"SISTERS ARE DOIN' IT FOR THEMSELVES": GRASSROOTS COMMUNICATION AND SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGE - A CASE STUDY OF A RURAL WOMEN'S SOCIETY IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

by

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Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

"sisters are doin' it for themselves": Grassroots Communication and Socioeconomic Change - A Case Study of a Rural Women's Society in West Bengal, India

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Abstract

"sisters are doin' it for themselves": Grassroots Communication and Socioeconomic Change - A Case Study of a Rural Women's Society in West Bengal, India

The Sunderban Khadi and Village Industrial Society (SKVIS), is a rural women's co-operatively run society in Canning, southeast of Calcutta in the state of West Bengal, India. It produces a variety of handicrafts including handspun handwoven cotton called *khadi*. Established in 1977 by a group of seven desperately poor rural women, by 1992 the society had grown to 950 members. Its primary purpose is to provide secure incomes for poor rural women. Begun with an initial capital of 800 rupees, its sales in the fiscal year 1991-92 were Rs.3,963,000 (Cdn.$180,200). The society has also reached out to poor women in neighbouring villages to help them organise along similar lines.

The thesis examines this grassroots initiative to achieve self-reliance focussing on the communication of knowledge and skills and processes of empowerment and their contribution to the success and sustainability of the society. It traces the history of the organisation, its relationship with the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) that funds its programmes, and analyses processes of grassroots communication in decision making within the organisation and in its training programmes. It also looks at the impact of the society on the lives of its artisan members, particularly the double burden of women labouring inside and outside their homes, and the socioeconomic change related to the efforts of the society in order to situate these efforts within the different perspectives in the theoretical literature on the participation of women in development processes.

The case study is based on three months of field research at SKVIS in the spring of 1993 involving participant observation, interviews and group discussions conducted

in Bengali, collection and analysis of primary materials, interviews with KVIC officials in Calcutta and Bombay, as well as background reading in the literature on gender and development, Indian and Bengali history, and Gandhian philosophy.

Figure 0.1 *Prarthona* or morning assembly at SKVIS

now there was a time
when they used to say
that behind every great man
there had to be a great woman

well
these times have changed and know that its no longer true
so we're coming out of the kitchen
coz there's something we forgot to say to you
sisters are doin' it for themselves
standing on their own two feet

sisters are doin' it for themselves
performed by Aretha Franklin and Annie Lennox
lyrics by Annie Lennox and David A. Stewart, 1985

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I would like to thank my Senior Supervisor, Dr. Pat Howard, for her academic guidance through my Masters programme, for her excellent feedback on my thesis, for her understanding and support of how I chose to shape it, and for her support beyond the call of duty. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the department for contributing to my academic and non-academic education and for informing my politics. As well, I thank Lucie Menkveld for her help in matters big and small through my many years in the department and through my innumerable crises. My thanks to Neena Shahani for her generous and friendly assistance as Graduate Secretary. Many thanks to "mesho," Mr. Debabrata Bhattacharya, for arranging my research at SKVIS, and to Mr. N. Ghosh for his assistance in this matter. I owe a debt of gratitude to "Kalyan-da," Mr. Prakriti Kumar Ray, for openly and honestly sharing his life's work with me and in helping me understand SKVIS, and to the "didis" and artisans at SKVIS for allowing me to research their society, for sharing their lives with me and helping me learn so much in the process. I am grateful to Mr. Kamal Taori and to Mr. G.K. Ghosh of the Khadi Commission for their frank discussions with me regarding the Commission. Many thanks to Barbara McIntosh for helping me get a handle on my "crazy-making" and to Betty Petricia for all her help and advice to an international student over the years. Thanks to my colleague Jyothi Gaddam for her encouragement in the final phase of my labours and for showing me it can be done. To Laura Atkinson, my "political buddy," and to Caroline Newton, my colleague and fellow party animal, thanks for your support, encouragement and good counsel over the years especially with my thesis. To my cousin Lucy Shun, thanks for all the times you were there for me when I needed you. To "mashi," Mrs. Anjali Bhattacharya, thanks for caring, and to Tani Bhattacharya, my partner in crime since grade ten, thanks for

everything. And last but not least to my father, Po Hing Liu, a thank you with love for a lifetime of love and support and the encouragement to do my own thing.

This thesis is dedicated to the founding members of SKVIS
who have struggled so hard and so well for so long
and continue to do so.
And to the memory of my mother
May Liu.

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Preface

My journey to this point

> ...knowing in the human studies is always emotional and moral as well as intellectual. (Rabinow, 1977)

The process of writing my thesis has been a long and arduous journey filled with many highs and lows. In moments of depression I frequently considered abandoning my thesis and moving on to other things. But the many 'highs' that I have experienced kept me going. Curiously, this journey seems to have brought me full circle. I came all the way to Canada from India to study 'development' and now find myself turning to the wisdom of a great Indian philosopher, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and to a generation of scholars influenced by him. I feel that some of this journey needs to be documented in order to situate my thesis within a context for you the reader.

What came before

My earliest interest in development and aid arose at the missionary school I attended in India. At six every morning the poor and hungry would line up at the gate of my school for their one decent meal of the day, funded by donations from Christians in North America. Worthy though this task was, and desperately needed, it always struck me as insufficient. I felt that different measures were needed, something long term, something that helped these people feed themselves. With time I realised that poverty and hunger was a chronic problem faced by many countries around the world. I wanted to know why and what could be done.

Just prior to my leaving for Canada, my best friend's father, Debabrata Bhattacharya, then Director of the West Bengal Directorate of Sericulture and

personally interested in development programs for women, told me about an unusual initiative being started up by a group of women some distance from Calcutta. It was unusual because these women were unmarried Bengali women in their thirties in a culture where marriage is seen as an important and necessary step for both men and women. I sensed a deep commitment on their part to helping the rural poor, and I resolved to research this group for my masters thesis.

My academic journey at SFU has been an experience of continually confronting new knowledge and ways of seeing things and being challenged to expand my world view. Along the way many illusions were shattered, and my naive faith in the inherent goodness of large organisations and superstructures was challenged. The more I read, the more I realised that patriarchy, racism and the abuse of power were pervasive in world systems. I reached a point where my views of nationhood, international organisations, alliances and agreements approached an unhealthy paranoia, no more useful than my earlier ignorance and naivete. But I persevered and have been, and continue to be, educated and re-educated by colleagues and professors in my department.

My first introduction to development studies began as an undergraduate with reading the Bruntland Commission's report of environmental, economic and cultural devastation around the world and of widespread poverty, hunger and disease in many Third World countries of the South, and the contributions of the countries of the North to these problems. The buzzword that it gave the world, 'sustainable development,' seemed to me a wonderful route to take as did its exhortation to think globally and act locally. It also emphasized the need to reorient technology, specifically in developing countries, towards sustainable development. Development, the U.N. and international aid were still benevolent in my eyes until I started reading more critical literature about the complicity of all three in exacerbating the problems of Third World countries.

The paradigm shift came in my second year of graduate school during a course called "Knowledge Systems, Technologies, and Development as Political Practice" with Dr. Pat Howard.[1] In this course I was introduced to radical scholars from India who are critical of development itself for its ethnocentric, Western bias and its contributions to gender, class, race, caste, and other oppression.[2] As well, they analyse "modern science" and technology and criticise its reductionist bias and contribution to the violence of industrialisation. Their research on grassroots movements in India provides an alternative to paternalistic models of development that impose answers from without as opposed to looking for solutions from within. The struggle of people at the local level to retain autonomy and control over their lives and their immediate environment appealed to my humanitarian and independent Aquarian spirit. During this time I read an article by Tariq Banuri, "Modernization and its Discontents: A Cultural Perspective on the Theories of Development," that summed up for me the perspective I had been struggling for through all these years at university in order to research the women's group Mr. Bhattacharya had told me about. Banuri quotes Gilles Deleuz's comments on the contribution of Michel Foucault to social theory - "You have taught us something absolutely fundamental: The indignity of speaking on someone else's behalf" (Banuri 1990, 96).[3] Banuri applies this lesson to the debate about modern development. He says,

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[1] This course was structured by Dr. Howard to provide a space for all participants to share and exchange readings of use to others and provided me with a number of articles that proved essential to my thesis.

[2] I would like to thank my colleague Jyothi Gaddam for introducing me to this area of study.

[3] I would like to thank my colleague Deblekha Guin for introducing me to Foucault and, especially, for making his work accessible to me.

> ... as communities become aware of oppression, whether it stems from ignorance, poverty, or other natural causes, or from injustice and inequity, they will define their own priorities and undertake social and political action to articulate and pursue them. On occasion, this may entail a prior emphasis on such conventional objectives as economic growth, consumption, industrialization, equity, or basic needs. On other occasions, other goals may assume greater importance, such as political participation, social harmony, ecological conservation, or the maintenance of social and cultural values. It is not for the outside expert to insist that the goals which she or he thinks are worth pursuing are the ones which should be pursued by all societies. (Banuri 1990, 96)

This perspective matched the approach that I wanted to take with my thesis in respecting the choices that these women had made to pull themselves and others out of poverty and the brink of starvation. Scholars propose numerous models to follow in order to change the world, but theories don't feed the hungry.

Prior to my leaving for the field I had undertaken a semester of directed readings on field research methods. I was concerned with conducting my research in an ethical manner while collecting appropriate and sufficient information.[4] I was also, at the time, struggling with my desire to champion the women and their chosen path to socioeconomic change while attempting an 'academic' treatment. As Kathryn J. Fox phrases it, I was interested in "extending research toward change." (1991, 249) Despite my awareness of the illusions associated with the goal of unbiased and disinterested research, I still wrestled with it. Then I came upon an article by Janet Finch (1984), "'It's great to have someone to talk to': the ethics and politics of interviewing women." In it she addresses the issue of political bias in feminist research, as well as the exploitative potential in the relationship of trust that is developed between interviewer and interviewee. She convincingly argues that,

> (a) feminist sociologist of course will be 'on the side' of the women she studies. This stance is entirely consistent with major traditions in sociological research, ... the sociologist sides with the underdog (sic)." (85) "Siding with the people one researches inevitably means an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment to promoting their

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[4] I would like to thank Dr. Celia Haig-Brown for introducing me to the literature on reflexivity in cross-cultural research.

interests. How else can one justify having taken from them the very private information which many have given so readily." (86)

I was elated to read that it was methodologically acceptable, even desirable, to conduct ethnographic research of this kind. As S. Reinharz phrases it, "since interest-free knowledge is logically impossible, we should feel free to substitute explicit ones for implicit ones." (Reinharz 1985, 17, as cited in Lather 1986, 63) But while I openly support and record the achievements of SKVIS, I have attempted an honest analysis of those areas that could be improved.[5]

As well she addresses the ethics of women researching women and the "easily established trust" that "makes women especially vulnerable as subjects of research." (81) Her suggestion, "the only morally defensible way for a feminist to conduct research with women is through a non-hierarchical relationship in which she is prepared to invest some of her own identity," informed my time in the field. Just as I would ask the women personal questions about their lives - past, present and future - I resolved to answer these same questions about myself and to try to foster a relationship in which they would feel free to question me in return. "But being sensitive to power inequality doesn't remove it." (Burawoy 1991, 5) I struggled with this dilemma, especially during the writing of my thesis, as discussed later.

So prepared, I went to the Sunderban Khadi and Village Industrial Society (SKVIS), a rural women's society in Canning, a small town on the banks of the river

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[5] While scholars accept that 'objectivity' is impossible, they stress the importance of the trustworthiness of data. In attempting to make my data 'credible,' I interviewed a number of different sources, the committee members, the artisans, various groups of trainees, Mr. Ray, government officials, and representatives of non-government organisations, in order to obtain various perspectives on the work of SKVIS and to cross-check all information as much as possible. See Lather (1986) for a discussion of conducting "openly ideological research" and the measures that can be taken to "guard against researcher biases distorting the logic of evidence." I am grateful to my colleague Caroline Newton for bringing my attention to this work.

Matla, about sixty kilometers south of Calcutta in the state of West Bengal, India. SKVIS is situated more than half a kilometer outside town.

The adventures of "Liu-di"[6]

> Field work is dialectic between reflection and immediacy.
>
> In the dialectic between the poles of observation and participation, participation changes the anthropologist and leads him/her to new observation, whereupon new observation changes how s/he participates. But this dialectical spiral is governed in its motion by the starting point, which is observation. (Rabinow, 1977)

I first visited SKVIS in the fall of 1991 with Tani Bhattacharya, whose father had told me about the existence of this society. We were both curious about this society we had heard so much about. As well my Bengali was a little rusty after five years of living in Canada, and we decided that she could interpret for me if necessary. We were given a tour of the facilities and spent an afternoon talking with a few of the executive committee members to learn more about the organisation. We spoke in Bengali, and I managed to follow the conversation except for some technical terms. The society was larger than I had expected and was housed in a two-storied brick building. I had expected mud huts. Its success was obvious. I came away thrilled that I had located a successful women's organisation, when so few are documented in the literature, and resolved to research this group for my masters thesis if at all possible.

After completing the coursework necessary for my degree, I wrote to the SKVIS executive committee asking permission to study their society. I didn't hear from them for months and in desperation asked Mr. Bhattacharya to intercede on my behalf. What if they said "no"? It seemed to me that my entire degree depended on researching

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[6] The committee members found it easier to pronounce my last name and called me "Liu." Other women at SKVIS adopted this practice. Those who were younger than me called me "Liu-di."

SKVIS and no other group. Mr. Bhattacharya, through a colleague acquainted with the women at SKVIS, Mr. N. Ghosh, arranged for my entry. I realised that my letter or status had no relevance, it was personal contacts that were important. I brushed up on my Bengali and returned to India in late January, 1993.

I was interviewed by Mr. Prakriti Kumar Ray and the executive committee members after I arrived at SKVIS. Mr. Ray is a freelance consultant in rural development, specialising in women's income-generating projects, and was critical in helping the founding members of SKVIS establish this society. He continues to advise SKVIS and is held in deep respect and regard by all the women at SKVIS. The interview was held mostly in Bengali with some English. Mr. Ray is fluent in both languages, whereas the committee members speak only a few words of English, except for the Secretary, Anima Mondal. Mr. Ray translated the more difficult terms. I explained my thesis, what it was about and the information I was interested in. I explained my research methodology and outlined my research schedule. As well, I mentioned that I would be examined on my thesis and research before getting a Master's degree. Then I invited questions. I answered a number of personal questions, and then Sushama Mistri, the treasurer, asked me, "What are you getting out of this? How will you benefit from learning all this?" Her question reflects Jurgen Habermas's wisdom that "no knowledge is divorced from human interest." She was shushed by the other women for asking this question, but I insisted on answering, saying that this was a very valid question. I wanted to conduct my research ethically, and this included being up front with how this research could benefit me. My reply was that I would then be able to write a good thesis, get a good grade for it and thereafter be able to get a good job. They found this perfectly acceptable. They encouraged me to interview whomever I wanted and assured me of their full cooperation. I said that I would provide them with a copy of my finished thesis. After negotiating my presence,

including payment for my board and meals, I was given permission to live on site in the guest bedroom.

I was formally presented to the membership of SKVIS by the Secretary of SKVIS, Anima Mondal, at a general meeting that was called to deal with internal matters soon after my arrival. She informed them of my extended stay and the purpose of my visit, that I was there to research the society and write a thesis, and that I would be interviewing some of them and observing them at work.

My presence at SKVIS generated some excitement among the women. From my first day at SKVIS I had joined them at their morning assemblies, at *prarthona*.[7] After their initial surprise, my participation stopped being a topic of discussion among them. I enjoyed those moments of our singing *Rabindrosangeets* together while the sun beat down on us.[8] I also hoped to demonstrate my acceptance of and interest in participating in their way of life and that I did not consider myself above them in any way.[9] After the general meeting was over, they wanted to know what a 'thesis' was and how far away was this place called Canada. I did not know the Bengali equivalent of 'thesis' and said it was a book of sorts that was required for my studies and that Canada was half way across the world north of the United States. They were excited that I wanted to write a "book" on them and pleased that I would be with them for a while. They had

---

[7] *Prarthona* means "prayer" in Bengali. Every woman on site is expected to attend. I was a "guest" and was not required to, but I asked the committee members if I could participate and they enthusiastically said yes.

[8] Named after Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate in literature in 1913, these are songs that he wrote. An immensely creative man and prolific in his work, Tagore has left Bengal with a wealth of music that pervades cultural life. He has, possibly, composed a *Rabindrosangeet* for every conceivable occasion.

[9] This was not artificial on my part as the Bhattacharya residence has been my second home for more than fifteen years.

had numerous visitors from Italy, Canada, Britain, Germany and other places, who stayed for a few hours, but none of them spoke Bengali. So while a number of them had been interviewed in the past and had answered questions posed by their visitors, they had not had the chance to ask any questions in return. My ability to speak Bengali thrilled them, and my extended stay and free intermingling with them provided them with the opportunity to ask me innumerable questions, all of them personal. A number of them told me that they were very happy that I was visiting and that they liked having this opportunity to converse with a visitor. The fact that I had been born and raised in Calcutta, not very far from Canning, seemed less important. Perhaps the fact that I am Chinese influenced how they viewed me. They identified me with Canada and were surprised that I had travelled so far in order to study their society.

No amount of reading about how to do field research actually prepares you for the real thing. The increasing heat, trains breaking down, sickness on one occasion, unexpected religious holidays that people in rural Bengal celebrate, the claustrophobia of constantly being surrounded by people, and the feeling of intellectual isolation were all challenges. I had to constantly adapt and change my plans and, sometimes, just go with the flow to see what information came my way. As well, I tried very hard not to impose my feminist beliefs or advice on those I talked to. I would often get upset with what some of the women were being put through by male relatives and frustrated that I could do very little. But, I realised that it was they who would have to live with the consequences of their actions, so I would merely sympathize with them and suggest that perhaps the society could help out.

I entered the field with the intention of allowing it to speak to me. I phrased my questions about the history of SKVIS and its present organisation rather broadly so that my informants could decide what was important to tell and so inform me. Through this I discovered that their training programme teaching rural women a number of different production skills was fairly large and an area of future focus and growth. As a student

of communication, I was interested in understanding the centrality of communication to the society's functioning. In fact, communication processes turned out to be a vital part of SKVIS's organisation and became the focus of my research.

My field trip lasted from early February until mid April. During that time I shuttled between SKVIS and Calcutta, often spending long stretches of time at each place. Some of my trips to Calcutta were for research purposes and some a break from the field to visit friends and family.

I soon settled into a pattern as my relationship with the committee members became more familiar. I addressed them as "didi" which means older sister in Bengali and is the customary form of address for an older female acquaintance signifying respect. So, for example, I addressed Anima Mondal, the secretary, as "Anima-di', and Sushama Mistri, the treasurer, as "Sushama-di." My familiarity with Bengali customs and habits broke the ice and removed the need for formality between us, and they relaxed around me. I also addressed Mr. Ray as "Kalyan-da", "dada" meaning older brother.[10]

Over the first couple of days, Anima Mondal and Sushama Mistri, who are not deskbound and whose duties require them to keep on the move, showed me around and explained how the society worked. But then they went back to their busy schedules, and I had a free run of the place. I spent most of my time in participant observation, hanging around the women in the different departments observing and listening, and answering their questions about myself. I suspect many felt that I was doing no work and merely lazing around, when, in actuality, I was busy assimilating what was going on around me, assessing the dynamics, keeping an eye out for anything out of the

[10] "Kalyan" is his nick-name. This custom of providing babies with a *dak-naam* is common practice among the Bengalis and is used by family and intimates. Often babies get named after sweetmeats. As adults these names seem incongruous but continue to be used. See Appendix A for an summary of my interviews with Mr. Ray.

ordinary, and looking for gaps in the information that I was constantly collecting in order to ask appropriate questions. I moved from department to department, housed in separate rooms, learning about the production processes - the spinning and weaving of muslin, the making of batik scarves, the dyeing process, the reeling of silk from cocoons, and block printing. The women were eager to teach me and this helped build rapport between us. I tried my hand at batik and reeling silk, but I limited my participation so as not to interfere with the women's productivity, which had a direct impact on their wages. After a day or two of having me hang around all the time, moving from department to department, they got used to my presence. Sometimes we would chat during their lunch and tea breaks as well in groups of various sizes. Some were informal chats, while others were semi-structured interviews or group discussions. Bengalis are great tea drinkers, after all some of the best tea in the world grows in northern Bengal in the district of Darjeeling. SKVIS supplies each department with tea leaves, milk and sugar, and the women of each department brew their own tea at about three in the afternoon. I happened to drop by some departments at tea time and in accepting their hospitality by drinking a cup of *cha* with them, I was accepted even more by the women. The information I collected through this entire process helped me understand the dynamics between the women and between them and the committee members.

In the evenings, when most women had returned home, I would make notes of each day's observations and a list of questions to follow up on. During my field trip, there were two groups of trainees in residence, and I had the opportunity to interview them as well. I lived on site and ate the meals that were prepared for those in residence. A matron had been appointed as chaperone and supervised the cooking. I guess she chaperoned me too. They were tickled to find out that I ate with my fingers just as they did and that I loved fish curry. This news spread to the rest of the women

and their perception of me as a foreigner decreased. Their previous visitors from abroad had all used forks, knives and spoons.

Some evenings, a few of the younger members, with their household chores taken care of, would show me around town. Sometimes I would accompany my friend, Shikha Mistri, as she shopped for groceries. A trainee at SKVIS with whom I developed a close friendship and with whom I had an effortless rapport, she often spoke for me when I could not express myself adequately, instinctively knowing what I was trying to say. Often I would allow her to translate for me when I interviewed trainees in the evenings as most of them were a little shy, having ventured away from their villages for the first time, and her presence helped. The youngest sister of Sushama Mistri and wise beyond her sixteen years, she would fill in the gaps in my understanding of facts and events at SKVIS and explain what I could not understand. I would frequently ask her to accompany me wherever I went as her presence made my research so much easier. We continue to correspond.

In late February, Canning had its seasonal *haat*, or market fair, and a group of us attended. These are festive occasions for towns and villages with plenty to see, buy and eat. SKVIS had a stall demonstrating the spinning and weaving of muslin as well as a display of a range of its products for sale. We bumped into a number of SKVIS's members at the *haat* with their families, all dressed up in their finery. This provided me with an occasion to observe SKVIS's public relations in the community and to mingle with SKVIS trainees and artisans away from the work environment.

Many women invited me to their homes eager to introduce me to their families, but I had time to visit just five homes and conduct group interviews. Bengalis are very hospitable people, and I was sorry I could not accept all the invitations and honour them this way, but there were nearly a hundred women on site every day, more when the second group of trainees arrived, and just as it was impossible to interview everyone, it was not possible for me to accept every invitation I received.

The festival *dol*, a celebration of the arrival of spring, was in early March. Bengal has an agrarian economy, and as a result *dol* has great significance. Usually this festival is celebrated with family, but every year the women who live in and near Canning celebrate it together at SKVIS. This provided me with an opportunity to observe the women relaxing together, their interaction with each other, and their bonds of friendship.

Upon reflection, I realise that I suffered from the 'problem of obviousness' (Gamson 1991, 55). The longer I lived among the women at SKVIS, the more I realised that I could not measure the social changes in their lives by my lifestyle. I needed to consider the strides they had made within the context of Bengali society. It had been a struggle to take note of how much further they needed to go in emancipating themselves and I soon turned to appreciating how far they had travelled. I had been forcing myself to study the women as though I was a stranger to Bengali society but I could not maintain this perspective. Having lived in Calcutta for most of my life and being familiar with the Bengali culture I soon slipped back into that culture and stopped taking field notes of daily events or keeping a detailed diary. I allowed the impressions that were building up day after day to inform me about the dynamics between the women. I only took detailed notes during their group meetings. As well, I decided to use my photographs and slides as field notes to capture certain moments, sometimes to take the place of field notes and sometimes to supplement them. When writing my thesis, I would often view them to bring back the mood and details of events. This worked fairly well, but I know that some details have not been recorded on my slides and have slipped away. If I were documenting interpersonal relationships, this might affect the validity of my research. But since my thesis looks at the larger picture, perhaps those details are less important. I discovered the extent to which the 'problem of obviousness' had affected me when I reached the final stages of writing my thesis and began analyzing SKVIS in order to situate it in theory. Distance from the field, re-

reading the theoretical literature, and being encouraged by my senior supervisor helped me deal with this problem as discussed later.

Most women agreed to be interviewed. One woman was reluctant as this would take time away from her work. As I went about interviewing women, others would ask me, "Aren't you going to interview me?" And as I took photographs of the women and the site, they were always eager to be photographed.[11]

Having read Finch's article, I was determined to be as open with the women as possible, but it proved exhausting. Most of the women at SKVIS were curious about me and had innumerable questions for me. After a while in the field, I tired of answering the same questions repeatedly. When things got too overwhelming, I would run back to the haven of the Bhattacharya home in the quiet surroundings of the Salt Lake area where, just like in Vancouver, houses are lined up in rows, roads are wide, and the population density is sparce.[12] I think I was starting to miss Vancouver. There I would unwind, plan the next phase of my research and feast on *mashi*'s cooking that satisfies like no one else's.[13] Refreshed and determined to continue as an ethical researcher, I would enter the field again.

I had a list of government officials from different ministries and departments in Calcutta to interview, three-quarters of whom I eventually managed to see. I had forgotten what the Calcutta bureaucratic culture was like. People were on leave because

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[11] Many wanted individual photographs which I could not accomodate due to the limited rolls of slides I had with me. I explained this, but after I returned to Vancouver, I had prints made of some of my better slides and mailed them to SKVIS for the women I had interviewed.

[12] Salt Lakes is an area of planned housing projects just outside Calcutta on the way to the airport.

[13] "Mashi" means maternal aunt in Bengali and is how I address Mrs. Bhattacharya, my best friend's mother.

their children were having exams or because they were having special religious ceremonies at home, were never there when they said they would be or did not have the information they were supposed to and would pass me on to another department. Finally, one government official's honesty made me realise the futility of my attempts. He described to me how statistics were compiled in his department - "We just put some numbers together and send it off to head office." I decided to give up chasing after numbers.

Another problem I faced in the field was loneliness. Away from my professors and colleagues, I had no one to bounce ideas off, to discuss my research and my methodology with, to discuss the usefulness of the data I was collecting and the obvious questions that I was not asking. This last problem came back to haunt me while writing my thesis and I realised the holes in the information I had collected. Sometimes I felt awkward asking certain questions, as though I was prying or suspicious, and never verbalised my queries. But in the field, I struggled to do qualitative research while desire for quantitative results lurked in the deepest recesses of my unconscious and kept pulling me in that direction. I wasted enormous amounts of time chasing statistics through the corridors of government offices and, at SKVIS, worrying if I had interviewed enough women to make my research valid or if I had asked them for enough demographic information.

In the second week of February, a delegation arrived from England, representatives of Traidcraft, an organisation that buys SKVIS scarves and garments. They stayed overnight and I translated for the women at SKVIS, happy to be of some use. The next day, I accompanied them on a ferry ride to SKVIS's subcentre at Basanti on the other side of the Matla river. Translating for them I learned from the questions they asked and the answers. I had never thought of asking some of their questions. I remember that I started worrying then about the questions that I was not asking but not knowing what those might be. There is still much to be explored. I intend returning to

SKVIS in the near future to pick up where I left off. Or, perhaps, someone else will do so before me.

Post-field depression

I returned from my field trip inspired by my experiences and overjoyed that I could paint a glowing and positive picture of what women can collectively achieve against such harsh odds. I think all researchers face some trepidation before entering the field about the sort of information they may collect. I had been concerned that the group might have gone downhill since my first visit. It turned out that they had progressed much further than I had expected.

However, once back on Canadian soil, halfway across the world from SKVIS, my enthusiasm became increasingly tinged with a strange inertia, and I became reluctant to put my experiences on paper. My brief introduction to Foucault and to the politics of speaking on behalf of others became an issue that I needed to resolve. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) phrases it, "Can the subaltern speak?" I had believed I knew where I was going with my thesis and who I was doing it for. But now, faced with the moment of truth, I was no longer sure. Did I have a right to describe the history of SKVIS, to discuss the experiences of the women who had so willingly and openly shared their past, their hopes, their fears, and their pain with me? In what way was I benefitting from their experiences? Was I exploiting them? The question that Sushama Mistri asked me - "What are you getting out of this?" - haunted me. And I was concerned I might "show (sic) off my subjects as a zoo keeper would, exploiting them for my own professional gain" in my writing. (Fox 1991, 248) I needed time to think about all of this now that I was removed from the field. These questions engendered an unexpected paralysis. After the "high" I had experienced in the field, my doubts were most unwelcomed. I pushed my thesis onto the back burner and increased my activism

in promoting alternative trade, volunteering with Oxfam-Canada on Bridgehead-related events. I resolved that words did not put food on the plates of the poor while sales of their handiwork did. Having spent so much time in the field and visited a number of women's homes, I knew that my volunteering had a direct impact on their lives and artisans like them. I even organised two Bridgehead bazaars at SFU, and the sales that were generated provided me with enormous satisfaction. According to the 1992 Bridgehead Annual Report, for every $1,000 worth of sales in Canada an artisan in the Third World is employed for a year. I saw my efforts as a tangible way of helping SKVIS and groups like them. I believed that this was the help they really needed not a bound thesis that only a few of them could read.

But another question that I was repeatedly asked by Anima Mondal was, "What can we improve? Tell us what is wrong in our society." My answer was always, "This group is great. You are doing incredible work here. I am here to learn from you; I am just a student."

As the deadline for me to write my thesis and graduate approached, I was forced to deal with the larger doubts surrounding my thesis. I had always intended to focus on the communication processes within the society and to analyze it for it's contributions to socioeconomic change and to the group's success. My case-study of this particular group was to determine what lessons could be learned from this group and their experiences. I refocussed my attention on these aspects of the society hoping to bring out the unique achievements behind it's success.

But in order to try and answer Anima Mondal's question, I had to return to the theoretical literature on women and development and integrate it into my thesis. I was uncomfortable with this as I felt it compromised my intentions, informed by Foucault, of studying SKVIS respectful of their chosen path. Too many theorists prescribe the road others should follow. Too often their theory describes the perfect situation unmindful of its operationalisation in the daily lives of poor women in the Third

World. As well the theoretical frameworks on the 'development' of women are Western constructs whose relevance to Third World cultures I question. As a result of its "ethnocentric" bias, many Third World activists feel that to take "feminism to a woman who has no water, no food and no home is to talk nonsense" (Bunch 1980, 27, as cited in Moser 1989, 1811). In attempting to situate SKVIS's attempts at socioeconomic change within this literature, would I be judging SKVIS's approach? After spending so much time in the field and forming a bond with the women and a commitment to the work of SKVIS, I did not want to find fault with it. Success stories of women's groups are rare, and I wanted to record the positive only. Was it a problem of obviousness in not understanding my reluctance to write my thesis or a refusal to apply "ethnocentric" and "imperialistic" theory? But academics demand theory. If I wanted to graduate I would have to analyse SKVIS from a theoretical perspective. I recalled the last general meeting I attended. It was generally known that I would be leaving soon, and I had a slide presentation of those rolls of film that were developed. Anima Mondal asked me again for my impressions of their society and I phrased my reluctant reply as an observation, that I had noticed a difference in the levels of consciousness among the women about the society's commitment to the social aspects of socioeconomic change. I returned to analyze this observation as I wrestled with the final chapters of my thesis.

Re-reading the theory on women in the development process and receiving incisive feedback from my senior supervisor helped me in my analysis. As well, I hoped that in analyzing the dynamics within SKVIS I was not betraying them but sharing information that they had few opportunities to access, perhaps, even giving them something in return for their generosity in giving me so much of their time. I owe them and my of academic community a theoretical analysis. I can only present them with my work. They have the power to decide its usefulness to them or to reject it. Theirs is a group that is seriously committed to addressing the issue of women's

poverty and is constantly changing, evolving and trying to improve itself as they see appropriate. From my knowledge of their wisdom and understanding, I feel sure that they will respect my struggle and efforts, irrespective of the value of my thesis to them, and tell me where they think I have misunderstood. They are, after all, the ones who are constructing this reality. I have only attempted to reconstruct for them, for myself, and for others who read these pages what they have achieved and the obstacles they face.

As for writing about the experiences of the women at SKVIS, I remembered my privileged position in being able to acquire an education while so many at the society could only dream of one. I could not waste this precious opportunity that I was taking for granted. I could not walk away from my studies. How would I explain my choice to the women of SKVIS? How could I not tell their stories when they had been so eager to be in my "book" and knew and accepted my intentions in writing a thesis on their experiences. Each of their stories was a tale of triumph, of battling and surmounting enormous odds. They had willingly and eagerly shared the stories of their lives with me and had done so with pride in their achievements. I felt that I needed to record their experiences for others to learn from. So many had been disappointed when I did not interview them because I could not possibly interview all one hundred or so women. I hope that my thesis does them justice and that I have used my position of power over the telling of their stories respectfully and in an ethical manner.

Introduction

> Women make up one-half of the world's population. They supply two-thirds of the labor-time of humanity, but receive only one-tenth of the total income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's goods. (Bisilliat & Fieloux 1987, 9)

These disturbing figures capture the plight of women as a group in the world today. The term 'feminization of poverty' was coined in the seventies to describe the worsening economic position of female-headed households within the United States (Dwyer and Bruce 1988), but this term was soon found to aptly describe the situation of women around the world as a group. Despite the increasing wealth of nations, greater awareness of social issues, and the enormous progress being made in the areas of science and technology, poverty persists and women and children suffer disproportionately. In many Third World countries, poverty is on the rise. Though some women have benefitted from technological and social change, most are caught in a downward spiral of poverty, victims of a "structural violence" (Bisilliat & Fieloux 1987, 81) emerging from the most destructive and inhumane expressions of patriarchy within social institutions and social relations.

