest group of vulnerable citizens.

(i). Consciousness-Raising Collective Interviews

Consciousness-raising refers to meetings by small groups of women over an extended period of time for the purpose of discussing personal experiences without professional leadership. In these meetings, women attempt to articulate a political analysis that will facilitate change. Feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon argues that consciousness-raising is a uniquely feminist method because it embodies principles such as enabling women to discuss and understand their experiences from their own viewpoints (1983: 227).

During my first few weeks in the village, I visited all the houses, getting to know the residents and drawing up a simple household census. The purpose was twofold - to collect basic demographic
information about the people, e.g., their names, age, marital status, schooling, landholding, occupation, and to get to know them. As I spoke the same language as the women, and could follow everything that was happening, I never carried a notebook with me. Every evening I noted down the happenings of the village day. I often used a camera, although I avoided using it the first two months. The village consisted of 83 households with a total of 479 inhabitants. All the families are Hindus belonging to the Kosari indigenous community. My first priority was to get acquainted with the women, and to find out what their activities were. I had difficulties, however, in meeting them at home. It was early October, the peak of the main agricultural season. Except for the very old, the very young, and some unmarried girls, the village was empty during the day. Girls, young mothers, middle aged and older women worked in their fields, or they were engaged in casual labor, miles away from their homes. I chatted with the women in their kitchens during early mornings when they prepared food to take to the fields. I also walked with them to the surrounding forests. It was absolutely normal and necessary for women of all ages to work in the fields. They took their children with them or left them at home in the care of an elder daughter, old mother or other relative. In one case, a baby was left daily with her aged grandfather, as the mother and grandmother both worked as casual agricultural laborers.

Consciousness-raising collective interviews were an important component of my methodology. I learnt that one cannot collect much data on one's own. Ranju, an unmarried woman in her late thirties, became one of my key informants. In order to have an adequate representation of women from different social and economic strata, a purposive random and stratified sampling was undertaken. Intensive interviews were carried out with women of 83 households from a cross section of the rural society. All the women interviewed belong to the Sonowal Kosari community and reside in the village of Kekuri. 61 of these women come from the families of small cultivators,
4 belong to the two big farmer households in the village, 11 come from the agricultural laborer households and 7 are landless. The majority of the interviewees are illiterate; out of 83 women, eight have received education up to the primary level, two are matriculates and two have completed secondary school. The names of all women participants have been disguised in my study for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality.

My first experience was to organize a group of women, to discuss the problems of household and field work, and consider possible solutions. With Ranju's help, I contacted the 83 women in our sample and invited them to join us for a meeting at the school playground at an appointed time. 28 women attended that first meeting. After I was introduced and my purpose in being there explained, I told them I was from a very different setting and had to learn from them what they did throughout the day. We started a dialogue of exploration, beginning with when they got up in the morning to when they went to bed at night. To put each woman at ease, I began each interview with a standard form that asked for demographic information such as the woman's age, marital status, and the composition of the household. This enabled women to relax, and talk about themselves, as they knew all the answers, and felt convinced that the interview had relevance to them as individuals. Having created an atmosphere which recognized the women's knowledge, I urged them to tell their life-stories at their own pace and in their own way. Much important information was gathered in this way. The opportunity was given to women to discuss their lives, their work, and what they do. When the woman had finished, I asked any supplementary questions, and checked any points which were unclear. The fact that I was an Axomiya woman interviewing other Axomiya women, sharing cultural patterns, increased our understanding of each other. As they explained to me what they did, I wrote it on a piece of paper in the form of a simple chart. When something was not clear to me, in terms of all it involved, I had them explain it further. This resulted in a lot of discussion and debate over
what was done when. Important in this process was the clear recognition that they were the experts. Gradually all the women began to participate, trying to explain to me, who at times must have appeared somewhat feeble-minded, what exactly was involved in each of these activities. There seemed to be a great deal of similarity in the work that was carried out. After we had finished our discussion and I thanked them profusely, I asked them what they had gotten out of it. They told me they were thrilled to know how much they were worth and all that they contributed to the household. By listing and discussing all their tasks and activities, their contribution had become visible. They asked that their husbands come to a similar session to see all that the women did. As our first meeting came to an end, the group decided that we should meet at the same school yard once every two weeks around three o'clock in the afternoon. At every meeting we arranged for a simple snack and tea for the participants.

In our subsequent periodical group discussions, which on an average lasted for about two hours, we went over the yearly cycle of each crop and animal produced. The women put together their various activities in the form of a simple calendar, drawn in a blackboard borrowed from the school. We started with crops, then with livestock, designating what men did, what women did, and what they did together, and which activities were done in communal work sharing. Because it was put together by women, a lot of food processing and animal care was included that would not have been included otherwise. Since these peasants were mainly involved in the subsistence economy, it was important to include all the subsistence crops processed on the farm as that made up a substantial portion of the cash savings the family was able to enjoy.

We then used the input to plan activities for women, both in terms of things that would make their work easier, as well as times when it would be appropriate to engage in collective income generation activities. We determined potential income-generating activities women could engage in
(that is, were they growing domestic materials whose surpluses could then be transformed with value added for good market sales) and when they might have time available to engage in such activities. In the light of the discussion, a number of weaving and craft projects were identified that allowed flexibility on the part of women and provided needed income during the hungry seasons, yet did not take away from the times when women's labor was needed for subsistence crop production.

The group discussions involving the village women and myself as researcher formed an integral part of our research methods. While I initially supplied some useful background information about the causes of women's subordination in the structural and historical processes, the women themselves interpreted their own situation. Their questions about the purpose of my work and their comments about their own, increased my understanding of both the dilemmas and the rewards surrounding women's activism. Our group meetings were only moderately successful in changing our situation. But we were very successful in producing rich, qualitative data on conflicts between home and work, low wages, and ideological barriers to feminist political action. While we did not move towards any significant collective action, the group seemed to produce change on an individual level. One by one, women talked about the problems in their community and the issues that concerned them. In the course of the discussions, those present learnt about experiences of other women like themselves which deepened their self-understanding, raised consciousness, and helped move to action.

This change in the individual level can be illustrated by the instance where Malti, a wage laborer, raised the issue of wifebeating. Her dramatic statement broke the silence on the topic in our group and produced an immediate reaction on the part of the others suffering the same humiliation, revealing the structural rather than individual nature of the problem, not as an epidemic but pandemic - an everyday, everywhere occurrence. This new knowledge created on the spot was used rapidly to work for prevention. Malti told me later that the group had helped to give her the courage to
speak out. This participatory research project had a similar effect on me, as I too became less fearful of sharing my own experience of patriarchy; differences in social status and background gave way to self-disclosure and sisterhood. A sense of personal change pervaded the members of the group. We were able to get rich insight into the lives and conflicts of women farmers, and discuss possibilities for action. In particular, our discussions on what action to take, revealed how we internalize our oppression, i.e., how fear, self-blame, and ideologies constrain our abilities to change the status quo. Such interactive group interviews proved to be emancipatory and empowering to the women, and a powerful place for praxis as it encouraged self-reflection and resistance. Guided by feminist principles, I believe researcher self-disclosure during interviews allows for true "dialogue" rather than an "interrogation", by promoting meaningful conversations between researcher and researched. Although learning about myself was not an intention of my study, working on this project was a consciousness-raising experience for me as it helped to clarify my vision and improve my decisions. The women forced me to reassess many of my original biases and rethink what it means to be a woman as I listened to the way they experienced motherhood, homemaking and community involvement.

3. The Universe of the Researcher

(i). The Village

I arrived in Axom in September 1995 and began my fieldwork in October, finishing in July 1996, bringing the total time spent in the field to ten months.

One hot sultry afternoon, as our bus approached Kekuri, the verdant landscape brought to mind Wordsworth's poetic pictures of paradise. A labyrinth of sunken paddies, jute fields, palm trees, and banana groves, a stream nearby, people chanting, a water buffalo ambling down a road, and
somewhere a neatly mud plastered temple. Life is simple here. On the creaking bus, the passengers' luggage consisted of a bunch of pineapples or a large jackfruit, tied with twine to make a makeshift handle. Three bullocks ambled lazily in the unpaved alley, leaving three steaming piles of dung in their wake. There is so much water that the clouds seem to be racing beneath the surface of the earth. Ever gracious with her bounty of treasures, mother earth had filled the trees with mangoes, coconuts, jackfruits and a myriad of other gifts. In the overly wet monsoon months from June to October, there is the joy of flowers and vegetable gardens through the whirl of a heavy farming season. Children splash about as if their lives had never been troubled by a shadow of pain. Chilling rains fall in a nonstop downpour lasting several days, when huge trees come crashing down, and rivers and streams fold in swirling eddies. Roads and walkways are invariably washed away, isolating each hamlet and the village itself from the larger civilization.

The picture that instantly caught my eye as I got down from the bus was that of women agricultural workers everywhere - transplanting and weeding in the paddy fields in big groups, singing as they worked. Women are expected to work when they sing. The work does not stop, feasts, weddings, festivals or harvests, there is always work to be done. As Abu, an old village woman told me, women do not sleep, they sing. There was more green here than my eyes had known in a long time. Herds of cattle grazed serenely amid the green pastures. Houses with thatched roofs were neatly camouflaged amidst all the vegetation. Further down, the road passed through open green fields with swaying coconut palm trees here and there. Even before I got acquainted with the site, I knew the site had selected its researcher, and I was home. There was a sense of belonging, before I had met even one villager. It was a curious self-directed adventure which was supposed to culminate in a process of data collection for the doctoral dissertation. I carried the research proposal - a neat twenty page document - with great reverence in a backpack on my shoulder.
As a daughter-in-law, gaining entry into the village was not difficult; in fact it was the easiest part. I was welcomed with enthusiasm at a specially arranged function, with the traditional garlanding, speechmaking, and distribution of sweets. The simplicity of my dress and mannerisms were praised. They felt flattered that I had chosen this particular village for my study. I knew the language, shared many cultural symbols, and could communicate with the people with relative ease. Initially I found it very difficult to explain to the villagers the purpose of my research. They wanted to know if I was associated with any government or non-government organization. My explanation that the intended research was towards a University degree I was undertaking in Canada and will be studied by people there stirred their curiosity. They were intrigued to hear that people in such a far-off place wanted to know about them. They also wanted to know what benefit my research was going to be to them. This was the hardest question for me as there were no obvious tangible benefits. Still, they accepted me and gave me their precious time to discuss various aspects of their lives.

My genuine interest in the welfare of the people showed through in many ways. I was overjoyed to see the paddy covered fields, because this meant they would have a good harvest and a continuous supply of food for most of the people. I was distressed to hear that many crops had been destroyed by the wave of floods in the last season. I was concerned about the marriage of young girls, babies dying at birth, the education of the children ... the list goes on. I felt a strong sense of affinity and wished very sincerely that their lives would become better.

I also had some other advantages. First of all, a married woman has a better status, and this is elevated even further if she has sons. Fortunately for me, I happened to have a husband and a son. However, people wondered what I was doing in the village while I should be caring for my family. They were relieved to hear that I was there with my husband's permission and my son was old enough to be taken care of by my mother-in-law. Many of them could not understand why I wished to
undertake the hardship of living in a village when I could "have everything that a woman desires". Others, seeing a peripatetic women doing the rounds, believed that I was a spy collecting data on them for the government.

(ii) I Find A Home

Having found the village, I had some initial difficulty in finding accommodation. As I began to go around Kekuri, accompanied by my mother for the first week, I expressed my need to reside within the village. The following week, I moved into a dilapidated ancestral dwelling, which had some drawbacks. I found myself in a very ramshackle building. The mud plasters of the wall had gone crumbly, and the roof was termite eaten. The windows were holes in the wall without panes, with rusting iron bars fixed vertically. They stopped humans, but not snakes, and stayed open day and night.

Initially there were some difficult adjustments I had to cope with. The main ones were being away from my son, getting used to a different diet and eating schedule, becoming used to living in dark surroundings, tolerating insects and cockroaches, and using a makeshift toilet made of bamboo poles, particularly after sundown. The first month was the hardest and I made several trips to the town during weekends not only to make sure that my son was adjusting to his new surroundings, but also to escape from the village. Gradually I became used to the surroundings.

I learnt all the survival tasks by trial and error. I learnt to draw water from the well for my personal needs, and was proud of being able to light a kerosene stove for the first time in my life. Sobita, a young woman of the village, helped me with the washing and cooking chores. During the day, little children happily surrounded my home, but I failed to understand why they ran away with shivers at nightfall. Thankfully, it was only much later I discovered that mad Lilakanto had leapt to
a violent death in the well ten feet away from my back door some fifteen years ago. No one drank water from that well anymore, using it only for the washing. As a woman my physical mobility was restricted at night when I had access to only a few neighboring households.

(iii). The Universe of Village Life

Then came the night of the Storm. There was heavy rainfall, bringing surging floods in its wake, particularly down by the riverside. My roof existed only for moral support. I had nothing but a powerful torch by my side. Fearful to venture out at that late hour, I resigned myself to a watery night and eventually fell asleep.

The next morning there was news of roads being washed away. I could see people using little boats for urgent tasks that could not be put off. Many people were marooned in their houses. House walls had come crashing down, and the angry river had washed away precious paddy, causing untold damage to the most fertile agricultural lands in the river plains.

It was a surprise that my house survived that season. Many were convinced that I was possessed by the spirits of the long-departed ancestors who must have inspired me in the first place to come to the village in time before the house came crashing down. My neighbors worked free of cost in patching up the craters in the walls and the big holes in the roof with bamboo strips. Others volunteered to plaster the dwelling with mud and dung. The experience increased my respect for the resilience of mud dwellings, which could put up with a lot of abuse and neglect at the hands of humans, termites and inclement weather before disintegrating. After the night of the storm, a kindly woman sent two of her young children to keep me company at night. This emboldened two more young girls to join us, so it was a merry group that sang songs and bhajans (religious songs) in the sorry haunted house during my months in the village.
In the eyes of the villagers, there are certain sacred duties toward an ancestral abode, just as towards the ancestral spirits and the Gods. Certain rituals have to be performed for pacifying the spirit of the dwelling itself, and certain festivals have to be celebrated to ensure the peace, protection and sanctity of the home. Only then one can go about one's worldly tasks without hindrance. Such celebrations include the marriage of the *tulsi* plant at the entrance of each house, known as Kongaali Bihu or the festival of the Poor, celebrated in mid-October. Also called Kaati Bihu, it marks the completion of sowing and transplanting of paddies. Magh Bihu, celebrated in the middle of January, heralds the end of the harvesting season, and is celebrated with communal cooking and feasting. We welcomed Bohaag Bihu, the Axomiya New Year, in April, which marks the arrival of Spring and the starting of the seeding season; we worshipped the cow, the most sacred of animals for every Hindu, and celebrated Diwali the festival of lights. We celebrated the birth of Lord Krishna at Janmastami, with a sense of community sharing in the house that year. The rains, their occurrence at proper times and in proper quantities, as well as their failure, are also an important preoccupation for the villagers. We worshipped Indra, the god of rain, with arduousness. The village women guided me through each and every ritual, and were very glad in their hearts that I was performing my religious duties. Religion served as the easiest medium of my interaction with the village people, who were strangers to me until then.

From that point on, the flow and rhythm of village life took over, and the research evolved and unfolded as an unresisting, natural outcome of my life in the village. My self-image changed as I compromised in little ways, but insisted in having my own in matters where I could not change. I began to apply the little red dot on my forehead, and red vermilion on the parting of my hair, a symbol of piety and well-being of one's husband. I grew my hair long to satisfy their wish. I was always dressed in the traditional mekhela-chador, a two piece garment, containing a long skirt and another
piece of cloth to cover the upper part of the body, and for married women, their head. All this met with smiling approval from the women. They were proud of having reformed me from a decultured city dweller into a village woman.

There are other ways that I did not change. I refused to follow menstrual taboos, and as required of a daughter-in-law, observe purdah. They did not ostracize me. They accommodated my strange behavior on good faith, and continued to share their lives closely with me. The village continued to grow on me.

Sometime at the end of three months I left for Dibrugarh, and returned after a week with some medicines for cough, cold and fever remedies, diarrhoea and dysentery, some ointments, eye drops and vitamins, for my personal use. When Taruni, one of the young girls staying with me at night, had a headache one day, I gave her a tablet. Little did I realize the advantages and perils of such an undertaking. Women began coming to me with sundry aches and pains, telling me how their visits to a dozen doctors did not satisfy them, but that my medicines worked instantaneously. Initially the medicines served to validate my presence in the village as a kind of direct service that helped to overcome the communication barrier as an outsider. As all kinds of crises are very common in the lives of villagers, I had to be very firm where money was concerned and refused to play the role of a moneylender. Yet this did not stop the villagers from always speculating about who is ripping me off, and how, imagining that so-and-so must be visiting me only to demand money.

(iv). Rhythm of Changing Seasons

I soon realized that if I was to do any indepth study at the microlevel, I would have to suspend the rigid time schedule as stipulated in my research proposal. To achieve this, I would have to allow the process to evolve naturally as a part of the ebb and flow of village life, within the rhythm of
changing seasons and work pressures. I also gave up on professional neutrality and research
objectivity; otherwise I would not have survived in the village beyond the first two weeks. I had
much to learn in the meanwhile.

Conditions of subsistence living rapidly change from year to year, as sons get jobs, others lose
jobs, land, and sometimes the homestead, as calamity strikes due to drought, famine, floods, sickness
and other crises. Misfortunes are only too frequent in village life. The lack of medical attention
coupled with ignorance of the rules of sanitation make childbirth hazardous, frequent epidemics
common and survival a miracle. Since to this are added unpredictable weather, insects, exploitative
landlords, cheating moneylenders, and corrupt officials, it makes village living very precarious indeed.
Religion and custom offer a sense of security to the people. Every villager is endowed with a rich
and complex religious life, with a multitude of deities and festivals. Birth, the puberty of a girl,
mARRIAGE, death, and other life-cycle crises are marked by elaborate rituals and regulated by customs
demanding strict conformity. The dead are propitiated annually during the "ancestor's fortnight"
where the spirits of the ancestors are worshipped with elaborate rituals. An essential part of village
religion is belief in the underworld, in sorcery and witchcraft. Cooperative coexistence with a high
level of give and take is an essential part of village life, particularly at the subsistence level.

It becomes very important for the researcher to respect and accept the villager's own world-
view, and develop a critical self-awareness so as not to misrepresent the total world of village
women's existence. As I discovered, it took me a long time to get on free and easy terms with the
women. Initially our conversations were flippant, and provided me with little understanding of the
village and its customs. Probing their work, attitudes and relationships required time, a commodity
they are genuinely short of. Even otherwise, parrying questions, answering in paradoxical proverbs,
and in general concealing information is a fine Axomiya art. Often my own artlessness provoked a
good deal of mirth, and joking at my expense, but I would smile along, knowing that the answers would come only if I was patient.

Understanding the subtleties of village interchange takes time, as it has its own definitions of time, space and codes of conduct. Therefore I realized that bringing out questionnaires and collecting data in a hurry, heedless of village conventions, would not only not be in the interests of my research, it would also fail to benefit the women in any way. It was only after I began to participate in village rituals, performing the daily pujas (worship), often joining the women in communal cooking sessions at weddings and festivals, that I began to gradually develop meaningful relationships with individual women, and an understanding for the distinct structures and meanings of existence in their lives. It did not take me very long after that to feel at ease with the women, many of whom addressed me as Bou (Hindu terminology for elder brother's wife). My relation with the women with whom I shared a common courtyard became much more intimate and, in addition, my presence at Kekuri became much more comprehensible and acceptable to other villagers. My increasing intimacy also helped me to become more and more involved with the women. As these relationships with women grew, many married women invited me to accompany them to their natal villages when they returned for festivals, weddings or the "vacations" allowed them after the birth of a child. These visits not only expanded my observations well beyond Kekuri; they also made me greatly aware of the difference between a woman's status as wife or daughter-in-law in her husband's house and her status as daughter or sister in her parent's home. I was unable to establish an equally friendly and easy-going relationship with men. Although I was occasionally able to talk to men in their individual homes, interaction with the same men in public places was discouraged.

By this time, I began to get a good feeling for the distinct structures and meanings of existence in their lives. An unmentioned fact about women doing research in rural areas is that the
appearance of male protection is fairly essential. In my case, my father-in-law, whose ancestors belonged to this village, is greatly revered by the community, although he only rarely visits the village. In his absence, old patriarchs and chivalrous young men took on that role even before I realized what was happening and came forward to educate me in village ways. Whether I needed coconuts to be taken down from the trees, or arrange for ritual celebrations, it was these men who made all the outside arrangements. Every single woman in the village has these appointed men, who take care of the male "preserves" for her, and these relationships are valued and extend into families. This is the way of the village.

During the initial weeks of exploring the village, I maintained a low profile as I went about the task of getting acquainted. My modern ideas of equality and my thinking that my caste, kinship or class status would be of no major concern to the villagers soon fell flat on their face. For the first time in adult life, I was confronted at each step, with rigid definitions about my ordained place in the hierarchical village society with its fine matrix of inter-connectedness. I also realized that it was Providence that had sent me to this village for my research. For it is only here that the village people would ultimately shrug off all my eccentricities in behavior and overlook my transgressions, even my stubbornness, once they know I am the daughter-in-law of the village. In any other village or community, the smallest rumor could have been sufficient to end my research and I would have been at the mercy of the powers-that-be. But here I could flaunt my egalitarian ways with impunity.

The medicines soon became a hindrance to my life and peace of mind, besides incurring the wrath of the village doctors. So I firmly stopped giving them to stop the deluge of ailing patients, only occasionally handing it out with extreme discretion. When I suffered a bout of ill health at one point, rumors were rife that the evil-spirits had cast their spell on me, due to my carefree wanderings through the haunted village terrain. I had to propitiate the neglected ancestral spirits before I could
go around my worldly tasks again.

(v). Community Organizing

Meanwhile I became firmly entrenched in the village. I continued to meet with the women both formally and informally. About twenty of the women regularly attended all the meetings. As a result of our meetings and informal conversations, we decided to organize an International Women's Day camp for farm women on the eighth of March, bringing outside resource persons to talk to the farm women, along with entertainment which included a film show at night. Up to one hundred women, many carrying their little children, participated with great enthusiasm and pride. It was a matter of honor for them that they were the center of attention.

We also initiated a women's marketing cooperative, but had to shelve our plans in the teeth of strong opposition from the bureaucracy. Till that point, I did not understand that people's cooperatives is a closely guarded political preserve. I was also constrained by my research interests, particularly the time restrictions of the university for completing my degree requirements.

In an impoverished region, it is development schemes for the poor that are the only source of corrupt gain. Accountability to passive villagers is almost unheard of, and I tread on sensitive egos by lending myself to the peasants. My simple questions to officials concerning the implementation of projects appeared very threatening. In all this my work of mobilizing mostly illiterate farm women became a sore point with the lower level functionaries and politicians. Their control over the public domain was threatened by women organizing, backed by the men. I took care to involve men, as I realized that women needed tremendous support from their menfolk in order to participate wholeheartedly in community action programs. Men's support is particularly vital at a time when there are few precedents to women playing a wider social role in village affairs. Thus women would
egg me on to intercede with their men to overcome possible opposition to a task at hand, and sometimes to simply accommodate their absence in the home.

4. Conclusion

By mid-1996 I was preparing to leave the village for North America. This would culminate in a doctoral degree after almost a year of change and transformation, of death and rebirth as I flit from world to world. More than that, it is a combined result of becoming a villager, surviving some intense harassment as an assertive woman, of going through some difficult life passages, of growing up at last. During the course of my fieldwork, babies were born, people had died, sons and daughters were married, joint families separated, new quarrels broke out, and old ones reconciled. I was able to observe the process of social relations as they are lived within, and sometimes around, the structures of Hindu culture. Here, people have a near mystical connection with their habitat, within the natural cycles of changing seasons amidst varying harvests, despite the grinding poverty. For most farmers there is no boundary line dividing their cognitive selves and their habitat, in an obvious symbiotic relationship with mother earth. I too became a part of the strong inter-connectedness between nature and human beings.

I believe that field experience is a political experience. It was also a profound emotional experience which made me question not only the neglect of women in rural development policies but my own role as a woman researcher. It led to an agonizing appraisal of studies on agrarian problems and I found that the women were invisible there. Androcentrism in social science research and use of standard indicators to measure changes in women's lives and social position are a constraint on understanding the complexities of women's role in development. Theory always underlies the way we collect, analyze and present data. It is never neutral. "Looking for information about ourselves
and about women in other societies, feminists have had to join Third World peoples, American Blacks, and native Americans in expressing their distrust of the body of literature which mainstream anthropology has called objective" (Reiter, 1975: 3).

The more I felt at home in Kekuri, the more I became uneasy and unhappy about my research. After ten months of fieldwork, I experienced "fieldwork depression". I felt tired, useless and sick. I was bogged down with questions such as: what was the use of collecting all this information and how could my research become a meaningful contribution for the women I had begun to care deeply for? I began to realize how much the conditions of life had worsened in one generation. Women from the extremely poor households would also come to me to help them with a better and more respectable way to earn income rather than as casual laborers.

It occurred to me that while these women wanted to change their fate, they were unable to do so on their own, and needed a catalyst to help them find a way. My experience in working with the women made me realize that women have to achieve more autonomy, the right to increased self-determination, self-respect and control over their lives and bodies, in order to achieve control over material resources.
Chapter 4

India: Political History and Economic Background

Introduction

This chapter will attempt to outline the position of women in agriculture in India by showing the importance of historical shifts and their significance in the National economy. I discuss the major landmarks in Indian history with a view to comprehend the distinctive nature of the Indian traditional culture and its interaction with the forces of Western domination and imperialism. The impact of government policies on the situation of rural women will also be examined.

Most Asian countries are characterized by the involvement of a large proportion of the population in agriculture coupled by a low income. India is the second largest producer of rice, contributing about one-fifth of total world rice production. One of the features of intensive paddy cultivation is that rice is capable of supporting much larger populations than any other grain. A special feature of the rice-growing regions is the preponderance of labor, particularly female labor at various stages of its production. Large numbers of men, women and even children participate in the production and processing of paddy. They include owners of land and wage laborers. Because of the heavy labor demands and coordination necessary for irrigation, social relations are often organized around the demands of rice production.

The eastern and northeastern states of India like Axom have the largest acreage under paddy, but the lowest yields. As in other rice-growing regions, in almost all the main rice-growing states in India there is a big agricultural labor population. More significantly, a greater proportion of agricultural laborers in all the rice-growing states are women. In Axom, as in the hill regions of northeastern India, female laborers outnumber male workers. Women participate extensively in all
stages of rice production, from land preparation through harvesting and post-harvest processing. Indeed women are said to have domesticated rice. This age-old involvement of women is borne out by the fact that some of the most beautiful songs in the rice areas were sung by women while transplanting paddy seedlings or while harvesting.

Few people in rural areas are able to escape the demands of the market economy. Efforts to intensify rice production through the introduction of green-revolution technologies and large-scale irrigation projects have had differential impacts on men and women, and they have mixed results for women in different class and ethnic groups. Global economic restructuring in many parts of the world in the 1980s and 1990s has placed severe strains on rural people, especially on women, who experience greater poverty and less remunerative income-earning opportunities than people living in urban areas (Obelpias-Ramos, 1991; Safilios-Rothschild, 1994; Ranadive, 1994). Structural adjustment programs have forced governments to provide fewer services such as health care and welfare, forcing families to participate in the informal economy, in wage work and in subsistence production. Without the traditional safety nets, and male wages proving inadequate to support their families, women have to overwork to earn income and provide for the survival of their families. Global and national restructuring processes have also resulted in the destruction of the world's forests, especially the tropical rain forests, in the 1990s. Initiated during the era of colonialism, the present day multinational corporations and national governments continue to destroy the remaining world's forests to obtain timber and expand agriculture. Environmental degradation affects men and women in different ways, as rural women are the first to experience increased work loads and health problems with the deterioration of the local environments. In the following sections, I will discuss these issues with special reference to the Indian context, and rural women's efforts to address these issues of injustice and inequality by organizing local actions to sustain forests, agriculture and their
environment.

1. India: Political History and Economic Background

India is a country of diverse geographical landscape and immense cultural diversity. The 849.5 million people (Census of India, 1991) of the country follow seven prominent religions (Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism). 48.1 percent of the total population is female. The average per capita annual income is $350 (World Bank: 1992: 218), much lower of course in the rural areas. India's economy is predominantly agricultural which contributes more than 35% per cent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) providing employment and income to more than 70 per cent of the population. About 43 percent of India's geographical area is used for agricultural activity. Out of the total population of 849.5 million, 552 million people live in the rural areas, i.e., 65 per cent of the total population (Census of India, 1991). The majority of the population is engaged in agriculture and poverty is widespread. The number of people living below the poverty line increased from 167 million in 1960-61 to 211 million in 1990-91 (World Bank, 1992: 270; UNIFEM, 1993: 1). The World Bank (1992) estimates that about 25 per cent of the population nationally and about 80 percent of the rural population have annual incomes of below $US 150, the internationally defined line of absolute poverty. The overwhelming majority of rural populations, poor and not so poor, survive on subsistence agriculture, and do not have access to minimum food, clothing, shelter, education and health facilities.

In the following sections I will discuss the major landmarks in Indian history from the time of the Indus Valley civilization to the 18th century, when the British first arrived in the scene, with a view to understand the impact of the forces of Western domination and imperialism on the Indian economy and culture.
(i). Pre-Colonial India: An Overview

The first element of Indian civilization is dated back to the Indus Valley civilization (2500-1700 B.C.). Archaeological findings have established that the highly urbanized Indus Valley civilization was wholly indigenous and that it had spread all the way from the Indus Valley to the Ganga-Yamuna plains and that the unified area, more vast than Mesopotamia and Egypt, was centrally administered with elaborate town planning. Indus Valley seals found in Mesopotamia provide evidence of a flourishing international trade (Malik, 1977).

The collapse of the Indus Valley civilization synchronized with the invasion of northern India by the pastoral Aryans who gradually extended their control over the Indo-Gangetic plain. Although there is no sufficient information as to where the Aryans came from, it is conjectured that they moved eastward from western Asia and crossed into India through Afghanistan and Iran (Basham, 1959: 57-58). They spoke Sanskrit, a language which has the same roots as Greek, Latin, Celtic, Slavic, and Persian. Archaeologically a void, this period in Indian history yields knowledge that can be gleaned only from the oral literature in the Vedic hymns, prayers, and from the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. India, however, did develop a strong oral tradition, and many of the writings from 1500 B.C. to the Middle Ages, memorized by succeeding generations, were passed on through the centuries. Significantly, these texts are mostly religious in nature and indicate that Indians were more preoccupied with religion than with current affairs. Aryan society was divided into four classes (varnas), which is the basis of the caste system: the Brahmin priests were the most important; the aristocratic Kshatriya warriors came next followed by the Vaishya commoners; and at the bottom of the scale were the Shudras who were considered fit only for menial tasks. There was also a fifth, though unrecognized, class entrusted with the lowliest duties such as scavenging and handling of dead
bodies. These so-called "untouchables" were forced to live under the most wretched conditions away from the village, were not allowed to draw water from the village well or enter a Hindu temple (Malik, 1977). (In spite of legal strictures imposed by the Indian Constitution, many at the lower end of society even today suffer from these caste taboos). The early Aryan age was one of constant fighting among tribes anxious to acquire pasture and agricultural land in the Indo-Gangetic plains. These internal wars prepared the groundwork for the first empire in Indian history, the Mauryan empire (320 B.C.-185 B.C.). The Mauryan empire had an elaborate administrative structure, but depended heavily on local rulers who were converted into hereditary governors of their own territories. This resulted in a proliferation of independent warring kingdoms with little unity (Thapar, 1963: 210). For over four centuries (180-200 B.C.), following the collapse of the Mauryan empire, India was overrun by a series of successive foreign invasions led by Greeks, Saka (Scythians), Parthians and Kushans. Though the resulting foreign dynasties had some impact on Indian culture, their overall influence was minimal. On the contrary, the foreigners got Indianized and were absorbed into the caste system, and some of the foreign rulers became great patrons of Indian thought and learning. Following the disappearance of the Kushans, except for a few decades of intrusion by the Huns in the early sixth century, India remained free of foreign invasions for a period of about a thousand years. This was followed by the rule of the imperial Gupta dynasty for 160 years (320-480), and then for 40 years by King Harsha's empire (606-647). As pointed out by Basham, during the Gupta period India was "perhaps the most civilized region of the world, for the effete Roman empire was nearing its destruction, and China was passing through a time of troubles between the two great periods of the Hans and the Tangs" (Basham, 1959: 66). The era saw a blossoming of Sanskrit literature, the establishment of the university of Nalanda - one of the earliest and greatest universities of the world; Hindu mathematicians contributed Algebra, the zero, and the decimal system to the
world, while Indian textiles, metal crafts, and spices found ready markets abroad. The most significant development in the subcontinent, prior to the arrival of the Muslims in the twelfth century, was the gradual replacement of Buddhism, which flourished in the sixth century B.C., by Hinduism which became the primary religion of India, providing the country with a unifying ethos. After the Guptas, India began its long decline, except for a brief revival under King Harsha in the north. The Hindu rulers had no sense of unity and would rather see their local Hindu enemies destroyed by foreign Muslim armies even if it led to their own destruction later. It is under these circumstances that Turko-Afghan and central Asian Muslims entered the politically fragmented subcontinent, first as raiders who looted the wealth of Hindu kingdoms and temples, and later as invaders who built successive empires in India that lasted from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The longest lasting was the Mughal empire which lasted from 1529 to 1857. Aurangzeb, the last great Mughal ruler, imposed a hated poll tax (jaziya) on the Hindus and razed several Hindu temples and built mosques on their sites. After Aurangzeb's death, the Mughal power declined so rapidly that in a mere fifty years a British trading company, the East India Company, had overthrown the governor of Bengal, and in another hundred years established itself as the unchallenged ruler of the entire subcontinent (Spear, 1970).

The rise and fall of innumerable native and foreign dynasties from the Mauryas to the establishment of the British empire, divided the country more than ever and facilitated the growth of regional culture areas, each with its own language. However, Hinduism, which had spread throughout the subcontinent, became an integral part of the social organization in India. Thus, religion became a unifier. Even the Muslim and the British rulers could not destroy this basic structure of society (Beauchamp. 1934).
(ii). Colonial Period

India was under colonial rule from the sixteenth century until Independence in 1947. The first colonizers were the Portuguese. Their occupation (1505-1656) was followed by the Dutch (1656-1796) and the British (1796-1947). While the Portuguese and Dutch rules had a strong impact on Indian society and the traditional systems, there were no major changes in the pre-capitalistic system as their interests lay mainly on trade and military power to support such trade. They did not seek to transform the existing socio-economic situation.

