

**Examining the Changing Status and Role of
Middle Class Assamese Women: Lessons from
the Lives of University Students**

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Abstract

Examining the Changing Status and Role of Middle Class Assamese Women: Lessons from the Lives of University Students

Postcolonial India is a complex and paradoxical mix of traditional practices and ultra modernity. This tension is especially apparent, and holds particular significance, with respect to women's changing status and role. Driving this research is a concern to examine the impact that structural reforms and neoliberalism are having on women's everyday experience of autonomy at home, in their careers and family life, and in the journeys they make from home to work through public spaces.

This thesis focuses on the specific case of Assam, located in the north-eastern region of India and, within it, a sub-population of young, middle class, Assamese women. The research draws on in-depth interviews and focus groups, in triangulation with a standardised questionnaire, conducted with a sample of students pursuing higher education in five different state-funded co-educational institutions of Assam namely Cotton College, Gauhati Medical College, Assam Engineering College, Gauhati University and Bajali College which have long histories of privilege and prestige. This research is designed to look for evidence of improved status in an extreme context where the liberating benefits of education and career salience are most likely to be found.

A key contribution of this thesis flows from the contradictions and complexities of the everyday practices that underpin the changing status and role of young, middle class Assamese women. The narrative analysis reveals contradictory processes underpinning women's

changing status in Assam; on one hand it shows higher education to be liberating for those who can afford access, in as much as it offers increased autonomy and exposure to international media and ‘cosmopolitan’ egalitarian ideals; on the other hand, women who seek fulfilling jobs and careers outside the home find their freedom of movement severely restricted in public by sexual harassment and at home they face continuing pressure to maintain labour-intensive standards of cooking and childcare. This coincides with tensions arising from ‘new femininities’ whereby, for many within Assamese society, the participation of women in higher education and their increased visibility in paid employment is symbolic of the advancing threat of globalisation as is the proliferation of ‘immodest’ (western) modes of dress; loss of extended family welfare; and an erosion of cultural practices and religious beliefs.

The research, which is an empirical contribution to existing knowledge, examines the ways that incomplete gender transformations are embedded in Assamese society. Generally it is perceived that Indian women’s subordination is explained with reference to a biological ‘naturalisation’ of sex roles or dominant patriarchal structures in state, market and family relations. This thesis challenges these perceived notions of traditional explanations by pointing to a trend of ‘Third Wave’ feminism circumscribed by plural ‘new femininities’ and ‘girl power’. At the same time the research engages with the critique of tradition identified by Hobsbawm (1983) as a variable rather than a fixed or static concept. It demonstrates that Assamese women are effectively experiencing a (re)traditionalising of their domestic roles with increased ‘Indianness’ in the social (re)production of daily life. Thus, the research also contributes to the theoretical literature on postcolonial feminism by following Mohanty’s (1987, 1988; 1991b) critique of the universality of ethnocentrism in Anglo-American scholarship and its presumptions that women of the so called Third World accept traditions

passively. Evidence of the (re)production of a mix of ultra modern and perceived notion of traditional practices is presented with respect to competing spheres of daily life; including relationships with parents/in-laws and spouse, childcare, norms of domestic labour and personal goals associated with education and career. The manifestation of this process is locally specific and highly uneven and contradictory.

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PART I

Introduction and Scope of Debate

Chapter 1

The Role of Higher Education in Women's Changing Status in Assam

1.1.0 Introduction

Postcolonial India is a complex and paradoxical mix of tacit notions of traditional practices and ultra modernity. This tension is especially apparent, and holds particular significance, with respect to women's changing status and role. Driving this research is a concern to examine the impact which structural reforms and neoliberalism are having on women's everyday experience of autonomy at home, in their careers and family life, and in the journeys they make from home to work through public spaces such as the street. Among the factors most likely to shape individual women's changing status and role in India are participation in higher education, paid employment and growth in the labour market as a result of the new economic reforms adopted in the late 1980s (Chapter 2).

It is important to recognise that significant variation has always existed *amongst* Indian women, in terms of their status and role, as well as for all women relative to men, largely as a function of differences of caste, religion and class (Towards Equality Report, 1974; Ghosh and Roy, 1997). To accommodate this underlying diversity, this thesis from the outset establishes strict parameters to the claims it seeks to make. It explores the question of changing status for one specific sub-population of young, middle class Indian women, located in one specific region, Assam, in the North-Eastern part of India. It does not claim to account for a general population of Indian women, nor even all women of Assam. Neither does it claim to establish a causal relationship between the rapid expansions of higher education and job opportunities

of ongoing modernisation with changes (positive or negative) in the status and role of young middle class Assamese women in any quantifiable sense. The more modest aim of this carefully chosen research design is to expose the contradictory processes of structural reform and neoliberalism to closer scrutiny. By studying a relatively homogenous sample of middle class women with well established access to higher education, the evidence found of complexity and contradictions of status and role are thrown into particularly sharp relief. Contradictions are explored in relation to three key areas of social organisation: higher education, careers based on paid employment and routine mobility in public spaces outside the home, such as those encountered on journeys to work. The decision to include experiences while out in public, alongside higher education and career, emerged as a result of the research activity reported in Chapter 6. This sample of women was found to experience a highly restricted freedom of movement when out in public (see below). In short, this approach seeks to uncover the highly contingent narratives, practices and identities of middle class women of Assam who would otherwise exist in limited profile as headline labour market and higher education statistics. While aggregate statistics may point to an upward trend in women's participation in higher education and job opportunities outside the home it is impossible without close observation of the daily lived experience to interpret from these bald trends a positive or straightforward 'improvement' in the status and role of young middle class women in Assam today.

The study is based on the perceptions and attitudes of students pursuing higher education at five different co-educational institutions of Assam; namely Cotton College, Gauhati Medical College, Assam Engineering College, Gauhati University, all located in Guwahati, the main city of the state, and Bajali College, located in an urban location of Barpeta district.

The first part of this chapter will explain why Assam has been chosen as an Indian case study. This part will also explain why students pursuing higher education have been chosen as a focus of investigation and then finally why in-depth interviewing and focus groups have been used in the study as a qualitative research methodology. A key contribution of this thesis flows from the contradictions and complexities of the everyday practices that underpin the changing status and role of middle class Assamese women. The second part will therefore critically review the concept of everyday practices and 'habitus' to illuminate the habituated temporal rhythms of life for middle class Assamese women juggling home, work and family practices at different periods of the day. The third part sheds light on the issues of change that underpin Indian women's status mainly since India's independence with respect to education and employment.

The study, which is an empirical contribution to knowledge, examines the ways that incomplete gender transformations are embedded in Assamese society. At the same time, it effectively makes the following contributions: first, it covers a geographical area not previously studied in-depth within India; second, it focuses on the transformation capacity of young students, a group neglected in the current literature on gender and women's issues; and, third, the study deploys mainly in-depth interviews and focus groups from feminist research methodologies that "belongs to a qualitative research tradition in which, in contrast to large scale surveys, a few cases are investigated in depth" (Dwyer and Limb, 2001; Halford et al., 1997; Jarvis, 1999; Wheelock et al., 2003: 2), and are underdeveloped in Assamese feminist research. Fourth, the study contributes to the theoretical literature on post-colonial feminism by following Mohanty's (1987, 1988; 1991b) critique of the universality and ethnocentrism of Anglo-American scholarship and presumptions about women of the so called Third World accepting traditions passively. This thesis consequently engages with a similar critique of

tradition to that identified by Hobsbawm (1983) as a variable rather than a fixed or static concept (see, Chapter 2). Lastly, the thesis makes a contribution to Third Wave feminism by pointing to a trend of 'Third Wave' in Assam circumscribed by plural 'new femininities'. Nevertheless, it also suggests that the whole notion of Third Wave feminism at present is hegemonic,¹ Eurocentric and American. The final part of the chapter identifies the research questions alongside the basic geographical and historical features of Assam.

1.2.0 The Case of Assam: The North Eastern Frontier of India

There are several key reasons for undertaking this study within the geographical confines of the state of Assam. First, although Assam finds mention in Bengali history and literature (for instance Gooptu, 2003; Rahman and Schendel, 2003), within the women's studies and geography of gender and development literature it is generally a neglected area of research (Sarma, 2004). Like the West, in India too there is a large body of literature on the status of Indian women, gender roles and their relations (see, for example, Agarwal, 1994; Agarwal, 1996; Agarwal, 1999; Agarwal, 2000; Basu, 2001; Basu, 2001; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996; 2006; Sharma, 1986; Seth, 2001). Yet Assam has not been the focus of research that concentrates on the diverse roles that women play, their perceptions and response to the challenges specifically posed by contemporary globalisation and neoliberalism (Chapter 2).

Globalisation is a concept that cannot be taken for granted and one cannot define one's response to it until the concept of 'globalisation' is adequately specified (Kurian, 1997). Here, globalisation is taken to mean the contemporary processes of political and economic

¹ A term coined by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to define the capability of a dominant social group not through force, coercion or visible rule but through the manufacture of consent through which willingness of the people is ensured to accept a subordinated status (Gramsci, 1971).

interconnection (Slater, 2004; Mills, 2009; Perrons and Posocco, 2009), recognising “the increasing interconnectedness of the world economically, culturally and politically” (Guinness, 2003: 1; Mills, 2009; Perrons and Posocco, 2009). Due to globalisation, and more specifically due to modernisation, the world has been transformed into a global village.² This globe has been desegregated by capitalist practices and ideology such that previous ideological axes have been eroded. The cultures of urban spaces are also immediately and directly influenced by globalisation in the context of consumption patterns and tastes, fashion, architecture, media and new forms of material culture; conversely, urban cultures, through intellectual trends, economic and technological innovations and the media, largely constitute so-called globalisation (Clammer, 2003; Yeoh, 2005). Nevertheless, it is also “a process that people in many parts of the world are concerned about because it appears to justify the spread of western culture and capitalism” (Guinness, 2003: 3) and inequality (Mills, 2009; Perrons and Posocco, 2009). Such processes of globalisation have resulted in changes in the socio-economic structures of Assamese society. As a result, they have implications for both non-tribal and tribal communities in general, and Assamese women in particular (Fernandes and Barbora, 2002b).

Limited research has been carried out in this field by different non-governmental organisations in the form of edited books and reports. For example, Gauhati University Women’s Studies Research Centre ³ has to date published three books (Debi, 1993; Debi 1994a and Medhi, 1996), two reports and sixteen monographs. The North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati, published several studies (Fernandes and Barbora, 2002a; Fernandes and Barbora, 2002b) and the North East Network compiled a directory/database on ‘Violence against Women’ (2003). At the same time, very few academics from the region have published

² A term coined by Marshal McLuhan (1962) to refer to the changes in telecommunications, computing and information technology that has had a profound influence in shaping people’s lives.

³ <http://gu.nic.in/html/wsrc.htm>, September, 30, 2006

independent works on the subject (but see Baruah, 1992; Barthakuria and Goswami, 1994; Ray and Ray, 2008). In the Department of Geography, Gauhati University, there have been only two PhD research projects completed on women's issues while a few are ongoing (Sarma, 2004). These studies are either highly descriptive or quantitative, with most of the research based on questionnaire survey or secondary statistics or objective indicators (Mohanty, 1991a). Arguably, aggregate secondary data analysis ignores the complex and contradictory processes that underpin women's daily lives and any perceived improvement in status. It is in this context that my thesis on the changing status and role of young, middle class Assamese women seeks to shed light on this neglected domain of perceptions, attitudes and competing identifications (see chapter 6). In short, the paucity of literature on Indian feminism in the context of Assam provides a clear rationale for the current study.

A second reason for studying Assam relates to the region's sub-culture within India. India is a land of unity in diversity with 28 states and seven union territories. This sub-continent is home to a heterogeneous population distinguished by diverse languages, traditions, life-styles, food habits and customs. Any aspects of these societies are important themes for research including the status of its women (Devi, 1993) as virtually every region or state has its own sub-culture (Davis, 1973). In this context, the changing status and role of young, educated middle class non-tribal women in Assam is an important aspect of study.

Assam's unique sub-culture connects to its own language, festivals and food endemic to the region. The notion of subculture refers to a group of people or a society at a micro-social level, which is distinct within a broader culture in having its own set of beliefs and rules that are exhibited in a form that differs from the parent culture (Jenks, 2005; Middleton, 1990). In this respect, Assamese women can be said historically to have generally enjoyed greater freedom in their daily lives compared with Indian women as a whole. This is because Assam is

geographically surrounded, and in some sense influenced, by a contrasting matrilineal ⁴ society and subculture (Behal, 2002; Debi, 1994a; Gogoi Nath, 1992). That is, Assam has eight major tribes ⁵ and 23 notified scheduled tribes according to the Census of India, 2001. The major tribes include *Bodo-Kachari*, *Mech*, *Rabha*, *Karbi*, *Tiwa*, *Mishing*, *Sonowal Kachari* and *Dimasa* with various *Kuki* tribes of the hill districts and the *Barmans* of Cachar. Tribal population constitute nearly 8.08% of the total population of India. The total scheduled tribe population of Assam is 12.4%.⁶ The caste system of Assam is discussed in Chapter 3. North-East India is undeniably the hub of India's tribal population (23%).⁷ The ethnic and cultural diversity has made this whole North-Eastern region different from the rest of the country (Fernandes and Barbora, 2002b). For instance, many of the tribal societies are matrilineal and Assam is also historically a society free from dowry and *Sati* ⁸ (widow immolation). There is nevertheless evidence that there are gender-related discriminations within Assamese society, which makes Assam an interesting case for this study.

Lastly, the limited literature that is available on Assamese women and gender issues could be collectively placed in the 'women and development' (WAD) literature (Chapter 2). Again, as argued by Mohanty (1991a), most Assamese scholars, like their western counterparts (see, Tong, 2007), have identified Assamese women in terms of under development, noting high rates of illiteracy (Taher, 1994; Sarma, 1994; Das, 1994), focusing on patterns of inequality,

⁴ A term used to describe the line of genealogical relationship or decent that follows the female side of the family (Mizinga, 2000)

⁵ The Government of India in its Fifth Schedule -Article 244(1) and Sixth Schedule-Articles 244 (2) and 275(1) of the Constitution of India officially recognised the disadvantaged indigenous population of India, as Scheduled Tribes (together grouped under "Scheduled Castes and Tribes") for their economic empowerment (<http://www.constitution.org/cons/india/p10.html>, January, 15, 2007).

⁶ Assam, The Data Highlights: The Scheduled Tribes, Census of India, 2001 (http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_assam.pdf, April, 17, 2007)

⁷ "Total Population, Population of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and their proportions to the total population" Census of India, 2001 (http://www.censusindia.net/t_00_005.html, April, 15, 2006)

⁸ *Sati* is a form of traditional funeral practice of some Hindu communities in which a recently widowed woman would immolate herself or forced to do so by the family or community members on the funeral pyre of her husband. Banned in the 17th century by the Mughal emperors, the custom continued even after it was made illegal under British rule 1829. The central government of India has passed the Commission of Sati Prevention Act of 1987, but the custom continues, although infrequently and illegally (Hawley, 1994).

especially the limited education of daughters (Choudhury, 1996; Goswami, 1994); as well as patterns of high fertility (Deka, 1993; Deka, 1996), the marginalisation of women due to economic reforms (Mahanta, 1996; Sen, 2002), and women as victims of male violence (Buzarbaruah, 2002; Borkataky, 1992; Debi, 1994c, Hussain and Dasgupta, 1996; Narzary, 2002; Sarma, 1996; Barooah, 1996; WSRC, G.U., 2001). In short, the tendency in relying on these headline indicators is to reproduce a ‘victim’ dependency narrative of women and development. While undoubtedly of value, these studies are highly descriptive, quantitative or dated. Given the significant and uneven impact of globalisation (and neoliberalism) in women’s day-to-day lives (Mohanty, 1991a) it is timely to question some of the myths and generalisations applied to Assam as a region and Assamese women as a marginalised population. The purpose of this study, then, is to apply qualitative methodology to explore the diversified aspects of the daily lives for a relatively empowered group of women, rather than treating Assamese women as marginalised and disempowered.

1.2.1 Higher education as a lens on women’s changing status

This study is based on the attitudes of students within the 17-35 age-groups, pursuing their studies in five different urban co-educational institutions namely Cotton College, Gauhati Medical College, Assam Engineering College, Gauhati University (all four located in the major city of the state, Guwahati) and Bajali College (located in an urban location of Barpeta district). It should be noted however, that these educational institutions of higher education in Assam are state-funded with long histories of privilege and prestige. My thesis does not take into account the newly expanded self-funded privatised institutions of higher education in

Assam that emanates greatly from neoliberal policies of India (Chapter 2, section on higher education).

The sample has been used in the study for four specific reasons. First, this group of educationally privileged students in Assamese society is a somewhat ignored group in terms of socio-geographic research. The term 'educationally privileged' refers to individuals who have the opportunity to pursue their career through formal education according to their own choice, and who usually, but not exclusively, hail from the elite middle, upper middle class or wealthy sections of society. Second, this privileged sub-group of students is young and progressive in as much as it is influenced by modernity (see, Chapter 2). This is a relatively mobile geographical group with high aspirations. Third, this sample frame is representative of the distribution of a typical student population in higher education - young and mainly female in their late teens, twenties or early thirties making the best of opportunities available to them in education, career and employment. Fourth, learning from the attitudes of the college and university students is important because they are the torch bearers in changing attitudes towards sex-roles (Goldscheider and Waite, 1991).

1.2.2 The role of qualitative methodology in feminist research

In the West, especially in gender geography, there has been a great deal of interest in the use of in-depth interviews and focus groups as key methods of data collection in qualitative research (Aitken, 2001; Healey and Rawlinson, 1993; Herod, 1993; 1999; Hughes, 1999; Mohammad, 2001; Mullings, 1999; Oakley, 1981; Sabot, 1999; Schoenberger, 1991; Shah, 1999; Sin, 2003; Skelton, 2001). Although these methods are not new, such methods have rarely been used in research on Assam (Sarma, 2004). In the thesis, in order to study the

changing status and role of young, middle class Assamese women, qualitative methods (in this case, in-depth interviews and focus groups), are applied to collect data on three main selected areas of social organisation: higher education, career trajectories (based on paid employment) and third, the everyday mobility of these career-minded women. In all three areas, a lack of resources in previous studies has prohibited such a close reading of attitudes (Sarma, 2004).

1.3.0 Everyday Practice

This thesis explores how the complexity of everyday life is implicated in the construction of identity of Assamese middle class women who are studying in higher education in pursuit of a career. Here the language of everyday life is used to generate a category of analysis: it is used to shed light on the complexities of the nature of daily rhythms of life (de Certeau, 1984; Datta, 2007; Lefebvre, 2004; Smith, 1987; Smith, 2005; Smith, 2007). I also review the notions of habitus and public/private that remain central to the discussion of everyday practices. The phrase ‘everyday life’ refers to “the ways of frequenting or dwelling in a place, on the complex processes” through which diverse acts are carried out such as those of aspiring for something, reading, talking, walking, cooking, caring and so on (de Certeau, 1984: xxii; also, Datta, 2007). The practices entailed are active (though not always pre-conscious) ways of going about daily life; ‘ways of operating’ that embrace trivial as well as sophisticated ‘background social activity’. Accordingly, the key aims of everyday life can be achieved, first, if the tactics of everyday practices do not conceal the background of social activity; second, even if there is abstruseness, the aims can still be achieved if a set of *modus operandi*, be it theoretical questions, methods, categories or perspectives, gain insight into this obscurity to make it possible to enunciate them (de Certeau, 1984). Moreover, the processes of urbanisation are pivotal to the transformations and growing complexities found in the everyday practices of people, families and households.

In their article on *Existential Ontology*, which discusses Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus (see below), Drefus and Rainbow (1993) argue, in contrast, that individual practices of coping (that are projected as primordial), emerge from the processes of socialisation and cultural training that are transformed gradually into public norms as structured, objective and unified. Therefore, such processes of social activity of everyday practice 'governs' an individual by deciding what probabilities "show up as making sense" (Drefus and Rainbow, 1993: 37).

At the heart of this thesis are the experiences of young, middle class, Assamese women for whom higher education, paid employment and routine mobility function as significant expressions of class habitus. Pierre Bourdieu, an influential French social scientist, whose work spans the fields of sociology, anthropology and cultural studies as well as human geography, developed the notion of habitus. Bourdieu defines habitus as a nexus of "shared social dispositions and cognitive structures which generates perceptions, appreciations and actions" (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984: 279). Central to Bourdieu's notion of habitus is an understanding of the component through which the social customs and conventions of a community are assimilated over time, mainly via the "formative experiences of earliest infancy, of the whole collective history of family and class" (Bourdieu, 1990: 91, see also O'Mahoney, 2007). Bourdieu argues that the everyday practices of individuals arise from habitus (McNay, 1999). Although habitual practices are incorporated in individual practices as well as in individuals, it is actually a set of shared social attitudes that produces almost uncritical, naturalised behaviour. Arguably, social relations, more importantly, gender relations can be best understood in terms of habitual practices (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984). Such habitual practices can be expressed in the way an individual stands, walks, inhabits space, talks (which includes accent and usage of phrases and idioms), thinks, feels and dresses (Bourdieu, 1977; Krais, 1993). Arguably, habitus is a way of operating,

“generative principles of regulated improvisations” (Bourdieu, 1977: 78, Kraiss, 1993), a structure, embraced by genesis (Kraiss, 1993). Bourdieu (1990: 56) thus describes habitus as a conceptual framework that represents the past as a by-product in the form of an “embodied history, internalized as a second nature” (Kraiss, 1993). It is in this context, Kraiss (1993) argues, that Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is somewhat different to the concept of ‘role’ as defined by sociologists this is based on a fixed or finite set of rules. By contrast, “habitus refers to something incorporated, not to a set of norms or expectations existing independently of, and externally to, the agent” (Kraiss, 1993: 170). Thus, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is complex, dynamic, both objective and subjective, extremely varied, infusing the fields of diverse subjects, and often “the site of the constitution of the person-in-action” (Postone et al., 1993: 4). Habitus, therefore, can be defined as the dynamic intersectional analysis of structure and action taken together with society and the individual (Postone et al., 1993). This notion of habitus also allows the examination of the behaviour of agents that are integrated and regulated objectively on the one hand, “without being the product of rules”, while rationally cognizant on the other hand (Postone et al., 1993: 4). This entails apprehension of practical expertise, which an individual has of their social situation, whilst at the same time grounding such expertise socially (Postone et al., 1993).

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus bears a similarity to that of culture, though the latter operates on a larger scale (Bourdieu, 1977; Lash, 1993; Li Puma, 1993). The word ‘culture’ is a term highly subjected to contestation. Edward Tylor defines culture as the “most complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by man [sic] as a member of society” (1871: 1). Raymond Williams, one of the pioneers of cultural studies in Great Britain, paved the way to demonstrate that the meaning of the word ‘culture’ has shifted with changing society. Arguably, culture is a dynamic system, always in

the process of fragmentation, that also embraces pluralisation of culture to include all cultures and subcultures. In their book, *Culture and Public Action*, edited by Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton reinforce that culture is inherently a dynamic process and predominantly about relationality. This strengthens Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'field' which is also about 'relational analysis' (Calhoun, 1993; LiPuma, 1993; Postone et al., 1993: 5).

The notion of Bourdieu's field is an investigation of his three-tiered hierarchy of social structures; each distinct field comprising its own history, logic and agent is situated within the notion of power as well as determined with relation to the internal dynamics of power (LiPuma, 1993). Postone et al. argue (1993: 5), that the concept of Bourdieu's field can be defined as

“an account of the multi-dimensional space of positions and the position taking of agents. The position of a particular agent is the result of interplay between that person's habitus and his or her place in a field of positions as defined by the distribution of the appropriate form of capital. The nature and range of possible positions varies socially and historically”.

(Postone et al., 1993: 5)

Bourdieu's concept of culture (symbolic order), or more specifically cultural capital, runs parallel to the fields or structured systems of social positions, where he describes the extent to which the cultural markers of taste (including knowledge, manners and patterns) and of consumption serve as a source of social distinctions, as economic capital is exchanged for different kinds of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; LiPuma, 1993). Examples of the fields of social distinctions along class (also caste in the Indian context), community and gender lines include education, employment, formal politics, lifestyles, scientific areas as well as the major areas of consumption such as housing, home decoration, tourism, music or artistic endeavour.

Bourdieu's analogy of cultural capital bears no relation to capital and culture as such, but definitely he believes that cultural (or social) distinctions play important roles in reproducing and expressing inequalities of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Lipuma, 1993; Postone et al., 1993). Arguably, culture can be legitimised to vie for power relations based on material resources as well as add to its obscurity in terms of politics of representation (Bourdieu, 1984; 1985; Jackson, 1989; Postone et al., 1993). As such, the notion of Bourdieu's capital serves to arbitrate theoretically both individual and society as well (Postone et al., 1993).

Feminists have also paid close attention to the notion of everyday practices (Rose, 1993). Smith (1987) locates the geography of everyday discourse as the world that is encountered directly and daily. It is the world in which an individual socialises by locating themselves physically. Arguably, positioning one's subjectivity in everyday life is implicit in its bodily existence (Smith, 1987). It is well documented, however, that within its own scope, everyday life may not be fully understandable (Smith, 1987); therefore, she calls for an ethnographic mode of inquiry to explore the practices of everyday.

Again, in her book *Institutional Ethnography*, Smith (2005) develops an institutional ethnographical methodological approach of inquiry and discovery that uses everyday practices as a lens to investigate social relations as well as social institutions (Smith, 2005). The lived experiences as well as the daily rhythms of everyday life of a particular institution are evidenced as 'conditions', 'occasions', 'objects', 'possibilities', 'relevance', 'presence' and so on, arranged in and by the habitual practices through which the institution is being supplied and discovered (Smith, 1987: 89). Therefore, it is a requisite that everyday life be visualised as structured by social relations that are usually not noticeable within it (Smith, 1987; Smith, 2005). Hence, an investigation circumscribing itself to the everyday practices of 'direct

experience' is inadequate to explain its social organisation (Smith, 1987: 89; Smith, 2005).

She goes on to argue that:

“The everyday world is not an abstracted formal “setting” transposed by the sociologists’s conceptual work to an abstracted formal existence. It is an actual material setting, an actual local and particular place in the world”.

(Smith, 1987: 97)

Various studies in geography and feminist accounts of the space of the everyday practices have examined how the intersectionality of everyday life and particular place(s) builds social action (Bassett, 2002; Datta, 2007; Mills, 2007; Nagar, 2000a; Nagar, 2000b; Rose, 1993; Smith, 2007). These studies have developed intersectional or integrative analysis of particular issues with respect to gender, race, class, caste and sexuality to illustrate how such intersectionality produces social action through the notion of a sense of place to shape people’s lives. The term intersectionality refers to the multiple and complex interconnections between socio-cultural categories and identities (Davis, 2008; Egeland and Gressgård, 2007; Hancock, 2007a, 2007b; Knudsen, 2006; McCall, 2001, 2005; Valentine, 2007).

The feminist theory of intersectionality is an integrated approach, a tool that recognises and evaluates the multifarious forms of discrimination, often through interaction between two or more forms of discriminations that reveal inequalities amongst women (or by gender) (Davis, 2008, Knudsen, 2006; McCall, 2001, 2005; Valentine, 2007). This framework identifies women as a heterogeneous group, each individually positioned in relation to multiple and layered experiences of racial/ethnic, sexual and economic discriminations that may take place as a result of the synthesis of identities.⁹ Recent geographical, political and sociological

⁹ Intersectionality: A Tool for Gender and Economic Justice
(http://www.awid.org/publications/primers/intersectionality_en.pdf, January, 12, 2008)

research has explored intersectionality as a point of departure mediating different aspects of social identity, such as class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality (Pratt, 1999; Pratt, 2002). By way of example, Geraldine Pratt (1998: 26) observes the way individuals are effectively ‘torn between identifications’ in the coordination of everyday life (Jarvis et al., 2001). This understanding of intersectionality as a normative and empirical research paradigm, offers scope to probe the changeable nature of these varied aspects of constructed identities, and in this way, trying to conceptualise intersectionality (Davis, 2008; Egeland and Gressgård, 2007; Hancock, 2007a, 2007b; Knudsen, 2006; McCall, 2001, 2005; Valentine, 2007). Because this research mainly adopts a ‘women in development (WID) approach’, (Chapter 2) the key intersections of mediation are those of class (including caste), women and gender.

Everyday space and women’s daily practices and routines are key issues in feminist research as a means to demonstrate the constraints and confinement of women especially within the house and locale (Rose, 1993; Smith, 1987). Central to an understanding of such unequal practices of everyday life is the public/private divide (Rose, 1993; Smith, 1987). Contemporary debate about the public sphere is drawn mainly from the seminal works of Jürgen Habermas (1989).¹⁰ This literature has expanded rapidly in recent years; diffusing diverse regions and periods over space and time. Habermas (1989), while discussing the hierarchal development of a public-private split, argues that in the classical societies, the public domain represented the citizen’s power to actively participate and debate in the political life. By contrast, the private domain represents the lack of such power. Habermas, says for instance,

“the realm of necessity and transitoriness remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere. In contrast--- stood---the public sphere as a realm of freedom and permanence”.

¹⁰ Originally published in 1962 in German and translated into English by Thomas Burger in 1989.

(Habermas, 1989: 3-4)

Habermas (1989) goes on to argue that, in the early industrial capitalist world, the public world of paid work comprised two separate spheres: the state and the realm of public political debate between its citizens. Similarly, the private world constituted two institutions: the family and the market economy (Habermas, 1989). However, this distinction is in the process of breaking down in welfare state capitalism, where citizen's power to participate in political debate has diminished in the context of politicised 'publicity' and social welfare. Similarly, the social institutions such as the family/market relationship as well as market/state separation are being gradually obscured.

The boundaries of the Habermasian discussion of public sphere theory, however, is being pushed forward and reshaped by the on-going restructuring processes of a globalised capitalist economy as well as other public assemblies that are often ignored because of a narrowly-defined discourse. The book, *After Habermas*, edited by Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts (2004) is an excellent example for bringing alternative perspectives and ideas to bear on theories of the public sphere. For example, the public sphere is being (re)shaped and (re)politicised with the emergence of the internet, the global network of networks, a potential medium for transnational democracy (Bohman, 2004). Again McLaughlin (2004: 157) outlines the possible prospects for, and hindrance to, the creation of a political economy of a "transnational feminist public sphere". She argues that the emergence of a transnational feminist network is one of the most noticeable manifestations of the development of a transnational public sphere. She goes on to argue that despite the existence of such networks, feminist theorists have had little impact on this field of development. Further, McLaughlin (2004) argues that in the contemporary globalised economic world, a space shaped by the

neoliberal paradigm (see chapter 2); the boundaries of the public sphere are being expanded by communication, cyberspace and other modes of information technology.

The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995 recognised ‘communication’ as a significant tool to women’s empowerment. Since then women’s networks have been developed at the local, national and international level. The efforts of these women’s organisations largely remain focused on the promulgation of global information, monitoring governmental and intergovernmental organisations and organising educational and awareness programmes for the promotion of social, political and economic empowerment (McLaughlin, 2004). In this context McLaughlin (2004) emphasises the significance of transnational feminist networks as public spaces; as sites for promoting unanimity, sharing and exchanging experiences and strategies.

It is well documented that the notion of public/private debate was reinforced by the First Wavers (see below) with the aim, in part, of “dissolving the distinction between a private woman’s sphere and a public, male arena” (Peet, 1998: 248). Feminists since this time have challenged the notion of a dichotomy between these overlapping spheres (Fraser, 1989; MacKinnon, 1989; McDowell, 2006; Rose, 1993; Walby, 1990). They have also recognised the many ways in which space is always gendered (McDowell, 1983; Rose, 1993; 1996; Pain, 1991; Valentine, 1989). Straddling the intersection of private/public spaces are those spaces of transcendence, production, politics and power that are frequently regarded as a male domain. By contrast, ‘home’ as a space of reproduction has frequently been regarded as a private and quiet space for women to perform unpaid labour (Okin, 1989; Pateman 1988, Rose, 1993; Walby, 1990). This research recognises that private and public spaces are the ‘practiced places’ (de Certeau, 1984: 117) intimately connected to the hierarchy of private and public spheres. Private space, in this research, includes those spaces used by the young middle class

career-minded Assamese women of my sample to practise everyday the discourses connected to femininity and modernity (see Chapter 2) especially within the household (see Chapters 5 and 6). For examples, the expectations associated with marriage and motherhood; ‘the double burden’, especially for majority of the married women in the sample (who have paid work) with respect to housework and childcare; their position within the family as a daughter and daughter-in-law; and to highlight the role of the women in the sample as mothers in socialising their children into the more subtle elements of cultural values. Public space embraces those spaces used by these women while commuting daily between home to their places of study (or to pursue their career) such as streets (neighbourhood streets, streets leading to the main roads), modes of public transport (which may include city buses, trekkers and rickshaws) as well as sites like bus-stops and market streets (including *bazaars* and shopping malls).

In the context of India too, a number of studies have highlighted the intersectionality of gender and public (Patel, 2006; Khan, 2007; Ranade, 2007; Phadke, 2007; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007). For example, Patel (2006), in her nuanced study of public space within the context of neoliberalisation, notes that the expansion of the labour market has changed the urban landscape, the nightscape, and shifted the roles of Indian women. This is particularly notable in the case of new job opportunities in the service sector, especially the IT sector and transnational call centres where calls have to be taken through the night to coincide with the day-time hours of callers living and working in the USA and the UK. She argues, however, that such changes have not resulted in any changes in the patriarchal relations of power, where women find their social and spatial mobility restricted when out in the nightscape, as “the nightscape brings forth gender and class connotations that mark their bodies as sites of transgression” (Patel, 2006: 18). This argument resonates with the findings presented in Chapter 6; here, theoretical sensitivity towards geography, gender and fear in public space

highlights the restrictions evoked in the everyday mobility of the women in my sample when they are out in public to attend classes and to pursue an independent career.

Further, there remains a general consensus that the notion of work came to be enforced spatially under the metaphorical division of public (paid work synonymous with employment) and private spheres (unpaid labour) since the Industrial Revolution that began in Great Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century. The emergence of this division brought new divisions of labour between working-class men and women and idealised separate boundaries for middle-class men and women (Rendall, 1990). The materialisation of such spatial binary dualism came to be associated with that of the 'home' (feminine) for women and 'work' (masculine) for men (Sarma, forthcoming). Arguably, the hidden politics of public/private dichotomy is rooted within the notion of power (see Chapter 2). It is well documented that although public and private spaces are socially and spatially separate, the two are inherently unstable, clearly interconnected in complex ways and produce 'hybrid spaces of agency' (Coe et al., 2007; Datta, 2007: 216; MacKinnon, 1989). Further, many feminist scholars argue that increasing participation of women in paid employment accentuates the public/private distinction as fluid and blurred, often yielding a mirage (Bhattacharjee, 2006; Brown, 1997; MacKinnon, 1989; Walby, 1997). Contextualising these theoretical accounts, I build on my thesis to explore the complexities and diversified aspects of the everyday lives of young, career-minded middle class Assamese women that underpin their changing status and role. Since the thesis sets itself up as a study of changing status and role, this at once leads to the question, changes from what? Hence, the following section is an attempt to contextualise the changing status of Indian women, mainly since India's independence in 1947 with respect to education and career (employment).

1.4.0. Indian Women's Changing Status

There is usually a consensus that following independence for India in 1947, women started to emerge from the grip of centuries of male domination. In colonial India, as a result of political and economic marginalisation, women were generally the victims of androcentric colonialism, as witnessed by explicit barriers to their educational and career advancement, as well as controls over their reproductive health and contraceptive decision-making. However, this is not to say that in the pre-independent India was without organisations that worked for Indian women's improved status. In fact Indian women, taken aback by the notion of 1920s 'Gandhian Feminism'¹¹ (Kumar, 1993: 67), were central to the Indian Nationalist Movement as a part of their pre-independent feminist movement. This occurred against a backdrop of liberal democratic values taking root in the West that was sanctioned by British bureaucrats. However, the women's movement in India actually gained inspiration from within the value system of its own society (see section on post-colonialism). Between the 1820s and 1850s, social reformers played a significant role in highlighting the importance of class (also caste) and region in shaping some powerful pre-independence femininities. For example, Rajaram Mohan Roy (of Brahma Samaj in Eastern India), Swāmī Dayanand Saraswati (of Arya Samaj in Northern India), Prathana Samaj in western India, the Theosophical Society in Southern India, Swāmī Vivekānanda, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar all, among many others, worked for the amelioration of the status of women in such things as the eradication of female infanticide, *sati* (widow-burning), prostitution, widow-remarriages, begging by destitute

¹¹ Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian Nationalist Movement, also known as 'the parent of 'Indian Women's Movement'' (Kumar, 1993:2) not only considered that women are equal to men, but he practised it in strict sense of the term. Under, his influence hundreds and thousands of women, both literate and illiterate, housewives and widows participated in India's freedom movement. (Arya, 2000; Chandra et.al, 2000; Kumar, 1993). The notion of Gandhian feminism connected 'femininity' with 'spiritual' and 'moral courage' and defined the "feminine" qualities as having the strength to combat imperial power' (Menon, 1999: 9). The chief motto of this Gandhian feminism was to empower women using their socio-economic status. Arguably, this notion of Gandhian feminism of 1920s gradually developed into 'majority feminism' in the 1930s (Kumar, 1993: 67).

women (Kumar, 1993; Prakash, 2000; Patel, 2001; Sen, 2002). Before I discuss this further, I will situate the labels of the ‘wave phenomena’ of feminism in the Indian context. The women’s movement of the West is labelled in three ways: first, second and Third Wave (Peet, 1998). Following the Seneca Falls Convention in the USA, the First Wave feminism that began in 1848 under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, with its one crucial aim of women’s political suffrage, is believed to have ended in the 1920s after having achieved its objectives (Kinser, 2004; Peet, 1998; Walby, 1997). Coined by Marsha Lear, Second Wave feminism started in the 1960s and remains active to date (Garrison, 2004; Kinser, 2004). While Third Wave feminism emerged in the mid-1980s as a product of the increased discussions and writings on intersections of feminism and racism (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Heywood and Drake 1997; Kinser, 2004) (see Chapter 2). The aims, objectives, struggles, strategies and tensions of each wave are diverse and varied; therefore it is difficult to speak of a single women’s movement (Peet, 1998). In a similar context, I argue that the Indian women’s movement being a heterogeneous movement, believed to be historically grounded in the India’s Nationalist movement and partly First Wave feminism, carries counter currents with a focus on varied problems beyond women’s rights, class, caste and gender (Derne, 2001). Therefore, I try to divide the movement into first, second and Third Waves in line with the West, first, to understand the greater depth, breadth, versatility and uniqueness of the Indian women’s movement and second, echoing Kinser (2004: 129) “as a way of negotiating feminist space”.

Despite the great efforts of the social reformer(s) the process of amelioration in the true sense of the term was provided by independent India, which fostered a route to constitutionalise gender equity in law (Chandra et al., 2000; Kumar, 1993). The very first of these constitutionalised promises was the guarantee of complete ‘Equality between the sexes’

(Kumar, 1993:1) and women's right to the franchise (Chandra et al., 2000; Kumar, 1993). The other promises that were materialised just after India's independence were sections of the Hindu Code Bill (a measure to "unify, modernise and codify" the Hindu law, giving greater rights to women) in the form of such acts as the Hindu Marriage Act; the Hindu Succession Act, the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act; and the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 (Bannigan, 1952: 173; Chandra et al., 2000; Laxmi, 2006; Levy, 1968; Kumar, 1993; Ray, 1952; Reddi, 1996). Such "extension of legal rights to Hindu women was not sufficient but it was a big step forward" (Chandra et al., 2000: 452). Gradually, thus, independence not only ushered in modernisation, economic development, urbanisation, and neoliberalism (new economic reforms since late the 1980s) (see Chapter 2), it also raised increased awareness of women's marginalisation. This awareness led to a number of international conferences such as the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo (ICPD, 1994)¹² and the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (FWCW, 1995). Consequently, women's advancement, development and empowerment emerged as areas of significant emphasis for the Government of India.¹³

Education and employment (career) are the two key arenas through which Indian women gained access to the public sphere. With respect to education (and literacy), a suite of focused policies has been introduced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, and Department of Education, Government of India, through a series of Five Year Plans,¹⁴ the Kothari Commission¹⁵ (Education Commission, 1964-66), Towards Equality Report¹⁶ (1971-

¹² <http://www.edcnews.se/Files/Cairoplusten.pdf>, October, 8, 2006

¹³ For details please see National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, India (http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/hrdr/init/ind_2.htm, March, 27, 2007) and Towards Partnership Between Men and Women in Politics, New Delhi, 14-18 February 1997

¹⁴ <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html>, January, 10, 2006

¹⁵ The Government of India appointed the Kothari Education Commission (1964-66) to generate an overall development strategy for education at all stages and in all aspects (Bagulia, 2004; Saikia, 1962). The headline narrative of the lengthy report which the Commission produced was the urgent need for women to have greater equality of access to educational opportunities. The commission also stressed a more significant role for Indian

74) and the National Policy on Education ¹⁷ (1968, 1986,¹⁸ 1992) (see Chapter 2) . These were all intended to address mass illiteracy, particularly among women. Such policies are responsible, at least in part, for improvements in the literacy rates for both males and females in India, including Assam, since independence in 1947. Therefore, for Indian women's equality and empowerment, education is undeniably the very basic indicator. Table 1.1 illustrates the magnitude of the change in literacy over time, comparing Assam with India, showing that the literacy gap between males and females has decreased over time. According to the census report of 2001, the literacy rate for the whole of India was 65.38%, where 54.1% of females and 75.85% males were considered literate. According to the same 2001 census report, the overall literacy rate for Assam was 64.24%, with female and male literacy being 56.03% and 71.93% respectively. This shows that the literacy rate for females in the study region is marginally higher than the national average.

women outside the home as both a consequence, and continuing driver, of India's economic restructuring. This phenomenon was to become more significant over time. Interestingly, the commission identified the promotion of greater opportunities for part-time employment as a means to enable educated women to participate in paid employment without undermining the fabric of Indian family life (Bagulia, 2004; Mazumdar and Agnihotri, 1999; Saikia, 1962).

¹⁶ This report was prepared by the Committee on Status of Women in India, appointed by the Government of India at the initiation of the United Nations. The report painted a bleak picture of women's disadvantage with respect to literacy and education stating that, according to the census report 1971, in the age group 15-25 years, nearly 68% of women and about 87% in the age group of 25 years and above was illiterate. In addition to this, it also cited the high rate of girls who dropped out of school (for details see, Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1974).

¹⁷ National Policy on Education (<http://www.education.nic.in/natpol.htm>, July, 5, 2006)

¹⁸ Emphasised compulsory elementary education up to the age of 14 and free education in the majority of states and Union Territories from years I to XII; some states, like Meghalaya and Assam, take tuition fees per annum per child in Government Schools for Classes IX and above. For Assam, the tuition fees per annum per child are only Rs. 48.

Table 1.1 Literacy rate ¹⁹ in India and Assam by sex: 1951-2001 (%)						
Census Year	India			Assam		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.53	28.01	7.58
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35	32.95	44.28	18.62
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	33.94	43.72	22.76
1981*	43.47	56.38	29.76			
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	52.89	61.87	43.03
2001	65.68	75.85	54.16	64.28	71.93	56.03
*Excludes Assam as 1981 Census could be conducted in Assam due to disturbed conditions produced by Assam Agitation (1979-1985)						
Sources: Census of India, 2001, series 1, India, Paper 1 of 2001, page, 115 and Census of India, 2001, series 19, Assam, Paper 1 of 2001, page, 23						

Within contemporary Indian society, saddled by the yoke of privilege, young, Assamese middle class women are seen to outperform their male counterparts in all levels of college education (see Chapter 5). These women are gradually advancing into the labour market (see Table 4.4 that highlights the issues of change and women's aspiration through biographical/narrative data). However, gender inequalities remain ingrained in the highest levels of the economic ladder and married women (who also have paid work) especially face persistent inequalities with respect to housework and childcare (see Chapters 5 and 6). The following section highlights the key aims of the thesis followed by a discussion on the location and historical background of Assam.

1.5.0 Research Questions

The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore and interrogate the complexities and contradictory processes involved in the everyday lives of young, educated, middle class women underpinning their changing status and role in Assam. It was a conscious decision to probe the aspirations of women whose access to the intellectual opportunities of 'elite' state-funded higher education institutions opens up a variety of biographical narratives, not least

¹⁹ Literacy rates for 1951, 1961 and 1971 Census (for India and Assam) relate to population aged five years and above. The rates for 1981, 1991 and 2001 Census relate to the population aged seven years and above.

those associated with an independent career, marriage and motherhood. The specific aims that are addressed by this research and reported in this thesis are:

- To explore the extent to which Assamese middle class women in higher education aspire to construct their identities: is higher education personally liberating or an extension of family duty? Associated with this, it aims to investigate the attitudes of these women towards the norms associated with career, marriage and motherhood.
- To highlight the persistent inequalities faced by the majority of married women students at home (who also have a job) due to the continuing pressure to maintain labour-intensive standards of cooking and childcare. Alongside this it also aims to explore other diversified aspects of the everyday experience of women in a range of themes such as cultural and religious beliefs and position within the family – underpinning women’s changing status and role within the private sphere.
- To probe the restrictions imposed on these women in their geography of everyday mobility (with respect to women’s accounts of street sexual harassment such as stalking, verbal abuse commonly referred to locally as ‘eve-teasing’²⁰) in their attempt to gain access to public space ²¹ (Phadke, 2007) to pursue study or career; as well as the reasons for these restrictions which may include the advancing trend of globalisation and neoliberalism and the proliferation of ‘immodest’ style of dress.

²⁰ United Nations Social and Economic Council have identified two types of sexual harassment laws. Among the two, the first is unwanted advances or molestation by men on women in public places such as beaches, roads, cinema halls, buses and sadly even in educational institutions. This is commonly referred to as eve teasing or street sexual harassment. The term ‘eve teasing’ is used commonly in South Asian countries (mainly in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan). In the case of India, such harassments against women are identified as crime under the Section 509 of Indian Penal Code.

[Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective-Violence Against Women ([http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/d90c9e2835619e79c1256ce00058c145/\\$FILE/G0310100.pdf](http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/d90c9e2835619e79c1256ce00058c145/$FILE/G0310100.pdf), December, 22, 2006)]

²¹ Although this thesis situates the discourse of safety and security with respect to only young middle class women but such discourse may be equally applicable to women of other classes with respect to their access to public spaces (Phadke, 2007)

1.5.1 The land of red rivers and blue mountains

Location and general background of Assam

Located in between the tropical latitudes 24° 3' and 28° north and eastern longitudes 89°5' and 96°1', Assam, the main gateway to the north-eastern part of India, is often described as the land of the 'Red Rivers and Blue Hills'²². The state of Assam²³ has a unique geographical character and can aptly be described as the political and economic nerve centre of north-eastern India covering a geographical area of 78, 438 sq. kms. (Bora, 2001; Bhattacharyya, 2005). It is one of the 28 Indian states and has boundaries with two foreign countries and seven Indian states (see, location map of Assam, figure 1.1). To the north of it lies the part of the state of Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan. The eastern boundary is bordered by the state of Nagaland, Manipur and some parts of Arunachal Pradesh. To the south, there lie the states of Mizoram and Meghalaya. The western side is bounded by the states of Tripura, West Bengal and Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal).

Assam is the most populous state in North-East India with a population of 26,638,407 persons consisting of 12,850,608 females and 13,787,799 males.²⁴ Although the region is rich in natural and mineral resources, agriculture characterised by small-scale farming, accompanied by low level technology (Bhagawati and Dutta, 2001) is the mainstay of the economy where

²² It is a land of 'Red River' because the mighty river Brahmaputra flows from east to west and dominates the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley and then merges with the Gangetic plain. A land of 'Blue Hills' because the geographic location of Assam is unique amidst the complex geologic and physiographic make-up of the north-eastern region of India; except on its western part, the state is bounded by highlands of hills and plateaus on its other three sides. Arunachal Himalayas on the north, by Meghalaya Plateau and the hills of Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura border it on the south and by the Arunachal Himalayas and by the Naga-Patkai hill ranges on the east (Bora, 2001). The blue hills bisect each other in many parts of the state with their blue haze and evergreen forest (Gazetteer of India, Assam State, 1999).

²³ In order to put an end to the last legacy of British colonial rule, the Government of Assam took a resolution on 27th February, 2006 to change the name of Assam to 'Asom'. However, this is just a resolution and has not been ratified by the Central Government yet. Therefore, in this thesis, I will be using the name of the state as Assam (<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2006/12/16/stories/2006121614550100.htm>, December, 30, 2006)

²⁴ Census of India, 2001 (<http://www.censusindia.net/results/rudist.html>, May, 30, 2005)

approximately 80% of the population lives in villages and both men and women are involved in most of the agricultural activities.

Historical sketch

Assam has been a place of great historical importance. It has been known by various names like Pragjyotisha during the early epic periods of Ramayana and Mahabharata, and as Kamarupa during the later part of the first millennium A.D., in the age of Puranas and Tantras (Taher and Ahmed, 1998) that encompassed the Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan, KochBehar, and the Rangpur region in eastern Bengal. King Narakasura and his son Bhagadatta, who distinguished himself in the Mahabharata war, were the famous rulers of Pragjyotisha in the Mahabharata Period (at least as early as 1000 B.C.). The ancient land of Kamarupa was ruled by different dynasties namely Barman, Salastambha and Pala in between the fourth and twelfth centuries (Taher, 2001). In 1228 A.D., Ahoms, a Tai race of South East Asia, belonging to the Mongoloid ethnic status (Kumar et al., 2004; Phukan, 1992), and descendants of the first king Sukaphaa (1228-1268), established a strong kingdom in Assam. The Ahom rule reached its peak during the reign of King Rudra Singh (1696-1714). During this period, the Mughals from the West made repeated attempts to conquer Assam but failed. Ahoms were remarkably successful in resisting the Mughals. But finally, in December 1661, Mirjumla, one of the deputies of Aurangzeb gained success to conquer Coochbehar. And in March 1662, he entered the Ahom capital Gargaon. But the Mughal victory was short lived in Assam. In 1667, they were driven away by Lachit Barphukan, one of the heads of the Ahom army before they could launch any further effective expeditions against the Ahoms. However, Ahom power gradually started declining in the second half of the 18th century as a result of both external and internal dissensions as well as civil war. It is well documented that one of such dissensions was the succession of Moamaria rebellions from 1769 to 1786. Again in 1816,

1817 and 1821 erstwhile Burma (now Myanmar) invaded Assam through its eastern borders ravaged the whole of Brahmaputra valley to establish an oppressive rule. Finally in 1826, following the treaty of Yandaboo,²⁵ the British annexed the Ahom kingdom and drove away the Burmese from the Brahmaputra Valley and brought it under the provincial administration of Bengal (Taher, 2001). Bengali was made the official language, and educated Bengali workers staffed administrative and professional positions, gradually opening a floodgate for the Bengali-speaking people, particularly the Muslim peasantry, to migrate from the densely populated erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to the fertile lands of the Brahmaputra valley.

Following repeated demands by the intellectuals and middle class of Assam alongside the language agitation of 1960-61(Chapter 3), for Assamese to replace Bengali as the official language in the Government offices and in educational institutions, Assamese became an official language in all government offices and educational institutes (Goswami, 1997). However, this linguistic clash between the migrant Bengalese and the native population continued and generated a socio-cultural conflict between the two groups. Assam was first separated from Bengal creating a capital in Shillong on February, 6, 1874 (Taher, 2001). But again this province was re-amalgamated with erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh) following the partition of Bengal into the west and the east by the British Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon in 1905. Then, following the shifting of the British capital city from Calcutta to New Delhi in 1912 (Dutta, 2003), Assam was balkanised once again by nullifying its partition with Bengal. This guinea pig treatment of its colonial geography generated an assumption that Assam was an extension of Bengal, which sowed the seeds of a deep anti-Bengali impression

²⁵ In order to put an end to the First Burmese War in Assam, a Treaty of Peace known as the 'Treaty of Yandaboo' was signed in between the Honourable East India Company and His Majesty the King of Ava on February, 24, 1826. This treaty could also be marked as the beginning of company's rule over Assam by annexing the Ahom Kingdom of Assam to the Presidency of Bengal (Baruah, 1999; Benerjee, 1992).

in the psyche of ethnic people of Assam. From then, the people of Assam started regarding the Bengalese as alien and, gradually, a hate-Bengali syndrome became part of the Assamese psyche, in terms of a fear of a loss of identity. In this context, Bareh (2001) argues that people of Assam regard Bengalese (especially the Bengalese of East Bengal) as the belligerent ethnic group who are guilty of committing cultural genocide in Assam. The Government of India encouraged a large-scale inflow of Bengalese peasantry by providing them with marginal lands and encouraged them to colonise new lands, which they transformed into cultivable land and directly made a positive impact on the economy of Assam. Similarly, the government employed people from Nepal as dairy herders and inspired them to occupy virgin land. Subsequently, traders, merchants and small-scale industrialists, such as Marwaris, Sikhs and many other enterprising Indians from other parts of the country emigrated to Assam and established businesses.

After independence in 1947, Assam has been one of the fastest growing regions, especially in terms of population, which in turn has transformed the ethnic composition of the state. This kind of transformation has steadily eroded the politico-socio-economic prerogatives of the indigenous people of Assam, while maintaining the unique sense that a ‘melting pot’ of migrant population underpins the politics of Assam. Alongside, Assam gradually won control over its own state assembly and embarked on a manoeuvre to (re)claim the pre-eminence of the Assamese culture and develop employment opportunities for the indigenous people of Assam. The geo-politics of Assam marks a clear division between the hill and the plain regions, which was viewed by the leaders of Assam as an intentional segregation of the region. This portrait serves as a backdrop for my later discussion of the roles and identities of Assamese women in general and middle class women in particular.

1.6.0 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts (Parts I and II).

Part I, presents the scope of debate and the methodology for the thesis. **Chapter 2** sets the scene, presents the scope of intellectual debate and reviews literature on the emerging themes concerning the changing status of Indian women. While doing so, it theorises women's empowerment in India under two umbrella themes – education and career. The intention of this chapter is to establish the theoretical context in which the thesis is situated and to identify some of the broader issues probed in the empirical chapters. **Chapter 3** first presents the

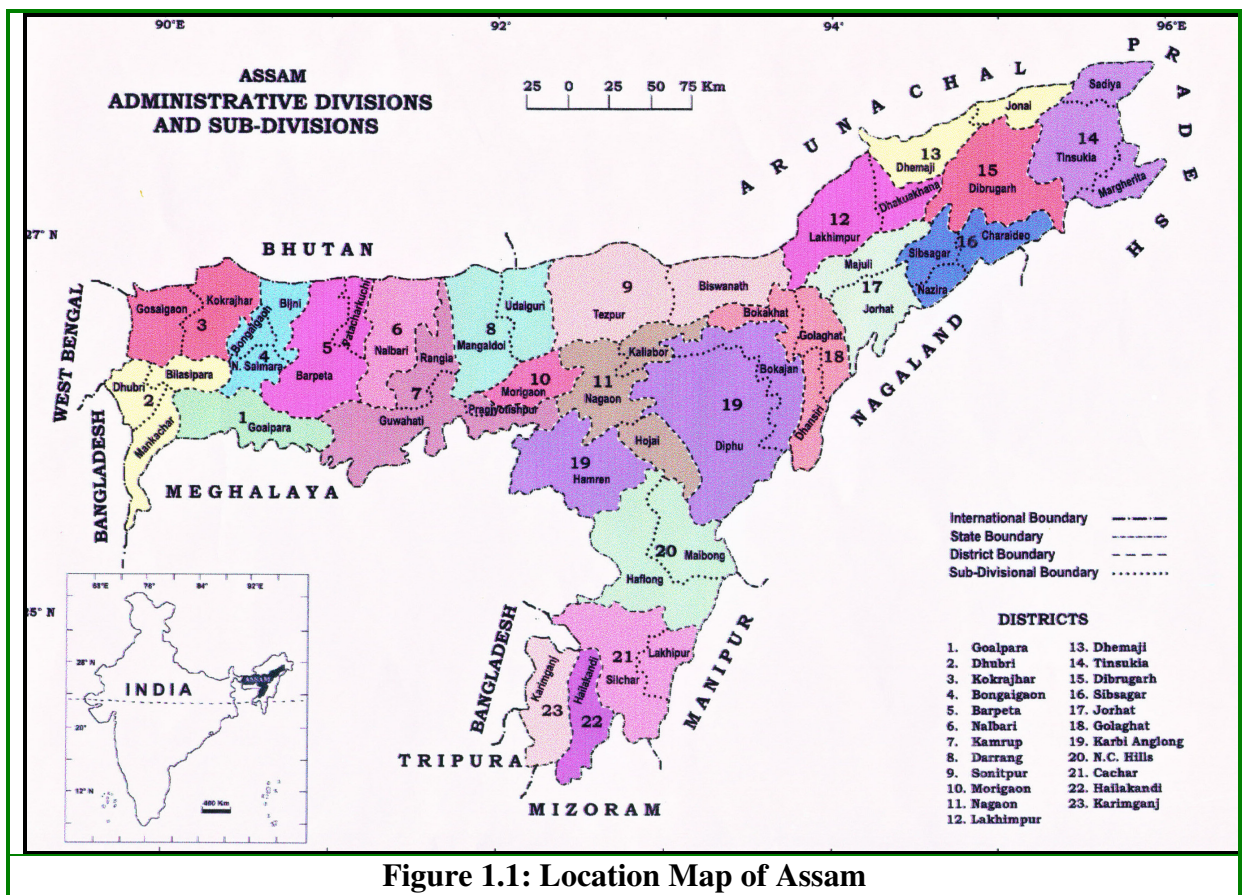


Figure 1.1: Location Map of Assam

changing phases of contemporary Assam including the political background. Then it goes on to highlight women's status and role in Assam today. **Chapter 4** presents a detailed discussion

of the research design, including the sample frame and other methodological issues that arise from epistemology and research practice.

Part II focuses on areas of social organisation and the interpretations of women's changing role and status from my field work. In **Chapter 5**, I look first for the patterns within the three areas of social organisation, for example, higher educational level, career paths including labour market trends and sexual politics of the public sphere both from the published data and from my own questionnaire survey. These patterns are those that emerged from my interpretation of the secondary data and an extensive questionnaire survey. Then, in **Chapter 6**, I probe for the explanations for these patterns by looking at the way students' narratives make sense of their values and by looking at the biographies in the in-depth interviews and focus groups. These explanations, in turn, are used to explore the contradictions associated with the career-mindedness of young, elite, middle class Assamese women who are exposed to various forms of power relations (that is, gender relations) within both the private and the public sphere that shape their positions and status. So, in these two chapters, I am moving from the general to the particular. Finally, **Chapter 7** summarises all the findings of the empirical study by re-visiting the conclusions and summaries of the preceding chapters. It also discusses how the findings of the thesis might relate to further change in the status and role of young, middle class Assamese women. It draws together the threads of the findings in light of the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and suggests broader conclusions.

Chapter 2

Theorising Women's Empowerment in India

2.1.0 Introduction

This chapter introduces a number of key intersecting debates that provide the conceptual frame of reference for this thesis. The literature on key issues such as feminisation, the impact of modernisation and development are critically reviewed. This establishes the conceptual rubric by which the daily lives of young, educated middle class Assamese women can be interpreted in the substantive chapters. Building on the normalising temporal framework of everyday practices introduced previously, this chapter opens up the question of women's empowerment and subordination to closer scrutiny. One of the key indicators of empowerment used here is that of education; another is the notion of 'employment'. It is the purpose of subsequent chapters (Chapters 5 and 6) to trace women's everyday practices in these spheres to make the connections between the rhythms and norms of everyday geographies such as aspirations for a career combined with the competing role expectations at home as well as in the journey they make through public space.

It is important to stress from the outset that women's issues in Assam generally, as for India, represent a distinctively different trajectory from that of the Anglo-American feminist movement. It is nevertheless the case that discussion of feminism in India is informed and framed by feminism emanating from multiple disciplines and from outside India. In part this is because of a lack of literature on gender studies in Assam, and also because of a legacy of colonial intellectual domination. As a result, many of the issues educated women face in Assam (such as 'balancing' motherhood with a career of paid employment) appear to be

framed by a western discourse which does not quite fit. In other words, there is evidence of a mismatch between theory and practice. Moreover, feminism in Assam is frequently represented as being ‘developmentally delayed’, a ‘laggard’ trapped in the Second Wave, rather than being part of a uniquely Assamese trajectory. It should also be noted that there is a long history of a middle class in India. Chapter 3 discusses the shifting nature of Guwahati in order to explain the nature of ‘middle classness’ as an essential context to the later substantive chapters. In short, this chapter asks how the competing bodies of literature are contributing to our understanding of women’s changing role and status – with particular reference to young, middle class women who have good access to higher education.

Within contemporary socio-geographic research, the subject of women’s status assumes a relative and multi-dimensional character, the nature of which has received considerable attention. The subject itself is very complex: it cannot be reduced to a political question but must be viewed rather as a social construction. The term ‘status’ is a gender-neutral term originally derived from Roman law,²⁶ but which can be used today to mean importance, prestige or position in terms of gender. The concept ‘status of women’ confounds precise definition and has been perceived in different ways in intellectual discourse and academic scholarship. According to the conceptual framework developed by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations (1975) in its publication *Status of Woman and Family Planning*, the concept is defined as the extent to which women have access to knowledge, economic resources and political power as well as the degree of autonomy they have in decision-making and making personal choices at crucial points in their life-course. According to Dixon (1978), the status of women means the extent of a woman’s access to social and material resources within the family, community and society. The idea of status can

²⁶ A person’s legal standing or capacity referred to a person’s freedom, citizenship and family rights (Oxford Dictionary of Law, 1983)

also mean women's authority or power within the family or community and the prestige ascribed to them by others (Mukerjee, 1975). Similarly, according to the Towards Equality Report (1974), the status of women refers to the position of women in the social system, distinguishable from, yet related to, other positions. Again, the notion of status also connotes the idea of equality (Krishnaraj, 1986) between men and women. Furthermore, Xaxa (2004: 4) argues that "status as 'prestige' and 'honour' can only be studied in relation to values".

In short, the status of women in any society can be viewed as an index of the standard of social organisation that occurs at different levels in a hierarchy: individual, household, community, society, polity and administration. Within this hierarchy of social organisation it is facilitated by instruments of education, such as through policies to promote literacy, equal opportunities initiatives, access to new technology (such as the Internet and satellite TV), as well as through employment opportunities, increasing political representation and so on. In this thesis, however, the concept 'status' is being used in a 'relative' sense (Alexander and Jayaraman, 1977; Verma, 2005a) to show the position of women relative to men within three intersecting realms of social organisation: higher education, careers based on paid employment and a third realm examining the practical realities and experiences of fear as women move about in public spaces, such as the street, journeying to and from places of study and employment.

This chapter is organised as follows. Section 2.2 theorises women's empowerment in India. Here, first, I theorise the notion of empowerment in the context of its entangled notion of power. Following this, I discuss the theories explaining women's subordination: biological 'naturalisation' of sex roles and patriarchal structures in state, market and family relations. Then I go on to challenge these theories by pointing to a trend of 'Third Wave' feminism.