All over the world, especially in the Third World, women face disease, malnutrition, illiteracy and high mortality rates. Scholars have documented increasing evidence of the commonality of their situation. Women are universally responsible for their children, given no recognition for the work they perform at home, exploited for their labour - poor working conditions and unfair renumeration - whether in fields or in factories, and have less access to resources and opportunities than men. They experience systematic discrimination on the basis of gender. The poorer the women the more hours they work to feed themselves and their families. Nearly one-third of all households are headed by women, rising to nearly one-half in some African countries. Eighty percent of the female population live in rural areas. Many are landless,

illiterate, unemployed or underemployed. The physical violence and abuse that women must face has also been documented. (Bisilliat & Fieloux 1987, Buvinic & Yudelman 1989, Buvinic, Lycette & McGreevey 1983, Mitter 1986, Momsen 1991, Sen & Grown 1987).

As these facts emerged over the U.N. Decade for Women (1975-84), governments and non-governmental agencies took measures to alleviate women's poverty and their worsening situation around the world, measures to include women in the development process. Since then, approaches to the 'development' of women have evolved over time with scholars, advocates and practitioners contributing to its emergence as a discourse and a practice.[1] The earliest approach was called 'women in development' (WID) and is still the dominant approach among governments and aid agencies. But after a decade of WID, the status of women as a group was found to have deteriorated. Critics have challenged the efficacy of the WID approach offering alternative approaches supported by feminist theory. More recently, radical scholars from Asia and Latin America have been challenging the idea of development itself.

The history and legacy of development

The term women in development (WID) was first used by the Women's Committee of the Washington, D.C. chapter of the Society for International Development and was soon picked up by American liberal feminists and the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, groups that were fighting for women's rights in the U.S., advocating the inclusion of women in development programs and for their

[1] For a discussion of the origin and history of the term 'development' see Marglin (1991) and Rahnema (1986). For an analysis of the emergence of 'development' as a hegemonic ideology/discourse see Escobar (1984). For an economic history of development theory see Blomstrom & Hettne (1985).

better integration into national economies. (Tinker 1990, Rathgeber 1990) With the discovery of Ester Boserup's book, Woman's Role in Economic Development, American feminists and advocates for women's economic programmes derived enormous support for their cause, and the push to address the inequality in women's situation intensified. The first comprehensive look at women's role in the development process, Boserup's research showed the extent to which women's work was being ignored and undervalued by development planners and the negative impacts on women of colonialism and capitalist penetration into subsistence economies. Boserup's call for change was framed within the ideology of efficiency, arguing that the integration of women into national economies would aid in the development of the entire economy. WID advocates argued that ignoring women would slow down the process of development in any country. Phrased in this way, the inclusion of women in development planning came to be viewed as acceptable and even desirable. (Bandarage 1984, Rathgeber 1990, Tinker 1990)

Pressure increased from women within and without the U.N system for a U.N. Women's Conference to put women's issues on centre stage. When in 1972 the U.N. General Assembly declared 1975 as International Women's Year, they did not guarantee a conference. Organised pressure from women and women's groups brought about the 1975 World Conference in Mexico City, where the themes were declared to be equality, development and peace. Equality was seen primarily as a feminist issue coming from Western industrialized countries; peace was included at the request of the Eastern socialist block; and development was perceived as the key to improving women's lives in the Third World countries of the South. (Bunch & Carrillo 1990) Development thus became a part of the official U.N. agenda. The issues raised at this conference and repeated at the Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen in 1980 and the Nairobi Conference in 1985 ensured that 'women in development' became firmly entrenched in the agendas of governments, non-governmental organisations, and U.N.

agencies around the world concerned with the status of women. These international conferences were extremely important for they legitimized these issues, forcing governments to address them. The documentation and data that each member government compiled for these conferences on the status of women's health, education, and employment clearly indicated the extent of the problem. As well, it provided academics and others with the data needed to study particular issues relating to women, their status and their economic, political and social participation around the world, adding to a growing body of literature. (Tinker 1990)

But more than these international conferences attended by official government delegates presenting their government's position on women's issues, it was the non-governmental meetings that occured simultaneously along with these conferences that were critical in providing a space for women to speak freely and be heard. Thousands of women from all over the world used this opportunity to meet, share their concerns, exchange ideas and strategies, network and support each other's work. Attendees in Mexico city numbered 6,000 and increased to 14,000 in Nairobi. The exposure that women's issues received was critical to a growing awareness among women of the widespread inequality between men and women and gave rise to mass movements for change. (Rathgeber 1990, Tinker 1990)

During the UN Decade for Women, the term 'women in development' came to mean the inclusion of women in economic development. Liberal feminism, which informs this approach, identifies the cause of women's oppression as their individual or group lack of opportunity and education. Thus the solutions coming from within this framework were aimed at ensuring them a fair share in the development process through equality, education, and employment.

This approach was also grounded in the modernisation paradigm reflecting the belief that growth and development is a "benevolent process" (Sen and Grown 1987, 15), that modernisation through industrialisation would improve the standard of living

in developing countries. Proponents assume that through education, a well-trained core of workers and managers would emerge who would contribute to the modernisation and industrialisation of predominantly agrarian societies. The benefits of modernisation would then "trickle down" through the economy to provide a better standard of living, employment, education, and health care for all. (Bandarage 1984, Rathgeber 1990)

The common WID approach to providing women with employment has been income-generating projects for women, women-only projects and microenterprises in order to increase women's access to employment, the marketplace, and to productive resources. As well, most development agencies focus on rural development given the greater poverty of rural women relative to their urban counterparts. (Buvinic 1986, Moser 1989, Rathgeber 1990, Tinker 1990)[2] Most of these projects emerging from the International Decade for Women were later found to have "misbehaved" (Buvinic 1986) because of their welfarist approach. Instead of making women more self-sufficient and self-reliant, they were found to engender dependency and to suffer from bad planning - teaching women production skills but ignoring marketing and research skills. (Buvinic 1986, Rathgeber 1990)

Structurally, this approach was aimed at "integrating women" into future development processes without questioning existing social structures that contribute to the subordinate position of women and their oppression and exploitation. Nor did it take into account women's reproductive labour and its contributions to the economy.[3] The theoretical weaknesses in this approach also contributed to the failure of women's

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[2] See Moser (1989) for an analysis of the various approaches within the WID school of thought, welfare, equity, anti-poverty, efficiency and empowerment.

[3] Feminists argue that the reproductive labour of women goes beyond having babies and child rearing. This 'labour' of women also involves the 'social reproduction' of the labour force and is not renumerated.

projects designed within this framework. Critics of the WID approach argued that women were already "integrated" into the economy - at the bottom of the system.[4] With its acceptance of the modernisation paradigm, in particular the assumption that modernisation is desirable and that its positive effects would "trickle down" through economies WID proponents did not question industrialisation or the exploitation inherent in capitalism.

Feminist scholars have picked up where Boserup left off adding a socialist-feminist perspective to the analysis of women's productive and reproductive roles in society, to include an analysis of the impacts of both patriarchy and capitalism on the status of women. In analyzing the impacts of capitalism and class, many scholars trace the roots of the 'feminization of poverty' in many countries of the South to the industrial age in Europe and the days of colonialism that accompanied it. (Boserup 1979) Mies (1984 & 1986) identifies the intersection of patriarchy and industrial capitalism as the root of women's exploitation and the exploitation of colonies in the modern era. She argues that both were necessary for the accumulation of capital by the emerging merchant class in Europe. Women in Europe were increasingly socialized for their reproductive role to ensure a steady labour force for the growing factories.[5] And the colonies were exploited as suppliers of raw materials and labour and as captive markets for the manufactured goods of the colonisers. Women in the colonies were exploited as "breeders" of slaves and cheap labour for colonial plantations. It was during this time that land was appropriated and privatized and commodified, usually the

[4] This was a criticism from the neo-Marxist feminists who are associated with the WAD, women and development, approach. See Bandarage (1984) and Rathgeber (1990) for a brief discussion of the connection between WAD and Marxist-feminism.

[5] See Jayawardena (1986) and Mies (1986) for a feminist analysis of how encouragement of the nuclear family by the state and capitalist interests supported colonialism and industrialisation.

best land. The destruction of traditional patterns of usage and ownership led to massive alienation of indigenous people from land they had customarily farmed for generations. In agrarian economies, women have traditionally had important roles to play in agriculture and have been primarily responsible for subsistence agriculture. Colonialism was especially detrimental to the position of women, leading to the devaluation of their productive and reproductive contributions arising from their gradual loss of control over land, tools, skills, and products.[6] As a result of the post-colonial legacy, there has been a widespread shift from subsistence agriculture to production of cash crops using modern technology controlled by men. Land reforms reflecting Western sexist, patriarchal biases have largely made land ownership patriarchal and its inheritance patrilineal leading to the proletarianisation and subsequent pauperisation of women.

Today, women occupy a subordinate position in all capitalist industrialised countries. Women earn one-third less than men for equivalent work. Their productive labour devalued, they face similar discrimination and oppression within the domestic sphere. Women's unpaid domestic work plays a crucial role in making the accumulation of surplus possible. Their productive and reproductive work within the home contributes to the reproduction of the labour force and to its maintenance. (Beneria & Sen 1981) Their domestic work frees men to hire themselves out for a wage less than the collective value of both partner's contributions. With their work devalued within the family, women relieve men of domestic work and are thus "colonized" by husbands. (Mies 1986)

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[6] Whitehead (1983) argues that property is not primarily a relationship betwen people and things, but a relationship between people and people. Given that Indian society is patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal, women's displacement from the control of capital can be better understood as it reflects existing social relationships between women and men.

The limitations of the WID approach in ignoring the importance of gender and the impacts of its intersection with capitalism is partly addressed by the gender and development (GAD) approach developed by socialist feminists. In situating women's oppression in both patriarchy and class it addresses production, reproduction, socialization and sexuality in its analysis of women's oppression. In focussing on the social construction of gender and the sexual division of labour, the GAD approach does not focus on women only but also on the role of men in the equation. As a result, solutions for change involve changes to the relationship between men and women at a fundamental level through to the societal institutions that reflect sexist biases and structures. As a result, the GAD approach looks closely at the oppression of women within the family, entering the arena of the 'private sphere' to analyze women's productive and reproductive labour and its devaluation. Given women's societal contributions in reproductive labour, the GAD approach places responsibility on the state for providing childcare and healthcare for women, calling for the state to play a more active role in the emancipation of women. Therefore, in its efforts to alleviate women's poverty, the GAD approach attempts fundamental changes to institutions and a redistribution of power between the sexes calling for "the abolition of the sexual division of labour; the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare; the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination such as rights to own land or property or access to credit; the establishment of political equality; freedom of choice over childbearing; and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women." (Molyneux 1985, as cited in Moser 1987, 1803)

A radical approach

Gandhi's insights into the violence inherent in capitalism and industrialisation and the technologies they have spawned has influenced a new generation of scholars, advocates and activists. Just as Gandhi resisted the use of violent measures to gain India's independence from British colonial oppression, so too are scholars, activists and India's oppressed opposing a violent road to 'development.' They oppose capitalism, industrialisation and patriarchal systems as providing no viable options to address the poverty and environmental degradation in India.

Increasingly, scholars from India influenced by Gandhi and scholars from other Third World countries, especially Latin America, are offering a radical critique of 'development.'[7] Recognising its inherent violence, they describe or redefine 'development' as maldevelopment, 'a fairy tale' and 'a dream gone sour' (Escobar 1992), 'a malignant myth' (Esteva 1985), 'a Frankenstein-type dream' and a hegemonic ideology that has colonized the mind (Rahnema 1986). According to Escobar (1992),

> "Development has functioned as a mechanism for the production and management of the Third World in the post-war period. It has done so through the systematic elaboration of fields of knowledge and institutions which made possible the establishment in the Third World of forms of power through which individuals, governments officials, and, sometimes, whole communities recognized themselves as underdeveloped, as unfinished manifestations of a European ideal." (413)[8]

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[7] See also D.L.Shet, Rajni Kothari, Ashis Nandy, Vandana Shiva, Pramod Parajuli, Orlando Fals Borda. Gustavo Esteva has used the term 'de-professionalized intellectuals' to refer to this group of scholars.

[8] See Escobar (1984) for a discussion of the origins of development as a discourse and its relationship with power and knowledge drawing on Michel Foucault's work.

These intellectuals are critical of the misperception that there is just one path to development and that the industrialized countries in the West are the models for all other countries to emulate. Subscribing to this belief denies countries their own evolutionary path, the opportunity to explore avenues of change in keeping with their respective political, economic, cultural and religious histories. Jumping on the bandwagon of development reflects a tacit acceptance of identification of a country's situation as one of 'under-development' and has led to a 'recolonisation' of now independent countries. Their solution is to seek alternatives to the whole concept of development rather than to continue searching for new development alternatives. In keeping with their radical politics, the alternative to development that they advocate is one that has reached them by 'trickling up' from people's grassroots movements that are fighting for environmental, economic, politico-cultural and social rights.

Collectively called "New Social Movements" (NSMs), they challenge the states' role of benevolent and paternalistic guardian of all its citizens. (Parajuli 1990)[9] Instead they are fighting for alternative forms of governance at local and regional levels. These grassroots movements have been aided bv "grassroots activists" such as middle-class educated youth, intellectuals, professionals, church people and others. (Escobar 1992) These NSMs have certain features in common. They are essentially movements at the local level that struggle to solve particular problems by creating conditions that give them "greater autonomy over the decisions that affect their lives." They tend to by-pass established organisations, local elites and parties. Even if economics is a primary concern, their struggle includes cultural, artistic, and communal concerns as well. Often they are unaware of the connection between their situations and the larger picture. Increasingly, they question the "knowledge of 'experts' and of government

[9] See Escobar (1992) for a discussion of the emergence of new social movements in the Third World by theorists in Western Europe and Latin America.

agents," depending instead on their own knowledge or giving it value in their decision-making. (Escobar 1992, 421-22) Some examples of NSMs from India are the Chipko movement and the movement to stop the Subarnarekha Multipurpose Dam Project - ecological movements by indigenous groups, mostly peasants, women and the poor, to retain control over the natural resources against monopolistic control by the rich. (Parajuli 1990, 181)

Women's colonial legacy

In India, what legacy has colonial rule left women? Evidence shows that colonialism displaced women who were part of the pre-modern artisan labour force or who fulfilled vital functions in agriculture or cloth-making. As a result, they often lost their valued socio-economic positions in society (Etienne and Leacock 1980,[10] Mazumdar & Sharma 1990). British mills and the importation of manufactured goods from England displaced women from traditional textile industries of spinning and weaving of cotton and silk, destroying traditional craft and artisan production. As well, under pressure from the British textile industry, legislation was passed by the British government in India to restrict the employment of women and children in India's cotton and jute mills in the late nineteenth century. (Mazumdar & Sharma 1990)

India's textile industries were renowned for the quality of the cotton and the fineness of the weave. Before the 18th century and the British Raj, India supplied all of Europe's needs for calico and muslin. At the time, Bengal exported "millions of pounds worth of cotton goods each year." (Brown 1990, 18) In fact it was the prospect of gaining monopoly control over Bengal's lucrative textile trade that brought the British

[10] See Etienne and Leacock (1980) for an anthropological, cross-cultural study of the impacts of European colonialisation on women in twelve societies around the world.

East India Company to Bengal. (Boyce 1987, 4) But with industrialisation in Britain, tariffs, some as high as one hundred percent in the late eighteenth century, were placed on imported Indian textiles, (Brown, 1990, 18) and in India taxes were placed on local cloth (Lamb 1955 & Sinha 1970, as cited in Boyce 1987, 4) in order to protect the British mills. India in turn was flooded with cheaper British mill cloth, and within sixty years Bengal had stopped exporting and was instead importing textiles from Britain that were increasingly made from Indian cotton. The impact on the displaced weavers was recorded by a British governor general. Regarding the famine that hit India in 1770, he wrote that "The bones of the weavers were bleaching the plains of India ..." (Brown 1990, 18)

According to Dasgupta (1987, as cited in Mazumdar & Sharma 1990, 193) the traditional Indian textile industry was the first to develop into commodity production in India and has a long history of domestic and export production. Indian textiles were in great demand even before the Christian era in the Roman Empire. Women were involved in the production of cloth for their families' consumption as well as in its production as a commodity. This is supported by ancient records. The *Arthasastra*, an ancient document on statecraft dating back to the fourth century B.C., prescribes equal wages for artisans of both sexes involved in silk production. It even suggests "measures to protect women artisans from sexual harassment by male supervisors." (Mazumdar & Sharma 1990, 193)

According to D.D. Kosambi, a respected Indian scholar and indologist, women were the first textile producers. He finds evidence for his claim in the *Rig Veda*, the oldest Sanskrit text dating from 1500 to 1200 B.C., which refers to weaving as a specialty of women. (1970, as cited in Mazumdar & Sharma 1990) Through India's history, spinning of cotton, wool, flax, and silk has been a primary occupation for women and records show that a large number of independent and highly skilled women

professionals worked in the spinning industry at the beginning of the colonial period. (Banerjee, as cited in Mazumdar & Sharma 1990)

The displacement of women from what has historically been their preserve started with the colonial era and continued with the growth of the textile industry in India. A 1981 study of the Bombay textile industry, the largest textile manufacturing centre in India, reveals that urban males were increasingly displacing urban middle class women. Disapproval of their employment because it was believed to reduce the quality of family life for their children was found to be a contributing factor. (Savara 1981, as cited in Mazumdar & Sharma 1990)

After India freed itself from the shackles of colonial rule in 1947 to emerge as a modern state, the equal political rights of women were enshrined in the Indian Constitution, one of the most progressive in the world where women's equality with men is concerned. Eager to fashion a new India built on "social justice and the nurturing of human potential," (Wignaraja 1990, 65) the state undertook various programmes of rural development for the rural poor. Though well intentioned, they failed to help their target population. According to Wignaraja, "party politics, excessive bureaucratization, lack of participation by the poor, social structure and unequal distribution of benefits were some of the causal factors." (66) The "Intensive Agricultural Development Programmes" in the 60's, later called the 'Green Revolution', were implemented next. The Green Revolution further marginalised poor women. Various programmes have since been implemented aimed at small farmers, landless labourers and poor women.

Despite this, the status of women in India today points to their continued oppression, exploitation and subordinate status. Mounting evidence through the last decade documents the deteriorating status of women in India. (Sen & Grown 1987, Momsen 1991, Mukhopadhyay 1984) Colonialism, industrialisation and capitalist

development have pauperised and proletarianised increasing numbers of women; increased international debt; caused widespread and increasing devastation of the environment, socio-political violence, and the adoption of inappropriate and harmful technologies. (Banuri 1990, 75)

The erosion of women's customary rights tc land and other productive resources has led to women increasingly becoming "a pool of marginalized people" living a subsistence existence on marginal land or as irregularly employed agricultural labourers. (Mies 1984, 18) As well, it has led to large-scale migration of women to tea, coffee and rubber plantations to find work as agricultural labourers ans as unskilled labour in mines, construction and industrial zones. In the cities, they find work in sweat shops or as casual labour, and as domestic servants. But, whether they labour in the fields or in factories, they are kept to the most menial, backbreaking, worst paid jobs that offer the poorest working conditions. Increasingly, women are also becoming "home-based industrial workers" knitting, rolling cigarettes, assembling toys, making lace, tailoring and sewing.[11] Poorly designed labour laws and protective legislation end up discriminating against women or making them less desirable as employees thereby affecting their employment. (Bisilliat & Fieloux 1987, Mazumdar & Sharma 1990, Momsen 1991, Mukhopadhyay 1984) According to a 1990 World Bank study called Gender and Poverty in India,

> women's participation rate (in the labor force) totals 51% ... India invests far less in its women workers than in its working men. Women also receive a smaller share of what society produces. They are less endowed than men with health care, education, and productive assets that could increase their return to labor. Women's nutritional levels are lower than men's; more women than men die before the age of 35. Three fourths of Indian women are illiterate. Ninety

[11] Tinker (1990) cautions that 'home-based workers' should not be confused with 'self-employed women' as the former are subcontractors at home working on a piece rate whose segregation from the final customer leads to their exploitation. See Mies (1982) for a discussion of the exploitation of home-based lace makers in Narsapur.

percent of rural and 70% of urban women workers are unskilled. Unlike men, women lack the bureaucratic know-how to make the system work for them. And in general, they do not own land ... Significantly, studies show that the poorer the family, the more it depends on the economic productivity of a woman. (1991, xv)

In many parts of the country, peasants and poor women are taking matters into their own hands and organising to fight economic, social and cultural oppression. According to Parajuli (1990), the new social movements in India provide a counter discourse to the "universal consciousness of capital trying to colonize the precapitalist territory of women, tribals and rural peasants." (186) Women's movements in India are "the most visible and assertive in challenging the established political, economic and cultural order." (186) Among the women's movements in India, he identifies three distinct trends: 'developmentalist', 'socialist-feminist', and 'eco-feminist.'[12] The 'socialist-feminists' focus public attention on the oppression of women in the public and private spheres as manifested by dowry deaths, male violence against women, discriminatory land and inheritance rights. In doing so they attempt to fight the causes not just the symptoms of women's oppression. 'Eco-feminists' focus on ecological and agrarian issues challenging capitalist technological development projects driven by reductionist science.[13] While 'developmentalist' movements, working within the 'women in development' perspective, have attempted "with considerable success" to obtain state funding for "projects that economically benefit women."

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[12] "These categories are not fixed and by no means perfect. Nor do the women of India or even activists in the movements categorize themselves in these terms. On the contrary, a given women's group could be categorized as 'developmentalist' in one occasion, 'socialist-feminist' in another and 'eco-feminist' on yet another issue. However in regional and national affiliations and networks, such orientations are becoming distinct." (Parajuli 1990, 187)

[13] See Shiva (1987, 1988 & 1991) for a critical look at technologies based on "reductionist science."

This case study examines a women's income-generating project that has managed to obtain state funding. The Sunderban Khadi and Village Industrial Society (SKVIS) is a successful rural women's society that was started by a group of poor rural women and now receives funding from the government-instituted Khadi and Village Industries Commission. Its artisans are involved in the spinning of cotton, weaving of *khadi*, reeling of silk, and the application of batik designs on silk and muslin. *Khadi* is a handspun and handwoven fabric that has been produced in India for centuries. In studying this initiative I hope to challenge stereotypical perceptions of poor women as passive recipients of aid, a view that informs most income-generating projects within the WID approach, and to demonstrate that poor rural women can be active agents of socioeconomic change. Given that women's income-generating projects have a high failure rate, what has contributed to this group's success in earning an increasing profit margin, in accumulating assets of Rs.1,200,000, and growing from a membership of seven to a membership of 950 over a period of fourteen years. Why has SKVIS been so successful in bringing about socioeconomic change in the lives of its members and empowering them to effect social change in their communities? I will argue that grassroots communication practices within this group have been central to its success and that it is through a continuation of its egalitarian decision making-practices that include all its members that SKVIS's success in empowering its members will continue. As well, I will answer the following questions. What impact has SKVIS had on the lives of its artisan members? And finally, as a women's income-generating project, where does it fit within the theoretical literature on development and the WID and GAD approaches?

Chapter 1

West Bengal is a land of poets and painters, musicians and philosophers, political activists and national leaders, a land of political and cultural ferment. It gave us Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore,[1] and poet, artist, auteur, and 1993 Oscar Lifetime Achievement Award winner Satyajit Ray.

Sonar Bangla or Golden Bengal

Bengal[2] was once legendary for its wealth and agricultural abundance, lying as it does in the delta of three great rivers - the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna. Bengal has some of the world's most fertile land, and like most deltaic regions in the world's history it has given rise to a great civilization.

In earlier times, travellers to Bengal were struck by its great prosperity. The Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta, whose travels took him to Persia, China, Sumatra, and Timbuktu, and who visited India six centuries ago reported: "This is a country of great extent, and one in which rice is extremely abundant. Indeed I have seen no region of the earth where provisions are so plentiful." (Yule 1866, as cited in Boyce 1987, 3) The French traveller Bernier, who visited Bengal around 1660, recorded similar impressions of the abundance, the variety and the relative cheapness of rice, sugar, vegetables, game and fowl, goats and sheep, and especially fish. He also noted Bengal's handloom textiles, which then ranked among the world's greatest. Its cotton

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[1] Tagore received the Nobel prize for literature in 1913. He was the founder of Vishvabharati University at Shantiniketan in West Bengal, an alternative approach to education.

[2] i.e. both West Bengal and East Bengal or what is now known as Bangladesh.

and silks were of exceptional quality and known throughout the world, especially its fine Dacca muslin made from silky cotton grown in Bengal. In comparing Bengal with the great civilisation in Egypt, Bernier favoured the former writing that the "pre-eminence ascribed to *Egypt* is rather due to *Bengale*."(Bernier 1914, as cited in Boyce 1987, 4)

Today, despite its rich culture and former prosperity, West Bengal is home to some of the world's poorest people. According to Boyce (1987, v), though its farmland is among the most fertile in the world, its average rice yields are among the lowest, and the area imports virtually all of its cotton for textile production. He writes, "Nowhere is the gap between what is possible and what exists more poignant."[3]

Nearly half the population and half the area of the state is involved in agriculture. The most important crop is paddy. Oil seeds and pulses are also grown along with fruits and vegetables and jute, another important cash crop that brings in highly valued foreign exchange.

Bengali society

Bengali society[4] is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal, with a hierarchy that places old men at the top and girls at the bottom. Bengali society is very respectful of age. While older people have power over younger members, and men over women, older women do have power over younger men within a paternalistic framework. This hierarchy is reflected in their speech. There are three forms of address, *aapni*, *tumi*,

[3] See James K. Boyce, Agrarian Impasse in Bengal, for a critical look at the politics of agriculture in Bengal, including Bangladesh, and the history and impacts of agrarian reform starting in the days of colonialism.

[4] My discussion here is limited to that of the Bengali Hindu society. I have insufficient knowledge of the impacts of Islam on Bengali families, and even less about Christianity.

and *tu-i*. *Aapni* is a formal and respectful version of "you" and is used when addressing elders such as grandparents, strangers, and those in positions of power or of a higher class, *tumi* is used between social and (age) equals/cohorts, and when addressing parents and older relatives and family friends, and *tu-i* is used when addressing younger relatives or friends. This hierarchy pervades all strata of Bengali society, and the relationships between individuals, male and/or female, are generally extremely paternalistic. This is reflected in another form of address, that of 'dada' or older brother, and 'didi' or older sister. Among acquaintances, younger people usually add the suffix "-da" or "-di" when addressing elders in order to accord them respect. Among siblings and cousins, even a few month's difference in age demands this form of address. In formal situations, this form of address is used to give respect or to acknowledge those in positions of power within class boundaries. Within this hierarchy, obedience to elders is beyond question. Influenced by this hierarchy, the style of communication is typically very didactic and everyone is full of good advice.

Bengalis aspire to culture, with a love for the arts - poetry literature, music, dance and theatre. It is often jokingly said that the Bengalis love the three p's - poetry, *paan* and politics.[5] They are sociable people and enjoy *aaddaa*-ing, or "shooting the breeze," about politics and football, and a host of other subjects, over a cup of *cha*.[6] An important feature of Bengali society is the quality of *bhodro*-ness that defines a refined person or *bhodrolok*, a mix of culture, education and respectability, a quality that is respected and aspired to. But even if a person is not of the *bhodro* class, s/he aspires to a sense of decency. Instilling a sense of *lojja*, or shame, in one's children is

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[5] This is a combination of spices and pieces of betel nut, wrapped in a betel leaf and chewed with lime. It is a mild stimulant.

[6] Bengalis are passionate about football, i.e. soccer. They are equally passionate about their tea or *cha*.

an important part of socialisation in all classes. This notion of *lojja* acts as a powerful tool of social control in Bengali society, especially in regards to regulating men's behaviour toward women.

The patriarchy present in Bengali society manifests itself differently across class lines. Mridula Garg (1991) has broadly categorised women in India into three groups, which I adapt as a socioeconomic spectrum of women in West Bengal. At one end of the spectrum are women born into families with wealth, social standing and connections to the power elites; with no financial restrictions on their opportunities for education in the best schools and universities either in India or abroad; who have every opportunity to step into socially and/or economically powerful jobs with private corporations or non-profit organisations doing status-enhancing social or cultural work. Garg labels these women as belonging to the "first world" within the "Third World" of India.

Towards the middle of the spectrum are women from the middle class, who with a certain degree of education and through academic excellence leading to scholarships can acquire an education at the best universities. It is from this group that women are being pushed into the workforce from economic necessity rather than an interest in self-determination and economic independence to develop their talents and potential. They are politically and socially aware and have given rise to both "rebels and die-hard conservatives." (Garg 1991, 407) In Calcutta, working Bengali middle-class women are frequently seen in processions marching on the Writers Building, the seat of government, protesting government actions or inaction. Garg considers these women to belong to the "second world."

At the other end of the spectrum are women of the "third world," who Garg feels lead lives "no better than beasts of burden," who are forced "with each act of development" to take on increasing workloads with less and less to eat in return. (Garg 1991, 407) They refer to themselves as "*goreeb lok,*" poor people ignored by government and with little power to bring about political change to improve the

socioeconomic conditions of their lives. They struggle to survive devoting their energies to these efforts either through subsistence farming or by migrating to larger cities, usually Calcutta, living in slums while they work for a pittance. This group is usually illiterate or with very little formal education but hope to educate their children as much as possible.

Women in the middle of the spectrum are the most mobile among the classes in Garg's estimate. They aspire to the educational and economic opportunities of the "first world" women, which some achieve through "sheer hard work and determination."

First I will discuss the position of women in the "first and second worlds" and then discuss the position of women within the "third world" within Bengali society as I know or have read about it. While there are many universals in Bengali society, class dynamics have a major role in the specific manifestations of gender relations.

Bengalis are highly religious and the dominance of female deities in Bengali Hinduism is often cited as a reason for the respect accorded women in Bengali society. The Goddess Durga, who represents the triumph of good over evil, is the preeminent deity, while her daughters, Goddesses Saraswati (learning and the arts) and Lakshmi (wealth), are the other two deities of importance. But this respect for women derives from the role of Goddess Durga as mother to Goddess Saraswati amd Lakshmi and to a number of other lesser Gods and Goddesses.[7] The sexual division of labour within Bengali society is embedded in religion. Women are, therefore, respected for their role or potential as mothers. This suggests a respect for motherhood as opposed to women per se. Women's roles as mothers and wives are seen as their most important function and the domestic sphere is constructed as their domain. The care of the children and

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[7] It can be argued that the patriarchal perspective has fashioned the image of Durga in her role of mother in order to make her more acceptable to society. And that this persona now reinforces and is reinforced by society's restrictive view of women's role in society.

management of the household is seen as their natural ability and duty. As a result, women rule supreme within the home and in the kitchen. Even if a woman has a professional career, she is still responsible for running the household and instructing the housemaid or cook if the family can afford one. At home, women are responsible for saying the daily prayers, but during religous ceremonies at marriages, funerals, festivals and other functions, male priests perform the rites. This role of supplicant to the Goddesses is interpreted by feminists as a form of social control for women become representatives of the family's piety and virtue and as such must measure up to the ultimate mother, Goddess Durga.

Among middle-class Bengalis, daughters are considered 'Lakshmi' (lucky mascots who will bring wealth into the home), but sons are still the preferred child to carry on the family name. One or two Lakshmis may be welcome, unless the family can afford more, but beyond this point daughters are seen as a financial burden rather than a 'Lakshmi.' In contrast, the ultimate blessing that can be given to a Bengali woman is - "May you be the mother of a hundred sons." Hence new brides are seen by parents in-law as a light that will brighten their homes for the wealth she will bring the family by bearing sons.

Marriage is seen as an important step for both men and women. Both men and women are socialised into seeing marriage as a natural progression in their life cycle and necessary for the economic, emotional and physical security it is supposed to provide. Women are seen as the other half needed to a make a man whole, and together they form the basic unit of society. Women are seen as integral to the family and the maintenance of a home. Within this stereotypical role, women are valued. The Bengalis are family-oriented people. In the past, when the wealthy had much property and huge homes, extended families living under one roof were the norm. Even those who could not afford one huge house lived next door to each other. Today, family members keep in close touch and support each other. Celebrations of marriages and births are usually

a gathering of the clan. Bengalis are generally very hospitable people who love their food and celebrating.[8] Previously, a married daughter was considered to have given up membership in her parents' family to join that of her husband's parents. Since extended families rarely exist today, and a married couple usually sets up a new home of their own, daughters retain their ties and loyalties to their own parents. This sets up a family network that can both bind, by socialising women within stereotypical roles, or support and protect women. Dowry deaths are not common among Bengalis and wife abuse is not acceptable.[9] Strong family networks can work as social deterrents against such behaviour and provide women with support and refuge. These family networks can act as reliable sources of information when identifying potential marriage partners for family members.

Hence women strive to be perfect wives and mothers. Within this social structure it is not unusual for men to bring home their paychecks and hand it over to their wives to manage. It is the woman's role to keep up family ties and social networks, to keep up cultural and religious traditions. Hence, a good wife manages the family income to ensure that the family is well fed, that the children are getting the best education affordable, that singing and dancing lessons are paid for, that their daughter's trousseau in the form of sarees and jewelry is being steadily laid aside, that appropriate presents are bought for relatives during festivals and marriages to reaffirm family ties

[8] Unfortunately, feeding friends and family at the marriage of one's daughter has become the societal norm and has forced many parents into debt.

[9] In India, predominantly North India, brides who bring insufficient dowry with them into a marriage face continual harassment from in-laws and husbands and are even murdered by them. Dowry deaths appear to be on the rise in India consistent with the increasing violence that women face. In West Bengal, there was a strong 19th century movement against dowry deaths led by the *Brahmo Samaj*, a modern Hindu movement advocating a monotheistic religion, and social and educational reforms according to Western principles.

and bonds. As wives and mothers, women must see to their husbands' comfort, manage the children's welfare and promote the families' standing in society.

Restrictions on women to remain housewives and mothers and to function exclusively within the home are not pervasive within Bengali society. The education of both men and women has loosened this bond as has economic necessity. Education is held in high regard by the Bengalis as evidenced by their devotion to Saraswati, the Goddess of learning and the arts. The literacy rate for urban women in Bengal is one of the highest among fourteen states in India. In 1981, nearly sixty-one percent of the urban population in West Bengal were literate. (Unicef 1991, 92) Only Kerala, a state in south India that still retains some matriarchal communities and matrilineal traditions, and Maharashtra[10] on the west coast have a higher female literacy rate, with nearly eighty percent and about sixty-two percent respectively. In West Bengal, as in the rest of India, education is highly subsidised by government. The Indian constitution guarantees free compulsory elementary education to all children up to the age of fourteen, but this is not enforced by the central and state governments. If students excel in their public exams, not being able to afford the fees is usually not an obstacle to their pursuing higher education. It is only if their families need them to contribute to the family income that they may forsake their education to find work.