The British conquest of India, a result of the expansionist activities of the East India Company, started in 1757. In 1858, the colony was transferred to the British Crown and the Indian administration was placed directly under the control of the government of Britain. The establishment of India as a Crown Colony synchronized with the rise of Western Imperialism, with long-term economic consequences for India. At the advent of British rule, the capitalist system was moving from its mercantile to the industrial capitalistic phase. The British, therefore, sought to change the basic economic structure. British imperial policy towards India was supremely callous. There was the destruction of a flourishing textile handicraft industry through a deliberate policy of favoring imperial economic interests. The British markets were closed to Indian textiles while the products of Lancashire cotton mills were given free entry into India. This nonreciprocal opening of the Indian market to British goods destroyed India's hopes of emerging as a major manufacturing center and produced an excessive dependence on agriculture. The Indian peasantry increased from 55 percent of the total occupational workforce in the mid-nineteenth century to 74 percent by 1939 (Basham, 1959). Yet this did not mean a growth of rural wealth. The native people provided the revenue for the entire British presence and activity in India as well as for their military campaigns in and around the subcontinent.
During the early stage of British administration, several measures were adopted to curtail the indigenous people's rights in order to satisfy European interests. A first and important step was restricting people's customary rights over land and forests on the grounds of wider national and public interest. This was followed by the creation and consolidation of an import-export economy based, in Assam, on plantation agriculture. Almost within ten years of British arrival in Assam, the first tea plantation was opened. In addition, timber for trade, oil, fruits and potatoes were introduced, adding to the growing denudation of forests.

Land sales, alienation and labor demands resulted in enormous hardships for the peasants. In addition, petty merchants emerged carrying out the triple functions of banker, buyer and seller. Buying cheap, selling dear and lending at exorbitant interest, these merchants thrived on already impoverished peasants. Moreover, the population was growing rapidly. These developments aggravated the problems of the peasants. At best, the peasants managed to produce for their own subsistence but had no surplus to sell.

In a span of 90 years British policies for land settlements and forest management had disrupted the life and socio-economic relations among the local people.

**a. Land Policy of the British:**

In the first phase of British colonial rule, marked by the rule of the East India company, the primary objective of land policy was to maximize the land revenue accruing to the Company. Revenue demands were increased, initially through the Temporary Settlements and then through the Permanent Settlement. Rich landlords were turned into zamindars and indigenous and other peasants into *ryots* (tenant peasants). Under this system, a class of intermediaries called "zamindars" was created to collect revenue for the government over agricultural land. These zamindars held legal titles
to land and enjoyed unrestricted rights to land-revenue collection. The land systems were also changed by the British - the land which had for ages remained inalienable and the collective property of the village community was now made alienable. The higher revenue demands could only be met by increasing taxes. For this purpose, more and more land was farmed out as *jagirs* (land given out for tax collection) to the *thikadars* (revenue farmers) and moneylenders. By the end of the colonial period, some 63 per cent of the land was farmed out as *jagirs* to *thikadars*. (Singh, 1991).

These revenue farmers were to pay a certain amount to the zamindar. In turn, they could levy any amount at all on the tenant peasant farmers. Apart from this revenue, they also taxed unpaid labor and levied various cesses. These cesses were in addition to the land and were usually paid in kind. Goats, rice, oil were demanded at every pretext. The peasants, who earlier paid a fixed *chanda* (tribute) were faced with having to pay increasing land revenue. As Wolpert (1977) points out, even the whole village had never paid as much as what was now extracted from a single peasant.

The zamindars and moneylenders forcibly took over large parts of fertile rice lands belonging to the peasants, often under the pretext of the supposed failure to pay rent. These lands were then cultivated with the labor of the former owners of the land. The nature of the peasants' relation to land changed fundamentally. Land which had so far been the property of the village, could now be taken out of the village community and owned by the moneylender and contractor. The entire state machinery - the courts, police and administration set up by the British, worked to secure the rights of the moneylender and the contractor against those of the peasants.

In this picture of growing indebtedness and dispossession, it is likely that areas with continuing village community land systems, including the forests, were relatively freer from debt. The undisputed rights of the peasants to clear forests and bring new land under cultivation were considerably restricted by the new laws. The forests no longer belonged to the village. The
combination of increased debt, dispossession of quality rice land by the zamindars and contractors and restriction of peasants' rights to the forests combined to destroy the reproduction of the local economy, instead of the expansion of agriculture (Sharma, 1974; Kumar, 1993).

Soon the colonial rulers began to see India as a source of raw materials and as a market. The north-east region was not of much importance as a market. But it played an important role in the supply of raw materials for colonial production. With the building of the railways, tea, petroleum, timber, and coal became important products of export. Thus a substantial portion of the surplus produced in Axom went out of the area, and was accumulated outside. This became even stronger with the onset of the colonial rule and continues to this day.

At the same time that the peasants were becoming increasingly resentful for the continued denial of a peaceful livelihood, a fire was raging in the rest of India demanding an end to British rule. The growing Indian bourgeoisie were consolidating their economic base with which they sought a share in state power. Mass meetings were being organized to protest against government policies. The peasants joined forces with the freedom struggle and responded with a spate of uprisings, demanding recognition of the system of communal land ownership. These uprisings and their brutal suppression are a part of history and need not be repeated here. What needs to be noted is that it resulted in a number of special laws to take account of some of the features of indigenous land systems. These laws showed that British colonial rule had passed on to a new stage of exploitation. In order to pacify the agitated peasants, in 1908 an Act was passed whereby all indigenous lands were made non-alienable. However, with growing pressure from the zamindar and mercantile groups to open up these lands for exploitation, these restrictions became slack and indigenous lands were made alienable with the "permission" of the administrative officials (Bose, 1993).
b. *Agricultural and Rural Development Policies of the British:*

Agricultural and Rural development in India was initiated by the British in the mid-nineteenth century. The British government's "finances were highly compromised and works of agricultural improvement, designed to be remunerative, offered the best prospect of an increase in revenue" (Whitcombe, 1980: 164). The chief task undertaken by the British government was that of irrigation. Some of the other measures adopted to bring about improvements in agriculture in the Axom provinces were building of field embankments to prevent soil erosion, eradication of weeds and improvement of communications to enable accessibility to the markets. Veterinary help to improve livestock, home gardening and sanitation and supply of drinking water were some of the other programs taken up for agricultural development.

The north-eastern region of Axom was prone to malaria, plague, small pox and cholera. In the early twentieth century, this caused considerable concern to the British government and in the archival records I found proposals for setting up a hospital at the district level and dispensaries at the local level. Detailed information of how these health problems were dealt with is not available in these records.

It was claimed that the method of approach to work in all agricultural and rural development programs would be through the villager, which would be an attempt to obtain peoples' participation. However, it is interesting to note that in 1935 a district rural development association was formed by the District Officer who enlisted all the leading landlords and local leaders in the association. These efforts appear contrary to the stated objective of people's participation. In fact, the rural and agricultural development programs were aimed at improving the conditions of the rural rich and landlords. The British government relied on these high caste Hindu landlords whom they saw as dependable revenue payers and therefore promoted their growth by consolidating land under them.
The landlords, in turn, supported the British government for they well knew that their existence arose from and depended upon the continuation of the colonial power. Economically, they were nothing short of ruthless exploiters of the small peasantry who were the actual cultivators of land, and socially, they tended towards orthodoxy as it strengthened their position in a stratified society. The pressing need for land reform arose out of the nature of land ownership chalked out by the British and the tremendous potential it had for exploiting the poor peasant.

Interestingly enough, the powerful group of rich landlords, who are mostly caste Hindus, continue to exercise control through political linkages at the block, district and state levels. They manipulate and regulate rural development programs to sustain their socio-political and economic power. The British administration forced upon India the concept of private property in land. In the late nineteenth century, land was therefore demarcated, and the first land allotments were made. These measures radically altered the rural areas as, with the stroke of a pen, former peasant cultivators were turned into tenants and serfs.

Today, 100 hundred years later, the majority of rural inhabitants, still linked economically and socially to these same landlords, continue to suffer as a result of these measures which have even more devastating effects on the position and status of women. The colonial law of inheritance, based on British property law, did not allow women to inherit property or even to rent land in their own name. This served to reinforce the cultural attitudes regarding women as unpropertied citizens. To date, it is rare that land is given to a woman of any class and is even more rare for a female cultivator to rent land independently. Land privatization was only a first step in converting traditional villages into thriving commercial centers to feed into the capitalist superstructure. The Government encouraged landowners to open up new lands, and introduce agricultural machinery. The notorious moneylenders emerged as a result of the increasing impoverishment of the villagers, especially the
share croppers.


Indian society today is characterized by a socio-economic structure based on unequal control over means of production and a bureaucratic structure that confers highly disproportionate authority on office holders. The class basis of agricultural and rural development in India is evident from the fact that of the total number of 552 million people living in rural areas, 60 percent are poor peasants and agricultural laborers owning 0 to 2.49 acres of land, 30 percent are small peasants owning 2.50 to 9.99 acres of land, and 10 percent are rich peasants who own 10 acres or more. This 10 percent of rich peasants own and control 60 to 70 percent of the total cultivated land area, possess 61 percent of total assets, secure nearly half of the total flow of credit, command about 63 percent of the gross value of output and 67 percent of the total amount of marketable surplus (calculated from data in National Agricultural Census of 1991), and wield considerable authority at all levels of bureaucracy. This concentration of socio-economic power in their hands makes them credit-worthy and "progressive" farmers, having technical knowledge and commercial skill. Poor peasants and agricultural laborers, who make up 90 percent of the rural population, control a total of approximately 20 to 30 percent of the land. The majority of the latter are victims of crushing indebtedness, ruthless taxation and frequent starvation caused by the growing monopolization of resources by the rural elite. This disadvantaged and dispossessed group receive hardly any consideration under development planning and programs (Das, 1959; Billings and Singh, 1970; Misra, 1981).

Rural women constitute 265 million, i.e. around 31 percent of the total rural population (Census of India, 1991), and comprise 50 percent of the agricultural labor force. More than 75 per
cent of rural women belong to the families of small and marginal farmers. Approximately two-thirds to one-half of the farm manual labor is done by women. Two-thirds of rural women are illiterate. They are involved in all sectors of the rural economy such as agricultural wage labor, animal husbandry, handicrafts, and related activities.

In the period after Independence, restrictions on land have been further loosened. Amendments have allowed various categories of transfer, whereby large areas of indigenous land are acquired for "public" purposes by officials and used to sanction virtually any project over and above those intended for industrial, mining or irrigation (Mellor, 1981; Krishna, 1986; Vanaik, 1990). There have been cases where land has been taken from the peasants for some project or the other, but even after the project has been abandoned the land is not returned to the peasants. However, the recognition of village land rights had a beneficial impact on the local economy as the peasants could clear and cultivate land and improve irrigation facilities, without being constantly threatened by a rapacious landlord. The process of reclamation of land for agriculture is still proceeding in the indigenous areas of the North-east.

The 1990s are witnessing cutbacks in the welfare programs leading to a significant decline in living standards. The global or macroeconomic reforms advocated in SAP packages have had a devastating impact on agricultural activities, particularly on women (Elson, 1989; Bates, 1989; Gladwin, 1991). In India, as in many parts of the Third World, agriculture provides a major part of the much-needed foreign currency, and the number of people involved in agriculture is high. The Gross Domestic Product and employment base are highly influenced by agricultural activities. The lowering of commodity prices, removal of government subsidies, privatization of marketing boards, and liberalization of the trade process all impact on agricultural production. By imposing drastic cuts in education and health services, SAPs have aggravated existing inequalities and further marginalized
women (Vyas, 1993; Shah, Gandhi and Chachi, 1994; Sharma, 1995).

Little has changed in the land and forest policy of Independent India. The current land and ecological crises lie in the exploitative policies followed by the British rule and perpetuated by the post-colonial government. The current national policies are often only remodels of the former policies of the colonial regime. Since Independence in 1947, India has been following a path of centrally planned development with the government making efforts to support weaker sections of the population. The national process of economic development through the Five-year Plans have aimed at better utilization of human resources. The attempts, though massive, have not achieved the goal of full employment for the rapidly growing population (Frankel, 1978; Bardhan, 1984). The 1971 census categorizes only 33% of the population as "main workers" (defined as persons working for at least 183 days a year) for all India and 25% for Assam. In the 1981 Census, these percentages had changed slightly to 33.44 per cent and 26.54 per cent respectively. In the 1991 Census, 34% were categorized as "main workers" for all India, of whom 56.4% were cultivators. Out of this group, only 19.4% are categorized as females. Out of the total "main workers" for 1991, 13.3% are categorized as agricultural laborers of whom only 19.2% are women (Census of India, 1991). The "main workers" for Assam is reported to be 27.6%. The employment ratio of women in Assam has been facing a steady decline, together with low literacy rates, high birth rates, and high infant mortality rates. After more than five decades of state-directed development, India continues to be characterized by high levels of poverty and economic inequality. The prevalence of poverty, illiteracy and disease has led to the recognition that the development programs have been a failure.
3. Position of Women in India

There is a history of female subordination (and also of female infanticide) in India. The ideal traditional family and kinship system was patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal and organized around male authority. Women occupied an extremely low status. The vast majority of women lacked economic independence and had no right to participate in most general political activities. According to the laws of Manu, the ancient Hindu law-book, women are required to function within the framework of three obediences: "Before marriage, obey your father. After marriage, obey your husband. After your husband dies, obey your son" (Das, 1962). India is a male dominated society, signalled in its culture and dress codes, and the invisibility of women at many levels of social life. The indigenous communities have been significantly Hinduized. Following the Indo-Aryan culture, protection of caste and clan purity and thus control over female sexuality is traditionally of supreme importance. Descent and inheritance is accorded patrilineally. The concern with caste purity and hence with the purity of the female body manifests in various cultural restrictions, such as the mobility of adolescent girls and young women, widow remarriage, and choice of marriage partner, all leading to restrictions on women's participation in market places. While women's strategies manipulate patriarchal norms, they do not threaten male dominance within a hierarchical family system (Bhasin, 1971; Everett, 79; 81; Omvedt. 1980).

The integration of the women's movement into the nationalist independence movement raised a number of fundamental questions concerning the participation of women in development plans and programs (Asthana, 1974; Basu, 1976; Butalia, 1985). On the eve of Indian Independence in 1947, the leadership recognized the need to tackle the difficult problems of social, economic and political "backwardness" of their women. However, the westernization of the Indian political elite, symbolized by the use of English and the absence of a national language between itself and the masses, and the
prevalence of religious and caste differences, created barriers between the urban and the rural sectors (Mazumdar, 1976; Lateef, 1981; Liddle and Joshi, 1986) The development strategies were never geared to destroy class-and-gender based disparities. They reinforced patriarchal bases of power and failed to involve the masses of rural women and men in the decision-making process at all levels of social, economic, and political activity as well as in planning and implementing development programs (Forbes, 1982; Desai and Patel, 1985; Sharma, 1991)

The following facts give an indication of the position of women in India today..

- Female literacy is 24.7 per cent, and less than ten per cent in the villages.
- Life expectancy of Indian women is among the lowest in the world at 58.3 years.
- The female-male population ratio is ninety-one women to 100 men - among the lowest in the world; this compares with a ratio of 99 women to 100 men for Ireland.
- Almost 90% of lactating women are anemic (UNDP, 1994).
- Women members constitute less than 7.1 percent in the Indian parliament

The Indian Association of Women's Studies Conference, held in Bombay on June 1998, (Indian Express, June 3, 1998) revealed some shocking statistics: a woman is raped every 54 minutes, two girl children are raped everyday, one woman is killed every 102 minutes in the name of dowry, half of married women are below 18 years of age, every year 10,000 girl foetuses are denied life and nearly 30 million agriculture women workers receive wages below the minimum wage limit. This despite legislation like Section 376, covering rape in the Indian Penal Code, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1986, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, the Pre-Natal Determination Act of 1994, and the Equal Remuneration Act, 1975. Such laws remain confined to paper and are yet to touch the lives of rural women (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Krishnaraj and Ranadive, 1987; 1989).

Domestic violence is widespread in India, as it is elsewhere. The police are inclined to treat issues such as incest, rape, and wife battering as domestic matters rather than police affairs. In these
cases the way forward lies not so much in law reform as with drastic changes in social attitudes. Violence against women includes stove burning - a practice where women are pushed into open fires or stoves and their injuries are then attributed to their own carelessness - kidnaping, gang rape, and murder. Because women in indigenous communities in particular are seen as possessions to be bought and sold, they have few rights within the family or community (Chatterji, 1988; Forbes, 1996).

There is an alarming and unique demographic situation in India today where the figure of women per thousand men has been falling continuously since the beginning of this century. In 1901 India had 972 women per thousand men. In 1971 women were 930 per thousand men; in 1991 the sex ratio stands at 923 women. Evidently women are fed poorly, tended unfairly and allotted to die preferentially. Among girls the mortality rate is much higher than among boys. Several studies undertaken by the National Institute of Nutrition suggest that malnutrition among female infants and adult women is on the increase in post-independent India. These studies also indicate that while there is a higher incidence of diseases caused by malnutrition among women, the hospital rate of admission and treatment of young and adult males for these diseases is higher (Agarwal, 1988; Khan et al, 1989; Bagchi, 1993). Osmani (1990) highlights the much lower caloric and protein intake levels of women relative to their needs, their higher levels of morbidity and malnutrition and their greater neglect during illness, found especially but by no means only in poor households. However, there are considerable regional differences in the extent of these biases which are much greater in the North-west than in the North-east and the South, due to economic and cultural factors. The economic factors of particular significance are gender differences in labour force participation rates and earnings and relative male/female marriage costs. In areas of visibly low female labour participation in agriculture and high dowry, such as north-west India, the view that girls are economic liabilities is especially strong. Hired labor, both male and female, accounts for a major share of the total labor
input in Axom. Rosenzweig and Schultz (1982) have pointed out a significant positive correlation in India between levels of rainfall in a district and the employment of women: the more the rainfall, the more rice, the more women are employed. As pointed out by others (Bardhan 1974; Miller 1981), it is also true in Axom that the economic value of female children and the value placed on their survival in infancy is higher than in the north or northwest parts of India.

Like the continuous fall in the proportion of women in the population, there has been a steady decline in the employment of women. Work opportunities and participation for women in India have been declining over the last several decades. The working group on employment of women in November 1995 came to the conclusion that women form the largest section of unemployed in both urban and rural areas. The roots of this tendency can be traced to an unequitable agrarian structure.

Women's position is impaired further by a class and sex-based strategy of technological development. The impact of technological change has in most instances had an adverse impact on women's employment (Krishnaraj, 1988). A UN report shows that when ploughing is mechanized and acreage extended women have to work harder to keep up (Bennett, 1992). As a result of modernization, there has been a steady loss of land and the number of agricultural labourers is on the increase (Mazumdar, 1991). This trend has had a major effect on the economic role of women in agriculture. Their participation in agriculture as independent cultivators has declined substantially, and more and more women have been forced into agricultural labour. The number of female cultivators has decreased by 50 per cent resulting in the growing feminization of poverty and the inability of the family farm to provide productive employment (Singh, 1996; Holmstrom, 1990). The growth in the number of agricultural labourers can be attributed to women's displacement from the role of cultivators and workers on family farms (Kandiyoti, 1985). The Committee on the Status of Women in India found that a rising level of employment in agriculture, particularly as agricultural
labor, is an "indication of increasing poverty and reduction in the level of employment and not of improving rights and opportunities for economic participation" (Towards Equality, 1974: 23).

Although women contribute significantly to agriculture, most agricultural training programmes are aimed at men. Property acquired during marriage is usually in the name of the husband. Inheritance rights of women are uniformly inferior to those of men. Women are denied possibilities of physical survival and employment in the process of modernization (Jain, 1975; 1978; Nanda, 1976; Mazumdar, 1982). They have been "squeezed out from the productive sphere and reduced to a unit of consumption and therefore, less socially desirable. The two streams of deterioration are two sides of the same coin" (Mitra, 1987). The increasing deterioration in the conditions of women, as exemplified in the witch-hunts that overtook the European counties between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries "is now having its counterpart in the Third World, this time more quietly and insidiously" (Mitra, Pathak and Mukherjee, 1989).

In the 1950s, a number of laws, quite radical in nature, were passed in India. These laws provided for monogamy and equality in marriage, as well as for adoption, succession and inheritance rights of Hindu women. However, the issue of self-arranged marriages or a woman's right to choose her partner is yet to be voiced in the organized women's movement of India. The Constitution of India declares equality of sex as a guiding principle, but in reality, the subordination of women to men and junior to senior pervades family life in all classes and castes in India. Customary practices preclude daughters from inheriting land except in the absence of male heirs (Krishnaraj, 1988). Several studies have pointed out that in post-Independence India, the State has actively collaborated with the rural rich in perpetuating inequality in landownership patterns, resulting in further decline in peasant women's position (Thorner, 1976; Bardhan, 1985; Mazumdar, 1983; Omvedt, 1983; Sharma, 1984). Women have few property rights. Bonded labor exists amongst the lowest income groups and affects
men, women and children. In agriculture women and children work an average 18 hours a day. Together with the cultural ideology of purity and pollution, the subsistence nature of the economy and mass poverty determine work patterns of women and life options in India. Despite cultural variations, women's substantial contribution to the rural household's survival and reproduction emerges as an overwhelming fact. Social attitudes, a general antipathy toward women, and their general lack of property keep women from economic ventures. The state in India has never questioned power relations within the family or enabled women to have access to property and other resources. Through its patriarchal ideology, it has further served to erode the rights which women earlier enjoyed.

Development projects formulated in post-independence India have created more suffering for the poor while benefitting a few. For instance, hydroelectric projects built mainly in indigenous areas have uprooted indigenous peoples in Assam. Thus, the main responsibility for development planning in India has remained with the upper-caste, male-dominated bureaucracy at the state and central level. No attempts have been made to make the political apparatus sensitive to the needs and interests of the masses of women and men, and to formulate and implement policies in consultation with the common people. Patriarchal structures dominated by rich men are represented as structures of participatory development. The state does not look upon housework as the duty of both men and women. On the contrary, its census records define housework as non-work and state policy implicitly suggests that housework is the "natural duty" of the wife and urges women to resolve the contradictions between housework and economically "productive" work (Bardhan, 1984; Chakravarty and Tiwari, 1979; Dak, 1988).

In India, as in other parts of the world, feminists are at the fore of the human rights movement, campaigning for equality of opportunity and equal status at all levels in societies where
traditional attitudes and practices weigh heavily against the females (Rajan, 1994; Mukhopadhyay and Seymour, 1993; Gandhi and Shah, 1992; Agarwal, 1994; Forbes, 1996).

4. Conclusion

Thus modern agricultural strategy has increased rural contradictions: the pauperization of the marginal peasantry and forced migration of a large number of landless labourers. The argument that in the future, increased productivity and income will absorb the marginal populations has been proven false. Moreover, the quality and range of access to resources has declined either due to environmental destabilization or due to the new agricultural strategies (Haddan, 1986). Regarding women in India, planners and policy makers have been insensitive to the position of women within the patriarchal power structure in the family and to unequal power relations between women and men in the community. Women's work in socio-economic development, their activities related to production and reproduction, are marginally recorded in Census data, surveys or other archival records routinely referred to for development planning. Rural development programs have repeatedly reinforced the housewifization of women and have treated them as "unpaid family workers" who receive no recognition for their productive and reproductive labor. Planning bodies and development research institutes are still largely capitalist male domains. Class and gender interests continue to determine the choice of development programs, planning policies, and theoretical concepts. These are the contradictions that cause fundamental questions to be asked.
Chapter 5

Axom: Political History and Economic Background

Introduction

In this chapter, I present a brief account of the traditional economy and society of the north-eastern region of India, with particular focus on the agrarian system. This account is a construction based upon colonial records, including such well known ethnographic studies as those of Moore (1901), Hutton (1921a, 1921b, 1945), Hodson (1908), Shakespear (1912), Gait (1926), Gurdon (1914), and Hamilton (1940). It is equally based on my own field studies, carried out during the period 1995-1996, and observing what of the traditional system still survives, in addition to the new elements.

1. India's North-East

Geography has had its influence on the economic, social and cultural life of the north-east region. A tiny corridor of India, curving like a scythe, is sandwiched between the Himalayas and the teeming land of Bangladesh. This narrow corridor of land connects India's northeast with the rest of the country. At Siliguri, situated at the mouth of this narrow land corridor, generations of tea planters, Buddhist lamas, Tibetan traders, and mountaineers have passed through, travelling eastward toward Axom on the single-track, now broad gauge railway that, along with an arterial road, is all that connects it with the rest of India (Hunter, 1879). The state of Axom is located in this extreme northeastern corner of the Indian subcontinent (See Map 1). North-East India comprises a long, narrow alluvial plain through which flows the mighty Brahmaputra river and a chain of mountains that are the extension of the Himalayas in the north. It is bordered to the north by Tibet and Bhutan, to
the east by Myanmar and west by Bangladesh. Over 90 percent of the region's population is rural, dependent on agriculture. This region was brought under British colonial administration during the second half of the 19th century with considerable use of force against the indigenous people (Muirhead-Thomson, 1948). The communities lived by land and forest and had little to do with state development policies or market mechanisms until after India's Independence in 1947. Real development and change began in the 1960s. In this the state and market mechanisms have both played their role.

The northeastern region of India, although related to the neighboring states in various ways, has been a distinct entity in Indian history for some three thousand years. Axom became administratively a part of British India in 1826 after the first Burmese war (1824-26). It became a separate province of India in 1874. The northern region is covered with high mountain ranges of the Himalayas and was largely inaccessible. According to Hutton (1921), racial and cultural characteristics of the hill tribes of north-east India can be traced to South-east Asiatic countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand, since people entered the region through various mountain passes in paleolithic times. They largely settled in the hilly regions, leaving the alluvial plains almost desolate and barren, until the period when the region began to be populated by Aryan immigrants from the great Indo-Gangetic plains of Northern India who settled down in the Brahmaputra valley. The Brahmaputra Valley forms a corridor between the two great civilizations of India and China, while the Himalayas reach to the frontiers of Iran and Central Asia.

The foremost feature of the social order of northeast India is its heterogeneity. The region is inhabited by three major groups: the hill tribes, the plains tribes and the non-indigenous populations of the plains. Within each group, there is tremendous variety; in terms of race (probably greater variety than in any other part of the globe); language (as many as 420 languages and dialects); and
religion (animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity). The north-east region today is comprised of seven states, each rather small. They are Axom, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Tripura. Formerly, well after India's Independence in 1947, all were included in the state of Axom. Since then, for reasons of indigenous and ethnic solidarity and the movement for separate identity, the other states have been carved out of the parent state, Axom. More than 80% of the people live in the villages. The region as a whole covers an area of 26 million hectares, over 7 percent of India's total area. Axom, covering much of the Brahmaputra valley, accounts for 71 percent of the plains area of the region.

2. **Axom: Ecology and Demography**

Today Axom consists of twenty-three districts of the Brahmaputra or Axom valley, which are chiefly Axomiya speaking, the three districts of Cachar in the Surma valley, which are Bengali speaking, and the two hill districts of Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills (see map 2). It is basically an agrarian state with over 80 percent of the population engaged in the agricultural sector.
The demographic facts of Axom are shown in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1. Axom: Demographic Facts, 1994**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>22.4 million</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>2.4 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>19.9 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Male</td>
<td>1.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Female</td>
<td>1.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Male</td>
<td>10.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Female</td>
<td>9.6 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Literacy</td>
<td>9.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Literacy</td>
<td>5.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Literacy</td>
<td>3.6 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>78,438 sq.km.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density per sq. km</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Ratio</td>
<td>923 females/1000 males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant Mortality Rate</td>
<td>81 (per 1000 births)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistical Handbook Of Assam, 1994

According to the 1991 Census, Axom has a population of 22.4 million people with a total area of 78,438 square kilometers, and a density of 286 persons per sq.km. The female population is 10.7m, i.e., 48 percent. Of the total population of 22.4 million, 19.9 million people live in the rural areas, i.e., 89 percent. Out of this sector, women constitute 9.6 million, i.e., around 48 percent. The sex ratio stands at 923 females per 1000 males. The literacy rate for women is 16 percent, while for males it is 26 percent of the total population (Statistical Handbook of Assam, 1994).

The Axom of today has emerged from a long process of historical evolution, and this process merits investigation if its brief history as a modern political entity is to be understood. The first stage in this examination is to consider the nature of Axomiya national consciousness, a force which is
backed by an ancient cultural heritage. The history of Axom occupies only a small part of the history of the subcontinent, but its existence cannot be satisfactorily explained without its being placed within the context of the subcontinent's historical experience as a whole. Culturally, Axom is woven into the fabric of the wider Indian civilization by a number of unifying threads, resulting from, for example, the character of Hinduism, India's comparative geographical isolation from the rest of Asia, and the rich literary heritage of Sanskrit (Bhuyan, 1928; Neog, 1980). Acting parallel with what might be termed 'Indian' cultural nationalism in Axom, is the regional Axomiya nationalism produced by certain diversifying features of Indian history such as its internal geographical variety and ethnic makeup; features which have strengthened the regional character where topography and race are more uniform. In addition, political disunity rather than cohesion has been a feature of India's history, reinforcing the distinctive regional qualities which give rise to a feeling of local cultural nationalism in areas such as Axom (Buchanan, 1963; Chatterji, 1955).

Axomiya nationalism has always been based upon cultural identity, with unity founded upon language and to some extent upon religion. The Axomiya language is related to others of North India but written in a distinctive script which has much in common with other north Indian scripts except Urdu and Punjabi. The flowering of Axomiya literature is a part of raising Axomiya national consciousness. The entire region of Axom has a strong cultural unity, reinforced by hundreds of years of a common political history (Choudhury, 1966; Guha, 1991).

(i). The Golden Land

Axom is a state of great beauty, of dreaming villages and quiet rivers, inhabited by a people possessing a natural grace and a consciousness of their ancient culture. Their roots, deep down, are Hindu, and they think of themselves as Axomiya first, and Hindus second. There are 22 million
people, speaking a common language, sharing a common history, and possessing the same traditions, living on the banks of the same river.

These rivers give them life and order their way of living. The Axomiya people know the waterways around their village, the secret channels, the hidden wellsprings. Their village is likely to be nothing more than a cluster of bamboo huts that would be washed away during the floods or reduced to matchsticks; and rebuilt within a day. The rivers change their course, the land changes its shape and the monsoons of summer dominate the lives of the Axomiya people, and they live precariously, never knowing what the next day will bring. Their security breeds a certain fatalism, a calm acceptance of disaster reinforced by their faith in God.

On any normal day a visitor to one of these villages would find herself in paradise. Sometimes the people working in the fields break into song, and in the evening there are more songs as the villagers crowd under the largest tree. On festive occasions, the women wear gold bracelets, necklaces and anklets, and move with extraordinary grace.

In these villages a family might earn less than a hundred dollars a year in cash, but they often live better than most of the poor people in the towns. They do not have to pay for shelter, for they build their own shelter and grow their own food. It is a hard life, but a satisfying one. The villagers are not only farmers, they are boat-builders, hydraulic engineers, architects of rough-hewn houses and huts, builders of dams and canals. Newspapers usually reach them too late to provide them with any useful information, and they rely on their cheap mass-produced transistor radios for news of the world beyond their village. Transistor radios have revolutionized their ideas and they no longer see themselves as people living in the remote backwaters. They know about the comings and goings of great political figures. It is not only that the villagers are politically conscious, but they also possess great untapped stores of political energy.
Guwahati, the capital, is a vast sprawling city with a million inhabitants. In the center of the city are parks, gardens, the governor's palace, the university, the Brahmaputra Hotel, all giving an appearance of wealth and spaciousness.

In the monsoon season, from June to August, and sometimes extending into October, the city becomes a steaming lake, an enormous quagmire. A hundred inches of rainfall every year, and most of it comes during the monsoon season. This is the time when a green mold grows on clothes and shoes, and mosquitoes and malaria flourish. During these months, the city becomes a sea of black umbrellas.

When the sun shines Guwahati comes to life again, shrugging off the long misery of interminable rains. The slow dragging pace of life during the monsoon changes to a brisk gallop; and the crowds of three-wheeled rickshaws, deliriously painted, are now revealed in their true colors. For the equivalent of ten cents the driver will take you for a mile's ride, offering in addition a running commentary on everything he observes around him in the local Axomiya language. The Axomiya are a people who like to smile and laugh, and tell stories, and chew betel nuts, and work hard under the broiling sun. Although they resent the government at New Delhi, the Axomiya are reasonably tolerant. They are treated like a colony, the greater part of their wealth going to support a corrupt government. Each year, rains fall uninterruptedly, millions of acres are inundated, peasant huts are destroyed and the economic life of the peasants comes to a standstill. The Chief Minister flies in, assumes complete charge of relief operations, accomplishes nothing and flies back. He promises relief funds, but these promises are designed more to improve his own image as benefactor of the people than to be kept. The floods subside, the dead are dug out of the mud, and the peasants rebuild the bamboo huts and work their fields. They observe ruefully that the government that takes their tax money has done very little to protect them from the floods and that most of the money sent from
Guwahati and New Delhi for relief somehow finds its way to the pockets of the officials. The Axomiya resent the aloofness and indifference of the government, its inefficiency and incompetence.

(ii). Cultural Landscape

The distinctive features of the Axomiya culture are inseparably connected to the religious institutions. The majority of Axomiya Hindus follow the path of devotion based on the teachings of the Bhagavat Purana which is associated in the state with the 15th century guru, Sankardeva.