In Section 2.3, I outline the concepts of modernisation, post-colonialism and westernisation. In the light of these theories, I go on to discuss the multiple and sometimes contradictory

identities of Indian women in general as a prolegomena to exploring the conflicting roles and competing identities of young, middle class Assamese women in particular (Chapters 5 and 6). This section also examines the impact of structural reforms and neo-liberal policies and ideology on (different sections) of the labour market and on (different groups of) Indian women in general and middle class women in particular. In addition, the section engages the theoretical literature on post-colonial feminism by following Mohanty's (1987, 1988; 1991b) critique of the universality and ethnocentrism of Anglo-American scholarship and presumptions about Third World women as accepting traditions passively (see Chapter 1). I engage Mohanty's critique to support the concept of tradition as a variable rather than a fixed concept (Hobsbawm, 1983).

Following this, section 2.4 discusses women in development in India. This section advocates the efficiency approach of Women in Development (WID) programmes that places emphasis on "efficiency and economic growth and stresses the economic contribution of women to development".²⁷ The WID paradigm suggests that Assamese middle class women occupy a starting point of societal change in contemporary Assam. The subsequent sub-sections discuss the development of higher education in India followed by the role of paid employment in development and the process towards a feminisation of the labour force. I then close this chapter with a discussion on women's representation in India and review the preceding sections as a set of conclusions to the chapter.

2.2.0 Theorising Indian Women's Empowerment

The language associated with the 'empowerment of women' became popular during the Second Wave feminism of the 1960s as a major goal of many Third World planning and

²⁷ "Women in Development" Women 2000
(<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/women%20in%20development%201992.pdf>, July 20, 2008)

policy agencies (Moser, 1993). It has been studied extensively across social sciences and beyond. Chapter 1 introduced the different policies undertaken by the Government of India to ensure Indian women's empowerment. Before discussing this further, it is essential to conceptualise the notion of empowerment. One of the challenges is to make sense of a term which has come to be so widely and liberally applied. Within development discourse, among academicians, labour organisations, health professions and many others, the language of empowerment is an umbrella concept, often used to justify development intervention (Nelson and Wright, 1995). It is generally understood that the roots of empowerment reside in definitions of power (Kabeer, 1999). In turn, power has to be understood as a dynamic and multivalent set of practices and situations (Fennell, 1999).

Some theories of power, such as Michel Foucault's (1978) post-structural perspective, (see below in this chapter) do not seek to locate power in a person or place in the sense of an attribute to be owned or placed. Rather than seeking to establish who 'owns' power in a particular context Foucault (1978: 93) exposes to scrutiny the way that power(s) are being exercised rather than being held: he argues that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere". Similarly, in his influential article *Empowerment-through-Participation as a Performance*, Mike Kesby (2005) defines power (as in empowerment) as a ubiquitous force operating everywhere, that is not intrinsic to the subject (someone who is intrinsically powerful), but instead is disseminated through complex networks of social and institutional interaction, everyday practices, discourses and relationships where subjects are powerful. For Kesby (2005: 2040):

"Neither is power inherently negative, limiting, or repressive; rather it is inherently productive of actions, effects, and subjects, even when most oppressive. Thus power governs not simply by refusal but also by permission: by telling people what they must

be, by enabling and conditioning the possibilities for their action, and by constituting regimes of truth by which they may understand and live their lives. Far from being absent except when exercised, this kind of power is constantly at work within the discourses and practices that structure daily life”.

(Kesby, 2005: 2040)

Allen (2003) points to the inherent spatiality of power. Reviewing the contributions of different social scientists, such as Michel Foucault, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, Michael Mann and Gilles Deleuze, Allen shows how space determines the role of power to a large extent. Contextualising the diverse vocabularies and constitutions of power (drawing on the reasoning of Weber and Arendt) such as those of domination, authority, seduction, manipulation, coercion and the like, he argues that these modes of power are far from identical; each hold “their own relational peculiarities” and are “always power of a particular kind” (Allen, 2003: 2). He puts forward his argument by stating that “people are placed by power, but they experience it at first hand through the rhythms and relationships of particular places” (such as the home, the classroom, the street) and the varied ways through which the actual registration of power is being shifted: proximity and reach, distance and mobility and of course, place and presence. The geography of power thus underpins the dynamic of everyday practices and the social and political organisation of a whole host of institutions disseminated across the contemporary geographical space (Allen, 2003). Arguably, then, empowerment is best understood as the means of ‘enabling power’ or ‘power to’ (act) as opposed to ‘power over’ (someone) (Peterson and Runyan, 1992; Rowlands, 1995; 1997).

Jo Rowland’s (1995; 1997) unravels this tangled notion of power by identifying four discrete categories: power over (power by men over men; men over women, that is, coercion and ability to influence); power with (power from collective action); power to (arrange to change

the existing hierarchy) and power within (individual consciousness, that is, sense of self-worth and self-knowledge of a person). She goes on to acknowledge that this model of power fails to acknowledge the zero-sum game, in which any gain in one person's power, results in a loss to another person's power (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999; also Rai, 2005). This argument provides the basis for feminists to consider the way different modes of power constitute different types of bodies; the way empowerment functions at different levels, and the transmission of power (Rowlands, 1995). In short, one form of empowerment does not simply replace or consume another. Instead, multiple forms function in parallel (an analogy being of many varieties of pizza rather than one type that is simply larger in size). Rowlands (1995) also argues that empowerment, as it is experienced at different levels and scales, must be viewed from a broader perspective to take account of the three key dimensions: personal (enhancement of one's sense of self, personal confidence and capacity by overthrowing the consequences of intimate realms of oppression); close relationship (here empowerment is about building proficiency through which the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it can be conciliated and controlled); collective (here empowerment is about enhancement of the capability of people to work and live together productively and effectively. This action is based on cooperation rather than competition where social identity of an individual through such collective action has both personal and political significance) (Drury et al., 2005).

Furthermore, Kesby (2005: 2051), who reconceptualises empowerment from a partly poststructuralist perspective, argues that it is "a linear process of enlightenment" which is 'reciprocal', 'lateral', 'accountable', and 'facilitating' rather than being 'hierarchical', 'vertical', 'dominating', and 'exploitative'. It represents 'power with' rather than 'power over'. It is redistributed among many rather than being concentrated among few. Arguably, it

is a process of the “decentring of decision-making power” which in turn implies that to be empowered means to be endowed with power (Rowlands, 1997; Sharp et al., 2003: 281).

As will be seen in Chapters 5 and 6, the subjects located at the heart of this thesis are well aware of their ‘power from within’ (as a form of energising empowerment); they also make use of their ‘power to’ (capability) to pursue financial independence, and they actively participate in the public sphere as agents of transformation by challenging ‘power over’. At the same time, these expressions of empowerment are partial, context dependent and subject to disruption (not least because of fear of violence).

Stine and Karina (2003) explain empowerment as a process by which disempowered individuals and groups gain the power to control their lives and the ability to make strategic life choices. Such empowerment would endorse international feminist and women-oriented networks. Hence, the empowerment of women could be defined as a continuous process rather than a state to be achieved (Shukla, 2004): it is necessary, but not sufficient in itself, as a function in the improved status of women. In their book, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Mohanty et al., (1991) argues that the notion of empowerment reflects a middle class dominated feminism. This argument has been reinforced by Sharp et al. (2003) in their study of rural African women through a Gender and Development (GAD) approach. Sharp et al. (2003) have moved beyond this literature to strengthen the argument through similar essays of Funk and Mueller (1993); Jankowska (1991) and Einhorn (1993). In contemporary society, the issue of empowerment of women no longer revolves around middle class women. Nonetheless, one of the double-edged achievements of the empowerment of women is the addition of the ‘double burden’ (Sharp et al., 2003). This is also demonstrated through my own research, especially in respect to married women; those who also have paid work face the

‘double burden’ when, after a day at work, they tend to take up responsibilities for household reproduction (see, Chapters 5 and 6).

Using this lexicon of empowerment, scholars have also been increasingly interested to observe the varied practices of women in the developing world. For instance, Batliwala, (1993; 2007) has looked at women’s empowerment in India by focusing on Integrated Rural Development (IRD: economic interventions, awareness building, and organising of women) and Research, Training, and Resource Support. She defines empowerment as “a socio-political process” that explain “shifts in political, social, and economic power between and across both individuals and social groups” (559). In 1993 she argued that in some programmes, especially within IRD, development and empowerment are used synonymously. However, in her experimental account of empowerment, she argues the significance of the term ‘empowerment’ in the way it was used as a politicised jargon of the Indian women’s movement, replacing official terminologies such as ‘women’s welfare’, ‘women’s development’, and ‘women’s upliftment’. Thus the various strands of the government and major donor agencies that support work with marginalised women have been gradually politicised and rationalised under the auspices of one document: ‘Women’s Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices’. This document defines empowerment “as a process, and the results of a process, of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups” (Batliwala, 2007: 560).

Consequently since the 1990s, in the era of neoliberalism (see below), the conceptual framework of Indian women’s empowerment came to be (re)politicised in two arenas: (i) the Self-help groups (SHP), the micro-credit organisations to stimulate Indian women’s economic empowerment. (ii) political empowerment through 33.3 % reservation of women at the grass-roots level of local self government bodies (Batliwala, 2007, also Cornwall, 2007). This thesis, about middle class elite Assamese women, however, uses the notion of empowerment with a

wider connotation to reflect ‘power within’ rather than ‘power over’ with respect to everyday practices and unfolding biographic narratives (Rowlands, 1995; 1997; Kesby, 2005; Rai, 2005; Verma, 2005a). This process reflects a self-generating aspiration (power from within) for a career (that includes expectations of marriage and motherhood); aspirations associated with particular social and political agendas, to exercise such aspiration within the framework of information, knowledge, resources and new opportunities opened up by India’s economic development including the new (neoliberal) economic reforms which have been rolling out since the late 1980s. Taking into account this conceptual framework, this chapter theorises the empowerment of Indian women in general, as a prelude to an elucidation of the changing status of young middle class Assamese women in particular.

2.2.1 Second Wave feminism in India

Chapter 1 introduced the ‘wave phenomena’ in the Indian context. Second Wave feminism emerged in the 1960s, as a universalised and radical expression of women’s rights in capitalist societies as a result of the anti-Vietnam war movement and civil rights campaign (Peet, 1998). This same movement took on various expressions in different parts of South Asia including India (Gothoskar and Patel, 1982). As a consequence of this differential manifestation, gender theories and empowerment hold different connotations in different cultures (Mohanty, 1988; 1991b). For example, in a developing country like India, the basic requirements for the majority of the population are food, clothing and shelter. Moreover, the society features a number of hierarchies and sub-hierarchies of caste, class, creed and religion. In such a complex situation the gender politics of India obviously differs from the West. Therefore, the parameters of western gender theories must be re-constructed in order to conform to the socio-cultural specifics of India (Mohanty, 1988; 1991a; 1991b).

Gender issues and women's rights cannot be separated from the developmental issues of India. Hence, the women's movement in India embraces an approach of 'women and development' (henceforth, WAD) (see, section 2.4.0 Women in Development in India) whereby diverse local organisations and institutions seek to challenge class, caste and gender inequalities (Patel, 1998). WAD emerged in the second half of the 1970s. It is an example of radical critiques of development and patriarchy premised on the argument that women have always been part of the development process, therefore, women's position would be improved alongside changes in the international structures (Marchand and Parpart, 1995; McClean, 2000; McIlwaine and Datta, 2003; Rathgeber, 1989). The WAD framework has been criticised, however, for neglecting the reproductive roles of women as well as the causes of gender inequalities, thereby failing to transform the existing social structures (McClean, 2000; Rathgeber, 1989).²⁸

The limitations of WID and WAD led to a theoretical shift in the debate that placed gender inequalities at the heart of the analysis. Hence, by the mid-1980s, influenced mainly by socialist feminist thinking, the more holistic perspective of Gender and Development (GAD) emerged. This was formulated to incorporate both men and women in the analysis (Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Rathgeber, 1989; Young, 1987). Most scholars agree that in order to shape particular aspects of society, the GAD paradigm re-examines the social, political, economic and development structures from the perspective of gender relations (Young, 1987). However, some scholars also argue that all three approaches of WID, WAD and GAD are fundamentally based on a western feminist perspective (Sen and Grown, 1987, Mohanty, 1991b). Moreover,

²⁸ Previously the liberal feminist tradition of the 1970s influenced the widespread adoption of a Women in Development (WID) framework. The rubric of WID, among other things, sought to focus women's role exclusively from the perspective of women as workers and producers, thereby, again, neglecting the reproductive roles of women (Chowdhry, 1995; Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Rathgeber, 1989). Despite its limitations, WID brought women's issues to the attention of development circles (Rathgeber, 1989). Therefore, the donor agencies, especially the international development agencies including the World Bank added a welfare perspective to WID and divided the same into three sub-approaches (see section 2.4.0).

“(just as) WID/WAD/GAD approaches are not entirely conceptually distinct, it often is not possible to place a development project squarely within a single theoretical framework” (Rathgeber, 1989: 14).

By contrast, the contemporary women’s movement in India remains a decentralised, heterogeneous movement (Derne, 2001). The reality reflects locally embedded value systems. The Government of India and Indian feminists voiced concerns regarding women’s educational, economic and political empowerment, alongside its focus on a range of problems such as the sexist bias in school textbooks, the persistence of ‘patriarchal’ family values, the discrimination against employed women in the work-place, violence against women (such as rape, dowry deaths, *sati* [widow immolation], wife battering), beauty contests, pornographic films and indecent images of women in the media (Calman, 1992; Derne, 2001; Gothoskar and Patel, 1982; Patel, 1998; Patel, 2001).

Within this heterogeneous movement, a sizeable section of the middle class urban feminist movement demanded greater equality and participation for women in key sectors of national life including professional and political spheres, as an alternative to their tacit ‘traditional’ roles (Narayan, 1997a; 1997b; Patel, 1998; Ruwanpura, 2004). They also demanded women’s representation²⁹ in Parliament and the State Assemblies of India. Narayan (1997a: 20) argues that such a focus tends to cast these women and their political vision as evidence of ‘westernisation’. Arguably, by contrast, the ambitious scope to the politics of this movement suggests little consensus along western lines. Instead what are considered to be ‘women’s

²⁹ The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution of India in 1993 provided a reservation of one-third of all seats (33.3%) for women including its Chairs in the local village, that is, in the Panchayat Raj institutions in the rural areas and Nagar Palike and Municipal bodies in towns and urban areas (Mathew, 1995; Mathew and Nayak, 1996). However, the new Indian feminists argued that in a patriarchal base, while making a political decision, this 33.3% at the grassroots’ cannot overrule the remaining 66.7% of their male counterparts (Sanajoaba and Rashid, 1996). Therefore, these feminists demanded to pass the *Women’s Reservation Bill* seeking to reserve one-third of seats for women in the national parliament and in the state legislative assemblies, over and above the reservations already in place at the local and municipal levels.

issues' and the political action prescribed vary widely (Calman, 1992; Patel, 1998). Patel (1998) argues that this is to be expected given the pluralising of Indian society and multifarious interests by region, religion, language, ethnicity, caste, class and gender. Arguably, such plural feminist movements highlight the lasting legacy of colonialism in generating persistent underlying divisions and patterns of segregation such as those between urban and rural areas (Freedman, 2002; Jayawardena, 1986; Narayan, 1997a; Narayan, 1997b).

Challenging women's subordination

I now turn to critically examine the roots of women's subordination in India. While the literature for this section draws mainly on Anglo-American trends, the discussion also considers how well western feminist concepts and gender theory 'translate' in the context of Indian pluralism.

Biological 'naturalisation' of sex roles

Although 'sex' and 'gender' are sometimes used interchangeably, it has become standard practice to differentiate between biological 'sex' and the social and the cultural construction of 'gender' as it applies to male and female roles, and to masculinity and femininity (Nicholson, 1995; Bradley, 1999). Nicholson (1995) describes the model of a sex/gender system or the relationship between sex and gender as being like a coat rack where sex is the basic frame of the rack on to which gender identities are hung, like many coats of different societies over different historical periods. Padia (2000: 30) argues that gender is a value-laden term which acquires new dimensions and greater significance and could be referred to as the 'social institutionalisation of sexual difference'. But in reality the value-ladenness of the concept of gender derives from the context in which it is used (Padia, 2000). This is further explained by the following example:

“When the female child becomes a wife, she acquires the functions of a mother; similarly a male child becomes a father. Now the functions of the mother are mostly confined to activities which quietly take place within the house. The father, on the other hand, earns a living by working in the outer world. What takes place in the open is noticed easily. What happens at home does not strike the public eye. So, by the average man, whose way of looking is confined to the externals - that is, whose *drishti is bahirmukhi* - the male is taken to be superior to the females. Those who are careful enough to take a comprehensive view of human life, attach as much value to the mother’s activities of producing and nursing children and keeping a family together as to the breadwinners’ outdoor activity of earning a living. It is really a defect in our eyes of looking at things, and not the fact of gender as such, which is at the root of prevailing bias against women”

(Padia, 2000: 29 and 30)

The Second Wave feminist movement of the 1960s generated a heated debate on sex (male/female) roles, which concluded that these were socially constructed rather than biologically determined (Peet, 1998; Walby, 1990). This recognised that gender characteristics are far from universal (Friedl, 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Rubin, 1975). Arguably, there is no single, universal, explanation for gender divisions and manifestations of masculinity and femininity (Padia, 2000).

Indian society maintains distinct sex roles for boys and girls (Goswami, 1994). These are typically associated with separate spheres of influence for men and women. With minor exceptions, the family structure as well as the society of India is by and large patriarchal or

patrilocal ³⁰ (Roy and Niranjana, 2004; Verma, 2005b). Hence, in such a society, where they are regarded as the perpetuator of the family line, men are placed in a more advantageous position than women (Verma, 2005b; Roy and Niranjana, 2004). Men as sons are considered of greatest value as a source of ‘gerontocratic security’ providing for their parents in old age (Arnold et al., 1998; Billig, 1992; 1994; DasGupta and Mari Bhat, 1997; Roy and Niranjana, 2004; Verma, 2005b). By contrast, a female is regarded as a ‘bird of passage’ (Verma, 2005b: 12) overlooked by inheritance and succession practices (Roy and Niranjana, 2004).

Many Anglo-American researchers argue that historically these perceived notions of traditional sex roles and stereotypes place men as primary breadwinners (paid work/career orientation) and that women are viewed as upholding family oriented roles such as marriage, motherhood, homemaker, nurturing children and maintaining the family (Bielby and Bielby 1989; Ferree, 1990; Reitzes and Mutran, 1994; Wiley, 1991). This reflects a psychologically focused theory of gender (Padia, 2000). Much the same is the case of sex roles for men and women in India (Padia, 2000; Roy and Niranjana, 2004; Verma, 2005b), but the embedded, hegemonic, patriarchal socio-cultural values and discourses makes these roles even more complex.

In the twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir (1972) argued that a woman is made rather than born. This way she challenged the essentialism of ‘biological determinism’ and claimed that it is the whole social process of society which constructs the notion of ‘femininity’.

“One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, physiological or economic fate determines the figure that the human being presents in society: it is

³⁰ The term patrilocal is used to describe a custom in which the bride after marriage goes to live with the groom's family (Ember and Ember, 1971)

civilization as a whole that produces this creative indeterminate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine.”

(de Beauvoir, 1972: 525)

This argument concerning the social construction of femininity rapidly gained ascendancy in ‘Second Wave feminism,’ providing a means of distinguishing between sex and gender which is now commonplace in feminist theory around the world (Freedman, 2002). Bem (1993) argues that the sex-roles in different cultures and societies all over the world emerge from three basic beliefs: Biological Essentialism, Androcentrism and Gender Polarisation. Bem (1993) argues that, as these beliefs are tested and eroded, a form of androgyny or the best of both genders can emerge. Her aim is to improve the status of women through normative social changes in the belief that culture fundamentally is the root cause of inequality. These hidden assumptions that Bem (1993) calls the *Lens of Gender* perpetuate not only patriarchal power, but also shape the perception of social reality. By way of example, men are meant to be outside the home and females confined within the four walls of the home (Duncan et al., 1997). Similarly, Holt and Ellis (1998) argue that sex-roles are basically the attitudes, behaviours, rights and responsibilities that a society associates with each sex, in conjunction with age, race and social class (Lindsey, 1994). These attitudes are identified by Lueptow et al. (2001) as assuring a role for men that is assertive, decisive, competitive, ambitious, confident and oriented instrumentally and a role for women which is nurturing, empathetic, sympathetic, gentle, helpful, affectionate and oriented expressively.

Chatterjee (1993: 238) argues that, in Indian society, the spatial politics of home are such that women are expected to provide the inner world whereas the outer world of ‘material interests’ is constructed by and for men. Arguably, such a system is pivotal to Indian society whereby clearly defined sex roles focus on the household and occupational divisions of labour. Young

girls grow up to learn that society expects them to behave differently from their male counterparts (Roy and Niranjana, 2004). That is, from their childhood they are taught to be typically 'feminine'.³¹ They learn to be quiet and demure, servile and subservient and are generally encouraged to follow their mother's footsteps and play with dolls and act out the roles of bride and home-maker. By contrast, boys are taught to play rough and boisterous games. Boys are trained to believe in themselves and take the initiative, whereas girls are taught to be modest about their abilities and humble about their achievements and to recognise themselves as the fair sex (Sarma, 1996). I argue that, in reality, the process of socialisation is far more complex. For instance, studies have shown that sex role orientation in Indian culture remains so deeply ingrained that even those women who are engaged in paid work outside the home view themselves primarily as homemakers where they bear the prime responsibility for housework and childcare. Women's paid work status and their ability to earn fails to transform marriage into a more egalitarian space (Lewis et al., 1999; Mukhopadhyay et al., 1993; Rani and Khandelwal 1992; Ramu, 1989; Shukla and Kapoor, 1990). In addition, my own research demonstrates that the majority of those married women students (who also do paid work) bear the lion's share of domestic work over and above their employment responsibilities. Further, my own study also demonstrates that a daughter-in-law is required to show a greater degree of loyalty and obedience to her in-laws. This of course relates to the patriarchal constructions of gender. That is, cultural practices of Assamese society expect a daughter-in-law to show a degree of respect and abide to the habits, rhythms and practices of her husband's family, even when these practices significantly differ from those of her natal family. The weight of this

³¹ Like many other societies, the society of Assam has distinct roles for boys and girls and men and women. Parents while raising their daughters try to develop a special psychology for their daughters for their future role as a mother and a wife. From their childhood onwards they are taught that boisterous games or rough play are meant for boys while young girls are encouraged to play with dolls and housekeeping materials (Goswami, 1994).

expectation accompanies a young, newly wed woman at every stage of her life in her husband's family (Medhi, 2002).

Similarly, studies have shown that a young unmarried daughter living with her natal family may face a greater degree of hostility from a stepmother than she would face from her natural mother (Medhi, 2002), though at times the number of sons and daughters in the family could be a decisive factor in the way a daughter is treated. This however contrasts with my own research, which shows that the middle class daughter(s) of my sample receives no discrimination regardless of the numbers of brother/brothers she has.

Again, studies of Indian women's higher education have shown that the gender politics of sex role socialisation and stereotyping of 'feminine' role reinforce women's exclusion from science based courses or as scientists, where they remain profoundly invisible (Chanana, 2004; 2007: 591; Bal, 2005; Poonacha, 2005, also Subramanian, 2007) (see, section on higher education). This echoes similar findings in studies undertaken in the West (Harding, 1986; Harding, 1986; Harding, 1990).

A perception that gender roles have become more liberal is especially true of urban and suburban settlements. This phenomenon is resonant of similar findings in studies conducted in the previous decade in Anglo-American scholarship (Loo and Thorpe, 1998; Powell and Yanico, 1991; Spence and Hahn, 1997; Twenge, 1997). There is a sense in which urban 'progressive' parents are restricting the processes of stereotyping children's behaviour, in the games they play and the toys they choose. Tacit traditional attitudes towards child rearing are being gradually modified to enable both girls and boys to realise their individual potential. Nevertheless, for the sizeable majority, especially those in more rural areas, the sex stereotyping still predominates through a general consensus that girls and boys develop differently. French feminists like Julia Kristeva (1980), Hélène Cixous (1976), Luce Irigaray

(1985) and also Gillian Rose (1993) agree that there are inherent differences between women and men. Nonetheless, my own research demonstrates that the young mothers of my sample expect to play an important role in socialising their children into the more subtle aspects of gender blindness that also uphold the principle of equal opportunities and sharing among their offspring.

Patriarchy and its critics

As the preceding section suggests, patriarchal practices and the (re)production of ‘naturalised’ gender inequality in Indian society are at the forefront of this thesis. The question is asked whether educated Assamese women are gaining equality and autonomy alongside men at home and in public life. The previous section suggests that improved status at home is highly contingent and uneven. This section goes on to conceptualise the grounds for subordination or empowerment in public life. In this respect it is essential to consider the persistence of patriarchal practices in Indian society, where the maintenance of a patriarchal society is generally understood as being “*male dominated, male identified and male centred*” (Johnson, 2005: 5). Though opinion varies, there is a general consensus that, all over the world, male domination of women essentially defines patriarchy (Beasley, 1999; Bhasin, 1993; Freedman, 2002; Rose, 1993; Ryan, 1992; Walby, 1990) wherever the systems, ideologies, and institutions of female subjugation have a long history.

The term ‘patriarchy’ was developed by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s to understand the systematic nature of men’s power (Alsop et al., 2002; Millett, 1971; McDowell and Pringle, 1992). Radical feminists like Firestone (1972) and Millett (1971) argued that an extensive system of patriarchal domination penetrates sexual politics of both the private and public spheres. Furthermore, radical feminists argued that the system operates independently of capitalism (Millett, 1971). By contrast, socialist feminist geographers refused to accept the

notion of patriarchy as an independent structure of women's subjugation and instead sought to investigate the relations between capitalism and patriarchy as a 'dual system' (Barrett, 1988; Eistenstein, 1979; Kandiyoti, 1988). Both capitalism and patriarchy could be considered as two systems of social relations that are mutually constitutive of every aspect of social life (Gibson-Graham, 1996).

Walby (1990, 1997), whose work is concentrated in the U.K and Europe, suggested that in advanced industrial societies patriarchal relations are produced and sustained by six sets of systematically separable frameworks in which men dominate and oppress women. She identifies these structures as: household chores, paid employment, state, violence, sexuality and culture. In doing so she abandons a uni-causal model in favour of these multi-causal structures of patriarchy (Alsop et al., 2002). Walby's work resonates with that of Kandiyoti (1988), who made distinctions between two main types of patriarchy - Asian patriarchy and the sub-Saharan African pattern. Kandiyoti (1988) also distinguished the structures of patriarchy on the principle of geographical boundary such as classic patriarchy as being distinguished from African patriarchy. In addition, she suggests the reasons why a majority of women accept the patriarchal structures rather than rebelling against them. Classic patriarchy is visible in a geographical area that includes North Africa, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey, Pakistan and Iran) and South and East Asia (specifically, India and China). The key roots to the production and (re)production of this type of patriarchy lies within the patrilocally extended household that is associated commonly with peasantry and agrarian societies (Kandiyoti, 1988). While, sub-Saharan African patriarchy are basically related to the system of polygyny where the insecurities of this system are generally tallied with the relative areas of women's autonomy.

Despite Walby's analysis "attempting to show how patriarchy can vary in its manifestation, it still relies at its core on an acceptance of men and women as clearly defined and distinct categories" (Alsop et al., 2002: 73). Similar criticism has been made by McDowell and Pringle (1992) on the grounds that Walby's (1990) analysis is highly descriptive and limited in scope to contemporary British society.

Most of the existing literature conceptualising structures of patriarchy focus mainly on the experiences and the struggles of women in industrialised societies (Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty, 1991a; 1991b; Haj, 1992). As a result it can be argued that analysis of patriarchy is largely both Eurocentric and ethnocentric (Haj, 1992). As a legacy of colonialism, the same accusations can be made of the reductive and ahistorical literature on Indian women which generally addresses class, caste, creed, religion, gender segregation, high fertility, poverty, illiteracy, arranged marriages, and the extended family network.³² While patriarchal practices of Indian society are, like other societies of the world, sustained by religious and 'traditional' practices related to these family institutions, greater attention needs be paid to locally uneven developments and adaptations, to avoid essentialism. For this reason attention needs to be paid also to social and material infrastructures of daily life beyond the home and family (including schools, media, public transport, employment) (Horn, 1991). By way of example, violence against women, such as sexual and verbal harassment, is another way of strengthening such patriarchal practices (Horn, 1991). Recent developments in feminist studies recognise that patriarchal practices have to be understood within the cultural and historical context (Haj, 1992).

³² Haj (1992: 762) argued that the limitations of the Western feminist's theories are generally apparent in the reductive and ahistorical scholarship on Middle Eastern Women, which commonly centres on the harem, the veil, gender segregation, arranged marriages, clitoridectomies and other presumed pathologies of Islamic culture. Similar scholarship has been applied on Indian women (Bhasin, 1993).

Lerner (1986) locates the origins of patriarchy in the transition from hunter-gatherer societies to the creation of archaic states and kinships. This kinship transition is used to (re)consider theories previously developed by traditionalists including the theories given by Sigmund Freud. She concludes that all these theories either lack proper evidence or are not theoretically satisfactory. However, she explains that the traditional meaning of patriarchy, which refers to the rule of the father (or the male head of the household) through legal and economic power over dependents (including wife and children), has a much wider meaning (Hakim, 2000). The concept of patriarchy is thus viewed as the male domination of social organisation within society in general, and the family in particular, which indicates that the power relations between men as a group and women as a group are unequal (Hakim, 2000).

Similarly, Johnson (2005) presents the notion of patriarchy as a comprehensive system of sexual politics. He argues that both men and women participate in the legacy of an oppressive system of patriarchy. Accordingly patriarchy is not an alternative way of saying 'men' (Johnson, 2005: 5). It is a kind of society that is a collection of people where both men and women participate in perpetuating patriarchal practices (Johnson, 2005).

In the Indian context, Bhasin (1993: 3) argues that the feminist concept of patriarchy is used to describe a family relationship dominated by a male 'patriarch' in a system of social structures used to oppress and exploit women. Patriarchy is thus defined as an invisible hegemony of Indian values, ethics, indigenous undercurrents and assimilated beliefs through which the ruling groups (patriarchs) maintain their dominance, not by force, but rather as a process of socialisation (of leadership and negotiation) that fosters consent through shared ideology, religion, castes and culture. This co-operation renders women's moral experience invisible and unrealised. Hence, in India, male domination (Bhasin, 1993) begins with the extended family structure (Thapan, 2001) in the form of a 'classic patriarchy' (Kandiyoti, 1988). Here, the

father (or the oldest man in the household) is the head of the family and he controls the production of resources, forces of labour, and reproductive capacities through the idea that he is superior, and is legitimised by differences in generation and gender.

Undermining this 'classic patriarchy' is the widespread erosion of a joint (or extended) family system in cities and urban areas and the shift toward a nuclear family system. Barpuzari (1992) argues that, for economic reasons perhaps, there has been a gradual breakdown of the joint (or extended) family system in Assam, resulting in the increased tendency, especially of the educated people, to migrate as nuclear forms towards the urban areas. He also argues that alongside this growth of individualism, largely associated in Assam with a rapid expansion of higher education, is the sense that migration to cities and urban areas takes the form of a protest against the autocratic behaviour of the mother-in-law and older members of the family (including the father-in-law). This is also interpreted in Chapter 6.

I also argue that extended families are not necessarily sites of patriarchy, although the legacy of extended family practices takes different forms in different households. My own research demonstrates that a majority of the married working women interviewed find that their role as a mother is deeply affected (often in a very practical sense) by the structure and organisation of extended family support. In most cases extended family support focuses on the paternal grandmother and other kin, but in few cases it is also the maternal grandmother who plays a significant role in the upbringing of the child. This finding reinforces earlier findings of women's experiences of motherhood from an ethnic perspective (Bhopal, 1998; Stack, 1974). Such an extended family support mechanism enables these women to manage the competing roles and identities of mother and career woman, though often at the cost of a 'double burden' of work and the normative practices (of appropriate dress and demeanour for instance) required to conform with the expectations of their kin (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Arguably, gender hierarchies combine with generational hierarchies given relations between two members of the same sex in the same household (Agarwal, 1994). For example, a sub-system exists, covering the hidden power of the mother-in-law, referred to by Mohan (2000: 81) as ‘mother-in-law’s kingdom’. That is, how a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law relate to one another is influenced by the gendered character of their relations with the men of the household (Agarwal, 1994). The institution of marriage entails that daughters-in-law remains subordinate to husband and parents-in-law (see section, position in the family, Chapter 6). In most cases, the mother-in-law has the power to control her daughter-in-law(s). She has the power to control her son(s) through pampering to a certain extent (Alexander and Jayaraman, 1977). This power of the mother-in-law is eventually transferred to her subservient daughter(s)-in-law only at such time as she becomes a mother-in-law herself (Kandiyoti, 1988).

According to Lerner (1986) like Johnson (2005), the system of patriarchy can only operate with the effective cooperation of women. Lerner (1986: 217) explains that this cooperation is secured by a variety of means:

“gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining “respectability” and “deviance” according to women’s sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women... a form of patriarchy best described as *paternalistic dominance*”

(Lerner, 1986: 217)

Foord and Gregson began a debate in 1986 concerning the gender roles and spatial patterns of women’s subordination. They suggested that the concept of gender relations is an outcome of

the limitations of gender role theory, arguing instead that roles and inequalities emanate from power relations between men and women. It is in this context that radical feminists adopted the concept of 'gender relations'- the nature of power relations between men and women (Convey et al., 1984; Daly, 1978; Millett, 1971). This turns the attention to a range of practices, ideas and representations, including the gender divisions of labour, roles and resources between men and women, and the ascribing to them of different abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, behavioural patterns and so on (Agarwal, 1994: 51). In the Indian context, these gender relations are both composed by and help compose these practices and ideologies through their intersections with social hierarchies of society such as class, caste, race (Agarwal, 1994) and also religion and creed to a great extent.

Foord and Gregson (1986) argue that too much concentration of feminist geography on gender roles and women's inequality has made it difficult to shift its focus from a description of the subordination of women to an analysis of how women's subordination is maintained and reproduced. Besides, in theoretical analysis, gender relations are misplaced and marginalised (Peet, 1998). Therefore, Foord and Gregson (1986: 187) argue that "patriarchy can be conceptualised as a particular form of general category gender relations" and this helps to find "the basic characteristics of patriarchy" as the subordination of women. Hence, many scholars argue for the need to deconstruct the monolithic notion of patriarchy, working with other terms such as difference, resistance, and space, as alternative, more nuanced ways of investigating the locally, culturally specific production and (re)production of unequal gender relations (Foord and Gregson 1986; Massey 1991; McDowell 1986).

Shifting the focus to the dynamic (re)production of unequal gender relations in the Indian context (of Assam) allows greater scope for modified relations to be acknowledged through recent changes in education, as well as new opportunities for paid employment for women.

Many industrial advanced economies have witnessed a feminisation of the labour force. Hence, Bradley (1999: 212) observes that “women are no longer readily prepared to accept their subordination as something natural or to acquiesce with male views of their inferiority as workers.” This is largely associated with a rise in the level of educational achievement amongst women (Crompton, 1997; Walby, 1997). Similar gender transformation is also occurring in India, especially in the urban areas where middle class and affluent women are challenging the perceived notions of traditional norms of domestic femininity (Chanana, 2004; 2007). Chapters 5 and 6 will examine the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which young, middle class educated Assamese women are challenging ‘traditional’ structures of patriarchy; how they are active agents of transformation yet simultaneously appear to (re)traditionalise their domestic and motherhood roles.

2.2.2 Towards a Third Wave feminism in India?

The preceding section suggests that patriarchal practices are deeply embedded in Indian society in ways which produce and (re)produce ‘naturalised’ gender inequality. It also suggests that within this ‘hard rock’ of Indian patriarchy (Sen, 2002: 25), gender transformations are taking place. Can this gender transformation best be described as a shift towards a Third Wave of feminism in India? Before answering this question, it is essential to define and theorise Third Wave terminology.

A Third Wave of feminism that developed in the West from the late 1980s tends to be labelled as postfeminism (Gillis and Munford, 2004; Peet, 1998). It recognises a shift in the political, cultural and economic agenda to reflect a neo-liberal and post-colonial climate (Heywood and Drake, 1997; 2004; Kinser, 2004) shaped by economic globalisation, techno culture and the ideas and ideals usually associated with postmodern and post-structuralist feminist

frameworks (see below) (Howie and Tauchert, 2004; Heywood and Drake, 1997; 2004) that encourages the evaluation of politics of representation in social spaces.³³

The term postfeminism refers to the idea that it comes “after a women’s movement”; it suggests that a women’s movement is no longer needed for feminism to continue (Gillis and Munford, 2004: 60). In short, postfeminism insinuates that although feminism failed to succeed in all of its political aims, it has been largely successful in shifting the terrain of cultural politics (Garrison, 2004). Arguably, postfeminism has contributed to a backlash (Faludi, 1992) against feminist scholarship. Brooks (1997) refers to postfeminism as a term either promoted widely by the media or formed at the crossroads between feminism and post-structuralism. Brooks (1997) urges, however, that such media-defined nomenclature of postfeminism should actually be differentiated from the feminist academic tradition in relation to postmodernist and post-structuralist terminology as well as post-colonial theoretical development.

In order to shift the boundary away from feminism, Gorton (2004) too argues that postfeminism is an idea which has been popularised largely by the media (in the public sphere). She situates the contemporary woman as postfeminist for legitimising her own history (Gorton 2004: 156) contributing to a stereotype of the postfeminist as “neurotic, thirty-something, professional, ‘singleton’” (Gibson, 2004: 139).

While there remains a subtle difference between postfeminism and Third Wave feminism, the emergence of the latter can best be understood in relation to the political object of

³³ Arguably, then Third Wave feminism is influenced by Edward Said’s text *Orientalism* published in 1978, which describes the spatio-politicised representation of the historical dominance by Europe, sustained by politico-economic influence, thereby orientalising the Orient. According to Edward Said (1978: 202) “the Orient that appears in *Orientalism*, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later Western empire”. Said’s *Orientalism* portrays the Orient as irrational, exotic, despotic and heathen. By contrast, the West is characterised as secured, circumscribed by rationality, morality, familiarity and Christianity (Said, 1978) (see also section on post-colonialism)

postfeminism (Garrison, 2004: 50). Sanders (2004: 50), while reinforcing the arguments of Heywood and Drake (1997), argues that ““postfeminist” characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against, and criticize feminists of, the Second Wave””. These young feminists as well as their texts, for example, Katie Roiphe and her book, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*; Rene Denfeld and her text, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman’s Challenge to the Old Feminist Order*; Naomi Wolf’s work, particularly *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It* have all been labelled postfeminists.

Furthermore, in her strident, well researched, treatise on the feminine experience, *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf (1991) engages the mythologies of western female beauty as embedded in laws and cultural practices. She demonstrates that there is a cultural backlash against feminism that relegates women to low paid service sector jobs as well as keeping feminism at bay. In a similar context, I argue that *Fresh Lipstick*, one of the bestsellers of Linda Scott, is a text that documents the ideology of anti-beauty. For the last 150 years such an ideology has dominated feminist thinking about dress and personal appearance (Scott, 2005). Arguably, these two texts “holds a more complicated position in contemporary feminism than the label postfeminist implies” (Sanders, 2004: 51).

By contrast, Third Wave feminism is an ideology, a movement or the “newest recognisable phase of feminist thought” whose principles are grounded on the praxis of Second Wave feminism, yet differentiated by some cultural and political ideologies (Garrison, 2004; Gillis and Munford, 2004; Gillis et al., 2004; Howie and Tauchert, 2004; Heywood and Drake, 2004; Sanders, 2004; Spencer, 2004).

Relationship between Third Wave and Second Wave feminism

The emergence of the Third Wave, however, does not mean that Second Wave feminism is over (Garrison, 2004). Actually, Second Wave feminism continues to remain active with its own cultural and political aims (Garrison, 2004). Some scholars argue that Third Wave feminism is an extension of Second Wave (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). However, Third Wavers have their own unique agenda, transformational capacity, alongside their own young culture, typically termed as the Third Wave (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Garrison, 2004). According to Heywood and Drake (2004), the majority of Third Wavers are born after the baby boom³⁴ and beyond. Arguably, Third Wave feminism has been developed by younger feminists for younger women; often characterised by a group of feminists coming from diverse backgrounds of class, cultures, gender and sexuality (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Heywood and Drake, 1997; 2004; Kinser, 2004).

Heywood and Drake (2004) assert that the experiences of those American women born after the 1970s are shaped mostly by the solidarities fostered by the economics of globalisation and neoliberalism (Spencer, 2004). Within the contextual framework of economic downward mobility, these young women experience relatively greater gender equality than their American mothers have ever experienced, and rationally cherish generational instead of gender solidarity (Heywood and Drake, 2004; Spencer, 2004). Arguably, this reinforces the insights of post-structuralism, of course, in the way that feminism is shaped by spatio-temporal circumstances (Heywood and Drake, 2004).

³⁴ Increase in the birth rate especially after the Second World War. Those born between 1943-1960 are termed as belonging to the baby-boomer generation. Those born between 1961-1981 belong to Generation X, while those born between 1982 and 1998 are called the Millennial Generation (Heywood and Drake, 2004: 21).

Third Wave feminism and postfeminist discourses focus on a multiplicity of femininities under the heading of 'new femininities' and 'girl power'.³⁵ These in turn reflect the growing confidence among young women, happy with their sexuality, as popularly depicted in media representations of 'Laddettes', the Spice Girls, the Powerpuff Girls³⁶ and the like (Gibson, 2004; Harris, 2004; Laurie et al., 1999: 2; Munford, 2004, also Baker, 2008; Thomas, 2008). However, many feminists argue that young women are making an effort privately to secure the public gains of Second Wave feminism within a social and economic framework of complexity and contradiction (Cullen, 2000; Heywood and Drake 1997). It is further argued that elements of Third Wave feminism critically engage with sexual abuse, beauty culture and power structures. However, at the same time, these elements make use of the defining power, danger and pleasure of those structures (Cullen, 2000; Heywood and Drake 1997). The key insights into these contradictions are sexual politics and the cultural values of a particular society (Cullen, 2000; Heywood and Drake 1997). Arguably, such contradictions imply a political stance and significance: the personal *is* political (Cullen, 2000) as popularly recognised back in the 1970s.

Essentialism

One of the challenges of Third Wave feminism together with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and Third World Feminism (especially post-colonial feminism) extends back to critiques of the Second Wave feminism's definition of femininity, that is, essentialism. Nevertheless, western or so called white feminism, which has been labelled as a 'hegemonic feminism' has been criticised for ruling out the probabilities of associating with different forms of feminism by avoiding essentialism as a requisite vehicle through which to drive the

³⁵ Girl power is a notion of female self-empowerment. This notion emphasises the power and agency of females. In contrast to the literatures describing women as 'victim' dependency, passivity and vulnerability narratives, the literatures on 'girl power' encapsulates female confidence and assertiveness (Baker, 2008; Harris, 2004; Thomas, 2008).

³⁶ http://www.cartoonnetwork.com/tv_shows/ap/cmccracken.html, October, 30, 2006

theorisation of identity politics (Chakraborty, 2004; Mohanty, 1988; 1991b). As Chakraborty (2004: 205) describes:

“Hegemonic feminism’s prioritisation of sex over race has been characterised by - and is symptomatic of - its anxiety over race, racial identity politics and racialised essentialism.”

(Chakraborty, 2004: 205)

Challenges, dilemmas and critiques of ‘essentialist’ identity politics by Third World and Black feminists have led western feminists to rethink any universal understanding of women’s common oppression and to acknowledge differences between different groups of women (Freedman, 2002). Such pluralistic thinking allows the recognition that Assamese women in general are distinct from their counterparts elsewhere in India with respect to their sub-culture, and that the educated young, middle class Assamese women in this thesis are different from other Assamese women in terms of their higher educational level, daily mobility, aspirations and goals in life. However, acknowledging these differences is only one step towards the production of a feminist programme that would help all groups of women, including the poorest and most marginalised (Freedman, 2002). This critique of ‘essentialist’ interpretations of gender is also central to post-structural and postmodern feminist frameworks (Butler, 1990; Freedman, 2002).

Post-structural and postmodern influences on feminist thinking

Post-structuralism and postmodernism are terms that are frequently used by contemporary feminist academics. Post-structuralism is an ontology connected to literary and philosophical analysis that was created after structuralist analysis of language and society (Strohmayer, 2005). In other words, post-structural human geography is a normative science seeking to explore the social and cultural realities and cultural interpretation of the modern world

(Strohmayer, 2005). Similarly, postmodern human geography is working to erode many of the foundational presumptions of geography: it entails a radical reconceptualisation of the field (Flusty, 2005).

It is usually said that postmodernism followed on from post-structuralism (Beasley, 1999; Cuff et al., 1988; Freedman, 2002) themselves derived from 'French feminism' (Tong, 1992: 217).³⁷ However, during the 1980s and 1990s the terms postmodernist/post-structuralist became more widely established (Beasley, 1999). Today, the term postmodern is a portmanteau term covering multiple fields. The influence of postmodern/post-structuralist ideas on Third Wave feminist thinking is evident in renewed emphasis on 'plurality' rather than unity (Aveling, 2002; Beasley, 1999: 81; Freedman, 2002).

Post-structuralist /postmodern feminists do not accept the concept of women as a homogenous group (Beasley, 1999; Freedman, 2002). By focusing on the significance of race and class, they emphasise the place-specific circumstances of gender relations (Momsen and Kinnaird, 1993). Critiques of essentialism question whether it is possible to consider 'women' as an analytical category (Freedman, 2002: 88). In response to this, postmodern/post-structuralist feminist theories offer a set of alternative ways of approaching the question of 'difference' and of addressing the problems related to women's identities and experiences. This paradigm not only considers the differences *between* men and women and the differences *between* women themselves, but also the differences *constitutive* of the female subject and the internal contradictions 'within women' (Barrett, 1987; Evans 1995: 125 cited in Freedman, 2002: 88).

Postmodern/post-structuralist feminists argue that a particular woman has multiple identities

³⁷ This refers to the crisis of the French student revolution of May 1968 where the structuralist writers such as Ronald Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault were sceptical of the promises of the school of structuralist thought and repudiated the fundamental assumptions of universalism of the principle or structure to the social world (Beasley, 1999; Cuff et al., 1998).

with respect to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, caste and creed. In this way, this group of feminists has rejected the concept of a fixed female identity (Freedman, 2002).

A number of scholars are associated with the debates of Third Wave feminism, developing an agenda reflecting 'new femininities' (for instance see, Heywood and Drake, 1997; 2004; Kinser, 2004; Mack-Canty, 2004; Shildrick, 2004; Walker, 1995). This also encompasses queer theory (Moon, 1998; Seidman, 1996); post-colonial theory (Mohanty, 1988; 1991b; Spivak, 1985; Blunt, 2005a; 2005b); transnationalism (Heywood and Drake, 1997) and ecofeminism (Mies and Shiva, 1993; Shiva, 1989). Third Wave feminism is partially developed in the Indian context that promotes women's perspectives, having its roots in post-colonial feminism, SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association in India, a grassroots organisation showing how working class women can transform themselves as well as the place they live in, without being highly experienced), *Samudayik Shakti* (working class feminist organisation that has roots in the non governmental organisation *Jagori* ³⁸) and ecofeminism, *the Chipko Movement* of the Himalayas,³⁹ for example (Datta, 2007; Hanson, 2007; Mack-Canty, 2004; Peet, 1998), but it has yet to be fully realised as a political project.⁴⁰

I suggest, however, that the notion of a Third Wave is largely western. Nevertheless, the analysis of this thesis, based on a close scrutiny of young middle class Assamese women, who are in higher education with some already advancing into the labour market (while others have high aspirations to enter paid employment); and at the cutting edge of the challenge to shift in

³⁸ <http://www.jagori.org/> January, 18, 2008

³⁹ In 1974, the hill women of Himalayan Valley (Now Uttarkhand) launched their ecofeminist movement, called 'Chipko', against the capricious felling of trees by timber contractors that led to destruction of the environment leading to paucity of fodder, fuel, fruits and vegetables; reduction of rainfall; and deforestation. This revolution is not directly related to the women's question, but it was a women's ferment in the sense that, had the forest disappeared, women as the keepers of the family would have to travel for time consuming miles to collect water, fuel wood and fodder (Chandra et al., 2000; Patel, 2001; Sen, 2000).

⁴⁰ However, UNICEF has recently launched projects in India on 'girl power' in order to develop the positive self esteem of girls (Thomas, 2008) [Transformation through Education: The Story of Lalita (http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/india_lalita_education.html, February, 2, 2008)]

gender roles, could be considered to reflect an emerging trend of Third Wave feminism in India. Arguably, this trend towards Third Wave feminism also circumscribes a phenomenon of ‘new femininities’ in Assam stemming from the changes in gender roles shaped largely by the processes of India’s modernisation, alongside the Five Year Plans of India that espouses economic development and more recently from the processes of neoliberalism that have shaped new employment patterns for women in post-colonial India. I turn now to a consideration of this economic context.

2.3.0 Modernisation, Post-colonialism and Westernisation

2.3.1 Modernisation

The terms Modernisation, Westernisation and Post-colonialism are highly contested concepts within the social sciences. Each needs to be examined in turn. The word modern is derived from the Latin word ‘modo’ which means ‘just now’ (Appignanesi et al., 1995: 6). Modernity is connected closely with ‘Enlightenment thinking’, while modernisation reflects an on-going process of changes closely linked with industrialisation (Appignanesi et al., 1995; Marchand and Parpart, 1995: 244). This process includes urbanisation, the application of science and technology, rapidly increasing occupational specialisation, rising bureaucratisation and educational levels (Inglehart, 1997, Inglehart and Baker, 2000). During the 1950s and 1960s, for developing countries like India, ‘modernisation’ and ‘westernisation’ were framed as theories of development. Hence, for India, two of the dominant socio-spatial forces of economic development since its independence in 1947 were urbanisation (Ghosh and Lama-Rewal, 2005; Mohan, 1985) and modernisation (Dutt and Noble, 1977). Dutt and Noble (1977) argued that in the Indian context, modernisation and westernisation are distinctly

different.⁴¹ Scholars like Appadurai (1996), Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, Gaonkar (2001) argue that modernity today is a global and multiple concept. These scholars argue that, although the West remains a 'clearinghouse'-a major 'governing centre' of global modernity, each society takes on the language and lessons of modernity differently to produce a modernity of their own specification be it multiple, hybrid or alternative (Appadurai, 1996; Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Gaonkar, 2001:1; Krishnaswamy, 2005).

Arguably, it is a simplification to say that western beliefs and westernisation promoted India's process of modernisation. Likewise, it would be wrong to label all so called 'traditional' practices associated with India as 'anti-modern'. In fact, in terms of economic development, some of the 'traditional' attributes have contributed to India's modernisation process (Dutt and Nobel, 1977; Prakash, 2000), alongside the neoliberalism adopted in India since late the 1980s. Importantly, the term 'modern' in India indicates a social system that acknowledges innovation; an administrative milieu that contributes to a fundamental infrastructure for change and a political leadership that succeeds in stimulating the people and the political system to produce such a modernisation process. Therefore, such ideas are indigenously built-in in the minds of the people. But also they systemically transform the entire spectrum of life; social, economic and political (Dutt and Noble, 1977).

Importantly, India's modernisation and economic development process since 1947 had been based mainly on Nehruvian model⁴² of socialism (through to the Five Year plans of the

⁴¹ Many economists like Friedrich A Hayek, however, made arguments to suggest that modernisation effectively entails westernisation (Lal, 2000).

⁴² In 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India formulated a mixed economy model, which he reckoned to be the best practical approach in the Indian setting. This model embraced large-scale industrialisation, central planning, the application of advanced technology and huge capital investments that drew heavily from the experiences of the West and the Soviet Union. This model, based on the ideology of socialism, also sowed the seeds of a capital-intensive economy that featured the centralisation of power, the use of advanced technology, and connection with the world economic circuit of the contemporaneous period. Although this model laid the foundation for the present growth, it received heavy criticisms on several grounds: it neglected agriculture, it provided the rationalisation for a chronically loss-making public sector, and, above all, it was based on the notion of 'soft state' coined by Gunnar Myrdal (1968), plagued by corruption, vested interests which is

Planning Commission of India)⁴³ while latterly neoliberalism (the new economic policies adopted in the late 1980s) (Bhagwati, 1998; Gupta, 2005) has been accompanied by a feminisation of the labour force, as in the West (Bradley et al., 2000). It is in this neoliberal context that many economic geographers in the West have used a political economic framework to discuss the shift in the gendered nature of globalisation and development (Gibson-Graham; 1996; Radcliffe and Westwood, 1993; 1996). Major changes have also taken place in India over the last two decades in the sphere of work and employment in both organised and unorganised sectors, with gendered implications. Within the last one and a half decades, middle and upper class women's career chances in India have improved to a great extent in middle ranking management, the higher legislative and decision-making bodies and also in teaching.⁴⁴

It is increasingly argued in the post-neoliberalisation era, that due to economic compulsion,⁴⁵ two incomes in a household have become a necessity (Madhavi, 2005; Ruwanpura, 2004). Consequently, the issue of work-life balance has become a significant issue for Indian women, as in the West. These shifts are leading to changes in household arrangements. The so called 'traditional' family model is now less prevalent, at least in urban India (Mukhopadhyay et al., 1993; Rani and Khandelwal 1992; Ramu, 1989; Shukla and Kapoor, 1990) and among middle class and elite women. And like many countries, the 'dual career'⁴⁶ arrangements are becoming the norm. Arguably, then, there has been a paradigm shift in gender relations. But to

one of the greatest obstacles to economic progress in a developing country like India (Balakrishnan, 2008; Chandra et al., 2000; Kumar, 2006).

⁴³ <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html>, January, 10, 2006

⁴⁴ However, as in western cases, the higher echelons of the career ladder in India have tended to be occupied by men (Liebig and Sansonetti, 2004).

⁴⁵ According to Reskin and Padavic (1994), economic compulsions may be defined as economic security as a result of which women increasingly participate in paid employment mainly for financial reasons.

⁴⁶ In 1969, the term dual career was first coined in Europe by an academic couple. There are however other terms having the same meaning, for example, "coupled careers", "conjoint career couple" or "coordinated career" couple (Rusconi, 2002).

what extent is this shift producing greater equality between women and men? The answer is complex and is informed by various debates on neoliberalism in India. First, though I discuss neoliberalism as an Indian policy.

2.3.2 Neoliberalism

The Indian context for neoliberalism

Neoliberalism in India embraces the policies of economic liberalism⁴⁷ from the late 1980s. More specifically from July 1991, India's post-independence development strategy, based mainly on Nehruvian model⁴⁸ (Leitner et al., 2007) of self-reliant economic growth and the rhetoric of 'socialism' under five-year plans (Balin, 2008; Ganguli-Scrase, 2001) was shifted away to espouse neoliberalism⁴⁹ alongside the structural adjustment programmes (Chakravorty, 2000; Dev, 2000; Ganguli-Scrase, 2001; Ghosh, 2005; Sharma, 2004; Williamson and Zagha, 2002). The aim of these new economic policies was first to reform Nehruvian dirigisme; to liberalise the 'closed' economy from various bureaucratic regulations and controls that were thought to have restrained the growth. Second, they sought to make the economy more efficient through increased market orientation (Ganguli-Scrase, 2001; Ghosh, 2005). The principal strategy of these policies was to achieve a greater share of the global market, in industry, trade and services through increased productivity (Ganguli-Scrase, 2001).

It is extremely arduous if not impossible to disconnect modernisation and post-colonialism (see, section 2.3.3) from neoliberalism (Nightingale, 2005). Here, I discuss the modernisation process of India that has been shaped by India's neoliberalism (see, Nightingale, 2005).

⁴⁷ Economic liberalism describes an economy where markets and competitive forces dominate (Ahluwalia and Little, 1998; Lal, 1998)

⁴⁸ See, footnote 42

⁴⁹ Alongside the failure of the Nehruvian model, neoliberalism in India was also fuelled by the macroeconomic debt crisis of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Gaidar, 2007), the then major trading partner of India together with the imbalance caused by the Gulf War that began in August, 1990 and lasted until February, 1991 (Balin, 2008; Williamson and Zagha, 2002)

However, it is important to note that the neoliberal paradigm reinforces the three approaches of policy, ideology and governmentality (Larner, 2000; Leitner et al., 2007, also, Nightingale, 2005). All these scholarships surmise that neoliberalism is characterised in terms of homology between Post-Fordist ⁵⁰ capitalism and restructured welfare state (Larner, 2000; Nightingale, 2005). The Indian economy, however, cannot be described as Post-Fordist because unlike other developed economies, the economy of India, a developing economy, has not undergone a Fordist stage; instead, it demonstrates a scaling of a compound adjunct of both feudal and capitalist relations that feature the characteristics of transition economies (Bhagwati, 1993; Ramamurti, 2008; also, Nightingale, 2005).

From the 1990s, the policies of neoliberalism in India have been championed by successive federal governments: whether it is the Indian National Congress (INC) and its allies or the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led Government (Oja, 2004). Indeed, Dr. Manmohan Singh,⁵¹ the present Prime Minister of India, was the key ‘architect’ of 1991 economic reforms (Oja, 2004: 368). “The shift in macroeconomic strategy from control base system to private sector led economic development” resulted in a significant increase in the growth rate of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ⁵² and a large-scale transformation of the economy (Shukla, 2005: 39). There is evidence to suggest some success of these economic reforms in tackling extreme poverty and giving some way towards achieving Millennium Development Goal 1.⁵³ For example, the number of people living on less than \$ 1.25 a day dropped from 60% to 42% from 1981 to

⁵⁰ Post Fordism developed as a reaction to Fordism (see footnote 59). It refers to the industrial model of modern socio-economic change that focuses a shift away from mass production and consumption towards a more customer friendly, flexible forms of work and production, driven often by information technology. Post-fordism thus, features dismantling of mass markets and shifting segmented patterns of consumption (Amin, 1994).

⁵¹ Dr Manmohan Singh was then the Finance Minister in the INC government led by the late Prime Minister Pamulaparthi Venkata Narasimha Rao

⁵² <http://www.worldbank.org.in/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/INDIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20195738%7EmenuPK:295591%7EpagePK:141137%7EpiPK:141127%7EtheSitePK:295584,00.html>, January, 30, 2007

⁵³ The key aim of United Nations Millennium Development Goal 1 is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by halve by the year 2015 (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>, January, 4, 2008)

2005. Over the same period, the number of persons living below a dollar a day also declined from 42% to 24% (Tharoor, 2007).⁵⁴ India has also been witness to the incredible growth in sectors like trade, construction, financial services, transport, storage, information and communication technologies (Ghosh, 2005; Gupta, 2005).

India has pursued reforms in its bilateral trade relations and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) with many countries of the world such as the USA, the UK, Japan, China, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Italy and Australia.⁵⁵ India is also sowing the seeds of strength to become a production base and an export hub for diverse goods, ranging from agricultural products to automobile components to high-end services (Bajpai and Sachs, 2004). India has also emerged as the world's third largest producer of food⁵⁶ (Chandrashekhar, 2004) and fifth largest manufacturer of steel in the world (Srinivas, 2007). In addition, India is the successful hub of business process outsourcing (BPO) industry that meets 70% of the worldwide demand and contributes an estimated \$17 billion to the economy (Gupta, 2005; Tharoor, 2007). As a consequence, Indian 'middle class' is expanding rapidly, approximately 60% people now live in households with income over \$3998.08 (Rs.1,94,325.52) per year as compared to only about 25% during 1994-1995 (see also, Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1995; Beinhocker, et al., 2007; Fernandes, 2004; Fernandes, 2006; Rothermund, 2008; Tharoor, 2007).⁵⁷ Evidence also shows that India is the fifth largest economy in the world in terms of purchasing power parity

⁵⁴ Revised Poverty Estimates: What does this mean for India?

(<http://www.worldbank.org.in/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/INDIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:21880804~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:295584,00.html>, February, 13, 2008)

⁵⁵ "India's Economic Relations" Economy Watch (<http://www.economywatch.com/international-economic-relations/india%27s-economic-relations.html>, 20, January, 2008).

⁵⁶ But it is the largest producer of milk; second largest producer of rice, wheat, sugar, fruits and vegetables, and the third largest producer of cotton in the world (Chandrashekhar, 2004).

⁵⁷ India: New Economy Old Economy, the latest report by the Economic Analytical Unit, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/releases/department/d022_01.html, December, 30, 2001)

(PPP)⁵⁸(Tharoor, 2007). Yet, neoliberalism in India is a tale of success, contrasts and divides (Tharoor, 2007). Before discussing the implementation of neoliberalism, it is essential to understand how the term ‘neoliberalism’ actually emerged.

Conceptualising neoliberalism

According to David Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is a theory that reinforces the political and economic practices of an institutional framework which suggests that the welfare of human beings can be progressed through the process of developing individual entrepreneurial skills and by liberation designated primarily by private property rights, free markets and free trade. The antecedents of the neoliberal theories, disguised in the form of free market economic theory, can be rooted in the works of a group of economists working with Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago who were invited by Augusto José Ramón Pinochet in 1973 to restructure the Chilean economy in order to transform socialism into a free-market economy (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2007; Leitner et al., 2007). However, the process of neoliberalism failed in Chile following “the Latin America debt crisis of 1982” (Harvey, 2005: 8).

Nevertheless, neoliberalism gained global prominence in the 1980s with the ground-breaking elections of Ronald Reagan in the United States of America and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. Margaret Thatcher started believing that ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA) and overtly accepted the neoliberal paradigm (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2002; 2007). Gradually, alongside the strong influence of the UK and the USA, the wings of neoliberal paradigm, reinforced by the “packages of reform” for “best practice” designated by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade

⁵⁸ An economic technique of currency conversion rates to measure price relatives and to determine that exchange rates between two currencies equalise when their purchasing power is same in each of the two countries (Schreyer and Koechlin, 2002).

Organisation, diffused swiftly to most parts of the globe in the form of political and economic policies (Bondi and Laurie, 2005: 395; Perreault and Martin, 2005). Recognising the spatio-temporal shifts over the global geographical space, Peck and Tickell (2002) theorised neoliberalisation from the perspective of spatial dynamics (Bondi and Laurie, 2005). Arguably, such spatial shifts are characterised by “proto-” to “roll back” neoliberalism, characterised by privatisation and deregulation associated with a withdrawal of the role of the state from the workings of the economy and sectoral policies and programs infused by free market principles (Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2002; 2007).

Neoliberalism as a set of economic ideas

The geographical literature on neoliberalism is varied but provides points of heated debate regarding the extent, where and how the neoliberal paradigm should actually be studied within geography (Barnett, 2005; Castree, 2006; Castree, 2008; Peck, 2004; 2008). Jamie Peck (2004) argues that in an increasingly globalised economy, geographies of neoliberalism today are global and multiple and therefore are neither monolithic nor universal but are rather varied in form (Peck and Theodore, 2007; Peck, 2008).