[10] Bombay, one of the largest and most populous cities in India and the world, is the capital of this state. It is India's economic and business nerve centre and home to India's huge and prosperous film industry. This probably accounts for the high literacy rate in the state.

Given the extent to which education is valued,parents encourage their children to acquire as many degrees as possible.[11] When children have school and college exams, the household schedule revolves around supporting them in their studies. Parents give their children encouragement and support at these times, as do other family members, and mothers will often prepare special diets of nutritious food and drinks. Most exams in the education system are competitive. In Bengal, students sit for public exams in grades ten and twelve and in their final years of university education. These results determine their acceptance into the next level of education and the quality of the institution. During exams it is common practice for mothers to accompany their children to the examination centre and wait outside while their children write their exams. If there are two exams on one day they ensure that a home-cooked meal is available during the lunch break. Working mothers will take a leave of absence from work to be home with their children, to ensure that they are well fed and that the home environment is conducive to them concentrating on their studies.[12]

Apart from valuing knowledge for itself, it is also seen as the ticket to a well paying profession or career. Bengalis are not known for their business acumen. Their intellectual and cultural pursuits lead them to careers in the service sector, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and professors being the most respected and sought after positions,

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[11] The education system has faced criticism for its Western and ethnocentric bias in being derived from the British school system. As well, critics have questioned its relevance to students in rural areas. (Unicef 1991, 176-77) Accordingly it is seen as a system for indoctrinating students with middle-class values. In addition, feminists are critical of education for perpetuating gender inequalities. (Bourque & Warren 1990) In West Bengal, the state government has made some changes to the syllabus to reflect Indian culture and history.

[12] Within the Bengali culture this is acceptable practice. During my field work in Calcutta in March 1993, I was unable to reach two women in different government ministries as they were on leave while their children sat for their grade twelve exams.

as well as careers in the Indian Foreign Service as diplomats and foreign office attaches, or in the Indian Administrative Service as civil servants. The sexist bias favouring women studying the humanities and men the sciences is less prevalent among the Bengalis. Women are encouraged to study medicine and engineering, the two most prized areas of study. Women are increasingly becoming professors, scientists, teachers, nurses, secretaries, and business executives. Without adequate education, lower middle class women usually end up in the service industry as clerks, typists, shopkeepers, hairdressers or beauticians catering to the needs of women at the more affluent end of the spectrum.

But while women are encouraged to pursue higher education and increasingly a career, marriage and motherhood is still the measure of their status in society. Education is a sign of class, but more importantly used to enhance their value in the marketplace of arranged marriages which is the norm. As well, they are encouraged to take singing and dancing lessons and to learn to play a musical instrument. This reflects the Bengalis' love for culture, but with the intersection of patriarchy translates into accomplishments that are desirable in wives and daughters-in-law. While a fine singing voice and accomplishment on a musical instrument is appreciated in men, these are less important in the marriage market. Earning capacity is more important. The dowry system has slowly become a part of Bengali marriages and reflects an increasing devaluation of women's productive and reproductive roles. Whereas previously parents gave their daughters a trousseau of clothes and jewelry and whatever else they could afford, now, a dowry in cash and kind is often demanded by the prospective groom and his family. As a result, those women with a better education or career pay less or no dowry. As well, looks are considerably more important in women than in men when

marriages are being arranged. A beautiful face and eyes,[13] and a fair complexion can go a long way towards lowering the dowry being asked. Among some Bengali families, the dowry system is looked down on as un-*bhodro* and will refuse alliances involving dowries.

Increasingly women are marrying later in order to complete their masters and doctoral degrees and this is acceptable in Bengali society, especially if the woman is exceptional in her studies and is accepted into a prestigious institution. A few women have chosen to devote themselves to their education and careers as professors, researchers, lawyers and doctors, professions that allow them the economic independence to support their choices. In such cases, women may even be respected for their commitment given the association of these professions with education and learning. But this respect comes after they have established themselves in their careers, after they have fought a psychological battle with the social and cultural norms. For while men rarely remain single either, women face more questions regarding their choice. As well, "love marriages," inter-caste marriages and inter-communal marriages are on the rise given people's mobility in following their careers and higher education.

Sexual discrimination deriving from patriarchal beliefs is reflected in the differential treatment of sons and daughters. For example, the head of the fish is considered a special treat for the extra nutrition available from these parts and the exquisitely tender flesh found around the head. But, among more conservative families, this piece is often saved for the males to eat and rarely given to the daughters.[14] As well, a son's education is considered more important than a daughter's. If the family

[13] In Bengali society a beautiful pair of eyes is very admired. Big, lustrous eyes like those of a cow are considered the perfect shape. The cow is sacred to Hindus.

[14] A model wife and mother, eternally sacrificing and giving, would never dream of eating it herself.

cannot afford to educate both, the son's education takes precedence. This is because men are still considered the main bread winners.

Despite the strides women have made towards following a career, the respect that is accorded them derives from their roles as mothers and wives. And women's freedom of movement and association is circumscribed by what is traditionally socially permissible for a *bhodro-mohila* (lady). Married Bengali women wear *sidhoor*, a red powder, on their foreheads as a sign of marriage along with coral bangles on their arms. Men traditionally have no sign of marriage. While unmarried women get harassed and sometimes surreptitiously fondled on crowded public transportation during rush hour, married women rarely do. But despite this, Calcutta is still the safest for women among the metropolitan cities of India attesting to the culture of respect for women in Bengal, which of course is slowly eroding. Bengali women are vocal and do not hesitate to protest loudly and gain support from passersby and others present. Miscreants are chastised for having no *lojja* or shame, and their behaviour is seen as disgracing their own mothers, the worst shame possible but again reflecting the respect accorded mothers and motherhood as opposed to all women. But just as the dowry system has crept into Bengali society, assaults on women are also on the rise indicating a sexist backlash against women's partial emancipation from the confines of home. The traditional segregation of women has changed with the entrance of women into the public sphere, and patriarchal notions of domination are taking on a different form. At religious events like ceremonies held in the temple, men and women still sit in separate halves of the room.[15] This segregation in Bengali society is partly embedded in the respect given to women's space and reinforced by the notion of *lojja* or shame. A frequently asked question of violators is - "Don't you have any shame?" But while this

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[15] To my knowledge, this is standard practice in most communities across the country.

shames the individual, this in no way attacks the systemic societal violence against women.

The devaluation of women's productive and reproductive labour increases as we move towards the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum and the physical and societal restrictions on women's movements increase as we move towards more rural areas. Without the economic means to afford a *bhodro* lifestyle and a wife to help maintain it, women are worked like "beasts of burden," are progressively devalued as we move along this spectrum. Daughters are seen less as 'Lakshmis' than as burdens whose marriages and dowries must be paid for, burdens to be transferred to their husbands.[16] Within a marriage they must play a subordinate role to their husbands, and their opinions and advice may not be valued. Extreme sexism is reflected in the oft repeated phrase, - "she's a girl, she's incapable, she won't succeed," even when referring to older women, and this works psychologically as social control to keep girls and women insecure regarding their abilities and fearful of not being able to manage on their own without a man. Social control is often maintained through restricting women's movements or by the threat of physical force. Poverty means that children must labour as soon as they are able. Daughters either help with housework to relieve their mothers who can then work outside the home or labour alongside their parents. Often daughters give up their own education to work so that their brothers can complete theirs, or they are never sent to school. Increasingly, young women are taking on the financial burden of caring for their families when parents are too ill or pass

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[16] I hesitate to use the word property. See Whitehead (1983) for a discussion of 'women as property'. Looking at a number of cross-cultural studies, she argues that women are not necessarily 'objects' even if they are not fully 'subjects' and calls for more research into power relationships between women and men and its expression in different societies.

away before their children have grown up. Many give up their dreams of finishing school.

In rural areas, women may never venture out of their villages. Girls and women are not encouraged to explore the world. "Good girls don't." "Good girls" stay home, are obedient and mind their tongues. If a woman marries a man from another village, she is escorted as a new bride to her new home and must keep the train of her saree pulled low over her face. If women travel away from their villages, they are usually escorted by their husbands, fathers or brothers who take care of all the travel arrangements. Girls and women are encouraged to be dependent on males in the family. Women walk a couple of paces behind their husbands and not by their side. Secluded as their upbringing is, when a crisis hits and women are left to fend for themselves, they often find themselves unprepared to cope and are often exploited by other men as a result. When economic necessity forces them to leave their villages to find work, they are easy victims to be tricked or lured into slavery and prostitution and kept virtual prisoners.

Women usually work in the fields during planting and harvesting season. Otherwise they are restricted to the house and not encouraged to mingle with others. If they hire themselves out as agricultural labourers, women tend to work in segregation away from the men. Married women cover their heads at all times with the train of their sarees and, when faced with strangers or males from the village, they pull this covering down to shield their faces. They are socialised to have little to say and as a result reply in monosyllables when questioned or by giggling. Shyness, again represented by *lojja*, is seen as a feminine virtue that is cultivated in girls. Their capabilites devalued, they are not encouraged to find their voice or to have one.

The intersection of patriarchy, class and caste is reflected in the statistics on literacy. Rural Bengal has a higher percentage of the state's poor. Urban women are much better educated than their rural counterparts. The literacy rate for urban females

in Bengal is 60.64 percent while that for rural females is 25.31 percent. In comparison, the literacy rate among urban males is 75.10 percent and 46.98 percent for rural males.[17]

Thus women's positions within this patriarchal and paternalistic society are tenuous and dependent on their role and status within their families. The oppression of women increases along the socioeconomic spectrum with a decrease in the value accorded their productive and reproductive labour. Feminists have long identified the traditional family as a unit of patriarchal society where gender construction and the systematic subordination of women occur, and this appears to be true in an analysis of Bengali society.

Theoretically, the partial liberation of women from the confines of the home has elements of cultural feminism.[18] Women in the more affluent sections of Bengali society tend to see women as the purer, gentler and better sex. This derives from the high regard that the Goddess Durga is held in. Female qualities are to be revered, as it is those qualities that make a good mother. Women are not seen as oppressed but as fulfilling their natural roles of wives and mothers. Women are seen as the superior sex in that they embody the qualities of patience, virtue, sacrifice, fortitude, and generosity. As a result women are still confined within the stereotypical role they have traditionally been assigned while economic necessity places on them a double burden,

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[17] The difference in literacy rates between males and females of the middle and upper classes would be much narrower, I feel. Migration of rural women to urban centres in Bengal affects the statistics on urban literacy rates.

[18] Cultural feminists see femininity as the most desirable form of human behaviour and reject masculinity as the ideal. Though femininity is defined in a positive way, this view does not challenge unequal power relations between men and women or male construction of genders. See Jayawardena (1986) for her critical analysis of the connection between feminism and the rise of a growing middle class of civil servants during the days of the British Raj.

that of being responsible for the care of their children and their homes and that of breadwinner. If women are accorded respect, arguably, it is motherhood that is valued rather than women themselves. In working outside the home, patriarchy is not challenged nor women's socially defined roles within it. Even class mobility occurs within this framework where education is used to exchange one's occupation for a better paying one and not to challenge existing class hierarchies. Here education is seen as a qualification that increases a woman's value as wife and mother.

The lay of the land

West Bengal has 16 districts.[19] Of these, the district of 24-Parganas is its largest, situated in the south-east corner of the state with nearly one-third covered by the dense Sunderban forest to the south.[20] The district of 24-Parganas is divided into two administrative units, North and South. 24-Parganas (South) is further divided into administrative units called blocks or *thanas*.[21]

The capital of 24-Parganas(S) is Canning, a small town that is the last stop on the railway line into the Sunderban area. The Sunderban forest - the last remaining tract of forest in West Bengal - is a popular tourist spot where visitors come to see the mangrove forests and, hopefully, to catch a glimpse of the Royal Bengal tiger, a

[19] These are - Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Nadia, Midnapur, Malda, West Dinajpur, Murshidabad, 24-Parganas, Calcutta, Howrah, Burdwan, Hooghly, Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia.

[20] Sometimes this is spelled as Sundarban.

[21] See Appendix D for a geographical profile of the district and selected blocks.

supposedly majestic beast. Named after Lord Canning, governor general of India from 1856-62, it was set up as a port by the British to guard the estuary opening into the Bay of Bengal. It was abandoned after the British moved the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi and silt from the river Hooghly and the tides of the area made the port difficult to navigate. Travellers to and from the interiors of the Sunderbans and the rest of the district transfer to buses that ply to and from Canning. Canning has a large fish auction where the entire local catch is auctioned every night, packed in ice, and sent off to domestic and foreign markets. The local economy revolves around providing services for tourists and locals. Within the town, there are few stable employment opportunities except government jobs at the railway station, the post office, government offices and research stations that variously monitor the soil, the weather, local agriculture and the forest. With limited work available, it is usually men who are given the opportunities. Most men are seasonal or casual workers, agricultural labourers, construction workers, coolies, the self-employed rickshaw pullers, or shopkeepers with small shops in town selling consumer goods, or merchants in the *bazaar*, or market, selling grain, fresh fruit and vegetables, fish and poultry.

The Sunderbans[22]

> The reality is always different from the romantic picture one draws in one's mind about a place. So it is with the Sunderbans. As a child, one reads so much about the peaceful villages in densely forested areas, with small rivulets and creeks on the banks of which there nestle delightful hamlets, the land being infested, however, with marauding tigers and the rivers with crocodiles, a land abounding nonetheless with fish and game and fowl; a region where daylight scarcely penetrates the thick

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22 "Sunder" means beautiful and "ban" means forest in Bengali.

vegetation and the myriad trees, where a boat trip gives you a complete escape from modern civlization. (Ghosh 1989, 103)[23]

The Sunderbans is an estuarine region of tidal creeks, mud flats and newly formed islands where most of the land is covered by dense mangrove forests. This is where the Matla and Bidya rivers and its tributaries form intermeshing veins of the delta and then open out into the Bay of Bengal. These rivers are capricious, constantly changing their course and eroding existing islands while depositing mud, sand and silt to build new ones. In addition to these problems of a deltaic coastline, the high tides flood the area with saline water leaving the soil unfit for cultivation.

In the early 19th century the British decided to populate this region. To the north of what became known as the "Fraser Line", lots were auctioned off to create *zamindaris*, while south of this line remained reserved forests. These new pioneer landlords, or *zamindars*, were expected to clear the area and settle on the land. Embankments were built to protect the people and prevent the salt water from reaching this land with each high tide. The rains washed away excess salt and in three to four years the land was cultivable. At this time, most of the settlers came from the neighbouring district of Midnapur, whose poor and dispossessed longed for a small plot of land of their own. The task of retaining the land put both life and health at risk for apart from tigers and crocodiles, malaria too was a constant threat.

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[23] Arun Ghosh's book, West Bengal Landscapes, is "an admixture of a travel diary, a record of the life and living conditions of the ordinary villagers, of the internal conflicts within government, of the problems .... of reaching the benefits of planned development to the people ..." and is a fascinating read that provides insights into the politics and economics of rural West Bengal.

But between 1951 and 1961, the population of the region increased dramatically because of an inflow of refugees from East Pakistan.[24] West Bengal's population increased from 26.3 million to 34.9 million, an increase of 32.8 percent, and most of these people came to the Sunderbans. (Bose 1968, 9) The people of the Sunderbans are amongst the poorest of West Bengal. Hence, at the bottom of the lowest economic rung, they are some of the poorest in the world. As well, a vast majority of the population belong to scheduled castes and tribes.[25] A group of people previously called the 'untouchables' whom Mahatma Gandhi renamed *harijans* or "people of God,"[26] their position is at the bottom of the Hindu religious and social ladder which exacerbates their marginal position and their poverty. This situation highlights the problems inherent in the migration patterns of the poor and the most vulnerable in society - marginal land for marginal people. Handicapped by their situation they must

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[24] Bengal was partitioned in 1947 and the former East Bengal became East Pakistan, a muslim territory. Many refugees into West Bengal had been well off in East Bengal as landowners and fled to escape real or potential persecution as religious minorities. With the civil war in 1971, East Pakistan gained independence and became Bangladesh.

[25] According to Chatterjee (1982), unlike other parts of India, "there has been in West Bengal no attacks on *Harijans* as a target of caste antagonism." (88) In states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Punjab and Maharashtra, violence against *Harijans*, including rape, are reportedly on the rise. (Hasan 1986, Omvedt 1982)

[26] According to the Vedas, the sacred ancient Sanskrit texts from which Hinduism derives, society is divided into four classes of people - the *Brahmans*, whose duties are the acquisition of learning and scholarship, to perform religious rites and to teach and preach, the *Kshtriyas*, whose duty it was to defend the people and the state, the *Vaishyas*, who were responsible for agriculture and business, and the *Shudras*, who were at the lowest rung of the social system and whose duty it was to serve the other three classes. The vedas denied them any civil, economic or religious rights. The *Shudras*, with time, became the 'untouchables'. (Hasan 1986)

now battle human and non-human adversaries. Unable to control their social and economic circumstances, they are also at the mercy of nature.

Climate

The climate of West Bengal is mostly tropical, hot and humid with four seasons recognised by the Meteorological Department of the Government of India, the hot season, the advancing monsoons, the retreat of the monsoons or autumn, and the cold season.[27] The monsoons bring heavy rains all over the state for about four months, from mid June to mid October, much welcomed by farmers and by all for the relief it brings from the intense heat of the summer. However, at its worst, the impact of the monsoons can be devastating along coastal Bengal. For those in the Sunderbans, a harsh monsoon can mean storms that lash the area leaving precious little behind. Often land too disappears along with homes and crops submerged under flood waters. Nor'westers in the summer and cyclones in the autumn add to the fury of nature, the latter sometimes causing tidal waves.

With so much of the area covered with water, transportation and communication is problematic, exacerbated by the proximity to the open sea. Strong currents and tides dictate the pace of life. Boats, ferries, launches are a prominent part of the transportation system of the area. There are two high tides a day when it is possible to schedule sailings. On land most roads are dirt roads. Although Calcutta is only sixty kilometers away by train, the deltaic nature of the region places it almost a world away. Inconvenient and at times dangerous, the tide forces government intervention to be as slow paced as a ferry ride down the river.

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[27] Except in the northern mountainous region, the foothills of the Himalayan range.

Occupation

Just as the rhythm of the tide dictates the movement of people, fisherfolk too spread their nets to catch fish swimming up with the tide for these waters are rich with a great variety of edible fish. Fish is a very important part of the Bengali diet and West Bengal is a leading producer of fresh water fish in India. Estuarine fishery, coastal fishery and sea fishery in and around West Bengal supply the state's inexhaustive appetite for this delicacy. Of these, the network of salt water creeks in the Sunderbans and broad rivers opening out into the sea is ideal for estuarine fishery. These waters are rich in some excellent and tasty varieties of fish, prawns, lobsters and crabs. All these make their way to the big fish market in Canning and are auctioned off. Most of the fish finds its way to Calcutta to satisfy the high demand there, while most of the prawns and lobsters are destined for foreign markets where buyers are willing to pay exorbitant prices for these delicacies.[28] With the government's demand for foreign currency, what was once a part of the normal local diet has become a luxury that few can afford. At present exchange rates, prawns and lobsters are both priced out of Indian markets. But even those willing to pay are out of luck, for foreign currency "smells" better.

The local farmers also try to grow one paddy crop a year from July to November. This monocrop culture is characteristic of the area, dependent as it is on the monsoon rains to reduce soil salinity. Apart from paddy, farmers grow a variety of

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[28] See Ghosh (1990) for a discussion of the conflict between prawn farm owners, usually businessmen from Calcutta, and small local farmers who live off their land. The former look to lease paddy fields, break embankments and flood the fields with saline water that ebb with the tides in order to increase their output and profits, while the latter are interested in farming their land to feed themselves and their families. Embankments have been known to get sabotaged as a result of which paddy fields get flooded with saline water rendering them unfit for agriculture.

fruits and vegetables, pulses, cereals, and oilseeds. Some are also involved in dairy and poultry farming.

Cycles of poverty / spirals of dependency

> The condition of the people is nowhere near so pathetic as in the Sunderbans. Much as the sea is majestic, and the potential resources of the area considerable, the Sunderbans - the settled area of it - present a depressing picture. (Ghosh 1989, 317)

According to government statistics, ninety-six percent of the population of the district of 24-Parganas(S) is rural, of which thirty-five percent belong to Scheduled Castes and Tribes. More than thirty-one percent of its rural population live below the poverty line.[29] (DRDA, 1992-93) Compared with other districts in the state, 24-Parganas(S) has a higher proportion of Scheduled Castes and Tribes as well as the rural poor. In a survey done by Development Dialogue in 1986 of sex workers in Calcutta's various red light areas, eighteen to nineteen percent of the women came from 24 Parganas,(S).[30] Given that the state of West Bengal has sixteen districts, the overrepresentation of women from this one district attests to the extreme poverty of the region.

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[29] The poverty line "in terms of monthly per capita expenditure is estimated corresponding to daily calorie requirements of 2,400 per person in rural areas and 2,100 in urban areas." (Unicef 1991, 207) In 1992-93, according to the Ministry of Rural Development, the poverty line was Rs.11,000 per family per annum, for a family of five.

[30] Development Dialogue is a non-profit (NGO) society "working in the area of women and child development, and on action projects." It is based in Calcutta with another office in Murshidabad. (conversation with Nita Shirali of Development Dialogue)

Of the thirty-six women I interviewed at SKVIS who were members of the society,[31] two were Muslims, one of whom was a converted Hindu married to a Muslim, and the rest Hindus; and about twenty women told me they belonged to the "scheduled caste",[32] a couple were unsure, and the rest belonged to a "higher caste." They ranged in age from fifteen years to fifty-five years. Nineteen of the women were in their thirties, ten in their twenties, five in their mid to late teens, one in her forties and one in her fifties. I also interviewed a ten-year-old daughter of one of the members. Their level of education ranged from none to Bachelor degrees. Most had completed elementary school, many high school. Most were married, their average age of marriage was sixteen years; four were separated from their husbands and four were widows, while a third were unmarried.

For most, poverty forced them to seek employment at SKVIS. For about a fourth of the women I interviewed, their fathers died when they were young and their lives changed for the worse. All of them had to stop their education, and their mothers, who had never even conceived of working outside the home, were forced to support the

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[31] I also interviewed a number of trainees. I discuss their responses in a later chapter.

[32] At SKVIS, I noticed no tension between Scheduled Caste women and women of a higher caste. At least two of the most active members of the executive committee are from the Scheduled Caste and I believe that the close bond among the committee members has set the tone for interaction within SKVIS. I am grateful to Dr. John Wood for the following insight. In Bengal, caste is less of a concern than in other parts of India. Class is more significant and, as a result, the communists have done better here than in other states.

I noticed little class tension either, if it existed. There were personal disagreements, which exist everywhere, but none of the women ever complained to me of class snobbery on the part of another woman. One of the committee members comes from an aristocratic and formerly wealthy family and had completed a Bachelors degree but displayed no airs. The degree of solidarity among the women is encouraged in large part by Mr. Ray who believes in religious, caste and class tolerance.

family, Sometimes older siblings became responsible for the entire family, in most cases the older sisters. In rare cases where their mothers had died, their fathers struggled alone to raise and support the family until they were old enough to start working. In Tumpa's case, her mother is a member of SKVIS. Sixteen years old and a student in grade eight, she took her mother's place at SKVIS when her mother fell seriously ill. She spins cotton after school, on Saturdays and during school vacations. She is under no pressure from her family to give up her education. Her older sister is also seriously ill, and her father, a farmer, cultivates the little land they have. Her older brother is a student.

A few women were unexpectedly widowed and unprepared for life outside the home. Most had never been to school and had no formal training. Up until that time their husbands had brought home decent wages and they had devoted themselves to being housewives and mothers. Pushpa Mondol's husband worked at the government agricultural research centre in Canning helping out in the laboratories. He went into hospital for minor surgery and contracted jaundice to which he succumbed three months later. She was left with two young children to care for. Similarly Gouri Buiya was widowed when her son was just a few years old. Neither have any schooling and heard of SKVIS through friends.

Some women work to supplement the family income either because their father's/husband's income is inadequate for more than the basic necessities of life, or it is unstable. Only Ajanta Sen mentioned that her in-laws preferred she give up work and stay home. But she prefers to be independent and has her husband's support. Putul Haldar's husband works as a casual labourer. His income is low and varies from day to day and the family depends on her steady income. A few members' husbands or fathers are self-employed and sit by the roadside with their wares or have small businesses like haircutting stalls, stalls selling cigarettes and refreshments in town or at the railway station, a fish shop, and businesses repairing radios and televisions or providing other

services. Business fluctuates and their monthly income varies. But among the women at SKVIS, the economic situation of these women and their families is relatively better with both partners earning an income. A few women's husbands are farmers with small pieces of land that provide enough rice for the family to live on. They may even grow some vegetables, and one of them has a pond that provides the family with fish. Two families have cows to provide fresh milk for the family.

Of the unmarried women that I interviewed, most lived with both parents and their siblings, with their mothers doing most of the housework. All of them mentioned that they were in no hurry to marry and under no pressure from their parents to do so. I suspect that their economic independence and contributions to the family income had a large impact on how they were viewed. No longer the stereotypical burden as daughters, they were valued as income earners and necessary to the household.

With few exceptions, all the married women must face the double burden of both working and taking care of the home and the children. Most are responsible for the housework, unless they live in extended families and their mothers-in-law run the household. Minoti Ghosh, who is unmarried and whose mother died when she was young, does the housework and is assisted by her younger sister. So for most of these women their daily schedules are very full. They wake up at about six a.m., sweep and dust the house, light the coal stove and make tea, cook lunch, pack everyone's lunches, feed the family and send them off to work/school, bathe, pray at the family altar or in the prayer room, eat their breakfast and head off to SKVIS to start work between ten and ten-thirty. In the evenings after work, at about six to six-thirty, they buy the groceries and go home to cook dinner. Some have to fetch water from the public tap or tubewell if they didn't do so in the morning or if they need more water. Some can afford to have water brought to the house by paying the water carrier or send other family members to do this chore. Some have part-time help to assist with the housework. After dinner they do the dishes and maybe the laundry, feed their livestock

if they have any, and then head off to bed. On weekends they finish the chores they couldn't handle during the week. Two women have progessive husbands. Pushpa Deb and Sabita Das mentioned that their husbands help them with housework - shopping for groceries and even cooking. Pushpa Deb's husband even helps with the dishes.[33] He teaches at the local school while Sabita Das's husband has a fish-shop.

Nine of the married women I interviewed are single and had either been widowed or abandoned by their husbands. Eight of them were single mothers. In the Sunderban area, very often men run off with their wife's dowry and/or jewelry and remarry leaving their former wives with no income and, very often, children to support. There is a public misperception that usually it is Muslim women who are abandoned or divorced since Muslim men, by religion, are allowed to remarry. But, in conversation with Mr. Ray and the women at SKVIS, I discovered that this perception is not true for the rural regions of West Bengal. Among the Hindus, women are abandoned just as frequently, if not more often. Among the middle and upper classes, social pressure works against this practice.[34] But among the poor in the rural regions, social pressure against the mistreatment of women is almost non-existent. For example, when Basanti Mazumdar was pregnant with her third child, her husband left and never came back. She sold off her jewelry to feed the family while waiting in vain for him to return. When her daughter, Puchu, was born, someone offered to buy Puchu from her, but she refused. Frequently among the poor, daughters are sold off and end up as

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[33] His assistance with this last chore is especially unusual for men are not supposed to touch someone else's used plate. The notion of *jhootha* is strong in India, referring to food or utensils that have been used. Frequently households will employ a person of a lower caste for this chore, while the preparation of meals remains the housewife's responsibility.

[34] Interestingly enough, according to the Vedas, *Brahmans* are allowed four wives, *Kshtriyas* three, *Vaishyas* two and *Shudras* one. (Hasan 1986, 3)

slaves or prostitutes. Often young boys are bought by criminal rings, maimed and sent into the cities to beg.

Saraswati Adhikari's husband abandoned her and kept her jewelry. Six months into her marriage, Mona Das was abandoned by her husband. Two of the women I interviewed were of the scheduled caste and had had "love marriages" with men of a higher caste. They had been abandoned by their husbands after their in-laws had pressured their husbands to remarry within their caste. Of the widowed or abandoned, commonly the in-laws refuse to allow them to continue to live with them. Sometimes the women themselves choose not to stay because the relationship is so tense. Among the single married women, a few have returned to their own parent's homes and contribute towards the family income as in the case of Mona Das. She supports her sick mother, sister and younger brother, and on weekends farms the plot of land that was left to her brother when her father died. They live on what she manages to grow. Saraswati, too, returned to her parent's home and contributes a fair amount to the family's income. But those with children don't want to burden their parents and struggle to survive on their own. With two exceptions, all of them have children and must support them alone, which has not always been possible without help. As a result, some have been forced to put their children into orphanages and visit them on weekends. Gouri, whose productivity in spinning is affected by her frail health, barely makes enough to feed herself and her son and receives an allowance from SKVIS for her rent. Widowed and desperately poor, she was forced to put her son in an orphanage and visits him once a month. Similarly, Ujjala Ghosh's daughters live in an orphanage and dislike being apart from her, but she has no alternative. Others like Basanti, who was abandoned by her husband, work extra hours. She works from six a.m. to six p.m. five days a week and half a day on saturday to make enough to support her three

children.[35] Her daughter Boishali, who is ten years old, helps with the household chores. Boishali wakes up at six every morning, lights the stove, helps her mother cook for the family, washes her one-year-old baby sister, feeds her eight-year-old brother and sends him off to school, bathes, eats her breakfast and goes off to SKVIS with her baby sister, whom she babysits while her mother works. At lunch time she takes her sister home, bathes her, and brings her mother's lunch to SKVIS. At four p.m. she heads for the group tuitions that are paid for by SKVIS and studies for two hours.[36] When her mother finishes work in the evening, they head home together. I asked her what life was like before her father left them. She recalled school, singing lessons and three meals a day with good food. After her father disappeared, she remembers the hunger. Now, she says, they can afford boiled rice and lentil soup.[37]

Apart from being exploited by their husbands for their dowry, some of the women have also been abused. Ujjala Ghosh put up with a troubled marriage and an abusive husband till they finally separated. For years she refused to separate from him worrying what society would think. After joining SKVIS, she realised her "strength" and chose to become a single parent.

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[35] In India, the official work week is five and a half days.

[36] SKVIS pays two women to tutor the children of some of its members. Everyday after school, the children come to SKVIS for their lessons, which last about two hours. Private tuitions are common practice attesting either to the poor level of instruction at school or the competitive nature of the classes.

[37] Boiled rice and lentil soup is a staple of most Indian diets. Unpolished rice is cheaper than polished rice, and fortunately richer in nutrients. Lentils are rich in vitamins, especially the B-vitamins, and relatively cheap and plentiful.

Many of these experiences highlight the consequences of being poor and of gender and caste discrimination. Their double burden,[38] and in Mona Das's case a triple burden,[39] and experiences with abandonment and dowry exploitation supports the research done by scholars on the lives of poor women in the Third World.

Against this backdrop of geography and gender, dispossession and deprivation, marginality and migration, politics and poverty, SKVIS was born. Without exception, the artisans who work at SKVIS had heard of the society through informal networks of communication, through family, friends and acquiantances.

"A Decade of Women's Struggle - the SKVIS experience"[40]

The Sunderban Khadi and Village Industrial Society was registered as a society in 1978 with the Registrar of Firms, Societies and Non-trading Corporations, West Bengal, in accordance with the West Bengal Societies Registration Act of 1961.[41] The intent of the society is to "serve the poor and distressed people by (providing) employment opportunities," to attempt to improve the economic structure of the village

[38] Wignaraja (1990) refers to 'double burden' as that of being poor and a woman, which differs from the other authors in my bibliography who use 'double burden' to refer to the responsibility of housework and income earner.

[39] She suffers the added burden of farming in order to feed her family. See Momsen (1991) for her discussion of this term. Moser's (1989) definition of 'triple burden' replaces subsistence farming with community work.

[40] This title is borrowed from a SKVIS document of the same name. See SKVIS (1989).

[41] See Appendix B for the society's Memorandum of Association.

through village industries and "to create wide(r) and faster rate(s) of employment opportunities through industrialisation and (the) promotion of allied development activities." (SKVIS Memorandum of Association, 1978)

The original members of SKVIS were a group of seven - Anima Mondal, Sushama Mistri, Bula Raha, Shephali Roy, Pushpa Deb, Purnima Biswas, and Gita Chowdhury - who came together in 1977 and swore to get the society up and running. With the exception of Pushpa Deb and Gita Chowdhury, all of them had been forced by the death or illness of their fathers to take on the burden of supporting their families. In conversations with me, most recalled, with regret, having to abandon their studies.

Sushama Mistri is the eldest of eight siblings. When her father died in 1975, she was in her final year at high school. She dropped out of school to look for work. Originally from East Bengal, now Bangladesh, her father had been forced to relocate his family to a small plot of government-given land in the Sunderban forest.[42] When the Matla river flooded and washed their land away, they moved to Canning. Anima Mondal was about to start college when her father took ill. She gave up her aspirations for higher education and turned her efforts to ensuring at least one decent meal a day for her family. Similarly, Bula Raha, Shephali Roy and Purnima Biswas were the eldest of many siblings. When their fathers took ill or passed away, they shouldered the responsibility for their families. Bula Raha's family live in a remote village called Badkulla in neighbouring Nadia district. Shephali Roy's family came as refugees from East Pakistan, where she is told they were quite well off, to a remote village called Sandeshkhali in the Sunderbans.

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[42] Though officially called East Pakistan after the partition of Bengal, Bengalis often still refer to it as East Bengal.