Up to the twelfth century, animism and the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition, based upon India's ancient Hindu epics, dominated most of the region's consciousness. Buddhism was introduced in the seventh century; Islam in the thirteenth; and Christianity in the nineteenth. The legends, myths, folklores and customs of the area were woven with those of the rest of India and originated from the same sources: the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition. Both the Ramayana and Mahabharata make distinct references to Praejyotisha and Kamrup - the ancient and medieval names of Axom. The first recorded history was by the Chinese traveller and historian, Hiuen Tsang, who visited India in the first half of the seventh century (Sarma, 1989). In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the neo-Vaishnavite movement led by Sankardev (1449-1569) had unprecedented mass appeal in the Brahmaputra valley, and to a lesser extent, in the neighbouring hills (Borpujari, 1990; Barua, 1969). Sankardev tried and did succeed in great measure to rid Hindu religion of its magical rituals and beliefs. Satras (monasteries), where prayers were held and religious discourses were given, were established. They became centres of equality among castes and tribes; even the believers of Islam were not discriminated against. Namghars and Kirtanghars (places of worship) were set up in most villages and "satradhikars" and "gosains" (senior priests) visited them from far-flung areas. As a result of all these, Krishna became the key figure in social life and came to dominate the religious as well

140
as the entire gamut of thought processes of the people of this region (Medhi, 1978).

In Sankardeva's religion, there is no caste system or untouchability. In fact, the caste system in Axom is less rigid than in the rest of the country. The Clarendon press edition of the Imperial Gazetteer of India observed that:

Hinduism in general and caste in particular are much less rigid in Axom than in Bengal. The first Hindu emigrants seem to have entered the valley of Brahmaputra at a time when boundary lines between one caste and another were not clearly defined, and the presence of a large non-Hindu population sections of which from time to time attained to sovereignty made it impossible for them to affect too strict a standard of religious purity. The higher castes are somewhat lax in the observance of the ceremonial details of their religion; while castes which in Bengal are of comparatively low rank enjoy in Axom a much more respectable position (Gohain, 1962: 52).

It is difficult to establish a hierarchy of caste in Axom because the structure of castes in Axom is fluid and vague in comparison with other parts of India. Caste, though important, has not been the sole determinant of one's status in Axom since the advent of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Axom.

The cultural landscape of northeast India is shaped by several ethnic groups. The forces of democracy, politics, modernization and development have decisively altered the age-old patterns of relationship of every ethnic group. The indigenous groups constitute 11% of the population in Axom, with Sonowal Kosaris forming about 3%. The individuality of a tribe is characterized by its cultural traits, its language, its code of laws, its geography and its socio-economic institutions. All these make one ethnic group different from another. Nonetheless, in the course of evolution, the indigenous communities of north-east India have developed certain traits and attitudes which are common to each other. These relate to (a) sense of kinship; (b) adherence to traditional beliefs; (c) love for the language; and (d) deep attachment to the land (Waddell, 1986).

The British policy of divide and rule had an adverse impact on northeast India. The work of Christian missionaries began in the 1840s with the publication of Arunodaya, a Baptist monthly in Axomiya, the translation of the Bible into Axomiya, the transcription of indigenous languages into
Roman script, the establishment of hospitals and the founding of schools and colleges for both boys and girls. The conversion of animists to Christianity occurred on a phenomenal scale. The introduction of Christianity led to growth in literacy and better health care. At the same time, it weakened intra-community bonds of unity, and led to a decline in the authority of indigenous chiefs, and erosion of indigenous religion and culture (Borpujari, 1981).

The economic policies of the British rulers had serious social and cultural repercussions. Notwithstanding the notes recorded by certain perceptive British administrators and demographers, the British attitude towards social and cultural issues in the Brahmaputra Valley was one of benign neglect (Gait, 1926). Actuated by a strong desire to rule by any means, the British stifled the growth of a tradition of democratic social organization.

3. Kinship Structure

Among the Kosaris, the sense of kinship is closely linked to the family and blood relationships. It is composed of a number of clans, kinship groups and extended families. All members have a sense of belonging to a community which has common ancestors. This unit has found its cementing force in the indigenous "animistic" faith which is full of spirits related to fire, water, forest, mountain. The proverbial attachment of an indigenous person to the land is a complex web of relationships, the primary force of which is economics. But it is also related to tradition, family ties, and religion (Bordoloi, 1987).

Axomiya society is patrilineal and patrilocal. Descent is traced through the male line, and the bride goes to live in the village of the groom's paternal kin, leaving her village upon marriage. Men remain among their families, thereby sustaining a close-knit structure within their communities. The same is not true for women. A man has established authority over his wife, and the allocation of
resources is controlled by him. This has affected women’s access to economic resources, although they are responsible for over half the labor in the household.

4. Axom’s Economy

Axom is geographically set off from the rest of India, rich in natural resources, and not politically powerful. The central government and business interests have a "colonial hold on Axom’s economy and the utilization of its resources" (Sarma, 1989: 49). These factors combine to make it easy for the central government to extract and export valuable resources at the expense of economic and social development in Axom. Axom, which is rich in oil, receives less than three percent of the total oil revenues collected by the central government. In addition, all of the oil is exported from the region before it is refined, thus limiting further revenues that could be collected from it. The tea industry is also important in Axom, but it is controlled from Calcutta and London and virtually all revenues, with the exception of wages, are taken out of the region.

In Axom, agriculture is the mainstay of the economy. It has three main activities: crop cultivation, livestock farming and cottage industry. Livestock farming is closely associated with agriculture through factors such as fodder, use of oxen for ploughing, and use of dung as fertilizers. The third component of rural livelihood is weaving. Approximately 88 percent of women are linked to agriculture and related activities. Women are critical participants in farm production and in the household economy. Ploughing is about the only activity women usually do not undertake.

The process of modernization which began in the colonial era has greatly disrupted the economy of Axom by devaluing the traditional economic occupations. In order to understand how this transition has affected women’s employment, it is necessary to assess the traditional agrarian economy of the north-east and women’s economic role in it.
i). The Traditional Agrarian Economy:

Most of the north-east region is mountainous. Between 80 to 90 percent of the population of the region is still dependent upon agriculture and allied activities. This, along with an increasing population, has meant increasing population pressure on the cultivable lands and in the forest cover. The boundaries of a village are well demarcated by water courses and hills, and customarily recognized by neighboring villages. The village community organization has a council of elders for purposes of managing the affairs of the village. This council, however, has little role to play in the state-sponsored development programs. They have been sidelined by village Panchayats (village councils, the lowest political level of local government) elected on the basis of adult suffrage under laws passed by the state legislatures in the region, as elsewhere in India.

From a selection of early British reports (Verrier, 1959) and ethnography (Dalton, 1872), what stands out as the most common economic feature of all the communities of the region is that they lived by shifting and settled cultivation, supplemented by animal husbandry, gathering of forest products, hunting and fishing. They also had some basic handicrafts like fashioning certain tools for their own use and making household goods, including cloth. This mode of earning a living continues in a vestigial form. New elements are in the ascendant, to which we shall return below.

While the peasantry satisfied its basic needs through this mode of economic life, they were not, contrary to the general belief, self-sufficient. For this reason they engaged in the exchange of goods by barter among themselves, with professional traders and with the neighboring areas of Tibet and Myanmar. If nothing else, salt and metal were supplied from outside. The goods supplied by the peasants in exchange included hunted and gathered forest produce, and cultivated items such as ginger, turmeric, mustard, pepper and betel-leaf (Dalton, 1872; Mackenzie, 1884).
For such transactions, money as a medium of exchange, and for wealth and capital accumulation was neither necessary nor present. In the late 19th century, the British for the first time, introduced money by imposing and collecting a house-tax payable in cash, and by paying in cash, for forced-contract labor required for road construction and other public works (Barpujari, 1970). This necessitated the exchange of some goods against money, but among the people money still had little role to play until after state plans for development were launched in the post-independence period.

Land is held in common either by the village community as a whole or the clan and lineage. Individuals and families by virtue of being members have the right to cultivate land for a living. If a member leaves the village, all rights are abrogated. Each year a new block of forest is cleared collectively and then divided and allocated among the member families according to the "number of mouths to feed". There have been elaborate and institutionalized forms of cooperative labor institutions among peasant families from the stage of clearing the forest to the final harvesting of the crop. In general there are two types of activity which give rise to two forms of labor. Activity or work of a collective nature, like clearing forests, constructing a village road are all on collective labor in which every family participates. Secondly, there is activity or work of a private nature benefiting a certain family for which the family requires cooperative labor from other families, which may be sowing, weeding, harvesting, house construction and so forth. Co-operative labor is mobilized on the basis of reciprocity..

(ii) Women's Role in the Traditional Economy:

In the traditional economy, production was mainly for subsistence. The family was the unit of production and men, women and children participated in production activities. To make this system efficient, there was division of labour within the family, assigning particular tasks to men and
women. The roles of the sexes were complementary and not necessarily hierarchical. Women's contribution to the support of the economy was crucial. They were responsible for the care of children, the production of the major share of the food consumed, marketing of handicrafts and produce, and domestic chores in general. With the onset of modernization and industrialization, family production for subsistence was gradually replaced by the specialized production of goods and services. The work place moved from the family home or immediate vicinity to specialised workshops and factories. The traditional division of labour which was necessary to make the family production unit efficient became inoperative. The introduction of technology necessitated the hiring of skilled labour. Women's traditional skills were of little use in the new economy and they were pushed out of the labour force (Ghadially, 1988; Awasthi, 1982).

The traditional village economy in Axom consisted of cultivators, artisans and those providing services. In each of these spheres, women played an important economic role. In many areas they were also responsible for marketing the products. Markets were local and easily accessible. Women were producers, managers of household industries, traders and retailers. These aspects of their role continue to exist in the traditional communities to this day. However, in the years since Independence, there has been a steady erosion in the position and status of women in Axom and the rest of India. The high female mortality rates, their illiteracy, lack of access to training and education, their unequal access to medical and health services point to this.

5. Traditional Land Rights of the Kosari Community

Historically, the Kosaris enjoyed a communal land system. However, it is a difficult task to study the historical evolution of this system as there is no written material on its early history. This does not mean that these are peoples who lack a history, at least until the colonial period. Despite
the paucity of material, we have enough reason to believe from historical reconstruction (Hutton, 1921; Gait, 1926; Shakespear, 1912) that the communal land system survived the onset of the colonial administration, and even today some forms of communal land ownership still exist. The Kosari system of land ownership was characterized by a system of clan or lineage ownership of village land. Originally, a Kosari male received land, not by seizure, but by village decision. When the family had brought the land under cultivation, he acquired a permanent right of its possession. A family possessed land only by virtue of being a member of the village community. The basic notion of the community, essentially a village community, is an agrarian one, identifying a common descent from the "original settlers" of the soil. Thus, agriculture is a dominant factor because it "determines the general social organization to which other economic, social and political activities are subordinate." (Meillasoux, 1981: 35). Forests and their flowering seasons also played an important role in the ritual life of the Kosari tribe. The village land that existed, according to the accounts of the nineteenth century missionaries and colonial administrators (Dalton, 1872; Hunter, 1879; Mackenzie, 1884), was held by the village community in common. Land was allotted to individual families or lineages, and could not be alienated or transferred without the approval of the community. The individuals relate in a double way - both as members of the community and as workers. Ownership and labor are combined, not separated. However, they were not combined for everyone who formed a part of the community. Women could relate to the community only as workers and not as owners. Thus, even in this earliest form of communal property, differences and distinctions already existed, characterized by the appropriation of labor by in-marrying women.

The community was also politically organized, although it did not amount to what can be properly called a state. There was no bureaucracy or army separate from the people. The rights of the land were those of the village community. Each village had a headman (gaonbura) and a priest
(bhakat). These posts, as all other posts, were hereditary. They were not only politically and ritually important but also had a superior economic position.

Over the years, relations between the village community and the outside world have changed, and this has resulted in change in the village community as well.

(i). Land Rights of Kosari Women

In the course of this long transition, what has happened to the status of women, to the land rights of women? Access to land is a crucial component of women's agricultural involvement. While women make up the majority of subsistence farmers throughout the third world, they have title to only 1 percent of the land (Dankelman and Davidson, 1988: 8-9). In India, women may hold rights over land through inheritance, purchase, or usufruct (clan or lineage trusteeship) from local authorities. Inheritance patterns may give women limited or no authority over land. Often social factors and family politics inhibit women from claiming their formal rights. In Axom, the customary land tenure system stipulates that the land use rights be governed by males, making a large percentage of women farmers legally landless. Under the usufructory system, where use of land is inherited or determined by clan or village elders, manipulation of these rights to the advantage of men over women is common. Neither as daughters, nor as wives do women have independent access to land. Widows with young children do have some rights over the husband's land, but they are limited.

Among the Kosaris, the patrilineal principle is strong with respect to land. Land is the major form of accumulation in their economy. Tradition dictates that land management and ownership remain male prerogatives. In Kekuri, land tenure falls under the jurisdiction of customary law, although there is a modern system under which land has to be registered and titled. Under customary law, land tenure is determined by the lineage, clan or village group. Land is seen as a sacred trust of
the ancestors to the group, to be supervised by someone recognized by the group, usually a male, who is seen as a connection to the ancestors in regard to matters pertaining to the use of the land. Thus one has the right to use land but not possess it. In the Kosari community, land is allocated by senior men and is inherited in the male line and divided among the male children. Women typically do not inherit land. The foundation of the village community is, as a result, that of the male descendants of the original settlers of the soil. Within this system of descent, women, nevertheless, have had certain definite though limited rights in land. These rights have evolved over time, and are still changing. These rights are essentially of two kinds: one is a life interest in land, a right to manage land and its produce; and the other is a right to a share of the produce of the land. A woman can accumulate some assets. Income from her wage labor or her own sale of forest produce can be used for such accumulation. A father or brother may keep some land for a woman, but a woman cannot claim it as a right. Married women are not entitled to plots. Husbands are automatically assumed to be family heads and the allotted plots registered in their names. As the family can name only one heir, this is usually the son. Women have the right to produce food on their husband's land, but have no control over it. Control rests with the husband, brothers, sons or village elites. In the case of a divorce, a man may give the wife land for maintenance and to allow her to live apart. A wife has thus limited rights to land. Her relation to land is only through the mediation of her husband, father or brother. A woman can easily lose the right to the use of land because of the death of her husband, divorce or abandonment. This situation becomes particularly difficult for the female-headed household where there is no male to provide access to land, or to help with the farm work, thus affecting their productivity and economic independence. None of the women in my group could afford to buy land on their own. One woman farmer maintained that she lost her right to use the land left to her by her husband as she was unable to pay the yearly taxes.
Widows, however, have the same rights to land as their dead husbands, inheriting all the land and movables. She has the right to manage the land and supervise its cultivation. Of course, the right is conditional on her remaining in the village and on her not remarrying. However, there has been a progressive degradation in the land rights of widows whereby they are pressurized by the male heirs of the husband to give up the land itself, and forced to live on a meager maintenance. This deterioration shows the growing domination of the market economy resulting in the increasing oppression of widows by their male relatives whose interest is to take over the land as soon as possible. Although men were dominant before, they did not have the motive to take over land as individuals until private property in land was introduced with the onset of "development" and "modernization". These market and legal changes also brought in its wake renewed attacks on widows as witches. Discussions revealed that there is a general feeling that the phenomenon of witch-hunting is related to the attempt of male heirs (sometimes the widow's own children) to remove the threat to their property rights and get rid of unwanted females, chiefly widows. Widows have a life interest in land, which after their death, would pass into the hands of the male heirs. When such women are denounced as witches and then driven away or killed, the land is immediately passed in to the hands of the husband's male heirs (Dreze, 1990; Chen & Dreze, 1995).

The situation in which a woman has the most comprehensive land rights equal to men, is when she is married in ghor jowai form, i.e., where the husband comes to reside in the woman's home as the father has no sons to inherit the land. A daughter married in this form becomes like a son, and has the same rights to land as any other son.

In spite of legislation, such as the Zamindari Abolition Act of 1950, no fundamental change has been brought about in the agrarian structure and land relations in India. Planned changes in rural development and agrarian transformation through land reforms have not succeeded in reversing the
process of decline in peasant women's position. Women still do not inherit property. A sister prefers not to press her claims to her share in her father's land since the goodwill of her brothers is important to her after her parents' death and a woman would prefer to be in a position to be able to call on her brothers whenever she needs it. As a wife, a woman has no ownership rights in the land of her husband. As a widow, she has limited rights of inheritance, but they cannot always be exercised. This is corroborated by evidence in different parts of the country (Towards Equality, 1974).

Women have been struggling against the prejudice of state officials as well as their own community's men towards women having independent land rights. During my field work, Podumi, a poor peasant woman pointed out:

Please ask the sarkar (government) why when it distributes land, do we not get any title? Are we not peasants? If my husband throws me out, then what is my security? Who is responsible for our children? Not our men. We are. Then why are we not given any title to the homestead land?

Mamoni, a wage laborer remarked sharply: "We never control any assets, not even the children we bear. They are known as the father's children. This has been going on for generations". Tunbai, another woman added:

Land is passed on from father to son. Even the jewelry that is a gift to a woman on her marriage is not given to her, it is kept by her in-laws. If a man dies or remarries, a woman is completely dependent on others for her survival. A man can gamble or drink away his land, but a woman is always concerned about her children. So land should be owned jointly by both the husband and wife.

One of the major reasons for any land reform program is to increase the economic assets of the poor and hence provide them with a more secure productive base to operate. However, in almost all cases the rights to land are bestowed on the male head of household regardless of traditional inheritance rights of men and women.

In India, before colonial rule, both rural men and women were granted customary rights to the produce of the land. The colonial administration introduced changes which disrupted the
traditional agrarian system. Land reforms forced reinterpretation of customary laws to place land under male control. Where land was developed for modern agriculture, tracts were designated "household property" and placed under the control of the male head of household and registered in his name, giving him the responsibility and documentation. The colonial system of land title registration, restriction of access to land depending on ownership in the modern sense and emphasis on plantation cultivation all had many disadvantages for women.

When land became a saleable property with the introduction of legal ownership, the motive of accumulation began. The access to land and the role of land changed dramatically. There was a small group of rural people who, through savings or inheritance, could achieve socio-economic mobility through the accumulation of land. Conditions were thus set for wage labor as the new landlords and urban bureaucrats could now establish contractual arrangements with the available labor. Thus the privatization of land and the commercialization of cash crops eroded women's traditional rights and access to land.

With the opening of tea plantations and introduction of commercial agriculture, surplus land was quickly exhausted. In this situation, women were overlooked in favor of men. It was assumed that since the woman farmed land as part of a family, she would not be at a disadvantage if the land belonged to her husband. The colonial state assumed the male to be the head of the household and it was usually the man who was sought by the state bureaucracy. This pattern was perpetuated after Independence by state-initiated rural development schemes. After colonial rule, The Five-Year plan of the 1950s and 1960s, the Rural Development Policy of the 1970s, the National Agricultural Policy of the 1980s, and the New Economic Policy of the 1990s, selected people to the schemes based on the characteristics of the male head of household. In the 1980s there was a marginal recognition of the peasant women's claim to their share in the redistribution of land. The Sixth Five-Year Plan
incorporated a new provision to give joint titles to husband and wife of agricultural and homestead land that was being transferred by government to landless households. However, like many other laws, this provision has been confined to the plan document. All decisions are made within a network of inter-locking bureaucracies over which women have little control, especially since their status and their employment is that of "secondary workers" or "helpers". Thus the traditional occupations of authority for women as custodian of "laxmi" or "spirit of the paddy" have disappeared, with no emergence of new ones.

The privatization of land and the commercialization of agriculture by national governments and development projects have decreased women's access to land. In Kekuri, privatization has resulted in the concentration of village common land in the hands of a few large landholders, and many women are adversely affected as they lose access to fuelwood, fodder, and water resources. Control of land results in increased competition among wage laborers from resource-poor households, lowered wages, and increased costs for sharecropping (McCarthy, 1993: 337). Where land titles are handed only to men, women effectively lose all rights to the land they farm; men are able to sell or rent land without the permission of the woman who might be farming it. As pointed out by Stamp in respect to Africa (1990), men have the legal title and have the collateral to obtain credit, which women lack. In India, as in many areas of the world, having title to land, is crucial for receiving access to agricultural service, obtaining credit, loans, receiving technical assistance, and joining cooperatives. My study shows that women, regardless of the position of their households in the village, bear the responsibility for the subsistence of their households. Women from both landless and land-holding households all have heavy, although differing, work loads; all have the responsibility for borrowing money either for production or to tide the household over, and suffer the responsibility for reconciling budget and cash shortages.
This situation has been perpetuated by the "myths" that planners believe about the traditional role and rights of women, as reflected in the allocation of land rights, access to cash income and in the allocation of responsibility for commercial crops mainly to men. This has strengthened the power of the male head of households over land and its produce as well as over cash income. This leads to a precarious situation as women's access to cash, income, land and their status has been linked to nutritional levels of the household, budgeting for family food consumption and the general welfare of rural families. Women now have a weaker position in making important decisions regarding the economic position of the household.

In response to the progressive deterioration of women's land rights, there has emerged a weak but nevertheless present assertion of women's rights to land in Axom. However, this growing assertion has met increasing resistance from men on the ground that the transfer of land to women will undermine the foundations of the community, descending as it is from a common male ancestor. Ironically, during my study, I found that resistance to the land rights of women comes not only from men, but from some women as well, who displayed considerable opposition to the idea. They cannot comprehend a system different from the patrilineal one they are used to. It should be no surprise that these women, like many others, have internalized the dominant patriarchal ideology. This is no reason to accept the existing social order. However, it does mean that these values have to be taken into account while working towards a movement for securing land rights for women.

6. State Development Plans and Market Integration

The traditional agrarian system still exists today, but it is gradually being transformed under the dual pressure of state-sponsored development programs and increasing penetration of market mechanisms. A fundamental change in the traditional agrarian system is private property formation.
at the expense of the common, community ownership of land. Private ownership is recognized by the community. There has been little resistance of the people, particularly the rich peasants, to this change, as it is in accord with notions of individual private property and market-based exchange relations. Furthermore, for all development purposes, government agencies deal with the owner directly. Therefore there is an urge among peasants to own land. Besides being inheritable and transferable, land as acquired property has acquired value; it is saleable.

Associated with this change in agrarian relations and the technology of agriculture there is transformation in the cropping system. Cropping or food self-sufficiency is no longer necessary. Food can be obtained from the public distribution system or purchased from the increasing number of nearby small towns.

It is convenient to discuss the market integration of the north-eastern peasantry at two levels: (1) integration with the national market and through it with the world market, and (2) integration within and between local communities.

The first level of integration operates through commodity exchange. Unlike in the traditional system, money has not only become a medium of exchange, but also a store of value and means of wealth and capital accumulation. Integration with the national market takes place through demand arising out of the changing pattern of consumption and investment. With increasing improvement in transport and communication, one finds manufactured items obtained from the market even in the remote villages - goods made of plastic, glass, radios, bicycles. The promotion of new agricultural technology makes it necessary to obtain cash-based modern inputs like hybrid seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, supplied by the national market. This presses for the commercialization of agriculture, and the cultivation of cash crops, for which there is increasing demand in the national market. International links of the peasantry have been established through the sale of such commodities as tea,
jute and cotton.

The second level of market integration is becoming established through the incipient factors such as markets within and between the peasants - markets for plantation, lease cultivation, wage labor, and lending and borrowing of capital.

Alongside such markets, there has appeared a wage-labor market. As a result of growth in private ownership of land, some families have come to own and cultivate more land than is necessary for "the number of mouths to feed". This prevents such families from mobilizing the required labor on a reciprocal basis.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the peasant communities of Kekuri, whose traditional economy of agriculture rested on the principles of common, community property in land, reciprocity, sharing, labor co-operation and kinship and was largely self-sufficient, has been giving way to an economy based on private property in land, personal income and wealth. Market-mechanisms are inevitably taking over the co-ordination and regulation of the production and investment decisions of the peasants in respect to the new, transitional economy. In all this, the peasants' strategy has been to capture private benefits opened up by the new opportunities. In the process, the force and power of the village community and the indigenous peasantry has been declining. A village elder remarked to me that 'the indigenous community will disappear with the disappearance of the common village lands'. An important way to stop this is through popular participation which is a fundamental element in reversing development strategies aimed only at economic growth.
Chapter 6

The Study Area and Farm Household Types

Introduction

This chapter presents an empirical evaluation of women's work in a changing agricultural environment in Assam. It examines the uniqueness of Kekuri society, a community characterized by dependence on subsistence farming catering to home consumption. The households considered in the study all live close to the edge of poverty. Apart from annual floods, the people are always threatened by the wrath of nature. The daily struggle for survival, therefore, requires a high degree of cooperation, commitment and group effort. They live in close contact with nature and have learnt to make the most of its resources. They are energetic, hardworking and witty people with a social system steeped in feelings of family and community.

1. The Study Area

The village selected for the study, Kekuri, is situated in the development Block of Tingkhong of Dibrugarh district in Northern Assam. According to the 1991 Census of India, Dibrugarh district has a total population of 1.04 million of whom 55% are men and 43% are women. The sex ratio stands at 905, much lower than the all Assam average of 923 females to a 1000 males (Census of India, 1991), which can be attributed to the traditional preference for sons and discrimination against the female child in relation to food and medical care. The literacy rate is reported to be 48 percent. 90 percent of the population is rural. Of the total working population in Dibrugarh, 81 percent depend on agriculture for their livelihood (Statistical Handbook of Assam, 1994). Dibrugarh lies in the banks of the river Brahmaputra. The village is located in a level tract of fertile soil intersected by
small lakes and tributaries. The countryside presents a panorama of rich cultivation in the main, broken up occasionally by barren soil and muddy swamps. The region has alluvial soil with an appreciable degree of fertility. In terms of topography and climate, Axom is endowed with a variety of perennial and seasonal garden crops - coconut, arecanut, turmeric, mustard, ginger, bananas, yams, and vegetables are the most common. Many villages also have trees including jackfruit, tamarind, mango, all of which bring cash income to the household, in addition to satisfying the household's consumption needs. However, in Kekuri, I did not find them growing around residential houses. Fish ponds which are an essential asset, form private property, and small-scale vegetable cultivation is more intense. The major crops of the region include rice, mustard, pulses, and bananas.

Annual rainfall in the Dibrugarh district measures an average of 185 inches. In the historical records, this region has been documented as perennially prone to floods and famines. The wrath of nature continues to be directed against this region, the agricultural seasons being characterized by floods, resulting in considerable impoverishment of the villagers.

The Block of Tingkhong within which lies the village of this study, came into existence in June 1992. Earlier it was part of the Jaipur development Block. There are 7 such Blocks in Dibrugarh district. Tingkhong covers 219 revenue villages and 14 Gaon Panchayats (Village Councils), with a total population of 1,21,904. Tingkhong Block has 4 junior basic schools. The Block has a Community Health Care Center and a Veterinary Hospital.

Tingkhong covers a total development area of 379.74 sq. km., of which cultivated area is 15,109 acres. The single crop area is 28,280 acres and the double crop area is 8,670 acres. The irrigated area is reported to be 136 acres. The main means of irrigation are ponds and rain water. There are no electric or diesel pumpsets.
The major crops grown in the Tingkhong area are paddy, wheat, mustard, pulses, sugarcane, vegetables, bananas, betel nut and bamboo. On an average, the total amount of paddy amounts to 5940 pounds per acre. These figures compare unfavorably with many other blocks in Dibrugarh. The new varieties of paddy introduced are Pankaj, Bahadur, Lachit and Masahari. The new varieties of paddy have not proved very useful in this area, because of their vulnerability to plant diseases and because the land here is mostly swampy and the traditional "Saali" proves more hardy.

Different kinds of fertilizers, Urea being the most popular, have also been introduced and made available at the seed and fertilizer distribution centers at the block headquarters in Nahoroni, which is about 20 kms from Kekuri. The other fertilizers used are Nitrogen, phosphorus and potash. However, the use of these in Kekuri is almost negligible.

2. The Village Under Study

Kekuri contains six hamlets (cuk). A hamlet is an area differentiated out of the village and usually named after the caste who inhabit it. Thus the village of my study is Kekuri Sonowal, as it is inhabited by the Sonowal community. By way of transportation/communication, Kekuri has been well connected by a paved road that runs right through the village. Post office and dispensary services are available in the neighboring village of Bamunbari, a small town approximately six kms from the village. The market facility is available twice a week when various artisans and traders gather to display and sell their goods. Bamunbari also caters to them as the major grain procurement and grain market. The township of Moran, at a distance of eighteen kms, features next in importance as loan facilities are available here to the villagers for agriculture and other purposes under the various schemes started by the government. It also serves as a sub-division of the district administrator.

Houses in Kekuri are predominantly bamboo and mud huts, interlaced with bamboo sticks and
plastered on both sides with mud. The huts have thatched roofs over bamboo rafters. The architecture of the huts is a response to the extremely humid temperatures, aside from its beauty and appropriateness in the pastoral and lush green settings of Axom. The homes are elegant, cool, environmentally friendly and economically sustainable. All the houses have courtyards, covered with a paste of mud and cowdung, where grain is dried, children play, and weddings and religious ceremonies are performed. Every household has a place for the sacred tulsi plant in one corner. Usually there is a raised veranda in front of the house, spread with a coat of mud paste, where people sit to work or talk.

The kitchen, usually a small dark room, is the purest part of the house where the ritually significant food daal-bhat (lentil broth and rice) is cooked and eaten. Every morning on waking up, the women clean and purify the kitchen area by spreading a paste of mud and cowdung over the entire area, used in many contexts to create a pure or sacred space. While cutting vegetables and carrying water may be performed by unmarried girls, the rice meals can only be cooked by the wife or daughter-in-law when they are not menstruating. Women are considered to be ritually impure at menstruation and cannot enter the kitchen. The cook cannot taste or eat the food until she has served everyone else for it is believed that would pollute the food. At the beginning of the meal, people wash their hands and feet so that nothing unclean will be brought into the eating space; after eating, people wash their hands, feet and mouth to remove the impure food. To the people of Kekuri, these rituals of purification are not ceremonies but simple acts of bodily hygiene, personal grooming, and dining etiquette. Women wash dishes outside - a cold dark task on a winter's evening - and then bring the dishes back to dry in the kitchen area.

Furniture is minimal but almost every house has at least one bed, brought by the bride as her dowry. Wardrobes, cupboards, tables and chairs are luxuries owned by a few. Most households
comprise of extended families, where generations live together, with new rooms being added at the
event of a son's marriage. Most living is done on floors covered by straw mats called *dhari*. Valuable
clothes and jewelry are kept in a small trunk under lock and key. The walls are usually covered with
pictures of gods, and occasionally a calendar with a picture of a buxom lady, usually a film star. The
husband sleeps on the bed, while the wife sleeps on the floor with the children, all in a line. The
Axomiya think it unkind to make a child of any age sleep alone by itself in a room. While there is
electricity in the village, the villagers cannot afford its high costs and continue to use kerosene lamps.

Most houses have an animal shed near the main house where whatever goats and cows the
family owns are kept. There is usually a kitchen garden where vegetables are grown and betel nut
and coconut trees are planted.

*Namghar* is a common feature in villages in Axom that developed as an offshoot of the
Vaishnava movement. A prayer house, a naamghar is also a symbol of unity, cooperation, and
solidarity in every village community in Axom, subserving the multifarious functions as a prayer
house, a place for village assembly, a cultural school, a village court and an agency of social control.
Aside from religious and memorial services, naamghors serve as theaters for the performance of
Bhaona - a folk opera.

The village has a group of elderly men, whose age, wealth and personalities, make them the
informal leaders of the village. The authority of these men is often sought in the mediation of quarrels
and minor land disputes. During my research period, these men were called on many occasions - once
when two women had come to blows over their quarreling children; once when a widow complained
she was being beaten by her brother-in-law who wanted her land. Such interventions are common
and usually the people accept the authority of this group of elders. In fact, many older people told
me that they cannot remember a single case where villagers went outside Kekuri to the police or
government courts.

Health facilities are provided in the village through training given to a person of the village selected for the purpose. The person, usually a female, undergoes a training of one and a half months before she becomes an Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM). There is a primary school in Kekuri. Started in 1935, this single-room two teacher school has 61 students. The building, made of bamboo walls, mud floors, and a thatched roof, is dilapidated, and remains closed during the monsoon season as the roof cannot withstand the onslaught of incessant downpours. The closest secondary school is at a neighboring village of Ouphulia, which is at a distance of seven kms from Kekuri. This often results in girls not being allowed to continue their education because of the distance at which the school is placed.

The village Kekuri covers an area of 207 acres; 165 acres comprise the total cultivated area. By Indian terms, Kekuri is poor. It has not benefited from any government schemes. Access to land is the most crucial determinant of a household's well-being. There are no irrigation facilities in Kekuri. There are no tractors, pumpsets or threshers. Kekuri has a total of 83 households with a total population of 479 of whom 261 are males and 218 are females. The majority of the people belong to the Sonowal Kosari indigenous community. 70% of the total land in the village is owned by 6% of the people, while the remaining 30% is divided among the rest. In the village of Kekuri, 7 women out of the total population of 479 have land in their names. Of these, 5 women have acquired land after the death of their husbands. 2 women in the 83 households studied have inherited land from their fathers because the families did not have any male child. It is customary in the region that land is not given to daughters or to women through marriage if one has male progeny. No land has been allotted to women by the government.

Land is divided into three classes: (1) kheti or wet rice land; (2) bari or house land; and (3)
*pharingati* or dry land generally used for bamboo.

(1) Rice Land

(a) ownership: Axom has always been a country of small farmers rather than big landlords, but with increasing population the size of most holdings is now uneconomic.

(b) tenancy: The system of tenancy is called "aadhi" which literally means "half"; the landlord provides the land, the tenant provides the plough, bullocks, the labor and all the costs of cultivation.

Two main varieties of rice are grown in the village, Sali and Ahu. Under Sali is included Lahi, which has a lower yield but tastes better, and is generally reserved for the preparation of rice cakes (Jalpaan) and ritual purposes. Sali seedlings are transplanted from nursery beds in June, July and August and grown in fields of standing water surrounded by narrow aisles. The crop is harvested in November and December. Ahu is sown broadcast on dry land between March and May and harvested in July and August. There are a great many individual varieties within these categories. The taste, yield and soil conditions suitable to each are well known to the villagers, most of whom grow about eight or ten different varieties. Both Sali and Ahu can be grown annually on the same land in succession. All cultivators grow a Sali crop but only the very poor cultivators are prepared to undertake the work of raising an Ahu crop. The soil is hard and difficult to plough in the dry months, the land must be fenced against the cattle which are by custom set free at this season to roam the fields, and harvesting is done under the blazing summer sun.

In rural Axom, it is considered shameful to sell land or be short of rice. Rice is bought freely in the market like any other commodity. Surplus paddy is sold outside the village. Poor villagers sometimes borrow paddy from surplus households which they repay later in paddy or in some cases by providing labor in the fields. No question of payment in money arises between co-villagers.
(2) House Land

Almost all the villagers own their house plots. 11 households are living on rented plots and 4 destitute households are living free on land provided by relatives. The garden area around the house is enriched with cowdung and used for the cultivation of a wide range of vegetables. Bamboo, areca nut trees, bananas and other fruit bearing trees enclose the houses and give to an Axomiya village its characteristic appearance of verdant groves.