Leitner et al. (2007: 3) have reported that a number of geographical studies on neoliberalism represent neoliberalism “as the putative successor to Fordism”.⁵⁹ Harvey (2005) argues that since the 1970s in political economic practices and thinking, visions of neoliberalism have been gaining ground. But Barnett (2005) has observed that there are no such things as generic neoliberalism. He believes that neoliberalism cannot be regarded wholly as a coherent hegemonic project. This idea has been reinforced by Castree (2006, 2008). Scholars however,

⁵⁹ A term coined in 1916 to refer to the success story of Henry Fords’ (1863-1947) automobile industry. Fordism refers to the labour process involved in the manufacturing process of a moving assembly line and mass production processes to achieve a lower price and can aptly be attributed to a mode of capitalist regulation. According to David Harvey (1989) Fordism signifies “the long post-war boom, from 1945 to 1973, [which] was built upon a certain set of labour control practices, technological mixes, consumption habits, and configurations of political-economic power” (Harvey, 1989: 124).

argue that the presence, roots and trajectories of neoliberal practices can be felt universally (Leitner et al., 2007). Indeed, the understandings of neoliberal subjects are highly complex and vary geographically over space and time (Leitner et al., 2007; Peck, 2008). The thesis sheds light that India's neoliberal market revolution is now playing its part in Assam's economic revival (see, Chapter 3) albeit slowly. Chapter 5 reveals that the new neoliberal economic policies of India are starting to influence the lives of Assamese women: that Assamese women have now been the beneficiaries of new job creations and also gaining entry in 'male-type' and production process jobs.

Neoliberalism as a market based ideology

Much has been written on neoliberalism through the lens of market based ideology. To cite several examples: Harvey (2005) examines the implementation of the neoliberal policies by the UK, USA, Australian and Chinese governments. Alongside this, he also reviews the stepwise implementation of neoliberal thinking in Europe, South East Asia, South America and Mexico. In so doing, Harvey (2005) argues that the consequences of the neoliberal policies have resulted in an increasing gap between the rich and the poor; the inconsistency between neoliberal theory and neoliberalism in practice. In support of this argument, Harvey (2005) argues that since the 1970s, the rate of global capital growth has declined and that neoliberalism has failed to restore the conditions of global capital accumulation. However, neoliberalism in practice has been a "political project to re-establish conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of the economic elites" (Harvey, 2005:19).

Recently, a number of geographers have drawn on empirical accounts from different geographical spaces of the world, and have attempted to promote 'professionalisation' as a part of neoliberal market place and "the promotion of individuals as agents of development, and market relations as they are constituted through processes of globalisation and economic

change” (Nightingale, 2005: 582; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Simpson, 2005). Andrea Nightingale (2005) tries to connect the logics of professionalisation of community forestry in Nepal with that of the ideologies of neoliberal environment-development programmes. In doing so, she probes the extent to which different Nepali communities support professional forestry notions both materially and symbolically. Kate Simpson (2005) examines the geography of ‘gap year’ experiences of young, middle class British youths particularly in foreign countries. She argues that such gap year experiences are ‘real life’ experiences of individual agents and that these skills have become essential for individuals to gain access to university education or the world of middle class work. Therefore, Simpson (2005) urges that such gap year experience is a ‘gap’ only in name. But my thesis does not explore the connection between professionalisation and the ideology of neoliberalism. Instead, highlights that neoliberalism in Assam has altered some of the ways through which Assamese middle class women construct their modern identities.

In the West, feminists including those of the Third Wavers examine the emergence of geographies of liberated ‘new femininities’ and ‘girl power’ in a neoliberal climate (Baker, 2008; Laurie et al., 1999; Heywood and Drake, 2004; Harris, 2004; Spencer, 2004; also Thomas, 2008). These feminists investigate the new social and relational spaces of opportunity and oppression (with respect to education, employment, motherhood, domesticity) of young women as ‘neoliberal subjects’ together with their negotiations associated with geographies of gender identities (Baker, 2008; Laurie et al., 1999). In similar and yet a slightly different context, it is the purpose of Chapter 6 to highlight the positive self-esteem of the young, middle class Assamese women who greatly aspire to make most out of their lives. This chapter shows that a majority of women aspire greatly to sell their skills in multinational companies (see also, Table 4.4).

In the Indian context, a number of studies highlight the macro-economic political transformations, as a result of the new economic policies of India (Balin, 2008; Bhattacharya, 1999; Corbridge and Harris, 2001; Ramamurti, 2008; Voyce, 2007). Drawing extensively on field work, Corbridge et al., (2005, 2007) consider the micro-level sociological research in five places in rural eastern India (Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bihar), in particular grassroots groups, to demonstrate how the newly informed ideas of neoliberalism are starting to shape people's lives. Furthermore, micro-level qualitative research documents the effects of economic transformations on communities and locals vis-à-vis the consequences of changing economic relations (Fernandes, 2006, Ganguli-Scrase, 2001, 2003; Lakha, 1999; Scrase, 2002; van Wassel, 2004). One of the intentions of this thesis is to highlight that as a result of neoliberalism and the processes of globalisation, the new middle class urban Assamese women build their modern identities by pioneering a new socio-cultural space in Assam. Before going on to discuss the ambiguous impact of neoliberalism, it is essential to distinguish neoliberalism from globalisation.

Neoliberalism versus globalisation

Many geographers have argued that globalisation embraces, as well as promotes, neoliberalism and could therefore be used interchangeably (example, Laurie et al., 1999; Laurie and Marvin, 1999). Other geographers are sceptical about the use of these two concepts as synonyms and argue that such an association of globalisation with neoliberalism is highly problematic (Kelly, 1999; Notermans, 1997; Weiss, 1997). Kelly (1999) argues that although globalisation appeared as the *deus ex machina* it could be used to legitimise neoliberalism but both the concepts are not at all identical. This is because the macroeconomic policies (and monetarist policies) of the neoliberal paradigm follows an uncommon trajectory with that of the economics of globalisation (Kelly, 1999; Notermans, 1997; Weiss, 1997). At the same

time, the contributions of Peck and Tickell (2002) suggest that both globalisation and neoliberalism are on-going processes, where often (though not always) forces of globalisation tend to incorporate the politics of neoliberalism, through an “out there” and “in here” phenomenon “but the incidence and diffusion of which may present a pervasive metalogic” (383) (also, Clark, 2004).

In India, according to Ganguli-Scrase (2003: 545), globalisation is envisaged “as an expansion of a neoliberal market economy” because “market liberalization and trade liberalization have been the cornerstones of the globalizing process in India”. She goes on to argue that globalisation in India is often viewed as a blend of socio-cultural and economic processes which is largely responsible for ‘opening up’ of the Indian economy to the global market. In fact, in India, the process of globalisation is playing an important role in the diffusion of neoliberalism (Ganguli-Scrase, 2003; Oza, 2001).

Impact of neoliberalism on labour markets and Indian women

The WID paradigm suggests that “structural adjustment has impacted negatively on most poor women, increasing their workloads and the costs of production” (Chowdhry, 1995: 33). In a similar respect, growing numbers of studies continue to show that the impact of globalisation and neoliberalism on labour markets and employment of India have had a highly uneven impact (Chakravorty, 2000; Dev, 2000; Ganguli-Scrase, 2001; Ghosh, 2005; Sharma, 2004). Some people and places benefited far more than others. Arguably, the benefits are gendered. It is widely noted that as a result of the new economic policies of India, there has been a growing social inequality (Patel, 2005; Shukla, 2005), particularly with respect to gender (Mathew, 1995; Ganguli-Scrase, 2001). It is furthermore suggested that the new economic policies will have a negative impact on female employees, especially in rural areas (Ghosh, 1996; Mathew, 1995). For example:

“The new economic policy has affected women both directly and indirectly. The threat posed to employment opportunities by multinational corporations as well as trade liberalisation will seriously jeopardize the availability of employment opportunities of women in this sector. The agro-processing industry, where women work in large numbers, is being taken over by Kellogg, Pepsi Cola, Nestle, General Foods and so on. Import of modern technology will lead to the cutback in low skilled jobs for women. Overall economic development has increasingly excluded women from productive employment pushing them into marginal occupations and has increasingly marginalised women”.

(Mathew, 1995: 67, 68)

The impacts of these driving forces on Assamese women, especially on the rural and urban poor, are particularly notable. As a result, many market spaces of Assam previously run by grassroots women *e.g.*, small shops and services have been replaced by urban development such as shopping malls, complexes and retail outlets as a result of commercial demands. Although, such development adversely affects some groups of women, they also create employment opportunities for others.

Arguably, there are winners and losers associated with these developments. For example, to a large extent in the case of rural Assamese women, these forces have had a positive impact. For example, the *Amar Bazaar* (Our Markets) was launched in 1998 using the concept of self-help - a revolution in self-employment as the only alternative to enhance the rural economy and ensure self-reliance. *Amar Bazaar* womenfolk also have a micro savings and micro credit program as a means to shift them from the subsistence mode to the surplus mode and to transform traditional practices into successful economic activities. It is important to note that

there are about 80,000 ⁶⁰ successful self-help groups in Assam ⁶¹ and most of them are run by women. ⁶²

Many studies demonstrate that Indian women's participation in higher education is a parallel trend of neoliberalism and feminisation of the labour force and of work in the organised sector (Budhwar et al., 2005; Gothoskar, 2000; Gupta et al., 1998; Mehra, 2002; Patil, 2001; Singh, 2003; Supraja, 2008). Neoliberalism (alongside globalisation) has transformed the world into a global market by connecting directly between the industrial and corporate environment and higher education. This has brought a transformation of the skills (such as knowledge of digital literacy, business management, human resource management; media and mass communication, fashion technology) required for jobs (Budhwar et al., 2005; Chanana, 2004; 2007). Another, newly driven impact of neoliberalism in India is the development of a 'media network' called NWMi (a network, only for women in the media, www.nwmindia.org). The aim of this network is to provide value journalism as well as to share, promote and exchange ideas among women professionals in the media, and, most importantly, to work for gender equality within the media and society (Supraja, 2008). These examples of structural adjustment strategies reinforce the efficiency approach of the WID paradigm (Chowdhry, 1995). It is suggested that influenced by neoliberalism, the efficiency approach would boost a more efficient growth and improve the situation of all sections of Indian women. It greatly emphasises intersections between gender, development and practice (Chowdhry, 1995). It is also suggested that "issues of equity would be resolved" with the occurrence of overall growth in the economy (Chowdhry, 1995: 33; see also section, Women in Development in India). In short, neoliberalism in India has created a considerable amount of employment opportunities

⁶⁰ The Assam Tribune, 12th June, Saturday, 2004 (<http://www.assamtribune.com/jun1204/at03.html>, October, 17, 2006)

⁶¹ "President to share success story of SHGs", The Assam Tribune, Guwahati, Tuesday, October, 17, 2006

⁶² The Assam Tribune, 24th July, Monday, 2004 (<http://www.assamtribune.com/jul2406/edit.html>, October, 18, 2006)

for those women in higher education who possess managerial, business and marketable skills and talent (Budhwar et al., 2005a, 2005b; Chanana, 2004; 2007; Mehra, 2002; Yukongdi and Benson, 2005) (see also sections on, higher education and feminisation of the labour force and Chapter 5).

This thesis, exploring the changing status of young, middle class Assamese women, highlights that neoliberalism in India enriches the career aspirations of these women (see, Table 4.4, Chapter 4 and Chapters 5 and 6). Qualitative interviews illustrate that many women of my sample aspire to have a career in advertising, media or private companies or work for the airlines industries. Such aspirations are possible now in a developing region like Assam due in part to neoliberalism, as job prospects in the labour market have increased with particular kinds of jobs, especially with a shift to a service-based economy (Chapters 5 and 6). For example: (i) as a direct impact of neoliberal policies by the government there has been better 'connectivity' (both in terms of transport and telecommunication) within Assam and other north eastern states as well as with the rest of mainland India (Sharma, 2008). Prior to economic policies influenced by neoliberalism, very few airlines (only Indian Airlines, which the Government operated as a monopoly) used to connect Assam directly with other parts of India and to only a few cities, New Delhi (the capital city of India) and Kolkatta (the nearest metropolitan city of India). However, post neoliberalisation policies broke down this monopoly with increasing demand. Assam is now well connected to the rest of the country by many frequent flights from varied privately run airline companies (such as Jet Airways, JetLite or Air Sahara, Kingfisher, Air Deccan, Spice Jet, Indian Airlines and Alliance Air) to many metropolises of India (such as New Delhi, Kolkatta, Bangalore, Mumbai, Chennai) through direct flights and connections;⁶³ most importantly, Assamese women (and also men) finding

⁶³ Economic Survey Assam, 2003-2004, Government of Assam, <http://www.assamgov.org/ecosurvey/TCT.htm>, July, 7, 2006

employment in the industry either as cabin crew or ground staff or in other capacity. (ii) Prior to new economic revival, most female students after completing their undergraduate or master studies were usually inclined towards a career in teaching, simply through lack of other job opportunities. However, following economic policies influenced by neoliberalism, the students in Assam are now opting for job oriented training offered by increasing number of private institutions to build careers in private companies, in areas ranging from fashion, media and journalism to airline and telecommunication industries.

2.3.3 Post-colonialism

The preceding section suggests that post-independence India has witnessed both positive and negatives impacts following the unfolding of neoliberalism since late the 1980s. An important framework within which to understand this transformation of India in the post-independence era and to question the extent, to which women have gained empowerment through this process, is the new literature on post-colonialism. This body of theory recognises that it is the incomplete dismantling of colonial rule which creates a ‘post-colonial’ legacy of inequality and uneven development (Madge et al., 2009; Raghuram et al., 2009). An understanding of post-colonialism casts light upon the contradictory position many young middle class Assamese women find themselves in. This is particularly true with respect to opportunities they might have in higher education and paid employment on the one hand, while facing persistent expectations of perceived ‘traditional’ feminine roles of wife and mother on the other hand. To explore these contradictions, here and in the subsequent empirical chapters, it is important to understand the patchiness of the post-colonial impact and the sense in which the influence of westernisation or tradition in practice reproduce persistent gender inequalities.

Post-colonialism loosely refers to the process of decolonisation after colonialism as well as to the theoretical approaches that draw on the experiences of such a condition, influenced mainly

by post-structuralism. It became an important discourse in western scholarship following the publication of the book *Orientalism* by Said (1978). According to Said (1978), Orientalism is a western style of modus operandi for influencing, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.

“My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient’s difference with its weakness... As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge”

(Said, 1978: 204)

Sen (2005) is critical about Said’s (1978) Orientalism on the grounds that it has a narrower focus than Said claims. India being a part of the Orient, there is an overlap of subject matter where Sen argues that without focusing on the evolution of a specific conceptual tradition, it is difficult to detect the ‘internal consistency’ in various western conceptions of India. There are three distinctive approaches to making an attempt to comprehend and (re)interpret India’s tradition from outside the country. Sen (2005: 141) identifies these as exoticist, magisterial and curatorial. The first approach focuses on wondrous facets of India, their peculiarity within a country which “has existed for millennia in the imagination of the Europeans” (141). The second approach focuses on the exercise of imperial power and the image of India as a subject territory from the perspective of British Governors. This perspective incorporates a sense of supremacy and guardianhood required to administer a country that John Stuart Mill described as “that great scene of British action” (Sen, 2005: 142). The third approach as defined by Sen (2005) is the most catholic of the three approaches. It attempts to (re)interpret, classify and exhibit the diversified aspects of Indian culture. This approach is different from the other two in the sense that it has its own propensity and interest in visualising the object. This approach

would envisage India as a very special, significant and extraordinarily interesting place (Sen, 2005: 142).

Arguably, a definitive *modus operandi* is necessary to explore post-colonial development geography (Raghuram and Madge, 2006). For this, the first step is to explain why a given piece of research is taking place in the post-colonial context in relation to a broader geopolitical context. The second step is to justify why the findings are analysed on such a subject positioning. A third step is to develop a method to include a definitive theorisation that would help in guiding the research. As Raghuram and Madge (2006) explain:

“Our theoretical methods should be less referential, less reverential and more contextualized so that theory does not become the playing ground for those who are already in the ‘know’. This could potentially force enormous changes to our current disciplinary practices. Our knowledge construction and regulation, writing patterns, grant reviewing practices, supervision sessions, methodological training, external examining procedures and refereeing processes, that is, our professional practices, will all need reconfiguring for this. Changes to such academic cultural norms will not happen overnight and will involve enormous commitment and potential losses for some”

(Raghuram and Madge, 2006: 283)

Finally, a post-colonial theoretical approach should consider the total investment required to conduct any research (for details see, Raghuram and Madge, 2006).

Previously, according to Spivak (1985), many literatures from colonial countries have sought to uncover the impact of the colonial past on writing from the centre, claiming that western culture and knowledge has been greatly (re)shaped by post-colonialism as well as by the colonised countries. Therefore, post-colonialism is a geographical process of analysing the

different elements of the power of the process of colonisation instead of the coloniser in order to trace the agencies of the colonised that (re)made and metamorphosed colonial societies (Bhaba, 1991; Raghuram and Madge, 2006; also, Madge et al., 2009; Raghuram et al., 2009).

According to McKinnon (2006) the relations between Orient and Occident as well as the First World and the Third World are best understood through a post-colonial analysis because they are inevitably and inexorably fixed in uneven relationships of power. Post-colonialism occupies an important place in development studies where the aim is to explore how feminist geography, influenced by post-structuralism, can bring new types of understanding to the production of geographical knowledge (Blunt and Rose, 1994). It is in this context that Guha and Spivak (1988) contemplate the importance of the dominated groups in (re)shaping the cultural history and historiography of the macro-region-India. Therefore, within both colonial and post-colonial societies of India, the subaltern study ⁶⁴ explores the driving forces of domination and oppression, especially in terms of extensive diversity of predominating and exploitative relations and elite groups.

Contemporary feminist studies bear similarities to post-colonialism as both studies are concerned with women's struggles, oppression and injustice in various geographical spaces (Blunt and Rose, 1994). Mohanty (1988; 1991a, 1991b) argues that in Western feminist discourse, it is tempting for feminists to analyse 'Third World women' from a cultural imperialist stance (Nagel, 2004). Like post-structuralist feminists, post-colonial feminists have criticised western feminism on the grounds of Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism, regarding all women as a homogeneous group, rather than accounting sufficiently for country-specific

⁶⁴ Subaltern study is a study that is recognised as the most exciting intervention in Indian historiography and cultural studies. It represents the significance of the dominated groups in (re)shaping history especially by exploring the dynamics of 'domination' as well as 'oppression' both within the colonial as well as post-colonial societies (see, Guha and Spivak, 1988; Spivak, 1994).

differences in ethnicity and local gender divisions of labour (Haj, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1991; Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty, 1991b; Raghuram and Madge, 2006).

Arguably, although the spatio-temporal origins of these two types of feminism are different, the underlying philosophy remains the same. Mohanty's (1988; 1991a, 1991b) critique of Eurocentrism however, does not mean that cross-cultural analysis on women is not possible. Nor does she visualise solidarity of North-South relations as futile (Nagel, 2004). Nonetheless, her focus is that such ahistorical approaches have faulted feminist theory. In this context, she identifies three primary analytic assumptions as problematic in Anglo-American scholarship. First, she has argued that 'women' were described by their 'object status' in which they were affected, and western feminists had failed to define the variety of systems and institutions through which they were actually affected. Second, a model of arithmetic is employed as a proof of universal phenomena, where different examples were added up devoid of context in order to arrive at a universal fact. In doing this, Western feminist discourse constructed a monolithic, singular image of Third World women as an object (or subject) of knowledge portraying women as a homogenous oppressed group. This paradigm fails to take into account the complexities of historical specificities and general discursive categorisation. Third, Mohanty notes that as a result of codification of knowledge through these first two assumptions, a paradigm signalling struggle and subjectivity is developed that does not allow Third World women to rise above their object status (Peet, 1998). Mohanty (1988, 1991b) has noted the ways in which economic, cultural, religious and political factors can intersect in various historically specific moments to create situations in which women are oppressed. Therefore, she calls for a theoretical paradigm involving intersectionality (see, section 1.3.0, 28-29, Chapter 1) that can avoid false generalisations but be highly contingent on context-

specific to address the commonalities and contradictions of women's struggle and experiences (McIlwaine and Datta, 2003).

Another sign of Eurocentrism is the false belief that feminism originated only in the occidental world and the endogenous roots of Third World feminism and other forms of feminist activity are mere imitations of this original feminism (Freedman, 2002). It is in this context, that Jayawardena (1986) has argued that oriental feminism was not a western creation but instead had its roots in the Third World and has existed simultaneously with the West. In support of her argument, she suggests that the issues of women's rights in China emerged in the eighteenth century, while in India, the women's movement was started in the 1820s by social reformers to work for the amelioration of the status of Indian women like the eradication of female infanticide, widow-burning (*Sati*), prostitution, widow-remarriages, and begging by destitute women (Patel, 2001). Nevertheless, she accepts that western feminism has had a positive impact on Third World feminism, mainly as a source of motivation for the Women's Liberation Movement. This movement emerged in the context of the Indian Nationalist Movement, a movement against colonial powers which could be commonly referred to as the 'First Wave' of the 'Indian Women's Movement' (Kumar, 1993; Freedman, 2002; Narayan 1997a; 1997b).

A number of scholars have addressed the diffusion of neo-colonial relations in diverse contexts (Said 1978; Bhabha 1991; Spivak 1988). Geographical literature on post-colonial studies is increasingly interested in spacio-temporal comparisons between the pre-independence and post-independence conditions of nations and cities, including labour indentureship, migration and diaspora (Legg and McFarlane, 2008; McFarlane, 2008; Yeoh,

2003).⁶⁵ Current theories on post-colonial content also focus on the interconnectedness between disability and post-colonialism (Parekh, 2007; Sherry, 2007).

Mack-Canty (2004) argues that in the phrase post-colonialism, the term 'post' does not necessarily mean the process of decolonisation but instead indicates the continued existence of a colonial legacy. She goes on to argue that the capitalist global economy in post-colonial discourse could be referred to as neo-colonial. Arguably, a new driving force called 'recolonisation' is making its way into the Indian Territory through which urban Indian women are being recolonised (Bhattacharya, 1994; Chaudhuri, 1999; John, 1998; Thapan, 2001). Importantly, post-colonial feminist geography has shifted its boundaries to broaden its aims beyond the binary distinctions of male and female in relation to the social constructions of gender identities. Besides, it also aims to broaden its relations across diverse contexts and by intertwining the significance of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, colonialism, culture, class (Blunt, 1994; Mills, 1996) and also to caste (especially in the Indian context). Further, post-colonial feminist geography explores the unequal power relations which function *between* women in different societies by investigating a range of cultural and social theories influenced by post-structuralism that (re)interpret multiple subjectivities and sites of gendered identities (e.g. Mohanty 1988; McDowell 1991). Now I turn to discuss whether the locally embedded post-colonial project represents a form of westernisation or tradition.

⁶⁵ While post-colonial studies are concerned with the transnational context, globalisation theory also seeks to examine the imperialist stance in globalisation, democracy and neoliberalism (Parekh, 2007; Krishnaswamy, 2005).

2.3.4 Westernisation or tradition?

The discussion in sections 2.3.1 to 2.3.3 suggest that the processes of acculturation⁶⁶ through westernisation (colonisation) and more specifically through the on-going processes of globalisation, fostered by neo-liberal market forces, alongside the deeply embedded value system of the society, are visible in the post-colonial capitalist economy of India. Many theorists believe modernisation is synonymous with westernisation (Inglehart, 1997; Lal, 2000). However, at the same time, Inglehart (1997: 24) argues that it is not helpful to equate modernisation with westernisation because the latter is an on-going process through which the 'traditional' values of a particular non-western society, especially the Third World (Orient), are transformed under western imperialism. As discussed earlier, Said (1978) viewed Orientalism as a western style of discourse to claim authority over the Orient. However, feminist geographers of the West have criticised Said (1978) on the grounds that women are involved in the imperial cultural production of the 'Orient' and the 'Occident' (Blunt and Rose, 1994). Further, like Sen (2005), Lewis (1996) has criticised Said (1978) on the grounds that Orientalism has overlooked that within the West there are internal divisions.

Importantly, feminist geographers in the West have focused on the intersections of global market forces and feminism, calling attention to the reliance of transnational companies on low skilled feminised labour to produce branded fashion textiles, electronic goods and other consumer goods (Allen, 1994; Barff and Austen, 1993; Phizacklea, 1990). Similarly, scholars have drawn attention to the way the core economies exploit cheap labour and also low-skilled feminised labour forces (Kochan et al., 1986; Lash and Urry, 1994; Peck, 1996).

⁶⁶ Acculturation paradigm is a process of assimilation, absorption and integration of cultural features of one group with that of another when two groups come into continuous contact (Kottak, 2005). According to Kottak (2005), the cultural features of either the groups or the weaker group or both may be altered, but the groups remain easily distinguishable.

The goals of modernisation were adopted along with urbanisation by the Government of India following its independence in 1947. This way the process of urbanisation appears both to drive economic development and unfold as a direct consequence of it (Mohan, 1985). Modernisation was planned mainly through the Five Year Plans in the form of policies to promote education,⁶⁷ particularly among women, as well as to stimulate new employment opportunities, regional development policies and national industrial policy (Jones and Visaria, 1998). At the same time, the economics of Indian urbanisation (Mohan 1985) and neoliberalism harnessed the trappings of high modernity: metropolises, urban agglomerations (UA), mega-development projects, nuclear power and indigenous-built communication satellites. Yet, India remains today one of the poorest countries with the second largest population in the world⁶⁸ associated with poverty (Ghosh, 2005; Sharma, 2004) and illiteracy.

Narayan (1997a: 20; 1997b) argues that the use of the term ‘westernisation’ in the Third World Countries implies tension and paradox. In this context, she discusses how as a result of the social and economic structures of many Third World Countries, a sea change has occurred in the process which is often controlled by a western economic agenda and western visions of ‘development’. Such changes have re-awakened and reinforced the impression that ‘traditional culture’ is under risk from ‘westernisation’. However, Lal (2000) argues that it is a process of Indian societies to modernise without westernising.

Arguably, modern India is a complex and paradoxical mix of perceived notions of traditional practices and ultra modernity (Thapan, 2001). Therefore, in the contemporary society of India, the phenomenon of modernisation differs from that of westernisation and is manifested by

⁶⁷ The First Five Year Plan of India (1952), as a part of the Community Development Programme, emphasised the eradication of illiteracy through the introduction of the programme of Social Education. (<http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html>, June, 5, 2005)

⁶⁸ India: Data, Projects and Research-Poverty “At a Glance”
<http://www.worldbank.org.in/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/INDIAEXTN/0,,menuPK:295589~pagePK:141159~piPK:141110~theSitePK:295584,00.html?>, January, 30, 2007)

effects of multi-national capitalism and global culture (such as McDonalds, Coca Cola, Pepsi) western music, branded western fashions (Raju et al., 2000). As a result of this heightened cultural globalisation (Ganguli-Scrace, 2001), the social geography of India, particularly with respect to its urban multicultural market spaces, has redefined the lifestyles of hundreds and thousands of city dwellers (Raju et al., 2000; Yeoh, 2005). Such market-oriented consumerism and the media-driven western influences have permeated and changed the indigenous fabric of youth culture. The popularity of a new middle class consumer culture, buying the latest cars, TVs, electronic gadgets, and trendy clothes, threatens to undermine Indian modes of dress and ways of life.

Further, Yeoh (2001; 2003; 2005) argues that many global cultural cities/countries of the oriental world emerged from a colonial context only a few decades ago. Therefore, along with their economic development in the global cultural world, the post-colonial endeavour of enlightening national identity and encouraging national pride remains a conspicuous goal. It is in this context, that Sen (2005: 139) argues that over the past centuries, the 'internal identities' (more specifically, what he calls the 'self images') of the Indians have been affected by colonialism both collaterally and dialectically. He argues, however, that such influences of western imagination are not straightforward. That is, the internal identity of post-colonial societies is affected by the power of deeply embedded colonial cultures and their forms of thought and classification. Importantly, the process of post-colonialism in India has shown that modernity of the western world cannot be directly translated in terms of an Indian construct because the socio-cultural values of the country are so deeply embedded that the ideological forces of the nation performs a pre-eminent role in the construction of the identity of the

Indian people who are so closely attached to their customs and belief systems (Bhattacharjee,⁶⁹ 2006: 338).

Krishnaswamy (2005) has argued that the present forces of globalisation carry much post-colonial content such as vocabularies of deterritorialisation, difference, and hybridity (Legg and McFarlane, 2008). These current global forces also emphasise the cultural values, ethical norms, customs and religious beliefs of post-colonial society, the use of certain post-colonial cultural products as evidence and exemplars of globalisation (Krishnaswamy, 2005). At the same time, much of the post-colonial content is strategically marshalled to the production of specific artefacts, technologies of alternative modernities (Krishnaswamy, 2005).

Narayan (1997a) in her book *Dislocating Cultures*, while discussing the notions of nation, identity and tradition, shows how western and Third World scholars have mis-represented Third World cultures and feminist agendas. Narayan goes on to draw attention to the political forces that helped to generate and perpetuate these misrepresentations since the colonial period. She also investigates the embedded and hidden problems through the picture that 'culture' posits for the respect of difference and for trans-cultural understanding. Further, Mohanty (1988; 1991b) criticises her western counterparts for making assumptions that women in various Third World societies were passively accepting traditions (Spivak, 1994; Narain, 2004). It is in this context I embed my argument to address the notion of tradition as a variable concept. However, it is also important to ensure that this thesis does not posit modernity in opposition to tradition.

⁶⁹ Bhattacharjee (2006: 338), in her article "*The Public/Private Mirage: Mapping Homes and Undomesticating Violence Work in the South Asian Immigrant Community*" she exposed new ways to (re)think about South Asian women in their own community and the connection between enforcement violence as recognised by public and private actors. It is in this connection she discussed the term 'South Asian' as an 'identity' and as a 'community' and has described that the ideological force of a nation (be it India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal or Sri Lanka) performs a pre-eminent role in construction of the identity of South Asian. Similar ideas can be applied to study the construction of 'Indian' as 'an identity' in post-colonial India.

The terminology of tradition, though widely used is often problematic in its usage. The term derives from its Latin root as an active verb *traditio* meaning an act of transferring or *handing down* information (Calhoun, 1993). In other words, tradition has to be thought of as a *modus operandi*, a medium, through which information is transmitted, especially for current practices crucial for the process of coordination (Calhoun, 1993). Pierre Bourdieu (1977) argued that those pieces of information need not be manifested by modes of discourse; it may be a knowledge implied symbolically; or even tacit knowledge epitomised through modes of action (Calhoun, 1993). Arguably, the notion of tradition (the process of passing down of information) is actually a part of the notion of *habitus*, rendered, of course, through a process of improvised principles, continual corrections and adjustments (Bourdieu, 1977; Calhoun, 1993).

According to Hobsbawm (1983: 1), in order to serve particular ideological beliefs, certain practices that are considered as traditional are actually constructed or recently ‘invented’ and ‘formally instituted’. In support of this argument, Hobsbawm (1983) argues that ‘invention of tradition’ refers to a set of beliefs controlled by manifested practices and rituals, which instil the traditional values and behavioural norms through continued repetition, indicating its continuity with the past (Jones, 2007). It is in this context, Jones (2007) argues, that these ‘invented traditions’ can be manifested by the concept of a ‘zone of tradition’ by territorialising its boundary and thus fixing it to a particular place. While analysing the politicisation of the term ‘tradition’, Yuval-Davis (1992) points out that ‘tradition’ reinforces the complexity of conservative gender relations.

Williams (1977; 1983), like Bourdieu (1977) and also Calhoun (1993), defines tradition as something associated with the handing down process, but at the same time they also stressed its powerful, passionate and pre-eminent sense of the process involving respect and duty.

Tradition in this sense is associated with memory which includes and excludes to build an intentional 'selective tradition' composed of selective past and pre-shaped present, which is then pre-dominantly constructed to operate within the socio-cultural values of definition and perception (Williams, 1977: 155; Hobsbawm, 1983). Arguably, there is no such thing as fixed tradition; rather it is a dynamic concept, often shaped by spatio-temporal geographical formation (Hobsbawm, 1983; Jones, 2007; Wills, 1996). Calhoun (1993) argues that as the traditional information is passed on to an individual through interactions or other related means, the individual learns to adapt to this information either in their conscious or subconscious minds, or through subsequent actions, thus the significance of a culture (see Chapter 1) is passed on with affirmation.

Hobsbawm (1983) has also argued that 'tradition' can be differentiated from 'custom'. According to him, custom consists of the dual function of motor and fly-wheel and predominates a traditional society. Custom "does not preclude innovation or change up to a point, though evidently the requirement that it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it" (Hobsbawm, 1983: 2). Custom thus, refers to a static concept attached to the maintenance of time-honoured beliefs, conventions and unchanged formalised practices imposed through repetition, but at the same time cannot be totally invariant (Hobsbawm, 1983). Nonetheless, Calhoun (1993) argues that where tradition remains inflexible, it runs the risk of hazardous consequences. Therefore it manifests itself a remarkably inept medium of synchronisation of action (Appadurai, 1981; Calhoun, 1993). Linked to this is the adjustment of traditional practices (often through unconscious action), epitomised in the habitus "can be supple enough to change with other aspects of a society" (Calhoun, 1993: 78).

Chakrabarty (2002), one of the subaltern scholars, discusses the role of the past in driving the modernity of colonial countries, especially India. In so doing, in his tribute to Ashish Nandy, he argues that Indian culture is composed of a blend of ethnic and assimilated undercurrents and beliefs. He goes on to argue that most Indians grow up with some or certain elements of such practices of tradition as a process of socialisation. In a similar context, I argue that my sample of young middle class Assamese women has also grown up with certain elements of tradition⁷⁰ (see also, Appadurai, 1981). I argue that nuanced analyses of the different socio-cultural institutions of a society are necessary to understand the cultural materialities and ideological context of the locales. But at the same time, one should note the political and analytical significance of the practices of tradition are contingent on socio-cultural and ideological factors. Further, discourses and theories often tend to overlook how practices are manifested and experienced in everyday life (Appadurai, 1981; Calhoun, 1993; Bourdieu, 1990; Jones, 2007).

Taking into account all of these above stances, I build on my own research to demonstrate that while some practices of tradition are unaltered, others are altered. I argue that both tradition and modernity reside side by side in Assamese society (Chakrabarty, 2002) and as such the dichotomy between modernity and tradition is not overemphasised in this thesis. Chapters 5 and 6 will demonstrate that these middle class women in higher education demonstrate shifts in certain gendered practices of tradition in their everyday life in order to build their modern identities of ‘having it all’: a career, marriage and motherhood; while at the same time retain other practices unaltered. One such example of (re)tradition includes their responsibilities for childcare and household chores.

⁷⁰ Chakrabarty (2002) however, notes that theories and discourses present society as objects of analysis. But theories are theories. They are not laws; therefore, theories carry their own shortcomings. It is in this context, he seems to argue, that there are certain aspects of society that remain translucent or wholly opaque and that is where theories fail to see beyond a certain boundary. It is this point where people practise to live practically (Chakrabarty 2002).

Calhoun (1993: 79) argues that every society being different, therefore, wherever general information (whether it is historically specific or transhistorical) about a particular society is passed on informally; it is more likely to be handed down through the 'codified or authoritative means'. In such a case, it is increasingly likely that those in authoritative power would definitely want some information to be passed on. Such information can still be considered traditional in the 'colloquial' sense (Calhoun, 1993). For example, with respect to the issues of attire, Chapter 6 shows that some women view tradition as somewhat fixed. Arguably, such sense of the colloquial notion of tradition exemplifies an opinion of thoughtfulness - respect and regard for "“what has always been” (whether or not it is in fact ancient being a matter quite secondary to what is believed to be so)” (Calhoun, 1993: 80).

2.4.0 Understanding Women in Development in India

The section on Second Wave feminism in India above provided an overview of the distinctions between WID, WAD and GAD. Growing emphasis on 'Women in Development' draws on well established critiques on 'gender blind' development discourses, as articulated in the seminal work of Esther Boserup. In 1970 Boserup first called attention to the role of women in development, identifying women as the central agents of economic life. The WID project, as mentioned earlier, has typically been endorsed by American liberal feminists and subscribes to the assumptions of modernisation strategies (Chowdhry, 1995; Rathgeber, 1989). Following this, the United Nations adopted the paradigm of WID which was later changed to GAD (Momsen and Townsend, 1987).

The significance of the WID approach is two-fold: first, to highlight women's role in the economy; second, to make connections between the process of development and changing gender relations (Momsen and Townsend, 1987; Moser, 1993). Although the WID approach fails to take into account the structural and socio-economic factors that causes inequalities

between men and women (Chowdhry, 1995; Rathgeber, 1989), this approach is classified by and large into three sub-approaches: the welfare approach, the anti-poverty approach and the efficiency approach (Chowdhry, 1995). All of these three sub-approaches overlap and often intersect. Nonetheless, its practice and analysis can still be separated (Chowdhry, 1995). The welfare approach recognises women's reproductive roles as mothers by assuming their childrearing as a sole task. This approach embraces the family planning programs, nutrition projects for children as well as for pregnant and lactating mothers (Chowdhry, 1995). The anti-poverty approach formulated in the mid-1970s, aimed at reducing poverty in order to provide the basic needs for the poor. However, development scholars identify women as the poorest of the Homo sapiens (Chowdhry, 1995; Moser, 1993). Therefore, this approach too, like the welfare approach concentrates on basic needs. In the early 1980s, the efficiency approach emerged with its focus on structural adjustment programs, neoliberalisation and privatisations of markets (Chowdhry, 1995). "Since women constitute more than fifty percent of the world's human resources, the efficiency approach urged development efforts to recognize the contribution of women and to integrate them into the development process" (Chowdhry, 1995: 33).

By focusing on the experiences and perceptions of middle class women, this thesis largely corresponds with a WID strategy. Here the aim is to make Assamese women more visible for development policies and agencies by contributing improved understanding of the changing status and role of this specific sub-population. The WID framework emphasises the role of middle class women as actors of social change with respect to higher education and paid employment as projects of modernisation. Women's increased career aspiration and their empowerment are realised through the language of 'power within' that is 'throughputs' through which they participate in the public as actors of transformation. Further, as discussed

above, embracing the efficiency approach of the WID paradigm, it can be demonstrated that the neoliberalism of India has altered some of the ways through which Assamese middle class women construct their identities. Therefore, in the context of India, and as a determinant of women's change in status, it is important to consider first the role of higher education and then, associated with this, renewed opportunities for women's participation in paid employment.

2.4.1 Higher education

Chapter 1 introduced the idea that through a suite of focused policies, the modernisation and expansion of education in India has come to symbolise the functions of both social transformation and equal opportunities for women (Chanana, 2004; 2007). The National Policy of Education (NPE), which was first formulated in 1968 in the wake of the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (Chapter 1), embraces the vision of education, from both its pragmatic and idealistic standpoints (Singh, 2005). Two decades later, however, the government of the late Mr. Rajib Gandhi, who was Prime Minister (1984-89) reviewed this policy on the grounds that the country was at the threshold of the 21st century and formed National Policy on Education, 1986,⁷¹ which had nine chapters. Chapter four (education for equality) of this policy stressed that education would be used as an approach for attainment of basic changes in the status of women, which in turn would play a positive role in the empowerment and equality of women (Chanana, 2004; 2007; Singh, 2005). Later on, both National Perspective Plan, for Women, 1988-2000, the '*Shramshakti*' (Labour force) Report, 1988 and the Platform for Action, Five Years After - An assessment⁷² underscored the role of

⁷¹ In 1990 under the chairmanship Acharya Ramamurti, the 1986 policy was reviewed. Certain provisions of this policy were modified in 1992 on the basis of the recommendations of this Committee. These were however minor modifications. The policy of 1986 however remains the same. Therefore, altogether there are three comprehensive national policy statements on Indian educational system (Singh, 2005).
(<http://www.education.nic.in/policy/npe86-mod92.pdf>, July, 5, 2006)

⁷² <http://wcd.nic.in/empwomen.htm>, June, 25, 2006

education in making women “active partners in the development process” (Chanana, 2004; 2007: 592).

Notwithstanding this apparent concern for women’s increased equality alongside overall improvement of all sections of women through education by the Government of India since independence in 1947, higher education until the 1990s remained largely a state funded activity with approximately 75% of the total expenditure being borne either by the federal government or by the respective state provincial governments (Chanana, 2004; 2007; Tilak, 2004). This made women students’ participation in higher education easier. At present, 41% of the total enrolled students in higher education are women⁷³ (Kapur and Mehta, 2004). However, studies show that women tend to be clustered in specific subjects in humanities and social sciences (Bal, 2005; Chanana, 2004; 2007; Poonacha, 2005). This relates to the underlying philosophy and stereotyping of “feminine roles to feminine subjects” (Chanana, 2004; 2007: 591), which is highly embedded in the process of cultural training of Indian women’s roles as “housekeepers and nurturers, mothers and nurses” (Bal, 2005: 872). This study reinforces previous studies conducted in the West (Harding, 1986; Statham et al., 1991). In a similar context, studies also demonstrate that such agglomeration of women in specific subjects can lead to occupational segregation later in their life (Chanana, 2004; 2007; Sharp, 1976). My research suggests that although occupational segregation remains persistent, women do appear to be entering male-dominated science based courses in rising numbers in India (Chapter 5).

⁷³ Annual Report, 2007-2008, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (<http://education.nic.in/AR/AR2007-08.pdf>, November, 20, 2008)

Since 1991 neoliberalism in India entailed a shift towards increased privatisation and expansion of higher education, resulting in the ‘moral ascendancy’⁷⁴ (The WASS collective, 2007: paragraph 3.1) spearheaded by the changes in the entrepreneurial skills and professional values of the competitive market (Agarwal, 2006; Chanana, 2004; 2007; Kapur and Mehta, 2004; Tilak, 2004). In this context, many private institutions mushroomed, opening up new disciplines such as management, media and mass communication, fashion technology; elevating these disciplines in the hierarchy of higher education (Chanana, 2004; 2007). Alongside, there has been significant growth in private medical and engineering colleges as well as “private vocational courses catering especially to the IT⁷⁵ sector” (Kapur and Mehta, 2004: 4). Further, another significant feature that characterises the political economy of India’s tertiary education due to neoliberalism and increasing integration of the country into the global economy is the growth of a skilled transnational workforce by the software industries (Kamat et al., 2003; Upadhaya, 2004).

It is well documented, however, that one of the negative features of neoliberalism with respect to the higher education system of India is that it has reduced government funding of universities, resulting in an increased pressure on these institutes to treat ‘higher education as business’ by raising their own funds from students, markets or industries (Chanana, 2004; 2007; Kapur and Mehta, 2004; Tilak, 2004). Many studies have been made to address these myriad issues of changes in higher education particularly those that affect women’s access (Chanana, 2004; 2007). My thesis, however, is centred on state-funded educational institutions in Assam: Cotton College, Gauhati Medical College, Assam Engineering College, Gauhati University and Bajali College. These institutions convey a long history of privilege and prestige; they are not new. Chapter 5 sheds light on the gender politics of educational change,

⁷⁴ By ‘moral ascendancy’ I mean the growth of a transnational skilled workforce by the software industry (Kamat et al., 2003; Chanana, 2004; 2007).

⁷⁵ Information and Technology

noting the changing opportunities and development of new career trajectories in Assam as a result of neoliberalism. Chapter 6 demonstrates how young women pursuing higher education in the aforementioned institutions aspire to use their educational credentials to obtain 'respectable' jobs to pursue their own identity in their everyday lives, wherein, for some women, neoliberalism remains a critical player in shaping their career aspirations.

Another significant change in India's higher education is the 'expansion' that has occurred through affirmative action or reservation, especially that of Other Backward Communities (OBCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) (see, Deshpande, 2006; Deshpande and Yadav, 2006; Somanathan, 2006). My thesis does not address the issue of caste as one of the key issues. Rather it highlights the issue of caste that embraces the class system of Assam (Chapter 3).

2.4.2 The role of paid employment in development

As discussed earlier, the pluralism of Second Wave feminism in India is also an expression of Indian women's increased visibility outside the home (Narayan, 1997a, 1997b; Patel, 1998; Ruwanpura, 2004). In response to the 'Towards Equality' report (1974) and new economic policies of India (1991), a number of studies were carried out in India to explore female labour force participation in the labour market (Anand, 2005; Devi, 2002; Dasgupta, 1999; Ruwanpura, 2004; Unni and Rani, 2000). In line with Boserup's (1970) 'Women in Development' approach, it is widely recognised that women's paid employment status is a key factor in determining women's empowerment vis-à-vis their socio-economic status (Anand, 2005; Devi, 2002; Dasgupta, 1999; Ruwanpura, 2004). It is in this context that scholars have suggested different ways to develop women's paid employment (Dasgupta, 1999; Devi, 2002; Ruwanpura, 2004). For instance, Dasgupta (1999) has explored the intra-household impact of an expansion in employment opportunities for women in a dual labour market (informal and formal).

In India, the supply of women's wage labour is arguably more complex as a consequence of the way marriage is used as the principal determinant of women's social position (Devi, 2002; Madhavi, 2005; Sarma, forthcoming). In the West, by contrast, the greatest single determinant of variation in female labour force participation by hours worked and occupation type is the presence of young children (Austin and Pilat 1990; Bird and Bird, 1987; Sekaran 1986; Smart and Smart 1990). The career aspirations of Indian women are therefore affected not only by motherhood but also expectations of marriage and the social norms of home-making associated with this 'subordinate' state (Madhavi, 2005). Importantly, the proximity of paid work to the home (Hanson and Pratt, 1995: 120) and the hard constraints of everyday co-ordination (chaperoning children to school) play a vital role in circumscribing what opportunities are actually available to women in the way they reconcile paid employment and family reproduction work (Jarvis et al., 2001). According to Madhavi (2005), geographical mobility and the spatial arrangement of 'work' and 'life' activities presents a far greater obstacle for women choosing to pursue an independent career than for their male counterparts. This is because Indian women are usually the primary caregiver and as such are reluctant to commute for long hours. At the same time Madhavi (2005) argues that the majority of lower and middle management working women are 'happy' to assume a role of supplementary breadwinner. This view appears to endorse the human capital 'preference theory' of Catherine Hakim (2000). Women are suggested to lack higher aspirations in life and are reluctant to attend seminars and conferences to (re)orient their careers, and these factors relegate women to work at jobs beneath their potential.

The literature within geographical studies has shown that middle and elite class women in paid employment depend greatly "on the labour of their working class sisters in childcare centres, in nurseries, after-school clubs, in their own homes and in the homes of childminders to

reproduce the close daily interactions of care between children and adults” (McDowell, 2006: 840). Many scholars also documented the significance of paid domestic work and the emergence of the ‘new servant class’ as an employment sector meant mainly for women (Gregson and Lowe, 1993; Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Gregson and Lowe, 1995; England and Steill, 1997). The ‘new servant class’ is mainly responsible for providing care (including childcare), cleaning and cooking (Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Gregson and Lowe, 1995). In the context of India too, a large literature documents the significance of paid domestic work (Raghuram, 1993; Raghuram, 2001) in intersection of gender hierarchies with those of caste (Raghuram, 2001). In India, paid domestic work is categorised under the unorganised sector (see below) employing 90% of the total workforce (Raghuram, 1993); and female constituting 93% of the total workforce in this sector (Shram Shakti, 1988; Mathew, 1995; Raghuram, 1993). Further, the household industries in India are one of the major areas of employment of marginal women workers as servants.⁷⁶ These women are mainly employed by their middle and elite class counterparts, who themselves may/may not be in paid employment. Nonetheless, servants are responsible mainly for household labour such as cooking, cleaning, dusting, sweeping and childcare. This is demonstrated through my own research (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Over the last decade, scholars in the West have observed the influence of post-structural and postmodern feminist thinking on female participation in wage labour and gender segregation in employment (Bradley, 1999; Crompton, 1997; Halford et al., 1997; McDowell, 1997, 1999; Mutari, 2003; Runté and Mills, 2004). It remains the case that little is known of Indian women’s participation in wage labour from a post-structural perspective. My thesis too, does not focus on this neglected dimension of development. Rather it highlights the changes in the

⁷⁶ A Resource Directory, 2003

opportunities and constraints facing young, middle class Assamese women, who gain most from the development of new career opportunities. This in turn reflects a trend towards a feminisation of the labour force which is discussed here and elsewhere in the thesis. This also paves the way for a more sustained empirical analysis of the role of higher education and employment opportunities for this sub-population in Chapters 5 and 6. Further, in this thesis I also discuss the contradictions and complications the Assamese women in the sample who are in paid employment, confront in their daily lives, inclusive of their attitude towards career, marriage and motherhood.

2.4.3 Feminisation of the labour force

In recent years, academics (including economic geographers) and development practitioners have started to discuss the implications of a feminisation of the labour force (Gibson-Graham and Cameron, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2005; Kanji and Menon-Sen, 2002; Standing, 1999). The feminisation of paid labour is a process by which changes in global economies and market-led growth alters the demand for (and supply of) women's paid labour in situations where new job opportunities in the growing service sector emphasise skills (such as communication and nurturing) which are typically 'sex typed' as female (Bradley, 1999; Bradley et al., 2000; Casale and Posel, 2002; Jenson et al., 1988; Kanji and Menon-Sen, 2002; Standing, 1999; Sarma, forthcoming).

As with other developing Asian countries, the feminisation of the labour force in India differs from that observed in western countries (Gills, 2002). In India, for instance, feminisation is associated with a process of proletarianisation whereby the majority of women's labour is absorbed into the unorganised sector of employment (Sarma, forthcoming). This is evident in the deregulation of labour markets, a fragmentation of production processes and the creation of new areas of export orientation that demand casual (less secure), low skilled, informal

contracts and ultimately low pay for most female labour (Casale and Posel, 2002; Kanji and Menon-Sen, 2002; Unni and Rani, 2000). Unlike in the West, this feminisation is mainly concentrated in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors of the informal economy of India (Unni and Rani, 2000). But the urban service industry which is categorised under the organised sector economy is now also in the process of being feminised (Ghosh, 2005). It should be noted that, in India the impact of economic restructuring and an associated feminisation of paid work opportunities has been highly uneven, reflecting a historic separation of employment in terms of organised or formal versus unorganised or informal sectors. Overall, the unorganised sector dominates in terms of Indian employment.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the employees of the organised sector economy occupy a favourable position, as they are made secure by labour legislation and are better waged compared to the employees of the unorganised sectors (Barua, 1994; Barua, 1998; Patel, 2005; Venkata Ratnam, 2006). This thesis addresses the issue of gender and a middle class elite who are absorbed mostly in the organised sector employment.

The characteristics of feminisation in India are such that female workers are typically younger than their male counterparts (Dunlop and Velkoff, 1999)⁷⁸ and the majority of them are married. Estimates from the 1991 Census of India showed the average age of all female workers to be 33.6 years compared with the male average age of 36.5 years. One explanation is that younger women, who have benefited most from the post-independence social transformation, are more likely to enter the workforce than older women, because the latter have little experience of paid work in the formal sector (Dunlop and Velkoff, 1999).

Section 2.3.2 has shown the impact of neoliberalism on the feminisation of the labour force in India. In contemporary society, educated Indian women are slowly gaining access to those

⁷⁷ <http://dget.nic.in/dex/empscenario.pdf>, September, 30, 2003

⁷⁸ <http://www.census.gov/ipc/prod/wid-9802.pdf>, July, 30, 2005

areas previously dominated by men such as the legal profession, science and technology, business, bureaucracy and government and more senior appointments in health care (Ganguli-Scrase, 2000). A recent survey by the Business Line from the Hindu ⁷⁹ group shows that India dominates the Asia list in an increase in the participation of women in the top level management, with India leading at 14% followed by Taiwan, while the Philippines and Hong Kong stand at 13% and 9% respectively (see also, Budhwar et al., 2005; Mehra, 2002; Patil, 2001). This finding remains similar to many phenomena of the advanced economies of the West (Crompton, 1997; Walby, 1997). Importantly, like in the West, this increasing presence of women at senior levels, particularly in bureaucratic roles in Indian companies/service sectors, could be perceived as a direct threat to patriarchal management structures as well as the production and (re)production of gender inequalities in the workplace (Madhavi, 2005). At the same time, it should also be noted that Indian women are lowly represented within middle and senior management and the highest legislative and political bodies (Rustagi, 2004; Menon-Sen and Kumar 2001). Nevertheless, the growing trend of Indian women's employment patterns epitomise a significant transformation in their labour market behaviour and positions. Arguably, alongside rapid developments, India is witnessing a continuing, though delayed, feminisation of the labour force (Budhwar et al., 2005). These phenomena reinforce studies conducted in the Anglo-American world (Casale and Posel, 2002; Walby, 1997; Wajcman, 1998).

In sum, the sub-section 2.4.1 discussed the development of higher education in India: that the real changes in development of higher education in India since 1991 are due to increased privatisation of self-funded institutions and policies of affirmative action. The preceding sections 2.4.2 and 2.4.3 also suggest the role of paid employment in development and that

⁷⁹ <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2007/03/28/stories/2007032802251000.htm>, December, 3, 2007

India is experiencing a gradual feminisation of the labour force. However, India is witnessing uneven development in terms of regional development and employment (Chakravorty, 2000). And in Assam, the study area, influenced by India's neoliberal economic reforms, the economy continues to remain in transition from planned to market-based (Chapter 3).

2.5.0 Women's Representation in India

This chapter has reviewed a number of conceptual debates as a lens through which to judge the most relevant body of theory for an assessment of women's empowerment in India today. The work of Anglo-American academic tradition which looms largest in this thesis, and also in this chapter, provides access to a range of critical literature on empowerment and development. At the same time, the point has been made that western feminist concepts and gender theory do not always 'translate' successfully to the Indian context. It is therefore noted that an Indian woman has multiple identities with respect to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, caste and creed. A recurring theme emerging from the review sections 2.2 and 2.3 above is the suggestion that while social, economic and political trends underpinning Indian women's role and status have been following broadly similar trajectories to those of the West, actual transformations on the ground have assumed a culturally nuanced 'selectivity'. The previous sections also demonstrate a transformation of gender relations, especially in urban areas, where middle class and affluent women are challenging norms of domesticity. There is also evidence that greater pluralism and distinctiveness of women's performance, though partial, has slowly been (re)shaping Indian society. The question was asked, for instance, whether India is now witnessing the emergence of a Third Wave of feminism. This section resumes this thread of analysis with respect to evidence of diverse and often contradictory 'new femininities' which might be said to unsettle earlier Second Wave notions of a universal movement of women's liberation. Arguably, what this analysis reveals is the need for a

context-specific grassroots understanding of apparently ‘global’ trends to draw out what impact social, economic and political forces, such as increased opportunities for women to participate in paid employment, have in the daily lives of specific populations of Indian women – in this case educated Assamese students. However, it is important to bear in mind the development of new femininities in India with the difference of construction of new femininities in the West (Bhaskaran, 2004; Gill, 2008). Such changes call attention to the ‘representation’ of women’s experiences in society. Representation is a highly contested term in geography with different meanings (Thakur, 1999) in different contexts such as: representation of one’s constituencies; United Nations groupings in representing accurately the population distributions of the world; representation in terms of economic weight; the need for the United Nations to reflect the major cultures, religions and civilizations of the world; representation in terms of the different regions of the world; equitable representations and the need to enfranchise non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and multinational corporations (MNCs) in the UN system (Thakur, 1999). In short, representation is the focus of scientific practice (Söderström, 2005). That is, this practice implies (re)production of meaning through images or words (Parpart et al., 2000).

Again, many cultural and feminist geographers have imagined the various ways in which geographical representations are spatial and gendered (Chowdhury, 1995; Hirschman, 1995; Marchand, 1995; Raissiguier, 1995). In the context of India, however, there is very little literature that addresses the theoretical representation of the gendered performance of young Indian women. In the Indian context, the word ‘representation’ mainly refers to the various issues of political representation of Indian women (Allwood and Wadia, 2004; Mumtaz, 2005; Sen, 2002; Sinha, 2000; Raman, 2002). But this thesis is not that of the political representation of women; rather it scrutinises young, middle class Assamese women’s performance

underpinning their changing role and status. It is in said context that this thesis represents young, middle class Assamese women by pointing towards a trend of Third Wave feminism in India circumscribed by plural 'new femininities' and 'girl power'. The thesis thus fills this research gap and makes a theoretical contribution with respect to the representation of young Indian women in a climate of higher education and increased career salience. Therefore, in this thesis, representation acts as a vehicle to demonstrate how the complexity of everyday lives is implicated in the construction of identity of Assamese middle class women.

However, a belief in a distinct version of masculinity for men and a 'suitable' femininity for women retains a powerful grip on Indian society (Bhaskaran, 2004). The construction of new femininities are articulated by the ideology of Indianness: the essence that remains well positioned in the minds of women (Bhaskaran, 2004), that may perhaps come to them "as taste, as embodied memories, as cultural training of the senses, as reflexes" often without realising that these women carry these essences (Chakrabarty, 2002: 46). Therefore, the profound construction of femininity is often controlled by the 'discriminatory paradigm'. This paradigm is composed of deeply embedded cultural practices, moral codes and the norms of gendered moral rationalities which control these young career-minded women, and create for them a dilemma of dual social expectations. The new Indian femininities are thus shaped by three important considerations: first, the respect and reverence in which women have been held as nurturers and bearers of life; second, the lingering taken for granted 'traditional' cultural expectations for women to channel all their energies into the home;⁸⁰ and the third, the modern goals for financial independence and a fulfilling career (Borkotoki, 1998; Chatterjee, 2008; Sarma, 2008; Sengupta, 2008)

⁸⁰ Home is defined as traditional, religious and ethnic (Dwyer, 1999)

This geographic sensitivity to the construction of gender recognises a more dynamic and diverse landscape of women's role and status, one which creates tensions and contradictions for individual women to negotiate in their daily lives. This phenomenon reinforces the earlier study conducted by Dwyer (1999) who probes the ways through which young British Muslim women negotiate their competing ideas about femininity in their everyday practices. Within this framework, my thesis explores the contradictory and the complex processes of changing gender politics of the daily lives of young middle class Assamese women. Using in-depth interviews and focus groups Chapter 6 addresses the paradox of increased freedoms associated with wage employment and autonomous careers, alongside continuing pressures to conform to the conventional standards of housework and childcare (Rani and Khandelwal 1992; Ramu, 1989; Shukla and Kapoor, 1990; Sharma, 1986; Shourabh, 2007) within the household and, most restricting of all, rising levels of unwanted attention when out in public (Chapters 5 and 6). This mix of liberation combined with reinforced subordination suggests a neglected tension to the gendered ramifications of 'new femininities' and 'girl power'. At the same time, the thesis also demonstrates that tradition is a highly contested and a variable concept where traditions and modernity reside side by side in Assamese society; and that my sample of young, middle class Assamese women are not accepting traditions passively, instead (re)traditionalising their strategies of housework and childcare responsibilities. In this way, the thesis makes a contribution to post-colonial feminist literature.

Chapter 3

Women's Status and Role in Assam Today

3.1.0 Introduction

The production of this thesis is based on the intersection of class, caste and gender in the specific case of middle class Assamese young women engaged in higher education. The purpose of this thesis is to stimulate a deeper understanding of the complexity of these intersections with respect to attitudes and norms associated with everyday practice. As such, this study offers new insights on gender, class and youth. Having established the theoretical framework in which the thesis is situated, this chapter explores the status of young women in Assam today. The chapter begins by providing an outline of the changes associated with the stratification of class and caste in contemporary Assam. It then moves on to shed light, first, on the shifting nature of household structures that underpin Assamese women's changing status. Second, it focuses on the key epochs and the associated socio-political implications that provide the backdrop to potential transformations in the status of young, middle class Assamese women.

3.2.0 Shifting Phases of Assam

3.2.1 Who are the Assamese?

An important question to consider at the outset of this thesis is; who are the Assamese? The answer to this question is complicated by historic waves of in-migration. Although the state of Assam is dominated by 57.81% indigenous Assamese (Table 3.1), there are other groups of Indian people speaking other languages, for example: Bengali, Rajasthani and Hindi. Some of

these non-Assamese speaking people have settled in Assam permanently after migrating to there to pursue business, jobs, or marriage. Moreover, some of the Hindu, as well as a sizeable Muslim, population had migrated from erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh) during 1947⁸¹. In this respect, the sons and daughters (born or brought up in Assam) of these non-Assamese speaking people could be considered Assamese.

Table 3.1 Distribution of population by Scheduled Languages in Assam (%)																	
Assamese	Bengali	Gujarati	Hindi	Kanada	Kashmiri	Konkani	Malayalam	Manipuri	Marathi	Nepali	Oriya	Punjabi	Sindhi	Tamil	Telegu	Urdu	Non-
57.81	19.43	0.02	4.62	0.0025	0.0004	0.0027	0.02	0.56	0.01	1.92	0.62	0.06	0.0038	0.01	0.10	0.02	12..53
Source: Statistical Handbook Assam (2002), Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, pages, 33-37																	

3.2.2 Class system

Another important factor to consider in defining the socio-demographic profile of Assam is the historic legacy of the class system. The concept of social class is typically based on an understanding of property and employment stratification (Crompton, 1993). Such a framework has its roots in the political economy of Marxist Geography. Extensive discussion of class struggles appears in the prolific work of Karl Marx (1818-1883), who defined social class with respect to the notion of class consciousness. Marx viewed social class not only as a descriptive category but also as a dynamic asset through which it was possible to understand the primary intersections and interactions of history and society (Lee and Newby, 1983; Marx, 1926).

⁸¹ At the time of independence of India when Hindusthan was divided into India and Pakistan

Also pivotal to classical understandings of social class was Max Weber (1864-1920). Max Weber argued that the social stratification of class is multi-dimensional, where 'power' is central to producing the unequal divisions of class in a society (Hughes, 1984: 7). According to Weber, this power relation can be divided into three spheres such as the economic, the social and the political, which are referred to commonly as class, status and party (for details, please see, Edgell, 1993; Hughes, 1984).

Karl Marx's views of class and social stratification however differed to that of Weber's. As Crompton (1993) explains:

“For Marx, class relationships are grounded in exploitation and domination within production relations, whereas for Weber, class situations reflect differing ‘life chances’ in the market”.

(Crompton, 1993: 30).

At the same time, Weber acknowledges that the class position of a society is determined by possession of property or lack of it. Modern discourse of class stratification centres more or less on either Karl Marx's or Max Weber's concept of class stratification. The key pioneers of modern concepts of class are Nicos Poulantzas, Erik Olin Wright, Anthony Giddens and Frank Parkin. Although the first two in this list share some similarity with a Marxist perspective, the ideas of the latter two share an affiliation to the ideas of Max Weber (Hughes, 1984; Giddens, 1973; Parkin, 1972). The discussion below goes on to suggest that the class system in Assam is best understood with respect to the understanding of Giddens (1973) and Parkin (1972) rather than Marx. Both of these scholars embrace neo-Weberian ideas on class. Giddens (1973) divided the class system of a particular society (bearing in mind the cultural variations of different societies) according to the way possession of capital, educational credentials and labour power distinguishing groups within society. He defines this bundle of criteria as

‘market capacities’. Parkin (1972), by contrast, divides the class system of a particular society according to a narrow hierarchy of occupations. Although Parkin argues that possession of property can serve to convey social stratification, he identifies occupational status as a far more convincing criterion for distinguishing groups in a particular society.