In organising themselves and setting up their society, they received enormous support and encouragement from Mr. Prakriti Ray and his wife, Tanusree Ray. As had Anima Mondal and Sushama Mistri, each of the others had heard of Mr. Ray and separately approached him for help. He encouraged them to organise themselves into a group and share their burdens and their achievements. Their first meeting to discuss the organisation of a group started in Anima Mondal's cow shed. Mr. Ray brought with him the benefits of a good education and his volunteering experience in rural development with church groups He acted as their resource person and guide, teaching them about oppressive and discriminatory structural systems in society, those that worked to oppress women and keep them subordinate to men and those that discriminated against the poor. He refers to himself as a "catalyst" or "organiser." The women faced many doubters who insisted, "you are girls, you'll never succeed." Mr. Ray himself faced harassment from people in Canning who accused him of bad intent, but together they persevered.

The group started with a rented mud hut as a workshed. Collectively they assessed their skills. Sushama Mistri knew a little about batik and this was to play a key role in the future of SKVIS. She would work for a private batik company during the day to support her family and contribute the rest of her wage to the group. In the evenings, she would teach the others how to do batik. Similarly, Anima Mondal and the others would give private tutoring lessons and do some sewing. In this way, each member contributed to the fund of Rs.800 that was needed to start up the society and register it with the state government and to buy raw materials such as fabric and dyes.

The women were responsible for all aspects of the operation - production, design, marketing, market research, etc. Their first contract was to cover straw rings with banana leaves and tie these on with thread. These leaf covered rings are used as *tabla* stands. As well, they would weave plastic net bags and make glass bangles, necklaces, and other trinkets. As their batik skills improved, they started accepting

orders from others, printing designs onto bolts of fabric, and later block printing or dyeing batik designs onto sarees.[43] For this they would charge a "printing fee." As work increased, the women gave up their other jobs to concentrate on the society, and with more money coming in, the members would take what was needed to feed their families and reinvest their shares in the society. As they received more orders, they would train new artisans who would then join the society. Their membership slowly increased, and some members soon received a small, regular wage.

Marketing was the most difficult of all the tasks. The women, most often Shephali Roy, would take these items to Calcutta to persuade shopkeepers to stock their goods and later to get new customers and printing orders for the bolts of fabric. The going was rough. Several times the shopkeepers would underpay them or not pay them at all. But the lessons were well learned. Shephali Roy's skills at market research improved from consulting with shopkeepers about defects in their products. This information was brought back to the group for discussion and problem solving. This experience has served them well. According to studies and literature reviews by Buvinic (1986), Tinker (1990), Wignaraja (1990), and the World Bank (1991), income-generating projects for women often fail because they don't teach participants about the realities of the market place. Having to do their own marketing in the early days sensitised them to the importance of studying their markets. As well, they were often discouraged when shopkeepers would not buy their products, but Mr. Ray encouraged them to persevere or else they would get nowhere. He told them about the problems they could expect to face, including the bribes that some shopkeepers were really after.

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[43] In conversation with Pushpa Mondol, who lives next door to the society, she recalled seeing Mr. Ray and the "didi's" carrying bolts of fabric in their arms and on their heads from the station to their workshop to save transportation costs.

The women decided not to do business with such shopkeepers rather than bribe them. It was then that SKVIS's strict and unwritten policy against bribery was formulated.

In these early days, the harassment that Mr. Ray faced in Canning as he helped the women organise led the women to decide to visit him in Champahati instead. Mr. Ray and Tanusree Ray opened their home to them and they set up a workshop there as well. Soon, some of the women decided to make their homes in Champahati. This provided them with the opportunity to distance themselves from neighbours who accused them of inappropriate behaviour or told them that they would never succeed. According to Illiana Choudhury,[44] an officer with Unicef in Calcutta, who works with women's groups, the reason why most women's income-generating projects fail is because participants have no faith in each other's skills or trust in each other's commitment. Living and working together, the bond between the women of SKVIS strengthened as did their resolve to succeed. Pushpa Deb, Purnima Biswas and Gita Chowdhury are now married and live with their in-laws, whereas Anima Mondal, Bula Raha, Sushama Mistri and Shephali Roy have chosen to remain single and live together in Champahati while they continue the work of SKVIS.[45]

In 1978, SKVIS participated in a *mela* or fair in Calcutta, displaying their handicrafts for sale. Representatives of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission attending the fair visited their stall, liked their handicrafts and were impressed by their struggle to form a women's group. They invited the women present to get in touch with their office. This the women did, and in April of 1979 they received certification from the Commission for a one-year period, giving them permission to use its logo on their

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[44] I spoke with Dr. Choudhury on the 30th of March, 1995, at Unicef in Calcutta.

[45] This is unusual among rural Bengali women. Social pressure to marry once the next sibling has an income is prevalent.

labels, cash memos (bills), and letterhead. Thereafter, based on good performance, the certificate renewal period was extended to once every three years.

The link up with the Commission was a turning point in SKVIS's history and the society was able to receive credit and expand its operations. Prior to this, the women had attempted to obtain credit from local banks without success. This is consistent with the discrimination women face in getting credit from formal institutions. They are forced to borrow from moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates. As well, this association with the Commission meant that Sushama Mistri would often be invited to teach batik to trainees at the Commission's training centres for a fee. This money would then be contributed to SKVIS's operating funds. That same year, they rented another hut to expand their printing section. This brought in more business and they were able to train more artisans. Then they decided to add a tailoring section to their activities for which another hut was rented in the village. They trained more women in tailoring and through these various stages of expansion increased their membership.

In 1980 the Commission changed its policy to directly fund certain societies. Prior to this, funding was distributed to state-run Khadi and Village Industry Boards, as a result of which the selection process and assistance was a highly politicized and bureaucratic affair.[46] The Commission, which is headquartered in Bombay, set up an office in Calcutta to administer this new policy of directly funding certain organisations. The Commission was satisfied with SKVIS's work and put it on this list. Bula Raha proudly pointed out to me that they bribed no one in order to achieve this. In the West Bengal bureaucracy bribery is common practice to ease paperwork through the corridors of power. Under this new policy they received a "Capital Assistance

[46] I suspect state politics were interfering with most programmes. The Commission is relatively free of local politics, as it receives its funding from the centre and is an autonomous body. It is also headquartered in Bombay, India's business centre, where bureaucracies are much more efficient.

Fund" from the Commission and help in preparing their first budget to the Commission for the 1981/82 financial year.

This Capital Assistance Fund consisted of an interest-free loan of Rs.75,000 for buying capital equipment, an interest-free loan of Rs.3,000 for operating costs, a full grant of one spinning unit, and the construction costs of one shed for women to work in, fifty percent of which was a grant and fifty percent a loan. The spinning unit consisted of fifty *charkha's* or spinning wheels, twenty *belni's* for making cotton slivers, wide cotton strips, from balls of cotton, and twenty *otni's* for removing the seeds from raw cotton. In addition to this hardware, training in spinning was provided for one of their members, and Gita Chowdhury was elected to go to Murshidabad.[47] As well, the Commission provided funding for a retail "counter," or shop, in Canning, advising them of its advantages. Seventy-five percent of this money was a grant for furniture and twenty-five percent a loan. The monthly rent was to be paid by SKVIS. This funding allowed SKVIS to expand their operations quite significantly and to put their organisation on a firm footing. With the Rs.75,000, SKVIS bought raw cotton for spinning and *khadi* from other producers for their batik. Apart from the goods they produced, they also bought handicrafts from other Commission-sponsored organisations to sell at their shop in Canning.

The next financial year, the 1982/83 budget brought more good news. Pleased with the quality of their batik, the Commission provided them with a loan for a dyeing operation. This unit consisted of a shed in which to work, wood blocks for printing, screens for silk screening, tables to work on, and a boiler used in the block printing process. With this, SKVIS was well on its way to success. Much of their work today

[47] Murshidabad is famous for its fine cotton and its fine muslin. It was a key centre during India's struggle for independence because of the spinning and weaving in the area. As a result the Commission has much of its investments there, including its spinning and weaving training centres.

revolves around cotton and silk batik for local markets and export and brings in the bulk of their revenue.

SKVIS first started exporting in 1981. A friend of Mr. Ray's from Holland was the first to place a personal order for several shirts. He then sent SKVIS a list of potential buyers in Europe and SKVIS wrote to these organisations, which were alternative trading organisations (ATOs). SKVIS would send them samples of silk scarves and other handicrafts, and they would place their orders. Some now send representatives to SKVIS to place their orders in person. Today SKVIS is a producer partner of a number of ATOs in Europe and in North America, a relationship that has been vital to the success of its exporting sector.

Over the years, the Commission has aided other smaller projects. In 1987, the Commission funded SKVIS's *ghani* unit, two electrically powered oil presses for the extraction of oil from mustard seeds. In 1991/92 the Commission provided funds (fifty percent grant and fifty percent loan) for their silk reeling unit used to extract silk from cocoons.

Today, SKVIS is housed in a two-storied building. The spinning, block printing and oil-extraction units are on the ground floor. The batik section and central stores are on the first floor. And the accounts section and a facility for trainees is on the second floor. The dyeing unit is housed in an adjoining building while the silk reeling unit occupies a shed across the courtyard from the main buidling.

Sushama remembers the time when they built the two-storied building according to Mr. Ray's design specifications. The land was bought in November 1981 from Miss J. Haldar, the principal of Lady Brabourne College. Because of her interest in social work, she sold them this land at a discount of thirty percent. Then a meeting was held to decide what needed to be done and bought. A decision was made to build a fence along the four sides of the property first and to buy all required materials from the wholesaler. Sushama Mistri would personally ride on the lorry to go and fetch bricks,

stonechips, sand, and iron rods, and along with a few others helped build the building brick by brick. First a small room was built with an asbestos roof and a cement floor. With time the room was expanded and a permanent roof replaced the asbestos. Then more rooms were added and finally the first and second floors. Two male construction workers joined about thirty to thirty-five women from SKVIS to complete the construction. In gratitude, these two men were given employment at SKVIS after the building was completed and today are the only male members of the society.[48] As well a tube well was sunk in 1982 that provides SKVIS with an excellent supply of drinking water.

The "Basanti sub-centre"

The history of their "sub-centre," called Basanti, parallels the problems that the original members of SKVIS faced when trying to make changes in their lives. This sub-centre is a source of special pride at SKVIS and its story was related to me by a number of different women at SKVIS. The Basanti sub-centre was started in 1990 at Purandapur village across the Matla river about three hours from Canning by ferry. Surrounded on all sides by water, the isolation of the Sunderbans is amplified and opportunities for women are even more remote than in Canning. A group of women in the village had heard of SKVIS through word of mouth and came to Canning to ask for help. Seeing genuine interest, SKVIS's committee members decided to give them training in beekeeping. After getting to know them better and seeing their continued eagerness to learn, they arranged for them to receive instruction in *papad* and *bori* making, processed foods made from pulses. These trainees were eager to learn more at

[48] These members neither attend general meetings nor vote. They do not participate in the daily morning assemblies either, but they do participate in departmental meetings.

SKVIS and so a group of thirteen or fourteen women formed the first batch of resident trainees at SKVIS. They received training in spinning, weaving and tailoring. Collectively they decided on a representative and SKVIS arranged for her to go to Birati to receive further training in spinning at the Commission's training centre. Given the women's real and continued interest in economic change, SKVIS bought a piece of land in their village to build a centre for them to work in. This was vociferously opposed by the men in the village, who, according to the committee members, "did not want to see women and girls do better than them, learning new skills and improving themselves." They faced many taunts and much ridicule from many in their village, including women, but Sandhya Biswas and Dipu Ghosh visited the village twice a week to train the women, to check on the centre and the progress being made, as well as to encourage the women to be strong and to persevere.

Now the centre is well established and the people in the village are happy with its presence as a number of their family members work at the centre and contribute to the family income. The sub-centre acts as a subsidiary and brings its finished goods to SKVIS for marketing and it is used as a site for training of new recruits from the Basanti area. It does not have its own committee and the executive members at Canning serve as executive for the sub-centre. The senior members of the sub-centre, some of the first trainees, manage its daily affairs and periodically report to the committee members in Canning. SKVIS also sends its trainers to the sub-centre to give training and they serve as channels of communication. The artisans who work at the sub-centre are paid according to the pay scale set by the Commission as are the artisans in Canning. But despite not having its own executive committee, this has not prevented the women here from taking the initiative to start a chilli farm, since chillies grow well in the area. In 1990 they leased a plot of land and their project was doing well.

Given the failure rate, as mentioned in the introduction, of income-generating projects for women aided by governments and non-governmental agencies, the success of SKVIS is remarkable. Its history is one of struggle, against the triple burden of gender, poverty and caste. When no one would help them, they helped themselves. Within their community, they faced ridicule and the repeated "you are girls, you'll never succeed," but they proved their detractors wrong. In the early days, people in their village accused them of immoral activities and bad behaviour. But after establishing SKVIS through hard work and determination and providing many of their accusers and their family members with incomes, slurs on their reputations have stopped, the opinions have reversed and their work and commitment is now respected. The society is now seen as *bhalo*, or a good society for women. In such a parochial environment where accusations are quick to fly and the level of acceptable bahaviour is restrictive in the extreme, this good reputation is highly valued and carefully guarded by the committee members. Within the paternalistic and patriarchal society that it operates in, a good reputation is integral to continued state patronage for its present and future programmes.

In addition, its good reputation is also a form of protection. Its reputation for being a "good women's society" has brought numerous visitors, local politicians, government officials, and even ministers from Calcutta. SKVIS has had to play a careful political game of no politics. While engaged in the public relations game of parading its politically powerful visitors, it had refused to align itself with any political party. Its success has brought attention to itself, and local economic and political "vested interests," as well as "anti-social elements," are eager to take credit for their success or would like to gain control or a share of the assets.[49] Some have been

[49] "Anti-social elements" refers to trouble-makers who would like to harass the women at SKVIS or groups of men who may attempt to extort money from SKVIS by threatening violence.

interested in using the society's building and premises for events of their own. This is consistent with researchers' findings that men tend to take over growing or successful women's enterprises. This derives from men's customary rights to dispose of women's labour which is extended to their right to dispose of women's income-earning activities. (Bhatt 1987 & de Treville 1987, as cited in Tinker 1990, Columbia HRLR 1977, as cited in Boserup 1990) But by remaining non-partisan and firmly maintaining that this is a "women's society" interested only in "women's economic upliftment" they have drawn on the traditional practice of the segregation of women and of respecting their space. Those who would insist on taking over would be accused of bad intent and of having no *lojja* in wanting to mingle among the women. Hence, a loss of reputation arising from accusations of irresponsible behaviour or of promoting or encouraging socially unacceptable behaviour in its members or trainees could lead to those with "vested interests" creating problems for SKVIS. To prevent this, SKVIS must, in essence, operate as a perfect mother, virtuous beyond reproach.[50] As a result, its committee members are vigilant against any situations that may have negative repercussions for the society.

SKVIS's executive committee have made a decision not to expand its production level or expand the society. It has decided to focus on helping women in other villages within the Sunderban area, to help them establish societes of their own. Given the high percentage of people from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the area and the oppression they have faced historically, SKVIS will be providing much needed assistance by teaching them spinning, weaving and other skills. Gandhi believed that

[50] While the committee members try to ensure that the organisation and all activities conducted on its premises remain beyond reproach, they in no way dictate to its members regarding conduct in their private lives.

spinning was the appropriate occupation for women and for the scheduled castes and tribes to alleviate their poverty. In my next chapter, I explore Gandhi's philosophy on economic and political life.

Chapter 2

The history and significance of *khadi*

Mythologised in Richard Attenborough's movie Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is ***Mahatma*** to India's millions, or the "Great Soul."[1] Also called the "Father of the Nation," he led India to freedom from the British *Raj*. More amazingly, his method for shaking off the oppression of colonial rule was based on non-violence or *ahimsa*. Today, he bestrides Indian political history like a colossus, and the name Gandhi has enormous political significance. In India's recent past there have been Prime Ministers who have shared this name and gained political advantage from a non-filial association. Gandhi has influenced political leaders and human rights activists around the world, not least Martin Luther King. From Attenborough's Gandhi the world remembers a little bespectacled bald man wrapped in a loin cloth and sometimes with another piece of cloth wrapped around his body. This cloth was *khadi*, handspun and handwoven cotton.

The political, economic and social significance of *khadi* is closely tied to India's recent political history. The history of *khadi*, relevant to this discussion, begins during India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. It was Gandhi who gave it life, named it and nurtured its growth and its role in India's march to freedom. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence or *ahimsa* was the guiding principle in this struggle and, not unexpectedly, the essence of *khadi* reflects this approach.

Cloth was symbolic of the dependency relationship between India and Britain. Through the years of colonial rule, Indian cotton was increasingly being exported to Britain for its cotton mills, while finished cloth was returned and sold in India. Not only was India exploited for the raw material, but it was also keeping the British textile

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[1] In Hindi, "maha" means great and "atma" means soul.

industry and its owners in business. As a result of this, village cottage industries of handspun and handwoven *khadi* that had existed for centuries before colonial rule were slowly dying out. Thus the call for a boycott of British textiles was both a political and economic stand against British rule. In Gandhi's words, "*Khadi* to me is the symbol of the unity of Indian humanity, of its economic freedom and equality, and therefore, ultimately, in the poetic expression of Jawaharlal Nehru, 'the livery of India's freedom'." (Gandhi 1945, iii, as quoted in KVIC 1991a, 5)

Gandhi and *Khadi*

Gandhi was first introduced to the spinning wheel in 1916 when he visited the village of Bijapur near Ahmedabad in Gujarat and saw a family engaged in spinning on the *charkha*.[2] The handspun handwoven cloth that was then produced he named *khadi*. He was struck by the self-sufficiency that could be achieved with this single means of production and saw the potential in spinning and weaving at home for India's rural millions. Thereafter, he was a strong proponent of spinning as an activity to compliment agriculture, which would allow people to engage in productive, honest even honourable work during the months when not involved in farming. This would allow them to clothe themselves and to sell the products of their handiwork in the cities thereby supplementing their incomes. This would help tide them over financially during droughts and food shortages. As well, Gandhi supported *khadi* activities as cottage industries for the millions more who were unemployed. As he put it, "if pestilence, poverty and bloodshed are to be avoided, there is no remedy but Khadi and other village industries." (Gandhi 1938, as cited in KVIC 1991a, 3)

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[2] The spinning wheel.

The *swadeshi* movement and *swaraj*

On the 20th of July, 1905, the British government in India announced the partition of Bengal. This was done in order to tighten its administrative grip on the country by dividing-to-rule the province of Bengal. It was the intellectual and political members of the Bengali community who were spearheading the push for freedom from the British *Raj* in India,[3] and in order to curb their growing success, the British made this decision. But this move was widely criticised and condemned across the country and led to a backlash resulting in the call for *swadeshi* which means belonging to, or made in, one's own country. This slogan was accompanied by another for the "boycott" of foreign goods. This *swadeshi* movement slowly grew from 1906 onwards and lay the groundwork for Gandhi's later call for the support of *khadi*.

After Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915, he read a book by R.C. Dutta called the Economic History of India that chronicled the plight of weavers in India and their growing pauperisation and alienation from their craft and the destruction of village economies. He reportedly wept at the violence that had been wrought on the village economies by the importation of British mill cloth and the duties and levies placed on locally produced *khadi*. (Gandhi 1962, 93, as cited in Bakshi 1983, 134) It was this text that influenced Gandhi, and he realised that *khadi* was the soul of *swadeshi* and that if *swaraj* or independence was to be gained, villages would have to freed as well, thus his call for the wearing of khadi. Gandhi himself vowed to wear clothes made of *khadi*, except for his cap and his socks.

In 1920, the Congress party officially adopted the policy of *swaraj* and Gandhi's promotion of *khadi* took on added urgency. Gandhi knew that *khadi* was more expensive than mill cloth and that it would be difficult for the poor to buy enough of it

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[3] At the time, Calcutta was the capital of Bengal and the capital of India.

to replace the mill cloth they had discarded, so his advice was for people to limit themselves to wearing just a loin cloth made of *khadi*. He wrote, "Let there be no prudery about dress. India has never insisted on full covering of the body for the males as a test of culture. In our climate we hardly need more to protect our own bodies during the warm months of the year." (Gandhi 1921c, as cited in Fischer 1983, 159) He then decided to lead by example and took to wearing a loin cloth with a shawl to cover himself in cooler weather. As well he even gave up the cap and socks that were not made of *khadi*, rejecting the last vestiges of foreign garb.

Swadeshi and the boycott of foreign goods was especially important because of its enormous economic significance to the millions of poor especially in India's villages. *Khadi* was a symbol of the oppression of the villages and therefore the oppression of India by British rule. Influenced by R.C. Dutta's, "Economic History of India," and having walked through innumerable villages, Gandhi realised that if *khadi* were to die out, the villages would die out as well, and without villages there would be no India.

His concern for the destruction of village economies led Gandhi to crusade for the 'upliftment of villages' and for 'rural reconstruction.' For Gandhi, it was a must for the peasants in India to have a simple industry to supplement agriculture. Over eighty-five percent of India's population were getting increasingly poor from lack of work to occupy their time. Gandhi's solution was for poor people to take to spinning. He strongly opposed the export of cotton and claimed that if he had the power, he would prevent even "an ounce of cotton from being exported" and distribute it to weavers instead. (Gandhi 1921b, as cited in Fischer 1983, 160) Gandhi saw his solution of re-introducing spinning in villages as one that would cause a ripple effect. The reinstatement of the village weaver would act as a catalyst leading to the reinstatement of a host of other village artisans such as the "... village dyer, the village washerman, the village blacksmith, the village carpenter, ... and many others." (Gandhi 1927, as

cited in Fischer 1983, 225) *Khadi* was the "central sun" around which the other village industries would revolve like planets. (Bakshi 1983, 136) Villages would then be self-sufficient in feeding and clothing themselves except for bartering with other villages for what could not be produced locally India would then be an economy built up of independent and self-sufficient villages based on the production of *khadi* and other village industries. For Gandhi, this would make possible real *swaraj* or self-government. The ouster of the British from India alone was not enough.

As well, personal *swaraj* could be gained by taking to the spinning wheel, by each person spinning everyday. Gandhi deplored the "divorce between intelligence and labour" which had led to the "criminal neglect of villages." The glorification of education at the expense of labour was unacceptable to Gandhi.[4] He believed that each person should occupy their free time by spinning, by labouring with their hands. This was honourable to Gandhi. As well, Gandhi believed that the revival of hand-made products, that of the village industries, would revive villages. Its replacement by "imitations of the West and machine-made products" had, according to Gandhi, contributed to the pauperisation of the people. By valuing the labour of village artisans and consuming their products, like soap, paper, match sticks and edible oils, villages would be revived. (Gandhi 1945, 14-15)

Gandhi was also interested in the removal of caste barriers in India. He had renamed the "untouchables" as "harijans" or "God's people" and they were later

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[4] Related to the divorce between labour and theoretical knowledge, Marglin (1990) has an interesting discussion of different knowledge systems that he calls 'techne' and 'episteme'. Technic knowledge is practical, intuitive, personal and contextual among other things, while epistemic knowledge is logical, analytic, theoretical impersonal and universal. He argues that the each system of knowledge gives rise to technologies and social relations that reflect its own qualities. The belief in the superiority of the latter system has led to its domination of production practices as a result of which workers are alienated from the experience and stripped of control and power over the process.

renamed as the Schedule Castes and Tribes by the government.[5] Gandhi believed spinning was the occupation to lift the harijans, "the most helpless among the poorest," out of poverty. (Gandhi 1934b, as cited in KVIC 1991a, 81) As well, Gandhi believed that spinning was an appropriate occupation for women. It disturbed him to see women labouring as road construction workers and believed that women working in the mills were being "exposed to temptations and risks to which they ought not to be exposed." If they had a spinning wheel, Gandhi believed that "no woman need ever seek any other employment than sitting at the spinning-wheel." (Gandhi 1941, 17, as cited in Desai 1952, 36)[6]

Gandhi's critique of industrialism, capitalism and "development"

The growth of industrialism in Britain and in Europe and the destructive impact of the growing industrialisation of the British textile industry on the Indian textile industry and on India's economy as a whole led Gandhi to some keen insights about the processes of industrialism, the production of surplus and the accumulation of capital. The interest in adopting the Western path to industrial development by Indian political leaders, in particular Jawaharlal Nehru, was opposed by Gandhi, who recognised the exploitative potential, and hence violence, in industrialism and the accumulation of capital and surplus.

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[5] Gandhi's three point programme or "constructive work" programme was the removal of untouchability of scheduled castes and tribes, Hindu-Muslim unity and universal spinning. (Gandhi 1945)

[6] Gandhi had a cultural feminist view of women. He saw women as the superior and stronger sex for their qualities of "sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge." See Gidwani (1989) for a discussion of Gandhi's views and Jain (1984) for a Gandhian approach to the 'development' of women.

According to Gandhi, *swaraj* or self-government did not mean "the end of capital." Rather he distinguished between capital and the evils of capitalism which was exploitative and hence violent.

> Accumulated capital means ruling power. I am for the establishment of right relations between capital and labour. ... I do not wish for the supremacy of one over the other. I do not think there is any natural antagonism between them.

Establishing this balance between capital and labour would then lead to economic equality, and the exploitation of those who labour by those who owned capital would cease. "I do not fight capital," wrote Gandhi, "I fight capitalism." (Gandhi 1925, as cited in Fischer 1983, 285)

Gandhi believed that industrialisation was not the route to take to alleviate the poverty and unemployment of the majority of India's poor. Gandhi saw "the evils" of capitalism as "inherent in industrialism" and that the two were linked to violence.[7] (Gandhi 1924, as cited in Fischer 1983, 291-292) He wrote,

> Industrialism is, I am afraid, going to be a curse for mankind.... Industrialism depends on your capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to you and on the absence of competition.... Pauperism must go. But industrialism is no remedy.

India's "ancient cottage industry of hand-spinning" was seen by Gandhi as necessary to "resist industrialism." (Gandhi 1931, as cited in Fischer 1983, 287)

Gandhi recognised that the pauperisation of the people was occurring because of the inappropriate use of machinery that was the legacy of industrialism. He felt that there was a place for machinery depending on the country.

> What I oppose is the "craze" for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on "saving labour" till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. ... Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. (Gandhi 1924b, as cited in Fischer 1983, 291-292)

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[7] See Marglin (1991) for a feminist critique of the industrial mode of production as "repressive and anti-democratic."

As a result, Gandhi felt that machinery may be relevant in a "sparsely populated" country like America, but India, a different "civilisation" with a different geography, history and lifestyle, "...may not need it at all. Where there are millions and millions of units of idle labour, it is no use thinking of labour saving devices." (Gandhi 1935, as cited in Fischer 1983, 293)

Gandhi disagreed with Adam Smith's analysis in The Wealth of Nations. According to Smith, the "human element" was one of the primary "disturbing factors" that prevented economic laws from having a free play. But to Gandhi, it was this "human element" on which the economics of *khadi* rested. The "pure economic motive" that Smith believed would guide the market was nothing more than human selfishness and was, in fact, to Gandhi, the "disturbing factor" that needed to be overcome. (Gandhi 1934c, 252, as cited in KVIC, 1991a, 85) "Khadi economics," was "based on patriotism, sentiment and humanity" (Gandhi 1938, as cited in KVIC 1991a, 2). Thus Gandhi believed it was the moral duty of all Indians to wear *khadi* in support of village economies. "*Khadi* represents human values, mill cloth represents mere metallic values, wrote Gandhi." (Gandhi 1934a, as cited in Gupta undated, 79) As well, Adam Smith believed in international trade, while Gandhi believed in protective trade. "Free trade may be good for England which dumps down her manufactures among helpless people and wishes her wants to be supplied from outside at the cheapest rate. But free trade has ruined India's peasantry.....Moreover, no new trade can compete with foreign trade without protection." (Gandhi 1924a, as cited in Gupta undated, 143) He knew there was no equality in a relationship between established economies or industries and less powerful economies or infant industries. He compared such a relationship to that between a giant and a dwarf. (Gandhi 1931, as cited in Gupta undated, 144) He recognised the capacity of the powerful to exploit others for cheap inputs to give itself an added advantage. Hence, Gandhi disagreed with the founding economic rules of capitalist societies.

Hence, according to Gandhi's economic philosophy, in order to take the non-violent route, "surplus, the mother of profit, ... the source of exploitation and poverty" needed to be eradicated. According to this economic equation, production should not be geared towards the accumulation of surplus and wealth but rather towards satisfying the basic needs of people. In fact, anyone consuming more than this amount was, according to Gandhi, an expropriator. (Dasgupta 1989, 201-202)

Hence, for Gandhi, economics and politics could not be separated. The adoption of *khadi* was necessary not only to rebuild India's village economies but also as a non-violent method of gaining independence from the British colonial government and to achieve true self-government.

The Indian National Congress

The founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 proved to be a major event in the political history of India. India's first national political party, the Congress leadership initially supported British rule believing that this alone could effectively guide India's development into a modern nation. But at the crucial point of its disillusionment with the Raj, when it sought to free India from this dependency relationship and sought *swaraj* or self-rule, the Congress party played a major role in getting the well-educated, middle class, "intelligentsia" and professionals involved in Indian politics. Its birth coincided with the growing political consciousness of the Indian population. This was facilitated in part by the development of English education, newspapers, technical change leading to improved and faster means of communication, and an increasing awareness of India's impressive past. (Bakshi 1983, 1-2)

Bakshi (1983) attributes the effectiveness of the Congress party in raising people's political consciousness of their constitutional rights under the British Raj to the fact that its annual meetings were held in major cities over a number of days and that its members debated national issues on a public platform providing a forum for free and

frank dialogue. These sessions greatly helped in the formation of public opinion and were crucial in the evolution of the process of political education of the people, preparing the way for the successful mobilisation of India's millions to join the non-violent resistance movement that Gandhi brought back with him from South Africa in 1915.

The Congress party was established with the cooperation of its Indian members and supported by key liberal British administrators. It was initiated by Allan Octavian Hume, an eminent member of the civil service in India and a democrat at heart, who was concerned that the British Raj had failed to solve the economic problems of India, that government was out of touch with the majority of citizens and that there could be no hope or security for the people unless they had political representation in the government. The Viceroy of India, Lord Dufferin, agreed with Hume, believing that the existence of a national organisation collecting views and opinions from across the country through which the British government in India could keep informed would prove useful to both the government and the public. (Bakshi 1983, 1-3)

In its early days, the Congress party leadership believed that "British rule alone could secure to the country the peace and order which were necesary for slowly evolving a nation out of the heterogenous elements of which it was composed, and assuring to it a ready advance in different directions." (Gokhale 1920, 1006, as cited in Bakshi 1983, 3) The literate and upper classes in India were enamoured by all things British, including the country's history and culture. But ultimately the Congress party became the central force around which India rallied in its struggle for freedom, gaining independence in 1947. (Bakshi 1983, 1-3)

Gandhi enters Indian politics

Gandhi started to take an interest in the problem of India's independence while fighting racism in South Africa. Gandhi visited London between July and November of

1909 to lobby the British government to block further anti-Indian legislation in South Africa and on his way back to South Africa he wrote of his hopes for the future in his first book, *Hind Swaraj* or Indian Home Rule calling for self-government and independence from British rule.

After he returned to India from South Africa, he attended annual sessions of the Congress party but his participation was limited as he sought to avoid politics. However, in 1920 he joined the All-India Home Rule League and became its president. Within the struggle for independence, *swaraj* and *swadeshi* were closely linked. The *swadeshi* movement became a strategy for the attainment of *swaraj*. At a historic special session of the Congress in Calcutta on September 4, 1920, the party approved and adopted the policy of progressive, non-violent, non-cooperation proposed by Gandhi in order to protest the government's ruthless killing of people in Punjab and their favouritism toward the Muslims through preferential voting rights and to establish *swaraj*.[8] Three months later at the December 1920 Congress meeting, the party declared its intentions to achieve *swaraj* within one year. As part of the effort towards this goal, it recommended, among other things, "the introduction of the spinning wheel in every home, larger production and use of khadi and (the) complete giving up of foreign cloth." (Gandhi 1921a, as cited in Fischer 1983, 168-169) It was at this time that Gandhi called on the men of India to wear a *khadi* loin cloth and himself took to this garb.

Gandhi tirelessly travelled throughout India addressing hundreds and thousands in mass meetings to spread his message. During these meetings he would ask the people to take off their foreign clothes, from coats down to underwear, and put them in a heap. Then he would light a match and set them on fire. (Fischer 1983, 159)

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[8] See Bakshi (1983, 44-86) for a detailed discussion of these events.

When Gandhi decided to step back from politics, his friends, afraid that this would split the Congress party, argued against this and persuaded him to accept the presidency of the party for 1925. As a condition for accepting this role, Gandhi insisted the wearing of khadi must become a strict condition of membership in the party. He also suggested that Congress members should spin each day.

With the commitment of the Congress party to *khadi*, the All India Khadi Board was slowly formed and was established in December of 1923. An integral part of the Congress, it worked under its supervision to spread the message behind *khadi* and to encourage universal spinning.

After India gained independence, Gandhi influenced the newly forming government to include *khadi* and other village industries in its plans for the "economic rebuilding" of India, especially for its rural poor. (Kothari 1957, 3) Soon after independence the government created the All India Khadi and Village Industries Board (AIKVIB). And in 1953, Parliament enacted the "Khadi and other Handloom Industries Development (Additional Excise Duty on Cloth) Act" which was "An Act to provide for the levy and collection of an additional duty of excise on cloth to raise funds for the purpose of developing khadi and other handloom industries and for promoting the sale of khadi and other handloom cloth." (Government of India 1983, 1) This act placed an additional duty on domestic mill cloth in order to subsidise the production of *khadi*.