(3) Dry Land

Dry land is high land suitable for growing dry crops such as mustard. There is little dry land in the village, and most of it is under bamboo.

59% of the population in this region falls in the category of small cultivators and sharecroppers. 33% face landlessness or near landlessness. They sell their labor in agricultural activity for wages and take land on "aadhi" or sharecropping from the large landholding families. The largest landowning family of the village has been a non-cultivating landowner, with sharecroppers being given land on the basis of "aadhi", i.e., the sharecropper getting half of the yield.

The terms of sharecropping are largely fixed on a basis of sharing the produce in half, but often place other kinds of social pressures on the sharecroppers that are not so apparent. The landowners, who also belong to the Kosari community, adjust the terms of sharecropping so that the benefits in agricultural yield and profit accrue to them rather than to the sharecropper. Weaker sharecroppers are sometimes forced to take not only infertile land but much more land than they can handle with their limited resources. Moreover, when the time comes to claim their share of produce, the terms of sharecropping are redefined, as the landowners claim the major yield from the fertile cultivated plots. The sharecroppers are thus forced into accepting this obviously inequitable
distribution of produce. The landowner also does the major decision-making with regard to the HYVs to be sown, supervision and management of the land. Given their pauperized condition, the sharecroppers become dependent on the landowner for borrowing money and grain in periods of crisis. The latter, in effect, is often reduced to a cheap farm laborer to the former. The landowner also extends credit facilities to the sharecropper, who must, therefore, unquestioningly take what is handed out to them in order to ensure a regular supply of loans and employment through both wage labor and sharecropping. The limited institutional loan facilities are inaccessible to these poor peasants due to the inadequacy of development programs and their administration.

3. Farm Household Types

During my fieldwork, I interviewed 83 women, collecting data on household composition, socio-economic characteristics, female participation in agricultural production, processing and marketing, household maintenance and reproduction, wages received, alternative sources of employment and income, access to and control over resources and benefits, women’s perception of their roles, and their awareness, resistance and participation in socio-economic change. These interviews, observation, and group discussions were conducted over a period of ten months of close interaction and participation in the daily activities of the women participants.

There is no standard or uniform household either in the labor or landowning category. Households differ in regard to the number of members as well as their age/sex make-up, marital status and educational level, number of earning members, type of occupation, control over land - both owned as well as under tenancy - and other assets in both the categories. The typical farm household has an average size of 6.7 persons who farm an area of 2.5 acres. Women are married traditionally, through the arranged marriage system, and the union is recognized by the community after the
wedding ceremony, and the payment of a small dowry, usually cash, goods, or animals. Husbands are perceived to be needed to acquire land and credit and to maintain respectability in the community. As Keteki commented: "We cannot do without our men because we need to be married in order to get land and to get our houses built. A woman without a man is not respected". Though the majority of the respondents were married and between the ages 26-50, there were a few unmarried women, as well as some women over 50 years old. There was only one case of a divorced woman. For the purpose of my study, the population of the village was classified into the following four broad socio-economic groups:

(8). Landless Agricultural Households

Landless agricultural households do not possess sufficient land to provide for basic subsistence and rely entirely on employment from other people. In Kekuri, there are 7 landless households. Women from these households have to work as wage labor. However, landless agricultural laborers cannot be considered a homogenous group. There are permanent and casual landless laborers, with different labor contracts and modes of payment - yearly, seasonal or daily - and payment may include cash and kind or cash alone. Unattached casual laborers are by far the greatest in number in Kekuri. Permanent labor today, however, is different from the bonded slavery of earlier periods where the laborer family was, for all practical purposes, the property of the landlord and the relationship continued over generations. Today, the permanency of the work contract lasts only for a short period depending on the landlord's need for labor. The labor respondents belong to landless and marginal households. Some of these households have recently experienced a reduction in the size of land under their control as a result of division of family property, sale and transfer caused by impoverishment and other reasons. A few labor households have been able to get some land on
tenancy basis (50:50 share cropping).

(ii). *Marginally Landless Households*

As compared to the totally landless, the marginally landless households possess their own dwelling place and a tiny plot as homestead. In Kekuri, there are 47 marginally landless households. These peasants generally own 1 acre per adult man. However, they hardly possess any cultivable land and have to rent or sharecrop additional land or work as wage labor on other people's land. Even those labor households that possess some cultivable land, it is not always paddy land. In addition to working in their family plots, women from these agricultural labor households have to hire themselves out to work on the fields of others as they do not have sufficient land to provide basic subsistence from self-cultivation alone. Most of the women working as casual labor in my study fall under these two categories.

(iii). *Small Cultivator Households*

Middle peasants own between 2 and 5 acres per adult man; they rarely work for others or hire labor or have their land sharecropped for them except by relatives. There are a total of 27 small cultivator households in Kekuri. Women of these households usually do not have to hire themselves out to work as wage labor but need to put in manual work on the family farm. Women from these households also participate in labor exchange groups that plant, weed, and harvest the crop together. Most of the women providing family labor in my study fall under this category.
(iv). *Landowning Households*

Landownership is in a dynamic process of change in India today. Major changes are taking place in the size of holdings and crops grown as a result of land reforms, social and economic mobility and migration, changing family size and composition, and also interest in cultivation. There are two landowning households in Kekuri. There are four women in one of the households - the mother and three daughters-in-law, the daughters having left their natal village after marriage. The other household has six women, the mother, two daughters-in-law, and three daughters of marriageable age. In Kekuri, landowning peasants own 5 acres per adult man: they do not work on other people's land. They hire labor to complete their work on a regular or seasonal basis. Some rent their land on a sharecropping basis to other villagers, who take 50 percent of the crop in payment for their labor. Of the two big landowning households in Kekuri, which can be classified in the category of medium households, in one household the male member is engaged in full-time non-agricultural occupation with a steady income which takes him away from home. The main occupation for the other household is still agriculture and the members have not entered professions other than cultivation. This increases or reinforces disparities between landowning households. The ability to make extra income in addition to that generated by paddy also distinguishes these households from the labor households which are dependent on a single source of income for their survival - wage labor. Access to education has also helped these households in acquiring employment outside agriculture. In one case, the interviewee's brother-in-law works in a bank.

If women agricultural laborer's work participation remains 'invisible', we know even less about the work done by women in the landowning households. A popular myth surrounding them is that they do not do any work. During my field work, an opinion contrary to this was expressed by the Block Development Officer at Tingkhong when he said: "All cultivation should be left to the women."
They are better at getting work done”. He was not drawing my attention to a fact generally ignored but was merely articulating what he saw around him. The landowning women in my study do not hire themselves out or undertake manual work on the farm. They are engaged in doing supervisory work over hired labor in the fields or non-field related agricultural work.

Land size is the most crucial determinant of female supervision. Increasingly more women are taking charge of cultivation in land while the size of their plots are becoming smaller mainly as a result of partition. In my study, women from landowning households showed remarkable interest and knowledge about paddy and other crops, selection and storing of seeds, pest control and other requirements. They supervised work, particularly work done nearer home, and even employed labor and made payments. Bokuli, a landowning woman, mentioned that although these tasks are attended to by her husband, she added "When my husband is away, I employ laborers and make payments to them". Another landowning woman, Chameli, said that sometimes she even worked along with the laborers in the fields, as it was an assured way of getting good work. Nirmali, a 45 year old landowning woman said:

"We did transplantation today. I was at the seedlings patch by 8 a.m. where I supervised the laborers pulling out the seedlings. They were tied into small bundles. They shifted the bundles to the area where they were to be planted. When I went there, I found bits of leaves floating above the water. I pressed them into the mud with my feet. I came home, took some pieces of white cloth, tied them into small sticks to make scarecrows, and went back to the field. Planted these sticks here and there in the transplanted area to frighten away the birds which would otherwise eat and destroy the tiny seedlings. I asked the laborers to use the seedlings economically and plant them close to one another without leaving any patch unplanted. They did as I told them. After the day's work was over, I returned home".

These women's statements give a fascinating picture of women's knowledge of cultivation, their concern and participation. They show a maternal tenderness toward the crop similar to that which they would show a child. Many of them visit the fields more than once a day and check the water level. Apart from supervising the laborers, women from both households reported that they worked
along with the laborers. The women also reported the importance of cooking and feeding for both the household members and the laborers.

In one household, however, the women did not do any work in the fields. The most obvious reason is that women have too much work in and around the house - taking care of poultry, pigs and other livestock, in addition to tasks like cooking, cleaning and childcare. When the workload at home increases, women have less time for work related to cultivation. And if the fields are far away, it becomes even more difficult. It also does not mean, however, that they are not otherwise involved in rice production. Apart from attending to the usual domestic chores, the women are engaged in the care of cattle - cleaning the cowsheds, feeding and milking the cows, making cowdung cakes, giving instructions to the cowherds, parboiling and drying paddy, cleaning and storing rice, feeding domestic help and farm laborers. I also found women who after finishing work in the house sat in the courtyard supervising threshing and other work. Many of them mentioned that they listened to the radio programs for farmers, and added they followed the suggestions only if they thought they would be of benefit to them.

From my study I was able to observe that women from landholding households face certain constraints in managing their own land, the most serious being cultural barriers that restrict male/female contact outside the home. As a result, women need help to buy essential goods in the market, bargain with people, and deal with male officials at governments offices. They also need help to sell their produce in the market, although when the merchant comes home they are able to sell and often make fairly hard bargains. These are male domains in which women alone do not feel welcome. It is clear that it is not physical strength but the ability to attract and hold good workers that is critical in being a good farmer. Thus it is inherently wrong to explain the lower status of women as being derived from their lack of physical strength. Thus landowning women's participation is manifested
in several ways, which cannot always be classified under common categories like "manual work" or "supervision". Many respondents said that they had to do more work now than what their mothers or grandmothers did. Others do less because the land under their control has become less or they have sold their land. Many complained about increasing labor costs and believed that paddy cultivation is a losing proposition. Chaya, a 19 year old woman from a landowning household says:

We now have to get up early, eat fast and rush to the fields. When we come back in the afternoon, the cattle have to be tended to. We are so tired. We neither get wages or recognition from the family for all the work we do nor do we have the freedom to do what we would like to.

Despite this fact, there is a widely held notion that women of upper caste and upper class households do not work - in this case, work related to rice production and more specifically "manual" work. An important reason behind this misconception of landowning women's work in rice production is the conventional definition of work - only labor which is brought for exchange in the market and which fetched an income is defined as 'work'.

Though nonrecognition and undervaluation of work are the common experience of women laborers and landowning women, they differ in their interests in land and production and what they get out of it. The interest of women in the first two and last categories are often diametrically opposed, in that they each represent different class interests; women in these groups may in fact share more with men of their own class than with women of other classes. An important point of difference is that women from landless agricultural labor households who perform crucial tasks in the production of crops, do not get sufficient food for themselves and their family. As for women of the third group, their interests are often the same as those of the landless and near landless women in that they too sometimes depend on outside employment. Without going into any detail on employer-employee relations, through my observations and interviews I can conclude that there does exist a clash of interests in the two categories of women. Both landowners and laborers talk about wages and hours
of work, but in very different ways. Laborers unanimously believe that fixed hours of work and increased wages have benefitted them somewhat, while land owners consider these two factors as being mainly responsible for reducing their income and profit. As Ratna, who owns three acres of land said:

Earlier there was no problem getting laborers. Instead of money they were given wages in paddy. Some of them used to work in exchange for food. Wages were very low and there were not fixed hours of work. The wages were fixed by the employers and the laborers had to work for that. They had no rights and could not demand more. Soon things began to change. When the prices of paddy increased the laborers were paid in cash. But this only created difficulties for the laborers. There was not much change in the wages.

Increased wages and changes in the old practice when the landlords could call laborers to work at any time of the day or night are felt everywhere.

Thus the two are glaringly different in their access to resources. However, there is one point of commonality between them: women in all categories have to attend to a large variety of activities in a day, and very often simultaneous attention is needed by diverse tasks. But the work of women from landowning households is even less visible, if not totally ignored, than the work of agricultural laborers.

My research also supports the view that female headed households are among the most severely disadvantaged because of labor shortages, lack of access to political resources, and cultural and religious ideologies. Headed by widowed, divorced, abandoned, or never married women, these households experience resource constraints at a much higher level. They are characterized by smaller crop acreage planted, fewer oxen, lower agricultural output, and proportionately higher consumption needs in relation to production. A few of the poorest must work as full-time servants in the homes of the rich. Members of this unfortunate group are those marginal individuals without families or land - deserted women, widows, and those who are physically handicapped. They are given room, board and clothing, but no money.
Chapter 7

Household and Farm Labor

Introduction

In this chapter, I will endeavor to examine the socially-determined classification of work, what is generally considered as women's work as opposed to men's work, thereby strengthening the idea of sexual as well as social division of labor.

Both recorded history, as well as folklore show that there has been, at all times, some kind of division of tasks between the sexes. A broad division of labor between women and men agricultural laborers engaged in rice production can be seen even today. Even a casual observer will notice women transplanting or weeding, and men ploughing. The division of labor within the farm household typically requires women to provide water, fuelwood, and health care in addition to food for home consumption and market sale. Men's duties on the farm usually extend to clearing the land and ploughing. Their other responsibilities include hunting, house construction, and other nonagricultural pursuits.

Unfortunately, this is not seen as a sexual division of tasks of equal importance. The tasks allocated by sex are arranged hierarchically, the female jobs being underpaid and considered more menial. Men are assigned jobs which are classified as skillful and strenuous and receive a higher wage. The grading of these tasks is neither based on volume in terms of the tedium nor on the number of hours spent on their performance, nor on value in productive terms. The logic of superior and better paid work for man derives from the fact that he is deemed to be the head of the household and thus ultimately responsible for the family. Women's tasks, though very crucial and involving skills which
have been acquired over generations, are treated as less important and of lower worth. This lower status given to women and their work has led to their invisibility. Surprisingly, in Kekuri, where 83 women participated in the research for ten months, and who are small cultivators and agricultural laborers, the census reports have marked either "nil" or just one or two for female agricultural laborers.

This cannot be treated as a mere omission. There is a significant number of households where women are primarily responsible for the upkeep of the family. Such women might be widows, never married, divorced, or deserted, or women whose husbands are alive but who either do not work, or whose income is insufficient, or who are working elsewhere. These women remain invisible to the official data-collecting system and are therefore disregarded by the agencies of the government responsible for formulating policies and schemes to help them economically. While at Kekuri, one such case was brought to my attention. I was told by the Panchayat members, all of whom are male, that the old age pension scheme meant for agricultural labor women could not be used in the village because the census report for the village did not show any figure under women agricultural laborers.

1. Obtaining Data on Gender and Intra-Household Issues

(i) Gender Specific Labor Tasks: Information was obtained by listing the major crops and livestock down the columns and the sequence of activities along the rows of a calendar which was drawn up in the course of discussions with the women. Under each enterprise and activity, the different sources of labor were classified by gender and age (male adult, female, adult, children). In each category, the principal female in the household was asked: who usually does what? Although the time involved in each activity was not recorded, the appraisal gave sufficient information regarding the gender-specific
tasks in a timely and cost-effective manner.

Understanding task specialization within the household, and identifying the gender division of responsibility for labor management and disposal of all types of household production, is crucial. For example, my study showed that women were collecting "gehu" as feed for pigs. As a result of the survey, a lecture on proper nutrition and health practices for pigs with women participants was conducted in the village. I also got a veterinarian to attend to the needs of women's livestock.

(ii). Access to Factors of Production: Additional gender-related questions were asked regarding access to resources such as land, capital, credit, information, training, and household agricultural technologies. Questions on food consumption and preparation were asked as it is women's responsibility to secure and prepare food for the household. The results revealed that rice and pulses such as mungbeans are important sources of protein.

(iii). Access to Income-Generating Activities: A third set of questions were asked about the access of women and men to income-generating activities. While farming is the major source of income in all households, there were differences in men and women's principal sources of income. For instance, working as hired labor in land preparation, ploughing, and construction work are the major sources of income for men. Fattening and selling of pigs, chicken and fish, and working as wage laborers in pulling of rice seedlings are examples of women's main income sources. Processing of rice, a traditional income-generating activity, is a very important source of income for the majority of the women, particularly in October after the harvest of the main rice crop.
2. Women's Farm and Household Work

This section shows that women's share in household and farm maintenance is significant and crucial and cannot be ignored. The cultivation of paddy is labor-intensive and work related to the production and processing of rice is the single largest source of employment for the women of Kekuri. However, there is variation in the total employment availability and the tasks in which they are engaged. The greatest importance in various agricultural and non-agricultural activities is given to what is considered "the core productive activity" over which women have no control. Ploughing and operating the potter's wheel, for instance, are taboo for women. With the exception of this activity, women perform most of the tasks in rice cultivation. Ninety per cent of the women interviewees were found active in the fields performing all kinds of agricultural tasks, including the production and processing of food grains on the family fields as well as the entire household tasks, including the physical reproduction and care of children. Most of these women belong to small cultivator and landless agricultural families. The relation between women working in their own and others' fields and the land owned by their families exists as follows

Table 7.1: Relation between Women Working in the Fields and Land Owned by their Families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. #</th>
<th>Land Owned</th>
<th># of Households</th>
<th># of Families where Women Labor in the Fields</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Above 5 Acres</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 to 5 Acres</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Below 2 Acres</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Landless</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Even up to a holding of 5 acres, women were actively engaged in the fields. In holdings above 5 acres, women do not labor in the fields as social norms prevent them from stepping outside the house. In subsistence agriculture, men contribute their labor by ploughing and women do other agricultural activities as well as wage labor.

While landless or near landless women face the problem of too much work for too little income, the women from the better-off households often withdraw from manual work as a status symbol. However, this withdrawal does not necessarily mean a lighter work load. During my study, women from these households reported that they actually have to put in longer hours of work often cooking for hired labor, as it is customary to provide at least one meal a day, especially in the peak season. Even in the economically well-off household, hired labor does not substitute for women's work in cooking. Because the social system prescribes that women play multiple roles as child bearer, child rearer, homemaker, farmer, worker, and community manager, women have to make constant tradeoffs in allocating their time, labor and productive resources among the household, farm and other obligations. In nearly 12 per cent of all households in Kekuri, women bear the greater responsibility for earning for the family and maintaining the household - including feeding and attending to disabled or aged husbands. The responsibilities of providing economically for the household, and for maintaining it and caring for its members weigh heavily on women. Sometimes these responsibilities themselves conflict - women have to often withdraw from agricultural work in order that they may look after a sick husband.

Table 7.2 summarizes the different activities in agricultural production, processing and marketing and the different sources of labor classified by gender and age (male, female and children).
Table 7.2. Activity Profile: Agricultural Production, Processing and Marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop Type</th>
<th>Rice</th>
<th>Household Gardens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seed Preparation</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land clearance</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Preparation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fencing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transplanting</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird scaring</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeding</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertilizing</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrigating</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvesting</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrying crops</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seed selection/preservation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnowing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other postharvest</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing/selling products</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying seeds</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying fertilizers,chemicals</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Labor</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: X=participates; XX= primary responsibility
(i) **Ploughing**. From their earliest introduction, throughout Europe, the Middle East and Asia, and later on in the New World, animal-drawn ploughs have normally been handled only by males, which perhaps forms the basis for the sexual division of labor in agriculture. In India, women are prohibited from touching the grip of the plough which is regarded as representative of the phallic symbol signifying fertility and creation. It is believed that pollution of this symbol by the touch of a woman would portend the wrath of the gods resulting in natural calamities. When I asked my respondents about whether women could ever plough, I was given an interesting answer. The women claimed that because ploughing has to be done by those who are sacred, only men can plough. It is clear that it is not physical strength but the belief that those who menstruate pollute the earth and therefore cannot undertake the sacred work of ploughing. Control of men over this vital productive tool and over the activity of ploughing is in this way perpetuated. The prohibition of women in this activity results in the greater control of men in the social, political and economic spheres and in a total disregard for women's work and their role in social production. Customs such as this one cut into women's chances of employment and are discriminatory. Among the Oraon indigenous community of Bihar, it is said that

'If a woman were to plough, there would be no rain, and calamity would follow. ... When women in desperate circumstances have ploughed family land they have been severely punished; a tribal woman in Bihar was yoked to the plough along with a bullock and forced to plough the village headman's field.' (Dasgupta and Maithi, 1980).

Kishwar writing about Ho indigenous women in Bihar observes that if a woman accidentally touches a plough she can be heavily fined by the panchayat (village council) because her action is believed to bring ill-luck to the entire village such as drought. She notes that 'in rare cases, they could even be
stoned to death' (Kishwar 1987; also, Sharma 1980: 114). Madgulkar points out that in poor households, unable to own or hire a bullock, when ploughing is urgent, in rare cases, a wife may be hitched up to the plough (1958: 57). While discussing my field work with a woman from Philippines who had worked in rural areas, I learned that in the Philippines, women often plough but never pull out the paddy seeds for transplanting.

(ii) Work with Animals: In Kekuri, as elsewhere, being barred from touching the plough does not mean that women have been spared animal work as they have always been responsible for some of the dirtiest and messiest of work including cleaning the cowshed, washing the animals, making cow dung cakes, milking the cows and often attending to deliveries. The animal shed is often located within the domestic space by choice to facilitate tending of the herd by the women. Thus, bathing, nursing, feeding of the herd and milking are female tasks while collection of fodder is more of a joint male-female work. To women the draft and dairy animals symbolize the family's prosperity and hence they accord the utmost care to this sector. Ironically, women do not accord themselves the same value despite carrying heavy burdens for the family's sustenance.

(iii) Irrigation: The second major activity for the preparation of land is irrigation. As mentioned earlier, the major source of irrigation in Kekuri, as in most of Assam, is rain water. The people are thus dependent on the vagaries of nature for a good harvest.

(iv) Transplanting and Weeding: In Kekuri, weeding and transplanting are considered to be women's work, and most men will not do this work even if there is no other work for them, taking
care to explain that 'only women know how to do it'. This activity is not considered important by the men or the women and is given no more significance than housework. Weeding is mostly done in the afternoon after women finish most of their work for the day except cooking for the evening.

(v). **Harvesting**: Participation of women is very intense at the time of harvesting paddy. Women are engaged in all of the activities connected with harvesting including cutting the harvested grain, carrying the harvested sheaves, threshing, winnowing, and all of the postharvest activities, though they may also be carried out by men. In southern Asia, women have not had access to any labor-saving devices that make use of animal power. Thus, in Kekuri, where threshing is done by beating the harvested sheaves against a board, it is done primarily by women. Processing grain both for the family's consumption and for the market is a major activity which is carried out by women. The task of cleaning, drying and storing of grain is performed entirely by women.

(vi). **Post Harvest Farm Related Work**: Women continue to work through the post-harvest grain processing operations. Threshing and husking continue to be manually done, women taking turns with men by conducting the threshing operations within the day while men carry it on through the night. Winnowing the grain is also women's job, and often takes up half to a full day's work. Winnowing is a skilled job which mothers teach to their female children. These long seasonal hours decreases to an hour or less for hulling of rice which is carried out when the need arises and as and when the time permits.

What is noteworthy here is the fluid definition of women's work. Men tend to participate in the processing operations as long as these are conducted outside the domestic sphere. But as the
farm work moves towards the domestic space - cleaning, hulling, storage of grain, men tend to relinquish the responsibility to women. The same is true of livestock and dairy related work, which is almost wholly managed by women.

(vii). Other Manual Tasks in Rice Cultivation: With regard to the actual tasks performed by males and females, there are very few jobs in rice cultivation that are not done by women. In contrast, ploughing and all activities that use bullocks as draft animals are done by males and these account for a very short period of the agricultural calendar. Other activities that tend to be restricted to males include:

a. climbing trees for coconuts or mangoes. Even little girls are strongly chastised for attempting to climb trees because it might show their genitals.

b. most operations connected with irrigation.

c. applying chemical fertilizers, which are expensive, is generally men's work.

d. applying pesticides is men's work. This is not to protect women from the bad effects of pesticide because they have to stand in pesticide-saturated mud but rather the explanation is that "pesticide costs a lot".

e. driving, repairing tractors, bullock carts and other machines is exclusively men's work.

f. digging other than garden work is done by men.

(viii). Major Household Activities: In the cool predawn darkness, the soft sounds of singing and pounding rice float out from behind the earthen walls. The women of Kekuri village have begun their day's work. Women spend long hours beside an earthen stove in a hot kitchen, producing delicious meals for the family. Cooking is one of the most important and time-consuming tasks in which
women engage. Women are also responsible for scouring dishes and pots, usually with clay and water. Among the other major household activities performed by women are pounding of rice and processing of lentils, sweeping and cleaning of house, plastering of walls and floor with mud and dung - a daily early morning job, feeding and taking care of the children, milking and providing fodder and cleaning the cattle, processing of milk and its produce, provision of fuel, making cow dung cakes, fetching water, and carrying of meals to the fields. Women sweep, hang out quilts to sun, and do the laundry. Mending and simple sewing are a woman's task. Women clean their homes daily, sweeping dirt from the earthen floors of the interior, the verandah and the courtyard. Repairing monsoon damaged house walls with plaster of earth and straw, and applying cleansing cowdung paste to the floors is women's work. Women also shape new earthen stoves, handmill covers and decorative panels for their homes. Many women paint their doorways with decorative designs. These tasks around the house are considered preferable to being sent out to the fields to do farmwork.

Women are also responsible for maintaining the purity of the household by performing the daily religious rituals every morning, after a bath and change of clothes which are considered polluted for having slept in them. The gods are bathed and offered grains of rice, fruit, leaves and fresh flowers. Rice is seen as an offering for Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity. In an agricultural economy where wealth is still largely measured in terms of one's access to rice, rice fields, and rice products, the goddess of rice holds a vital place in the cultural imagination. Through religious rituals, women act out their roles as protectors and caretakers of the family and the household. The woman of the house is referred to as Lakshmi; like the goddess, she has the power to attract wealth and prosperity into the household and prevent poverty from entering. The rituals solidify this relationship. Daily worship of the household gods and celebration of the numerous minor calendrical festivals, as
well as the essential maintenance of the ritual purity of the family kitchen, are all in the hands of women. Women seem to derive great satisfaction and pride from performing the worship ceremonies though these rituals often involve rising in the pre-dawn darkness to bathe in an icy river, making a trip to the temple, and fasting for the full day. In fact, many men told me that women are far more fastidious about ritual purity and more involved in religious and devotional matters than men, often undertaking voluntary fasts to earn merit. Hindu religion is governed by strong beliefs in pollution and purity. Eating, urination, defecation, copulation, menstruation, birth and death are all perceived as polluting to the village householder. Through the rituals of conventional religion, they try to maintain the balance in favor of purity - a fleeting state, achieved with effort and soon lost again. Death and childbirth put the family in a severe state of pollution, which requires strong purification rituals that are long, complex and taxing to perform. Ritual purification is extremely important in Hindu religion which contains a whole symbolic arsenal of purifying activities. Fasting, temporary vows of silence, various types of gifts such as "godan" (gift of a cow), uttering certain mantras, eating prasad (offerings made to the gods and then received back as blessings) all bring merit and purification to the donors. In addition, fire, water, gold, and earth, have active purifying powers that can be used to nullify pollution. Other substances in this category are the five products of the cow - milk, curds, clarified butter, dung and urine, as well as certain plants, such as the tulsi, the pipal and the mango tree etc. Table 7.3 details the different activities in household maintenance and reproduction by gender and age (male, female and children), time and place of activity.
Table 7.3. Activity Profile: Household Maintenance and Reproduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food processing &amp; preservation</td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>postharvest</td>
<td>household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collection of wild seeds and fruits</td>
<td></td>
<td>XC</td>
<td>periodic</td>
<td>up to 15 km from household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food storage</td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>postharvest</td>
<td>household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food preparation</td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>daily, average 1-2 meals</td>
<td>household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childrearing</td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>fertility rate of about 6.5 suggests a pregnancy once every 5 to 6 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing provision</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household cleaning</td>
<td></td>
<td>XXFC</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry</td>
<td></td>
<td>XXFC</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>household; wells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water carrying</td>
<td></td>
<td>XXFC</td>
<td>1-2 times daily</td>
<td>0-2+ km from household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel gathering</td>
<td></td>
<td>XXFC</td>
<td>daily/seasonal</td>
<td>0-5+ km from H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well digging</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>annual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious rituals</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>daily, seasonal</td>
<td>household; temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House construction</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>once every 5 to 6 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House maintenance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>annual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: X=participates; XX=primary responsibility; FC=Female children, C=Male and female children

As shown in the table, the household is regarded entirely as women's area of work and however active a woman may be economically, she is expected to do all of it, all by herself. I came across two or three such cases, where women are active selling cloth, teaching in a school and laboring in the fields, but have to bear the entire burden of housework. They find their husbands
unreasonable, demanding and not extending any help at all. Men do not take care of children, especially infants. Women provide care entirely for infants and children and when they receive help, it is from children or old people.

(ix). Fuel Collection: A Major Household Chore: The Kosari people enjoy a symbiotic relationship with the forest and with nature, and have, over the centuries, developed a constructive dependence on it. Their culture, social relations, religious beliefs and their entire life system is closely linked to it. Their needs like food, fuel, fodder, fertilizers and medicinal herbs are entirely provided by the forests. Thus, a balance was kept between human needs and ecological imperatives.

During the last four and a half decades of planned development and industrialization in India, trees have been treated primarily as raw material for forest-based industries and not as a renewable resource. This approach has destroyed many forests (Jain, 1991; 1995). In Kekuri, clearfelling of large tracts for raw material, destruction of trees by timber contractors and smugglers and reservation of protected forests, have reduced the area accessible to the village dwellers. The balance between forests and forest-dwellers, human and ecological needs began to weaken with the British forest policy that declared forests state property and a source of revenue (Shiva, 1988; Agarwal, 1986; Agarwal, 1984). Today more and more protected forests in Axom, which has one of the largest forest areas in India, have been transferred to the reserve category in which the people do not have many rights. Many are later destroyed for raw materials. An increasing proportion of common property resources have also been appropriated by rich peasants and landlords.

The principal sources of energy in rural systems are human, animal power and biomass in various forms - wood, crop residues, animal waste - used in the two major areas of the economy,
agriculture and the domestic sector. Women's work, more than men's, depends on access to energy and biomass. The most significant use of biomass is in cooking. The maximum impact of the destruction of biomass sources is on women. Women in all rural cultures are affected, especially those from poor, landless, marginal and small farming families. Women in Kekuri are also caught in the midst of this environmental crisis, working already long hours to produce enough food and income for the family's survival, in a situation of growing household needs. Given the culturally defined division of labour within the family, the collection of household needs like fuel, fodder and water is left to women. As the environment degrades, and this becomes increasingly difficult to obtain, women have to spend an extraordinary amount of time foraging for fuel, fodder, food and water by walking long distances from their homes, in addition to household and agricultural work and taking care of animals. Shortage of drinking water affects women the most as they are the ones who carry it, wash and clean with it. It has meant a greater burden of housework and lesser ability to maintain minimum standards of cleanliness greatly affecting their own and their children's health. In Kekuri women reported that they spend 14-16 hours working everyday, and it does not matter whether they are young, old or pregnant and whether it is a sunday or any other holiday. Day after weary day the routine repeats itself and year after weary year fuel and fodder collection time periods increase.

This destruction has resulted in a crisis in the life of the village-dwellers: impoverishment, indebtedness, and land alienation. Their nutritional intake is low. Shortage of fuel has led to fewer hot meals and more half-cooked food which is potentially harmful for health. Deforestation has deprived them of medicinal herbs from fruits, flowers, leaves, roots and other produce that were freely available till then. My data corroborates the findings of other studies in that the combination
of reduced food intake and non-availability of medicinal herbs has resulted in the deterioration of their health status. With deforestation, the increasing work burden on women is affecting everything else in their lives. They do not have time to seek health care even when they are ill.

The introduction of new technology for reducing drudgery in women's work like weeders and hoes, or in the household like improvement of smoky woodstoves has never reduced women's workload. The inherent sexism that permits men to return from the fields and go drinking and visiting, while women, on returning from the field, cook, feed the family and gather fuel and water still goes unchallenged. Seen from the point of view of women, it can be argued that all development is ignorant of women's needs at best, and anti-women at worst, literally designed to increase their work burden (Sen and Grown, 1987).

(x). Marketing: Throughout the world, women sell food, crops, and livestock for cash or barter. Eviota (1992) notes that rural women in the Philippines may sell produce "when they need cash for a specific purpose or manufactured items for their own consumption" (Eviota, 1992: 130). As pointed out by Safa and Antrobus (1992), purchasing produce from individual neighbors, preparation (handwashing, bundling, and packing), travelling to the market, and selling are very time-consuming activities. Women in Kekuri confine their marketing to local small-scale selling of poultry, pigs, and goats or the excess produce from their gardens. Like other productive activities which are controlled by men, marketing too remains almost entirely the men's domain, and a woman can sell an animal only after consultation with her husband, or other male relative. Out of the 83 households in Kekuri, we find only 7 families where women participate in decision making and exercise some kind of control in marketing. Most of the women in these 7 families negotiate with the grain dealers at home. With
the exception of two women, the remaining nine women in this category are either widows or own
land in their names or otherwise provide for the family. Some of the women sell grain to the local
dealers without their husband’s knowledge, for they find it impossible to manage with the amount
their husbands give them. These women also confessed that whenever their husbands find out about
these grain transactions, they are beaten up. In almost all the cases, money is kept with the women
but they have no control over it.

Informal markets, in an area with few employment opportunities, offer rural women a means
of earning an income, however modest, stimulates local farming, and provides a place for women who
are producers to sell their vegetables. The market also plays a social role, as it provides a meeting
place for women to exchange political news, renew and maintain friendships and family ties. Women
producers and marketers play important roles by providing the locally needed food and other goods,
and at the same time enables them to earn an income and maintain community ties. Women's
domestic responsibilities, the flexible nature of the informal market, and child care assistance from
local family members are some of the factors responsible for women's greater involvement in the
informal sector. Informal markets allow women to participate when they need to, which may be
irregularly, which also results in low returns on produce for these women. Often these women do
not have access to other opportunities to earn an income and feed their families. Family
responsibilities are a major factor restricting women's participation in formal market structures.
Transportation is another critical factor that affects women's ability to participate in formal markets.
Women farmers face many obstacles in taking their produce to local markets, making greater
demands on their time and labor. Development projects designed to promote women's participation
and increase their profits must take into account the larger context of women's lives - their time and
labor constraints, their access to agricultural resources, their family and community ties and obligations, and the limitations on their mobility.