Feminist geography maintains an ambivalent relationship to Marxist theory and scholarship. Marxist scholarship, as discussed above, has revolutionised working-class politics but typically subsumes women’s struggle for gender equality within a male-stream⁸² class politics. Although Marxist scholarship has tended to negate the significance of gender politics as an independent cleavage of this class politics, Marxist-feminist writers in the early twentieth century (such as Clara Zetkin 1857-1933, Rosa Luxemburg 1871-1919 and Alexandra Kollantai 1872-1952) believed that the struggle for women’s liberation was best incorporated within the struggle of socialism. The Second Wave feminism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (chapter 2) was also inclined to Marxist philosophy as a radicalised platform to understand women’s oppression in capitalist societies (Sarma, forthcoming).

Subsequent to the publication of David Harvey’s (1989) book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, feminist geographers began to develop more explicit arguments around the cleavages and intersections of class and gender politics (for instance, Foord and Gregson, 1986; McDowell, 1986). David Harvey received considerable criticism for overlooking the significance of women’s struggle (see, Massey 1991 and Rose 1993). This debate concerning the intersecting relationship of class, gender, ethnicity and race in modern and postmodern societies continues today (see for example, Adib and Guerrier, 2003, Crompton, 1993; Crompton and Mann, 1986; Ghorayshi and Belanger, 1996; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Massey, 2005; McDowell, 2006; Skeggs, 1997; Skeggs, 2004; Williams, 1995).

⁸² Male-stream refers to a masculinist approach that tend to neglect and devalue the question of women’s oppression, exploitation and labour (see, Davis, 1983)

Feminist theory challenges masculinist approaches for their neglect of the role of women in social analysis. This challenge highlights the role of social reproduction (Crompton, 1993; Crompton and Mann, 1986; Davidoff, 1995). For example, traditional economic geography defines an economy as consisting of only firms and markets, thereby fails to acknowledge the home economics, which is often based on structures of power as well as social and political relationship, embracing the domestic division of gender segregated work including the care of children, other household members and shopping. Arguably, the activities of unpaid labour of the household provide hugely in the maintenance of household standards of living, and to the sustainability of the overall economy. Therefore, unpaid domestic labour and childcare performed by women at home constitute another facet of class relation (Davidoff, 1995). Again, many feminists explore the emergence of new class conflicts that arise as a result of women's rising entry into paid employment and the public world that affects the nature of women's class relations not only within the society, but also the relations between women in different class positions (Gregson and Lowe, 1995; McCall, 2001; McDowell, 2006; Wheelock and Jones 2002). Nevertheless, the debate over the concept of class continues with new emerging conflicts (see, McDowell, 2006).

In the context of India too, a large number of studies have emerged which focus on the expansion of the Indian middle classes (see for instance, Beinhocker, et al., 2007; Mawdsley, 2004; Ranade, 2005). The emergence of an expanded middle class is typically explained with reference to neoliberalism and urbanisation (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1995; Beinhocker, et al., 2007; Fernandes, 2004; Fernandes, 2006, Ganguli-Scrase, 2001, 2003; Rothermund, 2008; Tharoor, 2007; see also, Chapter 2, section 2.3.2). A growing interest has also been expressed with respect to changes in consumption practices and 'westernised' middle class consumer identities (Lakha, 1999; Scrase, 2002; van Wessel, 2004; Voyce, 2007). For the

purposes of this study of middle class Assamese women in higher education it is necessary to highlight the class system of Assam and within this the emergence of a 'new' middle class.

It is generally true to say that a class system functions in contemporary Assamese society which is distinct from religion and caste (see below). This system embraces the power that people accrue either through the ownership of property and capital or through occupational status. It is the latter which is of greatest importance in the contemporary society. These cleavages also structure power relations, that is, the bargaining power, derived essentially from 'the control of land' and 'capital market' (Saikia, 2000: 159).

Notwithstanding local sub-cultural variations, the class system of Assam shares considerable similarity with the model of class put forward by Giddens (1973) and Parkin (1972). There used to be a general consensus that a hegemonic middle class occupied the topmost rung of the Assamese social ladder (Sharma, 1990; Saikia, 2000). More recently, however, closer scrutiny of the social roots of the Assamese middle class suggests that a middle class in Assam actually belongs to the middle echelon of the social hierarchy (Sharma, 1990; Saikia, 2000). The *Abhijata bhadralok* or upper class comprising merchants, top administrators and bureaucrats with power in terms of market capacities (Giddens, 1973) to control land and capital market, occupies the highest rung of such social ladder. Following this category, the *grihasta bhadralok* or the *maddhyabitto sreni* (the middle class) is understood to follow and accept the leadership of the upper class (Mukherjee, 1991; Saikia, 2000).

While the emergence of a powerful middle class is linked directly to the legacy of colonialism in every state of India, the social roots of this class differs from state to state (Saikia, 2000). Furthermore, the phrase 'middle class' extends over a wide spectrum of social and economic categories as an essentially urban characteristic (Saikia, 2000; Sharma, 1990; Mukherjee, 1991). Although the Assamese middle class is a by-product of colonialism, it has a narrower

social base and follows an unusual trajectory when compared with the Bengali or the Punjabi middle classes (see for example, Barpuzari, 1992; Mukherjee, 1991; Saikia, 2000; Sharma, 1990). Again, the Assamese middle class, unlike other social classes (such as priests and peasants) had no inseparable link and nobiliary pride with the past (Saikia, 2000). Nonetheless, it reflects an amalgamation of colonial bureaucracy, English education, and the role of tea (Saikia, 2000; Sharma, 1990). Each is discussed in turn.

With the development of modern education,⁸³ the colonial rulers actually sought to create a 'middle class' in India which would cooperate in the country's administration. The gradual impact of a rising middle class was visible in changes to the system of law and public administration in urban India (Barpuzari, 1992). Following the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the British rulers annexed their control over Assam (Chapter 1), especially Lower Assam, while Upper Assam came under their control after the Treaty (Barpuzari, 1992). By 1853, as a means to transform the land tenure system, the Government instituted the ryotwari⁸⁴ system (one form of Indian tax systems during British rule), especially in Upper Assam, while at the same time, allowed the continuation of the old system of revenue collection in Lower Assam (through *Zamindars*⁸⁵ in Goalpara district and *Choudhuries*⁸⁵ in Kamrup district). The ryotwari system of Upper Assam created the *Mauzadars* as revenue officers, equivalent to that

⁸³ During the pre-British colonialism, that is, during the 18th Century India, an indigenous educational system in connection with religion was very much in existence. A three tier educational system for the Hindus – *Pathshalas*, *Parishads* and the *Tols* imparting education in the 3Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic and for the Muslims, similar institutions known as *Maktabas* and *Madrassahs* were in existence and are still existent in some places of India. However, the British, following the recommendations of Macaulay in 1835, funded and introduced the modern education system (with the spread of English education) with Western style and content (Saikia, 1962). The current system of education in India is similar to the Western style, but has its own unique features with respect to its reservation policies for the constitutionally defined groups of lower castes: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes.

⁸⁴ A taxing system, through which the government claimed the property rights to all of the land, but at the same time, allotted it to the cultivators on the condition that they pay the taxes. The cultivators were allowed to use, sell, mortgage, bequeath, and lease the land as long as they paid their taxes. Otherwise, they were evicted. This direct tax relation between the government and the cultivators were meant to prevent sub tax collectors, thus increasing purchasing power, and, in that way, improving the marketing prospects for English products. Here, the taxes were only fixed in a temporary settlement for a period of thirty years and then revised. This way, the government increased its revenue (James, 1997).

⁸⁵ Registered local tax collectors often stamped as owners of the land in their district.

of *Zamindars* and *Choudhuries* of Lower Assam. However, by 1872, *Choudhuries* of Goalpara district came to be titled as *Mauzadars*. Arguably, *Mauzadars* as a powerful, wealthy, affluent Assamese middle class is one of the logical outcomes of colonial bureaucracy.

A second section of middle class Assamese created by colonial bureaucracy were those people (with or without formal education) randomly picked up by the rulers, and accommodated in the Government after they attained traineeship either in policing or civil administration (Saikia, 2000). For example, the *Talukdar* is the local revenue contractor, the associate of *Zamindar* in Lower Assam. Similarly, in Upper Assam, the *Mauzadars* were associated by *Barbarua*, who was again aided in his duties by a group of officials: *Hazarika*, *Saikia* and *Bora* (Barpuzari, 1992). It should be noted however, that the officials with the titles *Barbaruas*, *Hazarikas*, *Saikias* and *Boras* ⁸⁶ were actually the *pyke* officials, one of the aristocratic sections created by the *pyke* ⁸⁶ (or commoners) system of the Ahom kingdom. Another section of aristocratic, ex-officials of the Ahom kingdom, who were given responsibility by the Colonial rulers to collect revenues at a local level, were *Baruas*, *Phukans* and *Rajkhowas*. ⁸⁶ Arguably, in one way or the other, these sections of middle class Assamese officials remained the mediators between the government and the governed (Barpuzari, 1992; Saikia, 2000).

With the development and diffusion of the English model of education in the early 19th century in India, the upper middle class Assamese elite emerged gradually, having had their

⁸⁶ Medieval Assamese society with Ahom kings as rulers was essentially feudalistic with two classes-the rulers and the ruled. *Pyke* system is a corvée labour or tax system, often formal in its form, where persons in power (the rulers and official aristocracy) imposed and compelled their subjects (the ruled, especially the peasants, the vast majority of the population, who were commonly referred as the labour class) to pay or perform unpaid labour. The system evolved over time to be divided into *khels* or guilds, according to the locality in which the organised gradation officials of the Ahom kings commanded a number of sets under them. For examples, *Bora* (20 *pykes*), *Saikia* (100 *pykes*) and *Hazarika* (1000 *pykes*). Important *khels* were commanded by a *Phukan* (6000 *pykes*); a *Rajkhowa* (a governor of a territory) or a *Barua* (a superintending officer) each of whom commanded around 2000-3000 *pykes* (Borboruah 1981; Barpuzari, 1992; Gohainbarua, 1976; Hazarika, 2001).

inspiration from their Bengali counterparts (Barpuzari, 1992; Saikia, 2000; Sharma, 1990). This means that the educational facilities being not well developed in 19th century Assam, the intelligent Assamese, with the development of better transport and communication facilities, were inspired to make their way forward to Calcutta ⁸⁷ (now Kolkatta, West Bengal, the most important regional centre of Eastern India) for better prospects especially in pursuit of higher education or of trade (Barpuzari, 1992) or job opportunities. Consequently, an Assamese middle class elite intelligentsia emerged as public servants and salaried employees in and around the district and sub-divisional headquarters of Assam (Barpuzari, 1992). The professional middle class elite sprang up in line with western forms of education and training. Gradually, this section of the middle class elite kept on growing in terms of the learned professions such as legal, medical, teaching in higher educational institutions and secondary schools and journalism. Arguably, education has come to be seen as a significant asset by this class much as Gidden's (1973) market capacity.⁸⁸ Alongside the growing feminisation of the labour force in the contemporary society of Assam (Chapter 5) especially that of the service industry has also been feminised to a great extent.

Historically Assam is the second largest producer of tea ⁸⁹ (*camellia thea*) in the world (Taher and Ahmed, 1998; Bhattacharyya, 2005). Tea cultivation was first started in Assam after East India Company annexed the region and formed a Tea Committee on January, 24, 1834 (Taher and Ahmed, 1998). Since then, tea plantations, processing, manufacturing, and its allied industries such as plywood factories for packaging, have continued to open up new vistas for the Assamese middle class in terms of professional self-expression (Saikia, 2000). It should be noted that a vast majority of the employees connected to the tea industry are labourers, who

⁸⁷ From 1858-1912, Calcutta remained the capital city of British India. However, after the partition of Bengal in 1905 (see also historical sketch of Assam) on communal grounds and boycott of British goods that paved the way for Swadeshi movement, the British moved the capital to New Delhi (Dutta, 2003).

⁸⁸ Market capacity can be defined as a value attached to the possessions and skills acquired by an individual (Giddens, 1973) (see also, last paragraph of page 125 and beginning of 126).

⁸⁹ Mainly black tea, although the state produces smaller quantities of green and white tea.

are mired in poverty and are a marginalised section of Assamese society (statistics reveal that approximately a population of three million belonging to the community of tea tribes live over one thousand tea gardens scattered all over Assam, especially in the western and central districts of Assam) (Gohain, 2007). But at the same time, a sizeable section are engaged in growing, trading and selling of tea, who could possibly be placed in the upper class Assamese or middle class elite, while those employed in clerical and minor establishments could possibly be ranked under lower middle class of Assamese society. Nonetheless, every effort of employers and employees must be accounted “for the cheerful aroma of a morning cup of tea in every household” (Saikia, 2000: 185). Arguably, the emergence of Assamese middle class is an amalgamation of individuals belonging to different professions or trade. Nonetheless, it is a continued imperishable process rather than an event (Saikia, 2000; Sharma, 1990).

“A middle class that will include millions of people who traditionally see themselves as working class, but whose ambitions are far broader than those of their parents and grandparents... I believe we will have an expanded middle class, with ladders of opportunity for those of all backgrounds”.

(Tony Blair, Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, as quoted in *The Guardian*, Friday, January, 15, 1999, the Political Editor, Michael White)

On January 15, 1999, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Mr. Tony Blair commented to *The Guardian* that the concept of class has become blurred in contemporary British society; instead what counts is the individual’s position according to their own ability. In a similar context, in the wake of new economic reforms of India (neoliberalism), class seems to become less important in contemporary Assamese society. Rather an individual’s position based on that person’s own ability is more important. This also reinforces to what Smith (2000) discussed about the virtual evanescence of class from the disciplines of social sciences and beyond. Neoliberalism provides strategies and forces to boost the journey of this

continued expansion of a new rising young Assamese meritocratic middle class (Ganguli-Scrace, 2003) by providing them with intellectual stimulation to strengthen their moral fibre. Yet, for the social scientists, the concept of social stratification remains an important discourse in modern societies. Taking into account the stances of Giddens (1973) and Parkin (1972) I try to divide the class position of contemporary Assamese society based on the credentials of capital market and occupational status (Table 3.2). It should be noted however, that the personality of middle class elite in Assam vis-à-vis Guwahati changed after Dispur (Guwahati) was made the capital city of new Assam following reorganisation of Assam into Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. Hence, it is essential to highlight the shifting history of Guwahati (Assam). The following section engages this shift.

Table 3.2 Class System of Assam	
Class	Capital Market/Occupational Status
Upper class (<i>Abhijata bhadralok</i>)	Based mainly on the ownership of capital and power (bureaucrats, top administrators, merchants, ministers, tea garden owners)
Upper middle class elite (<i>grihasta bhadralok</i> or the <i>maddhyabitto sreni</i>)	Based mainly on educational credentials (professors, doctors, engineers, lawyers, journalists, or similar job holders in privatised, governmental, semi-governmental or public sector organisations)
Lower middle class (<i>nimno maddhyabitto sreni</i>)	Technical and clerical workers and others bearing minor posts in the government, administration, tea industry or in any other public or private sector establishments.
Working class	Based mainly on labour power (tea garden labourers, peasants, menial and unskilled workers)

3.2.3 Shifting history of Guwahati

Most of the educational institutions considered in this study (four out of five) are located within Guwahati, therefore, it is equally necessary to discuss the shifting nature of Guwahati and the emerging nature of middle classness within the city.

On January, 21, 1972, Assam shifted its capital to Guwahati (Dispur) from Shillong (Meghalaya) following balkanisation of North East India (Giri, 2001) and Meghalaya was carved out of Assam (see below). The modern Guwahati city, like Assam, has been identified as the ancient *Pragjyotishpura*, frequently mentioned in the *epics* and *puranas*. There are two

theories as to the origin of Guwahati. Some scholars say that Gauhati, surrounded as it is with hills full of caves (Assamese *Guha*), the name of the city may be derived as *Guha* (cave) and *hati* (a row), that is, city with a row of caves. There are, however, others who argue that Guwahati is associated with '*Guwa*' (arecanut) and '*Hati*', a row, thus making up a village or a town with rows of arecanut groves. Interestingly, Assam is a land of arecanut and one finds arecanut trees almost in every part of Assam. So, to distinguish an important city like Guwahati from other places of Assam, arecanut alone does not seem to be a very important criterion. Instead, the first explanation seems to be more logical and plausible.

It should be noted that present day North East India, the land of seven sisters, is actually made up of ancient Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura and the surrounding hill tracts (Taher and Ahmed, 1998). This means that the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram were all part of ancient Assam. Once this land was a home to diverse races of people such as Austro-Asiatic (present Khasis and Jaintias of Meghalaya), followed by Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloids (comprising most of the tribes of the hills and plains). Following this, came the Indo-Europeans from the West alongside the professing Muslims. Then came the Tai-Ahom Mongoloid group belonging to Sino-Tibetan family in 1228 under Sukapha. During the 17th and the 18th century another five groups of Sino-Tibetan family of Mongoloids (namely, Khamti, Khamyang, Aiton, Phake and Turung) migrated over to and settled in present Arunachal Pradesh and eastern part of Assam. In the early nineteenth century, another stream of migrants, namely Kuki-Chin, Naga and Kachin came from upper Myanmar across the international border to Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and eastern districts of Arunachal Pradesh (Taher and Ahmed, 1998). With the start of the tea plantation, the British rulers lured hundreds and thousands of labourers from Chhotanagpur, Bengal presidency, even Andhra Pradesh (Gohain, 2007). These are Mundari speaking group

belonging to Austro-Asiatic ethno-linguistic family (Taher and Ahmed, 1998). But the geopolitics of Assam bears a spectre history of balkanisation. In the section on caste system of Assam (see below), it has been highlighted that since the arrivals of the Ahoms, there remains a growth of cleavage between different sections of people inhabiting the lands of Assam. This cleavage gained prominence during the British rule. Further, in the section on historical sketch of Assam (Chapter 1), it has been discussed that the colonial geography of Assam received a guinea pig treatment that remains deeply embedded in the emotional sentiments of Assamese people. In 1946 (the eve year of India's independence) following the proposal of the Cabinet Mission ⁹⁰ to drag Assam again into a regrouping with erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), dealt another emotional blow to the Assamese people. Nevertheless with passionate opposition from the Assam Congress Committee together with support from the All India Congress Committee including Mahatma Gandhi, Assam was stopped from going into the pockets of East Pakistan (Bareh, 2001; Gohainbaruah, 1976, James, 1997).

Following the fall out of the language riot of 1960-61, Assam was fragmented once again in 1971, and balkanisation of Assam was taken one step further. That is, the Naga hills region was separated from Assam and made a separate state on December 1, 1963. Following this, in 1970, the Garo Hills and the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills were constituted into an autonomous state under the name of Meghalaya and in 1972 transformed into a full-fledged state. As a consequence of this balkanisation, Assam had to move its capital from Shillong to Guwahati, while Shillong remained the capital city of newly formed Meghalaya. Similarly, Lusai Hills and the North East Frontier Agency were made Union Territories in 1972 under

⁹⁰ On March, 19, 1946, the Cabinet Mission arrived in Delhi with three members Cripps, A.V. Alexander and Pethick-Lawrence and divided India into three groups: Group A- the Hindu Majority provinces that embraced Madras (now Chennai), Bombay (now Mumbai), Orissa and the United and the Central Provinces; Group B- the north western Muslim majority province, the Sind and the Punjab and Group C comprised the north-eastern Pakistan Zone (including Bengal and Assam), where the balance of religions favoured the Muslims (James, 1997).

the respective names of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, further raised to the status of states in 1987. Subsequently, Guwahati, that remained classified as a Class ⁹¹ III town until the 1951 Census, had its status raised to a Class I town by 1961 and then to an administrative capital by 1972 (Giri, 2001). Subsequently, immigration of Indian traders, merchants and small-scale industrialists, such as Marwaris and Sikhs, stimulated capital development in Assam (Chapter 1) and strengthened its ties to India. Arguably, reorganisation of the Assam with Guwahati (Dispur) as its administrative capital, together with immigration of people from other parts of India has (re)shaped the nature of the middle classness personality of Assam to a certain extent. The original Assamese, that includes, middle class, elites and working class, while preserving their own rooted subcultural traits, interacted with the cultural current of the immigrant population, tolerating the linguistic diversity and their respective sub-cultural idiosyncrasies in order to develop a close knit community. Therefore, crystallisation of a contemporary resurgent Assamese middle class is a conglomeration of a diverse immigrant population from different parts of India who have joined the stream of those previously marked as Assamese middle class, characterised by a historical medley of colonial bureaucracy, English education, and the role of tea (see section on class system), usually irrespective of caste (see section 3.2.4).

With the advent of new employment opportunities and consumption practices following neoliberalism, the new Assamese middle class bureaucrats, administrators, traders, merchants, small business owners have worked to build a new socio-cultural space. The vision is of a new Assam which is cosmopolitan and globally connected yet, simultaneously, also oriented towards the family institution. This paradox of openness to innovation alongside strong

⁹¹ On the basis of population size, the Census of India categorises the urban centres of India into six groups: Class I cities are those cities that accommodates a population of hundred thousand and above; 50 thousand to hundred thousand as Class II; 20 thousand to 50 thousand as Class III; ten thousand to 20 thousand as Class IV; five thousand to ten thousand as Class V, and below five thousand as Class VI (Census of India, 1971).

attachment to tacit ‘traditional’ notions of the family shapes middle classness, especially for young Assamese women. Chapter 6 draws on narratives of women in higher education who aspire to make the most of their educational capital while at the same time recognising the embodiment of socio-cultural values in established domestic and family roles, norms and obligations. This points to a reinvented tradition [that is, (re)tradition] at the intersections of class and gender (see Sarma, 2008)

3.2.4 Caste system

One of the basic attributes of the social structure of Indian society, and more specifically intrinsic to the Hindu religion, is the institution of caste that has gradually ramified into the *jati*⁹² system (Ahmad, 1999; Crompton, 1993). This system, as one of the stable and unique structures of Indian social institution, has been studied by a number of scholars (Ahmad, 1999; Chandra et al., 2000; Crompton, 1993; Kapoor, 2007; Kumar, 2005; Gorringer and Rafanell, 2007; Nadkarni, 2003; Newman and Deshpande, 2007). Gorringer and Rafanell (2007: 98), in their engagement with and deeply researched study of the embodiment of caste, use the Bourdieusean perspective to analyse the social position of an individual within a particular caste that determines “one’s ‘caste’ habitus” (see, chapter 1), to compare it with that of Michael Foucault’s model of embodiment. These two models basically theorise the notion of power through which everyday experiences of caste can be sensed (Gorringer and Rafanell, 2007). Using testimonies of Dalit social movement activists in the Tamilnadu protest against caste, Gorringer and Rafanell (2007) suggest that the Foucauldian model presents a better interactant insight into social stratification and formation of identity when compared to the approach of Pierre Bourdieu.

⁹² Based mainly on regional specificity (Ahmad, 1999)

This system of stratification divides the society on the basis of strictly defined occupational division of labour assigned with one of the four *varnas*⁹³ (Ahmad, 1999; Crompton, 1993; Nadkarni, 2003). There is usually a consensus that people of higher caste belong to the upper class of the social ladder. There is however an exception to this rule, as the rank orders of the endogamous corporate group of the caste system functions independently of power or money (Crompton, 1993). Rather, the instruments of social ordering of the caste institution are determined by birth, based on the achievement of the previous incarnation. The institution sticks to the so called values passed on by tradition, social taboos and customs that mirror the *Brahmin*, the priests, the imparters of knowledge and religion, at the top of the social system of *varna*, followed by the *Kshatriyas*, the warriors and the rulers. The *Vaishyas*, whose duty was to ensure the community's prosperity through agriculture, cattle rearing and trade occupies the third hierarchy of *varna* and in due course they emerged as merchants and traders. Whilst the fourth *varna* places the 'untouchables' or those responsible for 'unclean tasks', the *Sudras*, at the bottom of the ladder (Ahmad, 1999; Crompton, 1993). It should be noted however that within each *varna*, there may exist a different hierarchy of caste, connected to a defining occupation.

Kumar (2005: 5) argues that the term social class implies more of "economic connotations rather than social meanings", while caste implies "more of social meanings rather than economic connotations". Nonetheless, he argues that, at times, caste may have economic implications. Another distinction between class and caste is that while the former remains non-hereditary, at least in principle, the latter is hereditary (Nadkarni, 2003). Studies have shown that the most obnoxious principle of the caste system remains the separation of one caste from

⁹³ A system of closed status groups that is different from one another in accordance with the process of rituals performed on occasions such as birth, marriage and death. This system has ramified gradually on the basis of economic diversifications into the *jati* system. Arguably, *jati* is the offshoot of the caste system, where *jati pratha* complies with the system of *varna*, thereby, each *jati* can be comparable to a particular *varna* (Ahmad, 1999).

another, with restrictions pertaining to inter-dining and inter-marriage alongside the denial of access, especially to the untouchables and outcastes, to ownership of land, to temples or water from the village tank or well (Chandra et al., 2000; Nadkarni, 2003), yet, this system represents a complex network that sustains an interdependence one with another. There remains a general consensus that the caste system originated in the Vedic Age (or the Vedic period)⁹⁴ compounded by the Indo-Aryans after the fall of Indus valley civilization (2500-1800 BCE) (Ahmad, 1999).

Ahmad (1999), however argues that with the passage of time and most importantly, with increased urbanisation, economic development, the gradual collapse of feudalistic values, and the simultaneous process of construction of secular democratic polity of India have weakened the caste inflexibilities over place and space. This reinforces the study of Nadkarni (2003) and Srinivas (2003), who argue that the system as a whole is under collapse, but the legacy of caste identities remain (Nadkarni, 2003). Hence, caste as an institution transcends the cultural regions of India. However, the *jati* (the functional organisation of the *varna* system) system conforms strictly to an area dominated by a particular language/dialect (Ahmad, 1999) and covers a broad spectrum of social categories. For example, the *jati* trajectory in West Bengal cannot be compared with that Karnataka or Maharastra (Ahmad, 1999). Similarly, though the initial *varna-jati* system of Assam conforms to that of all India, with the passage of time there has been fragmentation in the *jati* system of Assam, through which a unique sub-cultural trait has evolved representing regional ethos, often forming splinter *jatis* within each *varna*.

⁹⁴ The Vedas, which gave the period its name. During this period, the authoritative Hindu texts, for example, *Rig-Veda* (hymns and praises); *Yajur-Veda* (prayers and sacrificial formulae); *Sâma-Veda* (tunes and chants); and *Atharva-Veda* (or the *Veda* of the Atharvans, the officiating priests at the sacrifices) and alongside Brahminas, Aranyakas and Upanishads were composed in Vedic sanskrit. The period roughly conforms between 2nd millennium–7th century BCE (The Hutchinson Encyclopedia, 1999 edition and “Kama”, Encyclopedia of Britannica online (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9044443/Kama>, December, 19, 2007).

One of the earliest settlers of the region, especially those belonging to the Indo-European ethnic origin, comprising of *Kalita*, alongside the Brahmins as well as a sizeable section of Muslims (who came to Assam as soldiers and craftsmen of the invading armies of the Sultans of Delhi and Nowabs of Bengal) (Taher and Ahmed, 1998), migrated over to and settled in Assam since 1205 A.D. (Kumar et al., 2004). The *Kalitas*, who belong to the *Kshatriyas* (or *Rajputs*) are the earliest settlers in the region, followed by the Brahmins (Kumar et al., 2004). These people brought with them Vedic culture, the Hindu religion and a higher technology of sedentary agriculture (Taher and Ahmed, 1998).

The genealogical structure of Assam also reflects the phenomenon of a tribe-caste continuum (Kumar et al., 2004). It has been already mentioned in Chapter 1 that Assam is the hub of eight major tribes where the total Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of the state stands at 12.4%. The whole non-tribal populace of Assam, who were mainly the tribals of yesteryear, (except the Brahmins, *Kalitas*, *Kayasthas* and few others) is concentrated in almost all the urban areas of the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valleys. It should be noted that it is actually through *sanskritisation*,⁹⁵ a gradual process of transformation through adaptation of Hinduism and its way of life, that they have emerged into the status of the caste Hindu system.⁹⁶ It has been discussed above in this chapter, that for approximately 600 years (1228- 1826), prior to annexation by British, Assam was ruled by the Ahom system, a kingdom of bureaucratic feudalism (Barpuzari, 1992). Although the ruling deity of the Ahom kings was *Chomdeo*, a non-Hindu, non-Buddhist God, the Ahoms patronised Hinduism (Hazarika, 2001; Baruah, 1993) and considered *Brahmins*, the priestly class who are placed in the highest hierarchy in

⁹⁵ An ethnophaulic term coined by the noted Indian anthropologist Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1916–1999) to refer to the process through which a particular *jati* (especially those belonging to the lowest hierarchy of Hindu *caste* system or even tribals) may seek promotion within the caste hierarchy by adopting the practices, habits, customs and ritual ideology of the higher caste of a particular *varna*, which can result in promotion within their *varna* but not between the *varna*. This process of transformation is known as *sanskritisation* (Srinivas, 1952).

⁹⁶ “The People”, Government of Assam, (<http://assamgovt.nic.in/people.asp>, November, 2, 2007)

the *varna* system, as the privileged caste. Over time the kings and other high officials, meant for administration and military services of the Ahom dynasty absorbed themselves into the Hinduised or Hindu-Assamese speaking subjects.⁹⁶ In this context, it should be noted that the titles conferred to the hierarchy of officials (such as *Bora*, *Saikia*, *Hazarika*, *Rajkhowa*, *Phukan*) by the Ahom kings came to be included either into different *jatis*, or formed itself into myriad *jatis* or started functioning as a *jati* in itself on similar lines to the all India *varna-jati* system (Ahmad, 1999). The most common example of transformation through sanskritisation in Assam is the Ahoms (Kumar et al., 2004). Arguably, it is paramount to consider that adoption of Hinduism by the Ahom kings transformed the land of Assam into 'Brahminic Hindu Civilisation' mainly through the settlement of the nobles, royal officials and the Brahmins (Hazarika, 2001; Baruah, 1993). It is well documented that the royal families encouraged the Brahmins as well as the artisans of the royal court to practise settled cultivation to open up a new mode of production (Hazarika, 2001). Gradually, the royal Ahom state acted as an agent of transformation of tribal culture to Brahminic Hindu culture. However, the settled-plough cultivation that served as a subsistence economy was gradually stratified and transformed into feudalism. Consequently, the compactness of the Ahom tribal territory slowly deteriorated and as a result, a multi-caste and multi-community village organisation alongside a settled communal system of production emanated. Thereafter, the cleavage emerged in a nascent form at the threshold of the British takeover of Assam (in 1826 following the Treaty of Yandaboo) between the non-tribals and the tribals, the peasants and the landlords, as well as between the underdeveloped and the developing. Subsequently, in the later part of the British rule, this cleavage was further strengthened on the basis of tribes and non-tribes, people of the plains and the hills as determined by their respective geography of the land. Arguably, in the early phase of state making, the imaginary geographical force

alongside colonialism can be visualised to have emerged from this type of polemic (Hazarika, 2001) (see section 3.2.3).

Earlier, in the 15th century, in particular antagonism to *saktism*,⁹⁷ one of the seats of hardcore esoteric Hindu practices of India; the Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) launched the *Bhakti* or Neo-vaishnavite movement. The movement, a monotheistic faith cutting across caste, creed and religion, fought particularly against casteism in Assam, in its attempt to initiate the whole population of Assam, including members of all castes and religions that included Muslims (Barman, 1999; Hazarika, 2001). His first few disciples included Muslims, tribals and lower castes as well as Brahmins. In contemporary Assamese society however, both faiths (*saktism* and *vaishnavism*) exists in parallel representing a distinctive mark of the composite cultural mosaic. However, unlike elsewhere in India, the *varna-jati* system has never taken firm roots in the social stratification of Assam.

Again, a sizeable population belonging to the Scheduled Caste⁹⁸ (SC) also inhabits the lands of Assam. According to the Census of India, 2001, there are sixteen notified Scheduled Castes in Assam⁹⁹ constituting 6.9 per cent of the total population of the state. This includes the *Bansphors*, *Bhunmali*, *Brittial Bania*, the *Dhupi*, *Dugla*, *Hiras*, *Jalkeot*, *Jhalo*, *Kaibartta* (the tea garden labourers), *Lal Begi*, *Mahara*, *Mehtar*, *Muchi*, *Patni*, *Sutradhar* and the *Namasudras*. They generally, but not exclusively, belong to one of the lowest hierarchies of the *varna-jati* system.

Another caste of Indian social system, other than the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, is the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Jaffrelot, 2000; Ramaiah, 1992). This caste

⁹⁷ Saktism is another sect of Hinduism that focuses on the worship of *shakti* or power (the divine mothers of Hinduism- Goddess Durga, Goddess Laxmi and Goddess Saraswati) (McDaniel, 2004).

⁹⁸ A term introduced by the British in the eighteenth century. Today India is the land of 1116 Scheduled Castes groups which constitutes about approximately 17% of the Indian population (Kapoor, 2007).

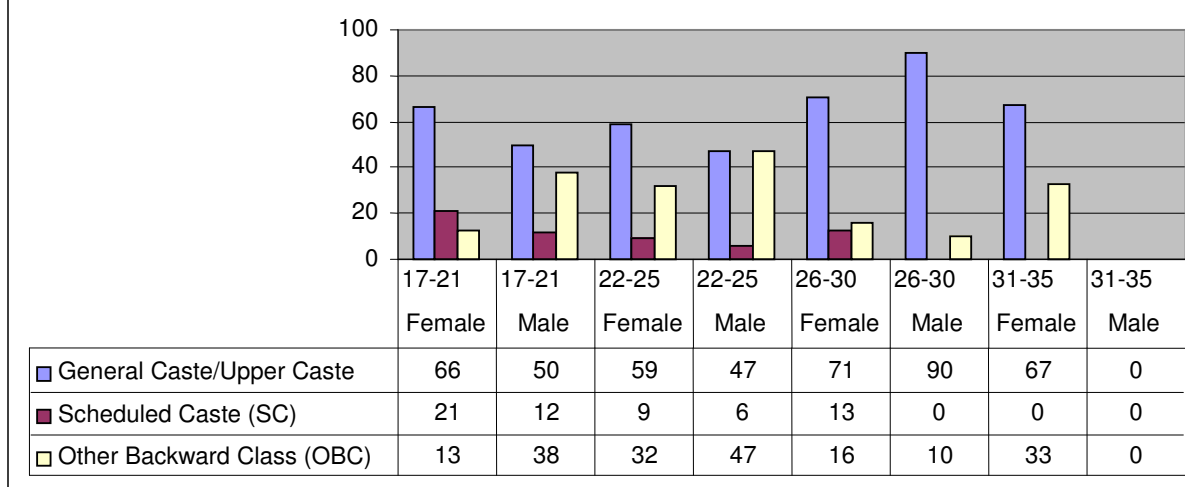
⁹⁹ Assam, The Data Highlights: The Scheduled Castes, Census of India, 2001 (http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_sc_assam.pdf, November, 2, 2007)

remains situated above the untouchables (the *Sudras*), but below the upper castes (*Brahmins* and Kshatriyas and *Baishyas*). The professional activity of this group remains mainly that of artisans and field workers (Jaffrelot, 2000). OBCs represent approximately half of India's population (Jaffrelot, 2000). However, this group, described as a socially and educationally backward class by the Ministry of Welfare, Government of India, is entitled to 27% reservations in public sector employment and higher education.¹⁰⁰ In Assam, the people with the surnames such as *Das*, *Gogoi*, *Bora*, *Hazarika*, *Saikia* are often found to occupy OBC status.

It is important to note that this thesis does not engage explicitly with the redesigning of affirmative action or reservation which is the reason for the biggest expansion in higher education in India in recent years (Deshpande and Yadav, 2006; see also Ghosh, 2006). Indeed, caste was not considered to be an important variable in the analysis of middle class Assamese women's status. Nonetheless, data on caste was sought in the questionnaire as a contingent variable and through this it is possible to confirm the percentage of middle class elite students pursuing higher education irrespective of caste. Although it is true to say that the majority of the students questioned come from an upper caste background (figure 3.1), it is also true that a sizeable percentage of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) are represented among the middle class elite. For example, figure (3.1) shows that over one fifth of females in the age group 17-21 belong to Scheduled Castes. It is also revealed that a significant percentage of students in each age-group belong to Other Backward Classes (figure 3.1). This finding of my thesis corresponds with existing anthropological understanding of M.N. Srinivas (2003).

¹⁰⁰ Articles 340(1), 340(2) and 16(4) of the Constitution of India are responsible for promotion of welfare of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Ramaiah, 1992)

Fig 3.1 Caste Background of Students in Higher Education, Assam (%)
(Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students)



3.3.0 Women's Status and Role in Assam Today

The preceding sections have discussed class and caste as an existing system of social stratification in Assam. This section begins by identifying the shifting household structures in contemporary Assam, followed by key political events that may have a bearing on Assamese women's status and role.

3.3.1 Shifting household structures

In geography, sociology and beyond, the terms 'household' and 'family' are very familiar, yet at the same time conflated and contested (Walby, 1990). As Walby (1990: 61) argues "not all members of a 'family' share a common household, and not all members of a household are members of the same family". Therefore, the two concepts should not be used synonymously (Walby, 1990). Family can be simply defined as "a kin-based co-operative" (Broom et al., 1981: 324). Chant (1997) defines household as a spatial unit that may or may not include members affiliated by consanguinity or blood ties. According to Lobo (2005), the term household needs more nuanced understanding while taking into account its structural,

relational, behavioural and ethnographic elements. Earlier, Shah (1973) defines household as one of the dimensions of family. It refers to the residential and domestic units shared by one or more persons, living under the same roof and sharing the same kitchen (Shah, 1973). Family, on the other hand is a unique social institution that transcends the spatial unit of the household to affiliate consanguinity, affinity or marriage links as well as co-residence alongside a wider network of kinship (Lobo, 2005; Shah, 1973; Zimmermann, 2005). In the West and elsewhere in the developing world too, the nature of family patterns has been changing dramatically, mainly since the 1960s: married couple families (with or without children), cohabiting couple families, single parent families, homosexual families (see, Chant, 1997; Denscombe, 1998; O'Donnell, 1993).

Using a functionalist perspective, Parsons and Bales (1955) believed that the family, as a primary social stable institution, is the first school to provide lessons of socialisation to a new member in order to make her/him an acceptable member of society. Parsonian functionalism also agrees that social construction of gender roles is central to constructing family ideologies; “men in the family performed the instrumental role and women the expressive one” (Parsons and Bales, 1955; Walby, 1990: 63). Similarly, Barrett (1980) stressed the significance of ideology in the construction of gender roles. He argues that “it is within the family that masculine and feminine people are constructed and it is through the family that the categories of gender are reproduced” (Barrett, 1980: 77). However, alongside wider social changes in the society such as industrialisation, increased feminisation of labour and the workforce, liberal feminists such as Young and Wilmott (1975) developed a symmetrical model of family by arguing that family structure is shifting from an extended to a more privatised, nuclear structure based on egalitarian and equal (same) opportunities for men and women where both husband and wife equally share household tasks. However, many researches reveal persistent

inequalities within the household with women performing more domestic labour than their male counterparts (Wajcman, 1983). Earlier, Oakley (1974a), in her study of housewives in London, concludes that the term ‘housewife’, besides being unpaid, dull and monotonous accorded them with low status. In similar context, many radical and Marxist feminists visualise family as a continued site of exploitation of women that helps to perpetuate capitalism and/or patriarchy (Delphy, 1984) especially with regard to women’s sexuality and their function as unpaid labourers within the household (Walby, 1990). My own thesis demonstrates that although the family is not a site of oppression, those women in the sample who combine the work of higher education studies with marriage, motherhood and/or paid work face a ‘double burden’ resulting in persistent inequalities with respect to housework and childcare (Chapters 5 and 6).

Black feminists on the other hand, argue on the grounds of ethnocentrism that families are not always sites of exploitation, but a place of camaraderie and resistance against racist society (Phoenix, 1990; Walby, 1990). As Walby (1990: 76) put it:

“...it is a haven from a racist society- and partly because the comparison between waged work and housework is less favourable to waged labour for women of colour than for white women, because racist structures mean that they get worse jobs.”

(Walby, 1990: 76)

In the simplest sense, the family structure in India is traditionally extended (Lobo, 2005; Morrisons, 2005; Shah, 1973; Thapan, 2001). This contrasts with the individualism and the nuclear family of the West. An extended family is generally headed by the eldest in the family, be it father/father-in-law or mother/mother-in-law, in the absence of her husband, who commands respect from the family members. Besides the head of the family, the other members of the extended family are married sons, their respective wives and children,

unmarried son(s) and daughter(s) and, seldom, widowed sister(s) and daughter(s) (with their children, if any). As the family system in India is by and large patrilocal, the married daughter leaves her extended family and becomes a member of the extended family of her husband.

A multitude of studies document the fact that a varied magnitude of structural change takes place in a society with the introduction of alien values, attitudes and technological processes (Barpuzari, 1992; Morrisons, 2005). “Change implies a process – a determinate continuous change along a continuum, which may be exclusive of chronological time but typically embraces socio-cultural or caste continuum” (Morrisons, 2005: 151). It is well documented that shifting family structures have been fuelled by the development of education, economic and technological opportunities (see for instance, Lobo, 2005; Morrisons, 2005). Earlier, Desai (1955: 97) argued that the very basis of jointness of an extended family system of India is shaken by changes in the rules of exogamy such as composition of the household, laws of succession and the *shraddha* ritual. However, the reasons for family nucleation in India are very complex. Therefore, further research is necessary for more nuanced understanding. My own thesis suggests that among other things, one of the causes of fissiparous shift from extended to nuclear is due to an increased incidence of women’s education and work outside the home that has resulted in an increase in women’s mobility. However, it remains the case that this shift is of dubious benefit, especially for married working women with children who have to face an overload of work, who after a day at work must also tend to the responsibilities for household reproduction (see, Chapter 6).

Although the extended family institutions are still very much in existence in the villages where the society remains primarily agricultural, however, in the towns and cities of Assam only a minority of families managed to remain extended in the face of the challenges and imperatives of modern life. It is not surprising to find in this study, conducted in urban and city institutions

that most of the students are from nuclear families. Out of 182 respondents, 154 belong to nuclear families (130 females and 24 males); 24 belong to extended families (17 females and 7 males) while 4 of them fail to mention their kind of family structure (2 males and 2 females).

3.3.2 Key epochs relating to women's status

The first part of this section has discussed the shifting household structures. As Assam remains a place of political unrest, it is essential to highlight the spectrum of socio-political implication associated with Assamese women's status in particular. In the post-independence period, increasingly influenced by the impact of globalisation, the region has witnessed many changes in terms of economic development and changes in the socio-economic structures of Assamese society. Assam can be considered as a globalised economic space which has tea, crude oil and natural gas industry as natural resources. In addition, major Indian business houses such as Godrej, Bajaj, Reliance, Airtel, Tata, Birla, Steel Authority of India (SAIL), Indian airlines, Jet Airways alongside many more, have set up their regional offices in Assam. Since, 1971, Guwahati became a tea auction centre, the second of its kind in India next to Kolkatta. The only stock exchange in North East India is located in Guwahati (Assam). Yet, Assam remains a developing economy.

Despite five decades of planned development since India's independence, Assam has been trailing behind most of the States of the country in the matter of economic development.¹⁰¹ In the neo-liberal era of the 1990s, Assam has become a strategic site for domestic call centres for private companies such as Airtel, Reliance India, Jet Airways and the like. Regional growth is being further fuelled by the robust transformation of real estates, growth of shopping malls, supermarkets, limited multinational restaurants like *Pizza Hut* and the qualitative and quantitative increase in the availability of telephone services. To a visitor then, Assamese

¹⁰¹ Address by Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi in the 51st meeting of the National Development Council.

landscape is a blend of both melancholy and cheerful looks: international airport, hubs of shopping malls, sky scrappers, newly built private institutions of higher educations, increased mobile phones connectivity, rising property prices, new branded private cars alongside noises of puttering trekkers, city buses always in competition with manual rickshaws, strolling animals on the garbage-littered shabby roads and graffiti on the walls.

In addition, the digital revolution paves the road to technological advancement in Assam too: computerisation of old records in offices, transformation of banking operations, faster and easier means of transport and communication and readily available online governmental, private and public information. Significantly, in this period of the embarkation of the process of neoliberalism, and the concomitant process of modifying the role of the Government, the gap between the rate of growth of economy of the State and that of the country widened appreciably.¹⁰²

One of the key causes for this slow growth is the growing number of militant groups,¹⁰³ of which the most violent ones are the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), and the Karbi Movement, each demand their politico-territorial autonomy (Baruah, 1999; Hazarika, 2001). Other reasons for slow growth include the rising population of illegal migrants from Bangladesh who have radically altered the demographic make-up of the State (Bareh, 2001). Against such illegal migration, in 1979 'Assam Agitation' was jointly launched by All Assam Students Union (ASSU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) which lasted until 1985 (Behal, 2002; Bhattacharya, 1999; Chandra et al., 2000). The large-scale civil conflict and violence that occurred as a consequence of this agitation has been compared by Weiner (1983) to the breakdowns of Northern Ireland, Malaysia, Cyprus and Lebanon. Though this

¹⁰² Chapter II Income, Employment and Poverty, Assam Human Development Report, 2003 (<http://www.undp.org.in/hdrc/shdr/assam/Assam%20Report%202003.pdf>, January, 30, 2005)

¹⁰³ Assam market bombing 'kills six' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7480090.stm, June, 29, 2008)

agitation was called off in 1985 together with the agreement with Central Government of India, that from March, 25, 1971, the day on which Bangladesh gained independence, new immigrants after this date would be deported to Bangladesh. However, this agreement fails to stop flows of illegal migration into Assam. Furthermore, the frequent bomb blasts in different parts of Assam (including the serial bomb blasts that occurred on October, 30, 2008) ¹⁰⁴ uncovers a deep well of anger against the Congress Government of the state for its failure to protect the people of Assam.¹⁰⁵

Women of all walks of life, irrespective of age, class, caste and religion, participated enthusiastically in 1979 Assam agitation, and students formed a regional political party known as *Asom Gana Parishad* (AGP) that was voted into power for the first time in 1985. As a result of the Assam Agitation, the colleges and universities of Assam gradually became active sites of politicisation for students who went on to pursue careers in politics either at the state or national level. However, this agitation did not contribute towards women's involvement in the key decision making processes of Assam politics. Nevertheless, one positive effect of women's broader-level political mobilisation is an increased awareness of political rights and a stronger voice in the political sphere (Kaushik, 2000). Today, many women in Assam have made politics either their part-time or full-time career by working for different political parties, which, according to Gelb (1986: 103), could be called "politics without power".

Women also engage in public demonstrations, ranging from protests against atrocities against women and price rises, to boycotts of dangerous products and campaigns surrounding environmental issues. Among the new generation of Assam, this political awareness is growing fast and leading to the emergence of a new political culture (Bhattacharya, 1999). It is well documented, that Assam Agitation took place simultaneously with the universalism and

¹⁰⁴ Deadly blasts rock Indian state (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7699105.stm, October, 30, 2008)

¹⁰⁵ *Asomor Arthanity* (Guwahati: Asomor Buniyad, 2008)

radicalisations of the women's liberation movement, which is also an expression of Second Wave feminism (Chapter 2). Arguably, the transformation of Assamese women's status can be said to have several inter-connected origins. Therefore, this Agitation alongside Indian feminist movements, economic modernisation and restructuring has had a direct bearing on Assamese culture and 'tradition' pertaining to women's increased education and their participation in paid employment and duties at home.

Another major socio-political change that Assam has witnessed during Assam Agitation was the rise of women's organisations as a direct consequence of an associated violence against women by the security forces.¹⁰⁶ During this phase, many women's organisations such as *Sadau Asom Lekhika Samoroh Samiti* of Goalpara in 1982, Woman Legal Aid Cell, and *Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samiti* in Guwahati in 1989 and many other similar organisations were formed. Inevitably, these organisations voiced opposition to all forms of violence against women and raised awareness of the vulnerable status of women and their position in the society. Figure 3.2 demonstrates the varied publicity materials produced by North East Network, a local non governmental organisation to raise awareness against women's precarious position in Assamese society. Also, the political unrest in Assam, deeply embedded in the socio-cultural matrix of its native people, gave birth to the emergence of a new political culture including a heightened political consciousness amongst women.

In 1994 the long awaited Assam State Commission for women was established to protect the constitutional rights of women and work for their betterment.¹⁰⁷ This led to the emergence of many private, non-governmental as well as governmental organisations committed to

¹⁰⁶ Sexual violence against women by armed forces is an age old phenomenon. This issue of sexual atrocities committed by armed forces received serious attention in the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/cover.pdf>, July, 15, 2008). As Assam suffers from a paucity of good governance, political violence continues claiming peoples's lives where women turn out to be the worst sufferers (refer to also footnote 147, section 5.5.0, Chapter 5)

¹⁰⁷ A Resource Directory on Violence Against Women in Assam

protecting and improving women's rights. According to current estimates, there are 32 counselling centres, 38 legal aid centres and 61 skill-training institutes for vocational training, helping women to get self-employed in different parts of Assam.¹⁰⁷ However, discrimination against women, including all forms of violence still continues.¹⁰⁷ Although these women's organisations have always been at the front of the platform in raising their voices against various atrocities against women, they have rarely spoken out or taken roles against the serious restrictions women face when moving about in public spaces. These restrictions are caused, for example, by widespread verbal harassment in the streets disguised in the form of 'eve-teasing' (Vasudha, 2005) and other types of sexual harassment, such as groping and fondling, especially in the crowded public transport and streets during the rush hours of the day (Awasthi, 2006; Chatterji, 2007; Nahar, 2008; Phakde, 2007; Sharma, 2005; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007). All these forms of harassment could have a direct or an indirect bearing on the changing norms of dress of Assamese women (see, Chatterji, 2008; Sharma, 2007b). Therefore, one of the aims of this thesis is to explore the restrictions imposed on the young, middle class women (with respect to women's accounts of street sexual harassment) of my sample in their geography of routine mobility when out in public (Chapters 5 and 6).

3.4.0 Conclusions

This chapter is an attempt to ensconce a complex theme on class and caste as an existing system of social stratification in Assam. The caste system is embedded within the middle class Assamese. The continued expansion of a rising Assamese middle class is cutting across all sections of Assamese society: the upper, the dominant castes, and the elite sections of minorities, scheduled castes, other backward communities and ethnic groups (see, Srinivas, 2003). It has also highlighted the shifting status of Guwahati: Guwahati (Dispur) transformed from an ordinary city to new administrative capital of Assam in 1972, following

reorganisation of North East India. In doing so, it has tried to reflect on the changing nature of Assamese 'middle classness' in the city. Furthermore, this chapter has also painted how the state of Assam continues to reel from its political crisis, while describing the key events that have had a direct bearing on the transformation of Assamese women's status including women's increased participation in politicisation.



Figure 3.2 Examples of Publicity Material produced by Northeast Network, a local Non-Governmental Organisation (used with permission)

Chapter 4

Methodology

4.1.0 Introduction

The preceding chapters presented and discussed the theoretical and contextual issues concerning women's changing status in Assam. It is now time to focus on the empirical research that I carried out in Assam to explore these issues. The results and discussion (and interpretation) of the empirical study are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the details of the research approach and epistemology together with the feminist practice and grounded theory that supported and shaped the methodology.

This chapter will first briefly describe the research design and approach undertaken for the thesis. After this, the chapter continues in the form of four distinct sections. The first section presents the philosophy and reasons for the feminist methodology and the grounded theory approach alongside the empirical study and the sampling frame. The chapter then turns to discuss the data collection where both extensive and intensive methods are described. The methods of intensive data are introduced with respect to in-depth interviews and focus groups. Next, it identifies a profile of twenty-nine interviewees as well as participants in the focus groups. Following this, it describes my positionality as an insider, how I carried out my research in Assam, including some of the advantages I gained and some of the disadvantages I had to overcome. Finally the last section of the chapter highlights the ethical issues involved during the research process.

4.2.0 Research Design and Approach

The main purpose of the thesis is to explore the attitudes and practices of young, educated middle class women in the context of recent socio-political reforms. These are anticipated to have had an impact on these women's status and role. The research is designed so as to critically examine how these women make sense of higher education, new career opportunities and everyday mobility in a context in which it is recognised that women experience tensions between taken for granted 'traditional' (family) and liberal economic (career) norms and roles. The research design focuses on the contradictions and tensions underpinning women's everyday experience, making the transitions between home, university and work, through public space, negotiating the different roles and femininities associated with these competing realms of daily life. In short, the research traces the obstacles that might circumscribe women's 'progress' in the contemporary Assamese society. I now turn to discuss the research practice that underpins my research.

4.2.1 Epistemology and feminist research practice

Feminist epistemology

My empirical study draws principally upon a mainly feminist epistemology and feminist research practices since it is mainly qualitative and is based on the individual lived experiences of women. The quantitative data by contrast seeks to generate a general portrait of students' attitudes and characteristics. Epistemology means philosophy of knowledge, which is mainly of two kinds: Positivism (or Logical Empiricism) and Interpretivism (that is, mainly Feminist Epistemology, Pragmatism or Hermeneutics and Phenomenology). Feminist epistemology can be regarded as one of the types of interpretative epistemology that asserts all feminist knowledge should be based on local knowledge and/or be interpretative in nature. In

the context of feminist studies, it refers to the ways in which gender influences our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification. Feminists claim that conventional forms of epistemology have not only repudiated women, but have taken men as the only empowered people who are able to decide what knowledge is (Harding, 1991; Raghuram et al., 1997; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Hence feminists call for a separate epistemology. Thus, Stanley and Wise (1993) argue that since the 1970s the feminist movement has highlighted the androcentric bias in knowledge production. They argued that in traditional sociological research, most research has been based on the experiences of men, and women are practically eliminated from the research samples. From their investigation the authors argue that sexism is deeply embedded in social science research.

“The most simple and in many ways the most powerful criticism made of theory and practice within social sciences is that, by and large, they omit or distort the experience of women.”

(Stanley and Wise, 1993: 27)

It is contended that feminist epistemologies are constructed on the grounds of ‘situated knowledges’ (Stanley, 1997) of women’s lived experiences in an androcentric scholarship. In their book, *Breaking Out Again*, Stanley and Wise (1993) focus on Bordo’s article *The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought* (1986) claiming that within conventional epistemologies, sentiments and sensations are repudiated as “a wild zone unnameable to reason and its scientific apparatus of investigation and control” (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 193). In contrast, Stanley and Wise (1993), reject this argument of Bordo for placing sentiments and motivation in an antipodal and a contradictory position.

The feminist challenge demonstrates not only the “reconsideration of the relation between female and male” (Jehlen, 1981: 75), but also highlights issues concerning the causes and

consequences of changes and stability in society. It explores sexual identities and also the neglected effects of culture-wide gender symbolism (Harding, 1987). Therefore, this form of epistemology is at present regarded as a separate approach to study. According to Raghuram (1993), at the initial stage of the development of a feminist epistemological framework, the objective was to acknowledge women by adding questions on women into standard questionnaires and to encourage more women to answer these questions. However, later on it was realised that this approach was not sufficient, as it was still androcentric in nature and the methodology continued to be positivistic. Stanley and Wise (1993) have strongly criticised positivism on several grounds, arguing that it is a problematic term for the feminist. Firstly, they argue it is based on a series of false binaries such as female versus male, emotion versus reason, subjectivity versus objectivity and nature versus science. The most intractable part of positivism is that it elevates masculinity, rationality, objectivity, science; thereby it disparages the feminine, emotion, subjectivity and nature. Secondly, the emphasis of positivism is on objectivity rather than sociological knowledge of the diverse social conditions through which knowledge can be generated. In contrast to the claim of positivists concerning the production of ‘hygienic research’,¹⁰⁸ feminists argue that this approach fails to see research as orderly because it involves no emotions, no experiences and no problems (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 153). Rather it involves ‘research as it is described’ and ‘research as it is experienced’ (Stanley and Wise, 1983). In my own research, questionnaire survey and tables that appears to be positivistic in nature has been used only as a guide (Patton, 1990) in order to share an impact on the research process. Further, feminists embrace subjectivity and the emotional connections between the researcher and the researched because the researcher’s ideologies, confidence,

¹⁰⁸ Hygienic research is produced by positivistic methodology in which the role of the researcher remains absent (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Feminists are sceptical about and addresses the myth of this ‘hygienic research’ “to be replaced by the recognition that subjectivity and personal involvement often have the better claim to “objectivity” through the way they allow the possibility of alternative meanings and understandings to arise” (DeVault, 1996; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Limerick and O’Leary, 2006: 102)

faith, attitudes and ethics shape their research and they are always part of the social relations which produce particular findings. Lastly, feminists argue that by using a scientific approach an imbalance in power is produced between the social science researchers and those researched. Likewise, DuBois (1983) has challenged the notion of value free truth in their research. All feminist research must be based on the principle of women's lived experiences and their respective cultures. Thereby this approach must be capable of bridging the separation of the researcher and the researched by focusing connections through empathy. Further, feminist research, apart from being interested in the scholarly world, must also engage with the political world, to bring about change by empowering women and raising consciousness about women's issues (Harding, 1987). In this respect, feminism can be regarded as one of the foremost political movements worldwide with its motto 'the personal is political' (Cullen, 2000).

Research method

Given that a key objective of my project is to investigate the socio-spatial contradictions of educated women's daily lives in Assam, my research is designed to emphasise and explore the phenomena through women's own accounts. According to Stanley and Wise (1983) and Harding (1987), there is no single distinct feminist research method. Rather, there are multiple methods overseen by distinct feminist approaches to epistemology (Harding, 1987). That is, feminists have drawn upon a variety of methods: ethnography, statistical research, survey research, cross-cultural research, philosophical argument, discourse analysis, and case studies. A distinctive epistemological framework is what makes feminist research unique.

Many researchers have used different types of feminist practice in their research (Kerr, 1998; Lennie, 1999; Lohan, 2000; Pini, 2002). However, feminists have been concerned with the techniques used in carrying out research, the way research is practised and, more

fundamentally, with the processes by which socio-geographic knowledge is formulated. Since the 1970s there has been much debate regarding the use of a separate feminist methodology (Stanley, 1997) and whether quantitative techniques can be used in feminist research (Raghuram et al., 1997; Raghuram, 1993). Both qualitative and quantitative methods have advantages as well as disadvantages. Feminist practices favour qualitative techniques because they reflect on the complexity of women's lives. Qualitative techniques allow the researcher to investigate the feelings, knowledge and understandings of the researched through in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation in order to gain an intense and deep understanding of the processes shaping the social world (Dwyer and Limb, 2001). For example, qualitative methodologies and in-depth interviews and focus groups in particular (which I use in my empirical study) 'allow dialogue between researchers and respondents to provide much more detail on context and process' (Halford et al., 1997: 59).

Jayaratne (1983) has argued that both qualitative and quantitative methodology can and should be a part of feminist research because the quantitative methodology can sometimes provide information which is unattainable through a qualitative methodology. Quantitative methods can act as a research aid and help a researcher to find the causes of an associate and clarify the changes in the trends of a particular area of research. Therefore, quantitative methods are useful for disclosing the generalised patterns (say for example, the overall rise in the level of female literacy rates, development of new career patterns over time, increase in sexual harassment against women and others). Qualitative methods are, by contrast, interpretative and inductive in nature. Ollenburger and Moore (1998) argue that 'feminism' cannot be described by a single technique. Rather, feminist methodology is an application of different principles of feminism to social science. Hence, many feminist researchers argue that both quantitative or 'hard' methods (for example, questionnaires, statistical analysis, geographical

information system and others) and qualitative or 'soft' methods (for example, in-depth interviews, focus groups, textual analysis and others) must and can form a part of feminist research. Quantitative methods are at times essential to provide explicit, detailed and definite information that sometimes is not possible to achieve and acquire through qualitative methods (Kwan, 2002; Raghuram et al., 1997; McLafferty, 2002; Raghuram, 1993; Stanley, 1997). In fact, both kinds of methods can be complementary to one another as demonstrated in my own research.

In this research, the main sources of data are qualitative such as from in-depth interviews and focus groups. The research is not intended to generalise the whole population but instead to explore in-depth the topics of the research and spend a sizeable amount of time with a small population (Krueger, 1988; 1994; 1998; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Wimmer and Dominick, 1997). That is, such research methodologies (especially in-depth interviews and focus groups) are more concerned with the depth of the data rather than breadth (Krueger, 1988, 1994, 1998; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Wimmer and Dominick, 1997). Qualitative methodology is less concerned about wider social patterns of the society-identifying patterns of Assamese women in general or perhaps women of Assam in higher education or by particular caste, religion or region. Rather it is concerned to interrogate these patterns to look for causal processes and also for particular narratives and cases which perhaps give reason to question the universality or straightforwardness of the patterns. Hence, this openness and 'textured discussion' of the interviewees can generate new theories and identify new issues; whereas the standardised questionnaire, the first tier of my data collection, has been carried out on an extensive scale to generalise the patterns in the population.

Although, opinions of different feminists vary with respect to epistemology and research methodology, a strong consensus exists that feminist research should be largely qualitative,

action-oriented and alert to women's experiences. This way a feminist researcher (whether male or female) seeks to understand the depth of women's problems where these include oppression and exploitation, experiences and consciousness. It is in this respect that my thesis explores the conflicting roles, identities and daily lives of career-minded young, middle class women. I argue from my own personal field experience that, in a developing region like Assam, a clearly laid out research method does not work. Therefore, alongside feminist research practice I employed a grounded theory approach to shape my processes of methodology.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory can be described as a general and systematic research method usually associated with qualitative methodology. Originally formulated by Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss, this method aims at a generation of a general theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). The main objective of this method is "to build a theory which is faithful and illuminates the area under study but data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, and then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 23, 24). Grounded theory begins with a research situation and follows an inductive approach that acknowledges the researcher's role developing and provisionally verifying a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data (Martin and Turner, 1986).

4.2.2 Empirical study

The empirical part of the study was carried out between the months of April and October 2003 in different educational institutions within the state of Assam, namely the Cotton College,

Gauhati Medical College, Assam Engineering College, Bajali College, and Gauhati University. These institutions have been selected because students from different parts of Assam come here to pursue higher education and to advance their careers in various academic fields. These institutions admit only the best, most intelligent students, who secure high marks in their examinations and are admitted irrespective of class, religion and language, though they have some places reserved for students belonging to three constitutionally defined groups of 'lower castes', such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other so-called 'backward' classes (such as *Baishyas*, *Ahoms*, and others) (see Chapter 3). These institutions do not have any reservations for students belonging to general or upper castes (such as *Brahmins*, *Kalitas*, *Rajputs*). These students are admitted purely on their respective merits. The following section describes the sampling frame for the thesis.

Sampling frame

The main reasons for examining the question of women's changing status and role through the lens of higher education and the attitudes of young, middle class students has already been discussed in Chapter 1. Focusing on this, higher education draws into consideration the role of access to information technology as well as offering opportunities for students to explore new horizons. Moreover, the student population has been a neglected area of research in gender studies in Assam; it has been historically sidelined or silenced both by society in general and socio-geographic research in particular. In similar response to this, in the West, Stanley and Wise (1993) consider the various ways in which socio-geographic researchers could use less powerful groups as samples of study and allow their voices to be heard whose experiences are usually 'hidden'. It is with this in mind that my thesis seeks to portray the experiences of the younger generation, whose voices have often being omitted from socio-geographic research in Assam.