The present khadi and villages industries programmes in place were formulated during the early days of independence when committees were struck to study the problem and to put together comprehensive recommendations to the government for the design and implementation of the All India Khadi and Village Industries Board (AIKVIB) programmes. The AIKVIB was also involved in this process.[9] These programmes were aimed at alleviating the widespread poverty among India's rural

[9] See Kothari (1957) for a detailed discussion of this process.

population. Spinning, weaving and village industries were seen as the perfect solution for the following reasons. They are labour-intensive and thus capable of employing larger numbers than capital-intensive initiatives. They are powered by human energy rather than conventional energy and are thus environmentally friendly. They involve low cost capital and locally available raw materials and taken together allow for people to live and work with dignity in their own villages instead of being forced to flood the cities and live in slums and work for exploitative wages. (KVIC 1991b, cover page)

After independence, the Government of India drew up its First Five-Year Plan. In it Rs.thirty crores was budgeted for the development of village and small-scale industries while considerably more was spent on large-scale industries.[10] Despite this, unemployment did not decline, nor was there any improvement in the standard of living for the majority, and the government was forced to reconsider its allocation of funds for the different sectors of the economy. For its Second Five-Year Plan from 1955-56 to 1960-61, Rs.two hundred crore was allocated, reflecting the government's concern with the problems of the rural majority and influenced by the recommendations of the All India Khadi and Village Industries Board.(Kothari 1957, v)

In November of 1954, the All India Khadi and Village Industries Board (AIKVIB) drew up its plan for the implementation of a programme for the development of khadi and village industries as part of its recommendations to the Government of India for its Second Five-Year Plan. This proposal contributed to the increased commitment of the government towards developing the rural economy. In principle it was based on the acknowledgement of the need for "a new social structure based on social and economic justice and guarantee of opportunity and equality of status" for all. This was to be ensured by the AIKVIB's programme, which would protect the seventy-

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[10] One crore is the equivalent of ten million.

one percent of India's labour force who were employed from competition from large-scale industries. (Kothari 1957, 12-13)

The Khadi and Village Industries Commission

The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) was created by an Act of Parliament (No.61 of 1956 amended by Act No.12 of 1987). Its functions are to "plan, organise and implement programmes for the development of khadi and village industries." (KVIC 1985, 4) With this legislation, the All India Khadi and Village Industries Board was replaced by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, which was given specific duties and powers by Parliament. The Commission is provided with two funds, the "khadi fund" and the "village industries fund," from the Central Government, and the Commission is authorised to administer these funds in carrying out its legislated functions. (KVIC 1985, 6) For its 1991-92 fiscal year, the Commission was provided with a budget of Rs.193 crores by the Government of India of which Rs.74.07 crores was earmarked for khadi programmes and Rs.111.96 crores for village industries programmes reflecting a significant increase in the government's commitment towards these programmes. (KVIC 1992, 18)

The Commission's central office is located in Bombay with branch offices in every state. The central office approves applications and budget proposals from recipients of its programmes, while branch offices provide these organisations with technical assistance. Broadly, the Commission's objectives are to provide employment in rural areas, skill improvement of people given employment, transfer of technology to rural areas through khadi and village industry programmes, creating self reliance amongst the people and building up a strong community spirit and rural industrialisation. (KVIC 1991b, 1) It has a commitment to helping disadvantaged groups from the "weaker section" such as women and people from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs) and has "liberalised patterns of assistance" for such

groups. This means that fifty percent or more, depending on the type of programme, of its financial assistance is in the form of non-repayable grants and the rest is a loan. (KVIC 1992b, 2)

In order to carry out these objectives,[11] the Commission either directly funds[12] registered societies and cooperatives or funds them through state-level Khadi and Village Industries Boards.[13] It arranges for these organisations to obtain loans from accredited banks at an interest rate of four percent per year and subsidises the difference between this interest rate and prevailing bank rates. Apart from providing financial assistance, it also provides training in the production of *khadi* and a wide range of village crafts. The Commission has a number of training centres across the country where it conducts various courses for this purpose. As well, it arranges for the marketing of goods produced through its programmes and runs *bhavans* or large shops in the major cities. It also has a wide network of smaller sales outlets across the country. As well, all government offices must buy their supplies from government *khadi* organisations, items like curtains, paper and tea towels. The Commission's research and development department works to improve the design and productive output of its various models of spinning wheels and other technologies, to improve

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[11] See Appendix C for a list of the Commission's functions and *khadi* and village industries activities.

[12] Directly funded organisations are mostly recipients of *khadi* programmes. (KVIC 1992) According to Kamal Taori the CEO of the Commission, directly funded organisations are checked for "democratic functioning" before being selected. I suspect this is because *khadi* is associated with Gandhi who was a strong proponent of individual self-government.

[13] The state Khadi Boards mostly implement the village industries programme.

production processes and to develop new products and production processes. (KVIC 1991b, 2-3, KVIC 1992a, 39-41)

According to its 1991-92 Annual Report, the Commission provided employment to nearly 5,000,000 people across the nation from 210,000 villages.[14] The participation rate for SC/STs as a percentage of total employment was a little more than thirty percent, and the participation rate for women in its programmes was forty-six percent. (KVIC 1992a, 4)

Khadi is still worn by a number of people in India especially by those who participated in India's fight for independence. But it is also increasingly popular among the younger generation. Because the cotton thread is hand-spun, it is uneven in thickness. This lends to the unevenness of the fabric creating an "air-conditioned" effect that is suitable in a hot climate like India's. As well, each strand is fairly thick resulting in a strong and long-lasting fabric that gives good value for money. This is important as *khadi* is more expensive than mill cloth because of its labour-intensive production. Across India, *khadi* experiences cycles of popularity among fashion-conscious women. In West Bengal, a communist state where the wider population is highly political, it is worn by those wanting to make a political statement and is popular among college students. It is also worn by those who appreciate the fabric for itself. As a result of the characteristics of the cloth and its various users, the demand for *khadi* is expected to continue.[15]

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[14] Some recipients of the Commission's funding are individuals and not necessarily all groups.

[15] Some of the information here was obtained through interviews with Kamal Taori, CEO of the Commission, and G.K. Ghosh, Director of its Calcutta office.

SKVIS is a women's society with a high percentage of women from SC/STs and is directly funded by the Commission. It has received a number of grants and loans from the Commission's offices in Bombay for both *khadi* and village industry activities such as spinning, weaving, *ghani* or edible oil extraction, silk reeling and the production of batik products. In the next chapter, the thesis explores the organisation of SKVIS and its implementation of Commission-sponsored activities.

Chapter 3

The Sunderban Khadi and Village Industrial Society

> SUNDARBAN KHADI & VILLAGE INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY (SKVIS) today is a successful venture of a small group of women belonging to Canning in the Sunderbans Region of West Bengal. SKVIS emerged from what was conceived in 1978 by a few women as a quest for self-reliance on the economic front. Presently it is a comprehensive experience of networking and awareness building of a strong women's organisation giving stress much beyond just promoting village industries. (SKVIS 1989, 1)

Today SKVIS is organised around three areas: Production, Marketing, and Training. According to its financial statements for the year ending March 31, 1992, SKVIS had 950 registered members, a net profit of Rs.59,000, fixed assets of about Rs.1,200,000, and a turnover of about Rs.8,514,000; a far cry from the nine members and Rs.800 they started out with in 1978. They have registered a profit every year since 1980.[1] Though economic development is the primary focus of the organisation, it recognizes the social discrimination faced by women and the harsh realities that this imposes. As a result social change is an integral, though implicit, part of its goal.

The Executive Committee

> If one were to survey God's cabinet in the Hindu pantheon - all the (significant) portfolios in the divine cabinet are held by women. Finance is held by Goddess Lakshmi, Education by Goddess Saraswati and Defense by Goddess Durga. (Swamy 1984, 74)

According to the society's Memorandum of Association,[2] "the affairs of the society shall be conducted, managed and administered by a body called the Executive Committee consisting of not less than seven and not more than eleven members, which

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[1] Information in this paragraph is based on conversation with Bula Raha in 1993.

[2] See Appendix B for the SKVIS Memorandum of Association.

shall be composed as follows: President, Vice-president, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Treasurer, members; and this Executive committee is to be a democratically elected body that stays in office for a period of three years after which a new election is to be held at the Annual General Meeting (AGM)." At the time of my field research, the Executive Committee consisted of nine members:[3]

Table 3.1
The Executive Committee

President	Tanusree Ray
Vice-president	Shephali Roy
Secretary	Anima Mondal
Assistant Secretary	Bula Raha
Treasurer	Sushama Mistri
Member	Sandhya Biswas
Member	Gita Chowdhury
Member	Pushpa Deb
Member	Ajanta Sen

Apart from fulfilling their executive duties, each of these members also works at SKVIS keeping the society running, except for the President, Tanusree Ray, who manages her family and attends committee meetings when major decisions need to be made.[4] Anima Mondal, as secretary, is a key figure in coordinating all aspects of the society's work and its different departments and ensures that the society is running smoothly in its day-to-day work. Tireless and super-efficient, she acts as liaison with

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[3] See Appendix B for a list of the original executive committee.

[4] Tanusree Ray has been of enormous help to SKVIS. When the original members were starting up a society, she welcomed them into her home and allowed them to set up a workshop there. In middle class Bengali society, such action is uncommon. She helped them as an older sister would and contributed pots and pans from her kitchen towards their batik work. From an educated middle-class background, she lends a woman's perspective that her husband cannot. The committee members value her continuing support of their work and trust her advice and offered her the presidency with the endorsement of the general membership.

the government and handles all correspondence and communication, including public relations for the society when visitors arrive.

Sushama Mistri, as treasurer, countersigns cheques and is the creative and artistic member of the team. Constantly on the move, she oversees the design section of the batik and printing departments and is responsible for creating new designs. She produces the larger, more complicated wall-hangings that are exported. As well, she gives training in batik and printing for the Commission and supervises SKVIS's numerous batik training programmes, often travelling for hours to various training sites to make sure things are going smoothly.

Shephali Roy is in charge of exports and handles the marketing as well. She receives new orders, passes them on and oversees labelling and packaging. She keeps an eye out for special instructions from buyers and delivery deadlines. As well, she handles the red tape of quality control inspection by the government's Central Silk Board and the documentation for export that is required by customs before it authorizes clearance of packages for shipping.

Bula Raha is in charge of the accounts department and is assisted by Pushpa Deb and Ajanta Sen. She signs legal documents and cheques on behalf of the society, ensures that SKVIS's books are up to date for its yearly financial audit, and prepares SKVIS's yearly budget submitted to the Khadi Commission. Pushpa Deb and Ajanta Sen handle salary, prepare vouchers for goods bought, and update the cash books and ledgers.

Sandhya Biswas is the DRDA Supervisor and administers the society's DRDA training programme and is SKVIS's liaison with the agency.[5] She handles the documentation required by the agency, coordinates the work of the programme

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[5] SKVIS acts as an NGO for the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA).

supervisors and trainers, and travels to the various sites to ensure that the training programme is going according to schedule.

Major decisions about the society as a whole are discussed by the committee members, who may consult with members who have the knowledge and experience regarding the specific case or consult Mr. Ray. Major decisions are ratified or rejected by the general membership during general meetings. Given the size of SKVIS, there is a heirarchy of decision-making within SKVIS. Individual departments are responsible for the day-to-day business, the smooth running of production and for working cooperatively. In order to ensure this, each department conducts group meetings for the artisans to share their collective knowledge and to catch anything that might have been missed by one person deciding alone. This process of group discussions has been a vital part of decision-making at SKVIS since its inception.

Production in the different departments

Major areas of production at SKVIS are spinning, batik, dyeing, block printing, tailoring, silk reeling, and ghani or village oil. Beekeeping, *papad* and *bori* making,[6] screen printing, weaving, jams and jellies, occur on a smaller scale or are less regular activities taught to trainees. The organization focuses on a few areas that have a steady market and can provide their members with a steady income in which they are able to ensure production quality. In 1991-92 total production was valued at Rs.2,943,000.

Spinning

Presently, SKVIS has five spinning units,three in Canning and two at their Basanti sub-centre. Of the 150 spinning wheels at Canning, some are used by the workers, while others are reserved for their training programmes. The model of

[6] These are processed foods made from pulses.

spinning wheel used by SKVIS is called the six-spindle all metal New Model (ambar) Charkha and is more complicated than the simple design used by Gandhi, but it requires hand-spinning all the same.

In the spinning room, housed in one half of the ground floor, spinning wheels are lined up in rows and columns, about thirty-five of them. Some women choose to work at SKVIS, distanced from the situation at home, while some take their charkhas home and work when they can. Here wide swatches or "slivers" of cotton are spun into thread and braided into "hanks" or *lachis*. Previously, the women produced these "slivers" themselves, but later they turned to buying them from another Commission-sponsored organisation to ensure a steady supply and a higher income for the women. These slivers have stronger fibres which break less often and are easier to work with.

Each worker is assigned a spinning wheel and is responsible for maintaining it. As part of their training, women are taught to take their machines apart and to reassemble them after cleaning. This is supposed to be a monthly ritual, and it is left to the individual to choose to do it regularly or not. The spinners are paid according to their output and so make sure that their machines are working smoothly. SKVIS provides them with a mixture of petrol and kerosene for cleaning the gears, while the women pay for the coconut oil and kerosene used for lubrication. I watched Monu demonstrate her skill in taking apart, cleaning and reassembling her machine, while she named all the different parts of the machine. I estimate the spinning wheel has no less than one hundred parts - gears, spindles, bobbins, bobbin stands, screws, rods, clips, pins, etcetera. Fascinated by the technology, she proudly informed me that she could strip, clean and reassemble her machine in less than an hour.

Women are paid per *lachi* or hank produced. Calculated according to an estimation of the fineness of the thread that can be produced on their model of spinning wheel and the required length, the Commission has set rates per hank.

Jhorna Debnath is the supervisor of this department and instructs new trainees who come to SKVIS. She supervises the spinning, distributes the cotton slivers to the women, collects their finished work, acts as troubleshooter if there are production problems, and keeps an eye on the quality of their work. She handles the petty cash, keeps a record of the department's expenses, that is, money spent on buying petrol, kerosene, and other supplies that the spinners need for production, as well as for the tea, sugar and milk used for their tea break. Once a week or every other week, she hands all the bills over to the accounts department. She also supervises the work of the women who spin at home. She keeps track of all the equipment in the department and its use in the different training centres and makes sure that its all in good working condition.

Batik

This department takes up nearly half of the first floor and has about twenty women ranging in age from fifteen to fifty-five. Here, cotton and silk scarves and wall hangings with batik designs are produced. Four women are responsible for measuring and cutting bolts of cotton and silk fabric down to the right sizes and stencilling designs onto these pieces for the others to wax. The other twelve women work in groups of three around small coal stoves that keep the wax melted. This wax is brushed onto the fabric according to designs sketched on the cloth. When these pieces of fabric are dyed, the waxed sections remain uncoloured. If the design requires more colours, the piece is waxed again and dyed in the next colour. Purnima Bhanja, one of the founding members of SKVIS, supervises production in this department, keeping an eye on the quality of the work and creating new designs. Tulu Deb handles administrative supervision and distributes work to the women in the batik department when a new order is received, giving out bolts of fabric from the storeroom and instructing the women on which designs and how many pieces to produce. She also receives their

finished work and passes it on to the central stores. She keeps track of the amount of work done every day and the coal consumed in their stoves.

The women who cut and stencil the fabric are paid a fixed salary every month. The women who work with wax are paid piece rates. The rate per scarf or wall hanging is set by the Commission and is scaled proportionally to the size of the fabric and the number of colours used. Hence, when a good order comes in, the women have plenty of work. Obversely, there are times when work slows down. During these times they make sure that work is evenly distributed among the women.

Dyeing

This section, housed in a new building, is expertly headed by Munju Sil, who has worked at SKVIS for more than eleven years. Only twenty-three, she first came to SKVIS as a child of ten. She was paid to hold the pieces of fabric while women waxed batik designs onto them. She left after a while and returned two years later. Now she is responsible for colour control - measuring, weighing and mixing the chemicals after determining how much dye is needed given the type and amount of fabric to be coloured. She is assisted by five other women.

They work closely with the batik department. After the women in the batik section have waxed the scarves and wall hangings, these are sent to be dyed. After these are dyed and dried, they are sent to the "paraffin" section to have the wax removed and then sent back to the batik section for another layer of wax if the design calls for a second colour. Otherwise it is washed and ironed and sent to the storeroom.

Paraffin section

This is the toughest work of all. Women work with huge vats of boiling water placed over huge coal stoves. Pieces of fabric are placed in the water to melt the wax,

which floats to the top and is skimmed off to be reused. These women are also responsible for washing the fabric after removing all the wax.

Tailoring

The tailoring department was started in 1986 and is housed on the first floor. Prior to this, they had a putting out system. Bibha Mondol, now in charge of the tailoring department, originally worked for SKVIS under this system stitching handkerchiefs at home on a neighbour's sewing machine. Anima told her that when the society expanded and sewing machines were available, she could apply to join SKVIS. Now she is responsible for ensuring that all orders are met and supervises the work of nine permanent staff and new trainees.

When she joined SKVIS nine years ago, they would receive about two export orders a year. Now, this department is extremely busy for five months of the year. They produce a variety of garments for export in cotton and silk. For domestic markets they produce both inner and outer wear for men, women and children in cotton *khadi* - coats, vests, shirts, kurtas, leggings for men and women, dresses, undershirts for boys and handkerchiefs.

Silk reeling

In 1989 SKVIS approached the Directorate of Sericulture (DOS), West Bengal, indicating an interest in their programmes for women. SKVIS has a mulberry farm in Nikarighata, half an hour out of Canning. Under the National Sericulture Project's programme for women and NGOs, the DOS provided SKVIS with mulberry tree cuttings for their farm, disease-free eggs, and technical assistance.[7] These eggs are incubated at home. The worms that emerge are fed mulberry leaves and reared till they

[7] This is a World Bank project.

produce cocoons. However, according to Mrs. Suvasree Sen, Special Officer (Women's Development) at the DOS, the soil salinity of the area around SKVIS is too high for the mulberry trees and the programme is under review. In 1992, SKVIS received funding from the Commission for a silk reeling unit, which is now housed in a shed at Canning and has six workers. Here silk thread is extracted from the cocoons. The DOS connects SKVIS with silk worm producers in other parts of the district and ensures that the price and quality of their cocoons are reasonable. Negotiations were underway between SKVIS and the DOS for a comprehensive training programme at SKVIS for a larger group of women to master techniques of mulberry planting, sericulture and reeling. Even if the mulberry planting programme is under review by the DOS, women can still engage in silk reeling.

The Storeroom

The central store, situated on the first floor is headed by Sabita Das, who is assisted by Ujjala Ghosh and Bonani Das. The central store contains supplies and raw materials bought for production as well as goods produced at SKVIS. Sabita keeps an inventory of all finished goods coming into the store and going out to their different shops or for export. There are two rooms dedicated to storing finished goods, which are stacked in cupboards and on shelves. Anything that is produced by SKVIS, either at Canning or at Basanti, finds its way to this store. Items produced by trainees, however, are stored separately on the second floor. Ujjala Ghosh helps Sabita Das with inventory.

Bonani Das keeps a record of all production supplies coming in and going out of the storeroom in order to price finished goods.[8] She calculates the cost of goods produced at SKVIS and prices the items based on the formula provided by the

[8] She is not related to Sabita Das.

Commission. Twenty percent is added on to the cost of all materials used in the production and is meant to cover overhead costs, labour and a profit.

Marketing

Total sales for the year ending March 31, 1992, were appróximately Rs.3,963,000. The price of all items produced at SKVIS is set by the Commission. As a result, SKVIS does not charge more or receive a higher profit for the items it exports. But it does sell more silk in export markets. Silk is expensive in India and SKVIS sells more muslin and silk-cotton fabric in its shops.

Table 3.2
Marketing Performance 1977-92
(All figures have been rounded off. Statistics for 1983-90 were not available)

Year	Exports	Printing charges[9]	Domestic sales
1977-78	-	-	500
1978-79	-	7,000	2,500
1979-80	-	29,000	7,000
1980-81	-	48,500	14,000
1981-82	11,500	76,500	79,500
1982-83	35,000	71,500	90,000
1990-91	785,000	-	1,557,000
1991-92	1,195,000	-	2,768,000

When SKVIS first started out, it was involved in the production of trinkets, plastic net bags and other small items and sales for the first year were limited. With time, the artisans' batik skills improved, and they started receiving larger printing orders requiring the printing of designs on to plain bolts of fabric. As well, domestic sales of their tailored and batik work steadily increased. They first started exporting in

[9] This is the amount charged for printing designs on to bolts of fabric or sarees.

1981, and their exports in 1991-92 contributed approximately a third of their revenues. With the increase in exports, there has been a shift in the ratio between domestic sales and sales from export. As well, they decided to phase out their printing services and concentrate on Commission-related activities, *khadi* and village industries.

Local sales

SKVIS sells its products in its own shops as well as participating in a network of inter-buying and selling with other Commission-related organisations throughout the country. As of March 1992, they had this reciprocal relationship with more than thirty organisations. Today SKVIS has six shops. One in Canning, one in Baruipur, one in Amtala, two in Calcutta, one of which sells cotton goods and the other silk items, and one in Basanti. Most shops are managed by two people except for two adjacent shops in Calcutta and the shop in Canning which have one shopkeeper each. These shops carry SKVIS-produced goods as well as items from other Khadi Commission-sponsored organisations. As a result they sell a range of products from sarees to incense sticks. I visited four of their shops, the two in Calcutta, the one in Canning and the Baruipur shop.

The Canning shop is in the heart of town. I spoke with Jhunu Begum who manages this outlet. She sells bedsheets and bedcovers, sarees, men's kurtas and loose pants, fabric pieces for kurtas and women's leggings, bolts of muslin, stoles and shawls, spices, mustard oil and incense sticks. She opens shop from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and then again from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.. Her duties involve keeping the place neat and tidy, handling customers, keeping monthly accounts of sales and expenses, balancing the books, keeping inventory of stocks, and requisitioning goods from the central store. She submits her month's accounts and stock statements to SKVIS at monthly meetings of all the shop managers.

One of SKVIS's Calcutta shops sells silk products only and obtains the highest income from sales among all its shops. The other sells cotton/muslin goods and had been in business for less than a year.

Exports

By 1992 more than one-third of SKVIS's total sales were from exports. In 1992, the value of its exports was Rs.1,195,000. SKVIS exports a variety of items such as silk stoles, wall hangings, and silk garments (including silk blouses, dressing gowns, sarees, and dress material), but its biggest seller is silk scarves. In cotton, it exports dress material, scarves, wall hangings, garments (including blouses, dresses, waistcoats, and Nehru jackets), tablecloths, handkerchiefs and bedcovers. It also exports incense sticks and kerosene lamps. It exports to England, Germany, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Holland, Switzerland, Scotland, Italy and the USA.

Women's pay scale

According to the information I obtained through my interviews, the monthly incomes varied from about fifty rupees to about Rs.1,500.[10] Tumpa Biswas, whose mother was sick, was spinning on her mother's spinning wheel after school and making about fifty rupees a month. During her summer and winter vacations she would make Rs.200 to Rs.250. Spinning is paid according to output. Bibha Mondol, the supervisor of the tailoring department, was working on a piece rate as well. One month, when there was a large export order, she earned about Rs.1,500 setting a record at SKVIS. In

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[10] Munju Sil's mother, who works at the local government hospital as a maid, earns between Rs.300 to Rs.400 a month when there is work available. Most months she makes less. Munju's monthly salary was Rs.725. Her father, who has a barber shop makes about Rs.600 a month. The official exchange rate is approximately twenty-two rupees to a Canadian dollar.

January 1993, during my field trip she earned Rs.600. Others in the spinning and batik and printing sections average about Rs.400. Some women are paid a fixed salary every month, such as the supervisors of the spinning and batik sections, trainers of the DRDA training programmes, staff in the accounts department, and the executive committee members. Their salaries range from about Rs.432 to Rs.1,100. According to the Commission's regulations, the ratio between the highest and the lowest salary cannot be more than 3:1. Bulbuli Das and Bapi Roy are on a fixed salary in the batik section and earn Rs.432. Ajanta Sen, a committee member who in the accounts department earns about Rs.1,000 a month.

Artisan Deposit Fund

Every month each member receives eight percent of their monthly paycheck as an Artisan Deposit Fund (ADF) from SKVIS as required by the Commission. Previously, each member had a bank account opened for them by SKVIS at the local Allahabad Bank. Each month eight percent of their wages would be deposited into their accounts along with the matching ADF from SKVIS. If they needed to withdraw money, the secretary's signature was required making it difficult for them to access their money and creating unnecessary work for Anima. This system was changed. Now the ADF is paid directly to the women who decide what to do with their money. Some have opened accounts in banks closer to their homes and variously have savings or current accounts, many invest their money in recurring deposit schemes or fixed term deposits.

Each Puja season, every member also receives a "puja bonus" of ten percent of their annual pay. Again, this is stipulated by the Commission.[11]

Training programmes

I was informed by various committee members during my field trip that their future plans for SKVIS did not include further expansion of its production facilities, but that its training programmes would continue to grow. At that time, SKVIS had two separate training programmes in place. One was an internal programme that they had designed themselves. The other was the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) programme that is implemented by the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) of 24 Parganas, South. In 1990, SKVIS became associated with the DRDA in order to provide training to women in this programme on behalf of the DRDA. Of the thirty blocks in the district, SKVIS has had training programmes, either its own or on behalf of the DRDA, in the following blocks: Canning, Mograhat, Bishnupur, Joynagar, Basanti, Falta, Gosaba, Patharprotima, Sonarpur.[12] Within these blocks, numerous training programmes were in place in different villages and towns. During my field research, nine separate DRDA training programmes were in progress simultaneously in different villages in the Canning I, Canning II and Patharprotima

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[11] Durga Puja is the biggest religious festival for Bengalis. It lasts for several days and celebrates the triumph of Goddess Durga over the demon or *rakshas* and is hence a celebration of good over evil. It is celebrated in October. "Puja bonus" is standard practice in Bengal.

[12] In the past, SKVIS has given training to women from blocks that lie in neighbouring districts though it is a society meant for women in its own district of 24-Parganas, South. The women appealed to the society to help as their situations were desperate, and the committee members did not have the heart to refuse. See Appendix D for a list of the size and population of these blocks.

blocks. And, as part of SKVIS's internal training programme, a group of about thirty girls, most of them between the ages of twelve and fifteen, were in residence at SKVIS to learn spinning. Except for the first group of resident DRDA trainees in 1990, all DRDA training programmes have been held in the respective villages of trainees. SKVIS's internal training programmes are held where it is most convenient depending on the distance of the village from Canning. SKVIS gives training in the following activities: spinning, weaving, batik, dyeing, block printing, sewing, tailoring, beekeeping, incense making, *papad* and *bori*, matmaking, machine knitting, and making detergent.

Training poor women enabling them to seek employment has been a core component of the society since its inception and will continue to be a large part of their future work. Recently, SKVIS bought an adjacent plot of land with plans to expand their training facilities. A shed will be built for more weaving looms, and the house on the site will be used for training in *papad* and *bori* making. SKVIS's trainees either join the society as members after they complete their training or work at home either being self-employed and selling their products in local markets or subcontracting to local businesses. SKVIS only accepts its own trainees as members. According to its records, it had 950 registered members in March 1992. Not all SKVIS's trainees complete their training.[13] Sushama Mistri explained that some drop out after discovering the work involved or that they will not be making enormous amounts of money after their training or as quickly as they would like. As a result, SKVIS tries to ensure in its selection process that only women who are in "real need," and will

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[13] I was unable to obtain figures on the number of SKVIS trainees since 1991, or the number of trainees that go on to become self-employed. There are no records beyond 1991 as SKVIS linked up with the DRDA and the expansion of its training programme left little time for SKVIS's own records. The DRDA requires immense amounts of paper work from its supervisors and trainers.

therefore apply their training, get accepted. Applicants are questioned about their financial need and their situation at home. It was explained to me that women who learn a new skill and don't apply it have wasted a spot that someone else may have desperately needed. As well, SKVIS's limited resources have been "wasted." SKVIS accepts one group of resident trainees a year and teaches them a number of different skills. These skills are decided upon by the committee members, the trainees, and the potential trainers in consultation with Mr. Ray.

In its first year, 1978-79, the society trained nine women from within the block of Canning. Their mission now is to continue training women from other parts of the Sunderban area and to help them organise themselves to form societies of their own. This is in keeping with the decision made by the committee members not to expand SKVIS. Inherent in their training programmes is an aim to spread the message of cooperation and the advantages of working this way. From experience they have found that there is strength in numbers, and that collective decision-making leads to better decisions.[14]

With the DRDA programme in progress in the district, the committee members were interested in focussing SKVIS's training programmes towards helping those women in the interior rural regions of the Sunderban region. This decision was submitted to the membership during the general meeting on 6 February, 1995, and their approval obtained. Anima Mondal explained to me that "women from Canning can go to Calcutta for employment, but women in the more remote rural areas have no opportunities or facilities or successful government programs to assist them." The goal is to help such women "stand on their own feet" and become wholly independent in managing their societies. In order to do so, Sushama Mistri said, "no matter how long

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[14] As well, they have found that SKVIS is getting difficult to manage as it increases in size.

it takes to train them, three months, six months or more, we will take that time to help them stand on their own two feet."

Ex-trainees are not left to flounder on their own however. Those forming societies keep in touch with SKVIS. In times of need or crisis, they come to SKVIS with their specific problems, and, if necessary, SKVIS sends a representative to investigate the situation, or they hold a discussion at SKVIS and return home with suggestions to solve the problem. During my field trip, I spoke with one woman who had come to SKVIS for help from a fairly distant part of the district. She mentioned that she was there to touch base with the society and to get advice on various matters.[15] Sandhya Biswas, DRDA supervisor, mentioned that often groups will approach SKVIS for help with group dynamics and group decision-making skills. Though these groups are independent, SKVIS is there for them if they need help, and this contributes to the group's confidence and their ability to successfully establish themselves.

Initially, women would approach the society in ones and twos to ask for training. But SKVIS has started to accept larger groups of trainees from less accessible and remote regions of the district. Most women hear about the society through word of mouth and hence are "known people" whose background can be "verified" through the networks of the women working at SKVIS. As mentioned earlier, SKVIS is interested in helping out those women with "a real need," those who will actually "put their training to use." As SKVIS has grown, their reputation for helping women of the Sunderban region has also spread, and women who need to find work usually find out through this informal information network.

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[15] This was earlier on during my field research and I kept no record of our conversation as I was focussing on the society itself and was not aware of the size of their training programme. I decided to look into their training programmes only after I discovered their scale and importance.

In 1990, once they had the capacity, SKVIS started accepting resident trainees in groups who live at SKVIS for the duration of their training. Sushama Mistri informed me that SKVIS accepts one group a year and provides food and accomodation and covers incidental medical expenses.[16] I was informed that this was funded by the society's profits. As well, after their training programme expanded they started giving out certificates with the Commission's logo to successful candidates. With these in hand, women can then take out bank loans and start up small businesses from their homes producing for local markets. I got the impression that most work individually. However, the committee members were enthusiastic about their trainees from the village of Deuli, in the Canning II block, who had formed a society and were starting to have some success in capturing the local market, selling tailored garments, dresses and petticoats. Clothing is usually brought in from Calcutta and sold by local shopkeepers. As a result, money is drained from local economies and finds its way to Calcutta adding to the poverty of these "hinterlands."[17] Without the Commission's highly recognisable logo, it is extremely difficult for these women to obtain credit. This is in keeping with the discrimination women in India face. Without collateral, banks do not give them loans. As women rarely own or inherit property, husbands or fathers are required to sign bank loans as a result of which women do not have control over the assets in their enterprises. Obtaining credit is difficult enough for women in the cities, while in rural regions this is nearly impossible. A study by the Asian Development bank confirmed the difficulty poor women have in obtaining credit from formal credit

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[16] During my field research, a few resident trainees fell ill and I accompanied them to the local hospital for their check-ups.

[17] See Innis (1956) for a discussion of the centre-hinterland theory and of the exploitation of the latter by the former.

systems. This is why they continue to rely on "informal credit markets" despite the exhorbitant rate of interest. (Wignaraja 1990, 32)

Table 3.3
SKVIS's training programme

Year	No. of women trained
1978-79	9
1979-80	20
1980-81	20
1981-82	85
1982-83	75
1983-84	80
1984-85	80
1985-86	175
1986-87	365
1987-88	380
1988-89	500
1989-90	730
1990-91	821
	Total 3,340

While at SKVIS, I observed a group of resident trainees during the day and in the evenings. They were from a village called Phulmaloncho in the Basanti block. On the 8th of February, 1993, I had visited their village with Mr. Ray and a number of trair ʼrs for the official inauguration of their training programme. We travelled in a jeep for about two to three hours over a combination of tarred, brick and mud roads. The people in the village are predominantly Muslim. Except for the panchayat building which is made of concrete, I saw a number of mud huts covered with roofs made of woven leaves scattered over the area.[18] This early in the year, the land was parched and ponds were shallow. I was informed that the area was desperately poor, and girls

[18] In villages of West Bengal, people live in such mudhuts made of locally available material.

and women were being sold as slaves and prostitutes. I was informed by the *Pradhan*[19] of the village *Panchayat*, Sheikh Wahed Ali, that women were extremely dependent on their husbands and bound by social restrictions. Demands for dowry were highly prevalent and women with dark complexions were having to pay more dowry. He was hopeful that by receiving training they could free themselves from their dependency on their husbands and that by having an income their "helplessness" and "troubles" would decrease. A few young women had approached SKVIS for help and had received training. Inspired by what SKVIS had achieved, they were eager to start a society of their own in Phulmaloncho. Given the desperate situation of women at this village, the committee members agreed to help even though most of the trainees were fairly young, ranging in age from eleven to fifteen. A few were in their mid to late teens. Given the women's enthusiam and the full support of the village head, Mr. Ray expects the society to be extremely successful. These girls and women came to SKVIS as resident trainees in late February and I had an opportunity to interview some of them.

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[19] This is the elected head of a block with a number of villages under his/her jurisdiction. The *Pradhan* of Phulmaloncho appeared to be a fairly progressive man and was highly concerned about the oppression the women in the village were facing. His older paternal uncle had donated a small piece of land and a concrete building for the establishment of a women's society and the inauguration ceremony was held there.

Gram Panchayats (council of villages) are the smallest political unit found at the village level. After independence *panchayats* were instituted by the govenmment to facilitate a more democratic form of government with representation at the village (*gram*) level. This was seen as important as India's majority live in rural areas. For an interesting description of *panchayat* politics in West Bengal see Ghosh (1989).