3. Women and the Struggle for Survival

The majority of Kosari women live in poor, rural, peasant homes and are agricultural labourers. Rice is the main crop and rice cultivation relies heavily on women's labour. Almost all women below fifty years of age engage in some work in the rice fields. Older women work in the field in the morning and go to the market in the afternoon. While women's labour is mostly performed in teams, called "khulong", men work individually. Women from the families who own small plots usually work in their own farms if the farm operates at subsistence level. If the plots are too small, both men and women work outside for a wage. In both cases, the burden of house work falls solely on the woman who perform it alone, with the help of her children. Landless labour women work for a wage and also do housework. They can be seen carrying their children to work in the hot sun, getting out early in search of work. They leave their children in the sun in the side of the fields and are very rarely given time to feed them. Their life is insecure, and unlike the woman who owns even a small plot of land, the landless woman has no choice but to work for wages for a living. To a certain extent, the life of the woman who owns a small plot of land is more secure than the landless woman.

Thus women's work is carried on within the confines of powerful and limiting constraints. Throughout my data collection, it was evident that women's work is massive, both in terms of volume and variety, both agricultural and non-agricultural. Although ploughing is done exclusively by males, it does not mean that the job demands greater strength than other arduous work done without the
assistance of animals, such as bending over transplanting for seven or eight hours a day, or carrying heavy head loads of grain, firewood etc. Carrying large heavy pots of water, balanced on the head or the hip is another activity done exclusively by women in Kekuri. No man would consider doing this work. During my research, when I asked why males never did transplanting or weeding work, a man tellingly remarked: "No man can keep standing bent over all day long in mud and rain. It is much too difficult, and our backs would hurt too much". Yet a pregnant woman right up to the time of delivery is expected to do this work. Women also told me that they often asked their children to walk on their backs at night to ease the pain.
Agricultural laborers, who are numerically greater in number than the cultivators, have always included women and men. In spite of this, women's work in Assam is "invisible". Many urban friends informed me that I would find few agricultural laborer women working in the fields. I found this to be untrue as my research brought me in touch with many hardworking, wage earning women. In broad terms, labor can be divided into three types: family, casual (hired for specific tasks on a seasonal or even a daily basis), and permanent (hired on a long term contract, usually extending over a year or more). Each type of labor can be divided into male, female and child categories. Even though the rate of population increase among the poor is lower than among the middle classes, the landless agricultural labor force has increased due to increasing impoverishment, and people losing land for a variety of reasons. Increasing economic pressures on poor and landless households in rural areas have also forced women to seek employment as agricultural wage labor. There are proportionately more female agricultural laborers than male. In India between 1961 and 1981, the proportion of women employed in agriculture increased from 26 percent to 50 percent of economically active women. According to the 1991 Census, half of all rural female workers (against one-fourth of all rural male workers) were agricultural laborers. With increased mechanization, which favors male labor, the demand for female labor has decreased, while the supply of female agricultural laborers has increased (Dixon-Mueller and Anker, 1988; Mitter, 1994). As a result, lower class women have been forced into the lowest ranks of unskilled, temporary laborers who work primarily during the peak agricultural season (Sen, 1982; Shiva, 1994; World Bank 1991)
The participation of women in wage labor differs according to whether they are from landowning families or from working families. With regard to the traditional division of labor, women and men of the landowning families do not work in the fields. Labourers farm the land under the supervision of the landlord. In the home of the landlord, female labourers do the housework - cooking, washing and childcare under the supervision of the landlord's wife. Landowning households tend to have large numbers of poor women working for them, and though wages are extremely low, food is included. Though the landlord's wife may have some education, she lives a secluded life. There is a tendency of the smaller cultivators of various castes and communities to emulate the former, which creates a contradiction in their actual way of life. At first during the course of my interviews, both women and men tended to deny that the women worked in the fields as wage laborers, but gradually they admitted it.

During my study I found that women in my sample did not enter into any contract directly with the employer; most often they worked to fulfil the husband's contract, or to repay loans, and most worked as casual laborers. Sometimes the husband is a casual laborer and the wife, a permanent laborer or vice-versa. As reported by some interviewees, more often the husband becomes a permanent laborer and his wife works for the same landlord, doing all the non-agricultural work required of him with no additional payment. In one case, the permanent laborer's wife was also expected to do the weeding, transplanting and harvesting in the landowner's field as part of her husband's work agreement. All of this together with our limited knowledge of women's entry into the labor market creates difficulties in accurately assessing women's work. There is a need for the study of labor contracts of men and women separately as they prevail at the grassroots level.

It is common knowledge that agricultural work is seasonal and that agricultural laborers face severe unemployment. The Rural Labor Enquiry (RLE, 1996) reports indicate that the average
number of days not worked due to want of work (involuntary unemployment) has increased for men, women and children with the sharpest increase for women. Yet we have very little information on the tasks women generally engage in. In paddy cultivation, the general assumption is that weeding, transplanting and harvesting are the tasks performed by women. However, in the course of my research I found that much is missed out when we treat only weeding, transplanting and harvesting as women's tasks. Apart from drying and stacking hay, the post-harvest operations include drying paddy, measuring, storing and dehusking. While rice mills have displaced manual dehusking, a common practice in the labor households of Axom is a foot-operated "dheki" which women use regularly. Hand pounding of rice is also done for special occasions. Sometimes women are also given the task of selection of seeds, its treatment and storing. Thus there is no uniformity in the tasks women agricultural laborers do or do not do. Moreover, in the given structure of development in the country, more male labor is made available as wage labor both in urban and rural areas, throwing almost the entire responsibility of agricultural work on women. However, women's work is perceived as non-specialized by both men and women and this forms a part of the "housewife ideology" that views women's productive work as an extension of household work.

1. Gender Differentiated Wage Levels

In this section, I will attempt to assess how much women earn from all the varied work they do. However, before proceeding, it is important to clarify the impact of the nature of their work on income. Apart from the lower rates of wages paid to women everywhere in the unorganized sector, the nature of their entry into the work force also influence their income. As I mentioned earlier, certain types of permanent labor contracts entered into by men assumes the free labor of their wives as part of the contract. I have also seen cases where a wife teams up with the husband, or mother
with a son, and a joint payment, usually given to the man, is received at the end of the day. Even if we were to make women's work 'visible', such incomes would remain "invisible" and submerged.

Another way in which women's earnings gets hidden is "self-employment" as we lack sufficient knowledge of what this means and how much is earned. Besides routine work in the household, women are also engaged in paddy related work in the fields, taking care of livestock such as fowls, pigs, ducks, goats and cattle, and grass cutting. Women in Kekuri go to the nearby forest to collect firewood, fruits and berries and other forest produce. Weaving baskets and matmaking by first collecting the necessary raw material from the nearby woods and selling or exchanging the goods in the market is work that women do either as wage work or as self-employment. I also saw women sitting with fishing rods near brooks, collecting small fish, crabs and snails and selling them. This is another form of 'self-employment'. Converting paddy to rice and selling it is also self-employment.

It is interesting that "bringing food to the fields" was also noted by some interviewees as work. There is also another type of 'self-employment' where the woman helps her husband in producing something, such as help in repairing one's own house where the woman does not get a wage or remuneration. Collecting cowdung, making dung-cake and collecting firewood serve not only as fuel for their own households, but can also be sold, especially in an emergency. Even though these activities do not bring sufficient income, they do provide small relief in the face of extreme unemployment. Each of these different kinds of work contribute to the survival of the family and cannot be ignored. But it remains difficult to know how to classify this kind of work - whether as self-employment or as wage work. Self-employment in the case of my interviewees is a dubious term as, given their limited resources, they cannot be expected to create more employment and produce goods and services that can be exchanged for an income in a big way. During my interviews, women who reported themselves as being self-employed could not say how much they get out of it.
As far back as records exist, and continuing to this day, there have been wage differentials between male and female laborers, as well as a tendency to pay less for tasks performed exclusively by women. Despite the Equal Remuneration Wages Acts, women generally get 40 to 60 percent of the male wages and are given the more labor-intensive tasks such as weeding, transplanting and harvesting. An all-India disparity between the daily earnings of men and women belonging to labor households in agricultural occupations has increased by approximately 50 per cent between 1981-1985 and 1991-1995 (RLE, 1996).

On interviewing both men and women in Kekuri, I found that a great amount of wage disparity exists between men and women. Table 8.1. summarizes the different types of agricultural labor in Kekuri.

Table 8.1. Agricultural Labor in Kekuri

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Labor</th>
<th># of households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family and Wage labor</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family labor</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage labor</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

56 families belonging to the marginally landless and small cultivator households engage in both family and wage labor. 19 families belonging to the small cultivator households are engaged in family labor. They do not hire themselves out to work but participate in labor exchange groups. 17 families belonging to the landless and the marginally landless households work as wage labor on other people's land. Table 8.2. details male/female wage differences for different types of rice production activities in the village. (One rupee equalled between $0.32 and $0.35 during the study period).
Table 8.2. Agricultural Wage Labor (Available three months per year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Average annual income from Wage Labor</th>
<th>Rupees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>400-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>120-200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Specific Activities (Rupees per day)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Ploughing (male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Transplanting (female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Weeding (female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. Harvesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Threshing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi. Winnowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among agricultural labor households, a striking observation is the low average income that comes into the household and the wage disparity between women and men; the maximum figure reported for the husband is Rs. 45.85 (approx. US$ 1.30) a day with meals, and for the wife Rs. 20.05 (US$ 0.58) a day, generally without meals. It is also important to remember that in at least one household the husband does not contribute anything to the household income. This points to the grim situation if these households were to depend on male earnings and the crucial nature of women's contribution for the survival of these households. During my study, I found that in the landless households where women are the sole bread winners, they receive less wages than those households.
with a working husband. Thus, women as a sub-group in an exploited class face special
discrimination based on their gender.

This disparity in wages is rationalized with the assumption that women are weak and cannot
do heavy work. Yet when the same task is done by males it somehow becomes a hard task. One
might argue that higher wages should be paid for work which requires bending over while standing
knee-deep in muddy water for hours on end, exposing the women to intestinal and parasitic
infections, attacks by leeches, and the possibility of crippling ailments like rheumatism and arthritis.

The justification for paying women less is also the assumption that they are less productive.
Agarwal notes that in studies dealing with total farm employment, female labor time is often
converted to three-quarters or half of male labor time based on an a priori assumption that female
labor is less efficient. According to her:

Observations on comparative male-female efficiency rate, in any case, are rendered difficult
when there is a sex-typing of tasks, so that there is a predominance of women in certain tasks
and men in others... Indeed, little systematic research has gone into actually comparing the
relative efficiency of men and women in given tasks. In this overall research void, studies
such as the one conducted by the Government Potato Seed Farm in Mattewara (Punjab,
India) during 1973-4 to test the efficiency of different potato-digging equipment stand out.
In this study, it was found that for the equipment tested, women were over three times as
efficient as men. ... This study, while no means conclusive, is nevertheless indicative, and
underlines the need for a requisitioning of hitherto a priori assumptions and for more detailed

In relation to rice cultivation, there has been no study on how much the average woman
harvests versus how much a man harvests. While there may be individual differences, it is not true
that there is a systematic difference between the sexes. Women contribute a much higher percentage
of the labor inputs than males. On the basis of a study carried out in four villages, Panikar notes that
more than two-thirds of the labor input is by females, and goes on to state:

In the literature, generally one unit of female labor is treated as less than equivalent to one of
male labor. In our judgement, there is no justification for this convention, especially so in
paddy cultivation where female laborers attend to more strenuous and arduous work. (Panikar
Some of the wage differential is rooted in traditional patterns, but it is also reinforced by recent legislation. Disappointingly, as of 1995, the new legislation in Axom dealing with wage rates has maintained this wage disparity. Despite women officials in different government positions, the wage policy has not changed perhaps because of the extremely low representation of women in the state legislature.

2. **Determinants of Women's Income**

Total household income is closely related to the number of working people in the household. It is difficult to count or calculate the number of earners in an agricultural labor household. The seasonal nature of the work forced many workers during the year to be idle. Nor is there assurance of work for all, even during the peak season. With the exception of one landowning household where the male member works full-time in a bank away from home, there are no households in the village of Kekuri where any or some of the members have been able to find steady work with a regular income. In looking at my data it is clear that the better-off agricultural laborer households have more earning members. The poorest households are also those in which there are no earning males, often with only one male as the main support of the household. These households include those of widows, abandoned or divorced women, but also elderly couples living alone, women with sick or aged husbands who have no children of working age, and in one case, an elderly woman supported by her daughter. The increased impoverishment of many women is especially striking in the case of women who do not have children old enough to earn significantly.

While the demand for both male and female laborers and casual workers has increased, their real wages have not. Hence, increase in employment opportunities at this level does not imply
increase in standard of living. In fact, because of the discriminatory wages, women have to work longer hours and bear a higher work load than men. Agriculture being a seasonal activity, there are times in the year when there is relatively more work for women than men, and times when there is relatively less work for women than men. The seasonality of agriculture places extra burden on women from the poorer households since they have to perform their field tasks within a limited time period with no extra help. The lack of female earnings at a particular time does not mean the family can fall back on the earnings of the husband's or male earnings; it often means no income at all for households already close to the survival margin.

Women in my study responded that agricultural wage labor is not a reliable source of income, and work in rice production does not provide adequate financial compensation. Yet they continue to work when it is available as it provides them with grain for food. During the three months of the year when there is wage labor, women consistently receive lower wages than men for the same activity. For the remaining nine months, the women support the households through weaving, rearing silk worms, selling vegetables and forest produce like betelnuts. In addition to agriculture, women engage in year round economic activities such as trading, beer brewing, rice pounding and mat and basket making. They also try to supplement their income with sale of milk, eggs, poultry and pigs. A few households have been breeding ducks and manage to earn something from the sale of both eggs and ducks. The risks are also great as one household found out when all the two dozen ducks died of disease. Another woman's cow was bitten by a mad dog. These households, already living in the margins, cannot afford such risks. Women also responded that seasonal agricultural wage labor is more remunerative than weaving and other craft projects from which they earn very little (Rs.20-40 per month). Still it provides small amounts of cash income throughout the year, while agricultural work only provides 2-3 months total employment. There are also women in specialized occupations.
such as "bez" (ritual healers) and "dais" (midwives). In the Kekuri area, a familiar sound is that of groups of women singing as they fish in the flooded rice fields during the rainy season. In fact, women usually sing during field and housework and the songs reflect their culture, experiences and aspirations. Special occasions of happiness are celebrated by women singing in groups, with one woman taking the lead. Often these songs touch on important aspects of women's lives. Many express women's responses to their situation - their ambivalence, as well as their certainties, their anger as well their acceptance, their hopes as well as their hopelessness. Table 8.3 summarizes alternative employment opportunities and their returns by gender.

**Table 8.3. Average Monthly Earnings from Alternative Employment in Kekuri**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Earnings in Rupees/month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selling eggs and livestock</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>75-100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaving</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>20-40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling Vegetables</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy (milk &amp; milk products)</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>0-50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest produce (firewood)</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>20-40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice beer</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>100-140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Labor (hired)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. mechanized schemes</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. village fields</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>100-150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40-60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Construction</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>250-500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50-100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. community health workers</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. village midwives (ANM)</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. traditional birth attendants</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>75-100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Activities (public meetings, community projects)</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: X = participates; XX = dominates. (One rupee equalled between $0.32 and $0.35 during the study period).
Female income constitutes a significant proportion of total household income, especially in landless and marginal landowning agricultural laborer households. The percentage of their earnings that women contribute to their households varies from 95 to 99 percent, whereas male contributions average about 70 percent. In these households, which have little or nothing to spare, female income cannot be regarded as supplementary.

The most important influence on a woman's income is the number of days' work she can get. This is influenced by willingness of female laborers to go to nearby, or even distant places seeking agricultural work, the availability of non-agricultural work for women in the village, such as making gur (raw sugar), the reluctance of women to do certain tasks that they were not trained for when young or due to questions of prestige. Women's health status, made worse by the nature of their work, also affects the level of a woman's income.

In general, all the women described harsh working conditions in agricultural labor, characterized by irregular work, long hours and low wages as well as exploitative labor relations. They describe health hazards and job insecurity. The health problems observed during the course of my fieldwork include certain types of seasonal illnesses that women are prone to get such as splitting heels from standing in the water and mud all day transplanting; severe arthritic pains, which are more common among women than men; age-related illnesses; and problems from the stress of recent pregnancy and childbirth. The frequent illnesses some women report may also be related to deficiency in essential vitamins such as calcium and iron. Many women suffer from ulcers and infected cuts on legs and arms from working barefoot in wet fields. Many noted the presence of thorns, broken glass, leeches and snakes as potential health hazards. As a rule women in rice cultivation constantly suffer from general body aches, fevers and respiratory ailments from working in the rain. I have personally
seen many elderly women, including my grandmother, unable to straighten their backs at all, having spent years in paddy fields. While manual work can affect men's health as well, I have never seen men so badly bent over.

Informal discussions and observational data from my study indicate that women have to withdraw from field work after child-bearing, at least briefly. Often there is no one to take care of the baby, and these women, who depend on their own and husband's income, are forced to cut back at the time when they need it most. As all these households live close to the margins in terms of food availability; any loss of income at time of birth, illness, or other causes, can lead to serious consequences like lowered food consumption, maternal and child morbidity and mortality. Most of the children in these households are noticeably malnourished. There is no indication that men increase their income contribution even at this critical time. When a baby is born at the time of an agricultural cycle when there is work only for women, and not for men, the family faces an even greater crisis. Childbirth often forces households to go into debt, borrowing against a woman's anticipated future income, and pawning whatever gold jewelry or utensils a woman may own.

Women's health is of extreme importance to them, particularly due to the insecurity of their work. Work is generally available only on a day-to-day basis. Often they do not know if they will have work for the day, or even half the day, until they show up at the field. Sometimes they might only get work for one hour, or even a fraction of an hour. If they are late, or their work does not satisfy their supervisor, they are dismissed without pay. Sometimes they start working and are only later told of a low rate of payment. Women are consistently paid lower wages than men. Landless laborers get very little income other than that which they get from selling their labor. Agricultural wage labor provides women with only seasonal employment (3 month/year) at low wages ((30-40 Rs/month).
Despite the wage differentials, the single most important problem facing workers in Kekuri is lack of work. Although women certainly want other things such as drinking water wells close to their homes, what they most desperately need is additional sources of income, no matter how much housework they might have. Among men, those with the highest earnings were not employed in agriculture, but worked as casual laborers in a variety of nonagricultural jobs.

3. Income Control

Another important aspect is the proportion of their earnings that men and women contribute towards the household. Conventional development theory and practice assume that if men's wages are increased, all the household members will benefit. However, it is clear that the issue is much more complicated. In the area of study, very few sources of salaried income remain. Thus, household income is continuing to decrease, with women remaining responsible for the bulk of household expenses. My data indicate that women contribute proportionately more of their income to the household and withhold less for personal use than men. There is a long-standing tradition in Axom of separate male and female budgets. Generally men's income is not available to their wives for productive investments. It is accepted that men spend a part of their earnings on personal expenses which vary from a cup of tea to food, bidi (rolled tobacco) and cigarettes to alcohol and gambling, and consumption articles like radios and bicycles, as is the case with Biren, a wage laborer in Kekuri. His wife, Dalimi, complained that a woman has to lead a miserable life. In the recent past, she had to go hungry for days together in order to save food for the children; Biren had earlier spent the family's meager savings on a bicycle, which he refused to sell, despite the fact that he could neither use it nor maintain it. Dalimi was firmly reprimanded and some times even beaten for suggesting its disposal.
Women's income-earning opportunities are closely related to the well-being of the household and their children's welfare. During our discussions, women indicated that they generally bring home their entire income, usually spending the little cash they earn on basic necessities, such as health care, school fees, essential food items like salt, kerosene, and other manufactured goods. While some younger interviewees said they sometimes spent some amount on clothes, women's expenses are generally directed toward easing the family burden rather than spending on a personal indulgence. Unmarried daughters tend to give most of what they earn to the household, although they may save some money for their marriages. Occasionally they buy cheap bangles or other ornaments, which do not make a significant dent in their incomes. Unmarried sons tend to give a higher proportion of their incomes to the households than do husbands. This may be because a son may be more aware of the mother's distress about the family's poverty and of her struggles to feed everyone.

To what extent do women retain control over what they earn? My interview data suggest that many of the women do retain some control over their earnings. In fact, in many households, it is the wife who handles the family's expenses. The men hand over their earnings to them after deducting their own expenses. However, if a husband asks for money for his personal use, refusal on the part of the wife could lead to a beating. An informant said that her husband asks for money for his expenses when he does not work, and beats her if she refuses. Another complained that her husband had pawned her jewelry without her knowledge. In another case, the husband not only takes money from his wife, but also borrows from his neighbors, which she has to repay from her wages. Thus men's control over women's income can extend to the ability to create debt for women and indirectly take their personal property. While it is not typical, it is true that in some households the woman must contribute to her husband's personal expenses in addition to financing the maintenance and reproduction of the household.

205
However, there are also households where the husband contributes a respectable proportion of his earnings to the family, and where he is very concerned about their well-being. In these households, where the man shared the domestic expenses, it was interesting to note that women lose control over taking care of domestic needs when the income was pooled as men's spending priorities were different. There are also households where the husband's contribution is very low, for one reason or the other, and the woman is the main provider. There is at least one such case in my study. On other aspects of financial autonomy, when I asked women if they could buy personal items like clothing for themselves without asking their husbands, many said that they would first tell their husbands and then buy. Others stated that they would require their husband's permission, while others stated that their husbands would make the purchase. This could also be because the cloth store is outside the village, or prices could be lower elsewhere. While women are generally free to move within the village, purchases outside the village are usually made by males.

While speaking with male and female laborers about the fact that men withhold more income for their personal use than women, men always agreed that this was the case. As one man put it, "It is part of being a man". The majority hold back money for status-maintaining activities and see nothing wrong in doing so. Women's perception of this disparity agrees with the explanation given by men. Most women confirm the projected disparity of wages and believe that it is due to the 'skill' and 'strength' required of a particular job that men get better wages and women are paid less. This shows that the devaluation of women's work sometimes reinforces women's sense of inferiority. While some women resent it, they do not expect it to change. For better-off families this is not a crucial matter. But for most of the households in my study who live close to the margins of survival, this can have serious consequences especially in times of crisis.
In rural Axom, women's traditional knowledge and skills have become vital for their survival, particularly with the onslaught of "modern" knowledge brought about by "development". Kosari women have followed a variety of traditional thrift practices which are continued to this day. The rationale of these practices can best be understood in the context of the existing patriarchal society in which men are the main breadwinners. The women are expected to manage the household within limited earnings and hence any amount saved secretly in cash or in kind assumes particular significance. One practice which is common in many households is what is called in Axomiya "emuthi sauel" (a handful of rice). Each day, before cooking, women take out a handful of uncooked rice from the amount kept aside for the day's meal and put it into a separate pot. This accumulated rice is then used when stocks of rice are depleted, or the money thus saved is used to meet emergency medical or other expenses. Others succeed in saving for the children's (usually their son's) education. Such traditional thrift and saving systems have played a vital role in knitting together and preserving human relationships.

Uncertain access to land and difficulties in retaining control over small cash earnings impede women's struggle to increase their food surplus. Women usually have little actual control of cash and therefore cannot demand expenditure on facilities that may reduce their burden of housework such as a water pump, general sanitation etc. Because appropriate technology is not readily available to women, improved seeds, improved storage, field to house transport, and farm to market roads remain elusive. Shifts in women's opportunities and demands could lead to a shift in the organization of household production, thereby increasing women's decision-making capacity with regard to resource allocation.
4. The Invisibility of Women's Work

The invisibility of women's economic contribution in agriculture also arises from traditional interpretations of such concepts as "work", "economic activities", "productivity" and "work place". The nature of women's food production, processing, storage, water and fuel carrying, home production and marketing of products is such that there is no clear dividing line as to where her work outside the home ends and household work begins. The difficulty of measuring female employment in the subsistence non-market economy is compounded by the fact that women, much more than men, engage in a multiplicity of tasks, only some of which enter the market economy. Though they may be engaged in economic production, this may not be paid for in cash, or only some of it may be production for a market economy and some for domestic consumption. Moreover, there is frequent change, seasonally and even daily, in the mix of exchange and consumption (Boserup, 1975).

For example, it is a regular and common feature for women in Kekuri to go food-gathering. This entails fishing in ponds and finding and collecting leafy green vegetables which grow wild in wooded areas and on the banks of ponds and reservoirs. This kind of activity takes up nearly two to three hours of a woman's working day. While they are out collecting vegetables or fishing, women also gather twigs and leaves to be used as fuel. Most of this work is translated into domestic consumption. If they happen to collect amounts over and above their households needs, the women sell these to land owning families whose women do not, for social reasons, go food-gathering. Often the transaction is in kind and not cash. The cash amounts are small and immediately used to purchase food items required for the day (eg oil for cooking). Another common example is the work put in by most rural women in the care of cows and other animals belonging to the household. Female jobs in agriculture include breaking clods of earth, manuring, weeding, transplanting, harvesting, and threshing. Women fetch grass for the animals, clean the cowshed, heap the cowdung and carry it to
the fields, and milk the cattle. They cut and carry huge loads of grass and fuel from the forest. As a result of the hierarchical division of labour between male and female in agriculture, wage discrimination against women is rampant. Even for the same jobs, women get paid less than men, the assumption being that women are less productive than men. On farms which use family labour, women work without receiving any remuneration. The fruits of their labour are then sold by the male members of the family who ultimately control the way these resources will be used. Although 40 to 50 per cent of the female labour force are unpaid family workers, the work of these women is not recognised either in an economic or legal sense. As a result women have no control over the productive assets in agriculture such as land and livestock, and little or no access to credit which is tied to land ownership.

Women's situation as a result of unemployment is more acute since most national employment programmes which are designed to provide employment to agricultural workers in peak unemployment periods are aimed at men. As, for example, the government sponsored Employment Guarantee Scheme for rural areas (providing rural unemployed with jobs in public works like road construction, building embankments etc) shows that 50 per cent of the workers are women. Work under the Employment Guarantee Scheme is available to the rural poor only during the agricultural off-seasons. However, unemployment periods are determined primarily by the peak periods of unemployment for rural men. Women's periods of unemployment do not coincide with men's. For example, men are busy during the ploughing season when women face acute unemployment. Thus even in peak agricultural seasons women do not necessarily have work and need public work employment more than men.

Women's employment opportunities are often temporary, characterized by low wages, poor working conditions and no job security. Men are paid higher wages than women for the same job;
women's jobs have less prestige and are paid less. In this way, women lose their subsistence base, perpetuating the dependency relations of women on their men. Despite these disadvantages, women wage laborers in India outnumber the male (Census of India, 1991). In order to understand and examine women's work, there is an urgent need to redefine the term "work". Only then will we be successful in accurately assessing women's contribution to the home and to society.
Chapter 9

Socioeconomic Consequences of "Development"

Introduction

India has a predominantly agricultural economy with productivity still at a low level. The three basic components of the strategy of planning for rural development - land reforms, co-operative farming, and community development in the 1950s and 1960s - made no attempt to destroy class-based institutions and patriarchal bases of power. There is a pervasive state intervention aimed at the integration of agriculture into the world market. The overriding interventionist goal is to provide incentives for increasing agricultural production for the external market through the introduction of new technologies and practices, based on the premise of an ever-expanding capitalist sector in agriculture. This preoccupation with economic growth, with its total disregard for subsistence, ecological and distributional considerations has led to increased gender, class and regional inequalities, unemployment, and ecological destruction, and impoverishment for many. Agrarian reforms in India have been concerned with one or several of the following issues: abolition of intermediaries in the revenue-collection system; security of tenure for sharecroppers and tenants; imposition of land-ownership 'ceilings', and the redistribution of private-property rights from landlords to the landless and the land-poor. In addition, the Indian Parliament has legislated reforms such as a National Minimum wage act, and an Equal Remuneration law. Yet most of these reforms have not been enforced, mainly due to apathy on the part of government agencies and control by local landlords who have vested interests in perpetuating the system. Regardless of which party is in power at the national level, the relations between central and state governments remain unequal. The constitution provides more extensive legislative powers to the center than to the states. Even those
matters under state control are hedged with qualifications. Although agrarian reforms fall within the state government's jurisdiction, they can be overturned by the central government. Poor households have not benefited from the government's expressed intentions. The fact that a very large section of the rural population in Assam have few rights in land is significant, both for the ways in which agrarian politics developed and also for the redistributive possibilities offered by the program of land reforms. While there are few precise estimates of the total number of landless households, a large proportion of agricultural laborers and tenant farmers are clearly in this category. Moreover, poor women are essentially excluded from many government reform programs. One example is land ownership, where not only does the husband alone receive the land title, the woman has no legal rights over land use, property disposal, or access to benefits from the use of the land. Without land titles, women have little access to information on new practices and institutional credit.

After the passage of the Minimum Wages Act in 1975, landlords were required to pay wages in cash, but these wages continue to be grossly inadequate. In none of the villages that I visited in 1995 were men or women receiving the legally mandated minimum wage. In most instances, agricultural laborers, especially women, continue to be paid in kind and made to work long hours. Daughters are usually withdrawn from school after completing grades 5 or 8, while sons are encouraged to go on for a college degree. Some men in Kekuri have also taken advantage of education since they are privileged under a preferential quota system. The Indian Constitution guarantees equal opportunities in the achievement of education and jobs to all citizens irrespective of caste, religion and gender. Some lower caste and indigenous people are further protected in the Constitution by a quota system which is based on a 20 per cent reservation for them in all government schools, institutes and employment places. After completing their higher education in the cities, few men choose to return to the village to manage their farms or work on them. Most prefer city jobs to
the hard physical labor required in farming. To the indigenous community, literacy also means urban employment and a chance to move up the caste and class hierarchy. With the men leaving for the cities, women from landowning households are forced out of the confines of their homes and into the fields to engage in arduous agricultural work. At the same time, village bound indigenous women try to raise their social status within the village community by observing purdah and adopting other patriarchal customs of the higher castes with as much fervor as their economic position will permit.

India's current so-called New Economic Policy (NEP) is not that new: the roots lie in the acceptance of a Western model of development. While promotion of a mixed economy was official policy, in reality the public sector was increasingly influenced by the corporate sector. The way of life, which is at the crux of the development paradigm, was industrialization and urbanization. In this process, a large silent majority who does not have monetary capital, but have two other kinds of resources, natural and human, was undermined and considered "backward". Planning has proceeded in this context where armed forces and a market to reach has taken precedence over drinking water in a village community. The chief beneficiaries within this model of modernization are the multinationals through the Indian rich, as well as the economic and political elite, including the corporate sector, who have joined hands with the global powers - the World Bank and the IMF. Through state intervention in the name of planning, 80% of the population have been marginalized and deprived of their natural resources.

Agricultural growth strategies pursued in India since the mid-1960's have not only increased inequalities and impoverishment, they have also increased male-female differences in employment and earnings among the poor. The present agricultural policy has abandoned social responsibility by pursuing large-scale high-tech farming geared to the unsustainable mechanisms of capital accumulation and profit for the multinational corporations and its political allies. This has destroyed
the productive potential and livelihood of millions of middle and poor peasants and landless laborers who are faced with loss of land, low wages, poor health, and consequent destitution and displacement. Added to this, state policies have contributed significantly to the rapid depletion of the country's natural resources - water, forests, soil. The permanent fall in the groundwater table in many areas, escalating deforestation due to commercial tree-felling, large-scale surface irrigation works and agricultural expansion, soil erosion, the decline in village commons due to appropriation by large farmers and government auctioning to private contractors, the barring of the poor from access to forest produce have all resulted in shortage in the availability of fuel, fodder, water and gathered food items to poor women (Agarwal, 1986; Shiva, 1987; Agarwal, 1992). These trends together with the emergence of dowry-linked female infanticide in parts of South-India and the growing popularity of foetal sex-determination tests followed by abortions of female foetuses in the North-west portend ill for the future survival chances of female children in many parts of India. Here son preference is not just a leftover of feudal ideology but is backed by the States's agricultural and population policies. India is faced with a dual crisis of a corrupt national system and a very greedy and corrupt global system, working in partnership with each other. The antidote to both - global and a corrupt national elite - is local democratic action, and an assertion on the part of people to defend themselves. This must be linked with international citizen mobilization and solidarity.

1. *Rural Planning and Development Projects-Dibrugarh District*

The first major development project called Rural Planning and Development project was set up in Dibrugarh district in 1954 and was started in 41 villages of the district. The program for Women's development has been an integral part of the Community Development program. It was formulated in the early fifties based on the experience gained in a number of rural development
projects and on the pattern of the U.S. National Agricultural Extension Service. The training of
village level workers was undertaken to make more field workers available for various development
programs. These programs were largely based on models existing in the advanced capitalist countries
and both expertise and equipment were imported from the United States. The stated objective was
to mobilize rural people for labor intensive agricultural projects, supported by land reforms, by new
village cooperatives and the National Extension Service. Some of these programs aimed to lead
towards greater mass participation but were, however, seriously limited by the fact that the model of
development did not take the indigenous social structure into consideration and in fact imposed
imported models on the people. The bulk of the rural people did not have access to credit and the
agricultural inputs they needed for intensified agricultural production. Consequently, the new
agrarian technology benefited the class with enough resources to invest in it.

Lying in the plains of the river Brahmaputra, Dibrugarh has rich and fertile soil and therefore,
offers a great potential in terms of agricultural produce if proper inputs are made available to the
farmers. However, a major problem in the area is that of soil erosion and therefore, of declining
productivity. Lying in the Brahmaputra plain, the water often floods the fields leaving behind salts
which make the land alkaline leading to denudation, and therefore, soil erosion. Land reclamation
and prevention of further erosion, therefore, became imperative for any degree of agricultural
development. The British were also aware of this problem and building of field embankments was
a part of their agriculture and rural development programs.