I conducted my research in three tiers in order to take into consideration the benefits and limitations of individual data collection methods. The first tier included the random distribution of self-completed questionnaires among students across the different educational institutions (through ‘gatekeepers’). For this I made 340 copies of the questionnaire with the expectation that I would get a return of around 250. I distributed 70 each in Cotton College, Gauhati University, Gauhati Medical College and Assam Engineering College. And the remaining 60 questionnaires were distributed in Bajali College. Overall I secured a return of 187 completed questionnaires which represents an aggregate response rate of 55%. However, five of the questionnaires were filled in by students belonging to ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (bearing surnames such as Bodo, Swargiary) who are likely to be from a society of matrilineal influence and are excluded from the main study, reducing the return rate of questionnaires to 54%. Now the question could be why is it necessary to exclude the sample of questionnaires on the basis of matrilineal influence? In this connection I argue that this study stem from a qualitative research project about the changing status and role of young, middle class non-tribal Assamese women, where the family structure as well as the society of Assam is by and large patriarchal and not matrilineal. The breakdown of return rates from the different institutions are shown in Table 4.1. In the second tier of research I selected from the returned questionnaires 29 ‘non-probability purposive samples’¹⁰⁹ of female participants for in-depth interviews. Then, in the final tier, I employed two focus groups from a subset of female students who participated in the earlier surveys. The various issues of these three methods (including the reasons of lower response rate in Gauhati Medical College and Bajali College) are discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁰⁹ Non probability sampling does not involve random selection of samples and purposive sampling is one of the two broad types of non-probability sampling method where sampling is done with a purpose in mind and believed to be representative (Swetnam, 2000)

There were altogether 182 students within the age-group 17-35. The age group was subdivided into four categories: 61 students (53 females and 8 males within the age group 17-21; 84 students (69 females and 15 males) within the age group 22-25; 34 students (24 females and 10 males) within the age-group 26-30. And in the older age-group of 31-35, there were only 3 female students. Altogether, there were 17 married students (15 females and 2 males) and all the married respondents were in the age group of 26-30 and 31-35.

Table 4.1 Field visit, Assam				
Institution	Date of visit	Questionnaires distributed	Response Rate (%)	Average Response Rate (%)
Gauhati Medical College	1 st week, April 03	70	27	
Gauhati University	2 nd week, April 03	70	76	
Cotton College	1 st week, May 03	70	64	54
Assam Engineering College	2 nd week, May 03	70	77	
Bajali College	2 nd week, May 03	60	27	

4.3.0 Methods of Data Collection

4.3.1 Extensive data collection

The first tier of the extensive empirical research involves collection of secondary data from different government offices and NGOs as a source of documentary evidence to support the findings. The second tier includes a questionnaire survey distributed randomly among the students in five different educational institutions. While the third and the fourth tiers of the empirical data include in-depth interviews and focus groups. I discuss each of these tiers in turn below.

Another element of my empirical study, involved visits to academics of social science and feminist scholars in Assam in order to collect their diverse views and perspectives on the subject of women's issues. This framework of expert opinions was very useful as additional

background to different aspects of women's subordination, the impact of global culture and the increase in violence against women.¹¹⁰

Statistics and other government and non-governmental publications

As already mentioned, my research, in part, uses secondary data as evidence in support of some of the findings of the intensive research (in-depth interviews and focus groups). Hence, different handbooks of statistics were collected from the government offices such as the Census Office of India, the office of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics and Government Press of Assam. In addition, some other census data such as literacy levels, employment statistics of India were downloaded from the official website of the Census of India.¹¹¹ In the early weeks of June 2003, I visited the office of the Crime Branch, Assam in order to collect secondary data on sexual harassment against women of Assam. In this connection, I met with Dr. Kula Saikia, Deputy General of Police and a renowned economist of the region. Whilst he was reluctant to provide me with published data he did put me in touch with an NGO called North East Network, which had studied violence against women extensively. Accordingly, I visited this NGO, and talked for several hours with their employees on different women's issues including violence. By this route, I secured a newly

¹¹⁰ Interestingly, one renowned Assamese feminist interviewed was very critical of the student population I am focusing on in this study (women within the age-group: 17-35). She argued that these young students know nothing about their 'tradition', culture and religion, only float on the wave of globalisation, strongly influenced by the media in particular and Americanisation. On the contrary, my interviewees revealed a very different reality. This sub-population was found to be very progressive and to have high aspirations in life. They were well informed, energetic and cultured. In fact, they were "intelligent, competent actors who are able to offer well-informed, accurate and reasonably honest accounts of the activities in which they were involved" (Bradley, 1999: 7). I was also reassured that the accounts of the researched were not distorted by their relationship with me as a researcher (Bradley, 1999) because the responses of the majority of the interviewees of my homogenous sample group were consistent (though at times there were diverse opinions in few set of questions). And in most cases whatever I was told by my interviewees tallied with whatever I observed (Bradley, 1999), I myself being an insider to the research process. All this would appear to reinforce the justification for this close attention paid to the female student population. As mentioned above, the student population is a neglected subject in feminist research of Assam; that is why, this renowned Assamese feminist saw these young women as she perceived. Arguably, as academic research has not so far been conducted with this group, myths and strengths are liable to be reproduced.

¹¹¹ <http://www.censusindia.net/>, April, 30, 2006

released directory on violence against women published by the North East Network. Additional information was collected with the employees of other NGOs - North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati as well as the Women's Research Centre of Gauhati University. Subsequent visits to Assam (in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2009) allowed me to gather further background information in the form of pictures of conditions of crowded public transport during the rush hours, Assamese women wearing western outfits, and updated secondary statistics.

Questionnaire survey

One of the first tasks of the research process included the design of an appropriate scientific questionnaire with respect to the research question. Questions were formulated so as to take minimum time, but achieve maximum details. If the questionnaire was too long, it might not be possible to maintain the interest of the respondents and produce a good response rate. The questions were designed to be comprehensive, mainly with close-ended questions but also to include a few open-ended questions where possible. In order to frame this questionnaire, help was being sought from the Question Bank Social Surveys Online ¹¹² and 'What is a Survey?', a pamphlet prepared by the Survey Research Methods sections of the American Statistical Association. ¹¹³

The questionnaire was divided into three sections (see Appendix I). The first section was devised to generate the personal information of the respondents and their family status. For this purpose fifteen questions were framed, most were close-ended. The second section of the questionnaire was to generate data regarding the issues of 'work-life' balance for those

¹¹² <http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk>, December, 17, 2002

¹¹³ <http://www.whatisasurvey.info/>, December, 1, 2002

females (married or unmarried) working while either studying full time or part-time (including the child care issues of married women). This section contains sixteen questions. The third section was framed to explore the attitudes and opinions concerning what were considered as an ‘appropriate’ female role with respect to childcare in the home and within marriage in everyday life. These questions were formulated on the basis of the ‘assumed’ capability of women compared to men. In framing these questions, the ‘Attitude to Female Role Questionnaire’¹¹⁴ was used to minimise the effect of any possible “prejudiced attitude to feminism” (Popova, 1999: 79) in the respondents. Most statements in the questionnaire were formulated in accordance with tacit ‘traditional’ views to stimulate the respondent to reflect on her/his attitudes to social roles (Popova, 1999). The respondents were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale with ‘strongly agree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ as anchors in a format similar to that previously formulated by Slade and Jenner (1978). Here the questions were close-ended, but a column was provided for comments in each question. Before going to the field, in order to validate the questionnaire, a pilot survey was conducted among 20 Indian friends of mine pursuing PhD.¹¹⁵ The questionnaire was reframed and changed according to their suggestion, of course, discussing this matter with my supervisors as well. For example, earlier, in the third section, I included a few open-ended questions like: ‘what are your aspirations in life and how do you relate your aspirations to your potential family role’ and ‘what are the impact of global culture on the daily lives of young women’. These questions were taken out from this section as I was advised by my supervisors that these questions would be more useful for in-depth interviews, as questionnaire was only a tool, a

¹¹⁴ In 1978, this questionnaire was designed in the UK by Pauline Slade and F.A. Jenner and was tested with a British population. Since my research explores the changing status and role of middle class Assamese women of Assam, I too used this simple questionnaire among the students pursuing higher education to assess their “attitude to females’ social role” (Slade and Jenner, 1978: 351), of course, bearing in mind the cultural and other related diversities between the UK and India. Further, many studies reveal that this questionnaire bears “positive information on its reliability” (Hubbard et al., 1982; Popova, 1999: 79).

¹¹⁵ All of them were reading for the degree of PhD in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, University of Newcastle

route to access interviewees. Now the question could be to what extent analysis of the data of the questionnaire survey illuminates the processes of everyday life. In this context, I argue that while section A is to extract the personal information of the respondents, section B [the section on work/life balance of a woman (married or unmarried) working while either studying full time or part time] and section C (the attitude statements) both illuminate the practices and rhythms of everyday life underpinning women's changing status and role.

In Assam, English is taught as one of the compulsory languages in all secondary and other institutions of higher education. Hence, most of the students can write and speak English. Therefore, the questionnaire was composed only in English, which was administered through gatekeepers (below I discuss about the gatekeepers) in the various educational institutions. Access to these institutions was aided by my insider status; firstly as a former student and a teacher of Cotton College. Secondly, insider status was established through my being born and brought up in the Gauhati University Campus.¹¹⁶ This meant I knew personally a number of people in the administration and in different departments. Here, I contacted three gatekeepers from three different departments: Geography, Law and History. Although I did not have personal contacts in Assam Engineering College and Gauhati Medical College, I contacted two lecturers of these respective institutions by e-mail prior to my visit and through them I gained access to these two institutions. Finally, in Bajali College, which is about 150 km away from the Guwahati City, I contacted one of the lecturers of this college over the phone and, through her; I visited the college and asked her to distribute the questionnaires for me.

Gatekeepers, especially in social science research are those persons through whom researchers gain access to data and respondents (Broadhead and Rist, 1976; Grønning, 1997). Therefore,

¹¹⁶ My father was a Professor, Department of Geography, Gauhati University from 1964-2000. And we lived in the University Campus. As I grew up in an academic environment, I happened to know many people working in the University.

the gatekeepers have the power to influence the research process by imposing entry conditions, by defining the area of study, by restricting access to data and respondents, by limiting the scope of analysis, and by retaining prerogatives with respect to publication (Broadhead and Rist, 1976). Further, they may also sometimes carry power to influence responses to the research enquiries. This is demonstrated through my own research as all the gatekeepers of the aforementioned institutions of higher education, where I conducted my research, were either the lecturers or professors teaching in different departments. I did gain access through them, but as my research tackles the question of changing status of middle class Assamese women, I asked them to distribute the questionnaire only to women students. The gatekeepers of Cotton and Gauhati University perhaps failed to understand or ignored this request and distributed it among both male and female students (although they did distribute mainly to women students). As a result, I received 149 responses from women participants and 33 from male participants.

Though the percentage of return rate is good for the analysis of my research, however, I faced a number of problems, which I narrate here as a limitation of my questionnaire survey. Except for Assam Engineering College, in none of the institutions could I collect the questionnaires in one visit. I had to make several visits, for example: I made three visits in Gauhati University, at least 5 visits in Cotton College and 3 visits in Bajali College while the worst was Gauhati Medical College where after several visits, repeated requests and phone calls, I received 19 questionnaires. This poor response from the medical students could be because being the future doctors of the society, they are assigned with busy duties for their surgeries and clinics; therefore, they may have been unable to spare their valuable time for others. I could understand that the return rate of Bajali College would be poor, because I distributed the

questionnaire in a slack period when the undergraduate examination had started; only a few classes of Master programmes were going on.

From the returned questionnaires, the personal details of the individuals were retrieved, tabulated, filtered and cross-tabulated based on the contingent variables such as; age-group, family structure, such as extended or nuclear. However, cross-tabulations did not show any significance regarding difference in their attitude and the patterns emerging from the data. For the purposes of data analysis, I decided to stick to the age -group. Interestingly, in analysing the data, I could find hardly any significant differences in attitude that related to age. From this, a non-probability purposive sample of 29 female students was selected for in-depth interviews, selecting at least three from each age-group, based on the consent of the 'willingness to be interviewed' question of section A of the questionnaire (see, Question No. 4, Appendix I). This is because as noted earlier, the questionnaire was mainly used as a route to access women students willing to be interviewed in-depth. Had it not been through a questionnaire, it would have been very difficult to gain access to the interviewees in a developing region like Assam, which otherwise had to be relied on verbal consent that remains always problematic. The question remains whether my questionnaire may be viewed as representative. In this context, I argue that on the whole the questionnaire seems to be reasonably representative of the available demographic data of the student population in higher education in Assam although one key disparity remains where the male students are underrepresented. Arguably, the research instruments used for this thesis are robust with respect to the identified aims which focus on changes in middle class women's role and status rather than attitudes relating to a general population of men and women. Table 4.2 demonstrates the selected characteristics of the questionnaire respondents.

Table 4.2 Selected characteristics of the questionnaire respondents		
Level of Study	Number of Students	Percentage to the total number of respondents
Undergraduate	85	47%
Masters* (including M.A./ M.Sc/ M.Com, Medical and Engineering, diploma in education and graduation in legal studies)	88	48%
PhD (including M.Phil)	9	5%**
Gender		
Female	149	82%
Male	33	18%
Age-Group		
17-21	61 (53=Female; 8=Male)	34%
22-25	84 (69=Female; 15=Male)	46%
26-30	34 (24=Female; 10=Male)	19%
31-35	3 (all female)	2%
Caste		
Upper/General Caste	114	63%
Scheduled Caste (SC)	21	12%
Other Backward Caste (OBC)	47	26%
Religion		
Hindu	164	90%***
Muslim	13	7%
Christian and Others	5	3%
Marital Status****		
Unmarried Female	167	92%
Married Female	15	8%
Family		
Extended	24	13%
Nuclear	154	85%
Employment*****		
Unmarried Women	10	5%
Married Women	15	8%
Married Women with Child/Children	14	8%
<p>* popularly known as Post graduates in Assam, ** This can be justified on the ground that the percentage of students pursuing highest degrees in academics is always lower than the Masters or undergraduate level.</p> <p>*** Majority of the population being Hindu **** The mean age of marriage among females in Assam is 18.23 years, ***** sub-population of 25 women in the survey (out of a sample of 182) who were in paid employment as a function of their studies</p> <p>Total number of respondents=182</p>		

4.3.2 Intensive data collection: in-depth interviews and focus groups

Conducting in-depth interviews

As already explained, the principle aim of the thesis is not to explore the status of women of Assam in general, but to explore those aspects of everyday lives underpinning the changing status and role of young, educated middle class women. The key areas of social organisation of the study are higher education, career and routine politics of everyday mobility in the public sphere. Now a possible question could be why only women students interviewed at the second stage. There are mainly two reasons for this answer. First, the project on which I am drawing upon is about the geographies of diverse aspects of everyday lives of young, middle class women in higher education living in Assam that develops understanding of their changing status and role. Therefore, the project is about women and not men. Second, there was already an issue of 'sensitivity' (Hopkins, 2007a: 532) in the questions selected for in-depth interviews, for examples, support of the family and/or spouse in shaping women's career; position of these women within the family as a daughter and /or a daughter-in-law. Further, many of these women faced sexual harassment on the roads while commuting daily from their place of study/ work to home and vice-versa. I feel this sensitivity is to be respected (Hopkins, 2007a); therefore, I deliberately focused only on women students in the qualitative interviews. Accordingly, in the in-depth interviews I explored the extent to which these women in higher education viewed themselves as either career-oriented or domestic oriented, their personal aspirations and the relation of these to their present and future family role; whether they pursued higher education as a personal preference or as an extension of family duty (please

refer to, Appendix III). In the next part of the interview, I probed the prospects of work/life 'balance' that includes the categorisation of 'double burden' in everyday practice. However, it should be noted that in this research, categorisation of 'double burden' also includes the 'total work burden' for women. Accordingly, I probed about the domestic commitments in their everyday lives to both married and unmarried students. But for my interviewees the issue of 'double burden' remains restricted only to married women students who also have a paid work (Chapters 5 and 6). In an ideal world, though paid work, studying, domestic work (such as cooking, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, ironing, dusting, sweeping and shopping) and childcare and rearing (such as looking after infants; teaching children at home; dropping and bringing children from school/nursery/crèche) should all be considered as characteristics of 'double burden' both for married and unmarried students, as the latter may have domestic commitments in the parental home. However, for my sample of unmarried students the rule remains different. Majority of unmarried students claimed that they are freed of all domesticity, instead asked by their parents to concentrate on their studies. But eight married students in the sample already confronted the dilemma of juggling paid work and studies with their roles of mother and wife.

The sample of interviewees includes twelve women who are in paid employment as a function of their studies. It is in this respect, the mothers in the sample were asked about their childcare arrangements and how they wished to raise their children. These women with high aspirations were then asked about their expectations of marriage and motherhood as well as their position within the family as a daughter or daughter-in-law. Discussion then turned to probe the contradictions of career-mindedness of these women when out in public. Interviewees were asked whether any of the women had experienced unwanted attention (such as stalking and verbal harassment locally known as 'eve-teasing') while commuting daily on public transport

and spaces to reach the places of employment or study. This discussion then finally sought to establish views as to whether eve-teasing or groping stems from resistance to changes in women's appearance with respect to the way they dressed, such as ethnic Assamese (Indian) clothing or western fashion.

During the process of interviewing, being an Assamese woman myself, I followed the suggestions of Oakley (1981) and shared my own experience of being a woman. I allowed myself to be gradually involved with the interviewees during the process of conversation. These interviews were more or less like informal talks, that is, 'conversations with a purpose' (Eyles, 1988) rather than formal discussion or what Kvale (1996: 5) refers to as 'professional conversations'. The questions were obviously open-ended and semi-structured, and most of the discussions were two way. In addition, there were full opportunities for the interviewees to raise questions and issues not thought of previously by me (Silverman, 1993), that is, there was an element of 'reciprocal interviewing'. Hence, I also prepared myself to answer the raised questions or issues on the topic of research. Although these interviews were like conversations, I endeavoured to explore the responses of the interviewees without interrupting the interviewee. Above all, I tried to make the interview lively and humorous. At the end of each interview, I provided them with refreshments.

The interviews went very well in as much as the majority of the respondents were enthusiastic, energetic, passionate and well informed. They did not fear speaking out openly. In addition, some of them even broke with the cultural taboos and spoke very openly about their own sexual harassment on public transport and verbal harassment on the streets while commuting daily from home to their places of work. This sense of equal power relations was maintained despite the differences in our ages (with few exceptions the students were junior to me in age). It might have helped that I too was a student in terms of academic status. However, a few of

the respondents struggled to answer some of the questions posed, as they either did not grasp the issues or were unaware of the ongoing debates referred to. Another reason could also be that I myself failed to communicate with the respondents properly. Hence, I learned in this process that I needed to refine some questions of my interview framework as well make my language of communication clearer. This process also revealed that this sample of educated Assamese women were not always equally knowledgeable with respect to various women's issues.

Recording of interviews vis-à-vis issue of language

None of the interviewees refused to have their interviews tape recorded. The importance of recording in-depth interview is well established (Longhurst, 2003; Valentine, 1997) as well as the need to ensure that permission is granted by the interviewee to record the same. Also, tape recording the interview rather than taking notes allowed me to gain a rapport with the interviewee throughout each interview by the use of encouraging phrases, comments and eye contact. This was very important because of the personal nature of the questioning. This rapport was also achieved in part by my ability to speak other Indian languages such as Hindi, Bengali and English, the international language, in addition to native Assamese. As already mentioned the majority of my sample spoke good English. Nevertheless, I did not want to restrict my interviewees to the use of English and they were free to speak in their vernacular (native) language and in their own words. However, all of the interviewees except three were more comfortable speaking in English rather than their mother tongue. As English is the second language of all the interviewees, the question may arise here with regard to its implications for data collection and analysis. In her book *Institutional Ethnography*, Smith (2005), while reconceptualising language as social, argues that language conveys as a medium through which the doings of people can be coordinated subjectively or consciously. In post-

colonial India, the legacy of the English language continues to be a vehicle of communication, a unifying and a modernising force, a marker of imperialism and class privilege among elite groups (Faust and Nagar, 2001; Kumar, 1991). The English language is often also viewed as “the language of social advantage and exciting economic opportunities” (Kumar, 1996: 71), a medium for acquiring and exercising power over native Indian languages (Kumar, 1991; 1996). Many scholars argue that the dominance of English as a marker of the aforementioned forces has created social fragmentation among classes (Faust and Nagar, 2001; Kumar, 1991; Kumar, 1996; Singh, 2006), however, at the same time, scholars claim that parents educated in the medium of vernacular Indian are compelled often to send their children to English medium schools because English education “provides an ‘entry ticket’ into the elite class; perhaps, more importantly, they increasingly suffer in their own lives for not knowing English, or for not knowing it well enough in specific contexts” (Faust and Nagar, 2001: 2880). As my interviewees belong to a middle class elite social group, most of them were educated either in the English medium or the missionary English medium schools established by the British during their rule in India. Therefore, the majority of my interviewees (with the exception of three) were more comfortable with speaking in English rather their mother tongue. Arguably conducting the interviews/focus groups in English has had no negative implications in data collection and analysis. Rather this language issue that has cropped up in my research of conducting interviews/focus groups acted as a bridge to good data collection and analysis. Table 4.3 shows details of which language was used with whom (my interviewees) and why.

It is also interesting to note that both the researcher and the researched are from the state of Assam but communicating and interacting with each other in a second language. This experience is obviously a different one to the experience described by Smith (1996) and Twyman et al., (1999), where communicating in a second language, there could often be

grammatical mistakes and some terms (as used by the British) could be confusing at times because of the use of different words to mean a particular term. For example: the term 'single' refers to 'unmarried'; the term 'postgraduate student' refers to 'students pursuing Masters (MA/MSc); research scholars' refers to 'PhD students' in Assam and so on.

After recording the interviews, the next step was to transcribe them. Valentine (1997) advises that once an interview has been conducted, the researcher should try to transcribe it as soon as possible for three reasons. Firstly, if the tape recorder fails to work during the process of interview, (as happened with two of my interviews), the interviewer will still be in an advantageous position to remember their discussion, which will be quite fresh in her/his mind and they will be in a position to reclaim it in the form of a note. Secondly, it will prevent the researcher going on to record a whole chain of blank interviews. Thirdly, prompt transcription allows translation of meaning to be made properly, where a verbatim translation is not possible. Since only three interviews were in native (Assamese) language, so while transcribing each of these interviews into English; every effort has been made to make a full literal translation of the same instead of summarising it. However, some of the sentences could not be translated word for word. In that case, only the meaning of the sentences has been conveyed.

Table 4.3 Issue of language in conducting interviews/focus groups in Assam			
No.	Names	Language used in conducting interviews	Educated in (that explains 'why')
1	Monalisha	English	English-medium schools
2	Mrinmoyee	English	English-medium schools
3	Rini	English	English-medium schools
4	Pinky	English	English-medium schools
5	Riku	English	English-medium schools
6	Murchana	English	English-medium schools
7	Bijoya	Assamese	Assamese-medium schools
8	Susantika	English	English-medium schools
9	Nani	English	English-medium schools
10	Lani	English	English-medium schools
11	Dikshita	English	English-medium schools
12	Ajanta	Assamese	Assamese-medium schools
13	Rezina	English	English-medium schools
14	Shreya	English	English-medium schools
15	Supriya	English	English-medium schools
16	Manusmita	English	English-medium schools
17	Bonojyotshna	English	English-medium schools
18	Maitreyee	English	English-medium schools
19	Roshan	Assamese	Assamese-medium schools
20	Riniki	English	English-medium schools
21	Shenaz	English	English-medium schools
22	Monajesa	English	English-medium schools
23	Akashi	English	English-medium schools
24	Swarnali	English	English-medium schools
25	Debanushi	English	English-medium schools
26	Indrani	English	English-medium schools
27	Ekta	English	English-medium schools
28	Aslesha	English	English-medium schools
29	Manisha	English	English-medium schools

Further, time was an important factor in the conduct of the interviews. Most of the interviewees were students attending full-time classes, including some women combining part-time studies with paid work. That is, whether it is the 'time' taken out of a class or during a break in between their classes or during the lunch break, it is always 'time' away from study/work or from socialising. Therefore, after arranging the time, date and place for the interview, I had to keep the interviews as brief as possible, as I did not want to lose any quality of the material collected. On average, the length of each interview was in between forty five minutes to an hour. Using a tape-recorder saved me a lot of time. As an additional aid to transcription I wrote down key notes after each interview on the basis of recall. Finally with respect to the collection of interview data in a developing country like India, and an

underdeveloped region like Assam, it has to be remembered that there are frequent power cuts and fluctuations of electricity. Therefore, the equipments used for the interviews (batteries for the recording system) had to be chosen with these constraints in mind.

Contacting participants

I anticipated that contacting the interviewees would be a difficult task, as I knew for sure that unlike western universities, students in Assam do not have student web mail because this type of infrastructure is yet to be developed in its universities and colleges. However, since my samples are students pursuing higher studies, I had an impression in my mind that more than 90% of these students will have their own e-mail addresses in some commercial domains such as hotmail, rediffmail, yahoo or similar services. However, in this thesis, in-depth interview technique has not been used in 'isolation' (Valentine, 1997: 112), but alongside a standardised questionnaire and focus groups. Therefore, as mentioned above, I included a 'willingness to be interviewed' question within the 'personal details section' of the questionnaire with space provided for e-mail addresses. Although a majority of the students did have their own e-mails, they failed to check their e-mails regularly because accessing e-mails at an internet café is very expensive for these students. Therefore, contacting students was a problem. Nevertheless, those selected female students who had their e-mails were contacted this way. Some others who did not have an e-mail but were willing to be interviewed were contacted through the 'gatekeepers' of the respective educational institutes (Valentine, 1997). And few others who gave their written consent in the questionnaire to be willing to take part in the interview were contacted through 'snowballing', through their friends (who had already participated in the in-depth interview), that is, using one contact, which in turn might help to establish another contact. In addition, through these contacts, I collected their respective phone numbers and postal addresses. So, after contacting the potential participants over e-mail/phone or personally

in advance, that is, a few days before each session and seeking their interest in and consent to participate in the programme, a letter of invitation was mailed to each participant by post or e-mail. In addition, a reminder phone call was also given to the participants prior to each session and, prior to conducting the interview, I also sent to each of the selected individuals an interview framework of my research.

Arranging places/logistics

My next step was to arrange a proper place, date and a time to conduct the interview (Denscombe, 1998). Again, regarding the venue of the interview, many geographers believe that the geography of a room and its logistics such as its size and comfort can really make a difference (Denzin, 1970; Longhurst, 2003 and Valentine, 1997). However, Longhurst (2003) and Valentine (1997) argue that if an interviewer has a plan to interview elites such as businesspersons, officials (say, from government or private institutions), then she or he will be compelled to interview them in their own workplace. Out of 29 interviews, which I conducted, 26 of them were conducted in different educational institutions. For this purpose, prior to each interview, a room was booked in each of the educational institutions through the respective gatekeepers. But the geographical setting of the rooms (especially in Cotton College and Gauhati Medical College) were such that the background noises of the institution and noises of the running fans (as the interviews were conducted during the summer of 2003) often interfered with the tape recording.

Three of my interviewees, despite me being a female, refused to be interviewed in the place arranged, but consented to be interviewed in their own house. This could be because of their psychological fear of meeting a stranger (O'Connell Davidson, 1991) or facing harassment (Skeggs, 1994). Here I would like to narrate a small anecdote connected to my in-depth interviews to illustrate the importance of the place of interviewing. When I went to interview

one of these interviewees in her residence, I found her sitting in her lounge and waiting for me with her father. She was pursuing her degree in engineering. Her father was praising her a lot and told me that she was a very bright student. He was equally encouraging her to speak very fluently, giving her the impression that this interview is very important as it is going to be tape recorded, as if I was recording the interview for a radio or TV programme to be telecast later. The father too sometimes responded to certain questions that were asked to his daughter.¹¹⁷ In addition, he was very proud about his daughter being selected for the interview when he found out that this interview is for my research, which I am pursuing at an overseas university. But I was not very comfortable and could not ask her some personal questions (like her position as a daughter within the family and whether she was sexually harassed when commuting daily from home to her college) as her father was sitting beside her during the interview. Moreover, I felt bad and unable to ask him to move out of the sitting room in his own home. Therefore, a proper place for interviewing is essential to generate quality interviewing.

Dress code

Again, in an interview, the dress code of the interviewer can really make a difference. Dressing patterns of different societies are different and in some societies there are even restrictions on wearing particular dress (Lloyd Evans et al., 1994). In Indian society, especially in the urban areas and among the elites, there are no restrictions to wearing any kinds of 'modest clothing' for women including that of modern or western (such as trousers/skirts and tops or shirts). However, women carrying out research activities, especially with regard to academics, are expected to wear ethnic Indian outfits like *sari*, *salwar kameez* or other Indian ethnic outfits. Hence, in order to make my interviewing a success, and being an Indian woman

¹¹⁷ Views of the father, however, are not used in my analysis of data.

from Assam myself, I always preferred to wear either a *sari* or my ethnic Assamese outfit, that is, my *Mekhala Sadar*.

Focus groups

Focus groups in my research have been used for the purposes of triangulation, along with the standard questionnaire and in-depth interviews (Denzin, 1989; Fontana and Frey, 1993). From the 29 interviews, two focus groups were conducted as a subset of this sample in Cotton College and Assam Engineering College selecting six in each. However, unlike in-depth interviews, these two focus groups were group discussions and not group interviews (Kitzinger, 1994). All the above mentioned steps and issues (used for conducting in-depth interviews), like using tape-recorders, arranging places, logistics, dress code, language, were also followed for the two focus groups. However, unlike the in-depth interviews, it was easy to contact the potential participants.¹¹⁸ “Focus groups are often used as a means of accessing the more-or-less public forms of discourse” (Jackson et al., 2007: 911). Therefore, the questions used for focus groups remained mainly to probe whether the impact of global culture on the daily practices of Assamese women- that have changed Assamese women’s appearance (such as their dress). Second, is this change responsible for restrictions of women’s increased mobility when out in the public? The general discussions to shed light on Assamese women’s status were asked for two main reasons. Firstly, to produce an interactive context for the discussion of these general statements underpinning the status of women and secondly, to explore the ground realities concerning the extent to which gender transformations have taken place in Assam. Therefore, these participants in the focus groups first filled in the questionnaire, then gave their personal opinions about their lived experiences of being a woman and some general views on certain questions through in-depth interviews and have

¹¹⁸ Because I selected some of the interviewees who were willing and enthusiastic to participate in the focus groups.

further taken part in focus groups to give their general views on the status of Assamese women. Now the question could be what is the justification for using focus groups? The answer to this question is that the purpose of my focus groups was to better understand the aforementioned mentioned generic issues of women (Hopkins, 2007a, Krueger, 1988; 1994; 1998; Krueger and Casey, 2000).

The two focus groups were carried out in the month of October 2003 after conducting all the interviews. Like the interview framework, a focus group framework was also sent to the potential participants either by e-mail or by post. In addition, prior to each focus group session, a reminder phone call or an e-mail was sent to these participants and a room (like the in-depth interviews) was booked in each institution. Each focus group was conducted only once and the average time for each was one and a half hours. However, unlike the in-depth interviews, I employed a moderator along with me (as my voice was impaired by a heavy cold and cough) to first introduce the topic, then to navigate the flow of discussion and to encourage cross-interaction. Besides, fluent interaction (through eye contact) was also encouraged so that the whole group became enthusiastic and got involved, which in turn helped to draw out quiet participants. In addition to this, prior to the start of each discussion, I confirmed clearly the purpose of my empirical study and provided initial introductions. I also tried to build their confidence by explaining that, like the in-depth interviews, all views given by them are important and will be valued. Further, I stressed on their confidentiality and explained that their identity would be presented in the thesis as pseudonyms (the same fictitious names of the in-depth interviews).

4.3.3 Profile of the interviewees

Altogether I interviewed 29 interviewees. Among them, eight are married and out of these eight married women, seven have children, twelve women are in paid employment as a

function of their studies. Nine interviewees are in the age group 17-21, ten within the age-group 22-25; seven in the age-group 26-30 and three within the age-group 31-35. Pseudonyms are used for these interviewees and this promise has been respected throughout the research. The fictitious names of the participants were made typical of the types of Indian names. The in-depth details which could disclose their identity are not presented. Table 4.4 portrays the biographical/narrative data. This table also highlights the issues of change in status and role of young middle class Assamese women by drawing attention to the subjects' maternal biography. This table follows the list of participants in the focus groups (Table 4.5)

4.4.0 Positionality

Scholars posit that in order to conduct ethical and participatory research, more attention needs to be paid to the issues of reflectivity and positionality (Hopkins, 2007b; Sultana, 2007). The positionality of the researcher can have a significant bearing on sample recruitment and the quality of data collection (Cochrane, 1998; Herod, 1993; 1999; Hopkins, 2007b; McDowell, 1998; Sultana, 2007). Hence, positionality of a researcher in a particular research area and at a particular time means presentation of the self, that is, our age, gender, race, religion, levels of education and personal experience, sexuality, ability and motherhood status (Skelton, 2001; Hopkins, 2009). Currently, debates in human geography and the geography of gender focus on the access scholars gain to privileged viewpoints through their 'insider'/ 'outsider' positionality and vis-à-vis their power in their research (Gilbert, 1994; Herod, 1999; Kobayashi, 1994; Mullings, 1999; Rose, 1997; Sabot, 1999; Sultana, 2007). In this respect, Herod (1999) observes that the 'outsider' and the 'insider' positionality of the researcher are subject to change from time to time and place to place as dynamic, unstable and mobile characteristic (see also, Hopkins, 2009). On the one hand, it can be argued that insider status of the researcher might lead to biased findings. On the other hand, the outsider positionality

might secure greater empirical objectivity (Mullings, 1999; Herod, 1999; Sabot, 1999). Here I consider the practical advantages and disadvantages of my insider positionality, the ethical issues of conducting the in-depth interviews and focus groups in Assam.

4.4.1 Benefits of being an insider

From my 'insider' positionality, I have gained some advantages that I have found out while comparing my positionality with some of my colleagues who have conducted their field study overseas by positioning themselves as an 'outsider'. Firstly, I was free from emotional anxieties as I was conducting my field study in my native place. Had I conducted my field study in some other overseas countries, say, Bangladesh or Pakistan, I am sure I would have a harder time in gaining access to certain types of information and informants. Secondly, I thought of myself as a privileged insider, as I had gained advantage in speaking in my first language of Assamese. Had I undertaken my project in some other states, say Gujarat or Tamil Nadu, I would definitely have been an insider from the point of view of Indian nationality. However, I would have found myself being an 'outsider' from the point of view of language and its associated subculture. In addition, I would have had to learn the respective state language or hire an interpreter, which would have incurred greater time and expensive. Thirdly, my 'insider' positionality did prove advantageous in gaining easy access to the different institutions (since I could easily speak in my own language and share my own experiences). Fourthly, being then the mother of a three year old child, my positionality as an 'insider' gave me an unquestionable insight with respect to the issue of childcare.

Table 4.4 Brief biographical information on each of the interviewees

No.	Names	Level of Study	Age	Marital Status	Caste	Religion	Family	No. Children & Age	Mother's Occupation	Employed in/Aspire to be
1	Manalisa	B.Ed, Part time	26-30	M	GC	Hindu	N	1 son, 4 yrs	Housewife	Junior College Teacher ^{**} but wants to establish a school of her own
2	Mrinmoyee	M.Phil Full time	26-30	M	GC	Hindu	N	1 son, 7months	Housewife	Politics [*]
3	Rini [*]	Masters. (Medical) ^{***}	31-35	M	GC	Hindu	E	-----	Housewife	Doctor ^{**}
4	Pinky	Masters (Medical) ^{***}	26-30	M	GC	Hindu	E	1 son, 9 months	Housewife	Doctor ^{**}
5	Riku	Ph.D, Part time	26-30	M	GC	Hindu	E	1 daughter, 3 yrs	Housewife	College Lecturer ^{**}
6	Murchana	Ph.D, Part time	31-35	M	GC	Christian	N	1 daughter, 3 yrs	Production Manager	College Lecturer ^{**}
7	Bijoya	Ph.D, Part time	31-35	M	OBC	Hindu	N	1 daughter, 5 yrs	Primary School Teacher	College Lecturer ^{**}
8	Susantika ^{**}	Ph.D	26-30	M	OBC	Hindu	E	1 son, 16months	Housewife	College Lecturer ^{**}
9	Nani	Masters (Medical) ^{***}	26-30	UM	GC	Hindu	N	----	Primary School Teacher	Doctor ^{**}
10	Lani	Masters Full time	22-25	UM	OBC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Civil service [*]
11	Dikshita	Masters Full time	22-25	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Middle School Teacher	Civil service [*]
12	Ajanta	Masters Full time	22-25	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	High School Teacher	Civil service [*]
13	Rezina	Undergraduate Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Muslim	E	-----	Housewife	Politics [*]
14	Shreya	Undergraduate Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	High School Teacher	Presently a tutor ^{**} but aspires to be an airline pilot [*]
15	Supriya	Undergraduate Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Government Employee	Airline pilot [*]
16	Manusmita	Undergraduate Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Advertising [*]
17	Bonojoyotshna	Undergraduate Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Civil service [*]

18	Maitreyee	Undergraduate Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Government Employee	Airhostess [*]
19	Roshan	Undergraduate Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Muslim	N	-----	Housewife	Airhostess [*]
20	Riniki	Masters Full time	22-25	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Advertising/Fashion [*]
21	Shehnaz	Masters Part time	22-25	UM	GC	Muslim	N	-----	Government Employee	Higher Secondary School Teacher ^{**}
22	Manajesa	Masters Full time	22-25	UM	SC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Entrepreneur/civil service [*]
23	Akashi	Undergraduate (Eng) Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Engineer (to work for a private multinational company) [*]
24	Swarnali	Undergraduate (Eng) Full time	17-21	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	School Teacher	Engineer (to work for a private multinational company)
25	Debanushi	Masters (Eng) Full time	22-25	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Government Employee	Presently a tutor ^{**} but aspires to work for a multinational company [*]
26	Indrani	Masters ((Eng) Full time	22-25	UM	SC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Engineer (to work for a private multinational company) [*]
27	Ekta	Masters(Eng) Full time	22-25	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Engineer (to work for a private multinational company) [*]
28	Aslesha	Masters (Eng) Full time	22-25	UM	SC	Hindu	N	-----	Government Employee	Engineer (to work for a private multinational company) [*]
29	Manisha	B. Ed Part time	26-30	UM	GC	Hindu	N	-----	Housewife	Junior College Teacher ^{**} but wants to establish a career in politics
Note [*] Rini lives in her parents' house; ^{**} her mother and her brother lives with her family; ^{***} Work full time as a function of their studies; ^{**} already employed in; [*] aspires to be; Abbreviations: Eng= engineering; M = Married; UM= Unmarried; GC= General Caste; OBC= Other Backward Caste; P.A.=Personal Assistant; E=Extended; N=Nuclear										

Table 4.5 List of participants of focus groups	
Assam Engineering College	Cotton College
Debanushi	Shreya
Aslesha	Murchana
Swarnali	Bonojyotsna
Akashi	Riniki
Indrani	Roshan
Ekta	Bijoya

4.4.2 Disadvantages of being an insider

At the same time, my ‘insider’ positionality did prove problematic at times. Being a daughter-in-law and staying with my in-laws in an extended family I had to behave simultaneously as a daughter-in-law and a researcher. As a daughter-in-law I was expected to show a great degree of loyalty and obedience and expected to do most of the housework, especially cooking which is a time consuming and a laborious task. To elaborate on this tension and the input it led to on my processes of data collection, it is constructive to narrate an anecdote. One day I had an appointment at 11.00 am with a participant for an in-depth interview. At that time, our extended family had 11 persons including three daughters-in-law. My other two sisters-in-law were not at home: one was in her parent’s house and the other one was out at work. So, I was supposed to cook lunch for the whole family before going to pursue my own work. I started cooking at around eight in the morning. At around nine o’clock several guests (relatives of my in-laws) turned up without prior notice. So, now I had to entertain the guests, make tea and snacks for them and cook simultaneously. I finished cooking around ten o’clock. The guests left at around half-past ten. After that I got changed and went to conduct my interview. Because of these hidden predicaments it was often challenging and complicated to fulfil the dual roles of daughter-in-law and scholar. Arguably, this tension allowed me to relate personally to the amount of constraints faced by working daughters-in-law in order to pursue their work outside home. Secondly, relatives expect a visit to their places, so, visiting

relatives' places sometimes depleted my valuable time and I could not devote full time to my research. Another disadvantage that I faced during this period was, as noted earlier, many regions of Assam are often affected by power cuts. Alternatively fluctuations of electricity keep the entire region in darkness for hours which hampered my work greatly. It was also difficult at times to work late outside the home, as it is not so safe to travel at night because of the fear of sexual assault (Barooah, 1996; Borkataky, 1992; Sarma, 1996).

4.5.0 Ethical Issues

It is not ethical to conduct research that is poorly planned and badly carried out (Blake, 2007; Greenfield, 2002; Hopkins, 2007b; Sultana, 2007). Therefore, the whole research process was planned, and formulated before going into the field. Oppenheim (1966) suggests that, while collecting information from the respondents for research, the researcher should be careful that the respondents are interviewed in simple situations. Similarly, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggest that each participant must be fully informed about the purpose and uses of the research. Besides, Denscombe (2002) describes that the rights and interests of the respondents have to be recognised by the researcher. Hence, consent was sought from potential participants and those electing to participate to use the data purely for academic and research purposes. As already noted, in order to protect the confidentiality of those involved in the study, the publication of any information or identifiable accounts were avoided. Moreover, anonymity and the chance to use a fictitious name were offered. Furthermore, a written script of the interview will be provided to each participant in due course. In addition, a letter of thanks was sent to each of the participants either through their e-mails or to their postal address. Another important issue I would like to mention here is that during my second visit to Assam I heard that one of the interviewees who was then newly married and was an employee of Pandu College passed away after a brief illness. This news came to me as a shock. Therefore, as a

gesture of good will, I decided to return the cassette to her family members where I recorded her voice during the interview.

4.6.0 Conclusion

This chapter, and the preceding chapters, has presented detailed background information including the theoretical, political and academic landscape in order to interpret the results of the empirical study that are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. This chapter has introduced the basic information about the research process undertaken in the empirical study. It has also discussed the practices of desk-based research and other ways in which the research has been conducted and the data produced. Arguably, a definitive research methodology does not fit the research approach conducted in a developing region like Assam. Instead this approach requires the employment of varied methodological strategies through systematic data collection. The issues of such a research approach include the combination of theoretical positioning; ethical issues; positionality of the researcher; practical infrastructures and techniques; and strategic limitations. Therefore, alongside feminist research practice, I followed the grounded theory approach to make incremental adjustments between the technical matter of methods and the ‘know how’ of research that shapes my appropriate and possible methodology.

PART II

Indicators and Interpretations from the Field of Women's Changing Role and Status

Chapter 5

Women's Changing Status: Emerging Trends and Developments

5.1.0 Introduction

This chapter paints a general portrait of Indian women's changing status with particular reference to young, middle class women in contemporary Assam. The discussion draws on evidence from secondary data sources and an extensive questionnaire survey of 182 students in selected co-educational institutions of higher education in Assam. The purpose of this extensive empirical analysis is to trace the general trends and developments underpinning women's changing role in Assamese society, the complexities of which are then interrogated and explored in greater depth in Chapter 6.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 5.2 considers the evidence pertaining to recent developments in higher education. It also highlights the emergence of new career trajectories for young women particularly as a consequence of the new economic policies of India influenced by neoliberalism. Section 5.3 examines the competing identities of young Assamese women with respect to their attitudes and expectations regarding notions of career, marriage and motherhood. Section 5.4 turns to the potential obstacles to women's full participation in higher education and the careers they hope to pursue, starting to tease out the current or anticipated issues of work-life balance. This uncovers a distinct pattern of women's multiple roles within the household with respect to housework, childcare and marriage. Following this discussion of trends and developments in the private or domestic sphere Section 5.5 attends to the politics of everyday mobility, highlighting the problems faced by

Assamese women in public, such as unwanted touching and verbal harassment locally known as ‘eve-teasing’.

5.2.0 Higher Education, New Career Trajectories and Neoliberalism

5.2.1 Higher education

Independent India has one of the largest systems of higher education ¹¹⁹ in the world with as many as 416 Universities at present comprising 251 State Universities, 24 Central Universities, 103 Deemed Universities, 5 Institutions established under States legislations and 33 Institutes of national importance established by Central Legislation. ¹²⁰ In addition, there are about 20,677 colleges with a total enrolment of 116, 000, 00 students (Table 5.1, which traces the expansion of higher education in India since independence). Reflecting broader ideas of Indian culture, higher education in the country is seen as a progressive and a liberating force by which each individual is empowered. Higher education in India is also perceived as a bridge between the past, present and the future: it is viewed as the means by which valued Indian tacit knowledge of ‘traditions’ can be transferred to new generations. ¹²¹ As part of this broader Indian context, Assam is also developing a strong system of higher education with two central universities, three state universities, one Indian Institute of Technology and various other institutions of higher education. Table 5.2 shows the growth of

¹¹⁹ In India, the structure of education system could be divided into five tiers – Pre-Primary (in the age-group 3-5 where the infants learn the skills of reading and writing); Primary (children within the age-group 6-11 are enrolled in Year One through Year Five); Middle School (children within the age-group 12-14 are organised within Year Six through Year Eight), High School (aged 14-17 are enrolled in Year Nine through Twelve) and higher education is a vehicle to specialise in a particular field which includes medical school, technical schools, colleges and universities (Saikia, 1962)

¹²⁰ Annual Report, 2007-2008, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (<http://education.nic.in/AR/AR2007-08.pdf>, November, 20, 2008)

¹²¹ Higher education in India Vision and Action Country Paper, Government of India, Department of Education, (<http://www.education.nic.in/htmlweb/unhighedu.htm>, June, 5, 2005)

higher education in Assam since independence. In theory it is a meritocratic system in which both females and males enjoy equal access. However, in practice, it will be seen in Chapter 6 that socio-cultural barriers continue to exist for women with respect to expectations of marriage and motherhood. Further, it is widely recognised that the Indian system of higher education is driven largely by the middle class elite (also, Bal, 2005; Kamat et al., 2004).

As already mentioned in Chapter 2, women are 41% of total enrolled students (Kapur and Mehta, 2004). Kerela records the highest percentage of women's enrolment while Bihar the lowest (figure 5.1). Table 5.3 shows the participation of females in higher education in Assam: it shows figures for female enrolment on different courses, as a proportion of total student enrolment. According to this table, of all students enrolled in higher education 35% are women. This proportion of women varies within different disciplines. For example, out of the students enrolled in the medical institutes of Assam, approximately 31% are women. Similarly, the percentage of total enrolment of women in science faculties (MSc and BSc) is respectively 33% and 17%, while in engineering and technology it is just 9%. By contrast, the percentage of female students enrolled in the arts faculties (MA and BA) is 45% and 41% respectively while the percentage of female students pursuing Ph.D/D.Phil/M.Phil is 43%. Similarly, in the commerce stream, a taken for granted male bastion, the percentage of females pursuing M.Com and B.Com is 20% and 14% respectively.

Table 5.1 Growth of higher education in India			
Institutions	1950-51	1990-91	2007-2008
Universities*	30	170	416
Colleges**	750	7346	20,677
Enrolment (000s)	263	4925	116,00000

Note: *includes institutions deemed to be universities, but excludes other institutions and ** includes Arts, Science, Commerce, all Medical [M.B.B.S, Ayurved, Nursing, Pharmacy and Dental Colleges], Engineering, Technology and Architecture

Sources: Annual Report 1996-97 (New Delhi: University Grants Commission); and Annual Report 2007-2008 Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (<http://education.nic.in/AR/AR2007-08.pdf>, November, 20, 2008)

Table 5.2 Growth of higher education in Assam					
Institutions	1948	1955-56	1960-61	1988-89	2004-2006
Universities	1	1	1	3	5
Colleges of General Education	N.A. *	24	41	173	442
Professional Colleges		8	8	45	116**

*Not Available **including Indian Institute of Technology

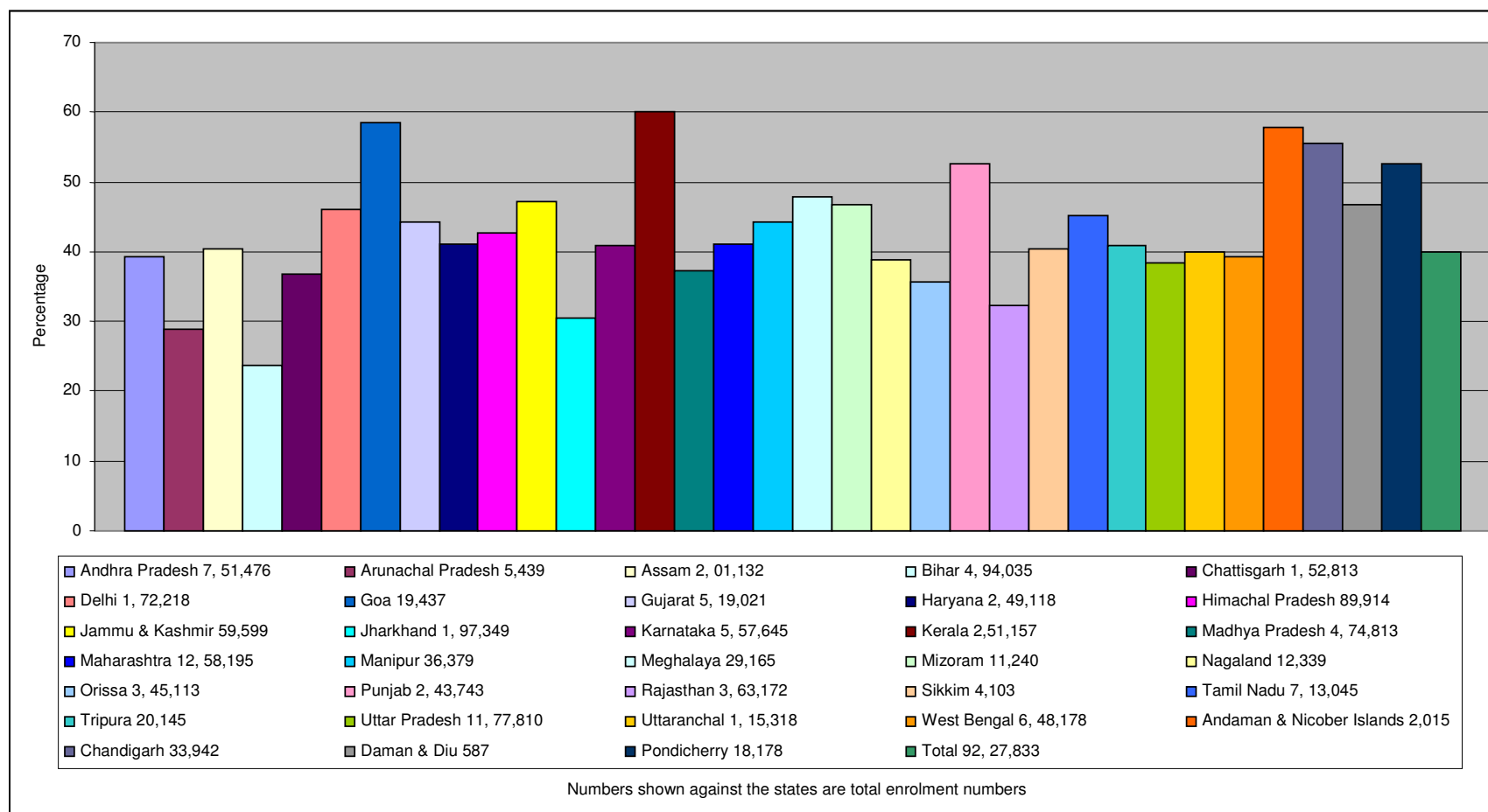
Sources: Saikia (1962); Statistical Handbook, Assam 2002 Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, pages 180-181 and Statistical Handbook, Assam, 2007 Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, pages 181-182

Table 5.3 Total enrolment by courses/stages of studies in Assam, 2004-2005			
Courses/Stages	Total Enrolment		
	Total	Female	% of Female
Ph.D. Sc/ D.Phil/ M.Phil	752	323	42.95
M. A	7531	3367	44.70
M. Sc	3994	1324	33.14
M.Com	1094	219	20.01
B. A & B.A.(Hons)	144605	57985	40.09
B. Sc. & B.Sc.(Hons)	31507	5340	16.94
B. Com & B.Com (Hons)	16696	2387	14.29
B. E & B.Sc (Eng.)	3810	350	9.18
B. Ed / B.T	2387	957	40.09
M.B.B.S (Alopathy) including Ayurveda/ Homeopathy/ Dentistry	2556	791	30.94
Information Technology	N.A.	N.A.	-
Management Courses	213	73	34.27
L.L.B/ L.L.M	7165	1576	21.99
Agriculture and Forestry Courses	N.A.	N.A.	-
Intermediate/Junior College/Pre-Degree/ Pre-University	34133	13376	39.18
Higher Secondary (College)	136756	49509	36.20
Polytechnic (Diploma)	4500	505	11.22
Technical, Industrial Art & Craft	4560	762	16.71
Total	402259	138844	34.52

Abbreviations: NA: Not available

Source: Statistical Handbook Assam, 2006 Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page 190.

Figure 5.1 Indian women's enrolment as percentage of all students, by state, 2002-2003



Sources: UGC, *University Development in India: Basic Facts and Figures 1995-96 to 2000-2001*, Information and Statistics Bureau, New Delhi; Kapur and Mehta (2004), "Indian Higher Education Reform: From Half-Baked Socialism to Half-Baked Capitalism" Working Paper No. 108, Centre for Development at Harvard University, (<http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cidwp/pdf/108.pdf>, July, 20, 2007)

With respect to higher education, it is well documented that science streams are perceived to be the domain of men. There is also a general consensus that the number of women enrolled on science courses is much lower than for men. Moreover, previous studies document that the general performance of women in science streams is relatively poor (Barua, 1998; Borkotoki, 1998). In addition, according to my survey results (Table 5.4), an average of 45% males of all age-groups agree with the statement that “Indian men are better than their female counterparts at complicated technical matters”. A possible explanation for this attitude is that while few Indian women have performed well in technical matters, it is normally the non-technical jobs where women are more visible (Borkotoki, 1998). At the same time, 77% of females and 40% males of all age- groups disagree that Indian men are better at complicated, technical matters than Indian women. Interestingly, here an average of 11% females and 15% males of all age-groups are ‘uncertain’ about whether Indian men are better at complicated, technical matters than Indian women.

Table 5.4 Indian men are better at complicated, technical matters than Indian women (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30	31-35		All Age Group	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree*	43	–	41%	20	46	20	–	41	15
Disagree*	38	38	36	20	29	20	33	36	25
Total*	81	38	77	40	75	40	33	77	40
Uncertain	11	25	11	13	13	10	–	11	15
Agree**	8	37	12	47	8	40	67	11	42
Strongly Agree**	–	–	–	–	4	10	–	1	3
Total**	8	37	12	47	12	50	67	12	45
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=149)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N = Total number in each age-group)									

I argue that, although dominance of science by men remains an ubiquitous phenomenon, for India in general, statistics reveal an increasing trend in the percentage of women in science based courses (figure 5.2; also, Chanana, 2004; 2007). For example, in Natural Sciences, the

figure for women increased from 7.1% in 1950-51 to 40.2% in 2002-2003. Similarly, in Engineering and Technology, it increased from 0.2% in 1950-51 to 22.3% in 2002-2003, while in Medicine and Agriculture, the figures for women increased respectively from 16.3% in 1950-51 to 44.7% in 2002-2003 and from 5.8% in 1950-51 to 20.2% in 2002-2003.¹²² In the case of India, the ‘power of science’ demonstrates “colonial exploitation as the model for the progress of science”: an imperial legacy, a symbol of liberty, progress and universal reason inherited by both men and women of post-colonial India (Prakash, 2000: 67). Some scholars, however, claim that the skewed gender distribution in science actually reflects the absence of men in the arts (Chanana, 2004; 2007).

Notwithstanding this deeply ingrained gender divide in Assam too, more women than in previous decades now study science-based courses (Borkotoki, 1998) such as engineering, medicine, mathematics, physics and botany. Moreover, women are increasingly visible in industry as entrepreneurs, and within police departments, high profile administration, the civil service and judicial offices (Choudhury, 1998; Bhuyan and Sharma, 2002; Sengupta, 2008; also, Ganguli-Scrase, 2000). The results of the HSSLC (Science) 2005 examinations (the equivalent of the UK A-Level examinations) for Assam Higher Secondary Education Council indicated that among the top 10 positions, five were being taken by female students and the top two position holders were also female. Similarly, the results of the same examination of 2006 showed that female students performed better than their male counterparts. The total pass percentage of female students in this examination was 76 while that of their male counterparts

¹²² The gender defined statistical database of the United Nations Commission for Europe reveals that the percentage of participation of women in science has marginally been falling for countries like the Poland, Bulgaria, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, Iceland, Netherlands, Russian Federation, Turkey, Norway, Latvia, Romania. The cause for such fall remains unanswered, while for other countries like the UK, Georgia, Greece and Hungary, the participation of women in the same is on the rise (Appendix V).

was 71.¹²³ According to exclusive interviews given to the Assam Tribune,¹²⁴ a premier newspaper of Assam, the best female students want to pursue careers either in electronics and communications in the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani in Rajasthan or study pure science in one of the Indian Institutes of Technologies. Failing this, the most ambitious female students aspire to pursue careers in engineering or medical science. This suggests that young middle class Assamese women have rising career aspirations. Arguably, the young Assamese women through their access to higher education and performance of their class habitus, that are institutionalised as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; LiPuma, 1993), are breaking out of their tacit traditional cultural norms of the family role and are participating in the public sphere as active agents of transformation rather than simply being recipients of improved education and equal opportunities.

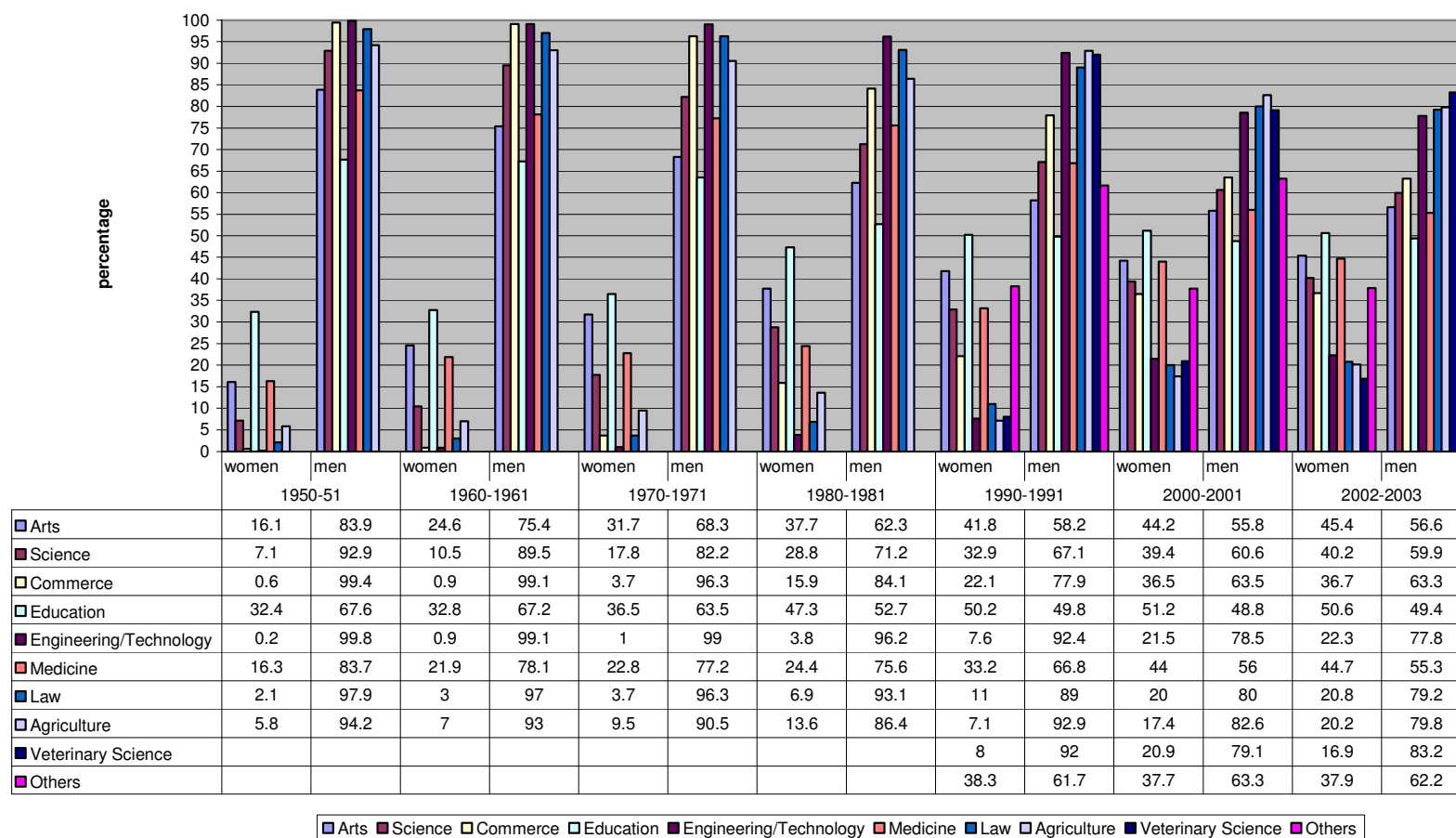
Similarly, in the results of the Higher Secondary (Arts) stream of 2005 and 2006, female students stole the limelight in both examinations as they occupied a majority of the top ranks. In 2005, out of the first ten ranks, six positions were occupied by females and, in 2006; eighteen students shared the first ten ranks of which twelve were female. Overall, however, the male students marginally outshone female students in both examinations. In another exclusive interview to the Assam Tribune,¹²⁵ the best female students want to pursue their careers in subjects of social sciences such as History, Sociology, English, Economics and then to compete for administrative or civil services careers or legal professions. Once again, these observations illustrate an overall rise in the educational standards and a parallel transformation in the aspirations of young women at college level.

¹²³<http://www.assamtribune.com/may2306/main.html>, May, 23, 2006

¹²⁴<http://www.assamtribune.com/may2705/main.html>, May, 27, 2005 and
<http://www.assamtribune.com/may2306/main.html>, May, 23, 2005

¹²⁵<http://www.assamtribune.com/jun0606/main.html>, June, 06, 2006

Figure 5.2 Proportion of Indian men and women students to total enrolment by discipline, 1950-51 to 2002-03



Sources: Chanana, K. “Globalisation, Higher Education and Gender Changing Subject Choices of Indian Women Students”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, February, 17, 2007, 590-598 and Chanana, K. “Gender and Disciplinary Choices: Women in Higher Education in India”, Paper prepared for the UNESCO Colloquium on Research and Higher Education Policy ‘Knowledge, Access and Governance: Strategies for Change’, 1-3 December, 2004, Paris.