The DRDA link-up and the DWCRA training programme

In 1990, the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) of 24 Parganas, South, first made contact with SKVIS. In 1990, when the DRDA planned to extend the DWCRA program into the district of 24 Parganas(S), it was looking for an orgainisation to give training to their women's groups. The Project Officer for the Agency quite serendipitously happened to catch a television programme on SKVIS and was struck by their achievements and their commitment to helping other rural women like themselves. SKVIS was contacted and Anima Mondal and Sandhya Biswas visited the DRDA office in Calcutta to present SKVIS's credentials. Then the Assistant Project Officer of the agency, Mrs. Shila Nag, visited SKVIS and spent three hours touring their facility. Impressed by their work and their internal training programme, SKVIS was recruited to carry out the DWCRA programme, in conjunction with the Training of Rural Youth in Self Employment (TRYSEM) programme, in the district.

The District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) are government orgainsations at the district level established by the Government of India to carry out the Ministry of Rural Development's 'Integrated Rural Development Programme' (IRDP). This programme "was launched throughout the country in the early 1980s with the sole objective of eradication of rural poverty" and focuses on encouraging the "growth of the rural economy ... in the areas of agriculture, village industries, and its service and business sectors." (DRDA 1992-93, vii) The agencies formulate "a need-based plan annually" for the districts under their jurisdiction and "coordinate with the various government departments, banks, Panchayat bodies at the grassroots level for fruitful implementation of the programme." (Ibid)

In 1982-83, the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) programme was started as a sub-programme of the IRDP, and the district agencies were entrusted with the implementation of this programme. Reviews of the

IRDP had found that of those being helped only ten percent were women. As well, they found that a large number of families were headed by women. In order to address these specific problems and the discrimination women as a group face in acquiring credit bank loans, or even employment, the DWCRA programme was conceived. Acknowledging the numerous studies done that show that women usually spend the money they earn on food, medicine and clothes for their children rather than on themselves, the DWCRA programme was seen as a way of improving the welfare of entire families. As a result, the trainees selected are all married women. Funded by the central government, the state government and UNICEF, the programme is aimed at women living below the poverty line,[20] with a view to providing them with opportunities for self-employment on a sustained basis and to help their families have a better quality of life. The programme seeks to organise poor rural women into groups so that they can collectively work towards solutions to the economic and social problems faced by them and their children. These groups are expected to "act as a counter-vailing force against social restraint and paternalism prevalent in rural areas" and to " function as forums in which women can articulate their problems and gather support for transcending gender barriers." (DWCRA 1993, 2) As well, acting as an economic unit they can take advantage of economies of scale from group investment, production, purchase of raw materials and marketing. Each group has between fifteen and twenty women, and is given a revolving fund of a certain amount of money in the form of a grant for buying sewing machines, knitting machines, supplies and raw materials. After completing the training programme, members may borrow from this fund in order to start up a home business or collective small enterprises where there is a division of labour among the women or one that is not too capital intensive. Women

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[20] This is calculated by the Ministry for Rural Development. In 1992-93, this was Rs.11,000 per family per annum, for a family of five.

may also start up small individual initiatives. In 1993, this revolving fund was Rs.15,200. At the same time, the DWCRA programme arranges for women to obtain funding under the umbrella of the IRDP of which it is a sub-programme. These financial schemes allow for economic activities on a larger scale and provide access to other government programmes for credit and further training.

During my field trip, there were nine training programmes in place in various villages within the Canning I, Canning II, Falta and Patharprotima blocks. These various programmes were in weaving, mat-making, tailoring, spinning, batik and knitting.

Trainees are selected by their respective Panchayat officials according to the need-based criteria set by the DRDA. The Panchayat then makes it recommendations to the DRDA and this list is passed on to SKVIS to carry out the training of the selected women. Each trainee receives a monthly stipend. This is paid to enable women to forego potential earnings they might receive during this time. During my field trip this amount was Rs.250 a month.

Trainers are selected by the committee members and other trainers and supervisors in consultation with Mr. Ray.[21] There were sixteen permanent trainers in the DRDA programme at the time of my field trip. They need to be literate in order to keep a record of all training activities as required by the DRDA. They are also selected on the basis of their ability to interact with people from varying class backgrounds as they must keep in touch with the Panchayat officials and the Block Development Officer (BDO) as well as mingle with the trainees.[22] Trainees from remote rural

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[21] This information was given to me by Sushama Mistri, supervisor of batik training programmes, Sandhya Biswas, DRDA programme supervisor, Lakshmi Mullick, tailoring supervisor.

[22] The BDO is appointed by the state government.

regions are extremely shy with strangers and keep their faces covered. As well, they have often internalised the oft repeated, "she's a girl, she won't succeed." As a result, when faced with learning a new skill during training, their self-confidence can be extremely low. In a group discussion with trainers, and in conversation with supervisors, I was told that women are frequently scared to touch the spinning, sewing, and knitting machines. And a phrase they hear often is "I won't be able to learn." Trainers must then keep repeating, "Definitely, you can succeed. Try and try again and you will manage." Sushama Mistri told me of the times when she has held the hand of a trainee and applied wax on to fabric to help her overcome her fear of not being able to learn. Given this, trainers need to understand gender socialisation. This is not difficult as trainers are themselves from the district and come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. But trainers must also have the patience and commitment to help these women. More importantly, they must not abuse their positions of power and instead build relationships of "trust" and "friendship" with their trainees in order to "find out the true situations at home" and intervene when husbands and guardians are abusive towards them or don't allow them to attend class.[23] The stipend that the DRDA provides trainees is a powerful tool in the hands of trainers and is often an incentive for husbands and fathers to allow women to participate.[24] Some trainers visit the women's homes and get to know the families in order to impress on husbands and

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[23] Early on during my field research, I had been informed by one of the committee members that one of the trainers had been posted in a different town as she had recently married and this was convenient for her. I later found out from other artisans that she had in fact been moved because she had been abusive towards a group of trainees.

[24] As explained in Chapter 1, Bengali society is paternalistic and patriarchal. Husbands and fathers, and brothers in their absence, are considered official guardians of daughters, wives and sisters. Their permission is required for participation in DRDA programmes and their signature is required on official documents.

fathers the need for women to be economically independent. This is phrased in such a way as to make this socially acceptable and to break the taboo against "respectable" women having more freedom.

Trainers go through a training programme of their own to sensitise them to a number of social issues. This course lasts for an intensive seven days during which trainers sing together to build solidarity, participate in "action dramas" where they act out oppressive social situations, and hold discussions on gender and class oppression and other social problems.[25]

The DRDA programme is fairly regimented. The time span for each training programme is designed according to the funding available. When SKVIS first linked up with the DRDA, Mr. Ray, the committee members and the trainers got together and discussed the content of the numerous training programmes in order to achieve the objectives of the DWCRA programme. Tailoring and weaving are six-month programmes, and within this time there are weekly targets to be met and monthly targets as well. The syllabus for the entire six months is laid out ahead of time and has to be followed quite strictly. And trainers must keep track of all activities and all materials used.

Lakshmi Mullick supervises the DRDA tailoring programme. Her duties involve giving training in tailoring, supervising the tailoring programmes in progress, as well as following up on past programmes and providing continuing support. Once a month she visits the various training centres to check on the work of the trainers and to make sure that things are progressing according to schedule. She makes buying trips to Calcutta for bolts of (mill) cloth, hooks, buttons, needles, thread and other materials

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[25] This information I received from Mr. Ray, who designed this programme. Subsequently, a number of trainers that I interviewed, when listing the training they had received at SKVIS, mentioned some of these exercises.

needed for the programmes. These she distributes to the various trainers, who in turn pass on these supplies to their trainees. She is responsible for collecting the garments produced by the trainees, calculating the cost of materials used and pricing them. During her monthly visits, she pays each trainee the stipend that the DRDA programme provides. Once a month she pays a follow-up visit to past training sites. Similarly, Sushama Mistri supervises the batik and block printing programmes and is responsible for past and current programmes, buying and distributing dyes, fabric and other materials.

The first group in the DRDA programme were trained at SKVIS and there were twenty-seven women enrolled in tailoring and thirteen in weaving.[26] Now trainers are sent to the respective villages and either commute every day or spend varying amounts of time in the field, and then return home as well as report to SKVIS on the progress being made.[27]

The geography of the Sunderban region makes travel difficult and time consuming. I randomly selected two trainers and asked them about their training sites. Anjali Das is a trainer for the DRDA programme. During my research she was training a group of women in Bishnupur in making coir mats. In order to get there every day from her home in Taldi, the railway station before Canning, she would travel two hours by bus, transfer to a second bus and ride for another half hour, then ride an auto-

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[26] Apart from these figures, I was unable to obtain statistics on the number of women that have been through the DRDA programme. Everyone was much too busy to look at past records and add up the numbers. As a result, I did not bother to ask them to locate their files for me either.

[27] During my field research there were nine DRDA training programmes in progress. Each group had between fifteen and twenty trainees. Some of these were six-month programmes and some lasting for three months.

rickshaw[28] for another twenty-five minutes to get to her destination. She had to commute to her training centre every day, five days a week. The programme was five-months long.

Pritha Ghosh recalled when she training a group of women in knitting and tailoring at Motordighi on the other side of the river from her home in Champahati. She would take the twenty-five minute train ride to Canning, ride the ferry to the other side of the river, take an auto-rickshaw for another forty minutes, change to a cycle-rickshaw for a thirty minute ride, and then walk the last twenty minutes through very rural areas. She would stay for five days and return home for the weekend. This commitment by trainers who show up regularly even though they live far off, or even when the weather is bad, helps build trust between trainees and trainers.

I asked Pritha to profile the trainees in her present group. She had fifteen women in her group. All the women were over thirty years of age. With one exception, all were married. Of these nine were separated from their husbands or had been abandoned by them.

Trainees are taught the required skill, like batik, tailoring,and knitting, the buying of raw materials from wholesale markets in Calcutta, the pricing of their products according to a set formula based on costs, and basic market research techniques. Trainees are also examined once a month on what they learn. And within the three- or six-month period there are another one or two exams that must be held. It is only after this that participants are given their certificates which qualify them for credit. They can then borrow from the revolving fund provided by the programme in order to buy equipment and supplies to start up their own enterprise.

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[28] This is a three-wheeled, motor-driven vehicle that is fairly common throughout India. It is a step up from the cycle-rickshaw, which is an alternative to rickshaws pulled by men.

I was also informed that "adult education" is part of the DRDA syllabus. Trainers are required to assess participants' level of education and literacy and to teach them to read and write. Trainees are also taught the songs sung at SKVIS's morning assembly and *pranthona* is held every day before training begins. They are taught "mother and child, health education and hygiene." They are also taught how to hold discussions in order to make group decisions. As well, they are "taught how to dress," and "how to talk" when negotiating business or doing market research.[29]

Analysis of communication in training programmes[30]

According to Mrs. Shila Nag, Assistant Projects Officer of the DRDA, the agency's DWCRA programme in the district has a fifty percent success rate. In her view the implementation of this programme has inherent flaws. She argues that the trainee selection process is politicized. About thirty percent of those selected are wives and daughters of key people in the village or Panchayat who aren't interested in working or earning an income and don't really need the training or the money. They

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[29] I was told that women in remote rural regions wear little more than the sarees wrapped around their bodies. The society believed that it was important to teach them to wear blouses.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, women's voices in rural regions are frequently 'silenced.' Trainers try to change the way women have been socialised. Admittedly, the changes in behavior that are being recommended reflect middle-class values and accepted behaviour.

[30] The comparison between SKVIS's internal programme and the DRDA training programme it implements is not very detailed as I had no opportunity to interview any DRDA trainees or to observe the programme in the field. Information on SKVIS's implementation of the DRDA programme was obtained in conversation with DRDA supervisors and trainers. My analysis is based on this information and, hence, has its limitations.

want the stipend paid to every trainee and sometimes even borrow from the groups' revolving fund without repaying the loan. Another problem she identified is in developing "marketing linkages." The DRDA has made no arrangements to help these women with the marketing of their handicrafts and so they have trouble selling their work. As a result, their groups get discouraged and tend to fall apart.[31] But sometimes even though the group does not stay together, individual women put their training to use, take out a loan and work at home producing for their local markets.

Dr. Illiana Choudhury, project officer at Unicef, provided further insight into the dynamics at play. Unicef is a co-funder of the DRDA's DWCRA programme with the central and state government. According to Dr. Choudhury, groups break up because of two reasons. One, because they have little faith that the group will succeed, and two, because they have little trust in the work skills and commitment of others in the group. Given these doubts, individuals are unwilling to take the risk and, as a result, women don't stick together once their training is over. They are more willing to work hard for themselves and keep all their earnings instead of staying together as a group.

In the Bengali rural culture women are not encouraged to mingle with other women in order to form support networks. Usually the family has a small plot of land that they assist with or else they are expected to stay home and take care of household chores. As well, women are socialised into believing themselves incapable of success. Given this stereotypical socialisation, is it reasonable to expect women to develop trust in each other and the self-confidence in themselves necessary to manage their own business after three to six months of training. Apart from learning new skills, group

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[31] This is supported by studies done to assess the Integrated Rural Development Programme of which the DRDA's Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas programme is a sub-programme. See Wignaraja (1990, 30-32).

dynamics and decision-making, they are expected to unlearn years of stereotypical socialisation.

The DRDA programme reflects the rigid capitalist work ethic of focussing on the goal and not on the process as well as in its efficiency criteria. The DRDA programmes have a fixed syllabus and trainees are marched through their training according to fixed schedules. The women are treated like clones working in assembly lines that learn at the same rate and expected to have all acquired a series of skills by the end of the programme. The particular skill to be taught is often decided on by the DRDA influenced by the availability of funding. But SKVIS does have control over the content and have developed methods by which to "motivate" women and encourage them to unlearn earlier negative stereotypical beliefs and to form a network of support for each other. However, the time limit of training programmes are also set by the DRDA. As well, the selection of trainees is done by the *pradhan*, or the village head, or by the Block Development Officer (BDO), the government appointed head of the block. This selection is supposed to be made according to the criteria of the DRDA but is often a political choice or a dictatorial one. Participants do not always apply to the programme but are informed of their selection and expected to show up for training.

In SKVIS's internal programme, it is the women themselves who approach the society for help and ask for training. As the saying goes, "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink." In this case the women want to drink. By approaching the society, they indicate a certain level of interest, motivation and perseverence. The particular skill to be taught is decided on after consulting the women who are asking for help. They are interviewed and their education level, skills, past training, home environment, financial situation and needs are assessed. The programme of training is discussed together by committee members, the trainer who will be training the women, and the new trainees in consultation with Mr. Ray. As Anima Mondal explained, sometimes they are asked for technical training only, sometimes only for economic

assistance in getting the group's business started, and sometimes for both. The potential market opportunities in their villages are discussed and raw materials that may be available in the area, and then the training is tailored to their needs. As well, SKVIS has a commitment to giving the trainees as much time as they need. As Sushama Mistri put it, "not all women are alike. Some learn really fast while some may take a little longer. But no matter how long it takes, we take the time to help them stand on their own feet."

A vital difference between the two programmes is that SKVIS's programmes are conducted on site, either at the Canning or Basanti sites. Women either commute to the society everyday or groups of trainees live on site for the duration of the training, whereas, except for its first trainee group, DRDA's programmes are held in the women's villages. What are the advantages of having trainees live and train at SKVIS where they have an opportunity to watch the committee members in action as they work with confidence dealing with all sorts of visitors, including ministers, problems, crises, and decisions? They mingle with the members of SKVIS, watch them work, play and laugh together and move about with relative independence. From living at SKVIS they learn that their backgrounds are no different from those of the artisans at SKVIS or even of the "didis" i.e. the committee members. SKVIS's solid two-storied building is powerful evidence of what is attainable and testimony to what can be achieved by a group of women working together towards a common goal. I asked the trainees from Phulmaloncho and the trainees for the Enterprise Building Programme about what they had learned from being at SKVIS.[32] Almost all of them mentioned that their experiences at SKVIS had instilled in them the belief that they too were

[32] The Enterprise Building Programme was a month-long programme hosted by SKVIS aimed at training rural women in entrepreneurship and was funded by two government agencies, the National Small Industries Corporation and the Small Industries Service Institute. This programme was attended by women from the Sunderban region only.

capable of starting up their own women's society or of starting up and managing their own businesses, that by trying and trying again they would succeed. It is questionable if this result can be matched by DRDA training programmes given the limited time that trainers spend in the villages. Clearly, these trainees have learned more than skills. Their experiences at SKVIS have empowered them to believe in themselves and their capabilities and to aim for success.

Away from the social and cultural environment of their villages, at SKVIS the trainees are free to experience an alternative lifestyle and reality, widen their horizons, dream new dreams, and work towards making these dreams real. As the DRDA training programme has demonstrated, if they trained in their villages, the menfolk would grudgingly allow them to attend, and when they returned home in the evenings, a portion of what they learned during the day would be undermined. At SKVIS, in a new environment amidst a group of strangers their dependency on each other increases and the process of bonding begins. In sharing these new experiences together and the excitement of empowerment, they envision their own society modelled on that of SKVIS.

Another factor might be the age of the trainees. The DRDA programme is aimed at women with children who are their primary concern. The group of trainees from Phulmaloncho that I spoke with were teenagers, averaging fourteen years in age. To what extent does their age affect their ability to form bonds of trust sufficiently strong to sustain their ambitions for a society? The original members of SKVIS were only a little older when they started up SKVIS.

At SKVIS, these trainees would join us in the morning for assembly and then work the hours that SKVIS members worked. Some would work during the evenings as well, extracting seeds from the balls of raw cotton to later turn into thread. Some time into their training programme, they started their own *prarthona*, or prayer session, in

the evenings singing some of the songs that they had learned during the morning assembly. I interviewed four young women ranging in age from sixteen to nineteen. All had previously trained at SKVIS. Jainoor Bibi was sixteen with a one year-old son. Her husband abandoned her six months after her son was born for another young woman and she returned to her father's house. He refused to give her permission to train at SKVIS, while her mother had no objections. So she left one night, without his permission, taking her personal belongings. When she would return home to visit, he would grumble at her but later stopped and expressed a desire to visit SKVIS. Sushama Sen, Rupali Das and Martina Bogi shared similar experiences with me. Their families were poor, and they were unable to continue their education. When they heard of SKVIS, they approached the committee members for help and succeeded in entering their training programmes. They had been training at SKVIS for several months when I arrived in 1993. Sushama Sen had completed her training in spinning and was now learning sewing and silk reeling. Rupali Das was involved in a Ministry of Social Services programme installing fuel-efficient coal stoves in homes at Phulmaloncho. Martina Bogi was attending the evening tuition sessions at SKVIS. Sushama Sen and Martina Bogi mentioned that they would be starting their own society in their village with the help of "dada" and the "didis." It was these young women that Mr. Ray and the committee members at SKVIS saw as future leaders of the society at Phulmalonho.

In the next chapter I will expand on my argument regarding the centrality of grassroots communication to SKVIS's economic success and its ability to bring about socioeconomic change in the lives of its members and empower them to effect social change within their communities. SKVIS's artisans have all been trained at SKVIS. As members of the society, to what extent do they participate in the running of the

organisation? What has been the impact of SKVIS on these women's lives? SKVIS is a women's society. As such, to what extent does it cater to the lives of its women artisans who must both run their households as well a earn an income. Is the society taking any steps to alleviate their double burden? Scholars and activists argue that income-generating activities are necessary in the short term, but in order to bring about real and lasting change, the relations between women and men need to be changed and both men and women must act as agents of social change.

Chapter 4

Evaluating SKVIS from a communication perspective

Communication in decision making

An area of interest to me in researching SKVIS was the 'grassroots communication' within the society. Riano (1994) uses 'grassroots communication' as a descriptive category for horizontal communication at what is considered the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder, or the grassroots level involving "a variety of communication processes, practices and systems" such as "women's informal communication practices, networks and associations, interpersonal and group communication, performing arts, cultural and artistic artifacts, writing, media produced in a group setting, folk and community media, and indigenous communication systems and practices." (xi, xiii) She cites A. Calder (1988, 2) who provides a more conceptual definition, describing it as "those communication processes guided by the goals of education for liberation that 'help the poor and underprivileged acquire a critical understanding of social reality.'" (vii) The women of SKVIS belong to the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder and hence it can be argued that their's is a grassroots organisation. In my analysis I will look at some of their grassroots communication practices in order to determine its impact in empowering women, in giving them greater control over their lives and in altering disempowering effects of their early stereotypical socialisation. Communication can have various impacts depending on both the medium and the message. The horizontal flow of information between women of similar backgrounds is especially important in communicating skills, knowledge and empowerment. This horizontal flow of information is a feature of grassroots communication suggesting that relationships between all participants in such

communication are egalitarian. Is this in fact the case at SKVIS? Is SKVIS a democratic organisation? My analysis will also address this issue.

Riano (1994) provides an excellent theoretical framework for the analysis of communication and empowerment at SKVIS.[1] In her "Typology of Women's Participation in Communication" she reviews the discourse and practices shaped by different conceptual frameworks that address the relationship between women, participation and communication.[2] These are: development communication, participatory communication, alternative communication, and feminist communication.[3]

Each type of communication is associated with different expressions of empowerment. Empowerment is defined as "not just individual achievements or accessing certain power positions, but the energizing of individual and collective subjects to participate in social movements and processes of emancipation. Empowerment constitutes the process of working to bring about individual and collective transformation." (23) In my discussion of communication practices within SKVIS, by applying Riano's framework, I will attempt to analyse the type of communication being used and its potential for empowerment.

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[1] Riano's (1994) edited volume is rich in case studies of "grassroots communication experiments" (xi) carried out by women of the Third World involving "speaking, writing, dancing, meeting, story telling and media production" in both mainstream commercial media and alternative media.

[2] In Riano's book, "participation" is placed at "the very centre of her discussion" on communication practice and discourse. (4) I have chosen to focus on the concept of empowerment.

[3] This is an extremely limited use and application of Riano's framework. I do not have enough information about communication practices at SKVIS and its impacts to do a more detailed application. I realise after reading her text that my own research in India would have benefitted enormously from it had it been available.

Table 4.1
Communication and empowerment

Type	Empowerment
Development communication (women as subjects)	Empowerment as acquiring information Learning new facts Engaging in discussion
Participatory communication (women as participants)	Empowerment as enabling Acquiring knowledge and status to take control of their lives Capacity to benefit from involvement
Alternative communication (women as subjects of change)	Empowerment as developing individual and collective capacity to bring about change Increased control and ownership of process
Feminist communication (women as producers of meaning)	Empowerment as transformation of social subjects and the acts of naming oppression Coming to voice Breaking the silence

Adapted from Riano Table 1.1 (1994, 6-7)

According to Riano, 'development communication' is an approach that has been used by governments and international development institutions and non-governmental organisations, for example, in India. Indonesia, Cameroon and Swaziland in programmes to promote child survival and nutrition by developing the mother's sense of self-confidence in child rearing and decision-making. In these programmes, "experts" or extension workers directly communicate with poor urban and rural mothers to bring about these changes. In this approach the empowerment of women is sought by increasing their access to information about nutritional foods and child

immunisation, which then allows them to actively seek out more information by going to local health clinics or by asking others.

In the 'participatory communication' approach, "women are seen as participants." (9) This approach has been used in Nepal where rural women received training in video production and produced a video on rural women's access to credit. This video was shown to other women in the workshop and positively influenced their confidence in being able to produce a video of their own. Screening the video within the wider community led to government representatives and policy makers meeting with the women to discuss and make changes to policies on access to credit. Here, women's participation can be seen as "bringing a more people-centered, rather than market-centred perspective to development." (9)

In this approach empowerment is seen as "the process through which individuals acquire knowledge and skills to take control of their lives." (Nair & White 1987c, 16, as cited in Riano 1994, 10) Empowerment is thought of as a process enabling individuals to benefit from involvment in the development programmes as a means to bring about control over economic and political forces. (Kindervatter, 1979, as cited in Riano, 1994)

The 'alternative communication' approach is an approach that has been used by women market vendors in Lima, Peru.[4] Members of the association of public markets, they used the market's loudspeakers to communicate about problems such as taxes, vending permits, and the legalisation of land. As well, they created, produced and broadcast weekly radio soaps foregrounding a number of different social problems such as the problems of migration to the cities, the *barrio*'s lack of facilities, poor working conditions and the association's internal conflicts. Through time, these women

[4] See Riano (1994, 12-17) for a discussion of regional frameworks within this approach such as 'popular communication, 'group media' and 'community media.'

increased their leadership role in the association. This approach of 'alternative communication' has also been used in a number of women's social movements around the world with the aim of bringing women to reflect on and become conscious of their subordinate position in society.

Empowerment here "refers to the individual and collective capacity and right to transform and affect change." (Riano 1994, 12) By participating in the production of communication, women are empowered to struggle and defend their rights. In this approach there is a recognition of power differences in society and of larger economic and political structures that need to be transformed through social movements and not just individual action.

'Feminist communication' is a framework that specifically includes a gender perspective in the communication within, and by, women's groups and feminists. An example of 'feminist communication are periodicals by women of colour in the United States. Empowerment in this approach involves the transformation of women as social subjects of struggle and as active producers of meaning. By participating in communication processes and projects, women "name" their own experiences and identities. That is, they speak for themselves by defining, constructing and presenting themselves and their "stories." Through this they are empowered to speak of their oppression (whether of gender, class, race and/or sexual orientation) as individuals and as members of a group, and to undertake actions to bring about social change. (Kidd 1992, as cited in Riano 1994, 1)

Riano (1991) challenges the myth of the 'silenced woman' and the stereotype of women as 'passive communicative recipients'. She argues that women are neither absent nor silent in community life but active participants as subjects of communication production. Grassroots communication processes provide an opportunity for women to participate democratically, but she cautions that, in practice, collective decision-making within organisations may conceal the presence of informal power which could be a

constraint to honest and open group dynamics. She argues that often 'democracy' is equated with "the notion of the physical presence of 'everybody'," a problem more prevalent in larger groups. She finds that collective decision making seems to work best in small groups with a "strong sense of group membership" and "tightly defined aims and objectives." I will apply Riano's analysis to the following discussion of the decision-making processes at SKVIS.

Group meetings

A key component of SKVIS's organisation and communication are the group meetings that are held at various intervals and levels. Some departments are larger than others requiring scheduled meetings, while in smaller departments, meetings are more informal and may even be held over a cup of *cha* during the tea break. I attended a number of such meetings and document them at length because there were so many and are integral to the smooth functioning of the society given its size.

The organisation of the society is heirarchical with the major decisions being made by the committee members. Prior to 1990, all decisions were made by them. That year the society experienced a major expansion and they realised that this system was not very efficient. A decision was made by the committee members to delegate decision making regarding production to the respective departments. With this decision, artisans in each department were given collective responsibility for the daily running of their departments with decisions being made jointly after a group discussion drawing on the group's collective wisdom.

As a result of the delegation of decision making, the women have a certain amount of control over decisions that affect their productivity and hence their incomes. Participating in group discussions and in the making of decisions has had an enormous impact on reversing the impacts of gender socialisation in 'silencing' their voices and

affects their ability to participate in decision making at home. At group meetings, women discuss different aspects of the production process such as group dynamics, production problems, availability of raw materials and co-ordination with other departments. As well, women discuss domestic problems that may be bothering them. The idea of leaving their problems at home and not bringing them to work does not really apply. Most artisans at SKVIS are paid according to their productivity. Often their household incomes are still below the poverty line. They have families to feed on these earnings. Women are encouraged to bring their domestic and personal problems to share with each other in their departments and with others at the society. Often solutions are found after collectively brain storming. As well, the 'telling of their stories' often provides a measure of relief and the emotional support that they gain from their friends goes a long way towards enabling them to deal with their problems.

Group meetings of the founding members

Group discussions within SKVIS began in the earliest days of the society's inception. In 1977, when the original members of SKVIS got together to address their financial needs, group discussions were held to decide what was to be done about their situation. During those early years, they[5] would meet together in the evenings with Mr. Ray and discuss issues of oppression and discrimination based on gender and class. They would keep a diary of the days events and their thoughts on their interaction with people and discuss them together in the evenings to understand the dynamics of gender and class. Four of these members have chosen to remain single and to dedicate themselves to the work of the society and to helping other poor women who face the hardships they faced. In my discussions with them and in my observation of their work,

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[5] The information in this paragraph was obtained in an interview with Mr. Ray.

I noticed an obvious consciousness of the sexism pervasive in society in their analysis of event when explaining their history and their work to me.

The executive committee

The executive committee is an elected body that is authorised to conduct, manage and administer the affairs of the society. They make the larger decisions regarding the running of the society and its direction. As Riano (1991) has observed, group dynamics within small groups are particularly effective as they have a strong sense of membership. In the case of the executive, they share and reinforce the goals and aims of the society, and this contributes to its ability to function efficiently. This group membership has provided the collective strength and confidence needed to start up and expand the society in order to address the economic needs of others and not just themselves and to persevere in challenging the barriers of class and gender. Not all the committee members are founding members. Sandhya Biswas joined the society in 1990 and became a committee member soon after. Ajanta Sen joined the society in 1983 and was voted into the executive during the election of 1987.

Trainers courses

In my group discussion and individual interviews with DRDA trainers I learned that in 1990, when SKVIS first started giving training to DWCRA trainees for the DRDA, they spent a week together discussing issues of gender and class oppression to sensitise them in dealing with their future trainees. It was explained to that though the trainers themselves come from similar backgrounds, helping other people is different from helping themselves. An attempt has to be made to understand the particular situations of individual trainees in order to "motivate" them, i.e. to change their earlier disempowering socialisation.

As well, trainers are selected through a group process of consultation among the committee members and other trainers and supervisors to select appropriate candidates. Collective information and observation helps ensure that the new trainer has the appropriate skills and is able to handle the power inherent in the position. At this level, members that are not committee members are able to participate in the larger decisions that affect the running of the training programmes and contribute to its success and the assistance of other poor people, like themselves, who have historically been exploited whenever possible by those more powerful.

General Assembly meetings

During my field research, I attended three general meetings, one a month, in February, March and April. At these meetings the general membership were updated on events at the society and decisions that had been made by the committee for their feedback and approval. Their suggestion were sought on future health care for the membership.

***Prarthona* or morning assembly**

Prarthona is held every morning at ten-thirty a.m. after everyone arrives to start their day's work at SKVIS. Every woman on site is expected to attend, from the President to the most inexperienced trainee. The women remove their footwear, form a circle, place an incense stick holder with some burning incense sticks in the centre of the circle, and sing a song of prayer. The only English song in their repertoire is "We shall overcome." Other Bengali songs follow in a similar vein containing messages of hardship and triumph or describing a beautiful world symbolically blooming with flowers that they have planted and nurtured. Another song says, "not you alone, not me alone, but you and me together," and is aimed at getting the message across that there

is strength in numbers. At the end of this prayer session, the women file off to their respective rooms carrying an incense stick for each room.

Morning meeting of department heads

Each department has a woman in charge, and they meet most mornings either before or after *prarthona* to discuss the day's work in their respective departments. Usually these meetings last about fifteen minutes and are crucial when a new order is received and the work of the various departments requires coodination. At the April 9th meeting, the heads of the spinning, batik and dyeing sections were present, Jhorna Debnath, Purnima Bhanja, Tulu Deb and Munju Sil. Ajanta Sen from the accounts department and Sabita Das from stores were there as well. Sandhya Biswas joined us later. Tulu kept minutes. They discussed supplies that needed to be bought for the new resident traines and the preparation of spinning wheels for them. The need to pay artisans for the work that they had handed in was mentioned. This reflects a concern for those who work on a piece-rate basis and whose incomes are not steady. Every attempt is made to ensure that they receive their money as soon as possible.[6] The atmosphere was relaxed and humorous as most have been together at SKVIS for many years.

Batik room meeting

On 9 February, 1993, I attended a group meeting of the workers in the batik room. Twenty-two women were present including myself, including Munju Sil from the dyeing section, and the meeting was so-chaired by Purnima Bhanja and Tulu Deb.

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[6] I recall overhearing a conversation between Anima Mondal and those in the accounts department along similar lines where she was questioning why women had not been paid as yet when they needed the money for day to day expenses.

Two new orders had recently been received and photographs of the silk scaves ordered were circulated among the women as well as swatches of the sample. Some remembered working on these designs.

A number of problems were discussed such as the build up of smoke making their eyes water. Consistency problems with the quality of designs was also raised. And Tulu questioned why some women were coming late to work. These problems were collectively discussed and suggestions were made to solve them. With respect to the problem of smoke, the women were told to try keeping the outside of the enamel bowls clean of wax. To solve the problem of some women not being able to handle complex designs, the women decided to try drawing grids onto the fabric first. Latecomers complained of housework at home and the commuting time needed to get to SKVIS as a reason for being late.

The discussions were open and participants vocal, some members more vociferous than others. This department has some of the youngest members of the society and often a number of them would talk at the same time and would be told to speak one at a time. They defended each other, spoke up for those who were too shy to speak or absent, and told each other off and sometimes argued and were shushed. All in all, it appeared to be an honest and open discussion. Overall their their collective responsibility for all matters pertaining to their department was obvious to me. Unlike the spinning room where each woman has her own equipment and works relatively autonomously, in the batik room the women must share equipment to a greater extent and are more affected by each other's work. At these meetings they have an opportunity to voice their frustrations and concerns about getting supplies on times, important as most get paid per piece, and about others in the group who won't cooperate.

They were reminded of a group of visitors from England arriving the next day and turned their attention to the songs they wanted to sing the next night for their guests.

Anima Mondal dropped in to announce the arrival of a group of buyers on the 17th of the month and told the women to have a number of samples for them to choose from. They were to check what stocks were in store and to decide what else needed to be produced, including design and colours. After she left, a vigorous discussion followed on what samples to make.

Dyeing section meeting

I visited with the team in the dyeing room a couple of times during their tea breaks. Over a cup of tea we would chat, and often they would discuss the day's work and what needed to be done next or the problems they were having with mixing the dyes for certain orders. This was a small team, and as a result, the department meetings were more informal. Munju Sil acts as an informal supervisor as she has the expertise, and the women work as a close knit group.