It is evident from the study of documents available that Development project planners and
policy-makers showed resistance to women's interests initially. Later when the women's component
in the rural development program was introduced, it was designed after the American Home Science
Extension program. The integration of women into rural development through Mahila Samity
Women's Groups) - most of them were paper organizations - was a scheme with a middle class bias using American textbooks and equipment for demonstrating home science techniques. Rural women were given training in crafts, sewing, kitchen gardening, jam and jelly making. The objective, as stated by the Directorate of Women's Programs, was to help the rural woman become "a good wife, a wise mother, a competent housewife and a responsible member of the village community" (Dibrugarh Mahila Samity Brochure, 1961). The planners totally disregarded women's work in the rural economy, specifically their contribution to agriculture and related production, e.g., cattle rearing, fishing, weaving etc. Most of these housewife improvement programs have proved a failure because they are irrelevant to the needs of women in subsistence agriculture and are unable to augment women's income in any way.

During the early sixties, each Block in the region had an Assistant Development Officer of women's programs and a Gram Sevika (Women Village Level Worker). The duties of these village level workers were to propagate and implement the women's program in the countryside, although the program itself implied a home extension and housewife approach. During the mid-sixties, the women's program suffered a further set back because planners and administrators concentrated on the development strategy of intensive agricultural growth. In the process, the village level women functionaries became redundant and were absorbed in other rural development programs like Family Planning and Applied Nutrition Program.

2. Government Policies and their Effect on Women

Women are involved in all the different types of agricultural systems in India; yet, their efforts often receive very little attention. Women's contribution to both intensive and extensive agriculture in Assam is significant. In intensified agriculture, women are engaged in the production
of food crops, such as roots and vegetables, that not only serve for subsistence but also are sold in local markets. Since women have been traditionally involved in this type of agriculture, they are familiar with the indigenous methods of agriculture and the traditional ways of managing land resources. The traditional agricultural practices of women help to enhance biodiversity and to make the local economy sufficient. The tools employed by women in subsistence production do not perturb the ecosystem, and the crops such as vegetables, basic grains, and root crops form part of the local staple food. This indigenous knowledge of women farmers must be tapped in order to be able to achieve appropriate development. The transfer of knowledge acquired from years of working on the land is the responsibility of women which needs to be recorded and valued.

Women have been an inconsequential element in rural development programs. Some of the failures and weaknesses of development projects in reaching the poor and achieve their goals of eradicating poverty and improving nutrition and health are due to inattention paid to the various social hierarchies operating in the rural areas, the political and cultural contexts within which the projects are implemented and overlooking the critical people involved with producing, providing and managing food supply within the poorest rural households - women farmers. The programs especially centered on women have been developed on the basis of insufficient understanding of women's role in agriculture. Moreover such programs are based on the unquestioning acceptance of the social norms of patriarchal ideology regarding women.

In India, the disadvantaged and dispossessed constitute 60 percent of the rural households. Despite constitutional provisions and legislative gains, the subordination of certain social groups has become necessary for the maintenance of certain privileges and lifestyles of powerful castes and classes, including the lifestyles of women from these strata. Unlike Africa where there is a growing food crisis, food production in Asia has generally increased over the last decades as a result of
transformation in technology, adoption of new varieties of crops, changes in rural institutions and organizations, spread of irrigation systems, and use of fertilizers to increase land productivity. Yet problems of malnutrition and undernutrition remain. In Kekuri, nutritional anemia affects an estimated 80 percent of low-income families, especially pre-school children and mothers. Undernutrition has always been linked to poverty and skewed distribution of food, with families of landless, small-scale farmers and general laborers as high-risk groups.

Women have been relegated entirely to the backwaters of rural development programs, although they play a major productive role outside their work, in the home, as peasant cultivators and as agricultural laborers. Until 1989, development planners in India did not have policies that favored women farmers, and ignored women's contribution and knowledge. The consequences were catastrophic for women farmers as it undermined the women's capacities to continue their positive contributions. In the past, the Indian government emphasized the improvement of homemaking aspects of women, neglecting the most significant contribution of women to agriculture, food production. The needs of poor, rural women have been ignored or overlooked by the government in its attempt to create access of the poor to land, employment, income and technology. For example, the efforts of agricultural extension officers are directed towards male workers and cultivators, as the role of female workers and supervisors have been ignored. Similarly, there has been little research on the transplanting operations performed by women. The negative effects of development programs are felt most acutely by rural women because of gender-based hierarchies which, on the one hand, limit women's access to resources and participation, and on the other, impose sexual divisions of labor that allocate to women the most labor-intensive, and poorly-rewarded work. The terms and goals of the development community has had little meaning to the population for which they are intended. Myths regarding women's abilities to understand and utilize new machinery
or methods persist, leaving women to maintain labor-intensive traditional technologies while men modernize their tasks (Tinker 1990: 40).

In recent years, Government intervention with respect to women has been broadly on two fronts: (1) programs to raise the income level of poor households, the most important being the IRDP; and (2) programs to raise the general health level through the institution of various mother and child programs. Two of the earliest schemes with the objectives of providing alternative employment and thereby additional income have been the food-for-work program and the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS).

i. Rural Development Schemes: Among the new schemes initiated for providing substantial assistance to women, the Integrated Rural Development Project (IRDP) is a major program. The IRDP was launched in 1978-9 in 2,300 blocks all over the country. Later the program was extended to all blocks in the country. The IRDP was a synthesis of the strategies tested and found "effective" from the past experience of implementing special programs such as the Small Farmers and Marginal Farmers Development Agencies.

A close look at the implementation of IRDP shows that the measures for rural development have benefited only a certain category of peasants owning land and assets and have, therefore, further marginalized the rural poor. In Tingkhong block under IRDP, only two women in the entire village were selected to undergo training for sewing and embroidery in 1994. The "target" of beneficiaries under the projects always fall short. Women tend to be ignored in this program because of their inability to furnish the required guarantee of domicile in the block area. Women who have been separated from their husbands but have not undergone a formal divorce procedure cannot avail of this facility despite their desperate need. Moreover, women rarely have any land in their names; they,
therefore, are considered a bad risk and find it difficult to manage any guarantor, which is usually required for the credit schemes. The real benefactors of these schemes are the rich families of caste Hindus who usurp most of the facilities; only a few poorer people, who are under the patronage of the rural rich, are included in these programs. Thus, the IRDP program has been ineffective as far as women beneficiaries are concerned. My respondents reported that they had to struggle repeatedly to get any loans in their names despite the stated priorities of the scheme. To rectify the situation, in September 1982 the government introduced Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), but it hardly took off even in the pilot areas. Non-involvement of people's institutions, better banking abilities of those having land and assets, and a clash of interest between government functionaries and vested interests were stated to be the reasons for the failure of the program.

Another scheme under IRDP included Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM). TRYSEM attempts to provide employment in rural areas by imparting training skills in agriculture and allied activities, including rural industries. There is a subsidy of 25 percent available for marginal farmers on the capital loaned and 33 percent for the landless. There is a provision that 20 percent of the beneficiaries under TRYSEM have to be women. A major drawback of TRYSEM, however, is that women are restricted to the skills that are relegated to women's sphere, such as sewing, knitting and embroidery. In Tingkhong Block in 1994, under the TRYSEM scheme, 60 candidates were selected for training, of whom 32 received training and 28 were yet to be trained. In the latter only two women were selected to undergo training for sewing and embroidery. The initial target of 100 beneficiaries under TRYSEM could not be covered. There are no instances where women have been encouraged to learn mechanical skills that may enable them to start small repair shops etc. My analysis of the schemes reveals that women are still confined to "womanly" tasks - tending cattle, kitchen-gardening, weaving etc. There has been no shift from the goals and
ideological perceptions of the earlier community development programs that seek to make women "better home managers". "Housewifization", as termed by Mies (1986), still seems to be the major goal of government development programs today.

_Mahila Mandals_ (Rural Women's Organizations) have been complete failures, and are mostly under the domination of the landed and higher class elites. These organizations concentrate on home economics and child care. Membership consists of women from higher-income families in the rural areas. The poorer women seldom participate because "they feel ignorant and are poor", "they do not see any use in participating in such training because it does not fit into their everyday lives"; and "the better-off women are prominent in organizing; the poorer women are organized by them to do the cooking and the cleaning". All these reasons reported by the women I interviewed show a lack of understanding of how class differences among women can lead to the poorer women being treated in hierarchical and patronizing ways.

In Tingkhong, 12 villages were covered under the UNICEF-sponsored Applied Nutrition Program in 1995; a total of 120 quintals of wheat, 135 mls of milk and 155 mls of mustard oil was made available to these villages. Children in the age group 0-6 years, pregnant women and lactating mothers were to be given 60 grams to 125 grams of grain and 10 to 15 mls of milk per day. However, these women and children were given only a quarter of their rightful share of grain and milk. At the time of distribution of grain and milk, several women were refused their share and asked to return quietly to their homes. While these women feel agitated and enraged, they are too powerless to do anything on account of their isolation, lack of resources and crippling poverty.

The Working Group on Women's Employment was constituted by the Planning Commission for the first time in the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-5) and it noted the problems of wage employment and self-employment for women. It recommended an increase in the employment of rural women and
allocation of resources as well as increased benefits to women in rural economic programs. The plan also provided for extension of credit facilities for self-employment. While credit extension to rural women on reduced rates of interest have been stressed in the subsequent plan documents at the policy level, there are, however, social constraints in translating it into practice. Social attitudes, a general apathy toward women on the part of bankers, and their general lack of property does not allow them to undertake independent economic ventures. Women in my study reported that they are reluctant to approach a bank as they are unfamiliar with institutional credit facilities and bank policies. Moreover, their general lack of property and assetless status make banking procedures more cumbersome.

Prejudices regarding the "proper" role of women in society and their "marginal" role in the economy have, to a great extent, determined the shape of public policy which have tended to treat women as subjects of welfare and development policies rather than active participants (Mazumdar, 1979). Planning and policy take into account women's roles in the family but ignore their role in the economy. Women as producers remain invisible. Moreover, the invisibility of women's economic contribution in agriculture arises from traditional interpretations of such concepts as "work", "economic activities", "productivity" and "work place". The nature of women's food production, processing, storage, water and fuel carrying, home production and marketing of products is such that there is no clear dividing line as to where her work outside the home ends and household work begins. The difficulty of measuring female employment in the subsistence non-market economy is compounded by the fact that women, much more than men, engage in a multiplicity of tasks, only some of which enter the market economy. Though they may be engaged in economic production, this may not be paid for in cash, or only some of it may be production for a market economy and some for domestic consumption. Moreover, there is frequent change, seasonally and even daily, in
the mix of exchange and consumption (Boserup, 1975).

New opportunities have been created for the rural poor in terms of co-operatives, rural credit, training in the use of new technology, marketing and extension services. However, these opportunities are introduced into the rural areas in a "top-down" approach based on the values of government departments and implementing agencies. In this approach, men are perceived to be the primary supporters of the family, while in reality it is men together with women who do so, and often it is the women who are forced to do so alone. As a consequence, women do not benefit from these programs, even if in theory resources are available to both sexes.

3. Anti-Participatory Technology

Although women play a significant role in agriculture and the allied activities as producers and processors, their access to agrarian technology is limited. My study reveals that Kekuri women hardly have any opportunity to learn about improved farm methods, technological skills, cooperatives and livestock activities. Credit facilities are less easily available to women, sometimes because loans are given against land titles and the land is held in the men's name, or credits are extended through cooperative societies of which mainly men are members.

The new agrarian technology in this region tends to be anti-participatory. I learnt from many women that with the commercialization of agriculture, women are increasingly losing control of the decision-making. Technological development programs, by creating a demand for cash to purchase high yielding seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, etc., have led to the formation of co-operative societies. These bodies unfortunately, apart from being totally dominated by the rural elite, have failed to involve any women.
Modern agricultural technology, on the one hand, denies women the employment opportunities otherwise available to them, and on the other, stereotypes all those jobs which pay less and require less skill, forcing women to take up jobs which come to be regarded as purely female tasks. Technology is therefore, neither class neutral nor sex neutral. Another important aspect is the bias in agricultural technology research. While improvements have been made on the tools mainly used by males such as the plough, little attention has been made on the tools made by women. Government technologies have been ineffective in the diffusion of technology that can lighten the daily drudgery of rural women, while taking into account the needs and abilities of different classes of women.

Capital-intensive innovations tend to convert female tasks into male jobs, as in the case of manuring. In Kekuri, women have been replaced in agriculture by the introduction of fertilizers and the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides, which are used by men and have come to replace women, who previously applied cow-dung. None of the women in my study apply chemical fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides. More accurately, a single man has come to replace a number of women, since the new technology requires much less time and effort. Electrification of the countryside has helped in the creation of mechanized processing. Technology has also resulted in the total elimination of female jobs as in the case of rice mills. One traditional source of employment for the poorest women had been hand-processing of paddy. This job has now been taken over by rice mills, which do the work for less than the wages for handpounding, and has thereby resulted in the loss of employment for women. Oil-extraction mills are fast replacing the home-extraction process. Mill-made cloth has replaced homemade spinning and weaving. All this is considered as progress because it relieves women from the drudgery of manual labor. But, mechanization and commercialization of home-based processing in the village has had a negative impact on women's
traditional service roles and income earning opportunities. Women have not been able to replace the lost opportunities with other sources of income. This has had a negative impact on the welfare of the family, since there is less income per household member. The effects of this exclusion of women due to the introduction of capital-intensive techniques is varied: in some cases, women have become informally employed, as traders and vendors in the internal market system, and in some cases, work as domestics. There were some families where the women and children have become dependent on the earnings of a male wage earner, while others have continued their subsistence production roles by cultivating family plots. My research clearly shows a widening gender gap and erosion of female status as a result of village electrification and mechanization. It can be said that with appropriate time and energy saving technology, the opposite could have been possible.

The adoption of the new agricultural technology has not improved the economic position of wage laborers in general, and of female laborers in particular. Women in peasant households usually have little actual control of cash and therefore cannot demand expenditure on facilities that may reduce their burden of housework such as a water pump, general sanitation etc. Women laborers still earn one-half and even less of male earnings. Here it should be noted that while in certain situations women receive the wage directly, in many cases it is handed over to the husband. This implies that even if women's work becomes more "visible", the earnings tend to get submerged.

There is also a process of mystification caused in the process of agricultural modernization by the assumption that as women cannot work outside the house, so they cannot handle technology. Thus, the new agrarian technology has used the feudal domestication and seclusion of women for increasing capitalist relations of production in the countryside.

When women are included in development planning, they are often seen as passive recipients of development aid rather than productive members of society (Stamp, 1990). Women have
traditionally been involved in productive processes requiring skill and organization, but the introduction of new technologies in Third World countries have often been implemented without regard for women's needs and abilities. As Bourque and Warren succinctly state:

one realizes how much technology and education are bearers of social relations marked by gender. Access to technology is not enough to change these gendered asymmetries, though it is clearly crucial to the process of change in the forms of education and in the uses of technology (Bourque and Warren, 1990: 100).

Carr further strengthens this argument:

Providing small farmers, and women in particular, with information on existing technologies does not result in technology transfer if the technology is not appropriate to their needs or if they do not have the necessary skills to interpret it and put it to use. The introduction of improved technologies to women therefore involves the transfer not only of information, but also of skills in ways that encourage the development and utilization of indigenous resources (Carr, 1991: 13).

Thus, it is clear that women's needs have to be taken into account when contemplating the introduction of new technologies. As Stamp concludes, "the miracle of technology lies not in its physical attributes but in its enlightened application" (1990: 53).

Agricultural Extension hardly reach any women. There are no female extension officers. Emphasis on the selection of male extension workers for agricultural training programs has invariably resulted in women farmers and agricultural laborers being left out of these training programs. In Axom, as in other parts of Asia, cultural constraints in the rural areas prevent male extension workers from communicating effectively with women farmers. Governments, extension personnel and development planners, who are themselves male, have traditionally 'targeted' men as recipients of resources and information on cash cropping. This kind of discrimination in imparting information constraints women's ability to increase their production of subsistence crops.
4. Pauperization and Marginalization of Women Farmers

Agricultural modernization has brought in its wake the all-India trend of pauperization and marginalization and the increased inequality between the sexes. The sharp fall in the demand for female labor is particularly evident in the high productivity states such as Punjab and Andhra Pradesh. Punjab, the heartland of the Green Revolution, has the lowest rate of women's participation in the labor force, i.e., 1.18 per cent (Chakravarty and Tiwari: 1979). The removal of women from their means of production and from their productive functions by the introduction of new technologies in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh has been pointed out by Maria Mies (1980). In Kekuri, the extent of marginalization of women is illustrated in table 9.1 which details access to and control over resources and benefits by gender.
Table 9.1. Access to and Control over Resources and Benefits in Kekuri

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>women have access but no ownership to land; government land registration eliminates women's traditional rights to use of land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water (household)</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>location of well is determined by men; women carry water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>M/(F)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>little available for subsistence producers; land ownership required for loans, limiting women's access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperatives</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>established by males; participation restricted to males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Inputs</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>improved seeds, fertilizers available to richer peasants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extension services</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>limited services in Kekuri; available mainly to men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved tools and technology</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>improved tools go to males; women rely on primitive digging stick and hoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>occasional bus from village to market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary education</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>42% of primary age males &amp; 30% females enrolled in primary school in Kekuri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>males have control to income proceeds; women responsible for daily household maintenance;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash employment</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>while both males and females engage in agricultural labor, it is marked by gender disparity in wages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>house belongs to the male; women only have access to it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>limited access available for both males and females in Kekuri; community health workers are males;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political power</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. traditional</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>political sphere traditionally male; although recently females have been guaranteed seats on the village council, in Kekuri there were no women members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. modern</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Labor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. daughters</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>women rely on daughter's labor for household, childrearing, and agricultural tasks until her marriage;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. sons</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>men rely on sons for agricultural labor &amp; other tasks outside the home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear from the table that women farmers face serious constraints in their agricultural production due to the lack of ownership and control over the means of production, and lack of access to agricultural extension and input. Other constraints faced by the majority of women farmers are poor quality of land; inadequate agricultural infrastructure for inputs, extension and credit; lack of
and credit; lack of equipment or animal power; lack of crop insurance; inadequate markets for purchasing inputs and selling produce; limited knowledge of crop varieties and cropping choices; and neglect by mainstream agricultural research and extension. In addition to facing the male-bias of mainstream agriculture, women also face male bias in traditional patterns of ownership and control. Even if legally entitled to rights, customary rights and patterns operate which keep women's shares under the control of male members of the extended family or kinship groups. Given the tendency of tremendous pauperization, women are also dispossessed by labor displacing technology whose introduction is invariably accompanied by male appropriation of the economically productive areas of work. This proves that the competing power of the poor in general and women in particular is brought to a minimum, making them easier to control.

Women's withdrawal from the workforce, however, should not be misinterpreted as an indicator of growing prosperity where women of the more affluent classes do not have to work in the fields. The kind of economic development that has taken place in this area does not alter the fact that for the majority of the households, agriculture is mainly a subsistence activity, where most or all of the output is consumed by the family which produces it, either directly or indirectly by selling the produce to meet the minimum needs of the family and to repay consumption loans. In this kind of subsistence agriculture, women generally share the heavy burden of agricultural work in terms of transplanting, weeding, threshing, harvesting, carrying the produce home and processing of food grains.

With the increasing pauperization of the peasantry, their dependence on alternate sources of survival grew, and here women's role is significant. Sharda, a landless laborer, says:

"To gather wild vegetables and leaves is the work of women. During hunger time, this work is crucial; we eat one cup of rice gruel and one leaf plate of vegetables and in this way we manage to live."
In addition to complementing the sources of subsistence from gathering forest produce, women also market much of this such as betel leaves and nuts, leaves made into leaf plates and cups, firewood, and "laopaani" (rice beer). Beer brewing is a woman's activity and is not given high status partly because of religious prohibitions on use of alcohol. Firewood is also essential for the household.

Women take part in hunting small game, and fishing. Also women traditionally make several of the processed products and convenience foods from rice. These products are beaten rice, parched rice and puffed rice. In addition, a number of snacks are prepared from rice such as "pithas". The Kosaris say that the women are constantly working. An interesting account of their work came to me from Rupohi, a wage laborer:

"We get up at cock crow (about 4 a.m.) clean and put the house in order, throw the dung out of the cowshed, fetch water, pound grain (a woman always works the mortar), tread the dhenki and prepare the food. The women pull out the paddy seedlings and plant the rice, cut it when ripe and cut the maize. We pull out the muga plants and clean the cotton and make thread for weaving. We make leaf cups and leaf plates. We plaster the floor and the walls and make all smooth, especially when the rainy season has caused damage. The women folk never singly but always in a body gather leaves and firewood from the forest and vegetables... Fishing (is carried on by us)."

The inequality between the sexes becomes even more evident when one considers the wage disparity between female and male wage earners.

Clearly agricultural operations are linked to the seasons, and therefore work is available only at certain times of the year. Earlier, the slack seasons offered periods of rest and also time for the celebration of life cycle events - like marriages - and festivals such as seasonal rites. Also, traditional occupations such as bamboo weaving and mat making, drumming, or catching rats, found a place in village life and economy through these 'secondary occupations'. A disturbing observation today is that some of the avenues that traditionally created "extra" work opportunities for women are fast disappearing under the impact of modernization, urbanization and technological change. Many
studies have shown how the access of the rural poor to forest land and commons have been reduced in recent years. For instance, roofing by tile and concrete is reducing the use of leaf matting which earlier used to generate some work. Similarly building permanent compound walls instead of using the traditional fencing which needs repairing and replacing from time to time takes away some of the existing work. Plastic has already replaced many traditional items like baskets and mat. In this process, the little extra that women could earn by doing all kinds of work is snatched away. In the absence of any work, the poor depend on personal loans and collection of food materials from the field. Cases of begging and starvation, and sometimes stealing are also not very uncommon; but this cannot be put in measurable terms.

Studies have shown, and my study corroborates the fact that the mother's income, rather than the overall household income, is a significant factor in the status of child nutrition (Charlton, 1984: 339). Their children grow up with insufficient food, clothing and education and face an uncertain future. Women bear the brunt of this uncertainty. Free trade policies pushed by the government have led to social injustice, violation of basic human rights, environmental destruction and impoverishment of many. The profit-oriented and investment policies of economic growth have created inequalities and marginalization of peoples, particularly women and children. Women's myriad roles, as producers, resource managers, and caretakers - imply that women have to constantly make adjustments on their time and labor to provide for the family's subsistence and welfare. While some educated women seek work away from home as teachers or nurses, many do not due to restrictions on their mobility. The responsibilities of being farmers, mothers, wives, healthcare providers, and educators take their toll on the health of these courageous women.
Chapter 10
Patriarchal Socio-Cultural Arrangements

1. Marriage

A girl is always looked upon as someone else's property, a temporary resident in her parents' house and destined to live elsewhere. Throughout her childhood, she is prepared for her inevitable marriage, ensuring that she is domesticated, demure and undemanding to be an acceptable bride. She is trained to do housework and take care of animals and constantly chastised for failures. It is seen to be the duty of the parents to give their daughter lifelong security by making a prudent selection of a husband for her.

Among the Kosaris, marriage negotiations are initiated by the girl's family, which sends an offer of marriage to the boy's family. Although some mothers may be central in the decisions about their daughters' marriages, many are not consulted any more than their daughters are. Once the engagement is agreed upon, exchange of gifts takes place, followed by the wedding and the kanyadan (gift of a virgin) ceremony.

It is usually the bride's family who have to incur most of the expenses of the wedding and it is customary for the wedding celebrations to take place in the bride's home. The bride's family is also expected to give a small dowry which usually includes rice, clothing, and household items such as a bed, bedding, and utensils. Many women asserted that the demand for dowry has been escalating, with men now demanding consumer items such as cycles and radios. Conducting a daughter's wedding and providing a dowry is a major cause of rural indebtedness. The groom's family is also expected to present some jewelry and clothing to the bride in a special ceremony known as the "joron". However, many women reported that their mother-in-law reclaimed it after marriage, while
others asserted that this custom of bride-price is disappearing altogether. The increasing shift from bride-price to dowry appears to be partly a result of unequal effects of changing employment and earning opportunities due to technological changes, and partly due to the homogenization of cultural values brought about by rising consumerism, modern media etc. The groom's family is expected to provide the living quarters for the son and his bride, and many families schedule their sons' marriage according to their ability to add a new room to their home. Thus, normally, men continue to remain firmly rooted to their natal village. On the other hand, the girl, typically in her teens, has to leave her childhood home and migrate to her husband's village, which marks a crucial watershed in her life.

This point of rupture in her life is marked by heartrending cries by the bride and her mother, and other female relatives from whom she is literally torn away by the "dorar ghor", a group of people from the husband's village who accompany her to her husband's household after the completion of the wedding ceremonies. Women's songs often reflect on the sadness of parting as the bride goes to the husband's home. She is thus incorporated into the husband's household, and his village, which she has never seen before this day, and where she is placed in a position with little power. The bride usually starts her married life in a joint household with her in-laws, to whom she is expected to show her unquestioning obedience. Young wives rarely address their husbands in the presence of others and then only indirectly through a third party. She refrains from calling her husband or any senior in-laws by name and is expected to observe purdah where she pulls the end of her sari up to cover her head in their presence. Her work is supervised by her mother-in-law, her movements monitored and her contacts with her parents regulated. Thus the young married woman begins her life in her husband's village with little economic power and without the support of networks established during her childhood. Therefore it is extremely difficult - but not impossible - for her to assert her will. She moves up the domestic hierarchy only after she has given birth to sons.
Women themselves expect to be married and feel that "marriage is essential". Yet many also complain about their married lives. Parents know they must get their daughters married, yet their relief in having done so is tinged with anxiety and sadness. While some husbands are kind, others are prone to beat their wives. In my interviews with 83 women, a overwhelming majority (68 women) claimed to have been beaten, pushed or otherwise abused by their husbands, and sometimes by the mother-in-law. Some are beaten on a daily basis. Besides physical violence, verbal abuse (cow, dog, idiot are some words of choice) to "keep women in their place" is common and color everyday conversations among almost all families.

2. Reproduction

The Kosari women of Kekuri have freedom of mobility and have fewer social constraints than the upper caste Hindus. Most of the women of the agricultural labor families from the village go in search of wage work to the nearby villages. These women, due to their outside work and travelling, have acquired confidence and are articulate. However, it is interesting to note that they still require an approval by their husbands or another male member in order to travel. Restraint on women's activity is conditioned by their role in physical reproduction. Women enjoy a higher degree of mobility before than after their age of puberty. Young girls, for example, are seen going to school, taking care of cattle and working in the fields as boys do. After puberty when their reproductive capacity begins, girls do not go to schools or work in fields; their chores become more household-centered. The control increases sharply among the young married women during the highest fertility period. They are under seclusion in their in-laws' houses and their work is subordinated to that of older women. Only after women have had a couple of children do they enjoy a greater degree of freedom and mobility.
The confinement of girls after puberty and young married women is described by both men and women as an attempt to prevent the formation of "illicit" sexual relationships and thereby save the "honor" of the family. The control of women's reproductive functions, therefore, becomes vital to the patriarchal power structure and becomes the focal point for women's subordination in a class society. As pointed out by Lourdes Beneria, "Conflicts over reproduction will be greater in class than in egalitarian societies. This is because in a class society privileges enjoyed by groups and individuals are threatened, in one degree or another, by those who do not enjoy them" (Beneria 1978: 5).

In Kekuri, women did not appear to have any knowledge of ovulation and its connection with their period of fertility. Instead they associate the fertile period directly with menstrual blood. Kekuri women give birth five or six times on average. There was one woman who has ten children. Few couples use modern contraceptives. The most common method is sterilization, which is resorted to only after the survival of four or five children is ensured. In one case, a woman with five girls, had become pregnant again due to the pressure of giving birth to a son, although her body had become weak from repeated pregnancies. I found that more women and men from the labor households plan their families. Some of them complained of loss of energy and inability to work after undergoing operations in this regard. But despite this, by and large the desire to limit the number of children, particularly by women is widespread.

The women in 52 of the 83 households react favorably to family planning, 26 negatively and 5 are indifferent. All the women say that the decisions regarding family planning are made by men. Pushpa, a wage laborer, for instance, says, "I have five children, three daughters and two sons. I do not want any more children. I am tired of frequent child-birth, but my husband does not allow me to adopt any birth control measures because he wants two more sons". Thus during my study, it was evident that poor women regard large numbers of children as a burden to themselves and to the
children for whom they cannot provide adequate food, clothing or education. However, it cannot be claimed that all poor rural women desire fewer births. Resistance to family planning in Kekuri, as in the rest of India, is due to the preference for sons, to the prestige and political power they bring and to the fact that in order to have two sons living past the age of six, each couple had to contemplate at least five births. The traditional preference for sons and need for more children is also reinforced by agricultural policies which emphasize the need for family labour, especially male labour. In Kekuri, men mentioned the economic advantage of having more children because it meant more hands to earn for the family, and women mentioned their fear that if they had only two children, both might die. Thus, there is no incentive to restrict families to two. Moreover, there are disincentives in the form of time lost and cost of going to a clinic, the time needed for recovery and the possibility of infection. Some women also consider large numbers of children as an insurance against the time when they are widows and require their children's support.

In Kekuri, it is usually left to the woman to take steps to limit the size of the family, provided she can overcome the resistance of her husband and in-laws. Many women reported to me that their husbands consider contraception a woman's responsibility fearing loss of strength and inability to work following vasectomy. Moreover, both women and men suggest that it is women who should undergo tubectomy; if there is any post-operative complications and she dies in the process, "a woman is easily replaceable". Thus, women are socialized to believe that their lives are cheaper than that of their men.

An important reason why agricultural laborers, particularly women, remain oppressed is the absence of child care and health facilities. During my study, many women expressed anxiety regarding inadequacy of medical facilities in the village. This is a problem they share with many other working women. They do not receive any kind of maternity benefit for which some women working
in the organized sector are eligible. Most of the women said that they work in the fields till the eve of delivery. Compulsions of their life force them to work within a few days or at the most, a month after delivery. It is not considerations of health or the need for rest, but the availability or non-availability of work that decide how soon they start waged work. During harvest times and during times when work is available they do not hesitate to go out just before or after delivery. I found that the network of elders, neighbors, older children keeps the rhythm of the production-reproduction cycle going.

3. Education

As in most of Axom, illiteracy in Kekuri is high and school attendance is sporadic for most children, especially girls. Girls and boys both attend the village primary school. While most families do send their sons to schools, few girls are educated and they are rarely allowed to continue beyond the primary school. Usually the girls' schooling stops when she reaches puberty. Boys are encouraged to continue with their schooling. Thus the education of girls is relegated to the background while the son is seen as an object of potential investment and given the preference of education.

Most women in Kekuri want their sons to seek white-collar jobs. Mothers do not hesitate to keep the daughters at home to assist with the housework and look after younger children, or to work in the fields. The majority of women start agricultural work before they are fifteen years of age. In many cases, they start going to the fields with their mothers when they are still very young. They collect cow-dung, or left-over grains in harvested fields or help with weeding. The early age in starting work in fields affect the schooling prospects of girls. 90% of the women I interviewed come under the category of "illiterates". These women had to stop schooling because of financial difficulties at home, to look after younger children, to take care of the home, to help mothers at work
both inside and outside the home, or because of not having enough interest, which is in itself a result of a combination of all the other factors.

Poverty and the need to look after younger siblings compel many women to drop out of school. In fact, the level of rural illiteracy prevailing in the area is quite shocking, particularly considering the fact that one of the two Universities of Assam, Dibrugarh University, is situated in this area. It is interesting to note that among the land-owning households, mere land-holding alone does not give any extra mileage to women in terms of education.

Traditional ideas about the subservience of women's role influence women's access to education. Education of girls also suffers from the fact that, in this area, schools are often located at some distance from the home and while boys' mobility is unchecked, girls are protectively kept at home. Only 2 per cent of the girls in Kekuri are educated till the secondary level. Since marriage and child-bearing characterize a woman's role, schooling for girls is not given priority. The children are brought up to think that certain tasks are beyond the competence of women and they even ridicule and jeer at the efforts of women to match up to male tasks. However, several women do feel that with education, women can acquire social and economic independence. In 66 of the 83 households, women send their children to schools. In the remaining 17 households, poverty and work at home keeps children away from school.

While there has been an increase in education among the children, this has not led to much in the way of alternative employment. The factors that can help laborer households to achieve upward mobility is education, acquisition of particular skills and employment opportunities created in the economy. While many of the poor are eager to take advantage of education, remaining in school is not easy. Moreover, education alone does not solve the problems of their lives. I spoke with several women whose children had completed schooling and had even got up to college but
continue to be unemployed. Thus in my sample of agricultural laborer women there were girls with high school diplomas who simply cannot get any other kind of work. This leads to a phenomenon of hungry, educated, underemployed, landless laborers - not a happy condition in any society. Thus it has become imperative to look for ways to make some improvement in their lives.

4. Food and Health Care

A variety of historical, cultural and economic factors influence the discrimination against women. Important cultural factors include son-preference for the transmission of family property and name, and marriage patterns in which parents cannot expect any material support from their daughter after marriage. This is closely interlinked to economic factors such as the earning capacity of females and marriage costs. In the struggle for survival, this discrimination shows itself in the intra-household differences in food and medical care. The sharing of consumption needs, especially food, within the household favors men over women. Food consumption is less for female children and this results in their greater malnourishment vis-a-vis the male child regardless of economic class. In terms of calories, women consume significantly less calories than men, and less than their energy requirements of field work, domestic and survival tasks. This deficiency is particularly severe in pregnant and lactating women who need extra calories.

Health care is also less available to females in the household, marked by greater discrepancy between male and female children with expenditure on boys being twice of that on girls. Gender differentials are also evident in the declining sex ratio (924 females per 1000 males for all Axom) which points to an overall pattern of discrimination in child care related to feeding, medical attention and mortality. In Kekuri, the health center is located at the neighboring township of Nahoron which is about 15 kms away. On interviewing the doctor at the health center, he mentioned that women's
ailments tend to be ignored in the initial stages and medical attention is sought only when the disease becomes serious. He also mentioned that women commonly suffer from malnutrition, anemia, gastroenteritis, malaria and respiratory disorders. Given their heavy workload, many women from poor households also told me that they often hide their illnesses in order not to disrupt their work. They seek medical treatment only when they become seriously ill.

While withdrawing women from field work to gain family prestige may be seen as a benefit in saving them from the noted health hazards, it does not reduce their overall burden of work as they are forced to spend time on non-field related work such as cooking for hired labor. Another dimension to the intra-household differences in poverty is the nature of women's domestic work; the burden of collecting fuel, fodder and water under deforestation falls entirely on women. While men have the leisure to drink liquor or play cards, women can rarely enjoy "leisure" in any real sense, as they are constantly surrounded by young children demanding attention.