Agriculture, Veterinary Science and Others are merged for the years 1950 to 1980-81 with Agriculture

Data for the Arts, Science and Commerce Streams of Higher Secondary Examinations, 2007 suggest that girls outperform boys in all the streams.¹²⁶ The 2008 and 2009 results for the same examination show the similar trend,¹²⁷ although the evidence is more mixed among the highest performing students. Just as in the West (Walby, 1997: 43), access to higher education is a success story for middle class women in the twenty first century Assam as “women have equalled or surpassed men in many areas of educational achievement”.

5.2.2 Career trajectories

In theory equality was achieved between the sexes (by law) following independence in 1947 (Kumar, 1993). In practice, however, prevailing family values continue to press Assamese women, especially those belonging to the elites and middle classes, into the roles of housewife and mother which are culturally constructed as subordinate or inferior to the male breadwinner (Medhi and Dutta, 1994). This normalisation of domestic feminine roles continues despite the rising levels of educational attainment now recorded for middle class women. In the past, most parents have viewed higher education for their daughters as unnecessary. Instead, the main concern of parents remains that their daughters become charming, graceful and polite, equipped with all the practical skills required for homemaking (Goswami, 1994). As a result of these social expectations, many women set themselves rather limited goals of achievement with respect to education and employment (Goswami, 1994; Ruwanpura, 2004).¹²⁸ This suggests a shift in opportunities and norms for women between the generations: the questionnaire survey indicates that there has been a significant change in women’s aspirations

¹²⁶ <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/details.asp?id=may2307/at01>, May, 23, 2007

¹²⁷ <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/details.asp?id=may1508/at01>, May, 15, 2008 and

<http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/details.asp?id=may2709/main>, May, 27, 2009

¹²⁸ For relatively poor women, paid work has been more of a necessity than an option. Even though they too are brought up to be wives and mothers, they have had to undertake paid work mainly in the unorganised sectors, that has inescapably resulted in low pay, low status and few prospects for promotion (Barua, 1994; Barua, 1998; Patel, 2005; Venkata Ratnam, 2006).

and opportunities within the space of a generation. Table 5.5 shows that smaller numbers of respondents' mothers work either in government service (15%) or as school teachers (14%). Whereas 58% of the female respondents' mothers (89 out of 149) remain housewives (Table 5.5), these students exhibit greater ambition (see, Table 4.4, Chapter 4; Chapter 6).

Chapter 6 shows that today there are class-driven parental pressures for daughters to study and earn. This means that in the cities of Assam, attitudes towards women, at least among the educated minority of people, appear to have changed considerably. Progressive parents are now concerned that their daughters' receive a good education (Chanana, 2004; 2007). If a daughter is one of the best students and herself ambitious, her parents will be supportive and encouraging, though only as long as this is not at the expense of denying education to a brother of the same age. Where resources are scarce and a sacrifice has to be made, most parents would still favour a son over a daughter as in any other part of India (Ruwanpura, 2004). There is a powerful economic motive to this favouritism in that a son is expected to look after his parents in their old age and in the absence of an alternative system of welfare, this provides a fundamental safety net of 'gerontocratic security' (Arnold et al., 1998; Billig, 1992; Das Gupta and Mari Bhat, 1997; Roy and Niranjana, 2004; Verma, 2005b; see also, Chapter 2). However, the findings of the questionnaire survey (Table 5.5) show that most of the fathers (the primary breadwinners) of the women in the sample are either high profile officers or white collar job holders. In this context, it is likely that cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) of an educated father offers increased opportunities to pursue higher education.

It is also interesting to note with respect to family favouritism that girls in Assam tend to perform better than boys. A similar gender-gap in secondary education is witnessed in the U.K. (Laurie et al., 1999; McDowell, 2003, 2004; Walby, 1997). Arguably, as discussed earlier, such outperformance by girls also reinforces the reflections of their choices for an

independent career. This observation finds resonance with many earlier findings of the Anglo-American discourse (for examples, Aveling, 2002; Baber and Monaghan, 1988; Bielby and Bielby, 1984; Granrose and Caplan, 1996; Hoffnung, 2004; Novack and Novack, 1996).

Table 5.5 Fathers' and mothers' occupation of women respondents					
Father's Profession	No.	%	Mother's Profession	No.	%
Doctor	5	3	Doctor	1	0.7
Media	2	1	Housewives	89	58
Engineer	7	5	Business	1	0.7
Government Service	63	42	Government Service	23	15
Academic Registrar	1	0.7	Professor	2	1
Advocate	6	4	Advocate	2	1
Defence Personnel	6	4	School Teachers*	21	14
Bank Employee	3	2	Production Manager	1	0.7
Business	14	9	Central Government Employee	1	0.7
Central Government Employee	6	4	Retired. School Teacher	2	1
Chartered Accountant	1	0.7	Not mentioned	6	4
Journalist	1	0.7			
Professor	2	1			
Manager in Tea Sector	1	0.7			
Medical officer	1	0.7			
College Principal	1	0.7			
School Teacher	5	3			
Retired/Govt/Semi-Government & Private Employee	15	10			
Not Mentioned	1	0.7			
Deceased	8	5			
Total	149	100		149	100
* includes primary, middle, high and secondary schools					
Source: Questionnaire survey with 182 students					

5.2.3 Neoliberalism

Chapter 2, section 2.3.2 on neoliberalism has shown the impact of neoliberalism on a feminisation of the labour force and of work itself in India. The impacts of these trends have

been highly uneven, reflecting a historic separation of employment in terms of organised (or formal) versus unorganised (or informal sectors). In this chapter, however, I will deal mainly with the organised sector of employment, because this is where most of my sample of young, middle class women are occupied (Chapter 2).

Since the mid-1980s ¹²⁹ and more specifically since July 1991, ¹³⁰ India has experienced the combined effects of free trade alongside the effects of structural reforms and neoliberalism disguised in the form of the new economic policies (Dev, 2000). Against the backdrop of structural reforms and neoliberalism (whereby the earlier trade barriers were removed and many state enterprises were de-regulated and privatised), new career opportunities have opened up and the number of job opportunities has increased in trade, business and service sector employment (Chanana, 2004; 2007). Similarly, across Assam, increasing privatisation and a shift to a service economy has ensued. Within the service sector, the greatest expansion of new job opportunities have occurred in teaching (both private and government institutions be it schools, college and universities), private hospitals, airlines, telecommunications and the media. As a consequence of such market driven policies, a gradual trend towards a feminisation of the labour force has occurred in Assam not only in terms of increasing numbers of women workers, but also in the terms and conditions of employment.¹³¹ Nevertheless, like the West, in India too, much of the employment growth has taken place in those areas that are characterised as ‘women’s work’ (for examples, education, retail, medical, clerical) (Bradley, 1999; Coe et al., 2007: 360) either with respect to demand for the so called

¹²⁹ During this period, a few domestic reforms were introduced in the Industrial sector of India (Dev, 2000).

¹³⁰ Major progress of neoliberalism started only during this period (Dev, 2000).

¹³¹ For instance, News Live, one of the local, newly formed private television channels of Assam absorbs 170 employees. Out of these 170 employees, 136, that is, 80% are women. Interestingly, a majority of the technicians working for this channel including its camera operators are women (figure, 5.3). This is particularly notable given that Assam remains a developing economy (Chapter 3). It implies that educated middle class women are to some considerable extent the beneficiaries of new job creation, where new jobs are concentrated both within sex-typed occupations and where women are also gaining entry in previously male-typed manufacturing and production process jobs (Dev, 2000).

‘nimble fingers’ (Elson and Pearson, 1981) or in terms of female-type ‘caring’ professions that draw on skills of ‘emotion-work’ (smiling down the phone) which are naturalised as female qualities. Arguably, many of the qualities and skills demanded by the employers in the organised sector of India could be stereotypically associated with the female (Budhwar, et al., 2005a, 2005b; see also, Yukongdi and Benson, 2005). Therefore it could be claimed that *femininity* in itself could be viewed as an essential quality in the ‘job market’ of the organised sector. This resonates with the previous finding of Woodfield (1998, 2007).

According to Ruwanpura (2004), employment of women in the formal labour market of urban India has increased at a rate of 4.33% per annum during the 1980s compared to the slower growth rate for men of 3.12%. However, women still represent only 17% of employment in the organised sector (Rustagi, 2004). Nevertheless, the highest shares ¹³² of women in the organised sector employment are notably in the southern and northeastern states of India (Rustagi, 2004). In Assam, women constitute approximately 31% of all the organised sector workers (Table 5.6). Further, the employment statistics show that it is mostly in the service industry that gradual employment growth has occurred (Table 5.6). This is mainly the consequence of women’s educational advancement and available opportunities ¹³³ within the state sector (Rustagi, 2004).

¹³² higher than the average 17% for women

¹³³ By available opportunity, I mean the tea industry which is one of the largest organised sectors in Assam employing about half a million permanent labourers besides an equal number of temporary/casual labourers.



Figure 5.3: Women managing all aspects of presentation at a local TV channel 'News Live'

The structures of employment in the organised sector (both public and private) in Assam have changed over time and a trend towards an increasingly feminised labour force is evident (Table 5.7). At the same time, Table 5.7 shows that the percentage of female employment in the private sector has fallen from 47.62 in 2000 to 43.08¹³⁴ in 2005. However, in the years 2003 and 2004 this table also shows a marginal increase in female employment in the private sector. Previous studies have shown that as a result of neoliberalism in India, the Indian middle class began to make significant contributions to the economy from the late 1980s (Pai Panandiker, 1998; Rothermund, 2008). This argument is supported by data from the World Development Report, 1996 which revealed that, in 1992, the top 20% of the Indian population (belonging to elite and middle class) contributed 42.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Pai Panandiker; 1998). It is in this context that I argue that since the late 1980s, the Assamese middle class (which is an educated class) has contributed significantly to Assam's GDP. Arguably, demand for educated Assamese women's labour and their labour supply represent the product of changing gender politics and political reform towards a more gender equal society. This shift towards feminisation is emerging as a new driving force of the new economy. Nevertheless, although overall neoliberalism has resulted in the absolute growth of female employment in the economy of Assam; occupational segregation continues to exist across all sectors, as will be discussed below in the following section.

¹³⁴ Upto September, 2005

Table 5.6 Employment in the organised sector (public and private), Assam, 2000-2005 (%)										
Sectors	2000		2002		2003		2004		2005**	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Public Sector	85.25	14.74	85.40	14.59	85.08	14.91	85.28	14.71	84.06	15.93
Central government	93.02	6.97	92.64	7.35	92.63	7.36	92.64	7.35	93.01	6.99
State government	83.77	16.22	83.41	16.58	83.30	16.69	83.39	16.60	83.30	16.70
Central quasi government	85.29	14.70	88.76	11.23	87.11	12.88	88.17	11.82	80.35	19.46
State quasi government	83.68	16.31	83.17	16.83	82.92	17.07	83.11	16.88	82.59	17.40
Local bodies	81.18	18.82	81.14	18.85	81.21	18.78	81.24	18.75	81.03	18.96
Private sector	52.37	47.62	55.84	44.15	55.43	44.56	55.32	44.68	56.91	43.08
Large (≥25 workers)	51.76	48.23	55.27	44.72	54.89	45.10	54.79	45.21	56.43	43.57
Small (10-24 workers)	89.29	10.70	90.76	9.23	90.70	9.29	90.74	9.25	90.57	9.42
Grand Total	68.21	31.79	70.30	29.69	69.66	30.33	69.66	30.33	69.34	30.66
** Up to September										
Sources: <u>Statistical Handbook, Assam 2002</u> Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page 164-165; <u>Statistical Handbook, Assam 2004</u> Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page 160-161; <u>Statistical Handbook, Assam 2005</u> Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page, 164 and <u>Statistical Handbook, Assam 2006</u> Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page, 166										

Table 5.7 Trends in female employment (%) in the organised sector (public and private), Assam, 1971-2005**			
Years	Public	Private	Total
1971			6.15*
1990			30.00
1998	13.43	47.55	30.90
1999	14.19	50.89	32.70
2000	14.74	47.62	31.79
2001	14.34	47.37	32.80
2002	14.59	44.15	29.69
2003	14.91	44.56	30.33
2004	14.71	44.68	30.33
2005**	15.93	43.08	30.66
* female participation rate			
** Up to September			
Sources: Saikia, (1962); <u>Statistical Handbook, Assam 2002</u> Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page 164-165 and <u>Statistical Handbook, Assam 2004</u> , Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page 160-161, <u>Statistical Handbook, Assam 2005</u> Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page, 164; <u>Statistical Handbook, Assam 2006</u> Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page, 166; <u>Economic Survey, Assam, 2003-04</u> (Chapter-XVI), Planning and Development Department, Assam			
(http://planassam.org/reports/economicSurvey_200304/chapter-16_labourEmp.htm, July, 7, 2006) and <u>Assam Human Development Report</u> (2003)			
(http://hdr.undp.org/docs/reports/national/IND_India/INDIA_2003_en.pdf, May,16,2005)			

5.2.4 Occupational segregation

In Assam, occupational segregation by sex is visible in the organised sector of the labour market. As in the West, occupational segregation by sex is frequently taken for granted and is often believed to be the consequence of the fact that each sex is ‘naturally’ better suited to different kinds of work (Reskin and Padavic, 1994). Tables 5.6 and 5.7 illustrate that the public sector is male dominated and women are poorly represented overall. Furthermore, although opportunities for female employment fell overall between 2000 and 2005 in Assam (Table 5.7), the share of female employment in the private sector (43.08% in 2005) remains significantly greater than that for the public sector (15.93% in 2005). This means that career opportunities have improved for women in the private sector in relation to the public sector within the last decade. This observation is similar to the findings of Anglo-American studies (Izraeli and Adler, 1994; Powell, 1993; Nerger, 1993). However, most women employees in private sector service industry are employed in the lower rungs of the ladder because they are mostly employed as labourers in the Tea industry where they represent a marginalised section of Assamese society.

Table 5.8 highlights the distribution of Assam Government employees according to their Office Status and Classes (Class I officials include higher professionals, government bureaucrats, administrators, and officials in managerial roles and decision making positions; Class II officials include lower professionals, technicians, lower administrators and supervisors; Class III employees include clerks and other technical workers, while Class IV employees include peon, *chowkidars* [caretaker] and cleaners). This table shows that like their Indian counterparts, the representation of Assamese women in professional, managerial roles and decision-making positions are very low (Agrawal and Rao 2004; Menon-Sen and Kumar, 2001; Rustagi, 2004). Equally, even in the lower rungs of the hierarchy, Assamese women are

poorly represented (Table 5.8). Arguably, the nature of this type of segregation in Assamese society, like the West, is both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ ¹³⁵ (Hakim, 1996). These types of segregation reinforce women’s financial dependence on men through payment of low wages and gender divisions of labour (Ruwanpura, 2004). One explanation why such segregation in the labour market persists is the extent to which Assamese woman’s cultural constraint role as a homemaker imposes restrictions in full participation in the labour market opportunities through gender divisions in the household especially with respect to childcare responsibilities (Rustagi, 2004; Ruwanpura, 2004). This ‘role strain’ will be further considered in Chapter 6. But it is first important to shed light on the competing identities of young middle class Assamese women with respect to their expectations of career, marriage and motherhood.

Table 5. 8 Distribution of Assam government employees (%) according to their office status and classes, 2005

Office Status	Sex	Government Office	Primary and Middle School	High School and Higher Secondary School	Institution of Higher Education
Class I	Male	82.5	-	2.25	5.29
	Female	7.1	-	0.27	2.6
Class II	Male	68.31	-	18.36	1.3
	Female	5.86	-	6.34	0.24
Class III	Male	43.71	23.77	11.96	0.42
	Female	7.36	8.37	4.27	0.10
Class IV	Male	74.27	7.73	8.93	1.74
	Female	5.87	0.64	0.62	0.15
Total	Male	50.89	19.61	11.35	0.81
	Female	12.14	6.54	3.58	0.18

Source: Statistical Handbook Assam, 2006 Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam, Guwahati-6, page 173

In summary, despite the trends of neoliberalism, and increased career opportunities in Assam, with new forms of professionalism and other so called ‘non-traditional’ paid employment for women (as well as for men), occupational segregation persists. Arguably, a ‘glass-ceiling’ firmly remains which suggests gender inequality in both public and private sector. This is indicative of an embedded patriarchal system. Importantly, it suggests that a ‘female

¹³⁵ The way in which both men and women tend to be clustered in different occupations and industry sectors is known as horizontal segregation, while vertical segregation refers to the way where men dominate the ‘high profile’ and ‘well paid’ jobs (Hakim, 1996).

ghetto' exists as an invisible geographical space dominated mainly by females with low status and undemanding careers. Nonetheless, one positive effect of the increased career opportunities in the contemporary society of Assam is that it has become a norm for an urban Assamese woman to work outside the home, which is regarded as socially necessary for it is an indicator of a liberated and economically empowered woman.

5.3.0 Competing Identities

5.3.1 Attitude towards career, marriage and motherhood

The geographical literature on the institution of marriage emphasises the oppressive conditions of marriage, mothering and housework (Rowbotham, 1989; Barrett and McIntosh, 1982). Within the institution of marriage, and as discussed earlier, the primacy of domestic chores have been the perceived 'traditional' role expectations for an Assamese woman. However, in the contemporary society, Assamese women's status as 'home maker' has been changing. In this context, the majority of respondents of the attitude statements (Appendices I and II, section C of my questionnaire survey), based on the analysis of different age-groups,¹³⁶ do not advocate the tacit 'traditional' roles of women. For example, Table 5.9 show that over half of those surveyed students (56% females and 66% males of all age-groups) do not support the idea that the most important job of an Indian woman is to look after the comforts of her husband and children. Interestingly, here both male and female students believe that the so called perceived 'traditional' roles of an Assamese woman have changed in contemporary society. Chapter 6 shows that educated Assamese women now perform the additional role of a 'co-earner' (Chatterjee, 2008; Sengupta, 2008). This challenge requires that they strike a balance simultaneously between their career and domestic responsibilities. In another finding

¹³⁶ In analysing the data, the age related differences in attitude was hardly significant (refer to, Chapter 4, questionnaire survey sub-section).

(Table 5.10), the majority of those students who responded (93% females and 82% males of all age-groups) endorse the notion that paid employment is not a hindrance to becoming a ‘good’ wife or mother. The responses here vary from a high of 100% males within the age-groups 17-21 and 22-25 to a low of 67% females within the age-group 31-35. Again, another finding of the questionnaire survey (Table 5.11) demonstrates that most respondents (99% females and 97% males) believe that married life is a priority to be shared equally by both the husband and the wife. In addition to this, Table 5.12 indicates that 77% females and 55% males of all age-groups do not support the notion that Indian women should plan to have children only when they are prepared to give up their jobs to look after their children until they are old enough to go to school.

Table 5.9 The most important job of an Indian woman is to look after the comforts of her husband and children (responses in %)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Group	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree*	36	38	19	40	33	30	33	28	36
Disagree*	17	25	33	20	38	60	34	28	30
Total*	53	63	52	60	71	90	67	56	66
Uncertain	11	12	9	13	4	—	—	9	12
Agree**	36	25	35	20	25	10	33	33	19
Strongly Agree**	—	—	4	7	—	—	—	2	3
Total**	36	25	39	27	25	10	33	35	22
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=149)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N= Total number in each age-group)									

Table 5.10 Employment is not a hindrance to becoming a good wife/mother (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Group	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree*	6	-	-	14	-	-	-	2	6
Disagree*	3	-	-	6	-	-	33	2	6
Total*	9	-	-	20	-	-	33	4%	12%
Uncertain**	4	-	2	6	-	10	-	2	6
Agree**	32	50	23	68	42%	40	67	31	52
Strongly Agree**	55	50	74	6	54%	50	-	62	30
Total**	87	100	97	100	96	90	67	93	82
Not filled in	-	-	1	-	4	-	-	1	-
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=149)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N= Total number in each age-group)									

Table 5.11 In married life, both the husband and the wife should equally take major decisions in life (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Groups	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Disagree*	-	-	1	-	-	10	-	1	3
Total*	-	-	1	-	-	10	-	1	3
Uncertain	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Agree**	9	25	16	40	33	-	-	16	24
Strongly Agree**	91	75	83	60	67	90	100	83	73
Total**	100	100	99	100	100	90	100	99	97
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=149)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N= Total number in each age-group)									

Table 5.12 Indian women should plan to have children only when they are prepared to give up their jobs to look after their children until they are old enough to go to school (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Group	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree*	30	38	48	7	46	40	67	42	24
Disagree*	40	25	28	26	46	40	33	35	31
Total*	70	63	76	33	92	80	100	77	55
Uncertain**	13	25	10	20	4	20	-	10	21
Agree**	13	12	12	40	4	-	-	10	21
Strongly Agree**	2	-	2	7	-	-	-	2	3
Total**	15	12	14	47	4	-	-	12	24
Not filled in	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=149)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N= Total number in each age-group)									

Perhaps more surprisingly, only a minority of respondents (21% females and 39% males of all age-groups) believe that childcare is primarily a responsibility of the child's mother. By contrast, a majority of the participants (77% females and 48% males of all age-groups) believe that if a mother has children under the age of 5, she should be able to go out to work. Responses vary from a high of 100% females within the age-group 31-35 to a low of 34% males within the age-group 22-25. Therefore, this notion suggests that attitudes toward financial independence for women have changed, at least among this particular sample of educated students.

Table 5.13 If a mother has children under the age of 5, she should not go out to work (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Group	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree*	17	25	20	7	8	30	33	17	18
Disagree*	47	25	46	27	67	40	67	51	30
Total*	64	50	66	34	75	70	100	77	48
Uncertain	13	13	6	13	17	10	—	10	13
Agree**	17	—	19	40	8	20	—	16	24
Strongly Agree**	4	37	7	13	—	—	—	5	15
Total**	21	37	26	53	8	20	—	21	39
Not filled in	2	—	2	—	—	—	—	1	—
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=149)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N= Total number in each age-group)									

Similarly, the majority of respondents (80% females and 78% males of all age-groups) disagree with the idea that a woman should resign from her job if her husband moves on with his transferable job ¹³⁷ (Table 5.14). Interestingly, here responses from a high of 100% males within the age-group 26-30 to a low of 60% males within the age-group 22-25 fail to endorse this attitude statement. Like the West, in contemporary Assamese society, a drive toward 'professional self-realization' (Popova, 1999: 81) has become very popular among young,

¹³⁷ A job that involves movement from one place to another as a result of higher promotion or as a condition required in the job to be fulfilled or both (Popova, 1999)

middle class women. This language of self-realisation can be associated with high aspirations for financial independence and personal fulfilment through career salience.

Table 5.14 A wife should resign from her job if her husband is on transferable job ¹⁰⁴ (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Groups	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree [*]	42	38	38	33	42	60	33	40	42
Disagree [*]	47	50	39	27	25	40	34	40	36
Total[*]	89	88	77	60	67	100	67	80	78
Uncertain	9	12	13	20	17	-	33	12	13
Agree ^{**}	2	—	7	13	16	—	—	7	6
Strongly Agree ^{**}	—	—	3	7	—	—	—	1	3
Total^{**}	2	—	10	20	16	—	—	8	9
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=14)	100 (N=33)
N= Total number in each age-group									
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students									

Arguably, these changed attitudes towards career, marriage and motherhood among young students reflect new femininities associated with a trend towards Third Wave feminism in India. This interpretation of my secondary data reinforces the perspectives as put forwarded by Heywood and Drake (2004) and Spencer (2004). Nonetheless, though these students are adults, the majority of them are unmarried and yet to test these attitudes in relation to the demands of family life (Murgai, 1996). The attitudes these students display are based on perceptions which are still forming and highly contingent, upon local opportunities and constraints (Murgai, 1996). Nevertheless, these changed attitudes indicate the growing confidence and self-esteem (see also, Laurie et al., 1999; Harris, 2004; Thomas, 2008) of young educated Assamese women that can enable them to encounter ‘girl power’ (Chapter 2). Besides, it can also be suggested that such changed attitudes fit with the idea that young educated Assamese women are increasingly optimistic about their future career and are self-reliant in their attitude (Chapter 4, Table 4.4; Chapter 6). In this sense, it can be suggested that these young, educated Assamese women are in the process of reconstructing their identities

and are more powerful than Assamese women of earlier generation. Chapter 6 illustrates that the educated Assamese women in my sample are career-minded (12 out of 29 women are already in paid employment): the personal stories of these women reflect that they aspire to self-empower themselves in order to actualise change and gain power and equality within the Assamese community. Such aspirations both promote and are in turn shaped by a Third Wave feminism in India.

5.4.0 Work-life Balance

This section of the chapter examines the issues of work-life balance for a sub-population of 25 women in the survey (out of a sample of 182) who were in paid employment as a function of their studies (15 married; 14 with children and 10 were unmarried). The results of my questionnaire survey demonstrate that of the 25 employed women, 11 work either for government or semi-government colleges; four work for private degree colleges, six of them are doctors and the other four teach other students to earn their living. As a result of the transformation of family structure in urban Assam (from extended to nuclear) and with more women entering the labour market in the new economy (Chaterjee, 2008; Sengupta, 2008), the old ideological family model of Assamese society (with the father working full time and mother staying at home) is gradually being eroded, replaced to an increasing extent by ‘dual career’ arrangements (Sarma, 2008). Therefore, balancing work and family has become an important issue for Assamese families and the numbers of people who combine work with household responsibilities have increased over the past two decades, at least in urban Assam (Chaterjee, 2008; Sengupta, 2008). This observation of my thesis echoes with earlier Indian studies (Mukhopadyay et al., 1993; Rani and Khandelwal 1992; Ramu, 1989; Shukla and Kapoor, 1990; also Lewis et al., 1999). In the first section, I discuss career as family status. Following this, I discuss the issues relating to reconciliation of work-life balance.

5.4.1 Career as family status, rising ‘dual career’ norms

For young women in contemporary Assamese society, careers assume the role of potential improvement in socio-economic status (Sarma, 2008; Sengupta, 2008). Responses from the attitude statement show that 83% females and 91% males of all age-groups are most likely to agree with the statement that Indian girls should be encouraged to be career-minded rather than domestic minded (Table 5.15). Many women understand that, even in Assam, in order to maintain a high standard of living, it is necessary for both the husband and wife to earn and pursue ‘dual breadwinner’ norms (Chatterjee, 2008; Sengupta, 2008). This interpretation is similar to many findings conducted in the Anglo-American literature (Bradley et al., 2000; Hardill, 2002; Sher, 2006; Walby, 1994). Prior studies have shown that ‘dual earner norms’ have become increasingly visible in India because of changes in socio-economic structures associated with neoliberalism and the imposition of structural adjustment programs (Ruwanpura, 2004). One-earner households (male breadwinner) are no longer able to maintain the family wellbeing. Therefore, due to economic compulsion women have started entering the labour market to supplement these household incomes (Bano and Verma, 1998; Ruwanpura, 2004). However, the results from the questionnaire survey (Table 5.16) demonstrate that out of the sub-population of 25 female employees, 23 (92%) sought paid work not only to gain increased financial security, but also to improve their standard of living and social status – that is to provide the finer growth, improvement and luxuries for themselves and their families, which otherwise would have to be forsaken. One possible explanation for this (apart from increased career opportunities) is that Assamese women, view their social status in public and economic terms, beyond child rearing and domestic duties. The suggestion is that Assamese women now increasingly aspire to ‘have it all’ – as a wife, a mother and a career woman (Chapter 6).

This subsection presents a snapshot of data to help explain why educated middle class Assamese women tend to seek paid work. Although it is not possible to draw any specific conclusion from the data, but Chapter 6 reflects that the typical trend is for dual-earner husband and wife families in Assamese society (see also, Chaterjee, 2008; Sengupta, 2008).

Table 5.15 Indian girls should be encouraged to be career-minded rather than domestic minded (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Group	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree [*]	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–
Disagree [*]	2	–	7	–	4	20	–	5	6
Total[*]	4	–	7	–	–	20	–	6	6
Uncertain	13	–	10	6	16	40	–	11	3
Agree ^{**}	43	63	21	67	42	30	67	32	55
Strongly Agree ^{**}	40	37	62	27	38	50	33	51	36
Total^{**}	83	100	83	94	80	80	100	83	91
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=14)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N= Total number in each age-group)									

Table 5.16 Reasons for taking up a job		
Reasons for taking up paid work	Number of respondents	% to the total number of respondents
High standard of living	23	92
Financial security	23	92
Self-satisfaction	25	100
To utilise time	none	
Social status	20	80
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 25 female employees		

5.4.2 Reconciling a career with family life

This section considers the issues of work-life balance of 25 women in the survey (out of a sample of 182), while presenting an overview of the emerging patterns and issues concerning women's multiple roles in the household with respect to housework, childcare and marriage. All of the 15 married Assamese women of my questionnaire survey combine higher education studies with paid work. While so doing, it considers the way they reconcile these competing demands on their time as part of their daily life. In contemporary Assamese society, the issues

of work-life balance are complex, involving sex roles, career trajectories, management of time along with financial values, accompanied by ingrained ideological prejudices and other hidden socio-cultural values. In this research, reference to a 'double burden' includes the 'total work burden',¹³⁸ for women. The categorisation of 'double burden' has been restricted to married women who also have paid work (see Chapter 4).¹³⁹ In this context, the results of the questionnaire survey reveal that unmarried women are typically freed from domestic commitments in their parental home (Table 5.17) because their parents prefer them to concentrate on their studies and paid work.¹⁴⁰

Educated and career oriented Assamese women are typically held in high esteem as the subject of family pride (Chapter 6). Therefore, the career women (irrespective of extended or nuclear family arrangements) have either their parents, parents-in-law or other relative to help them to balance their domestic responsibilities. Where this help is unavailable or insufficient, domestic workers are employed (Chapter 2 considered the role of domestic servants in modifying overall work commitments). This relieves career women of a significant burden of household chores. Moreover, a career woman very often has her husband to support her. One of the findings of my questionnaire survey shows that in the case of the 10 employed and unmarried women, parents are very supportive and endorsed their job outside home.

¹³⁸ The total work burden of young, middle class Assamese women includes paid work, domestic chores and childcare. Domestic work includes cooking, shopping (purchasing consumer and capital goods, trips connected to shopping), washing clothes, utensils, dusting, sweeping and ironing. And childcare activities comprise physical care given to a child within the family and teaching, dropping and bringing children from school/nursery.

¹³⁹ In an ideal world, however, paid work, studying, domestic work and childcare should all be considered as elements of a total work burden; for both married and unmarried students, since the latter may well have domestic commitments in the parental home.

¹⁴⁰ The reason as to why unmarried women are freed from household activities became clearer from the in-depth interviews that follow in Chapter 6.

Table 5.17 Household tasks undertaken by the women themselves									
Names	Household activities								
Married	Cooking	Shopping	Washing Clothes	Washing Utensils	Dusting /Sweeping	Ironing	Childcare	Teaching Children at home	Dropping and bringing children from school/nursery/ crèche
Rini	*	●	*	*	*				
Ila	●		*	●	*		●	●	●
Mukali	●		*	●	*	●	●	●	
Kaveri	●	●	*	●	*	●	●		
Simi	●		*	●	*	●	●		
Juna	●		*	●	*		●		
Pinky	*	●	*	*	*		●		
Jeeni	●	●	*	●	*		●		
Jonali	●	●	*	●	*	●	●	●	
Bijoya	●	●	*	●	*		●		●
Susantika	*	●	*	*	*		●		
Riku	●	●	*	●	*	●	●		●
Mrinmoyee	●	●	*	●	*		●		●
Monalisha	●		*	*	*		●		●
Murchana	●	●	*	●	*		●	●	
Unmarried									
Manisha	x	x	x	x	x	*			
Shehnaz	*	x	x	x	x	x			
Shreya	x	x	x	x	x				
Mitu	x	x	x	x	x				
Bijuli	x	x	x	x	*				
M'deepa	x	x	x	x	x	x			
Pompy	x	x	x	x	x				
Nani	*	x	x	x	x	x			
Debanushi	x	x	x	x	x	*			
Swapna	x	x	x	x	*				

Source: Questionnaire survey with 25 working women from a universe of 182 population
 * =occasionally; ●= shared with an adult/adults in the household; x =freed from household activities such as cooking, shopping, washing clothes, washing utensils, dusting/sweeping, ironing.

By contrast, in the case of 15 married employed women, it is their husbands and sometimes parents (or even parents-in-law) who supported them in their work outside home (Table 5.18). Interestingly, none of the family members have different opinions regarding these women working outside home.

Despite this informal system of support, career-oriented married Assamese women still face the dilemma of dual social expectations. That is, they are often caught between their desire to pursue a fulfilling career on one hand, and a need for the warm, the intimacy and security of family life which they gained through their socio-cultural background or the process of socialisation on the other hand. Therefore, these women carry within them simultaneously the expectations of their family and their particular segment of Indian culture. Hence, trying to strike a balance between the two and pull it off with aplomb can be like a 'roller coaster ride' (Devarajan, 2003). Devarajan (2003) goes on to argue that for a working Indian woman, it is challenging on a daily basis to leave her wailing toddler who would plead with her not to go to work. For this, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 6, married Assamese working women often face persistent inequalities at home with respect to housework and childcare responsibilities as the domestic division of labour are still viewed in contemporary Assamese society as the primary responsibility of women.

Table 5.18 Approval of work outside home									
Names	Approval of work outside the home			Do the family members have different opinions regarding work outside home		Work outside home, mostly approved by			
	Parents	Husband	In-laws	Yes	No	Parents	Husband	Mother-in-law	Father-in-law
Married									
Rini	•	•			•	•	•		•
Ila		•			•		•		
Mukali		•			•		•		
Kaveri		•			•		•		
Simi	•	•			•	•	•		
Juna		•	•		•		•	•	
Pinky	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•
Jeeni		•			•		•		
Jonali		•			•		•		
Bijoya		•			•		•		
Susantika	•	•			•		•		
Riku		•			•		•		
Mrinmoyee		•	•		•		•	•	•
Monalisha	•	•			•		•		
Murchana	•	•			•		•		
Unmarried									
Manisha	•				•	•			
Shehnaz	•				•	•			
Shreya	•				•	•			
Mitu	•				•	•			
Bijuli	•				•	•			
M'deepa	•				•	•			
Pompy	•				•	•			
Nani	•				•	•			
Debanushi	•				•	•			
Swapna	•				•	•			
Source: Questionnaire survey with 25 working women from a universe of 182 population									

Housework

It is well documented that since the Industrial Revolution the notion of work came to be spatially separated from the home whereby paid employment was recognised as ‘labour’ while tasks conducted within the home sphere were assigned low value as (unpaid) ‘housework’ (Rendall, 1990) (see Chapter 1). It was not until the Second Wave feminist movement of the 1970s that housework (inclusive of unpaid domestic labour and childcare) came to be recognised as an occupational role (Oakley, 1974b, 2005; Olsen, 1978). Despite such shift, studies in the West have shown that women, who even work full time paid work, still perform an asymmetrical share of domestic labour and childcare (Baxter, 1997; Oakley, 1974b, 2005;

Voicu et al., 2008; Wajcman, 1983).¹⁴¹ In similar context, my own thesis demonstrates that these Assamese middle class women who are married and also in paid work, bear the brunt of the bulk of housework that includes unpaid caring work too (see also, Palriwala and Neetha, 2009; Sharma, 1986; Shourabh, 2007).

Table 5.17 combines data for 25 households from individual questionnaire data recording the household tasks undertaken by the women themselves while, Table 5.20 records who helps these women to sustain their everyday life and the key events associated with housework and childcare.

Economic reforms have contributed to the modernisation of housework in India by the introduction of labour saving technology (see Cowan, 1983). Nevertheless, the nature of housework, especially cooking and food preparation in Assamese society (like any other part of India) remains complicated and is time-consuming. While the 25 respondents claim to cook their food with gas as their domestic fuel as opposed to ‘charcoal- burning pots’ (as previously used), cooking still remains a lengthy process. Rice is the main staple food and the vegetables which are commonly used (such as potatoes, cauliflower, cabbage, green banana, spinach, papaya, soya bean) as side dishes (made into ‘*tarkaris*’ and ‘*bhajis*’) and lentils (*dalhs*) need lengthy preparation and cooking times. Cooking of fish, mutton or chicken needs even more preparation and the cooking process is usually very slow. Modern domestic appliances such as refrigerators (used to store and reuse food), electric mixers used for grinding and juicing, ovens and pressure cookers do ease the burden of some of this work, but without greatly saving time. For most women everyday cooking either at lunch time or most commonly in the evening remains a laborious and a time-consuming task.

¹⁴¹ Table 5.19 also demonstrate that in many countries of the West, although domestic activities are gendered, however, time spent on these tasks by women remains more when compared with men (see also Oakley, 2005).

Table 5.19 Time spent in domestic activities, selected countries, selected available years									
Countries	Year	Total Domestic Activities		Cooking and Dishwashing		Laundry and Ironing		Childcare	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Norway	2000	3.63	2.33	1.18	0.52	0.30	0.05	0.57	0.28
Poland	2004	4.75	2.37	1.98	0.52	0.42	0.03	0.65	0.27
Spain	2003	4.92	1.62	1.82	0.38	0.53	0.02	0.50	0.20
Switzerland	2004	4.67	2.54	1.48	0.64	0.41	0.06	0.79	0.49
U. K.	2005	3.50	1.92	0.90	0.45	0.30	0.07	0.53	0.25
USA	2006	3.65	2.04	0.79	0.30	0.37	0.07	0.67	0.28
Belgium	2005	3.77	2.28	1.18	0.51	0.51	0.04	0.32	0.13
Canada	2005	4.10	2.50	0.90	0.40	0.30	0.10	0.60	0.30
Estonia	2000	4.88	2.55	1.72	0.46	0.58	0.05	0.58	0.16
Finland	2000	3.90	2.30	1.20	0.40	0.50	0.10	0.50	0.20
France	2000	4.42	2.48	1.37	0.38	0.47	0.02	0.40	0.13
Germany	2001	3.82	2.17	0.80	0.38	0.45	0.05	0.35	0.15
Hungary	2000	4.95	2.65	1.95	0.30	0.55	0.02	0.58	0.25
Italy	2002	5.33	1.58	1.90	0.28	0.62	0.02	0.47	0.18
Netherlands	2005	4.03	2.11	1.19	0.52	0.37	0.06	0.85	0.38
Turkey	2006	5.28	0.08	2.43	0.12	0.57	0.00	0.73	0.17

Notes: **Time spent** represents the average time spent on an activity per day (hours and minutes per day). **Domestic work** comprises housework, child and adult care, gardening and pet care, construction and repairs, shopping and services, and household management. **Cooking and Dish washing** includes all activities connected with the preparation of meals, snacks, drinks; it also includes baking and preserving as well as setting the table and serving. Dish washing also includes connected activities before and after washing up, e.g. cleaning the table after a meal and putting the rest of the food into the fridge, drying up, tidying away dishes, and loading and uploading the dishwasher. **Laundry** includes loading and uploading of washing machine, hand washing, hanging out and putting away laundry when not ironed or mangled. Ironing comprises mangling and connected tasks, such as folding and putting textiles into the wardrobe. Handicraft and care for textiles consists of making new products, such as knitting, needlework, sewing by machine or hand, or weaving. **Childcare** includes active care given to a child living in own household, including physical care, teaching, reading, playing and talking with a child, accompanying a child to a doctor, visiting a school.

Source: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (<http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/Saveshow.asp>, July, 10, 2008)

Among the questionnaire respondents (Tables 5.17 and 5.20) who were in paid employment, the mothers of the 10 unmarried women helped with cooking; although in a few cases along with a domestic worker or servant. However, Shehnaz and Nani (Table 5.17) claim to cook occasionally. Those women who were married mostly shared cooking with an adult female, especially with their mothers or mothers-in-law. In four cases, the work is shared with the sisters/sisters-in law. However, in five cases, the husbands of these women and their domestic workers also helped them to carry out the task of cooking.

Cleaning involves mainly dusting and sweeping, washing clothes and utensils. Dusting and sweeping are strenuous tasks in most houses. This is because of the need in a tropical climate to keep doors and windows open through which the dust blows in. In dusting and sweeping,

only in two cases of unmarried women (Monideepa and Debanushi), it is the mother who solely performs this task. While in the case of Swapna and Bijuli, their mother helps in dusting. In other cases, it is the domestic workers who perform this task. Interestingly, here all the married women claim to do occasional dusting/ sweeping.

Similarly, washing clothes is laborious and general observation suggests that it is commonly done by hand in buckets or stone troughs mainly due to the problem of continuous (or frequent fluctuation of) power supply. Although, it is the case that 90% of the samples have washing machines and 60% have vacuum cleaners, the survey also results that these tasks are frequently carried out by the domestic worker(s). However, the task of washing clothes is taken occasionally by all the married women (Table 5.17). In addition, in the case of three married women, washing clothes is shared with their mothers-in-law. And in another four cases, it is shared by their husbands. However, in the case of all the unmarried women, washing clothes is undertaken either by the mothers or the domestic workers or shared in between the mothers and the domestic workers (Table 5.20).

Utensils become very oily and sticky because of the use of a lot of oil and spices in Assamese cooking; cleaning them also takes much time and effort. Out of 15 married women, for 11, cleaning utensils at least once a day is a regular task (Table 5.17). However, this task is shared with an adult female or mostly with the domestic workers (in three cases, washing utensils are shared with mothers-in-law. Otherwise, it is the domestic worker who performs this task). In the case of all unmarried women, utensils are washed either by the mothers or by the domestic workers.

Assamese dress standards require carefully ironed clothes which is another time-consuming task and the dress is always ironed at least once after drying. The findings of the questionnaire survey shows that for six (Rini, Ila, Juna, Pinky, Jeeni and Mrinmoyee) out of the 25 women

employed sub-sample (all of them married) it is their husbands who exclusively carry out this task. For 10 women (Mukali, Kaveri, Simi, Jonali, Riku, Monideepa, Shehnaz, Manisha, Nani and Debanushi), this job is shared with an adult member of the household – either mother, father, brother-in-law, brother, sister or husband. However, nine women (both married and unmarried) failed to discuss this matter (Tables 5.17 and 5.20).

General observation suggests that shopping presents similar challenges, which may involve local purchases made on a daily basis or take the form of a large weekly shop which usually is done either by private car or by public transport (mainly city buses, rickshaws or seldom in auto-rickshaws).¹⁴² However, without a car, shopping can involve a considerable effort especially getting on and off the crowded city-buses after a shopping trip. Moreover, these crowded city buses are frequently the site of sexual harassment against women as is addressed here in section 5.5.0 and again in Chapter 6.

Buying daily food has become easier because of the arrival of the ‘concept of supermarket(s)’¹⁴³ (like Tanz, Orient, Nayantara, Vishal) which has grown rapidly in recent years where previously provisioning was via the corner shops. Figures 5.4, 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7 below show the inner and outer view of the new ‘supermarkets’ – *Vishal*, *Tanz* and *Nayantara*. Ready prepared foods are also increasingly available. It is now possible for a person to shop for all the goods they need from these new shops without having to shop around the High Street. But, unlike the western supermarkets (like Marks and Spencer, Tesco, Morrisons, ASDA, ALDI); these supermarkets remain small in size. Arguably, the arrival of these supermarkets has reduced the amount of time spent on shopping. The findings of the

¹⁴² Although the questionnaire survey failed to collect data as to whether the respondents shop by private car or use public transport, the answer to this question became clearer in the in-depth interviews that were conducted with 12 employed women. Out of the 12 employed women, 10 used private cars to do their regular shopping, while two (Debanushi and Shreya) used the public transport to shop on a regular basis.

¹⁴³ The answer as to whether the respondents used supermarkets also became clearer in the in-depth interviews. Here too, all the 12 employed women claimed to use supermarkets for shopping on a regular basis.

questionnaire survey demonstrate that in the case of four unmarried employed women (Shreya, Bijuli, Debanushi and Swapna); shopping is done mostly by their mothers ¹⁴⁴ or fathers. However, in the case of six unmarried women (Manisha, Shehnaz, Mitu, Monideepa, Pompei and Nani), shopping is shared in between their mothers, fathers, brother(s), sister(s) or domestic worker(s). For the 15 married employed women, in five cases (Ila, Mukali, Simi, Juna and Monalisha) they are helped exclusively by their husbands. Of the remaining ten, shopping is shared in between their mothers/mothers-in-law, fathers/ fathers-in-law or husbands.

Childcare

Caring is central to women's lives (Finch and Groves, 1983) and remains an inherent part of feminist ethics (see Chapter 6). In the West, literature on geography of childcare provision has focussed on issues of childcare as prime responsibility of women, be it the child's mother, a paid childcare worker (childminder) or nanny (Bhopal, 1998; Tivers, 1984; England, 1997; Gregson and Lowe, 1994, 1995; Pratt, 1997). In addition, many studies on sociology have also shown that grandparents, as well as relatives, friends or often neighbours as providers of childcare while allowing the child's (or children's) mother to enter the labour market (Gray, 2005; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Similarly, in Assamese society, the moralities and the socially constructed understandings of childcare and child rearing are generalised as the sole responsibility especially that of the mother, and sometimes even grandmother or any women in the house (see, Palriwala and Neetha, 2009).

Although the majority of the respondents (96% females and 82% males of all age-groups) of the questionnaire survey (Table 5.21) felt that under normal circumstances, a father should not be expected to look after his child/children, at the same time, for the sub-population of

¹⁴⁴ In the case of Shreya and Debanushi, shopping is done exclusively by their mothers as their fathers deceased.

students surveyed for this research (14 married women with children), the picture is rather different. Table 5.17 shows that all the married respondents with children undertake the task of childcare and in this way, (re)traditionalise their childcare responsibilities. Moreover, in day to day life, as we will see in Chapter 6, a working Assamese woman typically faces the challenge posed by managing her career alongside her childcare and household responsibilities (Devarajan, 2003). As discussed above, though the trend is towards a nuclear family structure and the number of working mothers has increased, options for organised childcare remain limited. There exist very few day-care centres, nurseries, and crèche facilities. Where such facilities do exist, they are poorly regarded.



Figure 5.4 Nayantara, a supermarket



Figure 5.5 Inside view of Nayantara



Figure 5.6 Inside view of Tanz



Figure 5.7 Vishal, a crowded department store

Table 5.20 -The household gender division of labour

Names	Domestic chores													Childcare											
	Cooking				Cleaning*			Ironing			Shopping			Support**				Crèche	Teaching			Transport			
Married	H	M/ML	DW	S/SL	H	M/ML	DW	H	M/ML/S/SL	F/FL/B/BL	M/ML	F/FL	H	M/ML	DW	F/FL/R	S/SL		ML	FL	H	H	ML/SL/R	DW	
Rini		●					●	●			●	●	●												
Ila		●		●	●	●	●	●					●	●	●				●		●		●		
Mukali		●			●		●		●				●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●			
Kaveri		●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●				●	●			
Simi	●	●			●	●				●			●	●	●						●	●			
Juna		●		●			●	●					●	●	●						●				
Pinky		●					●	●			●	●		●	●	●									
Jeeni	●						●	●			●	●			●	●	●				●	●			
Jonali			●	●			●		●		●	●	●	●	●				●	●	●	●			
Bijoya			●				●						●					●			●	●			
Susantika	●	●					●				●	●	●	●	●		●				●	●			
Riku		●		●			●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●				●	●		●	
Mrinmoyee			●			●	●	●			●	●	●		●		●				●	●		●	
Monalisha	●		●				●						●		●						●	●		●	
Murchana	●		●				●								●									●	
Unmarried		M	DW			M	DW		M/S	F/B	DW	S/B	M/F												
Manisha			●				●		●	●	●	●	●												
Shehnaz		●	●				●		●	●	●	●	●												
Shreya		●					●						●												
Mitu		●	●				●				●	●	●												
Bijuli		●				●	●						●												
M'deepa		●				●	●				●	●	●												
Pompy		●	●				●			●	●	●	●												
Nani		●							●		●	●	●												
Debanushi		●				●			●				●												
Swapna		●	●			●							●												

Abbreviations: M=Mother; F=Father; ML=Mother-in-law; FL=father-in-law; H=Husband; S=Sister; B=Brother; SL=Sister-in-law; BL=Brother-in-law; R= Relative; DW=Domestic Worker, •= household tasks shared between the members of the family, *Cleaning includes dusting, sweeping, washing clothes and cleaning utensils, **Support= Family support to look after the child at home

Source: Questionnaire survey with 25 working women from a universe of 182 population

Table 5.21 Under normal circumstances, a father should not be expected to look after his children (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Groups	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree*	62	50	61	40	67	70	67	62	52
Disagree*	34	25	35	33	33	30	33	34	30
Total*	96	75	96	73	100	100	100	96	82
Uncertain	2	12	–	–	–	–	–	1	3
Agree**	2	13	4	27	–	–	–	3	15
Strongly Agree**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total**	2	13	4	27	–	–	–	3	15
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=149)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N= Total number in each age-group)									

All 14 married women have one child and all the children are under the age of six. Only one woman in the sample uses a crèche to meet her childcare needs. In another 13 cases, childcare is shared – either among the husband(s), mother(s), fathers, mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, sisters, sisters-in-law or sometimes helped by an employed domestic/childminder or distant relatives. Of the informal carers, six are grandparent(s), eight are domestic workers, one a trained care taker, five relatives (three sisters, one sister-in-law and one distant relative) and of course, 14 husbands. It is however, not possible to ascertain from the survey whether these carers shared childcaring at the same time or during different parts of the day. Another limitation with this survey is that it fails to take into account the number of hours spent by the carers on different childcare activities. Therefore, this survey is inevitably limited to draw any nuanced childcare patterns. Nevertheless, it is clear from the survey that all of the 13 working women used informal childcare regularly six days a week, at least during the day as they have to attend to paid work or university lessons.

In eight cases, teaching the child is carried out exclusively by the husband. However, in one case, it is shared between husband and mother-in-law and in two cases; it is shared between husband, mother-in-law and father-in-law. In four cases (Mukali, Simi, Jeeni and Jonali) dropping off and collecting child (ren) from the school/nursery/crèche is exclusively done by the husband (Tables 5.17 and 5.20). In three cases, it is shared between husband and domestic worker(s). In one case, it is shared between mother-in-law, sister-in-law or a relative. In another case, it is solely the domestic worker who drops off and collects the child (Table 5.20).

On average, a working woman is found to spend 5-7 hours per day (or 30-42 hours per week) in her paid work (Table 5.22). In addition, she experiences a double day and a double shift at home (Chapter 6). She spends two hours per day or 14 hours per week on domestic chores. This has to be compared with a full time homemaker who works for 14 hours a day (or 98 hours a week).¹⁴⁵ Notwithstanding the proliferation of modern household appliances as well as the family support mechanism, a majority of the employed women (Table 5.23) in the sample (20 out of 25, that is, 80%) felt excessively stressed by working both at home and at the place of work [the survey, however, fails to ascertain as to why the unmarried women, who remain mostly free from household responsibilities (Table 5.17) feel extremely tired after their paid work]. Besides, majority of the married women (10 out of 15, that is, 67%) of the survey claimed that they do not get sufficient time to spend with their husband, children and other family members. On the other hand, six unmarried women reported that they do get sufficient time to spend with their families (Table 5.23).

¹⁴⁵ A Resource Directory on Violence against Women in Assam, 2003

Table 5.22 Number of hours spent on paid work by the respondents	
Names	Number of hours spent on paid work per day
Married	
Rini	7
Ila	7
Mukali	5
Kaveri	7
Simi	5
Juna	5
Pinky	7
Jeeni	7
Jonali	7
Bijoya	7
Susantika	5
Riku	7
Mrinmoyee	7
Monalisha	5
Murchana	7
Unmarried	
Manisha	7
Shehnaz	8
Shreya	4
Mitu	5
Bijuli	5
M'deepa	4
Pompy	5
Nani	7
Debanushi	3
Swapna	5
Source: Questionnaire survey with 25 working women from a universe of 182 population	

Table 5.23 State of work related pressure of employed women				
Names	Do you feel excessively tired by working both at home and at place of work		Time to spend with family/husband/children	
	yes	no	yes	no
Married				
Rini		•	•	
Ila	•			•
Mukali	•			•
Kaveri	•			•
Simi	•			•
Juna	•		•	
Pinky	•			•
Jeeni	•			•
Jonali	•			•
Bijoya	•			•
Susantika		•	•	
Riku	•			•
Mrinmoyee	•		•	
Monalisha	•		•	
Murchana	•			•
Unmarried				
Manisha		•	•	
Shehnaz	•			•
Shreya	•			•
Mitu	•		•	
Bijuli		•	•	
M'deepa	•			•
Pompy		•		•
Nani	•		•	
Debanushi	•		•	
Swapna	•		•	
Source: Questionnaire survey with 25 working women from a universe of 182 population				

It is apparent therefore that there remains a gendering of domestic duties (Table 5.20) and that a woman has her parents, husband or even her in-laws to support her in her career. However, Chapter 6 addresses that the domestic division of labour in Assamese society remains extremely unequal, largely as a consequence of labour-intensive standards of feminised domestic practice: it also shows that a working Assamese women face the brutal truth that they must pay a heavy price at home (managing their household chores and childcare responsibilities) for their financial independence and work outside the home. In similar context, Ursula Sharma (1986: 64) in her study of women's work and urban household in Shimla, North India argues that housework in India is viewed as a part of the "female role and that efficiency as a housewife is an important measure of success as a woman" (see, Sourabh, 2007). Though occasionally a husband (or any man) in the family may volunteer to offer a helping hand to his wife (or daughter/daughter-in-law/sister-in-law/sister), it is more an exception than the rule. The process of socialisation of most Assamese men is such that they are brought up unaccustomed to help out with the housework and childcare (Chapter 6; Sourabh, 2007). It can therefore be suggested that the presence of Assamese woman is considered essential within the home. These interpretations of my thesis bear similarity with that of earlier Indian and Anglo-American studies (Baxter, 1997; Mukhopadhyay et al., 1993; Palriwala and Neetha, 2009; Rani and Khandelwal 1992; Ramu, 1989; Shukla and Kapoor, 1990; Sharma, 1986; Shourabh, 2007; Shelton, 1990; Wajcman, 1983).

In summary, to all intents and purposes the respondents of the research suggest a very strong consensus on attitudes towards women in Assam indicating that this new middle class elite student population is surprisingly homogenous. Chapters 1 and 4 have adduced that in Assamese socio-geographic research; this group of educationally privileged student is a silenced and an ignored group, whose voices remain unheard and unheeded. This thesis acts as

a platform to allow their attitudes (towards career, marriage and motherhood) and everyday experiences (regarding housework, childcare and of course street sexual harassment) here and elsewhere to surface. Overall, the evidence from the attitude statements as well secondary data on higher education and the labour market mirrors that a change has occurred in the status of Assamese women among the educated elite and the impression is of a consensus in stated 'egalitarian attitudes'. There is an evident paradox; however, in the way this change in attitudes and opportunities maps onto an apparently enduring set of values whereby an idealised vision of femininity retains an extremely powerful grip on Indian society (Bhaskaran, 2004). This contradiction receives fuller exploration in Chapter 6. One suggested explanation is that these women are often controlled by the 'discriminatory paradigm' embedded in cultural practices, moral codes and the norms of gendered moral rationalities. In short, this change in attitudes and values is necessary but not sufficient as a means to transform daily practices and relations for working women in Assam.

5.5.0 Politics of Everyday Mobility

This section, which considers the politics of routine mobility in public spaces, is a relatively unresearched area of social organisation. Chapter 1 has demonstrated the reasons for considering this indicator within the study of young, middle class Assamese women's changing status and role. It has also demonstrated that although the discourse on safety and security is situated with young middle class women's access to use of public space, focusing squarely on the middle class women helps to explain the fact that the discourse of safety and security is not only in the interests of these women for whom it is ostensibly meant, but rather serves to legitimate the boundaries of class and gender in access to public space (Phadke, 2007).

From the above discussions it appears that within the two areas of social organisations [education and career (based on paid employment)], Assamese women have gained additional freedom in some aspects of their work. But, higher education and employment require a high degree of mobility through public spaces on a daily basis. Arguably, this sample of women have greater access to public space in relation to their contemporaries as a direct result of the cultural capital gained from participation in higher education and paid employment (Bourdieu, 1984; LiPuma, 1993; Phadke, 2007). It is in this respect that we see evidence of barriers to women's improved status. Young women are increasingly subjected to forms of street (hetero) sexual harassment ¹⁴⁶ (Awasthi, 2006; Chatterji, 2007; Nahar, 2008; Phakde, 2007; Sharma, 2005; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007; Vasudha, 2005) such as verbal and unwanted advances (groping or fondling, staring, pinching, touching) locally known as 'eve-teasing'. This is especially the case in crowded public transport and streets ¹⁴⁷ (Sharma, 2005; Sharma, 2007a). Arguably, this imposes restrictions to women's everyday mobility in public, which conflicts with their new found freedom in education and career. In addition, this has the effect of circumscribing women's movements through intimidation and fear for their safety and security.

Table 5.24 illustrates the incidence of crime committed against Assamese women in recent years (Das, 2005). However, it is apparent from this table that it contains lots of missing data. Therefore, the trend of a steadily increasing growth of crime against women remains unclear. Moreover, statistics have to be taken at face value and are not reflective therefore of the complexities of Assamese women's freedom of mobility when out in public. These statistics,

¹⁴⁶ see footnote 20 (Chapter 1)

¹⁴⁷ In Assam, violence against women is a by-product of political disorder (such as 'Assam Agitation' and other on-going violence introduced in Chapter 3). Sexual harassment against *Adivashi* (tribal) woman that occurred in the streets of Guwahati, Assam on November 24, 2007, following *Adivashi* militancy is one of the worst examples of street sexual harassment and a criminal case of molestation (see, footnote 151) in the history of Assam (The Assam Tribune, November, 27, 2007 <http://www.assamtribune.com/nov2707/at09.html>, November, 27, 2007; see also, Gohain, 2007).

however, are likely to underreport the true incidences of crime because they relate only to heterosexual behaviour and present only a small proportion of all cases of street sexual harassments. Furthermore, “crime statistics only reflect those crimes that are reported to the police and come within the public discourse” (Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007: 1543). Importantly, much of the incidences of street harassment committed against women never enter the crime statistics (Awasthi, 2006; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007). This problem of underreporting may be mainly due to the fear of public shame and vengeance.

Some scholars argue that appalling evidences of street sexual assault against women are often ignored by the police (Awasthi, 2006; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007). What is surprising is that many police officers are reluctant to register crimes committed against women (Awasthi, 2006; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007). Awasthi (2006) argues that there are several possible reasons for such reluctance on the part of the police officers. First, they deliberately want to keep the crime statistics low because filing of a First Information Report (FIR) of a crime committed against women, the first step in criminal investigation (in this case, street sexual harassment against women), is nothing but developing heaps of pending cases in the Family Court. Second, complaints of street sexual harassment lodged by the girls and young women are often ‘spurious’ because the young women turn up in the police stations without their families or sometimes show up in ‘revealing western clothes’ that are provocative in nature. In this way the women scapegoat themselves and are responsible for their own street sexual assaults (Sharma, 2007b). The most elicited debate emerging from these interpretations is the issue of a dress code (Chatterji, 2008; Sharma, 2008). What should young Assamese women wear when out in public?

Chapter 6 shows that young women experience significant restriction in their freedom of mobility in public as they become the victims of street sexual harassment or perceive this to be

an ever-present threat. Such harassment could comprise the passing of comments on the physical beauty of women or the way they dress, whistling, staring or singing ‘bollywood songs’, which could be considered as an expression of male domination¹⁴⁸ (Khan, 2007) and heterosexual behaviour (MacKinnon, 1979)¹⁴⁹. This is particularly because the public streets of Assam, where these types of verbal harassments are a trivial pastime for men. Figures 5.8 and 5.9 illustrate a typical situation of a number of men either standing on the road or sitting on their motor bikes. As we will see in Chapter 6, it is in just this situation that young women easily become the victims of harassment.

Radical feminists label harassment as all “the process of social control enacted by men over women in which the totality of our lives are available to being policed by them” (Stanley and Wise, 1987: 15). Arguably, any form of harassment against women in public imposes restrictions to their mobility. And sometimes might even signal fear as an indication of more serious violence (Pain, 1991). It also reinforces women’s subordination through legitimisation of socialised and spatilised control, accomplished together through fear of harassment and sexual assault. A prominent area of action for male assault, such as pressing up against women, groping and fondling, is in the crowded city buses (especially during the rush hours) as well as crowded places and deserted lanes. Figures 5.10 and 5.11 portray the condition of the public transport (city buses) especially during the morning and evening rush hours. One of the findings of my questionnaire survey (Table 5.25) is that a majority of the students believe that (77% females and 76% males of all age-groups) one of the greatest attributes of Assamese woman is femininity. Studies reveal that Indian woman’s femininity (regardless of whether married or unmarried) is defined by her self- accessorised practices such as a *bindi* (a dot on

¹⁴⁸ Bollywood songs are usually romantic songs that are commonly used by young men as euphemism to verbally harass (eve-tease) young women.

¹⁴⁹ Echoing on MacKinnon (1979), who defined harassment as an exertion of power to influence the male-dominated and heterosexual nature of many workspaces.

the forehead), nose rings, *mehendi* and *henna* (painting kits for the hands) and for a married woman, by her *mangalsutra* (long gold chain with black beads) and *sindoor* (vermilion) (Durham, 2006; Murti, 2007; Phadke, 2007; also, Phadke, 2005). These self-adornment practices of Indian women signals their efforts towards producing ‘respectability’ while out in public (Phadke, 2005; Phadke, 2007; see also, Blank noise project).¹⁵⁰ In similar context, majority of the participants of in-depth interviews (section 6.4.0, Chapter 6) felt that femininity is casually interpreted as ‘subordination’ whereby women are viewed by men as decorative or sexual objects rather than as equals.

An important question to be asked in section 6.4.0, Chapter 6 is why, alongside increased opportunities for higher education and paid employment outside the home, women are increasingly prey to sexual harassment (Awasthi, 2006; Chatterji, 2007; Nahar, 2008; Phadke, 2007; Sharma, 2005; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007; Vasudha, 2005) and in this way experiencing restrictions to their safety and mobility? It is the purpose of the in-depth analysis to follow in Chapter 6 to interrogate the contradictions of freedom and constraints. One possible explanation to be tested is that women appear to pose a threat by this new found freedom, or by adopting western modes of dress they have come to symbolise a threat to ethnic Indian tastes and values.