Spinning room meeting

In the spinning room women sit at their individual spinning wheels, and while they work with their hand turning the wheel, they keep up a lively conversation. (In other departments conversation is sporadic as more concentration in required to work with specific designs.) As a result, most concerns about departmental or other problems get voiced and discussed at these times. I talked with Jhorna Debnath, the head of this department, about these discussions and the monthly meetings. Technical problems such as broken parts and replacements are the sort of issues most often brought to her attention. The supply of cotton "slivers" from which they spin thread for muslin is another frequent problem. Women also discuss problems they face at home because it

affects their performance at work. If anyone is having financial problems and needs to borrow money they let her know and she passes this on to the committee members.

The consensus of the focus group with whom I spoke was that these monthly meetings serve a useful purpose and were not a waste of time as their suggestions and ideas for improving the way things work in their department are always implemented once they collectively agree on the change.

Monthly marketing meetings

This is a monthly meeting, held at SKVIS, of all the shopkeepers. Each shop is staffed by two people, except for the Calcutta shops that are adjacent to each other and have one person each, who are responsible for all matters pertaining to their store, from customer relations to book-keeping, inventory and accounts.

On March 27, 1993, the meeting was chaired by Anima Mondal. Six of the shopkeepers present were women and three were men. Ajanta Sen representing SKVIS's accounts department and Sabita Das, in charge of central stores at SKVIS were present as well.

These meetings serve as an opportunity for all the storekeepers to get together and exchange notes and collectively touch base with the centre. Apart from this monthly meeting, storekeepers individually report to SKVIS once a week and bring in their account books. Bula Raha explained that this is done to enable the accounts department to keep their books up to date as the Commission periodically sends representatives to drop in and check their books and the record of rebates being given

to customers.[7] The accounts department takes pride in keeping meticulous records which makes their yearly audit easier. This is important to them because it gives no one the opportunity to say, "Its a girls society, they don't know how to keep proper records." As well, with bribery fairly pervasive through the Indian civil service, they do not want to put themselves in the position of having to refuse to offer a bribe should their books not be up to date, which is against their policy, and then deal with the unpleasantness that could arise.

During this session, a number of topics were discussed - Commission procedures for filling out forms to be submitted to them for rebates, newer shopkeepers were instructed by others on how to write cash receipts for items sold and on efficient methods of record keeping. Other operational problems at the shops were discussed, for example the shortage of certain stocks. Sabita Das, as head of central stores and in charge of accepting finished goods, was informed of problems with products moving from her stores to the shops, such as bad labelling of items, pricing inconsistencies, and poor cutting and tailoring of some garments. These various problems were discussed collectively
and solutions were offered. Ultimately, the discussion moved to what goods needed to be bought for the next six months to replace depleted stocks. After a discussion of which items sold well in which shops, decisions was made regarding what to buy and where to buy them from.

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[7] In conversation with Mr. G.K. Ghosh, Director of the Commission's office in Calcutta, I discovered that "rebate fraud" is widespread with organisations falsely claiming to have given discounts to customers and collecting this amount from the government. To encourage the sale of *khadi*, the government occasionally provides customers with discounts, called "rebates," of about 10% to 20%, mostly during important religious festivals when people buy new clothes to celebrate. Commission-affiliated *khadi* stores sell the items at discounted prices and then collect this rebate from the Commission.

Sunil Mistri and Subroto Biswas have worked for SKVIS since their first shop was set up and hence have a lot of experience in marketing and as buyers. Twice a year, or when stocks are low, they go on buying trips to Khadi outlets in other states to bring back a more varied selection of goods for the different shops. They usually go to Kanpur in the state of Uttar Pradesh where the KVIC has a wider variety of cotton items to choose from and the quality is good. They travel to Bangalore in the south of India for silk items. South Indian silk is famous for its quality and its classic designs.

After the meeting was formally over, I had a group discussion with the nine storekeepers to get their thoughts on the usfulness of these meetings. As most of them work alone in their shops, these meetings allow them to break the isolaion of managing every aspect of their shops and to discuss their work with each other. Given the range in age and in experience, the less experienced can learn from the more experienced. Fear of the responsibility of making decisions is overcome by these opportunities for consultation and learning from the decisions others have made in similar situations. The storekeepers thereby share or lessen the risks and in the process learn to make decisions and to handle problems arising out of dealing with the public. By drawing on the collective wisdom and experience of the group, they say they feel that better decisions are made. The supportive role that this forum provides was reflected in the number of women who reiterated how they feel that they can bring any problem to the meeting to be collectively discussed and solved. Most importantly they gain self-confidence being able to handle their work.

DRDA trainers' meeting

These meetings are specifically for those involved in the DRDA training programme as it is so structured with every movement and expense having to be accounted for in writing. Sandhya Biswas, who administers this programme, meets with all the supervisors and trainers once a month and reviews the progress in their

training centres. At the meeting that I attended on February 6, 1993, there were nine trainers present, one of them male. Sandhya Biswas chaired the meeting and kept the minutes as well. Each gave a summary of their weekly report of their daily schedule and that of their trainees, for the previous weeks as well as what was achieved or not achieved. These written reports were handed over to Sandhya Biswas who had to write up a monthly progress report to the DRDA. We were joined by Sushama Mistri midway through these reports. Then the discussion moved on to problems that trainees were facing. Some members were more vocal than others, but the general tone was again no holds barred. Sushama Mistri chastised one trainer for her mistakes in her work, told her not to try and cover up her mistakes and to learn from this experience. Others freely interjected with advice and questions, but Sandhya Biswas and Sushama Mistri ensured that everyone had their say and kept frequent interruptions down. Sometimes when everyone was talking at the same time, Sandhya Biswas had to call the meeting to order. Problems of trainee absenteeism and theft were discussed. The solutions decided on were always the gentler options. Trainers were advised to visit the homes of those missing class to find out what the problem was and to stress the value of this training to trainees and especially to the husbands and fathers. One trainer discussed how she handled the situation when some equipment went missing - she told the group that the equipment was there for their collective benefit and that they were responsible for finding out who had taken the equipment if they wanted to use it. The stolen equipment was returned. Sandhya Biswas advised the other trainees to use this "consciousness raising" approach as well. Some were having problems with interference from local government officials.[8] They were told not to give out any

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[8] Frequently, men in positions of power within the village attempt to gain control over the training programme as there is a lot of money involved. This is consistent with the literature regarding male appropriation of women's incomes. (Boserup 1990, Tinker 1990)

information without first discussing with the group. The training programme is run by SKVIS on behalf of the DRDA and information regarding the programme is given to the agency to distribute to those that it is required to inform. Certain experienced trainers were sought for help with specific problems when the meeting broke into smaller groups. The meeting lasted most of the afternoon.

Emergency disciplinary meeting

On the 9th of April an emergency meeting was called at noon. One of the trainees in residence, who was about fourteen years old, had run off from the society without permission to meet a male friend.[9] Luckily, her absence had been noticed in time to stop her from catching the ferry and she was brought back. There was concern that other trainees, most of whom were fairly young, far from home for the first time in their lives and entrusted to SKVIS's care, might follow her example. The committee members considered this a serious matter that placed SKVIS's reputation at stake with implications for the future of their training programmes. The senior members of the group, who had been training at SKVIS for a number of months, travelled home and back unchaperoned when they wished to visit their families and had made the trip several times. The concern was for the new group of trainees averaging fifteen years in age and having led a secluded life in the past. Officially SKVIS had 'guardianship' of these young women which was a serious responsibility. As mentioned earlier, any person interested in gaining control of SKVIS would not hesitate to spoil SKVIS's reputation by claiming it was irresponsible and encouraging young women to behave inappropriately. Those present were: Jhorna Debnath, supervisor of their training in spinning; Sandhya Biswas, committee member and supervisor of the DRDA training

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[9] in the rural areas, there are no records kept of birthdays and age is usually estimated.

programme; Bula Raha, Ajanta Sen and Pushpa Deb, committee members; Pushpa Mondol, chaperone of the trainees; Sushma Mistri, committee member and supervisor of SKVIS's batik training programmes; Sushama Sen, trainee and senior member of the trainee group. Jhorna Debnath, Pushpa Mondol and Sushama Sen were all asked to give their opinion on the situation first. Then the group discussed what was to be done. Serious though the matter was, the group attempted to keep the matter in perspective and not make a hasty decision. They discussed sending home those girls who were not applying themselves. Jhorna Debnath, Pushpa Mondol and Sushama Sen, who knew the trainees well, were asked for their opinion regarding them. Finally, they decided to send for the girl's father and for an official from their village to decide what was to be done about the girl and the other trainees. For the present, the trainees were to be moved on to one floor instead of being spread over two floors. A couple of days later, after members from the village Panchayat had conferred with the committee members and Mr. Ray, it was decided to send all the trainees home to seriously think about their interest in the programme and make up their minds about participating. Those who were committed to learning could return after their decision. I was on a lower floor at the time when I heard sounds of loud weeping. I ran up to the second floor to discover what was the matter and found all the trainees weeping loudly and refusing to go home. Ultimately, the older trainees, ranging in age from sixteen to nineteen, stayed on and the younger trainees returned home to train in their village.

What can be concluded from these meetings and the participation of the artisans in decision making at SKVIS? Clearly there is an attempt at delegating authority and decision-making power and this has empowered women within their working environment. According to Tinker (1990, 43), "the process by which decisions are reached .... can foster either dependency or greater self-confidence and self-sufficiency." The grassroot nature of horizontal communication is a key to the success

of communication within SKVIS in fostering self-confidence and self-sufficiency. By training at SKVIS, women have acquired new skills and knowledge which they are applying to earn an income. Learning from women of their own socioeconomic and caste background has arguably made the process easier. By engaging in discussion, the women have un-learned their 'silence' and are taking charge of the immediate conditions in which they work and which have a direct impact on their productivity and work processes. By participating, they are discovering that their voices are being heard, their contributions valued and their calls for change within their departments are showing results. As well, many contribute to decisions that affect the reputation of the society. Many also work in the public sphere, as shopkeepers and trainers, and feel empowered enough to communicate with confidence and a sense of empowerment as they contributed to socioeconomic change in the lives of other women. In conversation with a few of the trainers, their dedication to their work came through. Many mentioned that even if they were not being paid high wages by the DRDA, they would continue to assist other women and help them "stand on their own feet." Their understanding of the oppression and lack of opportunity faced by other women like themselves came across clearly as did the realisation of the impact of their work. And among the executive, there existed the highest sense of empowerment. According to Tinker (1990, 43), "evaluations suggest that the simple fact of organising is itself an empowering experience as women begin to share problems and to recognize they are not alone in their struggles to survive." The founding members had done more than organise themselves. They created employment for themselves, provided for their families, and contributed to the formation of a large and profitable economic enterprise that is contributing to socieconomic change and the empowerment of increasing numbers of women in the wider community.

I asked a few of the women if participating in decision making at SKVIS had any impact on their participation in decisions at home and they mentioned that it did.

At Sushama Mistri's home all family members got together to make decisions that affected each other and the collective wisdom and wishes of all the members of the family were taken into consideration. Shikha Mistri, her younger sister of sixteen years, mentioned the collective decision making in her family to me at a later date.

What is the quality of decisions being made by the executive members? The growth of SKVIS and its increasing profits and membership suggest that the executive committee have managed the affairs of the society well. During my time in the field observing them at work and attending the general meetings and various group meetings, I noticed that the decisions that were made by the committee members were good decisions. They were thoughtful, fair and included a consideration of its possible consequences. When necessary, those outside of the executive were consulted and their knowledge and experiences allowed to influence decisions. Their decision not to expand SKVIS but to focus on assisting other women form societies of their own indicate their wisdom in not allowing SKVIS to get too large and unmanageable and reflect their experience in managing SKVIS at its present size. During my presence in the field, I observed that the committee members were constantly on the go. Their busy schedules were commented on by some members.

But clearly, the hierarchy of decision making affects the extent to which all members participate in decision making. The decisions that most members make affect the performance of their departments and their own productivity and do accord them a measure of control, but to what extent do they influence the larger picture, the running of the organisation itself? Alfaro has studied the organisation of women to form family kitchens in Peru as a strategy for self-help. (1994, as cited in Riano 1994) In her study she found that the distance between those women in leadership roles and women in the grassroots slowly increased with time. This was because only a few women could assume leadership roles. Without a realisation of this growing chasm, 'leaders' were making decisions that were then being passed on to the grassroots to be voted on. In

essence this was not a collective agreement though it was understood as such. In her analysis, this style of making decisions was, in fact, leading to the "formation of authoritarianism among the women" (267) and the group was no longer democratic. SKVIS has an elected executive whose role is to conduct, manage and administer the affairs of the society. The 'leaders' are already in place. But how can they guard against "authoritarianism" and fulfill their duties as elected representatives?

According to Mr. G.K. Ghosh and Mr. S.K. Misra at the Commission's Calcutta office, SKVIS is "exceptional" in that it is more democratic than other societies under the Commission's programmes. According to Mr. Ghosh, these other societies are "de facto dictatorships." Against this background, SKVIS's attempts at slowly delegating power can be viewed as progressive. But is this enough? If SKVIS's intention is to be a democratic society, clearly more is needed. In proposing "alternative visions, stategies and methods" for addressing women's inequality and oppression in the Third World, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a group of women scholars from around the world, suggest the formation of organisations in order to empower women. (Sen & Grown 1987) But a problem they recognise is "the ability and willingness to share power" within these organisations. They continue, "those with the dynamism, energy and genuine concern to start organizations are often afraid that others less motivated and more prone to personal aggrandizement will seize control over organizations built up with great effort. These fears are well-founded in some instances; they are compounded by the inflow of funds from ... agencies that makes the takeover of the organization and their resources more tempting." As discussed in a previous chapter, a takeover by external agents is a situation that the committee members are constantly on guard to prevent. Here Sen and Grown (1987) address takeovers from within. They suggest two ways in which to prevent such a situation. "Democratization of organizations and widening of their membership base" in order to distribute power and diffuse hierarchy. They also suggest

"explicit assertion and commitment to an ethic that rejects personal aggrandizement" firmly being built into the organisation from the beginning. (95) The practice of its committee members in firmly maintaining collective decision making from the inception of SKVIS to the present time suggests that they view the success of SKVIS as a joint effort and themselves as a part of the larger picture. Despite the expertise and experience they have accumulated over the years, no one member has taken over the show to autocratically make all the decisions. Hence, the risk is of a collective authoritarianism on the part of the executive. But the decision on the part of the executive not to expand SKVIS reflects a rejection of such tendencies. They could in fact continue to expand SKVIS and create more sub-centres like Basanti which would operate as satellites of their headquarter in Canning allowing the executive to control an empire through the district. Instead, they are encouraging the formation of new groups with their own executives and decision making powers. How can their commitment to collective decision-making and hence the rejection of increasing personal power be transmitted to the rest of the membership and a distancing between them and the general membership prevented? How can their strong sense of membership and commitment to the goals of the society be spread to all its members? An analysis of SKVIS's evolution indicates attempts at increasing democratic decision making among its artisans. I would argue that the role of communication is fundamental to ensuring democracy. Just as the founding members spent long hours in debate and discussion about various social problems and issues of oppression to reach a high level of understanding of these problems, the general membership need to spend time in group discussions in order to reach this level of awareness. As well, information regarding the wider decisions of running the society and its future direction need to be shared with the general membership in order to inform them of the need for a particular course of

action and to get their feedback before decisions are made final.[10] While I was not informed of an instance where the general membership disagreed with or overturned a decision made by the executive, I was aware of some discontent among some members at not being given training in tailoring or other skills. Bibha Mondol, the head of the tailoring department, had once set a record by earning Rs.1,500 in a month. As a result, this affected the desire of some women to learn tailoring and earn the same amount. I had been informed by a commitee member that a decision had been made not to expand the tailoring department as orders being received were not very stable or increasing. So while the executive were aware of the nature of demand for tailored goods which had resulted in their decision not to train more women in tailoring, the women who were discontent at not being transferred to the tailoring department were resentful. The communication gap here is one of the few that I noticed but is one that could be avoided by better communication between the executive and the general membership, especially important given the size of the organisation. Hence if SKVIS is to remain a democratic grassroots organisation, I would argue that it needs to continue to include all of its members in the decision making process and to consciously facilitate good communication between the 'leaders' and the grassroots.

Social programmes

As SKVIS has grown and continued to register a profit, it has made attempts at bringing in social, health and educational programmes to benefit its members and the wider community. Some of these programmes are paid for from the society's profits. Donations and contributions from friends and supporters pay for others. Organisations

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[10] This is necessary despite the fact that the executive make good decisions.

like Unicef and government departments/ministries pay for health education and other programmes that they host.

As well SKVIS is interested in "consciousness raising" among their members. I was informed my Anima Mondal that discussion groups have been held around feminist issues, women are encouraged not to neglect themselves and to care for their health and that of their children, to educate their children and to plan financially for their future.

Financial assistance

For those who cannot afford to, SKVIS will either pay their rent or pay for their children's school books and supplies, and in one case SKVIS helped pay for a member's wedding.

Apart from this aid, SKVIS also addresses the discrimination women face in obtaining credit from banks, a discrimination that the committee members remember well and described to me. When the founding members started up their society, they approached local banks for loans and were refused. They were not treated courteously either. SKVIS gives out interest-free loans to members in need. As well, women borrow money to buy land or "vans" and rickshaws for their sons and husbands to earn a living. Molina Saha from the spinning department borrowed money to buy a "van" for her son to operate.[11] Anita and her sister borrowed money to buy their father a boat. Munju Sil's loan was to pay for her sister's wedding expenses. A second loan was to repair and convert her house into a brick one. Sunder Halder bought a piece of land with the money he borrowed. Others have borrowed money to pay for funeral expenses, medical bills, converting their mud huts into brick houses, repairs to their houses, paying off their husband's debts with moneylenders. Munju Sil mentioned that

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[11] This is a variation of the cycle-rickshaw, only its seats more people and can be used for transporting goods.

she had paid back the money she borrowed for her sister's wedding. Gita Dutta mentioned that she borrowed money for her marriage expenses which she had since repaid. She borrowed money again to help free her husband's bakery from moneylenders and this loan was outstanding.

Flood relief

In late February, during my field trip a severe gastro-enteritis epidemic broke out in/hit the districts of Howrah, Midnapore and 22 Parganas, North and South, in West Bengal and in neighbouring Bangladesh. Over 1,000 people died in these three districts and thousands more were flooding local hospitals and clinics or suffering in their homes. SKVIS waded in to help with relief efforts and spent approximately Rs.40,000 on Halazone (chlorine) tablets for purifying drinking water and oral rehydration salts. These were distributed to the villagers by a few of the executive committee members who put their work aside and travelled around Canning and Basanti in thelast week of February.

In 1981, a devastating flood hit the Sunderban area. Sushama Mistri remembers it clearly. The plot of land at Dighirpaar, their present location, had recently been bought and the building had not been constructed as yet. All that sttod on the land was a mud hut. With the torrential rain and the flooding, this was swept away and the next morning, when they came to work, everything was gone. They spent the morning searching the surrounding area for their equipment.

As part of their relief efforts in the community, they distributed what clothes they had at their store in Canning. A black and white photograph in their archive shows a group of men, five of whom are wearing new batik kurtas (loose tunics that come to mid thigh) with large flower designs around the necks.

During the flood that hit in 1989, SKVIS was in a position to increase their relief efforts. They distributed blanket, tarpaulins and some food, and repaired about 250 homes, spending about Rs.50,000 in all.

Tuitions and adult education programmes

As part of SKVIS's social programmes the society pays for books and other school supplies for the children of those of its members that cannot afford to pay. As well, SKVIS has arranged for two women to tutor the children of those members who cannot afford private tuition. Every evening the children show up after school with their school books and lay out two large *maduris*, mats made of woven leaves, on the roof of the building and wait for Sandhya Das and Akadoshi Mondol to arrive. Sandhya works in the silk reeling department during the day and leads one group, while Akadoshi is a B.A. student putting herself through college by giving private lessons and leads the other group. These group tutoring sessions last about two hours every day and meet Monday to Friday. This programme was started in April 1991.

SKVIS has made several attempts to provide adult education to members and interested women in the area. When I visited SKVIS for my research, this programme was no longer in place as women were, apparently, dropping out after learning to sign their names. Many were unable to attend because they were too tired after a day's work and household chores. I spoke with a few members at SKVIS who had never attended school because of financial hardships in the family. They were eager to learn to read and write but their daily workload was too high to make this possible. The better paying jobs within SKVIS such as the accounts department and trainers in the DRDA programmes require a certain level of literacy. This latter meaning programme had recently recruited a number of its members as trainers who earned Rs1,000 a month, some of the highest salaries at SKVIS. Unfortunately, those, like Mona Das, who would like to train other women are restricted by a lack of formal education. Adult

education programmes provide an alternative if women could be relieved from their double burdens.

At the time of my visit, the President of SKVIS had approached a Calcutta high court judge, Mrs. Padma Khastugir, and invited her to visit SKVIS and speak about legal issues, the problems that women face and their legal rights. This could be potentially useful as, under the constitution, women have equal rights with men. But because of customary rights, women are often denied what is rightfully theirs. Scholars have called for changes to laws which do not reflect the spirit of the Indian Constitution. As well, they encourage women to challenge the courts in order to set new precedents for women's rights. (Moser 1989 and Sen and Grown 1987) Such a move may be intimidating and difficult for an individual woman to make, but there appears to be potential in the collective membership at SKVIS to challenge the discriminatory treatment of any of its members such as husbands abandoning their wives and keeping their jewelry or in-laws and other relatives depriving widows of the right to inherit their husbands estates.

Health programmes

Health is another major area of concern. Because of the high mortality rates of adults from disease and of children from disease and malnutrition, SKVIS sent one of its members to participate in various health education programmes. In the monsoon months when the area is frequently waterlogged, water borne diseases reach epidemic proportions. With such a vast area to cover, most of which is not easily accessible, government action is slow.

In the areas where women live, there is no running water and sanitation facilities are far from adequate with no indoor plumbing. As in all rural areas in Bengal, ponds are an important source of water for the community and are used for bathing, washing clothes, and washing pots and pans. Unfortunately, communal

sharing of this resource can also lead to a sharing of germs which is why cholera, typhoid and other such water borne diseases spread like wildfire in these areas.

SKVIS members learn hygiene through songs and what to do during epidemics which usually come around like clockwork once the monsoons begin. Water for drinking and cooking is obtained from tube wells, but with utensils being washed in the pond, germs are still being spread. Women are taught how diseases spread and what preventative measures to take. One of the songs I heard was a recipe for mixing salt, sugar and water in a particular proportion to be given to those who are ill in order to prevent dehydration.

In 1991, a nutrition expert was invited to SKVIS to speak to the women. Classes were given to forty women and they in turn were encouraged to discuss this information with the women of their departments. The Bengali diet is one of the most balanced in the world, with an emphasis on vegetables and fish and the eating of foods according to the season, and those in rural areas living close to the soil are aware of the various kinds of food available. This knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation. The eating of certain vegetables in season helps prevent illnesses and disease. Many plants, like neem and tulsi, and spices, like fennel, clove and turmeric, have medicinal or antiseptic properties and have been used as such for centuries.[12] Beck, (1992) who has studied the survival strategies of the poor in Bengal, has a wonderful quote from a poor woman in Bangladesh who was being told to cook more green leafy vegetables. She said,

> Don't worry about what I feed my family. you just give me some money and I will take care of it. You don't have to assume that I don't know what to feed my family. The problem is that I happen to be poor, and if you can't do anything about that then get out of here. Don't waste my time. (492)

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[12] The scientific name for the neem plant is *Azadirachta indica* and that for turmeric is *Curcuma longa*.

Often, government ministries and development agencies believe that the low level of nutrition among the poor is due to a lack of knowledge about nutritional foods rather than the fact that their poverty prevents them from eating what they would like.

Scholars who defend indigenous knowledge call for its revival against the hegemonic claims of experts promoting knowledge derived form systems external to local environments. Especially in the areas of science and medicine, these scholars question whether technologies and medical care based on Western reductionist science are appropriate in India or appropriate at all in building a healthy, happy world. Societies have existed for thousands of years using indigenous knowledge of health care and nutrition that have been devalued over the last century with the discovery of "scientific knowledge" and those not subscribing to modern medicine are considered ,"old-fashioned," "backward" and "unscientific." (Marglin 1990, Nandy & Visvanathan 1990, Shiva 1989 & 1991)

Anima attended a fifteen day course on primary health care and nutrition at the Christian Medical College (CMC) in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, one of the leading medical colleges in the country. This course was meant for health workers in areas where no doctors are available. Using the handbook provided by CMC, she would discuss one chapter a day with the women at SKVIS. In addition she has attended a Unicef-sponsored week-long course on mother and child care.

At the general meeting in February, 1994, Anima announced plans for bringing in a series of doctors to give the women health check-ups. An opthalmologist was the first to be scheduled and would visit in March.

Over a series of Sundays in March, Dr. Salil Ray, a practising opthalmologist from Calcutta visited SKVIS and checked out the eyesight of at least sixty women. In conversation with him after one of these sessions, I asked him about the state of the women's eyesight. He indicated that the problems were not serious, with no incidences of cataract, glaucoma or other diseases. Most of the women under forty needed a single

prescription while those over forty needed bifocals. The headaches that some complained of were due to astigmatism which would be corrected by their glasses, while others had minor sinus problems. In early April, a formal ceremony was held where Mr. Ray presented the women with their glasses. Overnight the scene at SKVIS changed, with every second person walking around wearing a pair of glasses.

The society paid his fees for services which he offered at a discounted rate, and the society paid for half the cost of eyeglasses with the women individually paying for the rest.

At the February general meeting the women were also invited to suggest other health problems that they would like taken care of for which specialists would accordingly be brought in. Someone suggested a lung specialist as the next possibility. Many women work at SKVIS or cook at home over coal fires in rooms with poor ventilation and lung ailments are not uncommon. As a more long-term measure, the executive committee was planning to create and maintain health records of all the members. Discussions were in process with doctors from Calcutta and Canning to set up an apropriate system.

Smokeless *chula* or stove

"Smokeless *chula*" are coal stoves that are designed to allow more oxygen to reach the burning coals and have a chimney that draws away toxic fumes that result from the combustion. They are more fuel efficient as the coal burns more thoroughly with a better supply of oxygen creating less soot, carbon monoxide and other residues. As a result, I was informed that it is more economic, hygienic and environmentally sound. This technology was initiated by the Ministry of Conventional Energy specifically for rural women living below the poverty line. To promote the use of this stove among this target group, a project funded by the Ministry of Social Welfare is in place. These stoves, offered for sale to other consumers at Rs.96 each are provided to

rural women at the highly subsidized price of Rs.15. This amount is meant to cover the installation fee of the stove. SKVIS has trained a number of its members in how to install these correctly. They are paid a fee by the Ministry for every stove they install. SKVIS is promoting this programme among their members and throughout the district.

A number of these social programmes can be seen to have been designed as 'welfare projects,' which were the earliest WID approach to "developing" women, viewing them as passive recipients of development and ascribing motherhood as their most important role and contribution to the economy. These were designed to deliver information, education, and other free services and products to poor women in order to assist them in their roles as wives and mothers. A number of these projects provided maternal and child health care and taught hygiene, nutrition and home economics or provided women with home-based appropriate technology. (Buvinic 1986, Moser 1989) SKVIS has sought out such services and products being provided by donor agencies and government ministries. But as Beneria and Sen (1981) phrase it, "The reduction of infant mortality, improvement in health and sanitation, and better midwife and paramedic facilities give poor rural women more options than having to resolve class contradictions through their own bodies." (297) After all, it is women's subordinate position in society, through oppressions of class and gender, that causes them to be overworked and in ill health amd therefore deserving of these free goods and services. On a practical level, these services should be taken advantage of.

Analysis of the impact of SKVIS

The sense of empowerment that women have acquired through membership at SKVIS has also affected their personal lives. As wage earners their status in their families have been affected as well as their ability to act as agents of social change. In all, SKVIS has had a tremendous impact on its member's lives.

In being a society for women, the committee has attempted to accomodate the realities of its member's lives. One is the double burden that women face in having to take care of the housework before coming to work. According to the Commission, official working hours are from nine thirty a.m. to six thirty p.m. but the society has made working hours more flexible. Most women at SKVIS arrive in time for morning assembly at ten thirty after doing their chores at home and leave between six and six thirty in the evening. Those who have babies or young children bring them along to work. I was informed of plans to start a creche at SKVIS in the near future.

As well, when members marry and move away to live in their in-laws home, SKVIS tries to accomodate this. Previously Gita Chowdhury worked at SKVIS in Canning. After she married, moved to Baruipur, and had a baby, SKVIS put her in charge of their shop there. Many artisans work at home, mostly spinning or sewing on the spinning wheels and sewing machines provided by SKVIS. Purnima Bhonjo, a founding member of SKVIS, took a leave of absence for several years to care for her two daughters, and now that they are of school age she has returned to SKVIS. SKVIS also gives women two months of paid pregnancy leave.

In the wider circle of family, friends and neighbours of the artisans at SKVIS, the society is now seen as a "good" one." According to Anima Mondal, in Canning women are now encouraged to work at SKVIS instead of being pressured to stay at home even when their incomes are not crucial to the family. The increase in its membership since its inception is proof of this, and not all members work at SKVIS because they desperately need the money. A few work at SKVIS, though their incomes are not vital to their households, as the working conditions and environment are

congenial and there is no sexual, or other, harassment to have to deal with. This allows them to have a personal income and provide their families with some extra frills.[13]

The impact of income on the situation of its earner and on the existing patterns of family-based gender subordination has been studied. Scholars conclude that there must be some impact since money is a form of power in itself. (Hunt 1980 & Omvedt 1980, as cited in Standing 1985, 232) Having an income regardless of its use or frequent appropriation by males, or female senior kin, does undeniably affect the self-image of women and their perception of themselves though the effects of earning an income "are far from uniform and depend upon a complex interplay of social and economic principles" (Standing 1985, 232-35) This is consistent with the findings of some researchers who have made cross-cultural studies of the "covert or overt negotiation" by women of their incomes among intimates within the household unit and the inequality in the outcomes. (Dwyer and Bruce 1988) Their studies show that the outcomes of these negotiations are partly determined by women's perceptions of themselves and the value they place on what they do. A woman's bargaining position is found to be weaker if she undervalues herself leading her to accept less favourable conditions. This self-esteem is crucial in affecting women's willingness to change their situations if they perceive them/it to be unfair. It also affects their willingness to seek help from others such as networks of support outside the immediate family, help from relatives and kin, soliciting the opinion of friends and neighbours in their community. As a result, researchers agure that increased earnings alone is insufficient for bringing about fundamental change for women. The way women see themselves and their situations is crucial to this process.

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[13] About five of the women artisans at SKVIS that I interviewed fall under this category.

As well, feminist scholars have argued that the achievement of personal power and status for women is through female solidarity groups. Analysis of women's organisations in India and Bangladesh indicate that these groups go beyond improving women's economic situations. They bring about change in women's outlooks, increase their freedom within the family unit, empower them to access community resources like literacy classes and to participate in local government by voicing their opinions.

Researchers have also found that the main reason women work to earn an income is to better the lives of their children and this influences how women allocate the incomes they earn or those they control. Women allocate a higher percentage of their income, than do men, to everyday subsistence and nutrition. As well, these findings reveal differences in the amounts that men and women take as personal spending money from their earnings. They found a consistency across cultures in the belief that men have a right to personal spending money, either because they felt they needed or deserved it and that women's income is for collective purposes.

But there remains a larger question, that of the impacts of an income on the capacity for women to self-determination. Standing (1985) questions the extent to which incomes really improve the situation of women or the extent to which it increases their capacity to 'control' resources that they earn or inherit.[14] Within the larger picture, to what extent does earning a wage increase women's personal autonomy to determine the conditions of their lives. She asks, "Are women who 'opt' to put money into a personal bank account in order to save for their daughters' dowries acting in any meaningful sense as autonomous agents?" (234) With respect to women's property rights, scholars argue that more than "managerial rights" are needed. To claim real control, women must also be able to reinforce ownership rights against hostility or

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[14] Control being defined by Standing (1985) as the capacity to make decisions regarding their use.

contestation by other family members, and to determine the future allocation of this resource. (Mayoux 1983, as cited in Standing 1985) To what extent do the women at SKVIS measure up to this standard?

All the women that I spoke to control and manage their earnings. Among the married women, almost all contribute at least half their earnings towards household expenses. Some manage the household budget or hand this portion of their monthly income over to their mothers-in-law if she happens to run the household. But they decide what to do with the share that they keep for themselves. Among those women whose husbands earn well, they keep what they earn, bank some, pay their life insurance premiums,[15] and pay for their own and their children's expenses - clothing, school supplies, medical expenses. I asked them what plans they had for their children's futures and they mentioned educating them as much as they could afford to. A few mentioned their duty of marrying off their daughters. The importance of marriage within Bengali society remains, but by educating their daughters, the mothers at SKVIS are providing them with qualifications that are marketable.

Among those unmarried, a few may contribute to the family budget if money is tight at home, but if not, they control their money and decide what to do withit. Those whose families are financially better off may not contribute to the family budget but contribute by spending on siblings, their mothers or other family members. Arguably, this is consistent with women's socialisation to be altruistic. Chinu Midha, who is

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[15] Life insurance plans are becoming increasingly popular in Calcutta, and are saving schemes with a fixed monthly deposit and a guaranteed return of a certain amount at term. Billboards advertising the Life Insurance Corporation's (LIC) schemes dot the city. The urban middle and lower middle classes are increasingly turning to savings schemes with banks and the LIC. At SKVIS, a few of the members' brothers work for the LIC as sales agents. Some members at SKVIS whith some savings have bought into the LIC financial plan.

fifteen years old and works in the batik section, pays for her nephews school supplies as well as for a private tutor to coach him in his lessons after school. Sandhya Das gives her brother pocket money every month and pays for her mother's clothes. Minoti Ghosh is putting her youngest sister through school. But in all these cases, the women control their money and their bank accounts.