The nature of women's work in agriculture also exposes them to particular health hazards. A UNDP report (1980) notes that in Asia there appears to be an association between working in the paddy fields and gynecological infections. This is an additional cost that both the woman working in her own fields and the women agricultural laborers have to pay. Women's unequal access to and control over cash is another crucial factor affecting the nutritional levels of women and children. The seasonal nature of agricultural production also contributes to a greater burden of poverty, particularly for women whose employment is much more seasonal in nature due to which they have access to wage income only in certain times of the year. Wife-beating and other forms of violence against women also add to intra-household inequities in the burden of poverty. Although women reported to be working harder and spending longer hours in the fields, there has been no compensatory improvement in their health or standard of living.
5. **Control of Women**

Women agricultural wage laborers face sexual exploitation and harassment by men of the ruling class and caste. Even without casteism, sexism is present in all strata of society and so is rape. The rape of lower-caste women is a socially sanctioned way to express sex and class domination. People in positions of power, upper caste men, police, labour contractors, military personnel, dismiss violence done to lower caste and class women as insignificant. Sexual violence against poor peasant and agricultural labourer women is a common expression of male dominance over other men. Such "lessons" take the form of raping women, burning huts and beating and torturing the men. Although the occurrence of such cases is rare in Kekuri, when they do happen, they are not reported to the police or covered by the press.

The landlords and rich peasants resort to beating landless labor women on the slightest pretext. In our meetings, four landless women engaged in wage labor reported that requests for grain or more money are grave enough offenses for beatings. When I accompanied women as they went to collect their wages from their employers, or ask for advanced pay, it was evident that regular deceit is a common practice in the payment of wages as the majority of the workers are illiterate. Moreover, I found the employers use insulting, inhuman treatment and abusive language with both men and women to establish their dominance over the oppressed and especially women.

Law, justice and police remain deeply implicated in the most unambiguous forms of patriarchal controls. Atrocities by the police are common occurrences. One of the largest areas of government expenditure in recent years in Axom has been the police, various paramilitary forces and the army. They enjoy near unlimited powers to murder, torture, maim, loot, rape, terrorize and extort bribes. It would be difficult to find instances of the rural poor having been offered any protection or support by the State. In fact the sight of a police jeep entering a village sends people fleeing into
forests and fields. Experience has taught them that a police jeep can only mean more torture and trouble for the poor, particularly women. Women are also oppressed by men of their own class. As I explored the lopsided effects of development and change in the rural areas, I became aware of the divergent responses of women within a domestic structure of inequality. The continuing struggle against patriarchy is reflected in their answers.

Makon, a widowed woman of a small cultivator family, describes the "lonely" and "burdensome life" of a woman under the stifling patriarchal hold:

"At a very young age a girl is snatched away from her parents to be wedded to a man she could not care less for and is thrown into an environment so totally alien and hostile to her. From that day onwards she is sentenced to a life long imprisonment with rigorous physical labor and emotional isolation. Her husband rules over her life, her only consolation being her children, of whom, again the daughters are torn away from her by marriage and the sons emulate the father in propagating patriarchal values".

Another case of a woman acquiring confidence by making a breakthrough from the patriarchal grip is Kamala, a wage laborer. Kamala was regularly beaten for being "immodest" and for her assertive demeanor. Driven by her husband's ill-treatment to her parents' house, Kamala refused to return to her husband's house till he treated her more humanely. Thereupon, the husband decided to desert her and bring another wife. Now Kamala lives in her house and has become very articulate and conscious of her rights as a woman.

Significantly, most of the women in the 83 households could trace a broad pattern of dependency roles and suppression that women in general are subjected to. Dulu, a mother of five, remarks:

"Dependency of a woman is what arrests the development of women. In a sense, the high-caste women are worse off than the lower caste women since their mobility is controlled entirely by their men and they are beaten much more. Their only redeeming factor is that they are economically better off".

Women are treated as chattels, to be 'disciplined', scolded and beaten as and when the men
desire to do so. This system of "controlling women" percolates to the lowest strata in society who emulate the richer caste groups. Men drink away a significant portion of the small amount the family earns, and wifebeating is common. This is evident from the fact that out of the total of 83 households, all the women, save 15, report a regular incidence of wife-beating. Of these 15, six are widows or otherwise separated from their husbands, another two own land and their husbands have come to stay in their native village. The husbands of the remaining six women are otherwise not economically active, leaving the major role of bread-earner and decision-maker to the women. Bhoni's is a typical response to the question of wife beating says: "I obey my husband completely and therefore, never earn his wrath". Physical violence within the family plays a key part in keeping women oppressed and exploited. The burden of the dual role of housekeeper and worker affects the women badly as they toil for long hours in the field and then return to do the housework under primitive conditions. They have to fetch water and fuel from long distances, and cook on wood fire, while children cry with hunger, neglect and fatigue.

Closely related to this practice of wife beating is the practice of massaging the husband's feet and legs every night. This practice is commonly referred to as "seva" (Service). Most women, after toiling the whole day in the house and outside have to render this "seva" every day. Over three-fourths of the women interviewed (70 of the 83 households) perform it regularly. Out of the remaining women, three are widows and nine declined to answer. Only one woman says she does not massage her husband's feet; this woman is the bread-winner of the family. Except when open quarrels erupt, and they frequently do, the wife's public behaviour towards her husband is marked by humility and deference. The accepted rationale for this worshipful attitude is religious. Many women I spoke with believe it is their religious duty to be obedient, respectful and pleasing to their husbands. However, women see these practices as also a part of the system which makes them socially and
economically dependent on men. Sharda, a woman of a small cultivator family, feels that a woman is economically dependent on the man and is, therefore, subordinate and immobile. She has to cater to his needs and desires; she adds,"I massage my husband's feet and legs to make my life in his house tolerable". But even the most pious women had no illusions about their husbands. Far from believing them to be gods, the women saw them as quite human, often with more than their share of human failings.

The responses of the women with regard to the system of purdah and the seclusion of girls after puberty and daughters-in-law till they have crossed the better part of their reproductive life are even more interesting and throw light on the rationale for isolating and confining women. A majority (75 out of 83) of the women see purdah as a hindrance to their mobility and freedom. It prevents them from moving around and meeting other women in the neighborhood. Rumu, a wage laborer, for instance, says that purdah is functional only for those women who have enough to eat. Phulu, an agricultural worker is most explicit in stating that purdah is meaningless for the women of her caste who tie up their saree above their knees and work adjacent to men in the fields.

A few older women, however, respond favorably to "purdah", and say that it protects the honor and morality of the women. They feel "goondagiri" (sexual harassment) had increased because women go around exposing themselves. There is, however, an interesting example of Moina, who feels that with the decline of purdah, women's work burden has increased. Outside work like grazing of cattle, cutting chaff, and weaving cots, which were earlier managed by men have now fallen to women.

Patriarchal power are also reflected in women's lack of control in decisions regarding the household consumption, marketing, investments and expenditure. More importantly, as mentioned earlier, control over women's reproductive functions also lies with the men.
The oppression and sexual exploitation of poor peasant women is a direct manifestation of the patriarchal social system prevalent in Axom. The present family structure is so weighted against women that their very survival too depends on the whims and arbitrary decisions of those in the family who exercise power. Contrary to the belief that patriarchal violence will disappear with "modernisation", the increase in all forms of violence against women and other forms of patriarchal dominance point to the introduction of market forces in the area and to the conflicts that follow this process. These women are aware of the fact that on account of their inability to organize and bargain in the labor market, they can be controlled more effectively. Following a decline of demand in the wage market, women are the first to be laid off. This insecurity of employment makes these women all the more vulnerable to the exploitative demands of the employer who enforces his own terms. Sewali, a wage laborer, feels that one of the reasons women are paid less is because they lack organization. "Women are under tremendous economic pressures so they are compelled into accepting the terms of the employers. If we women were to organize and demand a wage rise, perhaps they would gain something".

Since women's relationship to land is so precarious, their rights to land so minimal, and employment opportunities so scarce, it is difficult for women to keep a foothold if their family should maltreat them, and, therefore, far more difficult for them to resist exploitation at work places. The fear of sexual violence is also a powerful factor in restricting women's behaviour and sense of freedom. Often women accept the male view of what is important and in violent encounters, end up blaming themselves, the victims, rather than denounce the offenders. As a result, poor women bear the brunt of destitution and starvation. The conclusion is that violence against women is dependent greatly on power based exploitative relationships and attitudes towards women prevalent in Indian society.
Women are likened to the earth and this is often expressed as an idealized role. Like the earth, a woman too has to bear pain. The earth is ploughed, furrowed, dug into; a woman too is pierced and ploughed. A common metaphorical expression for sexual intercourse is ploughing. It may be used by a man to claim his right over a woman or over the offspring born of her. As in the rest of patrilineal India, in Axom too the children are believed to belong to the father, and kinship patterns emphasize the patrilineal descent principle and the fact that the child derives its identity from the father, thus stressing women's lack of rights over her children at the event of separation or divorce. One Kosari woman expressed her helplessness thus: "We give birth to our children. We keep them in our womb and nourish them with our blood, but the man claims them saying they are born of his seed". The fact is that although it is the women who are the real supporters of the family, and that in some cases, the man may even abandon his wife and children, leaving the wife to fend for herself and her children does not negate the general assumption that the children belong to the father.

Man's rights over the woman do not relate only to her sexuality and reproductive capacity, but include her productive abilities and her labor power. Just as he is entitled to have control over her sexuality and the products of her sexuality, he is also entitled to have control over her labor and the proceeds of her labor. The extent of her actual participation in the production process does not decide the worth of her contribution as she is perceived more as a family laborer. She is also perceived as a dependant in respect of shelter, as it is the man's right, both by law and by custom, to establish a matrimonial home. The Kosaris firmly believe that the house belongs to the husband and that he is the provider of shelter and food. It is therefore not surprising that a woman's role in cultivation and other productive activities is considered only as supportive. A woman has no right over her earnings for, it is argued, had she not earned them while living in the man's house and eating his rice? Women's contribution is spoken of as only providing vegetables and salt to the household.
The lamentations of a woman on her husband's death clearly brings out the husband's role as provider: "You are gone; who will provide me with food, clothes and shelter?" The non-recognition or gross under-recognition of woman's contribution to the economy is connected to this ideology of patriarchy.

6. Sex Roles

Agricultural modernization and technology serves the ideology of androcentric development and promotes the housewifization of women while undermining their political, socio-economic and technological "backwardness". The process acts against the conceptualization of women as producers of the economy, making them increasingly powerless. It is in this context of the development process that women's perception of their conditions and environment as well as of their own sex-roles have been analyzed. My study revealed that rural women's consciousness is integrally related with their participation in social production against patriarchy.

In a stratified society, it is the landowning class of caste Hindus who define the dominant values. In the traditional society, caste Hindus did not allow their women to work in the fields or do other manual work outside the house. This was seemingly done in order to keep their women "pure". It is probable that poor women of agricultural groups had to follow the caste rules of "purdah" and seclusion as these became a sign of higher class and caste status. The fact that the majority of women cling to their household role that "women are supposed to work inside their house" indicates that women have internalized the oppressive patriarchal norms of their domestication and justify the inequality of their sex roles as natural and sanctioned by religion and social norms. The women are inclined to share the prestige of class and caste groups who do not allow their women to work outside their house. Therefore, the contradiction between theory - women's acceptability of their
household role - and practice - the diverse activities of women in agriculture and outside the sphere of the household - should be interpreted as class-related criteria where only the life-styles and social values of powerful castes matter.

Production for the market cultivates a sense, in the work force, of limited control over their work and an under-estimation of their contribution to society. As pointed out by Nash, "For those sectors of the population which are excluded or limited in their participation in the labor market because of sex or ethnic consideration, the individual sense of worthlessness is even more distorted" (Nash, 1977: 161). This observation is crucial and fundamentally underlies the self-perception rural women hold of their roles as economic producers. When asked to comment on the difference in female and male wages for roughly identical activity, 51 women, including a few agricultural laborers justify the wage disparity between the sexes, on grounds of better skill and higher productivity of men. The remaining 32 women question the discriminatory practices sanctioning higher wages for men. They also resent the fact that apart from paying women less than men, this situation of unequal wages is maintained by downgrading female tasks even though male tasks require no special skills.

Dhuna, a subsistence worker says:

"It is a man's world and a woman has no bargaining power to fight for wage equality even though her demand could not be more valid. A woman works as hard as a man and produces as much as he does. In fact female sex-specific jobs like transplanting of paddy are much more back-breaking than male specific jobs like uprooting paddy saplings, yet women are employed on a much lower wage rate".

In an attempt to examine the manner in which these rural women perceive their own specific roles, they were asked to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman. The women in 71 of the 83 households stated explicitly that a woman's role is devoid of any advantages or positive attributes. Four found it advantageous to be a woman and the remaining 8 refused to say anything. Women in the former category of four belong to the well-off landowning families. The
positive factor in being a woman is seen in not having to take decisions about everyday problems and in not being forced to do heavy physical activity. Their positive reply is understandable given the fact that two of these women inherited land from their fathers, being the only daughters. Each of them resides in their paternal home and enjoys high status on account of their proprietary rights in land. Interestingly, neither of these women have ever been physically maltreated by their husbands and each of them has enjoyed appreciable powers in the domestic sphere.

The 71 women who see their lives as being devoid of any advantages come from a cross-section of socio-economic groupings. Social and economic dependency on the men, physical and mental exertion of repeated childbearing, tedious and time-consuming housework, repressive male authority resulting in the treatment of their women as chattels and slaves, non-recognition of the female productive and reproductive labor and restrictions on their physical mobility were the salient disadvantages attributed by these women to their sex in general. Padumi describes the miserable plight of a woman:

"A woman by virtue of her sex has her environment totally restricted. Her dependency on the man is total. So long as he is alive, she draws her identity through him, but if he chances to die before his wife, the woman is pushed alive into an existence worse than hell. She loses all position in society and is abused and accused of her husbands's death. Her status also hinges on her ability to produce children. A woman who has no children is better dead for she will be cursed for the rest of her life. A woman can find no relief on earth".

The failure to set any economic value on women's work in reproduction and maintenance of the labor force and the non-recognition of their contribution to production form a common background to all women in my study. A majority of the women give predominance to economic pressures in listing the disadvantages of being a woman since they feel it is the woman who has to eventually provide two square meals to their children from the available meager resources. As Saya, a wage earner says, "A poor woman's life is wrought with worries. A man goes for his work and forgets his problems. It is the woman who has to face the children's demand for food and bear their
Some of the poor working-class women, however, perceived their immediate problems as being more caste and class specific than sex-specific. The pressing problems of hunger, shelter and clothing weigh down equally heavily on women and men. They feel that unless there is an immediate release from these problems there can be no upliftment for either of the sexes.

It is clear that culture places a great responsibility on women for the reproduction of the work force. Culture also makes conflicting demands of males, expecting them to spend at least some of their earnings on such role-maintaining activities as sitting in tea-shops, eating food and drinking laopaani (local beer made from fermented rice) with friends. Thus, propagation of socio-economic stratification and sexual inequality is affected in a major way by institutionalized socialization through family and social institutions. The whole socialization process prepares young girls from childhood to fit their pre-determined roles as wives, mothers and subordinates. This process, progressing from home to school and back, while giving the girls a sense of inferiority ensures that the boys deem themselves superior.

The "invisibility" of women's work, domestic chores and other tasks, is part of a cultural/ideological system which views man as the primary provider. Control over women's mobility (i.e., sexuality) is an essential element of the property structure of the Indian economy and affects women of the peasant communities most severely. The social norms of purdah restrict the possibility of outside wage work for these women and also the acknowledgement of women as wage workers by peasant households when they are forced into wage work. This cultural bias is an integral part of the Census while enumerating women workers. Women's work is ignored as unpaid household work and their contribution to production is regarded as unnecessary. It is also because of this that more money is spent on a male child in terms of food, clothes and schooling, as he is seen as a potential
earner. This breeds in the males superior attitudes as they come to regard themselves as "the representatives of a new enlightenment". Women, as Boserup points out, tend to accept being treated as inferior, both at home and in the labor market. This social reproduction of values - which ignores the value of women's work, gets perpetuated and women get socialized into accepting their dependency on men.
Chapter 11
Political Awareness and Women's Response

1. Women's Awareness

Although the Axomiya caste system permits social mobility for men, it rigidly circumscribes women's roles. Perhaps because it considers women as repositories of tradition, Axomiya culture emphasizes a sharp dichotomy between the private world of women and the public world of men. Women's centrality to the construction and maintenance of lineages, kinship networks, and caste boundaries has further confined Axomiya women to the family and limited opportunities for autonomous political action.

The provisions of political equality and adult franchise to both sexes in the Indian Constitution as well as the prominence of a few urban, middle-class women in some of the overt positions in the political structure might lead to a wrong assumption that Indian women participate fully in the political process of the country. Although women's participation in general elections is high, in the last fifty years they have never even reached the proportion of 7.1 per cent of the Members of Parliament elected at any general election. Party manifestoes, election speeches and press discussions in the poll issues have failed to raise any women-specific issues. Women's issues are not given primary importance in the Parliament in view of the so-called national issues.

The government has provided for the inclusion of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women in various panchayat assemblies, co-operative societies and other block and district level committees. Under Section 12 of the Panchayat Raj Act, if women candidates are not otherwise elected to the Panchayat, the Panchayat members are to co-opt at least one member from the Gram Sabha (local council). In Kekuri, there were no women members in the Panchayat in 1995.
Women's representation is woefully low (close to 1 to 2 per cent) in local level decision making bodies such as Gram Panchayat, Block Development agencies and Cooperative societies. Hence a vast majority of the rural women lack training for the articulation of their problems which in turn prevents them from effective participation in decision-making processes. It was found in the 1991 Census that 90 per cent of women workers in the villages were illiterate and can not assert their rights.

In Kekuri, women are denied the opportunity to serve in formal decision-making positions in their communities. The head of the village council is a male, also supposed to represent women's concerns. At the village level, it was very apparent that all important decisions are made by men. Also evident was the continued importance of traditional authority in the village community. As two farm women related, "a woman's decision stands only if it does not differ from the man's". Women's limited political participation hinders their ability to gain access to agricultural services, as decisions are taken without the input of women.

Rural women of this region seem highly conscious of the fact that development and welfare programs launched by the government are usurped by the rural rich and the government officials at the local level. Two-thirds of the women interviewed, comprising largely the economically poor, cultivator and landless families, attribute only negative aspects to social, economic and technological changes in the period since Independence. They feel that there has been a manifold increase in their poverty and dependence over the years. Given the emphasis on commercial production in agriculture, relations in the village have become predominantly capitalist and, thus, starkly exploitative. Women complained of the rising social and economic power of the rich landowners and government officials who are mainly caste Hindus, who have appropriated all the benefits of development programs, denying the small cultivator and agriculture labor class their rightful share.
Similarly, technological changes have been detrimental to women, particularly indigenous, lower castes and the artisan groups. In the face of competition with commercial production in agriculture and rising harassment by landlord and the police, these groups have been forced to abandon their traditional occupations, thereby losing the benefits accrued from them. The women of these groups who helped in most of the productive activities of their traditional occupations are being forced to make their services available in the wage market at the minimal, exploitative wages.

The remaining one-third of the women interviewed perceive socio-economic change in the plan period as positive. All the women in this category belong to rich households and they see technological development in agriculture bringing in increased productivity and prosperity for their class. Education and exposure to the outside world, as Sonali, a woman from the landowning class says, have inculcated in these women a sense of confidence and reassurance.

Almost all the women I had discussions with wanted some improvement in their conditions, particularly in matters of health and medical facilities, education, law and order, employment and a mitigation of social and economic dependency on male authority. Seemingly, they are aware of the neglect of women and their work in planning and policy-making. They often do not mince words to express their indignation at the indifference of the government towards rural women, particularly to those who are in subsistence agriculture. There were queries on the purpose and objectives of this study as well. While they agreed that rural women are a disadvantaged section, much in need of employment and equality, they could not comprehend how a mere academic survey could benefit them.

Most women ridicule the short-lived adult education program in Kekuri. According to them, it is an attempt to educate the old men in matters unconnected with their lives and work. The only person who has benefitted from this program is a rich landlord who has taken the responsibility of
running this program. He has pocketed the petromax lamp, the blackboard and the tarpaulin made available by the government for this purpose.

Women who have been engaged in the Food-for-Work program complain of gross corruption and harassment. The attitude towards women is reflected in the words of the head of the Panchayat: "According to our Hindu tradition, it is ideal for a woman to die before her Swami (lord; a common reference to husband)". His wife is suffering from tuberculosis and has received no medical attention even though he could easily afford it.

Women workers face harassment when they go to claim their share of the grain or money which the government makes available as flood-relief and other welfare measures. Basanti, a traditional birth-attendant, complains that a couple of months ago when she went to receive her family's share of grain as flood relief she was asked to send her husband, as grain was not given to women. Basanti's husband, an opium addict, is a wage laborer but works very erratically. Basanti feels bitter and angry about the fact that as a woman she has to face many such situations of harassment from higher class men.

Given these experiences, I enquired whether in their opinion there is any necessity of including women in the Gram Panchayat or the block administration. As I have stated earlier, there is no woman either at the village or at the block level. Women in 64 of the 83 households explicitly suggest that women should be included both in the Panchayat and the block administration. According to them, women have been ignored totally in all rural and agricultural development programs and if they elect representatives in the Panchayat they will be able to demand their rights. Some of the women resent the fact that local politicians think it is enough to "canvass to the husbands" while women would caste their votes in agreement with their men. Parul has taken a vow that she and her friends would not go to the booths and vote unless politicians provide them and their
children with transport and mid-day meals as is usually done to the men.

There are a couple of women, however, who feel diffident about the inclusion of women in the Panchayat or the block level administration for they think it is of no use. They say, "Men do not allow us any decision-making in the household which is traditionally the women's sphere; then, how can we assert ourselves in the public sphere which is totally male dominated". Bina and Jayanti, two wage laborers feel that the inclusion of women in the local bodies would be of little use if the women happened to be from large landowning, caste Hindu families, as they are likely to represent and promote the interests of their class.

2. Women's Response

There are no signs of visible activism in Kekuri as village women have not mobilized around gender issues, or even class issues. Yet signs of resistance can be seen in the ways women try to covertly influence the directions their lives take. Kekuri women are actors and agents in their own right, and not passive-victims of their situations. Although they are tied down by social structures, their lives are not completely determined. They are affected by global and local forces beyond their control. They also try to shape their fate within the limitations in which their lives unfold. In the domestic realm, this can be seen in the small ways that women collaborate with one another to deal with their problems. These "weapons of the weak" and forms of everyday resistance that are used to challenge the structures of their oppression are spontaneous, individual and generally mundane, often avoiding open confrontation. They entail subterfuge and secrecy and can be elusive to the researcher. Many women told me that they would secretly sell small quantities of rice to obtain cash. In their husband's homes, women answer back to their husbands and refuse to cooperate. They sometimes put too much salt in the food or refuse to cook at all. Young married women continue to receive
small gifts from their parents on a regular basis. On my trips with them to their natal village, I observed that many would don a much more independent personality than in their husband's village, and are often able to mobilize their natal kin for their support.

However, in citing such evidence of women's everyday resistance, it is important not to exaggerate the potential of women to alter the terms under which they live. Women's resistance is conditioned and limited by the power structures within which they live. As women themselves know very well, their acts of resistance are sometimes self-defeating and self-destructive. The woman who refused to cook went hungry too. The woman who chose to "answer back" had to suffer further beating in the hands of her husband. Women's visits to their natal homes are regulated and parents who intervene are reminded that their daughter is now "someone else's property". It is also held that a woman should not burden her parents with her marital difficulties. Fear of shame, gossip, ostracism, even of the loss of home and children deter the most desperate woman from open defiance, till she is pushed to the limits of her endurance.

Similarities in women's experience are cross-cut by differences, whether because of class, or because of the fact that women's positions and interests change throughout the life cycle. Certainly women complain and resist, but they do not live in a constant state of rebellion. Besides, it does not also always seem the most sensible of responses. Women's resistance coexists with a subservience that takes account of the long-term benefits. The very structures through which Kosari women are controlled and which they are tempted to resist also provide the only means by which their long-term well-being can be sustained. The obedient wife can expect her husband to fulfil his obligations to provide her with life-long economic support. The young daughter-in-law can expect to win more personal space with time, although still remaining subject to her husband's requirements. Gradually, she will acquire more social support in her husband's village. During her middle years, a woman can
expect to enjoy a good degree of freedom, although by old age she once again may become dependent on her sons and their wives. Over time, women's positions in the domestic structures alter as women experience their daily lives from different vantage points. Their divergent interests also tend to set women in the same household against each other. The same woman who had at one time complained about her own oppressive mother-in-law may demand total acquiescence of her daughter-in-law. A daughter-in-law can take revenge on her old and widowed mother-in-law by making her life a misery.

The deeply ingrained psychological and social attitudes are very difficult to eradicate since they call into question values and behavior taught to both sexes since early childhood. However, it is not intended to imply that the women in the study accept their subordinate roles passively and unquestioningly. The increasing pauperization and marginalization has enhanced women's awareness, particularly of the agricultural labor class. These women have, out of their own life experiences and struggles, been able to comprehend the overt and subtle forces of oppression that they are subjected to. The majority of women studied (i.e., 62 of 83 households) are found very articulate in expressing their conditions and problems; 17 are partially articulate and 4 inarticulate. Interestingly, 8 of the semi-articulate and inarticulate women come from the richer households owning approximately five acres of land or more. It is also significant that none of these 8 women work outside the house.

Among the 62 women those highly organized and expressive are not only those who have been economically productive outside the domestic sphere but are understandably those who have been, in a major way, providing for the family. For example, there were 12 women who are extremely aware of their problems and articulate them in a highly conscious manner. Each of these women are full time wage earners and solely responsible for looking after their families, their men finding only irregular, sporadic employment. These women are also very assertive, making important
decisions with regards to expenditure and investment and highly conscious of their roles as bread earners. In striking contrast are the women from the larger landowner households who cannot coherently relate their low social position. Socialized throughout their life to play passive and subordinate subjects to their men, most of these women have never stepped out of the narrow confines of their home. Their men take the decisions in both domestic and outside matters, and the women live a secluded life unaware of socio-political development processes.

The women from the agricultural labor class relate to each other generally as women and specifically on socio-economic issues. Close to two-thirds of the women in my study interact with each other in varying degrees on issues of poverty, harassment by landowners, excessive burden of work, unemployment and social dependency of women on their men which has inhibited them from seeking wider avenues of economic independence. A majority of women from the remaining one third of the households who do not mix with the other women belong to the prosperous landowning households comprising thus the "elite" group, keeping a respectable distance from the "common" women. However, these women come together at weddings, and other festive occasions among their class groups. During these meetings, they sometimes participate, perhaps unconsciously, in propagating the degenerate feudal, patriarchal attitudes held by their men. Hence the jokes and conversations with sexual connotations which they indulge in are merely an expression of what they pick up from their men.

There are also some very poor women who are heavily burdened with work, both domestic and wage labor, and find it very difficult to manage extra time to come together. Neeru, a landless wage earner, says "No one in the village has anything to gain from talking with the poverty-stricken. People don't like to share another's misery or sorrow and keep away for fear of being asked to help". Economic pressures, mainly caused by increased commercialization of agriculture, succeed in creating
Informal women's networks, whether in the spheres of collective work, cultural roles or leisure activities, are an important source of support for women. The division of labour in traditional society has ensured that women frequently work in groups together. Traditional culture normally leaves women their own space for expression and they retain a central role where community and folk traditions are concerned. In Axom, most agricultural activities are done on a community basis and women walk together to work, to collect water and fuel. In the evening, groups of women can be seen coming home after work in the fields. Another common sight is that of women bathing and washing clothes by the riverside. The high point of village social life revolves around engagement and wedding celebrations and women are integrally associated with these activities. In celebrations centering around engagements, women are the principal actors. I attended two engagement parties in which women, young and old, performed vigorous dances and songs with many verses which they had memorized over the years. At weddings, women dressed and cared for the bride; they sang songs and practiced various rituals. Later, when children are born, mothers and sisters are active participants in caring for the new mother and child as well as distributing sweets. On special festivals like Bihu, the Axomiya New Year, women prepare special sweets and visit other households; groups of little girls can be seen dressed in new clothes by their mothers, playing, singing and dancing in the fields. Women are also involved in magical/religious rituals at birth and weddings that reflect local beliefs. I observed a ritual in which a pregnant woman was brought in front of a priest to ward off the evil spirits that were believed to have overtaken her and made her sick. In addition, women are very conscious of their religious duties, and on Sunday afternoons, they gather at the village temple and hold "kirtans" (religious songs) and "aai naam" (women's songs). Women's solidarity is expressed in daily routines as they groom and give physical care to one another, massaging and dressing skin.
and hair with oil. These customs reveal the significance of establishing and confirming social bonds, and women hold an important key to social harmony or discord. Women also play an important role in the village informational network. Most of my information on domestic relations and marriage practices was provided by women. As Rogers states:

Female solidarity, expressed in informal women's groups held together by a well-developed interhousehold female communication network, is most often cited as the strongest power base from which women operate in the community...acting as a kind of information control, heavily influencing community public opinion...their gossip also shapes public opinion, indirectly affecting male political decisions and behavior. (Rogers 1975: 735-6).

Women have strong and reliable lines of communication as they work together at home, at the village hearths, and as they visit. While they are restricted in many ways, women in Kekuri do not observe purdah, and are relatively free to move about. They also express opinions on all aspects of village life including political leadership and economic affairs. Much of the inter-dependence among the women is based on shared experiences and feelings. Although the women are open and direct among themselves, they are inhibited by prevailing custom in expressing their feelings to men. I experienced the empathy of the women as a few of them addressed me as 'sister". As a result of the displays of friendship, when I left the village, I felt bereft, as if I had lost something valuable. In Kekuri, women are dependent on each other for companionship, help in various tasks and emotional support. Of course, there is also much quarrelling and conflict among women, at times making it appear that the women are deeply divided and support the male power structure of the village. Nevertheless, women regularly support other women, even as they protect the rights of husbands, brothers and sons. Such informal networks are very extensive and closely knit in rural societies. These existing women's networks can be effectively used for organizing women around issues important to them.

Conducting fieldwork in an intensely interactive process, I could see the women's zest for life even when they portrayed themselves as victims of a violent husband or a ruthless mother-in-law.
There were women who wholeheartedly embraced the expectations placed on them and criticized those who dared to rebel. Some bemoaned their fate, and some simply endured their difficult circumstances. Many resisted what life had dealt them. Many appeared submissive in their actions but their resistance came through in their speech and their songs. Maybe they resisted in deed as well.
Chapter 12

Conclusion: In Sum and Looking Beyond

1. Implications

The indiscriminate opening up of the Indian economy in the name of New Economic Policy in 1991 have put the interests of transnational corporations and international financial institutions before the interests of the people. In the agricultural sector, this monopoly by transnational corporations has resulted in capital intensive agriculture, monocropping and changing land use patterns. These practices have marginalized poor peasants and landless laborers who have lost control over basic resources such as land, seeds, plant varieties and fuel. Trade liberalization has caused food scarcity, massive unemployment, homelessness and migration, destroyed communities and families, weakening the skills and knowledge base of people.

The political elite, a small spectrum of the population who have their feet in India and their heads in Washington, have joined hands with the global powers - the World Bank, IMF and multinationals. The so-called private sector is, in fact, completely supported by the State. Working through the media, they have created a consumer culture, based on Western consumptionist values that have reached almost every village and block in India. In Kekuri, the State has provided the village with a television set, but there is no drinking water. Globalization has led to exporting India's natural wealth and biodiversity such as flowers and seeds and importing junk such as toxic wastes. Local communities bear the brunt of this destruction and are faced with a major crisis of survival. At the same time, India's elite is geared towards consumerist-environmentalism - national parks and beaches for tourism and are apathetic towards livelihood environmentalism - a mindset carefully promoted by the consumerist ideology of free trade. Through state intervention in the name of public
planning, 80% of the population have been marginalized and deprived of their natural resources. Economic measures such as SAP have failed to steer the economy onto a course that is equitable and sustainable. Rather it has led to growing disparities in wealth and income, increased poverty, and environmental destruction with particularly damaging effect on women. There has been a trend towards falling wages and poor economic conditions, even as the proponents of this model continue to tell the peasants to wait for the benefits of growth to 'trickle-down'.

Women have been especially hard hit. Cuts in education, health care and environmental deterioration resulting from this growth-oriented model have forced women to spend more time than ever attempting to meet their own needs. They are caught in an impossible and unsustainable situation, squeezed between their increasing responsibilities and decreasing resources. All these factors have contributed to a growing sense of hopelessness and social disintegration. Assam today is in a state of turmoil as young men and women, disillusioned with the overall national and state economic program and political agenda, have taken up arms to demand access to land, credit, employment opportunities: the right to live. Crime is on the increase, as are cases of violence against women. Assam is a bomb ready to explode. The warning embodied in daily acts of insurgency and terrorism have not yet been heeded.

The greatest challenge to achieving a successful people-oriented, humane and inclusive development is in the recognition of the important role women play. This study has focussed on women farmers in Assam. Assamiya women farmers form an intricate weave in the fabric of Assamiya society. They are vitally important in the stability and sustainability of their families, culture, villages, towns, and communities.
My study, focused on rural women and work, shows the negative impacts of growth-oriented development policies on women's survival. These policies do not expand rural women's employment, income, standard of living or the survival of their households. They do not improve women's nutrition or health or provide public amenities to rural areas. The study is significant in highlighting the micro-level variations which are important for understanding at the macro level. It seeks to challenge the ways in which women's work and contribution have been ignored and devalued. The objective is to turn our thinking upside down, to make us begin our planning by defining who the beneficiaries and participants are and the conditions under which they work. To generalize about women based on the lives of women in one village that encompass so much variety is hazardous. However, it can provide an indicative picture of gender roles and constraints. My data show that in Kekuri:

1. Women perform a large part of the heavy manual work in rice cultivation in Assam.

2. Women start working and earning for the family from a young age.

3. Women and men tend to have separate economic and social spheres, though there may be considerable sharing of tasks and interchange across tasks and interchange across spheres.

4. Primary responsibility for producing and providing household food, and indeed for basic household maintenance (energy, water) rests with women.