¹⁵⁰ Blank noise is a participatory art project that endeavours to accost street sexual harassment (eve teasing) against women. It was started by Jasmeen Patheja in 2003, a graduate art student of Srishti School of Art Design and Technology in Bangalore, Karnataka. The project has now gained a national momentum and has diffused to other parts of the country, namely Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi, and Kolkata. The key aim of the project is to collect testimonies of sufferers of eve teasing and also to work with the victims as well as the perpetrators of this crime in an effort to transform the public perception of street sexual harassment against women, which is largely considered as a minor nuisance (Vasudha, 2005; Nahar, 2008). The results of a survey conducted by this project in Bangalore in 2006 revealed that practising symbols of Indian femininity signals an element of safety and security when out in public [The Hindu, New Delhi, September, 17, 2006 (<http://www.hindu.com/2006/09/17/stories/2006091711180300.htm>, September, 17, 2006) and *The Hindu, Metro Plus*, Bangalore, July, 12, 2005]

Table 5.24 Incidences of crime committed against women in Assam, 1990-2008			
Year	Rape	Molestations ¹⁵¹	Street Sexual Harassment ¹⁵²
1990	423	192	13
1991	427	190	10
1992	442	113	96
1993	508	146	5
1994	441	184	13
1995	588	572	15
1996	232 ^{**}	182 ^{**}	23 ^{**}
1997	717	686	18 ^{**}
1998	744	648	25 ^{**}
1999	703	720	25 ^{**}
2000	762	777	47
2001	817	850	48 ^{**}
2002	884	754	11 ^{**}
2003	1049	772	NA
2004	1036	758	NA
2005 [*]	613	338	NA
2008 ^{***}	505	429	NA

Abbreviations: NA: Not available; ^{*}Up to June 2005; ^{**}Statistics available for only a few districts of Assam; ^{***}Up to May 2008. **Sources:** *A Resource Directory on Violence against Women in Assam* Published by North East Network, 2003, Assam Tribune, 2nd October, 2005 (<http://www.assamtribune.com/oct0205/main.html>) and Assam Legislative Assembly, July, 2008

¹⁵¹ Molestation is a term used to refer to any incident that includes flagrant and easily recognised acts of sexual abuse usually against women and children. Such acts of sexual abuse may be fondling or sexualised touching, and in this way crossing the boundaries of personal space of a woman or even children (Graber, 1991).

¹⁵² See footnote 20 (Chapter 1)



Figure 5.8 Common pastime of young men (1)



Figure 5.9 Common pastime of young men (2)



Figure 5.10 Conditions of public transport during the rush hours (1)



Figure 5.11 Conditions of public transport during the rush hours (2)

Table 5.25 One of the greatest attributes of women is femininity (%)									
Age Group	17-21		22-25		26-30		31-35	All Age Groups	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male
Strongly Disagree [*]	—	—	—	—	8	—	—	—	—
Disagree [*]	13	—	4	7	—	—	—	7	3
Total[*]	13	—	4	7	8	—	—	7	3
Uncertain	11	—	16	27	12	20	—	14	18
Agree ^{**}	48	62	39	53	42	30	67	43	49
Strongly Agree ^{**}	26	38	38	13	38	40	33	34	27
Total^{**}	74	100	77	66	80	70	100	77	76
Not filled in	2	—	3	—	—	10	—	2	3
Grand Total	100 (N=53)	100 (N=8)	100 (N=69)	100 (N=15)	100 (N=24)	100 (N=10)	100 (N=3)	100 (N=149)	100 (N=33)
Source: Questionnaire Survey with 182 students (N= Total number in each age-group)									

5.6.0 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has provided an extensive overview of the trends and developments associated with women's changing status and role in Assamese society in general as a prelude to probing the complexities of the everyday practices of young, middle class Assamese women in particular. The results of the higher secondary examinations (the equivalent of the UK A-Level examinations) from 2005 to 2009 (in science, arts and commerce streams) indicate that young, Assamese women tend to outperform their male counterparts. Overall, the field of higher education is one of the areas where women are being able to make significant inroads into the hitherto exclusively male bastions of engineering, science and commerce. This reflects that women in higher education have developed self-confidence: they have self-empowered themselves through greater self-reliance by moving beyond the power plays [*power over* (ability to influence) and *power with* (power from collective action)] to participate in paid employment with their *power to* (organise and change existing hierarchies) and *power within* (individual consciousness) assets (Rowlands, 1995; 1997; Chapter 2). In short, Assamese women in higher education are trying to reconstruct their personal identities (Chapter 6).

This chapter also sheds light on the influence of neoliberalism on various strands of Assamese women's life, for instance, employment and domesticity-growing privatisation and shift to a service economy have had a drastic impact on the lives of young, middle class Assamese women. The discussion has highlighted that, running alongside the development of women's participation in higher education, is a parallel trend of neoliberalism and a feminisation of the labour force in Assam. Against a backdrop of structural reforms and neoliberalism, new career opportunities have opened up and the number of job opportunities increased in trade, business, services and employment. Arguably, these new career trajectories are the products of changing gender politics reflected in women's increased labour supply and increasing demand for

educated women. In short, Assamese women play a critical role in the changing economy of Assam. However, the number of female jobs remains less than men's and there is evidence of gender inequality in both horizontal and vertical segregation in occupation (Hakim, 1996).

This chapter highlights both the positive changes and the persistent barriers to gender equality confronting women in contemporary Assam. With the gradual normalisation of a 'dual career' household structure in contemporary urban Assam (Chatterjee, 2008; Sengupta, 2008), the old ideological male 'breadwinner' model appears to be in decline. However, as will be shown in Chapter 6, Assamese women remain tied to the domestic sphere: from the intensive standards of cooking required to the nurturing tasks of childcare, her presence is quintessential within the house. There is evidence, however, that young Assamese women are increasingly participating in the public arena as active agents of transformation and are capable of changing in their own interest. This and the above cited perspectives are in turn shaped by a Third Wave feminism in India. At the same time, this chapter has also highlighted the contradictory politics of daily lives in the public sphere. The public streets of Assam are male dominated where women are subjected to street sexual harassment.

The findings of the attitude statements (section C) towards career, marriage and motherhood suggest that a change has occurred in the status of Assamese women among the educated, middle class elite and the impression is of a rising consensus in stated egalitarian attitudes. However, all is not always as it seems. Chapter 6 goes on to highlight that the attitudes of these students are highly contingent. There are times and situations when the importance of family obligations eclipse career-mindedness.

Chapter 6

Women's Changing Status: Conflicting Roles and Identities

6.1.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of 29 in-depth interviews and two focus groups with young, middle class Assamese women in higher education, belonging to the 'Generation Xers' of their western counterparts (Heywood and Drake, 2004; see, Chapter 2). Previous chapters established the rationale for conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups with a purposive sample of middle class women students to explore the diverse everyday realities associated with their lives as students, daughters/ wives and in some cases participating in paid employment.

This chapter demonstrates that women are well aware of their 'power within' and are using their 'power to' as a means to pursue financial independence: these women are active agents of social change (Chapter 2). Yet, as will become apparent in the discussion which follows, such an association between increased career opportunities and 'liberation' from domestic subordination is by no means straightforward. Further, it is also discussed in this chapter and elsewhere that for many within Assamese society, the participation of women in higher education and their increased visibility in paid employment is symbolic of the advancing trend of neoliberalism alongside the proliferation and cultural 'threat' of 'immodest' western modes of dress; loss of extended family; an erosion of cultural practices and religious beliefs. The narrative analysis presented below reveals the contradictory processes of the mundane acts of everyday practices underpinning women's changing status and role. On the one hand it shows

higher education to be liberating for those who can afford access, in as much as it offers increased autonomy and exposure to international media and ‘cosmopolitan’, egalitarian ideals. On the other hand, women who seek fulfilling jobs and careers outside the home find their freedom of movement severely restricted by street sexual harassment (locally known as ‘eve-teasing’), and at home they face continuing pressure to maintain labour-intensive standards of cooking and childcare. The narratives reveal that, while women in higher education are highly career oriented, they fully anticipate putting husband, children and parents-in-law before themselves in the decisions they make concerning their careers in the future.

The chapter begins by addressing the extent to which women in the sample pursue higher education because of increased aspirations and personal career expectations or as a response to external encouragement (the removal of barriers or new opportunities). The narratives suggest that women’s competing roles and identities, and the strategies they adopt to reconcile these conflicts in daily life, mask the true depth of persistent gender inequalities. It is in this respect that discussion then turns to consider evidence of diversity in women’s everyday experience through a spectrum of cultural and religious beliefs and norms associated with marriage, child-rearing and position in the family. Finally, discussion turns to consider the politics of changing gender divisions of labour with respect to women’s accounts of street harassment (‘eve-teasing’) when out in public.

6.2.0 Women’s Pursuit of Higher Education: Personally Liberating or an Extension of Family Duty?

Women who have access to higher education in Assam represent a privileged elite. They are typically the daughters of high profile officers or white collar job-holders whose range of

choices in life reflects this professional status and relative economic advantage (Vianello, 2004). The interview narratives clearly demonstrate how the women in this sample use access to higher education quite instrumentally as a means of pursuing their own identity (Bayley, 1997; Vianello, 2004). These women are generally very career-minded, self confident and ambitious. A significant proportion of those in the sample (12 out of 29) are already in paid employment as a function of their postgraduate training (in medical sciences and as college lecturers or teachers). In this way those pursuing careers in medicine are, like their western counterparts, economically independent through the stages of postgraduate training (Archer 1989; Green and Wheatley 1992). Because the sample includes a number of postgraduates in relatively well paid employment it is possible to consider the prospects of work/life 'balance', where the narratives refer variously to future intentions as well as current practices with respect to the reconciliation of both a career and family life. Eight women in the sample already confront these issues of 'juggling' career and family roles as wives and mothers themselves.

There is ample evidence in the narratives to demonstrate the high degree of career orientation of the women, and in many cases high aspirations are endorsed by external support from parents or spouse. Murchana, for instance, a college lecturer, claims that the support she receives from her husband and her parents in pursuit of post doctoral training overseas is rooted in them 'wanting the best for her'.

I've got lots of support from my family, my spouse and that is why I'm pursuing my Ph.D. At times I've to compromise; they want that I should give them time too. They also want me to pursue my studies. They love me and so they want me. Otherwise they are very much supportive to my career. I'm highly career oriented and after my Ph.D. I want to do my post doctoral degree in an overseas university... (6: Murchana)

Similarly, Manalisha demonstrates considerable commitment and enterprise in her ambition to set up her own private school once she has secured her B.Ed. She claims that her husband does not hinder her opportunities in this respect:

My spouse has been very much supportive since my marriage. I got married when I was studying my Masters. And after that in the first year only I had my child. Together with the child I did my M.A. previous and final exams and now also I am doing my B.Ed. And he never expected anything which I should do at the expense of my studies... And after some years I think I will open a school of my own... (1: Manalisha)

Superficially, these extracts suggest a strong individual preference for career, much in the way that human capital theorists claim that it is an individual 'taste' for career versus family (or an adaptation of work to family) which determines the supply of women's labour in any given situation (see for instance the international comparisons provided by Catherine Hakim, 2000). Yet, the narratives also demonstrate that this career-mindedness is context dependent: it is almost always conditional upon the women accepting that domestic and family roles will at some point take priority. The case of Rini epitomises Assamese women's heavily circumscribed opportunities for an independent career:

My aspiration is to be a good daughter, wife, sister, mother and doctor - to make my husband and family proud of me and to make everyone happy. I want to be a capable doctor in my field but never to pursue a career at the cost of my family's well being. I am not so career-minded as well and again I repeat I don't want a career at the cost of my family... (3: Rini)

Rini, who is expecting a baby, goes on to stress that while her academic studies are central to her identity at the present time, this is only until such time as she has children. She takes it for granted that once she has children of her own she will put family responsibilities first:

My family is very supportive till now and they give me ample opportunities for my career because they believe that once I start my family I won't compromise my family for my studies... (3: Rini)

Similarly, Riku views her ambition to build a career as complementing, rather than denying, those of a successful wife and a mother:

Yes, my family has been very supportive in building my career. The second point is important. I... am career-minded but if the situation comes where I have to choose in between the two – for example: suppose there is an important conference for me to attend and at the same time my daughter has her exams then obviously my daughter's exams will gain priority and I will cancel my programme of attending the conference... (5: Riku)

Career aspirations vary across the sample from generally constructed 'feminine' type occupations (high school teacher, airhostess) through the white-collar professions (college lecturer, medical doctor, government official, civil servant), to a number of 'masculine type' occupations (engineering, airline pilot, politics). Shreya's ambition to become an airline pilot perhaps best reflects the dramatic transformation of new career opportunities now open to educated Assamese women, while Mrinmoyee wishes to establish a career in politics:

I am highly career oriented, I don't have my father, and he has passed away. My mother is a school teacher and she has brought me up to be very independent. I take tuitions during the evening hours but my aim in life is to be a pilot for which after my graduation I'm going for that... (14: Shreya)

----I'm a student of political science and now I'm doing my M.Phil. I love politics and want to take up politics as my career. My spouse is also very supportive as he himself is into politics. During my graduation I was a social service secretary and now I'm an active member of Congress Party. May be at some point of time I will contest elections---- (2: Mrinmoyee)

Nevertheless, the narratives also illustrate quite clearly that career salience cannot be viewed in isolation from moral norms and family obligations, however strongly the idea of a career is presented as a matter of personal preference and ambition. Before discussing further women's aspirations of career orientation, it is essential to highlight the feminist ethics that might consider when career orientation is a moral norm and when it is an obligation? In the West, a plethora of academic research has explored the work in feminist ethics including the 'ethics of care' (Brennan, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Jaggar, 1991; Noddings, 2002). The key goals of feminist ethics are: first, to gain ground in elimination of all forms of women's oppression (Brennan, 1999; WGSF, 1997). This aim of feminist ethics also includes the issue of 'power' – which remains solely about domination and subordination;¹⁵³ second, to work towards improving women's economic and financial conditions; third, to build an account of women's morality, based on their moral experience(s) (Brennan, 1999). The moral experiences of women, in fact, all moralities, can be defined as the principle of what is right or wrong, good or bad, justified or unjustified (Procter, 1998). Though there remains a varied degree of subtlety in the practice and theory of ethics, be it moral norms or obligation, all embrace the concepts of values, beliefs and responsibilities (Procter, 1998). "Morality allows and requires people to understand themselves as bearers of particular identities and actors in various relationships that are defined by certain values" (Brennan, 1999: 873). Feminists also endorse

¹⁵³ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-ethics/>, January, 17, 2008

that through the practices of morality and responsibility people learn to understand and share their understanding of each other (Brennan, 1999). The focus of the everyday practices of these women presented in this thesis is grounded on the locally circumscribed understanding of morality that is based on ethics of care and (or) responsibility for their families. Jaggar (1991: 93) argues that this is a paradigm of moral relativism which is “plural and local rather than singular and global, grounded not in transcendent reason but rather in historically specific moral practices and traditions” though the latter remains a variable concept. Jaggar (1991: 94), however, argues that feminist ethics cannot espouse a moral relativism that overlooks women’s oppression or trivialises women’s morality, although it remains neutral “between the plural and local understanding of ethics, on the one hand, and the ideal of a universal morality on the other”. Further, in feminist geography, ‘situated knowledges’ grounded on the recognition that knowledge is constituted by local socio-cultural values alongside academic knowledge can also be infused as inherently ethical (Stanley, 1997; Haraway, 1991).

In the case of young, middle class Assamese women, the narratives reveal that individual agents bend to the moral demands of the family. It remains however unclear from the narratives whether these obligations or norms become a site of power contestations. Nonetheless, it is clear that for majority of women access to higher education is both personally liberating as well as an extension of family duty. Therefore, while Shreya’s widowed mother has encouraged her daughter to recognise the value of financial independence, Debanushi will only pursue an independent career if doing so does not prevent her from looking after her mother, or denying what she sees as her feminine, caring identity:

During the final year of my graduation, I got a job in Gujarat through campus interview conducted in our institute. But I did not like to leave my mother alone and go. I know after my postgraduation and the law degree which I am doing will help me

to get a job somewhere here in one of the multinational companies but after establishing my career, that is, after gaining self-esteem I would like to play the roles of womanhood and merge from femininity to humanity and maintain a striking balance between my career and my potential family and of course look after my mother... (25: Debanushi)

It would be wrong, therefore, to over-determine the role of any individual agency in these women's participation in higher education and their career choice. The 'choices' these women make are not driven by personal preference alone but instead circumscribed by parental aspirations and local cultural norms governing what is deemed to be the best or proper path for a daughter or wife to pursue. This is illustrated clearly in the case of Bonojyotshna who is receiving private coaching to help her through competitive civil service exams explicitly to fulfil her father's dream of a powerful and prestigious career for his only daughter.

I'm career-minded but my career is decided by my father and he wants me to take either ACS ¹⁵⁴ or IAS ¹⁵⁵ examination and take up a job in civil services. I know how tough it is, but at the same time I also believe that it is not impossible. I am preparing for it and also taking commercial coaching for these exams. I want to get through it and fulfil my father's dreams... (17: Bonojyotshna)

Across the sample it is clear that exam results and qualifications often matter as much to parents as they do to the women themselves. Sometimes, as in the case of Riniki and Swarnali, this reflects a sense of reflected glory and family pride:

They always expect me to come out with flying colours and then get a career- 'best job' whereby they can feel proud of me. As my family members always encourage

¹⁵⁴ Assam Civil Service

¹⁵⁵ Indian Administrative Service

me to take up my studies seriously to make a good career, I'm always serious in this aspect... I'm doing my post graduation and I'm engaged fully in it and trying my best to come out with flying colours through which I think will be able to compete in the job market as getting a job is the ultimate aim of my life... (20: Riniki)

My family supports and helps me in every possible way for my bright career. I just could not imagine my life without my mother. Her love, support and encouragement helps me to shape my career. She does not allow me to feel low and encourage me in every way when sometimes I feel like failure. Her waking up late at night with me when I need to burn midnight oil helps me to feel confident. My father helps me to coping everything with positive hopes. He always encourages me never to loose hope and face everything with a smiling face. Since he himself is an engineer, he helps me a great deal in the subjects. Again he also helps me in my crisis. After my engineering graduation, I want to work for one of the private companies... (24: Swarnali)

In other cases, personal aspirations are bound up with pragmatic objectives such as to contribute towards a family business or replicate parental success. This is illustrated in the case of Manusmita's ambition to establish a career in advertising – just like that which her father enjoys:

My father is a film writer and producer - I have also the experience of helping him. So, I want to establish my career in the advertising world for which I'm working very hard and looking for various options to get into it... (16: Manusmita)

In summary, these narratives reveal the women's high aspirations, modern outlook and a high degree of a career orientation. Here and elsewhere in this chapter, this outlook provides a lens through which to understand the choices and mediations these young women have made, and continue to make, in their everyday lives. Women in the sample are motivated not only by

personal preference such as a 'taste' for economic independence, but are typically also encouraged by parents (or sometimes a spouse) to compete for powerful, status oriented, prestigious jobs as a matter of family pride. Arguably, this encouragement may be interpreted as a manifestation of the pressures to maintain middle class status through the accumulation of professional employment, qualifications and cultural capital cachet (Bourdieu, 1984; LiPuma, 1993; Chapter 5). However, the role of neoliberalism (Chapter 2) in shaping the career aspirations of some of these women (like Shreya, Manusmita, Debanushi, Swarnali) should not be underestimated. They are confident and expect to be welcomed into a workplace and achieve in their career. In this context, Table 4.4 (Chapter 4) has also shown that young women like (Manajesa, Akashi, Ekta, Indrani, Aslesha, Riniki, Roshan, Maitreyee, Supriya) greatly aspire to sell their skills to multinational companies. It is suggestive therefore, that as a result of the process of neoliberalism and globalisation, these young women aspire greatly to harness modern career resources and options in order to build their modern identities.

In a sense these young women enjoy greater flexibility in imagining their career trajectories than Assamese women were ever endowed in the past. In a minority of cases, typically those women pursuing 'male-type' employment, association with high status occupations ensures a notable degree of authority and respect in relation to parents, husband, children and in-laws. In this urban context, high self-esteem and confidence appear to grow, alongside a diminished emphasis on the tacit 'traditional' homemaker role. Arguably, as discussed in Chapter 2, such high self-esteem and growing confidence, represented as 'girl power' (Laurie et al., 1999, Harris, 2004; Thomas, 2008) reflects a trend towards a Third Wave Indian feminism. In general, however, this emphasis on social mobility through increased female participation in paid employment is complicated by competing expectations that women continue to maintain domestic and childcare responsibilities after marriage.

6.3.0 Competing Identities

Like their western counterparts, the women of Assam today have opportunities their mothers never dreamed of (Aveling, 2002; Baber and Monaghan, 1988; Bielby and Bielby, 1984; Granrose and Caplan, 1996; Novack and Novack, 1996). This follows on from recent evidence of a profound restructuring of paid employment (changes for men as well as new opportunities for women) and a transformation of the family from a joint or extended arrangement to a more simple 'nuclear' (adult couple with children) form, often comprising two breadwinners in a new 'dual career' norm. Chapter 5 detailed how the structures of employment have changed over the period since the late 1980s. Over the same period the Second Wave of Indian Women's Movement 'came of age'. One consequence is that educated Assamese women increasingly expect to pursue an independent career. Yet, they also face significant obstacles in the pursuit of this ambition. That is, educated Assamese women face far greater obstacles to reconciling a career with family life than their male colleagues. They are in effect caught between new opportunities for economic independence and persistent inequalities associated with the domesticities of the 'proper' wife and mother. Unlike their western counterparts, women in Assam are bound to the institution of marriage as the only legally recognised framework for sexual union and procreation. This means that while educated Assamese women have increased opportunities to pursue fulfilling careers in their own right they are at the same time morally and legally bound to the institutions of marriage and motherhood and the powerful cultural expectations of subordination to a husband, children and parents-in-law these institutions entail. The question of changing status and identity for the women in this research is thus determined by the particular ways in which these competing identities are negotiated in particular local contexts across daily life.

The following sections seek to unravel these competing identities; first with respect to persistent inequalities at home, with respect to housework and childcare practices; then with respect to expectations of marriage and the emotional ties of motherhood; and finally with respect to expressions of male domination (including violence and abuse) in the public sphere.

6.3.1 Persistent inequalities at home

Arguably, the most significant advances for women's liberation in Assam date from the late 1980s and 1990s. From this period, for the first time, women started to enter the so called 'masculine' (Coe et al., 2007) employment. Yet, this radical shift in women's career opportunities has not been matched by a similar transformation of household gender divisions of labour. Ferber (1997) and Hochschild (1989; 1997) argue that women in the West have been far less successful in off-loading domestic and caring responsibilities than they have been at taking on jobs and careers on equal terms with men. Likewise, belief that domestic chores and childcare constitute 'women's work' remains deeply entrenched in Assamese culture. While the dual career structure is increasingly the norm in educated families, women continue to undertake the lion's share of domestic work and childcare within this supposedly egalitarian arrangement. While many of the married women interviewed receive help at home from paid domestic workers they invariably work a 'second shift' at home after a day of paid employment, with only occasional support from their husbands and extended family. Consequently, (as discussed in Chapter 5) the question of work/life 'balance' amounts to something more complex than who earns what income or travels away from home to work. In contemporary Assamese society this issue hinges on ingrained ideological prejudices and other hidden socio-cultural values. Barua (1992: 18 and 19, see also, Phadke, 2005) observes, for instance, that the attitude of Assamese society perpetuates the myth that the working women go out of their houses 'just for a recreation' where the 'need' for outside employment

is challenged and looked down upon. However, this theme could be disputed when Shehnaz claims, that because of the support she receives from her parents in pursuit of her career (which requires long hours of travelling and a late return home in the evening), she has not become a 'talk of the vicious tongue' in her own neighbourhood.

.... My job is easy but I have to travel a lot. I have to travel to Moran and commute daily (150 kms). This has been possible because of my parents as I live at my parent's home. Mental support is always there. At the moment, they are also materially supporting me because I am not established yet. Early in the morning my mother helps me a lot, otherwise, getting up in the morning and preparing food is very difficult. They stand behind me; may be because of these nobody has been able to point a finger on me and say that this girl is so late in coming home or whatever our society generally speaks about working women. I am really lucky in this case... (21: Shehnaz)

Similarly, Borkotoki (1998) points out that husbands and male relatives have often disapproved of their women-folk working outside the home. However, all the twelve working women in the sample have claimed that they have always been hugely supported in pursuit of their career by their family which again contradicts this theme.

...Though, in our society many husbands and in-laws do not usually approve women to work outside home but as I've already said, I've got lots of support from my family, in-laws and especially my hubby to pursue my career... (6: Murchana)

Housework

Sharp et al. (2003: 282) argue that "for many women, the issue of empowerment does not revolve around the ability to leave the home to be admitted into the labour force; for them their lifeworlds have always spanned both public and private spaces". In similar context, the

narratives on middle class women clearly illustrate that it is the women who continue to shoulder responsibility for household chores, regardless of the extent to which they are occupied (full time or part time) in paid employment outside the home. Susantika, for instance, narrates the obligations of an Assamese working woman towards her housework, childcare and family and in this process finds no time for herself.

...I realise that a working woman always has to shoulder the constraints of her family. Constraints in the sense that she has to think of the kitchen, children, guests etc. of course, there are exceptions but in most instances she can hardly give time to herself-to the 'Self' as a person... (8: Susantika)

Similarly, Rini, who is staying with her parents for her work (as a function of her postgraduate medical studies) goes on to stress that while it is not so difficult for her to manage the household chores normally, this all changes when her parents-in-law or her husband (who is also pursuing postgraduate medical studies in a different town) comes for a visit. At these times she has to compromise to prioritise her studies over housework.

...Since I am doing my P.G here, at present I am staying with my parents. My in-laws are in Tezpur. And my husband is also doing his P.G in another city (he is doing his P.G. from Dibrugarh Medical College). In my parent's house, we are five sisters. Since we don't have a brother I have to do a lot of official work for my parents, especially for my father. At home I don't have much of housework, my parents understand and I can manage my studies, though I always share a little bit of housework with my mother. But when my husband or my in-laws comes for a visit, then it is sometimes difficult for me to manage time and I have to compromise with my studies to give my time for them and occasionally cooking special dishes for them... (3: Rini)

Although a strong family support mechanism exists and some men do offer to help out from time to time, the social norms assigning women ultimate responsibility for the home are powerful. The stark reality in this regard is that, while the Anglo-American scholars are concerned and critical about gender inequality and the factors relating to division of housework between women and men (see for example, Baxter, 1997; Oakley, 2005; Shelton, 1990; Voicu et al., 2008); there is an increasing tendency for Indian scholars to approve of housework as Indian women's central gender roles (Rani and Khandelwal 1992; Ramu, 1989; Shukla and Kapoor, 1990; Sharma, 1986). Of course it has to be acknowledged that housework patterns and socio-cultural values vary across country to country (Baxter, 1997). These ideas have also been reinforced by Shourabh (2007).

In the West, in the late 1970s, women spent on average eleven hours a week on household chores, in addition to paid employment outside the home: they enjoyed less leisure time than their husbands as a consequence of this unequal division of labour (Meissner et al., 1975; Walker and Gauger, 1973; Walker and Woods, 1976). Such a gendered pattern of inequality persists even more starkly in 21st century Assam where each woman on average spends two hours per day or 14 hours per week on domestic chores. That is, on average three hours more than western women back in the 1970s. This is on top of an average of five to seven hours per day or 30 to 42 hours per week in paid employment, as shown in the findings of the questionnaire survey in Chapter 5. Despite the help of paid domestic workers, but coupled with a diminishing extended family support system, for instance, husband working somewhere else and both in-laws and parents living in distant towns, there is stark evidence that women who work the 'double day' are hugely overloaded. This 'double burden' (Chapter 2) is one of the dubious achievements of empowerment of women (Sharp et al., 2003). Murchana

demonstrates about such ‘double burden’, whose husband works overseas. She lives with her daughter and her paid domestic worker.

...Though I have my maid, but as a mother also I’ve problems because my kid is very small, my husband works overseas. Since I’m working and my workload is very heavy, at times I get very very stressed... (6: Murchana)

There is again a large discourse demonstrating that such ‘double burden’ of women is not liberating (see for examples, Einhorn, 1993; Pascall and Kwak, 2005; Stoilova, 2006, Zhou, 2003). In the context of India, studies have shown that women’s double burden is a pressing issue which is on the rise (Lewis et al., 1999). Some argue that this ‘double burden’ is mainly due to the ‘new economic policies’ of India (Dewan, 1999 see also, Flew et al., 1999). In 1996, in Australia, Duncan Ironmonger argued that the value of unpaid labour at home is approximately equal to the valuation of the goods and services manufactured for the market by paid workers. Ironmonger (1996), therefore, urges for an inclusion of this valuation of unpaid labour as Gross Household Product (GHP). This argument has been reinforced by Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003). From this perspective, I argue that it is not the ‘double burden’ of these working women instead ‘triple burden’, which demonstrates that although superficially it seems that progress is being made towards the egalitarian household in Assam, the reality for women is very different – especially those who are married with children. That these women play down the pressures of overload and lack of leisure, insisting instead that they benefit greatly from the opportunity to earn an independent income, is testimony to the advance in status they have achieved in recent years. For these educated Assamese women it would appear there is no turning back to the idealised homemaker role, regardless of the exploitation this ‘liberation’ entails.

Childcare

As mentioned in Chapter 5, it is extremely rare to find organised child-care outside the extended family system in Assam. A small number of day-care centres, nurseries and crèche facilities are to be found in the rapidly growing urban areas but the high cost and dubious quality are such that they are not widely used. Within the sample Bijoya alone has her child cared for in a crèche. She explains that she does so because she has ‘no option’ given that both her parents and in-laws live in a different town.

When we first planned for a child, I thought that I will employ a domestic worker to look after our child. But it did not turn out to be so. When we first employ a domestic worker, we think everything will turn out to be fine but when we keep seeing their bad qualities and if those bad qualities are more than their good qualities, then I think it is not reliable to keep them and we never know how they treat our child in our absence. So, everything depends on the nature and character of the worker. Some worker also turns out to be very good. But I thought that it is not reliable to keep a child under the care of a domestic worker. Hence I kept her in the crèche. By keeping a child in a crèche under a responsible person we can always be free from mental tension but again it demands a bit of physical work because every morning we have to prepare her up with tiffin [packed lunch] for the crèche, then drop her and pick her up in the evening. But now as she goes to school, I or my husband drops her at school everyday and I fetch her up always at 3.30 pm... (7: Bijoya)

Bijoya goes on to stress that it is she rather than her husband who undertakes the managing or ‘connecting’ work involved with this form of paid childcare. Moreover, while her husband is ‘supportive’ he does not share responsibility for cooking and cleaning. The normative understanding is that her husband’s masculinity exempts him from this role:

I sometimes find it difficult to manage my household chores and give proper attention to my daughter. Although, my husband helps me a lot, he does not help me in cooking. The responsibility of the household depends on the wife. If the husband is tired, he might not help his wife in household chores and take rest. It is always easy for a male to sit and read his newspaper. But a woman has to cook even if she is tired. Besides, I am doing my research and I have to study. Hence, I feel that the workload is much more. Otherwise, I think it would have been easier... (7: Bijoya)

The majority of women with children in the sample organise childcare either within the context of an extended family support system or by employing a domestic worker. Monalisha for example employs a nanny:

After I had my child I stayed in my parents place for three months. And at that time my mother was looking after the child. During that time he did not give me much trouble as he is giving me now. He is four years old now. So, his education has started and now he is becoming naughtier. I have employed a lady at home. She takes entire care of him. But I am always there. If she goes then it will be a great problem for me (1: Monalisha)

Susantika has her mother and a domestic worker to look after her son while Pinky lives with her in-laws in a joint family, so her in-laws provide childcare along with a domestic helper.

Managing work and child is not a problem because I have my mother and a domestic help (8: Susantika)

I stay with my in-laws, so, my in-laws are looking after my son when I am at work. Moreover, I have also employed a domestic helper to help my in-laws. So, childcare has not been a problem for me so far... (4: Pinky)

Overall analysis of the women's different childcare strategies suggests that those who manage their household chores and childcare responsibilities through systems of family support experience less psychological stress than those managing the employment of domestic workers and private crèche facilities by themselves. Pinky, for instance, describes how she can reconcile her participation in higher education with family life because she lives with her in-laws in an extended family arrangement:

As I have already said, I stay with my husband and my in-laws, that is, ours is a joint family. Actually, my in-laws are very co-operative. After going from my work, usually my mother-in-law, who is really like my mother only, she prepares everything for me. She understands and gives me time for my studies and takes care of my kid. So, I don't have any problem and can manage with my work and domestic affairs...
(4: Pinky)

This is an important finding given that a shift towards nuclear family arrangements are taking place in urban Assam (Chapter 3, section 3.3.1). The transformation from extended family collectives to smaller, privatised units appears to undermine Assamese women's capacity to achieve equal opportunities to pursue an independent career in practice. At the same time, another evidence of my thesis, in contrast to this finding suggest that the nuclear family structure in urban Assam is due to the change in social context where Assamese women with increased education and their work outside home want to offload their responsibility for an extended family (see section 6.3.3, position in the family).

In summary, the narrative analysis allows us to understand the contradictions and complexities these working Assamese women face in their daily lives with respect to housework and childcare. Arguably, these complexities are 'tangled webs' of social expectations, intersections and tales for grounded routine (Jarvis, 1999).

The emotional ties that bind

This is not to say that within an extended family system, or where paid domestic help is available, women escape the strain of ‘juggling’ multiple earning and caring roles. In addition to the logistical work of ‘connecting’ childcare providers there are emotional responsibilities which are not easily off-loaded to others (Jarvis, 2005: 134). In effect the mothers’ experience a sense of being emotionally torn in two – as Murchana expresses by the way she feels jealous of the close relationship her maid has with her daughter:

I can’t give much time to my daughter and my husband. At times I feel jealous when I see my maid giving more time to my daughter... (6: Murchana)

While fully embracing the intellectual opportunities of higher education the majority of the women are quite adamant that this does not alter their cultural values. Majority of married women in the sample [who also have child (ren)] play an important role in socialising their children into more subtle aspects of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This is especially notable in the way they ascribe to motherhood the power to convey cultural and religious values to the next generation. The women do not want to raise their children on the basis of the gender biases their own parents subscribed to. They firmly uphold the principle of equal opportunities and sharing among their offspring. At the same time, concern is voiced to protect children from the ‘corrupting influences’ disseminated by the proliferation of global media; smoking, drinking, drugs, imitation of western fashions. Again, Susantika sums up this view:

Every parent wishes the best for his/her child. Gender should not stand in the way of child's development. But I would like my child to be a good human being. Morality and culture should be the foundations of his character. But given the present degeneration of the society, which I believe is due to global culture; I am afraid how

far I shall be able to bring him up in a desirable way. Excessive obsession with materialism is the result of degeneration. Now Assamese society has also lost its earlier innocent image, gradually the evils of materialism have grasped it. I am not sure when things will be in their places (8: Susantika)

In short, there is a widespread expectation that women systematically hold the power (and must take person responsibility) to stem the tide of unwanted public culture. Public culture is a term derived from the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989) to refer to a cultural ecotone produced by the domestic life and the projects of the nation-state where people irrespective of class, caste, gender and ethnicity participate to construct their identities through the experience of “mass mediated cultural forms” in relation to the mundane acts of everyday practices. Public culture thus implies a ‘zone of cultural debate’ emerging from the processes of globalisation that often generates tensions and contradictions between the folk culture and transnational culture, the core of public modernity in India (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995: 4-5). This is a theme which occurs time and again below with respect to women’s increased visibility in their use of public space and movement through the city, and their mode of dress and bodily appearance. This is a source of tension between a movement towards women’s liberation, such as with the equal treatment of sons and daughters, and resistance of western commercial values, where women are still held up as the moral guardians of Assamese purity.

6.3.2 Expectations of marriage and motherhood

Scholars in the West lament that the institution of marriage that includes marriage and housework remains oppressive for women (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Rowbotham, 1989) (see Chapter 5). However, there is also a large sophisticated literature in Anglo-American discourse which demonstrates women’s critical role as mothers or women’s own experiences

of motherhood practices (Bhopal, 1998; Holloway, 1999; Ribbens, 1994; Tong, 1992). In my research, the enduring expectation of marriage at a tender age ¹⁵⁶ is presented in the narratives as a key transition from the accumulation of personal status through higher education to a necessary moderation of these ambitions to accommodate taken for granted family responsibilities. This way the narratives clearly demonstrate discrete ‘before marriage’ and ‘subsequent to marriage’ biographies, as illustrated in the case of Riniki:

At present, I am very career-minded. Nowadays, most of the girls are career-minded. But later on, that is after my marriage, I might be domestic minded if the situation demands... I would prefer either one or two children. But that decision would also depend upon my husband... (20: Riniki)

Bound up with widespread understanding that marriage circumscribes the lives of the women are expectations of raising a family at some point. Yet it is in this respect that we start to find quite significant degrees of variation in women’s attitudes across the sample. On the one hand the more career-minded women and those who want to pursue the so called ‘masculine’ careers (such as pilot, politics and engineering) (Coe et al., 2007; Chanana, 2004; 2007) are outspoken in their intention to restrict the size of their family to one child. Others define the ‘balance’ (or compromise) they are seeking in terms of raising a son and a daughter on equal terms. Children are variously seen as the essential purpose of marriage, sometimes as a heavy burden of responsibility or, more typically, a gift and source of pleasure.

This way the narratives suggest both a shift in attitudes towards women’s economic independence as well as enduring cultural expectations that marriage and motherhood will impose female dependence upon, and duty towards, parents and spouse. This is demonstrated by Manisha, a teacher working in a junior private college.

¹⁵⁶ The mean age of marriage among females in Assam is 18.23 years while for all India, it is 17.68 years (Rustagi, 2004)

What I am today is because of the support I received from my parents. I am of marriageable age but I am not married yet. This is also because of the support of my parents. They want me to be absolutely mentally prepared for my marriage. Nothing forcible has ever happened to me. I am both career-minded and domestic oriented. In fact it is a mixture of both, because my family is very important to me; career is also important to me. And financially you have to be stable to get married and start a family. That's all... (29: Manisha)

A significant proportion of the women resolve this paradox by claiming their career and family occupy equal importance in their lives and by denying any real conflict between aspirations for a career and expectations of marriage and motherhood. This leads to the popular sense of striking a dignified compromise between domesticity and ambition. One way this compromise is reached is through repeated claims not to be 'totally career-minded', as with Shehnaz below. The suggestion is that to be 'totally career-minded' is to be selfish in the pursuit of personal ambition before family needs.

I would not consider myself totally career-minded and totally domestic-minded. I want my career in between two but I want two children in my married life because one will be too lonely, so two is the limit and with two I think I will be able to balance my career as well... (21: Shehnaz)

In similar yet slightly different context, Faludi (1992: 95) in her backlash thesis demonstrates the false representation of working American women by the media during the 1980s: that women absconded from the workforce to dedicate themselves to "'better" motherhood". Nonetheless, Faludi (1992) argues that the labour chart statistic of 1990 demonstrates that a minute proportion (0.5%) of working women aged between 20 and 44 quitting work to devote themselves to a good motherhood; this rose to 11% in 1991 in another poll of working women

carried out by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman. Yet, Faludi (1992: 95) argues that “the media’s advocacy of such a female exodus created more guilt than flight”. Arguably, the majority of working American women try to strike a balance between the norms associated with femininity and modernity (Hoffnung, 2004). It is in this context Hoffnung (2004) argues that since the 1980s the labour force participation rate of married American women with children increased dramatically. The majority of American women “want it all: career, marriage and motherhood” (see, Hoffnung, 2004: 711).

Another perhaps more radical compromise is the way some of the women place a restriction on family size, even in situations where their husband or parents would wish them to have more than one child. For Shreya the goal of one child is a clear compromise between the assumed ‘worthlessness’ of (or loss of female purpose in) a childless marriage and the loss of career opportunities that responsibility for more than one child would entail.

Unlike some modern couples of today, I am not going to follow DINKS [Double income no kids], instead I will prefer to have only one child because I believe that marriage without children is worthless... And with one child I will be able to make a perfect balance between family and work... (14: Shreya)

In summary, the modern ambition of ‘having it all’ - a career, marriage and motherhood is remarkably prevalent among these educated Assamese women, much as with their western counterparts (Baber and Monaghan, 1988; Bielby and Bielby, 1984; Granrose and Caplan, 1996; Hoffnung, 2004; Novack and Novack, 1996). The reality is rather different. Throughout the narratives there is a powerful sense of the women continually striking a compromise in their everyday practices between modernity (gender equality and individual freedom) and tradition (the preservation of certain forms of femininity). Frequently this compromise is presented as a ‘balance’ or ‘the best of both worlds’, but in practice it is patently associated

with personal sacrifice and a hugely extended work-load where career and family are reconciled by the 'double day' of paid employment combined with housework and childcare. The clearest sign that the tacit 'traditional' expectations of marriage and motherhood are being (re)negotiated to some extent by women in this sample is evidence that those pursuing the so called 'masculine' careers (Coe et al., 2007) intend to have only one child.

Given the post-colonial context, modern India is a complex and a paradoxical mix of traditional practices and ultra modernity (Thapan, 2001). Another significant story reflected in the findings is that a majority of women in the sample are not radical in their outlook but instead are 'moderate'. These young women seem to enact the principles of Third Wave feminism in their everyday practices: in the values and beliefs they practise as well as in the housework and childcare activities they perform. That is, on the one hand, these women aspire to walk gracefully in the limelight in apparent reflection of 'Indian women's liberation'; this transformation has brought about self-reliance, self-determination, confidence and economic independence- – a clear trend towards 'new femininities'. On the other hand, the working women in the everyday practices are simultaneously championing the 'needs' of their husbands and their children. Arguably, the ideological forces of Indian culture are playing a dominant role in the construction of the identity of these women (Bhattacharjee, 2006; Sen, 2005; Yeoh, 2005; Chapter 2). In the process, these women are (re)traditionalising their responsibilities of childcare and housework with increased 'Indianness' in the social (re)production of daily life. This is a significant dual burden in structure where there is little or no help from a strong family support network or spouse.

6.3.3 Position in the family

Generally in Assamese culture, as discussed earlier, the birth of a son is heralded with joy. This reflects the prevailing attitude, like other societies of India, of preference towards sons

(Arnold et al., 1998; Billig, 1992; DasGupta and Mari Bhat, 1997). One consequence of such powerful beliefs is the sense in which position in the family, that is the number of daughters and sons, can play a decisive role in the way a daughter is treated and the opportunities provided for her to enter higher education or pursue a career. As a general rule, for instance, an only daughter or an only daughter in a family of sons is more indulged and treasured than one born into a family of many daughters. The interviews revealed that six of the women were the only child in their family while ten were the only daughter in a family with a son or sons. Of those in families with more than one daughter, nine had one or more sisters, while four had both other sisters and a brother.

My analysis reveals that women in the sample who were only children experienced very favourable treatment, as did those who were the only daughter in a family of son. Indeed, women in this group typically claimed to get a lot of support from their parents, viewing the encouragement they received to pursue higher education as an expression of their parents' liberal attitudes. At the same time, it is striking how grateful these women were for the favourable treatment they received relative to a brother or brothers. Because they view their treatment as an exception to tacit 'traditional' norms they reward this with greater displays of respect and loyalty. Even in those families with two or more daughters (with or without sons) there was little evidence of discrimination against daughters in favour of sons. This lack of any clear association between position in the family and attitudes towards women's status and possibilities of a career suggests that, for these relatively affluent families, higher education and scholarship have come to be highly regarded as a measure of improved status for the entire family, for daughters as well as sons.

Where there does appear to be a continuing legacy of gender discrimination and patriarchy, however, is in the enduring expectation that upon marriage a wife will show loyalty and

obedience to her husband's parents. Evidence of the role of daughter-in-law is explored with respect to the narratives of the eight married women in the sample.

Loyalty and obedience to in-laws

For the first years of marriage in Assam a daughter-in-law is considered as an outsider and effectively placed on probation until she passes the test of loyalty and obedience. In this respect the way a daughter-in-law establishes respect is a matter of time spent proving her suitability. Daughters-in-law suggest a loss of innocence associated with what Mohan (2000: 80) (Chapter 2) refers to as entry into 'mother-in-law's kingdom', where they are exposed to various patterns of hidden power. This means that she is either treated with formal deference like a stranger in the house or harshly treated as an intruder, depending on the family circumstance. The terms on which a daughter-in-law is accepted into her husband's family are crucial to her ability to pursue an independent career. This is because it is expected that a daughter-in-law abides by the wishes of her parents-in-law and serves them to a large extent. The status of a daughter-in-law is improved upon the birth of a child, especially if the child is a boy. Despite the ubiquity of the preference for boys, especially where a son provides the main source of gerontocratic security, families in urban Assam appear to be less swayed by the argument for valuing sons more highly than daughters.¹⁵⁷ This was particularly evident in the previous section for this sample of affluent, educated women. In the context of this research then, loyalty and obedience in the institution and practices of marriage are more pivotal to the women's still restricted opportunities for an independent career than they are by the simple function of being born female.

¹⁵⁷ National Family Health Survey India-2, Assam, 1998-99

All the married women interviewed claimed that the role of daughter differed markedly from that of daughter-in-law. While in some families it is expected that daughters help their mothers with the household chores it is increasingly the norm in affluent educated households to find that daughters are freed from all household responsibilities so that they can focus instead on their studies and career (Chapter 5). In contrast, the expectations of a daughter-in-law, even at a distance, impose far greater restrictions. The women describe situations in which they have to demonstrate themselves to be good daughters-in-law, adjusting to the values held by their husband's family, whether or not they were raised according to more liberal values.

I didn't have any problem being a daughter. I got support from my father and from my mother also with no distinction between me and my brothers, I grew up very differently. As a daughter-in-law, I had problems because I'm working and my in-laws stay very far away. We stay in different places. My parents also stay away from my work place and my husband is away for 6 months in a year. I want to be a good daughter-in-law and trying to be that sometimes I've to act as a superhuman. Also I've problems because my way of living and their way of living are very different. I come from a very liberal family and they are from a very traditional family. So, I've to adjust a lot between the both. I get up early in the morning, have my bath and wear *Mekhela Sadar*¹⁵⁸ and then only I enter the kitchen. I do it because my in-laws want me to do it and they are happy seeing me doing it. I want to look myself traditional because I get a lot of respect. They get satisfaction. Their happiness is my happiness. I think education has a lot to play with it. My husband cares for me. May be actually I'm caring for my husband's happiness, because, through him, I am emotionally attached to my in-laws. (6: Murchana)

¹⁵⁸ Ethnic Assamese outfit

Riku similarly recounts the general expectation of a daughter-in-law living in the family of her in-laws. Her narrative highlights the limitations these expectations place upon the most highly educated and career-minded women, such as the expectation after marriage that they will always put family matters, including the entertainment of guests, before paid work and career:

The expectations are that your household works or your duties towards your families will always come before your career. Suppose you have a very important work to do or you have to go somewhere for your own work, and at that point some guests turn up, then you will have to entertain the guests at least for some time, no matter how important is your work, your work will always be treated as secondary. But because of the education that I have got, I know the things which are more important for me...

(9: Riku)

The gender politics concerning position in the family and the transition from daughter to daughter-in-law help explain the degree of variation in relative freedom experienced by the women. Patriarchal family practices become pronounced after marriage with respect to the standard of behaviour expected of a daughter-in-law, regardless of how well educated or career-minded she may be. Arguably, as discussed in Chapter 2, a 'suitable' femininity for married women retains an extremely powerful grip on Indian society (Bhaskaran, 2004). At the same time, nuclear family arrangements and increased spatial separation brought about by migration to new urban labour markets means that for some women the tacit 'traditional' and cultural expectations of a daughter-in-law are increasingly a matter of temporary and infrequent observance: a performance to put on during a brief visit for the sake of appearances. Murchana explains, for instance, that she was able to pursue her own life style and education while maintaining the respect of her in-laws because they lived apart and she could assume the

proper dress and behaviour on the few occasions each year when she visited her in-laws home. While Rezina, Aslesha as well as Murchana suggest that a changing family structure is due to the changing societal demand.

...Previously, in a joint family, people had to share their belongings. Everything was shared among all the children of the family. But at present, since the competition is so high and prices are going up, so, everyone wants the best for their children. That is, better education, better food and life style provided by globalisation in big cities. So, every individual wants to have a house in the big cities so that he could provide the best for his children and his wife... (13: Rezina)

...Yes, globalisation has its effect. It is the nature of every human being, not only women to be influenced by certain thoughts and ideas. The first idea of nuclear family is to be independent. Again, in the western countries, it came a long back. In nuclear families, the father and the son know their own work. It is not left for their sister or their mother to do it. In nuclear family it is taught to do this household chore because they feel that time has changed. By 'time has changed' they mean that time has changed 'globally'. In such cases, living in a joint family with mothers, grandmothers and people, who come from previous generations, they find it a hindrance, because they want freedom and independence. Same is the case with women. Let us take some more examples. Suppose today she is not feeling well and she does not want to cook food. In a nuclear family she can bring something from outside and eat. But in a joint family she cannot dare to say like that... (28: Aslesha)*

...It is because of the demand of the society. Nowadays, lots of people migrate from the rural area to urban area. It is not possible to bring up their parents along with them. In earlier days there were joint families, but now they have changed into

nuclear families. People have become much more individualistic. They want their own freedom and their own identity. Erosion of extended families represents the growth of the society. Society is not stagnant. Its branches will grow. May be in 50 years time there might be another type of family. Everything is changing, that's why it is changing... (6: Murchana)

Similarly, Monalisha reinforces that increase in family privatisation and rising dual career norms is especially due to a rise in the level of women's education, where educated working women want to offload their responsibility towards an 'extended family'.

...Nowadays, most women have become educated and work outside home, they do not have so much of time to manage a big family. If everyone (like in-laws and brother-in-laws) live together, then they have some compulsion. If you have to go somewhere, then you have to seek permission and you have to inform everyone. But education have changed our minds in such a way that we feel that we need freedom. So, everybody is going for nuclear family... (1: Monalisha)

In summary, the position of a daughter in the family is clearly determined by higher education and scholarship to an uneven extent. However, within the institution of marriage, a daughter-in-law is exposed to different patterns of hidden power and patriarchal family practices often with a greater degree of restriction to her liberation. The narratives in the sample clearly illustrate the resilience and the coping mechanisms adopted by the daughters-in-law in order to (re)adjust in the family of their in-laws to prove themselves as 'good daughters-in-law'. Simultaneously, because of the shift in family structures mainly to nuclear type of family, the educated daughters-in-law are able to pursue their own lifestyle with more freedom and choices. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is suggested that this shift in family structure

signals *inter alia* in a protest against the dictatorial autocracy of the mother-in-law (Barpuzari, 1992).

6.4.0 Persistent Inequalities in the Public Sphere

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 5, one of the predicaments of women's everyday mobility in Assam is the growing prevalence of street sexual harassment and public displays of male domination. Chapter 1 explained the reasons for adopting this indicator to explore middle class women's changing roles and status. This problem has the effect of circumscribing women's movements through intimidation and fear for their safety. Chapters 2 and 3 provided the essential background to the emergence of a distinct women's liberation movement in India and Assam from the 1960s, including by the late 1980s a number of organisations focusing on the issues of violence against women. Although these organisations have been pivotal in raising awareness of women's inequalities, they have tended to trivialise or ignore the issue of street sexual harassment (Chapter 3). This explains why the existence of women's groups has had little impact on the rising level of sexual harassment faced by many women on a daily basis.

Chapter 5 suggested that the issue of western dress code remains the most talked about aspect of women's safety in public (Chatterji, 2008; Sharma, 2008). Evidence reveals that a number of high profile Indian professionals have urged Indian women to dress 'appropriately' when out in public, as 'revealing' apparels is considered culturally insensitive and provocative to men (see, Chatterji, 2008; Sharma, 2008).¹⁵⁹ However, a number of reviews, debates, participatory projects and news reports suggest that there is no correlation between dress code and rise in street sexual harassment (Chatterji, 2008; Sharma, 2008; also, Dholabhai, 2007;

¹⁵⁹ "CJ has some 'modest' advice for women" The Hindu, February, 09, 2008 (<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2008/02/09/stories/2008020959100600.htm>, February, 09, 2008)

Blank noise project).¹⁶⁰ I argue that both the issues are highly contested and deeply sensitive. The analysis below on social geographies of sexual harassment against young Assamese women draws on in-depth interviews and focus groups. While these two qualitative methods are ideally suited to topics of a sensitive nature it has to be recognised that, at the same time, the data may sometimes be ambivalent. In focus groups, for instance, the responses may be influenced by peer pressure and in this way reflect a general tendency towards consensus (Krueger, 1988; 1994; 1998; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Wimmer and Dominick, 1997). The approach adopted respects the views and opinions of the respondents while at the same time recognising that respondents are expressing individual opinions that may or may not be based on prejudices, (mis)information or their own personal experiences.¹⁶¹ Hence I take careful attention in deducing what can be (or cannot be) drawn from discussion of focus groups of the highly sensitive issues.

In this section, first, I build on theoretical insights that help to explore the restrictions of routine mobility of young middle class Assamese women in public spaces outside the home; second, I highlight real and perceived fear of assault in the narrative accounts.

It should be acknowledged that the notion of ‘public’ is itself bound up, theoretically, with intersections of gender, fear and cultural capital. In the Anglo-American discourse, numerous studies now exist which attest to women’s circumscribed mobility and their experience of sexual victimisation in different public places and spaces (Berdahl, 2007; Glomb et al., 1999;

¹⁶⁰ “Protest against Regressive Statements on Women” (<http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/indiawomen2008/>, December, 2008); “Students do mind the ‘gap’- Organisations fume at Delhi police’s ‘profiling’” *The Telegraph*, July, 11, 2007 (http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070711/asp/frontpage/story_8043573.asp, July, 11, 2007) and “Delhi Police booklet for northeast students triggers protests” *Hindustan Times* (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/StoryPage.aspx?sectionName=NLetter&id=443e4a7a-f02c-48a9-b35046da3a5294ca&&Headline=Booklet+for+northeast+students+sparks+ire>, July 15, 2007) and for Blank Noise project, refer to footnote, 150, section 5.5.0, Chapter 5.

¹⁶¹ Of course I acknowledge that some of my participants talked about their experience of sexual harassment on the streets of Assam (see Chapter 4, section conducting in-depth interviews).

McMullin et al., 2007; Piotrkowski, 1998; Pain, 2001; Woodzicka and LaFrance, 2005). Literature on geography, sociology and beyond has explored extensively the intersection of gender, fear and [un]safety in public spaces; how the gendered dimensions of fear affect women's access to public spaces including their mobility; how and where women feel (un)safe (in their usage of public space) or how they negotiate living with fear (in the same) in the course of their life, and experiences of crime (Panelli et al., 2005; Patel, 2006; Phadke, 2007; Ranade, 2007; Starkweather, 2007; Khan, 2007; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007).

Feminists have been at the forefront of the platform to address the intersectionality of geographies of public crime (including the fear of crime, harassment, violence) and gender, which have previously been observed to be gender-blind, positivistic, and sometimes even stereotyped as racialised (Campbell, 1993; Gardner, 1995; Kelly, 1987; MacKinnon, 1979; Smith, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1987; Stanko, 1987; 1990; Starkweather, 2007; Pain, 1991; Pain, 1997a, b, c). Kelly (1987) argues that most women experience sexual harassment during the course of their life. It is in this context, Pain (1997 b: 417) argues that "amongst all the factors which have been noted to increase fear of crime, ...being female has the largest effect" (Starkweather, 2007).

Stanko (1987; 1990) identifies fear, harassment and violence as most people's (including women's) routinised understanding of the tactics of avoidance in their everyday lives. Women's particular fear of rape (in this research, street sexual harassment) further circumscribes their use of public space and public transport (Pawson and Banks, 1993; Valentine, 1989). Arguably, women's fear of rape is emblematic of their exclusion from public life (Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007; Valentine, 1989). Furthermore, feminist geographers argue that women can feel out of place in public spaces at night and consequently impose upon themselves a 'curfew'. The sense that women's bodies are 'out of place' in

public, at night, is especially apparent if they break the tacit taboo and wear clothing that is considered revealing or provocative, as if it is 'inviting' the would-be attacker (Pain, 1991; Valentine, 1989). The result is a symbolic expression of spatialised patriarchy through which women face behavioural restrictions inflicted on them by self and others (Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007; Valentine, 1989).

Arguably, the cultivation of women's fear can be viewed as a strategy which is synonymous with that of 'public patriarchy' as defined by Walby (1990: 179). The latter needs a more nuanced understanding to unravel the sense in which women remain disadvantaged and their exploitation occurs at all levels of every public institutions with "a shift in patriarchal strategy from exclusionary to segregationist and subordinating" Walby (1990: 179). Furthermore, postfeminist literature that has contributed to the backlash (Faludi, 1992; Superson and Cudd, 2002) against feminist scholarship has accused feminists of exaggerating the conflicts over rape and increasing the fear of the same (Roiphe, 1993) especially for women when they are out in public. Again, in her nuanced assessment on the institutions and laws to combat sexual harassment in the U.S.A., Cudd (2002) finds evidence of notions of a backlash to gender equality on US college campuses. In this connection, she argues that there is evidence to suggest a backlash against 'political correctness' on US college campuses where gender and race equality legislation is meeting with subtle forms of resistance among dominant groups of men who previously had unrestricted use of the space and recourse to sexist language.

Feminist geographers such as Koskela (1997) and Pain (1997c), however, have discussed positive strategies to deal with the threat and perceptions of crime, especially for women (and older people including men) by accentuating spatial confidence. However, Starkweather (2007) argues that the tactics used by women and men appear to overlap (in her study, she includes younger men) with respect to the ways they deal with and manage perceptions of

threat. That said, women are found more likely to enact tactics that avoid (or negotiate) their access to public space (Khan, 2007; Valentine, 1989; Viswanath and Mehrotra, 2007).

In India, incidences of verbal harassment and stalking are particularly widespread on the crowded city buses (Vasudha, 2006) especially during the rush hours when the majority of the women have to travel to reach places of study or employment and vice versa (Sharma, 2005). The Assamese women, like their Indian and western counterparts, feel no safer in crowded places than deserted lanes (Awasthi, 2006; Koskela and Pain, 2000; Pain, 2001; Yarwood and Gardner, 2000). Most cases of harassment go unreported and the victims suffer in silence. The widespread abuse of women on public transport in particular functions as a strikingly visible and effective symbol of male dominance which hinders women's personal use of public space. It is effective as a patriarchal practice in the sense that women's fear of assault and reluctance to experience repeated street sexual harassment means they are less likely to move about freely in public.

Women's testimonies

This section draws on testimonies of the women's experiences of unwanted attention (such as stalking and verbal harassment) while travelling on public transport and city buses. To the extent that increased participation in education and employment requires increased visibility in and movement through public spaces, such abuse obviously poses an obstacle to liberation. The narrative analysis provides some insight into the question whether this increase in street sexual harassment stems from changes in women's appearance (such as their dress) or men's behaviour (sense of threat) with respect to increased female participation in the public sphere. The research provides a valuable opportunity to explore the context of these increased instances of street sexual harassment. One possible explanation for the increase is that it represents patriarchal (male, especially old fashioned with tacit 'traditional' ideology and/or

elderly) resistance to the rapid transformation of women's role and identity over the last fifty years. This transformation is particularly apparent in the way women are now more visible on public transport, commuting to employment outside the home in growing numbers, some of them emulating western styles of clothes and appearance. This leads to a popular association between women's changing role and the perceived threat that globalisation imposes hegemonic western culture to Assamese cultural values. The suggestion is that women represent an easy target in a more complex struggle against the intangible enemy of global western hegemony. The interview narratives add some weight to this explanation.

Two parallel themes emerged from the narrative analysis: the first was widespread experience of harassment; the second was widespread concern that women (typically identified as 'other', younger students) were provoking attack by emulating western fashions and ideals and this way pushing the boundaries of established norms of public decency. As already mentioned earlier, despite the rhetoric guarantee of 'equality between sexes' by the Indian constitution just after independence, there is continuing disjuncture in practice especially with respect to abuses against women in public and the lack of state action to reduce this rising level of violence where the police themselves are sometimes involved as perpetrators of abuse. All the interviewees had experienced verbal harassment ('eve-teasing'), but this was especially the case among the respondents of the young age-group (17-25). There are 19 respondents in this age-group: nine within the 17-21 and 10 within the 22-25 age-groups. Seven respondents complained that they face comments from the opposite sex while out on the road, especially in the deserted areas while walking to their place of work.

The majority of verbal sexual harassment constitutes unsolicited and often offensive remarks about a woman's appearance, such as the shape of her nose (Shreya) or her figure (Maitreyee):

While coming to college from home I often find the street Romeos and pedestrians commenting on either my dress or my nose, as my nose is a long one... (14: Shreya)

As you see me that I am fat, I always get comments from the guys regarding my figure... (18: Maitreyee)

There is also widespread evidence of more serious physical abuses (such as groping and bottom slapping). Most women (16 of 29) claim that this demonstration of male-power typically reflects the attitude and behaviour of the older men rather than their contemporaries. Dikshita makes this observation:

I find that I am being harassed sexually, especially in the overcrowded bus because there are some unscrupulous, stupid and uncivilised men who travel in the bus and I think they belong to the middle age group and astonishingly some people of the old age-group, who would be like our grandfather. They take advantage of the situation and exploit the opportunity. Not only in the buses, but if we stand in a long queue to pay the electricity bills or phone bills we are sexually harassed as if a woman is an object of exploitation... (11: Dikshita)

Even when it is not the older men who are the perpetrators of such harassment, Mrinmoyee sees the unwillingness of older men to intervene in situations where they see a woman is being abused on a crowded bus as further evidence of the normalisation of disrespect.

We all girls know that eve-teasing takes place mainly in the roads but sexual harassment takes place mostly in the crowded buses where girls are physically assaulted. Another important thing is that the fellow passengers especially the male who are of our father's age and who also might have daughters like us never raise their voice against these acts. Once a man in the bus tried to touch me and I scolded

him very badly but I got support from nobody and got embarrassed... (29: Mrinmoyee)

Manajesha goes on to recount what she describes as the ‘comic incident’ of an older man winking and insinuating sexual advances towards her from his bicycle. While his action involved no direct threat, this incident illustrates the alarming acceptance that men simply cannot help but be excited by the appearance of women out on their own in public.

One day I was coming from home to the college. I was walking all the way. A man, I think he was around 70 years old with complete grey hairs. He was riding a bicycle. He waved and winked at me. It was embarrassing and funny at the same time that I laughed at him in such a manner may be he too felt ashamed and embarrassed. Out of embarrassment he tried to ride very fast and he was about to fall off from the bicycle. But somehow he regained his balance. A man of 70 or above winking at a girl of 20 like a grand-daughter... If old people do like that, then what can we expect from the young generation... (22: Manajesha)

This section suggests that a majority of women in the sample have been victims of street sexual harassment at some point. This experience of harassment indicates the way public patriarchy is deeply entrenched in Assamese society. Section 5.5.0 of Chapter 5 has shown that three quarters of the total respondents believe that femininity is a great asset. However, a majority of the interviewees also believe that Assamese women are perceived as sexual objects when out in public (see also, Phadke, 2005; Phadke, 2007). It is also striking that middle-aged and older men (as claimed by Dikshita and Manajesha) are also among the perpetrators of harassment.¹⁶² Of course the ubiquity of such abuses serves the purpose of

¹⁶² Similar cases of harassment against women are reported in countries like the Egypt, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, and Pakistan (Abdelhadi, 2008; Farouk, 2005; Mashiri, 2000; Vincent, 2008). Statistics suggest that in Egypt four out of every five young women are harassed sexually in the streets

opposition to women's liberation. Women are likely to be deterred from travelling on public transport and moving freely about the city to attend college and pursue independent careers where routine journeys are made unpleasant. Once again these findings are similar to a number of the findings of Anglo-American researchers (Glomb et al., 1999; Piotrkowski, 1998; Woodzicka and LaFrance, 2005). Unwanted touching and verbal harassment ('eve-teasing') are palpable expressions of male domination.