The earning capacity of these women has had considerable impact on their status within their families and, for most, in how they are treated by other family members. According to many of the committee members, and some of the women I interviewed, the situation of the women has improved a lot. Spousal abuse has decreased as well. A few women indicated that if they had any problems with their husbands, they would not hesitate to leave and come to SKVIS. While I did not ask the women if they had ever said so to their husbands I gathered from my conversations with most of the women that their husbands were aware that SKVIS was a strong refuge in case of need. I would not hesitate to claim that the experiences of Ujjala Ghosh and Saraswati Adhikari have influenced how women now view their options. Ujjala Ghosh who has been separated from her abusive husband for some time was previously upset by the separation and concerned about what society would think of her. After being at SKVIS for a year and a half, she saw the situation differently. She said the the "torture" that she had endured had given her mental strength, and as a result she now believed that it was okay to be apart from her husband. Similarly, Saraswati Adhikari had been abandoned by her husband, who kept her jewelry. After she joined SKVIS in 1986 and started earning well in the tailoring department, her husband wanted to get back together with her but she refused. The economic support of SKVIS and the emotional support from everyone at the society has undoubtedly contributed to the stand these women have taken. They in turn have reinforced the women's beliefs in their rights and their options in dealing with similar situations. This collective support has worked in the case of Pushpa Mondol. After her husband died, his family started to pressure her

to move out of the house so that they could take over. Pushpa Mondol shared her problems with the women at SKVIS and they got together and told her husband's family off. As a result, the harassment stopped.

According to Anima Mondal, previously parents regretted having daughters, but the attitudes of the parents of the women working at SKVIS is now different. In contributing to the family income the women are now valued. Many earn more than their parents, while some are the only steady source of income for the family. In many cases parents even seek the advice and counsel of their daughters in family matters. Minoti Ghosh, who is sixteen years old and the eldest daughter still at home, advises her father on various matters. Munju Sil, who is twenty three years old, participates in all the family's decisions. In fact, she mentioned that her father often sought her advice in financial matters relating to his barber shop. The pressure for them to marry young has also decreased, now that they are no longer seen as a financial burden or as only another mouth to feed. There were a number of unmarried women in their twenties at SKVIS.[16] In rural parts of West Bengal, most women are married off soon after puberty. When I asked them about their future plans not one of them mentioned marriage. Along with economic freedom has come the freedom to move around freely in the area. Women visit their friends and go to the movies or to the circus together.

The contribution that SKVIS has made to these women's lives goes beyond alleviating their most pressing economic needs. I asked them about the changes to their lives after coming to SKVIS in order to see their lives through their eyes. Most answers were all variations on the same theme. For many the worries of the past have faded or are fading, and they no longer worry about their future or that of their children. At

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[16] The mean age of marriage in the state of West Bengal is 19.26 years. Between 1987 and 1988, in all of India, forty-four percent of rural women between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years of age were married. (Unicef 1990, 82)

SKVIS they have job security and the peace that comes with it. As well they have found happiness and laughter with the friends they have made here, who also provide support and advice when they need it. They even support each other financially. When an artisan marries or there is a death in the family the women take out a collection to help out. Mixing with each other, meeting new people who come to visit or to train, and learning new skills and knowledge about all sorts of different things has expanded their horizons. As well, they have respect, from each other and from the larger society outside. Not least they have the "affection" of those at SKVIS. As Bapi Roy told me, strong friendships have been formed within their department. If anyone is ill and can't come to work, everyone from their department goes to visit her. When she is ill and can't make it to work, she doesn't like staying at home. According to Lakshmi Mullick, even when women are sick, they still often come to work because they feel better surrounded by friends. Some women mentioned their appreciation for more than the good income they earned at SKVIS. As Sabita Das puts it, "money isn't everything, "affection" is important."[17] In addition to the good will and support of an extended family, Mona Das and Minoti Ghosh mentioned their appreciation for the other opportunities that SKVIS has given them. They have learned music, new songs, dance, and drama by participating in cultural programmes that SKVIS hosts during special occasions like religious festivals and birthdays of famous leaders who led India to independence, and when government officials and visitors from abroad come to visit, activities that are important to the culturally appreciative Bengalis. As well, Minoti has benefitted from "the knowledge and wisdom that she has gained about life" and "the importance of working and improving her situation and that of her younger brother and sister."

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[17] In the Bengali culture, *bhalobasha*, affection or liking, is a word frequently used within personal relationships of all kinds reflecting its importance.

I asked women I have interviewed if they had any plans to leave SKVIS and work elsewhere. The unanimous answer was no. Some of the older women have worked at other places and remember the hardships they faced. Most earned between twenty five to fifty percent less than what they received at SKVIS when they first joined. When I interviewed them, many were trainers and supervisors with incomes in the highest income bracket at SKVIS. They appreciated the working conditions at SKVIS, not to speak of all the fringe benefits. Two of the younger members were not entirely happy with what they were doing at SKVIS and wanted to move to another department because they believed they would have a higher income. And a few mentioned that they would like to learn tailoring but had not been given an opportunity as yet.[18]

But overall, as Pushpa Mondol puts it, SKVIS has a "good atmosphere and a happy environment," one that she feels is good for her fourteen year old daughter to grow up in. Gita Chowdhury said "Khadi is a very good organisation. Even if they didn't pay me I'd still work for them." And Lakshmi Mullick said, "I will grow old at Khadi and die here." According to her, "SKVIS has given me everything." Some of the women who were in desperate straits before coming to SKVIS mentioned that if SKVIS had not helped them they would have become "brain short"[19] or "would have run aground."

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[18] One member who works in the tailoring department had an income of Rs.1,500 setting a record for the most earned by an artisan in a month. But this event is rare. Tailoring orders are not received regularly as a result of which, I was informed by Sushama Mistri that the tailoring department would not be expanded.

[19] This English phrase was actually used and is not a translation.

Sustainability and the future

SKVIS's has an excellent reputation with the organisations that it works with including Unicef and the DRDA. According to Mr. Muralidharan, regional head of Unicef in Calcutta, of the numerous NGOs giving training under their DWCRA programme, SKVIS is "one of the best." Dr. Illiana Choudhury, an officer at Unicef, gave SKVIS a similarly high grade. Mrs. Shila Nag, Assistant Project Officer of the DRDA, informed me that SKVIS is a "very good" organisation doing an excellent job of giving training to the participants of the DWCRA programmes.

Similarly, SKVIS's reputation with the Khadi Commission is equally good. According to Mr. Kamal Taori, the CEO of the Commission who has his office in Bombay, SKVIS's performance is "very good" and "ahead of the others" that are involved in the Commission's *khadi* and village industries programmes. According to Mr. G.K. Ghosh, the director of the Commission's branch office in Calcutta, SKVIS's performance is "exceptional" and is "one of the five top" organisations receiving aid from the Commission in the state of West Bengal. According to Mr S.K. Misra of the Commission's branch office in Calcutta, who has handled SKVIS's case since its earliest association with the Commission, SKVIS has a "very good professional relationship with the Commission in meeting dealines and in the repayment of loans."

Both Mr. Taori and Mr. Ghosh laud SKVIS for being able to get out of the "KVIC cocoon." SKVIS has registered a profit every year since 1980 and is not abusing its credit privileges with the Commission. Many organisations funded by the Commission fail to repay their loans and never break free of this dependency relationship. As a result of the Commission's growing debts, its sustainability is being questioned and its ability to create viable and independent economic enterprises

criticised.[20] They also lauded SKVIS for "going beyond Gandhi's tenets" in its export performance and in actively pursuing this market. SKVIS exports to a number of alternative trading organisations (ATOs) in Europe and in North America whose trading philosophy Gandhi may, in fact, have appreciated.

Alternative trade and the ATOs

Gandhi considered the international trading system to be unfair where the powerful exploited the less powerful. Would he support the alternative trading network which works to ensure a system of fair trade?

Alternative trade is a system of trade in which partners "seek deliberately to establish a more equal basis of exchange between First and Third Worlds," (Brown 1993, 156) one based on fairness, mutual understanding and concern for people and the environment. These trading partners, consisting of alternative trading organisation (ATOs) and their 'producer-partners' trade directly with each other by-passing "conventional multi-level trading systems so that Third World workers can earn a higher and fairer return for their labours." (Bridgehead Annual Report 1992) This direct relationship is in turn fostered between producers and consumers. This means consumers are given the following information: what is in the products, the truth about the living and working conditions of the producers, how much they earn for their labour, and the effects of their product and its production on the environment. This allows consumers to understand the impact of their purchase and the importance of their support.

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[20] I was informed by Mr. Taori of the Commission's attempts to redress this situation in assisting and training the recipients of its funding to address the realities of the market place. But larger change to the direction of the Commission is being resisted and is a politicised affair.

The idea of alternative trading emerged when a number of First World charities, of which Oxfam in the United Kingdom is the best known, decided to establish less dependent relationships with the recipients of their aid, mostly victims of famine, war and natural disasters.[21] They attempted to produce longer-term benefits by providing them with tools and equipment with which to earn a living and rebuild their lives, rather than just providing temporary relief measures. In addition, they helped sell their products in shops in the North. As this approach gained ground, an alternative trading network was born. Today it is a growing alternative to the existing system of work trade. In comparison to the world's total trade of hundreds of billions of dollars, the value of alternative trade can be measured in the millions. but alternative is growing. ATOs operate in nearly all the countries of Western Europe, North America, Japan, the United Kingdom and Australasia.[22]

Alternative trading organisations (ATOs) buy crafts, textiles, food and coffee from small-scale producers like women's and worker's cooperatives, community-owned and operated businesses, small enterprises and governments in the South. These groups pay their workers a fair wage, and many have social programmes that benefit their members. ATOs in turn pay their producer-partners a fair return for their labour, i.e. they pay the price that their producer-partners quote as calculated according to costs in their own economies. These products are sold by the ATOs mostly through mail order catalogues and sometimes in special shops. ATOs range in size from handling an annual turnover of millions of dollars, to independent retail coops. Some ATOs trade with hundreds of producer groups in Third World countries. Sometimes regular retail

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[21] Oxfam began as a small group of Quakers in Oxford, England, raising funds for famine victims in Greece during the Second World War.

[22] For a list of alternative trading organisations around the world, see Brown (1993).

stores carry a few items of fairly traded coffee, nuts and honey along with their other products.

In 1989, forty ATOs formed the International Federation of Alternative Trade (IFAT), an umbrella organisation for the ATO movement with headquarters in Amsterdam in the Netherlands.[23] The Federation's "objectives are to improve the living conditions of the poor and the oppressed particularly in "third world" countries and changing unfair structures of international trade mainly by way of alternative trade." (IFAT, undated) In 1993, IFAT had a membership of about sixty ATOs and producer groups from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Its members are expected to adhere to its Code of Ethics in their business operations and trading activities. According to IFAT's estimates, the alternative trade movement globally has sales of about US$300 million annually.

SKVIS trades with ATOs in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany and Italy. In Canada, SKVIS tades with Bridgehead Incorporated, an ATO with its head office in Ottawa, and owned by OXFAM-Canada. Bridgehead trades with eighty partner groups in twenty four countries over the world and sells its fairly traded products through its mail order catalogue, its two stores in Ottawa and Toronto, through volunteer sales representatives and wholesales to smaller retail outlets throughout Canada. (Bridgehead 1992) SKVIS first started trading with Bridgehead in February of 1990 and supplies Bridgehead with batik, tie-dye and block printed silk scarves.[24] As part of its trading philosophy, Bridgehead pays SKVIS fifty percent of the price of these scarves in

[23] In September 1993, IFAT moved its headquarters to Ephrata, Pennsylvania, in the United States of America.

[24] The information on SKVIS's relationship with Bridgehead is based on correspondence with Sarah Whitfield, Producer Liaison for Bridgehead, in October of 1993.

advance of receiving them to help SKVIS pay for the raw materials needed to produce them. Bridgehead also provides SKVIS with advice on trends, colours and fashions in the Canadian market as these are continually changing. As well, Bridgehead pays its partners a "development dividend" from its profits and has paid SKVIS this amount every year since they began their relationship up to 1992, the year for which I have information. In 1992, SKVIS informed Bridgehead that it had used their development dividend towards the education of its artisans and their children, as well as for "family health' and "welfare activities." In 1993, Bridgehead sponsored the attendance of two SKVIS members to the International Federation of Alternative Trade's (IFAT) bi-yearly world conference. That year, the conference was held in Manila in the Philippines.[25] Bridgehead made the recommendation to IFAT that SKVIS be invited to attend because they consider the group "such an inspiring model of a producer group" and because Bridgehead "wanted others to learn from their experience" and to give the women at SKVIS "the opportunity to be exposed to new ideas and markets."

SKVIS's other trading partners are also members of the International Federation of Alternative Trade.

About learning from failures

I asked Mr. Ray and Sushama Mistri about projects that have not succeeded and they were very open about discussing this with me. Sushama Mistri mentioned that their Processed Cereal and Pulses Industry (PCPI) programmes at SKVIS were not

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[25] During the end of my field research, I was informed that Sushama Mistri and Shephali Roy, both committee members would be going to Manila. Sushama Mistri is supervisor of the batik division that produces the silk scarves that SKVIS exports and Shephali Roy handles the export section.

doing too well though those groups that they had trained and were concentrating on this activity alone were doing well.

Their sericulture farming has not succeeded either. Their mulberry farm, situated some kilometers from SKVIS, has frequently been over run by goats that eat the tender mulberry leaves. Mulberry planting is new to the area and I was informed by Mr. Ray that there exists a belief that sericulture is only possible in the area of Murshidabad which has a long history of cotton and silk production. Again, mulberry tree farming had recently been introduced and was succeeding in neighbouring blocks like Baruipur and Mograhat.

Mr. Ray informed me that SKVIS's adult education programme had not reached its target in some villages either because women were only interested in the income-generating activities or because men in the village were were objecting to the women "learning more than them." Some of the men were even destroying the books and instruction material at the literacy centres.

Similarly, Sushama Mistri informed me of their programme for women at one of these villages. It was a very poor village of people predominantly from scheduled castes and tribes. SKVIS attempted to help the women several years ago but the programme did not succeed. Women were not showing up for their training and equipment was even getting destroyed. As a result, SKVIS gave up the attempt and informed the women that only if they were interested and committed would SKVIS help them. Sushama Mistri concluded that they learned a lesson from this experience, that unless women were interested, the training programmes would not succeed. Since that experience, SKVIS provides help only when asked. She mentioned that some women from that same village had approached SKVIS to start up the training programmes again and that SKVIS was in the process of making a decision. This experience reflects the 'women in development' (WID) approach to development with

external experts selecting the recipients of aid and deciding on the appropriate programme to be implemented.

Since this experience, SKVIS has sought, in their internal programmes, to help only those who ask, and the appropriate training is decided after consultation with the trainees. Eva Rathgeber cites an internal evaluation of USAID projects that found that projects that took "women into account from the very beginning, i.e., at the design stage have a higher efficiency level and are more likely to succeed." (Rathgeber 1990, 498)

Situating SKVIS within the literature

In the final analysis, the following questions need to be answered: Where does SKVIS fit within the 'women in development' (WID) and 'gender and development' (GAD) approaches to development?

SKVIS is many things at once. It is an organisation providing income-generating opportunities to its membership as well as an organisation providing training to women. Through this, it is preventing the migration of women to the cities where they could face economic and sexual exploitation. As well, by owning and controlling capital and property, SKVIS is addressing the issues of class and gender oppression. Tinker (1990, 43) suggests that "at the grassroots level, separate women's groups will still be necessary to facilitate women's ability to participate in the project and to express their own opinions." Hence, by evading the intent of males outside the society to take over the organisation, SKVIS continues to fight gender oppression. By providing personal loans to its members, SKVIS is providing them with credit that they would have problems obtaining from banks because of the discrimination they face. It is also strategically placed to act as a conduit for government-funded training and credit facilities to its trainees. As well, SKVIS is providing its members with a space to

empower themselves and bring about socieconomic change in their lives. Some women have a deep understanding of issues of gender oppression while others have a growing consciousness of gender issues. In their lives outside of work, women are forming alliances to fight gender oppression, as Pushpa Mondol's retention of her inherited home attests, and are empowering themselves through dialogue with each other and from the economic independence they have gained. Group discussions are empowering them as they gain a measure of control over work-related decisions, and this is translating to empowerment within the home and in public spheres for some women.

But as an organisation, does SKVIS attempt to bring about fundamental changes to gender relations between women and men? I would argue that it does not. While SKVIS has succeeded against enormous odds and provided its members with many benefits and protected them from the exploitation faced by women, it has not addressed the root causes of their oppression. The competence with which many women fulfill their double burdens can be a dangerous bind. The underlying pride that came through as they related surmounting their problems could in fact lead them to continue in these situations and not attempt to fight free of their roles as "supermoms" or "superwomen." These roles for women are increasingly being criticised in the West for its normalisation and acceptance of the extra pressure and burden on women to both hold a full time job outside the home and be responsible for all the housework and childcare. These roles also bind women within their traditional role as keepers of the domestic sphere as well as draw on and reinforce their essentialised virtues of sacrifice, long-suffering, servitude and dedication and do little to redress the imbalances in men's lack of participation in housework and childcare. As women increasingly take on more of the economic burden in caring for the family, advocates for women's rights call for men to equally share the domestic chores within the home. How can SKVIS encourage the men in the lives of its members to become agents of social change as well and contribute to redressing the imbalance of power between women and men?

A major criticism of the WID approach was that it did not take into account issues of gender and the time burdens that its strategies placed on women. These strategies were, in fact, frequently creating women's double burdens.

The GAD approach that was formulated to address the issues of gender rather than focussing on women sought to address these problems, but the implementation of the GAD approach has not been widespread. As Bandarage (1984) points out, there is a "vast and obvious gap" between theory and practice. The fundamental change to societal structures and institutions that the GAD approach requires is not likely to be easily gained. After an analysis of numerous programmes by international aid agencies, Rathgeber (1990) concludes that "it is difficult to find examples of development projects that have been designed from a GAD perspective." She finds that "the GAD approach does not easily lend itself to integration into ongoing developmental strategies and programmes. It demands a degree of commitment to structural changes and power shifts that is unlikely to be found either in national or international agencies." (495)

Moser (1989) presents what can be called a practical application of the GAD approach. She suggests that programmes for women need to address their practical gender needs as well as their strategic gender needs.[26] In order to address women's practical gender needs, policies need to focus on the domestic arena, on income-earning activities, and also on community-level requirements of housing and basic services. Policies addressing women's strategic gender needs must abolish the sexual division of labour, alleviate the burden of domestic labour and childcare, remove institutionalised forms of discrimination to give women rights to own land and access to credit, the establishment of political equality, feedom of choice over childbearing, ahd the

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[26] These concepts have been derived from Maxine Molyneux (1985) as cited in Moser (1989).

adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women. (Molyneux 1985, as cited in Moser 1989, 1803)

In applying this theory to practical policies, Moser suggests that within the area of employment, women must be given training to provide them with the skills required to find work. But they must also be trained in non-traditional areas such as masonry and carpentry in order to increase their employment opportunities and abolish the sexual division of labour.

In the area of housing, policies are needed to ensure that houses are designed to address women's spatial needs as wives and mothers and primary users of the space. Strategically, women must be given tenure rights to protect women and children in unstable or violent domestic situations or domestic separation and land rights which would allow them to use land as collateral for credit.

In addressing women's basic needs, policies that plan for childcare facilities, such as creche and nurseries, are needed. Strategically, placing these facilities at the father's work place allows men to take some responsibility for childcare, alleviating women's domestic burden.

Clearly, these policies need to be implemented at an organisational level higher than that of SKVIS. The implementation of these policies require fundamental changes to society. SKVIS has provided women with a space to experience growing empowerment and to collectively fight for their rights. It is perfectly placed to provide women with the space to gather in larger numbers, form a network of all its members

and trainees and demand fundamental changes of the government.[27] As Tinker phrases it,

> Though the indicators of income and goods suggest women are worse off than before the Decade began, women's organisations at all levels are giving women a sense of participation and power over their own lives they have never had before. (Safa 1987, as cited in Tinker 1990, 53)

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[27] Towards the end of my field research at SKVIS, Mr. Ray informed me of his hope to organise the members and trainees, past and present, to march in a rally and congregate at a central location within the district to discuss "women's issues" and to discuss collective plans for the next three or so years. Rallies were a tool for communication during India's fight for independence and continue to be used politically. He planned for the women themselves to design banners, placards and poster and to carry them during their march and to serve as tools for educating the general public along the way.

Appendix A

Conversations with Mr. Prakriti Kumar Ray

During my field research, I had several conversations with Mr. Ray. These conversations were held at various times due to his very busy schedule - during his numerous visits to SKVIS on business, during a jeep ride to visit the inauguration of a new training programme at the village of Phulmaloncho, and when I visited him at a new women's society in his home town of Champahati that he was organising. This is a summary of our conversations and provide a background on Mr. Ray and his approach to 'development.'

Born at Champahati, 24 km south of Calcutta, on November 23, 1946, he started his schooling at government run village schools in Champahati and completed it at St. Paul's School, a Catholic missionary school in Calcutta. He studied mechanical engineering at the Don Bosco Polytechnic and on graduating worked for a number of engineering firms as a draughtsman.

During this period, he started spending time with a Christian organisation that published Sunday School material, volunteering his time visiting numerous village churches and paying for his own travelling expenses. He worked at an engineering firm during the week and spent his weekends organising youth groups around development work in rural areas, for example, digging canals, building village roads, introducing new high-yield varieties of crops, organising farmers and fishermen's coops. Those who ran the organisation were pleased with his work, and offered him a full-time position. He had come to a crucial point in his life. He joined this organisation in 1976, with his wife's consent (They were married in 1975 and have one son and two daughters). Within a year he found that their approach to development differed from his. When he left in 1978, the parting was acrimonious. Unemployed, he decided (with

his wife's full support) to start a group with women. His older brother is a medical doctor who promised him his full financial support.

In 1976, when Mr. Ray was still working with the church group, he became convinced that the middle class cannot define the development structure for the rural or poor class. SKVIS was a challenge to test his approach to rural development.

I asked Mr Ray who influenced his approach to development. He said that he was "fully motivated from his Christian faith, belief and concern" in his work and that "love thy neighbour" was something he strongly believed in and attempted to put into practice. He interpreted the biblical story of Jesus restoring the sight of the blind metaphorically and had taken this story to heart and in his work to try and "open the eyes of the people."

Another influence he mentioned was Gandhi from whom he had obtained his approach to "rural reconstruction," based on the independent village relying on self-sufficiency, using human power as much as possible. Mr. Ray was also inspired by Gandhi's attempts to break the caste barrier and by his tolerance of all religions.

In 1973/74 he read Paolo Friere and learned of his concept of "conscientization" which both inspired and challenged him, i.e. was Friere's theory applicable or not? He mentioned that he continued to wrestle with what Friere meant by "conscientization" and felt that it was difficult to operationalize, but that he had learned from Friere's experience of how the people that he was trying to work with refused to accept Friere because he was an outsider. Friere's subsequent realization of the importance of getting "involved" with the people and being considered a part of them meant that "continuous involvement" was something that Mr. Ray tried to realise in his own approach.

Given his strong Christian beliefs, I asked him if he had ever tried converting the women. He said he had not tried to do so because he believed that the main aim of religion was to improve the humanism of people, and that it was important for people

to educate themselves in the area of humanity, whatever their respective faiths, to help them get along with each other and to be better people.

Mr. Ray's dialogue with the women first started in Anima Mondal's cow shed, which was significant for him as a Christian. At this first meeting, the women were understandably unsure about what it entailed to form a group and what to do once the group was formed. They looked to him for guidance. This meeting ended on on a note of great hope, but their line of action was not yet decided.

At the second meeting, the women raised a number of questions for Mr. Ray to answer, questions regarding society registration, getting funding and other procedures. He emphasized the importance of collecting community funds so that external agents could not control the women or the society and their activities.

They had a very difficult time getting funding. Mr. Ray tried the banks and a couple of Christian voluntary groups without success. Some businessmen were interested in lending the group money and owning the organisation and so approached the women. Mr. Ray interpreted their move as an attempt to exploit the women as workers and discussed the intentions of these businessmen with the women at a group meeting. They were left to decide whether or not to accept this offer. They chose to reject it.

As well, he discussed a number of other social issues with them, such as their social status and its link to the discrimination they faced in obtaining financial aid and the overall social structure of power and exploitation. As a result of these numerous discussions, he said that the women realised the importance of education for their families to improve their social situation. Each of the original members had since placed an emphasis on educating their brothers and sisters. He mentioned that Anima Mondal and Sushama Mistri's brothers had business degrees, Bula Raha's sister had a Masters degree in political science, and Shephali Roy's sister had a Bachelor of Arts degree. As for the women themselves, Anima Mondal was interested in studying for a

Bachelor of Arts and Bula Raha a business degree. However, the society kept them too busy.

According to Mr. Ray, his "camp concept" has played an important part in SKVIS's success. The women suddenly received a good work order and so they stayed over at his home for two to three days to complete the work. They lived there, cooking and eating amidst their work, and difficult though the situation was, Mr. Ray realized the importance of this opportunity for communion, for him to interact with the women and for them to bond with each other away from the larger social environment and its social, political, and cultural influences. The women moved into his home with him and his family, his wife and children, and stayed. Today the women continue to make their home in Champahati. This work space that was isolated from the outside world became a special meeting place. People could bring back information from the outside world for evaluation. Daily meetings were held in the evenings to discuss the day's work and events, strategies, risks, and plans.

For an intensive period of about two years the process of "conscientization" continued. Each maintained a daily diary of events and their opinions and these were discussed every evening. It is through living with them that he felt that he had been able to achieve the heart to heart relationship that they presently shared. This "camp concept" was borrowed from the traditional Indian model of education or the *gurugrhiha* method. In days of old children (*shishyas* or students) were sent to live with their teachers (*gurus*) in his *ashram* and worked and studied at the same time, keeping house and performing all the chores, while gaining an all-round education. A reciprocal relationship, students learn for their teachers and viewed by them as their successors of knowledge. Mr. Ray credited this "camp concept" with the success of SKVIS.

Appendix B

SKVIS Memorandum of Association

(As registered with the Registrar of Firms, Societies and Non-trading Corporations, West Bengal.)

According to "West Bengal Societies Registration Act, 1961 Memorandum of Association of Sunderban Khadi & Village Industrial Society." Registration No: S/22427 of 1978-1979 on 27 June, 1978.

3. Aims and Objects:
The objects for which the Society is established are:-

a) To attempt for the all round improvement of the village economic structure through village industries.

b) To create wide and faster rate of employment opportunities through industrialisation and promotion of allied developmental activities:

c) To arrange for production of Ghani, Paper making, Doll making, Bee keeping, Soap manufacturing etc. and other allied items, under the scheme of All India Khadi & Village Industries Commission, West Bengal Village Industries Board;

d) To work with co-operation and according to the scheme and objects of W.B. Khadi & Village Industries Board and All India Khadi & Village Industries Commission, West Bengal Government and Government of India;

e) To serve the poor and distressed people by way of giving employment opportunities through the scheme above mentioned:

f) To collect Government grants, aids, subsidies, donations etc. from Government of India, Government of W.B., All India Khadi & Village Industries Commission, W.B. Khadi & Village Industries Board and other statutory bodies and individuals;

g) To do all such other things as may be considered incidental, conducive to the attainment of the foregoing objects.

The income and properties of the society whatsover derived or obtained shall be applied solely towards the promotion of the objects of the society and no portion thereof shall be paid to or divided amongst any of its members by way of profits.

1. Memorandum of Association

2. Membership:
Any persons over 18 years of age, irrespective of castes, creed or religion and who agrees in writing to be bound by the Memorandum of Association and Rules and Regulations of the Society and are engaged of association with the Ghani, Paper making, Bee keeping, Soap manufacturing etc. under the All India Village and Khadi Industries Commission and W.B. Khadi and Village Industries Board, shall be eligible for membership of the Society. A minor may also become a member of the Society through his legal guardian.

3. Rs. 10/- admission fee

5. Register of Members:
.... containing names, address and their occupation, the date of admission and the date of cessation. .... kept open for inspection of the members of the Society on requisition to the Secretary.

6. Rights of Members:
a) Any member of the Society has the right to elect to be elected in any election of the Society;

b) To submit suggestions to the Executive Committee and sub-committee, if any, on any matter;

c) To inspect the accounts of the Society on appointment with the Secretary.

d) To pay his membership subscription within the prescribed time;

e) Defaulting members shall not be allowed to take part of vote in a meeting;

8. Executive Committee
The affairs of the Society shall be conducted, managed and administered by a body called the Executive Committee consisting of not less than seven to not more than eleven members, which shall be composed of as follows:
President, Vice-president, Secretary, Assistant secretary, Treasurer, members.

9. All members of the Executive Committee shall retire at the Annual General Meeting at the interval of every three years following their election when a new committee shall be formed. Retiring members shall be eligible for re-election.

10. Vacancies in Executive Committee may be filled up by the Executive Committee by coopting any member from the general body. They shall have also power to co-opt any new member in the Executive Committee for the better management of the affairs of the Society.

11. Meetings of the Executive Committee shall be held every two months or as may be thought fit.

12. (Quorum 4 members of Executive Committee)

14. Power and Duties of the Executive Committee.
a) To summon the Annual General Meeting and election of office bearers;

b) To accept donations, gifts, subscriptions, movable or immovable property for the attainment of the objects of the Society;

c) .... sub committee

d) To sell, lease, borrow funds, mortgage or otherwise dispose of and deal with all or any part of the property of the Society;

e) To keep proper accounts of the Society and to open bank accounts in the name of the Society.

18. Secretary:

Subject to any directions given by the Executive Committee shall discharge the following duties, he shall:

a) To look after all the administration and affairs of the Society and also all correspondence;

b) To collect all dues on behalf of the Society and grant receipt for money;

c) To keep accurate minutes of proceedings of all meetings of the Society and of the Executive Committee

d) To give effect to all directions or decisions taken in the meetings of the Society and of the Executive Committee;

e) To prepare the Annual Report, Financial statement under the guidance of the Executive Committee;

f) To institute, prosecute and defend suits and other proceedings in which the Society amybe connected.

g) To perform all such duties as are incidental and conducive to the office.

20. Treasurer shall exercise general supervising over the funds of the Society and shall advise on all matters relating to the financial policy. He shall be responsible for proper maintenance of accounts and of all receipts.

22. ... banking account shall be operated by the Secretary and Treasurer jointly.

24. General Meeting;

The supreme authority of the Society shall rest with the Genral Meeting of the Society.

25. Annual General Meeting

a) ... once every year

26. Quorum

One-third members.

31. Alteration of Rules

The Executive Committee shall have power to make such by-laws and Rules and regulations ... in the interest of the Society. These Rules and Regulations maybe altered, modified, rescinded, or added to only by special resolution passed by the members in a General Meeting by a majority of votes of three-fourth of the members at the meeting.

Appendix C

Preamble

KHADI AND VILLAGE INDUSTRIES COMMISSION

(Source: KVIC Annual Report, 1991-92)

* The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) is a statutory body created by an Act of Parliament (No. 61 of 1956 and as amended by Act No. 12 of 1987). It is charged with the planning, promotion, organisation and implementation of programmes for the development of Khadi and other village industries in the rural areas in co-ordination with other agencies engaged in rural development wherever necessary. Established in April 1957, it took over the work of the former All India Khadi and Village Industries Board.

* Now Village Industry means any industry located in a rural (area) population of which does not exceed ten thousand or such other figure which produces any goods or renders any services with or without use of power and in which the fixed capital investment (in plant and machinery and land and building) per head of an artisan or a worker does not exceed fifteen thousand rupees. At present the village industries, besides khadi, coming within the purview of the KVIC are: processing of cereals and pulses; ghani oil; village leather; cottage match; fireworks and agarbatti; gur and khandsari; palm gur; non-edible oils and soap; handmade paper; village pottery; bee-keeping; fibre; blacksmithy; carpentry; manufacture of shellac; collection of forest plants and fruits for medicinal purposes; fruit processing and preservation; bamboo and cane work; manufacture of household utensils from aluminium; gums and resins and manufacture of rubber goods (dipped latex products).

* Its functions also comprise building up a reserve of raw materials and implements for supply to producers, creation of common service facilities for processing of raw materials as semifinished goods and provision of facilities for marketing of KVI products apart from organisation of training of artisans engaged in these industries and encouragement of cooperative efforts amongst them. To promote the sale and marketing of khadi or products of village industries or handicrafts, the KVIC may forge links with established marketing agencies wherever necessary and feasible.

* The KVIC is also charged with the responsibility of encouraging and promoting research in the production techniques employed in the khadi and village industries sector and providing facilities for the study of the problems relating to it including the use of non-conventional energy and electric power with a view to increasing productivity, eliminating drudgery and otherwise enhancing their competitive capacity and to arrange for dissemination of salient results obtained from such research.

* Further, the KVIC is entrusted with the task of providing financial assistance to institutions or persons engaged in the development and operation of khadi and village industries and guiding them through supply of designs, prototypes and other technical information.

* In implementing KVI activities the KVIC may take such steps as to ensure genuineness of the products and to set up standards of quality and ensure that the products of khadi and village industries do conform to the standards including issue of certificates or letters of recognition to the concerned.

* The KVIC may also undertake directly or through other agencies studies concerning the problems of khadi and village industries besides experiments or pilot projects or the development of khadi and village industries.

* The KVIC is authorised to establish and maintain separate organisations for the purpose of carrying out any or all of the above matters besides carrying out any other matters incidental to its activities.

Appendix D

Profile of the district and selected blocks

(Source: *DRDA, 24-Parganas(S), Annual Action Plan 1992-93*)

Total geographical area	8,165.05 Sq. Km.
Area under cultivation	399,979.00 Ha.
Total population	5,707,829
Total rural population	5,473,620
Scheduled Caste population	1,847,584
Scheduled Tribe population	69,056

Block	Area (in hectares)	Population
Bishnupur I	11,655	178,702
Bishnupur II	9,405.54	184,303
Sonarpur	1,678.04	346,176
Canning I	20,568.7	196,217
Canning II	22,528	151,660
Basanti	29,000	226,902
Joynagar I	12,711.96	205,447
Joynagar II	17,518	177,181
Gosaba	33,250	200,506
Mograhat I	11,664	196,080
Mograhat II	13,600	223,246
Falta	13,406	198,486
Patharpratima	46,950	245,630

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