5. Tasks related to rice production and processing are gender-specific and changes in these tasks have been marginal even in recent times. Women are involved in some of the most labor-intensive aspects of rice cultivation, in addition to working the soil manually for growing vegetables, although they are culturally barred from ploughing the fields.

6. Women's work responsibilities tend to be greater than those of men and to involve more functions.

7. Women's contribution is crucial both for agricultural production and for the survival of the family, contrary to conventional development theory which assumes that women's income is supplementary to that of the males. Thus, women's income, particularly in landless labor households, cannot be ignored or treated as marginal or
The number of women belonging to agricultural labor households who are mainly responsible for the survival of the household is significantly high.

In Axom, manual work is looked down upon and culturally considered to be degrading. Withdrawal from field work is associated with higher economic status. For women, however, withdrawal from field work often means heavier work in the household.

There is a greater demand on women's time due to the labor-intensive nature of their work.

Women belonging to landholding households also play significant roles in agricultural production, particularly as supervisors and managers.

Females do not generally participate in political and public activities.

Despite the economic importance of women, they still fall under the authority of the man in marital relationships. The husband decides how household resources (including family labor) must be deployed.

As part of my action-research project and after lengthy discussions with the women, I learnt more about power relations in general and gender relations in particular by gaining insights into:

a) the strong solidarity between the village elite and the local bureaucracy;

b) the power wielded by the elite against the poor, particularly women;

c) the barriers to resistance by poor women;

d) the necessity of bringing poor women together through conscientization and grassroots organization.

It was possible for me to come up with these findings as my research is focussed on women, and committed to looking into their life and work with concern and sympathy. It is therefore important how we choose to interpret data. I regard my study as crucial for promoting the economic and social status of the poorest rural women. My study shows that the poorest rural women, and men, in Kekuri are among the most overworked and that these women generally work longer than insignificant.
men. This life of drudgery means that there is too much work for too little income and points to the need for reducing the burden of work allocated to women, the need to recognize the work that women do in both their productive and reproductive spheres, and the need to increase the creativity and productivity of tasks relegated to women.

My data on the prominence of women as agricultural laborers bears out Boserup's finding that in areas of intensive plough cultivation of irrigated land both men and women must work to support a family. I saw in Kekuri that women (and children) carry out the back-breaking task of transplanting paddy, while men concentrate mostly on the job of ploughing, which is considered skillful and demanding physical strength. Men receive more wages and their jobs are graded higher. Women toil as they do on the farm, along with their responsibility of cooking for the family and tending the children. The fact that the jobs performed by the women are absolutely essential to the existence of the family and tend to be very tedious and time consuming does not provide them with much autonomy concerning decisions in the home or even with regards to the disposition of their income.

The reasons given by women themselves for the sexual division of labor are different. Many women felt that tradition or custom explained the sexual division of labor in their work, while others mentioned women's greater experience and ability in their jobs, or the fact that women get lower wages.

Looking at my data, I simply cannot accept that the work done by the women I met is supplementary or marginal. In many cases there is no male "head" of the household. This fact along with increasing male unemployment and economic deprivation makes the work women do vital to the survival of the household and the family. Women start working at a very young age and continue working all their lives. The intimate connection of women to the home and children serves to define reproduction and maintenance work as women's "real" work, justifying both their exclusion from
production when they are not needed, and their lower wages when they are needed. It is poor women for whom the burdens of production and reproduction under capitalist development are greatest because their options are so limited by their class. Real change for female agricultural laborers will require projects that emphasize socio-political development as well as economic growth.

Some argue that it is a waste of time to look at female income and employment, and that it is more important to look at household income. They believe that increasing employment or wage levels for males would improve the standard of living of the household as a whole. While this would certainly help the poor, my data indicates that the contribution of females is crucial for family survival even in households with working males. Thus it is imperative to pay more attention to female income.

The Axomiya economy is predominantly agricultural, and most of the production takes place within the household. Most of what is produced is consumed at home. An overwhelming majority of the people are poor, and women of these households cannot afford not to be engaged in productive activities of one kind or another. Axomiya women are involved in agriculture in large numbers. Estimates have ranged from 70 to 80 per cent of the total population of Axomiya women being involved in agriculture. Yet the number of women in administrative capacities related to agriculture has nowhere increased in similar proportions.

Women are engaged in a multiplicity of productive and reproductive roles that do more than support agricultural production in rural areas. Women's reproductive roles are very important in the welfare and subsistence of the community, as are women's roles not only as users but also as managers of natural resources. Women's work is not restricted to the physical labor of agriculture but includes the maintenance of the household and compound, which includes cooking, cleaning, and principal caretaking of the family. The extent to which women engage in food processing often goes
beyond household consumption needs to include commercial sales in the informal sector. Beer brewing and sale, a major female agribusiness, is a good example. Women and girls between the ages of 10 and 14 of all economic strata are found to be working for at least nine hours a day, and contributing significantly to the household income. Besides working on their own family farms, the rural women of Axom were found to be spending a significant proportion of their time in wage work. Landownership and income status of the household tended to reduce the wage work women did, but did not affect their total work load. It became evident during my study that today women are taking an even-greater responsibility for farming, because men are either farming only part-time or have abandoned farming altogether in favor of off-farm wage employment.

If we examine the reasons for not working, lack of work and illness are the two major reasons for male unemployment. The reasons are many more in the case of women workers. Apart from unemployment, illness of self and other members of the family, maternity and child care and other family obligations are important reasons for female unemployment. If it is true that men can afford to do only select jobs and set a price below which they will not work it is because women are there to assure some food everyday.

Burton and White have argued that women tend to do only those tasks in agriculture that "are compatible with child care - tasks that are not dangerous, do not require distant travel, or are interruptible" (1984: 575). In my study, I did not find any data to support this statement. Different responsibilities make demands on a woman's time and energy and these change over different periods of her life-cycle. In contrast, one single demand is made of a man, viz. to be the provider of the family. But notwithstanding these various and varying responsibilities, I did not find women giving up work that fetched some income, except in rare cases when they did not have anyone to look after a sick child or an invalid husband. By and large, they cope with many demands. The ingeniousness
of women laborers to cope with most situations prevents agricultural labor households from falling from the present level of subsistence. During difficult times, women look for and do any kind of work, accepting low wages and bringing home whatever food they get. When there is shortage of work in their own village, women sometimes migrate in search of work and commute long distances. In return, their share of the family food basket is not sufficient to meet their daily calorie requirement, and they do not have any health, maternity or childcare facilities.

Regarding landowning women, my data explodes at least some of the myths about them. I found them quite knowledgeable and it is unfortunate that their managerial and supervisory skills remain hidden. The women in my study said that they engage laborers and manage fields when the men are away. It is possible that this ability of women to manage the fields is one factor that enables men to pursue non-agricultural work.

A fact about landowning women about which even they are not often conscious of is their deep sense of involvement in the cultivation process. Moreover, contrary to popular statement, with variations, women in agricultural households have some say in decision-making and access to resources, however meager it may be. But their own internalization that men are the masters keeps them from openly acknowledging their interest and contribution.

Like agricultural laborers, landowning women are also subject to seasonal variations in their tasks. However, this does not result in the hardships that labor households are exposed to in the lean periods. It also has to be remembered that there are households even among the landowning category who have no other income. In case the land passes out of their hands, due to transfer, sale or divisions, these women would be pushed into destitution. Since all the labor performed by landowning women is on their own land, they do not draw remuneration. In keeping with the traditional economic logic, it is, therefore, not even considered "work". The prevailing male attitude
in Kekuri subscribes to this view as well. Just as in the case of agricultural labor women, in the case of landowning women also the concept of "work" has to be redefined to help us better understand their contribution to agriculture and to the household.

Why do women accept discrimination like non-recognition and low payment in work, and still seek any job that fetches them an income? It is difficult to answer this correctly even by the women themselves. From the answers given by my respondents in relation to loans and advances from the employers, permanent versus casual work etc., I know that they are aware of their situation and are not happy with it. But in the absence of viable alternatives, and in the face of harsh unemployment, they do not have many options. I also found that the general tendency among them, regardless of resource status, was to work longer hours when labor rates fell.

Land is a key factor that links owners and laborers though their interests in land are different. Laborers sometimes resent their employers and landowners see wages as the major reason for increasing costs and often would be ready to convert paddy fields to cash crops which are less labor-intensive. Besides throwing large numbers of labor households into impoverishment, this would also adversely affect environment, ecology, soil conditions and the food situation.

Equally important is the fact that the character of land is fast changing. It remains private property, and the number of workers needed at any time and control over them is exercised by the private landowner. Land reforms, inheritance rules, population growth and the resulting need for more and more space for housing, urbanization, reclamation of cultivable area - these are among the factors affecting total cultivable area, the size of the family or individual holding, which in turn determines the demand for labor.

Technology is another factor that determines the demand for labor. Since even 75 percent of the crop often does not cover their subsistence needs, sharecroppers must retain landowners'
goodwill to secure loans during periods of scarcity. The government can help to ameliorate this problem by providing subsidized loans. In Axom, as in other parts of the country, there are formidable obstacles to land redistribution. In addition to the common practice of registering land under fictitious names, landlords have devised various means of profiting from their vested land. By obtaining a court injunction, a landlord can block land redistribution for decades. During this period, he can cultivate it surreptitiously, sell it, or convert it into nonagricultural land that is not covered by the land ceiling laws. Corrupt bureaucrats often collude with landlords to prevent land redistribution.

Another area in which landowners and laborers work jointly is in the assimilation and transfer of technology. Science and technology usually has the aura of superiority and is made to appear the domain of experts and scientists, beyond the understanding of ordinary people. However, in rice cultivation, laborers and landowners talk confidently about new varieties of seeds, pesticides and fertilizer, and do not find it difficult to understand these. This does not mean that they blindly accept everything. During my research, many women said that they listened to radio programs for farmers, and discussed day-to-day cultivation matters with other laborers and cultivators. They also reported that they do not follow every advice but choose suggestions which they think will work. Thus it is important to recognize women's traditional knowledge and expertise. Regarding the impact of new technology, it is difficult to draw a generalized conclusion. In most cases, a new technology has been labor displacing, with adverse impact on women's roles, status and self-esteem. Others, like village electrification, has rescued women from gruelling manual labor in processing of grain, but has also usurped their income-earning opportunities.

Since women are primarily responsible for the maintenance of the household, they are left with little time or flexibility to pursue skill development or training for more lucrative jobs. Another constraining factor on women's free time is the lack of innovation or improvement in simple
household technology which would reduce time spent on housework. In the household sector, provision of fuel has emerged as major work in a situation where acute scarcity of fuel is caused by widespread deforestation. Routinely, women must trek for miles all through the year to search for fuel substitutes such as twigs, branches, and crop residues for their daily cooking needs. For the majority, the activity is a daily chore involving half to a full day. Women of the lower income groups face a greater dilemma because their time for work is eaten up in collection of fuel.

Cultural insensitivity and deliberate perpetuation of a gender hierarchy by men are other contributing factors to the lack in easing women's time-consuming and monotonous work both inside and outside the home. The present economy is a mixture of subsistence and market agriculture. One important effect of the penetration of the market economy is that women have much less control on products of their labor, and on the income derived from it.

The dominant gender ideology severely restricts women's mobility. They are not expected to drive a bullock cart, a truck or a bicycle. As such, the changes taking place in agriculture have transformed gender power relations in a fundamental way: Women's access to and control over the basic means of production has diminished making them much more dependent on the income of their men. This process has been accentuated by male extension officers who select their 'contact farmers' from the males of the village. My research in general supports the conclusions derived earlier that cultural ideology plays a major role in women's decisions concerning participation in the labor market.

The cultural ideology of purity of the female body and control over women's sexuality did play a decisive role in the choice of work of both men and women, but more so for women. Work patterns and life options of women are very much controlled by cultural taboos, and some women are able to break out of this simply due to dire economic necessity. Women's labor power is not only tied to the households' socioeconomic status but is also controlled by men in the family. Changes in
the occupational structure of women are often only possible with the sanction and insistence of men in their families, and are not economically induced.

During my conversations, women revealed that they saw their increasing poverty in conjunction with their womanhood as an extra burden. The gender ideology prevalent in the region made women see themselves as the weaker sex. Symbolically, the superiority of the male was expressed in different ways. Differential values are placed on male and female work. Notions about impurity of the female body during menstruation and after child birth make women feel inferior to men. They also pointed out the greater responsibility of women in comparison to men towards their families. As an elderly woman explained: "men are like dogs; they go out whenever and wherever they like, and come home only to eat" (to eat, bhog kora, also has the connotation of sexual intercourse).

Women's perception of lack of power and control are connected with the sense of their own bodies. Most women over 40 who have at least four children would have preferred a smaller family, but blamed their husbands for not permitting them to use contraceptives or go for sterilization. The men have negative attitudes towards contraceptives. For poor women, the daily anxiety of feeding the family is enhanced by the constant fear of an unwanted pregnancy.

I discovered that the relative degree of a family's poverty is directly related to their access to work and a steady income. The population pressure on agricultural resources is creating smaller and more fragmented land units. Families who have at least one member employed as a teacher or clerk are more secure than those who have to subsist exclusively on agriculture or wage labor. Thus the ideology of development with its emphasis on the market economy is a big factor in creating economic and social disparities.
Poverty forces men and women into working as casual laborers for the local elite. The growing divide between 'the rich' and 'the poor' also places women in competition with one another, gradually replacing the earlier system of mutual help and exchange labor characterizing village life. In subsistence agriculture, the exchange of labor between different households and providing mutual help during the peak of the agricultural season was the basic organizing principle. This has changed under rural commercialization and competition for wage labor.

Discussions with the women reveal a general discontent with the effects of economic development on their work patterns. The women felt that agricultural development has not led to 'appropriate modernization' where women can access better educational opportunities and health facilities, or aspire to greater autonomy and decision making within the household. They universally agreed that what agricultural development has brought about is increased work, without recompense in cash, kind, prestige or appreciation from their family and community. Subsequently, increased work has deprived them of what little leisure time they previously enjoyed. As mechanization proceeds, women will be probably all but excluded from controlling the machines, and women are likely to be largely limited to carrying out traditional tasks. In this rural region of Axom, girls' education is growing, but at a very slow pace. Unlettered girls of poor families continue to spend their days in traditional menial tasks, while girls of wealthier families may be encouraged to attend schools, and for a few, possibly to find employment in teaching and other fields in the modern sector. This trend may continue until greater social and economic equality is achieved.

What is apparent from my research in Kekuri is that "work" which is physically hard, culturally demeaning, devoid of economic remuneration is not preferred by women, and for that matter, by men. Women withdraw from such labor as soon as the family's economic situation improves. Women who work at wage or non-wage labor do not achieve independence, power or
participate in decision-making processes regarding agriculture and major family decisions. "Work" by women does not lead to autonomy, gratitude from family males, recognition and acceptance by the wider community and attention from policy makers and given the choice, women would rather not engage in it. Since women are not counted as workers, their specific economic interests are neglected by development programs. Under-remuneration of women in the agricultural labor force is common and is related to women's invisibility in the cash cropping, land owning, and wage earning economy (Brydon 1989; Dixon 1982; Safilios-Rothschild 1994; Whitehead 1994).

Difficulties also arise due to the conceptual separation of domestic labor for consumption and economic production for sale or exchange, leading to the assumption that women's labor is domestic, and therefore, is not productive and does not contribute to economic development. On what basis can we separate the production of rice from its processing (pounding in a dheki etc.) and cooking, particularly when the rice is consumed within the family itself, and label the former as "production" and the latter as "domestic work"? The separation of family labor into "production" and "domestic work" is a result of a division of labor that separates the two genders of men and women. Given the socio-cultural aspirations of rural women in Kekuri, women's labor must be given equitable valuation and women's contribution in sustaining their community and culture recognized.

2. Towards Alternative Development

There is the need for an alternative paradigm which should evolve around the rights of village communities - right to live, right to livelihood, right to natural resources - based on the principles of inclusion of those excluded by mainstream development. Opposing all forms of foreign imperialist intervention, this paradigm involves a complete reorientation of economic policy to one that is people-oriented and ecologically sound, giving priority to protection of people's livelihood and
production for people's needs in a sustainable way. In order to reduce the increasing rich-poor divide, the model proposes the redistribution of assets which includes providing credit to women, poor peasant and small producers who are currently excluded from the banking system, redistribution of income by raising wages and thereby increasing the purchasing power of poor people, and increase in social spending. Thus, accompanying this economic policy is the need for a new social policy that emphasizes enhanced education, health care and poverty alleviation programs, so that the poor majority have greater access to food, education, health housing and basic infrastructure, thus improving the quality of their lives. It must ensure the active and full participation of local communities and take into account their particular needs.

No program can be sustainable if it fails to protect its natural resource base. It therefore must be accompanied by a massive program of reforestation, soil conservation, and biodiversity and strict legal restrictions on importing products that are harmful to human health and the ecosystem. Integral to this model is the need to reduce dependence on external markets by valuing local needs, knowledge and expertise. It recognizes the strengths of simple living which values both natural and human resources.

In such a context, the simple addition of a "women's component" to existing development frameworks is not the solution. This model calls for a questioning of the structures within which the oppression of women is embedded in order to come up with new definitions of work, social organizations and relationships which would improve the terms under which women are obliged to participate, and would make for alternative development. Another aspect that needs attention is the presence of women in policy positions that impact farmers. It is important to ensure that women are involved in all decisions, policy-making and implementation in social, economic and political aspects, since women have always played significant roles in the traditional methods of food production,
raising domesticated animals, and disease control in local livestock. This calls for a bottom-up approach for implementing programs that will enhance food production and livestock breeding for local use.

There is the need for greater participation of women in development schemes which assist them in real economic terms such as control over land, access to loans and training in modern methods of cultivation. Such endeavors have to go hand in hand with attempts to change cultural perceptions about women’s work. In order to empower rural women, development programs and International aid agencies should recognize the indigenous knowledge of women farmers and their contributions, expertise, and knowledge of the agricultural systems and natural resources. They should increase the accessibility of information to women on credit and other services, establish stronger ties through cooperatives, and link women with local and international research centers with a view to incorporating women farmers’ knowledge and needs. Removal of illiteracy by educating women at all levels (primary, secondary, and university) is paramount for creating opportunities for women to be involved in the policy making and implementation aspects of agricultural planning. Educating and training women in agriculture in the university level as well as training of women as extension agents are critical in order to involve them in the teaching and training of others. Appropriate training of women in food production and processing by providing simple technology need to be established. Labor saving options including postharvest, processing, storage, and marketing, in addition to crop production activities should be made available to women. Educating women on health care would provide for a healthier, more self-sufficient, productive and sustainable environment.

The position of women in the kinship structure needs serious consideration by planners in order to help women improve their productivity. There is the need to provide women with
educational, health, political, social, agricultural, and institutional assistance. Women can be empowered politically through networking and by building institutions that serve women's needs.

Rural programs should emerge out of a consultative process in which the "target group" and project personnel share their knowledge and resources and therefore create a better fit between needs and capabilities of the beneficiaries and the resources of the agency. Development specialists should listen to women farmers, not in response to a project, but with the vision of empowered leaders and equal partners with men engaged in the process of economic and social development. An invitation to women's interest groups to enter into a direct dialogue with policy makers would demonstrate commitment to improving the situation for women in all aspects of development.

A key principle of this model is the need for a people's democracy and new forms of political consciousness based on people's active participation and control over resources. The local community should be the first unit of planning that must be related to its resources, values and culture. Equity, justice and faith in human beings, free of money and market interventions, is at the root of this thinking and this vision. In short, it means, "Power to the People". Thus this model is directed toward a fundamental and structural transformation of the economy and society.

3. Recommendations: Towards Increased Autonomy

Clearly, women's work is vital and integral to the success of village life and will continue to be so far into the future. South Asian feminist scholars were the first to explicitly mention women's autonomy as a liberational condition in the process of transformation towards a better world (Jain 1983; Jayawardena 1982; 1986). Of late, the most effective channels for change appear to be those that are set up by women themselves, drawing on their collective memories of shared lives. In South Asia, like most of the countries around the world, females through their collective action and
memberships in solidarity groups and grass-roots organizations such as the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Working Women's Forum (WWF) in India, and Grameen (Rural) Bank in Bangladesh have been able to change the age-old conventions having a bearing on their lives.

I started the action-research project with the objective of contributing to local women's autonomy by increasing their earnings, strengthening their gender position and regaining their dignity.

What was the net outcome of the changes brought about by our meetings when analyzed on the basis of women's autonomy? As a result of the meetings, the women became less competitive with each other, and became more conscious of their collective interests as a group and as a woman. They became visible as a group and achieved greater self-confidence. Regarding control over their own bodies, a number of women started using contraceptives and some opted for sterilization. Their physical mobility also increased considerably. A few women also visited doctors on their own. Many younger women learnt to ride bicycles and some became more independent and felt more at ease in travelling by public transport. Regarding the control over the means of production, changing the established gender division of labor remained problematic, although one woman learned to use agricultural machinery, thus debunking the myth about women's lack of ability in certain 'male' fields.

Women continue to bear the burden of field duties in addition to household chores. One area where I felt my research had a positive impact was in that of cooperation and organization of women to control their own affairs. Time and again, women stressed the value of their collective efforts and their "being together". Through the meetings they learnt new skills such as conducting group meetings, giving and receiving constructive criticism, analyzing their own situation, arriving at collective decisions and also acting upon those decisions. This contributed significantly to the women's self-esteem and self-confidence and they were willing to take up more responsibilities regarding their own affairs. This became obvious when the women began to stand up against their
exploitation in the hands of the local bureaucrats and started voicing their own opinions. These women need the formal and informal support of outside groups and individuals to guide and motivate them in their many difficulties and conflicts.

Collective action is the only viable alternative to safeguard the interests of women in agriculture, particularly of the landless woman. We need to create links with indigenous women's groups to understand the effects of collective action and its application to the needs of women farmers and to understand how women organize, traditionally, formally, and informally. Women farmers also have the responsibility to themselves. They have the capacity to strengthen their position by creating a network of women's groups or organizations, at the local, state, national and international levels. Building a coalition of women's groups brings hope and opportunity for women to create one voice and lobby policy makers and decision makers who depend on their "votes". The extent of female participation in production in India is determined by a nexus of class/caste hierarchy and norms of patriarchal ideology. If we view Axomiya women from a hierarchical social perspective, they would be considered to have little power to affect their life conditions, an assumption that is not shared here. My research convinced me that the power of women in society rests to a great extent on their participation in solidarity groups.

Mainstream development with its attendant privatization and globalization pursued by the government's profit-oriented New Economic Policy protects the vested interests of the dominant classes and does not benefit oppressed groups. Government's political reforms do not redistribute economic power. An alternative strategy would involve transforming constraints into opportunities. In reviewing the situation of Axom, two quite different spheres - agrarian production and cultural relations - provide important illustrations. Although certain aspects of both spheres stifle progressive change today, they contain emancipatory possibilities that the government could realize only if it
possessed greater political will and vision. If the State government frequently cites the conservatizing weight of the central government, it seems oblivious of the extent to which Axomiya culture shapes its actions.

Important instances include the government's failure to organize agricultural laborers on a separate basis, frontally attack the dowry system, and support indigenous identity movements. The government thereby renounces an opportunity to mobilize the most oppressed groups. While rejecting the debased standards of caste Hindu society, there is need to uphold the customary laws of the people, although they themselves are not immutable and are the products of long periods of historical change.

The allotment of land to women, as to men, without the right of alienating it, will check the erosion of the rural community and enable it to work an alternative, collective path of appropriate development. According to the state agricultural secretary, small farms (of 2.7 acres) have the highest cropping intensity in Axom since poor peasants compensate for their lack of capital with their labor. Improving the economic conditions of the rural poor is thus likely to increase food grain production. Another priority should be irrigation. In Axom, even small household compounds could potentially produce more to meet household needs without reducing labor. Many landless agricultural laborer households in Kekuri have enough land around each house for a few productive trees. While almost all households have betel nut trees, I rarely saw compounds that are really productive - primarily because people have neither the resources nor the know-how to develop what little land they may have. Other possibilities for providing employment is seriously promoting dairying by making all the infrastructure available including credit loans, feed, and a reliable market for milk.

The State government has to become more responsive to issues affecting women. A human resources unit initiated to address the phenomenon of the changing gender roles would be a worthy
beginning. As of today, the traditional patriarchy, historically reinforced by feudalistic and colonial modes of production, and a layered bureaucracy are strongly resistant towards any reordering of power and privileges, and would be even more so if it were to involve gender dynamics. There is therefore, the need for a counter force from the oppressed groups in the form of a grass roots movement, as is already emerging in other parts of the country. This movement has to be spearheaded by local women's solidarity groups.

Throughout the world, governments, extension personnel and development planners have traditionally targeted male farmers as the primary recipients of training in the new technologies, resources and information that allow them to move into cash cropping which displaced subsistence farming and increasingly give female farmers the sole responsibility for subsistence crops or force them out of agriculture entirely. Because men are given more opportunities, the existing gap between male farmers and female farmers, who tend to be poorer, is widened. By ignoring women and their constraints, extension workers may be leaving out the majority of those who perform the farm work and who provide subsistence and could benefit most from training and access to resources. This kind of discrimination in imparting information, constrains women's ability to increase their production of subsistence crops which are essential to meeting the basic needs of the household. Increasing the yields of such crops, an important goal in its own right, will benefit women by providing them with a saleable surplus, and can be an important source of income for small producers by not leaving them at the mercy of world market fluctuations.

Women's access to cash and credit needed to buy inputs and access to resources as land, water and extension services must be considered by project planners. To deal effectively with women's farming needs, more female extension agents need to be recruited, and given better training in agriculture particularly with issues related to women, instead of weaving, embroidery, jam and jelly
making, rural development projects most frequently aimed at women. Some of the areas in which women require training are livestock management, water management, and agroforestry. Steps need to be taken to ensure that women receive adequate extension services and that women are encouraged to become extension agents. More importantly, would the fact of more female extension workers resolve the problem given that the agricultural extension bureaucracy in today's hierarchical society reaches only the better-off farmer? This question needs to be given careful thought.

At the risk of repetition, it may be pointed out that a considerable amount of research has been devoted to establishing that conventional workforce statistics do not take into account certain activities when they are carried out within the home and are integrated with other domestic work. The under-reporting of women's work in the Indian census imposes a serious handicap in documenting the precise roles of women in rice cultivation. Although the "invisibility" of women's work has generated much concern, the answer to the fundamental question as to "what is work" still eludes scholars. My findings support the argument that women agricultural laborer's work is not marginal and their earnings are not supplementary. By saying this I reiterate the need for a critical analysis of existing ideas on women's work, removal of biases entrenched in current thinking and developing correct alternatives. The data presented strongly indicate that a very high percentage of income earned by females, as compared to male earnings, goes to household maintenance. Thus I can categorically state that eliminating female work would have very negative effects on both women and the families they support.

In assessing employment policies, distinctions need to be made between labor saving-technologies that increase production by reducing women's drudgery and those that eliminate work opportunities for women. Such policy decisions will critically affect household survival among agricultural families. Only when we accept this and the fact that women's work is crucial both for
agricultural production and for the survival of the household, can we begin to redefine and rethink the many concepts and definitions such as work, labor, rest, wages and earnings that have so far served to distort the lives and work of women agricultural workers. Pressure must also be exerted by professionals, intellectuals, academicians for a redefinition of work in the context of women. Here, a few select recommendations of the Asian Regional Conference of Women and Household held in India in 1985 regarding women's work are pertinent and hence are excerpted below as endorsements:

a) All work involving skills and energy and resulting in a product should be counted as economic. A separation, however, could be made between production and pure maintenance types of work. Domestic activities need to be broken down into i) resources provision, ii) family care, and iii) household maintenance.

b) Production work could be further categorized as i) market oriented, and ii) non-market household production.

c) Market production could be further classified into i) modern paid, and ii) unpaid traditional.

d) Non-market household production could be divided into i) production for cash, ii) for consumption, and iii) for family care. Methods must be devised, however, tricky, to distinguish between wage work and self-employment.

e) Finally, in data collection, household approach should be replaced by gender approach. As much as possible, efforts should be directed towards eliminating bias in data collection of the interrogator as well as the respondent.

Agricultural laborers - both men and women - have to be looked upon, not as an unorganized body of unemployed and underemployed force depending on the vagaries of landowners, climate etc., but as a workforce engaged in an essential production process. Only data based on such new concepts would be more real and meaningful for change. It is also important to mention here that in the face of mechanization, modernization and technological changes, many of the areas and opportunities that offer women 'extra work' are disappearing. If continued unchecked, this trend will push agricultural households into further impoverishment.
By accepting the crucial nature of women's work, we could gain a better and fuller understanding of agricultural laborers about whose life there is considerable concern and interest. When and how did a division of tasks originate? Such a question points to the need for a thorough historical study. This is necessary not only to understand why women and men do certain tasks, and since when this division has existed, but also to understand why they are paid differently, and why women's work differ between villages and regions. Though a kind of division of tasks existed and still continues, it needs to be explored to what extent it was rigid at any time, and how women and men perceived it.

It is known that agricultural work is seasonal. What does seasonality mean in terms of the labor household's sustenance and how does the household cope with irregular work and unsteady income? These questions have not received the attention that they deserve, and should be considered as important areas for future research. Understanding these down-to-earth realities must be a prelude to any attempt at bringing change and betterment in the life of my interviewees and their families. This involves questioning many of our preconceived notions including skewed concepts and definitions, which have failed to capture women's work.

4. Conclusion

Women's contribution to family income will always be important for the poor households. It is clear from my study that the style of rural change in the village has increased the labor intensity and drudgery of some of the poorest rural women without necessarily increasing their income. Even if men's wages were to increase, their income would be insufficient to substitute for women's contribution. Hence there is need for active intervention on behalf of these women to ensure equitable distribution of benefits and terms of employment in order. Consequently it is imperative
to examine the appropriateness or otherwise of development programs and what the implications are of their introduction into the community, and their actual gains and losses to different groups, particularly to women from the lowest stratum of rural society. Only then can interventions increase subsistence production and enhance access to rural employment, nutrition, health care, literacy and education for the "poorest of the poor". There is the need for a special focus in policy on the employment and income requirements of women from landless and near landless households; and a special consideration for the gender implications of any income and employment impact of technological change.

In conclusion, I would like to unequivocally emphasize that the landless and marginal agricultural laborer households are living a very marginal existence and are most desperate for work. During my field work, one request that frequently came from the women was to help them find something worthwhile and profitable to do during the long agriculturally slack season. Any technological innovations must take this into account. Relief from drudgery should not be the sole consideration behind new technology. Changes in technology should not lead to displacement of labor, but in the creation of more, varied and rewarding activities. There is no neutral technology. Any innovation has to take into account the local class and gender interests which may work against the objectives with which the new technology is introduced. Thus there is the need for labor-using rather than labor-saving technology.

While personal empowerment is possible, only collective political action can bring about change. My research made it very clear the women can stand up for themselves and become more autonomous with the right kind of support and a favorable political climate. This support should encourage them to collaborate with each other and make their own decisions based on their own analysis of their situation. Above, all, through my research, the extent to which micro changes at
village level are interconnected in the wider political-economic structure became evident. Over the past decade, Axom has been disrupted by violence and civil war.

The economic situation at rural grass-roots level has deteriorated. In poor households, women are discriminated against in terms of food, clothing, education, health and other needs. Women have not benefitted from the programs of development designed to provide social welfare, housing, family planning, education and health facilities. Macro economic and political factors that are out of reach at the local level have increased the disparities between the "haves" and the "have-nots". Military defense continues to take priority and social programs have been limited. While national, political developments have influenced politics and law in Kekuri, they have been greatly mediated by local custom and economy.

The establishment of a Women's Division in the Capital exists on a level quite removed from the village women, although it does provide much needed research and economic and social programs for women. Government policies must provide the necessary support essential for the support of women farmers. Collaborative efforts on all levels of government, local, state, national, and international, is imperative in order to address farmer's problems adequately. Because women are a majority in the agricultural sector, the level of participation of women should not be that of tokenism, manipulation or placation.

While women's autonomy is a desirable political objective, the actual situation in which poor women from Axom and other poor regions find themselves, leaves little room for the realization of autonomy for all - and makes the concept appear overidealistic or even irrelevant. Without structural transformation towards a more equitable and peaceful world at large, efforts to increase women's autonomy at the grass roots remains extremely vulnerable. Moreover, programs of improvement of people's lives should not be based merely on weaknesses, but also need to be built on the strength
displayed in their everyday lives. Thus, new programs for women need to recognize and support their economic contributions as well as their solidarity groups as they work, recreate and celebrate.

One of the positive developments is the flourishing of women's networks North and South. A growing number of women have linked together across borders, class and race to struggle jointly towards an alternative vision of society. We can express this new understanding through our work helping our local community-based women's groups gain a greater understanding of development issues. The emerging global Feminism is one of the major social movements that is providing valuable leadership in taking up the challenge of global transformation to achieve peace, co-operation and freedom. The alternative vision provided by global feminism, with its focus on spirituality, ecology and its respect for the diverse histories and struggles for all women, has helped to move beyond the narrow concerns of middle-class white women to recognize poor women of color as the critical link in the process of global transformation. Women are also taking the lead to preserve human life against political violence. Thus women have organized themselves into Mothers' Groups in Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, the Middle East and Northern Ireland, demanding the return of their missing children. In Argentina, mothers are using diapers to create barricades against the police. The potential for militancy and the commitment to non-violent methods is the strongest attribute of women's struggles which must be strengthened through international support to avoid backlash and increasing violence against feminist activists.

Recognizing the concept of a woman's world encourages a globalization of a whole range of issues. It may not amount to anything more than the acknowledgement of a bond, an empathy, a shared element of experience - however different the experience - of being excluded, marginalized, discriminated against, victimized, undervalued. It manifests itself through shared humor, self-expression through song and dance. The struggle for global transformation must be a celebration of
nature and life by the global community - joyful, creative and holistic. Music, street plays, theaters and other art and popular forms of mass communication could prove invaluable in the pursuit of human freedom, peace and happiness.

Women activists need to participate directly in politics. No issue related to the women's question can be resolved without political action, and activism under the general banner of a political movement will invariably lead to consciousness on women's issues. If political parties are to become meaningful forums for women's issues unequivocally committed to women's emancipation, then the only hope lies in women's concerted struggles to politicize such issues from within and outside the party forums.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Economic and Political Weekly, 28, 43: 2332-2336.


Shiva, V (Forthcoming). *The Enclosure and Recovery of the Commons*.