6.4.1 Women's bodies: targets of anti-western hostility?

One explanation for increased sexual harassment against women suggested in the narratives is the growing taste for western fashions among young female students (Blunt, 2005a). These are deemed to be 'immodest' compared to distinct Assamese modes of dress. This theme emerged strongly in the focus group conducted with women students of Cotton College. This finding bears similarity with that of Khan (2007) who discusses that wearing modes of dress that are distinctly Indian (in her research, Khan has focused on Muslim women's access to public space, one of them wearing a *ridha*)¹⁶³ provide a powerful expression of habitus, capable of deflecting would be harassers (Phadke, 2007).

We can see many college girls (our counterparts) dressing indecently and that is why we find more and more cases of eve teasing and sexual harassment. This eve teasing has resulted in exploitation of women. This eve teasing has also resulted in rape indulgence in women. That is why; I feel that women should be decently dressed. Otherwise, these instances of eve teasing and of course sexual harassment will increase day by day. Women must be very confident no doubt about their dress. That does not

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7593765.stm, September, 30, 2008), while 87% of the young girls and women within the age-group of 10-18 and 82% within the age-group of 18-30 are being harassed in the streets of Bangladesh (<http://www.bnwla.org.bd/content/view/186/lang,en/>, December, 30, 2008).

¹⁶³ *Ridha* is a kind of attire meant for muslim women – "a combination of a coloured loose long skirt, a short frilly cape and a hood covering the hair" (Khan, 2007: 1531)

mean that she must wear a sari or cover herself from her head to her toe. Not that. She can be decently or confidently dressed. But she must take care of the fact that she does not look vulgar in it. If she looks vulgar, then she might excite the abnormal passions or the base instincts of man. Then she cannot blame the man for these because she herself is responsible for exciting those sexual instincts on the man. So, women have to take care of their dress code. They must not be vulgarly dressed... (Focus Groups: Cotton College)

Similarly, Riku sees the problem as one of a boundary being transgressed by the appearance of some educated 'modern' Assamese women. She goes on to attribute this to advertising campaigns by the media which associate 'modern' 'progressive' beauty products with sexual liberation. This finding of my research bears similarity to that of the backlash thesis of Faludi (1991), who suggests in her treatise that as more American women are visible in public space, they are more likely to be targeted by the media and its agents in varied ways. Faludi (1991) goes on to demonstrate that in order to sell commercial products, beauty product manufactures misrepresent the definition of feminism. In this way, the feminist ethic of financial independence is distorted and transformed to a consumer ethic, an ethic bearing purchasing power.

...'Commodification' of women has increased due to consumerism. Here, again, impact of globalisation such as media, fashions, advertising agencies and others are responsible for immodest presentation of women. Women's body is created by God to attract men, but this does not mean that one should expose herself at a public place... Why media have to advertise commodities like perfume, soap, lipstick by exposing the model's body... (9: Riku)

Since the barriers to global trade were eroded from the 1990s, every aspect of life has been increasingly open to commercial influence – at a speed that is alarming to many Indians (Gupta, 2005; Sinha, 2005). This assault of new commodities, fashions, job opportunities and ideas offers great promise to young people in higher education, but it can also be seen as a threat to folk cultural values and ways of living. As discussed in Chapter 2, commodification, accompanied by capitalism, democracy and the processes of re-colonisation (Bhattacharya, 1994; Chaudhuri, 1999; John, 1998; Thapan, 2001) have started to infiltrate urban Assam, opening its society to western markets and ideas. Therefore, since the late 1980s, Assamese women like their Indian counterparts have witnessed a revolution in beauty culture, beauty products (Runkle, 2005) and fashions. This revolution implies that ‘public culture’ (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; also, Jackson, 2004; Jackson et al., 2007) remains deeply active in the daily practices of these young modern Assamese women. The traffic in commodities runs in both directions, whereby Indian fashions and decorative crafts sell around the world. Nevertheless, echoing the findings of Dwyer and Jackson (2003), the import of western materialism assumes far greater significance through ‘alternative modernities’, especially labour-saving convenience goods. Even the ‘sari’ as a mode of dress is undergoing transformation, with emphasis on glamorous and easy to wear low maintenance designs.

The influence of western tastes and convenience goods can be seen clearly in the way a section of Assamese women dress today, especially in the most dynamic, urban, and rich areas. However, this finding is dissimilar to the findings of Jackson (2004) and Jackson et al. (2007) where they claimed that India is more modern in terms of fashion and style than Britain, and in this way Jackson (2004: 169) challenged “the assumption that modernity resides exclusively in the West”. At the same time, Assamese women wearing modern outfits (figure 6.1) and in the contrasting ethnic Assamese outfit, *Mekhala Sadar* (figure 6.2) are both

common. This signifies here and elsewhere that Assamese modernity has its own governing local cultural specification “in terms of specific forms of subjectivity, agency, pleasure and embodied experience” (Jackson, 2004: 168). Arguably, this also signals that consumers remain a critical player in shaping such experience where public culture manifests itself as a central site of cultural contestation (Jackson, 2004: 168).

The narratives reveal some evidence of a correspondence between western cultural influence and women’s liberation. While attitudes varied across the sample, a majority of the women made a strong connection between international media and western cultural imports and a transformation of social conventions that would previously have restricted women’s mobility and their pursuit of an independent career. Such perspectives are also related to the middle class attitudes cultivated in the past. Monalisha suggests, for instance, that women no longer feel compelled to dress a certain way but instead make individual choices according to their personal taste.

Yes, it is because of globalisation and media. For example see our dress pattern. Previously, married people used to wear only *Saris* or *Mekhala Sadar* but now this has changed, they wear dresses which are comfortable such as *salwar* or other types of western dresses... I don't regard the dress to be a social matter. It is purely personal... (1: Monalisha)



Figure 6.1 Women wearing modern outfits



Figure 6.2 Assamese outfit (*Mekhala Sadar*)

Arguably, educated women adopt such a dress code as a marker of having gained access to higher education through which “they can distance themselves from the backward associations of local dress and join the ranks of the ‘progressive’” (Tarlo: 1996: 324) – a marker of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that remains unevenly distributed among classes. Nonetheless, Tarlo (1996) argues that although Bourdieu’s argument of social distinction has been a useful theory to understand the emanation of varied clothing practices within Indian society this is not a sufficient tool to understand the magnitude of the problem of what to wear (Tarlo, 1996). Instead the question ‘what to wear’ is basically a personal problem that is central to the lived experiences of particular “individuals, groups or nations” (Tarlo, 1996: 329). Nevertheless, as we found above with respect to the abusive backlash against women who are considered ‘immodest’ or ‘vulgar’ if they follow western fashions too closely, this sense of privatisation and liberation should not be overplayed. The women recognise that in many ways women’s

fashions, as with Assamese culture in general, teeters on the brink between Indian-style progress and wholesale capitulation to westernisation. This is similar to the work reported by Peet (1989). This is also suggested in comments by six of the women who differentiate between the practical logic of substituting the more convenient and simple styles of Indian dress, such as the *Salwar Kamij* or *Lehengas*, for elaborate *Saris* or *Mekhala Sadar*, and the more provocative adoption of ‘immodest’ western mini-skirts and denim jeans. Manajesa, for instance, is anxious to follow the “nylon path” (Tarlo, 1996: 323) to a certain extent as they are comfortable and easy to maintain but at the same time she wants to preserve a sense of dress which is still distinctly Indian:

...western wears are more comfortable than the traditional *Saris*, *Mekhala Sadars* etc. But certain dresses like *salwars*, *lehengas* etc. can be taken up as regular dresses instead of hipsters, minis, tank tops etc. But if this practice continues, it will someday wipe off traditional dresses leaving no trace of it... (22: Manajesa)

Similarly, Debanushi who views tradition as ‘fixed’, stresses the need for Indian women to recognise their own ethnic styles of dress as fashionable, rather than to abandon this distinction in the face of new and novel imports. Linked to this attitude of fixed traditionalism can be seen as a marker of informal tradition- ‘idiosyncrasies’ based on ‘local adaptations’ (Calhoun, 1993: 79).

Who says that our dresses are not fashionable? But we ourselves don’t like to wear them. If you are going to that kind of environment where everyone is wearing casual dresses or western dresses then it is okay. But why are we adopting it in our everyday life. Many women say that it is [a matter of comfort and convenience to wear western styles]? But, mostly people like things that are different which are not very common. Why don’t we try to create that difference in our kind of dressing sense itself? So, I

think that we should conserve our traditional values and customs. It is a must. People in the West are adopting our values like the yoga, ayurveda and our dresses also to some extent. We can also adopt their culture and their dresses as a part of our wardrobe. But let us not change the wardrobe as a whole... (25: Debanushi)

It is important to note the extent of stereotyping in this debate between Indian versus western dress. Bollywood films for instance, contrast a spectacular and exotic image of India with the threat of an immodest western celebrity culture. In similar context, Nirad Choudhury (1976) (as cited in Tarlo, 1996: 323) accused Indian women for following a “nylon path” and in this way of becoming a victim of eroticism and cheapness. When the participants of focus groups conducted at Cotton College were asked for their opinions on the impact of global culture on styles of dress the majority stressed the co-existence of traditional-ethnic, partially adapted and ‘ultra-modern’ tastes and attitudes. This finding is similar to the findings of Mani (2003). While discussing the clothing practices of diasporic American-Indian youth, Mani (2003: 117) identifies the juxtaposition of American fashion with the Indian, as for instance, shorts and tie-dye tops, slacks and embroidered shawls, the layering of headdresses, nose-rings, anklets with jeans, thus presenting the diaspora as a localised cultural form. In a similar context, Phadke (2007) argues that the assets of Indian modernity that shape fashions do not entirely replace what she calls ‘traditional’ attire: instead it presents an expression of modification. She notes that “there is a whole new trend where women wear western outfits that are the height of fashion accessorised with their, ‘*mangalsutras*’, ‘*sindhoor*’, ‘*chooda*’ or other signs of Hinduness, particularly Hindu marital status” that itself reproduces the expression of femininity and thus simultaneously retaining middle class respectability (Phadke, 2007: 1517, note. 18; see also, section 5.5.0, Chapter 5). However, the participants of the Cotton College Focus Groups suggested that an ‘immodest’ ultra-modern outlook was especially prevalent

among the upper and middle classes where western fashions variously represented a symbol of wealth or aspirations of Bollywood celebrity (as a function of the influence of the cinema on women's fashions). Arguably, the clothing practices of these Assamese youths are similar to their Indian and South Asian counterparts in the West, thus unsettling the notion of 'rooted cultures' (Mani, 2003: 128; Malkki, 1997).

Interestingly, participants of the Assam Engineering College Focus Group saw the issue as one of too strict a social code of dress for women. They wished to see greater scope for women to dress how they like, pointing to the double standard that men were not publicly chastised for adopting western fashions and 'immodest' accessories. Three short extracts from this focus group illustrate this point:

Example 1:

...Due to the impact of globalisation, women are taking advantage of the modernisation that is taking place, and they blame women for that. [But the men] do [they] look any less vulgar than females? Then why do they blame only the females for exposing when they also expose themselves... (Focus Groups: Assam Engineering College)

Example 2:

...Women who play tennis, they also expose themselves. They do not expose with their intention of exposing or showing their beauties. We know that their dresses are only meant for their comfort to play a beautiful game of tennis. Hence, our mentality should not be so narrow. We must look at what they are doing. Even in the fashion world, if a girl wears a dress that is not covering her properly. We must not look in a negative way, may be that dress has been designed by a particular fashion designer to make it more popular. May be she is wearing that dress from that point of view. We

must not take it in a negative sense. So, men must change this attitude... (Focus Groups: Engineering College)

Example 3:

...It is the attitude of both men and women. Sometimes when we wear sleeveless salwars our parents rebuke us. It is because of the attitude of the society. In the fashion world, if Salman Khan ¹⁶⁴ pulls off his shirt and dances, he looks very handsome. But if a woman wears a mini skirt, the society says she is vulgar. We don't comment on the men then why do they have to do so?.....(Focus Groups: Engineering College)

In summary, the narratives suggest that sexual assault against women is widespread in the streets of Assam. At the same time the impact of westernisation is highly uneven. This is demonstrated with respect to the issue of dress code that is perceived to be responsible for the increases in street sexual harassment against women experienced by a majority of the respondents (in both focus groups and in-depth interviews). Thus, while these women condemn the increased abuse of women on public transport they are willing to attribute a degree of blame not to the men who perpetrate abuse but to provocative western styles of dress. They suggest that the solution is not to insist on rigid traditional standards but rather to build on the wide variety of Indian regional influences already found in Assam. Interestingly, this finding contrasts with the findings of Jasmeen Patheja who is collecting evidence of street sexual harassment for her project '*Blank Noise*' (see footnote, 150, section 5.5.0, Chapter 5). She concludes that it is a myth that women's attire invites harassment (Vasudha, 2005). I

¹⁶⁴ Bollywood star

therefore, emphasise again that the issue of apparels is a highly contested issue.¹⁶⁵

Considerably more work will need to be done to determine the motives of the harassers.

6.5.0 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter sheds light on the partial emergence of geographies of plural new femininities in contemporary Assam. It moves away from portraying a ‘victim’ dependency narrative of women and development to Assamese women as agents of actualising change (Chapter 1). It highlights how access to higher education presents these young middle class Assamese women with new career trajectories as well as exposure to modern ideas. For a majority of young women, neoliberalism (alongside globalisation) suggests a dominant narrative through which to (re)construct their identities. Increased self-esteem, confidence and self-reliance appear to come from the possession of cultural capital and class habitus. These young women aspire to make substantial gains by empowering themselves, to some extent expressing commitment to ‘girl power’ as a means of improving their social and economic status.

The narrative analysis also highlights the contradictory processes underpinning women’s changing status in their everyday practices; women are having to adapt to conflicting identities and roles at home and in the public sphere during different parts of the day. However, educated Assamese women now aspire to enter the so called ‘masculine’ jobs (Coe et al., 2007) and seek greater economic independence and status. This suggests that in the dynamic urban areas the role of the ideal homemaker is gradually losing out to the material rationale of

¹⁶⁵ Although, studies conducted elsewhere in the world: South Africa for instance, reveals that scantily clad women are at high risk of being harassed sexually (Vincent, 2008), at the same time, evidences also reveal that the issue of attire is a no deterrent indicator of street sexual harassment. For example, a finding conducted by the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights suggested that majority of the women facing harassments on the streets were dressed modestly, practising Islamic femininity and wearing either ‘niqab’ (an Islamic dress covering the body from head to toe, except for the eyes) or headscarves. In addition, the results of this survey also suggested that 62% of Egyptian men are involved in sexually harassing women (Abdelhadi, 2008).

the dual career arrangement. In this context, girls have high expectations of advanced qualifications and labour market skills as an asset and source of pride to their families. This shift towards the dual breadwinner structure coincides with smaller, privatised nuclear family units. Arguably, these trends of economic development, and the dismantling of tacit 'traditional' family support systems are mutually constitutive in urban Assam.

Expectations regarding career, marriage and motherhood reveal that a majority of the women interviewed aspire to 'have it all', though some women of marriageable age tend to postpone their marriage as a consequence of career orientation. Interestingly, it is the women who are pursuing 'male type' careers (as a pilot, in advertising, as civil servants) who make the strongest case for limiting family to one child after marriage.

The analysis above also shows that educated Assamese women face very similar issues to their western counterparts with respect to reconciling an independent career with family responsibilities. Yet, India being a complex and a paradoxical mix of tacit traditional practices and ultra modernity, and given the post-colonial context, close scrutiny of the cultural norms surrounding marriage and motherhood in Assam exposes some uniquely Indian characteristics to women's struggle for equality in this context (Bhattacharjee, 2006; Sen, 2005). Not only do Assamese women carry the overloaded burden of the 'double day' of paid employment and domestic work, they also have to live up to high expectations of loyalty and obedience to parents-in-law. The cultural norms associated with respect for in-laws typically entail the observance of ethnic cultural dress and labour-intensive cooking and cleaning for family and guests. The women in the research tend to play down this 'burden' and the struggle of balancing their career with family life. This is despite the fact that opportunities to off-load the second shift of domestic work and childcare are limited by the lack of organised childcare. Even where a family support mechanism or paid domestic help does exist the women continue

to take responsibility for all the ‘connecting’ work required to ensure children are cared for round the clock. In short, women in the sample are (re)traditionalising their responsibilities of childcare and housework. Moreover, many of the women still see their primary role as transmitting the cultural values and religious beliefs of their family to their children. Overall the evidence suggests that Assamese women’s career aspirations and economic independence combine with increased ‘Indianness’ in the social (re)production of daily life. The manifestation of this process however, is locally specific, highly uneven and contradictory.

Chapter 7

Towards a Third Wave Feminism in India

7.1.0 Introduction

The starting point of this research was an exploration of the complexities and diverse realities confronting young middle class Assamese women who are engaged in higher education. The research takes account of the ‘lived experiences’ of young middle class Assamese women as knowledgeable agents “located in actual lived situations” (Smith, 1987: 91). The lived experiences of these women’s everyday practices are constituted in this thesis “as that (realm) in which questions originate” (Smith, 1987: 91). For this purpose, the narratives provide a unique, fine grained, locally-constructed understanding. The production of this thesis therefore is a vehicle that demonstrates a gateway to increased status and empowerment of young middle class Assamese women with respect to the cultural capital of higher education and career (based on paid employment). Throughout the thesis, the aim has been to demonstrate the complexity of gender relations in Assam.

The thesis combines ‘breadth with depth’ by undertaking two complementary layers of extensive and intensive research data collection. The study first presented a broad review of trends and development concerning women’s changing status and role in Assamese society, with particular reference to young, middle class Assamese women, based both on secondary data sources and an extensive questionnaire survey of 182 students in selected co-educational institutions of higher education in Assam (Chapter 5). The study then interrogated these trends through intensive qualitative data collection (Chapter 6). Triangulating these two tiers of data

collection, it exposed the conflicting roles and identities of young, middle-class educated Assamese women today in their everyday practices.

In this final chapter, I first summarise the core conclusions. Second, I set the key findings in the context of the bodies of theoretical literatures: Post-colonial feminism and Third Wave feminism. In the final section of this chapter, I will present the implications and future directions (practice) suggested by this research.

7.2.0 Research Findings

7.2.1 Key findings

Assamese women as agents of transformation

One of the starting points of this thesis was Chandra Mohanty's (1991a: 6) critique of the way 'objective' indicators have been deployed in the past to analyse Third World women, especially within Western feminist discourse where this approach underestimates "the meaning of women's day- to-day lives". By contrast, my thesis has applied a qualitative methodology to explore the diverse everyday realities of a relatively empowered group of middle class women. This approach focuses on the transformative capacity of a population group (young women students) which is neglected in the current literature on gender and women's issues in Assam (Chapter 1). The thesis is innovative in the way it employs feminist epistemology and qualitative methods (in-depth interviews and focus groups) that have been neglected in debates on women's education and employment in Assam. The qualitative methods thus employed, explore the unique everyday experiences of Assamese women within social hierarchies that reveal the understanding of their power structures.

The thesis largely advocates a WID approach and seeks to mediate intersections between class, women and gender. Applying this theoretical framework to the empirical data helps to make sense of the complex issues of women's changing status and role in Assam.

Saddled by the yoke of privilege and through possession of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; LiPuma, 1993), my sample of young middle class Assamese women have increasingly realised the 'enabling aspect' of power (Marchand and Parpart, 1995: 244): that power is not a zero-sum game (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999). For a majority of young women, the process of self-empowerment, that is rooted within the power dynamics: 'power to' (creativity and enabling) and 'power within' (personal strength and self-respect) can be wielded to overcome and challenge 'power over' (domination and subordination) (Chapters 5 and 6).

Chapters 5 and 6 also suggest that these young women are able to make strategic choices: take control and ownership of their choices towards career aspirations, marriage and motherhood. Arguably, then, this process of empowerment is both about *enlightenment* -a power of gaining decision autonomy over resources and the ability to recognise their full identity and strength (Batliwala, 1993; Kesby, 2005; Shukla, 2004; Sridevi, 2005) and *outcome* that can be assessed against 'expected accomplishments' (Rai, 2005: 6) to unfold biographic narratives.

Competing Identities

This study has shown that high career aspirations of the women interviewed function alongside the narratives of modernity (Chapter 6). While a majority of these women aspire to 'have it all' with respect to a career, marriage and motherhood, the everyday reality is very different. Throughout the narratives there is a powerful sense of the women continually striking a compromise between modernity (gender equality and individual freedom) and tradition (the preservation of certain forms of femininity). Career aspirations of a majority of women are embedded within local cultural and family values, which continue to transmit

powerful expectations associated with domesticity, idealised femininity and the subordination of career to marriage and family obligations. That is, these women are motivated not only by personal preference such as a 'taste' for economic independence, but are typically also encouraged by parents (or sometimes a spouse) to compete for powerful, status oriented, prestigious jobs as a matter of family pride. This arguably contributes to women's competing identities of personal ambition; strong attachment to local cultural values and religious beliefs; loyalty to family members and obedience to in-laws. Overall the narratives appear to stress a discourse of 'balance' (or compromise) as shown in relation to women adapting (rather than abandoning) their career aspirations to the 'taken for granted expectation' that women will put their family first in the course of marriage and motherhood (Chapter 6). Further, the interpretations also suggest that a majority of the women in the sample aspire to (or have already) establish a 'dual earner' family; some of them postponing marriage or intending to have one or at best two children.

Persistent Inequalities

The qualitative interviews illustrate, some of the complexities and struggles behind statistics reporting the issues of constraints of housework and childcare. On the one hand, higher education is liberating for those who can afford it, in as much as it offers increased autonomy and exposure to 'cosmopolitan', egalitarian ideals. On the other hand, women who seek fulfilling jobs and careers still face continuing pressure to maintain labour-intensive standards of cooking and childcare at home. This is especially the case for married women who also have paid work. This inequality remains one of the dubious achievements of women's empowerment (Sharp et al., 2003). The data collected for this study therefore, shed new light on the changing roles and identities of young, middle class Assamese women.

Another area of social organisation considered in this study is the politics of routine mobility in public spaces outside the home, such as those encountered on journeys to work and vice versa. Section 6.4.0, Chapter 6 unfolds that women face restrictions in their everyday mobility when out in public. From jeers, prurient looks, misogynistic insults to inappropriate touching, pervasive prevalence of street sexual harassment against women is an enduring social malaise of the streets of Assam, which is largely ignored as a minor nuisance (Nahar, 2008) but tends to shackle women's mobility. Undoubtedly, ubiquity of such malaise is 'a wall of shame' for Assam and Assamese community as a whole.

While a majority of women in the sample condemn the increased abuse of women in public they are willing to attribute a degree of blame not to the men who perpetrate abuse but to provocative western styles of dress stamped largely as 'immodest'. They suggest that the solution is not to insist on rigid traditional standards but rather to build on the wide variety of Indian regional influences on dressing styles already found in Assam (Chapter 6). It is suggested therefore, that further nuanced research be undertaken in these areas.

In short, evidence of the (re)production of a mix of ultra modern, disguised in the form of public modernity and tacit 'traditional' practices is presented with respect to competing spheres of daily life; including relationships with parents/in-laws and spouse, childcare, norms of domestic labour and personal goals associated with education and career. The manifestation of this process is locally specific and highly uneven and contradictory. At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that the young middle class Assamese women are by no means hapless passive victims of endless male control. Indeed, the married women are effectively (re)traditionalising their institutionalised domestic roles of housework and childcare responsibilities with increased 'Indianness' in the social (re)production of daily life.

The thesis now engages with a similar critique of tradition to that identified by Hobsbawm (1983) as a variable rather than a fixed or static concept (see, Chapter 2). In the following section, I attempt to set the findings in the context of post-colonial feminist literature by following Chandra Mohanty's (1987, 1988; 1991b) critique of the universality and ethnocentrism of Anglo-American scholarship and presumptions about women of Third World accepting traditions passively.

7.2.2 Tradition: a variable concept

Mohanty (1987, 1988; 1991b) examines Western feminist discourse to explore how this scholarship constructs the 'Third World' women by constituting them as a 'single monolithic subject' (or object) of knowledge. Mohanty goes on to counter her criticism of Western feminist's assumptions that 'Third World' women are passively accepting traditions (see Chapter 2). This thesis, however, demonstrates that the concept of tradition, although value laden remains ahistorical (Hobsbawm, 1983). The 'invented tradition' often seems to reinforce a vision of power because it is authenticated, reified, often by old customs that are remapped and reinterpreted to shed a new light to the meaning of tradition (Hobsbawm, 1983; Jones, 2007). Hobsbawm (1983) argued tradition as a dynamic concept, often reified into 'official tradition' (Jones, 2007: 59), but it remains limited as a theoretical framework (Chakrabarty 2002). The practices, rituals and symbolism of invention of tradition do not entirely consolidate to indicate the constructions of the past (Appadurai, 1981; Hobsbawm, 1983). Rather, there is an inbuilt flexibility in the practice of tradition (Chakrabarty, 2002).

The evidence from this research suggests that a majority of the young middle class Assamese women have grown up with certain values of tradition (Chakraborty, 2002): values that incorporate an ideology of compliance and veneration (Calhoun, 1993; Bhattacharjee, 2006; Sen, 2005) for Assamese culture. For example, married women typically show considerable

respect to their in-laws, retaining their responsibilities for childcare and housework and some women preserve a traditional-ethnic mode of dress (Chapters 5 and 6). In this way, the women retain certain elements of tradition (the preservation of certain forms of femininity) as a part of their daily lives. This flexible approach to (re)tradition is a living reality of Assamese society. It is undeniable that the ideological forces of Indian culture do play a guiding role in the reconstruction of their identities (Bhattacharjee, 2006; Sen, 2005). Evidence suggests that these educated women innovate to retain certain valued elements of tradition by exercising highly individual choice and rationale, allowing them to break out of their ‘tacit traditional’ cultural norms to participate in public as active agents of transformation. In short, the women’s narratives reveal ‘selective tradition’ which functions powerfully in the reconstruction of their modern identities (Williams, 1977: 155; Hobsbawm, 1983) of ‘having it all’: career, marriage and motherhood. Therefore, it is timely to argue that these middle class Assamese women living in Assam are not accepting traditions passively. This study thus reinforce Chandra Mohanty’s proposed model of constructing ‘Third World’ women from the perspective of “a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another” (1991b: 65). Such an analysis remains politically focused and highly context specific, and most importantly, remains free from false generalisations (Mohanty, 1991b). I now turn to discuss the findings shaped by Third Wave feminist body of literature.

7.2.3 Towards a Third Wave feminism in Assam

Chapter 2 provides a critique of theories associated with the biological ‘naturalisation’ of sex roles, and patriarchy and argues that these are limited in their ability to explain the changing status and role of the partial emergence of plural ‘new femininities’ (Laurie, et al., 1999) in contemporary Indian society. These theories could be summarised in terms of the ‘nimble fingers’ thesis (Elson and Pearson, 1981). Third Wave feminism is argued to be more useful in

gaining critical explanations on the emergence of new femininities in Assam stemming from changes in gender roles. The narratives suggest that the young generation of Assamese women of my sample are 'able to achieve' generation of Assamese society with highly positive attitudes towards career, marriage and motherhood. This notion epitomise the emergence of 'girl power' in Assamese society circumscribed by plural new femininities. Indeed, clear parallels can be drawn between trends of plural femininities in Assam and a Third Wave feminism. Arguably, these new middle class Assamese women are both the symbol and the embodiment of a new generation of Assamese women.

It is well documented in this thesis that young middle class Assamese women belong to a similar cohort to the 'Generation Xers' of their Western counterparts. They are essentially modern, Indian, Assamese and middle class. This generation has been profoundly shaped by neoliberalism, privatisation and a shift to a service economy. The thesis demonstrates that the education gaps have been closing between men and women within this middle class and indeed that young women now tend to outperform their male counterparts (Chapter 5). In this narrow context of education it can be argued that gender relations have been transformed. This finding for Assam coincides with similar changes in gender relations reported in the West (Walby, 1997). Arguably, the more qualified a young middle class Assamese woman is, the more likely she is to participate in paid employment and aspire to a career: there remains a positive correlation between educational attainment and career salience (Sarma, 2008; Sengupta, 2008). These women are gradually advancing into the labour market (or preparing to do so) by competing with their male counterparts and becoming more or less like them (Chapters 5 and 6). Once again these interpretations bear resonance with a number of Anglo-American studies (Laurie et al., 1999; Spencer, 2004; Walby, 1997). Taking the words of Sylvia Walby (1997: 41, 43), "the greater success of men than women in achieving

educational credentials is now a phenomenon of the past. Young women are now better than or equal to young men in most levels of current educational achievement”. It is suggested therefore, that young middle class women of my thesis are more powerful than Assamese women have ever been before (Sarma, 2008).

In the historical context of women’s rights and social movements in India, a positive change in status and role for women must be judged in social and cultural terms, beyond legal rights, with respect to decision-making power and autonomy in all aspects of women’s daily lives. Not least in this judgement of progress towards equal rights is the freedom to journey from home to work and participate fully in civil society, safe from physical or verbal abuse and discrimination

7.3.0 Future Implications

The study is about the changing status and role of young middle class Assamese women in higher education. For this I studied only 29 women through in-depth interviews and focus groups. Whilst this small sample is insufficient to deliberate broader-ranging trends, the project could be considered a starting point for a more extensive study of young, middle-class Assamese women. In the following section I discuss several issues that emerge from this thesis as a subject of further investigation.

First, in order to understand the evidence of persistent inequality and incomplete gender transformation, we need to probe the male students’ attitudes within the social organisation of higher education and career. We need to better understand the extent to which the daily lives and aspirations of male students differ from their female counterparts, perhaps by advocating Gender and Development (GAD) approach. As such, this thesis produces a direction for future research, where it is suggested to include the male participants’ more fully in in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Second, it has been stressed earlier that Assam lacks literature on gender studies (see Chapters 1 and 2). Therefore, this project has mostly considered literature from the Anglo-American and also Indian academic tradition because this provides access to a range of critical literature on empowerment and development. At the same time, the point has been made that western feminist concepts and gender theory do not always ‘translate’ successfully to the Indian context. That is, arguments on Indian feminism and more specifically Assamese feminism are identified and framed by feminisms emerging from multiple disciplines, mainly from outside India. Therefore, I make a call to develop a ‘method’ for studying Assamese feminism that is shaped and informed by a uniquely Assamese trajectory that engenders critical reflection. My arguments for this method are paralleled by Mohanty’s (1988, 1991b) arguments of intersectionality- a discourse involving Assamese women, class, caste, religion, ethnicity, gender and fluid identities. Economic, cultural, religious as well as political factors can intersect in various moments of historical specificity to beget situations in which Assamese women of various class, castes or religious identities are either subjugated or liberated. The importance of these diverse social practices is historically contingent. Such a highly context specific analysis of intersectionality would incorporate Assamese women within a political platform of further research. Arguably, this discourse should take into account Assamese women’s “complex and mobile relationships between their historical materiality on the level of specific oppressions and political choices, on the one hand, and their general discursive representations, on the other” (Mohanty, 1991b: 69; Peet, 1998: 259): a discourse that is allowable for the probability that ostensibly tantamount practices which may be either oppressive or liberating (or in between) are determined by their local socio-historical and political contextual analysis (Mohanty, 1988, 1991b). Therefore, Mohanty (1991b: 58) puts it:

“Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis”

(Mohanty, 1991b: 58)

Of course such a method must be able to address the common essence of Assamese women with their counterparts’ elsewhere in India as well as with other women across the globe (Mohanty, 1988, 1991b). At the same time this method must be able to address the strategic contradictions among Assamese women and their counterparts in order to effect change (Mohanty, 1988, 1991b; McILwaine and Datta, 2003). Further, all sections of Assamese women should be able to take ‘the gate keeping positions’ of Assamese feminism (see, Valentine, 2007: 12).

Third, this study serves as a basis for further studies for work-life balance policy makers so that through a more joined-up thinking, necessary transformation can be brought in both societal structures and people’s attitudes in order to bring about equal responsibilities between working women and men in childcare and household labour.

Fourth, the empirical evidence suggests that career-minded Assamese women face pervasive inequalities when out in public. They face street sexual harassment on a daily basis which obviously breaches their basic rights of a dignified life. Arguably, the official rhetoric of equality between the sexes is not borne out in the reality of women’s daily lives. Of course, the state could play a more proactive role in improving this situation. Sections 292, 298(A) and (B) and section 509 of the Indian Penal Code identifies street sexual harassment disguised as ‘eve teasing’ as a serious crime (Chatterji, 2007). These laws on eve teasing mentions rigorous penalty and arrest of a harasser (if found guilty) for his attempt infuriate the dignity of a woman in public (Chatterji, 2007). In order to understand such gender inequality we need to explore the motivation of the harassers that might lead to a valid extrapolation. There is also

an urgent need to frame civil laws to protect Assamese women in public. Although evidence, mainly from focus groups suggests that the issue of western dress code is one of the deterrent factors for the rise of sexual harassment on the streets of Assam, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before the association between the two issues is more clearly understood.

It is also suggested that the feminists and women's organisations of Assam adopt the popular Western mantra of the 1970s – 'the personal is political' as 'personal experiences have political causes' (Cullen, 2000: 3). Finally, another implication of the finding of this thesis is that policy-makers, bureaucrats, politicians and civil authorities need to engage in a shared debate concerning the seriousness of sexual harassment in public transport. A related point to reduce this type of harassment on public transport could be the introduction of women-only buses especially during the peak hours of the day. Technology, such as surveillance cameras (Closed-Circuit Television or CCTV) might be used to monitor these public spaces. More importantly, regular awareness programme need to be held in schools, colleges, media and other social clubs where the participants must be given information on civic rights and responsibilities, and that the authorities and voluntary bodies must promote and develop.

Appendix I

The Questionnaire

Section A: Personal

(Please tick wherever applicable)

1. Name: (Miss/Mrs/Mr) _____
2. Name of your college/university and department: _____
3. Level of study: Graduate ☐ Post Graduate ☐ Others ☐, please specify _____
4. Do you want to take part in in-depth interviews? _____
5. If yes, your e-mail address _____
6. Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐
7. Age Group: 17-21 ☐ 22-25 ☐ 26-30 ☐ 31-35 ☐
8. Your place of birth: _____
9. Where were you brought up?(if different from your place of birth) _____
10. Marital Status: Single ☐ Married ☐ Separated ☐ Widowed ☐
11. Caste/Community: General Caste ☐ Other Backward Caste ☐ Scheduled Caste ☐ Scheduled Tribe ☐
12. Religion: Hindu ☐ Muslim ☐ Christian ☐ Sikh ☐ and Others ☐, please specify _____
13. Family (with no. of persons): _____
14. Household Structure: Nuclear ☐ Extended/joint ☐
15. What is your father's occupation? _____
16. What is your mother's occupation? _____

Section B

[Please fill in this section if you are a married or unmarried female and working while either studying full time or part-time]

1. Do you have a paid job while studying? Yes ☐ No ☐

If **No**, go to question number 6

2. If Yes, how many hours on average do you work per week? ____ hrs
3. Is your work: Full time ☐ Part time ☐ Permanent ☐ Temporary ☐
4. Employed in: Government Department ☐ Public Sector ☐ Private Sector ☐ Others ☐
5. Reasons for taking up a job:
- a. Higher standard of living ☐ Career mindedness /self satisfaction ☐
- b. To utilise time ☐ Financial security ☐ Social Status ☐
6. Do you have children: Yes ☐ No ☐

If **No**, go to question number 10

7. Ages of your children? 1. ____yrs 2. ____yrs 3. ____yrs 4. ____yrs 5. ____yrs
8. Does your child attend school? Yes ☐ No ☐
9. If **No**, who looks after your child/children in your absence: Grand parents ☐
Relatives ☐ Nursery/Crèche ☐ Domestic worker ☐ Trained Caretaker ☐ Husband ☐

For how long_____ How many days in a week?_____

10. Does your family/husband/in-laws approve of your work outside the home? Yes ☐
No ☐
11. Do your family members have different opinions about your work outside the home?
Yes ☐ No ☐
12. Who mostly approves of your work outside home? Mother ☐ Father ☐ Husband ☐
Mother-in-law ☐ Father-in-law ☐
13. Who regularly help you with the housework? (Please fill in **Form 1**). How many hours on average do you spend on your housework? _____
14. Do you own and use the following? (Please fill in **Form 2**)
15. Do you feel that you are excessively tired by working both at home and at the place of work? Yes ☐ No ☐
16. Do you get enough time to spend with your husband, children and family? Yes ☐
No ☐

Form 1: (Tick as many boxes as you feel appropriate)

Household Activities	Tasks taken by you	Mother	Mother-in-law	Sister-in-law	Sister	Brother	Brother-in-law	Father	Father-in-law	Husband	Domestic Worker
Cooking											
Shopping											
Washing Clothes											
Washing Utensils											
Dusting, Sweeping and others											
Ironing											
Teaching Children at home											
Dropping and bringing children from school/ nursery/ crèche											

Form 2: (Tick as many boxes as you feel appropriate)

Gas as a domestic fuel		Water Heater(Geysers)		Car, Scooter	
Television		Pressure Cooker		Telephone	
Video cassette player/ C.D player or DVD player		Air conditioners		Mobile Phones	
Cable Television		Washing Machines		Computer	
Tape-recorder		Video Recorder		Oven/Microwave oven	
Refrigerator		Mixer Grinder/Juicer		Electric Iron	
Vacuum Cleaner					

Section C: Attitude to Female Role

(Please answer the questions 1-12 by tick-marking one of the 5 alternatives and please provide additional comments where you feel necessary)

Note: Scale of 1-5, '1' indicates you '**strongly disagree**' and '5' indicates you '**strongly agree**'

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Comments
1. Indian men are better at complicated, technical matters than Indian women						
2. Indian girls should be encouraged to be career minded rather than domestic minded.						
3. The most important job of an Indian woman is to look after the comforts of her husband and children						
4. Employment is not a hindrance to becoming a good wife/mother						
5. Indian women should plan to have children only when they are prepared to give up their jobs to look after them until they are old enough to go to school.						
6. Both womens' as well as mens' career are equally important.						
7. If a mother has children under the age of 5, she should not go out to work						
8. A wife should resign from her job if her husband is on a transferable job						
9. It is the duty of the mother (in the case of a working mother) rather than the father to take leave of absence from duty when their child(ren) is/are ill.						
10. One of the greatest attributes of Assamese woman is femininity						
11. In married life, both the husband and the wife should equally take major decisions in life.						
12. Under normal circumstances, a father should not be expected to look after his child/children						

Appendix II

Questionnaire Findings

Section A: Personal

3. **Level of study:** see Table 4.2 (Chapter 4)

6. **Male:** 33 **Female:** 149

7. **Age Group:** see Table 4.2 (Chapter 4)

10. **Marital Status:** see Table 4.2 (Chapter 4)

11. **Caste /Community:** see figure 3.1 (Chapter 3)

12. **Religion:** see Table 4.2 (Chapter 4)

13. **Family:** see Table 4.2 (Chapter 4)

14 **Household Structure** see Table 4.2 (Chapter 4)

15and 16: **Father's and Mother's Occupation:** see Table 5.5 (Chapter 5)

Section B

(Filled by a married female either studying full-time or part-time while in employment)

1. Twenty five have a paid-job while studying
2. Please refer to **Table 5.22**, Chapter 5
3. For 16 women, their work is full time and permanent; for 4 women it is part-time but permanent. For remaining 5 women, it is part-time and temporary
4. 11 women works in either Government or Semi-Government Colleges; four works in private colleges; six are doctors and four takes tuition
5. Reasons for taking up jobs (refer to **Table 5.16**, Chapter 5)

Higher Standard of Living = 23; Financial Security = 23; Self- Satisfaction = 25; To utilise time = None; Social Status = 20
6. 14 married women have children.

7. Ages of Children

Ages of the children	
Age	Number of Children
0-1	1
1-2	1
2-3	1
3-5	11
Source: Questionnaire survey with 25 working women from a universe of 182 population	

8. Ten children attends kindergarten

9. Childcare (in the absence of the mother)

Grand Parents = 6; Relatives = 5 (3 sisters, 1 sister-in-law and 1 distant relative); Nursery/Crèche=1;

Domestic worker =8; Trained Caretaker = 1; Husband = 14

13 married working women used informal childcare six days a week.

Responses to 10, 11 and 12 (refer to **Table 5.18** in Chapter 5)

13. Please refer to **Tables 5.17** and **5.20** in Chapter 5

Time spent on household chores per day			
Married	Time spent per day	Unmarried	Time spent per day
Rini	2	Manisha	10 mins
Ila	2	Shehnaz	20 mins
Mukali	2	Shreya	10 mins
Kaveri	2	Mitu	25 mins
Simi	2	Bijuli	15 mins
Juna	2	M'deepa	10 mins
Pinky	2	Pompy	20 mins
Jeeni	2	Nani	10 mins
Jonali	2	Debanushi	10 mins
Bijoya	3	Swapna	10 mins
Susantika	2		
Riku	2		
Mrinmoyee	2		
Monalisha	2		
Murchana	3		

14. Please see **Table 1** below

15. See **Table 5.23** (Chapter 5)

16. See **Table 5.23** (Chapter 5)

Table 1 (Results in %)

Gas as a domestic fuel	100	Water Heater (Geysers)	60
Television	100	Pressure Cooker	100
Video cassette player/ C.D player or DVD player	90	Air conditioners	60
Cable Television	90	Washing Machines	90
Tape-recorder	100	Video Recorder	60
Refrigerator	100	Mixer Grinder/Juicer	100
Vacuum Cleaner	60	Car, Scooter	60
Telephone	100	Oven/Microwave oven	90
Mobile Phones	60	Electric Iron	100
Computer	35		

Section C: Attitude to Female Role

1. Indian men are better at complicated, technical matters than Indian women							
	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Disagree	23	–	28	3	11	2	–
Disagree	20	3	25	3	7	2	1
Uncertain	6	2	8	2	3	1	–
Agree	4	3	8	7	2	4	2
Strongly Agree	–	–	–	–	1	1	–
Not filled in.	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3
2. Indian girls should be encouraged to be career minded rather than domestic minded							
	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Agree	23	3	43	4	9	5	1
Agree	21	5	14	10	10	3	2
Uncertain	7	–	7	1	4	–	–
Disagree	1	–	5	–	1	2	–
Strongly Disagree	1	–	–	–	–	–	–
Not filled in.	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3
3. The most important job of an Indian woman is to look after the comforts of her husband and children							
	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Disagree	19	3	13	6	8	3	1
Disagree	9	2	23	3	9	6	1
Uncertain	6	1	6	2	1	–	–
Agree	19	2	24	3	6	1	1
Strongly Agree	–	–	3	1	–	–	–
Not filled in.	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3
4. Employment is not a hindrance to becoming a good wife/mother							
	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Agree	29	4	51	1	13	5	–
Agree	17	4	16	10	10	4	2
Uncertain	2	–	1	1	–	1	–
Disagree	2	–	–	1	–	–	1
Strongly Disagree	3	–	–	2	–	–	–
Not filled in.	–	–	1	–	1	–	–
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3

5. Indian women should plan to have children only when they are prepared to give up their jobs to look after them until they are old enough to go to school							
	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Disagree	16	3	33	1	11	4	2
Disagree	21	2	19	4	11	4	1
Uncertain	7	2	7	3	1	2	—
Agree	7	1	8	6	1	—	—
Strongly Agree	1	—	2	1	—	—	—
Not filled in.	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3
6. Both women's as well as men's career are equally important							
	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Agree	40	4	57	8	21	7	1
Agree	13	3	12	7	3	2	2
Uncertain	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Disagree	—	—	—	—	—	1	—
Strongly Disagree	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
Not filled in.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3
7. If a mother has children under the age of 5, she should not go out to work							
	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Disagree	9	2	14	1	2	3	1
Disagree	25	2	32	4	16	4	2
Uncertain	7	1	4	2	4	1	—
Agree	9	—	13	6	2	2	—
Strongly Agree	2	3	5	2	—	—	—
Not filled in.	1	—	1	—	—	—	—
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3
8. A wife should resign from her job if her husband is on transferable job							
	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Disagree	22	3	26	5	10	6	1
Disagree	25	4	27	4	6	4	1
Uncertain	5	1	9	3	4	—	1
Agree	1	—	5	2	4	—	—
Strongly Agree	—	—	2	1	—	—	—
Not filled in.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	53	8	69	15	—	10	3

9. It is the duty of the mothers (in the case of working mothers) rather than the fathers to take leave of absence from duty when their child/children is/are ill

	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Disagree	16	–	15	3	11	3	1
Disagree	11	4	26	1	7	6	1
Uncertain	12	–	4	5	2	1	1
Agree	11	4	17	6	–	–	–
Strongly Agree	1	–	7	–	4	–	–
Not filled in.	2	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3

10. One of the greatest attributes of women is femininity

	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Agree	14	3	26	2	9	4	1
Agree	25	5	27	8	10	3	2
Uncertain	6	–	11	4	3	2	–
Disagree	7	–	3	1	–	–	–
Strongly Disagree	–	–	–	–	2	–	–
Not filled in.	1	–	2	–	–	1	–
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3

11. In married life, both the husband and the wife should equally take major decisions in life

	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Agree	48	6	57	9	16	9	3
Agree	5	2	11	6	8	–	–
Uncertain	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Disagree	–	–	1	–	–	1	–
Strongly Disagree	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Not filled in.	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3

12. Under normal circumstances, a father should not be expected to look after his child/children.

	17-21 (Female)	17-21 (Male)	22-25 (Female)	22-25 (Male)	26-30 (Female)	26-30 (Male)	31-35 (Female)
Strongly Disagree	33	4	42	6	16	7	2
Disagree	18	2	24	5	8	3	1
Uncertain	1	1	–	–	–	–	–
Agree	1	1	3	4	–	–	–
Strongly Agree	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Not filled in.	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	53	8	69	15	24	10	3

Appendix III

Interview Framework

1. Career

How much does your family/spouse support you in your career?

Probing:

- a. Would you consider yourself to be more career-minded/or domestic oriented?
- b. What is your aspiration in life?
- c. How would you relate your aspiration to potential family role (both imaginary and practical)?

2. Work/life Balance

How do you manage your time at home as a daughter/daughter-in-law (if the interviewee is married) or as a both mother (if she has a child/children) and a daughter-in-law

Probing:

- a. Who does the brunt of housework?

(cooking, shopping, cleaning, dusting)
- b. Who helps you in your housework?
- c. Do you feel that you are excessively tired by working both at home and at the place of work?
- d. Do you get enough time to spend with your husband and children?

3. Childcare (for only married female students having children):

For students from Nuclear family

When you started a family to plan for a child, how did you imagine you would manage childcare arrangements? Have these arrangements turned out how you imagined?

Probing:

Exploring different options and various sources of information

- a. Preferences
- b. Making Decision
- c. Opinion from family and friends
- d. Different problems and practicalities
- e. For students from joint/extended family
- f. Who in general offers you a helping hand in looking after your kid?

Probing:

- g. Infant Care
- h. Dropping and bringing children from school/nursery/crèche
- i. Entertainment
- j. Caring sick Children

4. Reconsidering of Relationship

How do you wish to bring up your children? And what hopes and fears do you have for your childrens' future?

- a. On the bias of gender biases
- b. Shared values
- c. On the basis of cultural and religious beliefs
- d. Others (please specify)

5. Sexual Politics of the Public sphere

Are you being sexual harassed when you commute daily to reach the places of employment or study?

Probing:

Is it because of changes in womens' appearance in their dresses due to impact of global culture?

Do you believe that one of the greatest attributes of women is femininity?

Appendix IV

Focus Group Framework

Impact of Global culture on changes in womens' dress patterns:

Is the change in women's appearance responsible for women's increased restrictions when out in the public?

Appendix V

Percentage of Female University students: selected field of studies, latest available year, selected world regions

Country	Year	All Fields	Agriculture	Education	Engineering, Manufacturin g & Construction	Medicine, Health and Welfare	Humanities & Arts	Natural Sciences	Services	Social Sciences, Business & Law	Unspecified
Israel	2000	54	53	85	26	73	68	37		54	
Mexico	1982	36	23	53	14	47	44				
Mexico	2000	49	28	66	30	61	55				
Canada	1998	59	62	71	21	74	64	32		51	
United States	1995	55	36	76	16	82	60	44		71	
European Union											
Austria	2001	50	55	72	19	63	63	33	49	52	56
Austria	2002	51	58	72	20	64	63	34	51	53	55
Austria	2003	53	60	75	20	67	65	35	52	55	58
Austria	2004	53	61	74	21	68	65	35	53	55	66
Belgium	2001	52	44	69	18	70	60	30.8	52.6	53	56
Belgium	2002	53.1	48.3	71.2	20.5	72	59.5	28.9	49.4	53.1	56
Belgium	2003	53.3	50.3	71.5	20.2	72.7	59	30.1	47	53.4	44.5
Belgium	2004	53.8	49.8	69.8	22.8	73.1	55.9	28.5	54.2	53.9	81.8
Denmark	2001	56.5	51.7	68.5	26.2	80.4	64.7	33.2	26	47.1	
Denmark	2002	57.5	48.6	69.9	30.9	81.7	64	33.2	26.1	47.6	
Denmark	2002	57.9	51.3	70.2	32.8	81.4	62.8	32.2	23.3	49	
Denmark	2004	57.9	51.1	70.1	33.6	81.3	62.9	31.8	23.8	51.1	
Finland	2001	53.9	48.1	80.3	18.2	83.6	71.2	41.8	69.6	62.5	57.9
Finland	2002	54.1	48.9	80.5	18.8	83.6	71.6	41.8	69.1	63.2	
Finland	2003	53.5	48.8	80.8	18.6	84.2	71.3	41.7	67.1	63.3	
Finland	2004	53.8	50.6	80.7	18.5	83.9	71.1	41.3	67.6	63.3	
France	1997	54									
Germany	2001	48.7	46.2	69.3	18.8	71.7	63.8	32.6	53.8	45.2	51
Germany	2002	49	45.7	69.3	18.9	72.5	64.3	33	54.5	46.3	48.8

Germany	2003	49.5	46.5	69.1	18.9	73	64.9	33.4	54.3	47.4	58.2
Germany	2004	49.4	46.3	68.6	18.9	73	65.2	33.8	54.3	47.7	59.6
Greece	1996	59	38	69	30	46	81	44		66	
Greece	2002	51.2	43.1	67.7	27	72	73.5	37.2	41.9	54.1	
Greece	2004	51.7	43.6	70	28.1	74.5	73.2	37.9	57.6	54	
Ireland	2001	54.7	37.9	82.2	18.7	76.3	66.4	45.1	63.6	60.2	55.1
Ireland	2002	55.1	39.8	84	17.9	77.3	66.2	44	55.9	61	56.1
Ireland	2003	55.7	40.6	80.9	17.9	78.7	66.2	42.5	53.4	59.8	56.4
Ireland	2004	55.2	39.6	83.2	16.7	78.6	65	41.2	51.1	58.4	56.5
Italy	2001	56	42.5	84	26.5	62.9	74.5	49.6	48.5	56.7	62.8
Italy	2002	56.2	43.6	88.4	26.4	64.2	74.7	49.1	46.8	56.8	57.7
Italy	2003	56.2	43.5	87.6	26.7	64.6	74.3	49	47.9	56.8	68.5
Italy	2004	56.2	43.1	86.8	27.2	64.8	73.5	48.7	47.3	56.6	59.4
Netherlands	2001	50.5	45.4	73.9	12	75.1	57.9	23.4	49.4	46.3	26.1
Netherlands	2002	50.8	46.7	74.6	12	75.4	57.3	23	51.1	46.4	29.1
Netherlands	2003	51	47.9	74.5	11.7	75.4	56.4	23.4	52.4	46.8	37.9
Netherlands	2004	50.9	46.4	73.9	13.5	74.5	55.4	19.6	51.4	46.7	38.1
Bulgaria	2001	56.3	43	76.9	36.9	63.9	66.9	55.1	44	60.9	52.6
Bulgaria	2002	54	43.1	70.7	34.6	62.9	65.1	55.2	44.4	59.3	58.9
Bulgaria	2003	52.8	43.2	69.5	33.9	64.3	60.1	51.7	44.6	58	55.1
Bulgaria	2004	52.5	43.4	67.6	32.2	64.4	61.5	49.6	45.1	58.8	54.8
Romania	2001	53.5	41.7	50.9	26.6	64.7	66.6	59.8	84.3	60.2	65.4
Romania	2002	54.4	40.3	76.2	27.8	64.1	67.9	59.3	83.8	61.7	41
Romania	2003	54.3	38.4	75.4	29.3	65.6	66.2	58.8		62.1	40
Romania	2004	54.8	36.8	76.5	30.2	64.5	67.7	57.5	48.7	62.8	42.3
Spain	2001	52.5	44.6	76	25.5	73.4	61.2	37.2	59.3	57.4	48.4
Spain	2002	53.1	44	77.1	26.6	75.6	61.6	36.9	59.3	58.3	39.1
Spain	2003	53.1	44.9	77.5	27.3	76	61.7	35.6	60	58.6	43.8
Spain	2004	53.8	45.3	78.8	27.7	76.2	61.9	35.9	59.9	59.2	47.2
Sweden	1997	61	64	78	22	80	63	39		56	
Sweden	2001	59.1	54.2	77.3	29.3	80.6	65.5	45.4	60.2	61.2	73.3

Sweden	2002	59.5	54.4	77.9	29.2	81.5	64	43.7	59.1	61.5	77.8
Sweden	2003	59.6	55.5	77.9	28.8	81.5	63.1	42.8	57.9	61.3	74
Sweden	2004	59.5	56.1	76.7	28.2	81.2	63.2	41.9	58.5	61.1	
United Kingdom	1995	51	50	77	17	69	63	40		53	
United Kingdom	2001	55.8	54	72.6	18.4	78.5	61.6	43.3		55.2	57
United Kingdom	2002	56.2	55.7	72.6	18.6	78.7	61.7	43.1		55.9	57.4
United Kingdom	2003	56.6	56.9	72.8	18.9	79.1	62.1	44.7		55.3	58
United Kingdom	2004	57	59.3	73.8	19.2	79.1	62.2	45.2		55.4	59.7
United Kingdom	2005	57.2	59.5	74	19.6	78.8	61.8	45.8		55.2	60.6
Czech Republic	2001	50	51	72.2	20.3	72.6	59.2	35.3	39	55.6	
Czech Republic	2002	49.8	51.2	73.1	20.8	73.1	60.1	35.3	39.4	57.5	
Czech Republic	2003	50.7	50.5	73	20.7	74.2	61.1	34.5	37.6	57.4	
Czech Republic	2004	51.7	53.2	73.8	20.3	74.9	61.7	35.4	38.8	59.1	16.3
Estonia	2001	60.1	45.2	87.6	28.1	85.7	74.6	38.9	45	60.6	
Estonia	2002	61.5	75.7	86.9	29	82.1	75	39.4	45	62.5	
Estonia	2003	61.5	49.8	88	27.8	87.4	74.7	39.2	48.8	63.3	
Estonia	2004	61.8	51.6	87.1	26.9	88.3	76.5	39.9	50.8	64.5	
Hungary	2001	54.8	46.1	72.3	20	74.3	63.6	31.7	52.6	60.4	
Hungary	2002	55.3	44.8	71.9	21.5	75.4	62.8	31.9	44.5	61.1	
Hungary	2003	56.7	45.7	72.1	20.2	76.8	65	35	56.5	63.8	
Hungary	2004	57.3	45.4	71.1	18.6	77.1	64.7	33.7	56.8	63.9	
Portugal	1996	63	56	80	30	72	78	55		63	
Portugal	2000	57	54.5	81.3	27.8	75.8	65.2	49.9	50.3	60	
Portugal	2001	56.8	55.2	82.4	27.1	76.3	65.6	50.3	50.7	60.3	
Portugal	2004	56.1	54.7	83.6	26.7	76.6	63.2	49.2	50.5	59.8	
Malta	1995	51	50	77	6	69	55	41		56	
Malta	2001	54.8	36.6	70.9	23.3	62.1	54.9	31.6	44.8	49.9	
Malta	2003	56.9	30	74.2	27.6	65.3	57.9	33.4	29	53.3	
Malta	2004	55.9	44	78	26.9	65.3	57.8	33.1	44	53.1	
Poland	2001	58	55.1	73.6	21.7	69.1	69.5	49.5	44.5	62.1	70.6
Poland	2002	57.9	54.9	73.1	22.2	70.7	69.3	44.4	46.7	63	68.7

Poland	2003	57.8	55.4	72.8	22.1	73.2	69	42.6	51.1	63.3	68.6
Poland	2004	57.6	54.4	72.1	22.5	74.5	69.2	40.3	50.6	62.7	70.1
Poland	2005	57.5	54.8	71.8	25.6	75.6	69.5	32.7	50.5	62.3	70.5
Slovakia	2001	51.3	36.5	73.8	27.1	73.6	52.8	31.9	37.4	57.5	
Slovakia	2002	52.1	34.7	73.9	28.6	74	53.3	34.8	35.4	58.1	
Slovakia	2003	53.1	35.9	74.6	28.6	77.1	54.3	33.9	36	58.6	
Slovakia	2004	54.1	37.1	73.6	28.7	78.7	54.9	34.4	37.1	59.1	
Slovenia	2001	56.1	51.9	80.3	24.7	79.2	73.2	30.8	40.6	62.7	
Slovenia	2002	57.5	53.8	81	24.5	79.3	72.8	31	42.7	63	
Slovenia	2003	56.2	53.8	79.3	23.2	78.2	73.4	30	44.6	62.8	
Slovenia	2004	56.9	53.7	80.3	23.7	78.7	74.7	30.3	43.6	63.8	
Latvia	2001	62	44.7	83.3	24.9	83.6	77.1	38.8	44	65	
Latvia	2003	62.3	44.5	83.6	21.4	84.2	78.2	38.1	58.2	65	
Latvia	2005	63.2	46	85.9	21.4	86.7	78.3	30	48.6	66	
Latvia	2006	63.3	48.7	85.3	20.8	86.1	77.5	30.5	51.5	66.7	85.6
Lithuania	2001	60	63.3	79.7	30.6	79.9	73.7	42	43.6	66.2	
Lithuania	2002	60.5	51.8	80.5	29.3	81.5	73.8	40.3	42.3	67.7	
Lithuania	2003	60	50.1	78.1	28.1	82.4	74.1	37.4	44.7	67.4	
Lithuania	2004	60	50.3	76.6	27.8	83.2	74	36	44.8	67.9	
Cyprus	2001	58		90.6	7.8	73.4	80	42	46.2	57.1	
Cyprus	2002	54.8		90.7	7.5	70	80.3	36.8	35	54.2	
Cyprus	2003	49.5		89.3	7.7	70.2	59.5	32.2	38.2	46.9	
Cyprus	2004	47.9		88	10.1	70	77.1	33.2	27.6	50	
Other Western Europe											
Andorra	1995	56	40	86	19	70	61	35		66	
Norway	1995	67	17	82	17	82	63	17		21	
Norway	2001	59.2	49	77.6	24	81.2	61.8	33.7	39.7	55.9	59.2
Norway	2002	59.6	52.4	77.8	23.6	81.4	61.6	32.7	42.8	56.2	59.8
Norway	2003	59.7	52.9	77.6	24.1	81.6	62.3	32.1	43.8	56.4	62.2
Norway	2004	59.6	53.9	75.6	23.8	81	62.1	32.7	46.6	56.3	60.6
Iceland	2001	62.7	34.3	85.8	25.7	79.2	66.1	40.6	79.3	58.2	

Iceland	2002	63.2	36.8	84.4	26.3	79.5	66.2	38.9	79.5	59.6	
Iceland	2003	63.7	40.3	83.9	28	82.6	65.9	37.4	83	59.1	
Iceland	2004	64.5	38.2	84.6	31.1	85.4	65.7	35.2	83	59.5	
Switzerland	2000	43	40	68	12	60	57	26	54	42	
Switzerland	2002	43.3	42.6	70	13.1	62.8	57.9	25.3	51.8	42.9	42.1
Switzerland	2003	44.2	42.8	70.2	13.5	65.5	58.5	26	54.1	43.6	43.3
Switzerland	2004	44.9	44.5	70.2	13.9	66.9	59.2	26.4	53.1	44.5	47
Turkey	2000	41	34	49	24	60	49	44	40	42	
Turkey	2001	40.5	35.5	47.5	21.7	54.8	50.9	40.1	34.3	43.3	
Turkey	2002	41	35.6	48.5	21.7	56.4	52.3	39	33.5	44.1	
Turkey	2003	40.4	34.6	49.2	18.6	58.3	56.1	39.3	29	44.5	
Turkey	2004	41.4	37.2	52.9	18.9	61.6	43.6	40.3	31.4	43.2	
Other Central and Eastern Europe											
Albania	1998	64	28	83	31	63	73	64		45	
Albania	2001	61	33	78	24	72	70	64	56	49	
Albania	2004	62	39	82	26	74	71	74	21	60	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1996	64	51	89	37	60	74	61		62	
Croatia	2001	52.5	42.6	92	25	71	73.3	42.3	29	65.4	
Croatia	2002	52.6	44.4	91.4	25.8	70.6	72.2	43.8	28.6	65.2	
Croatia	2003	53.2	43.3	91.7	24.9	73.1	71.1	45.6	29	64.9	
Croatia	2004	53.7	44.8	92	24.9	71.9	70.7	45.6	31.3	63.6	
Serbia and Montenegro	2000	55	45	91	35	73.3	77	67	37	63	
The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	2000	56	42	88	28	71	70	67	46	62	
Commonwealth of Independent States											
Armenia	2000	55	34	73	30	49	63			46	56
Armenia	2001	55	38	80	27	51	66			45	53
Armenia	2002	54	41	74	27	41	55			47	54
Azerbaijan	1998	45	22	73		47	69		47	23	
Belarus	2001	57									

Georgia	2001	48.9	27	68	24.4	73.3	58	66.9		36.3	27.9
Georgia	2002	49.7	27.1	65.8	25.8	74.9	60.1	67		37.8	30.4
Georgia	2003	48.8	24.8	63.9	31.3	72	77.2	69.8	10.7	38.5	72.7
Kazakhstan	1998	55		71		67	52				
Republic of Moldova	2001	57									
Russian Federation	2001	55.8	51	79.5	22	78.3	78.7	51.8	84.3	66.7	61.7
Russian Federation	2002	56.7	51	78.9	22	78.6	79.9	52.5	83.8	67.4	63.2
Russian Federation	2003	55.8	51.1	78.1	24.9	77.8	78.3	52.5		65.8	61.5
Tajikistan	1995	32	32	33	32		36				

Notes:

'all fields' refers to agriculture, commerce, education, engineering, humanities and arts, law, natural science, mathematics, computer science, medicine and social and behavioural sciences; percentage in 'engineering, manufacturing and construction' refers to engineering only; percentage in sciences refers to natural sciences, mathematics and computer sciences; percentage in 'social sciences, business and law' refers to law only and percentage in medicine, health and welfare refers to medicine only.

Source: UNECE Statistical Division Database, Tertiary Students by Field of Study, Level of education, Sex, Measurement, Country and Year (<http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/database/STAT/30-GE/04-EducatAndcommunicat/04-EducatAndcommunicat.asp>, November, 10, 2007) and (<http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/Saveshow.asp>, November, 10, 2007)

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